 Reading time: 9 min.

In 1849, the printer G. B. Paravia published *Il sistema metrico decimale ridotto a semplicità preceded by quattro operazioni dell'aritmetica ad uso degli artigiani e della gente di campagna* edited by the priest Bosco Gioanni. The manual included an appendix on the most widely used currencies in Piedmont and the main foreign currencies.

Yet only a few years earlier Don Bosco knew so little about the noble coins in use in the Kingdom of Sardinia that he confused a *doppio di Savoia* with a *marengo*. He was at the beginning of his oratory activity and must have seen very few gold coins until then. Receiving one one day, he ran to spend it on his young urchins, ordering various goods to the value of one marengo. The shopkeeper, both practical and honest, handed over the goods he had ordered and gave him the change of about nine lire.

"*Why so much change*" Don Bosco asked, "*Wasn't that a marengo I gave you?*"

"*No,*"replied the shopkeeper, "*it was a coin worth 28 and a ½ lire*!" (BM II, 73)

From the outset Don Bosco was not greedy for money, but only eager to do good!

Doppie di Savoia (Savoy doubles) and marenghi

In May 1814, when King Victor Emmanuel I returned to possession of his States, he wanted to restore the old monetary system based on the Piedmontese Lira, worth twenty *soldi,* twelve *denari* each, a system that had been replaced by the decimal system during the French occupation. Before then, six lire made a silver escudo and 24 a gold Savoy double. There were of course no shortage of smaller coins, including the copper coin known as the *Mauriziotto* worth 5 *soldi,* so called because it bore the image of St Maurice on the reverse side.

But counting in francs had by then become so widespread that the King in 1816 decided to adopt the decimal monetary system as well, creating the New Piedmontese Lira with a value equal to the franc, and its related smaller coins, from the 100 lire gold piece to the 1 cent copper coin.

The Savoy double, however, continued in use for many more years. Created in 1755 by an edict of Charles Emmanuel III, it was called, after the creation of the new lira, the twenty-nine or twenty-eight-and-a-half lira piece, precisely because it corresponded to 28.45 new lire. It was more commonly called *Galin-a* (hen) because, while the obverse bore the image of the Sovereign with a pigtail, the

reverse showed a bird with spread wings, which the artist had intended to represent an eagle, but, pot-bellied as it was, it looked more like a hen.

The twenty-franc piece, called a *marengo* because it was minted by Napoleon in Turin in 1800 after the victory at Marengo, also remained in circulation for quite a while along with the Savoy gold coins. It bore on the obverse the bust of Minerva and on the reverse the motto: *Libertà – Egalité – Eridania*. It corresponded to the French coin called the gold Napoleon. The term "Eridania" stood for the land where the Po, the legendary Eridano, flows.

The name *marengo* was also applied to the 20 lire new gold coin of Victor Emmanuel I, while *marenghino* was the 10 lire gold coin, therefore with half the value of the marengo, minted later by Charles Albert. Marengo and marenghino were terms often used interchangeably, like franc and lira. Don Bosco also used them in this way. We find an example in the preface to the "Galantuomo" in 1860 (the almanac-strenna for subscribers of the *Letture Cattoliche*). Don Bosco plays the part of a soft drink salesman following the Sardinian army in the '59 war. At the battle of Magenta, he recounts, he loses his bag of money and the captain of the company compensates him with a handful of "fifteen glittering *marenghini*".

Writing on 22 May 1866 to Cav. Federico Oreglia, whom he sent to Rome to collect offerings for the new church of Mary Help of Christians, he tells him:

"As for your stay in Rome, stay for an unlimited time, that is, until you have ten thousand *francs* to take home for the church and to pay the baker […].

God bless you, Sir, and bless your labours and *may your every word save a soul and earn a marengo. Amen"* (E 459).

Meaningful wish of Don Bosco to a generous collaborator!

Napoleons with and without hats

From 1 May 1866, in addition to the gold coin, corresponding to the gold napoleon bearing the image of Napoleon with hat on the obverse, a paper currency of the same nominal value, but with a much lower real value, was forcibly issued in the now constituted Kingdom of Italy. The people immediately called it Napoleon with a bare head because it bore the effigy of Victor Emmanuel II without a hat.

Don Bosco also knew this well when he had to repay Count Federico Calieri a loan of 1,000 francs he had made to him in 50 gold napoleons. He did not miss the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone, taking advantage of the confidence he was granted. Countess Carlotta had in fact already promised him an offering for the new church. He therefore wrote to the Countess on 29 June 1866: "I will tell her that after tomorrow my debt to the Count expires and I must take care to pay the debt in order to acquire the credit. When you were in the Casa Collegno, you told me that

at this time you would make a donation for the church and for St Joseph's altar, but you did not fix the sum precisely. Therefore, have the goodness to tell me:
1) whether your charity involves making donations at this time for us and which ones;
2) where should I direct the money for Mr Conte?
3) if the Count has any payments that he can make with notes, or, as is reasonable, he should change the notes into napoleons according to what I have received" (E 477).

As one can easily understand, Don Bosco relies on the Countess's offer and proposes the settlement of his debt to the Count, if it will not be to anyone's disadvantage, in paper napoleons. The answer came and was consoling. The money was to be sent to Cesare, the son of Count Callori, and could be in paper money. In fact Don Bosco wrote to Caesar on 23 July:

"Before the end of this month I will bring the thousand francs to your house as you write to me and I will see to it that I bring as many napoleons but all with the head uncovered. For if I were to bring fifty napoleons with the hat on, perhaps they would burn down Jupiter, Saturn and Mars" (E 489).

And shortly afterwards he would make the very convenient settlement, while the Countess at the same time gave him 1,000 francs for the pulpit of the new church (E 495). If there is a debt to be paid, there is Providence to be had!

Money and mortgages

But Don Bosco did not only handle marenghi and napoleons. More often than not he found various items of small change, copper coins, in his pocket which he used for ordinary expenses such as taking a carraige when he left Turin, making small purchases and alms and perhaps making some gesture that we would call charismatic ones today, like when he poured the first eight soldi into the hands of the master builder Bozzetti for the construction of the new church of Mary Help of Christians.

Eight soldi, equal to 4 coins of 10 cents or 8 coins of 5, corresponded to a *mutta* in the ancient system, a coin struck in copper with some silver, with an initial value of 20 Piedmontese soldi, soon reduced to eight soldi. It was the ancient Piedmontese lira that came into the world through Victor Amadeus III in 1794 and was only abolished in 1865. The word *mutta* – *mota* in Piedmontese (read: *muta*) – in itself means "clod" or "tile". *Mote* was the name given to tiles made from oak bark, used for tanning leather, and, after use, still used for burning or keeping a fire burning. These tiles, which used to be as big as a loaf of bread, had been reduced by the avarice of the manufacturers to such minute proportions that the populace

ended up calling Vittorio Amedeo's lirette *mote*.

According to the Biographical Memoirs certain Protestant zealots, in order to keep the boys away from Don Bosco's Oratory, lured them by saying: 'What are you going to do at the Oratory? Come with us, you will have as much fun as you like and you will get *two mutte* and a good book as a gift" (MB III, 402) Two mutte were enough to have a good snack.

But Don Bosco also won people over with his mutte. One day he found himself sitting in the box next to the coachman who was swearing loudly to get the horses to run, and he promised him a mutta if he would refrain from swearing all the way to Turin, and he succeeded in his intention (MB VII, 189). After all, with a mutta the poor coachman could buy himself at least a litre of wine to drink with his colleagues, and at the same time treasure the words he had heard against the vice of blasphemy.

The saint of millions

Don Bosco handled large sums of money in his life, collected at the price of enormous sacrifices, humiliating quests, laborious lotteries, incessant wanderings. With this money he gave bread, clothing, lodging and work to many poor boys, bought houses, opened hospices and colleges, built churches, launched not indifferent printing and publishing initiatives, launched the Salesian missions in America and, finally, already weakened by the aches and pains of old age, he erected the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome, in obedience to the Pope, a work that was not the least cause of his premature death.

Not everyone understood the spirit that animated him, not everyone appreciated his multifarious activities and the anticlerical press indulged in ridiculous insinuations.

On 4 April 1872 the Turin satirical periodical "Il Fischietto", which nicknamed Don Bosco "Dominus Lignus", said he was endowed with "fabulous funds" On 31 October 1886 the Roman newspaper "La Riforma", the Crispini political paper, published an article on his missionary expeditions, ironically presenting the priest of Valdocco as "a true industrialist", as the man who had understood "that the good market is the key to the success of all the greatest modern enterprises", and went on to say, "Don Bosco has in him something of that industry that now wants to be nicknamed the Bocconi brothers". These were the brothers Ferdinando and Luigi Bocconi, creators of the large retail stores opened in Milan in those years and later called "La Rinascente". Luigi Pietracqua, novelist and dialectal playwright, a few days after Don Bosco's death signed a satirical sonnet in the Turin newspaper "'L Birichin", which began as follows:

"*Don Bòsch l'é mòrt – L'era na testa fin-a, Capace 'd gavé 'd sangh d'ant un-a rava, Perché a palà ij milion chiel a contava, E... sensa guadagneje con la schin-a!*".

(Don Bosco is dead – He was an astute man, Capable of drawing blood from a turnip, Because he counted the millions by the handful, And… without earning them by his own sweat).

And it went on extolling the miracle of Don Bosco who took money from everyone by filling his bag that had become as big as a vat (*E as fasìa 7 borsòt gròss com na tina*). Enriched in this way, he no longer needed to work, he merely gulled the gulls with prayers, crosses and holy masses. The blasphemous sonneteer concluded by calling Don Bosco "*San Milion".*

Those who know the style of poverty in which the saint lived and died can easily understand what kind of low-class humour Pietracqua was. Don Bosco was indeed a very skilful steward of the money that the charity of the good brought him, but he never kept anything for himself. The furniture in his little room at Valdocco consisted of an iron bed, a small table, a chair and, later, a sofa, with no curtains at the window, no carpets, not even a bedside table. In his last illness, tormented by thirst, when they provided him with a bottle of water seltzer to give him relief, but he did not want to drink it, believing it to be an expensive drink. It was necessary to assure him that it only cost seven cents a bottle. "He once more told Fr Viglietti: 'Let me also have the pleasure of looking in the pockets of my clothes; there is my wallet and purse. I think there is nothing left; but if there is money, give it to Fr Rua. I want to die so that it will be said: Don Bosco died without a penny in his pocket" (MB XVIII, 493).

Thus died the Saint of the Millions!