 Reading time: 5 min.

With a will, as we know, someone disposes of their belongings for the time after their death. One would not think, therefore, that what we are about to deal with is an overly pleasant topic. Yet it serves to make us better appreciate Don Bosco's great serenity and prudence. Even as a young man, he always had the thought of death before him and spoke of it often.

Various manuscripts of his last will and testament are preserved in the Central Salesian Archives (ASC 112 – FdB No. 73).

In Turin in 1846 he became so ill that his life was at risk. In the 1850s there were those who tried to assassinate him. And Don Bosco always kept himself prepared for every event.

The first of Don Bosco's wills that we possess dates back to 26 July 1856, when Don Bosco was about to turn 41 years of age and his mother was still alive. It began with these words: "In the uncertainty of life in which every man who lives in this world finds himself…, etc."

He left the usufruct of his possessions in Turin to Fr Vittorio Alasonatti, economer of the Valdocco house, and the property to the cleric Michael Rua, who was his right-hand man even then.

He left the Castelnuovo property to his relatives, bearing in mind that his mother, who was still alive was to remain the beneficiary. When his mother died in November of that year, he corrected what he had written: "All that I possess in Castelnuovo d'Asti, I leave to my brother Giuseppe…"

Later manuscripts

In February 1858, Don Bosco left for Rome for the first time in order to attend an audience with Pope Pius IX and present him with his plan for the Salesian Society. He had decided to go there by sea and return by land through Tuscany, the States of Parma, Piacenza, Modena and Lombardy-Veneto. He set off on the early morning of 18 February after a freezing snowy night, accompanied by his faithful cleric Michael Rua.

He only did the Turin-Genoa stretch by train. He then had to embark on the Aventino, a steamboat that ran to Civitavecchia. From Civitavecchia to Rome he travelled by mail coach. On 21 February he arrived in the city of the Popes where he was the guest of Count De Maistre in Via del Quirinale 49, at the Quattro Fontane, while Don Rua stayed with the Rosminians (MB V, 809-818).

But before embarking on that journey Don Bosco had arranged not only for a passport but also to make a will.

Another copy of Don Bosco's will bears the date 7 January 1869. In it he appointed Fr Michael Rua as his universal heir and executor, as far as Salesian property and, in the event of the latter's death, Fr John Cagliero.

On 29 March 1871 he reconfirmed Fr Rua and Fr Cagliero as his heirs and, for the Castelnuovo properties, his relatives. In the same year, during his illness in Varazze, he wrote a confirmation of his previous will on 22 December 1871 (MB X, 1334-1335).

The 1884 Testament

In 1884 Don Bosco was about to leave for France for the tenth time in search of money for the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome. He was in poor health. Dr Albertotti, who had been called in to dissuade him from the journey, after examining him had said:

"If he makes it to Nice without dying, it will be a miracle."

"If I don't come back, patience" Don Bosco had replied, "it means we'll put things right before we go, but we have to go" (MB XVII, 34).

And so he did. On the afternoon of that 29 February he sent for a notary and witnesses and dictated his will, as if he was about to leave for eternity. Then, bringing in Fr Rua and Fr Cagliero, and pointing to the notarial deed on the table, he told them:

"Here is my will…. If I never return, as the doctor fears, you will already know how things stand."

Fr Rua left the room with a swollen heart. The saint beckoned Fr Cagliero to stop and left him a gift of a small box containing his father's wedding ring.

On 7 December that year Fr Cagliero was consecrated titular Bishop of Magida and left for America on 3 February 1885, as Apostolic Vicar in Patagonia.

Don Bosco's spiritual testament

The Central Salesian Archives also contains a manuscript of Don Bosco's *Memoirs* covering the years 1841-1886, known in the Salesian tradition as *Don Bosco's Spiritual Testament*. We quote a particularly significant passage from it:

"Having thus expressed the thoughts of a Father towards his beloved children, I now turn to myself to invoke the Lord's mercy upon me in the last hours of my life.

– I intend to live and die in the holy Catholic religion which has the Roman Pontiff, Vicar of Jesus Christ above the earth, as its head.

– I believe and profess all the truths of the faith which God has revealed to holy Church.

– I humbly ask God’s forgiveness for all my sins, especially for every scandal given to my neighbour in all my actions, in all the words spoken at an inappropriate time; I especially ask His pardon for the excessive care I have taken of myself under the specious pretext of preserving my health…

– I know that you, my beloved children, love me, and this love, this affection is not limited to mourning after my death; but pray for the eternal repose of my soul…

– May your prayers be addressed with special purpose to Heaven so that I may find mercy and forgiveness at the first moment that I present myself to the fearful majesty of my Creator” (F. MOTTO, *Memorie…, Piccola Biblioteca dell’ISS*, n. 4, Roma, LAS, 1985, p. 57-58).

It is a document that needs no comment!