 Reading time: 4 min.

Ecumenism is a movement that arose at the beginning of the 20th century among the Protestant Churches, later shared by the Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church itself, and aims at Christian unity. The Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council states that by Christ the Lord the Church was founded one and the same and that the division of the Churches not only openly contradicts the will of Christ, but is also a scandal to the world. Our times, therefore, differ not a little in this respect from those of Don Bosco.

When one speaks of “Protestants” in Piedmont, one’s thoughts go first of all to the Waldensian Evangelical Church. The history, at times tragic and heroic, of this small people and church that found refuge, a stable home and its religious centre in the Pinerolo valleys is fairly well known. Less well known is the strong spirit of proselytism on the part of the Waldensians after the Emancipation Edict signed by King Charles Albert on 17 February 1848, which granted them civil and political rights.

Among the most conspicuous initiatives of their growing anti-Catholic propaganda in Piedmont, and then throughout Italy, was that of the popular press, which consequently provoked a lively reaction from the Episcopate and corresponding apologetic initiatives in defence of Catholic doctrine. In this field, behind the directives of the Holy See and the Piedmontese Bishops, Don Bosco also moved strongly concerned to preserve the youth and people of our lands from heresy.

Don Bosco’s *Catholic Readings*

One can understand how Don Bosco felt the duty to enter the fray in defence of the faith among the people and the youth. He engaged in courageous action in the popular Catholic press because he soon realised that the Waldensians in Piedmont were only the bridgehead of the premeditated Protestant siege of Italy (G. SPINI, *Risorgimento e Protestanti*, Milan, Mondadori Ed., 1989, pp. 236-253).

In this regard, an article by N. Fabretti appeared in *Il Secolo XIX* on 30 January 1988, entitled: *Don Bosco, a “young” saint*, which, among other things, declared him to be: “orthodox to the point of intolerance, violent against Protestants whom he considers, if they do not convert, to be children of the devil and damned”, and “a furious polemicist… who with his ‘Catholic Readings’ obsessively debunks Luther and Protestants and publicly insults the Waldensians.” But these vulgar accusations do not touch the real Don Bosco.

The *Catholic Readings,* whose publication began in March 1853, were

popular booklets that Don Bosco had printed monthly for the religious education of the youth and the people. Carrying out a simple catechesis, often in narrative form, he used these periodicals to remind his readers of Catholic doctrine on the mysteries of the faith, the Church, the sacraments, Christian morals.

Rather than arguing directly with the Protestants, he emphasised the differences that separate us from them, referring to history and theology as they were known at the time. It would be pointless, however, to look in booklets he printed, such as the*Avvisi ai Cattolici* and *Il Cattolico istruito nella sua religione*, ("Catholic Readings" 1853, nos. 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 12) for the elements most emphasised by the doctrine on the Church today. Rather, they reflect a catechesis that would now require clarification and integration. Don Bosco's apologetic style, then, mirrored that of well-known Catholic authors from whom he drew.

Today, in an ecumenical climate, certain initiatives may appear disproportionate to the danger, but one must keep in mind the environment of the time in which the polemic started from the Protestants themselves and "religious controversy was felt as a daily necessity to evangelise the people"" (V. VINAI, *Storia dei Valdesi*, Vol. III, Torino, Ed. Claudiana, 1980, p. 46).

The anti-Catholic Protestant literature of the time, in fact, presented Catholicism as a repository of sin, religious hypocrisy, superstition, and cruelty towards Jews and Waldensians. A well-known Protestant historian states in this regard: "We can say that in 1847 Italy was surrounded by a sort of Protestant siege, laid around it by Anglican Episcopalianism, Scottish Presbyterianism and the 'free' evangelism of Geneva and Lausanne, with support also from American Protestantism. Within the peninsula, besides the traditional foreign communities, there are already two bridgeheads, the Waldensians and the Tuscan 'evangelicals'. Outside, there are two organised communities with their own press in London and Malta' (G. SPINI, op. cit., p. 226).

But this was not enough. Don Bosco, as well as enduring attacks of suspicious origin, was debunked in various issues of the 1853-54 issues of the Protestant weekly "La Buona Novella" ("La Buona Novella", Years 1853-54, Year III, no. 1, pp. 8-11; no. 5, pp. 69-72; no. 11, pp. 166-168, n. 13, pp. 193-198; no. 27, pp. 423-424).

Those were times of "wall against wall"!

Don Bosco intolerant?

Don Bosco certainly did not deserve such insults. Louis Desanctis, a Catholic priest who had gone over to the Waldensian Church, gave great impetus to Protestant evangelisation with his presence in Turin, even arguing aginst Don

Bosco’s publications. But when, due to internal disagreements, he ended up leaving the Waldensians and moving towards an Italian Evangelical Society, he had much to suffer. It was then that Don Bosco wrote to him to invite him to his home to share “bread and study” with him. Desanctis replied that he never thought he would find such generosity and kindness in a man who was openly his enemy. “*Let us not pretend*” he added, “*You fight my principles as I fight yours but while you fight me you show that he love me sincerely, extending a beneficent hand to me in the moment of affliction. And so you show that you know the practice of that Christian charity which in theory is practised so well by so many…*” (ASC, *Raccolta originale N. 1403-04*).

Even if Desanctis did not feel like drawing the logical consequences of his situation, this lbedter remains significant as it uncovers the true Don Bosco, certainly not “the orthodox to the point of intolerance” or the “furious polemicist” described by the “Il Secolo XIX” columnist, but the man of God interested only in the salvation of souls.