 Reading time: 4 min.

The room where Don Bosco actually breathed his last (Valdocco, Turin)

“It costs me a lot of effort to go around, to give audiences from morning to evening; to visit benefactors; on certain days I feel very ill from tiredness and my infirmities: but thinking of you makes that effort sweet.”

“Far from your eyes, far from your heart…” sang Sergio Endrigo half a century ago, and the well-known singer-songwriter lamented the weakening of relations with a person you cannot see and whose life no longer flows before your eyes. It is also a somewhat common experience for all of us. But nothing sounds more untrue as far as Don Bosco and his young people were concerned; indeed one could say that the further they were from him, the closer he was to them. We offer a small sample of this by sifting through the hundreds of letters from the final years of his life.
He wrote on 5 February 1886 to the young missionary priest Fr Carlo Peretto “prefect” of the Niteroi house in Brazil: “If I were twenty years younger, how the trip to America would soon be done! But while there is a remedy for everything, as the years go by there is none: so patience. But do not think we are so far apart that I cannot be with you at certain times. And when evening comes and I rest for a few moments in semi-darkness, I review you all one by one, I see you in spirit, I seem to hear your voice, I am moved and I pray for you, oh! With how much affection, with how much fervour! And then I bless you as if you were all before me… as you were on the day of departure! In those moments, the vast ocean that separates us is no more than a drop of water; Brazil, Patagonia, Buenos Aires, Montevideo are no more than a step away from my chair.”
Touching. At night Don Bosco dreamt of his “beloved sons” scattered across the desolate and frozen steppes of at the “end of the world” to civilise and evangelise the indigenous tribes there… but during the day, perhaps towards sunset, in the “the hour that wakens fond desire in men at sea, and melts their thoughtful heart£, as the divine poet would say, he saw them directly in action as if they were in front of him. The power of love that goes beyond space and time! Don Bosco, who knew what he would have given to be close to his missionary sons! But he never had the chance.

Beyond the Alps

Another opportunity. Travelling around France, when he arrived in Toulon on

20 April 1885 Don Bosco took pen, paper and inkwell and addressed his boys from Valdocco with these words: “My dear sons, I have gone to France and you can guess why. You destroy the loaves and if I did not go in search of the “conquibus” (money with which to pay) the baker would shout that there is no more flour and that he has nothing to put in the oven. Rossi the cook would bring his hands to his hair and shout that he does not know what to put in the pot. Since the cook and the baker are right and you are even more right than they are, so I had to go in search of a fortune so that nothing would be lacking for my dear children.”

It might seem simply an elegant way and easily understood by the recipients who were well acquainted with the situation and the people mentioned, but it is worth noting that the Don Bosco travelling through France at that time was by then a shadow of himself, a man practically exhausted, a suit worn out by use, a “living miracle” as a French doctor described him. He admits to this himself as the letter continues. “It is true that it costs me a lot of effort to go around, to give audiences from morning to evening; to visit benefactors; on certain days I feel very ill from tiredness and from my infirmities: but thinking of you made that effort sweet for me. Because I am always thinking of the Oratory; and especially in the evening when I can have a little quiet I go to see the Superiors and the young people, I talk about them with those close to me, and I pray for them continually. And you also think of me, pray for me? Oh yes certainly, because your Rector wrote to me, and his letters, with the news he gave me about the house, gave me great pleasure.”

Don Bosco is always connected with his youngsters, he wants to know everything about them, he cannot live without them. He loves them, he thinks of them, he dreams of them, he makes them sharers in the spiritual and material graces with which Our Lady opens the hearts and wallets of the French benefactors: “Soon the month of May will begin and I would like you to consecrate it in a special way in honour of Mary Most Holy Help of Christians. If you only knew how many graces Our Lady has given in these days in favour of her good children at the Oratory! Our Lady really deserves you giving her a pledge of your gratitude.”

And since it is necessary to be concrete with the young, here is where Don Bosco gets down to practical matters: “So I propose a little gift to be made during the whole month and I want you to put it faithfully into practice. The *fioretto* is this: Each of you, in honour of Mary, should make an effort to keep mortal sin away from your soul by avoiding opportunities and by frequenting the Sacraments. Last year we had cholera in Italy: but in the future we may have worse. We therefore need Our Lady to spread her mantle over us.”

Of course, he also promises something good: “Soon I hope to be among you again and I commend myself to the Rector so that on that day he will make us all have

some fun in the refectory. You like cheerfulness don’t you? And I like it too and I wish and pray that the Lord will one day grant you all, grant me that eternal joy that he has prepared for those who love him.”

Promise kept

Forty years later from Marseilles, on 12 April 1885, he wrote to his former friend when he was a boy and now prefect of studies in Turin, Fr John Baptist Francesia: “You will tell our dear young men and confreres that I work for them and will be for them until my last breath, and they will pray for me, be good, flee from sin so that we may all be saved eternally. All. *Que Dieu nous bénisse et que la Sainte Vierge nos protège.* The itinerant, begging pilgrim Don Bosco was literally exhausted and so did not even realise he was concluding his short message in French.