 Reading time: 6 min.

It is certainly no mystery for those who know the “living reality” of Valdocco, so well and not only the “ideal” or “virtual” one, that daily life in a decidedly restricted structure accommodating several hundred youngsters of different ages, origins, dialects, interests 24/7 and for many months a year, posed quite some educational and disciplinary problems for Don Bosco and his young educators. We report two significant episodes in this regard, mostly unknown.

The violent scuffle

In the autumn of 1861, the widow of painter Agostino Cottolengo, brother of the famous (Saint) Benedetto Cottolengo, needing to place her two sons, Giuseppe and Matteo Luigi, in the capital of the newly-born Kingdom of Italy for study, asked her brother-in-law, Can. Luigi Cottolengo of Chieri, to find a suitable boarding school. The latter suggested Don Bosco’s oratory and so on 23 October the two brothers, accompanied by another uncle, Ignazio Cottolengo, a Dominican friar, entered Valdocco at a fee of 50 lire a month. Before Christmas, however, the 14-year-old Matteo Luigi had already returned home for health reasons, while his older brother Giuseppe, who had returned to Valdocco after the Christmas holidays, was sent away a month later for reasons of force majeure. What had happened?

It had happened that on 10 February 1862, 16-year-old Giuseppe had come to blows with a certain Giuseppe Chicco, aged nine, nephew of Can. Simone Chicco from Carmagnola, who was probably paying his fees.

In the scuffle, with lots of beating, the child obviously got the worst of it, and was seriously injured. Don Bosco saw that he was taken in by the trustworthy Masera family, to avoid the news of the unpleasant episode spreading inside and beyond the house. The child was examined by a doctor, who drew up a rather detailed report, useful “for those who had a right to know”.



The bully’s temporary removal

So as not to run any risks and for obvious disciplinary reasons, Don Bosco on 15 February was forced to remove the young Cottolengo for a while, having him accompanied not to Bra at his mother’s house (she would have suffered too much) but to Chieri, to his uncle the Canon. The latter, two weeks later, asked Don Bosco

about Chicco's state of health and the medical expenses incurred so that he could pay for them out of his own pocket. He also asked him if he was willing to accept his nephew back to Valdocco. Don Bosco replied that the wounded boy was now almost completely healed and that there was no need to worry about medical expenses because "we are dealing with upright people." As for accepting his nephew back, "imagine if I were to refuse" he wrote. But on two conditions: that the boy recognise his wrongdoing and that Can. Cottolengo write to Can. Chicco to apologise on behalf of his nephew and to beg him to "say a simple word" to Don Bosco for him to accept the young man back at Valdocco. Don Bosco assured him that Can. Chicco would not only accept the apology – he had already written to him about it – but had already arranged for the nephew to be admitted "to a relative's house to prevent any publicity." In mid-March both Cottolengo brothers were welcomed back to Valdocco "in a kindly way." However, Matteo Luigi remained there only until Easter because of the usual health problems, while Giuseppe remained until the end of his studies.

A stronger friendship and a small gain

Not yet content that the affair had ended to the mutual satisfaction of both parties, the following year Can. Cottolengo again insisted with Don Bosco to pay for the wounded child's doctor and medicines. Can. Chicco, when questioned by Don Bosco, replied that the total expense had been 100 lire, but that he and the child's family were not asking for anything; but if Cottolengo insisted on paying the bill, he would redirect this sum "in favour of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales." And so it happened.

The culprit had repented, the "victim" had been well cared for, the uncles had come together for the good of their nephews, the mothers had not suffered, Don Bosco and the Valdocco work, after having taken some risks, had gained in friendships, sympathy… and, something always appreciated in that boarding school for poor boys, a small financial contribution. Bringing good from evil is not for everyone but Don Bosco succeeded. There is much to learn.

A very interesting letter that opens a glimpse into the Valdocco world

But let's present an even more serious case, which again can be instructive for today's parents and educators grappling with difficult and rebellious boys.

Here are the facts. In 1865 a certain Carlo Boglietti, slapped for serious insubordination by the assistant in the bookbinding workshop, cleric Giuseppe

Mazzarello, denounced the fact to the Borgo Dora urban magistrate's court which opened an enquiry, summoning the accused, the accuser and three boys as witnesses. Wishing to settle the matter with less disturbance from the authorities, Don Bosco thought it best to address the magistrate himself directly and in advance by letter. As the director of a house of education he believed he could and should do so "in the name of all […] ready to give the greatest satisfaction to whoever required it."

Two important legal premises

In his letter he first of all defended his right and responsibility as father-educator of the children entrusted to him: he immediately pointed out that Article 650 of the Penal Code, called into question by the summons, "seems entirely extraneous to the matter at hand, for if it were interpreted in the sense demanded by the urban court, it would be introduced into the domestic regime of families, and parents and their guardians would no longer be able to correct their children or prevent insolence and insubordination, [things] that would be seriously detrimental to public and private morality."

Secondly, he reiterated that the faculty "to use all the means that were judged opportune […] to keep certain youngsters in check" had been granted to him by the government authority that sent him the children; only in desperate cases – indeed "several times" – had he had to call in "the arm of public safety."

The episode, its precedents and the educational consequences

As for the young Charles in question, Don Bosco wrote that, faced with continual gestures and attitudes of rebellion, "he was paternally and warned but without effect several times; that he proved not only incorrigible, but insulted, threatened and swore at Cl. Mazzarello before his class mates", to the point that "the assistant, of a very mild and meek disposition, was so frightened by this that from then on he was sick, unable to resume his duties, and continues to be ill."

The boy had then escaped from the school and through his sister had informed his superiors of his escape only "when he knew that the news could no longer be kept from the police", which he had not done before "to preserve his honour."

Unfortunately, his class mates had continued in their violent protest, so much so that – Don Bosco wrote again – "it was necessary to expel some of them from the establishment, and, sorrowfully, to hand them over to the public security authorities who took them to prison."



Don Bosco’s requests

Faced with a young man who was “disorderly, who insulted and threatened his superiors” and who then had “the audacity to report those who for his own good […] consecrated their lives and their money, to the authorities” Don Bosco generally maintained that “public authority should always come to the aid of private authority and not the other way around.” In this specific case, then, he did not oppose criminal proceedings, but on two precise conditions: that the boy first present an adult to pay “the expenses that may be necessary and that he take responsibility for the serious consequences that could possibly occur.”

To avert a possible trial which would undoubtedly be exploited by the gutter press, Don Bosco played his hand: he asked in advance that “the damage that the assistant had suffered in his honour and person be compensated for at least until he could resume his ordinary occupations”, “that the costs of this case be borne by him” and that neither the boy nor “his relative or counsellor” Mr Stephen Caneparo should come to Valdocco “to renew the acts of insubordination and scandals already caused.”

Conclusion

How the sad affair came to an end is not known; in all likelihood it came to a prior conciliation between the parties. However, the fact remains that it is good to know that the boys at Valdocco were not all Dominic Savios, Francis Besuccos or even Michael Magones. There were also young “jailbirds” who gave Don Bosco and his young educators a hard time. The education of the young has always been a demanding art not without its risks; yesterday as today, there is a need for close cooperation between parents, teachers, educators, guardians all interested in the exclusive good of the young.