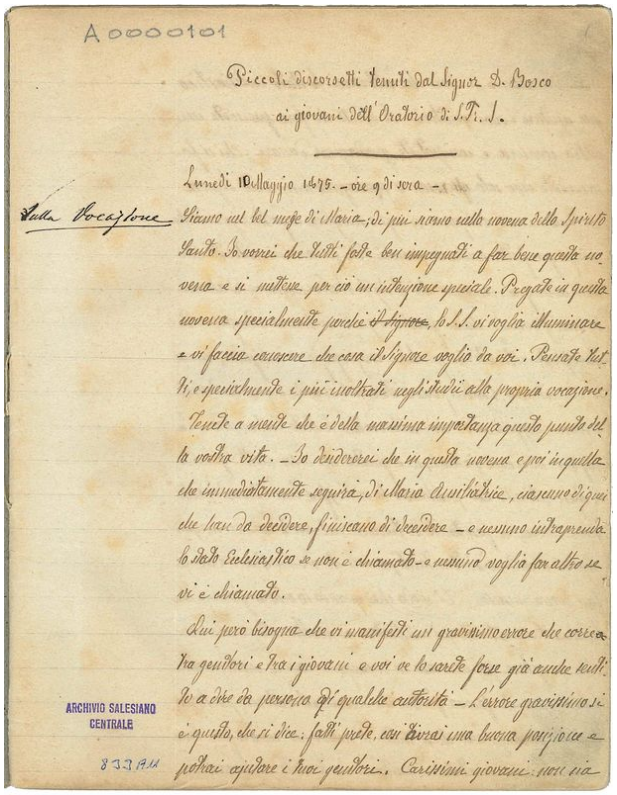
 Reading time: 4 min.

On 21 February 1875 some Salesians decided to set up an “historical commission” to “collect memories of Don Bosco’s life”, committing themselves to “write down and together read what we write in order to ensure the greatest possible accuracy” (so we read in the minutes written by Fr Michael Rua). Among them was a young 28-year-old priest who had recently been appointed by Don Bosco to organise and direct the Salesian Congregation’s novitiate, in accordance with the Constitutions officially approved the previous year. His name was Fr Giulio Barberis, best known for being the first novice master of Don Bosco’s Salesians, a role he held for twenty-five years. He was later Provincial and then Spiritual Director of the Congregation from 1910 until his death in 1927.
He was more involved than the others in the “historical commission”, preserving memories and testimonies of Don Bosco’s activities and life at the Valdocco Oratory from May 1875 to June 1879, when he left Turin to move to the new novitiate site in San Benigno Canavese. He left us copious documentation that is still preserved in the Central Salesian Archives, among which the fifteen handwritten notebooks he entitled *Cronichetta* stand out for their significance. Many scholars and biographers of St John Bosco have drawn from them (starting with Fr Lemoyne for his *Biographical Memoirs*), but until now they have remained unpublished. A critical edition was published last year, making this important and direct testimony on Don Bosco and the beginnings of the Congregation he founded available to everyone.

Fr Giulio Barberis, a graduate of the University of Turin, was an attentive and precise man in his work, and reading the pages of his *Cronichetta* one can see how passionately and carefully he tried to complete this work as well. Unfortunately, with regret and sorrow, he repeatedly points out that either for health reasons or because of his numerous other commitments, he had to suspend the drafting of the notebooks or limit himself to summarising or merely hinting at certain facts. At one point he finds himself having to write: “What a painful suspension. Forgive me, my dear *Cronichetta*: if I suspend you so many times and with such long suspensions, it is not that I do not love you above all other work, but it is out of necessity, that is, to complete my duties first, at least in the main” (Notebook XI, p. 36). Therefore, we are not surprised if the form of his entries is not always neat, with some ill-constructed sentences or some spelling inaccuracies; this in no way detracts from

what he has passed on to us.

The notebooks are a mine of information with the advantage of immediacy compared to other later narratives, which are more literary, but necessarily reworked and reinterpreted. We find evidence of important events, such as the first missionary expedition of 1875, the preparation, departure and effects of which are recounted in detail.


A 0000101

Piccoli discorsetti tenuti dal Signor D. Bosco
ai giovani dell'Oratorio di S. Fr. I.

Lunedì 10 Maggio 1875. – ore 9 di sera –

Sulla Vocazione

Siamo nel mese di Maria, di più siamo nella novena dello Spirito Santo. Io vorrei che tutti foste ben impegnati a far bene questa novena e si metterà per ciò un istruzione speciale. Pregate in questa novena specialmente perchè il Signore, lo S. S. vi voglia illuminare e vi faccia conoscere che cosa il Signore voglia da voi. Pensate bene, e specialmente i più istruiti vogli studii alla propria vocazione.

Tenete a mente che è della massima importanza questo punto della vostra vita. – Io dividerei che in questa novena e poi in quella che immediatamente seguirà, di Maria Ausiliatrice, ciascuno di quei che [illegible] da dividere, finiscano di decidere – e nessuno intraprenda lo stato Ecclesiastico se non è chiamato – e nessuno voglia far altro se non vi è chiamato.

Qui però bisogna che vi manifesti un gravissimo errore che corre tra genitori e tra i giovani e voi ve lo sarete forse già avuto sentito. Io a dire da persona di qualche autorità – L'errore gravissimo si è questo, che si dice: fatti prete, così farai una buona famiglia e potrai ajutare i tuoi genitori. Carissimi giovani: non sia

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The most important feasts are described (e.g. Mary Help of Christians or the birth of St John the Baptist, Don Bosco's name day) and how they were celebrated. We can learn about the ordinary and extraordinary activities at Valdocco (the school, the theatre, music, visits from various personalities…): how they were prepared and managed, what worked well and what needed to be improved, how the Salesians under Don Bosco's guidance organised themselves and worked together, without hiding some critical aspects. There are also small aspects of everyday life: health, food, the economy and many other details. From these chronicles, however, the spirit that animated the whole work also emerges: the passion that sustained the often overwhelming commitment, the affection for Don Bosco by both Salesians and boys, the style and educational choices, the care for the growth of vocations and

the formation of young Salesians. At a certain point the author notes: “Oh, that we might consume our whole life to the last breath in working in the Congregation for the greater glory of God, but in such a way that not a single breath in our life might have any other purpose” (Notebook VII, pg. 9).

The *Cronichetta* also presents a precise portrait of Don Bosco in his mature years. On 15 August 1878 Fr Barberis wrote: “Don Bosco’s birthday. Born as he was in 1815, he turned 63. A celebration was held. He made use of this occasion to distribute prizes to the artisans. Poems were printed as usual and many were read out” (Notebook XIII, p. 82). Many records dwell on the personality characteristics of the father and teacher of boys, including certain aspects that have been lost in later biographical narratives, such as his interest in the archaeological and scientific discoveries of his time. But above all, the total dedication to his work appears, in those years in particular the commitment to consolidate the Salesian Congregation and to expand its range of activity more and more with the foundation of new houses in Italy and abroad.

It is, however, difficult to summarise the very rich content of these notebooks. An attempt has been made in the introduction to the volume to identify some core ideas that range from the history of the Salesian Congregation and the life of Don Bosco (there are several passages in which Barberis mentions “former matters at the oratory”) to the formation model at Valdocco and management and organisational aspects. The introduction also deals with other issues related to the document: the use made of it, with special reference to the *Biographical Memoirs*, the historical value to be given to the information, the purpose for which it was written, and the language and style used. Regarding this last point, we note how the author, according to what he learned from Don Bosco himself, has enriched his chronicle with dialogues, amusing episodes, “good nights” and dreams of Don Bosco, thus making the reading also interesting and pleasant.



The volume also bears more general witness to the historical time in which it was written, in particular the troubled period following Italian unification. In March 1876 there was a change of government for the first time led by the party of the historical Left. In the eighth notebook of the *Cronichetta* on 6 August 1876 we find a record of the reception held at the Salesian boarding school in Lanzo on the occasion of the inauguration of the new railway, at which various ministers took part. Don Bosco's interaction with politicians and his interest in the affairs of Italy and other states is well documented and the historical notes at the end of each notebook provide essential information. Even more mundane news items find a place in the various entries, such as the laying of submarine cables for the electric telegraph or some health and medical beliefs of the time.

This publication is a critical edition, therefore mainly aimed at scholars of Salesian history, but also those who wish to delve deeper into certain aspects of the person of the holy founder of the Salesians and his work will find great benefit from reading it. Once one overcomes the obstacle of reading 19th century Italian, it is often enjoyable.

Fr. Massimo SCHWARZEL, sdb