 Reading time: 4 min.

*In a circular letter Don Bosco wrote in July 1885: “The good book even enters homes where the priest cannot enter… Sometimes it remains covered in dust on a table or in a library. No one thinks of it. But the hour of loneliness, or sadness, or pain, or boredom, or the need for recreation, or anxiety about the future comes, and this faithful friend dusts himself off, opens his pages and…”*

“Without books there is no reading and without reading there is no knowledge; without knowledge there is no freedom”, I read on the internet, not sure whether written by some nostalgic or a book lover or by a good connoisseur of Cicero.
Don Bosco for his part, as soon as he finished his studies, immediately became a writer and some of his books became genuine best sellers with dozens and dozens of editions and reprints. Once the Congregation was founded, he invited his young collaborators to do the same, using his own print shop set up in the same house in Valdocco. At a time when three quarters of Italians were illiterate, he wrote in the above-mentioned circular: “A book in a family, if not read by the one for whom it is intended or given, is read by the son or daughter, friend or neighbour. A book in a town sometimes passes into the hands of a hundred people. God alone knows the good that a book produces in a town, in a mobile library, in a workers’ society, in a hospital, donated as a pledge of friendship.” And he added: “In less than thirty years, the number of pamphlets or volumes we have distributed among the people adds up to some twenty million. While some books may have remained neglected, others will each have had a hundred readers, and thus the number of those to whom our books have done some good can be believed with certainty to be far greater than the number of volumes published.”
With a bit of imagination, we could say that in some way Don Bosco’s publishing network heralded both today’s online book, which is there for everyone to read, walking alone, almost wandering, and the ebook, the only one that in the continuing crisis of reading in Italy in recent years is attracting new buyers and new readers thanks also to its low cost.

**Competition**
The competition involved in reading a book is strong: today people spend hours and hours with their eyes fixed on Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, blogs and platforms of all kinds to send and receive messages, to see and send photos, to

watch films and listen to music. In themselves they might all be wonderful, good and correct, but can they replace reading a good book?
Some doubt is legitimate. For the most part, social media are promoters of a sort of culture of the ephemeral, the transitory, the fragmentary – even without immediately thinking of the flood of fake news – where each new communication eliminates the previous one. The names themselves say it: SMS “short message service” or Twitter, a bird tweeting, Instagram, i.e., quick picture posted on the spot. They convey quick information, very brief sharing of experiences and moods with people you are already in touch with. Books, good books on the other hand, the ones that are thought through and pondered, are able to provoke questions, help us deeply perceive the beauty that is found in nature and art in all its forms, in the solidarity between people, in the passion and heart that we put into everything we do. And not only that, because it is precisely a broad general culture, provided by history books in particular, that offers the ruling classes the flexibility, the ability to orientate, the breadth of horizons that when combined with competence are needed to make the choices of a general and comprehensive nature that are theirs to make. We are becoming aware of the deficit of such a culture in these very days.

**Don Bosco’s library**
Don Bosco helped thousands of young people grow up as “good Christians and upright citizens” through the dissemination of his books, with his library at Valdocco containing 15,000 books, his print shop, the libraries in individual Salesian houses, with a host of Salesians who wrote books for youth. How melancholic sad it is today to learn that around half a million children in Italy attend schools without a library! Of course, it is easier and more immediately profitable to build new supermarkets, new shopping centres, state-of-the-art cinemas, multinational chains dealing in technology and innovation.
Paper books or online books – today’’s libraries, thanks to technology, offer interesting remote services of various kinds – it makes no difference: as long as they make people grow in humanity. On one condition, however: that they are readable and available to everyone, even to non-digital natives, even to those who do not have the latest generation of tools, even to those who live in disadvantaged situations. Don Bosco wrote in the aforementioned letter: “Remember that St Augustine, who became a bishop, though an exalted master of fine letters and an eloquent orator, preferred inaccuracies in language and no elegance of style to the risk of not being understood by the people.” This is what the sons of Don Bosco continue to do today with books, with popular pamphlets, with videos and materials posted on the web which continue to circulate, today as yesterday, in all languages

everywhere, to the ends of the earth.