

A heart as big as the shores of the sea

A new time is given to us: from the Heart of God to the heart of humanity, reflecting Don Bosco's great heart.

Dear friends and readers,

In this December issue I address you with best wishes for a new year! For a new time given to us to live intensely and with 'newness of life', and I make the gift that the Holy Father has given us in recent days my own, as a propitious and timely wish: the Encyclical Letter *Dilexit Nos* on the human and divine love of the Heart of Jesus Christ.

We Salesians are used to singing: 'God has given you a heart as big / as the sands of the sea. / God has given you his spirit: / he has released your love'.

Pope Pius XI, who knew him well, said that Don Bosco had a 'beautiful speciality': he was 'a great lover of souls' and saw them 'in the thoughts, in the heart, in the blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ'. After all, there is a burning heart in the coat of arms of our Congregation.

Pope Francis introduces himself thus in No. 2 of *Dilexit Nos*: 'The symbol of the heart has often been used to express the love of Jesus Christ. Some have questioned whether this symbol is still meaningful today. Yet living as we do in an age of superficiality, rushing frenetically from one thing to another without really knowing why, and ending up as insatiable consumers and slaves to the mechanisms of a market unconcerned about the deeper meaning of our lives, all of us need to rediscover the importance of the heart.'

How powerful this indication from our Pope is, as he shows us a new way of living in a new time that is given to us, the upcoming year.

In no. 21, Pope Francis writes: 'This profound core, present in every man and woman, is not that of the soul, but of the

entire person in his or her unique psychosomatic identity. Everything finds its unity in the heart, which can be the dwelling-place of love in all its spiritual, psychic and even physical dimensions. In a word, if love reigns in our heart, we become, in a complete and luminous way, the persons we are meant to be, for every human being is created above all else for love. In the deepest fibre of our being, we were made to love and to be loved.'

And he adds in number 27 of the same Encyclical Letter: 'Before the heart of Jesus, living and present, our mind, enlightened by the Spirit, grows in the understanding of his words and our will is moved to put them into practice. This could easily remain on the level of a kind of self-reliant moralism. Hearing and tasting the Lord, and paying him due honour, however, is a matter of the heart. Only the heart is capable of setting our other powers and passions, and our entire person, in a stance of reverence and loving obedience before the Lord.'

I will not quote more, hoping to have whetted your appetite to read this splendid Encyclical Letter which is not only a great gift for living the time that is given to us in a new way, and that would already be sufficient; it is also a profoundly 'Salesian' indication.

How much Don Bosco wrote and worked on spreading devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus as divine love that accompanies our human situation.

A magnificent drive

We find the following, referring to Don Bosco, in the *Biographical Memoirs*, volume VIII, 129,: 'A most ardent devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus animated all his activities and rendered his familiar talks fruitful and his sermons and priestly ministry persuasive. Seemingly, the Sacred Heart helped him also by special charisms as he went about his arduous mission.' (Testimony referring to Fr Bonetti)

This testimony of Don Bosco's devotion to the Sacred Heart is

manifestly identified with the Basilica of the same name built by Don Bosco in Rome at the request of the Pope of the time. The physical building recalls and reminds us all of Don Bosco's 'monumental' devotion to the Sacred Heart. Just as it was with Our Lady, so it was with the Sacred Heart; Don Bosco's devotion is manifested in the churches he built, because devotion to the Sacred Heart is the Eucharist, Eucharistic worship.

Don Bosco's heart in constant love with the Eucharist: this becomes a magnificent personal impetus to make this something living and true in the new year, a true and profound wish for the New Year fully lived. As the hymn continues: 'You have formed men / of sound and strong heart: / you have sent them out into the world to proclaim / the Gospel of joy'.

I would like to conclude this brief message by wishing everyone a Happy New Year with the image that Pope Francis gives us in the first pages of the encyclical, referring to his grandmother's teachings on the meaning of the name of carnival sweets, the '*busie*' or '*lies*'... 'When she dropped the strips of batter into the oil, they would expand, but then, when we bit into them, they were empty inside'. Like lies, they look big, but are empty inside; they are false, unreal.

May the New Year be full and rich in substance for all of us, becoming real in the acceptance of God who comes among us.

May his coming bring peace and truth, and may what is seen from the outside correspond to what is inside!

Heartfelt best wishes to you all!

Life according to the Spirit

in Mamma Margaret (2/2)

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4. Exodus to her son's priesthood

From the dream at the age of nine, when she was the only one to understand her son's vocation, "who knows, maybe he will become a priest", she was the most convinced and tenacious supporter of her son's vocation, facing humiliation and sacrifice for this: "His mother then, who wanted to support him at the cost of any sacrifice, did not hesitate to make the resolution to have him attend the public schools in Chieri the following year. She then took care to find truly Christian people with whom she could place him to board." Margaret discreetly followed John's vocational and formation path, amidst serious financial straits.

She always left him free in his choices and in no way conditioned his path towards the priesthood, but when the parish priest tried to convince Margaret why John should not choose the religious life, so as to guarantee her financial security and help, she immediately reached out to her son and said words that would remain engraved in Don Bosco's heart for the rest of his life: "I only want you to examine carefully the step you want to take, and then follow your vocation without looking to anyone. The parish priest wanted me to dissuade you from this decision, in view of the need I might have in the future for your help. But I say: "have nothing to do with these things, because God is first of all. Do not bother yourself about me. I want nothing from you; I expect nothing from you. Think well: I was born in poverty, I have lived in poverty, I want to die in poverty. Indeed I protest to you. If you resolve to become a secular priest and by misfortune become rich, I will not come to pay you a single visit, indeed I will never set foot in your house again. Remember this well!"

But along this vocational journey, she did not

fail to be strong for her son, reminding him, on the occasion of his departure for the seminary in Chieri, of the demands of the priestly life: "John, you have donned the priestly habit; I feel all the consolation that a mother can feel at her son's good fortune. But remember that it is not the habit that honours your state, it is the practice of virtue. If you ever come to doubt your vocation, ah for pity's sake, do not dishonour this habit! Lay it down quickly. I would rather have a poor peasant, than a priest son who has neglected his duties." Don Bosco would never forget these words, an expression both of his awareness of his priestly dignity and the fruit of a profoundly upright and holy life.

On the day of Don Bosco's First Mass Margaret once again made herself present with words inspired by the Spirit, both expressing the authentic value of the priestly ministry and her son's total surrender to his mission without any pretence or request: "You are a priest; you say Mass; from here on you are closer to Jesus Christ. Remember, however, that to begin to say Mass is to begin to suffer. You will not realise it at once, but little by little you will see that your mother has told you the truth. I am sure that you will pray for me every day, whether I am still alive or already dead; that is enough for me. From now on think only of the health of souls and do not take any thought for me." She renounce her son completely to offer him in the service of the Church. But losing him she found him again, sharing his educational and pastoral mission among the young.

5. Exodus from the Becchi to Valdocco

Don Bosco had appreciated and recognised the great values he had drawn from his family: peasant wisdom, healthy shrewdness, a sense of work, the essential nature of things, industriousness in keeping busy, optimism to the full, endurance in times of misfortune, the ability to bounce back after beatings, cheerfulness always and in any case, the spirit of solidarity, living faith, the truth and intensity of affection, a taste for welcome and hospitality; all goods that

he had found at home and that had built him up that way. He was so marked by this experience that, when he thought of an educational institution for his boys, he wanted no other name for it than "home" and defined the spirit that would be impressed on it as "family spirit". And to give the right imprint, he asked Mamma Margaret, by now old and tired, to leave the tranquillity of her little house in the hills, to go down to the city and take care of those boys picked up from the streets, those who would give her no small amount of worry and sorrow. But she went to help Don Bosco and to be a mother to those who no longer had family and affections. While John Bosco learned the art of loving concretely, generously, unselfishly and towards everyone at Mamma Margaret's school his mother would share her son's choice to devote his life to the salvation of the young to the very end. This communion of spirit and action between son and mother marked the beginning of the Salesian work, involving many people in this divine adventure. Having reached a peaceful situation, she accepted, despite being no longer young, to leave the quiet life and security of the Becchi, to go to Turin in a suburban area and in a house stripped bare. It was a real departure in her life!

So Don Bosco, after thinking and rethinking how to get out of the difficulties, went to speak to his parish priest at Castelnovo, telling him of his need and his fears.

"You have your mother!" The Parish Priest replied without a moment's hesitation: "have her come with you to Turin."

Don Bosco, who had foreseen this answer, wanted to make some reflections, but Don Cinzano replied:

"Take your mother with you. You will find no one better suited to the work than her. Rest assured; you will have an angel at your side!"

Don Bosco returned home convinced by the reasons put before him by the provost. However, two reasons still held him back. The first was the life of privations and changed habits to which his mother would naturally have to be subjected in that

new position. The second came from the repugnance he felt at proposing to his mother a task that would have made her in some way dependent on him. For Don Bosco his mother was everything, and with his brother Joseph, he was accustomed to keep her every wish as unquestionable law. However, after thinking and praying, seeing that there was no other choice left, he concluded:

“My mother is a saint, so I can propose to her!”

So one day he took her aside and thus spoke to her:

“I have decided, mother, to return to Turin among my dear young people. From now on, as I will no longer be staying at the Refuge, I will need a servant; but the place where I will have to live in Valdocco, because of certain people who live near there, is very risky, and does not leave me calm. I therefore need to have at my side a safeguard to remove every reason for suspicion and gossip from malevolent people. You alone could remove all fear from me; would you not gladly come and stay with me?” At this unanticipated exodus, the pious woman remained somewhat thoughtful, and then answered:

“My dear son, you can imagine how much it costs my heart to leave this house, your brother and other loved ones; but if it seems to you that such a thing might please the Lord I am ready to follow you.”

Don Bosco assured her, and thanking her, concluded:

“Let us arrange things then, and after the Feast of the Saints we will leave.”

Margaret went to live with her son, not to lead a more comfortable and pleasant life, but to share with him the hardships and sufferings of hundreds of poor and abandoned boys; she went there, not attracted by greed for money, but by love of God and souls, because she knew that the part of the sacred ministry Don Bosco had taken on, far from giving him any resources or profit, obliged him to spend his own goods, and also to seek alms. She did not stop; on the contrary, admiring her son’s courage and zeal, she felt even more encouraged to be his companion and imitator, until her death.

Margaret lived at the Oratory bringing the motherly warmth and wisdom of a profoundly Christian woman, heroic dedication to her son in times that were difficult for his health and physical safety, thus exercising an authentic spiritual and material motherhood towards her priest son. In fact, she settled in Valdocco not only to cooperate in the work begun by her son, but also to dispel any occasion for slander that might arise from the dubious premises nearby.

She left the quiet security of Joseph's home to venture with her son on a mission that was not easy and was risky. She spent her time in unreserved dedication to the youngsters "of whom she was a mother". She loved the boys of the oratory as her own children and worked for their welfare, education and spiritual life, giving the oratory that family atmosphere that would be a characteristic of Salesian houses from the beginning. "If there is the holiness of ecstasies and visions, there is also the holiness of pots to clean and socks to mend. Mamma Margaret was such a saint."

In her relations with the children she was exemplary, distinguishing herself by her refined charity and her humility in serving, reserving the humblest of occupations for herself. Her intuition as a mother and spiritual woman resulted in recognising in Dominic Savio as an extraordinary work of grace.

Even at the Oratory, however, there was no lack of trials and when there was a moment of hesitation due to the harshness of the experience, caused by a very demanding life, the glance at the Crucifix pointed out by her son was enough to infuse her with new energy: "From that instant no word of lament escaped her lips. Indeed, from then on she seemed insensitive to those miseries."

Fr Rua summed up the testimony of Mamma Margaret well, after living for four years at the oratory: "A truly Christian woman, pious, generous-hearted and courageous, prudent, who devoted herself entirely to the good education of her children and her adoptive family."

6. Exodus to the Father's house

She was born poor. She lived poor. She died poor wearing the only dress she used; in her pocket were 12 lire destined to buy a new one, which she never bought.

Even at the hour of death, she turned to her beloved son and left him with words worthy of the wise woman: "Have great confidence in those who work with you in the vineyard of the Lord... Take heed that many seek their own good instead of the glory of God... Seek neither elegance nor splendour in works. Seek the glory of God; have poverty of deed as your basis. Many love poverty in others, but not in themselves. The most effective teaching is for us to be the first to do what we command others."

Margaret, who had consecrated John to the Blessed Virgin, had entrusted him at the beginning of his studies to her, recommending devotion and the propagation of love of Mary, now reassured him: "Our Lady will not fail to guide your affairs."

Her whole life was a total gift of self. On her deathbed she could say: "I have done my whole share." She died at the age of 68 in the Valdocco Oratory on 25 November 1856. The Oratory boys accompanied her to the cemetery, mourning her as "Mamma".

Don Bosco, saddened, said to Pietro Enria: "We have lost our mother, but I am sure she will help us from Heaven. She was a saint!" And Enria himself added: "Don Bosco did not exaggerate in calling her a saint, because she sacrificed herself for us and was a true mother to us all."

In conclusion

Mamma Margaret was a woman rich in interior life and with a rock-solid faith, sensitive and docile to the voice of the Spirit, ready to grasp and realise God's will, attentive to the problems of her neighbour, available to provide for the needs of the poorest and especially the abandoned young. Don Bosco would always remember the teachings and what he had learned at his mother's school and this

tradition would mark his educational system and spirituality. Don Bosco had experienced that the formation of his personality was vitally rooted in the extraordinary climate of dedication and goodness of his family; that is why he wanted to reproduce its most significant qualities in his work. Margaret intertwined her life with that of her son and with the beginnings of the Salesian work: she was Don Bosco's first "Cooperator"; with active goodness she became the maternal element of the Preventive System. At the school of Don Bosco and Mamma Margaret this means caring for the formation of consciences, educating to the fortitude of the virtuous life in the struggle, without discounts and compromises, against sin, with the help of the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, growing in personal, family and community docility to the inspirations and motions of the Holy Spirit to strengthen the reasons for good and to bear witness to the beauty of faith.

For the entire Salesian Family, this testimony is a further invitation to adopt a privileged attention to the family in the pastoral care of young people, forming and involving parents in the educational and evangelising action of their children, valuing their contribution in processes of affective education and encouraging new forms of evangelisation and catechesis of and through families. Mamma Margaret today is an extraordinary model for families. Hers is a family holiness: as a woman, a wife, a mother, a widow, an educator. Her life contains a message of great relevance, especially in the rediscovery of the sanctity of marriage.

But another aspect must be emphasised: one of the fundamental reasons why Don Bosco wanted his mother beside him in Turin was to find in her a guardian for his own priesthood. "Take your mother with you", the old parish priest had suggested to him. Don Bosco took Mamma Margaret into his life as priest and educator. As a child, an orphan, it was his mother who took him by the hand, and as a young priest it was he who took her by the hand to share a special mission. One cannot understand Don Bosco's priestly holiness without the

holiness of Mamma Margaret, a model not only of family holiness, but also of spiritual motherhood for priests.

Wonders of the Mother of God invoked under the title of Mary Help of Christians (12/13)

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A memento of the ceremony for the laying of the cornerstone of the church consecrated to Mary Help of Christians on 27 April 1865.

PHILIP, BENEDICT, CRISPIN AND THEODORE.

Phil. What a fabulous celebration it is today

Cris. Yes, it is fabulous; I've been in this Oratory for many years, but I have never seen a celebration like it before, and I don't think we will ever have another one like it.

Ben. Let me introduce myself to you, my friends. I'm gob-smacked: I just can't get over it.

Phil. Get over what?

Ben. I can't get over what I've seen.

Theo. Who are you? Where do you come from? What have you seen?

Ben. I'm a kid from way outa town. I left my place to join the boys at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales. When I rocked up to Turin, I asked to be taken here but the moment I walked in, I saw these flash carriages, horses, footmen, and coachies, all done up to the nines. "Is it possible", I asked myself, "that this is the house where I, a poor orphan, am coming to

live?" Then I step into the Oratory grounds, and I see a mob of young kids yelling, buzzing with joy, and almost going bonkers: "Viva, glory, triumph" getting cheers and good vibes from everyone, all the time. Then I raise my gaze towards the bell tower and see a small bell moving in all directions producing a harmonious ringing with all its effort. In the courtyard, it's a symphony of sound: tunes coming from here, tunes coming from there. Some kids tearing around, some leaping about, some belting out songs, and others getting stuck into games. So I say to myself, "what the hell's goin on?"

Phil. Here's why in just a few words. Today the cornerstone of our new church was blessed. His Royal Highness Prince Amedeo has been good enough to lay down the first brick. His Lordship the Bishop of Susa shows up to do the religious part. And there's a crowd of well-to-do people and our top-notch benefactors who've come to show respect to the King's son and make this solemn day even more grand.

Ben. Now it all makes sense why everyone's in such high spirits, and you lot have every reason to throw a top-notch party. But, mate, if you'll permit me to point out something, I reckon you've slipped up on the main bit. On a day as big as this, to welcome so many bigwigs, including the royal Heir, you'd reckon there'd be some fair dinkum grand preparations sorted. You should've thrown up triumphal arches, thrown flowers all over the streets, decked out every nook with roses, laid out classy frescoes on every wall, and a thousand other fancy touches.

Theo. You are right, dear Ben, you are right. This is what we all wanted to do. But think about it. As the battlers we are, us young guys weren't held back by a lack of keenness, but by our lack of muscle.

Phil. To give our beloved Prince a decent welcome, we all got together a few days back to yarn about what needed sorting for this big day. One of us piped up, saying, "If I had a kingdom to spare, I'd throw it his way, 'cause he's really worthy of it." "Spot on!" we all chimed in, "But strewth, we're as broke

as a bloke without a bob.” “That’s right” our mates jumped in, “If we haven’t got no kingdom to hand over, we can at least crown him King of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales.” “Lucky us!” the whole mob yelled, “Then we’d be laughing! No more misery, just one big endless festa!” Then another kid, seeing that the others’ ideas were a bit far-fetched, reckoned we could make him the king of our hearts, the boss of our affections. And since a few of our mates are already taking orders from him in the military, we could offer up our loyalty, our full attention when it’s our turn to serve in the regiment he’s running.

Ben. What did your mates say to that?

Phil. Everyone happily agreed with the plan. When it came to sorting out how to welcome him, we all agreed without a second thought: These gents are used to the high life, seeing grandeur and magnificence wherever they go, and they’ll understand our humble setup and be gentle with us. We’ve got every reason to reckon they’ll come through with flying colours, given the generosity and kindness we know they’re made of.

Ben. Great. You’ve put it well.

Theo. Yep. I reckon you’ve got it right. But it wouldn’t go astray, would it, to give ‘em a word of thanks, a few kind words to show our appreciation?

Ben. OK mates, but first I’ve got a few questions about the Oratories and what goes on in ‘em that I need to get sorted.

Phil. But that would mean that our kind benefactors will have to be pretty patient.

Ben. True, but I reckon they’d love to hear it. Since they’ve been and still are our main benefactors, they’ll be chuffed to bits to hear from those who’ve been on the receiving end of their generosity.

Phil. I’m a bit limited in what I can do, you see, ‘cause I’ve only been around for about a year, give or take. Maybe Crispin, one of the older ones, will be able to satisfy us; is that right, Cris?

Cris. If you reckon I’m up to the task, I’ll give it my best

shot to meet your expectations. First off, I'll say that back in 1841, these Oratories were just a bunch of youngsters, mostly from out of town, who'd turn up on Sundays to certain spots to get schooled in the Catechism. Then, when they scored better lodgings, these Oratories in 1844 turned into spots where kids could hang out and enjoy themselves in proper ways after doing their religious part. So, our idea of a good time was playing, having a laugh, jumping about, running amok, singing our hearts out, and belting out tunes on the trumpet and drums. Soon afterwards (1846) Sunday school was added, then (1847) evening classes followed. The first Oratory is the one where we are now, called St Francis de Sales. After this another was opened at Porta Nuova, then another one later in Vanchiglia, and a few years ago the St Joseph's Oratory in St Salvano.

Ben. You're telling me about the history of the festive Oratories, and that's great, I like it, but I would like to know something about this one. So what's the deal for the kids taken in here? What are they up to?

Cris. I can fill you in on that. Among the kids at the Oratories, and even some who roll in from other places outside of town, you've got some who, either 'cause they're completely on their own or 'cause they're flat broke and haven't got much to their name, would be staring down the barrel of a bleak future if someone with a bit of heart didn't take 'em under their wing, look out for 'em like a dad, and sort 'em out with the basics for life.

Ben. From what you're telling me, it seems that this place is for poor kids, but I can see you are all spruced up like little gents. What gives?

Cris. Check it out, Ben. Knowing we've got this massive show on today, everyone's gone all out, showing up in their fanciest stuff, making sure we're all looking spick and span, if not downright flashy.

Ben. Are there many of you in this house?

Cris. There's about eight hundred of us.

Ben. Eight hundred! Eight hundred, you said! And how do you

reckon you're gonna fill the bellies of all these ravenous loaf demolishers?

Cris. Not our problem, that's for the baker to work out.

Ben. But who coughs up the cash?

Cris. Just cast your eyes around at all these good people who are lending us their ears, and you'll figure out who's stepping up to the plate and how – sorting us out with grub, gear, and anything else we need to make this happen.

Ben. But I can't get over that number – eight hundred! What can all these kids possibly be doing, both day and night!

Cris. It's a breeze to keep them busy at night. They're all asleep in their own bunk, keeping to the rules, everything tidy, and as quiet as a mouse till the morning.

Ben. You gotta be joking.

Cris. I thought you were the one joking. If you're keen to know what we get up to each day, I'll give it to you in a nutshell. There's two groups. One is the working boys, the other is the students. The working boys (they call them artisans) here are flat out with lots of trades – tailoring, cobbling, smithing, woodworking, bookbinding, composing, typesetting, doing music, and painting. For example, these lithographs, these paintings are their work. This book was printed here, and was bound in our workshop.

So, basically, they're all students since they're all attending evening classes, but the ones who really shine and behave well usually get the nod from our superiors to focus solely on their studies. That's why it's pretty sweet having all kinds around here from among us. Some are docs, others are notaries, lawyers, teachers, professors, and even a few priests in the mix.

Ben. Is this music all from the kids from this house?

Cris. Yeah, those lads who just belted out a tune or played a riff are from right here in the house. In fact, most of the music you hear is cooked up right here in the Oratory. See, every day at a set time, there's a class just for music, so everyone, on top of their regular trade or book learnin', can level up their musical skills.

That's why we're chuffed to have a bunch of our mates holding down top-notch civil and military roles, thanks to their smarts. Plus, loads of 'em are dabbling in music in different regiments, the National Guard, and even in His Royal Highness's Regiment, Prince Amedeo's.

Ben. Stoked to hear that! So, the smart ones can really flex their brains and nurture their talents, instead of being held back by poverty or having to do stuff that's not their cup of tea. But tell me one more thing: when I came in I saw a beautiful church already built and decked out, and you told me you need another one: Why do you need this?

Cris. The reason is very simple. The church we have so far used was meant especially for the kids from outside who come on Sundays. But with the number of young kids we're taking in skyrocketing, our church is chockers, and there's barely any room for outsiders. We reckon that not even a third of the ones who would like to come can find a place. Imagine! We've had to send lots of 'em away, leaving 'em to stir up trouble in the squares, all because there's no more space left in the church!

I reckon it's also worth mentioning that from the parish church of Borgo Dora to St Donato, there's a whole bunch of houses and thousands of people living there, but there's not a church or chapel in sight – not a small one, nor a big one. And there's heaps of kids and grown-ups who'd really benefit from having one around. So there was a real need for a big enough church that could fit all the kids and still have room for the adults. That urgent, genuine need is what got us cracking on building the church that's the centerpiece of all our celebrations.

Ben. The stuff you've filled me in on paints a clear picture of what the Oratories are all about and why we're building this church, and I reckon it'll sit well with these gents, knowing where their kindness is headed. I don't really have the gift of the gab or able to spin poetry to come up with a good speech or deep bit of poetry about what you have told me, but hey, even a few heartfelt words of thanks can go a long

way in showing these people how much we appreciate their help.
Theo. I'd love to do it, but I have just learned about lines and rhymes in poems; it's all a bit tricky. So on behalf of my mates and beloved superiors, I'll just say this to H.R.H. Prince Amedeo and all the others: We reckon this celebration was great. We're even planning on engraving it in gold letters, saying:

May this day live on forever!

Sooner shall the sun reverse
Journey eastward in its course;
Every river backward flow

To its source begin to go,
Than this day be lost or fade
From our hearts, where it shall stay,
Among the fairest ever made.

And to you, Your Royal Highness, I want to say that we've got a real soft spot for you. Your visit means the world to us, and whenever we're lucky enough to catch sight of you in the city or anywhere else, or even just hear people talking about you, it'll always be a source of pride, honour, and genuine joy for us. But before we part ways, I've got a little request from my esteemed superiors and my mates. We'd be over the moon if you'd be up for swinging by again in the future, so we can remember what a great time we've had.

And you, Your Lordship the Bishop, if you could keep showing us that same fatherly kindness you've been showing so far, we'd be forever grateful. And you, Mr Mayor, who've played a big role in looking out for us, please keep watching our backs and see if you can arrange to have Via Cottolengo rerouted in front of the new church. We'll make sure to double down on our heartfelt thanks to you.

And to you, our Parish Priest, please keep seeing us not just as parishioners, but as your own dear kids, always finding in you a caring and gentle father. We urge all of you to keep up the stellar work as renowned benefactors, just as you've been

in the past, especially when it comes to finishing up that church we're celebrating today.

The work's already underway, rising up from the ground, and that in itself calls out to the generous souls among us to lend a hand and see it through to the finish. Lastly, rest assured that the memory of this splendid day will be forever cherished in our hearts. We all join together in praying to the Queen of Heaven, to whom the new church is dedicated, asking her to bless you with a long life and many joyous days ahead, bestowed by the Source of all blessings.

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Saint Francis, promoter of culture

As the pastor of a diocese the vast majority of which was made up of illiterate villagers and mountain dwellers, heirs to an ancestral and practical culture, Francis de Sales was also the promoter of a learned culture among the intellectual elite. To convey his message, he understood that he had to get to know his audience and take account of their needs and tastes. When he spoke to people, and especially when he wrote for educated people, his method was the one he set out in the Preface to his 'Treatise on the Love of God': 'Of course, I took into consideration the condition of the minds of this century, and I had to: it is very important to consider the age in which one writes'.

Francis de Sales and popular culture

Born into a noble family with strong ties to the land, Francis de Sales was never a stranger to popular

culture. The environment in which he grew up already brought him into close contact with the common people, to the extent that he himself would willingly place himself among the 'big mountain people' when they got up in the morning. During his pastoral visits, he used the patois, colloquially familiar with 'the coarse language of the country to make himself better heard'. In any case, it is certain that direct contact with the population as a whole gave his pastoral experience a concrete and warm character.

As we know, popular culture is much better expressed in narrative form than in writing. Need we remind you that while a certain percentage of the population could read, most could not write? Nevertheless, books from established booksellers and hawkers were appearing, not only in towns but also in villages. This production of inexpensive booklets must have been very varied, with the majority undoubtedly coming from popular literature that conveyed a still medieval sensibility: lives of saints, romances of chivalry, marvellous tales, stories of brigands or almanacs with their weather forecasts and practical advice.

But popular culture was also conveyed through everyday encounters and festivals, when people went out to eat and drink together in taverns and cabarets, particularly 'on weddings, christenings, funerals and confraternities', and at fairs and markets. Francis de Sales may well have done society a favour by not systematically shunning all forms of conviviality and public revelry, imposing restrictions only on ecclesiastics who were obliged to keep to themselves.

Wisdom and know-how

A sympathetic observer of nature and people, François de Sales learned a great deal through his contact with them. It was the farmers and those who ploughed the land who told him that when it snows in winter, the harvest will be better the following year. As for the shepherds and herdsmen in the mountains, their care for their flocks is an example of 'pastoral' zeal. In the world of trades, we often discover

admirable know-how:

'Ploughmen do not sow fields until they have cleared them and removed the thorns; masons do not use stones until they have cut them; locksmiths do not use iron until they have beaten it; goldsmiths do not use gold until it has been purified in the crucible.'

Humour is not absent from some of the stories he tells. Since ancient times, barbers have been known as great talkers; when one of them asked a king: 'How would you like me to do your beard? the king replied: 'Without saying a word.' Carpenters work small miracles: with a twisted piece of wood they can create 'some beautiful masterpiece'. Glassmakers, too, are astonishing, creating marvels with the breath of their mouths.

As for the art of typography, he understood its importance, especially for religious purposes. In a letter to the nuncio in Turin in May 1598, he lamented: *'There should be a printer in Annecy. Heretics are publishing very pernicious books all the time, while many Catholic works remain in the hands of their authors because they cannot be sent safely to Lyon and they have no printer at their disposal'*.

Art and artists

In the arts, the triumph of the Renaissance shone through in works inspired by antiquity. Francis de Sales was able to contemplate them during his visits to Italy and France. In Rome, during his trip in 1599, he admired the great dome of St Peter's, barely finished a few years earlier, and noted that Christian Rome had nothing to envy of pagan Rome: *Tell me, where is the memory of Nero? Everything said about him now is bad. Oh, what is the memory of the glorious apostle Saint Peter, a poor fisherman, barefoot and simple! Great is the palace, the basilica, the monument of Saint Peter; that of Nero is nothing.*

At the time, classical sculpture was the object of the greatest admiration, so much so, he said, that even 'the parts of ancient statues are kept as a reminder of antiquity'.

He himself mentions several sculptors of antiquity, starting with Phidias: he, who 'never represented anything so perfectly as the divinities', 'made a statue of Minerva, all of ivory, twenty-six cubits high in Athens', and on his shield 'he engraved his own face with such art that not a single strand of his image could be removed,' says Aristotle, 'without the whole statue collapsing'. Here is Polyclitus, 'my Polyclitus, who is so dear to me', he said, whose 'master hand' worked on the bronze. Francis de Sales also evoked the Colossus of Rhodes, symbol of divine providence, in whom there is 'neither change nor a shadow of vicissitude'.

Now we come to the famous painters mentioned by Pliny and Plutarch: Aurelius, a man who 'painted all the faces of the images he made in the air and likeness of the women he loved'; the 'unique Apelles', Alexander the Great's favourite painter; Timanthe, who veiled Agamemnon's head because he despaired of being able to convey the consternation on his face at the death of his daughter Iphigenia; Protogenes, who 'made an excellent masterpiece of an admirable satyr who enjoyed playing the flageolet'.

He was especially attracted to religious painting, which was strongly recommended by his former spiritual director Possevin, who sent him his 'charming work' *De poesi et pictura*. He considered himself a painter, because, as he wrote in the preface to *his Introduction to the Devout Life*, 'God wants me to paint not only the common virtues, but also his very dear and beloved devotion on people's hearts'.

Francis de Sales also loved singing and music. We know that he had hymns sung during catechism classes, but we would like to know what was sung in his cathedral. Once, in a letter, the day after a ceremony where a text from the *Song of Songs* had been sung, he exclaimed: 'Ah! how well it was sung yesterday in our church and in my heart! He knew and appreciated the differences between instruments: 'Among instruments, drums and trumpets make more noise, but lutes and spinet instruments make more melody; the sound of one is louder, and the other more suave and spiritual'.

The Florimontane Academy (1606)

"The city of Annecy," wrote his nephew Charles-Auguste de Sales pompously, "was similar to Athens under such a great prelate as Francis de Sales, and under such a great president as Antoine Favre, and was inhabited by a large number of doctors, either theologians or lawyers, or people well versed in humanities."

People have wondered how Francis de Sales came up with the idea of founding an academy with his friend Antoine Favre at the end of 1606, which they called 'Florimontane', 'because the Muses flourished in the mountains of Savoy'. Coming into existence in Italy at the end of the 14th century, the academies had spread far and wide across the Alps. It should not be forgotten that the Calvinists in Geneva had their own, and this must have played a major role in the creation of a Catholic rival.

The Florimontane Academy had its own emblem: an orange tree, admired by Francis de Sales because it was full of flowers and fruit almost all year round (*flores fructusque perennes*). In fact, explained Francis, 'in Italy, on the coast of Genova, and even in these countries of France, as in Provence, along the shores you can see it bearing its leaves, flowers and fruit in every season'.

The Academy was made up of recognised scholars and masters, but public lectures were planned to give it the air of a small people's university. Indeed, the general assemblies could be attended by 'all brave masters of the honest arts, such as painters, sculptors, carpenters, architects and the like'.

We can guess that the aim of the two founders was to bring together the intellectual elite of Savoy and to place literature, the sciences and the arts at the service of faith and piety in accordance with the ideal of Christian humanism. The meetings were held in Antoine Favre's home, where his children helped to welcome the guests. So there was something of a family atmosphere. In fact, as one article put it, 'all the academicians will maintain a mutual and fraternal love'.

The Academy got off to a brilliant and promising start. In 1610, no more than three years after its beginnings, Antoine Favre was appointed President of the Senate of Savoy and left for Chambéry. The bishop, for his part, was unable to maintain the Académie on his own, and it declined and disappeared. But while its existence was short-lived, its influence was enduring. The cultural project that had given rise to it was taken up by the Barnabites, who arrived at Annecy College in 1614. It is sometimes said that the Florimontane Academy inspired Cardinal Richelieu to create the Académie Française.

A Galileo affair in Annecy?

The Collège d'Annecy was famous for Father Baranzano. This Barnabite from Piedmont, who embraced the new scientific theories, was a brilliant teacher who aroused the admiration and even the enthusiasm of his pupils. In 1617, without the permission of his superiors, his disciples published a summary of his lectures, in which he developed Copernicus' planetary system and the ideas of Galileo. The book in question immediately caused such a stir that the author was recalled to Milan by his superiors.

In September 1617, Bishop de Sales wrote a letter to his superior general asking him to return to Annecy, where he was 'much appreciated' and 'very useful'. The bishop's wish was granted and Father Baranzano returned to Annecy at the end of October that year. In 1618, the religious published a pamphlet to make amends for his mistake, but there is no evidence that he renounced his ideas.

In 1619, he published *Novae opiniones physicae* in Lyon, the first volume of the second part of an ambitious *Summa philosophica anneciensis*. The bishop gave his official approval to 'this erudite work by an erudite man', and authorised its printing. It should be noted that Baranzano acquired an international reputation and came into contact with Francis Bacon, the English promoter of the reform of the sciences, with the German astronomer Johannes Kepler, and with

Galileo himself. It was a time when Galileo was being recklessly prosecuted in order to safeguard the authority of the Bible, which had been compromised by the new theories on the rotation of the earth around the sun.

While Cardinal Bellarmine was worried about the dangers of the new theories, for François de Sales there could be no contradiction between reason and faith. And was not the sun the symbol of celestial love around which everything moves, and the centre of devotion?

Religious poetry

The Renaissance had rehabilitated ancient, pagan poetry, which François had studied at school, and from which the Jesuits had expunged the most disturbing passages for young sensibilities. As a young man, he had been seduced by the biblical poetry of the *Song of Songs* and the *Psalms*, which would accompany him throughout his life. He himself wrote a number of religious poems that have come down to us.

The fact remains that it was not a few rather clumsy verses that ensured his literary reputation, which, during his lifetime, was sufficiently established for writers and poets to seek contact with him. Such was the case with the Provençal magistrate and poet Jean de la Ceppède, one of the great exponents of Baroque religious poetry, who sent him a copy of his *Théorèmes sur le sacré mystère de la Rédemption*. What delighted him most in this poet's verses was that he had succeeded in 'transforming the pagan muses into Christians, to remove them from this old Parnassus and lodge them on the new sacred Calvary'.

Francis de Sales knew and admired the power of poetry, 'for it is marvellous how much power discourse compressed into the laws of verse has to penetrate hearts and subdue memory'. In 1616, the Lyonnais poet René Gros de Saint-Joyre sent him his manuscript of *La mire de vie à l'amour parfait*, a poem in French verse divided into stanzas of eight lines, dedicated to the abbess of the Benedictine monastery of Saint-Pierre de Lyon.

By the Basque-born poet and humanist Jean de Sponde, he cites not the *Sonnets d'amour* or the *Stances sur la mort*, but the *Réponse au Traité des marques de l'Église* by Théodore de Bèze and the *Déclaration* sur les motifs de la conversion by this former Calvinist, whom he considered a 'great mind'. He was also in contact with the Burgundian poet and memoirist Jean de Lacurne, who was considered 'the delight of Apollo and all the Muses', and to whom he declared: 'I make much of your writings'.

Learned culture and theology

He also asked about the theological books that were appearing. After having 'seen with extreme pleasure' a draft of the *Somme de théologie*, he took the liberty of giving the author some advice. His opinion was that it was necessary to cut out all the 'methodical', 'superfluous' and 'importunate' words, to prevent the *Summa* from becoming too 'fat', to ensure that it was 'nothing but juice and marrow', by making it 'more palatable and pleasant', and not to be afraid of using the 'affective style'.

Later, writing to one of his priests who was engaged in literary and scientific work, he made more or less the same recommendations. It was necessary, according to him, to take into account 'the mood of the world', 'to write to the taste of this poor world', and 'to treat pious and holy things in a pleasant, historical way and which charmed a little the curiosity of the spirits of the time'. To write 'to the taste of this poor world' meant agreeing to use certain means capable of arousing the interest of the reader of the time:

Sir, we are fishermen, and fishers of men. We must therefore use not only care, work and vigilance in this fishing, but also bait, tricks, lures, yes even, if I dare say, holy tricks. The world is becoming so delicate that from now on we will only dare to touch it with musk gloves, or dress its wounds with civet plasters; but what does it matter, as long as men are healed and saved at last? Our queen, charity, does everything for her children.

Another fault, especially among theologians, was the lack of clarity, to the point where one felt like writing on the first page of certain works: *Fiat lux*. His friend, Bishop Camus, recalls this comment by his hero about the work of an illegible author: 'This man has given several books to the public, but I don't realise that he has brought any of them to light. It's a great pity to be so learned and yet not be able to express oneself. It's like those women who are pregnant with several children and can't give birth to any of them. He added with conviction: 'Above all, long live clarity; without it nothing can be pleasant'. According to Camus, the works of Francis de Sales certainly contain difficulties, but obscurity is a flaw that was never found on his pen.

A writer full of projects

Towards the end of his life, his pen was still busy with numerous projects. Michel Favre has stated that he planned to write a treatise *De l'amour du prochain*, as well as a *Histoire théandrique*, in which 'he wanted to describe the life of Our Lord humanised and suggest ways of easily practising the evangelical maxims'. According to his confidant and future biographer, Dom Jean de Saint-François, the *Histoire théandrique* was to consist of four books: a 'clear and vulgar version of the four evangelists united and allied together in a manner of concordance', a demonstration 'of the principal points of the creed of the Catholic Church', an 'instruction in good morals and the practice of Christian virtues', and finally a history of the Acts of the Apostles to show 'what the face of the primitive Church was at its birth, and the order and conduct that the Holy Spirit and the apostles established in it at its first beginning'.

He also had in mind a *Book of the four loves*, in which he wanted to teach how we should love God, love ourselves, love our friends and love our enemies; a book of the *evangelical maxims*, as well as a *familiar explanation of the mysteries of our holy faith*.

None of these works will ever see the light of

day. I shall die like pregnant women,' he wrote, 'without producing what I have conceived. His 'philosophy' was that 'you have to take on much more than you know what to do with, and as if you were going to live a long time, but don't worry about doing more than if you were going to die tomorrow'.

“Corso respiro” 2024. Salesian missionary renewal course

The Mission Sector of the Salesian Congregation, with its headquarters in Rome, organised a Missionary renewal course called Corso Respiro, in English language, for the missionaries who are already in the missions for many years and were desirous of a spiritual renewal and updating. The course which began at Colle Don Bosco on 11 September 2024 was successfully concluded in Rome on 26 October 2024.

The *Corso Respiro* had 24 participants from 14 countries: Azerbaijan, Botswana, Brazil, Cambodia, Eritrea, India, Japan, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Samoa, South Sudan, Tanzania and Turkey. Though we, the participants of the course came from various countries with our diverse cultural backgrounds and belonged to the different branches of the Salesian Family, we quickly established a strong bond among ourselves, and all of us felt at home in each other's company.

One of the uniqueness of the *Corso Respiro* was that it was a missionary course in which several members of the Salesian Family took part for the first time: 16 Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB), 3 Sisters of Charity of Jesus (SCG), 2 Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians (MSMHC), 2 Visitation

Sisters of Don Bosco (VSDB) and 1 Salesian Cooperator. Another positive aspect was the lived experience with some of the lesser known and smaller members of the Salesian Family.

The seven weeks of the *Corso Respiro* was a time of spiritual renewal which enabled us to deepen our knowledge of Don Bosco, Salesian history, charism, spirit and spirituality and to know better the different members of the Salesian Family. The Salesian Lectio Divina, pilgrimages to the places connected with the life and apostolate of Don Bosco at Becchi, Castelnuovo Don Bosco, Chieri and Valdocco, the days spent at Annecy and at Mornese, pilgrimage in the footsteps of St Paul the Apostle in Rome, participation in the general audience given by Pope Francis at the Vatican, visit to the Basilica of Sacro Cuore built by Don Bosco and the Salesian Generalate, sharing of missionary experiences by all the participants of the course, taking part in the solemn "Missionary Sending" from the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians at Valdocco, time spent daily in personal prayer and reflection, common eucharistic celebration and so on helped us very much to personalise and deepen our Salesian values and missionary vocation. The days we spent in Rome reflecting on the various aspects of the theology of the missions, sessions on Salesian youth ministry, personal discernment, on-going formation, missionary catechesis, emotional literacy, missionary volunteering, missionary animation of the Congregation, etc., with the help of experts in the respective fields were also very enriching. The pilgrimage to Assisi, the place sanctified by Saint Francis of Assisi, with the theme to "thank", to "re-think" and to "re-launch", was an occasion for us to thank God for our missionary vocation and ask Him for the grace to return to our mission lands with greater enthusiasm to do better in the future. Another speciality of the *Corso Respiro* was that it was not academic in nature with credits, theses, examinations and grading, but one which laid emphasis on the Word of God, sharing of experiences, reflection, prayer and contemplation with only a minimum theoretical input.

As participants of the *Corso Respiro*, we had the special privilege of witnessing the 155th “Missionary Sending” from the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians at Valdocco, Turin, on 29 September 2024. A total of 27 Salesians, practically all of them very young, left for different countries as missionaries after having received the missionary cross from Don Stefano Martoglio, the Vicar of the Rector Major. That memorable event reminded us of our own reception of the missionary cross and the departure for the missions many years ago. We were also made aware of the uninterrupted “Missionary Sending” from Valdocco since 1875, and the perennial commitment of the Salesians Congregation to the missionary charism of Don Bosco.

A very enriching aspect of the *Corso Respiro* was the sharing of the vocation stories and the missionary experiences by all the participants. Each one prepared himself or herself for it in advance and shared their vocational story and missionary experiences in creative ways. While some shared their experiences in the form of simple talks, others used photos, video clips and PowerPoint presentations. There was ample time to interact with each missionary to clarify doubts and gather more information about their missionary vocation, the country and the culture of their missions. This sharing was an excellent spiritual exercise because each one of us had the opportunity to reflect deeply on our own missionary vocation and to discover the hand of God at work in our life. This interior journey was very formative and it enabled us to strengthen our missionary vocation and helped us to resolve to commit ourselves with greater generosity to *Missio Dei* (“Mission of God”).

During the *Corso Respiro*, through the sharing of our missionary experiences, we were once again deeply convinced that the life of a missionary is not an easy one. Most of the missionaries work in the “peripheries” of various kinds (geographical, existential, economic, cultural, spiritual and psychological), and a good number of them in very difficult

conditions, under challenging circumstances and with many privations. In many contexts there is no religious freedom to preach the Gospel openly. In other places there are governments with fascist ideologies which oppose Christianity and have anti-conversion laws in force. There are countries where one cannot reveal one's priestly or religious identity. Then there are places where neither the Catholic institution nor the religious personnel is permitted to exhibit Christian religious symbols like the cross, the Bible, statues of Christ or saints or religious habit. There are territories where the missionaries cannot come together for meetings or spiritual exercises or lead a community life. There are nations that do not allow any foreign Christian missionary to enter their country and block all financial assistance from abroad to Christian institutions. There are mission lands that do not have enough vocations to priestly and religious life, and as a consequence, the missionary is overburdened with many works and responsibilities. Then there are situations where finding the financial resources needed to meet the ordinary expenses of running institutions like schools, boarding houses, technical institutions, youth centres, dispensaries and so on is one of the major worries of the missionaries. There are missions that lack the financial resources needed to build up the much needed infrastructure or persons qualified to teach in schools and technical institutions or offer basic health care services to the poor. This list of the problems which the missionaries face is not exhaustive. But the positive thing about the missionaries is that they are people of deep faith and happy in their missionary vocation. They are glad to be with the people and satisfied with what they have, and trusting in God's Providence they go ahead with their missionary work in spite of the numerous challenges and privations. Some of the missionaries are radiant examples of Christian holiness which make their life itself a powerful proclamation of the Gospel. These valiant missionaries deserve our appreciation, encouragement, spiritual and material support to continue with their missionary work.

A special word of appreciation to all the members of the Mission Sector who worked very hard and made many sacrifices to organise the *Corso Respiro* 2024. I hope that the Mission Sector will continue to offer this course every year, and if possible, in different languages, and with the participation of more members of the Salesian Family, especially the smaller and the lesser known ones. The course will definitely provide opportunity for the missionaries to have a spiritual renewal, theological updating, physical and mental rest, which are essential to offer better quality missionary and pastoral service in the missions and to establish stronger bonds among the members of the Salesian Family.

Fr. Jose Kuruvachira, *sdb*

Don Bosco and music

For the education of his youngsters Don Bosco made much use of music. Even as a boy he loved singing. As he had a beautiful voice, Mr Giovanni Roberto, head cantor of the parish, taught him Gregorian chant. Within a few months, John was able to join the orchestra and perform musical parts with excellent results. At the same time, he began to practise playing a spinet which was a plucked string instrument with a keyboard, and also the violin (BM I, 173).

As a priest in Turin, he acted as music teacher to his first oratory boys, gradually forming real choirs that attracted the sympathy of the listeners with their singing.

After the opening of the hospice, he started a school of Gregorian chant and, in time, also took his young singers to churches in the city and outside Turin to perform their repertoire.

He composed hymns such as the one to the Infant

Jesus, *'Ah, let us sing in the sound of jubilation...'*. He also initiated some of his disciples into the study of music, among them Fr John Cagliero, who later became famous for his musical creations, earning the esteem of experts. In 1855 Don Bosco organised the first instrumental band at the Oratory.

He did not, however, get ahead of the good Don Bosco! Already in the 1860s he included a chapter on evening music classes in one of his Regulations in which he said, among other things:

'From every student musician a formal promise is demanded not to go and sing or play in public theatres, nor in any other entertainment in which Religion and morality could be compromised' (MB VII, 855).

Children's music

To a French religious who had founded a festive Oratory and asked him if it was appropriate to teach music to boys, he replied: *'An Oratory without music is like a body without a soul!'* (BM V, 222).

Don Bosco spoke French quite well albeit with a certain freedom of grammar and expression. One of his replies concerning the boys' music was famous in this regard. Father L. Mendre of Marseilles, parish priest of St Joseph's parish, was very fond of him. One day, he sat beside him during entertainment in the Oratory of St Leo. The little musicians would occasionally play a flat note or two. The abbot, who knew a lot about music, winced each time. Don Bosco whispered into his ear in his French: *"Monsieur Mendre, la musique de les enfants elle s'écoute avec le coeur et non avec les oreilles"* (Father Mendre, children's music is listened to with the heart and not with the ears). The priest later recalled that occasion countless times, revealing Don Bosco's wisdom and goodness (BM XV, 58 n.3).

All this does not mean, however, that Don Bosco put music before discipline in the Oratory. He was always amiable but did not easily overlook failures of obedience. For some years he had allowed the young band members to go for a

walk and a country lunch on the feast of St Cecilia. But in 1859, due to incidents, he began to prohibit such entertainment. The youngsters did not protest openly, but half of them, urged on by a leader who had promised them to obtain permission from Don Bosco, and hoping for impunity, decided to leave the Oratory anyway and organise a lunch of their own accord before the Feast of St Cecilia. They had taken this decision thinking that Don Bosco would not notice and would not take action. So they went, in the last days of October, to lunch at a nearby inn. After lunch they wandered around the town again and in the evening they returned to dine at the same place, returning to Valdocco half-drunk late at night. Only Mr Buzzetti, invited at the last moment, refused to join them and warned Don Bosco. The latter calmly declared the band disbanded and ordered Buzzetti to collect and lock up all the instruments and think of new pupils to start instrumental music. The next morning, he sent for all the unruly musicians one by one, telling each of them that they had forced him to be very strict. Then he sent them back to their relatives or guardians, recommending some more needy to city workshops. Only one of the mischievous boys was later accepted because Fr Rua assured Don Bosco that he was a naive boy who had allowed himself to be deceived by his companions. And Don Bosco kept him on probation for some time!

But with sorrows one must not forget consolations. 9 June 1868 was a memorable date in Don Bosco's life and in the history of the Congregation. The new Church of Mary Help of Christians, which he had built with immense sacrifices, was finally consecrated. Those who were present at the solemn celebrations were deeply moved. An overflowing crowd packed Don Bosco's beautiful church. The Archbishop of Turin, Archbishop Riccardi, performed the solemn rite of consecration. At the evening service the following day, during Solemn Vespers, the Valdocco choir intoned the grand antiphon set to music by Fr Cagliero: *Sancta Maria succurre miseris*. The crowd of faithful was thrilled. Three mighty choirs had performed it perfectly. One hundred and fifty tenors and

basses sang in the nave near the altar of St Joseph, two hundred sopranos and contraltos stood high up along the railing under the dome, a third choir, made up of another hundred tenors and basses, stood on the orchestra that then overlooked the back of the church. The three choirs, connected by an electric device, maintained synchrony at the Maestro's command. The biographer, present at the performance, later wrote:

“The harmony of all three choirs singing in unison cast a spell over the entire congregation. As the voices blended together, the listeners felt that they had been immersed into a sea of voices which rose from all directions. During the singing, Canon John Baptist Anfossi was kneeling behind the main altar with Don Bosco. As far as he could remember, he had never seen or heard Don Bosco stir or say anything while at prayer. On this occasion, however, Don Bosco looked at him with moist eyes full of joy and whispered, ‘Dear Anfossi, doesn't it feel like being in heaven?’
(*BM IX*, 128).

Blessed Michael Rua. The Consecration of our Pious Society to the Sacred Heart of Jesus

On 24 October last, the Holy Father wished to renew devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus through the publication of the encyclical *Dilexit nos*, in which he explained the reasons for this choice:

“Some have questioned whether this symbol is still meaningful today. Yet living as we do in an age of superficiality, rushing frenetically from one thing to another without really knowing why, and ending up as insatiable consumers and slaves to the mechanisms of a market unconcerned about the deeper meaning of our lives, all of us need to rediscover the importance of the heart.”

We too wish to emphasise the value of this devotion, deeply rooted in the Salesian tradition. Don Bosco, inspired by the spirituality of St Francis de Sales, was keenly aware of the devotion to the Sacred Heart, promoted by one of St Francis' daughters, St Margaret Mary Alacoque, a Visitation Nun. This devotion was a continuous source of inspiration for him, and we propose to explore it in a series of future articles. Suffice it, for now, to recall the Salesian coat of arms, in which Don Bosco wanted to include the Sacred Heart, and the Roman basilica dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which he himself undertook to have built in Rome, spending time, energy and resources.

His successor, Blessed Michael Rua, continued in the founder's wake, cultivating devotion and consecrating the Salesian Congregation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

In this month of November we wish to recall his circular letter, written 124 years ago, on 21 November 1900, to prepare for this consecration, which we present here in full.

'The Consecration of our Pious Society to the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Dear Brothers and boys,

For a long time and in many places I have been asked with great insistence to consecrate our Pious Society to the Sacred Heart of Jesus with a solemn and authoritative act. Especially insisting on this were our novitiate and studentate houses, united in a holy league, and the cherished memory of that unforgettable confrere of ours who was Father Andrea

Beltrami. After a long delay, advised by prudence, I believe it appropriate to grant these supplications now, as the nineteenth century comes to an end and the twentieth century advances, full of many hopes.

Already on many occasions I have recommended devotion to the most sacred Heart of Jesus to my boys and Salesian confreres, as well as to our Sisters, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and convinced that it would bring great spiritual benefits to each of us, last year I decreed that every Salesian should consecrate himself to him. These recommendations were well received by everyone; my requests were scrupulously carried out, and the benefits I expected were abundantly obtained.

Now I intend that each one consecrate himself anew, in a very special way, to this most sacred Heart; indeed, I desire that each rector consecrate the house over which he presides entirely to him, and invite the young people to make this holy offering of themselves, instruct them in the great act that they are about to perform, and give them the facility to prepare themselves appropriately for it.

Christians can be told about the Heart of Jesus what Saint John the Baptist used to say to the Jews speaking about the divine Saviour: "There is one among you, whom you do not know." And in this regard we can also repeat Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman: "Oh, if you only knew the gift of God!" How much greater will be the love and trust our members and our youth feel towards Jesus if they are well instructed in this devotion!

The Lord has granted graces to each of us, he has granted them to individual houses; but he has been even more generous with his favours towards the Congregation that is our mother. Our Pious Society was and is continually blessed in a very special way by the goodness of Jesus, who sees how much we need absolutely extraordinary graces to shake our lukewarmness, to renew ourselves in fervour, and to carry out the great task that God entrusted to us: it is right, therefore, that our Pious Society be entirely consecrated to

that most sacred Heart. Let us all together present ourselves to Jesus, and we will be dear to him as those who offer him not only every flower from their garden, but the garden itself; not only the various fruits of the tree, but the tree itself. Since, if he accepts the consecration of individual persons, he must deem the consecration of an entire community even more acceptable to him, for this is like a legion, a phalanx, an army that offers itself to him.

It seems that this is truly the time desired by divine Providence to perform the solemn act. The circumstance appears very favourable and opportune. It would seem beautiful and, I would say, sublime, in the moment that divides two centuries, to present ourselves to Jesus as expiatory souls for the wrongdoings of the one, and apostles to win over the other to his love. Oh, how blessed Jesus will then look kindly upon our various houses, which have become like so many altars on which we offer the contrition of our hearts and our best physical and moral energies to him. How he will bless our Society, which gathers these scattered holocausts from around the world into one grandiose offering, to prostrate itself at Jesus' feet and cry out on behalf of his children: "Oh Jesus! Thank you, thank you; forgive, forgive; help, help!" And to say to him, "Jesus, we are already yours by right, having been bought by you with your most precious blood, but we also want to be yours by choice and by spontaneous, absolute consecration: our houses are already yours by right, as you are the master of all things, but we want them to be yours, and yours alone, by our spontaneous will; we consecrate them to you. Our Pious Society is already yours by right, since you have inspired it, you have founded it, you have brought it forth, so to speak, from your very Heart. Well, we want to confirm this right of yours; we want it, thanks to the offering we make to you, to become like a temple in the midst of which we can truthfully say that the Lord, master and king, our Saviour Jesus Christ dwells!" Yes, Jesus, overcome every difficulty, reign, rule among us: you have the right, you deserve it, we want it."

These are the desires, the sighs, the intentions of our heart: let us seek to draw constant inspiration from them and to invigorate them in the love of God in this very special circumstance.

Therefore, dear friends, the great moment has come to make our consecration and that of our whole Pious Society to the divine Heart of Jesus, public and solemn. The moment has come to make the external and authoritative act, so much desired, by which we declare that we and the Congregation are sacred to the divine Heart. It is now necessary to establish some practical rules which can regulate this important function.

I intend, above all, that this solemn Consecration be prepared for by a devout three-day period of prayers and preaching which will appropriately begin on the evening of the Holy Innocents, 28 December, the day on which Saint Francis de Sales, our great patron, died.

I intend, secondly, that the act of Consecration be enacted by all together, young people, novices, confreres, superiors of every house, as well as by the greatest number of cooperators that can be gathered. Those among the confreres who find themselves outside their own community and cannot return, due to some circumstance, should make an effort to go to the nearest Salesian house and join there in this act with the other confreres. Those who cannot conveniently come to one of our houses should still carry out this consecration in the best way possible, as circumstances allow them.

Thirdly, I establish that this function shall take place in the church, on the night of 31 December as it leads to 1 January, precisely at the solemn moment that divides the two centuries. You also know that for this year the Holy Father has stipulated that the Holy Mass may be solemnly celebrated with the Blessed Sacrament exposed at midnight on 31 December. Now, in our case it will be appropriate that when gathered in the church half an hour before, there be exposition of the Blessed Sacrament: and after at least fifteen minutes of adoration, all baptisms vows be renewed by everyone, religious

vows also be renewed by the confreres, and then the consecration of oneself, one's house, and of all human society to the Sacred Heart of Jesus be done, following the form prescribed by the Holy Father last year. At that very moment, together with the Superior Chapter, using an appropriate formulary I will consecrate the entire Congregation.

After this, the Holy Mass shall be celebrated in every house, followed by Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, preceded by the singing of the *Te Deum*, and by any other practices ordered by the Holy Father or by individual bishops for that occasion.

In the festive Oratories and wherever, due to any circumstance, it may not be possible or appropriate to hold this function at midnight, it can be done the following morning at the most suitable time, as the Holy Father has granted permission to have the Blessed Sacrament exposed from midnight until noon on the first of January, furthermore granting a plenary indulgence to those who, in the meantime, spend an hour in adoration there.

I would not want this Consecration to be a sterile act: it must be a source of great good to us and our neighbour. The act of consecration is brief, but the fruit must be imperishable. And to obtain this, I believe it appropriate to recommend some special practices to you, approved and commended by the Church, and enriched by many indulgences. While they will keep alive the memory of this great act, they will also serve to increasingly arouse this devotion in us, in the young, and in the faithful entrusted to our care.

I therefore propose that the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus be celebrated everywhere as one of the primary feasts of the year.

In all houses, let the first Friday of the month be remembered with a special ceremony, and let it be recommended to every confrere and young person to make a *Communion of Reparation on that day*.

Every confrere shall be enrolled in the association called the

Practice of the Nine Offices, and truly strive to carry out the office assigned to him.

Every house should be associated with the confraternity of the *Guard of Honour*, and display its banner; and every confrere and young person should fix the special time at which he intends to do his guard duty, as prescribed by the said confraternity.

In the novitiate and studentate houses, those who can should observe the *Holy Hour* according to the established norms for practising this devotion.

Since nothing can better contribute to making the above-mentioned act of consecration profitable, and to practising devotion to the Sacred Heart well than knowing what it consists of, I have compiled and herewith set out a suitable instruction. In this way, I hope that devotion to the most sacred Heart of Jesus will be more appreciated and desired by all of us and also by our good pupils.

Intimately convinced that this solemn act which we are about to perform will be pleasing to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, and that it will produce great good for our Pious Society, while I say farewell to you and bless you, I ask you again to join with me in thanking this Divine Heart for the great favours which it has already bestowed upon us, and to pray that the new century, while it will be a comfort and help to us, may yet be a century of triumph for Jesus the Redeemer, so that he, our dear Jesus, may reign in the minds and hearts of all people around the world, and that the *Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat* may soon resonate in the fullness of its significance.

Yours affectionately in Corde Jesu

Fr MICHAEL RUA

INSTRUCTION ON THE DEVOTION TO THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS

Jesus, our most merciful Redeemer, having come to earth to save all people, placed in his Church an invaluable wealth of goods which were meant to achieve such purpose. And yet, not

satisfied with this so universal and generous provision, whenever a special need was felt, he wished to provide even more effective aids to people. To this end, many divine solemnities were instituted little by little, certainly by inspiration of the Lord. To this end, the Lord raised up many shrines in every part of the world, and to this end, many holy religious practices were instituted in the Church, according to need.

*No. 22, Turin, 21 November 1900,
Feast of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple'*

Life according to the Spirit in Mamma Margaret (1/2)

Fr Lemoyne leaves us a truly outstanding portrait in his preface to the life of Mamma Margaret: "We will not describe extraordinary or heroic events, but we will portray a simple life, constant in the practice of good, vigilant in the education of her children, resigned and able to foresee the anxieties of life, resolute in all that duty imposed upon her. Not rich, but with a queen's heart; not instructed in worldly knowledge, but educated in the holy fear of God; deprived at an early age of those who were to be her support, but secure with the energy of her will leaning on heavenly help, she was able to happily carry out the mission that God had entrusted to her."

With these words, we are offered the pieces of a mosaic and a canvas on which we can build the adventure of the Spirit that the Lord gave to this woman who, docile to the Spirit, rolled up her sleeves and faced life with hard-working faith and maternal charity. We will follow the stages of this

adventure with the biblical category of the “exodus”, an expression of an authentic journey in the obedience of faith. Mamma Margaret also experienced her “exodus”; she too walked towards “a promised land”, crossing the desert and overcoming trials. We see this journey reflected in the light of her relationship with her son and according to two dynamics typical of life in the Spirit: one less visible, consisting of the inner dynamic of self-change, a prior and indispensable condition for helping others; the other more immediate and documentable: the ability to roll up one’s sleeves to love one’s neighbour in the flesh, coming to the aid of those in need.

1. Exodus from Capriglio to the Biglione farmstead

Margaret was educated in the faith, lived and died in the faith. “God was at the forefront of all her thoughts. She felt she lived in God’s presence and expressed this conviction in words that were customary for her: “God sees you.” Everything spoke to her of God’s fatherhood and great was her trust in Providence, showing gratitude to God for the gifts she had received and gratitude to all those who were instruments of Providence. Margaret spent her life in a continuous and incessant search for God’s will, the only real and practical criterion for her choices and actions.

At the age of 23 she married Francis Bosco, who was widowed at 27, with his son Anthony and his semi-paralysed mother. Margaret became not only wife, but adoptive mother and help for her mother-in-law. This step was the most important for the married couple because they knew well that having received the sacrament of marriage in a holy way was a source of many blessings for them: for serenity and peace in the family, for future children, for work and for overcoming difficult moments in life. Margaret lived her marriage to Francis Bosco faithfully and fruitfully. Their rings would be a sign of fruitfulness that would extend to the family founded by her son John. All this would arouse a great sense of gratitude and love for this pair of holy spouses and parents

in Don Bosco and his boys.

2. Exodus from the Biglione farmstead to the Becchi

After just five years of marriage, in 1817, her husband Francis died. Don Bosco recalled that as he left the room his mother in tears “took me by the hand” and led him out. Here is the spiritual and educational icon of this mother. She takes her son by the hand and leads him out. Already from this moment there is that “taking by the hand” which would unite mother and son in both the vocational journey and the educational mission.

Margaret found herself in a very difficult situation from an emotional and financial point of view, including a specious dispute brought by the Biglione family. There were debts to pay, hard work in the fields and a terrible famine to face, but she dealt with all these trials with great faith and unconditional trust in Providence.

Widowhood opened up a new vocation for her as an attentive and caring educator of her children. She devoted herself to her family tenaciously and courageously, refusing an advantageous marriage proposal. “God gave me a husband and took him away from me; when he died he entrusted me with three children, and I would be a cruel mother if I abandoned them when they needed me most... The guardian... is a friend, but I am the mother to my children; all the gold in the world could never make me abandon them.”

She educated her children wisely, anticipating the pedagogical inspiration of the Preventive System. She was a woman who had made the choice for God and was able to pass on the sense of his presence to her children, in their everyday lives. She did so in a simple, spontaneous, clear way, seizing every small opportunity to educate them to live in the light of faith. She did this by anticipating the “word in the ear” that Don Bosco would later use with the boys to call them to the life of grace, to the presence of God. She did this by helping them to recognise the work of the Creator, who is a providential and good Father. in creatures. She did this by

recounting the facts of the gospel and the lives of the saints.

Christian education. She prepared her children to receive the sacraments, passing on to them a vivid sense of the greatness of God's mysteries. John Bosco received his First Communion on Easter 1826: "O dear son, this was a great day for you. I am convinced that God has truly taken possession of your heart. Now promise Him to do all you can to keep you good until the end of your life." These words of Mamma Margaret make her a true spiritual mother of her children, especially of John, who would immediately show himself sensitive to these teachings which have the flavour of a true initiation, an expression of the capacity to introduce the mystery of grace in a woman unlettered, but rich in the wisdom of children.

Faith in God is reflected in the demand for moral rectitude that she practised with herself and inculcated in her children. "Against sin she had declared perpetual war. Not only did she abhor what was evil, but she strove to keep away the offence of the Lord even from those who did not belong to her. So she was always on the alert against scandal, cautious, but resolute and at the cost of any sacrifice."

The heart that animated Mamma Margaret's life was an immense love and devotion to the Most Holy Eucharist. She experienced its salvific and redeeming value in her participation in the holy sacrifice and in accepting the trials of life. She educated her children to this faith and love from an early age, passing on that spiritual and educational conviction that would find in Don Bosco a priest in love with the Eucharist and who would make the Eucharist a pillar of his educational system.

Faith found expression in the life of prayer and in particular prayer in common in the family. Mamma Margaret found the strength of a good education in an intense and caring Christian life. She led by example and guided by word. In her school young John thus learned the preventive power of God's grace in a vital form. "Religious instruction, which a

mother imparts by word, by example, by comparing her son's conduct with the particular precepts of the catechism, causes the practice of Religion to become normal and sin to be rejected by instinct, just as goodness is loved by instinct. Being good becomes a habit, and virtue does not cost much effort. A child so educated must do violence to himself to become evil. Margaret knew the power of such a Christian education and how the law of God, taught in catechism every evening and frequently recalled even during the day, was the sure means of making children obedient to their mother's precepts. She therefore repeated the questions and answers as many times as was necessary for the children to learn them by heart."

Witness of charity. In her poverty, she practised hospitality with joy, without making distinctions or exclusions; she helped the poor, visited the sick, and her children learnt from her to love the least of these disproportionately. "She was of a very sensitive nature, but this sensitivity so much became charity that she could rightly be called the mother of those in need." This charity manifested itself in a marked ability to understand situations, to deal with people, to make the right choices at the right time, to avoid excesses and to maintain a great balance throughout: "A woman of much sense" (Fr Giacinto Ballesio). The reasonableness of her teachings, her personal consistency and firmness without anger, touch the souls of the children. Proverbs and sayings flourish with ease on her lips and she condensed precepts for life in them: "A bad laundress never finds a good stone"; "Whoever does not know at twenty does not do by thirty and will die foolish"; "Conscience is like a tickle. Some feel it and some do not."

In particular it should be emphasised that John Bosco was to be a great educator of boys, "because he had had a mother who had educated his affectivity. A good, nice, strong mother. With so much love she educated his heart. One cannot understand Don Bosco without Mamma Margaret. One cannot

understand him." Mamma Margaret contributed with her maternal mediation to the work of the Spirit in the shaping and formation of her son's heart. Don Bosco learnt to love, as he himself declared, within the Church, thanks to Mamma Margaret and with the supernatural intervention of Mary, who was given to him by Jesus as "Mother and Teacher".

3. Exodus from the Becchi to the Moglia farmstead

A moment of great trial for Margaret was the difficult relationship between her children. "Margaret's three sons, Anthony, Joseph and John, were different in temperament and inclinations. Antonio was coarse in manners, of little or no delicacy of feeling, a manic exaggerator, a true portrait of "I couldn't care less"! He lived by bullying. He often let himself go and beat his little brothers, and Mamma Margaret had to run to get them out of his hands. However, she never used force to defend them and true to her maxim, she never laid a hair on Antonio's head. One can imagine what mastery Margaret had over herself to restrain the voice of blood and love she bore to Joseph and John. Antonio had been sent to school and had learned to read and write, but he boasted that he had never studied or gone to school. He had no aptitude for studies, he did the work in the countryside."

On the other hand, Antonio was in a particularly difficult situation: older than his age, he was wounded by being fatherless and motherless. Despite his intemperance, he was generally submissive, thanks to the attitude of Mamma Margaret who managed to control him with reasoned kindness. With time, unfortunately, his intolerance towards young John in particular, who did not easily allow himself to be subdued, would grow and his reactions towards Mamma Margaret would also become harsher and at times stronger. In particular, Antonio did not accept that John should dedicate himself to his studies and tensions would reach a climax: "I want to end this grammar. I've come big and fat, I've never seen these books." Antonio was a child of his time and his peasant condition and could neither understand nor accept that his brother could

devote himself to his studies. Everyone was upset, but the one who suffered most was Mamma Margaret, who was personally involved and had war at home day after day: "My mother was distressed, I wept, the chaplain grieved."

In the face of Antonio's jealousy and hostility, Margaret sought a solution to the family conflict, sending John to the Moglia farmstead for about two years and then, in the face of Antonio's resistance, she adamantly arranged for the division of the property in order to allow John to study. Of course, it was only the 12-year-old John who left home, but his Mother also experienced this profound detachment. Let us not forget that Don Bosco in his *Memoirs of the Oratory* does not speak of this period. Such silence suggests a difficult experience to process, being at that time a twelve-year-old boy, forced to leave home because he could not live with his brother. John suffered in silence, waiting for the hour of Providence and with him Mamma Margaret, who did not want to close off her son's path, but open it up through special ways, entrusting him to a good family. The solution taken by the mother and accepted by the son was a temporary choice in view of a definitive solution. It was trust and abandonment in God. Mother and son live a season of waiting.

[\(continued\)](#)

Great saint, great manager

It is not easy to choose, from the hundreds of unpublished letters of Don Bosco that we have recovered in recent decades, the ones that most deserve to be presented and commented on. This time we take a very simple one, but one that in just a few lines summarises an entire project of Salesian educational work and offers us many other interesting

facts. It is the one written on 7 May 1877 to a person from Trentino, a certain Daniele Garbari, who had repeatedly asked him on behalf of two brothers how he could found an educational institute in his area, like the ones that Don Bosco was founding throughout Italy, France and Argentina.

Dear Mr Garbari,

My absence from Turin was the cause of the delay in replying to your letters, which I have regularly received. I am very pleased that our institution is well received in these places of yours. The more it is known, the more it will be well-liked by the governments themselves; whether they like it or not, the facts assure us that we must help youngsters at risk in order to make them good citizens or keep them in dishonour in prison.

As for setting up an institute similar to this in the city of Trent or surrounding towns, it does not take much to begin with:

1. A room capable of accommodating a certain number of children, but with their respective workshops inside.
2. Something that can provide a little bread for the Rector and the other people who assist him in the care and management.

The boys are supported

1. by what little monthly boarding fee some of them can pay, or are paid by relatives or other people who recommend them.
2. from the little income the work provides.
3. by grants from municipalities, the government, charitable congregations, and the donations of private individuals. This is how all our trade houses are run, and with God's help we have progressed well. However, it must be taken as a basis that we have always been, and will always be, uninvolved in anything political.

Our overriding aim is to gather children at risk to make them good Christians and upright citizens. This is the first thing to be made clear to the civil and governmental authorities.

As a priest, then, I must be in full agreement with the ecclesiastical authority; therefore, when it comes to finalising the matter, I would write directly to the Archbishop of Trent, who will certainly not have any difficulties.

Here is my preliminary thought. As the matter continues and more is needed, I will write. Please thank on my behalf all those people who show me kindness.

I wanted to write this myself in my own poor handwriting, but I will hand over the pen to my secretary so that it will be easier to read.

With the greatest esteem and gratitude, I have the honour of being your

Humble servant Fr. Gio Bosco Turin, 7 May 1877

Positive image of Salesian work

First of all, the letter informs us how Don Bosco, after papal approval of the Salesian Congregation (1874), the opening of the first Salesian house in France (1875) and the first missionary expedition to Latin America (1875), was always busy visiting and supporting his already existing works and accepting or not accepting the many that were being proposed to him everywhere over those years. At the time of the letter he had the thought of opening the first houses of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians beyond the one in Mornese – as many as six in the two-year period 1876-1877 – and above all he was interested in establishing himself in Rome, where he had been trying unsuccessfully for more than 10 years to have a place. Nothing came of it. Yet another Piedmontese like Don Bosco, a “priest on the move” like him, was not welcome on the banks of the Tiber, in the capital Rome which was already full of unpopular Piedmontese, certain pontifical authorities and certain Roman clergy. For three years he had to “make do” with being on the outskirts of Rome, i.e. the Castelli Romani and Magliano Sabino.

Paradoxically, the opposite had happened with the city administrations and government authorities of the Kingdom of Italy, where Don Bosco had many, if not friends – their ideas were too far apart, at least great admirers. And for a very simple reason that every government was interested in: to manage the newly-minted country Italy with honest, hard-working, law-abiding citizens, instead of populating the prisons with vagrant “criminals” unable to support themselves and their families with a decent job of their own. Three decades later, in 1900, the famous Jewish anthropologist and criminologist Cesare Lombroso would give Don Bosco full credit when he wrote: “The Salesian institutes represent a colossal and ingeniously organised effort to prevent crime, the only one indeed made in Italy.” As the letter in question well states, the image of Salesian works in which, without taking sides with the various political parties, boys were educated to become “good Christians and upright citizens” was a positive one, even in the Austro-Hungarian Empire to which Trentino and Venezia Giulia belonged at the time.

Typology of a Salesian House

In the continuation of the letter Don Bosco went on to present the structure of a house of education: rooms where the boys could be housed (and he implied at least five things: **courtyard** to play in, **classrooms** to study in, **refectory** to eat in, **dormitory** to sleep in, **church** to pray in) and “**a plant or workshops**” where a trade could be taught with which the youngsters could live and have a future once they left the institute. As for economic resources, he indicated three assets: the minimum monthly boarding fee that the boys’ parents or relatives could pay, the small income from the craft workshops, public grants (government, municipalities) and especially private charity. It was precisely the Valdocco experience. But Don Bosco was silent here about one important thing: the total **dedication** to the educational mission by the Rector and his close collaborators, priests and lay people, who for the price of a loaf of bread and a bed spent 24 hours

a day in work, prayer, teaching and assistance. At least that was the way it was done in the Salesian houses of the time, highly appreciated by both civil and religious authorities, bishops first and foremost, without whose approval it was evidently not possible to found a house “that educated by evangelising and evangelised by educating” like a Salesian one.

Results

We do not know if there was a follow-up to this letter. Mr Garbari’s Salesian foundation project certainly did not go ahead. Nor did dozens of other foundation proposals. But it is historically certain that many other instructors, priests and lay people throughout Italy were inspired by Don Bosco’s experience, founding similar works, inspired by his educational model and his preventive system.

Garbari had to consider himself satisfied, however: Don Bosco had suggested a strategy that worked in Turin and elsewhere... and then he had his hand-written letter which, however difficult to ‘decipher’, was still a letter from a saint. So much so that he jealously preserved it and today it is kept in the Central Salesian Archives in Rome.

I killed her for a piece of bread

A man who had not entered a church for twenty years hesitantly approached a confessional. He knelt down and, after a moment’s hesitation, said through tears: “I have blood on my hands. It was during the retreat to Russia. Every day some of my people died. The hunger was terrible. We were told never to enter the isbas without a rifle in our hands, ready to shoot at the

first sign of... Where I had entered, there was an old man and a blond girl with sad eyes: "Bread! Give me some bread!" The girl bent down. I thought she was reaching for a weapon, a bomb. I fired decisively. She fell to the ground.

When I got closer, I saw that the girl was clutching a piece of bread in her hand. I had killed a 14-year-old girl, an innocent girl who wanted to offer me bread. I started drinking to forget: Imagine!

Can God forgive me?"

Whoever goes around with a loaded rifle will end up shooting. If the only tool you have is a hammer, you end up seeing everything else as nails. And you spend the day hammering away.