

The Exercise for a Happy Death in Don Bosco's educational experience (5/5)

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4. Conclusion

In the epilogue of Francis Besucco's life, Don Bosco makes the core of his message explicit:

I would like both of us to come to a conclusion which will be to our mutual advantage. It is certain that sooner or later death will come for both of us, and it is possible that it will come sooner than we think. It is equally certain that if we don't perform good works during our life we won't be able to reap their fruit at the point of death, nor we can we expect any reward from God. [...] I encourage you, Christian reader, I encourage you to perform good works whilst we have time; our sufferings are of short duration and what we shall enjoy lasts forever. [...] O Lord, help me, help me to persevere in the observance of your precepts during the days of my life so that we can one day go to Heaven to enjoy great happiness for ever and ever. Amen." [\[1\]](#)

It is on this point, in fact, that Don Bosco's discourses converge. Everything else appears functional: his art of education, his affectionate and creative accompaniment, the advice he offered and the programme of life, Marian devotion and the sacraments, everything is oriented towards the primary object of his thoughts and concerns, the *great business of eternal salvation*. [\[2\]](#)

Thus, in the Turin saint's educational practice, the monthly exercise for a happy death continues a rich spiritual tradition, adapting it to the sensitivity of his young people and with a marked educational concern. In fact,

the monthly review of life, the sincere account of it to our confessor-spiritual director, the encouragement to place ourselves in a state of constant conversion, the reconfirmation of the gift of self to God and the systematic formulation of concrete resolutions oriented towards Christian perfection, are its central and constitutive moments. Even the litany for a happy death had no other purpose than to nourish confidence in God and offer an immediate encouragement to approach the sacraments with special awareness. They were also – as the narrative sources show – an effective psychological tool to make the thought of death familiar, not in a distressing way, but as an incentive to constructively and joyfully value every moment of life in view of the “blessed hope”. The emphasis, in fact, was on virtuous and joyful living, “*servite Domino in laetitia.*”

[\[1\]](#) Bosco, *Il pastorello delle Alpi* , 179-181.

[\[2\]](#) This is how the Life of Dominic Savio concludes: “and like Dominic, when our time comes, see death approach with peace and joy in our hearts. How happy we will be then to meet Jesus Our Saviour who will judge us according to his mercy, and in his goodness lead us to an eternity of happiness. Amen.”, Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, 136.

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The Exercise for a Happy

Death in Don Bosco's educational experience (4/5)

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3. Death as a moment of joyful encounter with God

Like all the considerations and instructions in the *Companion of Youth* the meditation on death is marked by a marked didactic concern.[\[1\]](#) The thought of death as a moment that fixes all eternity must stimulate the sincere purpose of a good and virtuous life that is fruitful:

Consider that your eternal happiness or your eternal damnation depend on that fateful moment. [...] Do you understand what I am saying? On that moment depends whether you go to heaven or to hell; whether you will be always happy or always tormented; whether you will be forever a child of God or a slave of the devil; whether you will rejoice with the angels and the saints in heaven or groan and burn with the damned in hell for all eternity. These are great issues for your soul and reflect that upon a good life depends a happy death and eternal glory. Therefore delay no longer but prepare to make a good confession and to put your conscience in order. Promise God to forgive your enemies, to repair the scandal you have given, to be more obedient, to abstain from meat on the appointed days, to waste no more time, to keep the Holy days of Obligation in a worthy manner, to fulfil the duties of your state. Meanwhile place yourself in the presence of God and tell him with all your heart: "My God, from this moment I return to you. I love you and I want to love and serve you unto death. Most Holy Virgin, my Mother, help me in that moment. Jesus, Joseph and Mary, may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you."[\[2\]](#)

However the most complete and also the most expressive of Don Bosco's understanding and cultural

frameworks on the theme of death is found in his first narrative text, written in memory of Luigi Comollo (1844). There he recounts the death of his friend "...saying the holy names of Jesus and Mary, his beautiful soul quietly left his body and flew, as we devoutly hope, to its rest in the Lord's peace. His face was serene and a smile played about it as if he was seeing something marvellous." [3] But the placid passing so succinctly described had been preceded by a detailed description of a tormented final illness: " It is also good to note that an innocent soul adorned with so many virtues as was Comollo's, tells us that there is nobody who does not dread the approaching hour of death. He too experienced great apprehension." [4] Louis had spent the last week of his life but seemed "sad and melancholic, all taken up with the thoughts of divine judgement." On the evening of the sixth day, "Around eight o'clock the fever became very strong; at a quarter past eight he begun to go into convulsions and lost his senses. At first he cried out at length as if he were terrified by some frightening object or some grim spectre. From then until half past eight he came back to his senses somewhat and looking at those standing around he cried out in a loud voice: 'Oh, judgement!' Then he began writhing with such strength that five or six of us around him could hardly keep him in the bed." [5] After three hours of delirium, he "he returned fully to his senses." and confided to his friend Bosco the reason for his agitation: he had seemed to find himself in front of a wide-open hell, threatened by "a countless number of monsters", but he had been rescued by a squad "of strong warriors" and then, led by the hand of "a Woman" ("whom I consider to have been the Mother of us all"), he had found himself "in a delightful garden" which is why he now felt calm. Thus, "the fact was that however great was his fear of appearing before God, he then demonstrated his desire that this moment should come immediately. There was no more melancholy or sadness on his face. He was all smiles and happily wanted to sing psalms, hymns or spiritual praises." [6]

Tension and anguish are resolved in a joyful

spiritual experience: it is the Christian vision of death sustained by the certainty of victory over the infernal enemy through the power of Christ's grace, which opens the gates of blessed eternity, and through the maternal assistance of Mary. It is in this light that Comollo's account should be interpreted. The "great abyss like a deep huge furnace" near which he finds himself, the "countless monsters of all horrible and different shapes" that try to plunge him into the abyss, the "strong warriors" who rescue him "from such a predicament", the long staircase leading to the "delightful garden" defended "by many serpents ready to devour anyone who tried to climb up", the Woman "dressed in great magnificence" who takes him by the hand, guides him and defends him: it all goes back to the religious imagery that encapsulates a solid theology of salvation in the form of symbols and metaphors, the conviction of being personally destined for happy eternity and the vision of life as a journey towards beatitude, undermined by infernal enemies but sustained by the omnipotent help of divine grace and the patronage of Mary. The Romantic sense, which imbues the fact of faith with intense emotionality and drama, spontaneously makes use of traditional folk symbolism, yet the horizon is one of a broadly optimistic and historically active vision of faith.

Further on, Don Bosco reports an extensive discourse by Louis. It is almost a testament in which two main interrelated themes emerge. The first is the importance of cultivating throughout life the thought of death and judgement. The arguments are those of the preaching and devout publicity of the time: "you do not know if your days on earth will be short or long; but however uncertain may be the hour of death, it will certainly come; therefore do things so that your entire life is a preparation for death, for judgement... Men only think of death occasionally, they believe that this hour will come even though they don't want it to, but they do not ready themselves, so when the moment arrives they are agitated and afraid, greatly embarrassed in finding themselves needing to sort out matters of their soul." [\[7\]](#)

The second theme is the link between Marian devotion and the good death. "Since for all the time that we struggle in this vale of tears we have no other more powerful advocate than Mary most holy, you must therefore profess a special devotion to her. Oh! If people could be persuaded of the happiness that comes at the hour of death from devotion to Mary, everyone would be competing to find new ways to give her special honour. It will be her, with her son in her arms, who will be our defence against the enemy of our soul at the final hour. Even though all of hell might be arrayed against us, with Mary in our defence, victory will be ours. Look for other things from those who recite some prayer to Mary, or offer some simple mortification, and then believe they are protected by her, while they lead a shameless life. [...] May you always be truly a devotee of Mary by imitating her virtues, and you will experience the sweet effects of her goodness and love." [8] These reasons are close to those presented by Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort (1673-1716) in the third chapter of the *Traité de la vraie dévotion à la sainte Vierge* (which, however, neither Comollo nor John Bosco could have known). [9] All classical Mariology, conveyed by preaching and ascetic books, insisted on such aspects: we find them in St Alphonsus (*Glorie di Maria*); [10] before him, we find them in the writings of Jesuits Jean Crasset and Alexander Diaotallevi, [11] from whose work Comollo is said to have drawn inspiration for the invocation before his death:

Holy Virgin, kind mother, dear mother of my beloved Jesus, of all creatures you alone were worthy to bear him in your immaculate womb. Through the love with which you gave him suck, held him on your arms, suffered with him in his poverty, saw him ill-treated, spat upon, flogged and finally die suffering terribly on the cross. Through all of this obtain for me the grace of courage, keen faith, firm hope, ardent charity, sincere sorrow for my sins; and to all the favours that you have granted me throughout my life add the grace that I might die a holy death. Yes, dear and merciful Mother,

assist me at this moment when I am about to present my soul to divine judgement; you yourself can present me in the arms of your divine Son; if you promise me this here I am with ardent and frank spirit, dependent on your clemency and goodness and I present my soul through your hands to the Supreme Majesty from whom I hope to receive mercy.[\[12\]](#)

This text shows the solidity of the theological framework underlying the religious sentiment with which the story is imbued, and reveals a “regulated” Marian devotion, an austere and very concrete spirituality.

The *Cenni sulla vita di Luigi Comollo* (*Life of Louis Comollo*), with all its dramatic tension, represent the John Bosco’s sensitivity as a seminarian and student at the *Convitto*. In later years, as his educational and pastoral experience among young people grew, the Saint preferred to highlight only the joyful and soothing side of Christian death. We see this especially in the biographies of Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco, but we find examples of it already in the *Companion of Youth* where, narrating the holy death of Aloysius Gonzaga, he states, “The things that can disturb us at the point of death are especially the sins of our past life and the fear of divine chastisements in the next life”, but if we imitate him by leading a virtuous life, which is “truly angelic”, we will be able to welcome with joy the announcement of death as he did, singing the *Te Deum* full of “joy” – “Oh what joy, we are leaving: *Laetantes imus*” – and “in the embrace of the crucified Jesus he died peacefully. What a beautiful death!”[\[13\]](#)

All three *Lives* conclude with the invitation to be prepared for a good death. In Don Bosco’s pedagogy, as mentioned, the subject was presented with particular emphases aimed at conversion of the heart which is “frank and resolute”[\[14\]](#) and of the total gift of self to God, which generates an ardent living, fruitful of spiritual fruits, of ethical and at the same time joyful commitment. This is the

perspective in which, in these biographies, Don Bosco presents the exercise for a happy death: [\[15\]](#) is an excellent tool to educate to the Christian vision of death, to urge an effective and periodic review of one's lifestyle and actions, to encourage an attitude of constant openness and cooperation to the action of grace, fruitful in works, to positively dispose the soul to the encounter with the Lord. It is not by chance that the concluding chapters depict the last hours of these three characters as a fervent and calm expectation of the encounter. Don Bosco reports the serene dialogues, the "tasks" entrusted to the dying, [\[16\]](#) the farewells. The instant of death is then described almost as a blissful ecstasy.

In the last moments of his life, Dominic Savio had the prayers for a happy death read to him by his father:

"Dad, it is time; get my *Companion of Youth* and read me the prayers for the Exercise of a Happy Death".

At these words his mother burst into tears and hurried from the room. His father's eyes filled with tears, but choking back his sobs, he got the book and read the prayers. As he went through them Dominic answered clearly.

"Merciful Jesus, have mercy on me ...".

When his father reached the final part which runs: "When for the first time my soul will see the wonderful majesty of God, do not drive it away, but take it to heaven to sing your praises for all eternity . . .", he said:

"Yes, Dad – that is what I want so much, to sing the praises of Jesus for all eternity".

He dropped off to sleep again, but it was like he was reflecting on things of great importance. He awoke after a short while. Then in a clear voice he said: "Goodbye, Dad, goodbye . . . what was it the parish priest suggested to me ... I don't seem to remember . . . Oh, what wonderful things I see ...".

And so saying, with a beautiful smile on his face, and his hands joined on his breast he gave up his soul to God without any struggle. [\[17\]](#)

Michael Magone passed away “peacefully”, “He parted his lips as if to smile and gently fell back in death”, after kissing the crucifix and invoking, “Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I place my soul in your hands.”.[\[18\]](#)

The final moments of Francis’ life are characterised by extraordinary phenomena and uncontainable ardour: “His face appeared to be stronger and to have more colour in it than when he had been healthy. Its beauty and radiance was such that it eclipsed the infirmary lights”; “the dying boy lifted his head a little and stretched out his hands as if to shake hands with someone he loved. Then in a joyful resonant voice he sang, ‘Praise Mary, [...]’. Afterwards he made several efforts to lift himself up and devoutly stretching out his hands, he began to sing again, *O Jesus of burning love* [...]. He seemed to have become an angel with the angels in paradise,”[\[19\]](#)

[\(continued\)](#)

[\[1\]](#) Cf. Bosco, *The Companion of Youth*, 36-39 (consideration for Tuesday: *Death*).

[\[2\]](#) *Ibid.*, 38-39.

[\[3\]](#) [John Bosco], *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo morto nel Seminario di Chieri ammirato da tutti per le sue singolari virtù. Scritti da un suo collega*, Torino, Tipografia Speirani e Ferrero, 1844, 70-71.

[\[4\]](#) *Ibid.*, 49.

[\[5\]](#) *Ibid.*, 52-53.

[\[6\]](#) *Ibid.*, 53-57.

[\[7\]](#) *Ibid.*, 61.

[\[8\]](#) *Ibid.*, 62-63.

[9] Grignion de Monfort's work was only discovered in 1842 and published in Turin for the first time fifteen years later: *Trattato della vera divozione a Maria Vergine del ven. servo di Dio L. Maria Grignion de Montfort*. Version from the French of C. L., Turin, Tipografia P. De-Agostini, 1857.

[10] Second part, chapter IV (*Vari ossequi di divozione verso la divina Madre colle loro pratiche*), where the author states that to obtain Mary's protection "two things are necessary: the first is that we offer her our respect with our souls cleansed of sins [...]. The second condition is that we persevere in devotion to her" (*Le glorie di Maria di sant'Alfonso Maria de' Liguori*, Torino, Giacinto Marietti, 1830, 272).

[11] Jean Crasset, *La vera devozione verso Maria Vergine stabilita e difesa*. Venezia, nella stamperia Baglioni, 1762, 2 vols.; Alessandro Diotallevi, *Trattenimenti spirituali per chi desidera d'avanzarsi nella servitù e nell'amore della Santissima Vergine, dove si ragiona sopra le sue feste e sopra gli Evangelii delle domeniche dell'anno applicandoli alle meditoli alla medesima Vergine con rari avvenimenti*, Venezia, presso Antonio Zatta,

1788, 3 vols.

[12] [Bosco], *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo*, 68-69; cf. Diotallevi, *Trattenimenti spirituali...*, vol. II, pp. 108-109 (Trattenimento XXVI: *Colloquio dove l'anima supplica la B. Vergine che voglia esserle Avvocata nella gran causa della sua salute*).

[13] Bosco, *The Companion of Youth*, 70-71.

[14] Cf. Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele* (*Life of Michael Magone*), 24.

[15] For example, cf. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico* (*Life of Dominic Savio*), 106-107: 'On the morning of

his departure he did with his companions the exercise for a happy death with such devotion in confessing and taking communion, that I, who witnessed it, do not know how to express it. It is necessary, he said, that I do this exercise well, because I hope it will truly be for me that of my good death'.

[16] "But before I let you leave for paradise I would like to charge you with an errand [...]. When you are in paradise and have seen the great Virgin Mary, give her a humble and respectful greeting from me and from those in this house. Pray to her that she deigns to give us her holy blessing; that she may receive us all under her powerful protection, and help us so that none of those who are, or who Divine Providence will send to this house may get lost", Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele (Life of Michael Magone)*, 82.

[17] Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico (Life of Dominic Savio)*, 118-119.

[18] Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele*, 83. Fr. Zattini could no longer control his emotions and exclaimed: "O Death, you are not a punishment for innocent souls! For these you are the great benefactor who opens the doors to joys that will last for ever.. Oh, why cannot I be in your place, Michael?" (ibid., 84).

[19] John Bosco, *Il pastorello delle Alpi ovvero vita del giovane Besucco Francesco d'Argentera*, Turin, Tip. dell'Orat. di S. Franc. di Sales, 1864, 169-170.

The Exercise for a Happy Death in Don Bosco's educational experience (2/5)

[*\(continuation from previous article\)*](#)

1. The exercise for a happy death in Salesian institutions and the centuries-old tradition of the *Praeparationes ad mortem*

From the very beginnings of the Oratory established in Valdocco (1846-47), Don Bosco proposed the monthly exercise for a happy death to his boys as an ascetic tool aimed at encouraging – through a Christian perspective on death – a constant attitude of conversion and overcoming personal limitations and ensuring, through a proper confession and receiving communion, the favourable spiritual and psychological conditions for a fruitful journey of Christian life and the building up of virtues, in docile cooperation with the action of God's grace. The practice at that time was in use in most parishes, religious and educational institutions. For the people it was the equivalent of the monthly recollection. In the Salesian Oratories it was held on the last Sunday of each month, and consisted, as we used read in the *Rule*, “in a careful preparation, in order to make a good confession and communion, and to finalise spiritual and temporal things, as if we were at the end of our life.”[\[1\]](#)

The exercise became common practice in all Salesian educational institutions. In the colleges and boarding schools it was held on the last day of the month, with teachers and boys together.[\[2\]](#) The Salesian Constitutions themselves, from the very first draft, established how it would be done: “The last day of each month will be a day of spiritual retreat, in which, leaving temporal affairs aside as far as possible, each one will recollect, will make the exercise for a happy death, arranging spiritual and temporal

things, as if he were to leave the world and set out for eternity.”[3]

The procedure was simple. The boys, gathered in the chapel, read the words together that were in the *Companion of Youth*, which provided the essential spiritual and theological meaning of the practice. First of all, the prayer of Pope Benedict XIII was said “to ask from God the grace not to die a sudden death” and to obtain, through the merits of Christ’s passion, not to be taken “out of this world so much”, so as to still have an appropriate “time for penance” and to prepare oneself for “a happy and graceful passage [...], so that I may love you [Lord Jesus] with all my heart, praise you, and bless you for ever.” Then the prayer to St Joseph was read to beg “complete forgiveness” for one’s sins, the grace to imitate his virtues, to “always walk on the way that leads to Heaven” and to be defended “from the enemies of my soul at the end of my life; so that comforted by the hope of flying [...] to possess eternal glory in heaven I might breathe my last pronouncing the holy names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.” Finally, a reader read out the litany for a happy death, each element of which was answered with “Merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.”[4] The devotional exercise was followed by personal confession and “general” communion. “Extraordinary” confessors were invited for the occasion, so that everyone had the opportunity and full freedom to settle matters of conscience.

Salesian religious, in addition to the prayers said in common with the pupils, made a more detailed examination of conscience. On 18 September 1876, Don Bosco explained to his disciples how to make it fruitful:

It will be useful to compare month to month: did I benefit from this month, or did I go backwards? Then come to the details: how did I behave in this virtue, in that virtue?

And especially let us review what regards the vows and the practices of piety: with regard to *obedience*, how have I behaved? Have I progressed? For example, did I do the assistance I was given to do? How did I do it? In that class,

how did I commit myself? Regarding *poverty*, whether in clothes, food, cells, do I have anything that is not poor? have I been greedy? Have I complained when I lacked something? Then come to *chastity*: have I given rise to evil thoughts? Have I detached myself more and more from the love of relatives? Have I mortified myself in gluttony, looks, etc.?

And so pass on the practices of *piety* and note especially if there was ordinary lukewarmness, if the practices were done without motivation.

This examination, whether longer or shorter, should always be done. Since there are several who have occupations from which they cannot exempt themselves on any day of the month, it will be lawful to keep these occupations, but let each one on the said day make it his own [duty] to carry out these considerations and to make special good resolutions.[\[5\]](#)

The aim, therefore, was to encourage regular monitoring of one's life to improve oneself. This primary role of encouraging and supporting virtuous growth explains why Don Bosco, in the introduction to the Constitutions, said that the monthly practice for a happy death, together with the annual retreat, is "the fundamental part of the practices of piety, the one that in a certain way embraces them all", and concluded by saying, "I believe that the salvation of a religious can be said to be assured if every month he approaches the Holy Sacraments, and examines his conscience, as if he had to depart from this life for eternity."[\[6\]](#)

Over time, the monthly exercise was further refined, as we read in a note inserted in the Constitutions promulgated by Fr Michael Rua after the 10th General Chapter:

a. The exercise for a happy death is to be made in common, and in addition to what our Constitutions prescribe, these rules are to be kept in mind: 1) In addition to the usual meditation in the morning, a half hour of meditation is to be done again in the evening, and this

meditation is to reflect on the *novissimi* [the last things]; 2) It is to be done as a monthly review of the conscience, and the confession on that day is to be more accurate than usual, as if in fact it were the last one of your life, and Holy Communion is to be received. 3) After Mass and the usual prayers, the prayers indicated in the manual of piety are to be recited; 4) One should think for at least half an hour about the progress or regression that one has made in virtue during the past month, especially with regard to the intentions made in the retreat, the observance of the Rules, and make firm resolutions for a better life; 5) All, or at least part, of the Constitutions of the Pious Society should be reread on that day; 6) It will also be good to choose a patron saint for the month that is about to begin.

b. If anyone is unable, because of his occupations, to make the exercise for a happy death in common, or to perform all the aforementioned works of piety, he shall, with the permission of the Rector, perform only those works that are compatible with his role, postponing the others to a more convenient day.[\[7\]](#)

These indications reveal substantial continuity and harmony with the centuries-old tradition of the *preparatio ad mortem* widely documented by books since the beginning of the 16th century. The evangelical calls for vigilant and real expectation (cf. Mt 24:44; Lk 12:40), to keep oneself prepared for the judgement that will determine one's eternal fate among the "blessed" or the "cursed" (Mt 25:31-46), together with the Lenten admonition "*Memento, homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris*", have, over the centuries, constantly nourished the considerations of spiritual teachers and preachers, inspired artistic representations, been translated into rituals, devout and penitential practices, suggested intentions and loving longings for eternal communion with God. They have also aroused fears, anxieties, sometimes anguish, according to the spiritual sensibilities and theological perspectives of the various times.

The learned reflections of Erasmus' *De praeparatione ad mortem* and other humanists,[\[8\]](#) imbued with a genuine evangelical spirit but so erudite as to feel like rhetorical exercises, had gradually given way between the 17th and early 18th century to the moral exhortations of preachers and the meditative considerations of spiritualists. A pamphlet by Cardinal Giovanni Bona stated that the best preparation for death is the remote one, carried out through a virtuous life in which one daily practises dying to oneself and avoiding all forms of sin, to live according to God's law in prayerful communion with him.[\[9\]](#) He urged constant prayer to obtain the grace of a happy death; he suggested devoting one day a month to preparing close to death in silence and meditation, purifying the soul with a "most diligent and sorrowful confession", after an accurate examination of one's state, and approaching Communion *per modum Viatici*, with intense devotion;[\[10\]](#) he then invited people to end the day by imagining themselves on their deathbed, at the moment of their last moment:

You will renew more intense acts of love, thanksgiving and desire to see God; you will ask forgiveness for everything; you will say: 'Lord Jesus Christ, in this hour of my death, place your passion and death between your judgement and my soul. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. Help me, O saints of God, hasten, O angels, to sustain my soul and offer it up before the Most High.' [...]. Then you will imagine that your soul is being led to the dreadful judgement of God and that, by the prayers of the saints, your life will be prolonged so that you can do penance: therefore strongly proposing to live more holily, in future you will consider yourself and behave as dead to the world and living only for God and for penance.[\[11\]](#)

John Bona closed his *Praeparatio ad mortem* with a devout aspiration focused on the longing for heaven permeated with intense mystical inspiration.[\[12\]](#) The Cistercian cardinal

had been a student of the Jesuits. It was from them that he had drawn the idea of the monthly day of preparation for death.

Meditation on death was an integral part of retreats and popular missions: death is certain, the moment of its arrival is uncertain, we must be ready because when it comes, Satan will multiply his assaults to ruin us eternally: "What consequence then? [...] Get good habits now in life. Do not be content merely to live in the grace of God, nor to remain a single moment in sin; but habitually live such a life, by the continual exercise of good works, that at the last moment the Devil will not have the temptation to make me lose myself for all Eternity.[\[13\]](#)

From the 17th century onwards and throughout the 18th century, preachers emphasised the importance of the theme, adapting their reflections according to the sensibilities of the Baroque taste, with a strong emphasis on the dramatic aspects, without however distracting the listeners' attention from the substance: the serene acceptance of death, the call to conversion of the heart, constant vigilance, fervour in virtuous works, self-offering to God and the yearning for eternal communion of love with him. Gradually, the exercise for a happy death took on an ever-increasing importance, until it became one of the main ascetic practices in Catholicism. A model of how it should be carried out is offered, for example, in a 17th-century pamphlet by an anonymous Jesuit:

Choose one day of each month which is the most free from all other business, on which you must with particular diligence engage in Prayer, Confession, Communion and Visitation of the Blessed Sacrament.

The Prayer of this day will need to be two hours over two sessions: and the subject of it may be the one we will mention. In the first hour, conceive as vividly as you can the state in which you find yourself already dying [...]. Consider what you would like to have done when you are dying,

first with regard to God, secondly with regard to yourself, thirdly with regard to your neighbour, mixing in this meditation various fervent affections of repentance, intentions, and requests to the Lord, in order to implore from him the virtue of amending yourself. The second Prayer session will have as its subject the strongest motives that can be found for willingly accepting death from God [...]. The affections of this Meditation will be an offering of one's life to the Lord, a protest that if we could prolong it, beyond His most divine blessing, we would not do so; a request, to offer this sacrifice with the spirit of love which requires the respect due to His most loving Providence, and disposition.

You must make your Confession with more particular diligence, as if it were the last time that you have gone to wash yourself in the most precious blood of Jesus Christ [...].

Communion, too, must be done with more extraordinary preparation, and as if you were taking Communion for Viaticum, adoring the Lord whom you hope to have to adore for all Eternity; thanking Him for the life He has granted you, asking forgiveness for having spent it so badly; offering yourself ready to end it, because He wants it so, and finally asking Him for grace to assist you in this great step, so that your soul, leaning on its Beloved, may pass safely from this Desert to the Kingdom. [\[14\]](#)

The commitment to spreading the practice of the happy death did not limit the considerations of preachers and spiritual directors to the subject of the *novissimi* (the last things), as if they wanted to base the spiritual edifice solely on the fear of damned eternity. These authors knew the psychological and spiritual damage that the anxiety and anguish over one's salvation had on the most sensitive souls. The collections of meditations produced between the end of the 17th century and the middle of the 18th century not only insisted on God's mercy and abandonment to him, to lead the faithful to the permanent state of spiritual serenity that is

proper to those who have integrated the awareness of their own temporal finitude within a solid vision of faith, but they ranged over all the themes of Christian doctrine and practice, of private and public morality: truth of the faith and evangelical subjects, vices and virtues, sacraments and prayer, spiritual and material works of charity, asceticism and mysticism. The consideration of man's eternal destiny expanded to the proposal of an exemplary and ardent Christian living, which translated into spiritual paths oriented towards personal sanctification and the refinement of daily and social life, against the backdrop of a substantial theology and a refined Christian anthropology.

One of the most eloquent examples is provided by the three volumes by Jesuit Giuseppe Antonio Bordoni, which collect the meditations offered every week for over twenty years to the confreres of the *Compagnia della buona morte*, which he established in the church of the Holy Martyrs in Turin (1719). The work was much appreciated for its theological substance, its lack of rhetorical frills, and its wealth of concrete examples, and was reprinted dozens of times up to the threshold of the 20th century.[\[15\]](#) Also linked to the Turin religious environment are the *Discorsi sacri e morali per l'esercizio della buona morte* – more marked by the sensitivity of the time but just as solid – preached in the second half of the 18th century by Fr Giorgio Maria Rulfo, spiritual director of the *Compagnia dell'Umiltà* formed by ladies of the Savoy nobility.[\[16\]](#)

The practice proposed by St John Bosco to the students of the Oratory and Salesian educational institutions had, therefore, a solid spiritual tradition of reference.

[\(continued\)](#)

[\[1\]](#) John Bosco, *Regolamento dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales per gli esterni*, Turin, Tipografia Salesiana, 1877, 44.

[\[2\]](#) Cf. John Bosco, *Regolamento per le case della Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, Turin, Tipografia Salesiana, 1877, 63 (part II, chapter II, art. 4): “[...] Once a month the exercise for a happy death will be done by all, preparing for it with some sermon or other exercise of piety.”

[\[3\]](#) [John Bosco], *Regole o Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales secondo il Decreto di approvazione del 3 aprile 1874*, Torino, Tipografia Salesiana, 1877, 81 (cap. XIII, art. 6). The same was established in the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, with a very similar wording: “The first Sunday or the first Thursday of the month will be a day of spiritual retreat, in which, leaving temporal affairs as far as possible, each one will collect herself, make the exercise for a happy death, arranging her spiritual and temporal things, as if she had to leave the world and go to Eternity. Let some reading be done according to the need, and where possible the Superior shall procure from the Director a sermon or a conference on the subject”, *Regole o Costituzioni per le Figlie di Maria SS. Ausiliatrice aggregate alla Società salesiana* (ed. 1885), Title XVII, art. 5, in John Bosco, *Constitutions for the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (1872-1885)*. Critical texts edited by Cecilia Romero, Rome, LAS, 1983, 325.

[\[4\]](#) Giovanni Bosco, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi obblighi degli esercizi di cristiana pietà per la recita dell'ufficio della Beata Vergine e de principali vespri dell'anno coll aggiunta di una scelta di laudi sacre ecc.*, Torino, Tipografia Paravia e Comp. 1847, 138-142.

[\[5\]](#) Central Salesian Archives, A0000409 *Prediche di don Bosco – Esercizi Lanzo 1876*, notebook XX, ms by Giulio Barberis, pp. 10-11.

[\[6\]](#) John Bosco, *Ai Soci Salesiani, in Rules or Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales* (ed. 1877), 38.

[7] *Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales preceded by an introduction written by the Founder St. John Bosco*, Turin, Tipografia Salesiana, 1907, 227- 231.

[8] *Des. Erasmi Roterodami liber cum primis pius, de praeparatione ad mortem, nunc primum et conscriptus et aeditus...*, Basileae, in officina Frobeniana per Hieronymum Frobenium & Nicolaum Episcopium 1533, 3-80 (Quomodo se quisque debeat praeparare ad mortem). Cf. also *Pro salutari hominis ad felicem mortem praeparatione, hinc inde ex Scriptura sacra, et sanctis, doctis, et christianissimis doctoribus, ad cujusdam petitionem, et aliorum etiam utilitatem, a Sacrarum literarum professor Ludovico Bero conscripta et nunc primum edita*, Basileae, per Joan. Oporinum, 1549.

[9] Giovanni Bona, *De praeparatione ad mortem...*, Roma, in Typographia S. Michaelis ad Ripam per Hieronimum Maynardi, 1736, 11-13.

[10] *Ibid.*, 67-73.

[11] *Ibid.*, 74-75.

[12] *Ibid.*, 126-132: "Affectus animae suspirantis ad Paradisum".

[13] Carlo Ambrogio Cattaneo, *Esercizi spirituali di sant'Ignazio*, Trent, by Gianbatista Monauni, 1744, 74.

[14] *Esercizio di preparazione alla morte proposto da un religioso della Compagnia di Gesù per indirizzo di chi desidera far bene un tale passo*, Roma, per gl'Eredi del Corbelletti [1650], ff. 3v-6v.

[15] Giuseppe Antonio Bordoni, *Discorsi per l'esercizio della buona morte*, Venice, in the printing house of Andrea Poletti, 1749-1751, 3 vols.; the latest edition is the Turin edition by Pietro Marietti in 6 volumes (1904-1905).

[16] Giorgio Maria Rulfo, *Discorsi sacri, e morali per*

l'esercizio della buona morte, Turin, presso i librai B.A. Re e G. Rameletti, 1783-1784, 5 vols.

The Exercise for a Happy Death in Don Bosco's educational experience (1/5)

The annual All Souls Day commemoration presents us with reality that no one can deny: the end of our earthly life. For many, talking about death seems a macabre thing, to be avoided at all costs. But this was not so for St John Bosco; throughout his life he had cultivated the exercise for a happy death, setting the last day of the month for this purpose. Who knows if this is not the reason why the Lord took him to be with him on the last day of January 1888, finding him prepared...

Jean Delumeau, in the introduction to his work on *LaPaura in Occidente (Fear in the West)*, recounts the anguish he felt at the age of twelve when, as a new pupil at a Salesian boarding school, he first heard the “disquieting sequences” of the litany for a happy death, followed by an *Our Father* and *Hail Mary* “for the one among us who will be the first to die”. Starting from that experience, from his early fears, his difficult efforts to become accustomed to this fear, his teenage reflections on the last things, his personal patient search for serenity and joy in acceptance, the French historian drew up a project of historical investigation focused on the role of “guilt” and the “pastoral use of fear” in the history of the West and came to an interpretation “of a very broad historical panorama: for the Church, suffering and

the (temporary) annihilation of the body are less to be feared than sin and hell. Man can do nothing against death, but – with God's help – it is possible for him to avoid eternal punishment. From that moment on, a new type of fear – a theological one – replaced what came before and was visceral and spontaneous: it was an heroic remedy, but still a remedy since it introduced an exit where there was nothing but emptiness; this was the kind of lesson that the religious responsible for my education tried to teach me.”[\[1\]](#)

Even Umberto Eco recalled with ironic sympathy the exercise for a happy death that he was presented with at the Nizza Monferrato Oratory:

Ancient religions, myths, rituals made death, though always fearful, familiar to us. We were accustomed to accepting it by the great funeral celebrations, the wailing women, the great *Requiem* Masses. We were prepared for death by sermons on hell, and even during my childhood I was invited to read the pages on death by Don Bosco's *Companion of Youth*. Hewas not just the cheerful priest who made children play, but had a visionary and flamboyant imagination. He reminded us that we don't know where death will surprise us – whether in our bed, at work, or in the street, from the bursting of a vein, a bad cold, a haemorrhage, a fever, a plague, an earthquake, a lightning strike, 'perhaps as soon as we have finished reading these thoughts.' At that moment we will feel our head grow dull, our eyes hurt, our tongue parched, our jaw closed, our chest heavy, our blood frozen, our flesh consumed, our heart pierced. Hence the need to practise the Exercise for a Happy Death [...]. Pure sadism, one might say. But what do we teach our contemporaries today? That death takes place far from us in hospital, that we no longer usually follow the coffin to the cemetery, that we no longer see the dead. [...] Thus, the disappearance of death from our immediate horizon of experience will make us much more terrified when the moment approaches, when faced with this event that also belongs to us from birth – and with which the wise man comes to terms

throughout life.”[2]

In Salesian houses the monthly practice of the exercise for a happy death, with the recitation of the litany included by Don Bosco in the *Companion of Youth* remained in use from 1847 until the threshold of the Council.[3] Delumeau recounts that every time he happened to read the litany to his students at the Collège de France he noticed how astonished they were: “It is proof” he writes, “of a rapid and profound change in mentality from one generation to the next. Having rapidly become out of date after being relevant for so long, this prayer for a happy death has become a document of history insofar as it reflects a long tradition of religious pedagogy.”[4] The scholar of mentalities, in fact, teaches us how historical phenomena, in order to avoid misleading anachronisms, must always be approached in relation to their internal coherence and with respect for cultural otherness, to which every collective mental representation, every belief and cultural or cultic practice of ancient societies must be traced. Outside those anthropological frameworks, that set of knowledge and values, ways of thinking and feeling, habits and models of behaviour prevalent in a given cultural context, which shape the collective mindset, it is impossible to adopt a correct critical approach.

As far as we are concerned, Delumeau’s account is a document of how anachronism not only undermines the historian. Even the pastor and educator run the risk of perpetuating practices and formulas outside the cultural and spiritual worlds that generated them: thus, at the very least, besides appearing strange to the younger generations, they may even be counterproductive, having lost the overall horizon of meaning and the “mental and spiritual tools” that made them meaningful. This was the fate of the prayer for a happy death that was used for over a century, for students in Salesian works all over the world, then – around 1965 – completely abandoned, without any replacement that would safeguard its positive aspects. The abandonment was not only due to its

obsolescence. It was also a symptom of the ongoing process of the eclipse of death in Western culture, a sort of “interdiction” and “prohibition” now strongly denounced by scholars and pastors.[\[5\]](#)

Our contribution aims at investigating the meaning and educational value of the exercise for a happy death in Don Bosco’s and the first Salesian generations’ practice, relating it to a fruitful secular tradition, and then identifying its spiritual features through the narrative testimonies left by the Saint.

[\(continued\)](#)

[\[1\]](#) Jean Delumeau, *La Paura in Occidente* (14th-18th centuries). *La città assediata*, Turin, SEI, 1979, 42-44.

[\[2\]](#) Umberto Eco, “La bustina di Minerva: Dov’è andata la morte?”, in *L’Espresso*, 29 November 2012.

[\[3\]](#) The “Prayers for a Happy Death” are still to be found, with a few substantial variations, in the revised Manual of Prayer for Salesian Educational Institutions in Italy, which ultimately replaced *The Companion of Youth*, used until then: Centro Compagnie Gioventù Salesiana, *In preghiera. Manuale di pietà ispirato al Giovane Provveduto di san Giovanni Bosco*, Torino, Opere Don Bosco, 1959, 360-362.

[\[4\]](#) Delumeau, *La Paura in Occidente*, 43.

[\[5\]](#) Cf. Philippe Ariés, *Storia della morte in Occidente* Milan, BUR, 2009; Jean-Marie R. Tillard, *La morte: Enigma o Mysterio?* Magnano (BI), Edizioni Qiqajon, 1998.