

□ Reading time: 5 min.

*Did Don Bosco do politics? Yes, but not in the immediate sense of the word. He himself said that his politics were of the Our Father: souls to be saved, poor young people to be nurtured and educated.*

### **Don Bosco and politics**

Don Bosco lived intensely and with a conscious awareness of the problems, unprecedented for him also, of the great cultural and social changes of his century, particularly in their political implications, and he made a considered choice, one that he wanted to make part of his spirit and characterise his mission.

He consciously wanted “not to do party politics”, and left it as a spiritual legacy to his Congregation not to do so, not because he was “apolitical”, i.e. alienated from the great human problems of his era and the society in which he lived, but because he wanted to dedicate himself to the reform of society without entering into political movements. He was therefore not “disengaged”; on the contrary, he wanted his Salesians to be truly “committed”. But it is necessary to clarify the meaning of this political commitment.

The term “politics” can be used in two senses: in the first it indicates values and ends which define the “common good” in an overall perspective of society; in the second it indicates means and methods to be followed to achieve the “common good”.

The first meaning considers politics in the broadest sense of the word. At this level, everyone has a political responsibility. The second meaning considers politics as a series of initiatives that, through political parties etc., aim to direct the exercise of power in favour of the people. At this second level politics is connected with intervention by the government of the country, something which goes beyond the commitment desired by Don Bosco.

He recognised in himself and in his Salesians a political responsibility that relates to the first meaning, insofar as it is intended to be a religious, educational commitment aimed at creating a culture that informs politics in a Christian way. In this second sense Don Bosco did politics, even if he presented it in other terms such as the “moral and civil education of youth”.

### **Don Bosco and the social question**

Don Bosco presented the social evolution of his time. “ First of all, he was one of the few who had understood immediately-and he said so a thousand times-that the

revolutionary movement was not just a passing storm. Not all its promises to the people were unjust; many of them filled real needs. The workers demanded equality of rights without class distinction, more justice, and improvement of living conditions. Secondly, Don Bosco saw how wealth was becoming the monopoly of ruthless capitalists. Employers imposed unjust labor contracts on individual, defenseless workers, and crudely violated provisions for the Sunday rest. These abuses were bound to produce disastrous results; workers lived in misery, lost their faith, and fell prey to subversive principles. Hence Don Bosco deemed it necessary for the clergy to draw closer to the working class to guide it." (BM IV, 55-56).

Turning to the poor youth with the intention of working for moral salvation and thus cooperating in the Christian construction of the new society was precisely the natural and primary effect and consequence of the intuition he had of this society and its future.

But one should not look for technical formulas in Don Bosco's words. Don Bosco spoke only of the abuse of wealth. He spoke about it with such insistence, with such force of expression and extraordinary originality of concept, as to reveal not only the acuity of his diagnosis of the evils of the century, but also the intrepid approach of the doctor who wants to cure them. He indicated the remedy in the Christian use of wealth, in awareness of its social function. Wealth is much abused, he repeated incessantly. The rich must be reminded of their duty before catastrophe occurs.

### **Justice and charity**

Mentioning the work done in Turin by Can. Cottolengo and Don Bosco in Turin, a professor at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Turin admits the good done by these two saints, but then expresses the opinion that "this aspect of the Piedmontese charitable movement, despite the remarkable results achieved, has been historically negative" because more than any other it would have contributed to halting the progress implicit in the action of the popular masses who claimed their rights.

It is his opinion that "the activities of these two Piedmontese saints were vitiated by the basic concept that moved both of them, whereby everything was abandoned into the merciful hands of divine providence" (ibid.). They would have remained estranged from the real movements of the masses and their rights, bound as they were to the image of a society made up, by force of circumstance, of nobility and people, of rich and proletariat, where the wealthy had to be merciful and the poor humble and patient. In short, St J. B. Cottolengo and St J. Bosco would not have realised the problem of the changing classes.

I cannot stop here to consider Cottolengo's case. I will only point out that his intervention responded to a burning experience that immediately led him to do something, as the Good Samaritan of the Gospel had done (Lk 10:29-37). Woe if the Good Samaritan had waited for the change in society to intervene. The man on the Jericho road would have died! "The charity of Christ impels us" (2 Cor 5:14) was to be the action programme of St Joseph Benedict Cottolengo. Everyone has a mission in life. Action on the effects of evil does not negate the recognition of the need to go to the causes. But it is still the most urgent thing to do. And then Cottolengo was thinking not only about this, but about much more.

Don Bosco's intervention in the social question was guided by a fundamental option: for the poor, for the facts, and for dialogue with those who, even if on the other side, could be induced to do something.

### **Don Bosco's contribution**

As an educator priest, Don Bosco made a choice for poor and abandoned youth, and went beyond the purely charitable ideal, preparing youth to be able to honestly assert their rights.

His first activities were mainly for the benefit of poor shop assistants and workshop labourers. His interventions, which today could be described as trade unionist in nature, led him into direct relations with the bosses of these young people to conclude "work lease contracts" with them.

Then, realising that this help did not solve the problems except in limited cases, he began to set up arts and trades workshops, small businesses where the finished products under the guidance of a head of trade would benefit the students themselves. It was a matter of organising apprenticeships at home, so that young apprentices could earn their bread without being exploited by their masters. Finally he moved on to the idea of a head of trade who was himself not the master of the workshop or a wage earner in the school, but a lay religious, a master of a trade who could give the young apprentice, selflessly, full-time and by vocation, a complete professional and Christian education.

The vocational schools he dreamt of, and which were later implemented by his Successors, were an important contribution to the solution of the worker question. He was neither the first nor the only one in that endeavour; he did, however, put his own spin on it, especially by harmonising his institution with the nature of the times and imparting his own educational method to it.

It is therefore not surprising that great Catholic sociologists of the last century paid attention to Don Bosco. Bishop Charles Emil Freppel (1827-1891), bishop of Angers, a man of great culture and Member of the French Chamber, said on 2 February

1884, in a speech in Parliament on the worker question: “Vincent de Paul alone has done more for the solution of the worker questions of his time than all the writers of the century of Louis XIV. And at this moment in Italy, a religious, Don Bosco, whom you saw in Paris, succeeds better in preparing the solution to the worker question than all the speakers in the Italian Parliament. This is the indisputable truth” (cf. Journal officiel de la République française.... Chambre. Débats parlementaires, 3 février 1884, p. 280).

A testimony that needs no further commentary....