

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It is not easy to choose, from the hundreds of unpublished letters of Don Bosco that we have recovered in recent decades, the ones that most deserve to be presented and commented on.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.

An interesting court case at Valdocco

A letter to the magistrate of the City of Turin dated 18 April 1865 opens up an interesting and previously unpublished glimpse into daily life in Valdocco at the time.

Among the young people taken in at Valdocco in the 1860s, when almost all the workshops for the working boys, often orphans, had been opened, there were some sent there by public security. So, the Oratory did not only accept good and lively young men, good-hearted young fellows, but also difficult, problematic young men with decidedly negative experiences behind them.

We are perhaps used to thinking that things always went well at Valdocco, with the presence of Don Bosco, especially in the 1850s and early 1860s when Salesian work had not yet spread and Don Bosco lived in direct and constant contact with the boys. But later, with a large and mixed group of young people, educators, apprentice tradesmen, young academic students, novices, philosophy and theology students, evening school students, and “external” workers, difficulties had arisen in the disciplinary management of the Valdocco community.

A rather serious incident

A letter to the magistrate of the City of Turin dated 18 April 1865 opens an interesting and unpublished glimpse into the daily life of Valdocco at the time. We reproduce it here and then comment on it.

To the Urban Magistrate of the City of Turin

Having seen the summons to be served on cleric Mazzarello, assistant in the bookbinders’ workshop at the house known as the Oratory of St Francis de Sales; having also seen the

summons to be served on young Federico Parodi, Giovanni Castelli and Giuseppe Guglielmi, and having carefully considered the content of the summons, John Bosco, director of this establishment, in his desire to settle the matter with less disturbance on the part of the authorities of the urban magistrate's office, believes he can intervene on behalf of all concerned in the case concerning the young Carlo Boglietti, and is ready to give whomever the greatest satisfaction.

Before mentioning the fact in question, it seems appropriate to note that Article 650 of the penal code seems entirely extraneous to the matter at hand, because if it were interpreted in the way the urban magistrate's court would wish, it would introduce itself into the domestic regime of families, and parents and guardians would no longer be able to correct their children, not even to prevent insolence and insubordination, [which would] be to the serious detriment of public and private morality.

Furthermore, in order to restrain certain youngsters, most of whom were sent by the government authority, they had the power to use all means deemed appropriate, and in extreme cases to ask them to send the arm of public safety, as has been done several times.

Turning now to the case of Carlo Boglietti, we must regretfully but frankly state that he was given a fatherly warning several times in vain, and that he not only proved to be incorrigible, but insulted, threatened and swore at his assistant, cleric Mazzarello in front of his companions. This assistant, who was of a very meek and mild disposition, was so frightened by this that from then on he was always ill without ever having been able to resume his duties, and he continues to be sick.

After this event, Boglietti fled the house without telling his superiors in charge of him, and only made his escape known through his sister, when she learned that he wanted to surrender to the police. This was not done in order to preserve his honour.

In the meantime, a request is made to repair the damage that the assistant has suffered to his honour and person, at least until he can resume his ordinary occupations, and:

-that the costs of this suit be charged to him.

– that neither Carlo Boglietti nor his relative or councillor Mr Caneparo Stefano come to the aforementioned establishment to renew their acts of insubordination and scandals already caused on other occasions.

[Sac. Gio Bosco].

What can we say? First of all, that the letter documents how there were some young men sent by public security among the young men taken in at Valdocco in the sixties, when by then almost all the workshops for the working boys, often orphans, had been opened. So, the Oratory did not only accept boys like Dominic Savio or Francis Besucco or even Michael Magone, that is to say, good, lively and good-hearted youngsters, but also difficult, problematic youngsters with decidedly negative experiences behind them.

The very young Salesian educators of Valdocco were entrusted with the arduous task of re-educating them, and were also authorised to resort to “all means that were deemed appropriate”. Which ones? Certainly, Don Bosco’s Preventive System, whose validity was demonstrated by the experience of two decades at Valdocco. But when the facts were put to the test, “in extreme cases”, for the most incorrigible youngsters, recourse had to be made to the same public force that had brought them there.

In the case in question

Don Bosco, faced with a summons to appear in court because of one of his young clerics and some boys from the Oratory, felt it his duty to intervene directly with the constituted authority to defend his young teacher, to safeguard the positive image of his Oratory and to protect his own educational authority. With extreme clarity he pointed out to the magistrate the possible negative consequences, for

himself, for families and for society in general, of the rigid, and in his opinion unjustified, application of an article of the penal code.

As an excellent lawyer, Don Bosco's defence became a legal and educational harangue, thus turning into it into an accusation, and the accuser into the accused, to the point of immediately petitioning for compensation for the physical and moral damage caused to the young assistant Mazzarello, who fell ill and was forced to rest.

The outcome of the dispute

It is not known; it probably ended in deadlock. But the whole affair reveals to us a series of attitudes and behaviours that are not only little known about Don Bosco, but in some ways always relevant. We come to know that even under Don Bosco's watchful eyes the Preventive System could sometimes fail. The first interest to be safeguarded was always that of the individual youngster, obviously on condition that it was not in conflict with the higher interests of other school mates. In addition, the positive image of the Salesian work was also to be defended in the appropriate judicial forums. In which case, however, the possible consequences had to be wisely taken into account so as not to result in unpleasant surprises.

Where was Don Bosco born?

On the first anniversary of Don Bosco's death his Past Pupils wanted to continue to celebrate the Feast of Recognition, as they had done every year on 24 June, organising it for the new Rector Major, Fr Rua.

On 23 June 1889, after placing a memorial stone in the Crypt at Valsalice where Don Bosco was buried, they

celebrated Fr Rua at Valdocco on the 24th.

Professor Alessandro Fabre, a past pupil from 1858-66, took the floor and said among other things:

"You will not be disappointed to know, dear Fr Rua, that we have decided to add as an appendix the inauguration on 15 August next of another plaque, the commission for which has already been given and the design is reproduced here. *We will place it on the house where our dear Don Bosco was born and lived for many years*, so that the place where the heart of that great man who was later to fill Europe and the world with his name, his virtues and his admirable institutions might remain a signpost for contemporaries and posterity will remain a place where it first beat for God and for mankind."

As can be seen, the Past Pupils' intention was to place a plaque on the *Casetta* at the Becchi, which everyone believed was Don Bosco's birthplace, because he had always indicated it as *his home*. But then, finding the *Casetta* in ruins, they were encouraged to redo the inscription and place the plaque on Joseph's house nearby, with the following wording dictated by Prof. Fabre himself:

On 11 August, a few days before Don Bosco's birthday, the Past Pupils went to the Becchi to unveil the plaque. Felice Reviglio, Parish Priest at St Augustine's, and one of Don Bosco's very first pupils, gave the speech on the occasion. Talking about the *Casetta* he said: "The very house near here where he was born, which is almost completely ruined..." is "a true monument of Don Bosco's evangelical poverty."

The "completely ruined" *Casetta* had already been mentioned in the Salesian Bulletin in March 1887 (BS 1887, March, p. 31), and Fr Reviglio and the inscription on the plaque ("a house now demolished") were evidently speaking of this situation. The inscription covered the unfortunate fact that the *Casetta*, not yet Salesian property, now seemed inexorably lost.

But Fr Rua did not give up and in 1901 offered to

restore it at the Salesians' expense in the hope of later obtaining it from the heirs of Antonio and Giuseppe Bosco, as happened in 1919 and 1926 respectively.

When the work was completed a plaque was placed on the Casetta with the following inscription: IN THIS HUMBLE COTTAGE, NOW PIOUSLY RESTORED, FATHER JOHN BOSCO WAS BORN ON 16 AUGUST 1815

Then also the inscription on Joseph's house was corrected as follows: "*Born here in a house now restored... etc.*", and the plaque was replaced.

Then, when the centenary of Don Bosco's birth was celebrated in 1915, the Bulletin published the photo of the Casetta, specifying: "It is the one where the Venerable John Bosco was born on 16 August 1815. It was saved from the ruin to which time had condemned it, with a general repair in the year 1901."

In the 1970s, archival research carried out by Commendatore Secondo Caselle convinced the Salesians that Don Bosco had indeed lived from 1817 to 1831 at the Casetta purchased by his father, his home, as he had always said, but he had been born at the Biglione farmstead, where his father was a share farmer and lived with his family until his death on 11 May 1817, at the top of the hill where the Church to St. John Bosco now stands.

The plaque on Joseph's house had been changed, while the one on the Casetta was replaced by the current marble inscription: THIS IS MY HOUSE DON BOSCO

The Past Pupils' opinion in 1889, with the words "Born near here in a house now demolished" now took on another meaning; it did not mean the Caasetta at the Becchi.

The place names at Becchi

Did the Bosco family live at Cascina Biglione when John was born?

Some have said that this is in doubt, because they almost certainly lived in another house owned by Biglione at "Meinito". Proof of this would be Francesco Bosco's Will,

drawn up by notary C. G. Montalenti on 8 May 1817, where we read: "... *in the house of Signor Biglione inhabited by the testator in the region of the Monastero borgata [hamlet] at Meinito...*". (S. CASELLE, *Cascinali e Contadini del Monferrato: i Bosco di Chieri nel secolo XVIII*, Rome, LAS, 1975, p. 94).

What can be said about this opinion?

Today, "Meinito" (or "Mainito") is merely the site of a farmstead located south of Colle Don Bosco, beyond the provincial road that goes from Castelnuovo towards Capriglio, but at one time it indicated a more extensive territory, contiguous to one called *Sbaraneo* (or *Sbaruau*). And *Sbaraneo* was none other than the valley to the east of the Colle.

"*Monastery*", then, did not only correspond to the current wooded area close to Mainito, but covered a vast area, from Mainito to Barosca, so much so that the Casetta at the Becchi was recorded in 1817 as "region of Cavallo, Monastero" (S. CASELLE, *op. cit.*, p. 96).

At a time when there were not yet any maps with numbered plots, farmsteads and estates were identified on the basis of place names or toponyms, derived from surnames of ancient families or geographical and historical features.

They served as landmarks, but did not correspond to today's meaning of "region" or "hamlet" except very roughly, and were used with much freedom of choice by notaries.

The oldest map of the Castelnovese, preserved in the municipal archives and kindly made available to us, dates back to 1742 and is called the "Napoleonic Map", probably because of its greater use during the French occupation. An extract of this map, edited in 1978 with photographic elaboration of the original text by Mr Polato and Mr Occhiena, who compared the archive documents with the lots numbered on the Napoleonic Map, gives an indication of all the land owned by the Biglione family since 1773 and worked by the Bosco family from 1793 to 1817. From this "Extract" it appears that the Biglione family did not own any land or houses at Mainito. And on the other hand, no other document can be found so far

that proves the contrary.

So what meaning can the words “in Mr Biglione’s house... in the Monastero region of the hamlet of Meinito” have?

First of all, it is good to know that only nine days later, the same notary who drew up Francesco Bosco’s will, wrote in the inventory of his inheritance: “... in the house of Signor Giacinto Biglione inhabited by the unnamed pupils [Francesco’s sons] in the region of Meinito...”. (S. CASELLE, op. cit., p. 96), thus promoting Mainito from “borgata” to “regione” in just a few days. And then it is curious to note that even the Cascina Biglione proper, in different documents appears as *Sbaconatto*, in *Sbaraneo* or *Monastero*, in *Castellero*, and so on and so forth.

So where are we at? Taking everything into account, it is not difficult to realise that it is always the same area, *the Monastero*, which at its centre had Sbaconatto and Castellero, to the east the Sbaraneo, and to the south the Mainito. Notary Montalenti chose “Meinito” as others chose “Sbaraneo” or “Sbaconatto” or “Castellero”. But the site and the house were always the same!

We know, moreover, that Mr and Mrs Damevino, owners of Cascina Biglione from 1845 to 1929, also owned other farmsteads, at Scajota and Barosca; but, as local elders assure us, they never owned houses at Mainito. Yet they had bought the properties that the Biglione family had sold to Mr Giuseppe Chiardi in 1818.

All that remains is to conclude that the document drawn up by notary Montalenti on 8 May 1817, even if it contains no errors, refers to the Cascina Biglione proper, where Don Bosco was born on 16 August 1815, his father died on 11 May 1817 and the grandiose Temple to St John Bosco was built in our days.

The existence, finally, of a fictitious Biglione house inhabited by the Bosco family at Mainito and then demolished whenever or by whoever before 1889, as some have speculated, has (at least so far) no real evidence in its favour. When the Past Pupils the words “Born here at...” in

Becchi (see our January article) they certainly could not have been referring to Mainito, which is over a kilometre from Joseph's house!

Cascine, massari and mezzadri

Francesco Bosco, farmer at the Cascina Biglione, wishing to set up his own business, bought land and the Becchi house, but death took him suddenly on 11 May 1817 before he had been able to pay all his debts. In November, his widow, Margaret Occhiena, moved with her children and mother-in-law into the *Casetta*, which had been renovated for the purpose. Before then, the *Casetta*, already contracted by her husband since 1815 but not yet paid for, consisted only of "a croft and adjacent stable, covered with tiles, in poor condition" (S. CASELLE, *Cascinali e contadini* [...], p. 96-97), and therefore uninhabitable for a family of five, with animals and tools. By February 1817 the notarial deed of sale had been drawn up, but the debt was still outstanding. Margaret had to resolve the situation as guardian of Anthony, Joseph and John Bosco, by then small owners at the Becchi.

It was not the first time that the Bosco family moved from the status of *massari* to becoming smallholders and vice versa. The late Comm. Secondo Caselle has given us ample documentation of this.

Don Bosco's great-great-grandfather, Giovanni Pietro, formerly a *massaro* (sharecropper) at the Croce di Pane farmstead, between Chieri and Andezeno, owned by the Barnabite Fathers, in 1724 became a shrecropper at the Cascina di San Silvestro near Chieri, belonging to the Prevostura di San Giorgio. And the fact that he lived in the Cascina di San Silvestro with his family is recorded in the *Registri del Sale* of 1724. His nephew, Filippo Antonio, fatherless and taken in by Giovanni Pietro's eldest son, Giovanni Francesco Bosco, was adopted by a great-uncle, from whom he inherited a house, garden and 2 hectares of land in Castelnuovo. But, due to the critical economic situation he found himself in, he had to sell the house and most of his land and move with his family

to the hamlet of Morialdo, as a sharecropper of Cascina Biglione, where he died in 1802.

Paolo, his first-born son, thus became the head of the family and the farmer, as recorded in the 1804 census. But a few years later, he left the farmstead to his half-brother Francesco and went to settle in Castelnuovo after taking his share of the inheritance and buying and selling. It was then that Francesco Bosco, son of Filippo Antonio and Margherita Zucca, became a *massaro* of Cascina Biglione.

What was meant in those days by *cascina*, *massaro* and *mezzadro*?

The word *cascina* (in Piedmontese: *cassin-a*) indicates in itself a farmhouse or the whole of a farm; but in the places we are talking about, the emphasis was on the house, i.e. the farm building used partly as a dwelling and partly as a rustic house for livestock, etc. The *massaro* (in Piedmontese: *massé*) in itself is the tenant of the farmstead and the farms, while the *mezzadro* (in Piedmontese: *masoé*) is only the cultivator of a master's land with whom he shares the crops. But in practice in those places the *massaro* was also a sharecropper and vice versa, so that the word *massé* was not much used, while *masoé* generally indicated the *massaro* as well.

Mr and Mrs Damevino, owners of Cascina *Bion* or Biglione al Castellero from 1845 to 1929, also owned other farmsteads, at *Scajota* and *Barosca*, and, as Mr Angelo Agagliate assured us, they had five *massari* or sharecroppers, one at Cascina Biglione, two at Scajota and two at Barosca. Naturally, the various *massari* lived in their own farmstead.

Now, if a farmer was a farmer, e.g., at Cascina Scajota, owned by the Damevino family, he was not called "living in the Damevino house", but simply "alla Scajota". If Francesco Bosco had lived in the supposed Biglione house at Mainito, he would not, therefore, have been said to have lived "in Mr Biglione's house" even if this house had belonged to the Biglione family. If the notary wrote "In Signor Biglione's house inhabited by the testator below", it was a sign that

Francesco lived with his family at Cascina Biglione proper.

And this is further confirmation of the previous articles that refute the hypothesis of Don Bosco's birth at Mainito "in a house now demolished".

In conclusion, one cannot give exclusive importance to the literal meaning of certain expressions, but must examine their true meaning in the local usage of the time. In studies of this kind, the work of the local researcher is complementary to that of the academic historian, and particularly important, because the former, aided by detailed knowledge of the area, can provide the latter with the material needed for general conclusions, and avoid erroneous interpretations.

How to find the resources to build a church

A secret to be found

It is well known that Don Bosco's reputation for getting things done had spread throughout Italy. Since he succeeded in so many enterprises, many people asked him for advice on how to do the same.

How to find the funds to build a church? Mrs Marianna Moschetti of Castagneto di Pisa (today Castagneto Carducci-Livorno) expressly asked him in 1877. Don Bosco's answer on 11 April, in its brevity and simplicity, is admirable.

Starting point: get to know the situation

With the practical wisdom that came to him from his family upbringing and from his experience as founder-builder-realiser of so many projects, Don Bosco took up his pen and wrote, intelligently, that "there is a need for us to talk to each

other to examine what projects can be done and what probability there is of being able to carry them out." Without healthy realism the best projects remain a dream. The saint, however, does not want to discourage his correspondent right away, so he immediately adds "[carry out] what seems good to me in the Lord."

In nomine Domini

He begins well, one might say, with this "in the Lord". In fact, the first, and therefore the most important advice he gives to the lady, is to "pray and invite others to pray and go to communion often, as a most effective way of deserving his graces. The church is the house of the Lord, who will not fail to bless a church project if it is advanced by those who trust in him, pray to him, live a Christian life and make use of the indispensable means. A life of grace certainly deserves the Lord's graces (Don Bosco is convinced of this), even if everything is grace: "If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders labour in it."

Collaboration with everyone

The church is everyone's home; certainly the parish priest is primarily responsible, but not the only one. Therefore the laity must have a sense of shared responsibility, including the most sensitive, the most available, perhaps the most capable among them (those who today could be part of the pastoral council of each parish). Here then is Don Bosco's second piece of advice: "Invite the parish priest to put himself at the head of two committees with as many members as possible. One of men, the other of women. Let each member of this committee sign up for a donation divided into three instalments, one for each year."

Note: two committees, one male and one female. Of course, at the time the men's and women's associations in a parish were normally separate; but why not also see it as fair and loyal "competition" in doing good, in managing a project with their own strength, each group "in its own way", with its own

strategies? Don Bosco knew how much he himself was financially indebted to the female world, to the marquises, countesses, aristocratic women in general: they were usually more religious than their husbands, more generous in works of charity, more willing "to help the needs of the Church". It was wise to rely on them.

Widening the circle

In fact Don Bosco immediately added: "At the same time each one should seek donors who will give money, work or materials. For example, invite those who will have an altar made, the pulpit, the candlesticks, a bell, the window frames, the main door, smaller doors, glass etc. But only one thing each." Beautiful. Everyone had to commit to something that they could rightly consider their own personal gift to the church under construction.

Don Bosco had not studied psychology, but he knew – as all parish priests, and not just them, know – that by tickling people's legitimate pride one can also achieve a great deal in terms of generosity, solidarity, altruism. Moreover, throughout his life he had needed others: to study as a child, to go to the Chieri school as a young man, to enter the seminary as a cleric, to begin his work as a priest, to develop it as a founder.

A secret

Don Bosco then acts a bit mysteriously with his correspondent: "If I could speak to the parish priest I could suggest another means in confidence; but I hesitate to entrust it to paper." What was that all about? Hard to say. One could think of the promise of special indulgences for such benefactors, but it would have been necessary to go to Rome and Don Bosco knew how much difficulty this could cause with the bishop and other parish priests also involved in similar building projects. More likely it was a confidential invitation to seek the support of political authorities so that they might support the cause. The suggestion, however, would be better made *viva*

voce, so as not to compromise himself before either civil or religious authorities, at a time of fierce opposition between them, with the historical Left in power, more anticlerical than the previous Right.

What more could he say? One thing that was important to both: prayer. And indeed this is how he bids farewell to his correspondent: "I will pray that everything goes well. My only support has always been to have recourse to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and to Mary Help of Christians. God bless you and pray for me who will always be with you in J.C.".

Don Bosco and the Consolata

The oldest pillar in the Becchi area appears to date back to 1700. It was erected at the bottom of the plain towards the "Mainito", where the families who lived in the ancient "Scaiota" used to meet. It then became a Salesian farmstead, which has now been renovated and converted into a youth house that hosts groups of young pilgrims to the Church and the Don Bosco House.

This is the Consolata pillar, with a statue of Our Lady of Consolation, always honoured with country flowers brought by devotees. John Bosco must have passed by that pillar many times, taking off his hat and murmuring a Hail Mary as his mother had taught him.

In 1958, the Salesians restored the old pillar and, with a solemn religious service, began the renewed worship of the community and the population, as recorded in the Chronicle of that year kept in the archives of the "Bernardi Semeria" Institute.

That statue of the Consolata could therefore be the first image of Mary that Don Bosco venerated in his boyhood at his home.

At the "Consolata" in Turin

Already as a student and seminarian in Chieri Don Bosco must have gone to Turin to venerate the Consolata (BM I, 200). But it is certain that, as a new priest, he celebrated his second Holy Mass precisely at the Shrine of the Consolata "to thank the Great Virgin Mary for the innumerable favours she had obtained for me from her Divine Son Jesus." (MO 96).

In the days of the wandering Oratory with no fixed abode, Don Bosco went with his boys to some churches in Turin for Sunday Mass, and mostly they went to the Consolata (BM II, 104, 193).

In May 1846-47, in order to thank Our Lady for having finally given them a stable home, he took his youngsters there to receive Holy Communion while the Oblate Fathers of the Virgin Mary, who officiated at the Shrine, were available to hear their confessions.

When, in the summer of 1846, Don Bosco fell seriously ill, his boys not only showed their grief in tears, but fearing that human means would not suffice for his recovery, they took turns from morning to night at the Shrine of the Consolata to pray to Our Lady to preserve their sick friend and father.

There were those who even made childish vows and those who fasted on bread and water so that Our Lady would hear them. They were heard and Don Bosco promised God that even his last breath would be for them.

The visits of Don Bosco and his boys to the Consolata continued. Invited once to sing Mass in the shrine with his youngsters, he arrived at the appointed time with the improvised "Schola cantorum", bringing with him the score of a "mass" he had composed for the occasion.

The organist there was the famous maestro Bodoira whom Don Bosco invited to play the organ. The latter did not even take a look at Don Bosco's score, but when he was about to play the music, he did not understand it at all and, leaving the organist's post in a huff, he left.

Don Bosco then sat down at the organ and

accompanied the Mass following his composition studded with signs that only he could understand. The young men who had previously been lost trying to follow the famous organist, continued to the end without a cue and their silvery voices attracted the admiration and sympathy of all the faithful at the service.

From 1848 until 1854 Don Bosco accompanied his boys in procession through the streets of Turin to the Consolata. His youngsters sang praises to the Virgin along the way and then participated in the Holy Mass he celebrated.

When Mamma Margaret died on 25 November 1856, Don Bosco went that morning to celebrate the Holy Mass of suffrage in the underground chapel of the Consolata, stopping to pray at length before the image of Our Lady, begging her to be a mother to him and his boys. And Mary fulfilled his prayers (BM V, 374).

Don Bosco at the Shrine of the Consolata not only had occasion to celebrate Holy Mass several times, but one day he also wanted to serve Mass there. Entering the shrine to pay a visit, he heard the signal for Mass to begin and realised that the altar server was missing. He got up, went to the sacristy, took the missal and served Mass with devotion (BM VII, 57).

And Don Bosco's attendance at the Shrine never ceased especially on the occasion of the Novena and the Feast of the Consolata.

Statuette of the Consolata in the Pinardi Chapel

On 2 September 1847 Don Bosco bought a statuette of Our Lady of the Consolata for 27 lire, placing it in the Pinardi Chapel.

In 1856, when the Chapel was being demolished, Fr Francis Giacomelli, a seminary companion and great friend of Don Bosco, wishing to keep for himself what he called the most distinguished monument of the foundation of the Oratory, took the statuette to the family home to Avigliana.

In 1882, his sister had a pillar with a niche

built at the house and placed the precious relic there.

When the Salesians came to know about the pillar in Avigliana, after the Giacomelli family home was being demolished, they managed to get the ancient statuette back. On 12 April 1929 it returned to the Turin Oratory after 73 years from the day Fr Giacomelli had removed it from the first chapel (E. GIRAUDI, *L'Oratorio di Don Bosco*, Torino, SEI, 1935, p. 89-90).

Today the historic little statue remains the only reminder of the past in the new Pinardi Chapel, as its dearest and most precious treasure.

Don Bosco, who spread devotion to Mary Help of Christians throughout the world, never forgot his first devotion to the Virgin, venerated from his childhood at the Becchi pillar under the effigy of the "Consolata". When he arrived in Turin as a young diocesan priest, during the heroic period of his "Oratory", he drew light and advice, courage and comfort for the mission that the Lord had entrusted to him from Our Lady of the Consolata in her Sanctuary.

This is also why he is rightly considered one of Turin's saints.

Edmond Obrecht. I had lunch with a saint

In the biography of a famous abbot, the emotion of meeting Don Bosco.

Today it is quite easy to meet a Saint, as has happened to me several times. I have met several: the Cardinal of Milan Ildefonso Schuster (who confirmed me) and Popes John XXIII and Paul VI; I spoke with Mother Teresa, and even had lunch with

Pope John Paul II. But a century ago it was not so easy, so to have personally approached a saint was an experience that remained etched in the mind and heart of the lucky person. Such was the case with the French Trappist abbot Dom Edmond Obrecht (1852-1935). Way back in 1934, when Don Bosco was canonised, three days after the solemn ceremony he confided to the editor of the US Catholic weekly, the *Louisville Record*, his great satisfaction at having personally met the new saint, having shaken his hand, indeed having had lunch with him. What had happened? The episode is recounted in his biography.

Four hours with Don Bosco

Born in Alsace in 1852, Edmond Obrecht had become a Trappist monk at the age of 23. As soon as he was ordained a priest in 1879, Father Edmond was sent to Rome as secretary to the Procurator General of the three Trappist Observances, which in 1892 were to be united into a single Order with the General House the Trappa delle Tre Fontane in the Italian capital.

During his stay in Rome he had Sunday off and took advantage of it to go and celebrate with his Cistercian brethren in the basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. The titular celebrant was the Vicar of Rome, Cardinal Lucido Maria Parocchi, so Father Edmond had the opportunity to serve him several times at solemn pontifical services and to get to know him well.

Now on 14 May 1887 the consecration of the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome, next to what is now Termini station, was scheduled: a magnificent church that had cost Don Bosco a fortune and for which he had given "body and soul" in order to succeed in completing it. He succeeded and in spite of his health, by then decidedly compromised (he would die eight months later), he wanted to attend the solemn consecration ceremony.

For this very long celebration (five hours behind closed doors), Card. Parocchi was accompanied by Father Edmond. It was a decidedly unforgettable experience for him. He would write 50 years later: "During that long ceremony I had the pleasure and honour of sitting next to Don Bosco in the

sanctuary of the church and after the consecration I was admitted to the same table as him and the Cardinal. It was the only time in my life that I came into close contact with a canonised saint and the deep impression he made on me has lingered in my mind for all these long years." Father Edmond had heard a lot about Don Bosco, who, at a time when the Holy See's diplomatic relations with the new Kingdom of Italy were breaking down, was held in high esteem and high regard by the politicians of the time: Zanardelli, Depretis, Nicotera. The newspapers had spoken of his interventions to settle some serious questions concerning the appointment of new bishops and the taking possession of the property of individual dioceses.

Dom Edmond was not content with that unforgettable experience. Later on a trip he passed through Turin and wanted to stop and visit the great Salesian work of Don Bosco. He admired it and could only rejoice on the day of his beatification (2 June 1929).

Post Scriptum

The day before the consecration of the Sacred Heart Church, 13 May 1887, Pope Leo XIII had given Don Bosco an audience for an hour in the Vatican. He had been very warm with him and had even joked that Don Bosco, given his age, was close to death (but he was younger than the pope!), but Don Bosco had a thought that perhaps he did not dare express to the pope himself. He did so a few days later, on 17 May, on his departure from Rome: he asked him if he could pay all or part of the cost of the church façade: a handsome sum, 51,000 lire [230,000 euro]. Courage or impudence? Extreme confidence or simple impudence? The fact remains that a few months later, on 6 November, Don Bosco returned to the task and asked for the intervention of Monsignor Francesco della Volpe, the Pope's domestic prelate, to obtain – he wrote – “the sum of 51,000 francs, which the Holy Father's charity made him hope to pay himself... our Bursar is going to Rome to settle the expenses of this construction; he will come to you for the best answer he

can get.” He guaranteed that “Our over three hundred thousand orphans pray every day for His Holiness.” And he concluded: “Please forgive this poor and ugly writing of mine. I can no longer write.”

Poor Don Bosco: in May in that church, celebrating in front of the altar of Mary Help of Christians, he had wept several times because he saw his dream when he was nine come true; but six months later his heart was still in anguish because at the death he felt was near he left a heavy debt to close the accounts of that same church.

He truly spent several years, “until his last breath” doing it. Very few of the tens of thousands of people who pass by it every day on their way out of Termini station on Via Marsala know this.

Don Bosco and Italian

Piedmont in the early 19th century was still a peripheral area compared to the rest of Italy. The language spoken was Piedmontese. Italian was only used in special cases, just like one wears a special suit on special occasions. The upper classes preferred French in writing and resorted to dialect in conversation.

In 1822, King Charles Felix approved a regulation for schools with special provisions for the teaching of Italian. However, these provisions were not very effective, especially given the method by which they were applied.

It is therefore not surprising that the correct use of Italian also cost Don Bosco no little effort. There is a reason why, in his *Memoirs* it is easy to find Piedmontese words Italianised or Italian words used with dialect meanings as in the following cases:

“I noticed that [...] a sfrosadore was appearing”

(ASC 132 / 58A7), where *sfrosadore* (Piedmontese: *sfrosador*) stands for fraudster, and likewise, "*Don Bosco with his sons could cause a revolution at any time*" (ASC 132 / 58E4), where *figli* (Piedmontese: *fieuj*) stands for youngsters. And so on.

If Don Bosco was then able to write with propriety of language, combined with simplicity and clarity, it is due, among other things, to the patient use of the dictionary which Silvio Pellico advised him to use (MB III, 222).

A correction

A significant example can be found in the correction of a sentence in the first dream he described in his *Memoirs*, "*Renditi sano, forte e robusto*".

Don Bosco, revising the manuscript, drew a line through the word "sano" (healthy) and wrote "umile" (humble)" in its place (ASC 132 / 57A7).

What did Don Bosco really hear in his dream and why did he then change that word? There has been talk of a change of meaning made for didactic purposes, as seems to have been Don Bosco's custom at times in narrating and writing down his dreams. But could it not instead be a simple clarification of the original meaning?

At 9 years of age the little John Bosco only spoke and heard Piedmontese. He had just started studying "the elements of reading and writing" at Fr Lacqua's school in Capriglio. At home and in the village, only dialect was used. In church, he would hear the parish priest or chaplain read the Gospel in Latin and explain it in Piedmontese.

It is therefore more than reasonable to assume that in a dream John heard both the "dignified man" and the "Lady of stately appearance" express themselves in dialect. The words he heard in the dream must then be recalled in dialect. Not: "humble, strong and energetict", but rather "*san, fòrt e robust*" in the characteristic local accent.

In such circumstances these adjectives could not have a purely literal but a figurative meaning. Now "*san*", in a figurative sense, means: without wickedness, upright in

moral conduct, i.e. good (C. ZALLI, *Dizionario Piemontese-Italiano*, Carmagnola, Tip. di P. Barbié, 2 a ed, 1830, vol. II, p. 330, used by Don Bosco); "*fòrt e robust*" means "strength" with stamina in the physical and moral sense (C. ZALLI, op. cit., vol. I, 360; vol. II, 309).

Don Bosco would never again forget those three adjectives "*san, fòrt e robust*" and when he wrote his *Memoirs*, while at first glance he translated them literally, thinking back on it later, he found it more appropriate to better specify the meaning of the first word. That *san* (= good) for a 9-year-old boy meant *obedient, docile, not capricious, not haughty*, in a word, "*humble*"!

It would therefore be a clarification, not a change of meaning.

Confirmation of this interpretation

Don Bosco, in writing his *Memoirs*, candidly emphasised the shortcomings of his boyhood. Two passages taken from the same *Memoirs* confirm this.

The first concerns the year of his first Confession and Communion for which Mamma Margaret had prepared his John: Don Bosco wrote. "*I treasured my mother's advice and tried to carry it out. I think from that day on there was some improvement in my life, especially in matters of obedience and submission to others. It was not easy for me to be submissive to others because I liked to do things my own way and follow my own childish whims rather than listen to those who gave me advice or told me what to do.*" (ASC 132 / 60B5).

The other can be found a little further on, where Don Bosco speaks of the difficulties he encountered with his half-brother Anthony in giving himself up to study. It is an amusing detail for us but one that betrays Anthony's temper and John's as well. So Anthony is said to have said to him one day, seeing him in the kitchen, sitting at the table, all intent on his books, "*I've had my fill of this grammar business. I've grown big and strong without ever setting eyes on these books.*" And Don Bosco said, "*Carried away by blind*

rage I replied in a way I should not have. 'Our donkey is bigger and stronger than you are and he never went to school either. Do you want to be like him?' This so angered him that only speed saved me from a volley of blows and smacks." (ASC 132 / 57B5).

These details give us a better understanding of the dream's warning and at the same time may explain the reason for the linguistic "clarification" mentioned above.

In interpreting, therefore, Don Bosco's manuscripts it will be useful not to forget the problem of language, because Don Bosco spoke and wrote correctly in Italian, but his mother tongue was the one in which he thought.

In Rome on 8 May 1887, at a reception in his honour, when asked which language he liked best, he said, *"The language I like best is the one my mother taught me, because it did not require any great effort to learn it, and I find it easier to express my ideas with it. Then too, I do not forget it as easily as I do other languages."* (BM XVIII, 275)

Dream of the Ten Diamonds

One of Don Bosco's most famous dreams was the one called the "Dream of the Ten Diamonds" which he had in September 1881. It is a warning dream that will never lose any of its value, so that the declaration Don Bosco made to his superiors will always be true: "The evils threatened will be prevented if we preach on the virtues and vices noted there." Fr Lemoyne tells us this in his Biographical Memoirs (XV, 182-184).

To lift up Don Bosco's spirit lest it be crushed beneath such a load of both minor and serious vexations, God intervened now and then to strengthen him in the heartening assurance of the

mission entrusted to him from on high. That September he had one of his most important dreams that showed him the Congregation's immediate future and its glorious achievements, along with the evils which threatened to destroy it if timely remedies were not applied. What he saw and heard impressed him so vividly that, not content with merely telling the dream, he put it down in writing as well. The original has been lost, but numerous copies have come to light, all of them in remarkable agreement.

Spiritus Sancti gratia, illuminet sensus et corda nostra. Amen. [May the grace of the Holy Spirit enlighten our minds and hearts, Amen].

A teaching for the Pious Salesian Society.

On September 10 of this year 1881, the day the Church dedicates to the glorious name of Mary, the Salesians were assembled at San Benigno Canavese for their spiritual retreat. On the night of September 10-11, while I was asleep, I dreamed that I was in a richly adorned hall. I seemed to be strolling up and down its length with the directors of our houses when a man of majestic mien-so majestic that none of us could fix our gaze on him-appeared among us. Glancing at us in utter silence, he too started to pace the hall several steps from us. He was clad in a rich mantle or cape closed at the front of the neck with a scarf from which a ribbon hung down on his chest. The scarf was inscribed in luminous letters: *Pia Salesianorum Societas anno 1881* (Salesian Society in the year 1881), and on the ribbon were the words: *Qualis esse debet* (As it should be) . Ten diamonds of extraordinary size and brilliance adorning that august person kept our gaze from being fixed upon him. Three of the diamonds he wore on his chest: on one was written the word *Faith*, on another was written *Hope*, and the third over his heart bore the word *Charity*. The fourth diamond, affixed to his right shoulder, was inscribed *Work*; the fifth, on his left shoulder, read

Temperance. The remaining five diamonds adorning the back of his cloak were set into a quadrangle; the largest and most brilliant sparkled in the very center, and on it was written *Obedience*. The diamond to its upper right read *Vow of Poverty*, and that below it, *Reward*. On the diamond to the upper left was written *Vow of Chastity*; its sparkle had a brilliance all its own and drew our gaze as a magnet attracts iron. Beneath it was a diamond inscribed *Fasting*. These four diamonds focused their dazzling rays upon the one in the center; their rays, resembling tongues of fire, flickered upward, forming various maxims.

The diamond *Faith* emitted rays with the words: "*Take up the shield of faith that you may fight against the devil's wiles.*" Another ray proclaimed: "*Faith without works is dead. Not the hearers but the doers of the law will possess the kingdom of God.*"

On the rays of *Hope* were the words: "*Hope is in the Lord, not in men. Let your hearts rest where true joys are found.*"

The rays of *Charity* read: "*Bear one another's burdens if you want to fulfill My law. Love and you shall be loved. Love your souls and the souls of your charges. Recite the Divine Office devoutly, celebrate Mass attentively, visit the Holy of Holies with great love.*"

On the word *Work*: "*The remedy for concupiscence, a powerful weapon against the devil's wiles.*"

On *Temperance*: "*Remove the fuel and the fire will die out. Make a pact with your eyes, with your cravings, your sleeping, lest these enemies plunder your souls. Self-gratification and chastity cannot co-exist.*"

On the rays of *Obedience*: "*The foundation of the whole edifice and a precis of sanctity.*"

On the rays of *Poverty*: "*Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*"

Riches are thorns. Poverty is not made of words but is in the hearts and deeds. Poverty will open the gates of heaven and enter it."

On the rays of Chastity: "All virtues come with it. The clean of heart will see God's mysteries and God Himself."

On the rays of Reward: "If the lavish rewards are delightful, do not be deterred by the many hardships. He who suffers with Me will rejoice with Me. For My friends, suffering is momentary, but heavenly happiness is everlasting."

On the rays of Fasting: "The most powerful weapon against the devil's snares. The safeguard of all virtues. By it devils of every sort are cast out."

A wide, rose-colored ribbon formed the edge of the lower hem of the cloak and on it was written: *"Topic for Sermons, Morning, Noon and Night: Glean even bits of virtues and you will build a great edifice of sanctity for yourselves. Woe to you who despise small things; you shall fall little by little."*

Up to this point the directors were either standing or kneeling, totally bewildered and silent. But then Father Rua, as though beside himself, exclaimed, "Let's make a note of this, lest we forget it." He sought a pen but found none. Pulling out his wallet, he rummaged through it in vain. "I will remember," Father Durando said. "I intend to write it down," Father Fagnano retorted and began writing with the stem of a rose. All were surprised and they found they could read the writing. When Father Fagnano was through, Father Costamagna dictated these words: "Charity understands all things, bears all things, overcomes all things. Let us preach this in word and deed."

As Father Fagnano was writing, the lights went out and we were left in total darkness. "Silence," Father Ghivarello said. "Let us kneel down and pray; the light will return." Father

Lasagna intoned the *Veni Creator*, and then the *De Profandis* [ending with the invocation] *Maria, Auxilium Christianorum*.

As we all responded *Ora pro nobis*, a light shone, focusing on a poster which read: *Pia Salesianorum Societas qualis esse periclitatur anno salutis 1900* [The Pious Salesian Society as it runs the risk of being in the year of salvation 1900]. A moment later the light grew stronger, and we were able to see and

recognize each other.

At the heart of this glowing light, the same august person appeared again, but he looked very sad and on the verge of tears. His cape was faded, moth-eaten and threadbare. Where each diamond had previously been set, there was now a gaping hole made by moths and other insects. "*Look and understand*," the personage said. Then I saw that the ten diamonds had turned into as many moths ravenously eating through the cape.

In the place of *Faith* I now saw "*Sleep and sloth*."

In the place of *Hope*, "*Buffoonery and scurrility*."

In the place of *Charity*, "*Negligence in the performance of spiritual duties. They love and seek what gratifies them, not what pertains to Christ*."

In the place of *Temperance*, "*Gluttony*." "*Their God is their belly*."

In the place of *Work*, "*Sleep, theft and idleness*."

In the place of *Obedience* there was only a gaping hole and no inscription.

In the place of *Chastity*, "*Concupiscence of the eyes and pride of life*."

Poverty had been replaced by "*Comfort, clothes, drink and money*."

In the place of *Reward*, "*The things of earth are what we*

seek."

Where *Fasting* had been, there was only a hole, no writing.

We were now all filled with fear. Father Lasagna fell into a faint. Father Cagliero turned as white as a sheet and, grasping a chair for support, cried out, "Can it be that things have already come to such a state?" Father Lazzero and Father Guidazio, frightened out of their wits, reached out to hold each other up. Father Francesia, Count Cays, Father Barberis and Father Leveratto fell to their knees, rosary in hand.

At that moment an ominous voice declared, "*How the beauty has faded!*"

Then, as we stood in semi-darkness, something strange occurred. Pitch darkness again swallowed us up and in its midst a most dazzling light arose in the form of a human body. We could not fix our eyes on it, but we could make it out to be a handsome young man, clad in a white garment interwoven with gold and silver threads and entirely bordered by a string of brilliant diamonds. He moved toward us majestic in mien, yet gentle and friendly, and addressed us as follows:

Servants and instruments of Almighty God, listen and understand. Take heart and be strong. What you have seen and heard is a heavenly warning sent to you and to your confreres. Take it to heart and endeavor to understand it. An attack foreseen does less harm and can be warded off. Let each of the inscriptions be a topic of your talks. Preach unceasingly in season and out of season.

However, make sure that you always practice what you preach, so that your deeds may be a light, which may be passed on to your confreres from generation to generation as a solid tradition. Take heed and understand. Be cautious in accepting novices, strong in training them, prudent in admitting them [to vows]. Test all of them, but keep only the good; dismiss

the lightminded and fickle. Take heed and understand. From morning to night ceaselessly meditate on the observance of the constitutions. If you do this, the hand of the Almighty will never fail you. You will be a model to the world and to angels, and your glory will be the glory of God. Those who will live to see the end of this century and the dawn of the next shall say of you: 'By the Lord was this accomplished, and it is wonderful in our eyes. Then all your confreres and all your sons shall sing: 'Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to Your name be the glory.'"

These last words were chanted, and the youth's voice was joined by a multitude of other voices, so melodiously blended and resonant that we were soon beside ourselves and, to keep from swooning away, chimed in the singing. As the song ended and the light dimmed, I awoke and realized that it was dawn.

Memorandum. The dream lasted almost the entire night, so that, come morning, I was totally exhausted. Still, fearing that I might forget, I quickly arose and jotted down some notes, to serve me as a reminder in recalling all I have here written on this feast of Our Lady's Presentation in the Temple.

I could not possibly remember everything. But among other things, I was able to ascertain with certainty that the Lord is very merciful to me. Our Society is blessed by God, but He asks us also to do our share. The evils threatened will be warded off if we preach about the vices and virtues pointed out to us. If we practice what we preach, we shall be able to hand on to our confreres a practical tradition of what we have done and shall do.

I also managed to ascertain that many thorns and difficulties lie immediately ahead of us, but they will be followed by great consolations. Around 1890 there will be a great fear, around 1895 a great triumph. Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us.

Father Rua immediately saw to it that the august person's directive was followed-namely, that matters revealed in the dream should form the topics of sermons. He himself gave a series of talks to the Salesians at the Oratory commenting in detail on both parts of the dream. The dates mentioned by Don Bosco as years of triumph or defeat correspond in our Congregation to the onset of adolescence in human life a critical, precarious period setting in most cases the stage for the entire future. Certainly, the growth in both members and houses as well as the spread of our Congregation to several nations, both of which were experienced in the final decade of the last century, could doubtlessly lead to some deviation or other, which, if not promptly checked, might take us farther and farther from the right path. However, at Don Bosco's death, Divine Providence gave us a successor whose enlightened mind and energetic spirit measured up to the demands of those critical years. Father Rua, whom we may well characterize as the personification of all that is beautiful and wholesome in the first part of the dream, was indeed the watchful sentry, the undaunted and unquestioned leader needed to shepherd and guide the young recruits along the rightful path.

The portent of the dream transcends time. Don Bosco sounded the alarm for the special period which was to follow his death, but the admonitions *qualis esse periclitatur* contain a **warning which will never lose any of its significance. Hence Don Bosco's words to the superiors will always be valid: "The evils threatened will be offset if we shall speak about the vices and virtues pointed out in the dream."**

Don Bosco, politics and the social question

Did Don Bosco do politics? Yes, but not in the immediate sense of the word. He himself said that his politics were of the Our Father: souls to be saved, poor young people to be nurtured and educated.

Don Bosco and politics

Don Bosco lived intensely and with a conscious awareness of the problems, unprecedented for him also, of the great cultural and social changes of his century, particularly in their political implications, and he made a considered choice, one that he wanted to make part of his spirit and characterise his mission.

He consciously wanted “not to do party politics”, and left it as a spiritual legacy to his Congregation not to do so, not because he was “apolitical”, i.e. alienated from the great human problems of his era and the society in which he lived, but because he wanted to dedicate himself to the reform of society without entering into political movements. He was therefore not “disengaged”; on the contrary, he wanted his Salesians to be truly “committed”. But it is necessary to clarify the meaning of this political commitment.

The term “politics” can be used in two senses: in the first it indicates values and ends which define the “common good” in an overall perspective of society; in the second it indicates means and methods to be followed to achieve the “common good”. The first meaning considers politics in the broadest sense of the word. At this level, everyone has a political responsibility. The second meaning considers politics as a series of initiatives that, through political parties etc., aim to direct the exercise of power in favour of the people. At this second level politics is connected with intervention by the government of the country, something which goes beyond

the commitment desired by Don Bosco.

He recognised in himself and in his Salesians a political responsibility that relates to the first meaning, insofar as it is intended to be a religious, educational commitment aimed at creating a culture that informs politics in a Christian way. In this second sense Don Bosco did politics, even if he presented it in other terms such as the "moral and civil education of youth".

Don Bosco and the social question

Don Bosco presented the social evolution of his time. "First of all, he was one of the few who had understood immediately-and he said so a thousand times-that the revolutionary movement was not just a passing storm. Not all its promises to the people were unjust; many of them filled real needs. The workers demanded equality of rights without class distinction, more justice, and improvement of living conditions. Secondly, Don Bosco saw how wealth was becoming the monopoly of ruthless capitalists. Employers imposed unjust labor contracts on individual, defenseless workers, and crudely violated provisions

for the Sunday rest. These abuses were bound to produce disastrous results; workers lived in misery, lost their faith, and fell prey to subversive principles. Hence Don Bosco deemed it necessary for the clergy to draw closer to the working class to guide it." (BM IV, 55-56).

Turning to the poor youth with the intention of working for moral salvation and thus cooperating in the Christian construction of the new society was precisely the natural and primary effect and consequence of the intuition he had of this society and its future.

But one should not look for technical formulas in Don Bosco's words. Don Bosco spoke only of the abuse of wealth. He spoke about it with such insistence, with such force of expression and extraordinary originality of concept, as to reveal not only the acuity of his diagnosis of the evils of the century, but also the intrepid approach of the doctor who wants to cure

them. He indicated the remedy in the Christian use of wealth, in awareness of its social function. Wealth is much abused, he repeated incessantly. The rich must be reminded of their duty before catastrophe occurs.

Justice and charity

Mentioning the work done in Turin by Can. Cottolengo and Don Bosco in Turin, a professor at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Turin admits the good done by these two saints, but then expresses the opinion that "this aspect of the Piedmontese charitable movement, despite the remarkable results achieved, has been historically negative" because more than any other it would have contributed to halting the progress implicit in the action of the popular masses who claimed their rights.

It is his opinion that "the activities of these two Piedmontese saints were vitiated by the basic concept that moved both of them, whereby everything was abandoned into the merciful hands of divine providence" (ibid.). They would have remained estranged from the real movements of the masses and their rights, bound as they were to the image of a society made up, by force of circumstance, of nobility and people, of rich and proletariat, where the wealthy had to be merciful and the poor humble and patient. In short, St J. B. Cottolengo and St J. Bosco would not have realised the problem of the changing classes.

I cannot stop here to consider Cottolengo's case. I will only point out that his intervention responded to a burning experience that immediately led him to do something, as the Good Samaritan of the Gospel had done (Lk 10:29-37). Woe if the Good Samaritan had waited for the change in society to intervene. The man on the Jericho road would have died! "The charity of Christ impels us" (2 Cor 5:14) was to be the action programme of St Joseph Benedict Cottolengo. Everyone has a mission in life. Action on the effects of evil does not negate the recognition of the need to go to the causes. But it is still the most urgent thing to do. And then Cottolengo was

thinking not only about this, but about much more.

Don Bosco's intervention in the social question was guided by a fundamental option: for the poor, for the facts, and for dialogue with those who, even if on the other side, could be induced to do something.

Don Bosco's contribution

As an educator priest, Don Bosco made a choice for poor and abandoned youth, and went beyond the purely charitable ideal, preparing youth to be able to honestly assert their rights.

His first activities were mainly for the benefit of poor shop assistants and workshop labourers. His interventions, which today could be described as trade unionist in nature, led him into direct relations with the bosses of these young people to conclude "work lease contracts" with them.

Then, realising that this help did not solve the problems except in limited cases, he began to set up arts and trades workshops, small businesses where the finished products under the guidance of a head of trade would benefit the students themselves. It was a matter of organising apprenticeships at home, so that young apprentices could earn their bread without being exploited by their masters. Finally he moved on to the idea of a head of trade who was himself not the master of the workshop or a wage earner in the school, but a lay religious, a master of a trade who could give the young apprentice, selflessly, full-time and by vocation, a complete professional and Christian education.

The vocational schools he dreamt of, and which were later implemented by his Successors, were an important contribution to the solution of the worker question. He was neither the first nor the only one in that endeavour; he did, however, put his own spin on it, especially by harmonising his institution with the nature of the times and imparting his own educational method to it.

It is therefore not surprising that great Catholic sociologists of the last century paid attention to Don Bosco. Bishop Charles Emil Freppel (1827-1891), bishop of Angers, a

man of great culture and Member of the French Chamber, said on 2 February 1884, in a speech in Parliament on the worker question: "Vincent de Paul alone has done more for the solution of the worker questions of his time than all the writers of the century of Louis XIV. And at this moment in Italy, a religious, Don Bosco, whom you saw in Paris, succeeds better in preparing the solution to the worker question than all the speakers in the Italian Parliament. This is the indisputable truth" (cf. Journal officiel de la République française... Chambre. Débats parlementaires, 3 février 1884, p. 280).

A testimony that needs no further commentary...

What are the requirements for entering the Salesian Society

In various parts of the world the time is approaching when some young people, attracted by God's grace, are preparing to say their "Fiat" in the following of Christ, according to the charism that God has instituted through St John Bosco. What would be the dispositions with which they should approach joining the Salesian Society of St John Bosco? The saint himself tells us in a letter addressed to his sons (MB VIII, 828-830).

On Pentecost Sunday [1867] Don Bosco addressed a letter to all Salesians concerning the goal a candidate should have in mind when seeking admission to the Salesian Society. He also stated that the Society's definitive approval might not be long in coming. However, pertinent documents on hand give no such assurance. Since Don Bosco's personally written

letter is dated "May 24, Feast of Mary, Help of Christians," we feel that it may have been this feast which inspired him to write and perhaps gave him a more vivid vision of the future. Be that as it may, he had several copies of his letter made, and then he himself changed the date and addressed each respectively: To Father Bonetti and to My Dear Sons of St. Francis de Sales at Mirabello; To Father Lemoyne and to My Dear Sons of St. Francis de Sales at Lanzo. He also signed them himself and added the postscript: "Let the director read and explain as he judges necessary."

Here is the copy addressed to the Salesians at the Oratory:

"To Father Rua and to My Beloved Sons of St Francis de Sales in Turin.

Before long our Society may be definitively approved. I therefore feel the need frequently to communicate with you, my dear sons. Being unable at times to do so personally, I will try to reach you by letter.

First I shall treat of the general purpose of our Society, leaving the explanation of our rules to some other occasion.

The primary aim of our Society is the sanctification of its members. On entering it, therefore, everyone must discard any other intention and concern. It would be wrong to enter in order to enjoy a tranquil life, complete one's education, or free oneself of parental or other authority. This would hardly be a response to Christ's call. Such a person would be seeking temporal advantages, not his spiritual good. Our Savior praised the Apostles and promised them an eternal kingdom not because they had abandoned the world, but because they had abandoned it in order to follow Him through thick and thin; this they indeed did, wearing themselves out with work, penance, and suffering, and finally undergoing martyrdom.

It would also be wrong for anyone to enter or remain in this Society with the notion that he is necessary. **From the**

Superior General down to the last member, let everyone keep well in mind that nobody is necessary to the Society. God alone is its head, its absolute, necessary master. Its members must therefore turn to Him as to their head, true master and rewarder. Those who join this Society should work, obey, and abandon all worldly possessions exclusively for God's sake so that, at the end of their lives, they can tell their Savior, *"Behold, we have left all and followed You. What then shall we have?"* [Matt. 19:27]

By saying that **one should enter the Society only to serve God more perfectly and do good to himself**, we mean his true good, his spiritual eternal good. Anyone who seeks an easy, comfortable life in our Society is not rightly motivated. Our basic motive must stem from Our Lord's words that whoever wishes to be His disciple must sell his possessions, give to the poor, and then follow Him. But where can we follow Him, since He had nowhere to lay His weary head? He explains that we must follow Him in prayer, in penance, especially in self-denial, in accepting our daily crosses ... *"Let him deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow Me."* [Luke 9, 23] Till when? Till death and, if necessary, even till death on the cross.

This is what one does in our Society when he wears himself out in the sacred ministry, in teaching or in other priestly work till death, till even a violent death through imprisonment, exile, sword, fire, or water. Then, after having suffered and died with Jesus Christ on earth, he will join Him in the happiness of heaven.

This is how I understand Saint Paul's words to all Christians: *"Whoever wishes to rejoice with Christ must also suffer with Christ."*

After entering the Society with these good dispositions, a member must be undemanding and willing to accept any task-even the most menial- readily and cheerfully because what matters

before God is not the task itself but the intention with which it is done. All jobs are equally noble because they are all equally meritorious in God's sight.

My dear sons, trust your superiors. They shall have to give God a strict account of your actions. Hence they study your abilities and inclinations and use them in a manner compatible with your strength, but always in accordance with what seems best for God's greater glory and the good of souls.

If applicants enter our Society with these intentions, our houses will certainly be an earthly paradise. Peace and concord will reign, charity will guide superiors, and obedience and respect will anticipate their decisions, their undertakings, and even their wishes. Thus we shall have a family of brothers around a father, all united to promote God's glory on earth so as to be with Him some day and praise Him in the immense glory of the blessed in heaven.

May God abundantly bless you and your efforts. May He sanctify your activities and help you persevere in doing good.

Turin, 9 June 1867, Pentecost Day.

Affectionately yours in Jesus Christ,

Father John Bosco