

# **Don Bosco**

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Teresio Bosco

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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

As an alumnus of the Salesians, I consider it a great privilege to have been entrusted with making Don Bosco's biography by his homonymous Fr Teresio available to the English-speaking world.

As in every translation, there have been hitches. This introductory note is meant to expound the criteria have followed, in consultation with the Salesians.

#### Don Bosco and Proper Names

Before his priestly ordination he is *John Bosco*. After his priestly ordination he is "Don" Bosco. "Don" is a contraction from the Latin *Dominus* (a title given to priests).

Don Bosco's mother *is Mama Margaret,* for which rendering I follow Fr Lyons' translation of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* (henceforth LMO).

All Christian names are anglicised.

All priests other than Don Bosco are "Fr' in the singular or "Frs" in the plural. There is no full stop because they are not interrupted words. The contraction is in the middle.

Titles are capitalised in proper names only. Thus "Pope Pius IX," "King Charles Felix," but "the pope," "the king."

Following LMO, Mother Mazzarello's second name is Domenica, not Dominic or Dominique.

Also following LMO, it is "Louis" for Comollo, but St "Aloysius" for the company

Quotes from Don Bosco's words or writings are in italics, regardless of source.

I have opted for changing Our Lady of Consolation for Our Lady Consolata, by which name She is better known where this translation has seen the light.

#### Common Names

The English equivalents of *santuario* and *presbiterioare* "church/shrine" for the first and "sanctuary" for the second. The English "presbytery" corresponds to the Italian *canonica* or priest's house.

The *carabinieri*, an originally Piedmontese, now Italian, elite para-military corps, are well known in Europe, but not elsewhere. I have consistently used the word "police."

Idioms, informal titles, and dishes are virtually untranslatable. The *Societa dell Allegria*, founded by young John Bosco when a student in Chieri, I have left in the original Italian, not to fall into the awkward "Society for a good time" (LMO) or the grotesque "Glee Society."

itto for *polenta*, the traditional Piedmontese dish identical to the East African *ugali*. But I have conventionally italicised such words. Place-names like Porta Palazzo, etc. are in the original Italian.

#### Notes

have liberally peppered the book with historical footnotes for those readers not familiar with the ins and outs of 19th century European History. The responsibility for the accuracy of such notes is exclusively mine.

Non-historical footnotes are by the author of the book Fr Teresio Bosco. In the original they appear in the text.

I have not translated information (dates, names) irrelevant to English speaking people. Wishing readers as much enjoyment as I have had in translating, I beg 'to take leave of them.

Silvano Borruso 31<sup>st</sup> January 2003 Feast of St John Bosco

# INTRODUCTION TO DON BOSCO'S BIOGRAPHY

#### Sources

The first-hand source for Don Bosco's biography is the Saint himself. He told and re-told many episodes of his life to his boys, his Salesian children and his friends. To this divulgation by word of mouth he added the written *Memoirs*, first out of a suggestion, later order, of Pope Pius. Fr Bosco's biography, therefore, is a compilation from Don Bosco's own written texts, including books other than the *Memoirs*; from the writtings of the early Salesians who endeavoured to leave a written record of their founder's thoughts and deeds; from stories by alumni and other friends of the Oratory; and from witnesses at the process of canonization.

As same story varies slightly from source to source, there is no way of telling which source reports the bare facts. Don Bosco himself is not always consistent with dates and episodes, written down almost half a century after they happened.

Hence the reader should not be surprised if the text differs somewhat from that of the early Memoirs, covering the first 40 years of Don Bosco's life. The text is not a scholarly critical one, but one with the same aims as Don Bosco's handwritten Memoirs: instructing (first the Salesians and later everyone); entertaining; teaching and doing good, as was his custom from childhood.

The following section lists the essential events of Don Bosco's life as extracted from the sources. They are meant as an introduction to the main story, providing a useful framework to make it easier to assimilate and retain in the memory whatever instruction, piece of entertainment, of teaching and of moral exhortation the reader sees fit to make his or her own.

#### **Essential Events**

- 16<sup>th</sup> August 1815. John Bosco is born at Becchi, a cluster of homesteads part of the village of Morialdo attached to the town of Castelnuovo d'Asti. His parents are Francis and Margaret Occhiena. Two children had been born to Francis Bosco from a previous marriage: Anthony in 1809 and Theresa Mary in 1810. She died within two days.
- 1817 Francis Bosco dies, leaving three orphans: John and Joseph, Margaret's children, and Anthony.
- 1824 A mysterious ream reveals to young John God's mission for him: taking care of abandoned children or of youth going astray.
- 1826 First Holy Communion.
- February 1827. Differences with Anthony, who doesn't agree to John's schooling, force him to leave home at 12 to work as a stable boy at the Moglia homestead in Moncucco.
- November 1829. Back from the Moglias, John begins schooling with old Fr Calosso at Morialdo.
- November 1830. Death of Fr Calosso. Anthony, about to marry, loses interest in John's studies. John enrolls in a public school at Castelnuovo.
- 4<sup>th</sup> November 1831. John moves to Chieri, where he will spend the next ten years. Living in lodgings and on his wits, he finishes schooling.
- 1832 He founds his first association with his schoolmates: the Societa dell Allegria, with two main aims: fulfilling one's duties as a Christian and as a student, and be always cheerful.
- 1833 Confirmation at Buttigliera d'Asti.
- 1834 John strikes a friendship with Louis Comollo, the first "holy youth" of his life. Ten years later, 1844, he will write Louis' short biography.
- October 1835. John dons the cassock, joining the clerical state. He enters the Chieri Seminary, decided to be a priest.
- 1839 Death of Louis Comollo, followed by his apparition in the seminarians' dormitory John falls gravely ill.
- 29th March 1841. Ordination as a deacon.

- 5<sup>th</sup> of June 1841. The archbishop of Turin Msgr Fransoni ordains John Bosco a priest in the chapel of the episcopal palace. He says his first Mass next day at the altar of (lie Guardian Angel in the church of St Francis of Assisi, helped by Fr Cafasso, his lifelong spiritual director.
- Autumn 1841. He declines various offers of jobs for pastoral courses at the *Convitto Eccelesiastico* of St Francis of Assisi. On exploring the city of Turin, he discovers the grave problem of abandoned youth following the "industrial revolution" now reaching the city.
- 8<sup>th</sup> December 1841. In the church of St Francis of Assisi he meets a young up-country boy: Bartholomew Garelli from Asti, whom he invites to a weekly meeting together with his friends. It is the beginning of the Oratory.
- Autumn 1844. Don Bosco's Oratory begins "wandering" to various parts of the city: the marchioness of Barolo's Refuge, the cemetery of St Peter in Chains, St Martin of the Mills, the Moretta house and the brothers Filippi's open ground. Everywhere the boys are ill tolerated because of their noise. Don Bosco is under suspicion of rebellion towards the civic authorities and even of insanity.
- September 1845. At St Martin of the Mills Don Bosco makes a foundational encounter: an 8-year old, fatherless, pale boy: Michael Rua, who will become his right hand and eventually his first successor at the head of the Salesian Congregation.
- October 1845. He publishes a *Textbook of Church History*, followed by *Sacred history (1847)*, *The Metric Decimal System (1849)*, a History of Italy (1855) and many more books.
- 12<sup>th</sup> April 1846. The Oratory makes its final move to under a shed rented from Francis Pinardi at Valdocco. It is Easter day.
- July 1846. Don Bosco is at death's door. His cure is wrenched from our Lady's hand by the prayers of the young workers frequenting the Oratory.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1846. After a long convalescence at Becchi, Don Bosco returns to the Oratory. With him is his mother Margaret, who comes to be a mother also to his boys. Classes begin in two rented rooms.
- December 1846. Don Bosco rents the whole of the Pinardi home. Evening school takes a decisive turn.

- 12" April 1847. Birth of the Company of St Aloysius for committed youth.
- May 1847. Don Bosco's kitchen shelters the first boy asking him to stay, a migrant from the Sesia Valley. This same year Don Bosco gives a course of Spiritual Exercises for his best boys. It will become a yearly feature, from where he will spot the first "Salesian vocations."
- December 1847. He opens a second Oratory next to Porta Nuova, dedicating it to St Aloysius Gonzaga.
- February 1848. Don Bosco declines Marquis Robert d'Azeglio's offer to take part in political demonstrations: *I want to stay, now and forever, outside politics.*
- March 1848. First Italian war of independence. Political fever spreads among Don Bosco's first helpers, who stir up the older boys of the two Oratories against him. During spring he is shot at through the window of the chapel-shed. The would-be assassin misses.
- Autumn 1848. Ascanio Savio is the first of Don Bosco's boys to Don the cassock. He will remain with the Oratory four years. Following the defeat of King Charles Albert's army, Turin is in the grip of severe rioting.
- Anthony Bosco, his step-brother, dies in January aged 41. In February Don Bosco founds the journal, The Friend of Youth, which will fold up after 61 issues. With the diocesan seminary closed down, several seminarians continue their studies at the Oratory as Don Bosco's guests.
- 1850 Don Bosco founds a Society of Mutual Aid for young workers.
- 1851 Don Bosco buys off the Pinardi property, previously rented. He begins construction of the church of St Francis of Sales, completed and consecrated in 1852. He also signs the first apprentice contracts for those of his boys working in the city, thus being ahead of his time in matters of union agreements in the defence of young apprentices.
- 1852 The explosion of the powder magazine almost destroys the Pinardi house, sorely trying the Oratory.
- 1853 Don Bosco founds *Catholic Readings*, monthly booklets for popular Christian instruction. The first technical workshops begin at the Oratory, and the boarding school develops.

- 26<sup>th</sup> January 1854. Don Bosco proposes the foundation of the Salesians to four young men: Rua, Cagliero, Rocchietti and Artiglia. The proposal is for a promise to commit oneself with "charity towards one's neighbor."
- Summer 1854. Outbreak of cholera at Turin. Don Bosco's boys standout in the care of the sick. He has guaranteed them that no one would be struck by the disease on conditions of being in the state of grace and wearing a medal of Our Lady.
- 29th October 1854. Dominic Savio, a "holy youth," joins the Oratory.
- 25<sup>th</sup> March 1855 Michael Rua vows poverty, chastity and obedience into Don Bosco's hands. He is the first *Salesian*.
- 8<sup>th</sup> June 1856. Dominic Savio founds the *Company of the Immaculate Conception*. It is a selected group of young men collaborating with Don Bosco in doing good and assisting their friends.
- 25<sup>th</sup> November 1856. Mama Margaret dies aged 69.
- 9<sup>th</sup> March 1857. Death of Dominic Savio. Don Bosco writes his *Life*, which attains a huge spreading. Pope Pius XII will canonise Dominic in 1954.
- Don Bosco begins drafting the Salesian Rules.
- 1858 First journey to Rome to present his work to the pope. Pius IX in invites him to write down "the marvellous events" at the origin of his work
- Second Italian war of independence, ending with the bloody battle Solferino. Don Bosco writes, *After Solferino I have always maintained that war is a horror, and I think it to be truly contrary to charity.*
- 18<sup>th</sup> December 1859. Official birth of the Salesian Congregation, with Don Bosco and 18 other members.
- Death of Fr Cafasso, Don Bosco's great spiritual director. Michael Rua, one of Don Bosco's early boys, becomes a priest.
- 1861 Fourteen Salesians form a "secret committee" to preserve in writing; everything that Don Bosco does and says.
- 1862 Joseph, Don Bosco's brother, dies aged 49.

- 1863 Don Bosco opens the first Salesian house outside Turin: the "Little Seminary" of Mirabello Monferrato. Director is Michael Rua, for whom Don Bosco writes a few pages of "confidential memoirs," one of the foundational documents on the Salesian educational style:
- March 1864. Laying of the first stone of the church of Our Lady Help of Christians at Valdocco.
- 1866 Don Bosco acts as mediator between the Holy See and the Italian government for the return of 45 exiled bishops and for the election of new bishops.
- 1867 Pius IX renews to Don Bosco the order to write down the "marvellous origins" of his work. He will write down the bulk of his *Memoirs* between 1873 and 1875.
- 9th June 1868. Consecration of the church of Our Lady Help of Christians.
- 1st March 1869. The Holy See approves the Salesians as a *Pious Society*.
- 1869 Don Bosco starts publishing the *Library of the Italian Youth*. The aim is to place ancient and modern Italian classics in the hands of youth, abridged and purged of inopportune material. 204 such monthly booklets will see the light between 1869 and 1885.
- Don Bosco begins the Association of the Devotees of Our Lady Help of Christians
- 26<sup>th</sup> November 1871. Msgr Gastaldi is the new archbishop of Turin. Pius IX has nominated him also following Don Bosco's recommendation.
- 7<sup>th</sup> December 1871. Don Bosco falls gravely ill while on a visit to the Salesian house of Varazze. The illness lasts 50 days.
- 5<sup>th</sup> August 1872. Birth of the Congregation of the *Daughters of Our Lady Help of Christians*, side by side with the work of the Salesians. The superior is Mary Mazzarello, who takes the veil and the vows together with ten other girls.
- 1873 Death of Fr Borel. Beginning of grave differences with Archbishop Gastaldi.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1874. The Holy See gives final approval to the Salesian Rules.
  - 11<sup>1</sup> November 1875. Beginning of the Salesian missions. The first ten missionaries leave for South America headed by Fr John Cagliero.

- 1876 With the approval of the Holy See, Don Bosco founds the Cooperators, the third Salesian family. Their task is "to help the church, the bishops and the parish priests, doing good according to the spirit of the Salecian Society."
- 1977 The first General Chapter of the Salesian Society is held at Lanzo Torinese.

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians leave for the missions to help the Salesian missionaries. Beginning of the publication of the Salesian Bulletin, to keep the "Salesians in the world" co-operators in touch with Don Bosco. Its contents are letters from the missionaries, graces granted by Our Lady Help of Christians and the History of the Oratory.

- 1878 Death of Pope Pius IX. Don Bosco is received in private audience by his successor, Pope Leo XIII.
- 1879 The first Salesian missionaries enter Patagonia.
- 1880 Leo XIII entrusts Don Bosco with the building of the church of the Sacred Heart in Rome.
- Death of Mother Mary Domenica Mazzarello, co-foundress of the *Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*.
- 1883 Don Bosco undertakes a four-month journey to France, fundraising from city to city for the construction of the Temple of the Sacred Heart. Death of Msgr Gastaldi. Cardinal Alimonda, long-time friend and admirer of Don Bosco, is the new archbishop of Turin.
- 7th December 1884. John Cagliero, one of the early boys of Don Bosco, is consecrated bishop.

  He at once returns to the missions of southern Argentina. He will in due time be made a cardinal.
- In April Don Bosco is in Spain, where he spends a month fundraising for the Temple of the Sacred Heart and for his works. The journey is a triumph, opening a splendid future to the Salesian Congregation in Spain.
- In April Don Bosco is in Rome for the last time, for the consecration of the Temple of the Sacred Heart. He is in very poor health.
- 31st January 1888. Don Bosco dies at dawn.

#### CHAPTER 1

# **AWAY FROM HOME AT 12**

Bitter, wounding words rent the air that night in the kitchen, around the table. Anthony saw young John with the usual book next to his plate. He shouted:

"I'm going to fling that book into the fire."

Margaret, their mother, tried to cool him down:

"John works like everyone else. Why should it bother you that he wants to read?"

"It bothers me because the burden of this hovel is on my shoulders. It's who break my back on the ground. And I have no intention of support parasites. He is not going to have it easy while we eat polenta."

Young John answered back rather rudely. He didn't mince words, and was not born to offer the other cheek. Anthony stood up and went for him.

Joseph watched in fear. Margaret tried to step in between, but John got thrashed, probably worse than usual. At 12 he was no match for 19 year Anthony.

In bed he cried bitterly, more out of anger than of pain. Not far, his mother wept too. That night perhaps she didn't sleep.

By next morning Margaret had decided. She addressed John with the saddest words of her life:

"Better if you leave home. Antonio can't stand you. Someday he may hurt you."

"But where do I go?"

Much as his mother Margaret, John felt like death. She mentioned some farms around Moriondo and Moncucco

"They know me. Someone may give you work, at least for a while. Later we shall see."

<sup>1</sup> Italian for ugali. It is usually prepared from yellow maize.

## Into the Fog with a Bundle of Clothes

During the day she made up a small bundle with some shirts, his two books and a round loaf. It was February. Snow and ice lay on the road and on the hills around.

Next morning John left. Mama Margaret waved good-bye from the doorstep with her hand until she saw her young migrant disappear into the fog.

He tried the farmsteads his mother had mentioned. None had any work for a boy. By the afternoon both the loaf and his hope had gone. The Moglias were the last name on the list. His mother had said, "Ask for signor Luigi."

He stopped by the big gate in the yard. An old man was locking up.

"What do you want, young man?"

"To work"

"Great. Go and work then. Good-bye." And went on pulling the gate to bar it. John gathered the last shreds of courage: "But I must see signor Luigi"

He went in. The whole family stood next to the portico, cleaning sticks of wicker for the vineyards. Farmer Luigi Moglia, 28, looked at him in amazement.

"I am looking for signor Luigi Moglia."

"I am the one."

"My mother sends me. She wants me to work for you as a stable boy."

"But why does she send you out so young? Who's your Mum?" "Margaret Bosco, My brother Anthony ill-treats me, so she told me to look for employment as a stable boy."

"My poor boy, this is winter. We hire stable boys towards the end of March. Be patient and go home."

John felt disheartened and tired. He burst into tears of despair.

"Take me, for charity's sake. Don't pay me, but don't send me home. Here - he said with the strength of desperation - I sit down here and stay put. Do what you want with me, but I stay put."

Crying, he started collecting the strands of wicker and to clean them. Dorothy, Luigi's wife, 27 and good-looking, was moved at the young boy: "Take him, Luigi. Let's try him for a few days."

Luigi's 15 year-old sister, Teresa, also took pity on him. She was in charge of the cows.

"I'm old enough to come to work with you in the fields. This boy could just do for the stable."

John Bosco began to work as a stable boy in February 1827. The Moglias were a family of well-to-do farmers, hard workers all from morning till night. They tended vines and other crops, and kept oxen and cows. They pray together. In the evening they prayed the Rosary around the fire. On Sundays signor Luigi drove all to the solemn Mass celebrated by parish priest Fr Francesco Cottino.

Young John Bosco's stable chores were neither humiliating nor exceptional. Towards the end of March, dozens of stable boys like him would worked in all the farmsteads around. It was normal for boys of poor families. On March 25<sup>1</sup>, feast of the Annunciation, the employers made the rounds of farms and markets to hire boys for the rest of the year. The work was seasonal and *au pair*: eight months of solid work from April to November in exchange for food, lodging and 15 lire for clothes.

Stable boy John Bosco, though, was different. He was exceptionally young with six months to go before he turned twelve, but most especially he harboured a dream. It was a real dream, seen at night in his sleep. He would relate it.

#### The Dream

When I was nine I had a dream that remained deeply embedded in my mind for the rest of my life. I saw myself near home, in a vast yard full of playing children. Some laughed, quite a few uttered blasphemies. On hearing such foul language, I threw myself into their midst, punching and shouting to silence them.

A venerable Man appeared, nobly attired. His face was so bright 1 could hardly look into it. . He called me by name:

"Not with your blows, but with meekness and love you shall conquer all these friends. Speak to them at once about the ugliness of sin and the greatness of virtue."

Confused and frightened, I answered that I was a poor and ignorant boy. At that moment the boys stopped fighting, interrupted their brawls and gathered round the speaking man. Hardly knowing what I was saying I asked.

"Who are you that order such impossible things of me?"

"Precisely because they seem impossible to you, you must make them possible by obeying and by becoming knowledgeable."

How shall I become knowledgeable?"

'I will give you a Teacher. Under her guide you will become wise."

"But who are you?"

'I am the Son of Her whom your mother taught you to greet three times a day. Ask her for my name."

At that moment I saw a Woman of majestic aspect, attired with a cloak that shone as bright as the sun. Seeing me confused, she beckoned me and took me by the hand.

"Look" She said.

The youngsters had all disappeared. In their stead, I saw kids, dogs, cats, bears and many other animals.

"This is your field of work. Become humble, strong and sturdy What you see now happen to these animals you will cause to happen to my children."

I turned and saw that instead of wild animals there were now as many lambs, skipping, running and bleating as if giving a hearty welcome to that Man and that Woman.

Always within the dream, I burst into tears. I asked the Woman to speak clearly, because I did not know what it all meant. She laid her hand on my head and said. "One good day you will understand."

A noise woke me up and everything disappeared. I was in awe. I felt my hands ache out of the blows delivered, and my face burn out of the slaps received from those rascals.

Next morning I related the dream to my brothers, who laughed. Then I related it to my mother and grandmother. Everyone had a different opinion. Joseph: "You are going to be a shepherd." Anthony: "You will lead a hand of robbers." My mother: "Who knows, you may become a priest." Grandma uttered the definitive sentence. "Pay no attention to dreams."

I agreed with Grandma, but could not get the dream out of my mind.

The years following were deeply marked by that dream. Mama Margaret had understood (and soon John also would) that the dream signalled a way ahead.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The reference is to the Angelus Prayer. Today it is mostly recited at noon, but in former times it used to be recited also at dawn at dusk.

### 180 Pages of Memoirs

At 58 no one remembers what happened five short years before, but all remember, as if it was the day before yesterday, what happened at nine, eleven, fifteen years. One still feels on the knees the rough bark of a tree climbed so long ago, or the warmth of the dog's pelt stroked while the animal ran side by side.

At 58 Don Bosco wrote the history of his first decades on the pope's orders. His memory was as sharp as that of a movie camera. He filled three thick volumes, about 180 pages. He garbled the dates somewhat, but not episodes, memories and details, which retain a lively freshness.

#### Let Don Bosco himself introduce them:

I have often been urged to write the Memoirs of things concerning the Oratory. The, authority behind this piece of advice was great.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, I never took steps to begin, as I didn't like to speak about myself.

But now it is no longer a piece of advice: it is an order I cannot disobey. So I begin. What I am going to say has little value, rather confidential, but it may be useful to the Salesian family. For let me say at once that I write for my dearest Salesian children, with the express prohibition to publish these things either before or after my death.<sup>3</sup>

What will the use of these pages be?

To learn the lessons of the past so as to overcome future difficulties.

To make people know how God himself has guided us step by step.

To entertain my children for when I am no longer here, after God calls me to give account of my life.

Should you find much self-complacency, a certain eagerness to show off, forgive me. I am a father that rejoices in recounting his things to his children. I think that they too ought to be pleased at the small adventures of their father. They ought to be aware that in small as in great endeavours, I have always had in mind their spiritual and material welfare.

My children, when you read these memoirs, after I have gone, remember me as a has loved you and who has left these pages as a token of his affection. And remembering me, pray to God for the repose of my soul.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The dates of Don Bosco's childhood remain a hard problem even for specialists. Birth registers in Piedmont do not go back further than 1838, and marriage and death registers than 1866. For earlier years, parish registers must be consulted, going back to 1625.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> It was Pope Pius IX himself.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> He underlined every word of the prohibition. But the Salesians disobeyed him 73 years, later after debating at length about the problem of conscience. That is why today we can closely follow the events of that peasant boy in the smallest detail.

#### **CHAPTER 2**

### TRAGEDIES GREAT AND SMALL

My mother's name was Margaret Occhiena of Capriglio. My father's was Francis. They were peasants, earning their daily bread by hardwork and frugality.

John Bosco was born on 16th August 1815. Her mother called him *Giuanin* (Johnny), a very common Piedmontese first name.

His father's death remained his first memory. Francis Bosco had bought a small house and a few small plots of land. But to support five people, he also hired himself as a farmhand to a well-to-do landlord.

One May afternoon, coming back from work bathed in sweat, he imprudently stepped into his employer's cellar. A violent fever shook him within hours, cutting him down of double pneumonia in four days. He was 33. Don Bosco continues:

I was not yet two when my father died. I do not remember his face. I only remember my mother's words: "You are now fatherless, Giuanin. As people streamed out of the room where my father's body lay, I stubbornly insisted on slaying, "Come, Giuanin," my mother sweetly prodded me. If dad doesn't come, neither do I." "Come, son, your father is no more." With these words, that holy woman, sobbing, took me away I cried as she did. What can a small boy understand at that age? But that sentence, "You are fatherless," remained engraved in my mind. It is the first event of my life within memory.

#### A Bewitched Season

John's next memory is one of hunger he suffered that same year.

Becchi was a group of ten homesteads, one of which belonged to the Boscos. They were scattered on a hill, immersed in the undulations of the countryside. Vineyards alternated with patches of wood. They belonged to the village of Murialdo, in turn administered by the municipality of Castelnuovo d'Asti, five kilometres away.

The 1817 hills of the Monferrato, where Castelnuovo is, were hit, like the rest of Piedmont, by a terrific famine. Spring frosts gave way to a long drought. The crops failed.

Famine struck. Beggars were found dead in the ditches, with grass in their mouths.

A contemporary document describes Turin as if hit by a Biblical migration. Long lines of emaciated people in rags left the countryside descending on the city. Groups of families camped before churches and mansions, begging.

Margaret found herself with a family to support just in the middle of that bewitched season. At home she had her mother-in-law, old and crippled in a chair, Anthony, 9, born of Francesco's earlier marriage, and her two sons Joseph and John, 4 and 2 respectively. She was an illiterate peasant, but her sterling character stood out in those months. Don Bosco relates:

My mother fed the family till there was something to eat. Then she gave a sum of money to Bernard Cavallo, a neighbour, asking him to fetch some food. He scoured the markets, but, could find nothing even at exorbitant prices. He came back two later eagerly expected. On seeing him giving back the money saying he had found nothing we were struck with terror. That day we had not eaten. My mother unperturbed, spoke: "Francis on his death bed, told me to trust in Gad. Let us kneel and pray."

After a short prayer she stood up and said "Extreme cases require extreme remedies." With Bernard's help she went to the stable, killed a calf, cooked some of it and allayed our hunger. We were exhausted. In the following days she succeeded in buying cereals from afar, at usurious price.

Up until few decades ago to kill a calf, for a Piedmontese rural family, was an act of desperation. Fattening a calf was an investment. It would have fetched enough to face emergencies such as an illness. Killing it meant that the last reserve of the family had gone.

# An Event That Changed the Face of the Earth

Death, hunger and precarious living were the first memories of a child destined to become father to so many orphans, and to give bread, in his many homes, to countless poor children.

The Boscos' small tragedy, on a hill in the back of beyond, was a small aside to the *great* tragedy that, like storm, had shaken Europe and Italy in those decades.

28 years earlier, in 1789, the French Revolution had broken out in Paris. That event would change the face of the earth.

Its detailed account is beyond the scope of this book, but some of its aspects did leave a deep mark on Don Bosco's life.

The whole of Europe was saturated with the expectation of something new. The echo of terrible changes spread even to Italy. After centuries of immobility, with society petrified under the absolute control of king and nobility, France exploded. The middle class and the people claimed their rights, clamouring that the privileges of the nobility and the upper clergy should cease. Words like "freedom" and "equality" were no longer whispered, but shouted from the rooftops. *The Preamble to the Constitution of 1791* read:

"Humans are born free and with equal rights. These rights are freedom, property, security and resistance to oppression. The nation is the source of every sovereign power."<sup>2</sup>

It was to assert these rights, and not dynastic ones, that the French army fought against other nations of Europe.

As in every other time of radical change, though, terrific and most just decisions went hand in hand with partisan and totally unjustified violence. The middle class leaders of the Revolution demanded the right to vote, but only for people with property. They argued:

"The people's intervention in politics, illiterate and lacking self-control as they are, easily leads to excesses."

The revolution abolished all the privileges, except wealth. The middle classes got their freedom, but the poor stayed poor.

The poor staged a "parallel" revolution at the same time, apparently to redress the wrongs. The French peasants attacked and torched the castles of the nobility.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, in the midst of hunger, they violently prevented the free circulation of grain, engaging in field battles against groups of famished people wandering desperate in search of food.<sup>4</sup>

The people of Paris burst into violent and sudden flames of insurrection. King Louis XVI was mobbed into wearing the revolutionary cap and into drinking to the nation's health. Twenty days later he was dragged to prison with his whole family.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Privilege was mainly vested in the rent of land. Privilege had originated with the feudal system, which contemplated the discharge of an extra duty for every privilege granted. The extra duty of the nobility, in exchange for controlling land, was the cost of administration and defence. For the Church it was the social services: education, health, hostelry, etc. For as long as the duties were fulfilled, taxation on the lower classes amounted to no more than one month of work per year (which is in fact ¼ or less of what it is today). But beginning with the Low Middle Ages, the feudal lords and the upper clergy (bishops, etc.) dropped the duties and kept the privileges. Taxation began to fall heavily on the lower classes giving rise to great discontent.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The Church has never agreed to this proposition, still maintaining that sovereignty and therefore authority has its origin in God.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Armed, well-fed and organized mobs do not act spontaneously. They obey the orders of their leaders and especially those of their financiers. It is symptomatic that no mob, throughout the revolutionary period 1789-1971, ever attacked a financial establishment.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The famine was contrived. Nesta Webster writes: "There can be no doubt that the famine of 1789 was deliberately engineered by the agents of the duke (of Orleans), and that by these means the people were driven to the pitch of desperation necessary to produce the Revolution." That the cornering of the market, caused the famine, can be proved by the fact that the enraged mobs destroyed the grain rather than taking it home. They knew.

From August 1792 to July 1794, the "parallel revolution" took over. The middle class leaders gave way to the "popular representatives." They tried to change a revolution of "freedom" into one of "equality."

Some of the results were disastrous.

In September mobs of armed people invaded the prisons, full of aristocrats and suspect conspirers, massacring more than a thousand of them.<sup>5</sup> *In* January 1793 the king was convicted of high treason and guillotined.

The Terror began. Everyone "suspected" of being an enemy of the Revolution was convicted of treason. In October 177 people were condemned to the guillotine, in July 1794 they were 1285. The "enemies of the Revolution" were got rid of briskly, without even the shadow of a trial.

Concurrently, a heavy process of de-christianisation took place: Christian worship was forbidden, churches were shut, Christian symbols destroyed, priests persecuted, and the goddess "Reason" was enthroned in place, with humiliating masquerades in the very cathedral of Paris.<sup>6</sup>

Europe watched in astonishment. What was happening in Paris seemed a manifestation of collective madness. Even the most progressive persons, who had sympathised with the Revolution at the beginning were shaken.

In the years to come, "Revolution" came to mean the Paris terror. The very word inspired fear. The derogatory term "democratic revolution" really meant "the populace unleashed in disorder and violence."

# Napoleon: General at 27

In July 1794 both Terror and the "dictatorship of the people" ended up in the execution of their very chiefs: the fanatic Jacobins<sup>7</sup> Robespierre, Saint Just and Couthon.

The revolution went back into the hands of the middle classes. The 1795 constitution granted voting rights only to 30, 000 out of the 600,000 inhabitants of Paris. Only landed proprietors, were deemed able to lead the country. Little by little the revolution turned back on itself. The republic would become an empire.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The leaders of Paris Commune, chiefly Marat, deliberately planned and carried out the massacres. Most of the victims were common criminals and poor people. Foreigners of various nations assisted or abetted to the crime. 220 priests perished in the Sentember massacres.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The "goddess" was an opera singer, M.lle Maillard, taken in procession dressed in blue mantle and wearing the red cap of liberty.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> This faction started as the Club Breton, the first revolutionary club. It was a Masonic centre under the leadership of the duke of Orleans, who had grand designs about becoming the crowned head of the Revolution. He ended up guillotined instead.

In 1796, a revolutionary army, led by 27-year old Napoleon Bonaparte, reached Italy. In a few bloody battles in the Po valley, he defeated the Austrians. French soldiers spoke about brotherhood, equality, and freedom. Despite the shadow of the Terror, such words raised great expectations among the young generations. The kingdom of Sardinia (Piedmont + Savoy + Sardinia) was badly shaken. The king went into exile.

But Napoleon was a restless genius. His main concern was not so much spreading the triumph of the Revolution, as achieving shining, if bloody, military glory in 1799 he was in Egypt. Austrians and Russians invaded northern Italy again. Cossack riders on their steppe ponies, with their long beards and long pikes, invaded the cities. On Napoleon's return a new war broke out, with its attendant misery spreading all over the rich fields of the Po valley.

Napoleon started extorting men and money from every Italian region, to send them fighting in Spain and in Russia. He invaded with the greatest army every seen. The rigid Russian winter forced him to retreat disastrously. He lost 600, 000 men, among whom were 25, 000 Italians. 20, 000 more had died in Spain.8

From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> October 1813, at Leipzig, the giant "battle of the nations" marked the end of the French Empire and for many the burying of the revolutionary ideal.<sup>9</sup>

Once more Austrians, Germans and Croats descended from the Alps and crossed the river Isonzo. All proclaimed they were coming to "liberate Italy," but like all "liberators," no one had called them. They helped themselves to the plunder of cities and their countryside. After the jolt of 'Napoleon's "100 days" and Waterloo, he ended his days on an Atlantic islet. 10

Europe and Italy were tired, strewn with ruins and orphans. The countryside was in tatters, without young people, forcibly removed by military draft and sent to die in remote battlefields.

People, who for years had shouted "freedom," were now hankering for peace.

The Boscos' little tragedy took place in the more general context of the great one involving millions of other people.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Other sources put the total number of soldiers at 450,000. Only 10,000 survived. It is impossible to understand the Napoleonic wars without reference to the debt system, which had sparked off the ruin of France beginning 1780. When Napoleon became aware of it, he attacked it with all his might, trying to convince other sovereigns to back him. Few did. The money power defeated him at Waterloo, plunging all the European states deep into debt. The consequences of that defeat are with us to this day.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> The two things are concomitant, but unrelated.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> After Leipzig Napoleon abdicated and was given the Island of Elba in the Tyrrhenian Sea, as his personal property. 100 days later he escaped and gathered the army that suffered defeat at Waterloo. The exercise cost him going into debt for 5 million pounds. He died at 52, most likely poisoned.

## The King Sets the Clock back 15 Years

From his history books, John Bosco would learn one day to have been born at the beginning of a new era called "Restoration." It had begun on November 1<sup>st</sup> 1814, at Vienna, where the victor nations had gathered in Congress. In Italy it would last until 1847, the beginning of the *Risorgimento*.

The Restoration was a time of serious misunderstandings. The kings dethroned by the revolution and by Napoleon returned to their royal palaces thinking that 25 years of history could be erased by the stroke of a pen.<sup>11</sup>

Vienna had divided Italy, like a cake, into eight (unequal) slices:

- The kingdom of Sardinia: Piedmont, Sardinia, Savoy, Nice and the republic of Genoa on top;
- Lombardy and Venice, part of the Austrian empire;
- The duchy of Modena;
- The duchy of Parma and Piacenza;
  - The Grand duchy of Tuscany;
  - The Principality of Lucca;
  - The papal States;
  - The kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Victor Emmanuel I re-entered Turin in his royal carriage, surrounded by nobles attired in powdered wig and pigtail.

The people in the streets welcomed the king, most specially the rural people who wanted peace more than anything else. But those nobles in powdered wigs intended to guarantee peace by returning to the old days. The ignored the new ways of thinking that, despite Napoleon's bloody had sprouted and grown strong in Italy.

History had gone ahead, and nothing would push it back. The new middle class was a reality. People and goods travelled on the new roads built by Napoleon's engineers.

For centuries the bulk of the Italian populations were born, lived and died on the same plot of land, the same village, each stuck in autarky and centuries-old usages. Napoleon's armies had shattered that inertia. Internal migration, even though caused by tragedy more often than not, was a mass phenomenon.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> The misunderstanding continues. The revolution had dethroned kings on principle. Napoleon dethroned only those kings who would not stand behind him in his desire to fight the forces of Money power. At Vienna every single king was no longer the master of his own house, but a puppet in the grip of debt. It would be a matter of time before the Revolution would dethrone them for good.

Stagecoaches carried newspapers and books. Few knew how to read, but curiosity was unstoppable. The few readers spread news; horizons widened. At the 1821 Lubljana congress, Francis IV of Modena declared:

"Freedom of the press, the spreading of schools and universal literacy are the evil seeds of revolution."

In Piedmont agriculture underwent a new, flourishing development. The last remnants of forest in the valleys and hills were cleared. Vast tracts of land were opened to cultivation. Thousands of mulberry trees were planted for the raising of silkworms."<sup>12</sup>

Factories of all types mushroomed everywhere. Prices stabilised.

The day after his return Victor Emmanuel I abrogated all laws passed in the last 15 years, restoring the old pre-Napoleonic ones. The nobility and the upper clergy regained all their lost rights, while the middle class lost quite a bit of what they had gained.

While the king, then, set the clock back 15 years, middle class intellectuals like Silvio Pellico<sup>13</sup> went into exile to Milan; the youth of the best families hatched rebellion, joining secret societies, and setting their hopes on Charles Albert, a young prince of the Savoy-Carignano royal house who seemed attuned to the new times.

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 $<sup>^{12}</sup>$  Silk was Chinese monopoly by 2000 years until the  $6^{th}$  century, when two Byzantine monks smuggled silkworm eggs and mulberry tree seeds to Constantinople. From there their cultivation spread to the rest of Europe. Northern Italy still has a flourishing silk industry.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> 1789-1854. Dramatist and author of My Prisons, an account of his years as a political prisoner.

#### **CHAPTER 3**

# **CHILDHOOD**

When Margaret's husband died she was 29, rather young for the load she was to bear. But she wasted no time in feeling sorry for herself. She rolled up her sleeves and got on with work.

At home she washed dishes, cleaned the kitchen, fetched water, put order in the rooms. That's how she spent her "free" time, for the fields and the stable demanded her main efforts.

Like all her solid fellow-countrywomen, she mowed the grass, ploughed, sowed, reaped and made sheaves, dragged them to the threshing floor, and threshed. She earthed up the vines with the hoe, thinking about the vintage and winemaking.

Work had spoiled her hands, but she knew how to use them to caress her children, for while truly a hard worker, she was above all mother to her boys.

She brought them up kindly but firmly. Latter day psychologists write that for a good education a youngster needs father's *demanding* love and mother's *serenity and joy*. They add that an orphan risks losing this affective balance, resulting in softness without strength in the children, of lone mothers and in anxious dryness in those of lone father.

Margaret instinctively managed to keep a proper balance. She alternated calmed firmness and serene joy in unity. Don Bosco's educational style will owe a lot to his mother.

# A Great Personage

Margaret Occhiena had the religious sense of life at the basis of her instinctive pedagogy.

"God sees you" was one of her more oft-repeated sentences. She let the children free to run about the grass meadows. But as they left she repeated, "Remember, God sees you." If she noticed that they kept small grudges, or

were about to invent a petty lie to get out of trouble, she warned: "Remember, God sees even your most secret thoughts."

What she sculpted in her children's minds was not a God-gendarme though. As they enjoyed the fresh air on the threshold during clear, starry nights, she used to remark: "It is God who created the world and put all those stars there." Before the fields blooming with wild flowers she whispered: "How many beautiful things has the Lord made for us." As they recovered their breath after the harvest and the vintage, she urged: "Let us give thanks to the Lord. He has been good to us. He has given us our daily bread."

Even after a destructive hailstorm she invited to reflect: "The Lord has given, the Lord has taken. He knows why. If we have been evil, let us remember that God is not mocked."

At the side of his mother, brothers and neighbours, John learned to be aware of another Person: God, a great Personage, invisible but omnipresent. He was in the sky, in the fields, in the countenance of the poor, in the voice of conscience saying: "Well done, badly done." His mother had unlimited and indisputable trust in this good and provident Father, who gave their daily bread but at times allowed things difficult to understand, like dad's death, or hail on the vineyard. He knew the reason, and that was that.

## A Tip-Cat Game Draws Blood

John was hardly four when his mother assigned him three or four stems of retted hemp to fray. It was simple work, but work all the same. It was his first contribution to the economy of the household, which lived by the work of all.

Later he joined his brothers in the house chores: fetching firewood, rekindling the fire by gently blowing on the embers hidden under the ashes to save sulphur matchsticks, fetching water, shelling legumes, sweeping the rooms, cleaning the stable, herding the cows, keeping an eye on the baking, etc.

Immediately after mum-controlled work, there came play: the fields extended all round as far as the eye could see. Friends were eagerly waiting: they were strong, lively boys, but often rough and coarse. They were after mole holes, bird nests and endless games.

One of the hottest games was tip-cat.<sup>2</sup> One afternoon John returned home with a bloodied face. The wooden peg had hit him hard on the cheek. Margaret worried. While dressing his wound she said:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Matchsticks had recently been invented, but they were rather expensive item.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Lippa in Italian. It was a kind of primitive baseball. A player with a bat struck lightly a tapered wooden peg, then struck it again sending it flying while fielders tried to recover it. It went back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

"One good day you come without an eye. Why do you go with those boys? Some are up to no good."

"If it pleases you, Mum, I won't go anymore. But you see, when l am there they behave. They stop using certain words."

Margaret let him go.

Courage grows earlier than stature. When John and Joseph were five and seven respectively, Margaret had sent them to herd a flock of turkeys. While the birds looked for insects, the boys played. Suddenly Joseph, counting on fingers, shouted that one turkey was missing.

They looked everywhere to no avail. A turkey is no mean bird to disappear like that. Rounding a hedge, John came face to face with a man. He thought "There's the thief." Calling his brother Joseph, he resolutely confronted the man:

"Give us back the turkey."

The stranger looked amazed.

"A turkey? Haven't seen any around."

"You stole it. Return it lest we cry "thief, thief," and you get beaten up."

Two boys can be sent scurrying with a good spanking, but the resoluteness of these two made the man feel uneasy. There were men working not far, and if the two had decided to scream, anything might have happened. He got a sack from inside the hedge and disgorged the turkey.

"I only wanted to play a trick on you."

"No a gentleman man's trick, for sure."

In the evening they reported to mother.

"You ran quite a risk."

"Why?"

"First because you weren't sure he was the thief."

"There was no one else around,"

"It is not enough to call someone a thief. And you were two young boys against a grown man. What if he hurt you?"

"Were we to let him take the turkey?"

"It good to be courageous. Better losing one turkey though than getting thrashed."

John became thoughtful:

"Mmm, you may be right, mum, but the turkey was a big one..."

### A Cane in the Corner

Margaret was the sweetest of mothers, but strong and energetic. The boys knew that her "no" meant "no." No whim of any sort could make her change her mind.

In a corner of the kitchen there stood a cane, thin and flexible. She never used it, but never put it away.

One day john, hurrying out to play, left the rabbit hutch open. All the rabbits evaded. It was a hell of a job to catch them all.

Back to the kitchen, dog-tired, Margaret pointed at the corner:

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"John, fetch that cane."
The boy withdrew towards the door:
"What do you want it for?"
"Bring it and you will see."
"You want to cane me..."
"Why not, after what you've done"
"I won't do it again, Mum"
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The two smiled at each other.

On a day of burning sun, John and Joseph came dead thirsty back from the vineyard. Margaret went to the well, hauled a bucketful of fresh water and with a copper ladle gave a drink to Joseph first.

John sulked, offended by that preference. When his mother served him, he refused to drink. She said nothing, took the bucket to the kitchen and closed the door. Hot on her heels came John.

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"Mum..."
"What?"
"Will you give me to drink?"
"I thought you weren't thirsty."
"Forgive me, Mum."
"Well said." And she offered him the dripping ladle.
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John, now eight, is a thriving boy with a ringing laughter. Stout and solid, with dark eyes, his hair is thick and curly like lamb's wool. He likes adventure and risk. He never complains of grazed knees.

He had been climbing trees in search of bird nests. On one occasion, mishap struck. There was a tit's nest deep into the crack of a tree trunk. He thrust his arm beyond the elbow and couldn't withdraw it. After trying several times, the arm swelled. Joseph, watching from below, ran to call mother. Margaret brought a ladder, but didn't succeed either. Finally she had to go in search of

Someone with chisel. Pearls of sweat dotted John's forehead. From below Joseph, in fear than him, shouted, "Hold it, hold it, they're coming!"

The man wrapped the boy's arm into Margaret's apron and started chiseling. After seven or eight blows the arm came unstuck. Margaret did not feel like shouting at the boy, now as subdued as a drenched pup. She only said:

'Don't do it again, will you?"

### The Devil in the Loft

One autumn evening John and his mother were at Capriglio, visiting the grandparents. As whole large family sat around the table, in darkness except for an oil lamp, a suspicious noise sounded again and again above their heads. All looked up, holding their breath. A short pause and the mysterious noise started once more followed by a dull, dragging sound. The women made the sign of the cross; the children huddled by their mothers.

Warily, an old woman started telling how long ago from that same loft they could hear long, howling sounds, followed by frightening screams.

"It was the Devil. He's back."

And she crossed herself. John, unperturbed, broke the silence:

"It's a marten, not the devil."

Everyone shouted him down. Once again there was a thud followed by the long, wailing drag. The wooden roof was also the floor of the long loft used as a grain store. John broke the silence once more, jumping on a chair.

"You are mad! Margaret, stop him! There's no mucking about with the devil!"

The boy was on his feet. Lantern in hand, he lit it and got hold of a stick. His mother pleaded:

"Wouldn't it be better to wait until tomorrow?"

"Mum, you too are afraid?"

"No. Let's go together."

They clambered up the wooden ladder. Bearing lights and holding sticks, all followed behind. Opening the door wide, John lifted the light. A woman shrieked" There look! In the corner!

All looked. An upturned grain basket rocked and moved forward. John stepped towards it.

Take care! It's bewitched!"

John grabbed the basket and lifted it. A big, ruffled hen, trapped heaven knows for how many hours, shot away like a bullet, cackling. Everyone started laughing heartily. The devil! As the not too heavy basket lay unstable against the wall, the hen, pecking at some wheat grains still caught in the wickerwork, had entered the basket, upsetting it and getting trapped underneath. Tired and hungry, the poor bird was trying to escape by dragging the basket all over, hitting the odd obstacle here and there, with consequent thuds and assorted noise.

### The Oil Slick

Every Thursday, Margaret went to market at Castelnuovo. She left with two bundles full of cheese, fowl and green vegetables, coming back with cloth, salt and some small gifts for her children, who met her at sunset, galloping along the path.

One good Thursday, during a sustained game of tip-cat, the wooden peg ended up on the roof. John was quick:

"There's another one on the kitchen cupboard. I'll fetch it."

He ran for it, but the cupboard was too tall. He mounted on a chair, stood on tiptoes, stretched the arm, and crash! The oil jar fell off the cupboard, shattering and spilling its contents. The slick widened on the red tiles.

Joseph, not seeing his brother return, went back and watched the disaster. He brought his hand to his mouth:

"What will Mum not say tonight..."

They tried to put things right. They fetched a broom and gathered the broken shards. The slick widened and widened, as much as their fear.

John fell silent for about half an hour. Then he got a penknife out of his pocket, went to the hedge, cut a flexible twig and started carving it. Meanwhile he thought what to say to his mother.

Eventually the whole of the bark was intricately carved. At sunset they went to meet mother. Joseph, hesitant, stayed behind, John ran towards her:

"Good evening, Mum. How are you?"

"I am well. What about you? Have you behaved?"

"Mmm, Mum, look."

And he offered her the carved twig.

"What have you done?"

"I deserve your beating me. Unfortunately, I have broken the oil jar."

He spilled the beans and concluded:

"I have brought you the cane. I deserve it. Here it is, Mum."

And offered the twig, looking at her up from below with a craftly air of half repentance.

Margaret looked down for awhile and burst out laughing. John laughed too. Hand in hand they went home.

"Do you know you're growing into a clever rascal, John? I feel sorry for the oil jar, but I am happy you have not lied to me. Be careful next time. Oil is costly."

Joseph came closer now, after seeing the storm vanish together with his fear. I He was ten, meek and quiet, unlike John who was lively and turbulent. Patient, tenacious, ingenious Joseph loved his mother and brother with all his soul, but he was slightly afraid of Anthony.

## "I'm Your Mother, Not Your Stepmother"

Anthony was seven years older than John. He was growing as a rather introvert teenager, occasionally violent and coarse.

At times he would beat up his little brothers savagely, and Margaret had to step in between to stop him. He may have been traumatized by deaths of both his parents.

He felt a love-hate sentiment towards Margaret, switching from moments of tenderness to frightful bursts of wrath. On being scolded for his whims, he would advance towards her with clenched fists, saying with a broken voice "Stepmother!"

Margaret could have brought him to his senses with a couple of slaps, as most mothers would in those days. But she felt repugnance towards hitting anyone. She never lifted her hands against him. Firmly, she repeated:

"Anthony, I'm your mother, not your stepmother. Calm down and reflect. You will see that you were wrong to behave like this."

When Antonio cooled down, he went to her asking for pardon. But he could blow up any moment, to the great fear of the youngsters Joseph and John.

### **CHAPTER 4**

## **SPRINGTIME**

The Boscos were poor. Their home was the poorest among the few of Becchi. It had a single storey doubling up as living quarters, hayloft and stable.

Bags of maize lay in the kitchen, with two cows chewing the cud on the other side of a thin wall. The bedrooms, small and dark, were located on the ground floor under the naked roof.

It was poverty but not misery, for everyone worked, and a peasant's work yields little, but yields something. The walls were whitewashed. The bags of maize were few, but emptied piecemeal they were usually enough. The cows served as draft and ploughing animals, and therefore did not give much milk or butterfat. But the little they gave was enough.

The Bosco children were therefore never sad or aggressive. Patience renders happiness and poverty compatible.

When he was 8-9, John began sharing the family's heavy, hard work and its concomitant austerity.

Work was from dawn to dusk, and in summer the sun rises early. "He who sleeps catches no fish," Margaret reminded her boys on waking them up at the crack of dawn. With drowsy eyes, John must have asked himself where on earth were those blessed fish to be caught.

Breakfast was simplicity itself: a slice of dry bread and water. John learned to hoe, to mow grass, to handle the pruning hook, to milk the cows like a true peasant. Travel was on foot. The stagecoach passed by not far, along the road to Castelnuovo, but it cost money. At night they slept on straw mattresses filled with maize leaves.

## A Beggar's Feet

Whenever anyone fell sick in the neighbourhood, they came to wake up Margaret. They knew she never refused to give a hand. She used to wake up one of the children:

Let's go for a work of charity"

This s simple, old fashioned expression, encompassed a multitude of "values" like today's generosity, spirit of service, concern for the others, down to earth love and selflessness. Don Bosco reminisced:

In winter there was a beggar who often came to knock at our door There was snow around, and he asked to sleep in the hayloft. Before letting him up, Margaret gave him a plate of hot soup. Then she looked at his feet, often covered in sores. His worn-out clogs let in water and mud. She had no spare clogs for him, but she wrapped his feet in pieces of cloth and tied them as best she could.

Cecco was an old man who lived in one of the farmhouses of Becchi. He had been rich, but had squandered all his wealth. The children used to make fun of him. They nicknamed him "cicada." Mothers used to warn their childrenn about him with the fable of the ant and the cicada: "While we worked like ants, he sang and made merry, like a happy cicada. Learn from him."

The old man was ashamed of begging, and often went hungry. Come night, Margaret used to leave a small pot of hot soup on the windowsill, and old Cecco came and fetched it under cover of darkness.

John observed, and learned. Charity comes before hoarding. Second Matta was a stable boy employed on a farm not far. In the morning, his employer gave him two slices of dark bread and placed the halter of two Cows in his hand. He was supposed to graze them until noon. Going down the valley he met John, also bringing two cows to graze, but John had a slice of white bread, which in those days was considered a delicacy. One day John asked:

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"Will you do me a favour?"
"Willingly.
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"Let's barter our bread. Yours must taste better than mine."

Second Matta believed him, as he himself related years later. For three seasons they exchanged their slices every time they met. Only later, as a man, Matta reflected that John Bosco was a good person.

## Bandits in the Wood

There was a thick wood near the house. Often, at night, small groups of "bandits" hunted down by the police, knocked at Margaret's door for hot soup and some straw on which to sleep.

She was not afraid. She was used to it. During the Napoleonic wars, countless young men ran away from the draft. Some historians aver that

towards the end of his rule the rate of draft dodging approached 70%. They lived in wooded areas and on mountains, in packs. They lived by brigandage, or hired themselves to remote farms under false names.<sup>1</sup>

The worry was that the police<sup>2</sup> often arrived after the bandits. But at the Bosco's, a tacit truce was in force. The police, tired after the steep climb, begged Margaret for water, at times for a little wine. The bandits, on the loft, heard the noise of voices below and silently decamped. Lemoyne, Don Bosco's main and contemporary biographer, remarks, "The police often knew who was hiding in the loft, but they pretended not to know and never attempted an arrest."

Johnny looked and tried to understand. His mother told him that "before" it was the soldiers of the democratic regime who hunted down the loyalists faithful to the king. Now the hunters have become hunted. The king's police are after the democrats. Soon things will change once again. The "gallows birds," as Marquis Michele Cavour<sup>3</sup> dubbed the democrats, will become ministers, heads of police, rulers of the public welfare. Others will be hunted down.

Mama Margaret, used to such changes, offers hot soup to anyone knocking at her door without asking questions. Such events must have convinced young John Bosco of how relative politics and political parties are. He will always judge politics as a debatable and variable component of life. His life will stand on far more solid bases: souls to save, poor youth to feed and educate. He will dub it "The politics of the Our Father."

## "My Mother Taught Me to Pray"

It was not philanthropy or sentimentality that drove charity at Becchi. It was the love of God. The Lord was at home with the Boscos. Margaret was illiterate, but she knew long stretches of Sacred History and the Gospel by heart. And she believed in the need for praying, for talking to God, so as to have the strength to live and to do good. Don Bosco writes:

Throughout my childhood she taught me how to pray. She made me and my brothers fall on our knees in the mornings and evenings, and we prayed together.

The priest lived far. She did not wait for him, to find time to come and teach catechism to the children. When she was young, she had learned the

 $<sup>^{1}</sup>$  Napoleon was the first to institute the draft thus recruiting large arms. Among the dodgers, in France was young John Mary Vianney (1786 – 1859), the Holy Cure of Ars.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Carabinieri in the original. That military corps had been set up in those very years by King Victor Emmanuel I.

Father of Camillo Benso of the counts of Cavour, the main artificer of Italian unity (1810-61).

Catechism by heart, and now she was repeating it to John, Joseph and Anthony:

- Q. What does a good Christian do on rising?
- A. The sign of the cross.
- Q. What does he do after personal hygiene and dressing up?
- A. Fall on his knees if he can, before before a devout picture, and renew the act of faith in God's presence, saying devoutly: I adore you, God ...
- Q. What does he do before work?
- A. Offer it up to God.

The Rosary was one of John's earliest devotions. It was the evening prayer of all Christians. With the 50 Hail Marts, the peasants of Becchi prayed to Mary more as a mother than as a queen. They didn't think it nonsense to repeat the same prayer 50 times. After all they had been hitting the furrows hundreds of times with their hoes, and knew that it the only way to get a good harvest. While telling the beads, their thoughts went to their children, the fields, life and death. Thus John began to talk to the Blessed Virgin, and knew that She looked down and listened to him.

In his *Memoirs*, Don Bosco also recalls his first confession:

My mother prepared me. She took me to church, went to confession first and put a good word for me to the priest. Afterwards she helped me do the thanksgiving.

### To School in the Dead Season

Johnny went to Standard 1 at 9, during the winter 1824-25. Classes began on November 3<sup>rd</sup> and by March 25<sup>th</sup> were over. It was the "dead season' for the countryside. Before and after that, even children's arms, however weak, were necessary at home and in the fields.<sup>4</sup>

Since the Castelnuovo town school was five kilometres away, his first was a neighbor who knew how to read. Afterwards aunt Marianna, Margaret's sister, house servant at the Capriglio presbytery, where the priest doubled as a teacher, asked him to find a place in his school for her little nephew.

Fr Lacqua agreed. His aunt put up young John during three months, and again during the school year 1825-26. It was during that season that Antonio 17, began to harden in his attitude.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> An 1833 law had imposed compulsory and free primary education. The curriculum was the three R's and religion. But not all municipalities were in a position to implement the law.

"What does he have to go to school for? Once you know how to read and write your signature it's more than enough. Let him wield the hoe like me."

Margaret tried to reason with him:

"With the passing of the years, education becomes ever more necessary. Don't you see that even tailors and shoemakers go to school? To have someone literate and numerate at home will be most useful."

No sooner had he learned how to read than the books became his passion. He borrowed books from Fr Lacqua, spending many summer afternoons under the shadow of some tree, devouring pages. When herding cows, he was ready to look after his friends' animals provided they left him free to read.

He did not become a bookworm though. He liked reading, but he also liked playing and climbing trees.

One afternoon, together with friends, he spotted a goldfinch nest on a thick oak branch. He shinned up the trunk and sized the young birds: they were big enough to be caged. The nest was located at the very end of a long, thick branch almost parallel to the ground.

John thought and said from up above: "I'll go for it." Little by little he crawled along the branch, which was getting thinner and thinner. Stretching his arm, he got hold of the four fledglings and shoved them into his shirt.

Now he had to get back, but the branch had flexed downwards under his weight. He slid slowly backwards, but all of sudden his feet slipped and lost their grip. He remained hanging by his hands at a frightening height. He jerked the body upwards and got hold of the branch with his legs, but that was all. No effort would restore his prone position on the branch. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. His friends jumped and shouted down below, which didn't help.

When the arms gave way, he let himself go. The smashing blow was terrible. He remained senseless for a few minutes. He then managed to sit.

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"Are you hurt?"
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"I hope not"- he whispered.

"And the birds?"

"Here they are, safe and sound."

He unbuttoned the shirt and took them out.

"They cost me dear..."

Walking home, he was trembling all over and had to sit down again. On entering the house he told Joseph:

"I am unwell. Say nothing to mum."

He slept soundly, but felt the effects of that tremendous jump for many days.

### Blackbird

He had a real knack for birds. He had raised a tiny blackbird taken as a fledgling from its nest. Placing it in a cage made of wickerwork, he had taught it how to whistle. The bird learned. On seeing John, it saluted him with a modulated whistle, jumping all the time from bar to bar and looking at him with its bright dark eyes. It was a most homely bird.

One good morning the blackbird did not whistle. A cat had crashed into the cage and gulped it down. A cluster of bloodied feathers was all that was left. John wept. His mother tried to calm him down, saying that nests of blackbirds were there in plenty. But John went on sobbing. He cared nothing for other blackbirds. It was "that one," his little friend, that he cared for. It had been killed, to be seen no more.

For days he was sad, and no one was able to cheer him up. Lemoyne says that "in the end he began to reflect on the nothingness of worldly things, and took a resolution above the maturity of his age: he would no longer allow his heart to get attached to earthly things." He repeated that resolution, some years later, at the death of his best friend, and many other times.

Happily, John Bosco was never able to keep it. Like every one of us, he had a heart made of flesh, in need of love for things great and small. He w weep, with a broken heart, at Fr Calosso's death, at Louis Comollo's, at the first sight of boys behind prison bars. When someone did an evil turn to any of his boys, he would say, "If it were not sinful, I would throttle him with my hands." His boys would repeat, almost monotonously, "He loved me." Luigi Orione, one of them, will write: "I am ready to walk on burning coals to meet him once again and thank him."

Old ascetical manuals used to dub "attaching one's heart to creatures" a sin. It was better not to risk, to love little. But Vatican II, more evangelically, say that whereas creatures ought not to be made into idols, God has given us a heart for us to love fearlessly. The God of philosophers is impervious to suffering. That of the Bible loves and gets angry, suffers and weeps, quivers *with* joy and smiles tenderly.

## His Homeland

A boy begins to emerge from the family's protective cocoon aged about 9, scouting the world around him. At that age Johnny began to survey his homeland, beautiful, undulated, full of peace. Mulberry trees grew there with vines, maize and hemp. Herds and flock--- grazed there. There were dark green extensions of scrub. The hoe-wielding peasants were patient, tenacious men, loyal to their land, with roots as deep as those of the mightiest trees. They felt no shame at donning off their hats before the priest and before God, and each was a king behind the boil ted door of his homestead.

John Bosco was not only a great son of God, but also of that land. Heaven called him, but that climate, the atmosphere, the character of the people, moulded and nourished his vocation. He will always talk in the dialectal cadence of his hills, and bear the mark of his people in his soul.

### CHAPTER 5

## THE YOUNG ACROBAT

John's ninth year is marked by the "Great Dream:" the crowd of youngsters, the Man warning him: "Not with blows but with meekness," and the Woman foretelling: "One good day you will understand."

Despite grandma's prudent words, that night a great light did shine upon the future. That childhood dream conditioned the whole way of thinking and of being of John Bosco. It also conditioned his mother's behavior during the following months and years. She also saw in it the manifestation of a superior will, a clear sign of her son's priestly vocation. This is the only explanation of her subsequent conduct: leading young John along the way that would bring him to the altar.

In that dream, John saw an army of young boys, and received the order to do good to them. Why not start right away? He already knew quite a number of them: playmates, young apprentices and errand boys living on farm scattered in the countryside. Many were good boys, but others were vulgar and given to blasphemy.

In winter, many families used to spend the night together in a large stable with the great animals as central heating. While the women spun and the men smoked their pipe, John began reading to his friends. He read books borrowed from Fr Lacqua: the stories of *Guerin*, of Berthold, of the Royal France.<sup>1</sup> It was an instant success. Don Bosco recalls:

All wanted me in the stable. People from all walks of life joined my playmates. All enjoyed listening motionless to the poor young reader standing on a bench that all may have a good look at him.

The "best-seller" was by far the Royals of France. It was the marvellous and elaborate story of Charlemagne and his knights: Roland, Oliver, the traitor Ganelon, bishop Turpin and the slaughter by Durlindana, Roland's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The Royals of France and Wretched Guerin are epic romances from Charlemagne's times. Berthold was a character from the 16<sup>th</sup> century collection of tall stories. His cunning won him favour with King Alboin of the Longobards.

## Trumpets on the Hill

During the good season no one was interested in story-reading anymore. John understands: he has to do something, different and attractive. But what?

The acrobats' trumpets blare on the nearby hill. It's market day John goes with his mother. People buy, sell, argue and cheat. They enjoy themselves. They cluster around magicians and acrobats. The peasants' jaws drop before magicians and prestidigitators' tricks. John gets ideas, and begins to observe most intently the secrets of tightrope walking and of magicians' tricks.

The shows reach fever pitch during the patron saint's feast: acrobats dance on the tightrope; prestidigitators extract pigeons and rabbits out of a hat, they make a person vanish, or cut it into two and then make it reappear in one piece. There's lots of admiration for "painless tooth extractors."

But to see the show cost two soldi.<sup>3</sup> Where to get them? Margaret, consulted, answers curtly: "Make do as you can but don't ask me for money; I have none."

John makes do. He sells birds, weaves baskets and birdcages, sells them to hawkers, gathers medicinal herbs and brings them to the herbalist at Castelnuovo.

With the money he succeeds in getting to the front seats. He understands the role of the balancing pole in tightrope walking; and he takes note of the rapid finger motion hiding the magician's trick. He also sees through the crudest imbroglios.

To have a decayed tooth extracted, in those days, was sheer torture. The first anaesthetic would appear in America in 1846. John, during a fair in 1825 happened to see a "painless extraction" attributed to a magic powder. The patient had a really painful molar tooth. The prestidigitator, after dipping his fingers in the powder, while trumpets blared and drums rolled, let a spanner slide down his sleeve and with a sharp tap loosened the tooth and extracted it. The patient jumped off his chair screaming, but the trumpets blared loudly while the "dentist" hugged the patient shouting, "Thank you! Thank you! The experiment was a great success!" John is one of the few to have seen, and goes away laughing.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The Song of Roland, translated from the French, was immensely popular from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards. It is still staged as a pupper show in the south of Italy.

One soldo (L. Solidus, whence the Eng. Shilling) was five cents of a lira.

At home, he first tries the tricks: "I practiced for days and days until I learned to perfection." Months of constant practice and of headlong falls were needed before getting rabbits out of a hat and walking the tightrope. He would say many years later:

You may not believe me, but by the time I was eleven I could juggle, somersault, do the swallow trick <sup>4</sup> and walk on my hands, and even danced on the tightrope like a professional acrobat.

### Show on the Meadow

On a midsummer Sunday evening, John advertised his first show. On a carpet of sacks, he performed balancing miracles with pots and pans on the tip of his nose. He opened wide a youngster's mouth and extracted coloured balls. He waved the magic wand, and finally he walked the tightrope to his friends' cheers.

Rumour spreads. The public gathed ever bigger: youngsters and grownups, boys and girls, old men and women. The same people who heard him read *The Royals of France*, now watch him let a cascade of coins fall from a simpleton's big nose change water into wine, multiply eggs, open a lady's handbag out of which a live pigeon flies off. People laughed and clapped their hands.

His brother Anthony also went to the show, but never sat at the front. He hid behind a tree, playing hide and seek. At times he scorned the young acrobat: "There goes the good-for-nothing clown! I slog away at the hoe, and here he is, playing the charlatan!"

John suffered. At times he stopped the show and moved it a couple of hundred of metres further on, for Anthony to leave him in peace. As a "charlatan" he was a rather special one. Before the real final number, he got the Rosary out of his pocket, knelt down and invited everyone to pray. Or else, he repeated the sermon he had heard that morning in the parish. It was the entrance ticket to his shows, for both young and old. In life, John Bosco will be most .generous to others with his hard work, but as a good Piedmontese, he will do so at a price, not money, but a commitment to do something for God and for the poor.

After prayers there came the brilliant final number. He tended a rope between two trees, climbed on it with his balancing pole and walked among stunned silence and frenzied ovations. He would recall:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The swallow trick consisted in grasping a vertical pole, raising the body horizontally and spinning it with legs apart, like a swallowtail.

After a few hours of such recreation, when I was dog tired, every amusement ceased, we briefly prayed and everyone one went home.

## First Holy Communion

On Easter Sunday 1826, March 26<sup>th</sup>, John made his first Holy Communion at the Castelnuovo parish church.

My mother kept close to me. During Lent she took me to confession. "Johnny", she said "God is preparing a great gift for you; you prepare yourself well. Confess everything, be sorry, and promise to God to be better in the future." 'I promised. God knows whether I kept the promise."

That morning she came with me to the sacred table, and helped me in the preparation and in the thanksgiving. On that day she didn't want me to do any manual work, but to read and pray. She kept on repeating:

"It has been a great day for you. God has taken possession of your heart. Promise him now to be good for the rest of your life. In the future go to Communion often. Always say everything in confession. Be always obedient. Willingly go to catechism classes and to the sermon. But for the love of God avoid foul-mouthed friends like the plague."

I tried to put all that into practice. I sense that from that day on my life improved, especially in obedience and in submission to others, for which I felt great repugnance.

### The Worst Winter

Next winter was for John the worst of his life. Grandma (Francis' mother) died. Anthony, now 18, got increasingly estranged from the family. His tantrums became more frequent.

Towards the end of October, Margaret hinted at the possibility of sending John to Fr Lacqua's school for another year, to learn the rudiments of Latin. Anthony reacted sharply:

"Latin? What do we need Latin for? Work we need, work!"

Most likely Margaret mentioned John's looming priesthood, but Anthony judged it a utopia. John heard him often repeat, "To train a priest costs ten thousand lire." It was a sum way beyond the possibilities of a peasant family of the time.

Making use of the errands to aunt Marianna and grandpa living in Capriglio, John succeeded in going to Fr Lacqua often during the winter of 1826-27. Anthony felt bitter. One good day it was open war. Don Bosco himself told the story:

First to my mother, then my brother Joseph, Anthony peremptorily said:

"Enough is enough. Stop all this grammar. I have grown up big and strong and never looked at those books."

Afflicted and angry, I said something I shouldn't have:

"Neither did our donkey go to school, and behold, he's bigger than you."

At those words he flew into a rage and I just managed to run away from his beating. My mother felt most afflicted, and I cried.

For a few days the tension increased. Anthony was pig-headed, and John had no intention of offering the other cheek: he reacted in a lively way. Then the episode of the book on the eating table took place, told at the beginning of the book. John didn't manage to run in time, and was thrashed.

Next morning, Margaret said those saddest words: "It's better for you to leave home."

John arrived at the Moglia farm on a foggy day in February, his disconsolate tears securing for him employment as a stable boy.

### CHAPTER 6

# FROM STABLE BOY TO FR CALOSSO'S PUPIL

Within days Luigi Moglia said to his wife, "That boy is not bad business." John Bosco had started with dedication. He was keen and obedient. His task was to look after the stable animals. The heaviest chore was to lay fresh straw every morning for the cows, removing the manure with a pitchfork and carrying it away on a wheelbarrow. Then he had to curry the animals, take them to the drinking trough, climb up the loft to get hay, fill the mangers with the daily ration, and milk the cows.

Obviously he did not do all that single-handed; he helped the chief cowherd, who assigned to him chores within his capacity.

John showed his goodness also at the evening prayers. Dorothy often invited him to direct the Rosary.

His sleeping quarters consisted in a small, clear room, better than at Becchi, where he had to share a room with one of his brothers. After a while he ventured to light a candle end and read for an hour or so. The books were on loan from Fr Lacqua. No one objected, and he went on.

Come Saturday evening, he would ask the owner permission to go to Moncucco early in the morning. He was back by breakfast time, and at ten o'clock he went to High Mass with the whole family.

As the strange permission was asked for every Saturday, Dorothy became curious, for she was responsible for the boy to his mother. She went to Moncucco before dawn, and from a friend's house spotted John arriving and entering church. There she saw him going to confession, attend early Mass and go to communion.

It was a rare thing to receive the Eucharist in those days. At High Mass no one went to receive. Whoever wanted Communion had to attend low Mass early in the morning.

Dorothy returned home with him.

"From now on, when you want to go to low Mass, just go. There is no need to ask for permission."

In confession, John confided his desire for the priesthood to Fr Cottino, the parish priest. He spelled out the difficulties. The priest encouraged him to be regular in confession, to receive the Eucharist weekly, to pray during the day and to trust in the Lord: if it was His will, the difficulties would be resolved. He also exhorted him not to abandon his studies and offered to give him Latin classes if compatible with his work. In the meantime he would lend him books.

### Two Grains and Four Ears of Corn

Old man Joseph, Luigi Moglia's uncle, was coming back from the fields dripping sweat, hoe on his shoulder. It was noon, and the belfry of Moncucco struck twelve. The old man, tired, sat on the hay to recover his breath. Not far he spotted John also on the hay, but on his knees, saying the Angelus as his mother had accustomed him, three times a day.

Half serious and half merry, Giuseppe grumbled:

"Bravo! We masters wear ourselves out from morning till night to exhaustion. And the stable boy takes it easy and prays in peace and quiet."

John's answer was also half serious, but sharp:

When it's question of working, barba<sup>1</sup> Joseph, you know well that I don't shirk it. But my mother taught me that if one prays, four ears of corn sprout from two seeds. And when one doesn't, two ears sprout from four seeds. Hence, it would be good to pray too."

"God bless us!" blurted the old man. "Now we have a priest at home."

With the fair season the boy took the cows to grazing. He was responsible for their not straying into other people's property, their not eating wet grass and their horn not getting their horns damaged.

Sitting in the shade of a tree, as the animals grazed, he would find time to read. Moglia did not complain, but shook his head.

"Why do you read so much?"

"I want to be a priest."

"Don't you know that to study, today, one needs nine to ten thousand lire? Where will you find them?

"If it's God's will, someone will see to it."

One of his playmates was 8-year old Anna, Moglia's daughter. On seeing John reading instead of playing, she became irritated.

"Stop reading John."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Italian for "beard" but Piedmontese slang for "uncle."

"But I want to be a priest, to preach, to hear confessions."

The girl teased him:

"A priest? You'll be a cowherd at most."

"You tease me now, but some day you will come to confession to me."2

The Moglias allowed him to go to school with Fr Cottino during winter, but rarely. Classes were few and far between and progress was minimal.

Besides the parish priest, he made friends with the Moncucco boys. The presbytery entrance doubled as classroom during the week and as meeting hall on Sundays. John did his magician's tricks, read the most action-packed pages of sacred history and got his little friends to pray.

When bad weather prevented him from making it to Moncucco, some of the boys living nearby went to him at the Moglia's. John showed them the hayloft, amused them and taught them the catechism.

From February 1827 to November 1829 almost three years went by, apparently wasted as regarded his studies. But were they wasted in regard of God's call? Biographer Pietro Stella reports an apparently insignificant event: "On one occasion, Dorothy and her brother-in-law found John on his knees with a book in his hands. His eyes, shut, pointed to heaven. They shook him into consciousness. Those years were not wasted. The sense of God took root in him, leading him to contemplation. He talked to God while working the fields. Those were years of waiting, recollection and entreaty, on the part of God and men."

In 1827 Alessandro Manzoni<sup>3</sup> published in Milan the first edition of *The Betrothed*. In 1828 Giacomo Leopardi<sup>4</sup> began drafting his great poem *Idillii*: In 1829 Gioacchino Rossini<sup>5</sup> staged William *Tell*, one of his masterpieces. During those same years, John Bosco curried cows in a lost farm of the Monferrato. But he began to converse with God.

### Uncle Michael

Mama Margaret felt John's absence at the Moglia's like a thorn in her heart. She must have talked to her brother Michael who, at the expiry of the rural labour contracts on November 11<sup>th</sup> went to see his nephew. He found him leading the cows out of their shed.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Anna told her children this episode. Four or five times a year she used to go to Valdocco for confession to Don Bosco, who welcomed her like a sister.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> 1785 – 1873. Patriot and literary man. The novel is still acclaimed as a masterpiece of world literature.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> 1798 - 1837. Poet, scholar and philosopher. Died in Naples of the plague.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> 1792 – 1868. Prolific composer of many operas and of classical music. He invented the musical device called "crescendo."

"No. They are kind to me, but I want to study. I am 14 now and have not advanced a whit."

Return the animals to the stable and go back to Becchi. I will speak to your masters, after which I am due to the market at Chieri. But tonight I will call at home and we'll fix everything."

John re-made his bundle, said goodbye to signora Dorothy, signor Stephen, barba Joseph, Teresa and Anna. They were friends now for life.

Not far from Becchi, Margaret spotted him and rushed to meet him:

"Anthony is at home. Hide until uncle Michel arrives. If Anthony sees you he might suspect a plot and God knows what might happen."

John slipped away behind a hedge and sat near a ditch. It was not over then. One had to be ready for a struggle.

Uncle arrived in the dead of night. He picked tip his nephew, numb with cold, and him home. There was tension, but not war. Anthony was now 21 and about to marry. On being promised that John's upkeep and his studies would not fall on him, he did not object.

Michael got in touch with the parish priest. Of Castelnuovo and Buttigliera, trying to put his nephew up with them. But he didn't go far. The solution came completely unexpected.

### Four Soldi for a Sermon

In September 1829 a new chaplain Fr John Melchior Calosso had come Morialdo. He was about 70. He had resigned the parish of Bruino years earlier because of ill health. He was a venerable priest, loaded with years and with pastoral experience.

In November a "popular mission" was held at Buttigliera. John was there, as was Fr Calosso. On the way home, the old priest spotted among the throng a 14-year old boy walking all alone.

"Where are from, son?"

"Becchi. I have listened to the missionary's sermon."

"I wonder what you understood with all those Latin quotes." He shook his head smiling. "Your mother could have given you a timelier sermon."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Popular missions had their origin in the preaching of St Vincent de Paul (1580 – 1660). The aim was to stimulate the faith and piety of the popular masses. The means were a series of meditations and devotional exercises covering the whole of Christian doctrine, delivered by professional preachers over a period of a few days.

"It's true. My mother often preaches to me. But I think I have understood the missionaries"

"Really? If you repeat to me a few points of today's sermon I will give you four soldi."

John started and repeated the sermon word for word, as if he were reading it in a book.

Fr Calosso kept his emotion to himself.

"What's your name?"

"John Bosco. My father died when I was two."

"Where did you go to school?"

"I learned the three R's at Fr Lacqua's, at Capriglio. I would love to go on studying, but my elder brother won't hear of it, and the parish priests at Castelnuovo and Buttigliera have no time to help me.'

"Why do you want to study?"

"To be a priest"

"Tell your mum to come and see me at Morialdo. Old as I am, I may be able to give you a hand."

Margaret, sitting at Fr Calosso's desk, heard:

"Your son has a prodigious memory. Let us not waste any more time to get him to study. I am old, but I will do whatever I can."

They agreed in letting John study with the old priest, not far from Becchi. He would go home to sleep and to help during the high agricultural season.

Suddenly John had attained what he had missed for so long: fatherly confidence, a sense of security and trust. He wrote:

I immediately placed myself into Fr Calosso's hands. I bared my soul to him, relating my every thought, word and act. I realised what boon it was to have a regular spiritual guide, a faithful friend of one's soul, which I had never had. Among other things, he forbade a penance I used to practice, for being too muck for my age and circumstances. He encouraged frequent confession and communion. He taught me daily mental prayer and d spiritual reading.<sup>7</sup>

While at Bruino, Fr Calosso had revived a "Company of Mary Help of Christians." There was also a statue dedicated to Mary under that title in the parish church. Was it from him that Don Bosco got his devotion to her under the same title?

## "Every Hope Died with Him"

By September 1830 he was staying with Fr Calosso also for the night, perhaps to avoid possible tensions with Anthony. He went home weekly for the laundry.

His studies progressed satisfactorily. He would recall those days enthusiastically:

It is difficult to imagine my happiness. I loved Fr Calosso like a father; I served him most willingly in everything. That man of God had so much affection for me that would often repeat "Do not worry about the future. For as long as I live you will lack nothing. Should I die, I will provide for you." I was so happy. But an unexpected disaster shattered every hope.

One morning of November 1830, while John is at home for his laundry bag, someone hurries to tell him that Fr Calosso has been taken ill.

"I didn't run, I flew," would recall Don Bosco. It was a heart attack. Fr Calosso recognised John, but couldn't speak. He pointed at a key in a drawer, making signs not to hand it to anyone.

And that was it. All the boy could do was to cry desperately over the dead body of his second father. "Every hope was dashed with his death"

The remaining hope was the key. In the drawer he found six thousand lire. From the dying man's gestures it was clear that they were meant for him and his future. Some who had assisted Fr Calosso confirmed it. But there were others who maintained that the words of a dying person mean nothing. Only a regular will gives or takes away rights.

Fr. Calosso's nephews arrived. They behaved most honestly. They inquired and said to John:

"It would seem that our uncle left this money to you. Take all you want."

John thought for a while:

In his Memoirs, Don Bosco summarises all these events in a single sentence: "When Fr Calosso's heirs turned up, I handed over to them the key and everything else." It was an abrupt decision shorn of all possible calculations. As a priest, his password would come from Scripture: Give me souls and take away the rest.<sup>8</sup>

Once more, John was on his own. He was 15 and had no teacher, no money and no plans for the future. 'I wept disconsolately" are his words.

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<sup>8</sup> Gn 14:21

## CHAPTER 7 CASTELNUOVO

But life had to go on.

To prevent further difficulties with Anthony, Margaret decided to divide the property. The excuse was Anthony's impending marriage, which contracted with Anna Rosso on 21" March 1831.

Both the fields and the house were divided. Half of it went to Anthony and the other half to Margaret, Joseph and John.

In December, John hit the road to the Castelnuovo municipal school. Besides the primary section, the municipality was offering a five-year Latin language course. But the students were few, and they attended classes in a single classroom. Their only teacher was Fr Emmanuel Virago.

### Lunch in the Mess-Tin

At the beginning John, 15 and strong, thought nothing of the five kilometres separating Becchi from Castelnuovo. He left home with a slice of bread as a midmorning snack. After three and a half hours of morning classes he returned home for lunch. Then he walked back to school for the three hours of afternoon classes and returned in the evening. It took the first snowfall to modify the crazy rhythm of 20 kilometres a day.

Uncle Michael found part-time lodgings for him at John Roberto's, a good man who doubled up as tailor and town musician. John took lunch at his house, eating out of a mess-tin.

But five kilometres in the morning and five in the evening are no joke, especially in winter. John walks decidedly, come rain or snow. Like all rural folk he saved his shoes for the classroom, walking barefoot in the mud. Rain, wind, sun and dust are his only travel companions for many days.

There are evenings, in January, when he doesn't feel like returning home in a blizzard, and asks signor Roberto to sleep under the staircase, even without dinner.

Mama Margaret was only too aware that John's health could be affected by the wintry conditions and made a deal with the tailor. For a reasonable sum, payable in corn or wine, signor Roberto would give John full lodging: hot soup at noon and the space under the staircase at night. Mum will provide the bread.

She walked with him to Castelnuovo carrying the little equipment a 15-year old may need. She entrusted signor Roberto with "keeping an eye pulling him by the ears," and said to John: "Be devout to the Blessed Virgin Mary, that she may help you grow up."

His schoolmates were 10-11 year-olds. His cultural make-up, to date, have been rather modest. Because of his oversize coat and tatty shoes he soon became the target of practical jokes and ridicule. He got dubbed "the cowherd of Becchi."

Remembering how adored he was by the boys of Morialdo and Moncucco, John suffers. But he gets on with studying, helped and well liked by the teacher. Fr Virano was a capable and kind man. Spotting John's good will, he took him aside and made him progress rapidly. When John drafted an excellent composition on the biblical character of Eleazar, Fr Virano read it publicly, concluding"

"Whoever can write essays like this, can afford to wear cowherd's boots.

What matters in life is the head, not the boots."

Castelnuovo d' Asti stands on high ground some 20 kilometres from Turin. Near the hilltop there are the ruins of an ancient castle, and on the ancient castle, and on the very top there stands "The Castle Church" dedicated to Our Lady. John often climbed there, praying the Lady "to make him grow up well."

Six hundred families accounted for the 3, 000 inhabitants of Castelnuovo. Mama Margaret came weekly from Becchi bringing two big round loaves meant to last the whole week. She also kept a close eye on her son. It was providential, for among the classmates there were half scoundrels who could have easily led him astray.

That year some schoolmates were a danger for me. They wanted me to play truant and gamble with them. As I pleaded to having no money, they said. "It's time you wake up. Steal from your master and from your mum." I remember replying "mother loves me a lot. The last thing I want is to displease her."

Schooling, in those days was very much rooted in religious instruction. Half an hour of catechism opened the day every morning. The last Saturday period was dedicated to Christian religious instruction, and the teachers were supposed to give the students not only the possibility, but also the facility to attend daily Mass and monthly confession.

### "Only Asses Grow up at Becchi"

By April John had no sooner recovered much of his lost time, than disaster struck once more. Fr Virano was commissioned parish priest at Mondonio, leaving the school in the hands of Fr Nicholas Moglia.

Fr Moglia was pious and given to almsgiving, but he was 75. He was absolutely incapable of controlling the five classes. One good day he would threaten the boys with the rod in an outburst of anger, on another he would sit down helpless before utter chaos.

He confronted the oldest as responsible for the continuous disorder. He had a particular aversion for the oldest of all, "the cowherd of Becchi," who himself felt the keenest discomfort at the disorder. Every occasion was good to mortify him:

"What can you understand of Latin? Only big asses grow up at Becchi. They are good, very good, but still asses." Go gather mushrooms and birds' nests: that's your lot, not studying Latin."

The schoolmates, who had left him in peace at Fr Virano's benevolence towards him, now went wild again. John felt discouraged.

One good day he decided to take his revenge. Fr Moglia had assigned a Latin translation test. John, in Class One, asked if he could do the test for Class Three. Fr Moglia felt offended.

"What do you think you are? Go straight back to your seat, and stop playing the ass."

John insisted. The priest gave in.

"Do what you like, but don't expect me to read your idiocies."

The boy swallowed hard and got on with it. It was slightly difficult, but he felt up to it. He was among the first to finish. The teacher got the paper and set it aside.

"Please read it. Tell me my mistakes."

"Go sit down and stop bothering me." John, kind but stubborn, didn't give up.

"I'm not asking you much, just to read it."

Fr Moglia read. The translation was excellent, which made him lose his temper even more.

"I said it that you were a good-for-nothing. You have copied it from A to Z."

"From whom?"

His neighbours were still at their work, biting their pens in search of inspiration.

"Impertinent! – burst out the priest -Back to your seat, and thank me for not chasing you out of school."

Arteriorsclerosis and prejudice form a deadly combination, then as now.

Those last months of the school year were months of humiliation for John. He will not name Fr. Moglia in his *Memoirs*. He respected old people. But he will allude to "one could not keep order. He almost scattered to the winds all that Fr. Virano had taught in the previous months."

## The Alienating "Black Cassock"

There was another thorn in John's side during those months. He had made the acquaintance of two splendid priests, Frs Calosso and Virano. He couldn't understand how different all the others were.

I happened to meet my curate on the road, in the chaplain's company. I greeted them from afar; on coming up to them I bowed to their cassock; but they kept distances, happy with kindly returning the greeting without interrupting their walk.

The black cassock seemed to cut them off from the people. In the seminary, students were taught the appropriate behaviour for an ecclesiastic reserve and gravity, detachment.

I felt very displeased about it. And said to my• friends, should I become a priest, I will do the opposite. I will approach the boys, talk nicely to them, and give them good advice.

John was far from imagining that this resolution of his would cause a true, if silent, revolution among the clergy in the next 80 years. In the seminaries they will realize that the boy was right, and will educate the new generations of priests not to gravity that keeps distances, but to that smiling goodness that does away with them.

At Morialdo, John used to spend his free time in serene conversation Fr Calosso. The old priest recalled his past, and the boy daydreamed about the future. Then he swept the church, did the washing up in the kitchen and rummaged for books in the small library.

At Castelnuovo the priests didn't want to have anything to do with him. How was he to spend his free time?

Music was his first hobby. Signor Roberto was the head chorister of the parish and kept a spinet at home. John used to go with him often to the chantry rehearsals. With his help John had a go first at the spinet and then at the organ.

But Roberto's first occupation was tailoring, and John's second hobby was to sit next to him and learn how to sew buttons, take hems up, sew handkerchiefs and cut waistcoats. He worked so well that Roberto proposed to him to forget school and become his assistant.

In April Fr Moglia started harassing him, and the chaos at school convinced him that he was wasting his time. With his mother he agreed to apprentice himself to blacksmith Evasio Savio. He learned to wield hammer, file and work at the forge.

He was far from imagining that all those trades would one day come handy for the opening of workshops for the poor boys of the Turin outskirts. His only worry at the time was to save some little money, which he would soon need. The following year he and his mother took a risky but decisive step: schooling at Chieri.

### **CHAPTER 8**

## "I MUST STUDY"

John packed up and said goodbye to signor Roberto, but did not return to Becchi. He went instead to Sussambrino, where his brother Joseph, together with Joseph Febraro, worked as sharecropper. Margaret also left Becchi with her son.

Those summer months were a time of intense study. He did not want to find himself handicapped at Chieri.

But he did not want to be a burden to his brother either. So he helped in the farm chores. He built a rudimentary forge with which to mend farm tools, and herded cows. Looking after the animals gave him time to read and study.

10- year old Rose Febraro, Joseph's daughter would recall years later that John was so much taken by his books as to let the cows stray more often than not. She looked for him studying among the maize stalks, and brought back the straying animals before the farmers could protest.

"Your cows were having a go at the millet."

"Thank you, Rose."

She looked at him for a while.

'Why do you take them to graze if you don't look after them?'

"I must study, Rose; every now and then I get distracted."

"Is it true you're going to be a priest?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll look after your cows for you, together with mine."

John thanked her and plunged back into the pagers of his books.

### One More Dream

At Castelnuovo John had befriended his schoolmate Joseph Turco. The boy's father owned the Renenta, a farm bordering on the Sussambrino. He

was a good man and a good Christian. At times he passed by John as the boy studied.

"Come on, John, this time you'll succeed."

"Thanks, signor Tuno. I really hope so. My only fear is that my mother won't be able to pay for my lodgings at Chieri"

"But the Lord is there, isn't He? He will smooth the way for you."

"I hope so. But I am still afraid"

It was a sad smile. It was difficult to contradict him, as so much had gone awry. But one good day the Turcos, father and son, saw him run excitedly:

"I have good news. Last night I dreamt a dream. I saw myself as a priest looking after many boys."

Turco senior was perplexed.

"It's only a dream, though."

"You can't understand. It's enough for me. This time I will succeed."

He had seen the same valley dreamt at 9. He had seen the flock and the shining Lady entrusting him with it. "Become humble, strong and sturdy," she repeated, "and one day you will understand."

The village of Montafia celebrated its patron saint's feast during summer. It wasn't far, and John came to know that they had set up a greasy pole. Among the prizes there was a purse with 20 lire.

They'd come handy, he thought, and went.

The pole was very tall, smooth and well greased. The young men cast greedy glances at the steel ring up there, from which all the goodies hung. There were packages, cold meats, salami, wine bottles and the purse. Every now and then someone, egged on by the shouts of the crowd, spat on his hands and had a go. They all rushed up the pole at the beginning, but half way were out of breath and had to give up. They slid down to the booing and yelling of the throng.

After sizing up the situation, suddenly John stepped up to the pole, spat on his hands and gripped it. He began climbing, but slowly and calmly. Every now and then he sat on his heels to recover breath.

People below shouted impatiently, waiting for his sliding down. But that money mattered a lot to him. At Moncucco he had worked for a yearly wage of 15 lire and there, within climbing distance, there were 20. He was ready to spend the rest of the day on the pole if necessary.

Inching his way up, he arrived where the pole thinned out. He got his breath back and gave the last, decisive pull-up. He stretched his hand, removed the purse with the 20 lire and placed it in his teeth. Then he removed salami and slid down.

## A Reluctant Beggar

Twenty lire off the greasy pole were not quite enough for the transplant to Chieri. He lad to buy suits, shoes, books, to say nothing of lodgings. The Sussambrino sharecropping was not a gold mine either. In October, John talked to his mother.

"If you agree, I get hold of two sacks and go begging from the neighbouring families."

It was hard for his self-esteem. Don Bosco will become the greatest "beggar" of the 19th century, but begging will always be hard for him. In that month he overcame his repugnance to stretch his hand for the first time.

Morialdo was an odd collection of scattered villages and homesteads.

"I'm Margaret Bosco's son. I'm going to Chieri to study for the priesthood. My mother is poor. Please help me if you can."

All knew him. They had been at his shows, had heard him repeat the homily and they loved him. But they were not that well off. They gave him eggs, some maize and a few measures of wheat.

A brave woman from Becchi, going to Castelnuovo, went straight to the parish priest Fr Dassano. She told him that it was a shame not to help such a good boy in his studies, forcing him to beg from door to door.

Fr. Dassano knew nothing of it. He thought that come November, John would resume his studies at Castelnuovo.

He gathered information, obtained a small sum of money and sent it to Margaret. He also put her in touch with Lucy Matta, a widow moving to Chieri to look after her son, also a student.

It was a good piece of advice. Margaret spoke to the woman. John would stay with her son. Full board was 21 lire monthly.

Margaret could not afford it in cash, but undertook to pay it in flour and wine, while John undertook several domestic chores: fetch water, get firewood for the fireplace and the stove, hang out the washing, etc.

Towards the end of October John appeared before the parish priest at Castelnuovo for the certificate of admission. To be admitted to the public school, every young man had to get a certificate of good conduct from the priest. The latter also undertook to supervise the boy's holidays and to report a possible bad behaviour.

King Charles Felix<sup>1</sup> had issued this provision of the law shortly before his death the same year 1831.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> 1765-1831. 11<sup>th</sup> child of Victor Amadeus III, he was the last ruler of the main Savoy dynasty.

## The March of History

While John Bosco lived his difficult childhood among the hills of Castelnuovo, history was marching on relentlessly Without pretending to be exhaustive, a few historical remarks are necessary for a better understanding of John Bosco's personal development. Many of his impressions, ideas and reactions have to do with that history

Against the rigid reaction of the princes, the years 1815-20 had seen the spreading of secret societies throughout Italy They were preparing rebellion and revolution.<sup>2</sup>

In January 1820, the first spark of revolution had burst in Spain. At Cadiz, a military revolt had forced king Ferdinand VII to put an end to his absolutism and grant a constitution: a law that guaranteed freedom and the right to vote to each citizen. The king swore to abide by the constitution.<sup>3</sup>

Six months later the same spark burst in Italy, causing a widespread fire. In the kingdom of the Two Sicilies a small cavalry regiment revolted to the cry, "Long live freedom and the Constitution." Within a week king Ferdinand I granted the constitution on the Cadiz model, not to lose his kingdom.<sup>4</sup> He swore on the Gospel to abide by it.

On March 10th 1821, when John Bosco was six, a military revolt also hit Piedmont. Its leader was Count Santorre Santarosa.<sup>5</sup> The city of Alessandria hauled down the Savoy flag and hoisted a tri-coloured flag similar to the revolutionary one of France. The garrisons at Pinerolo and Vercelli also rose in revolt. A colonel marched on Turin at the head of a regiment.

King Victor Emanuel 16 rushed in terror from Moncalieri to Turin and summoned the Crown Council, which counselled him to grant the constitution so as not to lose everything. He was about to do it when he got news that Austria had decided intervention to "restore order."

By "princes" is meant here "heads of state" Their rigidity would avail nothing against the money power, which financed rebellion and revolution against the institution of the Christian monarchy everywhere. The English Civil War 1642-49 was the first episode. World War II 1939 – 45 would be the last.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> 1784 – 1833. The Constitution had been adopted in 1812, but Napoleon, whose prisoner Ferdinand, was, had sent him to overthrow it. After Napoleon's fall the constitution was restored and Ferdinand, now (1820) in debt like all the other monarchs, had to accept it.

<sup>1751 – 1825.</sup> The granting of constitution was the first revolutionary step towards overthrowing the monarchies. The aim of the secret societies behind the revolutionary movements is the establishment of a World Government under a universal monarchy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> 1783 – 1825. After the failure of the revolt, Santarosa tried his luck in Greece, but was killed by Egyptian fire during the siege.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> "Austria" was the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, including today's Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, North-East Italy, and the greater part of the Balkans, Until World War I Austria acted as a conservative factor throughout Europe. The Great War shattered the Empire and the 1919 Peace Treaty dismantled it.

Overwhelmed by the events, Victor Emmanuel abdicated in favour of his brother Charles Felix, away at Modena. He nominated 23-year old prince Charles Albert as regent.

### "Tell the Prince"

Charles Albert<sup>8</sup> had hobnobbed with Santarosa, whose ideas he somewhat shared. He was however permanently undecided between absolutism and liberalism. His wavering character would secure for him the title "re tentenna." What he really wanted was power at all costs, against the Austrians on one side and the liberals on the other.

A great throng had gathered under his palace requesting a constitution (how many knew what it meant?). <sup>10</sup> He gave in and signed it on the evening of March 13<sup>th</sup>. It had been drafted on the Cadiz model. Two days later he swore to respect it. He formed a new government, with Santarosa as Minister of War.

When Charles Felix got the news at Modena, he came furious. To Chevalier Costa, the bearer of Charles Albert's letter, he said "Tell the Prince that: if there is still royal blood in his veins, let him go to Novara to receive orders."

Charles Albert at first tried to resist, but catastrophic news came from Naples: an Austrian army had defeated the liberal troops; Parliament had dissolved, the constitutional regime overthrown. The young prince withdrew to Novara. Thence he abdicated the regency and invited all to submit to the king. And left for exile to Florence."

An Austrian army went ahead of Charles Felix returning to Piedmont. It defeated Santarosa's volunteers and "restored order." 70 leaders of the revolt were condemned to death (68 *in absentia after* escaping to Switzerland or France), 300 civil servants were sacked and the Universities of Turin and Genoa closed for a year. Charles Felix, writing to his brother in exile, said that "all University graduates are corrupt; good people are all ignorant."

The "risings of 1821," as history books would dub them, involved exclusively the middle classes. The masses of peasants and the workers remained completely indifferent, at times even hostile. Tradesmen, small

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> 1798 – 1948. He was the first ruler of the Carignano line of the Savoy dynasty.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Italian for "wavering king."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> "Constitution" was often a catchword. In the 1825 uprising at St Petersbury, the Russian troops were crying "Constitution" after having been deceived into thinking that it was the name of the future wife of crown Prince Constantin.

Florence was at the time the capital of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.

entrepreneurs, industrialists, military and civil personnel intended to make use of the "liberal revolution" to replace the aristocrats in power. The reforms demanded by the Cadiz Constitution were neither popular nor democratic. The right to vote was reserved to those with property. They were the ones to send representatives to Parliament, evidently to defend their interests. As the French Revolution had already done, the liberal revolution intended to abolish all privileges except that conferred by money.<sup>12</sup>

## "King by the Grace of God and of No One Else"

Charles Felix re-entered Turin in October 1821. By today's standards he is a most extraordinary figure. He had never desired to be king. He loved a retired, modest life, and was most pious. He accepted the throne exclusively as "a duty of conscience."

But the moment he accepted, he was consistent with his rigidly absolutist views to the end. He understood himself as a king "by the grace of God and of no one else," intending to govern his people as the head of a household governs a family of rogues. Nothing was farther from his mind than the "popular sovereignty" of Illuminist<sup>13</sup> coin bandied about by the French Revolution. He was the sovereign. The people were not.

He gave the monopoly of public education to the clergy. The censorship of books was in the hands of the bishops and the Turin diocesan Curia. He directed that schools should teach catechism daily, and that children should pray before and after classes. The schools John Bosco went to at Chieri during ten years, four in public school and six in the seminary, the books he read, the timetable imposed on him, all bore the "stamp" of Charles Felix.

The king sent the Jews back to the ghetto, withdrawing the rights granted to them by Napoleon. Among the military regulation was the following:

The soldier shouting or making seditious speeches will be punished with between 100 and 120 strokes of the cane, divided into two sessions with a day of rest.

He understood the death penalty as a salutary deterrent, and thus approved the application of "red-hot iron tongs" to the condemned men being taken to the gallows. This detail, more than any other, deserved for him the nickname of "Charles the Fierce." <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The last sentence can be repeated today without changing an iota.

Rationalist Secret society founded by Adam Weisshaupt in the 18th century. Together with Freemasonry it has consistently upheld revolutionary movements.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Carlo Feroce in Italian.

He never understood the message of an anonymous poster stuck on the walls in Turin: "Majesty, your subjects are no longer things; they are persons." For him they were no more than subjects, to be kept on the straight and narrow with strong-arm tactics. D'Azeglio<sup>15</sup> defined his ten-year reign as "despotism full of right and honest intentions."

He died in April 1831, leaving the throne to the same Charles Albert whom he had previously dubbed "a degenerate sucker of our family." He had just heard the disquieting news from Modena, Parma and Bologna: the liberals had once again risen, as in Paris the year before, against the absolute rulers. Austria had sent an army to crush the rebellion led by industrial Cyrus Menotti and by General Zucchi. There was fear of an invasion of Savoy by a volunteer legion gathered at Lyons, but the French police dispersed it.

## "As Long and Sad as Lent"

Charles Albert, 33, succeeded him on the throne at Turin. He had to remake his "image" before the absolutists and the reactionaries by fighting in Spain against the liberals. They paid him back in the same coin dubbing him "traitor and perjurer."

He was extremely pale and tall (6 foot 8). The Piedmontese populace lost no time dubbing him "as long and sad as Lent." To show that he no longer the prince who signed the Constitution, he ordered 19 Mazzini followers (7 at Alessandria and 12 at Genoa) shot by firing squad and condemned 70 more to prison terms.

But Piedmont and Italy, despite the attempts at stopping history in its tracks, has changed. The middle class had become very important. Even without understanding what "democratic freedom" meant, it would ask for commercial freedom, which would spread well-being through the peninsula.

Piedmont now saw the building of canals, the draining of swamps, the clearing of forests, and the cultivation of the mulberry tree and of the vine. The cultivation of the potato put an end to the recurrent and terrible famines following periods of drought. About thirty iron-ore mines were opened, a ceramic industry also started. The town of Bra became a tanning centre; Cuneo became the first European market for silkworm cocoons. As soon as Charles Albert lowered the custom tariff on wool, the Biella region became the seat of flourishing wool industry: spinning mills mushroomed everywhere, and the first Merino sheep made their appearance.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> 1798 – 1866. Aristocrat, painter, author and statesman.

The need for improving the road network was felt next, and for the railway shortly afterwards.

Political thinking also inexorably changes. In the last months of 1831, at Marseilles, Mazzini<sup>16</sup> founded the society "Young Italy." The idea of Italy as a national state began to spread as a development of its historical identity determined by its cultural and popular traditions, necessarily leading to freedom and independence. Italians began to understand that they had a common destiny, which they themselves ought to lead, together with (or instead of) kings, who up to now had been considering the people as a flock of incapable minors.

In the year 1832 Turin saw the publication of *My Prisons* by Silvio Pellico. The booklet shook Italy, instilling a different way of thinking. Austria, up to then considered as the guardian of public order and social peace, loses face. In the meek and sad pages of the writer, who spent ten years in the imperial prisons, the Austrian government shows the fierce aspect of a torturing and repressive tyranny.

<sup>16</sup> 1805 – 72. Young Italy was under the control of the Masonic society Haute Vente Romaine, whose leaders despised Mazzini in no uncertain terms.

#### **CHAPTER 9**

## LAST ADOLESCENT YEARS AT CHIERI

On 4<sup>th</sup> November 1831, an unusually sunny day, John walked to Chieri in the company of his age mate John Filippello. On the road, John confides to his friend his hopes in the future studies, his past and his many attempts. Filippello, a simple boy asks:

"Only now you are going to study, and you know so much already? Soon you will be a parish priest!"

John becomes serious.

"Do you know what to be a parish priest means? He has the gravest duties. On getting up from table at lunch or dinner, he must reflect: I have eaten. Have my parishioners? Whatever he has he must divide with the poor. Dear Filippello, I will never agree to be a parish priest. I intend to dedicate my whole life to the youth."

While the two boys walked and talked of hunger and poverty, the silk workers of Lyon, 250 kilometres as the crow flies, were rioting. They took to the streets protesting against low wages and an 18-hour day. There were battles in the streets. The French army crushed the strike with more than 1,000 casualties.

Next year Paris would register a similar revolt with 800 dead. In the spring of 1834 the Lyon and Paris workers will riot together to the cry: "Let us live working or die fighting." They will be met by whiffs of grapeshot.<sup>1</sup>

John Bosco was in the dark about all that. No news transpired in the government-controlled newspapers. During the first months, bits of stray news reached him about the liberal risings. A plot had been discovered at Turin. The leaders were certain Brofferio and Bersani, heads of a society "Knights of Freedom." Bersani will mark seven years in prison at the fort of Fenestnelle. The "revolution" whispered about every now and then is leading Italy towards a constitution and independence from Austria. The movement will soon be nicknamed 'Risorgimento."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Anti-personnel artillery charge.

Another word for "resurrection." It would lead to Italy's political unity in 1860. At the same time Germany was becoming one State under the leadership of Otto von Bismarck (1815 - 98).

John did not even suspect the existence of another revolution, deeper and radical, already transforming northern Europe and about to arrive in Italy. It is the Industrial Revolution, with the concomitant "social question." He will get acquainted with it first hand in ten years, on his arriving in Turin.<sup>3</sup>

## Sticking Out Like a Sore Thumb

"My lodgings were at Lucia Matta's, a widow with an only son," wrote Don Bosco.

Margaret accompanied John to Chieri. A friend had carted there her two sacks of wheat. She went to see the widow.

"This is my son, and this is the rent. I've done my part. My son will do his, and I hope you'll be happy with him."

The first person I met was Fr Placid Valimberti, dearly remembered. He gave me good advice, introduced me to the school discipline master and to the teachers. As my earlier studies were a hotchpotch of subjects without a fixed aim, I was advised to enrol in Class Six.

The teacher, Fr Valerian Pugnetti, was very good to me. He looked after me in a special way, he invited me home, and saw to it that I lacked nothing that could have helped me

I had turned 16. My build made me stick out like a sore thumb among my tiny schoolmates. Anxious to get out of that after two months I sat for the test to be admitted in Class Five (the order of classes was backwards).

I was happy to get in, for the teacher was dear Fr Valimberti. As I was consistently the first in class, after two months I was allowed to sit another test and promoted to Class Four.

The teacher was a Vincenzo Cima, a stern disciplinarian. On seeing a boy as big as him come to class half way through the year, he publicly blurted:

"This character is either a blockhead or a great talent."

Utterly astonished at that frankness I said:

"Something in between. I'm a poor youth eager to do his duty and to progress in his studies."

Conventional historians see the Industrial Revolution as the cause of the social question, with its attendant pauperism, overcrowding, and assorted social evils. In reality the Industrial Revolution saved the dispossessed from starving to death, albeit at a high social cost. The cause of the dispossession was not the Industrial Revolution but land grabbing, in operation in Europe since Henry VIII of England. By early 19<sup>th</sup> century the contagion had reached Italy. Another way of getting rid of the dispossessed (mistaken for "overpopulation" by Malthus and Co.) was to foster migration. This pressure resulted in colonialism, from 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain to 19<sup>th</sup> century France, England, etc.

He liked that. With unusual affability he said:

"If you have good will, you are in good hands. I will not leave you idle. Take heart. Should you find anything difficult, tell me and I will help you."

I thanked him wholeheartedly.

#### A Small Incident

Chieri is a small town 10 kilometres from Turin. It stretches at the foot of the same hill as Turin, but on the opposite slope. In John Bosco's time it had 9,000 inhabitants. It was full of monasteries, convents, weavers and students.

There were religious houses for both sexes: Dominicans, Oratorians, Jesuits, Franciscans, St Clare nuns, etc.

There was a large crowd of cotton and silk weavers distributed among 30-odd factories.

Students flock from the whole of the Monferrato and the territory around Asti to wretched life. The courses of study were cheap, but there were no scholarships. Many faced heroic sacrifices to pay for board and lodging. They hunted desperately for after-school work: part-time jobs at copyists, cleaning the homes of the well-to-do, tutorials, grooming horses and maintaining carriages. To save, they would stay without fire even in winter, studying wrapped in heavy blankets and wearing wooden clogs.

John Bosco lived in the midst of that poverty. Every now and then Margaret came from Sussambrino for news about her son from Lucia. The good widow was happy with him. The boy undertook house chores, was pious and studied a lot. He also helped the widow's son, older than him but who was a reluctant student. John befriended him and even succeeded in taking him to church, to ask God's forgiveness for his laziness.

John missed no occasion to contribute to the rent. He managed to earn a little money at the wood workshop of an acquaintance. He learned to wield plane, chisel and rasp file.

Two months into Class four, a small incident gave me notor tety The Latin teacher was expounding on Cornelius Nepos<sup>4</sup> life of Agesilaus. <sup>5</sup>I had forgotten the texthook at home, and opened the grammar before me to sway the teacher's attention. The boys noticed it. One of them nudged his neighbour, another one laughed.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> 100 – 25 B.C. Roman historian of the classical age.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> 444 – 360 B.C. King of Sparta at the height of the Peloponnesian Wars.

Teacher Cima inquired, and on seeing that all the eyes were staring at me, ordered me to repeat the explanation. I stood, grammar in hand, and managed to repeat the Latin text and the explanation. The class exploded in applause.

The teacher, under the impression that for the first time he had not been able to impose discipline, lashed out with a slap, but I ducked. Then, with his hand on the grammar, asked my neighbours the reason for the disorder.

"Bosco doesn't have the text. He only has the grammar. But he repeated the text by heart."

The teacher looked at the book under his hand and asked me to continue. Then he said:

"I forgive you thanks to your great memory You are well gifted. Only make good use of it."

John had already demonstrated his striking memory to Fr Calosso. But things out of the ordinary now began to happen at Chieri. One night he dreamt writing a text of Latin composition in class. On waking up he wrote it down, and translated it with the help of a priest friend. In class, the teacher dictated that identical text, which John translated in record time.

The second time there was a complication. John handed in the composition much too early. The teacher read, looked at the rough copy and was dumbstruck.

On the rough copy there was the text of an assignment he was about to give, but on second thoughts had decided not to, for it was too long.

"Where did you get that?"

"In a dream."

Dreams are usually trifling events in people's lives, but in John Bosco's they played an important role. As the years went by, they acquired more and more weight. Those who at Valdocco heard Don Bosco whisper, *I had a dream...* would keep their ears open. That strange priest saw too many things in dreams: the sins of his boys, the death of kings, and the brilliant future of a snotty-nosed kid playing skittles.

# The Societa dell' Allegria

In the first four classes I learned how to stand up to my peers at my expense.

The school imposed severe standards of Christian life, up to demanding a "receipt" for having gone to confession. But despite that, some boys were wicked. "One was so shameless as to ask me to steal a valuable object from my landlady."

At the beginning John kept away from those boys, not to end like a mouse in the cat's paws. But soon his brilliant successes enhanced his prestige. Why not to make use of it to do them good?

The boys who wanted to drag me down to a disordered life were the most negligent in their studies, and so they started to ask me to give them a hand.

He helped them perhaps too much. On one occasion he was caught passing a complete translation, and what saved him was the good will of a teacher who made him repeat the exam.

Thus did I garner their goodwrill and affection. First they came for help, later for my stories, and finally for no reason at all.

They were happy together. They formed a club, which John baptized *Societa dell' Allegria*." The rules were simple in the extreme:

- 1. It is forbidden to act or talk in such a way as to make a good Christian blush.
- 2. School assignments and religious duty most be abided by.
- 3. Stay cheerful.

Cheerfulness will always be a fixed idea in Don Bosco. Dominic Savio, his favorite student wrote: "For us sanctity consists in being always cheerful. We try to avoid sin because it steals joy from the heart." For Don Bosco, cheerfulness is the deep satisfaction born of knowing that one is in God's hands and therefore in good hands. Cheerfulness (*Allegria*) is the simple word standing for the great value of Christian hope.

"By 1832 I was at the head of a small army." They played the quoits, walked on stilts, jumped and ran. When they were tired, John entertained them with magic tricks from a table erected on the grass.

I took out hundreds of coloured balls from a dice-box, and dozens of eggs from an empty can. I collected bullets from spectators' noses, guessed the sum of money in people's pockets and with a simple touch I turned metal of any money into dust.

#### A Tetrathlon

One Sunday the audience at St Anthony's dwindled. An acrobat had arrived. On Sunday afternoons he exhibited shows of high acrobatics,

challenging the youth of the town at racing and jumping. People flocked to him.

John, annoyed at having been left alone by his companions, went to see. The man was a real athlete. He ran and jumped like a machine, and intended to stay for a while.

John gathered the best among his boys.

"If he goes on staging a show on Sunday afternoons, our society will collapse. Someone among those he challenges should beat him."

"And who?"

"Let's find someone. It's not the end of the world. I think I can beat him in a foot race."

John was 17 and felt very fit. In his *Memoirs* he would say:

I had not weighed the consequences of my words. Imprudently, one of the boys reported my words to the man, and there I was, advertised as a student against a professional athlete.

The main street crossing the city would be the racetrack. The bet was for 20 lire, a month's rent. John didn't have them, but the society's members managed to put them together. "There was a huge throng of spectators."

At the start, the athlete shot ahead by some ten metres. He was a sprinter, john a middle-distance runner "Soon I caught up, and left him so much behind that he gave up half way."

It should have ended there, but the acrobat asked for a return match. It was a point of honour to accept. I challenge you to a jump for 40 lire." They accepted. He chose the site: a watercourse with the far bank reinforced by a parapet. The man jumped, his feet almost touching the parapet. "It was impossible to go beyond. I could lose, but not win. I resorted to an expedient. I jumped as far as he had, but kept my hands on the parapet and vaulted onto the other side."

The acrobat was annoyed, not only for the money but also because people had begun mocking. '7 want another challenge," he said. "Choose any dexterity skill."

I accepted and chose the mage wand. The stake had doubled to 80 lire. I put a hat over a stick and placed its bare end on the palm of my hand. I made it jump on the tip of the small finger, then to the ring finger, the middle, the index, the thumb; then on the hand's back, the elbow, the shoulder, the chin, the lips, the nose, the forehead and back all the way to the palm of the hand.

"I' won't lose this time" he said with assurance.

He got hold of the same stick and with marvellous dexterity repeated the itinerary up to the lips. But his nose was in the way. The stick hit it and he had to grab it not to let it fall.

At this point John began to feel sorry for the poor devil, who after all was a good worker. "The wretch saw his fortune dwindle. Furious, he shouted."

I still have 100 francs. I bet them on a tree climb. The winner is the one who to the top of that elm. "We accepted, and almost let him win, for we did not mean to ruin him financially."

Hewent first. He reached so high that if he had dared go any further, the tree would have bent, and he would have come crashing down. All asserted that it was impossible to get any higher. It was my turn.

I got up almost where he had. There I made a handstand and placed my feet upside down, a metre higher than he had.

Applause broke out below. My friends jumped and shouted for joy. The poor man was dejected and about to cry. We gave him back the money in exchange for a lunch at the Muletto hotel.

In his *Memoirs* Don Bosco will record that that lunch cost 25 lire, and that the acrobat was able to put back 215 lire in his pocket. He also recorded the athlete's parting words: "By returning that money to me you have saved me from ruin. Thanks a lot. I will remember you with pleasure, but I never bet again against students."

## Sightseeing of Turin

The won challenge brought the "Society" strength and glory. On holidays the members went to the Superga hill. They gathered mushrooms, they sung, contemplated the scenery and at times reached Turin to have a look at the marble equestrian statue on the steps of the Royal Palace. It was almost 30km on foot there and back. They came back with a strong appetite, telling marvellous stories about their sightseeing to their lazier companions.

John saw Turin for the first time. The city was growing. The population had increased by one third in ten years. The cost of buying or renting homes shot out of control. The need for hospitals, old people's homes, kindergarten and schools grew dramatically.

Charles Albert proposed to foster the people's education, but his Foreign Minister Solaro della Margarita, Catholic but conservative, disagreed. Universal education would have aroused in the people "needs impossible to meet and fostered ideas making them restless, unhappy, discontented."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The same phenomenon has repeated itself wherever in the world land monopoly has dispossessed people. This is the origin of the slums within sight of skyscrapers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> 150 years later the same argument was offered in apartheid South Africa so as not to start television.

That same spring, Canon Cottollengo<sup>8</sup> opened his first hospital in the outskirts of the city, filling it with 35 incurables refused by all the other hospitals.

It was the 27t" of April 1832. Arriving at the Valdocco area on a donkeycart and with two sisters, the canon hung a sign on the door of the shack he had rented. The sign read: *Little House of Divine Providence*. It would soon become the miracle of Turin, housing ten thousand incurables rejected from everywhere else.

In June, John heard the name of Vincent Gioberti<sup>9</sup> for the first time. He was a young priest from Turin, professor of philosophy at the University. Arrested for participation in a republican plot, he went into exile to France. Ten years later he would publish in Paris a famous book: *On the Moral and Civil Primacy of the Italian Race.* 18 years later he would become the Premier of King Charles Albert.

From the Royal Palace, where John Bosco and friends had gone to touch the equestrian statue, Charles Albert issued the first reforms, but slowly and between fears and scruples. The first one was the abolition of torture, inhuman relic of more barbarian times.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> 1786 – 1842. Canonised in 1934. Founder of the Societies of the Little House Divine Providence and 14 religious congregations.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> 1801 – 52. Premier of Piedmont. 1848 – 49. Philosopher and political writer.

#### **CHAPTER 10**

## FRIENDSHIP'S HIGH SEASON

John Bosco began Class Three in the fall of 1832. In the next two years he attended the courses of humanities and rhetoric, finishing in 1835. He was still an excellent student, in love with books and with a most tenacious memory.

I made no distinction between reading and studying. 1 could easily repeat whatever I read in a book. Paying attention in class was more than enough to learn what I had to. Since my mother had accustomed me to sleep little, I was in a position to read for a good two thirds of the night. I read books by candlelight. Elijah, a Jewish bookseller, lent me the Italian classics for five cents a book. I read almost one a day.

John was *now* 18, the age of deep friendships. Even as head of that small army, he had begun to form a restricted circle of intimate friends.

Hemet the first of them during the usual hubbub caused by a teacher's lateness. There was a real racket. The boys began playing leapfrog. "Those who studied least were the best at it." There was a 15-year old newcomer who ignored the turmoil, sat at his desk reading a book.

On one occasion a lout accosted him grabbing him by the arm.

"Come and play."

"I don't know how."

"You'll learn. Don't let yourself be kicked into it."

"Hit me if you wish. I'm not coming."

The ill-mannered rogue slapped him twice. The noise echoed all over the school. I felt my blood boil. I expected the offended boy to react strongly, bigger as he was. But he didn't. With his red, almost bruised, face, he said:

"Does that make you happy? Leave me alone then. I forgive you."

John was thunderstruck. That was a truly heroic rejoinder. The boy's name Louis Comollo.

"From that day on he was one of my intimate friends. I can assert that he taught me how to live as a Christian."

Under the apparent weakness John discovered great spiritual riches. Instinctively he became his protector against coarse and violent classmates.

### A Human Club

One day a teacher was late. In class it was the usual confusion

"Some wanted to beat up Comollo and Antonio Candelo, another good boy. I yelled to leave them in peace, but they didn't listen. Insults began to fly. "I said "Whoever says a foul word, I'll sort him out"

The tallest and most shameless erected a mall around me, and two more slaps hit Comollo's face. I lost the light of reason and looked for a stick or a chair. In their absence, I grabbed one of them by the shoulders and began to rotate his body in the air like a giant club. Four of them, hit, crashed to the floor. The others ran away shrieking.

At that moment the teacher entered and saw arms and legs flailing in the midst of an otherworldly din. He started shouting and slapping people all around.

As soon as the storm abated, he asked what was going on. He didn't believe what he was told, and asked me to repeat the feat. He burst out laughing, and so did the rest. He forgot about punishing us.

As soon as Luigi could approach me alone, he said.

"My dear, your strength frightens me. God hasn't given it to you to make mince meat of your schoolmates. He wants us to forgive, and to do good to those who do us an evil turn."

John listened and followed Comollo to confession. But it took time for him to learn the Gospel teaching about offering the other cheek. He would impose it on himself, but it would never be congenial to him. He will repeat often the words heard in the dream, "Not with blows but with love will you conquer your friends."

# A Tip-off

In the summer of 1833, companies of soldiers suddenly invaded Chieri. Surveillance doubled at the gates of the city. Armed patrols did the rounds night and day. Gatherings of people were forbidden.

A tip-off had warned that the men of Mazzini were about to unleash a revolt at Turin and other cities of Piedmont. The previous year had brought news of the founding of the "Young Italy" by Mazzini: copies of the sect's

Journal has been discovered in a false-bottomed trunk sent by mail from Marsaelles to Genoa. The plan was to set fire to various parts of Turin, provoke popular riots, assassinate the royal family and proclaim the republic. Later it transpired that Mazzini had personally handed over to a certain Gallenga the dagger with which to stab Charles Albert.

The leak and the rapid mobilisation of troops led to the arrest of the plotters. Twelve of them were executed. A year later the same people made a second attempt in the Savoy, led by General Ramorino and by Garibaldi.<sup>1</sup>

The censors panicked into ridiculous measures: a stock off caps was confiscated because they were coloured red and blue, the colours of the French Revolution.

At the end of the academic year 1832-33, Lucy Matta's son completed his studies. John had to look for new lodgings.

John Pianta, a family friend, offered him a barman's job. He would clean the premises early in the morning before school, mix drinks and look after the billiard room during the night. In exchange, Pianta would give him soup twice a day and lodgings.

John accepted for want of anything better. It was hard work, especially when having to keep the billiard score late into the night.

In 1888, more than 50 years later, old man Pianta would reminisce: "It was impossible to find a better boy than John Bosco. Every morning he went to serve Mass at the church of St Anthony. At home my mother was old and ill, and he treated her with immense charity." That grasping man was treating his young employee with far less charity.

He would have him prepare coffee and chocolate, confectionery and ice cream, but he would him only soup.

It was Mama Margaret's task to bring her son bread and the main dish. Lodging was "a narrow room above a small oven for baking cakes. Access was by a small stepladder. If he stretched in bed, his feet would stick out not only from the bed hut also from the room."

# James Levi Alias Jonah

In Chieri there lived a largish Jewish community. Charles Felix's laws had confined the Jews to the ghetto, a special quarter reserved to them. They were "tolerated" as second-class citizens. Jewish boys felt a special discomfort on Saturdays. Their religion forbade them to work on the Sabbath, the prohibition including homework. Their choice was either to go against conscience or get low marks and their schoolmates' derision.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> 1807 – 82. A very able guerilla leader in Italy and South America, in the pay of the international money power exercised through British Prime Minister Pamerston.

John helped them on a number of occasions, doing the Saturday homework for them. He particularly befriended James Levi nicknamed "Jonah" by the boys. His father, like John's, had died when he was very young.

Don Bosco remembered that friendship with unusually affectionate words.

He had a beautiful countenance and an almost unearthly singing voice. He played billiards extremely well. I felt affection for him, and he reciprocated with a sincere friendship. He came to spend all his free moments with me. We sang together, played the piano, read, told stories.

That burning, shining friendship showed that John felt in no way embarrassed or fearful.

But an unspecified "disorderly riot that could have had sad consequences" provoked a crisis in the young Jew. John, not to proselytise but out of affection, offered him his best possession: his faith. He lent him the catechism. "In a few months he learned the main truths of faith. He was most happy, becoming better in word and deed by the day."

The inevitable family drama exploded when the boy's mother discovered the Christian catechism in her son's bedroom.

She thought she would lose her son as she had lost her husband. She confronted John:

"You have ruined him."

John used the best language he could, but to no avail. Threatened by his relatives and by the rabbi, "Jonah" left his family for a while. Little by little things calmed down. On August 10<sup>th,</sup> in the cathedral of Chieri, the young Jew received baptism. The official register reads: "I, theologian and canon Sebastian Schioppo, by concession of the most Reverend Archbishop of Turin, have solemnly baptised the young Jew James Levi, aged 18, with the name of Louis."

"Jonah" remained Don Bosco's affectionate friend for life. As late as 1880 he visited him at Valdocco, to reminisce together about "the good old days."

# Blanchard's Apples

Signor Pianta's soup could hardly satisfy the strong appetite of 18-year old John Bosco. He was hungry more often than not. Joseph Blanchard, a youth of his age, often noticed it. He went to his mother, a fruit and vegetable seller, and filled his pockets with apples and chestnuts. The good woman saw but looked in the other direction. At lunch the same thing

Happened with the fruit bowl. One good day Joseph's brother Leander burst out:

"You mum see nothing. Joseph carries away your fruit by the kilo and you don't pay attention."

"I know it all. But I also know where he takes it. That boy John is a good boy, and hunger is bad news at his age."

Despite the hunger, John was always able to find the five cents he needed to borrow books from Elijah the Jew. At night he always read. Signor Pianta was aware. Many years later he would testify: "Often he spent the whole night studying. In the morning I found him still at his books by the oil lamp." It is unclear if he was more impressed by John's iron will to study or concerned about the oil burnt in the lamp. Don Bosco also remembered those nights:

"Often it happened that waking time found me with the same book in hand started the night before." And added "But this practice ruined my health. I will always counsel to do what one can and no more. I discovered at my expense that night is meant to rest."

John Bosco was not a weird wonder. He was an adolescent full of good will and rather impatient. He would learn both patience and a sense of measure from life itself.

#### **CHAPTER 11**

# JOHN AT 20

In March 1834, about to complete the humanities year, John applied to the Franciscans<sup>1</sup> for admission.

Schoolmate Eugenio Nicco bore the reply to him:

"They are waiting for you to sit the admission exam at the monastery of St Mary of the Angels in Turin."

He walked there. The admission register reads: "The young man John Bosco of Castelnuovo is accepted with full marks. He has all the necessary qualities. 18th April 1834.

Immediately afterwards he prepared all the documents necessary to enter the monastery of the Peace, in Chieri.

Why has he taken such a decision?

He is now 19, and becomes aware that it is a time of reckoning. He has struggled and suffered to become a priest, but during the past months he has had to face dramatic problems.

## **Poverty**

He felt no longer at ease with having to depend on his mother. Confiding in his friend Evasio Savio of Castelnuovo, he asked: "How can my mother go on supporting me in my studies?" He also spoke to some Franciscan friars, who knew him well. They unhesitatingly replied: "Come to us." They were ready to waive the entrance fee payable by novices.

There is more. "Taking counsel with myself, I was thinking that as a diocesan priest my vocation ran a serious risk." It was neither a question of scruples nor of vain fear. His biographer Stella wrote:

In those days professional clericalism was something truly to be feared. Man undertook the clerical "career" not out of religious but of human reasons, to secure a future. One could sense what great evil for the priesthood interior emptiness and religious superficiality were.

Religion order founded by St Francis of Assisi in 1182 – 1216.

A symptom of this danger was the excessive number of seminarians: from 250 in 1834 to 565 in 1940 for the towns of Turin, Chieri and Bra. 207 were day students; Don Bosco himself recalled that 20 out of 24 classmates enrolled in the seminary for the course of rhetoric.

As too many entered, there were too many sad cases of defection from the priesthood. Many considered the seminary as a short cut to a teaching post or to employment in the civil service.

To stem the evil, the bishops increasingly tried to limit the number of day students, who attended classes and the liturgical services, but inevitably infected the environment with a certain amount of worldliness.

#### The Peasant Woman in a Black Shawl

Towards the end of April John went to his parish priest, Fr Dassano, asking for the necessary documents to enter the monastery. Fr Dassano was nonplussed:

"You in a monastery? Have you thought it out?"

"I think so."

Days later the priest climbed the path to Sussambrino to talk to Margaret.

"John wants to become a Franciscan friar. I have nothing against it, but my opinion is that he should be a parish priest. He knows how to talk to people, to attract the youth, to be loved. Why bury himself in a monastery? Let me say this plainly. You are not wealthy, and are not young anymore. When you are no longer able to work, your son as a parish priest will be in a position to give you a hand. As a friar he will be lost to you. I think you should dissuade him, for your own good."

Margaret threw a shawl around her shoulders and walked down to Chieri.

"The parish priest tells me you want to enter a monastery. Is it true?"

"Yes Mum. I hope you have nothing against it."

Listen carefully, John. I want you to think out calmly. Once you have decided, go straight ahead Without looking at anyone's face. The most important thing for you is to do the will of God. The priest wants me to dissuade you. But I say this to you: your mother has nothing to do with it. God comes first. I ask nothing of you and expect nothing of you. I was born poor, have lived poor and intend to die poor. Better still, mark my words: should you be as a priest have the disgrace of getting rich, I will never set foot in your house. Remember that."

The old woman with the black shawl spoke sternly, her countenance full of energy. Don Bosco would never forget those words.

John was about to finish gathering the documents, when he had a strange dream.

A few days before entering the monastery I dreamt a throng of friars in tattered garb. They ran in all directions, away from each other. One of them approached me: 'If you are looking for peace, you will not find it here. God is preparing for you another harvest elsewhere."

It would have been the usual futile dream, but not for John. By now he realised that dreams are important, even when conveying uncomfortable truths.

His confessor would not hear about dreams or friars. He said: "In these matters one ought to think for oneself, not seek advice from others. Think it out and decide."

What was he to do? He postponed all decisions and went back to school. But he could not postpone forever. One day he confided the matter to Comollo, from whom got a classic piece of spiritual advice: pray a novena, write a letter to his uncle Fr Comollo, and blindly obey.

On the last day of the novena we went to confession and Communion together. I served an extra Mass at the altar of Our Lady of Graces. Back home, there was a letter from Fr Comollo: "All things considered, I would urge your friend not to enter the monastery." Let him become a priest and have no fear of losing his vocation. With recollection and piety he will overcome all obstacles."

## Fr Cafasso<sup>2</sup>

Accepting the advice meant entering the seminary Money was the remaining hurdle, but Fr Cinzano, who had replaced Fr Dassano at the Castelnuovo parish, entered the scene. He went to visit two well-to-do families of the town. Together they gathered enough to pay for John's last year of school.

But John was not satisfied. His friend Evasio gave him another piece of advice.

"Go to Turin and see Fr Cafasso. He's young, but he's the best priest native of Castelnuovo."

Fr Cafasso was 23, but already had the reputation of being one of the best guides of souls. Many restless, unhappy people went to talk to him. He lived at Turin, in the *Convitto* for priests. While completing his theological studies, he looked after the sick and the imprisoned.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> 1812 -60. Canonised in 1947.

John went to him and told him all his perplexities. Calmly and unhesitatingly, F. Cafasso said:

"Complete the year of rhetoric and then enter the seminary Divine Providence will let you know what God wants of you. Don't worry about the money: someone will provide."

In Fr Cafasso John has met the counterpoise of his life. Because of his own volcanic temperament he lived among dreams, projects, perplexities, successes and failures. Fr Cafasso, unperturbed and inspiring peace, would be beside him the discreet friend, wise counsellor and silent benefactor.

The Chieri seminary had opened its doors in 1829. The archbishop of Turin, Columban Chiaveroti, had planned it as a secluded place, almost a cloister, far from the hustle and bustle of Turin. John will enter it as a boarder, as Fr Cafasso had counseled. The priest's friend Fr Guala paid the fees for the first year.

The entrance exam was held at Chieri instead of Turin, which every summer was under the threat of cholera. John passed it without difficulty.

The school holidays were the last before entering the seminary. John spent them at Sussambrino and Castelnuovo, beside the parish priest:

I refrained from giving shows during those holidays. I read good books instead. But I went on taking care of boys, entertaining them with stories, pastimes and songs. Many of them had grown up without any knowledge of the truths of faith. I taught them catechism and the daily prayers. It was a sort of Oratory: some 50boys loved and obeyed me as if I were their father.

#### The Piedmontese Trademark

On 16<sup>th</sup> August 1835 John turned 20. He was a man by now, tough, intelligent, mature and about to undergo priestly training. His solid Piedmontese character is his trademark.

Henri Bosco, a distant relative of the Saint, published once an analysis of such character.

- The Piedmontese is neither brilliant nor a wit. He does not think in a hurry. He is slow in understanding, in reflecting, in responding. Hence he does not act on impulse, is not fiery or exalted.
- On the other hand he is solid and strong. He endures hardship without complaining. He is also prudent. The tough life has taught him to think unhurriedly.
- He is positive. Original ideas do not seduce him. He knows by experience that they are unlikely to last. Any brilliant idea is tested on the field of experience. He keeps his feet on the ground. It is his strength.

- Reality is often rough and hard. The Piedmontese tackles it with patience. He is patient both in spirit and in heart.
- He loves and does not betray He is faithful. Faithfulness is the greatest sign of perseverance, its noblest expression and purest product. It entails courage. The Piedmontese is courageous, without being rash. He is more of a soldier than a warrior. But he knows how to fight. He fights well, seriously, without spirit of adventure. He is more willing as a defender than as an attacker.
- Such defensive vocation comes to him from the intense love for his land, his goods, his family, although his goods may be meagre, the land demanding and the family a burden hard to bear.
- Given the chance, he migrates. But he never loses his roots. From the bottom of his soul there spring the virtues of patience, attachment, solidity and good practical sense.

God only knows to what a degree Don Bosco was endowed with the virtues proper to his race: endurance, practical spirit, practicality, genius for the real, patience, even stubbornness.

But God gave something else to this young man about to enter the seminary: a big heart that loves big. Don Bosco's heart does not give up before a youth humiliated by ignorance, people eaten by misery, persons shrivelled by godlessness. I think that this was the charisma, the particular gift bestowed on Don Bosco that became integrated with the natural gifts from his native land at times dramatically and disturbingly.

A total heart knows nothing of half measures, blindly responds to the challenges of reality, and transforms human patience into Christian impatience. To the fearful suggestions of "common sense" it responds with enthusiasm. The saints always have common sense, but we always notice it "afterwards." What looks like madness is great faith in God and men. It is not a passive faith expecting everything from heaven, but a faith springing from vision, from adventure, a faith that unleashes the offensive.

Don Bosco has been driven by such faith rooted in love. Its reasons are unreasonable, because it is not the reason due to intelligence or to ordinary common sense.

That is why many priests, fellow-countrymen and sincere brethren in the ministry, educated together with him in the same seminary, did not understand him.

The Church summarized it all by placing, as the opening text of his Mass, the words that the Bible dedicates to Abraham (another one without "common sense"): "God gave him wisdom and understanding, and a heart as big as the seashore."

#### **CHAPTER 12**

# THE SEMINARY: LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

Donning the cassock, in those years, was an important step. The young man exchanged his civilian clothes for the priest's garb as a public sign of intent: "I intend to be a priest and live as a priest." Besides the cassock he would Don the white collar, the biretta<sup>1</sup> and the round hat, all compulsorily uniform black.

Don Bosco once said, "I have always needed everybody's help," which had been true also that day. The cassock, hat, shoes, biretta and even the socks were gifts of the people of his village.

On Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> October the church at Castelnuovo is packed. There are people from Becchi, Morialdo and surroundings. At High Mass the parish priest announced that well-known John Bosco, that good young man, would embrace the clerical state.

John approaches the altar with the cassock dangling from his arm. The solemn words of the rite follow suit.

"When Fr Cinzano the parish priest ordered me to remove my civilian dress saying:" "May I he Lord remove from you the old man with his habits and ways," I said to myself, How much junk is there to dump! My God, destroy my bad habits. Then he handed me the collar: " "May the Lord put on the new man, created after God's heart in justice, truth and sanctity." "I added, My God may I truly begin a new life according to your will. Mary, be my salvation."

## Seven Resolutions

After Mass Fr Cinzano had a surprise for John: an invitation to the patron feast day of Bardella, a nearby village.

I went to please him but half-heartedly. I felt out of place, a sort of newly dressed puppet. I had prepared that day for weeks and I found myself smack in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The biretta was a square cap with three ridges on top and a pompon in the middle.

middle of a lunch full of people determined to have a good time, chat, eat, drink and make merry. What had they in common with one who scarcely two hours earlier had put on a habit of holiness to give himself whole to the Lord? On the way back home the priest asked me why I was so pensive. Speaking frankly, I told him that the morning ceremony violently clashed with what had followed it. Seeing priests playing the clown among half-drunk table companions had disgusted me. Were I to know that one day I should became a priest like that, I would dump this habit here and now.

The priest saw that the young cleric was right. He resorted to clichés: "That's how the world is, one must take it as it is," and, "Evil has to be seen to be avoided."

Four days later John entered the seminary. He recollected in silence and reflection and wrote seven resolutions meant to turn his former lifestyle upside down.

- 1. I will refrain from going to dances, the theatre, and public shows.
- 2. I will not play the magician, the acrobat, and will not go hunting.
- 3. I will be sober in food, drink and rest.
- 4. I will read spiritual books.
- 5. I will struggle against thoughts, conversations, words and readings contrary to chastity.
- 6. I will engage daily in mental prayer and spiritual reading.
- 7. Daily I will tell stories and give ideas that can do good

I knelt before an image of Our Lady and formally promised to keep them all, cost what it may.

He would not always succeed, for he was made of flesh and blood like the rest of us. But he decidedly steered off the old ways into the new.

John was due to the seminary on October 30<sup>th</sup>. The night before, at Sussambrino, he was packing the clothes that Margaret had prepared for him.

My mother kept on looking at me as if she wanted to say something. Suddenly she took me aside and spoke."

John, you have donned the priestly garb. My consolation is as great as a mother's can be. Remember though, that it is not the habit that makes a priest. It is virtue. Should you one day have doubts about your vocation for heaven's sake do not dishonour this habit. Put it aside at once. I prefer to have as a son a poor peasant than a duty-shirking priest. When you were born I dedicated you to the Blessed Virgin. When you began your studies I entreated you to love our Mother. Now I urge you to be all Hers, John."

When she finished speaking she was moved. I was crying.

"Mother, thank you for all you have done for me. I'll never forget these words."

Early next morning I travelled to Chieri and in the evening l entered the seminary.

A sundial on a whitewashed wall greeted him first. The inscription read: "The hours are slow for those who suffer, but fast for those who rejoice." It was a good piece of advice for a young man about to spend six uninterrupted years within those walls.

In the chapel, with the seminarians lined up in the pews, the organ intoned the hymn *Come Holy Spirit*. The academic year began with three days of spiritual excercises in complete silence.

## A Rigid Timetable

"At the seminary, the days followed one another without change." It was another way of saying that monotony was the heaviest obstacle during those first months.

The timetable was very rigid. Every activity started dead on time. It was all written on a paper hanging in some corner, next to a small bell. The timing was split down to the quarter-hour.

The Timekeeper rang the bell on the dot. At that tingling, the whole community went in, out; spoke, kept silence, studied, prayed. The first instruction, on entering, was that the little bell was the voice of God.

One single day spent like that could be stimulating, even amusing. But let anyone repeat it eight times to understand what monotony means.

King Charles Felix had decreed the timetable for the seminary as well as all the schools of the kingdom. Not even the princes were exempt. Royal Palace timetable of Crown Prince Victor Emmanuel in 1835, when he was 15, read:

"Wake up at 5:00, Mass at 7:00, classes 9:00 - 12:00 noon, lunch at 12:00, homework 2:00 - 7:30 p.m. dinner at 7:30 p.m., prayers at 9:00 and to bed.

On Sunday he had to attend two Masses: low Mass before breakfast in the palace chapel and High Mass after breakfast in the cathedral."

In the seminary, unlike in the Royal Palace, daily Mass went together with meditation and the recitation of the third part of the Rosary. Meals were taken in silence: the seminarians listened to someone reading Bercastel's *History the Church*<sup>2</sup> from a pulpit.

Cusine was most simple. "Eat to live, live not to eat" was one of the oft-repeated maxims.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The French Attoine Bercastel (1720 – 94) wrote a 24-volume History of the Church, a classic in print for many decades.

Recreation was the only time of relaxation. Don Bosco recalls keenly fought card games. "I wasn't very skillful, but I won more often than not. At end game my pockets were stuffed with money, but on seeing how sad my companions were for having lost, I became sadder than they. Besides, by dint of fixing my mind on the cards, kings of spade and jacks of hearts danced before my eyes while studying or praying. Halfway the second year of philosophy I decided to call it quits."

What actually made him break oil with card playing was winning a large sum of money. The opponent, also from a poor background, had stubbornly insisted on return games. In the end, plucked clean, he almost broke into tears. John felt ashamed, gave him back all he had gained and gave up cards for good.

With his Salesians he was very hard as regards card playing. "It is a huge waste of time, and our time is for the boys. On the day I have nothing better to do I will play cards again."

## Shadows at the Seminary

As the days went by, John discovered more dark spots in seminary life.

The first was the same as had disturbed him at Castelnuovo: the superiors kept distances. For the sake of respect and dignity they rarely appeared.

The students greeted the rector and the other superiors on arriving and leaving. No one ever went to talk to them, except to be reprimanded. When one of them happened to walk near the seminarians, there was a general stampede. How many times did I desire to talk to them, to receive good advice.

#### Biographer Stella reports:

John did not seek formal approval, but loving kindness, a response to the affection he bore towards them. His temperament demanded a climate of mutual liking and of that sympathy arising from being on the same wavelength.

To establish such mutual sympathy, Don Bosco thought it essential that educators should be physically among the youth. He was so convinced of it that this point became an essential element of his educational system.

The second dark spot were some seminarians. Many were men *of flawless virtue*, but there were also *dangerous ones*, to the point of introducing *impious and obscene books* into the seminary.

A third motive for sadness was the prohibition of frequent communion. "Holy Communion could be received only on Sundays or special solemnities. To receive it during the week one had to disobey."

In the morning, while the seminarians formed a long queue before the dining hall, on occasions John turned the corner, entered the nearby church of St Philip and asked for communion. The "price" was fasting until lunch.

This subterfuse made it possible for me to have frequent communion. I can swear it was the food that most efficaciously nourished my vocation.

## Thursday Breaks

Every Thursday afternoon the monotony of the timetable was broken by the doorkeeper's calling: "Bosco of Castelnuovo!"

John knew the visitors: the members of the *Societa' dell Allegria* wanted to see him and tell him the news. Schoolmates and young boys whom he had entertained with his shows and his stories, all wished to listen to him again. "There were droves of young boys," one of John's roommates recalled, "Surrounding him in festive mood. He entertained them all cheerfully, speaking to everyone." After the bustle, jokes and laughs, they would briefly stop in the chapel at the feet of Our Lady.

Every Thursday was like a breath of fresh air, the clandestine extension, as it were, of his fixed idea: the Oratory.<sup>3</sup>

He described it to his most intimate friends: it would be located in the outskirts of a great city, and would have courtyards, buildings and throngs of boys. "I am inventing nothing," he would repeat. "I dream it at night every now and then."

In 1890 Fr Bosio, parish priest of Levone Canavese and co-seminarian with Don Bosco, visited the Oratory for the first time. On reaching the middle of *the* courtyard, surrounded by members of the Salesian Superior Chapter, he looked around and exclaimed: "Nothing is new to me of what I'm seeing. Don Bosco had described it all to me at the seminary, as if he were seeing it with his own eyes. I see exactly what he described."

Dreams and poverty acted as a strange pair accompanying Don Bosco throughout life. The dreams threw open the gates of hope into the future; poverty threw a spanner in the works of the present.

The mid-year exam carried a prize of 60 lire for the best student in every class for academics and conduct. John managed to get it every year, thus paying for half his seminary fees.

He also earned little money with odd jobs: "Anyone who needed a shave, fix his biretta, or mend an item of clothing, would always find me ready to do it."

 $<sup>^{3}</sup>$  Not only Don Bosco made use of the term "Oratory" following St Philip Neri (1515 – 95), whose foundation is still known as "The Oratory" thoughtout English speaking countries. As later explained, a number of priests among his contemporary used the same term. Here "The Oratory" means Don Bosco's.

## Among the Rich

Cholera made its regular appearance in the summer of 1836. Turin was in fear. The Jesuits shifted their venue from the college of the Carmel to the castle of Montaldo. They were looking for a trusty dormitory assistant who could double tip as Greek language coach. Fr Cafasso sent seminarian Bosco: "Go earn some lire."

From 1<sup>st</sup> July to 17<sup>th</sup> October John lived for the first time among the scions of well-to-do families, in direct touch with the virtues and vices of the sons of the rich. He confessed *how difficult it is for a priest to acquire the authority needed to do them good. He* became convinced that God called him to live among the poor. This conviction *will* be absolute: just as he is not called to educate girls, he is equally not called to educate the sons of the wealthy. 30 years later, on 5<sup>th</sup> April 1864, Fr Ruffino proposed to him to open a college for the nobility Don Bosco rebutted:

"Never. It would be our ruin as has been the ruin of other religious orders. Their call was to educate the poor, and they abandoned it to serve the rich."

## Comollo Again

In October 1836, as John Bosco left the castle of Montaldo to spend a few days among the vineyards of Sussambrino, Louis Comollo donned the cassock. At the end of the month he too entered the seminary at Chieri together with his friend John. Their friendship revived and strengthened.

Louis was John's junior by two years, but acted as his spiritual goad.

Quite often he interrupted my recreation. He pulled me by the sleeve, asking me to accompany him to the chapel.

Comollo felt at ease there. He overflowed with endless piety: visits to the Blessed Sacrament, prayers for the dying, the Rosary, the Office of Our Lady, be beads for the Souls in Purgatory, etc.

John, as many other Christians who work hard for the kingdom of God, felt a deep fascination, almost nostalgia for that piety made of pure ardour, of simple abandonment in God.

He sensed that there was a bit of exaggeration in his friend. Delicately he commented,

I didn't even try to imitate him in his mortifications. He rigorously fasted for the whole of Lent and on Saturdays. At times he lunched on bread and water. Often he left aside the main meal and wine, and only ate bread soaked in water with the pretext that it did him good.

As we see it today, it was a voluntary race towards exhaustion and death. A good spiritual director would not have let him rush headlong towards his demise. Twenty years later Dominic Savio would try a similar regime, but Don Bosco decidedly blocked him. At that earlier time, though, John was not the prudent guide of consciences he would become. He felt true admiration for Comollo's discarnate asceticism, with which, despising every earthly value, he sought refuge in God.

He will always feel the fascination of Louis Comollo's sanctity, burning in a flash to heaven. But his path towards God will be different. His sanctity will be of solid flesh, made real indirect contact with the affection and urgent needs of the young, with down-to-earth problems that shine light on and simplify ascetical theory.]

#### A Lost Seminarian

A new seminarian had arrived at the beginning of December: John Francis Giacomelli from Avigliana. He has left a precious testimony, portraying John Bosco in his second year of philosophy. Briefly it says:

'I entered the seminary a month late. I knew no one, and during the first days I felt lonely and lost. The first time I sat down to study, an older seminarian stood before me. He was good-looking, curly-headed, pale and thin, as if suffering from some ailment. It was John Bosco. He approached me after lunch on seeing me alone, and kept me company during the whole recreation time. He was very kind tome. I remember, for instance, that my biretta was too big, and because of it some seminarians teased me. John fixed it in no time.

There were two seminarians with the same surname Bosco. To distinguish, the first called himself "medlar wood" indicating unwillingness to bend. John called himself "willow wood" indicating the opposite.

He was not over pious, on the contrary he was rather hot-tempered, and it was obvious that he had to make a real effort to control himself. He had a great love for the youth, and his greatest pleasure was to be among them."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> "Bosch" in the Piedmontese dialect stands for wood.

#### **CHAPTER 13**

# **JOHN BOSCO PRIEST**

June 24th, feast of St John the Baptist, is John's feast day and the beginning of four months of summer holidays.

He takes the dusty road from Chieri to Castelnuovo, then the path climbing to Sussambrino, some 12 kilometres in all. His brother's farm welcomes him with the cock-a-doodle-doo of the roosters and the shy smile of a splendid niece.

In 1833 Joseph, 20, had married Mary Calosso, a girl from Castelnuovo. Their first daughter had died when three months old. The second, Philomena, was born in the spring of 1835. She looks fascinated at uncle John in the wood workshop, operating the lathe and the forge, who cuts and sews clothes together and fashions beautiful rag dolls for her.

## Harvesting Wheat

The grapes are ripening; the wheat is ready for harvesting. When there is a lull in the workshop, John grabs the sickle and joins the long line of harvesters. He sweated abundantly under the wide-brimmed straw hat.

He truly rejoices in this open-air activity after eight months of near captivity tied to school desks.

Suddenly, a hare races along a line of grapes. John rushes home, grabs Joseph's shotgun and one the chase. He thinks it a two-minute task, but the hare runs and runs. Stubborn, he does not give in.

From a field to another and another, I ended up crossing valleys and climbing hills. After hours, the beast was within range and I shot it. It fell. I fell sad at seeing it die. Some friends who had followed me congratulated me for the great shot. I looked at my shirtsleeves, with no cassock, a straw hat, and gun in hand after a five-kilometre race. I was most embarrassed.

Back home he re-read the resolutions written down on embracing the clerical state. Number two said: "I will not play the magician; I will not go hunting. He said, Lord, forgive me."

His hobby was once again to be with the youth.

Many boys were already 16-17 year olds, and knew nothing of the truths of faith. II delighted in teaching them catechism. I taught the younger ones how to read and write. I charged no fees, but the conditions were application, attention, and monthly confession.

## **Priestly Training**

On 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1837, John began the study of theology. It is the "science that studies God," fundamental for would-be priests. At the time it was a five-year course, divided into dogma (Christian truths), morals (Christian moral law), Sacred Scripture (God's word) and history of the Church from the origin to date.

The study of theology is of great importance in a priest's life. His mind is formed during those youthful years of full availability. Throughout life, the priest will sharpen his thinking, touch it somewhat under the influence of new events, but will hardly change it. His ways of seeing and judging things will be determined by his "theological bias." It is the "tool chest" of a priest.

Those years were extremely important for John *Bosco*. Although endowed with extraordinary gifts, he was a product of his time, and especially of *the Church of his time*.

To understand Don *Bosso* it is important to know what he studied, read, was told in spiritual direction, and the homilies he heard. For instance:

- Dogmatic theology ordered everything in terms of the final account to the divine judge, to receive from him eternal life or death.
- Everything ought to be judged in function of eternal life, reward or punishment.
- Moral theology centred everything on the relation between divine law and human freedom. One's actions are a responsible adaptation to divine law.
- Preaching was directed at fostering a state of anguish in extra sensitive souls. It stressed the great and difficult priestly obligations, the ministry's great dangers (the world, women, all kinds of dissipation) and the strict account that the divine sovereign would demand of every priest.

It is understandable that, prodded by such preaching, Don Bosco may have exaggerated at times in matters of self-control and ascetical practice. Man` old-time seminarians doubtless experienced the same thing.

## **Judging Events**

It is also very important to outline the background of the historical period Don Bosco lived through, the *Risorgimento*. From that he will appraise the future of the Church and of the world.

Pastoral letters and sermons of the time take for granted that both the French Revolution and the Napoleonic empire had been "failures." They are full of expressions such as "The most terrible of revolutions...," "Iniquity abounded among us," "the net is torn, we are free!) The restoration of the thrones was "in the hands of God," etc.

The main reason for the failure was the sliding from the great principles of freedom and equality to the Terror and thence to Napoleon's dictatorship. The principle of the Revolution taken from the Enlightenment, "Reason is the only way to truth and goodness," led to disastrous consequences.

The religious dimension, irreducible to terms of human reason, needed reappraisal. The authority of the sovereigns was being re-valued as being exclusively under divine law. The king's enlightened wisdom was to repress the revolutionary forces always lying in wait and leading to disorder and violence.

There was ambiguity in this reappraisal. Catholic conservatism would have led to an authoritarian Christianity, some kind of alliance between throne and altar unable to understand that freedom, equality and fraternity are Christian values. Such ambiguity did in fact prevail almost up to 1848.

Under the counter there circulated the ideas of Catholic liberalism, even in the ecclesial milieu. Liberal Catholics acknowledged the validity of the great principles of the Revolution. They condemned Jacobin<sup>1</sup> violence and Napoleon's dictatorship. They desired a system of checks and balances: a king able to keep a tight rein on the revolutionaries, but also a Constitution that guaranteed freedom and equality Freedom and equality, of course, were desired for all except for the "lower classes."

Both liberals and conservatives were scared stiff of "democratic equality:" as the Terror had taught, such a thing would have degenerated into the tyranny of a minority purporting to govern "in the name of the people," thus producing chaos.

Among the liberals there were famous names such as the intellectuals Antonio Rosmini<sup>2</sup> and Alessandro Manzoni.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> A faction of the French Revolution taking its name from the convent of St James where they first met. They turned out to be the most violent party of the Revolution.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> 1797 – 1855. Ordained priest in 1821, Rosmini found a religion institute and accompanied Pope Pius IX in exile. His writings trying to reconcile the nationalist movements with the doctrine of the Church embroiled him in controversy throughout his life. They were first condemned and then absolved. Evidence is being collected towards his possible cononisation.

John Bosco had a conservative bent of mind, although at times urgent situations forced him to overcome, when not upturn, conservative positions. It could not be otherwise in 1832 Pope Gregory XVI had issued the encyclical *Mirari Vos*, declaring that "modern liberties" were unacceptable to Catholics. Freedom of conscience, for instance, put Catholic truth and error on the same level. Seminarians were meant to read and meditate that encyclical, which was in the curriculum.

## What Were Cavour, Mazzini and Garibaldi Doing?

As John Bosco assimilated all those ideas at Chieri, Charles Albert at Turin acted as the champion of Catholic conservatism.

Throne and altar are close allies. The clergy controls the University: a representative of the archbishop attends graduation ceremonies. In 1834, the Arsenal courtyard, the king unveiled the monument to Pietro Micca, the man who had sacrificed his life to save his city.<sup>3</sup> In his speech, however he took care not to extol the common man's virtues, but those of the ignorant and obedient subject ready to sacrifice his life for his king.

In I837 the main actors of the *Risorgimento* had not come together yet. That movement would deeply shake Italy, causing turmoil in everything, including "conservative" and "liberal" ideas.

Giovanni Mastai-Ferretti, the future Pius IX<sup>4</sup> from 1846, is bishop of Imola. At 45, he has the reputation of being open-minded. Deploring the excesses of the papal police, he is a friend of count Pasolini, the top liberal of his city.

Camillo Cavour, 27, manages his Leri farm. In boots and straw hat he will to<sub>rn</sub> morning till night through fields, orchards and rice paddies. In 1831 he was a young lieutenant with the Genoa garrison. On hearing of the revolutionary movements, he had shouted: "Long live the republic!" whereupon the army had banished him to the Aosta valley. His father, head of the Turin police, exiled him to the family farm. But he managed to travel across Europe between a harvest and another. He had seen and admired Paris and London, and had met the Italian exiles. His judgment was "They are a herd of crazy imbeciles and fanatics. I could use them as manure for my beetroot crop."

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> In 1706, during the War of Spanish succession, a German contingent under Eugene of Savoy arrived in time to relieve a French siege to Turin. Micca was about to mine a bridge when a French contingent approached, to close to give him time to light the fuse and flee. He set fire to the charge and perished with the French.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> 1792 – 1878. He still holds of the record as the longest reigning pope.

Mazzini, 32, has just been expelled from Switzerland whence he used to direct his terrorist conspiracies. He now lives in a London suburb, writing for the newspapers to earn a living. Heavily bearded, he wanders alone in black garb in the London fog.

Garibaldi, 30, is in Brazil after fleeing the failed Mazzini revolution in the Savoy. He sails a privateer in the southern sea of Brazil on behalf of the revolutionary government of Rio Grande. His Italian Red Shirts will wore garments of that colour made from a stock of red cloth bought below cost at Montevideo, originally destined for the *saladeros*, the Argentine butchers' sheds.

Victor Emmanuel, 17, lives a regimented life in the Turin Royal Palace. He must accompany his father to the aristocrats' balls and feasts, standing beside him for hours on end. The only time of unrestrained happiness is for him in the stables, where he speaks the language of the stable boys, rides like a swashbuckler and was eager for action and was fresh air.

History marches on, and not only close by, but also far off.

In 1836, Morsel<sup>5</sup> invented the electric telegraph and his code of dashes and dots. The first telegram would appear soon, first for the exclusive use of governments and the press and later for the public.<sup>6</sup>

In 1837 cholera claimed the life of Giacomo Leopardi, 39. Queen Victoria ascended the throne. Her very long reign saw England become the top colonial power in the world.

The year 1838 saw the death of the Marquis of Barolo, ex-mayor of Turin. His widow decided to use her wealth for the relief of women ex-prisoners and ex-prostitutes. Her *Refuge* rose next to the Cottolengo's.

King Ferdinand<sup>7</sup> built the first Italian railway in 1839 near Naples. That same year Jacques Daguerree<sup>8</sup> built the first photo camera. Thanks to him there will be real images of Don Bosco, one of the first saints whose actual countenance is faithfully communicated to posterity.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Samuel Morse, 1791 – 1872.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> 150 years later it would be the turn of the Internet.

 $<sup>^{7}</sup>$  1810 – 59.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> 1787 – 1851.

### **CHAPTER 14**

## "DON BOSCO"

On the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary 1838 John Bosco, theology student was invited to Alfiano to deliver his first homily. "The parish priest, Fr Joseph Pelato, was a pious and doctrinally sound priest. I asked him what he thought of my homily."

"Beautiful, very orderly. You will be a good preacher."

"Do you think the people have understood?"

"Hardly. My brother and I, priests both of us, yes, a few others too."

"Yet it was easy stuff."

'For you, that is. For the people, what you said is above their heads. It's all very well to weave a long spiel based on Sacred and Church history, but the people don't understand.

"What can I do?"

"Forget the classics and speak dialect. Use Italian if you wish, but at the level of the common, repeat common, folk. Don't try reasoning. Tell stories, give examples, and be simple and practical. Remember, people hardly follow you. The truths of faith out to be explained in the easiest possible way."

For Don Bosco that pierce of advice was one of the most precious ever received. He made us of it in homilies, catechisms and books.

## A Pact with the Hereafter

It was November 1838. John Bosco's second year of theology will be marked by a tragic event and truly disturbing one.

Louis Comollo spoke strangely during the last month of holidays. Looking at the *v*ineyards from the top of a hill he said:

"Next year I hope to drink a better wine."

"What do you mean by that?"

At first he refused to answer. Then he said:

"For quite some time I have been feeling such a burning desire to go to heaven that it seems to me impossible to live on earth much longer."

Early in the academic year the two were reading together the biography of a saint. John commented:

"It would be nice for the first of us to die to bring news of the hereafter to the other."

Louis was struck by the idea. He took it up at once.

"Let's make a deal. With God's permission, the first of us to die will come to tell the other whether he is in heaven. OK?"

They shake hands.

In the morning of 25<sup>th</sup> March 1839 they walked towards the chapel. Louis stopped John and with a serious face said:

"It's the end. I am unwell, and know I'm going to die."

John tried to be jocular.

"Come on, you are too well. Yesterday we walked together for an hour. Don't get ideas in your mind."

But the matter was serious indeed. Luigi collapsed in the chapel and was taken to the infirmary with a worrying high fever.

Easter fell on March 31<sup>st</sup>. Louis received the Viaticum. His strength was leaving him. A moment when only John was with him he got hold of his hand and whispered:

"The moment has arrived. We were looking forward to becoming priests together, to helping each other with advice. But God has other plans. Promise to pray for me."

He died on 2<sup>nd</sup> April at dawn, grasping John's hand. He was not yet 22. Within 48 hours a most strange event took place.

In the night between April 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> I was asleep in a dormitory with some 20 seminarians. About 11:30 I heard a deep noise in the corridor, like a vehicle dragged by many horses coming close to the door. All the seminarians woke up. No one said a word. I was petrified by terror. The noise came closer. The door opened violently. Then I clearly heard Comollo's voice say three times, "Bosco, I'm saved!" The noise stopped. The seminarians were all out of bed, clustering around Fr Fiorito, the priest in charge of the dormitory. It is my first memory of true fear, to such an extent as to make death preferable. I became so sick that I almost died of it.

### Millet Bread and Barbera Wine

The serious sickness affecting John Bosco was a form of depression, lasting into the beginning of the next academic year. He didn't feel like eating and could not sleep. After a few months the doctor advised total rest in bed.

His recovery sounds almost incredible. When his mother was informed, she came to visit him, carrying a large round loaf of millet bread and a bottle of vintage Barbera wine. For the poor, malnutrition is the only disease and good food the only remedy. They know nothing of fancy names of diseases and sophisticated medicines.

John did not want to humiliate his mother by refusing her gifts. After a first bite of bread and swig of old wine, he went on eating and drinking without even noticing it. The whole loaf and the bottle gone, he was overcome by deep sleep for two days and one night. When he woke up he felt cured.

## "I Trembled at Committing Myself to Life"

He recovered so fast that towards the end of the year:

I thought I could gain a year by studying during the holidays. Such permission was granted only rarely. I went t to see archbishop Fransoni; applying for permission to study the fourth-year course during summer, so as to conclude the five years of theology within the academic year 1840-41. The reason I gave was that had already turned 24.

The Archbishop, after checking the results of the previous studies, granted permission, with the proviso that John sat all the exams before November and was ordained sub-deacon. The appointed examiner was Fr Cinzano, parish priest of Castelnuovo. After two months of intense study, John passed the exams.

The sub-deaconate, at the time, was a decisive step in the life of an aspiring priest. It implied a lifelong vow of chastity, from which the Church never dispensed for any reason.

The would be priest made a ten-day retreat in total silence. He went for general confession, examining the whole of his past life, asking himself and the confessor representing God whether he was in a position to commit himself *for ever*.

I wanted to go ahead, but trembled at the prospect of tying myself down to life.

On 19<sup>th</sup> September 1840, the bishop invited John to think for the last time about the importance of the order he was about to receive. John's

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### "A Priest Does Not Go to Heaven Alone"

In November 1840 John began the fifth and last year of seminary. On 29<sup>th</sup> March 1841 he was ordained deacon, the last step before the priesthood.

On May 26<sup>th</sup> deacon John Bosco began the Spiritual Exercises in preparation for ordination. Following the spiritual director's invitation, he meditated on the words of the Psalm: "Who will ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who will dwell in his sanctuary? He who has hands and heart clean." He looked back at his life and found that his hands, ever since Margherita made him join them in prayer, had miraculously remained clean.

A priest does not go to heaven or hell alone. If he lives well, he will go to heaven together with the souls he saves with his good example; if he gives scandal with an evil life, he will go to perdition together with the souls damned because of his scandal. I will do all l can to observe the following resolutions.

There follow nine resolutions, on the same line as those made at the taking up of the clerical state. Three of them are part and parcel of his future "priestly style:"

- I will make a rigorous use of time:
- I will bear all, do whatever I can and suffer any humiliation when it is question of saving a soul:
- St Francis of Sales' charity and sweetness will be with me everywhere.

### **Priest Forever**

On 5<sup>th</sup> June 1841, in the Archbishop's palace chapel, John Bosco in white alb prostrates himself before the altar. The organ intones the Gregorian chant. Priests and seminarians invoke one by one the great Saints of the Church: Peter, Paul, Benedict, Bernard, Francis, Catherine, Ignatius...

Pale with emotion and exhausted by the last hectic days, John gets up and kneels before the archbishop. Louis Fransoni lays hands on his head invoking the Holy Spirit to come down and consecrate him priest forever.

Minutes later he concelebrates with the archbishop. He is now "Don Bosco."

I celebrated my first Mass at Turin in the church of St Francis of Assisi, assisted by Fr Cafasso, my beloved benefactor and director. At home, where no first Mass had been celebrated for a long time, they were eagerly waiting for me for the feast of the Holy Trinity. But I preferred to celebrate it at Turin, noiselessly, at the altar of the Guardian Angel. It was the most beautiful day of my life. At the memento of the dead remembered my dear ones and my benefactors most specially Fr Calosso, really a great one. It is a pious belief that the Lord always grants the grace asked for by the priest who celebrates his first Mass. I ardently asked for the gift of the word, to be able to do good to souls.

He celebrated his second Mass at the altar of Our Lady Consolata, in her great church in Turin. On raising his eyes, he saw her there, the Lady shining like the sun who 17 years earlier had talked to him in his dream. "Become humble, strong and sturdy," she had said. The time for him "to understand" had arrived.

The following Thursday; feast of Corpus Christi, compulsory at the time, he celebrated Mass in his native village.

The bells rang for a long time. The church was packed. "They loved me, and were happy to have me there."

The young ones goggled on hearing that the priest used to be an acrobat.

The grown ups remembered him as a playmate and schoolmate.

The old ones, from the surrounding hills, had seen him pass many times barefoot and books in hand.

That night, Margaret talked to him face to face: "You are now a priest, to Jesus. I have not read the books you have, but remember that to begin to say Mass is to begin to suffer. At the outset you will not notice it, but little by little you will see that your mother is right. From now on think only of the salvation of souls, and don't worry about me."

#### **CHAPTER 15**

## FIRST STEPS

What will Don Bosco do now?

He is intelligent, willing to work, and poor.

Three jobs come to him on a plate. The first is as tutor for the children of a family of the Genoa nobility. Many such families, rather than sending their children to the public schools preferred to educate them at home. They always wanted a priest as teacher and educator, for he gave guarantee of seriousness. The offer carried a salary of 1,000 lire per annum, an excellent proposal.

His own people at Morialdo and environs urge him to accept the vacant post of chaplain. They offer him double the usual salary.

Fr Cinzano, parish priest of Castelnuovo, offers him the job of assistant parish priest. He too guarantees a good salary.

It is funny that all should have mentioned money, as if being a priest meant to settle in a comfortable "job." The only discordant voice was Mama Margaret's, the woman struggling daily to make ends meet: "If you ever become rich, I won't set foot in your house."

Don Bosco went to seek advice from Fr Cafasso in Turin.

"What am I to do?"

"Refuse. Come here to the *Convitto* and complete your priestly training."

Fr Cafasso sees far. He has understood that Don Bosco's human and spiritual drive cannot be squandered in one family or in a small village. Turin, on the other hand, can make use of him to the full. Everything is new: suburbs, time, problems. Fr Cafasso's only concern will be to rein him in.

### First Discovery: The Slums

The Convitto was an ex-monastery next to the church of St Francis of Assisi. There, theologian Fr Louis Guala, assisted by Fr Cafasso, prepared 45 young priests to become "priests of their time and of the society where they had to live."

For two years (actually three for Don Bosco), they listened to one talk the morning by Fr Guala and another in the evening by Fr Cafasso. The rest of the day they exercised their ministry in hospitals, prisons, charitable institutions, palaces, hovels and lofts. They delivered homilies in churches, gave catechism classes to the youth and assisted the sick and the old.

The talks were not about theology. They were reflections on the priests' daily experience with the city's load of human problems. They analysed the ecclesial and social situations most directly, reflecting on it twice a day. As Don Bosco would put it, "There one learned to be a priest."

Fr Cafasso was a small man, frail and with physical defects. But he was untiring with teaching, preaching, hearing confessions and attending the prisoners. Don Bosco had him as spiritual director from 1841. He would go to him for confession, for advice before important decisions, to open his soul and to obey.

Up to then Don Bosco had only known rural poverty. He had never seen anything like a slum. Fr Cafasso sent him off: "Go and have a look." And he went, Sunday after Sunday.

What he saw devastated him. The slums were zones of turmoil and revolt, true belts of distress. Stray adolescents of all ages wandered around, unemployed, sad-looking and ready for anything. They played, fought, uttered blasphemies and worse.

Next to the city market he discovered a true "child labour market." The a rea near Porta Palazzo swarmed with hawkers, matchstick sellers, shoe shiners, chimneysweeps, stable boys, broadsheet pushers, errand boys to shopkeepers, all poor boys living from hand to mouth.

In the Memoirs he recorded that the first groups of boys he could approach were "stonecutters, bricklayers, plasterers, road pavers, squarers and many r; others from far off villages."

The sons of the poor and the unemployed hunted for any work to survive. They were the first immigrants of crowd in the belt of slums that had begun to surround the great cities.

He could see them up scaffoldings, trying to apprentice themselves in shops and wandering about uttering the characteristic chimneysweep call. He could see them gambling at street corners, with the hard, determined look of one ready to try anything to succeed in life.

If he tried to approach them, they fled, mistrusting and scornful. They were unlike the boys of Becchi, ready to listen to stories or to watch a magician's show. They were "the wolves," the wild animals he dreamt of as a child, even if those eyes betrayed more fear than ferocity.

#### The Industrial Revolution

The street boys of Turin were one of the perverse effects of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

In 1769 at Glasgow, Scotland, James Watt had patented the steam engine. A single 100-horsepower unit could do the work of 880 men. A spinning mill driven by a Watt engine could produce as much yarn as 100, 000 hand spinners. To look after the spinning machines all one needed was 750 workers under a few sheds.

That was the beginning of the factory workers, also known as proletarians.<sup>2</sup> Before, people were peasants, traders, artisans. Spinners produced cotton and wool yarn by hand. All owned their workshops.

The faster and more abundant production of factories caused an instant drop in prices and an enormous expansion of the market.

Railways, ships and other means of transport availed themselves of the new source of power.

At the same time, medicine and hygiene began to progress too. The plague and smallpox were overcome. The population of Europe grew from 180 million in 1800 to 260 million in 1850.

The unstoppable growth of industry caused a crisis in the artisan class.<sup>3</sup> Avalanches of people poured into the cities from the countryside. The industries were centres with large numbers of dependent workers fulfilling monotonous tasks.

England saw the growth of cities around the coal, iron and textile industries. The Industrial Revolution rapidly spread to France, Germany, Belgium and America.

The change from an agrarian to an industrial society was much more abrupt than that from hunting to cultivating the soil of many centuries earlier.

The Industrial Revolution shook people from a relatively tranquil existence with new, huge and pressing problems.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This is the second crisis. The first was the disappearance of the artisans' guild, associations that regulated their market and looked after their social security. The 179 Loi Chapelier, spread from Revolutionary France had done away with the right of association, thus leaving the citizen alone before the powers of the State. The consequences of this centralizing, dirigiste, mentality are with us today. Again, no one knows what the Industrial Revolution would have looked like if the new inventions have been regulated by the guilds.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The advent of the Industrial Revolution happened to coincide with the dispossession of the poor of their lands. No one knows what that effect would have been had the institution of property remained widespread.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The term (from the L. *prolis*, offspring) means someone whose only wealth is his/her children.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Industry *per se* does not pose such problems. It does so indirectly, because industrial growth is pushed from below by the in-built of credit. The money issued by banks as loans covers the principal but not the interest demanded. The amount of money is therefore chronologically insufficient and some industries must prosper at the expense of others.

#### **Progress**

Coal, oil, dynamite, electricity and the atom unleash previously unknown, immense forces that open the gates to a new world. Watt's discovery was the first of a series that allowed the exploitation of new sources of energy as also their use, for destructive purposes.

The results were staggering. By 1850 the past was not just past, it was dead. World population had increased from 750 million in 1750 to 1.2 billion in 1850. It would reach 2.5 billion by 1950.

The well-being made possible by the industrial revolution had never been seen before. In a pre-industrial country, half the income went to food. In a famine the entire income would be absorbed by food, and not always.

In an industrial country food absorbs scarcely a quarter of the income.

Habits, beliefs, education, the family, were deeply affected. The new generation inherited enormous problems like the growth of lethal weapons, the crumbling of the traditional State, environmental pollution and the social alienation of the old.

Despite the foregoing problems, the Industrial Revolution allowed humankind to extend its control of nature, reduce distances, and break many of the material limits that had conditioned it for millennia.

### The Frightening Human Cost

The first hundred years of it were marked by a frightening human cost. "A tiny minority of super-rich imposed true slavery to a countless multitude of proletarians." 5

The biggest issue was the social question. The new proletariat, born in and around the industrial cities, had no wealth other than their hands and their children. Their conditions were dreadful.

By 1850 half the population of England was massed around its cities. "Housing" consisted in underground cellars where the whole family lived without air, in foul-smelling dampness and darkness. In the factories there it, no hygiene to speak of and no rules except what the boss dictated.

Starvation wages caused people to eat boiled nettles. Families disintegrated, drunkenness spread as did prostitution, crime and new diseases linked to working conditions, like tuberculosis, silicosis, etc.

Not only men and women, but also children worked in factories, their life being one of continuous torture.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The quote is from Leo XIII's Rerum Novarum (1891). 100 years later the situation has worsened.

As they were not allowed to sit or rest, fatigue and sleep caused untold working accidents. Unsurprisingly, their life was short.<sup>6</sup>

By 1850 French, Belgian and German proletarians lived in conditions identical to those of their English counterparts. Survival was a gamble. A family had nothing to spend on medical care, drugs or clothes. At Nantes, France, 66 out of every 100 children died before the age of five. Life expectancy, for a worker of the 1830s-40s was 17-19 years. They were the years of the Lyon riots mentioned earlier in the book.

## Massacre of the Innocents in Italy Too

In Italy, lack of capital and of raw materials retarded the arrival of the Industrial Revolution. The first textile factories opened in Austria-controlled Lombardy and Venetia. The first engineering complexes opened in Milan in 1846. Industrial growth was slow and irregular.

The spinning mills of Lombardy employed 100-200 workers each, mostly children. Their tasks were so monotonous as to reduce them quickly to idiocy. Daily work lasted 13 hours in winter, 15 to 16 in summer. Water-driven mills never stopped. Children worked all night. The humid and unhealthy environment, rising much too early, the uncomfortable posture were the causes, as one local doctor averred, of "glandular hardening, scrofula," rickets and cold tumours." Thus did more than 15, 000 children spend the flower of their youth in Lombardy.

By 1841 the industrial revolution was slowly getting to Turin. To counteract the drop in prices, custom duties on corn and silk were lowered, thus inducing landowners to better methods of production. In 1839 Charles Albert approved the building of the Genoa-Turin rail line, and re-examined the project for the lock canal between Genoa and the *Po.*8 In 1841 engineer Medail presented his project for the Frejus tunnel.9 An Agrarian Association was founded the year after, and the king donated his property at Pollenzo to be turned into an experimental farm.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Margaretha Laski writes: "Children were gathered in their hundred in the slums of London, and sent by rail to the spinning mills of Lancashire. Many could hardly walk. Working hours were from dawn to dusk, 12 hours a day. They collapsed due to lack of sleep and tiredness in the dark environment of the factory. The machines wove the cloth, and a child was enough to look after one of such. Food was limited to one meal a day, at noon. Disease wreaked havoc among the young workers." Laski forgets to add that more often than not it was the parents that pushed their immature offspring to the factories, faking their age. The wages of one or two adults were insufficient to survive.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Tuberculosis of the lymph nodes.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> This canal was never built.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> It was eventually built in 1857 – 71. It is 13.7 long and was the first long-distance rock tunnel driven from two headings.

The city was visibly growing. In the 10 years 1838-48, population grew 17% from 117,000 to 137,000. Construction was booming. 700 new housing units were besieged by 7, 000 families. Migration would peak in 1849 – 50 with between 50, 000 and 100, 000 new immigrants.

Poor families or solitary youngsters arrived from everywhere, even from Lombardy. In construction sites Don Bosco could see

eight-to ten-year olds, far away from their homes, serve the stoneworkers, spend days walking up and down scaffoldings come sun or wind, climb step ladders carrying loads of lime or bricks, with no other education than rude reprimands or harsh beatings.

In the evenings, the workers' families climbed into their lofts, the only accommodation they could afford. Don Bosco climbed there too. He found the lofts "cramped, narrow, dreary and filthy. Whole families sleep, cook and at times even work there."

### Assessing the Situation

Gangs of youth wandered, especially on Sundays, in the streets and along the banks of the river Po. They had a good look at the well-to-do who also walked there, mindless of the surrounding poverty.

Don Bosco quickly assessed the situation. Those boys needed a school and jobs towards a more secure future. And they needed to be boys, to unleash their energy by running and jumping over green spaces, not growing sad on the sidewalks. They also needed to meet God, to discover their dignity and assert it.

He was neither the only one nor the first to reach such conclusion. Even Charles Albert had felt the urgency to help the popular masses.

The king's main worry, though, was "the other revolution," the political one, already in the air and about to explode noisily in 1847-48: the *Risorgimento*. He was divided between the absolutist ideas he had sworn to Charles Felix to uphold unto death and the liberal ones, pressing hard for constitution and Italian unification.

Keeping an eye on Austria, the enemy of every concession to the liberals, he was slowly and cautiously shifting from absolute to moderately liberal positions. He established relations with some liberal representatives. He would thus become a main actor of the *Risorgimento*.

But the social conditions of his kingdom also worried him, causing him to support every charitable and educational initiative. Priest and

Politicians were also divided for or against liberal ideas, but struggled together against the material and moral misery of the people.

A whole range of schools for the working classes rose in Turin. The academic year 1840-41 registered ten boys' schools with 927 students and nine for girls with 519. Two technical schools for workers opened in 1845, with courses of applied mechanics and chemistry. The Brothers of the Christian School opened eight evening schools for 700 workers.

Don Bosco concentrated on the problems of the youth. Fr Cafasso noticed it, and decides to push him fully.

#### **CHAPTER 16**

## BARTHOLOMEW GARELLI

The Turin people nicknamed Fr Cafasso "the gallows priest." He used to go down to console the prisoners, climbing on the tumbrel carrying the condemned to the place of execution, comforting them to the end.

Turin had four prisons, two for men and two for women. On one of his visits Fr Cafasso invited Don Bosco to accompany him.

The dark corridors, the black, damp walls, the sad and miserable aspect of the prisoners deeply upset him. He was disgusted, feeling like choking.

He was most keenly anguished, though, at seeing boys behind bars.

I was horrified at the large number of 12 to 18-year olds, all healthy and strong, intelligent looking; rotting there eaten by insects and starving of material and spiritual bread.

He returned, in Fr Cafasso's company or alone. He tried to speak to them, not formally in catechism classes supervised by the prison guards, but face to face. At first the reaction was sharp. He had to swallow heavy insults. But little by little one or two started opening up. Don Bosco could talk to them as a friend.

And he came to know their sorry stories, their dejection, their anger at times turning into ferocity. The most common offence was theft. Hunger, or the desire to have something more than the necessary to survive, as also envy for the well to do who exploited their poverty, made them do it.

Society, powerless to do anything for them, locked them up. They were fed on black bread and water. The prison guards, afraid of them, beat them at the slightest occasion. There were many together in a single cell. The hardened criminals became the leaders in no time.

The most heart-rending thing was that upon release, many were determined to lead a better life, even if only out of the fearful prison conditions. But after a while they were back in.

He tried to understand, and reached the conclusion that the underlying reason was their having been left to their own devices. Either they had no family, or their families had rejected them for having "dishonoured their name forever."

I said to myself: once out, these boys should find a friend taking care of them, helping, teaching, taking them to church on Sundays and holy days of obligation. They would not go back to prison.

Day after day he succeeded in befriending some. The young prisoners started coming to his "catechism behind bars" more and more willingly.

"As I made them conscious of their dignity, they fell a sense of goodness and resolved to improve."

But often, on returning, he found everything as before: hardened faces, sarcastic remarks, blasphemy. Don Bosco was not always able to overcome dejection. On one occasion he burst into tears. Someone asked:

"Why does that priest cry?"

"Because he loves us. My mother too would cry if she saw me here."

## Waiting as "In the Good Old Days"

Don Bosco irrevocably decided. "At all costs, these youngsters must not go to prison. I must save them. I told Fr Cafasso and sought his advice."

There were other priests in Turin trying to solve the same problem, each in his own way.

The city had 14 parishes in the centre and two in the suburbs. The priests felt the problem, but waited for the young people to come to them in the parish halls and in the churches for evening catechism classes, Sunday school and Lenten courses.

They regretted "the good old days" when the young immigrants arrived with a letter of recommendation from the rural parish priest to his urban colleague. They failed to realise that the wave of population growth had forever buried such orderly ways of behaviour, and that "the good old days" would never return.

New ideas, new methods were called for. Assistant parish priests, besides presiding over funerals and baptisms, ought to try a flying apostolate in stores, workshops and marts.

Milan, where the industrial revolution had arrived earlier, has already solved the problem of the young misfits with a network of "oratories," new institutions for the new times. By 1850 the city had 15 of such, some

with decades of experience. Fr Pavoni had opened the first one at Brescia as 1809.

At Turin the problem was still there. The parish priests hesitated. In 1846 they went to see what had been done in Milan. They met and resolved: "The Turin parish priests, gathered in conference, debated the convenience of opening oratories. Having weighed fears and hopes, and considered that no parish priest is in a position to open such an oratory in his parish, they encourage Fr John Bosco to go on with his own (Oratory) until further deliberation."

As the old priests hesitated, the young ones got on with the task.

#### Fr Cocchi

Fr John Cocchi was a young provincial priest ordained in 1836, when Don Bosco was is in his second year of philosophy.

He opened the first Turin Oratory in 1841, after a failed experiment a year earlier. It was located at Moschino, close to the river Po, a derelict place of ill fame. He placed his oratory under the protection of the Guard Angel.

Fr Cocchi, an ingenious and sensitive priest, was full of brilliant ideas and rash actions. He was more of an initiator than a constant and long-term accomplisher. He was also somewhat liberal, dissenting from the archbishop's or even the pope's political line. He was therefore "suspect" even though his active charity shook the inertia of many ecclesiastics.

In 1849 - 50 he would promote three charitable institutions in favour of the youth and the needy. Other priests, together with him, were starting to launch into the apostolate with the youth. They were free from parish duties. Some had been or still were in Fr Cafasso's *Convitto*, united in friendship by common experiences. Don Bosco recalls that Fr Cafasso himself used to give a weekly catechism class, on Sundays, to youth stonemasons. Classes were held in the sacristy of the church of St Francis. But other cares prevented him from continuing. He wanted over the catechism to Don Bosco, but after the traumatic experience of the prisons, Don Bosco was thinking of something more consistent.

He wanted a centre where boys without a family would find a friend, and the ex-prisoners help and support. The centre was to be linked not to a parish but to his person. And it should not function only on Sundays for catechism, but the whole week. He would be friend, help and meet them at their workplaces.

### A Hail Mary as Foundation Stone

The idea materialised in the morning of 8<sup>th</sup> December 1841, the same year as Fr Cocchi's first Oratory. Don Bosco has lived at the *Convitto* for 35 days.

On the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception I was vesting for Mass. The sacristan, Joseph Comatti, saw a shy young boy in a corner of the sacristy. He invited him to serve Mass.

"I don't know how."

The boy was uneasy.

"Come get on with it. I want you to serve Mass." "I have never served it."

The sacristan flew into a rage.

"You fool! If you don't know how to serve Mass, what do you come to the sacristy for?

He grabbed the coat hanger and started beating the boy over shoulders and head. The boy took to his heels.

"What are you doing? Why do you beat him?"

"Because he comes to the sacristy without knowing how to serve Mass."

"How daft!"

"What's that with you?"

"He's my friend. Go and get him, I need to talk to him."

The boy returned, mortified. His head was clean-shaven, his jacket lime-stained. He was a young immigrant. Perhaps at home they told him, "When you are in Turin, go to Mass." So he went, but did not have the courage to mix in church with well-dressed people. He tried the sacristy, which is where young and old men go in the countryside.

With loving kindness I asked him.

"Have you been to Mass?"

"No."

"Come. After Mass I want to talk to you about something that might interest you."

He promised to come. After Mass and thanksgiving, I took him aside and smiling, I asked him:

"My good friend, what's your name?"

"Bartholomew Garelli."

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Where are you from?"
"Asti."
What do you do?"
"I'm a bricklayer."
Is your Dad alive?"
"He is dead."
And you're Mum?"
She's dead too."
How old are you?"
"Sixteen."
"Do you know how to read and write?"
"No."
"Do you know how to sing?"
The boy wiped his eyes, looked at me in amazement and replied.
"No."
"What about whistling?"
Bartholomew smiled. That's what I wanted. We were already friends. Have you received your first Holy Communion?''
"Not yet."
"And your first confession?"
"Yes, when I was small."
"Do you go to catechism classes?"
"I daren't. The younger boys tease me..."
"Would you come if I taught catechism for you alone?"
"Very willingly."
"Even here?"
"Provided I'm not beaten!"
"Don't worry. You're my friend now. No one will touch you. When do you want to start?"
"Whenever you like."
"Right now?"
"Right now."
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Don Bosco knelt down and recited a Hail Mary. 45 years later he would say to his Salesians, "All the blessings we have received from heaven are the fruit of that Hail Mary recited with fervour and with a right intention."

After the Hail Mary Don Bosco made the sign of the Cross to begin the class, but noticed that Bartholomew made a vague gesture unlike anything resembling it. With great kindness he taught him how to make it. In the Asti dialect he began to explain why we call God "Father." In the end he added:

"I want you to come next Sunday Bartholomew."

"With pleasure."

"But not alone. Bring your friends with you."

Bartholomew Garelli, the young bricklayer from Asti, was Don Bosco's first ambassador among the young workers of his neighbourhood. He reported meeting that nice priest "who also knew how to whistle" and invited them.

Four days later, Sunday, nine boys came to the sacristy. They did not come "to church" but "to see Don Bosco." The Oratory was born.

## "Right Now:" Don Bosco's Trademark

In the dialogue with Bartholomew Garelli, the word "right now" looks like any other word. But no: it is like a live seed, planted to sprout and grow.

At the time, "right now" was like a password for a large group of the Turin clergy. With the turmoil of the industrial revolution, and without anything ready made, these priests will throw their energies into the fray to do something for the poor and the miserable. Don Bosco and his Salesians will specialise in doing things "right now." It will be their trademark.

The poor youngsters cannot afford to wait for the social question to be solved with reforms, organic plans or revolutions. It is true that "right now" is not enough. Teaching how to fish is better than giving a fish to one who is hungry, but giving him a fish "right now" gives him time to learn how to fish. Neither the "right now" nor the "waiting for a different future" are enough each by itself, for in the meantime the poor die in misery.

Don Bosco and his first Salesians opt for the "right now." They teach catechism, give bread, job training, and procure jobs with a good working contract. Meanwhile the liberal State hypocritically "abstains" from the labour question, letting the powerful oppress the poor and the defenceless. Later other Catholics, as well as socialists, communists and anarchists will launch the attack towards reform.

#### **CHAPTER 17**

## THE YOUNG BRICKLAYERS

As the young priest was delivering a learned homily from the pulpit a group of very young apprentice bricklayers slept soundly, heads on one another's shoulder, on the steps of a side altar. Don Bosco passed by and touched the first on the shoulder.

"Why are you asleep?"

"We don't get anything, mumbled the oldest." In any case, that priest doesn't preach for us, adds his neighbour."

"Come with me."

He tiptoed with them to the sacristy. "They were Charles Buzzetti's, Johnny Gariboldi, Germano." With emotion, Don Bosco described to his first the little bricklayers from Lombardy that would stay with him for 30 - 40 years. Everybody knew them at Valdocco. "They were simple apprentices then, today they are master builders."

Bartholomew and friends joined them in the sacristy. The number of boys was growing. Don Bosco taught them how to pray and preached a homily pitched to their understanding, dialoguing with them, weaving into it and intriguing pieces of news. Afterwards they sat in the front pews for Bosco's Mass.

But the morning is long, and after Mass and the breakfast loaf the boys wanted to play. They scampered first in the *Convitto* courtyard, but froze on seeing a priest pass by.

Frs Guala and Cafasso understand. They gave formal permission to Don Bosco for his boys to play there on Sundays. For three years they never withdrew it, even when the boys grew from 15 to 80 by summer.

It meant to give up the afternoon peace and siesta. 80 boys under one's window may sound like music the first time, but like nerve-racking noise the tenth.

## **Devotional Objects and Loaves**

Don Bosco understood that enough is enough, and weather permitting he started taking his boys out to the hills, along the river and to the shrines of Our Lady.

His first resolution was to accept "boys most in danger, preferably exprisoners." But throughout his life he will never have the courage to send away a boy asking to stay with him. In no time the bulk of his troop would be packed with stonecutters, bricklayers, plasterers, pavers from far away who could not afford to go home during the dead season December-March.

Frs Guala and Cafasso, while encouraging the other priests to repeat Don Bosco's experience, also helped by hearing confessions and talking to the boys.

Don Bosco was a little embarrassed. "They gave me prayer cards, booklets, medals, crucifixes to give out as gifts." But his little bricklayers had more urgent needs. He mentioned it to the priests. "They gave me clothes for the worst off and bread for the unemployed, until such time as they could find work."

Looking for jobs for the unemployed and for improved working conditions for those with a job was a full time occupation for Don Bosco throughout the week.

I used to visit them at work. The boys were delighted, as were their employers, who willingly gave work to youngsters whom they knew would be looked after during the week and on feast days.

The ex-prisoners were a more delicate problem. He found jobs at honest employers' for them "one by one," and went to visit them during the week. The results were good. "They lived an honest life, forgot the past and became good Christians and decent citizens."

Every Saturday Don Bosco was back at the prisons, for that most difficult apostate.

My pockets were all of tobacco, fruit, bread rolls. I wanted to do good to those unfortunate youngsters who had ended up in there, befriend them, and invite them to the Oratory upon release.

#### **Twelve Musical Beats**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1842 was the feast of the Purification, holiday of obligation at the time. Don Bosco had formed a choir of 25 voices. "Without

music our meetings would have been like a soulless body." They sang t the top of their voices along the hills paths, but they could also delicately sing a simple song of praise to Our Lady, *Lodate Maria* (praise Mary).

During Mass the congregation was astonished at the 25 "barabbotti" attracting sympathy by singing so well.

The briefest Marian praise, twelve beats long, would spread from Oratory to Oratory and from school to school, out to the remotest corners of the globe, from India to the slums of Brasilia and Corumba in the Mato Grosso.

Amusingly, only 35 days separated that success from Giuseppe Verdi's "Va Pensiero" from the opera "Nabucco" staged on March 9th that same year in Milan.<sup>2</sup>

## The Child from Caronno

Come spring, the little bricklayers who went home during the dead season are back in town. Don Bosco's troop grows and grows. Joseph Buzzetti from Caronno, Carlo's 10-year old brother, also arrives. He grew so fond of Don Bosco that he never left him. From that spring of 1842 to dawn of 31st January 1888, Don Bosco's death, Buzzetti was always at his side, calm witness of the human and divine vicissitudes marking the life of "the priest that loved him." Many events in Don Bosco's life, which today skeptics would distrust as "legends," the simple eyes of the young bricklayer from Caronno saw and registered. He was always within shouting distance from "his' Don Bosco.

## "For as Song as I Have a Piece of Bread"

What bound the boys to Don Bosco was his deep cordiality. The boys felt and saw it in practice. He was at their disposal full time.

For those who needed to learn how to read or to count, Don Bosco found time himself, or another teacher.

For those who had a cantankerous boss or was out of work, he set things in motion to find a job or an honest, Christian employer.

If any of them urgently needed money, Don Bosco was always ready to empty his purse in his hands.

Literally, "little Barabbas."

<sup>1813-1901.</sup> The opera is a musical on the Biblical theme of King Nebuchadnezzar.

If their work was hard and dull, making them ask, "come and see me," Don Bosco went. He entered workshops and building sites. To see him and talk to him was a real relief.

Many heard from him a phrase they would never forget: "I have such love for you that if I had only one piece of bread left, I would divide it with you."

If he had to scold someone, he would do so privately, to avoid mortifying him. If he promised anything, he would keep the promise come what may.

There were many priests who, in those years, committed themselves to do a good turn to poor boys. Their attitude was kind and loving, but serious, as the rules of St Louis Pavoni and the Brothers of the Christian Schools aver. Kindness with the boys, by all means: provided they did not raise the voice level too much. They were not to explode in boisterous cheerfulness. One ought to impose silence and recollection, otherwise the "little wild animal" inside them would get unchained.

Don Bosco's loving-kindness was different. As founder of the *Societa dell Allegria* he knew the value of noisy joy. That explosive charge called "youth" needs to be touched off, releasing stored energy He himself urged them: "Play, jump, make noise. My only concern is that you don't sin."

What he really wanted was fresh air and open spaces for running at breakneck speed. Surely he saw to it that the boys did not hurt or get hurt. But far from curbing them, he stimulated them. He sensed that the educator must not stay away from the boys' gaiety. He must share it, organise it when it fails to develop by itself, and avoid anything that may prevent it.

The boys returned that love, growing ever fond of him. To meet Don Bosco was always a joyful experience.

On one occasion he met a boy coming back from shopping, with a bottle of vegetable oil in one hand and a glass of vinegar in the other. But as soon as he spotted Don Bosco he ran: "Good morning, Don Bosco!" Oil and vinegar swayed precariously.

Don Bosco smiled at seeing him so happy, and played a trick on him: "I bet you are unable to clap your hands as I do," and claps. The boy, in his happiness, fails to understand. With the bottle under his arm he claps his hands shouting, "Long live Don Bosco!" Inevitably, bottle and glass shatter on the ground. The boy is in tears:

"Poor me, mum will beat me at home.."

"Don't worry, we'll fix that."

And Don Bosco buys for him oil and vinegar from a drugstore.

### Risorgimento Politics

In April 1842 Turin was celebrating. Crown Prince Victor Emmanuel weds Adelaide daughter of Archduke Rainier, the Austrian viceroy of Lombardy. Two exceptional events marked the wedding: the Holy Shroud was on show from the loggia of the Palace<sup>3</sup> and the king granted an amnesty to the revolutionaries of 1821.

The king was taking a cautious step in the direction of the liberal moderates. In 1843 Gioberti, still in exile, would publish his *Primacy of the Italian Race* at Brussels. His thesis was that the greatness of Italy and that of the papacy are inseparable. Italy's independence, therefore, entails that the pope should be president of a confederation of Italian states.

Charles Albert was happy with the proposal, while keeping a wary eye on Austria. He congratulated Balbo, another liberal, on a book written by him, but warning him at the same time to publish it at Paris.

He sent an official protest to the king of France for having given a military commission to a revolutionary general condemned to death in Piedmont, but in 1848 the same general would become Charles Albert's prime minister. Don Bosco observes, confirmed in his mistrust of politics and politicians.

## St Joseph Cottolengo

On 30<sup>th</sup> April 1842 canon Cottolengo died at Chieri. Hundreds of incurables lay in his *Little House of Divine Providence*. Years earlier, the Finance Minister had sent for him.

"Are you the director of the Little House?"

"No. I am only Divine Providence's laborer."

"Maybe, But where do you get the means to support all those sick people?"

"I've already told you: from Divine Providence."

That man, used to income, expenditure, balance sheets, and to see things in terms of money, lost his patience.

"Money, reverend, money. Where does the money come from?"

"Not again. I have told you twice. Divine Providence supplies us with everything. We have never lacked anything. I shall die, and so will you Minister, but Providence will continue looking after the Little House."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The Holy Shroud of Turin was a possession of the Savoy dynasty from its arrival from the Middle East in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to 1983, when king in exile Umberto II bequeathed it to the Holy See.

When Cottolengo's health started deteriorating, Charles Albert himself had sent for him. He spoke rather brusquely:

"Mister canon, please consider that you too are under the inexorable law of death. What will happen to all those orphans, invalids and incurables of the *Little House?*"

As the king spoke, the sharp, rhythmic steps of a military platoon could be heard from the courtyard through the large window opening on it. Cottolengo asked:

"Your Majesty, what's that?"

"It's the change of watch. A platoon is replacing another." The priest smiled:

"That's the answer to your question. There will be a change of watch **at** the *Little House*. *I will* go, and Divine Providence will send another to take my place."

And so it was. Canon Anglesio succeeded him at his death, and the *Little House* continued at its location between the market and the building of the Marchioness of Barolo.<sup>4</sup>

Don Bosco reminisced that he had visited the *Little House a* few days after arriving in Turin. After asking for Don Bosco's name and place of origin, the canon said, with his absent-minded, jocular way:

"You have the face of an honest man. Come to work here. You'll never run out of work."

Don Bosco had often gone there to hear confessions and to spend time with invalid boys. One day Cottolengo fingered Don Bosco's cassock with this piece of advice:

"It's too light. Get a much tougher one. Many boys will hang from this cassock."

## Hunger for God

And they did hang from it. The number of boys grew by the month. There were more than 100. They needed not only bread and work, but also the faith that nourishes even when bread is scarce. Don Bosco was not a philanthropist but a priest, and his concern was that they should meet God.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The Cottolengo is a world-wide institution today.

It was quite remarkable, both on week and feast days, to see my confessional by 40-50 boys who queued up for a long time to go to confession.

To go to confession was not always easy for the boys. Don Bosco helped them with the simplest of rules:

If you don't know what to say ask the priest to help you. It is enough. He will ask a few questions and everything will be alright.

Don Bosco administered the sacrament with the keenest sense of sin and of the life of grace. He was not only judge, but also father, eager to increase the life of grace in the boys.

During his years in the *Convitto*, he had already been convinced that not with severity but with kindliness he would bring souls to God.

Communion was the natural crowning of confession. Many boys received it weekly.

Don Bosco spoke of God effortlessly. In ordinary conversation, while walking, paying, telling jokes or exchanging quips, he would talk of heaven. In moments of great joy he would burst out:

What a pleasure to be together in heaven!"

At times the conversation dealt with good, evil, life and the hereafter.

Someone would ask:

"Will I be saved?"

"That would be it! You, going to hell! Do you think God created heaven to leave it empty? Obviously to climb up there one has to struggle, but I want all of us to get there. What a celebration it'll be!"

#### **CHAPTER 18**

# THE MARCHIONESS AND THE SHORT PRIEST

The summer of 1844 marked three years of Don Bosco's stay at the *Convitto*. Fr Cafasso paid a visit to Fr Borel, spiritual director of the *Refuge* founded by the Marchioness of Barolo.

"I should like to send to you a good priest. Do you have a room and a salary for him?"

"But there is no work here, not even for me. What can I ask him to do?"

"Let him loose. If the salary worries you, I'll pay it. His name is Don Bosco. At the Convitto he has started a kind of oratory for poor boys. If we don't find a place for him in town, the archbishop will send him as assistant parish priest in some village, and the boys will return to the streets. It would be a real pity."

"All right then. I'll talk to the marchioness."

Fr Cafasso returned and saw Don Bosco.

"Pack your bags and go to the Refuge. You will work together with Fr Borel, and you'll have plenty of time for your boys."

## A Cilice Under the Finery

Marchioness de Colbert was at the forefront of the Turin high society. A refugee from France at the time of the Revolution, she had married the Marquis of Barolo, a former mayor of Turin. In 1838 he had died, leaving her childless and with an immense fortune. At 53 the marchioness wore the cilice of penance under her dress, dedicating herself exclusively to the poor.

In her *Memoirs* she wrote, "I must pay for my ancestors' unjust privileges. I must settle accounts for the debts they contracted with the miserable and the exploited."

For many years she used to spend three hours daily in the women's prison. She endured insults, humiliations, even beatings, for wanting to

teach those poor women. In the end she succeeded in getting the authorities to separate the men's prison from the women's. She herself brought them to a better, healthier building.

She founded orphan homes and residences for working girls.

At Valdocco, next to Cottolengo's *Little House*, she built *The Refuge*, for streetwalkers willing to start a new life. Next to it she opened. a home for the *Little Magdalenes*, girls under 14 in danger.

That same 1844 she had launched into the construction of the *Hostel of St Philomena* for sickly and crippled girls.

Although personally involved in all these activities, she kept her elegance and liveliness. The most famous intellectuals of the time met in her salon. Pellico was her secretary. He had written *My Prisons* in her palace. Balzac <sup>1</sup>and **Lamartine**<sup>2</sup> corresponded with her, keeping her informed on French affairs.

Fr Borel went to see her:

"I've found a spiritual director for your Hostel. His name is Don Bosco, from Convitto."

"Alright, but the Hostel is still being built. See me in six months time."

"No, Marchioness. You either get him now or he will be sent elsewhere. Fr Cafasso has strongly recommended him. He has mentioned an oratory by this priest. He says that it would be a pity to let it go to the dogs."

The marchioness asked for further information and was convinced. She assigned to Don Bosco a yearly salary of 600 lire. He would have a room next to Fr Borel's, near the Refuge.

On her first meeting the marchioness, Don Bosco also asked for information and guarantees. He accepted to minister to the Refuge, but asked to be forced to abandon his boys. He also asked that any boy wanting to approach him on weekdays should be allowed to.

The marchioness, near 60 but still sprightly and genuine, liked his frankness. She granted him the strip of ground next to the Hostel under construction. As soon as practicable she would also assign to him two rooms in the building to adapt as chapel.

It was a beginning, albeit a rough one.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Honore de Balzac. 1799 – 1850. Most famous French novelist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Alphonse de Lamartine, French poet and statesman, 1790 – 1869.

### Wolfs into Lambs

It is Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> October 1844. Don Bosco is pensive. Next day he is to tell his boys that the Oratory is moving to the Valdocco outskirts.

I was uneasy. The place, the means, the people, everything was uncertain. That night I had a dream that seemed an appendix to the one at Becchi when I was nine.

He saw a pack of wohes. He wanted to flee, but a lady dressed as a shepherdess gestured me to accompany the pack. She walked ahead. We stopped three times. At every stop, many wohes changed into lambs. Dog-tired, I wanted to sit down, but the shepherdess urged me to keep going. We reached a vast courtyard surrounded by a portico, with a church in the distance. The number of lambs increased beyond counting. Many shepherds appeared, looking after them, but they didn't stay long. Then something marvellous happened. Many lambs became shepherds and started taking care of the others. The shepherdess invited me to look south. I saw afield... Look again, "she said. I saw a splendid, tall church... Inside it there was a white banner with an inscription in very large letters: "Hic domus mea, inde gloria mea" (Here is my house, whence my glory).

I didn't believe it, but I understood later, when each of the things I saw came true. Better still, this dream, plus another one, served me as a guideline for the future.

The other dream was written down by Frs Barberis and Lemoyne as Don Bosco related it.

A lady said to me, "Look!" And I saw a small, squat church, with a little courtyard and a great number of bolls around... As the church became insufficient, I turned to her once more, and she showed me a much bigger church with a house next to it... I saw myself surrounded by an immense number of boys. I saw a huge church in the midst of many buildings, and a beautiful monument right in the middle.

## "Don Bosco? The Oratory? Where Are They?"

On Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> October Don Bosco announced the move to his boys, but with a certain anxiety. He dared to describe what he had actually seen only in a dream. He cheerfully announced "a large room, all for us, where you'll be able to sing, run and jump. The boys were very pleased. There was impatience all over."

Next Sunday 20th, groups of boys walked beyond the city limits descending towards Valdocco. The right bank of the river Dora was an expanse

of pastures and fields, with scattered peasants' cottages. The *Little House* and the *Refuge* stood next to taverns and cottages, where people lived in peace. The boys didn't know where to go, and began knocking at random, shouting: "Where is Don Bosco? Where is the Oratory?"

The people, who had often experienced gangs of hooligans, thought of a ruse and shouted back:

"What oratory and what Don Bosco! Get out of here! Take to your heels or get a taste of our pitchforks!"

I heard a commotion and got out with Fr Borel. The boys rushed to us."

There was place in plenty to play and run around, but no place to pray, to hear confessions or to celebrate Mass.

The vast room I promised you isn't ready yet. Whoever wants can come to my room or to Fr Borel's."

Until December they were like sardines. "The room, the corridor, the staircase, were all cluttered with boys. Two of us were to confess 200 of them." And who can keep 200 waiting boys quiet?

One wanted to light a fire, another to put it out. One stacked the firewood, another spilled the water. Bucket, tongs, fireside shovel, pitcher, basin, chairs, shoes, books, were the more in chaos the more everybody wanted to put order.

The report may seem exaggerated, but not for anyone who has ever lived among the youth.

Six Sundays went. Two hundred boys lined up behind Don Bosco in midmorning to go for Mass in one of the nearby churches.

Fr Borel often went with them. He was a simple and popular man. Because of his short stature people nicknamed him "the short priest." He was untiring. He had taken Don Bosco under his protection, helping him not only with a loving friendship, but also often with his purse.

The "short priest's" homilies enjoyed a great success among the boys. He preached in dialect, making a lavish use of proverbs, witticisms and humorous remarks. To those who urged him to preach with more decorum, he used to reply: "The world is awkward, and so must the homilies be."

#### Snowflakes on the Brazier

On 8<sup>th</sup> December the two rooms adapted as chapel were ready just in for a terrific time, for a terrific snowstorm had fallen during the night.

In the morning the snow was high on the ground, and it was terribly cold. A big brazier was carried to the chapel. Buzzetti recalled that when carrying it outside, the snowflakes fell into it, crackling as they touched the hot embers.

The boys arrived. There was a small altar, a small tabernacle, few benches.

I celebrated Mass; many boys went to confession and communion, and I wept, because I thought that the Oratory was now a permanent reality.

He was wrong. He would weep again, not of joy this time but of sadness, before finding a truly permanent place.

The 8<sup>th</sup> December 1844, however, Don Bosco's Oratory will get a permanent name: "Oratory of St Francis of Sales.<sup>3</sup> He himself gives the reasons:

The marchioness had ordered a portrait of this Saint to be painted at the entrance. Our ministry also required great calm and gentleness. We had sought St Francis' protection to obtain from him his extraordinary meekness.

Don Bosco had bought bowls, quoits and stilts for his boys to give vent to their boisterousness (the football had not been invented yet!). He continued to help the most needy with food, clothes and shoes.

With a room at his disposal, he now thought about giving some education to the more intelligent. They came in the evenings, stealing a couple of hours from sleep, their faces blackened by soot or whitened by lime, their cloaks on their shoulder to fend off the bitter cold, hungry for schooling.

But books, clothes and games equipment cost money. Don Bosco felt shy and embarrassed. He found it repugnant to go begging from well-to-do families. Fr Borel encouraged him:

"If you really love your boys, you must make this sacrifice."

Don Bosco went. Fr Borel had prepared the visit to the first family. Don Bosco felt his cheeks blush on receiving the first 300 lire.

42 years later he would ask one of the early Salesian directors to go and receive some alms. The man replied that he "lacked Don Bosco's frankness." Don Bosco became serious:

"You have no idea how much it costs me to go begging."

He always felt embarrassed, but he never demeaned his dignity. He was neither shy nor coarse. The upper class families that received him would say:

"It looked as if an angel entered our home."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> 1567 – 1622. He was famous for his gentleness in controversy. He succeeded in converting the 60,000 Protestant Calvinists to the Catholic faith. He died as bishop of Geneva.

As well as looking after his boys, he also fulfilled his duties. He was supposed to exercise his ministry with the unhappy women and girls of the *Refuge*. He clearly said that that was not his mission, but performed his conscientiously nevertheless.

Don Bosco was by no means a woman-hater. He always accepted the operation and the presence of women with simplicity, from the little girl's offering him to look after the cows at Sussambrino to the precious cooperations of the Valdocco mothers: his own, Fr Rua's, canon Gastaldi's, and big Marianna sister of Mama Margaret. The "women's room," as it was called, was located beside the boys' infirmary. When Dominic Savio developed high fever, in the winter of 1857, he got out of bed and went to warm himself at the fireplace of big Marianna, who was also sick. He even scolded her for complaining about her ailments "sent to her by God." Don Bosco's alleged misogyny, his feeling uncomfortable in the presence of women, is a myth invented by biographers under the influence of doubt ideologies.

#### Failure at St Peter in Chains

From the first months at *the Refuge,* Don Bosco and the marchioness were on diametrically opposed tacks. He tried to persuade her to allocate building under construction not to sick girls but to abandoned boys. And she hoped all the time that he would let go of his boys and take care her concerns full time.

It was a mutual illusion. As time went on, the number and the noise of grew alarmingly. A few rose bushes were destroyed by the violence of the games, and some nuns were apprehensive at those teenagers roaming too close to the *Little Magdalenes*. The marchioness became impatient: the Oratory had to go.

But where? All Don Bosco had were his dreams, a far cry from being reliable maps.

A partial solution came by Lent of 1845. Daily classes of catechism for the older boys (compulsory at the time) would be held at *Saint Peter in Chains*. It was a church dedicated to the Crucified, beside which there was a disused cemetery<sup>4</sup> surrounded by a portico and with a hall and an ample courtyard.

Catechism classes were quiet and orderly. As the cemetery chaplain, Fr Tesio was Don Bosco's friend, Don Bosco asked to be allowed to transplant there the whole Oratory, which could use both church and courtyard.

On Sunday 25th Fr Tesio was going to be away. He agreed:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The cemetery still stands in the Valdocco suburbs.

"Come with your boys on the 25th. You will celebrate my Mass."

The chaplain committed two likely mistakes. He must have thought that those disciplined boys seen at the catechism classes were all that there was in the Oratory. And he must also have taken it that at the end of Mass and other liturgical functions, the boys would have all gone home, perhaps after a simple picnic in the courtyard.

Things turned out differently. The priest's housekeeper saw an enormous horde of boys pack the church. After Mass they all caught the breakfast roll and started running wildly and noisily in the courtyard and under the porticoes. The woman, who was raising chicken under it, was taken aback. She flew into a rage, shouted and chased the boys, broom in hand, while hens and boys fled in confusion before her tantrums.

Her chase took her close to Don Bosco, whom she started covering in contumely. Her gentlest sobriquet was "Desecrator of holy places!"

Don Bosco understood that he had to leave.

I stopped the recreation. We left, hoping to meet in a quieter place next Sunday.

It would seem a banal incident, were it not for a startling circumstance. Fr Rua, testifying at Don Bosco's process of canonisation, related: "Many years later a certain Melanotte from Lanzo, who had witnessed the scene, told me that Don Bosco, unperturbed before all those insults, said to the boys: "Poor woman! She's ordering us out, without knowing that by next feast day she will be dead and buried."

On Fr Tesio's return, she gave him such a catastrophic account that the chaplain (perhaps not daring to withdraw his permission directly from Don Bosco) wrote a letter asking the City Council formally to forbid all recreations within the precincts of the cemetery.

It is regrettable, "Don Bosco wrote, "but that letter was Fr Tesio's last. Both he and his housekeeper died suddenly within the week.

#### **CHAPTER 19**

## THE WANDERING ORATORY

Following the unhappy experience of *Saint Peter in Chains*, the boys of the Oratory fell back to meeting at the Refuge. The marchioness did not object, but reminded Don Bosco that the Hostel would open on August 10. It was an obvious hint that his boys would find the doors shut from that day on.

On July1845 Don Bosco received a letter from the City Council. Thanks to a recommendation from the archbishop, the Council granted "the use of the chapel of the City Mills for the catechesis, from noon to 3 p.m. The boys are strictly forbidden to enter the second courtyard of the building."

For three hours on Sundays they had now the use of a church, which was more like a survival kit than a Royal Palace.

We took benches, kneelers, and candlesticks, big and small pictures. Everyone carried he could, and whatever he could, and like a people on a migratory journey we set up headquarters there.

The City Mills, dubbed Molassi by the people, were located in the Emmanuel Philibert Square (Porta Palazzo), on the right hand side descending towards the river Dora. This large square hosts daily a colourful market place, with rows and rows of stalls.

## "Cabbages, Dear Boys..."

Neither Don Bosco nor the boys were happy about the situation. He wrote:

It was impossible to celebrate Mass or give Benediction in the evening. Hence there could be no Holy Communion, the essential element of our institution. The very recreation was chaotic. The boys played in the street or in the small church square amidst passing carts and horses."

And concluded: "For want of anything better there was nothing for us to do but wait."

He had rented a room on the ground floor of the building, where he taught catechism and other school subjects as best as he could.

Fr Borel tried to revive everyone's morale with a famous homily that the boys hailed as "the homily of the cabbages:" "Cabbages, dear boys, do not form a beautiful, big head unless transplanted." Everybody laughed. He went on: "It's happening to our Oratory. Transplanted from place to place, it has grown bigger and bigger." He outlined its history and concluded: "How long shall we remain here? Let's not worry. Let's trust in the Lord. For certain He blesses us, helps and cares for us."

Serious trouble blew up a few Sundays later.

The Secretariat of the *Mills sent* a letter to the City Council with a list of serious charges: the boys were damaging the church and the buildings. Besides, they were "a likely revolutionary gathering (a very damning charge in those days) and a seedbed of immorality."

The Mayor sent a commission to investigate. They found everything normal: the boys were boisterous, and there was such thing as the scratch of a nail on a wall. There was no sign of revolution or of immorality. The real cause of complaint was the neighbours' irritation. The loud singing, the din, the noisy games ruined their Sunday rest.

Don Bosco felt very sorry for the slander, which always leaves traces behind. He was less so for the decision communicated to him shortly afterwards. The Council did not withdraw the licence, but it would not renew it beyond January 1<sup>st</sup>. The official letter would be sent in November. In the meantime, would he please be "reasonable."

Don Bosco tried. From then on, the church of the *Mills* became a simple rallying point. The boys played on the wasteland along the banks of the Dora.

To pray they went to Madonna del Pilone, to Sassi, to Madonna di Campagna. In these churches I celebrated Mass and explained the Gospel. In the evening I taught a little catechism, told some stories and we sang songs of praise. Then we walked around until it was time for the boys to go to their families. The uncertainty of the situation seemed such as to send the Oratory up in a puff of smoke, but no: the number of boys increased extraordinarily.

## "Michelino, Take Half"

Near the City Mills, that September, Don Bosco had an encounter that would mark a turning point in his life. As the boys pushed each other to get a medal from him, standing aside there was a small, pale, eight-year old with a conspicuous black band on his left arm. He had lost his father

months previously. He felt loath to push into the crowd. There were no more medals, so he was left empty handed.

Don Bosco went straight at him, smiled and said: Take, Michelino, take."

Take what? That strange priest, never seen before, was giving him nothing. Stretching his left hand, he was making a sign as if cutting it into two with his right one. The lad lifted his eyes questioningly. The priest said: "We two will share everything equally."

What did Don Bosco see? He never revealed it, but that boy would one day become his right hand and first successor at the head of the Salesian congregation.

The Boy Michael Rua did not understand, then or for many years afterwards. But he was drawn to Don Bosco, that priest with whom one felt so happy and warm.

Michelino lived at the Royal Arsenal, where his father had worked. Four siblings had died young, and he was very frail. His mother did not allow him to go to the Oratory often, but he saw Don Bosco at the school of the Christian Brothers when in Standard Three. Later he would recall:

When Don Bosco came to say Mass and to preach, on his entering the chapel we children felt as if an electric current flowed through the crowd. We jumped on our feet, got out of our places and clustered around him. It took him quite a time before making it to the sacristy. The good Brothers were unable to restore order. But when other priests came, nothing like that would happen.

## Books Written by Candlelight

The month of October marked an important event. Don Bosco published Church History for Schools, the first of a series of books for his boys, written by candlelight during hours robbed from sleep and in a hurried handwriting. It was not a "scientific" work: none of Don Bosco's books is. But it was a popular work, adapted to the simple mind and modest culture of his boys. It contained stories about the popes, the more luminous events ~ the history of the Church, profiles of saints and a description of those works of charity that blossom among the People of God in all centuries.

Later there followed Sacred History (1847), The Metric Decimal System (1849) and a History of Italy (1855).

Besides schoolbooks Don Bosco wrote many more books and booklets: lives of saints, readers, prayer books and books of religious instruction. None would be a masterpiece, but all were an act of love towards his boys, towards simple people and towards the Church. Many of them would cause him trouble, to the point of being beaten up to stop him writing.

#### Three Rooms at Fr Moretta's

The Council's letter duly arrived in November, as did the bad weather.

The climate did not allow walks, short or long, in the countryside. Together with Fr Borel we rented three rooms at Fr Moretta 's house.

That house no longer exists. Its last wall was incorporated into a church, branch of the Mary Help of Christians parish, on the right hand side descending towards the great church. In the three rooms "we spent four months, rather cramped but happy that we could gather the boys, teach them and give them the opportunity to go to confession."

Don Bosco recalled, smiling, that in those rooms he was forced to renege on the resolution he had made long ago when at the seminary: to entertain the boys in such a cramped situation, he resorted to prestidigitation. It was such a success that he did not stop again.

With the help of Fr Carpano he also started a regular evening course of studies, very different from the occasional classes given up to then.

In such an issue as popular instruction, Don Bosco was not a conservative but a liberal. To the worried archbishop Don Bosco said,

"One need not inquire where the inspiration for this new initiative comes from. One need only to look at its nature, and if good, give it a Christian direction before it gets corrupted by an antireligious spirit."

## A Big Question Mark

In December Don Bosco's health gave cause for concern. He was the chaplain of the Hostel for sick girls between three and twelve. He was engaged in the prisons, at the Cottolengo, in various schools of the city. He worked in his Oratory, taught in the evening school and visited his boys at their workplaces. And the 1845-46 winter promised to be very cold.

In Turin winter arrives late, but covers its alleys with thick layers of grey snow that give the city months of continuous and depressing cold.

Don Bosco's lungs appeared rather frail in those months. Fr Borel noticed it and told the marchioness of Barolo. She gave Don Bosco 100 lire for the Oratory, with the curt order "to cease from any occupation until complete recovery."

Don Bosco obeyed, breaking off all engagements except his boys. He quickly realised that it did not do him much good.

But his health was nothing compared to the storm clouds gathering over the Oratory. Embittered, he wrote: "At the time strange rumours were

spreading abroad. Some called Don Bosco a revolutionary, others a madman, and others yet a heretic.

"First to join the fray were the parish priests. At a meeting early in 1846, one of the items on the agenda was catechesis. The parish priest of the Carmel expressed his perplexity about Don Bosco's Oratory: the boys leave the parishes without even knowing their parish priest. Is it a good or a bad thing? Other parish priests were equally worried.

"I was not a question of miserable ambition or jealousy," Don Bosco quickly adds. "They were truly zealous for the salvation of souls." They sent two emissaries to clear up the situation.

In his Memoirs, Don Bosco reconstructs the exchange, often repeated. It was a key argument for his work. Essentially, it went:

"This Oratory of yours draws the youth away from the parishes. Why don't you send the boys there?"

"Because most of them know neither the priest nor the parish. They are all upcountry boys, foreigners coming to find work. They come from Val d' Aosta, Sacountr, Biella, Novara, Lombardy."

"Why don't you help them to fit in their respective parishes?"

'It is impossible. Their many dialects and lack of fixed abode are the biggest obstacles. But we could try that, provided each parish priest came to gather his own and take them to his parish. Even so, there would remain difficulties: quite a few are dissolute and unruly. Only when attracted by recreation and walks they accept to be taught catechism and prayer. Every parish should have a place where to gather them in leisurely recreation."

"But this is impossible. We have no rooms, and on Sundays the priests have other duties."

The conclusion was a foregone one. A few days later Don Bosco received the following communication: "The parish priests, unable to provide, each an oratory in his parish, encourage the priest Giovanni Bosco to continue."

The first question had been answered. Others, far more threatening, would arrive by the spring.

# A Different Oratory

The main characteristics of the Oratory of St Francis of Sales were thus outlined. Don Bosco had drawn on the experience of the oratories of Milan, Brescia, and that of St Philip Neri in Rome. He had followed on the

footsteps of Fr Cocchi in Turin itself. But he had uniquely stamped his work with his own personality. In his hands, the Oratory had become something truly original, different from every other.

Here is a list, however incomplete and inadequate, of such characteristics:

The traditional oratories were extensions of the parish. Don Bosco's transgressed those limits. His was "the parish of the parish-less youth" as archbishop Fransoni would call it.

The traditional parish priest inspired a "stem lovingness" that damped gaiety and was wary of noise. Don Bosco inaugurated a "cheerful lovingness": the priest himself fostered noisy games and unleashed youthful joy.

The traditional oratories opened exclusively on Sundays for two-three hours in the afternoon. Don Bosco was available the whole of Sunday to begin with. Then he extended the Oratory to the whole week, with evening classes and with meeting the boys at their workplaces.

The boys going to a traditional oratory went to a given parish with its own church. The boys of the Oratory of St Francis of Sales, paradoxically favoured by the migratory phenomenon, went to look for Don Bosco, to spend the day with him. The centre of the Oratory was not the institution of the parish church, but the person of Don Bosco with his continuing, stimulating presence. The rapport was personal, not institutional.

The other oratories selected the best boys. Their parents introduced them to the parish, guaranteeing their good behaviour. Don Bosco selected the other way round as it were. He began with young ex-prisoners who did not know where to find a friend. Then it was young stonemasons with their families far away. Abandoned boys in danger formed the core of this. Oratory with its doors permanently open. Obviously Don Bosco had to demand some responsibility of his boys, asking them to co-operate. He was unable to attract the hooligans from their gangs, or the misfits who never agreed to set foot in a church. Nevertheless he looked at them with sympathy, to win them over one by one, or at least to try. At times he would 'succeed, but at times he failed.

## A Hanging at Alessandria

That same year 1846 a youth of 22, whom Don Bosco had befriended in prison, was condemned to death together with his father. They were to be executed in Alessandria. When Don Bosco, in anguish, went to see him, the young man broke into tears, asking the priest to accompany him in his last journey. But Don Bosco's courage failed him, and he could not promise.

The condemned men were sent off.

Father Cafasso was due to join them with the postal coach to assist in their last moments. Knowing that Don *Bosco* had refused to go, he sent for him and scolded him:

"Don't you see how cruel you are? Get ready; let's go together to Alexandria."

"I will never be able to bear that sight."
Hurry up; the coach won't wait for us."

The priests arrived in Alessandria on the eve of the execution. The young man, on seeing Don Bosco enter the cell, threw his arms around his neck and broke into tears. So did Don Bosco. They spent the boy's last night together, praying and talking about God.

At 2:00 a.m. Don Bosco gave him absolution, said Mass for him in the cell, gave him Holy Communion and the two gave thanks together. The bells of the cathedral church pealed the agony. The door of the cell swung open, letting in the gendarmes and the hangman. The latter, as was the custom, knelt down before the prisoner and begged his forgiveness. Then he tied his hands behind his back and put the noose around his neck. Minutes later the cart with the condemned man crossed the prison gates with Don Bosco also on it. Just behind there followed the cart carrying the boy's father and Fr Cafasso. A throng of people watched in silence. When the scaffold appeared in the distance with the gallows in readiness, Don Bosco paled and passed out. Fr Cafasso, who was keeping an eye on him, stopped the carts and eased him down.

The tragic procession got to the scaffold and the two were executed. When Don Bosco came, it was all over. He was deeply mortified. He whispered to Fr Cafasso:

"I feel so sorry for that boy. He trusted me so much..."

"You have done all you could. Leave the rest to God."

In March 1846 good Fr Moretta went to see Don Bosco with a sheaf of letters. Later Don Bosco wrote:

The tenants astonished at the constant din of my boys' coming and going; declared that they would all leave the place unless we slopped our meetings forthwith.

He felt an impulse of rebellion. Was it possible that no one could bear noisy youth? Had not those adults been young themselves? He did not know where to go; but luckily for him spring was in the air, and it was not urgent anymore to be under cover.

### Author's Notes about Don Bosco's Dialogues

Some readers of the first edition kindly observed, "the frequent dialogues dramatize and instil liveliness into the text, but damage its historical value, for they are arbitrary reconstructions."

I answer that I did not invent the frequent exchanges, and neither they seem to me "arbitrary reconstructions" for the following reasons: Don Bosco's autograph Memoirs, published in 1946, extend through 248 pages of print. One hundred and six of them contain verbal exchanges, some rather long and detailed. It was Don Bosco's own style of relating stories.

- 1. Half the *Life of Mama Margaret*, written by Fr Lemoyne when Don Bosco was still alive, consists of dialogues. The author wrote: "The writer came to know all that appears here about *Mama Margaret* from Don Bosco himself, with whom he had the good fortune of spending more than six years and talking to him every night; ...asking him every now and then about what he had said years before, and which I had faithfully committed to paper, I was astonished to hear him repeat identical stories with the identical words uttered by his mother. He spoke as if he were reading a book. It was the same for many other facts that he confided to me and that I treasured for my confreres" (M.B. 1121). Don Bosco corrected that booklet "Weeping with Emotion" as some eyewitnesses averred.
- 2. Father Lemoyne published 7, 700 pages of Biographical *Memories* in nine volumes, covering Don Bosco's life until 1870. In the preface to Vol. I he writes: "All the stories, *dialogues*, and everything I have thought worth recording, are but the faithful and literal exposition of eyewitness accounts." In the preface to vol. VIII he says: "Let us repeat that everything written here and earlier is a faithful account of what actually happened. The eyewitnesses of Don Bosco's life are in the hundreds... many of them wrote down their impressions of him and what they heard from him personally. Even *such dialogues* as recorded and handed down to us are told as they happened in their presence." The nine volumes were published when the protagonists of those dialogues, from Fr Rua to Fr Cagliero, were still alive. Fr Albera (the "Paolino" at Don Bosco's side from 1858) personally revised the drafts. Fr Lemoyne had died during the printing of vol. IX. Fr Albera, presenting it to the Salesians wrote: "All who knew how diligently Fr Lemoyne gathered the Memories and with what love and affection he wrote them down day after day, would appreciate them all the more." (Acts of the Superior's Chapter 24 April 1917).
- 3. Fr Bonetti related the history of the Oratory, very rich in dialogues, in the Salesian Bulletin, when Don Bosco was still alive. Don Bosco personally revised every issue. He was so keen on such revision, that he asked for the drafts even during his trip to Spain in 1886, sending them back with his annotations. Fr Ceria, who compiled the last nine volumes of the *Memories*, confirms Don Bosco's typical way of telling stories: "Blessed Don Bosco, on telling things that had happened to him, used to repeat every cut and thrust as he recalled such. Fr Lemoyne and other hearers who took them down, reproduced them verbatim."

The above are the source of the dialogues. I have respected their content, retouching only the archaic style and condensing them here and there.

#### CHAPTER 20

## EASTER UNDER COVER

He succeeded in renting a piece of open ground enclosed by a hedge, belonging to the Filippi brothers. There was a huge shelter in the middle, where they kept games equipment. Every Sunday 300 boys ran, jumped and capered around while Don Bosco heard confessions sitting on a bench.

About ten o'clock, at the roll of drums, the boys lined up in two long columns. A trumpet blared and they set off to hear Don Bosco's Mass, at the Consolata or at the Capuchins.' After Mass and Communion they breakfasted on the lawn.

One day Paul, a boy fresh from the countryside, joined the throng. He himself tells the story:

"Mass was celebrated, many received Holy Communion, and everybody rushed to the courtyard for breakfast. I thought I did not qualify for it, and stood aside waiting to rejoin them on their way back. Don Bosco spotted me."

What's your name?"

"Paolino"

"Have you had breakfast?"

"No sir, I have not gone to confession or communion."

"But confession and communion are not necessary to have breakfast."

"What is necessary?"

"To have appetite."

He led me to the basket and gave me lots of bread and fruit. I went down with and played until dusk.

From that moment, and for many years, I did not abandon the Oratory or dear Don Bosco, who did me so much goad

On the evening of a feast-day, while the boys played, Don Bosco caught sight of a boy, about 15, beyond the hedge. He sent for him.

"Come on in. Where are you from? What's your name?"

There was no reply. Don Bosco pressed:

"What's the matter with you? Are you ill?"

The boy hesitated. As if un-nailing his lips, he whispered:

"I'm hungry."

The basket was empty. Don Bosco sent for some bread from a nearby family, and let him eat. The boy spoke as if getting off a weight from his chest:

"I'm an apprentice saddler. My employer sacked me for not working well. My family is in the countryside. Last night I slept on the steps of the cathedral, and this morning I was so hungry that I thought of stealing. But I was afraid. I tried begging, but people kept on saying: "You are strong and healthy, go to work." Then I heard boys shouting, and I came."

"Listen, tonight I'll take care of you. Tomorrow I will take you to a good man, and he will give you work. You'll see. And if you want to come back here on feast days, you will make me happy."

"Most willingly."

During those months strange rumours were afoot about Don Bosco. They materialised into three great dangers: opposition by the civil authority, conviction that Don Bosco was mentally ill (therefore risking being abandoned by his collaborators) and eviction by the owners of the property, thus mortally threatening the Oratory.

### The Marquis and the Police

Those years were pregnant of revolution. Three hundred youth marching out of one of the gates in double column to the roll of drums and sound of trumpets worried the head of police. The boys were not all that young; some of them were tough and daring young men, not averse to carrying the inseparable knife.

Marquis Michael of Cavour (Camillo's and Gustavo's father), head of police at the time, summoned Don Bosco. After some pleasantries, the two were at loggerheads at once.

Don Bosco heard very tough conditions: limit the number of boys, stop marching them in and out of town in columns, and get rid of the oldest as he most dangerous. He refused.

Cavour started shouting:

"What do you care about those scoundrels? Leave them in their homes. Don't take such responsibilities on yourself or it'll be trouble for all!"

"I teach catechism to those poor boys, and this is no trouble for an anyone. In any case, I have the archbishop's permission."

"The archbishop knows all that? Very well then. I'll talk to him and he will put an end to all this nonsense."

Archbishop Fransoni did not put an end to anything; on the contrary he defended Don Bosco.

From that day on, police patrols began their rounds close to where the boys were playing. Don Bosco took it as a joke, but he felt on edge: the slightest *irregularity* would have meant the end of the Oratory. Cavour was very powerful.

#### Is Don Bosco Mad?

Without intending it, Don Bosco himself set off the rumour that he was going mad. . To give some comfort to the boys as the whole gang moved from cemetery to a mill, and, and from a shack to a meadow, he began relating his dreams.

He spoke of a large, spacious Oratory, churches, homes, schools, workshops, thousands of boys and full-time priests. Everything he said had no on the daily, precarious reality.

Boys, the only ones who can daydream, believed him. At home and at work, they repeated Don Bosco's dreams. Unsurprisingly ordinary people started saying, "Poor man, he's got fixed ideas. In the midst of that entire din, he'll end up in the madhouse."

It was not malicious gossip, but a widespread opinion. Michael Rua would remember: "I had just served mass at the Military Arsenal. I was going out, but the chaplain stopped me.

"Where are you going?"

"To Don Bosco's, it's Sunday"

"Don't you know? He's ill, and incurably so."

That piece of news struck me hard. I felt really sorry. I wouldn't have been sorrier on hearing that my own father was that sick. I ran to the Oratory, but found Don Bosco in his usual smiling self."

The rumour making the rounds of Turin was that he had become so crazy about the youth that he had gone off his head.

Fr Borel, his closest collaborator and friend, tried to stop him from relating his dreams.

"You speak of a church, a house, a recreation enclosure. Where are all these things?"

"I don't know, but they exist. I see them."

One good day, after an umpteenth attempt at calling him to reason, Fr Borel burst into tears. He left the room: "Poor Don Bosco, he's gone."

It would seem that the diocesan office also sent people to check on his degree of mental balance. One day two of his best friends, Frs Ponzati and Nasi, decided to extricate him from this painful situation.

They must have arranged for a medical check-up at a psychiatric hospital, for him to be properly diagnosed and cured. As Don Bosco was teaching catechism, a closed carriage arrived. The two priests alighted and invited him to a ride.

"You're tired. Come, a breath of fresh air will do you good."

"I'll take my hat and be with you."

One of the two opened the door.

"Go in."

By then Don Bosco had already smelled a rat.

"After you two, thanks." After insisting the two agreed. Don Bosco quickly closed the door and intimated to the coachman:

"To the mental hospital, quick!" They are waited."

The asylum was not far. The male nurses had been forewarned to expect a priest. They found two. The chaplain of the hospital had to intervene to get them out of trouble.

After such a heavy practical joke, the two priests were roundly annoyed. But later they restored their friendship with Don Bosco. Fr Nasi would eventually animate the music at the Oratory.

But everybody was leaving him. "All kept distances. My collaborators left me alone with some 400 boys."

"Common sense" collapsed. Don Bosco is either a saint or a madman. It's difficult to say which. History was repeating itself: St Francis of Assisi dropping his clothes before his father and leaving, naked, saying: "Now I can truly say, Our Father who art in heaven," or Cottolengo throwing the last coins out of the window, saying: "Now we shall see if the Little House is my work or God's." How can one blame small-thinking victims of human prudence and good sense, for calling these men mad?

The situation was so odd that Don Bosco himself started having doubts about his dreams. In 1864 he would tell how precisely in those days he had dreamt of a house not far from the meadow, for himself and his boys. Next morning he invited Fr Borel to go and see *it: l have it*. But on reaching it, they found it to be a house of ill fame. Mortified, *Don Bosco* exclaimed,

"Lord, let me see, get me out of this mess!" The dream returned for the fourth time, and a voice said to him, "Do not be afraid. Everything is possible to God."

### Agony

One good day the owners pitched up, perhaps at the Marquis' behest. The carefully examined the clods of turf, pitilessly trodden by 800 clogs. They called Don Bosco:

"But this is desertification!"

"At this rate our meadow will turn into a dirt floor."

"Sorry, Father, but this can't go on. Don't pay us rent, but you must go."

They gave him two weeks' notice.

Don Bosco was thunderstruck. To the humiliating stories circulating, there was the added worry of finding another open space at once. But nothing was available. Who would rent a piece of ground to a madman? The 5<sup>th</sup> April 1846, the last Sunday on the Filippi property, was one of the bitterest days in Don Bosco's life.

He led his boys to the *Madonna di Campagna* for Mass. He spoke, but without witticisms or allusions to transplanting cabbages. He said he was looking at them as birds whose nest was about to be destroyed. He invited them to pray to the Blessed Virgin: after all, they were in Her hands.

At noon he tried with the Filippis for the last time. Nothing could be done. Was he to say good-bye to his boys?

That night I gazed at the multitude of playing boys. I was alone, worn out and in poor health. I walked up and down all by myself and cried in tears, My God, tell me what to do!

# The Grafting Stock

It was not an archangel who arrived at that very moment. It was Pancras Soave, a little man with a heavy stutter, manufacturer of soda and detergents.

"Are you looking for a place to set up a laboratory?"

"Not a laboratory, an Oratory."

"It's all the same to me, but I have a place for you. Come and see. It belongs to signor Francis Pinardi, an honest man."

Without leaving the Valdocco zone, Don Bosco walked cross-country for about 200 metres, to face "a single-storey shack, with a worm-eaten staircase and balcony, surrounded by vegetable gardens, meadows and fields." Not far he could see "the house of ill fame" of his dream. "I was about to climb the staircase, but Pinardi and Soave directed me elsewhere:"

"Your place is behind."

"It was a large-size shed."

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The shed is still there for pilgrims to visit. It is located in a corner of 'the courtyard of the church of Our Lady Help of Christians lost in a maze of buildings. It is the humble stock from which sprouted the grafted, gigantic work of Don Bosco. In 1929 the Salesians refurbished it as a well decorated chapel.

But on that 5<sup>th</sup> April 1846 it was a humble, low shed, leaning on the north side of the Pinardi home. It was surrounded by a low wall, which gave it the appearance of a cabin. It had been built not long before as a hatter's workshop and washerwomen's store.

Not far a canalised stream drained into the Dora. Its size was 15 x 6 metres, with two additional small, enclosed spaces. Don Bosco was about to refuse.

"Too low, it's no good for me."

"I can fix it as you wish. I can dig, build steps, and change the floor. But I'm eager that you should bring your laboratory here."

"Oratory, not laboratory." A small chapel to gather the boys together."

Pinardi's confusion was understandable. Workshops and workplaces used to be built near water streams. He was perplexed at first, but then said:

"No matter. I'm a singer, and can come to give you a hand. I will bring two chairs, one for me and another for my wife."

Don Bosco was still uncertain

"If you assure me that you will lower the floor by 50 centimetres I accept."

He no longer wanted to pay monthly rent. He disbursed 320 lire for a year, the equivalent of half his yearly salary. Besides the shed, he could make use of the ground around it for the boys to play.

He ran back to the boys shouting:

"Cheer up, boys! We've found the Oratory! We shall have church, school and a courtyard to jump around and play. We shall go next Sunday. It's there, at Pinardi's."

It was Palm Sunday. Next week it would be Easter, the solemnity of our Lord's Resurrection.

#### And the Bells Rang

Francis Pinardi kept his word. Stonemasons arrived, dug and strengthened the walls and the roof. Carpenters laid a wooden floor over the earthen one. It would seem an impossible task to finish in six days, if one forgets that in those days a working day was one of 12-14 hours. By Saturday evening the building was renovated.

Don Bosco placed on the little altar the chandeliers, the crucifix, a lamp and a small portrait of St Francis of Sales.

The .12<sup>th</sup> of April was the great day. The bells of the whole city rang early in the morning of Easter Sunday.

There were no bells anywhere near the Pinardi shed, but there was Don Bosco's affection calling his boys to the Valdocco low grounds.

They arrived in waves. They crammed the little church, the surround around and the meadows. Recollected and in silence, they witnessed the blessing of the chapel and attended the Mass that Don Bosco celebrated for them. Then they caught hold of the usual loaf, swarmed over the meadows and exploded with joy. Finally, they had a house all to themselves.

#### CHAPTER 21

### THE LITTLE BRICKLAYERS' MIRACLE

The timetable Don Bosco drafted for the Oratory, recorded in five pages of his Memoirs, was rather demanding. Few, today, would dare proposing such a timetable to young boys. "Early in the morning the church opened for confessions until 8:00 a.m., time for Mass. If too many boys needed confession, Mass was delayed until 9:00 a.m.

The homily consisted of an explanation of the Gospel, and later of Sacred History in installments. After Mass there was school until noon.

After one hour or so for lunch, recreation began, with bowls, stilts, toy guns and swords, and gymnastics. Catechism began at 2:30 p.m., followed by the Rosary or by the singing of vespers once the boys became proficient at it. Then he delivered a short homily, followed by the singing of the Litanies and Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament.

After coming out of church, there was free time. Some continued catechism, others learned how to sing or read. Most kept on running, jumping and playing until dusk.

I made use of those lengthy recreations to approach every single boy. I whispered a few words into their ears, exhorting one to a greater obedience, another to punctuality at the catechism classes, another to confession, etc.

## **Priestly Concerns**

Don Bosco also played, occasionally performing acrobatics as he himself avers. But he was a priest first, as the following story shows.

A boy, repeatedly invited to fulfil the Easter precept, used to promise but never kept it. One afternoon, during a heated game, Don Bosco stopped him and summoned him to the sacristy for an alleged errand.

He wanted to come in shirt sleeves as he was, but I asked him to put on his jacket. In the sacristy I said

"Kneel on this kneeler."

"What do you want?""To hear your confession

"But I'm not prepared."

"I know. Get prepared now and then I will hear it."

"You did well to catch me like that; otherwise I would Iran never come to a decision."

He made his preparation as I was saying my Breviary. Then he made a good confession. From that moment on he became much more punctual in his religious duties.

### Good-bye at the Roundabout

At dusk they were all in the chapel for the evening prayers and the evening hymn. Then there took place a moving good-bye.

Out of church each one said good night a thousand times, but without really waking a move to go home. My exhortations to go were useless. Then six of the stronger boys made a kind of chair with their arms for me to sit on and forced me on it. The throng moved on, laughing, singing and making a general racket until the nearest roundabout. There they sang the final song until, amidst the most impressive silence, I wished them good night and a good week. All shouted, Good night!" and let me off the improvised throne. Every one went home, except the older ones who wanted to see me off at my home, where I used to arrive dog-tired and half-dead.

Many a boy whispered to him, "Don't leave me alone during the week. Come and see me at work." Come Monday, many building sites in Turin m unusual priest tucking up his cassock and climbing up scaffoldings among buckets of lime and piles of bricks. After his duties at the Hostel, at the prisons and schools of the city, Don Bosco used to go up there to see his boys.

They were jubilant. The "families" where they retired at night were not their real ones with dad and mum. With their parents still in the country, they lived with an uncle, a relative or a fellow villager. At times they lived with their employer, entrusted with the young man by his parents. But there was little warmth there. It was a real feast to find a "true" loving and helping friend.

Out of love Don Bosco always talked with the employer. He wanted information on the wages, the time for rest, the possibility of attending

church on Sundays. He will be among the first to help draft regular work contracts for the young apprentices, and watch that the employers observed their terms.

He met old friends and made new ones. He used to visit factories employing many apprentices, and invited them all to the Oratory. He was especially concerned with the young migrants from the countryside.

#### Spitting Blood

But Don Bosco was human, and human strength has its limits. After the stress suffered in spring, his health deteriorated rapidly.

At the beginning of May the marchioness of Barolo, who thought highly of him, called him in the presence of Fr Borel. She tended to him the huge sum of 5,000 lire (eight years salary) and imperiously said:

"Take this money and go to have a complete rest anywhere you wish."

"Thank you. You are very charitable. But I have not become a priest to look after my health."

"And neither to destroy it. I understand that you have been spitting blood. Your lungs are in tatters. How long do you think you can go on like this? Stop going to the prisons and to Cottolengo's. And above all leave your boys for a while. Fr Borel will look after them."

Don Bosco thought it a further attempt at separating him from his boys. He reacted brusquely:

"I will never accept that."

The marchioness lost her patience:

"If you won't listen to my gentle suggestions, listen to my threat. You need my salary to go on. Hence, either leave your Oratory and take a rest, or I fire you."

"Well then. You can find many priests who can replace me. But my boys have no one. I cannot abandon them."

Don Bosco's words were heroic, but he was wrong. The marchioness seemed hard on him, but she was right, as the coming months would confirm. At 31 he was a holy but young priest, rather stubborn and without a sense of limit. She, at 61, was much wiser. And she was also holy. After that outburst she knelt before Don Bosco asking for a blessing, which she never did with other priests.

Soon afterwards she gave a letter to Fr Borel with the obvious intention that Don Bosco should also see it, where she summarised her position:

- 1. "I approve and praise the work of instruction for young boys, even though I do not see it expedient to locate it too close to my institutions for girls in danger.
- 2. "Since I believe in conscience that Don Bosco's chest needs complete rest, I will pay him his salary on condition that he leaves Turin long enough to recover s health. I am anxious about that because I think very highly of him."

Should Don Bosco refuse, she undertakes to find another priest as chaplain of the Hostel within three months. In the meantime she sent him 800 lire in a roundabout way.

Don Bosco was indeed spitting blood. It was probably a mild case of Tuberculoses. But he continued to think of the future. On 5<sup>th</sup> June 1846 he rented three rooms on the top floor of the Pinardi house for 15 lire a month.

Marquis Cavour was heard of again that month. Every Sunday he sent policemen to watch the Oratory. In 1877 Don Bosco would -reminisce,

What a pity not to have had a camera at the time. It would be so good to see again the hundreds of boys hanging on my every word, and six stiff upright policemen in uniform, two by two in three different places of the church also listening to my homily. They were so useful to me in looking after the boys, even though they had been sent to look after me! Some furtively wiped tears off their eyes with the back of the hand.

It would have been great to take a picture of them kneeling with the boys, around my confessional, waiting for their turn. I preached more for them than for the boys: I spoke of sin, of death, of judgment and of hell...

### 'Lord, Don't Let Him Die..."

The first Sunday of July 1846 was a very hot day. After an exhausting day at the Oratory in torrid heat Don Bosco, on his way to his room at the *Refuge*, passed out. They lifted him up bodily and laid him in bed. The symptoms were "cough, heavy inflammation, loss of blood," a likely pleurisy in other words.

"In a few days I was in point of death." He received the Viaticum and the Anointing of the Sick. The news spread like wildfire along scaffoldings and workshops: "Don Bosco is dying."

Every evening a group of distraught boys arrived at the room where Don Bosco lay in agony. They came in their still dirty working clothes, their faces white with lime. They skipped dinner to come to Valdocco. They cried, praying:

"Lord, don't let him die."

The doctor forbade all visits. The male nurse, placed there on the marchioness' orders, obeys his strict instructions to the letter. The boys are desperate.

"Let me have a look at him."

"I won't let him speak."

"I want to say one word to him, just one."

"Were Don Bosco to know that I am here, he would sure let me in."

For eight days Don Bosco was between life and death. Some boys, during those eight days, working under the fiery sun, didn't touch water to snatch from heaven the miracle of Don Bosco's recovery. The young bricklayers prayed in shifts, day and night, in the church of Our Lady Consolata. There was always one of them kneeling down before our Lady. Their eyes were heavy with sleep after a 12-hour working day, but they didn't give up because Don Bosco must not die.

Some, generously but thoughtlessly, promised to pray the Rosary for life, and others yet to fast on bread and water for a whole year.

On Saturday there was a crisis. Don Bosco's strength had gone, and the slightest effort caused hemorrhage. During the night many feared it was the end. But it wasn't.

Don Bosco recovered. It was the miracle, "snatched" from our Lady by boys who could not remain fatherless.

On a Sunday towards the end of July Don Bosco, helping himself with a walking stick, hobbled towards the Oratory. The boys flew at him. The older ones sat him on a chair, lifted him up and bore him in triumph into the courtyard. Don Bosco's little friends sang and wept. He wept too.

They all entered the chapel and thanked the Lord together. In the tense silence Don Bosco said few words:

"I owe you my life. Be sure of it: from now on I will spend it entirely for you."

I think they are the greatest words of his life, a "solemn vow" with which he consecrated himself to the youth and to no one else. He would cap them with those he uttered on his deathbed: "Tell my boys that I shall be waiting for them all in heaven."

He exhausted the little strength he had to speak to the boys one by one. "I changed in what I could the rather rash vows and promises that some of them had made when I was in danger of death. It was a most sensible thing to do."

The doctors prescribed a long period of convalescence with complete rest. Don Bosco climbed to Becchi, next to his brother and mother. Before he left he promised his boys:

"I shall be back by the first autumn leaf fall."

### "Your Money or Your Life"

He travelled on donkey back, stopping at Castelnuovo to rest his bones shaken by the gentle beast. He arrived at Becchi by nightfall.

A bevy of nine nephews and nieces, sons and daughters of Anthony and Joseph, gave him a rousing welcome on the threshing floor. Don Bosco stayed with Joseph and slowly recovered his strength by walking farther and farther along fields and vineyards. His mother's affection and the fresh air of the hills did the rest.

Every now and then he wrote to Fr Borel, asking for news about the boys and thanking the various priests who were giving a helping hand at the Oratory.

In August he walked as far as Capriglio. On the way back, crossing a wood, he heard a harsh voice:

"Your money or your life."

He is scared:

"I'm Don Bosco, and have no money."

After a quick look at the man with the sickle, he changes voice.

"Cortese, you wanting my life!"

Under the beard he had recognised a young man befriended in prison at Turin... The would-be assassin also recognised him, and wished the ground would swallow him.

"Forgive me Don Bosco. I'm a wretch."

And he told the priest in bits and pieces a bitter, but rather usual, story. Out of prison, his family had disowned him. "My mother also cold-shouldered me. She said I was the family dishonour."

There was no question of finding work. They slammed the door in his the moment they knew he had served time.

Don Bosco heard his confession before the two made it to Becchi.

"Today you come with me."

He introduced the young man to the family:

"I found a good friend. He will be our guest for dinner."

Next morning, after Mass, he gave the man a letter of recommendation for a parish priest and for some good employers, and sent him off with a hug.

It was now October. During his long walks he thought out projects for the immediate future. Back in Turin, he would go to live in one of the rooms rented from Pinardi. Little by little, he will give hospitality to boys without family.

But that place is not suitable for a lone priest. Not far there is that house of ill fame, coupled with a tavern where drunks sing into the night. He should live in company, with someone above suspicion. Otherwise nasty rumours would not take long to spread.

He thinks of his mother. But how to broach the issue? She is now 58, and at Becchi she lives like a queen. How to uproot her from her house, her grandchildren, and her serene, daily routine?

But perhaps the bad harvest of 1846, and the worse one forecast for 1847, will somehow lend strength to his request. One evening he took his courage in both hands.

"Mother, would you come to spend some time with me? I have rented three rooms at Valdocco, and soon I will give hospitality to abandoned boys. You told me one day that if I became rich you would not set foot in my house. I am now poor and deep in debt, and to live alone in that neighbourhood is risky for a priest."

The old woman became very pensive. She didn't expect it. Don Bosco pressed on, gently:

"Would you be a mother to those boys?"

Margaret whispered: "If you think it's God's will, let's go."

### Outsiders, and Not a Penny to Their Name

On Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> November, as autumn leaves were falling buffeted by the wind, Don Bosco set out for Turin; carrying a missal and his breviary. Margaret walked beside him, carrying a basket with some laundry and little food.

Don Bosco had written to Fr Borel. "The short priest" had most kindly had all Don Bosco's belongings transported from the room at the *Refuge* to the Pinardi rooms.

The two wayfarers covered the distance on foot. At the roundabout one of his priest friends recognised the two and went to meet them. He saw them covered in dust and tired.

"Welcome back, dear Don Bosco. How's your health?"

"Recovered, thank you. I've brought my mother with me."

"But why on foot?"

"Because we lack these..."

Don Bosco smiled as thumb and index finger slid eloquently against each other.

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"Where are you going to stay?"

"At Pinardi's, nearby."

"Without resources?"

"I don't know. Providence will see to it."

"You're always the same..."
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The good priest shook his head, took his watch (a precious, rare commodity those days) out of his pocket and gave it to Don Bosco.

"I wish I was rich that I might help you. I do what I can."

Margaret entered first. Her new home consisted of three small, unadorned and bleak rooms. There were two beds, two chairs and some pots and pans. She smiled:

At Becchi I kept very busy putting things in order, cleaning the furniture and washing crockery and cutlery. Here I will have more time to rest..."

After a short rest they started working peacefully. As Margaret cooked some dinner, Don Bosco hung a crucifix and a picture of our Lady on the and then made the beds for the night. Mother and son sang together. The lyrics said:

What a Woe
With neither fame
Nor a penny
To our name...

A boy by the name of Stephen Castagno heard them. The news spread in a flash:

"Don Bosco is back!"

#### CHAPTER 22

# A POWDER MAGAZINE ABOUT TO BLOW UP

Sunday November 8<sup>th</sup> was a great feast. Don Bosco had to sit on an armchair outdoors. The boys surrounded him, sang and wished him their best.

Many of them had been at Becchi visiting him. They had forced him to bring forward his return by threatening in jest, "Either you return to Valdocco, or we'll transplant the Oratory here."

Fr Cafasso had opposed such an early return against doctor's orders. He had got the archbishop to intervene.

"I was allowed to return to the Oratory on condition that I should refrain from preaching for two years." And confessed, "But I disobeyed."

### The Evening School

Don Bosco's first concern was to restart and enlarge the evening school.

I rented another room. We taught in the kitchen, in my bedroom, in the sacristy in the choir in the church. Among the students were also notorious rogues, who spoiled and upset everything. A few months later I rented two more rooms.

Some eyewitnesses recalled: "It was a real sight to see the rooms lit in the evenings, full of young students. Some would stand, book in hand, before a notice board; others would be writing at a desk, or sitting on the ground scrawling block capitals on the page."

Frs Carpano, Nasi and others had come back to help. The rumours about Don Bosco's "fixed ideas" had died out during his sickness and convalescence. He did have a fixed idea, though, and was ready to spit blood to bring it to fruition.

Between him and the marchioness there had remained some ill feeling. It was inevitable. Either could say to the other, "I told you so." The marchioness saw her worst forecast come true: Don Bosco did collapse, risking death, he did have to take a long rest; the Oratory was taken care of by Fr Borel. But Don Bosco also felt he was right in not abandoning the Oratory for anything in the world. Obviously it was no longer possible for him to take up his job at the Hostel again. The contract, expired in August, was not renewed. Don Bosco still preached to the sick girls every now and then. The marchioness stopped paying him a salary, but every so often she would send him generous alms "for his rascals" through Fr Borel or Fr Cafasso. She did so until 1864, the year of her death.

There were heavier happenings in the making. What really mattered was that the Oratory enjoyed stability and that Don Bosco was healthy enough to withstand the great political storm about to burst.

### Bishop Mastai-Ferretti becomes "Pope Pius IX

Early in 1846 a famous journalist wrote of Turin:

I am bored stiff to have to walk from square to square of this square city, where everybody speaks softly and walks slowly. I detest the polar ice piling up in heaps, city streets as straight as men are crooked, prudent liberals going to the Sunday homily, and the Friday Rosary led by count Balbo, may God bless him.

He was no prophet. Turin was a powder magazine about to blow up. Count Balbo was the representative of that moderate liberalism that within months would shake Italy like an earthquake.

In June of that year 1846 the "open-minded" bishop of Imola, cardinal Mastai-Ferretti, was elected pope, taking the name of Pius IX. He was a pious man. He was neither a politician, nor did he have any sympathy for liberal ideas.

But he had a deep sense of humaneness: that is why he acted on some political reforms long overdue in the Papal States.<sup>1</sup>

But the reforms were mistaken for liberal overtures, bringing a trail of misunderstandings.

On 17<sup>th</sup> July, days after his elections, he granted a political amnesty against the opinion of many cardinals.<sup>2</sup> Many detainees were in prison because of their taking part in the liberal rising.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The Pope, as the head of the Papal States, necessarily had to take political decisions concerning the welfare of his subjects. Political reforms, however, were as slow moving as were Church affairs.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The government of the Papal States was overwhelmingly clerical. Civil servants were priests, cardinals and bishops also doubled up as governors of the provinces, etc.

In order to "understand" the prisoners, he would sneak incognito into the prison of the castle of St Angelo, conversing with them and spreading panic among the prison warders. And he would do the same with the city hospitals, to "take the pulse" of the people's thinking.

In the following months he disciplined the papal police, at the same time demanding of Austria that her diplomats respect the independence of a sovereign state to a greater extent than hitherto.<sup>3</sup>

In the spring of 1847 he granted limited press freedom, instituted a council of State with some elected laymen in it (a sort of Parliament) and allowed the formation of a city militia.

In the light of Gioberti s book *The Primacy and* its thesis, Pius IX appeared to the liberals as the much awaited pope supposed to bring about out Italian unity and independence with a liberal stamp. Wherever he went, he could not avoid parades, people paying him respects and torchlight processions.

The liberals were not the only ones to understand Pius IX like that. Also socialist sympathizers and those of the "democratic left" said it was a miracle. Even Metternich, the conservative champion of state absolutism, disconsolately said, "I could imagine anything but a liberal pope."

Pius IX was not liberal, but for almost two years the events forced him to play a rather equivocal role as if he were one.

In the summer of 1847, to protect Austria against a "liberal pope," Metternich ordered an Austrian garrison to occupy the pontifical city of Ferrara. The liberals understood the move as the final break between the Holy See and Austria, the little spark that could have ignited the imminent war of independence. Charles Albert offered his army to the pope. Garibaldi, writing from America, placed his volunteer legion at the pope's orders. Mazzini, writing from London, used burning expressions in the pope's praise.

And soon Pius IX became like a flag of national unity. He had never thought of waging war, but events were overtaking him. A war of independence was in the air.

#### Don Bosco v the "Patriot Priests"

Turin was the second Italian city after Rome to organise demonstrations in favour of Pius IX and his "liberal" gestures.

The rather conservative archbishop Fransoni was perplexed. **He** strongly suspected that the liberals were making use of Pope Pius IX. Other

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The independence of the Papal States had always been more nominal than real. From 756 to 1870 no pope ever had an army strong enough to withstand a serious invasion. Austria was the last of a long line of states interfering with the pope's independence.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> 1773 – 1859. His absolutism can be gauged by his dictum, "Every assembly is a source of disorder."

Bishops were instead enthusiastically embracing "the Church's new liberal line. "In 1848, almost all the Sardinian and Piedmontese bishops issued patriotic pastoral letters.

Don Bosco's use of the sobriquet "the great Gioberti" in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition his book of Church History published at the beginning of 1848, is an indication that he might have sympathised with the common hopes of Italy in the form desired by Gioberti. But it did not last long, for the sobriquet disappeared from the text of the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Soon he clashed with the patriot priests. A deep chasm separated him from the likes of Fr Cocchi.

The occasion of the clash was the pope's speech of 29th April 1849. Clarified the misunderstanding, and it was clear that the liberals intended to make use of him as their tool.

# **Angry Volleys of Stones**

The hidden struggle for the good of the boys and against debt, the "little history" of the Oratory, goes along side by side with the "great history" international politics.

Don Bosco has succeeded in renting all the rooms of the Pinardi property and surrounding grounds for 710 lire a year. He is now erecting a wall with a gate at each end. The impudent frequenters of the tavern-cum-house of ill fame will no longer be able to infiltrate the courtyard and molest the boys.

He set aside a corner of the grounds as a vegetable patch. The boys called it "Mama Margaret's garden." The rent and boys' subsidies did not leave much money for the kitchen budget. The old country woman saved, growing lettuce and potatoes.

Gangs of louts played every Sunday on the surrounding grounds. They gambled, quaffed wine bought in large bottles from the tavern, uttered blasphemies and insulted the boys entering the Oratory. Don Bosco patiently approached them. He even played a card game or two with them. Little by little he succeeded in attracting a few. More than once, though, while explaining the catechism in the open, his boys must flee to the chapel under angry volleys of stones. He was only too aware that his 500 boys were small fry compared to the thousands of vagabonds roaming the streets, without faith and very often without bread.

The Vanchiglia neighbourhood, next to Valdocco, was infested with gangs of hooligans that gave the police no end of trouble, lived by snatching bags from people on their way to or from the market, and often clashed by stone-throwing fights and often in potentially tragic knife fights.

Occasionally he intervened by throwing himself into the fray, trying to disperse them by slapping and punching. A clog hit him in the face. "Not with the blows," the dream had warned him, but dreams also have their exceptions.

#### **A**Thief

One of Don Bosco's tactics to bring good boys to the Oratory was to "enter workshops with apprentices. He used to go straight to the employer.

"Could you do me a favour?"

"If I can, Father."

"You can. On Sundays send these boys to the Valdocco Oratory. They will learn some catechism and become good."

"They really need it. Some are insolent loafers."

"Not at all. Look at their gentle faces. Agreed then: on Sunday we'll meet at the Oratory, we shall play and have fun together."

With another type of youth the tactics was different. Leaving Fr Borel at the Oratory, Don Bosco roamed the streets and squares of the outskirts. Bunches of young men gambled on the kerbs. As the playing cards went around, money, up to 15, 20 lire, stood in the centre of the group on a handkerchief.

Don Bosco studied the situation. With a lightning move he grabbed the handkerchief and took to his heels.

"The money! Give us back the money!"

Those poor boys had seen everything except a priest thief. Don Bosco ran towards the Oratory, shouting:

"Catch me first. Run!"

He entered the gate, then the chapel, with the young men in hot pursuit. There they found Fr Carpano or Fr Borel preaching from the pulpit to a throng of youth. The show was on.

Don Bosco played the seller of nougats.<sup>5</sup> He shook the handkerchief with the money and shouted:

"Nougats! Nougats! Anyone buying my nougats?"

The preacher pretended to fly off the handle: "Get out of here, you scoundrel! This is not the market place!"

"But I must sell, and there are so many boys here. Any offer?"

The dialogue took place in the Piedmontese dialect. The boys split their sides laughing, and the newcomers were flabbergasted. Where had they ended up in?

Meanwhile the two priests went on "dialoguing," and between a quip and another they debated on gambling, on blasphemy, and on the joy stemming

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Sweetmeats of sugar, honey, nuts and egg-white (C.O.D.).

from being friends with the Lord. Eventually even those who had it chasing Don Bosco smiled and got interested.

The singing of the litanies closed the session. The newcomers clustered around Don Bosco.

"Will you give us back the money?"

"After Benediction." Out in the courtyard he gave them back their money, added a snack, extracted their promise that from then on they "would come here to play." Many did.

### Drunken Revellers' Song and Dance

Stephen Castagno, one of those boys, testified: "Don Bosco was always the firs in playing games. He was the soul of every recreation. I don't know how he managed, but he was at once in every corner of that courtyard, in the midst of every group of boys. He had an eye for every one of us. We were dishevelled, often dirty, bothersome and naughty. And he was delighted to be with the most wretched. For the very young ones he was like a mother. Often we quarrelled and fought. And he separated us. He lifted his hand as if he wanted to hit us, but he never did. He grabbed us by the arms and pulled us away.

#### Buzzetti recalled:

I met hundreds of boys arriving at the Oratory without the slightest education or religious instruction, but who changed behaviour in no time. They grew so fond of our Oratory as not to leave for years, and went weekly to confession and communion.

The 'Giardiniera,' the popular tavern next door, was a real nuisance. Whenever it was necessary to keep the windows and the doors of the chapel open, the songs and shouts of the drunken revellers drowned the priest's voice. At times Don Bosco left the pulpit, took off surplice and stole and went straight to the tavern threatening to call the police.

The problem of the collaborators was becoming urgent. Fr Borel and the others were not always available on Sundays. Where to find personnel for help, for the catechism, and especially for the evening classes?

Don Bosco remembered that in his dream *many lumbs beame shepherds*. He selected the best among the young men, and taught them aside. Those 8 -10 young teachers not only turned out to be very good; some excellent priests. Laymen from the town also came to give a hand: there was a goldsmith, two sellers of knick-knacks, a broker and a joiner.

#### **CHAPTER 23**

### ORPHANS AND POOR MIGRANTS

There was drama at the Oratory in the winter of 1846-47. A 14-year old boy, one of its regular frequenters, was ordered by his habitually drunken father to stop going. The boy ignored him. The man, a shopkeeper, flew into a rage, threatening to kill him if he did not obey. One Sunday evening the boy went home to find his blind-drunk father wielding an axe. Raising it, he shouted:

"You've been at Don Bosco's!"

The boy, in deadly fear, ran away with the man in hot pursuit screaming:

"If I catch you I'll kill you!"

### A Tree in Thick Fog

The boy's mother, who had seen it all, ran after her husband to disarm him. The faster boy got to the Oratory with a good lead over his dad, but found the main door locked. He knocked and knocked, but no one came. Desperate and exhausted, he shinned up a mulberry tree nearby. It had no leaves that could hide him, but that night there was a heavy fog.

The father arrived, panting and still wielding the axe. He gave a series of heavy knocks. Margaret, who by chance had seen the boy climb up the tree, ran to open after having told Don Bosco. The man rushed in, ran upstairs and barged into Don Bosco's room. Threateningly he asked:

"Where is my son?"

Don Bosco confronted him resolutely.

"Your son is not here."

"He is."

He threw open cupboards and doors.

"I'll find him and kill him."

Don Bosco rose energetically.

"Sir I said he's not here. But even if he was, this is my house and you have no right whatsoever to be here. Get out or I call the police."

Don't bother, Father. I will go to the police myself and you'll have to give me back my son."

"Excellent, let's go together. I have a few things to relate about you, too, and this is the right time."

The man, having something to hide, beat a retreat, mumbling threats. Don Bosco and his mother went to the mulberry tree and called the boy in low voice. There was no reply. He spoke louder:

"Come down, dear. There's no one around.

Still silence. They feared an accident. Don Bosco went up with a stepladder and found him in shock, his eyes wide-open. He shook him. As if waking up from of a nightmare, the boy started shouting and getting agitated. They almost fell off the tree together. Don Bosco had to grip him tightly, whispering,

"Your dad's left. It's me, Don Bosco. Don't be afraid."

Little by little the boy calmed down and started crying. Don Bosco eased him off the tree and led him to the kitchen. Mama Margaret prepared hot soup and Don Bosco laid a straw mattress near the fire. Next morning he found a good employer in a nearby village. Only after some time was the boy able to return home.

That episode reopened a wound in Don Bosco's heart. A-number of his boys had nowhere to spend the night. They slept under bridges, or in dreary public dormitories. For some time he had entertained the idea of giving them hospitality.

He first tried in the spring of 1847. On the right-hand side of the Pinardi building there was a small barn, where six young men were put up for the night. It was a fiasco. By morning the guests had disappeared, taking Margaret's blankets with them.

Don Bosco repeated the experiment a few days later. It was worse: they carried away the hay and the straw too. But he didn't give up.

#### Soaked to the Skin and Numb with Cold

It was raining cats and dogs that night in May. Don Bosco and his mother had just finished supper. Someone knocked at the main door. It was a boy, about 15, drenched in rain and numb with cold.

"I am an orphan from the Sesia valley. I'm a bricklayer, but I have not found work yet. I'm cold, with nowhere to go..."

"Come on in. Come near the fire, otherwise you'll get a bad cold as soaked as you are."

Mama Margaret prepared dinner for him. Then she asked:

"What do you intend to do next?"

"I don't know. I had three lire when I arrived, but I've spent them."

He broke into silent tears.

"Please, don't send me away."

Margaret thinks of the vanished blankets.

"I could put you up, but how do I know that you won't run away with pots and pans?"

"No, ma'am. I'm poor, but I've never stolen." Don Bosco has gone out, in pouring rain, to collect some bricks. With a few boards he rigs up a bed and lays his own straw mattress on it.

"You'll sleep here, dear. And you'll stay until you need it. Don Bosco will never send you away."

"My good mother invited him to say the night prayers."

"I don't know them."

"Pray with us then."

"In the end she said a few words about the need to work, to be faithful and to practice religion."

The Salesians have recognised in Mama Margaret's little sermon the first "good night" that ends the day in all Salesian houses. Don Bosco judged it to be "the key to morality, to their good running and their success."

But she was not too convinced of the effectiveness of her words. That night the kitchen remained locked until morning.

That boy was the first orphan to lodge in Don Bosco's home. By year's end there would be seven. One day they will be counted in the thousands.

The second was a 12-year old boy from the city of Turin. Don Bosco found him crying with his head against a tree. He had no father, and his mother had died the day before. The landlord had evicted him, seizing the family belongings in lieu of rent. Don Bosco took him to Mama Margaret and found employment for him as a shop assistant. He succeeded in life, and was one of Don Bosco's lifelong friends.

The third one was Joseph Buzzetti, the little bricklayer from Caronno. Don Bosco himself invited him. One Sunday, he was saying goodbye to the boys, he held him by the hand.

"Would you come to live with me?"

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"Willingly."
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"Let me talk to Charles."

The elder brother, who had been frequenting the Oratory for the past six years, agreed. Joseph was 15. He worked as a bricklayer in Turin, but lie stayed at Mama Margaret's from then on.

#### The Little Barber

Next was Charles Gastini. One day in 1843 Don Bosco entered a barber's shop for a shave. The little boy came to lather.

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"What's your name? How old are you?"

"Carlino. I'm eleven."

"Good, Carlino. Give me a good lathering. How's your dad?"

"He's dead. I have only my mother."

"I'm sorry."
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The boy completed the lathering.

"And now, come on, get hold of the razor and give me a shave."

The barber was horrified.

"No, Father! The boy is inexpert. He's only supposed to lather."

"But some day or other he will have to start shaving won't he? He might as well start on me. Get on with it, Carlino." Carlino shaved, trembling. On reaching the chin he sweated. After a few scrapes and minor cuts he finished.

"Well done, Carlino! And now that we are friends, I want him to come to the Oratory every now and then." Gastini came, making instant friends with Don Bosco.

In the summer of that same year Don Bosco found him crying near the barbershop.

"What happened?"

My mother has died, and the owner fired me. My elder brother is in the army. Where do I go now?"

"With me."

"See, I'm a poor priest. But I will share with you my last piece of bread.

Mamma Margaret prepared another bed. Carlino stayed at the Oratory for more than 50 years. Cheerful and lively, he acted as master of ceremony at every show. He could make everybody laugh with his stage effects. But whenever he spoke of Don Bosco he wept like a child. "He really loved me," he used to say. And he sang a refrain that everyone knew by heart:

Three score and ten - And I shall go;

"Papa" Giovanni - Told me so.

It was one of the many prophecies that, half serious and half in jest, Don Bosco would make to his boys. Charles Gastini died on 28<sup>th</sup> January 1902. He was 70 years and a day old.

Don Bosco adapted two adjacent rooms as dormitories for those early boys who came to stay. There were eight beds, a crucifix, an image of Our Lady, and a poster saying, "God sees you."

Don Bosco celebrated an early Mass for them. The boys said the morning prayers and the Rosary. Then, each with a loaf of bread in his pocket went to work in the city, coming back for lunch and dinner. Soup was always abundant, next course varied with what vegetables grew in Mama Margaret's garden and with how much money was in Don Bosco's purse.

Money. From the beginning it was a dramatic problem. It would continue to be for the rest of Don Bosco's life. His first contributor was not a countess, but his own mother. The poor peasant woman sent for the trousseau, wedding ring, earrings and necklace that she had jealously preserved since her husband's death. She sold the lot to feed the first boys.

### The Archbishop's Visit

In May of that year Don Bosco founded the *Company of St Aloysius.*<sup>1</sup> Its members committed themselves to three things: give good example, avoid evil talk and frequent the Sacraments. Soon it consisted of a group of boys helping each other to be better.

On June 21<sup>st</sup>, St Aloysius' day, there was a solemn celebration. Don Bosco always proposed that young saint as a model of purity. The archbishop came to confirm those who had not yet received the sacrament.

On that occasion the Archbishop, who had forgotten he was not in the cathedral, put on his mitre and on standing up hit the ceiling with it.

Everybody laughed, including him, who remarked: "Don Bosco's boys deserve respect. Hats off to them!"

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> St Aloysius Gonzaga (1568 – 91).

At the end the acts of the ceremony were drafted. The name of the minister and that of the sponsor were written down on separate papers, each with the name of the boy's parish. The papers were then sent to the archbishop office for transmission to the various parishes.

Don Bosco saw this as an important detail, because by that gesture the archbishop practically approved the Oratory as a "parish for the abandoned youth." Thus he confirmed his support for Don Bosco before the city parishes, whose priests were still hesitant in his regards.

In September Don Bosco bought the first statue of Our Lady for 27 lire. It is still kept in the Pinardi chapel, on the right hand side. The boys took it in procession in the surroundings on the feasts of Our Lady. The "surroundings" added up to some houses, the tavern, the usual noisy drunks, two small irrigation canals, and a little avenue of mulberry trees today, incorporated in the courtyard of the basilica of Our Lady Help of Christians.

#### Cockades at the Pontifical Mass

In 1847 the liberals were putting pressure on King Charles Albert to accelerate reforms. But the king had an eye on Austria, and did not intend to, lose control. He took a step forward followed by one backwards, as uncertain as ever. In September the hymn of the *Risorgimento* made its appearance. The lyrics, drafted at Genoa, had been put to music at Turin.

On 1<sup>st</sup> October, at a rally, the crowd applauded king and pope, but the police dispersed the crowd on royal orders. Days later the king sacked the conservative, pro-Austrian foreign minister. The police dispersed all demonstrations that cried, "Long live Pius IX!" The king gave notice that he was thinking of great reforms, but the people must keep quiet.

On 29<sup>th</sup> October a special law granted a large degree of decentralisation to the municipalities. There will be grassroot elections of councillors. Electors, however, will be only the landowners who pay taxes, teachers and civil servants, about 2% of the population. A cautious "freedom of the press" was also granted.

On 1st November the king left for Genoa. 50, 000 people saw him off, singing and waving flags. That same month Charles Albert, together with the Grand Duke of Tuscany and pope Pius IX signed a custom union for the three states. It looks as if the federation of Italian States prophesied by Gioberti was about to become reality.

On 4<sup>th</sup> December Charles Albert returned from Genoa. Turin gave him a rousing welcome. The seminarians also wanted to take part in the demonstration, but the archbishop forbade them. 80 of them disobeyed and mingled with the crowd.

The challenge became a provocation when the seminarians appeared in the cathedral for the archbishop's Christmas Mass wearing their cockades. Fransoni closed down the seminary in the first months of 1848.

### Fireplace in the Sacristy

These resounding events had no effect on Don Bosco's humble activity. The boys were nearly 800, some coming from very far. A second Oratory was called for in the southern part of the city.

The new place was still in the outskirts. The ramshackle buildings on either side of the street were the homes of washerwomen, who festooned the hanging wires with colourful laundry. Well-to-do citizens went there for Sunday afternoon strolls, and gangs of unemployed youth went there to play their games.

After consulting the archbishop, Don Bosco rented a little house, a shed and a piece of ground *next to the iron bridge* for 450 lire yearly. He then broke the news:

When bees increase and multiply beyond the capacity of the hive, a swarm forms and goes elsewhere. We shall imitate them. We are going to open a second Oratory and form a second family. Those of you who live in the southern suburbs of the city will not have to walk much: by the 8th of December you may go to the Oratory of St Aloysius, next to the gate by the iron bridge.

Fr Borel blessed the new Oratory on 8th *December* 1847. Fr Carpano was its first director in that coldest of winters. He went there on foot, carrying a bundle of firewood under his cloak. He would light the fire in the sacristy and warm himself together with the boys.

#### **CHAPTER 24**

### **1848 FEVER**

In the year 1848 the European nations blew up one after another like as many powder magazines.

The great cities were the most affected: Paris (23-24 February), Vienna (13 March), Berlin and Budapest (15 March), Venice (17 March) and Milan (18 March).

There was heavy fighting at the barricades. In a couple of months Europe was in the flames of revolution.

The explosion was so general that Czar Nicholas I of Russia asked: What is left standing in Europe?"

We shall not relate the entire revolutionary process, but pinpoint those of its aspects with a direct bearing on Don Bosco's story. Special emphasis will be on Turin and Piedmont.

#### Liberals, Patriots and Workers at the Barricades

It is impossible to understand the shake-up of 1848 without considering the threefold interacting of

- The liberal movements in favour of tempering royal absolutism with constitutions and a representative system;
- The aspiration of various nations to independence, especially from the Austrian empire;
- The workers' movements for a greater social justice.

Put it more simply, constitution-minded liberals, independence-minded patriots and exploited workers fought on the barricades side by side.<sup>1</sup>

The workers, forced to labour for 12-14 hours a day, fought hard especially in Paris. They scored a lightning victory. After the overthrow of king

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Those at the receiving end of the well-coordinated violence had another story. German crowds were chanting: Has the devil – his own son – and his name is - Palmerston." They knew that the professional agitators behind the violence could always find ready asylum in the nearest British embassy. Palmerston was British Prime Minister as well as Supreme Patriach of Freemasonry.

of Louis-Philippe, workers and middle-class persons could be seen fraternizing around liberty-trees blessed by the clergy. There was a proclamation on the right to work, the working day was reduced to 10 hours, and national workshops<sup>3</sup> opened everywhere.

Workers' blunders and middle-class intolerance caused the revolutionary movement to collapse as quickly as it had risen. Four months later General Cavaignac 4 took Paris by storm. The 140, 000 workers gathered there fought for four days, with terrible reprisals by the army. The working day returned to 12 hours.

This repression had the effect of turning the workers away from "humane socialism" towards the harder and more pitiless Marxism, whose founders<sup>5</sup> had published his *Communist Manifesto* that same year.

In Italy the workers fought at the barricades in Milan only. Elsewhere the main forces were the liberals demanding constitutions and the patriots demanding war on Austria, which controlled the territories of Lombardy and Venetia, but had all the other states under her heavy protection.

The granting of constitutions, the popular anti-Austrian insurrections and the first war of independence under Charles Albert are the three milestones marking the year 1848 in Italy.

#### The Statute

Rumours of war were abroad in Turin in 1848. Everybody talked politics. The partial freedom of the press resulted in a mushrooming of newspapers for all political tastes.

On January 30th the news is that King Ferdinand of Naples has granted a constitution, and that the people of Milan are boycotting the Austrians. Ten important citizens approached Charles Albert demanding a constitution.

After days of anguish, Charles considered abdicating. He did not think it right to break the oath uttered 25 years earlier to Charles Felix. But Crown Prince Victor Emmanuel thought otherwise: his father cannot leave him weathering the storm alone without ever having given him a say in government.

On 7th February Charles summoned the extraordinary Crown Council, declaring himself ready to consider a constitution or Statute that would guarantee respect for the Catholic faith and honour for the monarchy. But he urged the ten to keep the crowds at bay: he will not tolerate impositions.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> 1773 – 1850. King between 1830 an 1848.

Government-sponsored employment centres.

<sup>1802 – 57.</sup> He lost the presidential election to Louis – Napoleon III) in the last months of 1848.

Karl Marx, 1818 – 83.

On 10<sup>th</sup> February Pius IX, in Rome, spoke to a turbulent mob. He asked not to demand reforms impossible to grant" and concludes: "Bless Italy, great God, and keep for it the most precious gift of faith." The controllers of public opinion, decided to make of Pius IX their tool for a war on Austria, publise "Bless Italy, great God" and leave out the bit about impossible reforms and keeping the faith. That slogan becomes the war cry of the liberals. Pi us IX was disappointed, in vain trying to clarify the misunderstanding. It was perhaps at this juncture that Don Bosco began to have misgivings about the whole project, and started distancing himself from the liberals.

Within days news arrived of the constitution granted at Florence (17th February) and of the Paris revolt (23th February).

A massive demonstration marked by a thanksgiving ceremony for the constitution was planned or the 27th. The huge Vittorio square will accommodate delegations from all corners of the kingdom. All the organizations in Turin are invited to send massive representations. Marquis d'Azeglio in person goes down to Valdocco to invite Don Bosco with all his boys.

### The Marquis and the Priest

Don Bosco himself wrote down the dialogue with the Marquis, albeit 25 years after the event. The rendition may not be word for word, but the of the exchange is clear enough.

They had reserved a place for us next to institutions of all hues. What was I to do?' Refuse, and I would have been dubbed Italy's enemy, accept, and I would also have to accept principles that I judged of noxious consequences. The Marquis opened the dialogue.

"Let the city know that your work is not against modern institutions. This will be of advantage to you. Alms will increase; the municipality and I myself will be lavish with you."

"Marquis, It's my immovable principle to keep out of politics altogether. I'm neither in favour nor against."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Whatever good turn I can for these poor abandoned boys. I strive to make of them good Christians in respect of the Church and good citizens in respect of civil society."

"You're wrong. If you persist in this principle, everybody will abandon you."

Don Bosco thinks exactly the opposite. He was certain he would have been abandoned if he had opted for politics especially of the liberal amp. He went on, stubborn:

"Invite me to things where a priest is called to exercise charity, and I will sacrifice for it my life and my wealth. But I intend to stay out of politics now and forever."

#### Anticlerical Gangs on the Rampage

The demonstration was impressive: 50,000 people paraded before the king on horseback. The archbishop gave permission for a Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament but refused to celebrate Mass and to sing the Te Deum in the cathedral.

The seminarians, against the archbishop's wishes, also paraded all wearing cockades. The archbishop retaliated by closing down the seminary.

Anticlericalism exploded in revenge. On  $2^{nd}$  March gangs of hooligans assaulted two Jesuit residences, smashing panes of glass and breaking down doors.

Next day they threateningly surrounded the convent of the nuns of the Sacred Heart. They protracted the siege for seven days, always kept at bay by the police. Both the Jesuits and the nuns left Turin within days.

The racket went on. The hooligans demonstrated beneath the windows of the Convitto:

"Death to Fr Guala!"

They attacked the palace of the marchioness of Barolo on the grounds that she was thought to harbour 15 Jesuits.

4<sup>th</sup> March. Charles Albert signs the Statute before the Crown Council. The king's absolute power is at an end. The parliamentary regime begins.

But paradoxically there are no demonstrations of enthusiasm. Instead, angry uproars are on the increase against the archbishop, priests and the supporters of absolutism.

8th March. To restore order, a National Guard is organised. Within hours 500 citizens pledge to join it.

# Milan Rises and Asks for Help

Alarming news came from everywhere. Vienna has risen. The emperor has sacked Metternich (13<sup>th</sup> March). Pius IX has signed the constitution (14<sup>th</sup> March). Revolutionaries have risen at Berlin and Budapest (15<sup>th</sup> March). Much closer home, Venice and Milan have risen against the Austrian armies (17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> March).

Milan requests help. The Council of Ministers and the king take stock of the situation. First, they decide to send a Royal Guard brigade to the Ticino border, to prevent Austrian troops from infiltrating Piedmont.

The revolt continues in Milan. General Radetsky,<sup>6</sup> commander of the imperial troops, asks for a truce, which is refused. He is forced to abandon Milan on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.

Venice also succeeds in expelling the Austrians and declaring itself a Republic Turin crowds chant: War, war!

On March 23<sup>rd</sup> the representatives of victorious Milanese arrived, demanding an immediate intervention of the Piedmontese army before the Austrians can launch a counterattack. They asked that it adopt the Italian, tricolour instead of the Savoy blue banner, and that it delay entering Milan after the victory.

#### War on Austria

The war council decided on war and Charles Albert accepted. The towards shouted, "war on Austria!" but that night the king confided to a friend: "If I had not declared war, the revolution would have put an end to the State. Now that it is proclaimed, I risk losing the throne. But I'm ready for it."

The Piedmontese army crossed over into Lombardy. On the 24<sup>th</sup> March, archbishop Fransoni is booed and insulted at the end of a religious ceremony with the king and the crown prince.

The king went to the war front at the head of 60,000 men, with the crowd giving him a rousing send off. It is a festive atmosphere.

But war is another kettle of fish. All the regiments leave Turin. All the horses are commandeered for military transport purposes. The city, without carriages, is immersed in an eerie silence, pregnant with fear.

In the evening riots explode once again under the archbishop's windows. The Home Minister informs him that his "temporary absence" from the city would be welcome. On March 29<sup>th</sup> the archbishop leaves for Switzerland.

The Vicar General, acting in his stead, announces public prayers for the combatants. He exhorts the parish priests to help the families of those recalled for military service. He authorizes farmers to work on Sundays in fields of those who are away at war.

And the political leaders make use of the opportunity to sack the remaining conservatives from all public offices.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> 1766 – 1858.

#### Valdocco Battles, True and Feigned

War fever spread among the youth. The various gangs engaged in violent fights, not at all playful. Armed with sticks, knives and stones they knocked the living daylights out of each other. Don Bosco went frequently out to call the police and launch himself into the fray among the hotheads.

On one occasion he saw a 15-year old boy plunge his knife into another's belly. On the way to hospital he died while mumbling: "I'll settle accounts with you!"

Don Bosco remembered with sadness: "Those fights never ended." There were times when the two gangs, instead of fighting each other, decided jointly to pelt the priest's house with stones. They sounded like hail against the roof, under which Buzzetti and the other boarders trembled with fear.

To attract boys to the Oratory, Don Bosco took advantage of the war fever to invent a new game. Joseph Brosio, an old friend of his, had served as Bersagliere in the army. Don Bosco suggested that he set up a mini-regiment with the boys, giving those military training.

Brosio accepted. He got 200 old muskets from the military stores, fitted with mock barrels. He brought a trumpet and started marches, counter marches, bayonet charges, retreats, assaults. The "regiment" not only performed most successful shows, but also kept order in church.

On a Sunday afternoon, before a large crowd of spectators, disaster struck. The "vanquished" ended their rout in Mama Margaret's vegetable garden, with the "victors" in hot pursuit. Both "armies" smashed lettuce, parsley and tomatoes to pulp.

Mama Margaret, watching from afar, was dismayed.

"Look, look, John, what they've done to me... they've destroyed everything..."

#### "Let Me Go Home..."

Next evening Margaret lost heart. The boys were asleep and she, as usual, was tackling a heap of clothes to mend: a torn shirt ripped trousers and holed socks. She had to work by candlelight, for the boys had nothing else to wear. Don Bosco was beside her, sewing patches on jacket elbows and mending shoes. She suddenly whispered:

"John, I can't stand it any longer. Let me go back to Becchi. I work from morning till night, I'm a poor old woman, and those wild boys ruin everything. I can't go on like this."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> A crack crops of the Italian army, founded early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Don Bosco didn't try to cheer her up with a joke. He said nothing. He pointed his finger to the Crucifix hanging on the wall.

The old woman understood. She bent her head once again on a pair of holed socks and went on sewing.

Never again did she ask to go home. She would consume her last years among those boys, noisy and ill bred, but who needed a mother. Every now and then the poor, tired old woman would lift her eyes to the Crucifix.

### War in Lombardy

On 26 th March the news is that the Italian dream of unity is about to true. Charles Albert's army got a 17,000-strong contingent of Papal troops and a 7,000 one from Tuscany. The Grand Duchies of Parma and Modena have held a plebiscite favourable to union with Piedmont.

On 6th April another contingent arrived from Naples, sent by King Ferdinand's newly acquired enthusiasm.

The first engagements ended in victory, sending happy news to Turin. Another piece of news arrived from America, where Garibaldi had embarked with his legion of volunteers.

On 30<sup>th</sup> April the first political elections were held in Turin. Gioberti, elected President of the Chamber, came back from exile, and is received in triumph.

The left attacked Charles Albert calling him traitor.<sup>8</sup> They asked for the revision of the trials for the risings of 1821 and 1831. Their newspapers advocated violence. Princess Adelaide, daughter of an Austrian archduke, burned **her** private letters. Charles Albert, on the field of battle, is most annoyed.

An icy shower is about to cool the enthusiasm and irritation of the Italians.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> When he was still a young prince in 1821 he had supported the revolutionaries.

#### **CHAPTER 25**

### **COLLAPSE**

On 27th April an envoy of Charles Albert is in Rome for talks with Pius IX. The pope has already sent an army of 17, 000 as material help, but he hesitates in the matter of moral help. "If I could sign *Mastai*," *he* said, "I would most willingly do so, for I'm Italian too; but I must sign *Pius IX*, and the head of the Church must be a minister of peace, not of war."

Reports from Austria and Germany have notified the pope that a revolt threatens, with a danger of schism.

### End of the Misunderstanding

On 29<sup>th</sup> April the pope addresses the cardinals. His reforms were due not to "liberal" intentions, but to humane and Christian sentiments. The very idea of war against the Germans disturbed him deeply. He asks of God concord and peace, not war. And finally he declares that he cannot possibly be the president of "a certain new republic comprising all the peoples of Italy."

The misunderstanding is over. Liberal pressure to turn him into their tool had fostered it beyond limits, as had also his personal wavering. The dream of an Italian federation of monarchies received a mortal blow.

Next he wrote to the Austrian emperor, asking that the Italian people under his rule be allowed to unite into a single nation.

But this show of good will ended in nothing.

The sudden flame had shot up and had just as suddenly died out. Archduke Leopold of Tuscany recalled his troops; so did King Ferdinand of Naples, who dissolved Parliament to boot.

Some Neapolitan and Pontifical troops, plus a contingent of Tuscan University students, stayed behind on the battlefield as volunteers.

May 30th brought the last good news of victory. Flags fly in the streets, people shout: "Long live Charles Albert king of Italy!"

The Austrian counterattack was not long in coming. Radetsky's took four cities by storm.

Ordinary life at Turin began to feel the pinch. Business stagnated, money was scarce, shops closed, unemployment rose. Shoemakers and tailors went on strike, protesting against miserably low wages.

The alarming rumour began to spread that the capital was about to be moved to Milan. Without royal court and civil service jobs, Turin risked becoming a city of unemployed. Landowners who had gambled on a construction boom, mortgaging themselves for 637 million lire, were terrified.

### Mess Tins and Rations at the Oratory

Biting poverty forced the dwellers of the Oratory to tighten their belts. The boys came to lunch with a mess tin each for their rations. The huge, boiling pot contained rice and potatoes, pasta and beans, or a nourishing concoction of dry chestnuts boiled with maize flour specially designed for wartime consumption.

Don Bosco himself dished out the brew, seasoning it with jocular words:

"Do justice to the cook!"

"Eat a lot f you want to grow."

"I'd love to give you some meat, but I haven't any. The day we find an ownerless cow, you'll see what a feast!"

For dessert there is often an apple. Not an apple each, but "an apple" for all. Don Bosco throws it in the air for anyone to catch.

For drinks, there is abundant, fresh water at the common pump.

Some of Margaret's hens climbed cackling on the eating table for whatever crumbs they could find. There was no bread. Don Bosco gave 25 cents to each boy to buy whatever he wished or could. That sum fetched a larger quantity of soldiers' biscuits than ordinary bread, but of a lower quality.

After lunch or dinner, with identical fare, each washes his mess tin and pockets his spoon. Those with extra appetite are welcome to pluck lettuce from Mama Margaret's garden patch, but oil and vinegar for seasoning is on their savings. Times are hard. Every boy scrapes the last cent, or manages what he can. Don Bosco stopped a boy just in time from selling his straw mattress for 40 cents.

Mama Margaret helps with free haircuts. To a boy complaining that his crop of hair showed steps after a haircut, Margaret replied: "That's the staircase that'll lead you to heaven."

Don Bosco felt sorry at not being able to feed his boys properly. But a much greater sorrow was in store for him in those same months.

### Loyal to the Pope Come what May

After Pius IX's 29<sup>th</sup> April speech, tension increased between the two types of priests. On the one side there were the likes of Frs Cocchi and Ponte, and on the other there was Don Bosco. The patriots were of the idea that they had to identify with the aspirations of "the people" towards national unity for the success of religion: Don Bosco considered loyalty to the Pope an absolute priority. So much so that he instructed the boys not to shout "Long live Pius IX" but "Long live the pope." His misgivings towards the liberals were increasing by the day.

More than a century later we know better. The unity of Italy was a success no doubt, but was not carried out in the best of manners. The *Risorgimento* was not a mass phenomenon. It involved mostly the middle classes. Ordinary people supported it in a few cities at most. The bulk of the population, more than 70% of it, was indifferent when not hostile to the whole idea.

Don Bosco was a peasant, with an instinctive aversion for "movements" led by astute lawyers and political intriguers, at whose behest the real people were called upon to shed blood on the battlefield. For him, war was a scourge of God and a ruin for the poor. Maybe his vision was limited, but he could see far. He chose loyalty to the pope and complete freedom from political parties. His Oratory developed into a worldwide congregation. It is true that history is not made of ifs and buts, but we think that if he had opted for flag waving in the streets with his boys, today we would probably speak of him as an erstwhile good vice parish priest of the Turin outskirts.

His loyalty to the pope, however, brought him no end of trouble. Two priests helping him at the Oratory of St Aloysius, despite his prohibition, took the boys to political demonstrations with flags and cockades. Their homilies became political platforms. Don Bosco had a row with them. At Valdocco it was worse. One of Don Bosco's helpers delivered a homily full of words like "freedom, emancipation, independence," and the like.

I was in the sacristy, eager to stop all that disorder. But the preacher, after Benediction, invited priests and boils to go out together. Singing national hymns at the top of their voices and waving national flags, they went to the Mount of the Capuchins. They formally promised not to come to the Oratory unless received with national insignia.

The Valdocco Oratory was deserted. Fewer than 100 boys came instead of the usual 500 plus.

None of the priests returned. The boys apologised, acknowledging that they had been deceived, and promised to obey and behave from then on. But I was left alone with almost 500 boys; the only desultory help was Fr Borel's.

The older boys never returned either. The average age of the Oratory dropped considerably.

#### **Dramatic News**

One dramatic piece of news after another characterised the second half of 1848. Grapeshot put an end to the Prague and Paris insurrections. Between 23<sup>rd</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> July, Austrians and Piedmontese clashed for the decisive battle. Charles Albert's defeat was so crushing that he could not even organise the defence of Milan.

In Turin, the news caused severe social disorder. The National Guard was called to maintain law and order. On 9th August the Piedmontese signed an armistice, while the Turin politicians were lashing at the ineptitude of the leaders and the deceptions of the priests. Drastic measures were taken: change of government, plus the prohibition to sell newspapers in the streets, to affix political posters and to form groups in the open.

### A Harquebus Shot

Every affront to priests and religion became the fashion. I was often assaulted, at home and in the streets. One day, as I was teaching catechism, a harquebus<sup>1</sup> shot crashed through the window, tore through my cassock between the arm and the rib cage, and ripped a hole in the wall.

The boys were terrified. Don Bosco, rather shaken, cheered them up in his jocular fashion:

It's a practical joke in poor taste. I'm sorry for the cassock, the only one I have. Our Lady loves us.

The shot was a rough iron ball, which a boy dislodged from the wall.

On another occasion, while in the midst of a throng of boys, someone attacked me with a long knife. I escaped by a miracle, running headlong to my room. Fr Borel also miraculously escaped a pistol shot.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> 15<sup>th</sup> century firearm, a smoothbore matchlock later superseded by the musket.

Much of the press fanned hatred against the priests. They even attacked Don Bosco with titles like "Revolution uncovered at Valdocco," "The Valdocco priest and the enemies of the Fatherland."

### Need for a New Brand of Priests

Such rabid anticlericalism led Don Bosco not only to feel sorry, but also to think.

A vertigo of hatred rose against the religious orders and ecclesiastical congregations, and generally against the clergy and the authority of the Church. This fury and contempt for religion kept the youth away from morality and from piety, eventually resulting in a dearth of vocations to the priesthood.

This dearth was for him the most serious danger. But instead of wasting time lamenting the evil times, he asked himself: What can I do to foster vocations?

He judged that the people had risen against the priests not so much because of the latter's lack of enthusiasm for the war of independence, but because the majority of the clergy did not come from them. Priests used to come from the nobility or the middle classes at most. The protagonists of the new times, beyond the *Risorgimento*, were going to be the workers instead.

If this was the cause, the solution was not for priests to go and fight on the Novara battlefield, as Fr Cocchi would.

God made known his plan for a new militia of his choice, no longer to come from among the well-to-do families. The wielders of hoe and hammer would be from now on the ones to join the rank and file of the priesthood.

It would be a proletarian clergy.

Don Bosco set to work in that direction with the modest means at his disposal. He chose thirteen among the hundreds of boys coming to the Oratory, and invited them to do a course of spiritual exercises. They spent the whole day at the Oratory, and in the evening those who didn't find a bed there went home.

Don Bosco undertook to "study, know and choose those who might have given signs of vocation." The calm of those young men contrasted violently, with the climate of agitation gripping the city.

He chose four out of those thirteen, repeating the experiment the year after.

### Tragic News from Rome

The van of the defeated regiments entered Turin on 18<sup>th</sup> August. There was no festive atmosphere, but the people received the tired, dusty soldiers with sympathy.

The king re-entered on 15<sup>th</sup> September to a cold and sad reception. Rumours abounded: French troops were about to enter the city, the war was to start again, the king was about to abdicate, and revolution was about to explode.

On 11<sup>th</sup> October Charles Albert reshuffled the government, the streets still seething with disorder. Soldiers left their quarters to demonstrate. One could hear the most contradictory shouts: "Long live the king!" "Long live the republic!" "Long live peace!" "Long live war!" "We want housing! "We want food!"

Tragic news arrived from Rome in mid November. Pellegrino Rossi, first layman Prime Minister of the Pontifical Government, had been assassinated. The mob pressed on the pope to convoke a constituent assembly And wage war on Austria.

In Turin, crowds of hotheads roamed the streets shouting: "Down with Pius IX!" "Down with retrograde ministers!" "Long live Rossi's assassin!" "War!"

There was a widespread fear that revolution might break out, with its concomitant Jacobin terror.

At the end of November the news was that Pius IX has given in to the demands of the mob and had fled, disguised as a simple priest. He had sought refuge in Gaeta, in the kingdom of Naples.

Charles Albert dissolved Parliament and convoked new elections. The other nations repressed the revolution by force. Grapeshot did its work at Vienna after Paris and Prague. The Berlin Parliament was dissolved in December.

# Two Signs of Hope at Valdocco

The first winter fog arrived, as did two signs of hope, which Don Bosco humbly acknowledged.

Ascanio Savio, fellow villager of Don Bosco, was the first of his boys to embrace the priesthood. He was to enter the seminary, but the one at Turin

was closed, and the other one at Chieri was about to. The diocesan curia allowed the young man to Don the clerical robes at the Cottolengo's, and later, to help Don Bosco with the Oratory.

But he did not stay. Four years later he entered the seminary and became a diocesan priest. Of Don Bosco he would say:

"I loved him as if he were my father." Don Bosco would say of him: "I entrusted him at once with a number of things to do, from teaching catechism to many other chores." I felt some relief.

He was the first lamb to become shepherd.

The second event was of another order.

A solemnity was being celebrated at the Oratory Many hundreds of boys had prepared themselves for Holy Communion. Don Bosco celebrated Mass convinced that the usual ciborium full of consecrated Hosts would be in the tabernacle. But the ciborium was almost empty Joseph Buzzetti, the boy in charge of the sacristy and of many more things besides, had forgotten to prepare another one. He noticed his oversight too late, after the consecration.

When the boys began to crowd for Communion, Don Bosco felt grieved at having to send them all back to their pews. But he could not resign himself to that. He began distributing the few Hosts at the bottom of the ciborium.

To his great astonishment and Buzzetti's, the Hosts did not diminish. There were enough for all.

Joseph Buzzetti himself related the marvel to his companions. In 1864 he repeated it to the first Salesians in Don Bosco's presence, who confirmed the story.

Yes. There were few particles in the ciborium. Nevertheless I was able to give Communion to all those who wanted, and they were not few. I was moved, but calm. I thought to myself f the miracle of consecration is a greater one than that of multiplication. But blessed be the Lord for both.

While dramatic events were shaking Italy, in a lost corner of the Turin outskirts, the Lord had multiplied His presence among the boys of a poor priest. It was a sign, mysterious but shining with great light.

#### **CHAPTER 26**

# POLITICS AND THE SOCIAL QUESTION

#### The Politics of the Our Father

The year 1848 marked the first, dramatic clash between Don Bosco and politics. He will bequeath his line of action to his Salesians.

He himself spelled it out to a bishop:

I realised that if I wanted to do good, I had to leave polities aside. I have always shunned it, thus being able to achieve something. I have found no obstacles; on the contrary I found help where I least expected it.

The key points of Don Bosco's attitude towards politics, not only for rear 1848, can be resumed as follows:

- Party politics is a very relative thing. Fortunes change overnight: people condemned to death become Prime Ministers, and loyal people are ditched without compunction. Hence he asserts: *No party shall ever have me.* "Right" and "Left" are not anchor points. The real issue is saving souls, and feeding and educating poor boys. This is *the politics of the Our Father.*
- Some historians have pointed out that, despite Don Bosco's professed neutrality in politics, he did in fact side with the pro-Austria conservatives. But this is understandable. He had been taught in the seminary, from papal encyclicals and other documents, that Austria was a protector of the Holy See; hence he looked at it with sympathy. He did not consider such an attitude as politics, but as a question of faithfulness to the pope.
- Furthermore, he knew first hand a number of Turin liberals and democrats: they were the usual motley crowd of clever intriguers of doubtful intentions. Some were notorious thugs.
- He could not avoid alignment, but always with the pope's political opinion. In 1862 I happened to be at a reception, surrounded by liberals and democrats. Soon they wanted Don Bosco's opinion on the Piedmontese takeover of Rome (in 1870 they would in fact take it).

I resolutely answered: I am with the pope. I am a Catholic, and blindly obey the pope. Should the pope tell the Piedmontese, "come take over Rome." I would add"

go take it. "Should the pope say that the Piedmontese would commit robbery by going to Rome, I would say the same... if we want to be Catholics, we are to think and believe what the pope thinks and believes.

If he had earlier sympathised with the idea of an Italian federation under the presidency of the pope, it was not because he thought it right, but because the pope appeared to think so. After Pius IX's speech of 29<sup>th</sup> April, however, Don Bosco returned to conservatism, not because of his personal leanings, but because of the pope's. Don Bosco changes the way the pope does.

### The Social Question

The same year 1848 saw the publication of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. That revolution would make less noise than the revolts of 1848, but would go farther and deeper. The communists' position was a radical one in regard of the social question that for decades had agitated the nations of northern Europe. Communism was a drastic denunciation of the exploiting classes, and an appeal for the violent overthrow of "the system" founded on injustice.

Don Bosco did not seem to see the problem in terms of social classes in transformation, or to be aware of the extension of poverty in relation to social upheavals. If this means that he had no "scientific" vision because he did not make use of terms like "capital" and "labour," so be it. But if it means that he had no understanding of his times and that good sentiments were his only guide, this is far from the truth.

Fr Lemoyne, the Salesian historian who enjoyed Don Bosco's confidence, wrote, "Don Bosco understood from the beginning, and *repeated it a thousand times*, that the revolutionary movement was not a passing whirlwind. Not all promises made to the people were being dishonest. Many responded to universal, lively aspirations of the proletarian masses. They wished equality without class distinction, greater justice and an improvement of their economic conditions. On the other hand he could see how wealth increasingly concentrated into the hands of pitiless capitalists, and how employers imposed unjust work contracts with insufficient pay and long hours."

Don Bosco lived on the watershed between two eras of world history, and hence also of the Church.

Before the industrial revolution, artisans were grouped into guilds. These "workers' clubs" were a creation of the Middle Ages: rather rigid, but providing a certain amount of social security to their members.' The poor existed,

but not in numbers comparable with the huge, miserable masses of proletarians abandoned to their own devices, brought into existence by the factory system during the first century of the industrial revolution. The church intervened in favour of the poor with the model devised by St Vincent de Paul (1581-1660): organised charity.<sup>2</sup>

The new industrial society abolished the guilds according to liberal principles so that the only freedom left to the proletarian masses was that of letting themselves be exploited by powerful employers.<sup>3</sup> Liberalism diligently prevented the formation of new structures able to defend workers' rights on the line of the ancient guilds.<sup>4</sup>

Many churchmen, in the absence of readymade programmes of action, launched into doing something "at once."

They dusted off St Vincent de Paul's method and set to work.<sup>5</sup>

Soon it became clear that charity was not enough, even with the provision of professional schools and teaching laboratories. It was necessary to for social justice, and for institutions and laws that protected work! rights. It was a long journey, due to incomprehension by the hierarchy and strong opposition by the liberal States.<sup>6</sup>

Don Bosco plunged into the thick of the new situation with all his strength. He had a sense of urgency dictated by what he saw and by his generous availability to work for poor boys. He and his first Salesians were conscious that the poor could not afford the luxury of waiting for reforms, and that they needed help "right now." Catechism, bread, professional training, and a job protected by a good work contract became the "urgent programme" that Don Bosco's sons carried out in aid of the young proletarians.

This choice was not the result of a hunch. The situation became clearer as the years went by, and Don Bosco became ever more conscious of the greatness as well as of the limits of his mission.

## Realpolitik

For Don Bosco, the word "politics" meant something more than following a party line. It meant getting involved in the social question: being

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Charity has gone a long way, but the fact the social question at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is slowly returning to 19th century situations, shows that justice is still to be done.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The notion that labour is robbed by capital is simplistic one. Behind the employer there is the even more powerful landlord, taking his cut as rent, and the hugely powerful usurer taking it as interest. Curiously, Marx never noticed.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The Trade Union movement succeeded in giving some form of protection to workers. But as their leaders failed to see beyond the capitalist, their influence has been wanning beginning with the 1990s. Needless to say, liberals have succeeded for more than a century to keep all this information out of the faculties of economics.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> In 1833 St Frederick Ozanam (1813 – 53) founded the Society named St Vincent de Paul.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The Welfare State is the result of this approach. Instead of restoring justice by taxing the unearned income of both landlord and usurer, the State has effectively joined both, by taking capital and labour a large chunk of the fruits of their exertion and distributing what is left after its bureaucrats have taken their cut.

for or against free trade, State intervention in the labour market, strikes, workers' socialist societies, the Owen-inspired co-operatives<sup>7</sup>, the unions, social legislation as demanded in Germany by bishop Ketteler<sup>8</sup>, etc.

"To stand aside from politics," for him, meant therefore not to let himself embroiled into the debates surrounding the social question. He refused to talk about Mazzini and his revolutionary enterprises as much as about Marx, Count Margarita and Cavour. He imposed this attitude to his Salesians.

He therefore solved the problem, however much one may debate in which way he did solve it. To plunge into the social debate would have met taking sides, therefore being "for" someone and "against" someone else. To be known as a "socially-minded priest" would have meant cutting himself off all help from the middle classes and the well-to-do.

But he needed help, "now" and from all sides, because he did not want to send the poor boys back to the streets. And with all that help he certainly did good, a lot of it and down to earth.

## A Simple Programme

The programme presented to the rich and the well-to-do was simple: the poor ran the risk of being carried away by revolution, because poverty is intolerable. Such a situation is unworthy of a Christian people. The rich ought to place part of their substance at the disposal of the poor, failing which they are not Christians. The poor, prodded by destitution, will demand to share the wealth knife in hand. They will unchain the revolution, with its trail of Jacobin disorder and violence. The insensitive rich will take the blame for not wanting to get the poor out of their misery.

Don Bosco acted as the Good Samaritan, who on meeting the victim of the bandits, dragged him out of the ditch, took him to the inn and cared for him at his own expense. He did not act as a politician, who would instead go off and propose a law against banditry.

He understood with the passing of the years that "acting right now" was not enough. Charity has precise limits. But he also knew that he was not alone in the Church. He would often declare to his Salesians:

Obviously in the world there must be people who go into politics, to give advice, point out dangers and suck but such task is not for us. There are people in the Church, competent enough to tackle such hard and dangerous questions. In an army some do the fighting, others carry the stores, and others yet perform tasks equally necessary to secure victory.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> 1771 – 1858. Welsh manufacturer turned social reformer. He built a milling co-operative in Lanarkshire, which became famous before all reform-minded people.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> 1811 – 77. He maintained that the solution of the social question was the Church's responsibility.

His option for immediate intervention may obviously be debated. The results may not: they are true miracles acknowledged by all. Wherever the Salesians went, they succeeded in befriending all with the Oratory and the musical band. They were "different priests."

#### What If...?

One thing is certain: had Don Bosco chosen to plunge into the social debate, he would have opened very few schools and workshops, and surely attracted extra criticism. He himself declared it on 24<sup>th</sup> June 1883:

Enter politics? What for? What could we achieve with all our efforts? Nothing but perhaps render our work impossible.

Schematising to the maximum, Don Bosco was before a dilemma:

- Either struggle against the *effects* of social injustice by helping poor boys, asking for and obtaining help from all to start schools and workhops;
- Or struggle against the causes of the same injustice, by public denouncing them and by forming unions of workers, thus giving up the help by people actually benefiting from a system based on exploitation. The result would have been the drying up of the sources of charity and the abandoning of the poor boys to their own devices.

In the first case he would have saved the youth from immediate danger, risking however being made use of by "the system" by bringing up, obedient and docile workers thus avoiding disturbing the powerful;

In the second case he would have pressed for a change of system, but risking not being able to attend to the immediate, pressing needs of the poor.

Either choice entailed dramatic consequences in the sense of not being to do "everything" he wanted. This was true not only for him but for also other churchmen.

The urgency of the moment impelled him towards the first choice. On realizing the limitations, he felt under the guarantee of the Church acting t whole:

Let us leave declarations and denunciations to other religious orders better than us in political matters. We go straight to the poor.

Don Bosco compares well with other socially minded 19<sup>1h</sup> - 20th century thinkers and and operators like Ketteler (1811-77), Toniolo (1845-1918) and Sturno (1871-1959). Each brought his fruits to the people of God.

#### **CHAPTER 27**

# THORNY, BLEAK 1849

"The year 1849 was thorny and bleak, despite great efforts and mighty sacrifices."

The year began with a sad piece of family news. On 18<sup>th</sup> January, Don Bosco's brother, Anthony died suddenly at 41. Of late he had often come to the Oratory to visit Mama Margaret and Brother John. They talked about poor harvests and the heavy taxes with which the government bled the farmers white to finance the war effort. He also brought news of the seven children God had granted him. The last but one, Nicholas, had gone to heaven after only a few hours, but the others were doing well.

The years and the ups and downs of life had drawn the two brothers together again. Coldness between them was a thing of the past.

On 1<sup>st</sup> February, King Charles Albert inaugurated the new Parliament. The bulk of the Left listened to him in hostile silence. In the streets people were shouting: "Hail war!" "Down with the priests!" "Long live the republic!" The newspapers published obscene cartoons of Pius IX, dubbing him "Italy's traitor." Some of them mockingly attacked Don Bosco too. One called him "The Saint" and "The Valdocco magician."

Gangs of hooligans started again pelting with stones the Pinardi building, now rented in its entirety. Don Bosco always went out in Brosio's company. The ex-soldier recalled: "Whenever we walked along the main street, a mob of little scoundrels insulted Don Bosco, hurling indecent epithets and singing revolting songs. One day I felt like boxing their ears. But Don Bosco stopped, succeeded in drawing near to a few, bought some fruit from a woman vendor and gave it to "his friends" as he called them."

# The "Friend of Youth" Folds up

Don Bosco was worried by the evil that the anticlerical press wreaked upon the youth. Antireligious newspapers were sold in the streets and

struck on the walls. Catholic newspapers were few, and lacked the pluck that seduces people.

To his many other worries he added a newspaper, which he called *The Friend of Youth*. It came out three times a week, and he looked after its publication and distribution together with two other priests.

It was a failure. The first subscribers were 137, down to 116 the second quarter. It folded up after 61 issues with a deficit of 272 lire. Don Bosco never regretted it. He had tried to do good. He had met head on, for the first time, the lack of concern of the "simple souls." The Catholic press, in Italy, is till dragging that particular ball-and-chain after more than 100 years.

### War Again

At Turin, war was again in the air. On 20<sup>th</sup> February the prime minister resigned. The hawks of the democratic left, in control, pushed for war, petitioning the king to that effect. On 12<sup>th</sup> March the armistice was denounced and a week later war broke out again. But the 75, 000 soldiers this time showed no enthusiasm. An entire regiment refused to march. Some deserted. A few were shot by firing squad. Radetsky's new password to his troops is: "To Turin!"

On 23<sup>rd</sup> March the battle of Novara flares up along a 4-kilometre front. Despite episodes of true heroism, by evening Radetsky's more powerful artillery has gained the day. Battle and war are lost. Chaos reigns during the night. Bands of disarmed, bedraggled soldiers walk along the roads, without commanding officers. They shout: "Home! Let Pius IX, let the rich and the warmongers pay! We are going home!"

At 1:00 a.m. Charles Albert abdicates. With a cloak over his shoulders he boards a gig and leaves for exile.

On being informed of the abdication, Radetsky granted a six-hour truce. The 29-year old new king, flushed out after a four-hour search from among the bivouacking soldiers, went for a parley with the Austrian field marshal in the courtyard of a farmstead. He asked for conditional surrender, otherwise he would have to abdicate too and leave Piedmont in the hands of the revolutionaries. When he left, 82-year old Radetsky commented, "Poor boy!"

#### Last Shred of Freedom

The country suffered most. In Turin the atmosphere was tense. Upon the Austrians' asking for 200 million as war compensation, while occupying

Alessandria, the opposition "democrats" burst out in anger. They openly advocated a republic and asked for resuming the war to the bitter end. Genoa rose in revolt.

The young king returned to Turin, retook Genoa with an artillery barrage, and negotiated peace with Austria on milder terms.

A few smouldering embers were all that was left of the great fire of 1848. The fighters of the spring barricades had been defeated. Austrian artillery silenced the patriots. The workers resumed their heavy 12-hour working day. The liberal constitutions were abrogated almost everywhere except in Piedmont, where the Statute held out.

This shred of freedom will turn out to be important: Italy will coalesce around Piedmont. Elsewhere freedom will take a long time to take root and sprout.

### Shipwreck of the "Patriot Priests"

The Novara debacle also meant shipwreck for the "patriot priests" of Piedmont. Fr Cocchi, with his idea of "following the people," had led a contingent of 200 young men from his Vanchiglia oratory to the Novara battlefield, but the head of the division where they caught up with the army refused to accept them as combatants. The youth didn't know what to eat or where to spend the night.

After the rout, they returned to Turin in the dead of night and dogtired. For enterprising Fr Cocchi it was a thorough defeat.

His oratory remained closed for some months, while he went on hiding. He re-surfaced in October, with a charity project launched with two other priests, called "Institute for Young Artisans." This work, still extant, is the tacit acknowledgment that Don Bosco's political line was the right one.

# 33 Lire for the Pope

Tens of thousands of refugees crowded the streets of Turin. Life was hard. Rents soared, wages dropped. Industry was lifeless. Heavy taxes raked in the little money in circulation. There was a glut of labour despite the booming construction industry. Houses got built in large numbers, but they were rented before completion.

Meanwhile Pius IX was still in exile at Gaeta. Marquis Gustav Cavour and a canon launched a collection called "Peter's Pence." The boys of the Oratory put together their cents and collected the grand sum of 33 lire, which they handed over to the committee by the end of March.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> May Don Bosco received a letter from the Nuncio:

The Holy Father has experienced a sweet emotion on receiving the affectionate and candid offer of the poor young artisans and on reading the words of devotion accompanying it. Please let them know how much their offer has pleased him. It has been a most precious one indeed, as coming from the poor.

The pope reciprocated with 720 rosaries, which arrived on 21st April 1850.

#### Small Present for Don Bosco

June 24<sup>th</sup>, feast of St John the Baptist, is also Don Bosco's name day. Charles Gastini and Felix Revile, despite the hard times, decided to give Don Bosco a small present. Secretly, the two put together all the money saved from their meals and from occasional tips. But prices in the shop windows were high, so in the end they settled for two small silver hearts of the type that poor people give to Our Lady "for grace received." It was strange, but an ingenious and moving choice.

On the eve of the feast, when everybody was in bed, the two knocked Don Bosco's door, and blushing to their earlobes tended him the two hearts.

On the morrow everyone knew. Many felt a holy envy.

### Four Boys and a Handkerchief

Don Bosco had an eye on the two boys of the silver hearts. In 1848 they had done the course of spiritual exercises with eleven others. This year the boys would be 71, in two turns.

Don Bosco's permanent idea remained *studying, knowing and choosing individuals* who might give signs of vocation to the priesthood.

At the end he called Buzzetti, Bellia, Gastini and Reviglio.

"I need someone to give me a hand with the Oratory. What of you?"

"Give you a hand? How?"

"First of all with an accelerated course of studies including Latin. Then, if it's God's will, by being ordained priests."

The four looked at each other in the face and accepted.

Don Bosco put only one condition. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and crumpled it in his hands:

"I ask you to be like this handkerchief in my hands: obedient in all."

Only Bellia had finished primary school. In August Don Bosco got Fr Chiaves to give them language classes and in September he himself took them to his brother Joseph at Becchi for an intensive course of Latin.

They got back to Turin in October, in time to attend Charles Albert's state funeral after his death at Oporto, Portugal.

## The Vanchiglia Battalion

That same October, in agreement with Fr Cocchi and with the archbishop's written approval, Don Bosco reopened the Oratory of the Guardian Angel in the Vanchiglia neighbourhood. It consisted of two sheds, two rooms, a huge hall adapted as chapel, all for 900 lire a year of rent. Fr Carpano was in charge.

Fierce fights were the hallmark of Vanchiglia. Don Bosco sent the veteran Brosio to give Fr Carpano a hand. The man trained a bellicose "battalion," ready to play but also to hit in earnest if necessary. He relates:

"On one occasion there appeared 40 louts armed with stones, sticks and knives, determined to invade the Oratory. The director was so frightened that he trembled like a leaf. Seeing that they were quite ready for a fight, I barred the door, assembled the older boys and armed them with the wooden guns. I divided them into squads. The order was that in the case of attack, at my signal they should counterattack in unison without sparing blows. I hid the youngest, crying, in the church, and stood by the entrance door, which the hooligans were trying to batter down. In the meantime someone had gone to alert the cavalry. The soldiers arrived with unsheathed sabres."

Everything Went Well that Time.

On 18<sup>th</sup> November Fr Giacomelli, former co-seminarian of Don Bosco, went to live at the Oratory, where he stayed for two years. With his help and Ascanio's, Don Bosco could now increase the number of boarders to 30.

They would be 36 in 1852, 76 in 1853 and 115 in 1854. In 1860 they would be 470 and in 1861 600. They will peak at 800.

Life at the Oratory is one of poverty. In winter they freeze in or out of church, except in the kitchen where there is a wood stove. Wool- or horsehair-filled mattresses are a luxury for a few. Most sleep on a sack full of leaves or straw. 17-year old Joseph Buzzetti is in charge of the little money of the community, to his great astonishment at being so completely trusted.

On Sundays the boarders join the 500 boys regularly invading the Oratory, play and go on excursion with them.

On 20<sup>th</sup> November King Victor Emmanuel dissolved Parliament and convoked new elections. With harsh words, he accused the democratic left

for having caused the ruin of the nation, inviting the people to elect more moderate representatives. The new MPs approve the peace treaty, which turned out to be no more than a 10-year armistice. The ten years passed working in silence.

## Twenty Cents of Maize Meal

Towards the end of 1849, with many people suffering the pangs of hunger in the Turin's outer belt, mysterious happenings marked Don Bosco's saga. We could well dub them the "small miracles of a priest in aid of the poor." Joseph Brosio, the veteran, relates the first.

One day, while I was in Don Bosco's room, a man came to beg, saying that he and his five children had not eaten for a whole day. Don Bosco searched through his pockets only to find 20 cents. He gave them to the man with his blessings.

Once alone with me, he said he was sorry not to have been able to give him more. Had he had 100 lire, he would have given them to him.

"And how do you know he's told you the truth? What if he was a scrounger?"

"No, he's sincere and loyal. I'll tell you more: he's industrious and very affectionate towards his family."

"How do you know?"

Don Bosco took my hand, looked at me straight in the eyes and said:

"I read his heart."

"That's a good one! But then you see my sins too?"

Don Bosco smiled.

"I can smell them."

I must say he did read my heart. If I forgot something in confession, he would point it out to me unfailingly. And I lived a kilometre away. One good day I had done something charitable that had cost me a great deal, and no one knew. No sooner had Don Bosco saw me at the Oratory than he said,

"What a beautiful thing you did that'll prepare heaven for you!"

"What have I done?"

He narrated it in detail.

Not long afterwards, in town, I happened to meet the man of the 20 cents. He recognized me, stopped me and told me that he had bought maize meal. The whole family had eaten their fill. And he kept on repeating: "In the family we call him "the priest of the miracle of the maize meal." Twenty cents can buy maize meal for no more than two, yet seven of us ate our fill."

#### Charles!

Marchioness Fassati related the second event, repeating what Don Bosco himself had told her one day.

One day someone came to summon Don Bosco to the bedside of one of the boys of the Oratory, who was gravely ill. Don Bosco was away. He returned two days later. He went to see the boy next day about 4:00 p.m.

On getting there, he saw the black pall hanging from the door with the boy's name. He went up to see his parents and condole them. They were in tears. The boy had died in the morning. Don Bosco asked to be allowed into the room where the body lay. One of the family went with him.

Don Bosco said that, on entering the room, he was assailed by the thought that the boy was not dead, and called him by name: "Charles!"He opened his eyes:

"Don Bosco, you've woken me up from a terrible dream!"

Those present fled in terror, shouting and knocking down the chandeliers. Don Bosco quickly ripped the shroud wrapping the boy's body."

He went on:

"I dreamt being pushed into a long and dark cavern, so narrow that I could hardly breathe. At its other end I could see a clearer and wider space, where souls were being judged. When it was my turn to be judged, I was terrified for having done my last confession badly. Then you woke me up!"

Charles' parents had run back on being informed that their son was alive. The boy greeted them, but told them not to hope for a cure. He embraced them and asked to be left alone with Don Bosco.

He said that he had had the disgrace of falling into what he had thought a mortal sin and that on feeling sick he had sent for Don Bosco, intending to confess it to him. But they had not found him and another priest had come instead, to whom he had not had the courage to confess it. God had shown him that he had deserved hell for that sacrilegious confession.

He went to confession with great sorrow, and on receiving the grace of absolution he closed his eyes and gently breathed his last.

#### The Chestnuts

Joseph Buzzetti witnessed the third event. On November 2<sup>nd feast</sup> of All Souls, Don Bosco had taken the boys of the Oratory to pray at the cemetery. He had promised boiled chestnuts for all upon their return. He had ordered three sackfuls.

But Margaret had misunderstood, and so had cooked only three or four kilos. Buzzetti, the young "supply officer," checked the situation:

"Don Bosco will be disappointed. I must tell him at once." But in the turmoil of the returning mob of hungry boys, he could not make himself understood. Don Bosco took the small basket from his hands and began to dish out chestnuts by the ladleful. In the bedlam, Buzzetti shouted,

"Not like that! There isn't enough for all!"

"But there me three sacks in the kitchen."

"No, only these, only these!"

Buzzetti shouted in vain while the boys came in waves. Don Bosco was perplexed:

But I have promised. Let's go on till they last."

He went on dishing out a ladleful to each. Buzzetti, nervously watching the diminishing chestnuts with one eye, kept the other on the never-ending queue. "Someone else began to look in the same direction. At a given moment there was silence.

Hundreds of eyes stared at the never-emptying basket...

There was enough for all. For the first time that night, the boys, their hands full of chestnuts shouted: "Don Bosco's a saint!"

#### **CHAPTER 28**

## A HOME AND A CHURCH

In the last months of 1849 Don Bosco petitioned the Ministry of the Interior for a subsidy. On a Sunday afternoon a committee of three senators went down to Valdocco to observe and report to the Ministry. The impression was very positive. They saw 500 boys playing in the open and praying in the chapel. They sought information in great detail about the house where 30 boys were boarding.

One of them questioned a boy chosen at random. He was a stonecutter from Varese. His father had died. Bursting into tears, the boy revealed that his mother was in prison.

"Where do you put up for the night?"

"Up to a few days ago at my master's. But now Don Bosco has taken me in."

The relation is still in the official Acts for 1st March. It runs:

The institution of the distinguished and zealous priest John Bosco appears to be an eminently religious, moral and useful one. It would be a severe blow for the city, should it fail for lack of subsidy. Our committee requests the Ministry of the Interior for effective help to such useful and profitable work.

Those words fetched 300 lire from the Senate and 2, 000 from Minister Rattazzi. But the money, however welcome, was not the main benefit. The long, tormented struggle between Church and State was about to burst. The visit and report of the three senators, requested by Don Bosco, would allow the Oratory to sail through the storm almost unscathed.

# The Archbishop Under Arrest

In December 1849, 1, 000 ecclesiastics and 10, 000 citizens of Turin petitioned Prime Minister d'Azeglio<sup>2</sup> for the return of archbishop Fransoni, still in exile at Geneva.

 $<sup>^{1}</sup>$  1808 – 73.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> 1798 – 1866.

After a wrangle between king, cabinet, and the bishop of Genoa, Fransoni returned to Turin in March 1850.

The political climate was hot. The Siccardi Bill was being debated in both Parliament and Senate. The new law abolished the Church's privilege of trying and judging priests abolished the right of asylum by which the police could not enter churches, and studied the possibility of extending the ecclesiastical status to more goods.

The Bill was passed on March 8tth. The king gave his assent the next day. The anticlerical gangs went on a rampage: "Down with the priests! Long Live Siccardi!" As the procession reached the archbishop's palace, the mob insulted: "Death to Fransoni! Away with the pope's legate!" Stones began to fly: All the windowpanes were shattered, and the mob tried to batter down the main door. The cavalry had to intervene, sabres in hand.

The clergy reacted at once. Pius IX protested with a letter of the cardinal Secretary of State. The Nuncio asked for a passport and left Piedmont. On 18<sup>th</sup> March the archbishop sent a secret circular letter to all the parishes forbidding priests to appear before a civil court without his permission.

On 21st April the police raided the press that had printed the circular, the post office and the archbishop's palace. The circular was seized and judged as "instigation to rebellion." Msgr Fransoni, summoned before a civil court, refused to appear, whereupon he was condemned to a fine of 500 lire and a month in prison. On 4<sup>th</sup> May he was arrested and taken to military citadel.

Tension was high. There was a strong Catholic opposition, but feebly represented in Parliament, as only 2% of the population had the vote.

The guard officer at the citadel cried as he welcomed the archbishop, and the commander ceded him his living quarters.

Many groups petitioned the king for permission to visit the prisoner, including a number of Don Bosco's boys.

The tug of war between the government and the archbishop restarted in July. The Minister of Agriculture fell gravely ill and requested the Sacraments. The parish priest received orders from the archbishop to demand public recantation of his personal approval of the Siccardi Bill. The minister refused and died on 5<sup>th</sup> August without Viaticum.

Rioting exploded in the streets. The Servites<sup>3</sup> were expelled. The minister of War demanded that Fransoni resign the archbishopric. Upon refusal, he ordered a new arrest and had him taken to a fort near the border with France. Thence the archbishop would be banished from the territory of the State.

Squads of thugs assaulted the monasteries of the city. The members of the various religious orders barricaded themselves in their houses. On 14<sup>th</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Congregation of mendicant friars dedicated to apostolic work going back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

August someone came to alert Don Bosco that the Oratory was going to be tacked that evening. The advice was for him and his boys to leave. Don Bosco thinks, but decides to stay put. At 4:00 p.m. the column of demonstrators is approaching. But one of the mob had in the past received help from Don Bosco. He turns to the first groups: "It's no good to assault the Oratory. All we'll find is poor boys and a priest looking after them. Don Bosco is a man of the people like us. Let's leave him alone."

After a short argument the column decided to go elsewhere.

### The Second Quartet

Under the storm, Don Bosco kept on working in silence. The first four Boys, almost at the end of the crash course, were almost ready to Don the clerical robes. Michelino Rua had just finished primary school in the summer of 1850 at the Christian Brothers'. Don Bosco kept an eye on him. One day he called him aside: "What do you intend to do next year?"

"My mother has had a word with the head of the military arsenal. They have a clerical job for me, so that I can help the family."

"I also had a word with someone. Your teachers have told me that the Lord has gifted you with a good mind, and that it would be a pity not to continue with your studies. Would you?"

"Of course. But my mother is poor, and my father is no more. Where is he going to find the money?"

"I'll see to it. You only ask her for permission to begin Latin."

Rua's mother looked at her lanky son in the eyes for a long time. The love was enthused about Don Bosco."I'm happy, Michelino. But what about your health? The Lord has already taken four of your siblings, and you are even frailer than they were. Tell Don Bosco not to keep you on books for too long.""

Michelino lived within striking distance of the Oratory, and his health was not strong. Don Bosco left him at home for another two years, but in November he arranged private tuition for him. In the evenings he himself instructed the boy in arithmetic and in the metric system. Together with Rua there were three more. It was the second quartet that Don Bosco hoped o bring to the priesthood.

On Sundays, while Buzzetti and the rest gave a hand to Don Bosco with the Oratory, Rua and Angel Savio went to the Oratories of Vanchiglia and Porta Nuova to help and give catechism classes.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1851, after 14 months of fast-forwarding, the first four boys passed the exam with brilliant marks before the tribunal of the diocesan

curia. Buzzetti, Gastini, Bellia and Reviglio vested the clerical robes at the Oratory. Don Bosco was radiant with joy on seeing the first lambs finally become shepherds. But he is wrong. Of the four, who started philosophy next day, Bellia and Reviglio were eventually ordained priests, but did not stay with the Oratory Gastini soon lost heart and dropped out. Buzzetti stayed with Don Bosco, but without becoming a priest. The first hope to materialise was the lanky boy still living with his mother: Michael Rua.

## A Dizzy Sum of Money

After the vesting, Don Bosco began to think of the house. He could not continue in a place not his own, which could be sold to a third party overnight. On a Sunday afternoon he approached Pinardi.

"If you give me a good price, I'll buy your property."

"I will give you a good price. What's your offer?"

"I had it priced by an honest engineer. He reckons that the property is worth between 26,000 and 28,000 lire. I offer you 30, 000."

"In cash and in one instalment?"

"In cash and in one instalment."

"Shake my hand. In two weeks time we'll sign the instrument."

Don Bosco shook Pinardi's hand, after which he felt dizzy. 30,000 lire were the equivalent of many of today's millions. Where to find all that money in a fortnight?

Divine Providence intervened at once. That same evening Fr Cafasso, who hardly ever came on Sundays, paid me a visit with the news that the pious countess Casazza-Riccardi had entrusted him with 10,000 live for me, to spend as I judged best for the glory of God. Next day, a Rosminian religious arrived with the offer of a loan of 20,000 at 4%. Abbot Rosmini<sup>4</sup> never pressed for either the principal or the interest. Chevalier Cotta, in whose bank we signed the agreement, provided the 3000 live needed for clerical expenses.

It was 19<sup>th</sup> February 1851. It is difficult not to see the hand of Divine Providence, but more difficult still for Don Bosco not to forge ahead.

#### A Salesian Porziuncola

One evening that same month, as he mended clothes for the sleeping together with his mother, Don Bosco whispered to himself:

"And now I want to erect a beautiful church in honour of St Francis of Sales."

Margaret dropped needle and thread.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> 1797 – 1855. Famous philosopher, theologian and founder of a religious congregation. His cause of beatification is on course.

"A church! Where is the money? We can hardly feed and clothe these poor wretches, and you talk of a church. I hope you'll think twice about it, and speak with the Lord, before embarking on such a feat."

"Mother, if you had money, would you give it to me?"

"Sure, but I've none."

"And you think that God, so much more generous than you, will deny it to me?"

There was no way to "reason" with a son like that.

On the other hand Don Bosco was right: the Pinardi chapel had been enlarged, but it couldn't fit all the boys even with two extra storeys.

Moreover, "as they had to climb down two steps to get in, in winter we were flooded with rain, and in summer we were stifled by the heat and overpowered by the stench."

Chevalier Blanchier designed the new church and Frederic Bocca was the contractor. Don Bosco warned him, joking:

"At times I shall not have money to pay you."

"We'll slow down the pace of construction then."

"No, no. Let's hurry; I want the church finished within a year." Bocca shrugged his shoulders.

"We shall hurry, but you hurry with the lire too."

"After digging, the foundation stone was laid on 20th July 1851."

Chevalier Cotta, one of Don Bosco's greatest benefactors, laid it in place, and 14-year old Michael Rua read a message of thanksgiving. Famous Fr Barrera delivered the speech. He may have sounded exaggerated, but he wasn't. He said: "This stone is a mustard seed. It will grow as big as a tree, with many boys seeking refuge beneath."

Money was the constant worry. Don Bosco knocked at the door of all his acquaintances and beyond, but could put together only 35,000 lire. He needed 30,000 more.

The bishop of Biella sent out a circular letter to all the parishes, reminding them of all the bricklayers of the zone whom Don Bosco had helped. A special Sunday collection delivered only 1000 lire.

The boys helped as much as they could with their labour. One of them recalled, "The walls had reached the height of the windows, and I and other boys formed a human chain passing bricks up to the scaffolding."

Don Bosco embarked into a raffle for the first time. "We got 3,300 gifts. The pope, the king, the Queen Mother and the Queen Consort contributed." The gifts were on show in a hall behind St Dominic's church. A rather thick brochure publicised the raffle.

The ticket-selling operation cost a lot of humiliations to Don Bosco, but the raffle fetched the notable sum of 26,000 lire. He would resort to raffles whenever he was broke, and recommended it as a means for fundraising shortly before his death.

The church was consecrated on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1852. It can still be seen, at the end of the Pinardi building, dwarfed by the size of the basilica of *Mary Help of Christians* reaching within three metres of its door. It was the Salesian Porziuncola.<sup>5</sup> For 16 years, 1852-68, the heart of Don Bosco's work beat within its walls.

Young Saint Dominic Savio prayed there, consecrating himself to Our Lady before the altar dedicated to Her. Michael Magone, the scoundrel of Carmagnola, and Francis Besucco from Argentera, who repeated Dominic Savio's heroic feat, also came there.

Fr Michael Rua celebrated there his first Mass. Mama Margaret, fast aging, could be seen there for four years, several times a day. That is where she got the strength to go on working for the poor boys.

#### Was It the Evil One?

"With the new church we were able to look after those boys who wanted to not only the sacred functions, but also the day and evening school (the Pinardi chapel, the church and the new sacristy doubled up as classrooms during the day). But what to do about the crowds of poor boys who constantly come for shelter? In that moment of supreme need, it was decided to undertake the construction of a new wing."

I was near winter. The work started at full speed, but bad weather set in. Rain fell in torrents night and day for several days. The water filtered between the brickwork, leaching out the fresh mortar. The walls were no more than a loose collection of bricks and pebbles. About midnight on 2<sup>nd</sup> December a violent noise began, increasing and frightening. The walls were crumbling in ruins..."

The boys were aghast. Don Bosco spoke:

"It is a practical joke of the devil. With God's help and his Mother's, we shall build everything."

The devil may have had a hand in it, but so had contractor's greed. The wall stumps revealed a shoddy rock- and sand-fill. Mortar was very scanty. The damage amounted to 10, 000 lire. Work could start only in spring, and building was completed in October 1853.

We badly needed those rooms, so we rushed to occupy them. Classrooms, dining hall and dormitory were now a reality, and boarders increased to 65."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The inference is to the locality near Assisi from where St Francis's work took off.

#### **CHAPTER 29**

## **GOD'S DOG**

Sometime in 1848 Charles Albert had granted equality of civil rights to Protestants and Jews, who before that had only been "tolerated. "The Catholics thought that the Protestants would be happy with obtaining their rights. Instead, the Waldensians launched a proselytising attack almost at once. They founded three newspapers and cheap propaganda books, besides organising talks and conferences.

It was the first clash with "pluralism." The Piedmontese Catholics became indignant, but did not do much more.

Trusting in the laws that had protected them until then, all they had was some newspapers and some cultural publications. They had neither journals nor magazines for the ordinary people.

In 1849 the bishops met in conference. They concluded that indignation alone was of no use. It was necessary to get moving with the press and with preaching. They decided to publish a collection of good books, if a newspaper (*The Bell*) and of a series of booklets called *Catholic Readings*. Paper and booklets were Don Bosco's idea. The style was simple and popular, while their content touched exclusively upon matters concerning The Catholic faith. Twelve monthly issues cost 1.80 lire.

### To Dialogue but a Head-on Clash

Don Bosco wrote the first six booklets with the title The Catholic Instructed in His Faith.

He recalled, smiling, that he found it hard to get ecclesiastical approval. The Turin Vicar General said: "I don't feel like signing that. You challenge and take the enemies head on." Don Bosco had written in battling mood. He had no notion of "dialogue." His style was to force the enemy between rock and a hard place. The struggle's purpose was to save souls for God, for the Church and eternal life. He intended to use all means available to

Dam "the torrent that was trying to sweep away society and religion with its corrupt waves."

Recalling the failure of *The Friend of Youth*, he was rather apprehensive. Instead, *Catholic Readings* had a huge, approving readership from the beginning. The Protestants unleashed their wrath.

Two Waldensians and an Evangelical pastor went down to Valdocco. They tried to convince Don Bosco to stop publishing the Readings, *or* at least to tone them down. They achieved nothing.

"On a January evening, two men came to visit me. On entering they said:

"You, Mr theologian, have a great gift. You know how to write for the ordinary people. You ought to dedicate yourself to writing history, geography, physics. Leave these *Catholic Readings* they are stale arguments."

"True, the arguments have been dealt with in works of high culture. But no one has developed them for the people."

"We are ready to finance you for a work on history and stop this useless work."

They tended four 1 000 lire notes.

"If it is useless work, why spend money to stop me? You see, I'm a priest dedicated to the good of the poor. I intend to continue writing and publishing the Catholic Readings."

Their tone became threatening.

"It's a bad idea. Are you sure that after going out you will be able to return home safely?"

I stood and opened the door. "Buzzetti, see these gentlemen off."

#### Wine and Chestnuts

On their way out, the two mumbled, "You'll hear from us again." And they did. One evening, while teaching, two men came, summoning me to a pub where they claimed a man was dying. I went, but took the precaution of asking some of the bigger boys to come with me despite the men's trying to dissuade me.

At the pub they took me to a room where a group of fun-lovers were eating chestnuts. They invited me to eat with them, but I declined.

"At least drink some of our wine. It'll do you good."

They poured wine for all, while one of them clumsily tried to serve me from another bottle. I said "cheers" and put the glass on the table.

"Don't. It's an insult."

"But I don't feel like drinking."

They became threatening. They grabbed me by the shoulders.

"Willy-nilly, you will drink."

"If you really want me to drink, leave my arms free."

And I shook them off.

"Since I can't drink, I will give the glass to one of my boys to drink on my behalf."

I strode towards the door, threw it wide open and invited the boys in. Before those strong young men, the tune changed. They apologised, saying that the sick person would go to confession next day.

A friend investigated. He reported that a man had offered to buy dinner for them on condition that they forced me to drink some wine prepared by him.

### They Wanted to Do Me In"

These stories sound like fiction, but they are true. They took place before many witnesses.

On a September evening I was called in a hurry to a house near the Refuge, to confess a dying woman. I asked many of the older boys to come, for by then I trusted nobody.

I left some at the foot of the staincase: Joseph Buzzetti and Hyacinth. Arnaud climbed up to the landing, next to the sick woman's door.

On entering I saw a woman, gasping as if breathing her last. I invited the four people present to leave the room so that I could hear her confession. The old woman screamed

"Before going to confession, I want that rascal to apologise."

"I haven't done anything!"

"Shut up!"

As the last to shout stood up, before I knew what was happening, someone put the lights out, and I found myself at the receiving end of a hail of blows. I grabbed a chair just in time and lifted it to protect my head, then rushed to the door. The blows meant to kill me shattered the chair instead. Only one blow crushed my right thumb, taking off the nail and half a phalanx. I went back home among my boys. It was another attempt among many to make me desist from slandering the Protestants.

# God Dog

"As the butt of frequent bad jokes, I decided not to walk alone to and from Turin. In those days there was a long stretch of undeveloped countryside between the Oratory and the centre of the city."

On a dark evening I was returning home all by myself, somewhat apprehensive I must say when all of a sudden a huge dog came by my side. At first he frightened me, but he looked d friendly, so that by stroking him on the head as if I was its master, we became friends. He came with me all the way to the Oratory.

The same thing happened a number of times. I must say that I Gris" did megreat service. What I relate is the pure truth.

It was a misty and rainy evening towards the end of November 1854. I was returning alone from the city. I suddenly noticed two men walking ahead of me. They accelerated or slowed down as I did. I tried to turn back, but it was too late. They were on me in no time, throwing a cloak on my head. I tried not to get tangled, tried to shout, but couldn't.

Then I Gris appeared. Howling, he savaged the face of the first with its paws, at the same time sinking its fangs into the other. The two implored:

"Recall your dog!"

"I'll call him if you leave me alone."

"Call him now!"

I Gris was howling like an angry wolf. The two took to their heels, while the dog accompanied me home .Whenever I went out alone, no sooner I entered the wooded area than the dog appeared. The boys of the Oratory often saw it enter the courtyard. Two of them got so frightened that they wanted to stone it, but Buzzetti stopped them.

"Leave him alone, it's Don Bosco's dog."

They petted him and took him to the dining hall where I was having dinner with some future priests and my mother.

Everyone was apprehensive. I assured them:

"Don't be afraid. It's my Gris; let him in."

He went all around the table, and then came to me wagging its tail. I offered him food, but he didn't touch any. He placed is head on the tablecloth, as if saying good evening, and then let some boys accompany him to the door.

I remembered that that evening I had come home late, and that a friend had given me a lift in his carriage.

One of the boys described the dog: "It looked really formidable. Often Mama Margaret would say on spotting it: Oh, the ugly beast. It cut a figure like a wolf, with a long snout, straight ears and a grey coat. It was a good metre at the shoulder."

Michael Rua saw the dog twice. He testified that one evening Don Bosco needed to go out for some urgent affair, but found 'I Gris lying across the door. He tried to push it aside and then to step over it. But at every attempt the dog growled and pushed him back. Mama Margaret, already familiar with it, told her son:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Piedmontese dialect for "the grey one."

"If you don't want to listen to me, listen to the dog at least. Don't go."

Next day Don Bosco came to know that a man with a pistol was waiting for him at a bend of the road.

Bosco often thought of finding out where that dog came from, but to no avail. In 1872 a baroness asked him what he thought of it. Don Bosco smiled:

'To call him an angel would be laughable. But one cannot call it an ordinary either.

### Nap at the Shoemaker's

In daytime Don Bosco worked for his boys, went around begging, heard confessions and preached in many of the city's institutions. At night he stole hours of sleep to fix clothes and shoes and to write his books. Lost sleep piled up, and at times caught up with him unawares.

After lunch he often fell into a deep sleep all of a sudden, sitting on a chair, his head on his chest. Those present tiptoed out of the room not to wake him up.

That for him was the toughest hour of the day. He used it to go out for various errands, and to visit the benefactors. "Walking keeps me awake," used to repeat. But at times he did not succeed.

One afternoon, in the small square before the Consolata, such a heavy sleep assailed him that he forgot where he was or where he was going. Nearby there was a shoemaker's workshop. Don Bosco entered and asked owner to be allowed to sleep on a chair for a few minutes.

"Come in, Father. I am sorry if I shall disturb you with my hammer."

"No, you won't disturb me."

He sat next to a low desk and slept from 2:30 to 5:00 p.m. On waking he looked around, then at the watch:

"Poor me! Why didn't you wake me up?"

"Dear Father, you were sleeping so well that to wake you up would've been an evil thing to do. I wish I could sleep like that!"

#### **CHAPTER 30**

## THE FIRST WORKSHOPS

In the Salesian archives there are two rare documents: two work contracts between master and apprentice signed by employer, employee, and Don Bosco. The main clauses are:

- 1. The master pledges to instruct the apprentice in his trade, and not in another. He is to correct the boy's conduct, but in words only.
- 2. He pledges to give the boy all holy days free.
- 3. He undertakes to pay a daily wage with a yearly rise, and with two weeks of paid holidays.
- 4. The apprentice pledges his prompt, assiduous and attentive service to the master, and to be docile, respectful and obedient.
- 5. The director of the Oratory pledges his assistance towards the success of the contract.

### **Touching Many Sore Points**

With such private deed Don Bosco touched many sore points. Some employers made use of their apprentices as servants and scullery-boys. By the contract he obliges the master to apprentice the boy exclusively to his trade. Employers used to hit their apprentices, and Don Bosco demands that corrections be done by word only. He is concerned with the boy's health, day rest, and holidays. And he demands a progressive wage because the third year of apprenticeship was a year of true, professional work.

The second contract kept in the archives is almost identical to the first, but signed also by the boy's father. The employer pledges to treat the apprentice not as a master but as a father. The first point reads: "Mr Joseph Bertolino, master joiner, pledges to advise the youth Joseph Odasso as regards his moral and civil behaviour, same as a good father would advise his son; to correct him lovingly in case of faults and always by word of mouth, never by ill-treatment."

Don Bosco did not invent apprenticeship contracts. An older institution for street boys, founded in 1774, had something similar, but such attempts were few and far between. Nobody else stood for apprentices' rights.

Parents were almost always poor and ignorant. The civil authorities left free rein to "the laws of the market" according to liberal doctrines, thus letting the boys be exploited as they may.

### Alone and Defenceless at His Masters' Mercy

At the beginning, the residence at the Oratory gave preferential shelter to young workers. After the drenched young orphan who had landed in Mama Margaret's kitchen, plus Buzzetti and Gastini, every year they arrived by the dozen. Some stayed three years, others two months, others all their lives. Only from 1856 the boarders were in the majority.

Young workers were given preference owing to their miserable status. The royal edicts of 1844 had suppressed the guilds, leaving the workers, especially if young, alone and defenceless at their master's mercy. Charles Albert had with difficulty approved a "welfare society" in the face of strong liberal opposition.<sup>1</sup>

Don Bosco found jobs for each of his boys, demanded a just contract and visited them at work every week on behalf of their families. If the master did not respect the contract, Don Bosco withdrew the apprentice.

In 1853 he decided to open some workshops in the newly completed building. Two reasons impelled him to take this step: the immorality and irreligion among older city workshops employees, and the asset that shoemakers, tailors and printers would be for the Oratory itself.

#### The First Two Desks

In the fall of 1853, Don Bosco opened the shoemaker and tailor shops. The shoemaker's shop was placed in the cubbyhole, today mini-sacristy, of the Pinardi chapel. It only had two low desks and four stools. Don Bosco was the first master: he sat at the desk and shaped the first shoe sole before four youngsters. Then he taught them the use of the awl and of waxed thread. A few days later he handed over the post of master shoemaker to the doorkeeper of the Oratory.

The tailor's shop was located in the old kitchen, but not before pots, pans and stove were moved to the new building.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> It took Piedmont 50 years copying the revolutionary Loi Chapelier of 1791, which had done the same damage in France. Bad laws are not due to chance.

Don Bosco and his mother were the first masters. He taught what he had learned at Castelnuovo from signor Roberto.

In the first months of 1854, rather casually, he opened the bookbinder's shop. None of the boys knew anything about that trade. One day, surrounded by founded by them, he spread on the table the printed folios of *The Guardian* his latest booklet. Then he pointed at a boy:

"You'll be a bookbinder!"

"Me? I don't know what it means."

"It's easy. Come. Do you see? These large sheets of paper are called signatures. They must be folded in half, four times. Come on, try."

They started working until all the folios were correctly folded. Don Bosco placed the signatures on top of each other:

"This is the book. Now it needs sewing."

With Mama Margaret's help and after some needling of fingers the job was completed. As glue they used a little wheat flour thickened with water. The cover was stuck on.

The trimming operation remained. What to do? The boys suggested all sorts of techniques: scissors, a knife, a rasp file. Don Bosco went to the kitchen and fetched a half-round mincing knife. With a few neat strokes he trimmed the sides. The boys laughed, as he did. The binder's shop was placed in a room of the new building.

### One Year for the Printing Press

Fourth, a wood workshop started in earnest towards the end of 1856. A huge number of apprentices were withdrawn from the city shops and placed in a large hall with benches, proper tools and a wood store. A Mr Corio was the first master.

The fifth and most coveted was the printing press. Don Bosco had to run around for a whole year before obtaining the official licence on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1861. He had to employ a master printer, with Buzzetti as his assistant.

The starting date of the print shop remains unknown. The boys themselves informed their benefactors with a printed sheet sent to all.

The first book printed at the *St Francis of Sales Press* was canon Schmid's *Theophile*, a short story about a young hermit. It was a part of the *Catholic Readings for May* 1862. The *Readings* were mostly printed there from then on.

The modest beginnings were two flywheels rotated by hand. But soon, when Don Bosco was still alive, the shop grew with the technology that allowed it to compete favourably with the best commercial printers. It had

four heavy presses, twelve power-driven machines, stereotyping, foundry and engraving.

In 1862 Don Bosco opened his sixth and last workshop: a smithy, the ancestor of the modern mechanical engineering shop.

### Four Attempts before Hitting the Right Formula

Don Bosco encountered many difficulties before he hit on the right formula for his workshops.

At the beginning he employed professional masters with a normal salary. But they worried more about the standard of work than about the progress of the boys.

In the second attempt he handed over the whole responsibility to the instructors, as if they owned the shop. It was up to them to find work. As a result, they treated the boys as simple labourers, subtracting them from the authority of the director of the Oratory.

In his third attempt Don Bosco assumed entire authority over the workshop, leaving the masters with the sole task of teaching the boys. But the masters, fearing competition from the boys, taught little and let them rot.

He found the right formula when he succeeded in forming masters entirely dedicated to him. They were the Salesian Coadjutors, religious like the priests but dedicated to the professional schools.

### There's No Room in This House for the Not Really Poor"

The residence at the Oratory was not meant to churn out workers, but to be a true educational centre. Hence Don Bosco drafted his first set of regulations in the academic year 1854-55.

The young apprentice must be between the ages of 12 and 18, be "orphan of both parents and totally poor and abandoned. If he has brothers or uncles who can look after him, he will not be admitted."

The boys are informed to whom to owe obedience as superiors of the House. They are.

- The Rector, responsible for the duties and moral standards of the sons of the House;
- The Prefect or Bursar;
- The Catechist or Spiritual Director, with the task of looking after the boys' spiritual needs;
- The Assistant, who distributes bread and looks after the dining room and the dormitories.

As fundamental virtues he recommends piety towards God, work, obedience to the superiors, love towards the workmates and modesty. He dictates standards of morality for inside and outside the House. Three evils are particularly to be shunned: blasphemy, dishonesty and theft.

The timetable contemplated early rising, morning Mass, prayers, the Rosary, breakfast and then work. For the evening there was homework. The day ended with the evening prayers and the "good night" words by Don Bosco to the whole family.

The boys were solicited to do a monthly day of spiritual retreat, called the Good Death Exercise, and a yearly course of Spiritual Exercises.

In religious matters, Don Bosco was always less demanding with the young workers than with the students. But after noticing some exceptional spiritually minded boys also among the workers, in 1859 he founded the Saint *Joseph Society*. It was a group of the best, dedicated to deepen their Christian life and to do apostolate.

#### **CHAPTER 31**

## THE GREAT COATS

On 1st November 1851 Don Bosco arrived at his native Castelnuovo to preach for the feast of All Souls.

One of the altar boys accompanying him to the pulpit was staring for the whole of the sermon. Back in the sacristy Don Bosco noticed the boy still staring. He called him:

"Mightn't you have something to say?"

"Yes sir. I want to go to Turin with you to become a priest."

"Very good. Tell your mum then to come and see me at the parish priest's after dinner."

The boy's name was John Cagliero. He was fatherless. He and his mother arrived after dinner.

"Is it true, Theresa, that you want to sell your son to me?"

He laughed.

Oh, no! We only sell calves here. Boys are given for free."

"So much the better. Get some laundry ready and tomorrow I'll take him with me."

Next morning at dawn John Cagliero was in the church. He served Bosco's Mass, breakfasted with him, kissed goodbye to his mum and got hold of his bundle. Then impatiently asked: Don Bosco, shall we go?"

#### Breadsticks Basket Will Do

They walked all the way. Little John walked twice as long, because as he talked to Don Bosco he was running ahead, chasing birds and jumping across ditches. Years later he would recall:

On the journey Don Bosco asked me a thousand questions, and I gave a thousand answers. From then on I had no more secrets for him. About my pranks, he told me in jest that from now on I had to be better. Finally we made it to Turin.

It was the night of 2<sup>nd</sup> November, and we were both tired. Don Bosco introduced me to Mama Margaret:

"Mum, here's a boy from Castelnuovo."

"Your only worry is finding boys, and I have nowhere to put them."

"This one is so small, that we can put him in the breadsticks basket. We can haul him up under the beam, like a canary in a cage."

Mama Margaret laughed and looked for a place. There was not a corner free. That night I had to sleep at the foot of another boy's bed.

Next day I was struck by the surrounding poverty. Our dormitories, on the ground floor, were narrow, paved with flagstones. In the kitchen there were few tin bowls each with its spoon. It was years before we saw forks, knives and serviettes. The dining room was a shed. Don Bosco served lunch, helped to keep the dormitory in order, cleaned and patched our clothes, and served us in the humblest chores.

We lived in common. More than an institution, we felt like a family under the direction of a father that loved us, and who was concerned with our material and spiritual good.

From the word go, John Cagliero showed a lively mind and a good sense of humour. He had an overwhelming desire to play.

Michael Rua was still at his mother's. In the morning he led the small band of boys to Professor Bonzanino's for tuition. On Don Bosco's behalf, Rua was in charge of order, watching that no one played truant. But he could hardly contain Cagliero. No sooner had they were out of the Oratory than John changed route. He ran towards Porta Palazzo and stopped, enchanted, to watch charlatans and street shows. Then he ran to school, ahead of the others, sweating but happy Michael scowled at him.

"Why don't you walk with us?"

"I like another route. What's wrong with that?"

"You ought to obey"

"Don't I? I'm supposed to come to school, and I come. I must be punctual, and I am. What's it to you if I like watching the charlatans?"

Cagliero would become the first Salesian bishop and cardinal. With Fr Rua he would be a supporting pillar of the Salesian Congregation. But his temperament was as different from Rua's as it could be. Michael was diligent, constant and thoughtful. Cagliero was extrovert, enthusiast, exuberant. But both were ready to throw themselves into the fire for Don Bosco if need be.

## "You'll Cross the Red Sea and the Desert"

On 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1852 Michael Rua came boarding at the Oratory. Next day he, Don Bosco, Mama Margaret and 26 other boys marched to Becchi on foot. Don Bosco was to preach at Castelnuovo; the boys put up at his brother Joseph's.

Before leaving Don Bosco spoke to Michael:

"For next year I need someone to give me a hand in earnest. October 7th is the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. The parish priest of Castelnuovo will come to Becchi and will assist at your taking the cassock. Back at the Oratory you will be Assistant and teacher to the other boys. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

In the evening, as they travelled back to Turin by coach, Don Bosco broke the silence:

"Dear Rua, you are about to start a new life. But know that before attaining the Promised Land you'll have to cross the Red Sea and the desert. If you help me, we shall cross both, and arrive together at the Promised Land."

Michael thought but did not understand much. He asked:

"Do you remember when we first met? You had distributed some medals, and there was none left for me. Then you made a strange sign, as if wanting to give me half of your hand. What did you mean?"

"Haven't you understood yet? I meant that we two are going to share everything. Everything mine will also be yours, including debts, responsibilities and headaches."

Don Bosco smiled.

"But there will also be most beautiful things, you'll see. And in the end the most beautiful thing of all: heaven."

# 50-year Guarantee

On Easter Tuesday 1853 the Turin sky was dark with storm clouds. John Francesia and Michael Rua, great friends, were studying together. But Michael was distraught, with an absent look in his eyes. He looked as if overcome by great distress. Francesia, after twice trying to call his attention in vain, shut the book and burst out:

What's the matter with you?"

Biting his lips not to cry, Michael whispers:

"My brother John has died... Next it'll be me..."

It was the last brother still living at home. Now the mother would be alone in the little apartment at the Arsenal. Don Bosco was informed and came to distract Michael by walking together along the streets of Turin. They walked briskly, talking of the Oratory. Turin had just celebrated the mirth centenary of the famous "miracle of the Blessed Sacrament." Don Bosco's booklet about the event was selling like hot cakes. Suddenly Don Bosco stopped and spoke slowly:

"In 50 years time it will be the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the miracle I won't be around. But you will. Remember to have that booklet reprinted."

Michael thought: 1903 was fabulously far away He shook his head. "It's all very well, Don Bosco, to talk about my being around. I'm afraid that death will play an ugly trick on me."

"No trick, ugly or beautiful. I guarantee that you'll be around in 50 years. Reprint the booklet, will you?"

In 1903 Fr Rua, 66, was at the head of the Salesian Congregation. He had the booklet reprinted.

## Gentlemen and Ragamuffins

While dedicating himself to the young workers, Don Bosco did not neglect the students. He was aiming not only at preparing collaborators and eventually priests who would help him, but also at raising priestly vocations for the dioceses. He searched among boys of the working classes, growing with the hoe and the hammer in their hands, to make up for the dearth of priestly vocations.

The first quartet had disappointed him, but the second one fully rewarded his hopes. And there were others of the same quality in line. The students' residence, born quietly, developed vigorously. It had twelve boarders in 1850, 35 in 1854, 63 in 1855 and 121 in 1857.

The students of the first three years of Latin went for classes at Bonzanino's, and then moved to another teacher's near the Consolata for the humanities and rhetoric.

The sons of the well-to-do who frequented those two private schools and handsome fees. For Don Bosco's boys tuition was free.

A t the start the young gentlemen made fun of the ragamuffins arriving at the school in old greatcoats that made them look like smugglers or comic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> In the year 1453 some thieves broke into a church in Turin and stole the sacred vessels with the Blessed Sacrament. On their way to the French border, the donkey with the load stopped and the Host left the saddlebag and stood shining in mid-air. The thieves returned the sacrilegious loot and Turin celebrated the occurrence from then on.

actors. The Ministry had given the coats away to Don Bosco, together with soldiers' caps. They looked more like blankets, but were good enough against rain and snow. Bonzanino stood no nonsense: "The value of a boy is measured by the pages of his homework, not by the colour of his coat." The ragamuffins often bested the others. But Don Bosco's love for them was demanding: he did not tolerate loafers. In 1863 a university professor averred, "At Don Bosco's people study, and very hard at that."

# "I'm at Ease Among My Boys"

Don Bosco did not like the idea of boys walking to and fro between the Oratory and the city. And the classrooms of the two private schools were no longer enough for all the boys from the Oratory.

As soon as John Baptist Francesia, 17, graduated in Latin, he was entrusted with the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class. It was November 1855.

Next year grades 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> started under the direction of one of Don Bosco's friends. By 1861 there were more than 200 students, taught by four young seminarians.

The Appendix to the Regulations stipulated the three qualities for a student to be accepted: "special talent for studies; eminent piety; willingness to become a priest, but with freedom to follow or not his vocation at the end of the Latin course."

There was no insistence on students' having to be orphans and poor like the workers. But their majority came from poor milieus, as the greatcoats eloquently testified.

The timetable was the same for both workshops and classrooms.

Until 1858 Don Bosco directed the Oratory personally, as the father of a large family. The boys did not feel the difference between being there and being at home. There was no regimentation and no excess of rules and regulations.

Don Bosco spent time with them whenever possible. He used to say, 'I can't live without my boys." Only grave motives would keep him away from them. He even worked in the study room, not because there were no assistants, but because he felt at ease there. He read, studied and planned his books while sitting at one of the desks.

Immediately after dinner, up to 1870, a stream of boys would rush to Don Bosco's room as he was about to finish his dinner. They vied for being close to him, looking at him, asking questions, listening and laughing at his quips. They sat, stood or even knelt down all around him. Don Bosco called this custom the best dish of my poor dinner.

#### Did Don Bosco Understand?

The students lived in a very intense religious atmosphere. They were the tender buds of future priestly vocations, and Don Bosco wanted them submerged in a climate of sacramental, Marian and ecclesial piety.

Confession was weekly or fortnightly for all. Don Bosco heard confessions daily for two, three hours, and on the eve of feast days even for the whole afternoon. His widespread reputation for "reading sins" encouraged total trust. Many boys went for daily Communion.

Very few did not receive for more than a week.

Devotion to Our Lady could be inhaled with the air. It reached its highest in the days of Dominic Savio, as also at the time of the construction of the great Basilica.

Love for the pope was an anchor point in Don Bosco's Christian thinking. They will dub him "more papist than the pope," without getting it too wrong. And it was not a question of words only: He would burn his last years obeying the pope's invitation. And the boys absorbed that mentality.

But according to modern psychologists and ecclesiologists he was wrong in the matter of the boys' holidays with their families. He wanted the holidays to be as short as possible, for he considered them *a grave danger* for *a budding* vocation.

Today's experts allege that Don Bosco did not understand the value of the family and of the parish as local church for the budding of vocations. But the results speak for themselves: in 1861 alone, 34 vocations matured at the Oratory. The anti-clericals nicknamed his house "the priests factory." By the end of his life, thousands of priests had been trained at Valdocco. And they were not exactly an army of repressed men.

Don Bosco was convinced that if a priest is to live chastity, as a young seminarian he ought to be protected during the delicate period of puberty is a consideration worth meditating, while not ignoring the values of the family and of the local church.

#### **CHAPTER 32**

# 1854: THE SALESIANS

0 n 26<sup>th</sup> January 1854, with Turin in the grip of a polar winter, four young men gathered eagerly in the warmth of Don Bosco's little room.

You see that Don Bosco does what he can, but he's alone. If you give me a hand, we shall perform miracles. Thousands of poor boys are waiting for us. I promise to you that the Blessed Virgin will send us large, spacious Oratories, churches, houses, schools, workshops, and many priests ready to give a hand, and not only in Italy but also in the rest of Europe and in America. I can see a bishop's mitre on one of you...

The four young men stare in amazement. It sounds like a dream. But Don Bosco does not speak in jest. He is serious, and looks as if he read into the future.

"Our Lady wishes us to start a society. I have been thinking about its name for a long time. I have decided that we shall be known as Salesians."

Those four young men will be the foundation stone of the Salesian Congregation. Michael Rua's diary for that day reads:

Rocchietti, Artiglia, Cagliero and I gathered in Don Bosco's room today. We were asked, with the Lord's and St Francis of Sales' help, to make a practical work of charity towards our neighbour. Later we shall make a promise and thereafter, if possible, a vow to the Lord. All those who do so, now and in the future, shall be called *Salesians*.

# Roses in the Pergola

Don Bosco's words to his young men that evening were the same that, years earlier, had almost sent him to the madhouse.

But he stubbornly kept on repeating them. He sees those things in dreams. In 1847 he dreamt what he called "a fundamental dream," inspiring the order of his programme. He recounted it to the first Salesians in 1864:

Some day in 1847, after thinking a lot about ways and means to do good for the youth, the Queen of heaven appeared to me. She led me to an enchanted garden with a most beautiful arcade full of leafy, flowery creepers. The arcade led to an equally enchanted pergola, flanked and wholly covered with rosebushes in full bloom. The ground was also covered with roses. The Blessed Virgin said

"Take off your shoes and walk under the pergola. That's your way."

'I was happy taking off my shoes, as I felt sorry to tread on those roses. As I started walking, I felt at once very sharp thorns hidden under the roses. I had to stop. I remarked:

"I need shoes here."

"Certainly, -she replied-. And good ones, too."

I put them back on, and resumed walking with some travelling companions that had just appeared. They asked to walk together with me.

Many branches hung like as many festoons. I saw only roses, above, at the sides, ahead. But my legs got tangled and hurt in the branches hing on the ground I pushed aside a branch that was in the way and it pricked me. My hands and my whole body were bleeding. All the roses hid huge quantities of thorns.

"All those who saw me walk remarked "Don Bosco walks always on roses! All is well with him!" They did not see the thorns that shredded my poor limbs.

Many invited priests, seminarians and laymen had started following me in festive mood, attracted by the beauty of those flowers; but as soon as they noticed the thorns, they started crying: "We've been cheated! Quite a few turned back. I was left alone. I started crying: "Is it possible for me to cover this route all alone?"

Soon I was comforted by a crowd of priests, seminarians and laymen. They were advancing towards me, saying: "We are all yours, ready to follow you." I went ahead of them and we resumed walking. Only few lost heart and gave up. The greater part reached the goal with me.

At the end of the pergola, I came to a most beautiful garden. The few followers were slimmer, dishevelled, bleeding. But a gentle breeze arose, healing them. Another wind blew, and as if by magic I found myself surrounded by an immense crowd of young men, seminarians, lay coadjutors and priests help me in looking after the youth. I recognised many of their faces, many I had not met yet.

Then the Blessed Virgin, my guide, asked me.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> This was a most unusual expression for Don Bosco. He used to say, "I dreamt a most beautiful lady."

"Do you know the meaning of what you see nor, and have seen before?"

"No"

"Your walk among roses and thorns is your care for the youth. You will have to walk with the shoes of mortification. The thorns are the obstacles, the sufferings and the worries in store for you. But don't lose heart. With charity and mortification you will overcome all, and will attain the spineless roses."

As soon as the Mother of God spoke, I woke lo find myself in my room. 'I have told you this, for all of us to be c certain that the Mother of God wants our Congregation. Let its all get on with working for the greater glory of God."

Led by this peace-giving certainty, Don Bosco daily cast nets among his boys to thicken the ranks of his future Salesians. He casually asked, "Do you like Don Bosco? Would you stay with me?" Or: "Wouldn't you give me a hand to work with the youth? You see, I have enough work to keep 100 priests and 100 seminarians busy. If I had them, we could go out to the whole world."

The boys were familiar with this kind of talking. They commonly spoke of the future Oratories, of Don Bosco's dreams, of "staying or not staying" with him. One evening in 1851 Don Bosco threw a handful of sweets from his window to the rejoicing boys down below. One of them, seeing Don Bosco smile, shouted: "Don Bosco, if you could see the whole world with many Oratories!" Don Bosco looked up in the air in his usual serene countenance: "Who knows the day when the sons of the Oratory will truly be scattered throughout the world."

## "What's the Salary?"

Fr Victor Alasonatti, three years Don Bosco's senior, taught primary school at Avigliana. He had a knack for handling young boys. Don Bosco had met and befriended him at the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius'. He was rather stern, demanding a composed look of his kids, but they loved him.

Don Bosco used to tease him off and on when they met.

"How many boys do you have? Thirty? Aren't you ashamed? I've got 600. How can you be happy with only 30 lads? Come to Turin to give me a hand."

"What's the salary?"

"Bread, work and heaven. Not many lire I'm afraid, but you can put aside as much sleep as you wish."

One jest after another set Fr Alasonatti thinking. Don Bosco noticed. Then he wrote to him: "Come help me say my Breviary." One good day Fr Victor settled his affairs and arrived at the Oratory with only a small suitcase. He gave a hug to Don Bosco:

"Here I am. Where do you want me to say my Breviary?"

Don Bosco took him to the accounting office.

"This'll be your kingdom. You've taught so much maths that sums and subtractions will be chicken feed for you."

Fr Alasonatti's countenance became grave.

"From now on, you give orders and I will obey. And don't spare me, for my intention to work hard to gain heaven."

Fr Alasonatti became Don Bosco's gentle, somewhat austere, shadow, believing him of all the work he could: the general management of the house, assistance to the boys, keeping books, records and the hardest and driest correspondence.

When he felt tired, and when his health began to decline, he glanced at a little card in his breviary, on which he had written: "Victor, what have you come for?" together with Don Bosco's oft-repeated sentence: A priest's rest in heaven.

The day after his arrival, Fr Alasonatti began his mission at Valdocco rather unusually. Cholera had broken out in Turin.

#### Death in the Streets

The frightening news reached Turin in July Genoa had registered 3000 deaths. At the first deaths in Turin, on 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> July, the king and queen left the city by sealed carriage.

The focus of the pestilence was Borgo Dora, not far from Valdocco. It was a slum of immigrants, with no hygiene and in the grip of malnutrition. In a month, 500 of the 800 people stricken by the disease had died.

The mayor launched the appeal for people courageous enough to assist the sick and bring them the lazarettos so as to avoid contagion. On 5<sup>th</sup> August, feast of Our Lady of the Snows, Bosco spoke to the boys. He began with a promise:

"If you get into the state of grace and refrain from committing mortal sins, I promise that not one of you will contract cholera.

Then he invited them:

"You know about the mayor's appeal. Paramedical personnel are needed to assist the stricken people. Many of you are too young. But if any of the older ones feel like coming with me to hospitals and homes, we shall do together a work of in and a thing very pleasing to God."

Fourteen boys signed up at once. A few days later 30 more joined after having wrangled for permission. They were very young.

Those were days of hard, far from agreeable, work. Doctors prescribed massage and rubbings on the legs so as to cause abundant sweating. The boys were divided into three groups the biggest as full-time workers in lazarettos and the homes of the stricken; a second group scouting for newly stricken people; and a third one, made up of the youngest, remained at the Oratory ready to answer any emergency.

Don Bosco urged precaution. Every boy carried a small flagon of vinegar, to rub his hands every time he touched a sick person.

Often the sick lacked bed linen, blankets and underwear. The boys ran to Mama Margaret, who rummaged through the cupboard for anything. In a few days it was empty. A young boy nurse came one day saying that a sick man squirmed on his pallet without a bed sheet. Margaret thought, then removed the altar cloth and gave it to the boy: "Take it to your sick man. I don't think the Lord will complain."

## The Sad-looking Giants

Towards the end of August John Cagliero, 16 at the time, felt ill on returning from a lazaretto, perhaps as the result of eating spoilt food. The doctor, called at once by Don Bosco, diagnosed typhoid fever.

He was with high fever the whole month of September. Down to skin and bones, the youth felt faint. The two doctors called in consult said that the case was a desperate one, and suggested that the boy be given the last sacraments.

Don Bosco was deeply disturbed. He really loved that boy, and didn't have the strength to break the news to him. He asked Buzzetti to do so on his behalf, as delicately as possible. In the meantime he went below stairs to fetch the Viaticum.

No sooner had Buzzetti spoken to John than Don Bosco arrived, holding the reliquary with the Blessed Sacrament. But he did not proceed beyond the door. He gazed into the void, as if seeing something that the others couldn't. Then he approached the sickbed, but with a completely changed face. The previous sadness and anxiety had gone. He was cheerful and smiling. John whispered:

"Is it my last confession? Must I really die?"

With a determined tone, Don Bosco answered:

It's not time for heaven yet. There are many things to be done. You will recover, and will become a priest... later.. with the breviary under your arm you will go all over... and bring the Breviary to many others... and go far... far. "

And he returned the Viaticum to the church.

Within a day the fever subsided. John returned to Castelnuovo for lung convalescence. Buzzetti and Cagliero began asking themselves what Don Bosco had seen on entering the room. Don Bosco himself told them some time later.

On stepping on the threshold I saw a great light. A shining white dove bringing an olive branch descended on the sickbed. Hovering a few inches from Cagliero's pale, drawn face, it dropped the branch on his forehead. At once the walls of the room fell away, opening to far, mysterious horizons. A multitude of strange, primitive people appeared around the bed. They looked like gigantic savages. Some were dark-skinned, with red tattoos on their faces. Two of them bent their proud, sad faces on the sickbed, whispering, "If he dies, who will come to help us?"

The vision lasted only a few seconds, but I became absolutely certain that Cagliero would recover.

## A Page in Eight Minutes

At the first rains the cholera subsided rapidly. The number of cases decreased, until the end of the emergency was declared on 21<sup>st</sup> November. The 2,500 cases from August to November had resulted in 1,400 deaths. Not one of Don Bosco's boys had been stricken. Most went back to their studies, some left for a short holiday with their families.

As always, Don Bosco climbed to Becchi for the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. An old seminary classmate, Fr Cugliero, came to see him.

"Listen. I'm told that together with the little Barabbas you also accept at your Oratory good boys who give hope of becoming priests. I have one for you. His name is Dominic Savio. His health is not that good, but he is, and I very much so. I bet you've never met a boy like that. He's another St Aloysius Gonzaga."

Don Bosco smiled.

"Come on! Don't exaggerate! In any case it's all right by me. I'm staying for a few days. Bring him and his father. I'll check what stuff he's made of."

The meeting took place on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1854, in the small courtyard of Joseph Bosco's house. Don Bosco was so impressed that he took down the dialogue word for word.

On the first Monday of October, early in the morning, I saw a boy approaching me with his father. What attracted me was his cheerful face and his pleasant, respectful look.

"What's your name? Where are you from?"

"Dominic Savio from Mondonio. Fr Cugliero has told you about me."

I took him aside and we spoke about his studies and his lifestyle. We were immediately on the same wavelength and in full, mutual confidence. I spotted a soul in the spirit of the Lord, and I was not a little amazed at how much divine grace had achieved by such an early age.

After a rather lengthy discussion, before calling his father, he said:

"Well, what do you think? Will you take me to Turin to study?"

"I think the cloth is good."

"What for?"

"To make a good suit for our Lord."

"Let me be the cloth then, and you the tailor, take me with you and tailor a good suit for the Lord."

"What do you want to do after the Latin course?"

"God willing, with his grace I ardently desire to be a priest."

"Good. Now let me give you an aptitude test. Take this booklet, study this page and tomorrow come and recite it to me."

Then I left him free to play while I spoke to his father. Within eight minutes Dominic was back.

"If you wish I am ready to recite the page"

I got the book, and to my surprise he not only knew the page by heart, but also understood every word of it.

"Excellent. You have finished in advance, and I answer you in advance. I'll take you to Turin, where from this very moment you are counted among my dear children. Pray God that he may help the two of us to do his will."

"I hope to behave so that you'll never have to complain about me."

Don Bosco realised that Fr Cugliero had not exaggerated a bit. Had St Aloysius be born on the same hills and been the son of peasants, he could not have been too different from that smiling boy who wanted to be made into "a beautiful suit for the Lord."

## A Mysterious Notice

While convalescing at Castelnuovo, John Cagliero imprudently overate grapes, and high fever returned. Don Bosco went to visit him. John's mother was desperate:

"My John is gone! He raves about dressing the clerical robes, while high fever is taking him..."

"No, my good Theresa, your son is not raving. Prepare the cassock for him. He will don it in November at the Oratory. Fever will not take him: he has yet so much to do in this world."

And so it was. On 22<sup>nd</sup> November, St Caecilia's day, John Cagliero, fully recovered, donned the cassock. He was allowed to frequent the seminary while staying at Don Bosco's.

On October 29<sup>th</sup> Dominic Savio came as a boarder. The first thing he noticed on entering Don Bosco's office was an inscription saying, in Latin, *Da mihi animas, coetera tolle.*<sup>2</sup>

When Dominic's father left, the boy, after a little hesitation, asked Don Bosco what those words meant. Don Bosco helped him translate: "Lord, give me souls and take away the rest." Don Bosco had chosen those words .as the motto for his apostolate. When Dominic understood he became thoughtful, then said: "Yes. This business is not about money. It's about trade in souls, and I hope mine will be one."

Daily routine began for him too. He also donned a greatcoat, following the small band under Rua's orders to Bonzanino's classes. His day was that of a young student: homework, classes, school, books and classmates. Don Bosco followed his progress daily. One day he wrote: From the very day of his being admitted, he fulfilled his duties with scrupulousness difficult to improve on.

## Balloons and Buntings on the Po

A special atmosphere electrified the Oratory towards the end of November. The Novena to the Immaculate Conception for the year 1854 had begun. Pius IX had announced that he would solemnly declare the dogmaof the Immaculate Conception of Mary on 8<sup>th</sup> December. Love for the Blessed Virgin revived in the whole Catholic world. Great celebrations were in the offing.

Don Bosco, who very specially felt the hand of the Blessed Virgin, spoke about it every evening. The boys followed the novena with great fervour. In ordinary conversation he would ask what each of them would give the Madonna as a present on her feast day. Dominic Savio answered: "I want to wage a pitiless war on mortal sin. I intend to ask the Lord and his Mother to take my life rather than let me fall into sin."

He was repeating the resolution made at his first Holy Communion: Death rather than sin." It was not original. They were the closing words of the Act of Contrition recited in those days after confession. Many young boys used to commit themselves like that at their first meeting to Jesus in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Gn 14:21, already commented upon.

the Eucharist.<sup>3</sup> What is impressive is that Dominic should keep that resolution heroically until death. Many boys would forget it together with their childhood toys.

It is the 8<sup>th</sup> of December. Pius IX, before an imposing assembly of Cardinals and bishops, proclaims as a dogma of faith that Mary, from her very first moment of existence, has never been stained by original sin.

On that same day Dominic Savio, during a pause in the festive activities of the Oratory, enters the church of St Francis of Sales, kneels down before the altar of the Blessed Virgin, and takes a small piece of paper out of his pocket. That prayer, composed by him, will become famous throughout the Salesian world.

"Mary, I give you my heart. Keep it yours. Jesus and Mary, be always my friends. But let me die before falling into the disgrace of committing a single sin."

That same night Turin celebrated. In a splendid street lighting, thousands of coloured balloons shone on balconies, terraces, and on the banks of the Po. People descended in the streets, and a grandiose procession set out towards the church of Our Lady Consolata. The youth of Valdocco also passed through the streets of the city singing, with Don Bosco among them.

## A Little Orphan

The year 1854 closed on a sad note. The Turin municipality had set up an orphanage in a hurry, to house about 100 children left without parents by the cholera. As the cold weather set in, the mayor appealed to the Catholic institutions to take in the orphans.

Don Bosco accepted 20 orphans. One of them, Peter Enria, would later remember:

One day, Don Bosco arrived. I had never seen him. He asked for my name and said:

"Do you want to come with me? We shall be always good friends".

"Yes, sir."

"Is this your bro?"

"Yes sir."

"Tell him to come too."

A few days later we were taken to the Oratory. My mother had died of cholera; my father had contracted it too. I remember that Don Bosco's mother scolded him.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Even the queen suggested that resolution to Crown Prince Humbert, son of Victor Emmanuel, born n 1844.

"You always accept new boys. How can we keep and clothe them all?"

In fact I had to sleep on a heap of dry leaves, with just a blanket for cover. Don Bosco and his mother sewed up our torn trousers and jackets, for we had only, one of each.

Don Bosco set up a separate zone for the orphans. For more than a year taught them himself, later helped by seminarians and friends. The other boys of the Oratory referred to the orphans as "the shorties' class" because their small size.

Peter Enria stayed with Don Bosco the whole of his life, assisting him like a son in his last illness and closing his eyes.

But the cholera, beside the evils left behind in the city, had done something good for the Oratory. The generous assistance of the boys to the parents had made it known and appreciated by the public. The mayor's open praise had accredited it to the authorities. The almost incredible thing that none of the boys in the thick of the contagion was affected by it. Don Bosco's "mad" words had once again made people think.

#### **CHAPTER 33**

# YOUNG PRISONERS ON LEAVE

The year 1855 witnessed a most violent clash between Church and State. Piedmont was slowly waking up under Prime Minister Cavour. MPs learned how to speak of budgets, deficits, tariffs and investments instead of delivering flowery verse. The rail network reached 850 km, as much as the rest of Italy put together. Industrial complexes and shipyards were built at Genoa. The abolition of the duty on grain gave a push to agriculture.

On 28th November 1854 the Rattazzi Bill was tabled in Parliament. Under the pretext of economic measures, the real intention was to reduce the influence of the Church. The Bill proposed the dissolution of the *contemplative* religious orders not dedicated to education, preaching or looking after the sick. Their revenues, accruing to the State, would have facilitated "assistance to the poorer parishes."

It was an intromission by the State in the life of the Church. Not only could the law decide which religious orders were or were not productive for the State, but also which orders were or were not useful to the Church. The Catholics, bishops at their head, were thus able to prove that the Bill violated precisely the principle of separation between Church and State often touted by Cavour as one of the pillars of his policy.

It was forecast that the Bill would pass in both chambers. Only the king could have blocked it.

#### Funerals at Court!

On a freezing afternoon of December 1854, Don Bosco related a strange dream: while in the middle of the courtyard, he had seen a Court page, clad in red, crying aloud: "Great Court funeral!" "Great Court funeral!"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The kingdom of the Two Sicilies had built the first Italian rail line in 1839. But increasing episodes of insurgency forcibly delayed its development.

On waking up, he had put pen to paper and written a letter to the king telling him of the dream.

Five days later, the same red page appeared again. On horseback in the courtyard, he shouted aloud: "Announce: not Great Court funeral, but Great Court funerals!" At dawn Don Bosco wrote a second letter to the king. He suggested to him "to act in such a way as to avoid the threatened punishment, while trying his best to stop that Bill at all costs."

On 5<sup>th</sup> January 1855 Queen Mother Maria Theresa fell sick. She rapidly declined and died on the 12<sup>th</sup>. She was 54. Her remains were translated to the crypt of the Savoy dynasty in the Basilica of Superga on the 16<sup>th</sup>, in freezing weather.

On 20th January Queen Maria Adelaide, King Victor Emmanuel's wife received the last sacraments. She had delivered a baby 12 days earlier, and had not recovered. She died the same day at 33.

On 11th February, after 20 days of grave illness, Prince Ferdinand of Savoy, the king's brother, duke of Genoa, died. He was 33.

The seminarians of the Oratory were the only ones in the know about Don Bosco's dreams. They were appalled at seeing at what lightning speed Don Bosco's prophecies were coming true. Not even in times of pestilence had three royal graves opened within a month.

The king himself had descended on Valdocco twice, furious at Don Bosco. The Bill passed first in the Low Chamber with 95 votes against 23 and then in the Senate with 53 votes against 42. The king signed it into law on 29th May. Three hundred and thirty one religious houses with 4, 540 members were thus suppressed. Rome replied with the "major excommunication," reserved to the pope, for the authors, abettors and executors of the law Meanwhile on 17<sup>th</sup> May the king's baby son, four months old, also died. Whether saint or bird of ill omen (depending on the viewpoint), Don Bosco had prophesied correctly.

#### The First Salesian

Don Bosco gave a weekly talk to his seminarians. He spoke of poverty, chastity and obedience, the three virtues always considered by the Church as "the road to God." He explained what to take a vow meant: a solemn promise to God to practice those three virtues for life.

At the end of the first year of talks, he thought Rua to be the most prepared. He called him:

"Do you feel like taking the three vows for three years?"

Thinking that this would mean a closer link with Don Bosco, Michael assented.

On 25<sup>th</sup> March 1855, feast of the Annunciation, a simple ceremony took place in Don Bosco's unadorned room. Don Bosco, standing, listens. Michael Rua, kneeling down before the Crucifix, speaks: "I vow to God to be poor, chaste, obedient, and place myself in your hands, Don Bosco..." There are no witnesses, yet a religious congregation is born at that moment. Don Bosco is the founder. Michael Rua is the first Salesian.

The most difficult thing, for him as for Cagliero and Francesia, was to sleep. Not that they wouldn't: at times sleep assailed them while standing. But they couldn't, for lack of time.

They had to study and pass frequent and very hard exams. And Don Bosco entrusted them with classes of religion, assistance in the dining room and in the workshops, and the orphanage school.

On Sunday he sent them to the Oratories. The Guardian Angel had lost its director all of a sudden in 1855. Don Bosco nominated Michael Rua, 17. The little chimneysweeps were its main frequenters. They were boys down from the Aosta Valley in the fall, shouldering a rope and a long brush. They wandered uttering a characteristic cry, for some family to let them in and clean the interior of the fire chimney before winter set in. The operation improved its draft.

They were very small boys, just fitting in the narrow walls of the flue. Their hands and face were black with

Early On Sunday mornings Michael arrived at the Oratory, swept the rooms, put order in the church. As the first boys arrived, he helped them go to confession to the priest who would celebrate Mass later. By 9:00 a.m. about 100 boys had gathered, and Michael acted as another Don Bosco for them for the whole day. He started the games, spoke to the boys, listened to their sorrows and taught them catechism.

At dusk, as the gas lamps began lighting the streets, the boys left. Some accompanied him in the direction of Valdocco. "See you next Sunday, Michael!"

Rua arrived exhausted. He ate something warm, kept for him and the other three equally exhausted young clerics returning from the other Oratories. The four then climbed to their garrets under the roof where their beds were. He fell asleep as if struck by lightning. One Monday morning Cagliero woke up still sitting on the chair, socks in hand. He had not even made it to the bed. He recalled:

There was neither heating nor running water in our garret under the roof. We filled washbasins with water for washing next morning. In the morning the water had frozen solid. To wash we opened the window, scraped some freshly fallen snow, and with it rubbed our hands, face and neck. Our skin smoked after, a few minutes! Then we wrapped ourselves into a blanket and studied. Rua was studying Hebrew, Francesia crafted Latin verse and I composed music exercises.

In November 1855, the upper primary section accepted its first boarders. On top of all their other preoccupations, Francesia added that of language teacher, Rua of maths and Cagliero of music.

One might be tempted to think that Don Bosco was out of his mind to let those young helpers kill themselves of overwork. But reflect: John Carnal Cagliero lived to be 88; Michael Rua died as head of the Salesian Congregation at 73; and John Francesia died at 92, Latinist of European fame. Don Bosco knew: hard work doesn't kill.

#### Head-on with the Minister

Political cartoonists of the day used to give Cavour the body of a cat, whiskers and all; to Interior Minister Rattazzi they gave that of a rat. Their nicknames sounded akin to the images.

Don Bosco and Rattazzi were at loggerheads all along the political front, but Rattazzi would receive him at a moment's notice. He highly esteemed a priest working for the people's good, sparing the government no end of double by keeping those boys off the streets.

In 1845 the government had built a brand new juvenile prison called *Generala for* 300 inmates. Don Bosco looked after it regularly, making many friends among those boys jailed for the usual offences of theft and vagrancy.

There were three groups of inmates: those under special surveillance, locked up during the night; those under ordinary surveillance, made to the ordinary prison line, and those reputed dangerous simply because someone, fed up with them, had handed them over to the police. They worked on the prison farm or in workshops.

In 1855 Don Bosco taught a complete catechism course for all and held a three-day course of Lenten Spiritual Exercises, at the end of which every young prisoner went to confession.

Don Bosco was so impressed by that show of good will that he promised the boys something "exceptional." He spoke to the prison chief warder, proposing to take them on an all-day outing to Stupinigi, to relieve the sadness due to their being locked up. The warder was stunned.

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"Are you serious, Father?"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Absolutely."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Do you know that I am responsible for all the fugitives?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;No one will run away. I give you my ward for it."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Save your breath, reverend. For a thing like that, talk to the Minister."

Don Bosco went to Rattazzi. "Very good - said he - a long walk will do the young prisoners a lot of good. I shall give orders for plainclothes police to be on the watch along the way."

"No. My only condition is that no police "protect" us. And I want your word of honour. I take the entire risk. If anyone runs away, you'll jail me."

They laughed together. Then Rattazzi became serious.

"Don Bosco, please come down to earth. Without police you will not bring back a single one."

"And I tell you that I will bring back the lot. Let's bet."

Rattazzi thought for a few seconds.

"Very well then. I accept. I trust you, and also trust the police. In case of escape they will not take long to catch the fugitives."

## On Leave for a Day

Don Bosco returned to the *Generala* and broke the news. The young prisoners went wild with joy. After calling them back to silence, he went on:

"I have given my word of honour that from first to last you will behave and will not attempt to escape. The Minister has given me his word that he will not send any police, in uniform or plainclothes. Now you have to give me your word- if only one escapes, I will be dishonoured. They will not allow me to set foot here again. Can I trust you?"

The boys confabbed. Then the oldest spoke.

"We give you our word. We shall all come back, and shall behave."

Next day was warmish, almost like springtime. They left for Stupinigi along tracks and pathways. They jumped, ran, shouted. Don Bosco walked in their midst. A donkey loaded with provisions opened the column.

At Stupinigi Don Bosco celebrated Mass, then they ate lunch on the grass and broke out into games and races along the river. After a late afternoon snack they returned. The boys urged Don Bosco, rather tired, to ride the unloaded donkey. They led it by the bridle and singing and laughing arrived at the prison. The warder at once counted them: they were all there.

It was a sad farewell at the prison gate. Don Bosco said goodbye to each one. He went home heavy-hearted for having given them no more than one day of freedom.

When the Minister heard the news he was delighted, in triumphing mood.

"Why is it that you can do such things and we can't?"

"Because the State gives orders and punishes. It can do no more. But I love those boys. And as a priest I have a moral strength that you cannot understand."

# Nine-Page "System"

Don Bosco was often asked to put down his "educational system" in book form. But lack of time and the impossibility to stop and think long enough to complete the task, prevented him from bequeathing us a "scientific" work.

In 1876 he finally took his courage in both hands and penned a sketch of the educational system used in the Salesian houses. It consists of nine ages added to their Rules as an appendix. The Salesians are urged to read and re-read it.

While not a scientific work, there transpires from it Don Bosco's drive, which no written page could accurately describe.

He begins by distinguishing between two sectors:

- The repressive system, as used by the State, the army, etc, "consists in acquainting the subjects with the law, watching to see that they obey, identifying the transgressors and punishing them. This system must make use of harsh words; those in charge must avoid all familiarity with the subordinates, rarely mixing with them."
- The preventive system, as applied in institutions like the Oratory, "leans on reason, religion and loving kindness. It excludes all harsh punishment and tries to limit even light punishment."

Director and assistants act as loving fathers: they talk, guide, counsel and lovingly correct.

The student does not feel disheartened. He becomes a friend, for he sees in the assistant a benefactor who wants his good, sparing him sorrows, punishment and dishonour.

The educator, having gained the heart of his protégé', will be able to follow him even after leaving, still counselling and even correcting him.

Such practice is based on St Paul's words: Love is patient, love is kind. It bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things.<sup>2</sup> Hence only a Christian is in a position to apply the preventive system successfully. He ought to make constant use of reason and religion.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 13:7

The Director must therefore be 100% dedicated to his bolls, being always in their midst during free time.

From here Don Bosco lays special emphasis on the schools, which by 1876 would keep occupied the bulk of the Salesian forces. Not always the Don Bosco of the Oratories transpires from his instructions.

Teachers, master craftsmen and assistants must be people of known morality. Let them avoid every kind of special friendship or affection with the students like the plague. Let them arrive first at the point of reunion, and let them never leave students idle.

Leave students free to jump, run, and make as much noise as they like. Gymnastics, music, declamation, drama and long walks are most effective means towards attaining discipline, moral and physical health. St Philip Neri<sup>3</sup> used to say: "Do what you like. It's enough for me that you don't sin."

An educational institution stands on three pillars. frequent confession, frequent communion and daily Mass. Never force the boys to frequent the sacraments, but encourage and give them every opportunity to make use of such.

An individual educator is wholly dedicated to the good of his students. He ought to be ready to undergo every trouble and hard work to attain his end- the civic, moral and scientific education of his charges.

He ought to try being loved rather than feared. The withdrawing of kindness is punishment enough, but a punishment that fosters emulation and encourages without demoralising. Praising what is well done and blaming negligence are prize and punishment respectively.

Never punish in public, except most rarely. Punish privately far from the others. Use maximum prudence and patience, seeing to it that the boy understands his being wrong by means of reason and religion.

Absolutely avoid hitting anyone- it irritates the young and degrades the educator.

# Another Dream: The Old Oratory

While Don Bosco found it difficult to write systematic treatises, he had a knack for describing real life. The dream he narrated in a letter of 1884 is the liveliest and most fascinating expression of his educational sensitivity.

In May of that year he was in Rome, where he had a dream, at once consigned to paper.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> 1515 -95. He set up his Oratory in Rome.

I saw myself in the old Oratory at recreation time. There was life, movement, and cheerfulness. Boys ran, jumped and played various games. A group of them clustered around a priest, hanging on his every word. Elsewhere a seminarian played a game amidst another group of boys. Everybody sang and laughed. Everywhere priests and seminarians were surrounded by playing youngsters, who made a cheerful, loud din. One could see the greatest cordiality reign between superiors and subordinates. I was delighted. My guide said:

"You see, being on friendly terms brings affection, and with it trust. All this opens the heart. The young men fearlessly tell everything to their teachers, assistants and superiors. They become sincere within and without confession, and are ready to do everything asked for by those whom they know love them."

At that moment Joseph Buzzetti came along.

"Would you like to see today s youth at the Oratory?"

I saw them at recreation time. But I no longer heard shouts of joy and singing. There was no joyful activity as in the first vision. You could read boredom, weariness and diffidence in the boys 'countenance. Many were playing carefree, but others were all by themselves, leaning against pillars or along the stairs. Others yet looked around suspiciously. St Aloysius would have felt uncomfortable among them. Buzzetti exclaimed:

"How different they are from us!"

"It's unfortunate! But how to revive them?"

"With love."

"But aren't my young ones loved enough? You know the hardship and the humiliations I had to suffer and still suffer to give them bread, a home, teachers, and especially seek their salvation. And directors, teachers and assistants burn their youthful years for them. Buzzetti insisted"

"We lack something else. Young people should not only beloved, but also should feel that there are."

"But don't they see that all we do is out of love for them?"

"No."

"What's needed?"

"That on seeing themselves being loved in the things they like, they begin to love things they like less, like discipline, study and self-control. I'll explain myself look, look closely at the boys in recreation. Where are our Salesians?"

I looked, and saw few priests and seminarians mingling with the boys. The greater part walked and conversed together without paying attention to the boys; others watched from afar; some warned, but threateningly. Some wanted to enter a group, but the boys kept distances. Buzzetti went on:

"In the old days you were always amongst us, especially during recreation. Do you remember the old days? It was like a piece of heaven. We recall that time lovingly, because affection was the normal thing, and we had no secrets for you."

"True. Everything was a joy for me. But now you see. The ever-increasing worries and my health prevent me from behaving like then."

But why don't your Salesians take your place? They ought to love what the young people like, and then the young people will love what the superiors tell them. Now the superiors are taken as superiors and no longer as fathers, brothers and friends. Hence they are feared and little loved. If it is desired to bring about one heart and one soul, for the love of Jesus the barrier of difference must come down and be replaced with cordial trust. Obedience will then lead the boy as a mother leads her little child. The old peace and joy will reign again at the Oratory."

"How can that barrier be broken?"

Show friendship to the boys at recreation time. Without friendship there can be no affection, and without affection there is no trust. He who wants to be loved ought to show that love. Jesus Christ became small with the small ones and bore our infirmities. He is the master of friendship! A teacher seen only at his desk is no more than teacher. If he goes to recreation with the boys, he becomes their brother. He who sees himself loved also loves. And he who is loved obtains anything, especially from the young ones. Trust is like an electric current flowing between the youth and the superiors. This love in turn will enable the superiors to bear all hardship, trouble, ingratitude, annoyance, faults and the youth's negligence. Jesus Christ did not sever the reed about to break, did not put out the flickering light. There's your model. No one will anymore work out of vain glory, punish to avenge his wounded self-love, let his heart be stolen by a creature for the sake of whom he will neglect the others, and out of human respect fail to warn whoever needs to be warned. Why replace charity with cold rules and regulations?"

Don Bosco concluded that long letter with the following words, dictated crying, as his secretary averred:

No sooner does a boy enter a Salesian house, than the Blessed Virgin takes him under Her special protection. My dear children, time is nigh for me to leave you for eternity. Do you know what this old man who has burned his whole life for the youth wishes for you? Nothing but that the happy days of the Oratory should return. They were the days of affection and trust between superiors and the young; of mutual amenability and tolerance for love of Jesus Christ; of open hearts in all simplicity and candour of charity r; and true joy for all.

#### **CHAPTER 34**

## A DOUBLE FAREWELL

On the first Sunday of April 1855 Don Bosco preached on sanctity. A few boys turned up their noses, but Dominic Savio took it seriously. Don Bosco's voice raised a topic that seemed to be meant just for him. He thought of St Aloysius, St Francis Xavier, the early martyrs... and dreamt about *sanctity*.

On 24th June the Oratory celebrated Don Bosco's name day. He wanted to return the boys' affection.

"Let everyone write a wish on a piece of paper. I assure you I'll do my best to satisfy you."

#### A Short Sentence

The requests ranged from the sensible to the grotesque. Dominic's read: Help me become a saint."

Don Bosco took it seriously. He called Dominic.

"Here's the formula for sanctity. First: cheerfulness. Anything that disturbs you is not from God. Second, your duties: school, personal study, prayer. Do it not for personal ambition but for love of God. Third: think of the others. Always help your friends even if it costs you. Sanctity is all here."

Dominic obliged. Don Bosco wrote *a Life of Dominic Savio* shortly after the boy's death, with many simple and touching episodes. On one occasion a boy had introduced some pornographic material in the Oratory. Five or six boys immediately grouped around him, ogling and laughing. Dominic came close, wrenched the magazine from the owner's hands and tore it to pieces.

The owner protested, but Dominic shouted louder: "What stuff you bring to the Oratory! There's Don Bosco slogging the whole day to make us good citizens and good Christians, and here's you bringing this garbage into his home! These pictures offend God, and they mustn't get in here!"

When the boys returned after the summer holidays for 1855, Dominic Savior's looks worried Don Bosco.

"Did you rest during the holidays?"

"Yes, Don Bosco. Why?"

"You're paler than usual. What's up?"

"Maybe the journey..."

Dominic smiled, but it was not tiredness due to the journey. His sunken, bright eyes and his pale, drawn looks betrayed poor health. Don Bosco took precautions at once.

"This year you will not walk to school. Rain and snow might do you harm. You will attend Francesia's classes here at home, so that you can rest a little longer in the morning. And take it easy with your study: health is God's gift, and we ought not to spoil it."

Dominic obeyed. But some days later he felt worse. He went to Don Bosco.

"Please help me to sanctity fast."

# The "Company of Mary Immaculate"

Dominic had made many friends, some older than him. He always chose them among the best boys.

At the beginning of 1856, the Oratory had 153 boarders: 63 students and 90 artisans.

Come spring, Dominic had an idea. Why not form some kind of "secret" society made up of the keener boys? They would act as a compact group of young apostles among the general mass. He approached some. They liked the idea, and decided to call it the *Company of Mary Immaculate*.

Don Bosco gave permission, but suggested caution. Let them first write down the rules and then approach him again.

They tried. At their first meeting they decided whom to approach, rejecting talkative people like Francesia. Three of them had a hand in drafting the regulation, but the main one was Dominic's.

The 21 points of the rules stressed frequenting the Eucharist to improve; helping Don Bosco by becoming young apostles, prudently and delicately; and spread joy and serenity around them.

Article 21 condensed the Company's spirit. It ran: "A sincere, filial, unlimited trust in Mary, a special tenderness towards Her, and a constant devotion will make us overcome every obstacle, keep our resolutions, be tough with ourselves, loving and kind with our neighbour and careful in everything."

The Company was launched on 8<sup>th</sup> June 1856, before the altar of Our Lady in the church of St Francis of Sales. Everyone pledged fidelity to the commitments.

It was Dominic's masterpiece. He had nine months to live, but the Company would last for more than 100 years, until 1967 to be exact. In every Salesian house there would be a handful of committed boys, some of whom would be called to the priesthood.

The members of the Company took special care of "client boys:" the undisciplined, foul-mouthed ones ready to pick up fights. Every member took one of such under his protection, acting as a sort of "guardian angel" to try and get him back to the straight path. They also took care of the new arrivals, helping them through the first days. New boys were usually lost, without friends, unable to play and speaking only the dialect of their villages. They felt nostalgia.

For Lent, Dominic overdid it. On hearing homilies and exhortations to penance, he went for extraordinary mortifications. An assistant told Don Bosco that Dominic was on bread and water at least on Saturdays, was sleeping without a blanket in still cold weather and had put some broken pieces of bricks under his bed sheet.

Don Bosco acted at once.

"I absolutely forbid you all penance. Better, I grant you only one: obedience. It is hard, pleasing to the Lord, and does not ruin your health. Obey and it's enough for you."

## Mama Margaret's Farewell

On 15<sup>th</sup> November Mama Margaret fell ill. It was acute pneumonia, lethal for a 68-year old woman worn by overwork. Life at the Oratory seemed to come to a halt. How to do without her? The young clerics gathered around her bed. How many times they used to go to her kitchen:

"Mama, will you give me an apple?"

"Mama, is soup ready?"

"Mama, I've lost my handkerchief."

"Mama, my trousers got torn."

Heroism for her was made up of rags to patch, hay and wheat to harvest, washing up and busying herself among pots and pans. In those humble chores, her fortitude was in never getting tired. Her trust in divine Providence never flagged. She taught the faith, showed common sense and motherly sweetness by peeling potatoes and cooking *polenta*.

Don Bosco learned his educational system from her. He was the first to be educated in *reason, religion* and *loving kindness*. The Salesian Congregation was cradled on the knees of Mama Margaret, who was now passing away like a flickering candle.

Joseph Bosco came from Becchi with the older children. Fr Borel, her confessor since her arrival at Turin, brought her the Viaticum. She gathered her last strength to give John her last piece of advice.

"Take care, for many seek their own profit instead of God's glory... near you some love poverty in others, but not in themselves. What we ask of the others we must be the first to practice."

She did not want John to see her suffer. She thought of the others to the last.

"John, go... You suffer too much seeing me like this. Remember that this life consists in suffering. True joy can be had in life everlasting... Now go, please. Pray for me. Farewell."

Joseph and Father Alasonatti stayed around her deathbed. She passed away at 3:00 a.m. on 25<sup>th</sup> November. Joseph went to Don Bosco's room and the two brothers embraced in tears.

Two hours later Don Bosco called Buzzetti, the only person before whom he was not ashamed to be seen crying.

They went to the crypt of the Consolata, where Don Bosco celebrated Mass for his mother. Then they knelt before the Madonna's image and Don Bosco whispered: "Now my boys and I have no mother on earth. Be close to us, be our Mother."

A few days later Michael Rua went to his mother.

"Since Mama Margaret's death we don't know what to do. No one knows how to make soup and mend socks. Mum, would you come?"

Joan Mary, 56, follows her son and becomes the second mother to the Oratory. She will stay for 20 years.

# A Boy that Speaks to God

On a December night, with the streets of Turin white after the first snowfall, Don Bosco was dispatching correspondence at his desk as usual. He would write till midnight. Suddenly, someone knocks at the door.

"Come in. Who's it?"

"It's me, Dominic Savio. Don Bosco, hurry, there's a work of charity to be done."

"Now? This late? Where do you want to take me?"

"Hurry Don Bosco, hurry."

Don Bosco hesitates, but looking at Dominic he sees a face in earnest instead of the usual serene countenance. And his words have a decisive of command. Don Bosco takes his hat and follows him.

Dominic runs downstairs, across the courtyard and into the main city street. He turns into a side street, then another. He doesn't talk or speak, proceeding surely in amaze of alleyways. He climbs a staircase. Don Bosco follows to the third floor. Dominic knocks at a door.

"This is the place."

And he goes back home.

A dishevelled woman opens the door. On seeing Don Bosco, she exclaims:

"God sends you. Hurry lest it be too late. My husband has had the disgrace of losing the faith long ago. He's dying, and he's asking for confession."

Don Bosco approached the bed of the dying man, finding him in fear and almost in despair. He heard his confession and gave him absolution. In a few minutes the man passed away.

Some days later, Don Bosco was still struck by the event. How could Dominic know? He called the boy aside:

"Dominic, when you came to my office that night, who had told you about that man? How did you know?"

Something unexpected happened: the boy gave him a sad look and burst into tears. Don Bosco did not dare ask further. He understood that at the Oratory there was a boy in touch with God.

## "Will I See My Friends from Heaven?"

Turin experienced an exceptionally severe winter in 1856-57. By February Dominic had paled further. A deep cough shook his frame, and his strength visibly declined. Don Bosco was worried and called a good doctor.

After a thorough check-up, the specialist diagnosed: "His frail constitution and his constant spiritual tension are like abrasives filing away at his life."

"What can I do for him?"

Professor Vallauri shrugged his shoulders. There was no medical science to speak of in those days.

"Send him back to his native village, and give him a study break."

Dominic resigned himself to the decision. But he felt very sorry at having to leave his studies, his friends and most especially Don Bosco.

"But don't you like your parents' company?"

"I would rather end my life here, in the Oratory."

"Don't say that. You are going home now, recover and then come back."

Dominic shook his head.

"I'm going, but I won't come back. Don Bosco, this is the last time we talk. Tell me: What can I do for the Lord?"

"Offer him your sufferings, often."

"Will I see my friends of the Oratory and my parents from heaven?"

Don Bosco swallowed hard.

"Yes."

"And... will I be able to come and see them?"

"If the Lord allows it."

It was Sunday 1st March. He took his last, moving leave from the members of the Company. Then his dad arrived with the horse-and-buggy that took both back to Mondonio. He waved at the corner that would separate him forever from his friends, the Oratory, and "his" Don Bosco, who felt a pain deep inside at the carriage's driving away. His best pupil had gone, the little saint gift of Our Lady to the Oratory for three years.

Dominic died almost suddenly on 9th March 1857, with his father at his bedside. He whispered:

"Farewell dad... the parish priest was saying... but I don't remember... what beautiful thing I see..."

Pope Pius XII canonised him on 12th June 1954. He is the first 15-year old saint.1

#### The Blood Red Sash

Don Bosco saw Dominic again, in a dream in Lanzo in 1876. He narrated it in ten closely written pages of the 12<sup>th</sup> volume of his *Memoirs*.

I saw myself at the edge of an immense sea-blue plain. But it looked more like a clear, bright crystal than like water. A most sweet music filled the air.

An immense throng of youth appeared. Many I knew from the oratories or from the other colleges, but the majority was unknown to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> St Dominic Savio is the first confessor of that age. Younger canonised saints, boys and girls are invariably martyrs.

me. The endless crowd moved towards me. Dominic was at their head. Behind it were seminarians and priests, each leading a group of youngsters.

Dominic Savio advanced from the crowd and stood before me. He was so close that I could have touched him. How beautiful he was! A shining white robe covered him down to his feet. A wide red sash girded his loins. He wore a crown of roses. He looked like an angel. He spoke first:

"Why don't you say anything? Aren't you the man who used not to be afraid of anything, who braved slander, persecution, enemies, distress and danger of all sorts? Why don't you speak?"

I faltered.

"Are you Dominic Savio then?"

"I am. Don't you recognise me? I've come to talk to you. Oftentimes we talked on earth. How many times you gave me signs of friendship. Didn't I return that love? I had great trust in you!"

"Where are we?"

"In the place of happiness."

"Why do you wear this tunic? What's the meaning of the red sash?"

A voice sang the verse of the Bible: They are virgins, and these are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.<sup>2</sup> Then I understood that the blood-red sash symbolised the great sacrifices bordering on martyrdom, suffered to keep the virtue of purity. The shining robe symbolised preserved baptismal innocence.

"Why are you ahead of the others?"

"I am God's ambassador. As to the past, let me tell you that your Congregation has done much good. Do you see that endless throng of youth? They were saved because of you, or your priests, seminarians or others led by you towards vocation. They would be many more, had you had more faith and trust in the Lord."

"What about the present?"

Dominic held out his hand with a bunch of flowers. There were roses, violets, lilies, gentians, and ears of wheat. He said

"Give it to your sons. Roses are the symbol of charity, violets of humility, gentians of penance, lilies of chastity, and the ears of wheat of love for the Eucharist."

"And the future?"

"God is preparing great things for your Congregation. There is great glory waiting

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Rv 14:4

for it. See to it that your Salesians do not stray from the right path indicated by you. If your children are worthy of their high mission, the future will be brightest, and it will bring salvation to people without end. The condition is that they be devoted to the Blessed Virgin and keep the virtue of chastity, so pleasing to God."

"What about me?"

"If you only knew how many vicissitudes you have to go through yet!"

I stretched my hands to touch that holy boy, but his hands slipped away from mine as if made of air, and I could not grasp them...

#### **CHAPTER 35**

# FRIAR OR NOT, I STAY WITH DON BOSCO

On a summer day in 1857, Minister Rattazzi received Don Bosco. They talked about the Oratories. The Minister appreciated their work more than ever, especially after the cholera and the adventure at the juvenile prison.

"Don Bosco, I wish you a long life. But what will happen to your boys when on you are no more?"

'Let me answer with another question, Minister. What can I do to guarantee the survival of my work?"

"I think you should choose lay people and priests whom you trust, then form Society. Imbue them with your spirit, and train them in your system. Today they will help you, tomorrow they will continue your work."

Don Bosco smiled.

"Two years ago you helped pass a Bill that suppressed many religious communities. Now you are proposing precisely a new religious community. Will the government let it survive?"

Rattazzi smiled in turn.

I know the law of suppression very well. You may found a society that no law will be able to sink."

"How?"

A secular State will never recognise a "religious" society under the Church as an authority different from its own. But if a Society arises whose every member keeps his civil rights, submits to the laws of the State, and pays taxes, there's nothing the State can object to. Such a society is nothing but an association of free citizens, coming and living together to do some charity much as other people come together for purposes of trade, industry or mutual help. If then, *in the internal forum*, such members accept also the authority of the bishops or of the pope, the State couldn't care less: any

association of free citizens has free reins provided it accepts the laws and the authority of the State."

Don Bosco thanked the minister, assuring him that he would think about it. Rattazzi had most clearly put order in the thoughts that Don Bosco was brooding over for years. He was just then studying how to found a Congregation of religious in relation to the Church and of free citizens in relation to the State. The major difficulty now was: would the Holy See accept the new arrangement? It would have meant accepting in practice the separation between Church and State, turning the classical schemes of religious life topsy-turvy. Up to then, the religious were such in relation to both Church and State.<sup>1</sup>

## Putting Things in Writing

While thinking about the *formula*, Don Bosco was taking care of the *persons* who could form part of this Congregation. One after the other, the adult collaborators were abandoning him. The way to follow was the one our Lady had indicated to him in one of his dreams: the shepherds ought to come from the flock.

In March 1855 Michael Rua was the first to take the vows. A few months later Fr Alasonatti became the second.

In 1856 it was the turn of Francesia, who composed a solemn Latin poem for the occasion.

None of the three had any idea that they were members of a "Congregation." They thought they had acquired closer links with Don Bosco "to give him a hand."

Don Bosco was extremely prudent: congregations and friars did not enjoy a good image. He cautiously avoided any appearance of religious life: no regular meditation, no long prayers and no austere observances.

Not until 1859 did Don Bosco declare himself "head of a religious Congregation." A good many young men aspiring to the priesthood had received the cassock from him, but only because the archbishop saw them necessary for the Oratories. These young clerics sat for examinations at the diocesan curia and went to the diocesan seminary for classes. Few were dispensed because their help was crucial at the Oratory. Don Bosco governed the Oratories, the boarding facilities at Valdocco, and the young clerics, under the authority of the archbishop of Turin, Msgr Fransoni.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> That separation was nothing new. Between the collapse of the Western Roman Empire (476) and the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire (800) there had been the same separation between Church and State as there was in the United States in Don Bosco's time. But it was difficult to draw the logical conclusion.

Nothing transpired externally, but the substance was condensing. It was necessary to put a few points in writing, some sort of "rule" fixing the essential of spirit and method.

Don Bosco began this work, silently, in 1855. He drew on his own experience, on the rules of the Oratory, sought advice, searching the rules of ancient orders and also of the more recent congregations, like Fr Rosmini s institute of Charity and Fr Lanteri's Oblates; of the Virgin Mary.<sup>2</sup>

The interview with Rattazzi, in which the minister had only repeated what he had publicly declared in Parliament, was like a flash of understanding. He saw how he could adapt the substance of the religious life to the new political situation. Don Bosco will earnestly defend the "civil rights" of his religious.

The text was ready by the end of 1857. The exhausting task of getting ecclesiastical approval was about to begin.

Msgr Fransoni, informed at his Lyon exile, was very encouraging. He suggested that Don Bosco request an audience with Pope Pius IX.

#### Pius IX

Early in February 1858, Michael Rua spent many hours by candlelight copying the manuscript of the Rules in elegant hand. Don Bosco had requested it

"Do a good job of it. We'll bring them to the pope together."

On 18<sup>th February</sup> they set off for Rome. It was a long and difficult journey by land and sea. They applied for a passport, and Don Bosco drafted his will before leaving. The Oratory was left in Fr Alasonatti's care.

On 9<sup>th</sup> March Don Bosco has his first audience with the pope. The Holy Father showed a benevolence that would never falter. He expressed his admiration for the exuberant activity of the Turin priest. He approved the founding of a Congregation adapted to the times, but added some recommendations. The most important was to bind members not by means of 'promises" as Rattazzi had suggested, but of true and proper "religious vows." He told Don Bosco that even the pope had to think hard about it. "Go, pray and come back in a few days. I will tell you my mind."

Happy with the reception, Don Bosco revised the text and had Rua copy it again. On 21st March they went for the second audience. The pope specified:

"I am convinced that your project will do a lot of good to the youth. Let it be carried out. Let the rules be mild and easy to observe. Dress, and act, so as not to attract too much attention. Perhaps it would be better to call it

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Ven, Pius Bruno Lanteri, 1759 – 1830. He had founded congregation in 1815, the year of Don Bosco's birth.

Society rather than Congregation. See to it that every member be a religious in relation to the Church and a citizen in relation to civil society."

Don Bosco quickly grasped that there wasn't much difference between Pius IX and Rattazzi. He presented the redrafted rules to the pope:

"Within these rules, revised according to the recommendations of your Holiness, are the entire discipline and spirit that have guided us for twenty years."

There was nothing monastic. The society was one of ecclesiastics and lay people bonded by vows and wishing to be dedicated to the good of the poor youth. In relation to the State they were citizens: "On admission, no member will lose his civil rights even after having emitted the vows, for he will maintain the right of property." In relation to the Church they were religious: "The fruits of personal wealth, for as long as he remains in the Congregation, must be handed over to it."

At the third and last audience, on 6<sup>th</sup> April, Pius IX returned the manuscript, indicating them to pass it to Cardinal Gaude.

This Piedmontese cardinal was in very friendly terms with Don Bosco. He read and revised further. He suggested that Don Bosco try them for some time and re-present them to the pope later.

Don Bosco left Rome on 14th April.

#### A Week to Think about It

On 9<sup>th</sup> December 1859, Don Bosco thought that the time had come to speak openly of a religious Congregation. He spoke to 19 "Salesians" gathered in his room.

"For quite some time I have been thinking of founding a Congregation. The moment has come. The Holy Father Pius IX has encouraged and praised my project. The Congregation does not come into existence now: it already existed in those rules that you have been observing traditionally. Now is the time to give it formal existence by accepting its rules. Members will be only those who, after reflecting seriously, declare themselves ready to emit the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. You have a week to think about it."

There was an unusual silence at the end of the meeting. As people began to speak, it was clear that Don Bosco was right in proceeding slowly and prudently. Some mumbled that Don Bosco wanted to turn them into *friars*. Cagliero paced the courtyard up and down, torn by contradictory feelings.

In the end the desire to be with Don Bosco won. Cagliero burst out: "Friar or not, I stay with Don Bosco." It was an historical declaration. Fr Alasonatti drafted the minutes of the meeting erecting the group in Don Bosco's room into a "Society or Congregation."

Don Bosco was unanimously elected Major Superior, sub deacon Rua spiritual Director, deacon Angel Savio Treasurer. Three more were elected Advisers, thus completing the future Superior Chapter of the Society.

## "What Are You Doing at the Oratory?"

The Congregation was born. Don Bosco's joy, however, was incomplete: his dearest Joseph Buzzetti was not among the 17 he had accepted as members.

He had lost a finger as a consequence of mishandling a firearm, which in those days was a serious impediment for priestly ordination. And he was humble enough to have given up the idea of donning the cassock.

But he dedicated every hour of his day to "his" Don Bosco and to the Oratory. He assisted at meals, laid the tables, supervised the cleaning, taught catechism, kept the accounts and posted the issues of *Catholic Reading*. He also directed the choir until 1860, when he handed over to Cagliero.

With his sagacious mind and prompt action, he was the soul of every raffle. He sought orders for the workshops, ordered bread and looked after the purchases.<sup>3</sup>

The Oratory was for him his own flesh and blood. At the time of the collapse of the building, he had gone through the invoices with a fine toothcomb. He had found irregularities, and had confronted the contractor with harsh words. Don Bosco himself had to calm him down.

"Let's be patient. The Lord will help us."

"Surely He will! Meanwhile you work night and day to gather a few hundred lire, and these characters steal thousands in a whiff. They deserve a good lesson."

"Leave it. If they deserve that, the Lord will mete it out to them."

Buzzetti acted as Don Bosco's bodyguard whenever danger threatened, meeting him on the road when he returned in the evenings. Many ill-intentioned louts lost ardour when they saw his imposing figure and thick red beard next to the priest they intended to harm.

His two brothers, one a bricklayer and the other an excellent master builder, often chided him:

"If you don't intend to be a priest, what on earth are you doing at the Oratory?"

"Don Bosco has guaranteed my bread even after his death. I'm all right as I am."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> In the account of Fr Lemoyne.

Yet this young man, 27 in 1859, didn't feel like taking vows to be a Salesian.

The Society Chapter admitted the first layman on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1860. He was Joseph Rossi, first "Coadjutor" as the lay Salesians came to be called.

#### **Buzzetti's Crisis**

The 14th May 1862 marked a new stage in the consolidation of the Salesian Society. Twenty-two Brothers, accepting Don Bosco's invitation, took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in his presence. The ceremony took place in Don Bosco's usual room.

At the end Don Bosco spoke: "While you were offering your vows to me, I was offering mine to this Crucifix for the rest of my life, in sacrifice to the Lord."

One of the 22 was Joseph Gaia, who for many years worked as a cook in the Oratory. Another was a member of the Turin aristocracy, whom Don Bosco had rescued from a rather dissolute life during a course of Spiritual exercises. After nine years at the Oratory he joined the Jesuits.

An easy temptation regarding the first lay people joining the Congregation was to consider those who were neither priests nor young clerics as "servants" of the house, or at least as "second class" members.

This view may have caused Buzzetti's crisis.

He sensed that rules and regulations were modifying the ancient patriarchal, family style; he could see that the management of the house and many of his chores passed little by little into the hands of the clergy. Sadness and discouragement convinced him to leave. He found a job in the city and went to take his leave from Don Bosco. With the usual frankness, he told him that he felt like the least wheel of the cart that he had to obey those whom he had taught how to blow their noses when they were kids. He did not hide his sadness at having to abandon the enterprise he had seen grow since the times of the Pinardi shed.

Don Bosco did not say, "You're leaving me alone. How will I manage without you?" He did not think about himself, but about his dearest friend.

"Have you found a job? Is the pay good? You've no money, and you'll need some for the first expenses."

Don Bosco opened the desk drawer.

"You know these drawers better than I do. Take anything you need, and if it not enough tell me and I'll find it for you. Joseph, I do not intend you to experience want for my sake."

Then he looked at him with the fondness he had for his boys.

"We've always been fond of each other. I hope you'll not forget me."

Buzzetti burst into tears. He wept for a long time.

No, I don't want to leave you, Don Bosco. I'll stay, forever."

## The "Coadjutor" to Don Bosco's Mind

After this event, Don Bosco took pains to define the figure of the Coadjutor or lay Salesian, better than before.

He referred to it during the "good night" to the artisans on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1876. "There is no distinction whatever between members of the Congregation. Everyone is treated the same: artisans, young clerics and priests. We consider ourselves brothers."

In 1877 Joseph Buzzetti finally applied for membership to the Salesian Society. The Superior Chapter, made up of a number of those whom he had taught how to blow their noses" unanimously accepted him. It must have been one of the happiest days for Don Bosco.

Many Coadjutors had joined in the meantime. They directed the workshops looked after the main gate, the infirmary, the administration, acted as factorums, cooked. All, however, helped the priests in the apostolate: they taught catechism and worked as assistants and educators.

The temptation to see them as a separate class resurfaced in the last years of Don Bosco's life. At the third Chapter of the Congregation, held in 1883, somebody suggested: "Coadjutors must be kept low. They must form separate category" Don Bosco reacted sharply: "Not at all. Our brothers Coadjutors are like everyone else."

That same year he spoke to them in the same tone: "You are not the ones to take manual chores directly. Your task is to direct. You ought to act as the master supervising the workers, not as a servant... This is the idea of the Salesian Coadjutor. I need many like you to help me! I am therefore happy to see you in clothes cut to measure; I am also happy that each one of you sleeps in a proper bed in a suitable cell. You ought not to be servants, but masters, not subjects, but superiors."

The figure of the Coadjutor did not arise in Don Bosco's mind all of a sudden, as an original creation; it emerged gradually, with its ups and downs.

Joseph Buzzetti might have been the ideal Coadjutor of Don Bosco's mind. He was 100% trustworthy, humble, and always available in any difficulty. He felt the Oratory as his family, his own flesh and blood. He felt fulfilled because his family was being fulfilled. He did not understand much of juridical subtleties. He wanted "to be with Don Bosco" at all costs.

### **CHAPTER 36**

## THE LAD MAGGONE

After 1850 Don Bosco paid increasing attention to his Congregation, but neither his thoughts nor the many journeys and meetings towards consolidating the foundation, diverted his attention from the youth. Don Bosco was never the head of a business, but of a family. He considered the presence of children essential.

On returning from trips, meetings and various businesses, he went straight to hear boys' confessions. The youth was his main concern, on being kept waiting for an audience in Rome as much as for a train on a station platform.

On a foggy evening in the fall of 1857, he was waiting for the Turin-bound train at the Carmagnola rail station. Any other traveller would have opted for the relative warmth of the waiting room, but not Don Bosco. He had heard boys play, and stared into the fog searching for them.

"Among the shouts a voice stood out. It sounded like a captain's, whom everyone obeyed. A strong desire gripped me to meet the one capable of imposing order on such considerable chaos."

He approached them. As soon as the black cassock popped out of the fog, all the little rascals fled except one. He stepped forward, hands on his sides, and rather imperiously asked me, "Who are you? What do you want of us?"

#### To Miss a Train or to Miss a Soul

Don Bosco gazed at the dishevelled boy. Behind his fierce eyes he spotted an irrepressible zest for life, unfortunately about to wander adrift. I n a few minutes he won enough trust to get the essentials: Michael Magone, 13, fatherless. His future project, "I've learned the idler's trade."

The train hoots, Don Bosco risks missing it. But missing that boy would be a bigger disgrace. He puts a medal of Our Lady in the boy's hand:

"Go to Father Ariccio your parish priest. Tell him that the priest who's given you this medal wants information about you."

A few days later he received a letter:

Michael Magone is a poor, fatherless boy. His mother, the sole breadwinner, cannot assist him; because of his fickleness and carelessness he has been repeatedly thrown out of school; nevertheless he has completed 3<sup>rd</sup> grade rather well.

As for morals, I think he is good at heart and of a simple life; but he is hard to control. He can upset any classroom, at school or at catechism; when he keeps quiet, everything is peaceful. When he leaves is to everybody's relief.

Because of his age, poverty, temperament and intelligence he deserves as much care as he can get.

Don Bosco replied that if the boy and his mother agreed, he was ready to accept him at the Oratory.

Fr Ariccio called Michael and talked to him about the Oratory: hundreds of boys running, having fun, studying or learning a trade. Then he concluded: "He's ready to accept you. Would you like to?"

Michael snapped back: "Damn it! Of course!"

His mum saw him off at the station, with his bundle of clothes and her heart in the grip of emotion. Michael made his way to Valdocco and met Don Bosco.

"Here I am, the Michael Magone of Carmagnola station."

"I know, dear. Have you good will?"

"Bags of it."

"Then please, do not turn my house topsy-turvy."

"Don't worry, I won't upset you. In the past I haven't controlled myself too well, but for the future I intend to change. Two of my playmates are already in prison, and I..."

"Cheer up. Only tell me whether you want to study or to learn a trade. 'I'm ready to do as you please. But if it's my choice, I'd prefer study."

"And what do you want to do when you finish school?"

"If a rascal..."

Michael smiled under his bent head.

"Go ahead:. if a rascal..."

"If a rascal could come to be a priest, I'd be happy to be one."

"We shall see what a rascal can do. I'll put you to study."

From that moment, singing, shouting, running, jumping and making a racket became his life. Not that he became a saint overnight. The Company of Mary Immaculate placed a big boy at his side, to help and correct him. It was hard work with Michael's coarse vocabulary, foul language

and swearing bordering on blasphemy. But at every correction Michael, as lively as ever, thanked his friend and made an effort to improve.

The one thing he wholeheartedly hated was the sound of the bell interrupting recreation to resume school and study. With his books under his arm, he looked more like a young prisoner on forced labour.

## A Boy's Sadness

But he really loved the bell signalling the end of classes. Don Bosco followed him with special affection:

"He looked like a cannonball straight out of the barrel. He was at every corner, setting in motion everything he touched." He was already a team captain, which became unbeatable from his arrival.

A month went by.

Within days Michael grew increasingly sad. He withdrew to a solitary corner looking at his friends playing, but eschewed his friends' din and at times, unseen, wept. It was as if a veil of gloom had drawn across his face. Don Bosco observed.

One good day I sent for him.

"Magone, I need a favour. But don't say no, please."

"I'll do anything you say."

"Put me in charge of your heart for a little while. Why have you been so sad for the past few days?"

"It 's true... I am desperate and don't know what to do."

Michael burst into tears. I let him cry. Then I jested:

"And you are general Michael Magone head of the Carmagnola band? What kind of general are you? You are incapable of telling what causes you sadness?"

"I would, but I can't express it"

"Give me just one word."

"My conscience is in a tangle."

"That's enough. I understand. But you can fix it in no time. Only tell the confessor that you have something to revise of your past life, and he will take the thread. All you'll have to say is "yes" or "no."

There were other priests hearing confessions at the Oratory, but almost all the boys went to Don Bosco. That same evening Michael knocked at his office:

"Don Bosco, sorry for disturbing you... but the Lord has been waiting for me a long time, and I don't want to let him wait until tomorrow."

With Don Bosco's help, Michael laid his little miseries, which he thought enormities, at the feet of the Crucified, and asked for forgiveness. Don Bosco witnessed that resurrection.

Michael's cheerfulness had wane on his beginning to understand that true happiness does not consists in jumping around, but in the friends with the Lord and in peace of conscience. He had noticed his friends going to Communion and improving by the day. Sensing that his conscience was not at peace, he felt greatly uneasy. At the end of his confession he was moved: "How happy I am!"

Next day he captained his team to a memorable victory. He was his usual self again.

### Fisticuffs in Piazza Castello

Through Magone's story, Don Bosco unveiled the method with which he approached hundreds of boys in whom *evil was at work*. He made use of the simplest means to reconcile them with God and launch them on the road to sanctity.

"Now the bell calling to church no longer rankled in Michael's ears. It called to meeting Jesus, his friend by now."

With Don Bosco's help he drafted a "battle plan" to keep and strengthen that friendship: a commitment to keep perfect purity and to spread goodness and joy among his peers.

Michael wrote seven resolutions in his personal notebook, calling them 'seven policemen" that would defend his friendship with the Lord

- 1. Meet Jesus often in confession and Holy Communion.
- 2. Tenderly love the Most Blessed Virgin Mary.
- 3. Pray a lot.
- 4. Frequently address Jesus and Mary.
- 5. Don't treat your body too blandly.
- 6. Keep always busy with something to do.
- 7. Stay away from evil company.

Don Bosco used the same pattern to help boys to be good.

Michael's style was impulsive and easygoing, rather different from Dominic Savio's. On one occasion a boy was entertaining a group with dirty jokes. Some in the audience guffawed; others meant to leave but lacked the courage. Michael went straight for him, stuffed four fingers in mouth in shepherd's fashion and let a deafening whistle blow right into his ears. The boy jumped in a start. Then he became enraged:

"Are you mad?"

"Am I mad or are you, spewing all this filth?"

On another occasion Don Bosco had asked him to go together on some errand.

Passing by Piazza Castello, one of two gambling boys burst into swearing and uttering blasphemies. Michael went straight for him and slapped him across the face. The young swearer did not expect it. Slightly stunned he counterattacked. They started knocking the living daylights out of each other before an amused crowd of spectators. Don Bosco had to dart into the fray to separate them. Michael hissed:

"Thank this priest. Without him I would have made mince meat of you."

Don Bosco had to persuade him that it was not a good idea to lay it into all those who uttered blasphemies.

Michael's readiness to come to blows was not his only skill however. He was becoming more helpful and generous by the day. He helped the small boys to make their beds, to clean their shoes, and gave a hand with homework to the less capable.

### Don Bosco's Hand on Michael's Head

Don Bosco was so happy with his improvement that he took him with the best boys to Becchi for a short holiday. In October 1858, Michael began his second academic year at Valdocco.

On the last day of the year, during the "goodnight," Don Bosco urged all to begin the new year in the state of grace, "because for some of you it will be the last."

Don Bosco's hand rested on Michael's head as he said that. The boy thought, "Did he say that for me?" He was not afraid, but said to him, "I'll be prepared."

Three days later he felt a violent bellyache. It was a recurring pain, experienced before, perhaps chronic appendicitis. At the infirmary the ailment did not look serious. Don Bosco spotted him from the window, asking him what the matter was. Michael answered, "Nothing, the usual ailment."

But on the night of 19th January his condition worsened. They urgently summoned his mother. The doctor, hearing the breathing become heavier and difficult, opened his arms in the disconsolate impotence of an erstwhile medicine. He only said, "Bad news."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The first appendicitis operation were attempted towards the end of the century.

On 21<sup>st</sup> January Michael was dying. His friends, dismayed, prayed for him. The Viaticum was brought.

Near midnight Don Bosco was by his bedside. His mother had to go home to look after the younger siblings.

Suddenly he spoke. "It's time, Don Bosco. Help me... tell mum to forgive me for all the trouble I caused her... give her all my love, tell her to take heart...I'll be waiting for her in heaven...

It was midnight. Michael had a moment of drowsiness. Then, as if waking up from a deep sleep, in a serene countenance he said to Don Bosco:

"Tell my playmates that I'm waiting for them in heaven... Jesus, Joseph, Mary..."

His face stilled in the serenity of death.

### Meanwhile, in Politics

This small, but sorrowful, tragedy, marked the beginning of 1859 at the oratory. The official foundation of the Salesian Society would mark its end.

That same year was bringing political turmoil to Italy, which together with the rest of Europe was marching in increasing unrest.

In December 1852 Louis Napoleon, Bonaparte's nephew, staged a coup. He proclaimed himself emperor with the name of Napoleon III.<sup>2</sup> He presented himself to Europe as an heir to Napoleon's glory, ready to support all the nations claiming independence from the Austrian empire.<sup>3</sup>

Astute and cynical Cavour had taken over from the romantic representatives of a federal independent Italy under the pope, who were dead or dying off. In 1855 he sent a Piedmontese task force to the Crimean war, side by side with the French and the English against Russia.

The move did not enjoy the favour of either conservatives or revolutionaries, but Cavour could see far.

He used the dead of the Crimean campaign as an entrance ticket to the Peace conference of 1856, with the idea of asking France's help in getting The Austrians out of Italy.

His chance came early in 1858, when Mazzini's follower Orsini bombed Napoleon III's carriage. Before being guillotined on 13<sup>th</sup> March, Orsini had written two letters to Napoleon urging him to liberate Italy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> 1808 – 73. Emperor until 1870. He assumed the title of Napoleon III because Napoleon II (1811 – 32) was Napoleon I's only son.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> In reality a tool of Freemasonry under Palmerston until the latter's death in 1865.

Cavour chimed in, calling the emperor's attention to the need for pacifying Italian unrest, failing which many extremist Orsinis could arise. In July 1858 Cavour and Napoleon III met at Plombieres, agreeing to declare a joint Piedmontese-French war on Austria. France was promised the territories of Nice and the Savoy.

# War Again

On 10<sup>th</sup> January 1859, king Victor Emmanuel launched a verbal declaration of war on Austria with a speech in Parliament. 60,000 Piedmontese troops marched to the border helped by the van of a French division. The Turin populace was enthusiastic about the war, with lights, songs, shouts and applause.

160,000 Austrian troops tried to defeat the Piedmontese before the arrival of the bulk of the French army. They came so close to Turin as to cause panic.

But Napoleon's army, transported by rail, arrived in time. The French obtained their first success at Magenta on 4<sup>th</sup> June. Napoleon III and Victor Emmanuel entered Milan four days later.

Austrian Emperor Francis Joseph decided to take personal command of his army. The omens are bad.

Peter Enria, 18 at the time, wrote:

The Turin populace got war fever in 1859 as it had ten years earlier. Gangs of boys played war games in the fields outside the city. They were meant to be mock battles, but heads got heated up and volleys of stones flew dangerously. Every Sunday it was the same story.

One Sunday Don Bosco entered the church for the usual homily to the boys of the Oratory, but only found the boarders. He asked, *Where's everybody?* No one knew. He went out to the fields and found them fighting in earnest. There were more than 300 of them, and big stones whined around ominously. Don Bosco entered the fray. I looked from afar, fearing that he might be hit. But he, undaunted, walked some 50 paces into the centre of the commotion. When all saw him, they froze.

"Now that you have made war, let's go for catechism."

No one tried to run away. All entered the church with him.

### Solferino

The terrible battle between the French-Piedmontese and the Austrians took place on 24<sup>th</sup> June, South of Lake Garda.

It was a scene straight out of hell: the boom of cannon, the rattle of rifle shots, and the shouts of the combatants and the thundering of cavalry hoofs nixed with the cries of the wounded and dying on the battlefield.

After 14 hours of combat, the Austrians were overwhelmed.

30,000 dead, wounded and dying lay helpless on the field of battle. Their cries sounded like a terrifying choir. Henri Dunant, future founder of the Red Cross, went around at night searching with his lantern:

It was like looking at hell itself: dismembered corpses, the maimed crying praying, blaspheming; the wounded dragging themselves aimlessly or relief.

At sunrise next day the scene showed the utter dread of war: stinking corpses, clouds of flies on putrefying wounds and savage cries.

That was the true face of war, not what the Turin newspapers exalted that day as if it had been a picnic. At the end of the year Don Bosco published a booklet at loggerheads with the passing excitement of the day.

After Solferino I have been repeating that war is a horror, and I think it truly contrary to charity.

## Success of "Realpolitik"

When Napoleon III fully assessed the situation, he realised that he had not gained much from Solferino. Austria's defeat had caused Prussia to send threatening armies to the Rhine. Various Italian provinces asked to join Piedmont. Without consulting Piedmont, on July 8<sup>th</sup>, he signed a unilateral armistice with Austria. Only Lombardy went to Victor Emmanuel but not Venetia. The Piedmontese were furious. Cavour was depressed. Napoleon, returning to France through Turin, received a glacial welcome, good riddance as it were.

By February of 1861 Italy was one,<sup>5</sup> with Victor Emmanuel its king.

Cavour's triumph of *realpolitik* did not last long. He collapsed on 29<sup>th</sup> 'May and died on 6<sup>th</sup> June. His death would prove a blow to the young kingdom.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> 1828 – 1910. He founded the Red Cross in 1864.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Except for Rome, which would be conquered in 1870.

### **CHAPTER 37**

# LIFE AT, AND WITH, THE ORATORY

Every October Don Bosco led a selected group of boys to Becchi on the occasion of the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. Their number grew from 20-odd at the beginning to more than 100 by 1858. Among them were singers and musicians, each carrying a change of clothes and little food in a bundle.

Joseph Bosco hosted the group. He was always cordial, and also ready to look the other way if the boys looted his vineyard.

The actual celebration of the feast took place on the first Sunday of October. The rest of the time, for up to three weeks, the boys went for long walks in the environs.

Becchi served as general headquarters up to 1858: they left in the morning for a not-too-distant village and returned by evening. From 1859 onwards the walks became true itineraries through the Monferrato hills.

Don Bosco used to plan the journey in advance. Parish priests and benefactors were waiting to put up the hot and tired crowd. They walked along rural paths, up and down hills and vineyards. The boys were divided into groups, singing and rub-a-dubbing while driving the donkeys that carried the backdrop and the wings for the theatre. Don Bosco followed in the rear, surrounded by a group of youngsters never tired of hearing him tell story after story of the villages they went through.

On devising a village, the crowd formed into ranks and solemnly marched into it with the band playing in the van. One of the participants wrote:

I have an undying memory of those adventurous trips. They filled me with astonishment and happiness. I went with Don Bosco through the Monferrato hills from 1854 to 1860. There were some 100 of us, who could see the reputation for sanctity that surrounded Don Bosco. His arrival in those villages was always a triumph. The parish priests, and often the civil authorities, waited for him to pass through. The inhabitants looked out of windows or stood on their doorsteps, farmers stopped their chores to come and see the Saint. Mothers showed him their children, and kneeling down asked for his blessing. It was our custom to go straight to the parish church to pay a visit to the Blessed

Sacrament. The church filled in no time. Don Bosco would always deliver a homily to the people from the pulpit. Then we all sang the *Tantum Ergo and* he gave the Eucharistic benediction.

Picnic lunches were always abundant. People used to bring baskets of fruit, homemade bread, cheese and pints of wine.

They slept under sheds or in large rooms, lying on leaf-filled sacks or on straw mattresses.

## A Five-year Old Toddler

The scope of the trips extended farther and farther. In 1861 they boarded, a train from Valenza to Alessandria and back all the way to Turin. Next year the State railways reserved two coaches for the return trip from Alessandria to Turin. The year 1864 they went the farthest ever: Genoa. Then unexpected difficulties put an end to these long journeys. Excursions were limited to Becchi and Mondonio, Dominic Savio's native village.

Those excursions were not only unforgettable memories for his boys, but also a "visiting card" for every village, out of which Don Bosco brought splendid Salesian vocations to the Oratory.

In 1861 he spotted the nine Rinaldi children lining up in front of their home in the village of Lu. They were scaled down like organ pipes. They all cheered at the passing bands, and met Don Bosco later at their father's farm. Philip, the eighth child, was particularly enthusiastic. Before leaving Don Bosco caressed those children, looking into the young boy's eyes for a long time. As Father Philip Rinaldi, that toddler would become Don Bosco's third successor at the head of the Salesian Congregation.

## The Wonders of Montemagno

In 1862 the crowd wound its way to Montemagno. Attracted by the blare of trumpets, a 12-year old boy playing in a valley below dropped playmates and shoes, running towards the village square. He elbowed his way through the throng and made it to the front row. Don Bosco noticed that eager look under a shock of red hair.

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"What's your name?"

"Louis Lasagna."

"Would you like to come to Turin with me?"

"What for?"

"To study, like all these boys."
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"Why not?"
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"Tell your mum to come and see me at the parish priest's."

The boy joined the Oratory at the end of the month. Very much lively but also deeply sensitive, he became homesick and ran away after a few days. Some superiors were against re-admitting him, but Don Bosco stood by him:

"There's good stuff in that lad, you'll see."

Louis returned and became very fond of Don Bosco. He was the second Salesian bishop and a great missionary.

Two years later Don Bosco returned to Montemagno in August. For three months it had not rained. The vines were withering on the hills. Don Bosco preached the Triduum in preparation for the feast of the Assumption. At the end of the first homily he announced:

"If during these three days you reconcile yourselves with God with a good confession, ands to Communion on the feast day, I promise abundant rain in the Madonna's name."

Coming down from the pulpit he faced the parish priest's angry look. "Well done! What a neck!"

"To do what?"

"To promise rain in public for the feast day."

"Did I say that?"

"We all heard you. And I don't like it a bit."

The people responded with faith. Fathers Rua and Cagliero, who were with Don Bosco, years later still remembered how tired they were after many hours in the confessional.

The rumour of the "prophecy" reached the neighbouring villages. Many were curious, others skeptical. Assumption day began with the clearest of skies. There was no trace of cloud well into the afternoon. Fr Porta witnessed:

I was going to church for Vespers in the company of Marquis Fassati. We talked about the promised rain. In the ten brief minutes from his palace to church, our foreheads were dripping with sweat. In the sacristy, the Marquis said to Don Bosco:

"This time, Mister Don Bosco, it's a fiasco. You've promised rain, and it's anything but." At the end of Vespers Don Bosco donned surplice and stole and climbed on the pulpit. As he began the Hail Mary before the homily, the sunlight dimmed. A few minutes into the homily there were flashes of lightning and peals of thunder. Don Bosco halted, gripped by emotion. A thick, continuous rain started lashing against the church glass windows.

Imagine how eloquent Don Bosco waxed. It sounded like a hymn of thanksgiving to Mary.

After Benediction people lingered in church and in the hall while the rain continued pouring down.

Hailstones often accompany sudden summer storms in the Monferrato. Some fell on that day too. The over-conscientious went to investigate and found that it had hit the vineyards at Grana. That village celebrated the feast with a public dance, to the annoyance of the parish priest.

## Mary Mazzarello

Passing through the village of Mornese that same year 1864, the boys gave a concert of military marches and cheerful music. In the first row there sat Mary Mazzarello, 27. At the end of the show, Don Bosco spoke briefly: "We are all tired. My boys need a deep sleep. Tomorrow we shall meet at ease."

Next morning the parish priest introduced the *Daughters of Mary Immaculate* to Don Bosco, who was impressed by their character and industry. He spoke to them briefly, encouraging them to persevere in the state they had chosen and in virtue. Mary would become the co-foundress of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Don Bosco harvested a successor (Rinaldi), a bishop (Lasagna) and a to foundress (Mazzarello): not bad as a result of those October walks. But we digress. Let us return to the main story.

### Fr. Rua's First Mass

Michael Rua's priestly ordination had been fixed for 29<sup>th</sup> July 1860. In preparation for it, Don Bosco sent him to a course of spiritual exercises at the priests of the Mission. Towards the end, Fr Rua wrote to him in French, the language used at the Mission. He asked for a *memento* for the most important day of his life.

Don Bosco was doing his own course of exercises at St Ignatius'. He replied in Latin:

"You did well to write to me in French. But let your French be confined to speech; in your soul, spirit and action be Roman, fearless and generous."

Fr Francesia was with Don Bosco that day.

On 29th July Don Bosco returned from St Ignatius. I was with him. As he felt seasick inside the coach, the two of us sat outside next to the coachman. We were startled at seeing three cassocks in the distance, finally revealing Fr Rua and two young clerics. Don Bosco asked the coachman to stop.

"Where are you going?"

"To Caselle. Bishop Balma will ordain me priest there."

"I'm so happy. I've prayed for you, dear Fr Rua, and I hope the Lord will grant what you ask. Give my regards to Msgr Balma."

We were pleased at our three confreres' going on foot, in the fashion of the poor, for a priestly ordination.

Next Sunday the Oratory celebrated Fr Rua's first Mass. Next to the altar was a huge bunch of white flowers, gift of the little chimneysweeps of St Aloysius'.

Back to his room, Fr Rua found a letter from Don Bosco. He read:

You will see the Salesian work extend beyond the Italian borders to many parts of the world. You will work and suffer a lot; but you know that the Promised Land is not attained without crossing the Red Sea and the desert. Suffer with courage. Even here on earth Our Lord's help and consolation will not be lacking.

After Fr Rua's first Mass Don Bosco's countenance became relaxed, showing great security. The Oratory was by now huge, with almost 500 boarders and 300 apprentices learning their trade in the workshops. Don Bosco often went fundraising: It was not easy to feed so many people. But he is now at ease. Fr Rua is like a "second Don Bosco" at the Oratory.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> of June brought a great sorrow to him: Fr Cafasso died. He got the news of his last illness too late. He rushed there but arrived when Fr Cafasso had just expired. He knelt at the foot of the bed and prayed for a long time. To few he owed as much as he owed him. Cafasso had always helped and encouraged him. He had been his "spiritual father" in the truest sense of the word.

## 400 Round Loaves in an Empty Basket

On 22<sup>nd</sup> October Francis Dalmazzo, 15, joined the Oratory attracted by Don Bosco's fame. 20 days later, though, the boy had lost heart.

Used to my home and a delicate fare, I could not adapt to the Oratory's much more modest fare and usage. I wrote to my mother to come and fetch me, as I was most determined to go back home.

On 11th November Francis' mother came.

Before leaving, though, I wished to go to confession to Don Bosco for the last time. I waited for my turn during Mass. On going out, each boy was given a round loaf for breakfast.

As I waited for confession, the two in charge of distributing bread came and addressed Don Bosco.

"There's no bread for breakfast."

"What can I do? Go to our baker Magra and get some more."

"Magra says that he will not give us anything until we pay him."

"We'll think about it. Let me hear confessions."

I could hear that dialogue carried out in low voice. It was my turn for confession. Mass had reached Consecration. The two boys came back.

"Don Bosco, there's nothing at all for breakfast."

"Let me hear confessions I said. We'll see to it later. Look in the cupboard, in the dining halls. Something or other must be there!"

As they left I finished my confession. The two returned.

"We've gathered everything we could. There are very few loaves.

"Put them in the basket. I myself will hand them out. Leave me in peace now. I must finish hearing confessions."

He went on confessing the last boy in the line. I could see the basket next to the door after the altar of Our Lady. Recalling what I had heard about Don Bosco's miracles, and curious about what would happen, I found a strategic place from where to watch the whole operation.

My mother was already there, waiting for me.

"Come, Francis."

I signalled to her to wait for me a little longer. When Don Bosco arrived, I was the first to grab my loaf. I looked into the basket and saw no more than 15-20 loaves. Unseen, I stood right behind Don Bosco, on the step, my eyes wide open. Don Bosco started handing out the bread. The youngsters filed past him, happy to get their loaf and kissing his hand. He said pleasantries or smiled at each one.

All the 400 students got their loaf. At the end I had another look at the bread basket, and with great astonishment. I counted the same number of loaves as at the beginning. I was astounded. I ran straight to my mother:

"I'm not coming. I don't want to go away. I'll stay. I'm sorry to have got you as far as Turin."

I recounted her I had seen with my own eyes adding that I did not want to abandon a saint like Don Bosco.

Francis Dalmazzo became a Salesian. He directed the Valsalice college for, eight years, and for seven more he acted as Procurator General of the Salesian Congregation to the Holy See.

### Preference for the Poor

Don Bosco found an avalanche of applications from students eager to be accepted at the Oratory. He was afraid to hand out the "fruits of charity" to non-deserving cases. He therefore introduced a new clause. For the first two months students would pay a fixed amount. After having proved

their worth by good behaviour, their dues would be reduced or even forfeited. His charity, however, admitted of many exceptions. The new conditions for admission were:

### For apprentices:

- To be orphan of both parents;
- To be between 12 and 18 years of age;
- To be poor and abandoned.

#### For students:

- To have finished primary school;
- To have a good mind and be of good moral behaviour;
- To be accepted for two months at 24 lire/month until further assessment.

Clothing was to be provided by the students themselves, unless they gave proof of extreme poverty.

### The 1861 "Secret Committee"

An unusual event took place at the Oratory in 1861. Fourteen Salesians met in secret. They were all convinced that exceptional, not to say supernatural, events were taking place around Don Bosco. To lose them for posterity would have meant throwing away a treasure. Each undertook to take notes, to read them before a meeting of the 14 and correct them together. The idea was to record things exactly as they happened. It is therefore not 100% certain that they recorded the exact truth. We are grateful to those early Salesians for their work. Their many hours snatched from sleep made it possible to have a wealth of information about Don Bosco that would otherwise have been lost. It is necessary however to remark on a few points.

First. Don Bosco was speaking off the cuff, not with the intention of recording for history. Such narrations ought to have been taken much as Napoleon's memoirs at St Helena, which are full of emotion, flashes of remembrances, of memories, but certainly not rigorous historical descriptions. They ought to be read alongside documents, maps of battlefields, letters and treaties.

Instead it happened that Don Bosco's words were taken as rigorous and exact in every detail.

Second. Those diligent gleaners of memories and words of Don Bosco had lots of work to do, and did not know the city well. Hence they put down all that Don Bosco was doing, but nothing at all of what was happening in the city and environs at the same time. Therefore whatever they say about Don Bosco is certainly true, but it does not follow that everyone else was doing nothing. There were many apostolic enterprises in Turin, of people with the same social concerns in mind. Those remembrances give the impression that it was always Don Bosco to have the first intuition and, to take the first initiative. But searching for facts, one realises that while he was truly great, many others beside, ahead and behind him were exerting as much effort as he.

For example, the church of *Mary Help of Christians* reads like a miracle of expenditure, alms, speed of construction and an immense gathering at the inauguration. But the history of Turin shows that four other great churches were built at the same time, ranging from 220,000 to 1500,000 are in money spent.

Not that the church of Mary Help of Christians loses anything in comparison. It stands as a miracle of will, of faith and of charity. It acquires its eight dimensions, though, when placed side by side with the other four churches. One ought not to lose sight of the wood for the trees.

Ditto for the evening school, the workshops and the missions. They are all extraordinary accomplishments, but in a context of equally exceptional catholic enterprises. Don Bosco ceases to be a "monster" to become a saint working side by side with equally committed priests. They all worked with faith and dedication.

*Third.* God had granted Don Bosco mysterious gifts. His dreams looked at the future like an open book, and his prophecies punctually came true. But he was also a man, a poor priest trying to see a little ahead like everyone else. He also advanced opinions, hopes and predictions that at times came true and at times didn't.<sup>1</sup>

To register these predictions and to expect that they would all come true without exception is to falsify Don Bosco's figure, denying him, as it were, the right to be like every other man before the ups and downs of life. This was a limitation of those early witnesses. We would be much more grateful if they had also written about Don Bosco's doubts, perplexities and mistakes. His greatness and humanness would have been enhanced, not decreased, by it.

Nevertheless the work of those early Salesians was of incalculable value.

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He tried to get Fr Guanella for the Oratory, but his mission was elsewhere.

### **CHAPTER 38**

## DREAMS AND THE BASILICA

In October 1844 Don Bosco twice dreamt meeting a shepherdess. He recorded what she had told him.

She told me to look south. I saw a cultivated field with millet, potatoes, cabbage, beets, lettuce and other vegetables. She insisted:

"Have another look."

I looked again and saw a splendid, tall church. An orchestra, musical instruments and a choir invited me to celebrate High Mass. Inside there was a white band saying in Latin, Hic domus mea, inde gloria mea (Here is my house, hence will my glory go forth).

### The Three Churches

I was in a huge plain with an immense throng of youth. Some fought, others swore blasphemies. Volleys of stones whined through the air, thrown by the fighting groups. I was about to go away when a Lady appeared beside me:

"Go among those young people and work."

I advanced, but what could I do? There was no place where to gather them. I queried the Lady. She said,

"Here's the place!"

And showed me an open field.

"This is only an open field!

"My Son and the Apostles had nowhere to lay their heads."

I started working on that field, warning, preaching, and hearing confessions. But I thought it a waste of time without an enclosed area where to gather them.

The Lady intervened.

"Pay attention."

I looked and saw a low, small church, a bit of courtyard and many young people.

I started working again. But the church became cramped, and I had recourse to Her again. She showed me another church much bigger and with a house next to it. She then led me a little farther, to a piece e of cultivated ground almost before the facade of the second church. She added:

"In this very place, on the soil where the glorious Turin martyrs Adventor and Octavius shed their blood, I want God to be honoured in a very special way."

And she placed her foot on the spot where the martyrs had died. I wanted to mark the spot, but found nothing to do it with. Nevertheless I kept precise memory of it.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile more and more youth surrounded me. But I looked at the Lady; means and accommodation kept on growing. Eventually I saw an immense church precisely over the spot she had shown me as the one where the martyrs of the Theban legion had died. It had many buildings all round and a beautiful monument in the middle.

Don Bosco had always kept an eye on the field of millet, potatoes and other vegetables. He had recognised it as the field next to the wall surrounding the Oratory. He used to call it "the field of dreams." As soon as he could afford it, he bought it on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1850. But urgent debts had forced him to resell it in 1854, when the cholera epidemic forced him to admit 20 boys at one go. He bought it again on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1863. In the meantime something else had happened.

## 'It Will Be the Mother Church of Our Congregation"

L7-year old Paul Alberta had just joined the Salesian Congregation in December 1862. One Saturday night Don Bosco had finished hearing confessions about 11:00 p.m. Paul accompanied him to have a bite before retiring. Don Bosco appeared lost in thought. He began:

Although I have heard so many confessions, in truth I remember nothing of what I have said or done, for a fixed thought preoccupied me. It distracted and pulled me out of myself as it were. Our church is too small for so many young people. We shall build another one, more beautiful, bigger, magnificent. It will be called Mary Help of Christians. I haven 't a penny and I don know where the money is going to come from, but it doesn't matter if it is God; will, the church will be built.

Not long after he spoke of the same project to John Cagliero, who testified: In 1862 Don Bosco said to me that he was thinking of building an imposing church, worthy of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He said:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The spot is marked with a golden cross in the chapel of relics of the basilica of Mary Help of Christians.

Up to now we have been celebrating the feast of the Immaculate with solemnity. But the Blessed Virgin wants us to honour Her with the title of Help of Christians. The circumstances are so unhappy that we truly need the Blessed Virgin to help us conserve and defend the Christian faith. Can you guess the third reason?

I think that it'll be the Mother Church of our future Congregation. It will be the centre from which all the other works in favour of the youth still go forth.

You guessed right. The Blessed Virgin is the foundress and She will be the supporter of all our works.

## Mary Help of Christians at Spoleto

Half way through the 19<sup>th</sup> century the history of the Church was going through turbulent times. The structures of a society officially Christian were clashing against those of an increasingly secular State. The terms in which the Church faced the surrounding culture were no longer the same.

The most burning issue was the Papal States and Rome their capital city. While Catholics thought those states indispensable for the pope's independence, their territory seemed on the verge of being conquered by the kingdom of Italy. The bishops of Umbria urged their faithful to pray through the intercession of Mary, Mother of God and Help of Christians.

In March 1862 at Spoleto, a small town in Umbria, Our Lady spoke to a 5-year old boy from an image in a ruined church.

She also cured a young farmer. Pilgrims began to flock in increasingly large numbers, and the archbishop of Spoleto wrote to the Catholic press at Turin commenting on those events. In September of that year, he launched the project for building a big church on the spot of the miracle, renaming the image from Madonna of the Star to Mary Help of Christians.

Don Bosco read the archbishop's relation to the boys. It was at that time that he had the famous dream of the two pillars: the ship of the Church, with the pope at the helm, travelling balloted but sure in stormy weather and among projectiles hurled at her from countless enemy ships. It finally found a safe harbour between two pillars, one representing the Eucharist and the other our Lady Help of Christians. Hence the expression "unhappy times" that he used as the second reason for building his church.

# Noses Turning Up

Don Bosco commissioned the design to engineer Spezia, who produce a drawing in the form of a Latin cross on a surface area of 1, 200 square

metres with a maximum length of 48 metres. Don Bosco took the drawings to the City Council for approval. There was no objection except for the title *Help of Christians*. The uneasy authorities turned up their noses. Taken together with the miracle at Spoleto, the letters of the Umbria bishops and the controversy in the Turin newspapers, those words sounded like throwing a gauntlet. The councillors proposed various other names, but Don Bosco was adamant: the title stayed.

## Forty Cents to Begin

The contractor Don Bosco appointed was Charles Buzzetti, Joseph's brother, met many years before in the church of St Francis of Assisi. He called the administrator Fr Savio and told him to start the digging of the foundations.

"Don Bosco, how are we going to manage? This is not a chapel, but a huge and costly church. This morning we didn't even have enough money to pay for postage stamps."

"Start digging. Whenever did we start anything with the money already there? Providence will have to play its part after all."

Digging began towards the end of 1863 and the beginning of 1864. Towards the end of April, the contractor invited Don Bosco to go down the foundations to lay the first stone. He went with a throng of priests and students. At the end of the ceremony he turned to Buzzetti.

"Here's the first advance payment."

He opened his purse and dropped its entire contents in Buzzetti's hands: 40 rents, not even half lira. Noticing Buzzetti's surprised look, he immediately added:

"Don't worry. She will pay the balance."

And She did, but not without Don Bosco's sweating hard for it.

Joseph Cottolengo and Don Bosco were contemporary and fellow-countrymen saints. Both were daily helped by Divine Providence and *lived* by it. But while Cottolengo would say, "Divine Providence has already prepared the money we need. Let's wait for it," Don Bosco said, "Divine Providence has already prepared the money we need. Let's go get it. "Fr Paul Albera, second successor, was an eyewitness.

Only he who witnessed the events first hand can have an idea of the work and the sacrifice that our Father imposed on himself during the time it took to build and finish the church of *Mary Help of Christians*. Many thought it a fit of rashness, far beyond the possibilities of that humble priest.

Don Bosco squeezed his imagination to get money from the public's charity. He inundated Turin and Piedmont with letters and circulars; he solicited the high societies of Turin, Florence and Rome; he organised an impressive raffle. In May 1866 he wrote a letter to Chevalier Oreglia:

The number of stonemasons had to be cut from forty to eight for lack of means. Times are really calamitous.

### The Madonna Begs on Don Bosco's Behalf

If Don Bosco, poor as he was, succeeded in overcoming all those difficulties, he owed it to Our Lady's help.

She was responsible for the most fruitful collections. News of graces big and small received by those who helped in the construction of the church spread throughout Italy.

Most sensational was the grace granted to 80-year old Senator Chevalier Cotta, one of Don Bosco's benefactors well known in the political and financial circles of the city.

Don Bosco went to visit him as he lay in bed, given up for by the doctors. The sick man spoke in a faint voice:

"Few minutes more, and then eternity."

Don Bosco replied very cheerful:

'No, Senator. The Madonna still needs you down here. You must live to help me build Her church."

The old man whispered:

"There's no hope..."

Don Bosco's faith made him dare:

"And what would you do if our Lady granted you the grace of a cure?"

The old Senator smiled, and with all the strength he could muster waved two fingers.

"Two thousand lire... for six months... to the church at Valdocco."

"Well, I'll go get my boys to pray for you, and shall wait for you, cured." Three days later the Senator appeared at Valdocco completely recovered.

"Here I am. The Madonna has cured me. I've come for the first instalment of my debt."

Many such graces were granted. In February 1868 Don Bosco wrote to Oreglia: "Mary Help of Christians helps with one resounding favour after another, every day. A complete account -would fill volumes."

## Blessing and a Few Jewels

Returning from the city one *day*, Don Bosco found a woman holding a year-old child in her arms. The boy looked emaciated, covered with sores, ill and voiceless, almost a corpse. Don Bosco asked:

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"How long has he been sick?"

"Since birth."

"Have you sought medical advice?"

"Yes, but doctors say there's nothing doing."

"Would you be happy if he recovered?"

"Imagine! My poor boy!" And she kissed him.

"'Do you think the Madonna could cure your son?"

"Yes, but I don't deserve it. If She cures him, I'll give Her all my dearest possessions."
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"Then go to confession as soon as you can and receive Holy Communion. Say Our Father and the Hail Mary for nine days in succession, together with your husband. The Madonna will answer your prayers."

Don Bosco gave the child the blessing of Mary Help of Christians. Two weeks later, on a Sunday, among the people who thronged the sacristy of the sanctuary, there was a woman with a young boy in her arms, his eyes limpid and most lively. She made her way to Don Bosco.

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"Here's my boy."

"What can I do for you, ma'am?"
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Don Bosco had forgotten. The woman reminded him, saying that on the third or fourth day of the novena the boy had fully recovered.

"I've come to fulfill my promise."

She produced a box with her poor treasures: a golden necklace, a ring and two pendants. Don Bosco was touched. They reminded him of his mother's almost similar jewels. The woman went on:

"I promised our Lady my dearest possessions, and please accept them."

Don Bosco shook his head.

"My good woman, do you have enough to live?"

"No, we live from hand to mouth. My husband works at the foundry."

"Have you saved anything?"

"What can one save on three lire a day?"

"Does your husband know you want to give these objects away?"

"He does, and he's happy about it."

"But if you give away everything, what if something unexpected happens, a sickness for instance?"

"The Lord knows we are poor and will look after us. I must give what I have promised."

Don Bosco was deeply moved.

"The Madonna will not accept such a great sacrifice. If you really want to give me a token of your gratitude, give me the ring and keep necklace and pendants."

"No. I've promised all and I must give all."

"Do as I say. The Madonna is happy that way."

"Can it be true? I don't want to go back on my word."

"You don't. I guarantee it in Her name."

The woman looked undecided.

"Do as you wish. But if you want all my gold, here it is." Don Bosco urged her not to worry, and caressed the child.

### A Farmhand from Alba

Travelling night and day, a poor farmhand arrived from Alba.<sup>2</sup> He went to confession, received Holy Communion, and introduced himself to Don Bosco saying he had come to fulfil a promise. He had fallen sick and the doctors had given up on him. He had promised Our Lady to bring Her all the money he had if She cured him. He had recovered instantly.

Don Bosco stared at that poor man with shabby clothes, who in the meantime had taken a piece of paper from his pocket unrolling it carefully. The money appeared: one lira. He tended it to Don Bosco with a solemn gesture:

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"Here's all I have. It's all my wealth."
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"What do you do for a living?"

"Farmhand. I live from hand to mouth."

"How are you going back home?"

"As I came. Walking."

"Aren't you tired?"

"A little, as the journey is long."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Some 70km of Turin as the crow flies.

"Have you eaten?"

"No, because I wanted to go for Communion. But before midnight I ate some bread I had in my pocket."<sup>3</sup>

"What do you have for lunch?"

"Nothing."

"Listen. Today you stay with me. I'll give you lunch and dinner. Tomorrow, if you want, you go back home."

"That'd be odd! I bring you one lira and you give me food for two or three!"

"Listen. You have given your offer to the Madonna. Now Don Bosco gives you some soup and a glass of wine."

"No. I know that Don Bosco and the Madonna have the same purse. I'm going back on foot. If I get hungry, I will beg. If I get tired, I'll seat under a tree. If I feel sleepy, someone or other will let me in a barn. My promise is serious. Goodbye and pray for me."

And he left.

### Note on Don Bosco's Dreams

Some historians have cast doubt on the truth of Don Bosco's dreams, by means of all kinds of theories and paying no attention to Don Bosco's own accounts and to those of sworn witnesses at his process of beatification. It is only fair to reproduce what Don Bosco himself thought of his dreams and what his immediate collaborators had to say.

### Note on Bosco on Himself

In the early years I was slow to lend to my dreams the credence they deserved. Often I thought them to be nature's tricks. Whenever I narrated them, or announced future demises or future events, I myself felt uncertain, not trusting what I had understood and fearing having told lies. Once I went to confession to Fr Cafasso and mentioned this rash way of speaking of mine. He listened, thought a while, and then said: "Since what you say comes true, hold your peace and go on." Years later when young Casalegno died and I saw him in the coffin laid on two chairs in the portico, exactly as I had dreamt, I no longer hesitated in firmly believing that it was the Lord who sent me those dreams.

The discipline for the Eucharistic fast was from midnight of the previous day. This was reduced to three hours in 1953 and to one hour in 1967.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The discipline for the Eucharistic fast was from midnight of the previous day. This was reduced to three hours in 1953 and to one hour in 1967.

### Fr Berto on Don Bosco

Long before the event, he predicted the demise of almost all those who died at the Oratory, with details of date and the circumstances. Once or twice he warned the youth concerned. Often he gave him a good boy for companion; at times he mentioned the youth's initials publicly. As far as I remember, these predictions were fulfilled almost without exception.

## Fr Ceria's Catalogue

As an early biographer of Don Bosco, Ceria classified the dreams into three groups.

Ordinary dreams, which strictly speaking should not appear in a biography. But some appeared in the *Memoirs* just to make Don Bosco better known.

Dreams that were not such but true visions. They took place in daytime, like the one about John Cagliero's future.

• Night dreams, revealing obscure or future events.

It is rather difficult to make a neat distinction. On one occasion, difficult to say when, Don Bosco dreamt to be in St Peter's, inside the great niche on the right of the central nave, right above St Peter's bronze statue and the big medallion with the mosaic of Pius IX. He could not understand how on earth he had ended up there. He wanted to get down. He shouted, called, but no one would hear. In anguish, he woke up. One would call him a nightmare by bad digestion. But looking at that niche today, in 1936, one sees there the grandiose statue of Don Bosco by sculptor Canonica. It is obvious that it was not a nightmare, and even less by bad digestion.

### **CHAPTER 39**

## **FLEDGLING RUA**

The parish priest of Mirabello in the neighbouring diocese, who wanted a college in his parish, invited Don Bosco to set it up. After making sure that he would have a free hand, and that the institute would receive only students aspiring to the priesthood, Don Bosco accepted.

The construction of the church Mary Help of Christians had just begun, heavily engaging Don Bosco, but he took all necessary precautions for the success of the Mirabello enterprise. Another bishop, with very few vocations in his diocese, supported the project. It was agreed to call it the *Little Seminary*.

In the fall of 1863 Don Bosco called Fr Rua.

"I must ask a big sacrifice of you. They are calling us to open a Little Seminary at Mirabello in the Monferrato. I have thought of you as director. It is our first house outside Turin. All the eyes will be on us to see how we manage. I trust you fully. I will give you the confreres necessary to assure a successful launching."

Rua was 26. Together they chose the clerical personnel and also some of the best students from the Turin Oratory. They would act as good leaven among the 90 boys accepted for the first year.

## Four Pages of Good Advice

Rua left after the feast of the Rosary. He had four handwritten pages of advice from Don Bosco, who poured in them all his preoccupations of rather, educator and priest concerned for the salvation of souls.

Don Bosco later realised how important those counsels were, and redrafted them in document form for all the Salesian directors.

I talk to you as an affectionate father opening his heart to one of his dearer sons."

### With yourself

- Let nothing upset you.
- Avoid mortification's in eating. Sleep no less than six hours every night.
- Say Mass and pray the Breviary with piety, devotion and attention.
- Meditate a little every morning, and pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament every afternoon.
- See to it that you are loved rather than feared; when giving orders and correcting, show that you have in Mind the good of the person and not your own whim. Be ready to bear anything short of sin.
- Think carefully before taking important decisions.
- On anyone being reported to you, make sure of the facts before judging.

### With the teachers

- Talk with them often. Do anything you can to attend to their needs.
- Let them avoid particular friendships and partiality with their charges. With the assistants.
- Consult them at length about students' behaviour. See to their punctuality. See that they spend recreation time with the students.

### With the young boarders

- Never, for any reason, accept a student expelled from other institutions or known for his bad habits.
- Spend as much time as you can among them during recreation time; whisper some affectionate remark you know into their ears, whenever you have the opportunity and see the need for it. This is the great secret to gain their heart.
- Set up the Company of Many Immaculate.

### With the day students

- Make use of charity and courtesy, without from the boarders.
- In material questions, agree with anything insofar as possible, even at cost, but without detriment to charity.
- In spiritual, or simply moral, matters, everything has to be of tackled for the greater glory of God and the good souls. Everything ought to be sacrificed for that: commitments, obstinacy, and spirit of vengeance, self-love, reason, claims and honour itself.

The main additions appeared under the title Confidential Reminder for Directors.

- Try never to make demands beyond people's strength, or that can jeopardize health.
- Utter a brief aspiration» to God before deciding anything.
- Spend as much time as possible with the students so as to know and be known by them.
- Leave nasty and disciplinary action to others.
- Foster everyone's talent:; Assign jobs that people are known to like.
- Save on everything, except on the sick.
- Study time and experience have taught me that gluttony, greed and vainglory have been the ruin of erstwhile flourishing Congregations and respectable religious Orders. The passing of the years will leach you truths that now may seem incredible to you.

### The "Great Secret"

Whisper some affectionate remarks you know into their ears. Don Bosco told Rua that it was one of his great educational secrets. Many of these "whisperings" have been recorded from alumni of Don Bosco.

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"How are you? What about your soul?"
"You ought to help me in a great enterprise. Do you know which? Becoming good."
"When will you finally decide to be my consolation?"
"Shall we break the devil's horns with a good confession?"
"Shall we make friends as regards your soul's affairs?"
"Do you fear that the Lord's indignant with you? Go to Our Lady."
"Heaven is not meant for the idle"
"Pray, pray well and you'll be certainly saved."
"Are you in stormy weather? Invoke Mary: She's the Star of the Sea."
"Think about God's judgment."
"Don't trust your strength too much."
"Think about God. You'll be better and happier."
"With your help, I shall make you happier, both in this life and in the next."
"With your help, I will fashion you into another St Aloysius."
"He who perseveres to the end will be saved."
"Work, work. We shall rest in heaven."
"Cheer up! A piece of heaven will fix everything."
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### Another Mother and Plenty of Work

Don Bosco thoughtfully arranged for Fr Rua's mother to be with him al +, Mirabello. She looked after the laundry, but above all she was a balancing influence in the inevitable difficulties her young son had to face.

The first difficulty was the teachers' qualifications. Soon, though, the Mirabello Salesians obtained excellent results, especially in getting priestly vocations.

The director was the protagonist of the success, to the point that a newspaper called him "a second Don Bosco."

The experiment lasted for two years. At the beginning of 1865 the Salesian Society had 80 members, with eleven priests. But this year 1865 sorely tried the young society. In a few months five of the early Salesians were knocked out of action; boarders increased to 700; the church of Mary Help of Christians was swallowing huge sums of money and Fr Rua's health came to the verge of collapse.

### The Painting of the Madonna

In the first months of 1865, Don Bosco planned a huge painting of our Lady as backdrop for the church. He commissioned it to painter Lorenzone, telling him the scene he wanted:

"High up I want Mary Help of Christians among angels; around her the Apostles, prophets, virgins and confessors. Down below people from the world over, stretching their hands towards Her for help."

Lorenzone let him finish.

"And where do you want to put the picture?"

"In the new church."

"And you think it'll fit? And where will I paint it? A space where to execute such a painting would have to be the size of Piazza Castello!"

Don Bosco acknowledged that the painter was right. Around Our Lady there would be only Apostles and evangelists. The Oratory would figure at the bottom of the canvas.

Lorenzone rented a room with a very high ceiling at Palazzo Madame and set to work. It would take him three years.

He succeeded in giving Our Lady's face a most sweet, maternal look. A priest of the Oratory paid him a visit.

One day I entered his study to have a look at the painting. Lorenzone was up a stepladder, putting the last touches to Our Lady's face. He did not turn at the

noise I made. He went on working. Suddenly he noticed me, took me by the arm and led me to where I could see the painting fully lit.

"Look at Her, how beautiful She is! It's not my work. It's not me who painted it. I feel another hand guiding mine. Tell Don Bosco that the painting will be most beautiful."

He was enthusiastic beyond telling. Then he resumed work.

When the canvas was hoisted in place in the sanctuary, Lorenzone fell on his knees and wept like a child.

#### A Farewell and a Return

In the morning of 8<sup>th</sup> October a young cleric came from Lanzo, where Fr. Alasonatti had gone to recover his health, with the sad news that the priest had died during the night. He gave Don Bosco his last letter. He had consumed the last eleven years of his life in silent, sacrificed work. The amount of paperwork, invoices, bookkeeping and the rest was such that often he worked through the night. As he had requested on arrival, he had truly gained heaven. Come September, a throat ulcer had caused him terrible sufferings.

Don Bosco recalled his figure before the students as if he had been his brother. The loss for the Oratory was incalculable.

Meanwhile at Mirabello, Fr Rua was planning the new academic year. A message arrived from Turin:

"Don Bosco wants to see you. Fr Bonetti will replace you here. Come soonest."

Fr Provera, the messenger, recalled:

Fr Rua was writing at his desk. Without hesitation, without asking questions or explanations he stood up, got hold of his Breviary and said, "Let's go."

He left his mother behind until a replacement could be found. At Turin Don Bosco met him.

"You have been acting Don Bosco at Mirabello. Now I want you to do the same at Valdocco."

He handed everything to Rua: the workshops with 350 young artisans, the building site of the church, the publication of *Catholic Readings* with its 12,000 subscribers, and even the greater part of Don Bosco's correspondence.

## Don Bosco's Mornings

By then, receiving visits occupied Don Bosco's whole morning. Visiting had started way back in 1846, growing little by little. In 1858 he could still go out about 10:30 or 11:00. But by 1860 the visits had increased so much that he was forced in his room from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. This routine went on till his last illness. After Fr Cafasso's death, Don Bosco inherited his spirit. Anything important in Turin, in all social classes, somehow or other involved Don Bosco. Fr Cagliero adds:

I could see very many people coming to visit him. They came asking for prayers, a blessing, a piece of advice for some good work, bringing an offer for his boys, or even only to see him and talk to him. Everybody came: ordinary people, authorities, ministers, rectors of seminaries and even bishops.

A lawyer who had often been received by Don Bosco would recall:

Despite the many urgent matters in hand, he never showed impatience or shorten the audience. He was respectful, friendly and affectionate. I heard many say, "How well Don Bosco treats people!"

His secretary Fr Berto often heard him comfort the sick requesting to see him. He repeated, "God is a good father. He will never allow us to be afflicted beyond our strength." To sufferers relating to him the good things they had done, he would say, "God does not forget. He will settle the bill in heaven. He's the best payer that exists."

On one occasion a very rich trader went to see Don Bosco, driven by pure curiosity. He came out in confusion, murmuring repeatedly, "What a man! What a man!" I heard him say what no other priest ever says. As I took leave of him, he said, "Let us see to it that one good day you with your money and I with my poverty get together in heaven.

### The Dome

In 1866, lack of funds stopped work at the church before completing the dome. Don Bosco hesitated for a few days; then he gave orders to replace the dome with a simple vault and finish the building. Both contractor and administrator were sorry and surprised: the building lost most of its beauty. They decided to linger for a month in case Don Bosco changed his mind. In the meantime they carried out other works. Then Senator Cotta appeared.

"Is it true you want to do away with the dome?"

"No one wants to do away with anything, but we've run out of money. The roof must be laid before winter sets in."

"Carry on as planned. The means won't be lacking. I am daily experiencing the Lord giving me the hundredfold of everything I give for His sake."

The dome rose in place. On Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> September Don Bosco and a young man climbed the scaffolding and laid together the stone closing the last course of bricks.

In 1867, a huge statue of Our Lady was hoisted onto the dome. Don Bosco wrote: "It is four metres tall, surrounded by twelve stars. The statue is in glided copper. It glows with the rays of the sun. It looks as if saying, I am here to receive my children's prayers, and to grant graces and blessings to those who love me."

But Valdocco was still in the poorest outskirts of Turin, together with the works of Cottolengo and of the Marchioness of Barolo.

# "Mad Prophecies" Coming True

The sanctuary was consecrated on 9<sup>th</sup> June 1868. Msgr Riccardi, the new Archbishop of Turin, celebrated the first Mass. Next was Don Bosco's, assisted by Frs Francesia and Lemoyne. 1,200 youth packed the church.

It was a very moving moment for all. Don Bosco's "mad prophecies" had come true. The *splendid, tall church* had arisen miraculously *on the field of millet and potatoes.* The white band around the cupola read *Hic domus mea inde gloria mea*. The altar was *surrounded by an immense throng of youth*.

Someone remarked this to Don Bosco, as if wanting to sweeten all the bitterness he had had to swallow during those years. But he simply replied: "I'm not the author of all this. It's the Lord and the Blessed Virgin that, deigned to make use of this poor priest to carry it out. Every single stone in this church is a grace of the Blessed Virgin Mary."

A few days later a Catholic newspaper made a remark that Don Bosco liked very much: "The church was built by and for the poor."

That celebration did not make Don Bosco lose his head. Had he been tempted in that direction, the pressing difficulties would have brought him back to earth with a thump. between Turin, Mirabello and Lanzo, where a third college had been opened, the monthly bill for bread alone was 12,000 lire.

### Fr Rua's Collapse

Fr Rua bore the brunt of the situation in silence, as was his custom. For more than a month he hardly slept more than three, four hours a night. Overwork drained his organism of energy.

On 29<sup>th</sup> July he collapsed into the hands of a friend on entering the Oratory. The doctor was alarmed. He diagnosed advanced peritonitis.

Don Bosco was away and someone called him urgently. He arrived by evening. But on returning home he found many boys waiting for confession. He appeared strangely cheerful. Someone said to him:

"Come at once to see Fr Rua. He may die any moment."

"Nonsense. Fr Rua will not leave without my permission. I'm going to hear confessions."

He heard confessions into the night. Then, instead of going to the infirmary, he went to dinner surrounded by a tense silence. No one understood why Don Bosco, always so caring for the sick, was so discourteous with his main collaborator who insistently demanded to see him.

At the end of dinner Don Bosco went to his room to leave his bag, and then went to see Fr Rua, whose forehead was dripping with cold sweat. He was very ill. On seeing Don Bosco he whispered:

"Tell me if my hour has come... I'm not sorry to die..."

"Die? Dear Rua, I don't want, you understand? I do not want you to die. I'd be in a fix without you! We've a lot of work to do, a lot! It's no time to die!"

He spotted the Holy oils on the table:

"Who's the joker who wants to anoint Fr Rua?"

Fr Savio owned up.

"People of little faith! Be of good courage, Fr Rua. Listen: were you to jump out of the window right now, you would not die. Now take away these oils and leave him alone."

In three weeks Fr Rua recovered. After six weeks of convalescence he returned to the courtyard, playing like a boy. He couldn't run, but he played marbles with the youngest, shooting them expertly with his thumb.

In August of 1876 a Salesian asked Don Bosco point blank:

"Is it true that many Salesians have died of overwork?"

"If it were true, our Congregation would not have suffered; on the contrary. But it isn't true. Only one Salesian deserves the title of victim of overwork: Fr Rua. But fortunately the Lord is keeping him strong and vigorous."

#### CHAPTER 40

## SALESIANS ON THE MARCH

The construction of the church of Mary Help of Christians might give the impression of being the turning point of Salesian history, taking a parallel but independent track from contemporary world affairs. At that time, Salesian history is marked by the foundation of the *Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, the beginning of the foreign missions, the institution of the co-operators, the dignified but harsh struggle with the Turin hierarchy for the independence of the Congregation, and the exhausting Roman negotiations for the approval of the Salesian Rule.

## The Other History

It would be a wrong impression. Many historical events act as the warp for Don Bosco's multi-faceted woof: Italy's difficult march towards unification, the rabid clashes between the political authorities and the Church, massive migrations, an increasing demand by the masses for better education and culture. These events give a new direction and sensitivity to Don Bosco's action.

After Cavour's death on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1861, the reins of government were in the hands of the so-called "Historical Right." They inherited Cavour's state-Craft but not his genius. Their interests wholly coincided with those of the rich bourgeoisie and landed aristocracy.<sup>1</sup>

As regards the Church they kept Cavour's policy of separation between Church and State, but not without hitting at the clergy and the bishops suspected of supporting the pope.

On the other side of Parliament sat the "Historical Left," not at all akin to homonymous 20<sup>th</sup> century movements. They also issued from the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, since only 400,000 Italians had the right to vote out of 22 million. But their programme included some democratic reforms like the extension of the franchise and even stronger anticlerical action.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Read: land grabbing. The Turin urchins welcomed by Don Bosco were the jetsam of the landless.

Before the occupation of Labium and Venetia, Italy was about to reach million inhabitants. 80% were illiterate. University students totalled 6,500. 70% of the population was in agriculture, only 18% in industry. Ansaldo, the biggest industrial factory, employed scarcely 1000 workers. Railways totalled 2,000km. The merchant navy was third in the world after England's and France's.

## **Banditry and Migration**

War against banditry began in the South in 1861. The so-called "bandits" were armed groups of people still faithful to the Bourbon dynasty, long which were disbanded groups living by looting and robbing. They all resented the new regime imposed from above by military conquest and seen as such.

The representatives of the "Historical Right" felt utter contempt for the South. Minister Farini wrote in 1861:

This is Africa, not Italy. Before these country boors, Bedouins are a paragon of civilisation.

These politicians tackled the symptoms without caring for the causes, like the rampant illiteracy (almost 90%), poverty, and the desperate rebellion the peasant masses against the new heavy taxes and the military draft at compulsorily took young men away from their families.

The war against banditry engaged an army of 120,000 with pitched battles, sieges, military courts and shootings by firing squad.

More than 5,000 "bandits" were thus killed between 1860-65. The war as won, but the problems remained.

The south, downtrodden and humiliated, began the sad phenomenon mass migration. From 1861, 123,000 people a year left home for a better 'e abroad. After 1876 the figure would peak at half a million a year.<sup>2</sup>

When Don Bosco sent his first missionaries to Argentina he told them: "Go, seek these brethren of ours impelled to foreign shores by poverty and misadventure."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Besides the heavy taxes that prevented marginal cultivators from making ends meet, America was dumping on the European market wheat cultivated by exploiting virgin lands, at prices well below European production costs. Furthermore, a juridical system that had protected those farmers for centuries, keeping them in full employment albeit at not exceptional high wages, was scrapped, and replaced with a wholly unsuited one that institutionalised the well-known gap between the rich and the poor. This disorder is still with us at the beginning of the 21" century.

## Turin No Longer Capital City

The clash between the Italian State and the Holy See resumed violent in 1862 for the possession of Rome. Garibaldi and his volunteers, with Rattazzi s tacit consent, disembarked at Palermo.<sup>3</sup> Thence they moved north with the intention of conquering the Latium and Rome. But before Napoleon III's protest and the reaction of the Italian Catholics, the Turin government sent troops to stop Garibaldi. He was wounded in battle and arrested.

On 15<sup>th</sup> September 1864, Italy and France signed an agreement. Napoleon III undertook to withdraw the French troops defending the pope, while Italy undertook to respect papal sovereignty over Rome. As a token of good will, the government declared it would move the capital from Turin to Florence.

As the news reached Turin, the city exploded in revolt. 6 000 demonstrators gathered in Piazza Castello shouting: "Down with the king, long live the republic!"

Next day a threatening crowd gathered again before the offices of the official government newspaper. Suddenly from the side alleys, mounted patrols of police pounced on the crowd sabre in hand, killing and maining.

The crowd dispersed, but regrouped and stormed the police headquarters.

Another demonstration, peaceful this time, gathered in Piazza Castello, but nerves were very much on edge. A squadron of police received order to shoot to kill, leaving ten casualties on the pavement. At this point popular fury knew no bounds: the offices of the Gazette were destroyed by volley after volley of stones, and gunsmith shops looted. People are up in arms. The minister of the Interior, fearing civil war, calls for 28 000 troops and 100 cannon. The artillery pieces are deployed on the Mount of the Capuchins, their muzzles trained on the city centre.

In the evening of that 21<sup>st</sup> September, Don Bosco gathered his boys under the porticoes and all prayed for Turin and its people.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> rioting resumed at 9:30 a.m. A hail of stones fell on the policemen defending the headquarters, seriously wounding two of them. Their colleagues began shooting into the crowd, for a count of 26 casualties.

The king, indignant, demanded the resignation of the government, naming an army general as Prime Minister. Rioting ceased, but the capital was quickly moved to Florence. Turin felt betrayed.

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Actually at Marsala, some 120km further west on the Sicilian coast.

## **Religious Crisis**

The pope felt equally betrayed. Abandoned by Napoleon III's military protection, Pius IX stiffened his anti-liberal resolve. He issued the *Syllabus of Errors* condemning 90 modern propositions. He denied, among other doctrines, "that the Church could and ought to be reconciled and negotiate with progress, liberalism and modern civilisation."

What frightened the pope and very many Catholic milieus was the grave religious crisis that seemed to change the face of the world.

The new manager and entrepreneur classes preferred to read Stock Exchange lists rather than the Bible. The new proletarian masses, rootless and exploited, took to the class struggle much more easily than to the Gospel beatitudes. Rural-urban migration, the forced changes in trade and occupation, the new life conditions and in general the tearing of the old social fabric, caused deep changes in ways of thinking, withdrawing vast categories of people from the influence of parish priests and pastors. It all looked like a rejection of Catholic traditional principles, an abandoning and lessening of Christian practice, but above all it had all the aspect of rebellion against the Church authorities, still bound to a model no longer existing.<sup>4</sup>

The crisis will reach its acme with the occupation of Rome by Italian troops in 1870. Catholics fell back on themselves, organising a kind of state within a State. To rescue their values and educate the next generation in a Christian climate, they created, side by side with the anticlerical State institutions, "Catholic" societies for social security, popular banks, insurance companies and educational establishments for their children.

Don Bosco lived smack in the middle of this moment of Italian history. He launched into setting up Catholic school. The Salesians would in effect enter a new phase of development with the foundation of such colleges.

## A People's History

Those were years of great misery for the poor. In Piedmont, workers laboured up to 12 hours a day for starvation wages, without social security or insurance of any kind. Agricultural workers brought their 10-12 year old children to market every March, to be hired by the big landlords. This practice existed in the times of young John Bosco, continuing well into the 1970s in some regions of Italy. Girls used to grow their hair into a thick braid which, sold at 18, would fetch the biggest portion of the sum to buy their *trousseau*.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Traniello, quoted by TB in BN

Migrants left in droves: seasonal ones towards France and Switzerland, permanent ones to America.

The year 1864 saw the foundation of the First Workers' International. At the beginning it had three currents.

- British syndicalism, aiming at reforming workers' conditions and politicising the workers' movement;
- The followers of French socialist Proudhons<sup>5</sup> rejecting the class struggle and Marxist communism. They tried to organise workers' co-operatives aiming at a slow suppression of capitalism;
- The followers of Mazzini, already controlling 450 workers' societies in Italy with 120,000 members.

Little by little the International would fall under Marx's domineering influence. He expelled those disagreeing with him and imposed his communist ideas.

That same year 1864 Msgr Ketteler, bishop of Mainz, Germany, published *The Labour Question and Christianity*. It was the programme of German social Catholicism, asking that the State legislate on labour and social security. It demanded a minimum wage, maximum working timetable, holiday rest, the prohibition of women and child labour, social insurance and revamping the intermediate societies between the individual and the State: the family, the municipality and the guild.

The gains of such movements and of the workers' struggle were slow and tiring. In 1864 the French government recognised the right to strike. In 1866 Prussian Prime Minister Bismarck<sup>6</sup> b extended the franchise. Workers could send their representatives to Parliament for the first time. That same year strong pressure from the Catholic Associations forced the Belgian government to recognise the unions. The recognition extended to Austria (1870), England (1876) and France (1884).

From 1<sup>st May</sup> 1866 an international campaign was launched towards reducing the working day to eight hours. There were 5,000 strikes and countless demonstrations. Everywhere police and the army repressed hard. In Chicago there were numerous dead. The organisers of the strike were hanged.

During the last decades of the century almost all the European States reduced the working hours to ten, forbade full time jobs for boys under 13, and passed regulations for accidents at work, on hygiene and work on feast days. The German government, under pressure from the Catholic "Centre" and the followers of Lassalle<sup>7</sup> introduced compulsory insurance against accidents, sickness and old age.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> 1809 – 65.

 $<sup>^{6}</sup>$  1815 – 98.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> 1825 – 64. Disciple of Marx from 1848.

Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Belgium and Italy followed in due time.

## Taxing People's Hunger"

In 1868 the Italian farming population, already poor, was hit by the iniquitous flour tax. The tax base was the milling of wheat and other cereal. It hit hardest those feeding on bread and maize meal, i.e. the poorest people. There was a wave of insurrection throughout the country. The insurgents often shouted, "Long live the pope and Austria!" The army intervened, causing hundreds of casualties between dead and wounded. But government still taxed the people's hunger.

That tax meant a heavy extra expenditure for Don Bosco's Oratories and r houses; where every day the boys gulped down mountains of bread.

## "Salesian Colleges"

After the opening of the Little Seminary at Mirabello, Don Bosco was d from many parts of Italy to found not Oratories but colleges. He accepted, always stipulating that beside every college there should be an oratory set-up.

And so it happened that Don Bosco's Salesians got themselves committed to teaching primary, secondary and professional subjects in very y schools.

How could they, born in an oratory, become in a few years "specialists" colleges of the people's sons?

The mushrooming of Catholic colleges and schools took place in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its underlying cause was the liberal policy legislation of the government. The deep dissension between the legal the real country, made up not only of Catholics but also of socialists opposing government policy, had as a result the non-confessional State school, some of them anticlerical, where fierce battles were being fought about the teaching of religion.

The other consequence was that the Catholics began to organise themselves in everything: religious associations, social security, people's banks, insurance companies and educational colleges. They staked their claim on the low middle class and on the working class, thus creating something to a society within the official society.

That is why in 1863 the Salesians began to run colleges, hospices, art and craft training centres, agricultural schools and seminaries, and why

they preferred the boarding model. The Salesian colleges, with their massive contribution of young recruits, contributed to strengthening Catholic forces in Italy and in the world.

#### "Educate the Poor"

The homes for artisans were re-named *Hospices*, but still accepted orphaned and abandoned boys only. Those for students were called colleges, also oriented towards the sons of the poor. This was always Don Bosco's explicit will.

Back from Rome on the evening of 7<sup>th</sup> March 1869, he related to his Salesians some recommendations of the pope:

Educate the poor. Never set up colleges for the rich and the nobility. Keep board and lodging fees low; do not increase them. Do not set up rich houses. If you educate the poor while being poor yourselves, you will be left undisturbed and will do a lot of good.

Reality followed these instructions, and not only in the early years. In 1875 Don Bosco wrote that the financial balances marked *zero* at the Alassio, Varazze and Sampierdarena colleges. In 1898, ten years after Don Bosco's death, the Bologna institute, headed by his ex-secretary welcomed 181 youngsters. The non-paying orphans were 49. Only 33 boys paid the full board and lodging of 25 lire a month. The other 99 paid hardly half that. Yearly income was 23,000 lire, expenditure 46,000. The healthy deficit was 100%.

## The First Five Colleges

In 1864, the Lanzo College was opened. Don Bosco sent Fr Ruffino, 24, as director, and seven young clerics. For the first five months they lived in squalor and poverty. Fr Sala, later general administrator of the Congregation remarked:

The place was bare, with half-ruined walls. There were neither chairs nor tables. One of us cooked food, which we ate on an old door laid on two trestles. The missing windowpanes were replaced with towels and blankets. We slept on straw...

The opening year saw 37 boarders plus a crowd of undisciplined day students. In March one of the young clerics was condemned to complete inactivity by illness complicated by exhaustion. The young director, struck by tuberculosis, died in July. The six survivors ran the college. Fr Sala wrote:

How much did we work! We did not want people to talk ill of the college simply because it was run by us young clerics.

Next year Fr Lemoyne took over, and things began to improve.

In 1870 the Alassio College was opened with Fr Cerruti, 26, at the head.

In 1871 the turn came of the Marassi Hospice, transferred to Sampierdarena a year later. Its director was Fr Albera, 26. It began with three workshops for abandoned orphans. Next to the professional school Don Bosco wanted a section for boys that gave hopes of priestly vocation.

In 1871 20 Salesians entered the *Civic College* at Varazze led by Fr Francesia, one of Don Bosco's very first students. They had previously started one at Cherasco, but had had to close it.

Don Bosco came to pay a visit. A crowd of inhabitants came to applaud him. He laughed with them:

"To support the boys I don't need people clapping their hands in the air, but putting them in their pockets. If come lunch-time 1 just clapped, the boys would be in a fix."

In 1872 Don Bosco accepted the Valsalice College for young aristocrats. It was a heavy burden for the Congregation. Seven priests had formed a society and opened, up a college for young aristocrats on one of the hills around Turin, but it had been a financial disaster.

Msgr Gastaldi, new archbishop of Turin already in tense relation with the Salesians, called Don Bosco and ordered him to take it over.

Don Bosco didn't want to. Years earlier he had asserted, "Not that, as long as I live! It would be our ruin!" But the archbishop imposed it on him under obedience.

Don Bosco tabled the issue before the young Chapter of the Society, and all gave a negative opinion. He also went to Lanzo to speak with Lemoyne, who replied, "Refuse. Didn't you tell us that to accept colleges for the nobility would be the ruin of our Congregation, and that we must always stay with the sons of the people?"

In the end, and in order to avoid one more clash with the ecclesiastical authority, he accepted.

The institute had very few students but a large expenditure. The Valdocco Oratory had to subsidise it. Don Bosco was bitter:

"Now it is the poor that support the rich!"

In 1887 he was in a position to buy the building for the huge sum of 130,000 lire. He immediately replaced the young aristocrats with Salesian trainees for the priesthood, renaming it *Seminary for the Foreign Missions*. The problem of conscience was solved.

## **Turning Point**

At Don Bosco's death, the 768 Salesians had 64 houses in six countries. Hospices and Colleges stood side by side. The Sunday, or even daily, Oratory remains the centrepiece of the Congregation. The cheery Valdocco bedlam had its replicas in Italy, Argentina, Spain and Brazil. Don Bosco's successors will always follow the line: every Salesian work must have an Oratory.

But starting in 1864 Don Bosco had become aware of a new need for the sons of the people: serious, qualified schools giving them a solid, Christian formation. It is a turning point for the Salesians: an increasing number of them will go to run the Colleges. Don Bosco's principle for his Congregation was:

The youth of the poor constitute the basic element of the Salesian mission. The Salesians will have to adapt their action to their needs with a quick and daring reading of the signs of the times. It is not the youth of the poor that have to adapt to the Salesians and their works, but the other way around.

#### **CHAPTER 41**

# WHAT ABOUT THE GIRLS?

The Oratory celebrated Don Bosco's name day on 24<sup>th</sup> June 1866. Fr - Lemoyne, director of the Salesian house at Lanzo, recalled:

A beautiful moon shone in the evening sky. I spent about two hours with Don Bosco in his room. The din of the feast could be heard from down below. Hundreds of small candles burned inside glasses hanging from every window and along banisters. The band intoned the music. Don Bosco and I went to the window to enjoy the enchanting spectacle. Don Bosco was smiling. Suddenly I said:

"Don Bosco, do you remember your old dreams? Here are the youngsters, the priests and young clerics that the Madonna had promised you. Twenty years have gone and we've never run out of bread." Don Bosco was moved."

"The Lord is good."

We fell silent. I spoke again:

"Don't you think that something is missing to cap your work?"

"What?"

"Don't you want to do anything at all for girls? Don't you think that a Sisters' institute founded by you would crown your work? How much work could they carry out for our poor students. And they could do for girls what we do for boys."

Don Bosco thought for a while.

"Yes, that'll come too. We shall have Sisters. But not now; a little later."

Perhaps Don Bosco had been thinking of something along the line, but without reaching firm conclusions. The decision came after his meeting with two key people: Fr Pestarino and Mary Domenica Mazzarello.

# Typhoid, Witches and the Evil Eye

The war of 1859 had bereaved a number of families living on the hills of Mornese. In 1860 typhoid fever, perhaps incubated at the bottom of a dirty well, rapidly spread, sowing terror across country.

People still spoke of witches and of the evil eye. Germs, hygiene, disinfection, were meaningless words.

Everybody abandoned the families stricken by the fever. The healthy ones locked themselves in their homes.

The Mazzarello family was hit among the first: father, mother and then the children. Within days the father and the elder boy were dying. Fr Pestarino, the parish priest, visited them and realised that they needed someone to look after them. He went straight to a relatives' home, their namesakes. He called Mary, 23, a solid girl that worked like a man and prayed like an angel.

"Two people are dying at your uncle's. Would you give a hand?"

Mary is afraid, like everyone else. After a long pause, while the priest calmly awaits the answer, she replies:

"If my father accepts, I'll go."

Her father, a true Christian, agreed. She entered the stricken house: Order and cleanliness quickly returned. Medicines and food were ready on time.

The sick got cured, but Mary Domenica contracted the fever. Within days she was at death's door. The doctor looked at that once beautiful face, now pale and drawn, and shook his head. Death seemed near. He orders more pills. Exhausted, she murmurs:

"Thank you, but please don't let me swallow any more pills. I need nothing more, only for God to come and take me."

But her time is not yet. She will have to work a lot on this earth before God comes to take her.

## Mary and Petronilla

All of a sudden the fever subsided. The colours of health returned to her face, but a diffused weakness lingered on. The old vigour was gone.

She had more than one suitor, nothing preventing her from being a good spouse and mother. But she had other ideas, asking herself: "What am I to do in life?"

She was a member of the *Pious Union of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate*. The Union, founded by Fr Pestarino in 1855, had achieved an unexpected success throughout Italy after a Genoese priest drafted a proper constitution for it. Mary was the youngest of its first five members.

Petronilla Mazzarello, Mary's best friend but no relation, was also a member. Sometime in 1861 Mary spoke:

"I've decided to be a seamstress. I will open a small sewing school for poor girls. Would you like to join me? We'll live together as in a family."

A year later, the small shop was a going concern in the village outskirts, with about ten young girls apprentices. But an upset changed everything.

## Four Frightened Eyes

One winter evening in 1863, when the young girls were all home, there was a knock at the door. It was a hawker, widowed, with two young daughters. He asked Mary and Petronilla to keep the toddlers also for the night, because he couldn't stay at home and was not in a position to look after them. There they were, 8 and 6, their four frightened eyes staring. The two women took them by the hand and lit a fire.

Suddenly, without any planning, that evening the small sewing shop became a home for poor girls. Mary and Petronilla went around begging for two small beds and a little flour for *polenta*.

Rumour spread in Mornese: the Mazzarello women are taking in orphan girls. Many came with help: a bundle of firewood, blankets, and half a sack of flour. B but they also brought more girls in need of a home. Soon there are seven.

Before beginning work, the girls say a Hail Mary. When the church bells strike the hour, Mary comments: "One hour less in this world, one hour closer to heaven." She also encourages her young charges to work for God: "For every stitch make an act of love of God."

Mary intended "to do good to all the girls of the village" also on Sundays. It is a kind of oratory. The two friends gathered the girls, took them first to church and afterwards for long walks and games.

#### Fr Pestarino

Fr Dominic Pestarino was born at Mornese, and ordained priest in Genoa at the age of 22. Eight years later he had returned to his own native village to help the aged parish priest. He spoke to his countrymen from the pulpit:

I'm looking for work, but not in our vineyards; in that of the Lord, here in church. I have received many offers of work, but I'll stay here among you if you give me the work I'm looking for.

He met Don Bosco first at Genoa, and later on a train. Don Bosco invited him to come and see Valdocco.

Seeing so many boys running happy at a school that taught work and the faith, Fr Pestarino was enthusiastic. He asked Don Bosco to take him in. Don Bosco accepted him as a Salesian, but sending him back to Mornese where he was needed for more urgent matters. But he remained a collaborator and obeyed Don Bosco. From that moment he attended the meetings of the Salesian directors.

Meanwhile in Mornese two more *Daughters* asked Mary and Petronilla "to be like them." The girls reported to the priest.

"Why not? You have so much to do that in two you can't manage."

A community was born: the four *Daughters* taught young girls to sew, and acted like mothers to the seven young boarders living with them.

In 1864 Don Bosco paid a five-day visit to Mornese. Mary Mazzarello went to listen to his homilies and to the "good night" he gave to the boys. She became convinced that Don Bosco was a saint.

Next year the *Daughters* split into two groups: one living community life, the other made up of girls that preferred to stay with their families.

#### A Lost Notebook

The people of Mornese began building a college to which Don Bosco I promised sending his Salesians as soon as it was finished. Everybody contributed with money and with work.

The chapel was finished in 1867. Don Bosco came to celebrate the first invoking God's blessing over the nascent college and the people. He stayed four days, giving a talk to the small group of *Daughters*.

In 1869 he gave a serious thought about founding his "second family." Without much fanfare, he sent Mary and Petronilla a hand-written notebook, with a timetable and a small set of rules to encourage them to a more regular life."

That notebook is lost, but Sister Petronilla remembered that

Its counsels were.' Live habitually in the presence of God; utter frequent aspirations act sweetly, patiently and lovingly; watch over the girls, keep them always busy and see that they grow in piety, simply, genuinely and spontaneously.

In 1870 Don Bosco stayed at Mornese for three days of rest and to check the Daughters and their use of the notebook. He was fully satisfied. On 30<sup>th</sup> January 1871 the Salesian directors met at the Oratory. Fr Pestarino related the progress at Mornese.

On 24th April 1871 Don Bosco spoke to the Salesian Chapter:

Many have repeatedly asked me to do also for girls what we, by the grace of God, have been doing for boys. Were I to pay attention to my personal inclinations, I

would not embark into this kind of apostolate. But I fear I am putting obstacles in Divine Providence's way.

I invite you to reflect before the Lord, to deliberate in his presence for what will be to God's greater glory and the souls' greater good. Let our prayers ascend to God during this month so as to obtain the necessary light for this most important step.

#### No Polenta

Felicine Mazzarello, Mary's sister, recalled those early times:

Often the little community lacked the necessary sustenance, even maize meal for polenta. When we had maize meal, there was no firewood.

Mary then went out with some of the girls to fetch it. She brought the *polenta* to the courtyard, inviting her companions to a sumptuous lunch. They lacked crockery and cutlery, but not appetite and cheerfulness.

Towards the end of May 1871, Don Bosco summoned the general Chapter, asking for opinions. Everybody was favourable on the initiative in favour of the girls. Don Bosco concluded: "Now we can take it for certain that God wants us to take care of girls as well as of boys. I propose that the house Fr Pestarino is completing in Mornese be dedicated to this work."

In mid-June Don Bosco convoked Fr Pestarino, who returned to Mornese, according to Sr Petronilla's memory,

not in the third heaven as he always appeared when coming back from seeing Don Bosco, but thoughtful, upset and dejected.

Fr Pestarino's report is calm, almost bureaucratic, perhaps unlike the meeting:

Don Bosco expressed the desire to cater for the Christian education of girls of the working classes, declaring that Mornese was the place he knew best. The *Daughters of Mary immaculate were* already there. They could become The *Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, for the good of so many daughters of the people. Fr Pestarino answered that if Don Bosco took responsibility for direction and protection, he would place himself in Don Bosco's hands.

At that moment the small community had grown to eight young women. Two special difficulties upset Fr Pestarino: those girls were good Christians, but becoming nuns was far from their minds.

The second was that Don Bosco wanted to allocate the building under construction to the *Daughters of Marv Help of Christians*, but the village had worked towards making use of it as a boys' school. The proposed change would mean trouble.

#### The Pope's Opinion and the People's Resentment

That same June 1871 Don Bosco travelled to Rome. On hearing of the new project, pope Pius IX asked for a few days to think it over, then said:

"Your project seems to me inspired by God. I think that these sisters should have as their aim the instruction and education of girls, much as the Salesians do for boys. Let them depend on you and your successors. Think therefore about their constitutions along this line and test the project. The rest will come."

On 29<sup>th</sup> January 1872 Fr Pestarino, at Don Bosco's behest, gathered the 27 Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to elect their first superior. Twenty-one votes went to appalled Mary Mazzarello, who begged them to change their minds. The girls insisted, Fr Pestarino decided to consult Don Bosco. Mary is relieved, for she thinks that Don Bosco knows her incapacity well. But Don Bosco knows how able she is, and confirms her in office. She is desolate.

Now the *Daughters needed* a fixed abode. But what were they to do so as not to upset the village? Something unexpected came to the rescue. The presbytery had become unsafe, so the municipality decided to knock it down and rebuild it. They asked Fr Pestarino to let the parish priest live in the house next door, where the girls ran their needlework school.

"And where am I going to put the girls and their charges?"

"Send them to Borgo Alto. The ground floor is finished and it's unoccupied." Borgo Alto was the building under construction. Fr Pestarino felt relieved: he was being ordered what he dared not ask. The Daughters made the move by horse cart, taking with them also some silkworms with which to get some extra income.

At first no one paid attention, but then the rumour spread that the Daughters would occupy the building permanently, that their number was rapidly increasing and that they would form a new religious Order. The people protested. Don Bosco called it a general mumbling and grumbling, hut another historian is more explicit:

The people of Mornese felt betrayed. The Daughters took their first steps in a climate of incomprehension, not to say hostility. And all was on top of poverty and want, which were bad enough. Felicina, one of the sisters, wrote:

The rumour spread that the girls would not have withstood it for long. Humanly speaking it should have been that way, for they lacked so many things. But Mary Domenica was not put off. She went on with her life of hard work and sacrifice. As the building was unfinished, she was busy the whole day gathering stones. For the washing she had to go to the river, quite far from the

inhabited centre. On laundry day, she took some slices of bread or even simply *polenta*, and walked to the river with a small group of girls, returning home after work. She was tired and wet, but her first worry was too see that the others changed clothes and had something warm to eat, which she prepared herself. She was like a loving mother.

#### The Smell of Chestnuts

On 5<sup>th</sup> August 1872 the first 15 Daughters received the religious habit. Eleven made their vows for three years, Mary Mazzarello among them.

The bishop gave a crucifix to each: "My good daughters, take the portrait of your beloved Jesus. He will comfort you in adversity."

Don Bosco was present at the taking of the veil and profession. Then he addressed them:

I see your sufferings with my own eyes. Everyone persecutes and derides you, and even your relatives cold-shoulder you. Do not be surprised. You have just read in the Office of Our Lady. My spikenard gives off a most sweet scent. But do you know when herbs give off scent? When they are crushed. Do not regret being so maltreated now in the world, my daughters. Be of good cheer and hold your peace, for only thus will you fulfil your mission. If you are worthy of your condition, you will do a great good to your souls and those of your neighbour.

Poverty had almost become destitution. The main course of the community was *polenta* with boiled dried chestnuts. One of the sisters recalled that as they smelled the chestnuts a couple of hours before being served, "we almost passed out."

Many sisters used a wooden board wrapped in rags as a pillow. All the pillows in the house were reserved for the young girls. Mary Mazzarello did not want the young sisters make that mortification, but she could not insist too much, as she herself had invented it.

#### Death Knocks Twice

Mary Podgy, one of the earliest vocations, died in her sleep on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1874. She was always cheerful, ready to help, to serve, to look after the sick. She had suffered hunger and cold throughout that winter.

Her funeral attracted the whole population of Mornese. Many wept. The people were fully reconciled with those girls with drawn faces saying the rosary. From that day on there was no more dearth of flour, either for bread or for *polenta*.

But death knocked again. On 15<sup>th</sup> May Fr Pestarino was reading a passage on the shortness of life to the sisters. He commented that "death could well surprise me within a year, a month, a week, a day, an hour, and perhaps at the very end of this reading..." He burst into tears amidst the sisters' general disconcert. At 11:00 a.m. while working, he collapsed and died within hours. He was 57.

## Three Daughters in a Snowdrift

The first three sisters left on 9<sup>th February</sup> 1876, going to open an oratory and a school for girls in Liguria.

A second group, of seven, left for Turin on 29<sup>th</sup> March. They opened an oratory and a girls school 50 metres from Valdocco Oratory. For more than 40 years that house was the headquarters of the *Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*.

During 1876, 26 more sisters left Mornese for several destinations. Seven went to found a work camp by the sea, for boys and girls with TB. One of the Daughters spending her life there was an ex-orphan that years earlier had knocked at door of the Mornese house leading four younger sisters by the hand.

By 1878 the Daughters were a large family, spread throughout the world. Don Bosco indicated that they should transfer their centre of operation from Mornese to Pizza Monferrato. For Mary Mazzarello it was a painful wrenching. She bade goodbye to her old parents, to the cemetery where Fr Pestarino and some of the sisters rested, and to the little house where she had taught needlework to those young girls.

Despite being Superior General, Mary never lost her sense of proportion. She continued to look after the youngest girls as if she were their mother. One of them, affected by chilblains that had stuck feet, socks and shoes together, tried to get into bed unseen, with her shoes on. Mary noticed. She said nothing, went down to the kitchen and fetched a basin of warm water, gauze and cotton wool. She brought all to the young girl's bed: "Show me your feet. Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you."

# Mary's Farewell

In January 1881 the sisters began to notice that Mary's health was declining. Someone suggested it to her, but she replied:

"For everybody's sake is better that I go. They will elect a better Superior than me."

She collapsed while seeing off some sisters leaving for the American mission. A hitch forced her to spend a night huddled up in a corner, with her clothes on and shivering. In the morning she couldn't get up. Later she made a superhuman effort and saw her daughters off at the pier. Two hours later she couldn't stand on her feet.

The doctor diagnosed severe pleurisy. She spent 40 days with high fever, away from home, tortured by vesicants that were the only cure known in those days, and that were skinning her back.

But she recovered. The doctor, however, brutally diagnosed few months of life. At Nizza she met Don Bosco.

"The doctor spoke clearly. Don Bosco, I ask you: do I have any hope of recovery?"

Don Bosco did not give her a direct reply. Instead, he told her a parable.

One day, death knocked at the door of a monastery. To all the sisters she met, she would say, "Come with me." But all shied off-they had so much to do. Then she went to the superior.

"You are the one to give good example. Come."

"The superior had to bow down and obey."

Mother Mazzarello understood. S he bowed down and managed a smile. She reached Nizza pale and exhausted. She thanked the sister for their warm welcome.

"In this world we must neither rejoice too much nor be too sad. We are in God our Father's hands, and we must always be ready to do His will."

The end came in the spring. She could see the green vegetation and lots of flowers. She loved to hear the din of the carefree running girls. She summoned the sisters.

"Love one another. Be always united. You have left the world. Don't build up another one inside here. Think why you have joined the Congregation."

She was very ill, but did not want to sadden anyone. She managed even to sing. God called her on May 14<sup>th</sup> at dawn. She murmured: "See you again in heaven." She was 44.

Catherine Daghero, 25, was elected as Mary's successor. She had joined the Congregation at 18. Mary had helped her to get over the nostalgia and the hardships of the beginning. In 1879 she had become director at Turin. By being near Don Bosco she had developed entrepreneurial qualities in respect of the oratory and the school: solidity, balance, goodness.

Under her impulse the Daughters spread their work in Italy, France and South America. At Don Bosco's death they ran 50 houses, with 390 sisters and about 100 novices.

#### **CHAPTER 42**

## A DOUBLE SHUDDER

Two events of extraordinary historical importance took place in 1870: the first Vatican Council and the occupation of Rome by the Italian army.

## Rome and Naples: Council and Anti-council

The Council officially opened on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1869. It had two aims, both indicated by Pius IX: a clear exposition of Catholic doctrine in the face of modern errors and a declaration of papal infallibility.

Three hundred years had gone by since Trent.<sup>1</sup> Pius IX sent a warm invitation to the Orthodox bishops to attend, but they rebuffed him rather discourteously.

The Protestants were also invited, but the clause "as a good occasion to re-enter Christ's only flock" rankled in their ears.

Italian Freemasonry, virulently anticlerical, proclaimed an anti-council held at Naples. They also organised demonstrations in various provinces clamouring for "implacable war on the pope."

About 700 Council Fathers gathered at the Council. On 20<sup>th</sup> January 1870 Don Bosco left for Rome, arriving on the 24<sup>th</sup>. On February 8<sup>th</sup> he had two long audiences with Pius IX, who urged him to publish and spread a booklet of Church History highlighting the pope's infallibility.

Don Bosco complied by the end of that year: he sent the latest edition of his Church History to all the subscribers of *Catholic Readings*, with an appendix on the Council and on papal infallibility.

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<sup>1 1546-64.</sup> The Council had taken place at Trent, next to the Alps, in the hope of attracting the schismatic Protestants.

## "The Voice of Heaven to the Shepherds"

On 12" February Don Bosco handed to the pope some handwritten pages of "previsions for the future."

"On 5th January of this year 1870 the material objects in my room disappeared from sight as I became engrossed in spiritual thoughts."

The tone of the exposition ranges from the imaginative to the prophetic, mixing invective, previsions and appeals often mysterious and confused. The pope was particularly struck by the following:

The voice of heaven is now directed to the Shepherd of shepherds. You are at the Great Conference with your Advisers; but the enemy of good does not rest one moment. He studies and puts into practice all his arts against you. He will sow discord among your Advisers, and will cause enemies to arise from among my children. The worldly powers will spew fire with the intention of smothering the words in the throat of the custodians of my law. They will do harm, but to themselves. You press on; if difficulties are not solved, cut them short. If you are in trouble do not stop. Press on until the head of the hydra of error is cut off. This blow will cause earth and hell to quake, but the world will be safe and all good people will exult. Gather around you but two Advisers, finishing off the work entrusted to you wherever you go.

Days go by fast, your years advance towards their appointed number. The Great Queen will always be with you, and for the future, as for the past, She will always be the great and unique help in the Church.<sup>2</sup>

Twenty lines further down Don Bosco mentions the pope's future:

Now he is old, decrepit, defenceless and despoiled. Nevertheless, his captive word still makes the whole world tremble.<sup>3</sup>

## A Storm Gathering over France

The page that at the time seemed to make the least sense regarded France. In those months Napoleon III looked like the most powerful sovereign of Europe. The disastrous war with Prussia (1870) and the massacres of the Commune (1871) were unthinkable even so shortly before they happened.<sup>4</sup> Don Bosco had written:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> In Latin in the original: *Magnum et singular in Ecclesia auxilium*.

Rome would be occupied on 20th September.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The war last for months (July 1870 - May 1871). After Palmerston's death in 1865, Mazzini acquired the ascendance in Freemasonry that he had lost in Napoleon III. Accordingly, Freemasonry abandoned Napoleon and supported Bismarck, with the clause that he would persecute the Church in case of victory. Napoleon's army easily defeated, surrendered at Sedan. Leftist radical staged a communist revolution in Paris lasting ten days, staging a massacre in which they shot the archbishop Msgr Darboy. The army quelled the revolt with heavy losses on either side. Bismarck paid his "pound of flesh" to Freemasonry with his Kulturkampf against the Catholic Church.

The laws of France no longer acknowledge the Creator. The Creator will let Himself be acknowledged by visiting France three times with the rod of His wrath. He will prostrate her pride with defeats, plunder and destruction of harvests, men and beasts... Your enemies will plunge you into anguish, hunger, and fear and in the abomination of the nations. But woe unto you if you do not recognise the hand hitting you... You will fall into foreign hands, and your enemies will see your buildings burning from afar. Your homes will become a heap of ruins soaked in the blood of your heroes that are no more.

The following days Don Bosco approached many bishops, using the prestige he already enjoyed to promote infallibility. He was especially insistent with Msgr Gastaldi bishop of Saluzzo and great friend of his.

One day Pius IX approached Don Bosco:

"Wouldn't you leave Turin to establish yourselves in Rome? Would your Society lose?"

"Holy Father, it would be its ruin!"

Don Bosco left Rome on 22<sup>nd</sup> February.

On 24<sup>th</sup> April the Council unanimously approved the decree *Dei Filius*. It clearly and concisely sets out the relation between God, revelation and faith. It underscores that science and faith, properly understood, cannot clash, for both issues from God.

## Is the Pope Infallible?

The debate on infallibility began on 15th May. A cardinal wrote in his diary:

It looks as if we are in for a difficult sailing, aboard a ship buffeted by waves, and on which everyone is seasick.

The debate was harsh, both within and without the Council. The dissenting minority saw such declaration as a difficult obstacle for attracting the Protestants.

On 18<sup>th</sup> July the Fathers approved the text. As it was being read, terrific thunderclaps made the windows shake. The only light was that of repeated lightning strokes. The text read:

The Roman Pontiff, when speaking "ex cathedra," i.e.. when exercising the office of pastor and doctor of all Christians in virtue of his apostolic authority, thus defining a *doctrine of faith or morals* binding the whole Church, enjoys the

infallibility promised him by divine authority in the person of Peter, thanks to the divine Redeemer's will. Hence such definitions by the Roman Pontiff are unchangeable in themselves, not because of the consensus of the Church.

A four-week break followed. But the Council was never to reconvene because of the grave events that were in the offing.

## The "Bersaglieri" at Porta Pia

On 19<sup>th</sup> July Napoleon declared war on Prussia. One disaster followed another until the surrender at Sedan on 2<sup>nd</sup> September. Napoleon himself was taken prisoner.<sup>5</sup>

But France did not surrender. It proclaimed the republic, moved the seat of government to Tours, but in the end it had to concede defeat. The humiliating peace was signed at Frankfurt in May 1871, after the quelling of the Jacobin revolt.<sup>6</sup>

After the Sedan defeat, the Italian government felt its hands free in the Roman question. Having obtained Venetia from Austria as a result of the third war of independence (1866), an army of 60,000 faced the papal army of 14,600 under General Kanzler.

Many advised the pope to leave the city. The pope, by then, judged his flight to Gaeta in 1849 to have been an error. Decided to stay, he consulted faithful people anyway, among them Don Bosco. He replied:

"Let the sentry, the angel of Israel, stay at his post, guarding God's Rock and the Ark of the Covenant."

After a siege of few hours, the "bersaglieri" entered the breach that the artillery had opened at Porta Pia east of Rome. The pope gave orders to surrender and hurled the major excommunication against the responsible parties. Casualties were relatively low: 56 dead and 141 wounded on the Italian side, 20 dead and 49 wounded on the papal side.

Don Bosco received the news at Lanzo, unruffled by it as if he had known it for a long time.

The pope indicated to the Council Fathers that, given the situation, the meeting would be adjourned "until further notice."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Apart from bad advice, Napoleon's defeat was secured by treason. The French army had maps of Germany, but not France. The first lightning Prussian victories bottled its two main corps with France, where the French command had no idea of where they were.

The left has always inflated the figures for the casualties to anything like 20,000. General Galliffet, who commanded the repression, reckoned that the real figure was about 200.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> In 1962 it was proposed to continue the suspended council of 1870, but it was decided not to. The Council would be known as Vatican II.

#### Don Bosco's First "Death"

The military occupation of Rome and the end of the Papal States after some 1,500 years had an immense worldwide repercussion, impossible to imagine today. Many thought it was the end of the Church.

A year later, the young, fledgling Salesian Congregation experienced a severe shudder. On 6<sup>th</sup> December 1871 Don Bosco collapsed at the Varazze rail station. Those present feared a heart attack. They lifted him bodily to the nearby Salesian house and laid him in bed like a child.

The sickness turned out to be most serious. The body became covered in small, hard swellings, while he experienced stabbing pains and high fever. Thinking him at death's door, they brought him the Viaticum.

Consternation reigned in Turin. If Don Bosco dies, what will be left of his work? His right hand, Fr Rua, was only 34. Many Salesians offered their lives in exchange for Don Bosco's. It seems that much later he said, I was supposed to die at Varazze. The subsequent years are God's gift to some of my children."

The illness lasted for two months. The news was so alarming that the Oratory received only vague-sounding telegrams.

This very circumstance gave origin to one of the most moving testimonials of the genuine love that surrounded Don Bosco.

Peter Enria, the toddler orphaned by the cholera of 1854, rushed to Varazze to look after Don Bosco. Joseph Buzzetti remained in Turin, uneasy at the lack of real news. The two started a secret correspondence. Their style is poor and full of clichés, but the affection that transpires from them is absolutely genuine.

## Buzzetti-Enria Excerpts

23<sup>rd</sup> December. Enria to Buzzetti:

I am so sorry to have to give you not so good news about our poor father. Today the fever did not abate an instant. He was bathed in sweat the whole day. He frightened me several times by moaning aloud while dreaming. I came close to the bed, but he said it was nothing.

Dear Buzzetti, sorrow prevents me from saying more. Please tell people to pray heartily, and the Child Jesus will be moved to compassion towards us. It is 2:00 a.m. He looks as if asleep. Happy Christmas to all. I will spend the festivities with aching heart at the bedside of our dearest father, yours and mine.

#### Buzzetti replied:

I could not finish reading your letter, of the 23<sup>rd</sup>. On reading that dear Don Bosco suffers every day more sorrow, grief and tears that I was unable to, contain prevented me from continuing.

I prayed hard and asked all to pray; I asked Baby Jesus to give me all of Don Bosco's pains and even death, in exchange for his health and a long life. Please go on writing. Do not be afraid of causing me grief. You would cause me more were you to stop giving us news about the precious health of Our dear father. Kiss his sacred hand on my behalf, and ask him to bless me.

#### 31st January 1872

Dear Buzzetti, our loving father's health goes on improving, but slowly. Small pimples go on appearing, causing him some pain and fever.

#### Buzzetti replied:

Dear Peter, we are expecting good news. The novena ended yesterday. Today, if Mary Help of Christians finds us worthy of Her love, She will cure our dear Don Bosco; if not, we shall go on bothering Her.

The cold is dismal. Every day a number of water jugs crack up because of the ice, including yours in your loft.

When Don Bosco truly began to improve, Enria sent a telegram.

Feast yesterday. Dad up. Come visit. Today well.

The news spread like wildfire at the Oratory. Everyone was happy. Don Bosco continued to improve, so Enria stopped writing for two or three days.

#### Buzzetti wrote:

Dear Peter, are you still alive? If you are, as I hope, why don't you keep your promise not to let a day pass without giving me news of dear Don Bosco? Stop taking me for a ride!

#### Enria answered at once.

Don Bosco's health improves steadily. At times he bursts out: "Oh when shall we enter the Oratory again!" And then he becomes engrossed in the thought of what he will experience on re-entering our blessed house.

On 15<sup>th</sup> February Don Bosco was able to return to Turin. He went to the church of Mary Help of Christians by the main entrance. The Valdocco boys and many friends were waiting for him. As he stepped in the sanctuary, Buzzetti intoned the Psalm Praise *the Lord, children*.

Don Bosco, kneeling before the tabernacle and Mary Help of Christians, prayed for a long time. Then he thanked the boys and invited them to thank the Madonna. Enria was in the sanctuary, kneeling; Buzzetti took him by the arm and led him outside. They embraced and wept.

#### **CHAPTER 43**

# THE CO-OPERATORS: SALESIANS IN THE WORLD

The project for the Salesian Co-operators took shape in the 1870s. Like all of Don Bosco's ideas it was not a sudden inspiration: it had been growing roots for a long time.

As soon as the Oratories began, in 1841, some pious, zealous priests came to give a hand. The harvest appeared abundant even among young boys in danger. These collaborators, or co-operators, were always the support of the works that Divine Providence placed in our hands.

#### Adieu to Fr Borel

Don Bosco's first thought went to the priests, whom we have seen appearing here and there in his vicissitudes. At the wandering Oratory first, then at Valdocco, despite the clash with Don Bosco's "wild" ideas and "political" stance, love for the youth made many priests close ranks behind him. Frs Cafasso and Borel occupy a special place among those faithful and sacrificed men forever linked to the Salesian work of Don Bosco.

"Shorty" Fr Borel passed away quietly on 9th September 1873. Don Bosco wept beside the expiring priest.

He looked like a small nonentity yet ten good priests could not have done all the good that this great worker of God has done.

He left nothing, not even enough for his grave. But Don Bosco knew how many times he had emptied his purse in his hands, without counting either pennies or 20-franc gold pieces.

The Salesian directors, summoned by Don Bosco for the funeral, carried the coffin to the cemetery. Priests, the youth, the band, went for their last adieu to him. They were the crowd that Don Bosco used to describe to Fr Borel in 1844: "They exist, because I see them."

#### Men and Women of Good Will

Don Bosco's thought of the laypeople next. Some belonged to the aristocracy, including Count Cays, ordained a Salesian in his maturity; others were simple workers and traders, starting with Joseph Gagliardi, the seller of knick-knacks who gave his free time and his savings to the Oratory.

Their co-operation was most varied. What Don Bosco demanded most was availability to teach catechism on Sundays and on the weekdays of Lent. Some helped him with the evening school. Others yet spent time looking for jobs for the boys, especially ex-prisoners.

There were women too: Besides Don Bosco's mother and her sister, there were Fr Rua's mother, Michael Magone's and canon Gastaldi's.

The latter had taken it upon herself to see that the laundry was clean and ready every Saturday.

That was a real need. Some of those poor boys had no change of clothes besides the tom shirt they were wearing, and they were so dirty that no employer would accept them into his workshop.

Madame Gastaldi called an assembly every Sunday morning. Like an army general, she carried a detailed inspection of the hygiene of body and clothes. She even inspected the beds, often as smelly as a lair of wild beasts.

Many co-operated with money. A priest gave all the alms he received from well-to-do parents for the poorer boys. A banker paid a regular pension, as if he himself were a boarder at the Oratory. An artisan regularly brought in his savings.

## "Day Salesians" Turned Down

Little by little Don Bosco became convinced of the need for an association of such co-operators.

He made his first attempt in 1850, gathering together seven trustworthy lay Catholics. It was a failure.

In 1864 he drafted a chapter in the Rules of his Society presented to Rome. Many monsignors turned up their noses at the term "Day Salesians." Anyone, even staying with his or her own family, could have been a Salesian. Without taking vows, they could have co-operated with the work in favour of the poor youth. Article 5 foresaw that Salesians who left the Congregation "for a reasonable motive" could have been retained as "day members."

The chapter was rejected. Don Bosco, stubborn like a good Piedmontese, re-presented it, first in modified form, then as an appendix. There was nothing doing. For the approval of the Rules (1874) he had to remove it. Today it would perhaps be considered as "an intuition of genius."

After the rejection, Don Bosco started working at something akin to it. In 1874 he drafted an outline of the Union of St Francis of Sales. He consulted the Salesian directors, who showed little enthusiasm. He shoke his head:

"You do not understand. But you will see this Union become the support of our Society. Think about it."

The members of the Union had a triple aim:

- To do good to oneself by exercising charity towards one's neighbour, especially the poor and abandoned youth;
- To share in the works of piety and religion carried out by the Salesian Society;
- To accept poor youth in their own homes, instruct them and defend them from danger.

#### The Salesian Co-operators

By 1876 he had the final draft. He called the Pious Union of his collaborators *Salesian Co-operators*. He had the draft printed and sent to the pope for approval. Pius IX's Brief approving the Union arrived on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1876.

The aims were identical to those proposed two years earlier: do good to self with a committed Christian life, help the Salesians in their enterprises, and remove evil obstacles in the way of the youth.

The means are similar to those used by the Salesians: catechism, spiritual exercises, and support to priestly vocations, spreading the good press, prayer and alms.

The last word "alms" caused a lot of misunderstanding. Many Salesians reduced the activity of the co-operators to giving money for the support of their works. Don Bosco had to step in rather energetically. At Toulon in 1882 he said:

"Understand well the purpose of the Pious Union. The Salesian co-operators ought not only to collect money for our works, but also to do their best to cooperate in the service of their brethren, especially the youth."

In his journeys in Italy and abroad, Don Bosco laboured a lot to increase the ranks of the army of co-operators. Genoa and Liguria furnished large numbers of them. So did Nice and Marseille in France. In this cosmopolitan city there were so many that Don Bosco always felt at home among them.

A notable Spanish co-operator was Dona Dorotea de Chopitea, known as the Mother of Salesian works. Her cause of beatification has been introduced.

#### The "Salesian Bulletin"

The first issue of the monthly *Salesian Bulletin* saw the light in August of 1877. Don Bosco had designed it as an instrument to keep the co-operators in touch with each other and with the Salesian work.

Don Bosco considered it as important as to take personal care of the first issues. Later he handed over to Fr Bonetti, recalling him from the directorship of one of the best colleges and member of the Superior Chapter.

To anyone who asked to whom to send the Bulletin, Don Bosco would reply: "To those who want it and to those who don't."

The Bulletin published the first letters of the Salesian missionaries, which young and old read voluptuously. Every issue had an instalment of the history of the Oratory, also eagerly expected by readers. And it had missionary news from all over the world, with many accounts of graces received from Our Lady Help of Christians. Pope John XXIII recalled:

My early years were gladdened and protected by the dear image of Our Lady Help of Christians. It was a simple reproduction, cut out of the Salesian Bulletin. My great-uncle Xavier used to receive it and read it eagerly to all of us. That pious image would preside over my bedstead. How many prayers and confidences of mine did that humble image receive! And Mary Help of Christians has always helped me.

In 1884 Don Bosco was talking to Fr Lemoyne. His idea about the Cooperators had become increasingly clear over the years.

The direct purpose of the Co-operators is not to help the Salesians, but the Church, the bishops, the parish priests, towards which the Salesians would direct them.

At Don Bosco's death in 1888, it was evident that the apostolic drive of the young Congregation was raised by one order of magnitude thanks to the action of its co-operators. Many of them deserve being called *Salesians in the world* in point of fact even though not juridically.

#### **CHAPTER 44**

## **BOYS OF THE ORATORY**

In 1870 Don Bosco was 55. The last 18 years of his life to 1888 are on record as the *Biographical Memoirs*, in nine massive volumes. The following excerpts are random gleanings from them.

#### 'I've Stolen Two Loaves"

It is break time some day in August 1872. At the sound of the bell, an immense crowd of youngsters rush into the courtyard for the afternoon snack. The two bakers in charge had set up four huge baskets full of fresh bread, shouting, "One each! No more!"

Newly arrived eleven-year old Francis was looking at the scene half mesmerised, waiting for his turn. He had had his fill at lunch, but hunger had returned with a vengeance, and he thought that a loaf was not enough. He needed two at least. But the Oratory was poor, and bread had to be rationed in 1872.

As he was mulling over these thoughts, he noticed some of his friends taking their loaf and rejoining the queue for a repeat, and another. He elated the story himself.

I too let myself be overtaken by hunger. I stole two loaves and went behind a column to consume them ravenously. Then I felt the pangs of remorse. I thought:

"I've stolen. How will I dare receive Communion tomorrow? I must go to confession!"

But my confessor was Don Bosco, and I knew how sorry he would feel at knowing that I had stolen. What was I to do?

Not so much out of shame, but of not wanting to displease Don Bosco, I ran out of the church's door and went to the Consolata, not far away.

The church was half in darkness. I chose the confessional most out of the way and began.

"I've come to confession here because I'm ashamed to confess to Don Bosco!"

There was no need for me to say that, but I was so used to be sincere that I thought it important. A voice answered.

"Speak out. Don Bosco will never know."

It was Don Bosco's voice! Good heavens! I sweated cold. Don Bosco was at the Oratory, how could he have got there? By a miracle? No, there was no question of a miracle. He had been invited, as usual, to confess at the Consolata, and I had run into the one I was precisely running away from.

"Speak, son. What happened?"

I was shaking like a leaf.

"I've stolen two loaves of bread." "Did they hurt you?"

"No."

"Don't worry then. Were you hungry?"

"Yes."

"Hunger for bread and thirst for water are good. Listen: when you need anything, ask Don Bosco for it. He will give you all the bread you want. But remember Don Bosco prefers your trust to your making him believe you're guiltless. With trust he will be able to help you, with your feigned innocence you would slip and fall and no one would help you. Don Bosco's wealth is the trust of his children in him. Never forget it, Francis."

Sometime next year, at lunchtime they told me that my mother was looking for me. I found her in tears.

"What's up, Mum?"

"Nothing, Francis, nothing. But you see: we are poor, and the administrator has just told me that he'll send you home if we go on not paying."

She cried because of the threat. I had to go to class, so I had to leave her. But at the afternoon break I found her again, this time happy and smiling.

"See, son? I've stop crying. I've been to Don Bosco, and he told me:"

"Good woman, tell your son that if the administrator shows him the door, he can come back through the church and see me. Don Bosco will never chase him away."

Mum kissed me and left. That same evening the administrator sent for me, but I feared him, so went to Don Bosco before going to him. I knocked.

"Who's that?"

"Francis Piccollo."

"Come in, Francis. How many months does your mum owe?

And he took a piece of paper. I told him. He wrote a receipt for the whole year and signed it. No one noticed, not even the administrator on reading the receipt. I was very touched, more by the delicate way in which he had acted than by his work of charity.

Three more years went by. One day my age mates and I clustered around Don Bosco, walking up and down the portico. I wanted to talk to him alone, but dared not. But as usual he noticed and took me aside.

"You want to say something, don't you?"

"You guessed right. But I don't want the others to hear." Then I whispered into his ear:

"I want to give you a present. I think you will be pleased with it.

"What is it?"

"Myself!"

Don Bosco joked:

"And what am I going to do with a bloke like you?"

Then he became serious.

"Thanks, Francis. You couldn't have given me a better gift. I accept, not for me, but to offer and consecrate you whole to the Lord and to Our Lady Help of Christians"

Piccollo became a Salesian priest. He worked in Sicily for 30 years as I teacher, director and Inspector of the Salesian works there. He died in 1930.

#### **Eusebius**

That same 1872 another boy worried because his parents could no longer afford the boarding fee. Don Bosco saw him sad and asked:

"What's the matter, Eusebius?"

"My parents cannot afford the boarding fee and I have to drop out of school."

"But aren't you a friend of Don Bosco?"

"But of course!"

"Then we'll fix it. Tell your dad not to worry about the past anymore, and in the future let him pay what he can."

"But my dad wants to know the exact sum, because he wants to commit himself to paying all he can."

"What was the fee up to now?"

"Twelve lire per month."

"Write to him that we fix it at five. And let him pay if he can. Come to my office and I'll give you a chit for the administrator."

Eusebius also became a Salesian priest. He worked in Calabria and Sicily, dying in 1923. Lots and lots of boys received such attention from Don Bosco.

#### Philip Ronald

Don Bosco had met five-year old Philip during one of the October walks in the 1860s. When Philip was ten, his father thought of sending him to Don Bosco's *Little Seminary* at Mirabello, within shooting distance from Lu where they lived.

Young Philip gathered his belongings and went to boarding school on his father's cart. He was leaving home for the first time. While a little apprehensive, he was serious and thoughtful. He understood that the little sacrifice he was making could open for him vistas beyond dad's fields and vineyards.

His first teacher was Paul Albera, a young cleric at the time. Philip would write of him:

Father Albera was like a guardian angel to me. I was in his charge, and he looked after me with so much charity that I am still amazed every time I think of it.

Unfortunately together with Albera there was another assistant, a rather uncouth, offensive one.

Don Bosco came twice from Turin for a visit to the seminary. He spoke at length with Philip. They became friends.

During spring things came to a head. Philip's left eye had become sore after a winter of intense study. One day of particular tension, the ill-mannered assistant hurt him badly.

Philip did not lose his composure. He went straight to the director and told him he was going home. It looked like a passing mood, but no. Philip stuck to his decision.

On Don Bosco's third visit, he found out that Philip was back home. He was disappointed. He wrote a letter to the young man asking him to think it over.

Many more letters followed the first one, all in the same vein. "Phil, remember: the doors of Don Bosco's houses are wide open for you."

Rarely did Don Bosco insist with a boy the way he was insisting with him. It seemed as if he could see something definite in his future. But the boy, while maintaining friendship with Don Bosco, did not budge.

In 1874 Philip was 18, and Don Bosco went to visit him home. As they talked, a crippled woman came in, on crutches and with a diseased arm, asking Don Bosco to cure her. Don Bosco blessed her with the blessing of our Lady Help of Christians and she, under Philip's eyes, threw away the crutches and went home cured. Philip, however touched, still said no to an umpteenth invitation by Don Bosco to follow him to Turin.

That "no" to Don Bosco would weigh on his conscience for the rest of his life.

May the Lord and his Mother see to it that after having resisted grace so much in the past, I may not abuse it anymore in the future.

He began to say "no" to prayer, to his mother's warnings about bad friends, to the priest's inviting him to frequent church more often. It was a true crisis, which he would get over thanks to his mother's prayers.

#### Don Bosco's Decisive Battle

In 1876 Philip turned 20. The parents of a good girl visited his parents offering their daughter in marriage. But Don Bosco was also there from Turin, ready to give battle for Philip.

The meeting was long and decisive. With a peasant's tenaciousness, Philip spelled out all his difficulties. But Don Bosco was also of peasant stock, and rebutted them one by one. He could see in Philip the stuff of a good Salesian, and did not intend to lose him.

Later Philip would say: "He gained me little by little. My parents left me free. I chose Don Bosco."

In November 1877 Philip joined the Sampierdarena house that Don Bosco had set up for late vocations. He was now 21, and to reopen Latin grammars at that age is rather hard. The first assignments fetched very low marks. Yet, with the same stubbornness he had shown towards Don Bosco, he now tackled the hard climb of academic studies.

The director happened to be the same Fr Paul Albera that had looked after him at Mirabello, and who comforted him in key moments. One good lay Philip told him he was thinking of running away Fr Albera answered, I'll come and get you again."

On 13th August 1880 Philip took the vows kneeling before Don Bosco. He was now a Salesian.

During the fall he received the minor orders<sup>1</sup> plus the sub deaconate and deaconate. Interestingly, Philip proceeded not by personal decisions, but by obeying Don Bosco's orders. He trusted Don Bosco absolutely. He recalled:

Don Bosco used to tell me, on such and such a day you will sit such and such an exam, will receive such and such Order. I obeyed every time.

Don Bosco had never acted that way with any other person. Usually he exhorted and invited, but left the individual free to decide. To Philip, Don Bosco gave orders. He obviously read into the future of that young man with the utmost clarity.

Philip Rinaldi said his first Mass on Christmas Eve 1882. Don Bosco was there, very happy. Embracing him, he asked, "Are you happy? The answer was a bit disconcerting: "If you keep me with you, yes. Otherwise I wouldn't know what to do."

A few months later Fr Costamagna came back from the American mission. Fr Philip, carried away by enthusiasm, asked Don Bosco to be a missionary. But now it is Don Bosco's turn to say no.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The liturgical reform of Vatican II abolished the minor orders.

"You'll stay. You'll send others to the missions."

Fr Rua will be Don Bosco's first successor at the head of the Salesian Congregation. Fr Albera will be the second, and Philip Rinaldi the third. Old Fr Francesia will say of him, "The only feature of Don Bosco he lacks is the voice. He has everything else."

## The Resting Canon

In 1872 Don Bosco travelled to Genoa for a short visit. He received in audience the Genoese canon who had helped him buy the Alassio property. Don Bosco asked:

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"What do you do?"

"Me? Nothing. I rest."

"You rest? But you are healthy and still young."
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"I've worked in America for many years. Now it's time to rest." Don Bosco became very serious.

"Don't you know that heaven is a priest's rest? And that God will demand of you a most strict account of time squandered?"

The Canon was thunderstruck. He did not know where to turn and get out. Next day he returned to the Salesian house asking the director to let him play the organ, teach music, preach.

"Don Bosco said terrifying words to me!"

Another person Don Bosco met was the Superior General of the Friars Minim of St Francis of Paula. He was a most learned man, in charge of a parish. "I wonder how much work you have as General of the Order

"Little or nothing. We are few, you know?"

"How many novices do you have?"

"None."

"And students?"

"None."

Don Bosco's countenance became serious and grave, his words trembled.

"How come? And you do nothing to prevent such a well-deserving Order of the Church from disappearing? Your Order has not yet fulfilled the end for which your Founder established it, and many glorious prophecies concerning it are yet to come true!"

But there are no vocations!"

"In Italy maybe. If you don't find them there, go to France, Spain, America, Oceania. You have a most grave responsibility, a great account to render to God. What labours and sorrows did your Founder St Francis of Paul<sup>2</sup> have to bear to found your Order! And you will let so many prayers, toil and hopes go lost?"

The good old Father General was annihilated. He promised to do his best to find new vocations.

## The Little Bricklayers

The original Oratory, despite the increasing load falling on Don Bosco, thrived as much as ever. Don Bosco never forgot, even less forsook it. The following remembrances are in the first person.

I arrived in Turin for Lent of 1871, to work as a bricklayer. On the first holy day I went to the Oratory, as my parish priest had encouraged my workmates and me to do. I liked what I saw. I frequented it every year from March to November, until I was drafted into the army.

The entrance to the Oratory in those days, to the left of the sanctuary of Our Lady Help of Christians, was a rough door made of wooden boards. Three or four priests and many young clerics were with us. Don Bosco came in the morning for Mass and in the afternoon for catechism.

The second year I did my first Holy Communion at the Oratory. All of us wore a clean suit. Those whose families could not afford it got one from Don Bosco. He himself celebrated Mass at St Francis' and gave us Communion. At the end of the ceremony, there was a table spread out for us with bread, cheese and salami. Don Bosco poured out a small measure of wine into each one's glass, and distributed some biscuits.

Whenever a youngster sported torn clothes or shoes, Don Bosco replaced them, patched up but in good conditions. The merry-go-round and other games attracted us, and we got gifts every now and then. Another attraction was the music played by the band.

Another young bricklayer had come to Turin with his whole family. The first day he came to the Oratory there was a raffle, and he won a necktie. Don Bosco himself tied it around his neck.

"What's your name?"

"Francis Alemanno."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Have you been coming long?"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> 1436-1507. He spent the latter part of his life in France.

"This is my first time."

"Do you know Don Bosco?"

The boy became embarrassed, and then lifted his eyes, looking shy.

"You are Don Bosco."

"But you will know Don Bosco well if you let him take care of your soul."

"That's what I'm looking for: a friend that takes good care of me."

"How nice! This evening you've won a tie, and with it I will tie you down that you may not go away for good!"

Francis truly befriended Don Bosco. From the Oratory he joined the Salesian Congregation.

Life at the Oratory was prospering with the usual throng of young bricklayers, distribution of clothes to the poorer boys, and personal dialogue with each youngster in the shadow of the Sanctuary.

Don Bosco handed down its direction first to Fr Barberis and then to Fr Pavia, helped for many, many years by the legendary Coadjutor John Garbellone. Rather eccentric and original, this man was a living proof of Don Bosco's extraordinary power for forming people, enhancing the natural talents of the poorest temperaments.

Garbellone would be the soul of the Sunday Oratory for 50 years. He had a notebook with 6,000 names of boys whom he had personally prepared for Holy Communion. In 1884 he took the post of bandmaster, which he proudly held with majestic bearing up to his death in 1928.

Don Bosco had gained his friendship by entrusting him with 30,000 lire to go and pay off a debt. Garbellone was 28 at the time, and penniless. That gesture had touched him so deeply that from that moment on he would have thrown himself into the fire for Don Bosco.

#### Michael Unia, Peasant

On 19th March 1877 a 27-year old farmer, Michael Unia, arrived at the Oratory. He told Don Bosco that he wanted to study for the priesthood, but not for the Salesian society; he wanted to exercise it in his native village.

"What if the Lord had greater plans for you?"

"If He makes me understand it..."

"If God revealed to me your soul, and I were to relate it to you here and now, would you take it as a sign that he wants you a Salesian?"

Unia did not know whether to take it seriously or in jest. He thought a little.

"Well, then. Tell me what you see in my conscience."

Don Bosco spoke. He listed good works and sins to the utmost detail. Unia thought to be dreaming.

"How do you know?"

"There is more. You are eleven, in the church choir, at Vespers. The boy next to you was asleep with his mouth open. You too the biggest plum out of your pocket an dropped it in. The poor boy, choking, jumped to his feet and ran wildly all over. Vespers had to be suspended. You were laughing your head off, but the priest boxed your ears with half a dozen slaps."

Michael Unia stayed with Don Bosco. He was the first Salesian missionary to the lepers of Colombia, in a remote area by the name of Agua de Dios. He lived among 730 wretches, to whom he restored the dignity of children of God. He died of overwork many years later.

#### **CHAPTER 45**

# THE FOREIGN MISSION

Between 1871 and 1872 Don Bosco had a dramatic dream.

I was in a wild, utterly unknown region. It was an immense, uncultivated plain, without hills or mountains. Far out on the horizon, though, I could see high, rugged mountains. I saw crowds of men going through it. They were almost naked, of an extraordinary stature and fierce aspect. They were bristly and long hair, between bronze and black in colour. They were cloaks made of animal skin hanging from their shoulders. Their weapons were a long spear and a sling.

They were divided into tribes: some hunted wild animals; others walked wall pieces of flesh dripping blood stuck on their spears. Some fought among themselves, others against people apparently dressed in European military uniform. The ground was strewn with corpses. I shuddered at the spectacle.

Suddenly some people materialised from the plain. By their dress and way of speaking I understood them to be missionaries of various Orders. They approached those barbarians to preach them the religion of Jesus Christ. I stared at them, but couldn't recognise any. They moved into the midst of those savages, but as soon as the barbarians spotted them, they attacked and killed them. They made trophies of their heads, stuck on the spear ends.

# **New Risky Attempts**

After seeing such brutal scenes l asked myself, how can these savages be converted? Then I saw in the distance another party of missionaries coming close to the brutes but with cheerful countenance.

Some youth went ahead of them. I trembled, thinking that they were about to be killed. I approached them. They were young clerics and priests. I recognised our Salesians. The early ones I knew personally, but not the later ones. But they were all Salesians; they were our own.

I asked myself: "How come?" I didn't want them to go on. I was about to stop them. I expected them to end up like the ones before. But I saw that their presence caused joy among the barbarians. They laid down their weapons, changed their countenance, and received the Salesians with extreme courtesy. I was astonished saying, "Let's see how it'll end up!" I saw our missionaries advancing among them. They instructed, and the people willingly listened to their voices. They taught, and the people eagerly learned. They warned, and the people put those warnings into practice.

I went on observing. The missionaries said the Rosary, and they answered that prayer. Then the missionaries went right into the middle of the crowd and knelt down. The people, arms laid down, knelt down too. One of the Salesians intoned Praise Mary, o tongues of the faithful and the crowd continued in unison, so loud that I woke up almost in fear.

That dream had a notable impact on Don Bosco's life. "After that I felt in my heart that the old longing for the missionary apostate had returned."

He had first thought of the missions when still a young student at Chieri. At the time, in Piedmont, the Work for the Propagation of the faith was well known. They published works describing the labours and martyrdom of missionaries, which were avidly read.

Vatican Council I (1869-70) contributed greatly to missionary development. Bishops from the Americas, Africa and Asia, whenever they went to Italy, found clergy far in excess of domestic needs, and freely recruited missionaries among them.<sup>1</sup>

Specific requests came to Valdocco from Hyderabad in India and from San Francisco in California. Don Bosco declined. He was not thinking of missions yet.

A year later he had that dream. He began a frantic search to identify the region that Divine Providence had destined to his Salesians. When foreign requests started piling up on his desk, he paid a different kind of attention to them.

#### Two Rivers and a Desert

I first thought that the dark men seen in my dream were Ethiopians. But a brief inquiry made me desist. Then I thought of Hong Kong, off the coast of China, then of Australia. The description received of the Aborigines there did not tally with what I had seen. Then I inquired about Mangalore, in the Malabar coast...

The Piedmontese conquest had rendered the entire civil service of the Papal States, made of priests, redundant from their clerical jobs.

<sup>1</sup> The Piedmontese conquest had rendered the entire civil service of the Papal States, made of priests, redundant from their clerical jobs.

In the end the Argentine consul in Savona, Gazzolo, spoke of the Salesians to the archbishop of Buenos Aires, who expressed a desire to have them there. I got hold of geography books on South America and lo and behold, I saw the very people and the region seen in my dream. It was Patagonia, an immense territory to the south of Argentina.

Don Bosco was scanning maps for a specific detail: the spot marked by God, consisting of two rivers at the entrance of a vast desert. He could not find it in any map. Only upon first meeting Consul Gazzolo he came to know that the two rivers were the Colorado and the Rio Negro, in Patagonia.

Don Bosco was thinking of missions in the strictest sense: missions among the pagans, and among cruel and savage people... In Argentina he had discovered "his" savages. "Savage" was in those days like a magic word, raising interest and curiosity. The Patagonians had always been described as giants. Fancy 18<sup>th</sup> century drawings represented them twice the size of Europeans, and an encyclopedia published at Turin in 1864 described them as

broad shouldered, with an enormous head, black and coarse hair, scanty beard, expressionless countenance, and about two metres tall. Their fierceness matched the uncultivated, treeless ground, inhospitable and very windy. They rode very fast horses, armed of lasso, bolas and spears, which they handled most expertly.

# **Enrolling Volunteers**

The archbishop of Buenos Aires formally applied for missionaries towards the end of 1874. Don Bosco read the first letters to the Chapter on 22<sup>nd</sup> December. The proposal was double:

- Take over the Buenos Aires Mother of Mercy parish catering for, Italian immigrants;
- Open a boarding school for boys in San Nicolas, an important centre in the diocese of Buenos Aires.

Don Bosco replied outlining the three points of his programme.

- He would send some priests to Buenos Aires to set up the headquarters for the Salesians in America. They would work in favour of the poor and abandoned youth by teaching catechism and other subjects, teaching, preaching and setting up Sunday oratories;
- Later they would take on the work of San Nicolas
- From these two bases they could later sent elsewhere.

The third point meant "to reach the 'savage' people as soon as possible."

The specific method of evangelisation was thus fully outlined. The men of Don Bosco would not launch into working among far away tribes at once. They would start working on safe territory among Italian immigrants, most numerous in Argentina and in dire need of religious and moral assistance. From there they would start off for their "frontier" apostolate.

On 27<sup>th</sup> January 1875 the consul notified Don Bosco that his conditions had been accepted.

On 29<sup>th</sup> January, feast of St Francis of Sales, Don Bosco gathered artisans, students and confreres in the study room, where a stage had been erected. Consul Gazzolo mounted the stage in picturesque uniform, together with Don Bosco, the members of the Superior Chapter and the directors of the Salesian houses.

To an enraptured audience Don Bosco announced that, with the pope's approval, the first Salesians would soon leave for the mission of southern Argentina. Both boys and Salesians received his words, which could have caused apprehension before the possible risk of a rash adventure, with wild enthusiasm. Fr Ceria wrote:

A new leaven bubbled into students and young Salesians. Applications to join the Congregations multiplied. Missionary ardour took possession of all.

To judge the impression produced we must take into account that the Congregation at the time still looked like a family gathered around their Head. But the burst of fantasy of that day opened unexpected, boundless horizons. In an instant it made people see their idea of Don Bosco and his work in a new, gigantic vision. A new stage began in the history of the Oratory and of the Salesian society.

On 5<sup>th</sup> February Don Bosco officially announced the first missionary expedition to all the Salesians residing outside Valdocco. His circular pleaded for volunteers to apply in writing within the month of October.

Enthusiasm exploded. Almost all offered themselves for the missions. It is not exaggeration to say that "a new era" had begun.

# The Boy of the Giants Heads the Expedition

Don Bosco's sent eleven missionary expeditions in all. The first was the one that aroused most enthusiasm.

It was prepared in the most minute details. Don Bosco got in touch with some Buenos Aires personalities, so that his sons could be received as "friends among friends." He asked co-operators to see that the missionaries lacked nothing. He himself was surprised at their generosity.

The men chosen were the best that the young, still small Congregation could offer. Don Bosco chose six priests and four coadjutors among the mass of applications. Some ended up badly: not always Don Bosco got it right, and not always did he receive supernatural guidance.

The head of the expedition was John Cagliero, the boy over whom he had seen two copper-coloured giant Indians bend over. At 37 he was strong, jovial, intelligent and of exuberant activity. He was about to take things in hand in America. It was difficult to imagine the Oratory without him. With his degree in theology, he taught the young clerics; he was the unsurpassed music teacher and composer; he could be trusted with the most delicate matters, and was the spiritual director of a number of religious Institutes in the city. His departure would have meant a serious loss.

Don Bosco recruited him in a peculiar fashion. After meditating on the issue for a long time, one good day he told him:

"Together with the missionaries going to America I should like to send one of our older priests. He would spend some three months with them until they were settled down. It would be hard to leave them to their own devices without a support, someone whom they could wholly trust."

"If Don Bosco didn't find anyone else and thought of me for this job, I'm ready."

"Good then."

Months went by without touching that point again. As departure loomed near, Don Bosco approached Cagliero again:

"A re you still of the same mind about going to America? Or were you joking?"

"You know very well that with Don Bosco I never joke."

"Well then. Get ready, it's time."

Cagliero got ready in a few feverish days.

With such good-natured simplicity, the first and greatest Salesian missionary began his task. Three budgeted months became 30 long years.

One of the five priests leaving was an ex-soldier of Garibaldi. The Coadjutors included a master carpenter, a cook and master shoemaker, a music teacher and an administrator.

#### 20 Handwritten Instructions

Summer was dedicated to studying Spanish. In October Fr Cagliero led them to Rome to receive the pope's blessing. Pius IX entered the room.

"I am a poor old man. Where are my little missionaries? You are then Don Bosco's sons going to preach the Gospel in Argentina. You will have a vast field where to do good. Spread your virtues among those peoples. It is my desire that you should multiply. The need is great and the harvest among indigenous tribes most abundant."

They returned to Turin. Fr Ceria wrote:

An expedition of missionaries to a remote corner of America, around 1875, had something epic about it in the eyes of the dwellers of that corner of Turin called Valdocco. People looked up to them as generous champions intrepidly moving towards mystery. Seeing them going around in their exotic dresses, everybody tried to approach and have a word with them.

Don Bosco said goodbye to them in the church of Mary Help of Christians. At 4:00 p.m. the church was packed. At the end of vespers he mounted the pulpit and outlined the programme of missionary action.

First, they would look after the Italian immigrants in Argentina.

I particularly insist on the sorry state of many Italian families. You will find a large number of children and even adults in the most deplorable ignorance of reading, writing and religion. Go and look for these brethren of ours taken to foreign lands by poverty and misfortune.

Later they would begin the evangelisation of Patagonia.

We are beginning a great work. It is not a question of converting the universe in a few days, not at all. But who knows whether this departure could be like mustard or millet seed giving rise to a large plant and do a lot of good?

At the end Don Bosco gave his fatherly embrace to those about to leave. The stir was great when the ten men crossed the church along the aisle, flanked by boys and friends crowding about them. Don Bosco was the last to get to the main door to face a great spectacle: the square crammed with people, with a long line of carriages waiting for the missionaries and many shining lanterns in the night. Fr Lemoyne addressed Don Bosco.

"Don Bosco, is this the coming true of the *Inde exibit gloria mea* (Hence shall my glory go forth)? Don Bosco was very moved."

"It is."

Everyone of the missionaries had a paper with 20 "special recommendations" handwritten by Don Bosco during a recent train journey. He had

had them copied for everyone. They are a distillate of what Don Bosco expected of the Salesian missionaries. The five most significant points are:

- 1. Look for souls, not money, honours or dignities.
- 2. Take special care of the sick, the children, old people and the poor. You will earn God's blessing and people s benevolence.
- 3. Show yourself to the world as poor in dress, food, living quarters. You will be rich in God's eyes and will be able to conquer people's heart.
- 4. Love, advise and correct one another Do not practice envy and do not keep grudges. Let the good of one be the good of all, and the pain and suffering of one be the pain and suffering offal. Let each try to remove or at least lessen sufferings.
- 5. In labour and sorrow, do not forget that there is a great prize waiting for us in heaven. Amen.

That same 11<sup>th</sup> November Don Bosco accompanied the missionaries to Genoa, where they embarked on the French boat *Savoie*. Don Bosco was glowing with emotion.

The future was not going to be easy. Fr Cagliero had a small note by Don Bosco saying:

Do what you can: God will do what we cannot. Entrust everything to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and in Mary Help of Christians, and you will see with your eyes what "miracle" means.

#### **CHAPTER 46**

# PATAGONIA, PROMISED LAND

They landed at Buenos Aires on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1875, to find themselves surrounded by friends. The archbishop and his priests, 200 Italian immigrants and even some alumni of the Valdocco Oratory were on the pier for a rousing welcome.

What soon struck them was to meet

good-natured people with good traditions, respectful towards priests, but extremely ignorant and needy in matters of religion. Their first letters revealed that some 30,000 Italians in Buenos Aires, and ten times as many in the country as a whole, were left to themselves by the dearth of Italian-speaking priests. Fr Cagliero and two confreres felt they were like rain quickly soaking into a parched field.

Following the plan drafted at Turin, they divided themselves into two groups: Fr Cagliero and two confreres settled at the parish church of Our Lady of Mercy to look after the Italian immigrants; Fr Fagnano led the remaining six to San Nicolas to open the boys' boarding school.

The Buenos Aires Oratory was providential, an instant success.

The city had nothing to help boys.Fr Cagliero and his collaborators were shocked. On asking the many boys around them, mostly Italians, whether they knew the sign of the Cross, the boys stared at them uncomprehendingly. On asking them whether they went to Mass on Sundays, the boys replied that they never remembered, as they never knew when it was Sundayand when not.

There were not enough schools. Within weeks Fr Cagliero was under siege not only from Argentina, but also from neighbouring Uruguay. The Apostolic Delegate at Montevideo, exhorting him to send Salesians, gave him the sorry figures: in a country as big as half of Italy there wasn't a single seminary, major or minor, not a single seminarian and not a single Catholic school.

#### What about the Indios?

For the moment there was no talk of the "savages" that had spurred them to go overseas in the first place. The true "mission" was right there, where evangelisation was extremely urgent.

Fr Cagliero identified three lines of action. First a workshop for apprentice artisans (*Artes y oficios*), which apart from being an absolute novelty would have done a lot of good; then a boarding school at Montevideo as the first Christian college in Uruguay; and finally, a social work in La Bola, the poorest district of Buenos Aires, then under Masonic control.

No priest dared cross that district on foot. Fr Cagliero entered it straight away, gathered a group of boys and distributed medals of Our Lady. He even managed to talk to some families. The archbishop came to know.

"You've been very imprudent. I've never been there, and I do not allow my priests to set foot there. It's very dangerous."

"I am truly tempted to return."

And he did. The boys rushed to meet him shouting in the Genoa dialect: "The priest of the medals!" The scene of Don Bosco in the outskirts of Turin many years earlier was re-enacted: "This is for the best... and this for the worst among you...do you know how to make the sign of the Cross? And the Hail Mary?"

Men and women stood at the entrances of their homes to look at that daring priest among their rascals, promising a courtyard with games, songs, music and a cheerful din.

Letters from Valdocco, on the other hand, urgently requested news of the "savages." The boys' imagination soared on imagining adventures among the *Indios* freely roaming those immense plains. Don Bosco had to fuel that enthusiasm, not let it flag.

The missionaries started gleaning news here and there, and their letters reported what they found. The quality of news improved with time. A letter of 10<sup>th</sup> March 1876 read:

The material and spiritual conditions of the Pampas and Patagones tribes fills us with deep bitterness. The chiefs are at war with the government. They complain of vexatious oppression. They elude the military garrisons, and with their Remington rifles kidnap men, women, children, horses and cattle. The military, on the other hand, engage them in a war of extermination. Hearts, far from coming together in reconciliation, draw further and further apart in hatred and revenge. It would be a different story if missionaries went there instead of soldiers. Many souls would be saved; prosperity and social well being would take root among the people. Missionaries can do little or nothing amidst the exasperation and hostility now prevailing...

#### Relief from Turin

Don Bosco understands. The throng of the Buenos Aires immigrants reminds him of the boys descending on Turin from the surrounding valleys when he was a young priest.

And he prepared a second expedition. Seconding Fr Cagliero's assessment of the situation, he sent 23 Salesians, among them Lasagna, the boy with the shock of red hair. They would give a big push to the Salesian work, but the effort was a real bloodletting for the young Congregation.

He wrote to Cagliero, this expedition has sunk us to our necks, but God helps us and we'll pull through.

Don Bosco's desire was not to set aside the project of evangelisation of the *Indios* for too long. He proposed opening boarding schools in cities near their territories, admit their children, approach the adults through them, and "eventually get vocations from their youth and later missionaries. Indio would evangelise Indio."

On the spot the plan doesn't work. Three Salesians, however far they ventured from the inhabited centres, came across isolated colonies, but never saw the face of a "savage." There were no cities anywhere near their territories. To reach the lands of the Indios, one had to join groups of adventurers and merchants travelling in caravan or by sailing ship for 1, 000 kilometres. At the end of those journeys there existed conglomerations of little houses and huts that tomorrow might attain town size.

In November 1877 Don Bosco sent a third group of 18 Salesians. Eight of them were very young clerics. Some defined it "a children's crusade," but the results would justify Don Bosco's foresight.

The first group of *Daughters of Mary Help of Christ ums* travelled together with the Salesians. Mother Mazzarello herself saw them off at Genoa. After this first small group many thousands more would cross the ocean.

The archbishop of Buenos Aires understood that Don Bosco was doing the impossible for his diocese, and wanted to reciprocate. He asked his vicar, Msgr Espinosa, to travel with two Salesians to Patagonia, the land of the *Indios*. Don Bosco would thus have first hand news about the "savages."

On 7<sup>th</sup> March 1878 Frs Costamagna, Rabagliati and the vicar embarked on a southbound steamship. They would disembark at Bahia Blanca, some 1,000 km from the capital, and proceed "somehow" for another 250 km to Patagones on the Rio Negro, the natural border between the Pampa and Patagonia properly so-called.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> In the summer of 1212 thousands of children went to the Holy Land trying to conquer it from the Muslims by love instead of force. It ended in disaster, but it spurred the fifth Crusade of 1218.

The attempt not only failed, but verged on tragedy. A terrific gale violently shook and tossed the ship for three days and two nights. The battered vessel had to return to Buenos Aires.

Fr Costamagna's colourful letter describing the storm was a roaring success at the Oratory, and among the readers of the Salesian Bulletin where it was published.

#### "The Cross Follows the Sword. Patience"

The second Salesian expedition to the lands of the *Indios* left on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1879. General Julio Roca, Minister of War, was leaving for the South with 8,000 troops. The military expedition was meant to mop up the indigenous guerrilla tribes.

In previous expeditions quite a number of *Indios* had been massacred. Others had been taken into slavery to Buenos Aires and distributed among families there. The remaining tribes harboured an undying hatred towards the Whites. It was easy to foretell that rather than surrender they would choose being exterminated. It was also easy to foretell that the soldiers would indulge in the usual mayhem.

The Minister of War was induced into thinking of "moral means." He asked the archbishop to send priests that might serve as chaplains for the soldiers as well as missionaries for the indigenous tribes. The archbishop sent his vicar and two Salesians, Frs Costamagna and Botta.

Costamagna didn't like the arrangement. He feared that the priest mixed with the soldiers would alienate those people from the Gospel. In any case it was more necessary than ever to pray.

This first missionary journey took the priests from Buenos Aires to Azul, Carhue, Choele-Choel, Patagones. They rode for about 1,300 km or travelled in closed wagons. Letters describing this trip were avidly read by everyone at the Oratory, starting with Don Bosco, and published in the Catholic press in Turin. One account read:

We set off with the Minister of War and many soldiers from Azul, the last inhabited settlement in Argentina, after which the great Pampa desert starts. The Cross follows the sword. Patience! The archbishop has accepted, and we had to yield. They assigned a horse and a wagon for us all. We loaded it with the altar, the harmonium and our baggage.

The first day we spotted occasional *toldos* or huts covered with animal skins. They are Pampas, semi-civilised *Indios*. Their skin is dark, their faces wide and flattened. Passing by them, we greeted them in a few words of their language, and off into the desert we went...

Carhue is a station in the heart of the Pampa desert, the border between Argentina and tribal territory. The buildings are an earth fortress and some 40 huts or *toldos where* members of the Eripayla and Manuel Grande tribes live. I asked for a horse and rode into their midst.

As I came close to the settlement, my heart was beating fast. But the son of the Eripayla chief came to meet me. Luckily he spoke Spanish. He welcomed me cordially, and then took me to his father and interpreted for us. The chief received me most kindly, telling me that it was his eager desire that all be instructed in the Catholic faith and baptised. At once I assembled the boys and started teaching catechism. With little effort I taught them the sign of the Cross...

At Carhue we baptised some 50 boys and 20 children of Christians. Would to God that we could have stayed for at least a month! But the Minister beckoned us to follow him and we left. We left half heartedly, hoping to return soon...

We crossed the desert not only in the company of the military, but also of some members of indigenous tribes, who were going to form a new settlement at Choele-Choel on Ministry's orders. In a month of travel we saw only desert and more desert.

We reached the river Colorado on 11<sup>th</sup> May. The river is about the size of the Po at Turin. We celebrated Mass on one of its banks.

I applied to go with the van, ahead of the bulk of the army to reach the Rio Negro. I rode for three days among thom bushes, careful not to have my clothes torn to shreds. In the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> I woke up at dawn, shook the hoarfrost off my so-called bed and warmed up before a bonfire. Then I rode off towards Choele-Choel. At 4:34 p.m. I reached the Rio Negro, the river that separates the Pampa from Patagonia proper. The sun was setting behind the Andes. Within myself I intoned a song of thanksgiving to Mary Help of Christians on Her feast day...

#### Manhunt

Next morning I immediately looked for *Indios* prisoners of war to evangelise them. I found them in the most abject misery. Some were half naked, without shelter and sleeping in the open. As they spotted me, the wretches came and surrounded me, men, women, boys and girls...

The missionaries reached as far as Patagones, a centre of 4,000 inhabitants on the Rio Negro, from where they returned to Buenos Aires towards the end of July.

The military campaign on the river went on until April 1881. In fear and desperation, the *Indios* fled towards the Andes and into Chile, or surrendered. One of their chiefs hid in a high valley on the Cordillera.

From that moment they ceased to be organised military units. The survivors, frightened and poor, would from then on be hunted like wild beasts, captured as slaves for the factories or just shot.

On 5<sup>th</sup> August 1879 the archbishop of Buenos Aires offered the Patagones

mission to Don Bosco, who charged Fr Costamagna with setting up a Sisters' and a Fathers' house. Don Bosco would send the necessary personnel and all would take care of the material means.

On 1<sup>st</sup> January 1880 Don Bosco announced to his Co-operators the beginning of the Patagones mission. "I have accepted, with faith in God and in your charity."

Two settlements had developed at the mouth of the Rio Negro: Patagones and Viedma. Two groups of Salesians left Buenos Aires to start two mission stations at the two. Fr Fagnano would look after the territory between the two rivers, as vast as northern Italy, whereas Fr Milanesio's domain was Patagonia proper, a huge expanse south of the Rio Negro as big as the whole of the Italian peninsula.

Fr Fagnano favoured letting the people come to the missionaries. Fr Milanesio adopted the opposite tactics: he rode, looking for the *Indios*. In a short time he learned their language, befriended a number of tribes people and rescued isolated families from the abuses of the Whites. His flowing beard became the emblem of the typical missionary. The *Indios* trusted and revered him, to the point of using his name like a magic formula when maltreated by the purportedly "civilised" Whites.

The two tactics perfectly complemented one another. Viedma and Patagones became the seats of efficient schools and colleges where a new generation of citizens grew up, honest Christians respectful of the *Indios*. The two places became also strategic points from where itinerant missionaries followed the course of rivers into valleys, hills and mountains to visit both *Indios' toldos* and White colonists' fazendas.

Manuel Numuncura was the last great Araucan chief. He asked Fr Milanesio to be the go-between in the negotiated surrender with the Argentinian government. Under the Salesian's guarantee he laid arms at Fort Roca on 15th May 1883. In exchange he got the uniform, commission and salary of an army colonel.

### "In the Bowels of the Mountains"

That same year 1883 Don Bosco dreamed the future of South America and of his missionaries.

I watched out of the train's window, seeing varied and splendid territories pass before my eyes: forests, mountains, plains, immense and majestic rivers... We skirted a still unexplored forest for more than 1000 miles...

I could see well into the bowels of the mountains and in the depth of the plains. I had under my eyes the incomparable wealth of these countries, waiting to be discovered. I saw mines of precious metals, inexhaustible seams of fossil coal, oil deposits bigger than any found so far...

The train restarted through the Pampa and Patagonia... we reached the Straits of Magellan. We alighted at Punts Arenas.<sup>2</sup> For miles the ground was encumbered with fossil coal, wooden boards, of immense heaps of metal partly raw and partly worked. My guide pointed at all that and said: "What today is only a project, one day will be reality,"

I concluded-I have seen enough. Now take me to my Salesians in Patagonia.

We returned to the station and boarded the train again. After a long journey, the locomotive stopped at a sizeable settlement. I alighted and immediately met Salesians...

I went into their midst. They were numerous, but I didn't recognise them. None of my early sons was there. They looked at me as if I was a newcomer I kept on asking:

"Don't you know me? Don't you know Don Bosco?"

"Oh yes, we know of you. We have seen you in pictures. But we never met you personally."

"Where are Frs Fagnano, Costamagna, Lasagna, Milanesio? Where are they?"

"We've never met them. They came here long ago. They were the first Salesians to come here from Europe. But they are long dead."

At that answer I thought to myself: Is this a dream or is it real?

We boarded the train again. The whistle blew and we headed north... For hours and hours we skirted a very long river, at times on the left, at times on the right bank. Numerous savage tribes appeared. My guide kept on repeating:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> There is no railway for the last 15 degrees of latitude on the South American continent to this day (2003). Don Bosco's dream has yet to be realised.

## The Last Missionary Dream

Don Bosco had his last missionary dream in the night between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10th April1886. He related it, his tired voice broken by emotion, to Fr Rua and to his secretary, who transcribed it.

The essential points were that Don Bosco scanned the horizon from a mountain peak. An immense throng of youth ran towards him.

"We've waited for you; we've waited so long, but now you're here. You are among us and will not escape!"

A young shepherdess herding a huge herd of lambs said:

"Look farther. Look, all of you. What do you see?"

"I see mountains, then sea, then hills, then more mountains and sea."

A young boy said: I read Valparaiso. Another read Santiago. The shepherdess went on:

"Start from there and you'll see how much the Salesians will have to do in the future. Draw a line and look."

The youth took a closer look and said in unison: We read Beijing. She added:

"Draw another line from Beijing to Santiago through the centre of Africa, and you'll have a precise idea of how much the Salesians will have to do."

'But how to do all that? Distances are huge, the places difficult, and the Salesians are few."

"Don't worry. Draw a line from Santiago to the centre of Africa. What do you see?"

"Ten mission stations."

"These will be training centres for novices, furnishing multitudes of missionaries to look after these territories. Now look in this other direction. Here are ten more centres from mid Africa to Beijing.

More missionaries will be formed here. Hong-Kong, Calcutta, Madagascar will all be training centres for missionaries."

At Don Bosco's death there were 150 missionaries and 50 Daughter of Mary Help of Christians in five countries of South America: Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Chile and Ecuador. An immense amount of work had been carried out in 13 short years.

#### **CHAPTER 47**

# THE GASTALDI SAGA

In 1882, speaking about the archbishop of Turin Lawrence Gastaldi, Don Bosco said:

"The only thing lacking is for him to plunge a knife into my heart."

Such a grave assertion could stop any cause of beatification. Yet the Holy See experts, after having gone over it with a fine toothcomb, declared that Don Bosco had exercised *all* the virtues, including patience, to a heroic degree. They did not judge those words as an insult to his archbishop, and not as a burst of wrath or impatience either. He was letting a weight off his chest on reaching the limits of endurance.

Don Bosco's early biographers silenced or glossed over the events narrated in this chapter for judging them thorny. But we deem today's Christians to have grown into adulthood. They will not get scandalised at verifying how even great men of God make mistakes. It is rather constructive to know all that. They not only suffered in God's name; in God's name too they caused other people to suffer. On earth we are all poor people, whatever uniform we may wear with whatever number of stripes on our sleeve.

### Msgr Riccardi's Coolness

Don Bosco suffered the long, humiliating clash with his archbishop, piercing like a crown of thorns, during the very period of his most resounding successes.

Msgr Fransoni had died in his Lyon exile in 1862. He had ordained Don Bosco, had seen his work born, grow, and had always supported him.

He had called the Oratory "the parish for boys without parish."

Political bickering had retarded the nomination of a new archbishop until 1867. He was Msgr Riccardi, of noble extraction. He was seven years' Don Bosco's senior, and a very good friend of his. He was bishop of Savona at the time of his appointment as archbishop of Turin. Don Bosco went to visit him and he threw his arms around Don Bosco's neck. He told Don

Bosco that he knew of his capacity for working with the youth, and how much good his priests were doing at Mirabello. On coming to Turin, he intended to hand to Don Bosco the running of two junior seminaries, and the restructuring of the Chieri major seminary.

But something went wrong at their first meeting. Don Bosco made clear that he had founded a religious Congregation way back in 1859, and that the Holy See had given its seal of approval with the *Decretum Laudis of* 1864. Msgr Riccardi was nonplussed. Rather agitated, he remarked:

I thought you had founded a diocesan institution, under my jurisdiction. I thought you would work entirely within my diocese..."

The astonishment and sadness of the archbishop are understandable. In a moment when after so much hardship he was trying to consolidate the forces of the diocese, rallying them around the bishop, Don Bosco appeared to isolate himself. But he aimed at a much greater mission for the good of the Universal Church, not just the diocese of Turin.

Riccardi's coolness towards him went on increasing for the next three years.

When the metropolitan seminary had been closed down, many seminarians had taken refuge at Valdocco, others at the Cottolengo. This move had attracted much sympathy for Don Bosco. The Oratory had appeared as a providential citadel giving refuge to the young hopes of the Turin clergy.

The situation had now radically changed. On 11<sup>th</sup> September 1867 the archbishop wrote to Don Bosco:

I no longer allow my diocesan seminarians to teach or to work as dormitory assistants or as prefects. This decision is meant to favour their studies. I shall also refrain from ordaining anyone not in the Seminary.

Dark times loomed for Don Bosco. Many seminarians, not intending to stay with him to begin with, left the Oratory for the Seminary. Those who had bound themselves to him with vows became apprehensive about their future ordination. Don Bosco had a lively confrontation with the archbishop.

Following your orders, young priests ought to move to the Convitto and seminarians to the Seminary. Is Don Bosco to remain alone among all his boys?

The archbishop did not budge, but fortunately the tension did not last. With a decree dated 1St March 1869 the Holy See, keenly solicited by Don Bosco, and officially approved the Salesian Society. Another decree granted Don Bosco the faculty to give dimissory letters to young clerics joining the Oratory before the age of 14. This meant that those who had grown up at the Oratory could be ordained priest on Don Bosco's recommendation without having been at the Seminary.

Msgr Riccardi died in October of 1870.

### "You Asked for Him, You Get Him"

Pius IX, who appreciated Don Bosco a lot, consulted him for the choice of a new archbishop of Turin. Don Bosco proposed Msgr Lawrence Gastaldi, bishop of Saluzzo. He was his great friend, the Congregation having received much support from him. Pius IX knew Gastaldi's brisk character, and did not agree. But before Don Bosco's insistence he finally gave in to the proposal.

"You asked for him, you get him. Let him know on my behalf about the appointment, and also that in a few years I will add something more (perhaps the cardinal's hat)."

Don Bosco cabled him at once: "Your Excellency, I have the honour to be the first to communicate to you your appointment as archbishop of Turin."

No sooner did Don Bosco return than Gastaldi rushed to Turin. He embraced Fr Lemoyne and went upstairs with him, impatient and restless. On seeing Don Bosco, he took him by the hand and they had a very long confidential talk. Rather imprudently, at the end of the conversation Don Bosco let him know that he had had a hand in his appointment, adding the pope's words "I will add something more." Gastaldi cut him short: "Let divine Providence act." Behind his humility, there lurked a little touchiness.

Their friendship could truly be said to be proof against anything. Gastaldi's mother had worked at the Oratory for many years, and she considered Don Bosco as her own son, as the two were age mates.

When Don Bosco was soliciting letters of recommendations from bishops to have the Congregation approved in Rome, Msgr Gastaldi wrote a most beautiful one:

I testify that archbishop Fransoni, from his Lyon exile, declared he considered this Congregation as a special blessing from heaven, because many youth were being prepared to the priesthood in it at the time when diocesan seminaries were closed down.

Ten months later he wrote:

Merciful God spreads his bountiful blessings here. Here one can see a specific mission towards the youth... The undersigned has seen a colossal church rise from within the Congregation, marvellous to behold. The more than half a million lire spent in its execution by priests without property is a living miracle proving that God blesses this Society.

He had also written a volume of Historical Memoirs. About Valdocco he said

God evidently blesses this territory with the many institutes of charity and piety arising there. It is enough to say that one can admire here the Little House of Divine Providence and the Oratory of St Francis of Sales.

Don Bosco always turned to him as to a brother. He submitted to him the drawings of the church of *Mary Help of Christians* for him to check it, and accepted his suggested modifications.

# A Great Archbishop

Msgr Gastaldi was a truly great archbishop of Turin. The bishop of Aosta said of him:

He was born to be bishop. Everything in him foretold a man of leadership: the ascendancy of character, the vigour and willpower behind his projects, the extent of his knowledge, the ease of speech, the fervour of his piety, Roman orthodoxy, and his deep love for souls and for the Church.

The bishop of Alba assessed him from another viewpoint:

The archbishop, together with many good qualities, had a somewhat exaggerated idea of his authority and knowledge. He had also somewhat of a quick character. At times he took a rash decision and with difficulty he retracted it, out of fear of demeaning the prestige of his authority.

The time of chaotic enthusiasm was over. The First Vatican Council had steered the Church strongly towards centralism. Every diocese was closing ranks around its bishop, who in turn depended directly on the pope.

Msgr Gastaldi was a great re-organiser of the diocese of Turin. He revived the seminary and gave it discipline. He reined all the ecclesiastical forces of the city in his hands. He wrote pastoral letters outlining the living problems of the Church, calling the faithful to a stronger life of faith. In the pastoral letter of 1873 he wrote:

Last year 40 diocesan priests died, and 14 were ordained. What do you think dear faithful? What will be left of the clergy in a few years without your help and without your giving us means to provide for this Archdiocese? Half a million people live here. How many worthy priests are necessary to satisfy its needs?

In 1877 he gave indications on girls' education:

Education may be limited to stimulating the religious sentiments of the girls, trying to make them love whatever feelings they develop in pious practice. It may be happy with images of the Blessed Virgin Mary with a nice hairdo, with lighting, altar ornaments, splendid liturgical functions, melody, fragrance of incense and preaching. All of this stimulates the heart, but takes in no account sacrifice, abnegation, or forgiveness for Christ's sake. Such education cannot call itself Christian except in the most imperfect sense, and will not produce true Christian girls imitators of Jesus Christ.

He had a strong and manly devotion to Our Lady. On the eve of his own death he went to pay a visit to the Consolata, saying,

Let us go to pay a visit to our dear Mother, placing ourselves under Her cloak. It is a consolation to live and to die under that cloak.

Cardinal Nina, official protector of the Salesian Congregation in the Vatican, was saddened at the news of his death on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1883. He remarked:

I thought that his last pastoral decisions, taken in affront towards my poor Salesians, would be an obstacle to his canonisation.

That he should think of canonisation at all means that the archbishop was not that bad after all.

### Don Bosco's Basic Mistake

Why then did such a terrific storm arise between the two? Tension was so high that the pope himself had to intervene in the Vatican inquiry that had to be called for.

Don Bosco made a fundamental error, and paid for it very dearly. He had written a very long letter to the archbishop, dated 14<sup>th</sup> May 1873. Trying to get him back to his earlier, friendlier, ways, he wrote, *inter alia*, this unhappy sentence:

I wish to inform Your Grace that some confidential information has been leaked in Turin by someone within the Government. These papers allege that Canon Gastaldi became bishop of Saluzzo at Don Bosco's behest. And he became archbishop of Turin also at Don Bosco's behest.

Don Bosco's fundamental error was to believe that such remarks would arouse the archbishop's gratitude. Instead, they aroused Gastaldi's extreme susceptibility.

At the time of the letter, the archbishop's interventions had already attained painful extremes. Don Bosco therefore erred in putting that information in writing. He irritated Gastaldi all the more. He should have understood it from the earliest days, on committing the same error albeit in a lighter form. As soon as Gastaldi was appointed, Don Bosco suggested to him, without being asked, to make Fr Bertagna his pro-vicar. At the time of the archbishop's coming to Turin on 26<sup>th</sup> November 1871, Don Bosco was beside him. He alleged having been promised by the anticlerical municipal authorities a solemn entry for the archbishop, which turned out not to be true. A balanced personality would have considered such attitude a friendly one. One beyond the limits of susceptibility would definitely consider it as patronising.

No sooner did the archbishop reach the cathedral and mount on the pulpit, than he strongly affirmed, "that his election was due to the unexpected ways of divine Providence, in no way due to any human favour. The Holy Spirit had placed him at the head of the Turin church." He repeated these words again and again, unusually strongly. It was a clear sign that he wanted to shake off any trace of "protection." It was also a sign that he did not like at all the rumour that he had obtained the appointment thanks to Don Bosco.

Some in the public had forebodings. They considered that speech as the first bolt of lightning from the storm about to burst.

The letter of 14<sup>th</sup> May 1873 opened the cataracts of heaven. Msgr Gastaldi never swallowed those lines. It is in general bad manners to tell even a friend, "I got that decoration for you." To a man like Gastaldi, "with a rather exaggerated view of authority" those words were like gall.

Four years later canon Tresso, alumnus of the Oratory and rather close to Don Bosco, went to visit the archbishop trying to bring peace. Gastaldi was bitter:

He boasts having had me appointed bishop; he even wrote to me a letter flinging it in my face. But I sent the letter to Rome, that they may see what kind of saint they've put so much trust in.

### The Press

The anticlerical press fanned the fire, trying their best to sow enmity between Don Bosco and Gastaldi.

The following are samples of their reportings:

Fanfulla, 16th October 1871:

The bishops of the Italian dioceses have been nominated by recourse to Don Bosco's proposals. He was called to Rome from Turin for the purpose." Some Milan newspapers dubbed Don Bosco "The Piedmontese pope." The innuendo was that an archbishop must obey the pope.

Turin Gazette, 8th January 1874:

Famous Don Bosco at Rome. Enjoys ready audience at the Vatican. In pope's high esteem. Has ready access to Government.

Busybody's Lantern of 6th-7th May 1876 alleged that the archbishop had forbidden Don Bosco to say Mass on the ground that he "had too many connections in Rome," escaped his authority and extorted money from the dying. And it concluded: "It remains to be seen who is more powerful, Don Bosco or Monsignor Gastaldi."

All these allegations turned the knife into the wound, but they are not enough to fully explore the dissension between the two. A factor not to be underestimated is Don Bosco's great popularity versus Gastaldi's extreme susceptibility, plus other factors worth analysing in some depth.

#### Power Use and Abuse

The archbishop did great things towards reorganising the diocese. But the human price he demanded was high: suspensions, harsh moods, arguable decisions and hateful methods.

As the years went by things got worse. He quite gingerly suspended priests from saying Mass or hearing confessions, both extremely severe ecclesiastical penalties. Many sued him in the Roman courts of the Curia. By February 1878 there were about 30 court cases involving Gastaldi and his Turin priests.

In the very early days, when things were not that bad yet, Don Bosco had interceded on behalf of a canon of Chieri, a little stubborn but a good man after all. The archbishop had suspended him all the same from saying Mass and hearing confessions. It was such a scandal that the poor man had to leave town.

The most dramatic case was Canon Bertagna's, once recommended by Don Bosco as pro-vicar. After 22 years of teaching moral theology at the Priest's residence, he was suddenly sacked without explanation. It was September 1876. He bore it in silence and withdrew to his native Castelnuovo. The residence was closed down. The humiliation made Fr Bertagna sick. Three years later the bishop of Asti appointed him his Vicar General. He enjoyed the highest reputation as a moral theologian. In 1884 Cardinal Alimonda, Gastaldi's successor, consecrated him auxiliary bishop and nominated him rector of the Major Seminary.

A well-known Roman Jesuit remarked that he had to mend many fences between Gastaldi and the powers that be, and that in Rome they were fed up with the whole business.

It does not follow though that Gastaldi was a fire-eater. As a person he was humble, generous and kind. He was a true golden heart. But as soon as he had to deal with people under his archiepiscopal authority, he became authoritarian and inflexible. Here are many examples in the history of the Church.¹ Such people become "pitiless in the name of God." They represent more the Almighty than the carpenter Son of God servant of servants, washing his servants' feet and accepting being crucified.

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most notorious historical precedent is that of pope Urban VI (1378-89), who unleashed the Great Schism of the West by identical methods

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## Indiscipline to Begin With

Gastaldi was as inflexible in regard of the young Salesian Congregation. He was perhaps harder, owing to the fear of appearing as "a creature of Don Bosco."

He tackled first the alleged "indiscipline" at the Oratory. He was disgusted by the volcanic fervour of the Oratory and of the Salesian Society. Don Bosco controlled the lot with certain ease, but to outsiders it looked like a noisy chaos of disorganised forces. In a not too distant future, they may have required painful interventions by the lawful authorities.

There were other people in Turin with a negative impression of that climate of serene familiarity that was in fact Don Bosco's pride and joy. Monsignor Cajetan Tortone, Charge d'Affairs of the Holy See to the Turin government, had drafted a long report in 1868:

I proved a painful impression at the hour of recreation. Young clerics mixed with apprentice tailors, carpenters, shoemakers, etc. They ran, played, and jumped together with little decorum... Good Don Bosco, content with their being recollected in church, cares little about imbuing them with the sense of dignity becoming to the priestly state they intend to embrace.

According to the Monsignor, Don Bosco should have taught the young clerics "to keep distances" from vulgar tailors and shoemakers. Nothing was farther from Don Bosco's sensitivity.

## A Further Motive of Tension

It seems that Msgr Gastaldi had thought of tackling that "indiscipline" personally. There are two mysterious episodes not fully understood, but that perhaps reveal something about that tension.

Don Bosco fell sick at Varazze soon after the archbishop's entry in Turin. Gastaldi asked for news, and on hearing about the seriousness of the sickness he called Fr Cagliero:

"How many are you firm and resolved in your vocation?"

"More than 150."

"What would happen if your father Don Bosco died?"

"We would find an uncle in his stead.

"Right, right. But let's hope God keeps him."

Fr Cagliero had the impression that in case of Don Bosco's death, the Salesians would go to him for leadership. A canon whom Cagliero told about the meeting, commented: "Just as well you didn't say more! Anything definite would have hurt the Congregation."

When Don Bosco returned from Varazze, recovered, the archbishop went to greet him. As the boys were getting ready to offer the archbishop a brief reception, they saw him going downstairs in agitated pace. Don Bosco could hardly keep up with him. He paid no attention to the cheers of the boys. He went straight to the carriage without saying goodbye and left. Canon Anfossi asked Don Bosco:

"The reception did not end well. Was anything the matter?"

"What can we do? The archbishop would very much like to be the head of the Congregation, and this is impossible. In any case we shall see..."

What did the archbishop propose? The most probable opinion is that he asked Don Bosco to retrace his steps and to turn the Salesians into a diocesan Congregation under episcopal direction. He could have even asked to become its head. In 1874 he wrote to Cardinal Bizzarri:

Don Bosco has a special talent to bring up the lay youth, but he does not seem to have an equal talent for the young clerics.

The archbishop felt himself to have such talent. He would have taken the Congregation in his hands, leaving Don Bosco as the "good papa" of the Oratory.

Seeing that there was nothing doing in that direction, he undertook to impose an iron discipline on the Salesians, soon degenerating into true persecution. He labelled every imperfection or delay as "disobedience," "revolt," and "indiscipline."

It would be in bad taste to go into details. Quarrels, after all, are just quarrels.

# Final Approval of the Rule

Don Bosco left for Rome on 30<sup>th</sup> December 1873. After exhausting delays and second thoughts, the final approval of the Salesian rules was debated at the Holy See.

The pope appointed a committee of four cardinals.

They argued and corrected the text until April. Msgr Gastaldi intervened against the approval with the letter to Cardinal Bizzarri quoted above: Don Bosco could direct lay youth, but not clerics or priests.

The committee cast their final vote at the beginning of April: three votes were in favour, one against. Pius IX was informed that the solution of the debate lacked one vote. He said:

"That vote's mine."

It was 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1873. Ten days later the decree of final approval was made public. The Congregation was solidly under the pope, who granted

Don Bosco a 10-year faculty to issue dimissory letters for any Salesian to be ordained priest.

Nothing changed in Turin.

### The Blacklist

On 16<sup>th</sup> December 1876 Don Bosco wrote a letter to Cardinal Ferrieri listing the main points of friction with the archbishop.

- In September of 1875 Don Bosco had been suspended from hearing confessions. Canon Zappata commented that such measure was appropriate for a drunkard. Don Bosco had to leave Turin, as his boys used to go to him for confession. No reason was ever given for such a harsh measure.
- Prohibition to preach Spiritual Exercises to outside teachers;
- Some Salesian priests saw their permit to preach withdrawn;
- Refusal to participate to the most solemn ceremonies at the Oratory, and prohibition to invite Prelates other than himself. The first missionary expedition had left without the bishop's presence;
- Refusal to administer Confirmation to the boys of the Oratory and prohibition for any other bishop to administer it.

Don Bosco concluded: "Such measures suppose grave motives unknown to us, and give scandal in the city."

On 25th March 1878 Don Bosco wrote to cardinal Argil with a new list of abuses:

- Don Bosco was threatened with immediate suspension from hearing confession were he to write anything
  against the archbishop, except in letters to the pope, the cardinal Secretary of State, or the Cardinal Prefect
  for the Religious;
- A number of Salesian priests had been under suspension for more than eight months;
- Refusal to ordain priests for the Congregation, with grave hurt for the houses and the missions.

Msgr Gastaldi also sent his information to Rome. Any unfavourable report on Don Bosco was forwarded to cardinals without first-hand information about the facts.

Cardinal Ferrieri, for instance, opposed the Salesians for the whole of his life, thinking them to be "an artificial and temporary jumble of people."

What caused Don Bosco most sorrow, though, was that Pius IX, his great friend and protector from the beginning, was cooling towards him. The constant depicting of Don Bosco as a stubborn, almost lawless, man, was beginning to have its influence on the pope too.

Pius IX died on 7<sup>th</sup> February 1878. Don Bosco was in Rome, knocking here and there to have an audience. He was not able to see the pope.

#### Leo XIII Tests Don Bosco

On 16<sup>th</sup> March Don Bosco had his first audience with Leo XIII, elected pope on 20<sup>th</sup> February. He wrote a triumphal report: the pope had accepted being nominated a co-operator, had recognised the finger of God in the Salesian work and warmly blessed the missionaries. But about the wrangle with the archbishop of Turin he "was waiting for an official report of the Congregation for the Religious."

In private talks with his Salesians Don Bosco was less triumphant. He clearly related how much he had suffered with obstructed audiences, intercepted letters, and opposition, both covert and overt from many quarters, harsh and mortifying words.

Pope Leo was evidently aware of the grave controversy hanging over the Turin priest's head, and if outwardly he handled him with kid gloves, he proceeded cautiously to see clearly into the matter. Around him, Don Bosco's enemies were many and seasoned.

One of Don Bosco's most trusted friends, at the time, was Cardinal Alimonda. He strove to prove Don Bosco's sanctity to pope Leo XIII. He chose a difficult test, for the mettle of that poor priest to shine through.

The church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was under construction in Rome. Despite the pope's personal commitment, numerous appeals to the episcopate and fundraising in many nations, the works had stopped at ground level.

Pope Leo was dejected. Alimonda intervened:

"Holy Father, I think I have a sure way of succeeding."

"What?"

"Give it to Don Bosco."

"Will he accept?"

"Your Holiness, I know Don Bosco. His devotion to the pope is boundless. If your Holiness proposes it to him, I am sure he will accept."

Don Bosco, 65 at the time, was deep in financial troubles. He was building two churches: St John the Europetet in Turin and Mary Help of Christians

in Vallecrosia. Besides, he was committed to the construction of Salesian houses at Marseilles, Nice and Spezia.

Pope Leo summoned him on 5<sup>th</sup> April 1880. He told Don Bosco that accepting the project would have been "a holy and most pleasing thing" for the pope. Don Bosco answered:

"The pope's desire is to me an order I accept what your Holiness wants most graciously to entrust me with."

"But I will not be able to give you money."

"Neither do I ask for it. All I ask is your blessing and your permission to build an Oratory next to the church. Many poor youth of that neglected neighbourhood will be able to apprentice themselves to the arts and crafts."

"Agreed. I bless you and all those who will contribute to this holy enterprise."

#### Trial at the Vatican

The wrangle with the archbishop took a worse turn. To defend his Congregation, Don Bosco had to bring a legal suit to the Vatican for a proper trial.

One of the witnesses at Don Bosco's process of beatification was Lorenzina Maze de la Roche, niece of archbishop Gastaldi. She declared under oath:

Beginning in 1873 a most painful controversy developed between Don Bosco and my venerated uncle Msgr Gastaldi. I came to learn about such dissensions both from what was public and from what Don Bosco himself was confiding to my mother and me.

He exhorted us to find ways and means to inform the archbishop directly of the rumours spreading among the clergy, and in the Press, directed at sowing discord between the two parties and hurt both. These controversies were like a constant thorn in my mother's heart and mine...

Whenever Don Bosco spoke with the two of us we could see how intensely he suffered from all these trials... but he always spoke about the archbishop with such respect and charity as to leave both of us edified.

In my personal diary I had written: "Why did my Monsignor uncle change like that? Whoever did take it upon himself to cause such a discord, must surely prove a terrific remorse."

With these last words I alluded to the secretary of my uncle, Dr Thomas Chiuso, long dead. Whenever I was invited to dinner by my uncle the archbishop, I heard his secretary utter frequent gibes and sarcasms directed at the Valdocco people: "those down there," he used to say.

I wrote to Don Bosco the following words in my diary: With all the good will to be strong and to pluck up courage in adversities, there comes a moment when a disgust

on top of another cause the poor stomach to take notice and break down. Never in my life I saw Don Bosco change countenance, but on that occasion, as he was speaking, he alternatively paled and blushed...

On the other hand I must also testify that my venerated uncle, when speaking to me, showed to be very sorry, not so much by word of mouth but by his painful expression, that his relations with Don Bosco were no longer what they used to be at the beginning of the Oratory.

Eight cardinals debated the suit between Don Bosco and the archbishop in the Vatican on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1881. Two voted for the archbishop, four for Don Bosco. On reading the report, the pope blocked the debate. He addressed Nina, cardinal protector of the Salesians:

"Authority must be safeguarded. Don Bosco is so virtuous that he will accept anything."

It was the second card played by Leo XIII to test Don Bosco's sanctity.

### The Bitter Chalice

Pope Leo himself stated the conditions for peace. Wrapped in fine diplomatic language, the substance was that Don Bosco had to write a letter to the archbishop asking for forgiveness, and the archbishop had to reply that he was happy to bury the hatchet.

Don Bosco swallowed bitter. He gathered the Chapter of the Congregation and read the pope's text to their general consternation. Some asked for time to think about it. Fr Cagliero cut the Gordian knot with his usual frankness.

"The pope has spoken and we must obey. He knows Don Bosco and that he can trust him. There's nothing to wait for: let's obey and that's it."

Don Bosco wrote the letter. The answer was: "I heartily grant the implored forgiveness."

Soon afterwards Don Bosco opened his heart in a letter to Cardinal Nina. Besides exposing the bitter pill he had had to swallow, he listed some of the sad consequences of the decision:

In the Curia their gloat over the humiliation imposed on Don Bosco. Such rumours, badly inflated and spread, dishearten the poor Salesians. Already two directors of houses have asked to leave, as the Congregation appears to them as the laughing stock of the authorities. Some priests and young clerics have asked the same thing. Nevertheless I want to keep rigorous silence, as I have already inform your Eminence.

### Serene but Destroyed

From that moment on, Leo XIII had nothing but exquisite kindness towards Don Bosco. He appointed Cagliero first Salesian bishop, and granted in perpetuity the necessary privileges that would make the Congregation independent of the bishops for the ordination of its priests.

At his election he had found hostility in the Vatican towards Don Bosco. With two tests he took the measure of his sanctity.

To test a rock for gold, it is heated in a crucible at melting temperature. If gold comes out, it has value, if not, it is dross. That happened to Don Bosco. The finest gold came out, but his human frame was reduced to cinders. From 1884 onwards he was like a shadow of himself.

It cost him beyond measure to have to beg the forgiveness of a man who had been scourging him for ten years. He was not born to offer the other cheek.

The church of the Sacred Heart, which would cost 1.5 million lire, exhausted him during his declining years. He obeyed out of faith in Christ's Vicar and for love of his Congregation that absolutely needed the pope's esteem.

Don Bosco came out of the two tests serene, but destroyed. His Congregation flourished so much precisely because it was born of a crucified priest.

#### **CHAPTER 48**

# TO FRANCE AND SPAIN

The "cross of the Sacred Heart" began to weigh on Don Bosco.

He began by sending two Salesians to Rome, to assess the state of the works and to control the expenditure. It was customary in Rome to filch cuts from papal contracts. Don Bosco sent pressing notes to the two priests asking them to control provisions, prices, moving materials, stolen items and workers' performance. He also suggested employing a professional clerk of works.

Then he set in motion a proven fundraising method: multilingual circulars, raffles, subscriptions, and personal letters. It was not a magic wand. It entailed hard toil, humiliations, controls and overwork for many confreres. Don Bosco took the bulk of the work on himself.

# "It's On My Shoulders"

At Don Bosco's process of beatification Fr Rua testified as an eyewitness.

It was painful to see him climbing *up* and down stairs begging for alms and submitting to heavy humiliations. He suffered so much that at times, in the intimacy with his people, he would comment on his bent back by saying, *the Sacred Heart church is on my back*, or jokingly adding, *They say that the Church is being persecuted*. I can say that the church persecutes me! Aged and in poor health, it is possible to affirm that that work sapped the greater part of his strength.

The greatest effort was his trip to France where he went begging from city to city from 31<sup>st</sup> January to 31<sup>st</sup> May 1883.

At 68, Don Bosco had five years more to live. His Congregation had grown large, while the world was undergoing a deep restructuring in ideas and institutions. Don Bosco would have needed that time to sit down and think a synthesis of his thought and intuitions that might remain as a stable basis for his works. He should also have thought of the new social context in which his Congregations would operate in the future, solid and stable.

Instead, he was forced to go begging during the last years of his life, and not for poor youth, but for a church in Rome, which from the roof downwards turned out to be a disconcerting affair.

But the two trips forcing him to France and Spain, precisely during these "squandered" years raised a triumph around him: the "man of God" succeeded in reviving "the sense of God" in the masses of the people.

Marx<sup>1</sup> had defined religion as "the opium of the people." Anarchist Bakunin<sup>2</sup> demanded an open profession of atheism from his adepts. The 1871 Paris Commune had recently manifested undoubted signs of militant atheism. The Church no longer faced small sectors of unbelief, but a worrying exodus of large social strata from religious practice and obedience.

Society as a whole was losing the sense of God and of the divine respect for human life. In the days of the Commune, for instance, atheistic communards' pitilessness had found its match in the bourgeois' artillery suppressing the Commune with whiffs of grapeshot mowing down mostly workers.

This last effort of Don Bosco was therefore not in favour of a church or of poor youth, but of an entire generation that risked losing the sense of God and the greatest human values. This generation, in France and in Spain, rediscovered the "sense of God" and "of spending oneself for the others" in Don Bosco.

#### Paris at White Heat

When Don Bosco set off he was almost blind, his varicose veins hardly allowing him to stand on his feet. His body was worn out. In two months and 19 days he reached Paris via Nice, Toulon, Marseille, Avignon, Lyon and Moulin.

No one, he least of all, foresaw the extraordinary emotion, the enthusiasm, the crowds and the resurgence of faith that a poor country priest would provoke.

Some "prudent" had counselled, "Don't go to France. In Paris they are building "their own" Sacred Heart church at Montmartre. It has cost millions and it's still unfinished. Who's going to give you a penny?"

Don Bosco gave such people the lie once again. At Avignon the crowd began at the station. People ran behind his carriage. Armed with scissors, they cut off bits from the hem of his cassock. They had to look for a new one in a hurry.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, 1818-83 is best known for his Communist Manifesto (1848) and his Kapital (1864).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> 1814-76. He opposed Marx at the First International.

At Lyon the churches were packed. They surrounded him, slowed down his carriage and blocked that of his hosts. An irritated coachman was heard saying, "It'd be better to carry the devil than this priest."

There was fear of a fiasco in Paris. Italy had just switched allegiance, from France to Austria and Germany, with the treaty of the Triple Alliance. And besides Don Bosco's being Italian, the French government was very much anticlerical.

Touchy Paris welcomed the apostle of the poor with white heat fervour. He arrived on April 19<sup>th</sup> lodging at friends', but received people elsewhere not to inconvenience them.

Everybody was saying, "He's a saint," despite the danger that such affirmation could be put on the spot. He let himself be photographed, alone or in groups. To those who reproached him for it, he said, *It's a good means, not to let myself known, but to get people interested in my work.* And he facilitated information to his biographers. Dr D'Espiney's book, even though full of inaccuracies, sold 50,000 copies in a few months.

### A Photo Portrait

In a photo taken in those days Don Bosco's face appears old and worn out, as if made of papier-mâché. His forehead is deeply furrowed. The mouth shows utter exhaustion. His eyes, sunk behind thick eyebrows, let through a gaze that looks almost blind. The man behind that look knows the meaning of suffering. He is acquainted not only with his own, but also with that of people he had made his own, to lessen life's hardship and give them a vision of heaven at the moment of death. At first glance, that portrait was meant more to raise compassion than enthusiasm.

Don Bosco's hands also appear in the portrait. They are an honest worker's hands, which blessed the sick, caressed children, and gave back health like the Lourdes waters. The Parisians saw those hands operate. They did not feel pity for him; they asked Don Bosco to have pity on them. They saw in him the envoy of hope, the providential dispenser of cures and graces.

The throngs in the capital city were the same as in the provinces, only harsher and more exhausting on him. The press commented:

Le Figan. "Outside the house of Ville-l' Eveque, where he gives audience, there are lines of carriages every day, for the whole week. Ladies of the nobility beg his miracles for themselves and for their relatives. They say that he performs them most easily."

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> First French biographer of Don Bosco

Le Pelerin: "They recounted miracles, or invented them. High society ladies went in search of the saint who cares little about the applause of the world, who prepares the homily at the Madeleine as much as he prepares a short speech to a beggar, and who gives to a worker as much of his time as to a prince."

# Don Bosco's Parisian Day

He rose at 5:00 a.m. and retired at midnight, exhausted. Visits began at 6:00 a.m. Then he went to say Mass in some church. He was always waylaid at the exit, besieged with question, persecuted by requests, surrounded by supplications and demands. E very body wanted to talk to him, touch or at least have a good look at him.

They stopped him on staircases, in waiting rooms, at sacristy doors or in the streets. To his regret he was always late for appointments. His French is bad, with a foreign accent. His eloquence is modest.

One day he was getting ready to say Mass at the *Arch-confraternity for the conversion of sinners* before a huge crowd. To someone who wanted to enter, but couldn't, a woman remarked, "We've come to hear Mass. It is the Mass for sinners, but a Saint will celebrate it."

Some asked for miracles. He answered: "I'm a poor sinner. Pray for me. But we shall pray together to Mary Help of Christians. She heals, listens, understands, and has compassion. She answers from heaven. I can only pray to Her."

But when the "poor sinner" prayed to Her, She always answered as if She were at his beck and call.

The top religious authorities welcomed him cordially. Cardinal Lavigerie<sup>4</sup> waited for him at St Peter's church, recommending him to the people's generosity. He called Don Bosco "the St Vincent de Paul<sup>5</sup> of Italy.

Not only rich families responded to his appeal, but also the poor. Everybody gave. He received banknotes, coins, gold pieces, even jewels. There came a moment when he did not know where to put all that stuff.

He went to Lille and Amiens for a week. The enthusiasm was the same. Before the terrible scissors that reduced his cassock to shreds he would murmur, 'Not all mad people are in the madhouse!"

Returning to Turin by train, Frs Rua and De Barruel, who were with him, were still dumbstruck at the days just gone by. It was like a dream that they would never forget. Don Bosco reminisced with them about the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> 1825-92. Founder of the White Fathers. He died as archbishop of Algiers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> 1580-1660. Founder of a religious order for the care of the underprivileged, indifferently known as Paulists, Vincentians or Lazarists.

days when he was herding two cows from Becchi, his rural home. If all those aristocrats knew that they brought a poor peasant of Becchi in triumph...

### Peace Comes with the Cardinal

The new archbishop of Turin, Cajetan Cardinal Alimonda, entered Turin almost incognito on 18<sup>th</sup> November 1883. Pope Leo XIII would say to Don Bosco in a 1884 audience:

"In sending him, I thought of you. The cardinal loves you very much."

His benevolence was for Don Bosco a providential comfort in the last four years of his life.

Soon after the archbishop's arrival, Don Bosco asked for an audience. The cardinal drove to Valdocco in his carriage.

"To save time, I've come instead."

It was 10:30 a.m. The meeting, in Don Bosco's little room, lasted more than one hour. In the meantime the boys were informed in the workshops and classrooms. Someone laid buntings along the balconies. The musicians rushed for their instruments. When the cardinal stepped on the balcony, the band played and the boys applauded. The archbishop smiled:

"Dear children, thank you. I bless you and recommend myself to your prayers."

Then he visited the workshops and prayed before the picture of Mary Help of Christians for a long time.

### "Should I not Return..."

The French collection had been abundant, but the Sacred Heart church was a bottomless pit. At the beginning of 1884 there were huge debts and not a penny to pay them with. On 28<sup>th</sup> February, despite his disastrous health, Don Bosco said:

"I'm going back to France.

Rua and Cagliero tried to dissuade him. They called the doctor, who declared that it would be a miracle for him to reach Nice alive.

"If I die, patience. Before leaving I will put my affairs in order. But I must go."

When he was out of the door, the doctor spoke to Fr Rua.

"Be very careful. I wouldn't be surprised if he died suddenly, without any warning. Have no illusions."

Don Bosco dictated his will before a notary and witnesses. Then he notified Rua and Cagliero that they were his heirs.

"Should I not return, you know what to do."

Rua left the room heavy-hearted. Cagliero stayed, almost in tears.

"Do you really want to leave in that state?"

"What else do you want me to do? Don't you see that we've no means to go ahead? If I don't go, where would I find the mean; to pay off our debts? Are we to have the boys without bread? Only in France is help to be found."

Cagliero burst into tears. He fought them back, and then said:

"We've always progressed by miracle after miracle. You'll see that the Madonna will perform another one. Go, we shall pray for you."

"I'm going. My will is in this box. Keep it as my souvenir."

The journey did not proceed beyond the south of France, but the collection was very abundant. At Toulon an aristocratic family gave him 150,000 lire in one instalment.

At Marseilles Fr Albera, worried about his conditions, called famous Dr Combal. His opinion was:

"You are like a threadbare suit, worn day in day out. If you still want to keep it, you must put it in the wardrobe. You understand what I mean: absolute rest."

"Thank you, doctor, but that's the only medicine I can't take."

Financial difficulties forced on him his last begging trip. In 1886, two short years before his death, he travelled to Barcelona, Spain. The welcome was a repetition of Paris, with thronged streets and rooftops, and human clusters hanging from streetlights. And lots, lots of gifts. They even offered him the hill of Tibidabo, with a magnificent vista over the city.

His last return trip took him through Montpellier, Tarascon, Valence A Grenoble. He remarked, "It's all Our Lady's work. Everything comes from that Hail Mary recited 45 years ago, with a boy, in the church of St Francis of Assisi."

As Don Bosco's body increasingly bent over, his soul increasingly shone rough it. On one occasion a Salesian director went to unburden himself to him.

"I'm tired to death. How can I go on like this?"

Don Bosco bent down, pulled up the hem of his cassock and showed his swollen legs. Flaps of skin covered the shoes either side.

"Muster yourcourage, dear. We shall rest in heaven."

In the evening of 25<sup>th</sup> June the alumni celebrated his name day. Don Bosco was touched. He thanked them, very tired.

"I'm like a cicada uttering its last shrill."

To those who saw him walking around bent down, alone, and went to help him asking, "Where are we going, Don Bosco?" he would reply, "To heaven."

#### **CHAPTER 49**

## **BISHOP CAGLIERO**

Don Bosco's early plan had foreseen that Cagliero should spend three months in America, help the mission settle down and come back. He remained two years instead.

In 1877 Don Bosco had sent another expedition headed by two very capable men. Cagliero was now in a position to return in time for the General Chapter to be held at Lanzo. He was the Spiritual Director of the Congregation, and the only expert in missionary work.

In the following years Don Bosco entrusted him with starting the Salesian work in Spain and with being at the head of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, then taking its first steps.

## "Who Could Replace Me?"

In 1879 Don Bosco, despite being only 64, was feeling exhausted and declining in health. He intended to choose a successor able to take things in hand and replace him any moment. Rua and Cagliero were the obvious choices as the most trustworthy and capable. Don Bosco loved them no end, and the affection was fully returned. Would choosing one have upset the other?

Don Bosco proceeded delicately. On one occasion he asked Cagliero to accompany him on an errand in the vicinity of Turin. Point blank he asked Cagliero:

"Should I die, who do you think could take my place?"

Fr Cagliero did not touch wood, but rolled his eyes.

"Don Bosco, don't you think it's too early to speak of such things?"

"Granted. But let's suppose. Whom would you choose?"

"There's only one. He's the only one capable enough to replace you."

"I would make two, even three, names."

"May be later. Not now. Who are your three?"

"First you tell me your single candidate."

"Fr Rua. There's no one else."

"You're right. He's always been my right hand."

"Hand, head and heart, dear Don Bosco. He's the only one capable of taking your place when God really decides to call you to His presence."

Don Bosco had acted with extreme delicacy, and Cagliero, equally delicately, had stood aside. No shadow would now be cast over the choice of the "second Don Bosco."

Without ever telling him, Don Bosco was extremely grateful to Fr Cagliero for those words of frank humility on the horse-and-buggy taking them to Foglizzo.

## The Bishop's Hug

On the 16<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> November 1883 the Holy See issued two important documents. The first erected northern Patagonia into a Vicariate Apostolic under Vicar Fr Cagliero. The second erected southern Patagonia (*Tierra del Fuego*) into a Prefecture Apostolic, under Prefect Fr Fagnano.

Fr Cagliero would have returned to America as Pro-vicar, but not yet consecrated bishop. Don Bosco did not agree. He spoke to Cardinal Alimonda, wrote to Cardinal Protector Nina and beseeched the pope. Cardinal Ferrieri was very much against the idea, but this time the pope accepted Don Bosco's request. A letter dated 9<sup>th</sup> October 1884 reached Valdocco:

At last Sunday's audience the Holy Father granted Don Bosco's request. He consented to the episcopal ordination of Fr Cagliero, Pro-vicar Apostolic for Patagonia.

Don Bosco lived a very happy day. The early dream of the dove and the olive branch was coming true. Those words to a dying boy, "You will have to let many others bring the Breviary... You will go far, far..." were not illusions: they had become stark reality.

The consecration took place in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1884. For the Oratory it was a memorable event. One of the early boys of Don Bosco, who had joined the Oratory as a fatherless 13 year old, at 46 was being consecrated bishop of an immense missionary territory.

At the end of the ceremony, the young bishop left the procession and went to his mother. The 80-year old woman rose to meet him, supported by another son and a nephew. Msgr Cagliero held her white head in his

arms, and saw her to her seat among the muted commotion of the congregation. On reaching the sacristy, Don Bosco was waiting for him, mixed in the crowd and biretta in hand. The bishop ran and gave him a tremendous hug. He had kept the hand with the episcopal ring hidden in the folds of his cape. The first kiss was Don Bosco's exclusive right.

#### Fr Rua Don Bosco's Vicar

Soon after Cagliero's appointment as bishop of Patagonia, Don Bosco announced the choice of a vicar. At the Superior Chapter of 24<sup>th</sup> October 1884 he said: "I need someone to whom I can entrust the Congregation, for him to take full responsibility. The pope would like Don Bosco to retire. My poor head can't stand it anymore..."

He wrote to the pope proposing Michael Rua. The affirmative answer arrived at the beginning of December.

## Don Bosco Held Him by the Hand

Msgr Cagliero was to leave for South America on 1st February 1885, together with 18 Salesians and six Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. But by the evening of that day he felt tired after seeing the missionaries off at the station. He spent the night at Valdocco and went up to see DonBosco. They sat in silence for some time. Then Don Bosco asked:

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"Have your companions left?"

"Yes."

"When will you leave?"

"I must be at the harbour tomorrow."

"If you can, rest for some time before you leave."

"Leave it to me. Bless me now."

"Why now? Come tomorrow morning. We'll talk at ease."

"No, Don Bosco. I'm off very early tomorrow morning."

"You're tired... but do as you wish."

"Give me a blessing also for my companions."

The Bishop knelt down. Don Bosco took him by the hand:

"Have a good trip. Should we not meet again here on earth, we'll see each other in heaven."

"Don't say that, we shall meet again."
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"As the Lord wants. He's the boss. You'll have lots of work in Argentina and Patagonia. You will labour a lot, and the Madonna will help you."

He started the blessing in slow voice. At times he failed to remember the words, and Cagliero prompted him in low voice. Don Bosco, docile, repeated them, still holding his hand. The bishop stood up.

"Good night, Don Bosco. Have a good rest."

"Greet for me your travelling companions, the confreres working in America, the co-operators... So many things I would tell you... May God bless you."

# "A Log Cabin for a Bishop's House"

In those last years Don Bosco followed the vicissitudes of the missions with great affection. He read Cagliero's letters and had them published in the *Salesian Bulletin* immediately.

In July 1886 Msgr Cagliero wrote that the most populated part of northern Patagonia had entirely been covered, visited and evangelised by the Salesian missionaries.

That same July a chief's son visited the bishop at his Patagones residence. He asked the bishop to go up the Chichinal valley to evangelise the adults of the tribe. Cagliero reported:

In the huge Chichinal Valley we baptised 1,700 indigenous people. Every day we taught catechism for three hours in the morning and three in the afternoon. The bishop's house was a log cabin plastered with mud, with a leaking roof protecting from the sun and from rain, provided it didn't rain. There was no trace of beds. We slept on hides that the good people had placed at our disposal. They are good people, full of enthusiasm.

In 1887 Msgr Cagliero with two Salesians embarked on a long missionary journey of 1,500 kilometres. After the Rio Negro valley, they were to go over the Andes into Chile, to the town of Concepcion.

For the first 1,300 km everything went right. The bishop baptised 997 indigenous adults, blessed 101 marriages, distributed 1000 Communions and confirmed 1,513 candidates. They spent countless hours teaching catechism to children and evangelising adults.

In the morning of 3<sup>rd</sup> March they had a most serious accident.

After climbing the Cordillera up to 2,000 metres of altitude, we had another 1,000 to go. The path wound close to high granite walls, with a sheer drop on the other side. Suddenly my horse shied and reared wildly. I invoked Mary Help of Christians and jumped off. A spike of rock went into my chest, breaking two ribs and puncturing a lung. I was like dead, breathing with difficulty and unable to speak. My companions came close. I tried to mumble a few

words to the effect that out of 24 ribs one or two could be sacrificed. We had to go back, wading two rivers and climbing two ridges before we could find a practitioner treating patients with primitive medicine. I asked him jokingly if he was also a blacksmith able to fix my ribs. I stayed there a month and by the grace of God recovered. Still convalescing, I mounted a horse again. In four days riding with my companions we crossed the Cordillera at 3,000 metres and descended to the Chilean plain on the shores of the Pacific. There I set the foundations for the Salesian houses of Concepcion, Talca, Santiago and Valparaiso. That year, on horseback, with three companions and sleeping in ditches or under trees, we crossed America from one ocean to the other.

### An Interview

In April 1884 Don Bosco was in Rome again. Some benefactors had promised large sums for the Sacred Heart Church, but had not turned up since. Don Bosco remarked, Let's go ring the bell.

On that occasion, for the first time in his life, Don Bosco gave an interview to a newspaperman. The *journal* de Rome published it in its issue of 25th April 1884.

- Q. By what miracle have you been able to found so many houses in so many different countries?
- A. I have done far more than I hoped, but I don't know how. The Blessed Virgin knows our needs, and She helps us.
- Q. How does She help you?
- A. For instance. Once I received a letter from Rome saying that the building of the Sacred Heart needed 20,000 lire within a week At that moment 1 had no money. I left the letter by the holy water stoop, fervently prayed to the Blessed Virgin and went to sleep, leaving the matter in Her hand. Next morning 1 received a letter from an unknown person." I had made a vow to Our Lady. In exchange for a certain favour I would give 20,000 lire to a charity. I got the grace I asked for and I am sending you 20,000 lire." On another occasion I was in France. There I got the unpleasant news that one of my houses was in dire straits unless 70,000 lire were found at once. I could see no solution, so I prayed. I was about to go to bed at 10:00 p. m. when someone knocked. It was a friend of mine with a thick file in his hands." Don Bosco, in my will I had Assigned 70,000 lire for your works. But today it occurred to me that it is better not to wait for death in order to do good. I've brought it to you. Here is 70,000 lire."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> This journalistic technique had been invented in America in 1859.

- Q. These are miracles. May I indiscreetly ask you whether you have performed miracles yourself?
- A. I have only thought of doing my duty. I have prayed and trusted in the Madonna.
- Q. Could you briefly explain your educational system?
- A. Very simple. Let the boys do whatever is most amenable to them. The point is to discover their budding good qualities, and trying to develop them. Everyone does with pleasure what he knows he can do. This is my principle; and my students work not only with industry, but also with love. In 46 years I have never punished anyone. And I daresay that my boys really love me.
- Q. How did you manage to extend your works to Patagonia and Tiers del Fuego?
- A. Little by little.
- Q. What do you think of the present conditions of the Church in Europe and in Italy? How do you see the future?
- A. I'm no prophet. You journalists are, a bit. You should be asked that. Nobody but God knows the future. Nevertheless, humanly speaking, the future seems bleak. My forecast is very sad, but I'm not afraid. God will always save his Church, and our Lady, who visibly protects the contemporary world, will make redeemers arise.

### **CHAPTER 50**

### THE LONG CRY

In Don Bosco's last years his spirituality attained new heights. Suffering may drive one either to despair, or to cynicism, or to blossoming sanctity. This blossoming could be observed in Don Bosco from one day to the next. Even his humanity was transfigured.

In the last ten years of life, especially from 1882, Don Bosco appears as one who has fully assimilated the lessons of a long experience. There are no more clashes like the ones with his brother Anthony, with his first collaborators or with Archbishop Gastaldi. He shuns controversy like the plague. He does not want battle; even in the face of hostility and vexation, he is not in favour of harsh rebuts and counterattacks like those of many Catholic publications. He rather suggests, dodge raindrops and stay dry. There was still opposition and scarce official support. Often there was tax oppression on the part of administrative and political authorities, but he himself looked increasingly imbued with the ideal of loving kindness and benevolence.

## A Small, Thoughtful Priest

In 1883 he received the visit of a young, serious-looking priest from Lombardy. He was Fr Achille Ratti. The meeting lasted for half an hour, during which Don Bosco gave him all the information he desired. Then he told him:

"Make yourself at home. I am very busy, but you go around. Look at anything you wish."

At that time the directors of various Salesian houses were in Valdocco for a meeting. After lunch, with Don Bosco standing by the table, they came to tell him of their difficulties. Fr Ratti wanted to withdraw, but Don Bosco strangely said:

"No, no. Please stay."

That young priest would one day be Pope Pius XI.<sup>1</sup> 49 years later, relating the event to some Roman seminarians, he would remark:

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 $<sup>^{1}</sup>$  1922 – 39.

People came from all over, with some difficulty or other. He, standing heard, grasped and answered everything in seconds. He paid attention to everything surrounding him, yet one could see that nothing worried him, as his thoughts were elsewhere. And so it was: he was elsewhere, with God. If was marvellous how he had the right word for everything. That was the life of sanctity and of prayer that Don Bosco led among his unrelenting daily routine.

## A Flower of Eternity

In April 1885 Don Bosco was taking a stroll in the garden of a lady who had invited him and his secretary for lunch. He stopped before a flowerbed. He plucked a violet.

"Kind of you to have invited us to lunch, ma'am. I want to reciprocate with a flower, a thought." "What thought, Don Bosco?"

"Eternity. It ought to accompany us always. Everything passes in this world: only eternity lasts. Let us labour for a happy eternity."

Don Bosco thought of death as meeting God. At times he was brooding over it. One day in 1885, greeting a man, he begged: "Pray for me."

"But Don Bosco! You don't need it."

His face became very serious, and tears appeared in his eyes. Most sincerely he said,

"I need it, lots of it.

## "Our Lady Is Here"

That August Don Bosco travelled to the ceremony of taking the veil and the profession of some *Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*. He was so exhausted that could give Communion only to few sisters. He saw the whole ceremony from a chair. But he wanted to say something. As his voice was weakening, Fr Bonetti repeated aloud phrases that could not be heard properly.

"You want me to say something. If I could, I would say a lot more. But I am an old man as you can see. I want to tell you that the Madonna loves you very much.

And you know, She is right here in your midst..."

Fr Bonetti translated: Don Bosco means that the Madonna is your mother and that She looks at you and protects you.

"No, no. I mean that Our Lady is right here, and that She is very pleased with you..."

Fr Bonetti: Don Bosco wants to say that if you are good, the Madonna will be happy with you.

"Not at all. I want to say that the Madonna is truly here, right in your midst! She walks in this house, and covers it with Her cloak."

### The Rich

Colossal sums of money, in the millions (of the 1800s) passed through Don Bosco's hands in his last 25 years. But he was always poor. Not a cent stuck. Someone doubted whether Don Bosco may not have pampered the rich a bit too much. Couldn't he have lulled their consciences to sleep in regard of their social responsibility?

It is a legitimate question. On scanning his life, it is clear that he treated everyone doing good to him with extreme kindness: the peasant or worker offering him cents as much as the Count giving him hundreds of thousands of lire.

Some were extraordinarily generous with him, and he corresponded with extraordinary kindness. He used to go to Countess Callori for impossible cases. She never disappointed him, and he used to call her "mamma," most appropriately it would seem. As to lulling consciences to sleep, let some facts speak for themselves.

In 1882 he received the visit of a Capuchin on behalf of an old and childless multimillionaire Genoese nobleman. Don Bosco asked:

How come this man doesn't give alms in proportion to his wealth?"

"You're wrong, Don Bosco. He gives 20,000 lire a year to the poor."

"20,000 only? If the wants to obey Jesus Christ, and give accordingly, 100,000 a year wouldn't be enough."

"I understand. But I don't know how to persuade him. What would you say to him?"

"That I have no intention of going to hell for his sake, and that if he wants to go alone he's welcome. Then I would order him to give alms according to his status. Should he refuse, I would tell him that I wouldn't go on assuming responsibility for his soul."

"I'll tell him."

The priest kept his word. But the old nobleman was not pleased and dismissed him.

Contractor Borgo of Sampierdarena had done many favours to the Salesian house for very poor boys. He had advanced huge sums without interest, he had drafted plans without asking for a fee, and for two years he had not demanded a salary for site supervision.

His wife had died 20 years previously, and he had kept with him all her jewels and finery. One day he remarked casually that he wanted to do something for his late wife, in suffrage for her soul. Don Bosco was brusque:

"If you want to act as a Christian, what do you keep all those precious, useless trinkets for?"

"What do you suggest?"

"Bring them here, for these boys who haven't even what they need."

The contractor was almost offended. It was too much of a sacrifice. But he went for a long walk and thought about it. A few days later he was back. Don Bosco was still at Sampierdarena. He personally handed him all the precious souvenirs of his late wife.

Many Salesians judged Don Bosco's words to the rich rather harsh. On 4th June 1887 he said:

"A few nights ago I dreamt Our Lady. She reproached me for keeping silent at times about the obligation to give alms. She complained that priests are afraid to speak from the pulpit about giving the surplus to the poor, and it is their fault if the rich keep the gold in their safes."

On 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1887 hr went with two Salesians to visit a lady, great benefactress of his. As she was seeing him off, she asked:

"Don Bosco, what must I do to be saved?"

"You must become poor, like Job."

The lady was disconcerted, as was the Salesian who had heard. Don Bosco said no more. In the carriage on their way back Fr Belmonte frankly asked him:

"Why did you speak so harshly to that woman? She gives a lot of alms."

"You see, there's no one daring to tell the truth to the rich."

During his last trip to France, Don Bosco made a flying visit to Hyeres. Monsieur Abeille, president of the Marseilles Chamber of Commerce, went personally to the church money for Don Bosco. In the end the

congratulated him because many rich men had emptied their wallets on the collection plates. Don Bosco replied.

"I find this most natural. You see Monsieur after you set aside 100 francs a month, which is more than enough, the rest is for God."

He always felt sorry on recalling the death of an 84-year old marchioness, another benefactress of his. She sent for him, made her confession, and then, looking at him with a bewildered look asked:

"Do I really have to die?"

Don Bosco tried to talk to her of God, but she kept on looking around in anguish.

"My beautiful palace, my rooms, my drawing room, so intimate... do l have to leave all that?"

She had asked her servants to bring her a precious Persian rug. She caressed it as if beside herself, repeating:

"How beautiful! Must I really leave it?"

To a Salesian who hesitated to go on a trip looking for alms, he strongly said:

"Go, and be courageous. The rich do us good, but we also do good to them, by giving them occasions to help the poor."

In 1876, on a visit to Chieri, Don Bosco saw Joseph Blanchard, who as a young man had often emptied the fruit bowl at home to feed him. He was an old man now, walking along the street with a plate and a wine bottle in his hand. Don Bosco left the priests with whom he was conversing and went straight to him, joyful.

"Dear Blanchard! How happy am I to see you again. How are you?"

The old man was rather embarrassed. "I'm well, mister."

Don Bosco's face became sad.

"Why do you call me mister? I'm John! I'm poor Don Bosco, as poor as when you used to allay my hunger."

He turned to the priests who had drawn close:

"Gentlemen, this is one of poor Don Bosco's first benefactors."

Then, turning to Blanchard:

"I care, you know, that they should realise it. You did all you could for me. Every time you are in Turin you must come to lunch with me."

Ten years later, in 1886, Blanchard got wind that Don Bosco's health was not good, and went to pay a visit. The secretary stopped him in the anteroom.

"Don Bosco is not well. He's resting. He cannot receive anyone."

"Tell him Blanchard's here. You'll see; he'll receive me."

Don Bosco recognise the voice from behind the door. He got up with difficulty and went to meet him. He took him by the hand, led him in and sat him on a chair.

"Well done, Blanchard, to remember poor Don Bosco. Haw's your health, your family?"

They spoke at length. It was almost lunchtime:

"You see, I'm old and in poor health. I cannot go down to lunch with you: my legs do not serve me anymore. But I want you to go down to lunch with my Salesians."

He called the secretary:

"Take this friend of mine to the dining room of the Chapter and give him my place. I will pray for you, Blanchard, and don't forget your poor Don Bosco."

In confusion, the little old man had lunch at the centre of the Superior Chapter of the Congregation, telling them of his friendship with young John at Chieri and of the meeting of 1876.

## Ten Days to Rome

The church of the *Saxed Heart was* to be consecrated in May 1887. It had cost seven years of work, hardship and declining health.

Don Bosco could not have withstood a long trip to Rome in one stage. They arranged for short stages with many stops. He left on 20<sup>th</sup> April. They were afraid he would not make it even to Moncalieri, ten kilometres away. Frs Rua and Viglietti accompanied him. For the first time in his life he travelled first class. He made long stops at the Salesian houses on the way, and in houses of benefactors informed in time.

At Florence he met elderly Countess Uguccioni: he supported by Fr Viglietti, she on a wheelchair. Don Bosco joked:

"Well, my Lady countess! Shall we dance?"

"Oh, Don Bosco, look in what state you find me..."

"Well, well, don't be afraid. We shall dance in heaven!"

At the Arezzo railway station there was an unexpected meeting. As soon as the stationmaster spotted Don Bosco he ran, and weeping of joy embraced him.

"Do you remember me? I was a street boy in Turin, without parents. You welcomed me, educated me and loved me. If I have now a good family and this job I owe it to you."

He made it to Rome in the afternoon of 30<sup>th</sup> April.

They took him to the Lombard Seminary, asking him to address the students. He could only utte a single sentence:

"Always think of what the Lord, not men, think of you, for good or for evil."

The pope received him, sat him down and placed an ermine fur on his knees.

"I'm an old man, Holy Father. This is my last journey and the conclusion of all. There's much to do, but I have no need to urge my sons to work. Rather and he winked at Fr Rua - I have to urge moderation. Many work not only by day but also by night."

Fr Rua intervened:

"Holy Father, the one to give scandal to us has been precisely Don Bosco."

The pope smiled. Then he gave a wise counsel:

"I would urge you and your vicar not to worry too much about the number of Salesians as about their sanctity. Numbers do not increase God's glory, virtue and sanctity do. Be cautious and strict in accepting people."

Going downstairs, the Swiss Guard stood to attention. Don Bosco laughed.

"At ease. I'm no king. I'm a poor hunchback priest."

# The Long Cry

The solemn consecration took place on 14<sup>th</sup> May. Next day Don Bosco wanted to go down to the church and say Mass at the altar of Mary Help of Christians. No sooner had he started than Fr Viglietti, who was serving, saw him burst into tears. It was a long, irreressible cry, lasting for the whole Mass. At the end, they almost lifted him bodily to the sacristy.

"Don Bosco, what's the matter? Are you ill?" Don Bosco shook his head.

"The scene of my first dream, when I was nine, was before my eyes. I saw my mother and brothers argue about what I had dreamed..."

that dream of long ago the Madonna had told him, "One day you will understand." Now looking back, he understood. It was worth it: so many sacrifices, so much work, for the salvation of so many souls.

On 18th May Don Bosco left Rome for the last time.

### Louis Orione and Three Notebooks of Sins

Don Bosco never kept distances from his boys, not even in those last years when worn out by journeys and debts. To see them, hear them and take a stroll with them revived him even after a gruelling day.

Louis Orione, 14, joined the Oratory in October 1886. His father was a street paver. Louis had served as apprentice, kneeling down next to his father on the wet sand, placing one cobblestone next to another with mallet taps. He had applied to join the friars at Voghera, but had fallen sick and had to go back home. The Salesians of Valdocco had accepted him.

Don Bosco fascinated young Louis. The boy noted in his diary that whenever Don Bosco came down to the courtyard, more and more rarely, throngs of boys clustered around him struggling to get near and receive a word from him.

Young Louis also pushed and shoved. Don Bosco gazed at him, smiled, and asked him whether the moon in his village was bigger than at Turin. Then he joked with him.

Louis eagerly wanted Don Bosco to hear his confession, but by now Don Bosco, at the limit of his strength, confessed only Salesians and some of the older boys about to enter the novitiate. Inexplicably, however, he obtained this most singular privilege. He took his preparation very seriously. He tells the story himself:

I filled three notebooks of sins doing my examination of conscience.

Not to leave out anything, he consulted manuals. The only "No!" was at the question, "Have you killed?" Then he queued for confession, notebooks in hand. He shook with emotion: "What will Don Bosco say on reading all that," he thought to himself.

He knelt down. Don Bosco smiled at him. "Hand over your sins."

The boy gave him the first notebook. Don Bosco took it, made as if weighing it in his hand, and tore it up.

"Give me the rest."

The other two books ended up the same. The boy was disconcerted.

"You've made your confession. Think no more about what you've written."

Young Louis would never forget the smile that Don Bosco gave him on saying that.

He managed to go to confession again with Don Bosco, who one day looked at Louis straight in the eyes and said:

"Remember, we shall always be friends."

Louis Orione never forgot that promise. On knowing that Don Bosco was dying, he offered his life in exchange. And on becoming the founder of a Congregation with oratories and very poor boys, he would say, thinking of Don Bosco:

"I would walk on burning embers to see him once again and thank him."

He called the three years spent at Valdocco "the happiest season of my life."

### **CHAPTER 51**

## FAREWELL TO THE WORLD

Towards the end of August 1887 Don Bosco went to Valsalice to hear confessions at the course of spiritual exercises held there for young Salesian vocations.

Since 25<sup>th</sup> May he had no longer chaired the Superior Chapter of the Congregation. He had been at the one held at Valsalice on 25<sup>th</sup> September, chaired by Fr Rua.

In the second half of September he fell ill, with high fever and violent headaches. A few days later he was no longer able to say Mass. His secretary noted:

Yet he is always cheerful; he works, writes and receives visits. He needs comfort, yet he is the one that comforts others.

One evening towards the end of September he was trying to have some dinner in his room. He spoke to the Salesian keeping him company.

"My time is short. The Superiors don't believe it, and think that Don Bosco will live long yet... I do not regret dying. What I feel sorry for is the debts of the Sacred Heart Church, despite so much money collected. Dear Fr Dalmazzo is a good man, but he is no administrator... What will my sons say on finding such heavy burdens on their shoulders? Pray for my soul. I will not be at next years'spiritual exercises..."

#### Loneliness

Fr Paul Albera, Provincial for the Salesian houses in France, was leaving. He came to say goodbye. Don Bosco looked at him affectionately, with tears in his eyes.

"You're going too. You're all abandoning me. I know Bonetti will leave tonight. So will Rua. They are leaving me alone."

Silent tears flowed from his eyes. He was poor and tired, feeling loneliness enveloping him after so much work. Fr Albera let himself be overcome by emotion too. Don Bosco plucked up strength:

"I'm not scolding you, you know. You are doing your duty. But I'm a poor old man... I'll pray for you, God be with you."

Before returning to Valdocco he spoke to the director of the Valsalice house. His gaze fixed on the staircase, he slowly said:

"From now on, I will look after this house.. get the drawings ready."

Fr Barberis thought he was speaking of the drawings for the extension under construction.

"I'll get them ready and let you have them by winter."

"Not by winter. Next spring. Give them to Fr Rua."

Don Bosco's continued gazing at the staircase.

Four months later, on the landing of that very staircase, Don Bosco's grave would be prepared. Fr Barberis handed the drawing of the monument that capped it to Fr Rua in the spring of 1888. Then he remembered Don Bosco's mysterious words.

## Like a Flickering Candle

Don Bosco was back at Valdocco on 2<sup>nd</sup> October to the usual rousing welcome of his boys. They went with him, shouting and joyful, up to the stairs leading to his room. The older ones helped him up, stair by stair. On top, Don Bosco waved his hand and the boys responded with a booming long live Don Bosco!"

But the candle was flickering.

He celebrated Mass in a small private chapel, always assisted by a priest. He spoke and breathed with difficulty. He joked with some visitors:

"I'm looking for two spare bellows. Mine have stopped working."

On 4th October Fr Cerruti, the head of the Oratory, went to see him to report. At the end Don Bosco spoke.

"You're pale. How's your health? Take care. Look after yourself as you would Don Bosco."

Cerruti was touched. Don Bosco went on: "Take heart, dear Fr Cerruti. You'll see how happy we shall be in heaven."

The secretaries handed him letters already opened. He wrote some marginal remarks, but was unable to reply personally anymore. The last letter with a sentence in his handwriting was to Mrs Broquier: Let us give much, if we want much. May God bless and guide you.

During Mass he was short of breathing. *He* celebrated on the 4<sup>th</sup> and and 6<sup>th</sup>. On Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> he would try again, but he was prostrate in the end. It was his last Mass.

### Bishop Cagliero's Return

On 7<sup>th</sup> December Msgr Cagliero returned from America, arriving in the evening. Fr Rua had cabled him: "Papa unwell." Cagliero embarked at once.

The boys gave a rousing welcome to the bishop as he crossed the courtyard. He gazed at the windows behind which Don Bosco's life was ebbing. Cagliero entered to find Don Bosco sitting on a modest sofa. He knelt down before Don Bosco, who held him close to his heart, leaning his forehead on Cagliero's shoulder. The old boy's strength and courage give him a new lease of life. He touched the bishop's chest, where he had fractured two ribs on the Andes, asking:

"Are you well now?"

"Yes, Don Bosco, I'm really well."

Cagliero noticed how much Don Bosco had aged in three years. They spent the time sitting together on the sofa. The bishop told him about the missions, the Salesians working there, the indigenous people saved and baptised in the thousands.

Suddenly, as when he was a boy, he blurted out: "Don Bosco, hear my confession."

The bishop wrote down the advice received in that confession on a paper that he took to America.

"I wish you to stay here until everything is sorted out after my death."

"Tell all the Salesians to work zealously and with ardour: work, work."

"Love one another as brothers. Help and bear one another."

Don Bosco spoke to him again at length. Suddenly, as if in distress, he said:

"I'm at the end of my life. It's up to you to work now to save youth. But I have to express a fear. Some Salesian may misinterpret Don Bosco's affection for the young, and let himself be carried away by too much sensitivity, thus attaching himself rashly to some creature."

"Don't worry, Don Bosco. None of us has ever interpreted badly your affection for the young. About someone using it as an excuse, leave it to me: I will repeat this recommendation to all."

On 16<sup>th</sup> December the doctor ordered a ride in a carriage, for a breath of fresh air. Rua and Viglietti went with him. On the way back Fr Viglietti spotted Cardinal Alimonda under the portico of the main street. Don Bosco asked:

Please ask him to come. I can't walk to where he is."

The cardinal crossed immediately to the other side with open arms:

Oh, Don Bosco, Don Bosco!"

He entered the coach, embraced and kissed Don Bosco. They spoke for out half an hour as the vehicle drove slowly with Fr Rua following on foot.

### Thoughts with a Flavour of Eternity

On Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> December Don Bosco's strength waned almost completely. Outside some 30 boys queued up for confession.

"I don't feel like it... I don't..."

Moments later:

"Yet it's the last time I can hear their confession. The last time... tell them to come."

On 18<sup>th</sup> December he received the visit of Fr Reffo of the St Joseph Congregation.

"My dear, I've always loved you and forever, will. I'm at the end of my days. Pray for me and I will pray for you."

On 19<sup>th</sup> December Fr Viglietti found him in such good spirits that he asked for a few words on some cards to be sent to co-operators. Don Bosco answered, "With pleasure."

Half lying on the sofa, leaning on a wooden board, he wrote on the reverse of a card:

"Mary, obtain for us bodily health if it is good for the soul, but ensure our eternal salvation."

And on another one:

"Hurry to do good works. There may be no time left."

Then he stopped, remarking:

"Do you know I can't write anymore? I'm too tired."

Viglietti suggests he stop.

"No, I must go on. It's the last time I write."

He continued on a number of cards. Every thought has a flavour of eternity.

"Blessed those who give themselves to God in their youth."

"Whatever delays giving himself to God is in great danger of losing his soul."

"My children, conserve time and time will conserve you forever."

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"If we do good, we shall find good in this life and in the next."

"Whoever sows good works gathers good fruits."

"We harvest the fruit of our good works at the end of life."
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On reading this last sentence, Fr Viglietti could not hold back his tears. "Don Bosco, write something more cheerful..."

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Don Bosco jested:
"Yon're like a boy! Don't cry. I've told you these are the last words I'm writing. In any case, I'll try to obey you."
And he went on writing thoughts of eternity "May God bless us and deliver us from every evil."
"Give in plenty to the poor if you want to become rich."
"Give and you will be given."
"May God bless us, and may the Holy V irgin be our guide in all of life's dangers."
"Children are Jesus 'and Mary's delight."
"May God bless and amply reward our benefactors."
"May God bless and amply reward our benefactors."
"Mary be my salvation."
"Saving the soul is saving all. Losing the soul is losing all."
"Whoever protects the poor will be handsomely rewarded at the divine tribunal."
"What a great reward shall we have for the good done in life!"
"Whoever does good in life, finds good in death."
"In beaven we enjoy all goods, for eternity."
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The last sentence was his last written one, in almost unrecognizable handwriting.

# Silence in the Courtyard

That same morning he received his last visits. For the last 40 years he had dedicated his every morning to counselling, blessing, consoling, helping, cheering up those who desired speaking to him. The last visit was Countess Mocenigo's. It was 12:30 p.m. of 20<sup>th</sup> December. In the evening the doctor ordered a new ride for fresh air. Despite his protestations, they took him down bodily, seated on a chair. As the carriage drove slowly, an alumnus of the early days stopped it. Don Bosco recognised and embraced him.

"My dear, how are you doing?"

"So so. Pray for me. They've told me at the porter's that you were about to pass by, and I wanted to say hallo to you."

"And what about your soul?"

"I try always to be a worthy son of Don Bosco."

"Well done, bravo. God will reward you. Always live as a good Christian."

It looked as if the fresh air had helped, but when the doctor arrived he found the opposite. He ordered him in bed. A young cleric asked:

"Don Bosco, how do you feel?"

"A good conclusion is the only thing left."

The end loomed imminent between 20<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> December. Coadjutor Peter Enria, who watched beside him every night, used to say, "He suffered in silence."

With high fever, as the breathing became difficult, the doctor ordered something nutritious. Fr Viglietti brought him soup. Don Bosco stretched his hand, but the priest insisted in holding the bowl himself. Don Bosco joked:

"It's you who want to eat it, isn't it?"

Down below the courtyard is packed with boys, but all keep a strange silence. Even the youngest stare at the window behind which their great end is dying.

# "I Need the Advice Myself"

On 23rd December the end seems imminent. Don Bosco murmurs: "Get someone to anoint me."

To Fr Bonetti sitting by the bedside he says, clutching his hand: "Always be Fr Rua's strong support."

He picked himself up on Msgr Cagliero's entering:

"Tell the pope that the Congregation and the Salesians' special purpose is to support the authority of the Holy See, wherever they may live and work... You'll go, protected by the pope, to Africa... You will cross it... You will go to Asia d elsewhere... Have faith."

Joseph Buzzetti entered. Before his red beard, Don Bosco joked saluting; him militarily.

"Dear Buzzetti! You're always dear to me."

Towards evening Fr Cassini, the missionary returned with Msgr Cagliero, kept him company. Don Bosco whispers:

"I know your mum's poor. Speak freely to me and to no one else. I'll give you anything necessary."

Peter Enria performs the humblest services. Don Bosco looks at him gratefully.

"Poor Peter. Be patient."

"Oh, Don Bosco. I would happily give my life for yours. And not only me, you know? Many others would. We all love you."

"The only separation I will feel on dying is to have to leave you."

It's late in the evening when the cardinal arrives. They have informed him that that may be Don Bosco's last night. He embraces and kisses him. Don Bosco makes another effort.

"Your Eminence, pray that I may save my soul."

"You, Don Bosco, you ought not to fear death. How many times have you recommended being prepared!"

"Yes... now I need that advice myself."

In the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> they bring the Viaticum, and Msgr Cagliero administers the Anointing of the Sick. Don Bosco improves slightly.

On 26<sup>th</sup> December Charles Tomatis, one of the boys from Dominic Savio's times, arrives with his boy for Don Bosco to bless. But he did not expect to find him so run down by illness. He kneels at the foot of the bed, crying, "Oh Don Bosco! Oh Don Bosco!" When he leaves the room, Don Bosco beckons Fr Rua:

"You know he's not well off. Pay him the transport on my behalf."

That same day Catherine Daghero, a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, pays him a visit, asking for a blessing for all the Daughters. Don Bosco murmurs:

"Yes, I bless all the houses of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. I bless the Superior General and all the Sisters... save many souls."

The doctor has prescribed perfect silence and no visitors. Don Bosco spends his days dozing off, continuously half asleep.

It is 29th December. At days end Don Bosco summons Rua and Cagliero.

"Love one another like brothers. Love, help and support one another as brothers. God's help and Mary Help of Christians' will not be lacking... Promise me that you'll love one another like brothers."

During the night he asks Enria for a sip of water.

"One must learn how to live and how to die."

## The Awakening of the "Monsters"

It looked like the end, but instead there was an unexpected improvement between the 1st and 20<sup>th</sup> of January. Health seemed to come back, giving the old trunk a new lease of life. It was God's gift, but a short-lived one.

On 21st January Cagliero entered the room.

"Dear Don Bosco, it would seem that the danger has been averted. They call me to the village of Lu for their patron saint's feast. The village has given us so many good missionaries and Sisters. Afterwards I'll visit our boys at St Martin's."

"I'm happy, go. But hurry up."

The morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> dashed all hopes. Don Bosco got rapidly worse.

In the afternoon of the 24<sup>th</sup> the conditions are extreme. The doctors say that he may go any moment. The drowsiness has become heavy. It is the beginning of delirium.

Peter Enria heard Don Bosco clap his hands, trying to cry:

"Help, help! Save those youth! Most Holy Mary, help them! Mother! Mother!"

Some said that in these delirious phrases Don Bosco expressed fear for the youth, not a sense of trust. The best modern psychology says the contrary: sentiments and fears repressed for a lifetime with a great effort of willpower revive in those moments. They are "phantasms," "monsters" that re-appear after escaping from the cages of the unconscious where the will, now paralysed by illness, had kept them locked.

From his Seminary years, Don Bosco bore, for a long time forgotten in is unconscious, a system of education condensed in the pair *fear-mistrust*. For his whole lifetime, spurred on by his love for the young, he had inverted it into another pair: *friendship-trust*. An example was the most singular way of hearing the confession of a fearful boy like Louis Orione.

Paradoxically, all of this seemed to conquer him now after having been conquered by him for a lifetime.

## Tell My Boys

It is 26<sup>th</sup> January Msgr Cagliero, back from Lu, gone to Don Bosco's bedside. He assessed the situation as desperate. He tried however to "know" from Don Bosco himself.

"They call me to Rome. May I go?"

"You will, but afterwards."

Don Bosco's voice is a shadow of its beautiful former self. Pain is at times intolerable. Fr Lemoyne suggests:

"Think of Jesus on the cross. He also suffered without being able to move."

"That's what I constantly do."

The whole of the 27<sup>th</sup> and the morning of the 28<sup>th</sup> were spent in constant raving. One of his last moments of lucidity returned in the afternoon of the 28<sup>th</sup>. To Fr Bonetti, at his bedside, Don Bosco whispers:

"Tell my boys that I shall be waiting for all of them in heaven."

On 29th January the doctors found him near the end. One of them says: "Take heart, tomorrow things may improve..."

With his look now wandering, Don Bosco replies:

"Tomorrow?... Tomorrow?... I am going on a long journey..."

In the first night hours he shouted: "Paul, Paul, where are you? Why don't you come?"

Fr Paul Albera, Provincial of the Salesian works in France, had not arrived yet.

On 30<sup>th</sup> January, in a moment of lucidity, he said to Fr Rua:

"See that you are loved."

About 1:00 p.m. Buzzetti and Fr Viglietti are at his bedside. Don Bosco opens his eyes wide, attempting a smile. On seeing them, he waves his hand. Buzzetti bursts into tears.

31<sup>st</sup> January, 2:00 a.m. Fr Rua notices that things are coming to a head. He dons a stole and intones the prayers for the dying. The other superiors of the Congregation are summoned.

When Msgr Cagliero arrives, Rua gives him the stole, goes to Don Bosco's right side and whispers:

"Don Bosco, here we are, your sons. We beg your forgiveness for all the trouble you have had to suffer because of us. As a sign of pardon and of fatherly goodness, give us your blessing once more. I will guide your hand and pronounce the formula."

Fr Rua lifted Don Bosco's now numb hand and uttered a blessing for the Salesians, present and absent.

The death rattle shakes the room.

At 4:30 a.m. it suddenly stops. Fr Belmonte almost shouts:

"Don Bosco's dying!"

He breathed three times, heavily and with difficulty. Msgr Cagliero repeats aloud the prayer learned from him as a young boy.

Jesus, Joseph and Mary, I give you my heart and my soul. Jesus, Joseph and Mary, assist me in my last agony. Jesus, Joseph and Mary, may my soul expire in peace with you.

Then he takes off his stole and drapes Don Bosco's shoulders with it. He is already in the Light.