

□ Reading time: 4 min.

Who would have thought it? Don Bosco as an early ecologist? Don Bosco pioneering door-to-door waste collection 140 years ago?

We could say so, at least according to one of the letters we have recovered in recent years and which can be found in the 9th volume of the Epistolary (no. 4144). It is a printed circular from 1885 that in its own small way – the city of Turin at the time – anticipates and, obviously in its own way, “solves” the major problems facing our society, the so-called “consumer” and “throwaway” society.

The addressee

Since it is a circular letter, the addressee is generic, someone who may or may not be known. Don Bosco cunningly “captures” the reader’s attention immediately by calling him “well-deserving and charitable”. Having said this, Don Bosco points out to his correspondent a fact that is there for all to see:

“Your Excellency will know that the bones, left over from the canteen and generally thrown in the rubbish bin by families as waste, when collected in large quantities are then useful to human industry, and are therefore sought after by men of art [= industry] who are paid a few pence per myriagram. A company in Turin, with whom I am in contact, would buy them in any quantity.” So, what would be a nuisance, both at home and away from home, perhaps in the streets around the city, can be wisely used to the advantage of many.

A high purpose

At this point Don Bosco launches his proposal: *“In view of this and in conformity with what is already being practised in some countries on behalf of other charitable institutes, I have come up with the idea of appealing to the well-to-do and benevolent families in this illustrious city, and begging them that instead of letting the leftovers from their table go to waste and become useless, they give it freely for the benefit of the poor orphans gathered in my Institutes, and especially for the benefit of the Missions in Patagonia where the Salesians, at great expense and at the risk of their own lives, are teaching and civilising the savage tribes, so that they may enjoy the fruits of Redemption and true progress. Similar recourse and such a prayer I therefore make to Your Excellency, convinced that you will take them into*

benign consideration and grant them."



The project seemed appealing to several parties: families would get rid of some of the table waste, the company would be interested in collecting it to reuse it in other ways (food for animals, fertilisers for the countryside, etc.); Don Bosco would get money from it for the missions... and the city would remain cleaner.

A perfect organisation

The situation was clear, the goal was high, the benefits were there for all, but it may not be enough. It was necessary to collect bones "door to door" throughout the city. Don Bosco did not flinch. Seventy years old, he now had deep insights, long experience but also great managerial skills. So, he organised this "enterprise", taking care to avoid the ever-potential abuses in the various phases of the collection operation: *"Those families who are good enough to accept this humble request of mine will be given a special bag where they will put the bones mentioned, which will often be collected and weighed by a person appointed by the purchasing company, and issued a receipt, which in the event of a check with the company itself will be collected from time to time in my name. In this way, Your Excellency will have no other choice but to issue the appropriate orders so that these useless leftovers from your canteen, which would otherwise be lost, may be placed in the same bag, to be delivered to the collector and then sold and used by charity. The bag will bear the initials O. S. (Salesian Oratory), and the person who comes to empty it will also present some sign to make himself known to Your Excellency or to the family."*

What can we say other than that the project seems valid in all its parts, even better than some similar projects in our third-millennium cities!

The incentives

Obviously, the proposal had to be supported with some incentive, certainly not economic or promotional, but moral and spiritual. Which? Here it is: *"Your Excellency will be well-deserving of the above-mentioned works, you will have the gratitude of thousands of poor youngsters, and what is more important, you will receive the reward promised by God to all those who strive for the moral and material well-being of their fellow men."*

A precise approach

As a practical person, he devised what we might call a very modern approach to

succeed in his undertaking: he asked his recipients to send him back the coupon, placed at the foot of the letter, bearing his address: *"I would ask you again to assure me of this, for my sake and for the completion of the procedures to be carried out, by detaching and sending me back the part of this printed matter which bears my address. As soon as I have your acceptance, I will give the order that the aforementioned bag be delivered to you."*

Don Bosco closed his letter with the usual formula of thanks and good wishes, which was so much appreciated by his correspondents.

Don Bosco, besides being a great educator, a far-sighted founder, a man of God, was also a genius of Christian charity.