

□ Reading time: 6 min.

*Don Bosco was able to win over poor young people not only because of his outward talents, but above all because of a deep emotional harmony born from his personal experience of being an orphan and abandoned. The emotional wounds of his childhood fostered in him a natural solidarity with lonely boys and an intense, even unconscious, desire to be a father to them. He chose to live for the young, showing them an explicit, stable, and reassuring love, anticipating the insights of modern psychology on the importance of feeling loved.*

*Because he knew how to say “forever”.*

Don Bosco was successful with poor and abandoned youths because he was a likeable, athletic, and juggling priest. But above all, he won them over because he was able to tune into them unconsciously, having been abandoned, orphaned, without food, without a roof over his head, and in great need of warmth himself. In other words, his natural ability to connect with young people was the result of an unconscious process of emotional solidarity with them. Often, love is born precisely from understanding and sharing the same hardship, the same problem.

So, in addition to the conscious reasons, unconscious motivations also played a part, because during the first part of his life he met many ‘good fathers’, but he always lost them, especially through their death, periodically feeding a deep ‘abandonment anxiety’. These painful experiences therefore corresponded to a continuous ‘twisting the knife in the wound’, which certainly helped to equip him, even as an adult, with a great willingness to help those in need of a father.

His repeated experience as a biological and emotional orphan thus led him not only to search for fathers, but also for sons, because Don Bosco had experienced first-hand that the need for family warmth is a boy’s requirement and that, when it is lacking, the young person suffers and weeps for it. When as a teenager, after the

death of Fr. Calosso, he was unable to establish a family relationship with the only father figures available to him, the parish priest and the curate, who when meeting him in the street merely returned his greeting. Don Bosco wrote, "Many times, weeping, I said to myself and also to others, 'If I were a priest, I would want to do things differently; I would want to approach the children; I would want to say good words to them, give them good advice. How happy I would be if I could talk a little with my parish priest'" (MO, 44).

Precisely because he had lived through these emotional states, as an adult he loved young people and helped them, especially if they were alone. But this conscious willingness to understand them and to soothe their pain from emotional loss also corresponded to an unconscious desire of his to help many "lonely versions of himself".

It must also be borne in mind that Don Bosco was the "father of youth" for a biological reason as well. Every man, in fact, feels the need to enrich his personality through that of a son. Don Bosco, however, had sublimated, in the context of consecrated celibacy, the emotional potential of biological fatherhood into an emotional fatherhood (meaning by fatherhood the ability to perform those emotional and practical functions to raise children), so that his was a psychological and material fatherhood that is transmitted through love. He did not, therefore, limit himself to housing and materially providing for the young, but exercised a role towards them that did not coincide with that of the father figure in the patriarchal family of his time, where "lovingness" was a weakness while "making oneself feared" was a badge of merit.

Don Bosco, in fact, chose to live with the young and to dedicate his whole life to them. But he was also a "full-time" father on a daily basis, who thought of his "sons" day and night, even when he slept, as he often dreamt of them, sometimes continuing in the dream scene what he had thought about while awake. He suffered from being away from them, to the point of disobeying his superiors and risking his health to return to the Oratory as quickly as possible. In 1846, after the serious illness that brought him to the point of death, he cut short his convalescence with his mother in Murialdo to return to Valdocco.

"I would have prolonged my stay in that native place, but the young boys began to come in droves to visit me, to the point that it was no longer possible to enjoy either rest or tranquillity. Everyone advised me to spend at least a few years outside Turin, in unknown places, to try to regain my former health. Fr. Cafasso and the

Archbishop were of this opinion. But as this was too great a sorrow for me, I was allowed to come to the Oratory with the obligation that for two years I should no longer take part in either confessions or preaching. I disobeyed. Returning to the Oratory, I continued to work as before and for 27 years I had no more need of either a doctor or medicine. Which has led me to believe that it is not work that harms bodily health" (MO, 191-192).

And the letter written by Don Bosco years later, on 9 February 1872, from Alassio (after another serious illness) to Fr. Michele Rua, also testifies to how this "love" never failed:

"...next Thursday, God willing, I will be in Turin. I feel a great need to go there. I live here with my body, but my heart, my thoughts, and even my words are always at the Oratory, in your midst. This is a weakness, but I cannot overcome it" (E, II, 193).

In his way of loving the young, Don Bosco anticipated the discoveries of child psychology, stating: "Let the young not only be loved, but let them know that they are loved" (MB, XVII, 110). That is, the boy must feel and know the adult's affection, because one can love as truly and deeply as one wants, but if it is not shown, he does not perceive it. If, in fact, this love for him is not acted upon in a concrete way, if it does not go beyond formal appearances, the consequences can be dramatic due to the inevitable conclusion he reaches, "Nobody loves me because I am worthless."

But even as adults, we find the meaning of our existence in being loved by others. Everyone likes to be loved, respected, helped, praised, sometimes even a little flattered; sometimes a few compliments are a right to feed our healthy narcissism in the right dose. The more we feel loved, the more we are convinced of our worth. Indeed, we love ourselves if we have been loved; we like ourselves if others like us; we love our body if it is appreciated and loved by others.

Affections constitute the substance of life, and the search for recognition, acceptance, and approval from others is part of psychological normality. They are also useful to the psychic economy because, when they remain at the level of desire, they make one feel like an orphan for one's entire life.

Don Bosco therefore rightly wanted a "declared" affection. Precisely because he was deeply convinced of this, often when he accepted a new young person, he would welcome him by saying, "Come, I will be a father to you" (MB, IV, 290). Not

just “I will be a father to you” for a day, a month or a year, but “for ever”. The boy, in fact, must not only know that the adult loves him in a psychologically mature way, but he must also be reassured about the continuity of this affection.

Don Bosco had gone through a painful sequence of emotional frustrations (loss of his father, bullying by his half-brother Antonio, the sudden death of Fr. Calosso, etc.). He had therefore intuited that it was not enough to love, but that, in addition to the quality of affection, continuity was also fundamental, as it calms and reassures those who have to grow up. There is a very significant episode in this regard that occurred in 1854, during the cholera epidemic. Among the boys left orphaned, one was called Pietro Enria. Let’s read the testimony of the protagonist himself, who described his meeting with Don Bosco in the temporary orphanage, opened urgently by the Turin city council near the church of San Domenico.

“I met the Servant of God in September 1854, in the Dominican Convent, where, through the care of a committee, we boys who had been orphaned by the raging cholera were gathered. One day Don Bosco came to visit us there (there were about a hundred of us), accompanied by the Director of the Orphanage. I had never seen him before. He had a cheerful and kind air, which made you love him even before speaking to him. He smiled at everyone and then asked for our first and last names, if we knew our catechism, if we had been to confession, and if we had already made our first communion, and we all answered with confidence. He finally passed by me, and I felt my heart beat not out of fear, but out of the affection I felt for him. He asked my name and surname and then said to me, ‘Do you want to come with me? We will always be good friends, until we can go to Heaven. Are you happy?’ — And I replied, — ‘Oh yes, sir’; then he added, — ‘and this one with you, is he your brother?’ — ‘yes, sir,’ I replied: — ‘Well, he will come too’.”

*Giacomo DACQUINO, Psychology of Don Bosco, p. 96*