 Reading time: 4 min.

A letter to the magistrate of the City of Turin dated 18 April 1865 opens up an interesting and previously unpublished glimpse into daily life in Valdocco at the time.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A letter to the magistrate of the City of Turin dated 18 April 1865 opens an interesting and unpublished glimpse into the daily life of Valdocco at the time.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