 Reading time: 10 min.

Anonymous, Portrait of Don Giovanni Borel (1801–1873), late 19th century, tempera on copper, 37.5 × 29 cm, Museo Casa Don Bosco, Turin-Valdocco.

Giovanni Borel emerges as a Turin priest of solid formation, deeply embedded in the pastoral and charitable fabric of the city. A royal chaplain and later spiritual director of the Marchioness Barolo's Refuge, he dedicated himself for over thirty years to assisting the young women received, the nuns, and the associated institutions, also collaborating with Cottolengo and Fr. Cafasso, especially in the prison ministry. A brilliant and popular preacher, he combined evangelical simplicity with apostolic zeal. His bond with Don Bosco was decisive. Having met him at the Convitto, he became his friend, guide, and main supporter in the early years of the Oratory, defending him, helping him financially, and taking responsibility for him in the most difficult moments. Thus, in a discreet but crucial way, he accompanied the birth and consolidation of the Salesian work until his death in 1873.

Because he had true friends.

We know little about Fr. Borel's family. From the baptismal registers of the parish of San Giovanni Battista in Turin (that is, the cathedral church), we learn that Giovanni Luigi Teobaldo Maria, son of Giuseppe Antonio Borel and Carola Motto, came into the world on 1 July 1801, and was baptised the following day. An older brother, Luigi Giuseppe, was born in 1798, while another younger one, Michele Gaetano, was born in 1804. Both the year 1801 and the fact that the registered name was Giovanni (and not Giovanni Battista) are confirmed by civil and ecclesiastical documents.

In official registers, both ecclesiastical and civil, his surname is Borel, but Don Bosco in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, and often in letters, writes "Borrelli" or "Borelli". Perhaps he believed that "Borel" was a dialectal form and wanted to Italianise it.

The Marchioness Barolo always called him “Borel”, but it is unlikely that the name and family were of French origin.

He attended primary and secondary school according to the school system in force at the time. Thus, between 1809 and 1814, he was a pupil at the Turin schools based on the French model, which prescribed three years of primary studies and three years of secondary studies (followed by the lycée). From 1814 to 1817, however, he completed his secondary studies in accordance with the restored Savoy system, which provided for three years of upper Latin studies (grammar, humanities, and rhetoric) after elementary studies and lower Latin. Then, he moved on to the two-year philosophy course (1817-1819) and the five-year theology course (1819-1824).

In the diocese of Turin, the external clericature was in use, a system whereby a seminarian could reside at home and attend philosophy and theology courses at the University or the seminary. Borel was part of a group of “external seminarians” assigned to one of the four churches designated for this purpose, under the guidance of a prefect appointed by the archbishop. He took the clerical habit in 1817, and joined the group of clerics attached to the church of Corpus Domini. He confirmed this himself when he gave his testimony at the beatification process of Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo.

The records relating to his theological studies and examinations are held at the Historical Archive of the University of Turin. He obtained his bachelor’s degree on 29 March 1821, his licentiate on 3 June 1823, and his doctorate on 24 May 1824 (from which point he could use the title of “theologian”). It is interesting to note that the signature of the theologian Luigi Guala, professor of the faculty of theology and rector of the Ecclesiastical College of St Francis of Assisi, appears on all of Borel’s examination certificates.

He was ordained a priest on 16 September 1824, at the age of 23.

The newly ordained priest was required to attend, after ordination for about two years, the moral conferences in one of the recognised venues (seminary, university, College of St Francis of Assisi), as a completion of the theological course and preparation for the exercise of the ministry. We have no documentation on the venue attended by Borel, but since he has been mentioned among the priests who gravitated towards Cafasso’s positions (who, however, would only begin teaching around 1836), we can assume that he had attended at least some of the public

lectures of the theologian Guala. In any case, Fr. Borel's link with the College and his theological-pastoral orientation appears undeniable.

In 1824, when he was ordained a priest, he was already serving as a "cleric of the House and of the Royal Chapel"; in 1831 he was promoted to "Royal Chaplain", a function he held until 1841. Natale Cerrato writes, "The court clergy, present at specific times to perform specific religious service functions, constituted the 'Royal Chapel', headed by the grand almoner, who was the archbishop of Turin. Under him were six almoners, ecclesiastics of noble family, who represented him at court, participating in liturgical functions without wearing sacred vestments, but standing in a black cape as assistants to the royal persons. In addition to the almoners, there were the chaplains and clerics, who provided the liturgical service, the former celebrating Mass and preaching, the latter serving according to established shifts. The office of royal chaplain was an honorary and coveted position, which came with a salary and left ample free time for other occupations."

In 1837 he submitted his application for a pension as a royal chaplain, but he continued his service until December 1840, when he was appointed Spiritual Director of the Marchioness Barolo's Refuge. While still serving at the Royal Palace, together with the theologian Carlo Antonio Borsarelli, he was spiritual director of the Royal College of St. Francis of Paola, from the academic year 1829-30 to 1842-43. His main duties were the daily celebration of Mass for the students, Sunday preaching in the school's congregation (explanation of the gospel in the morning, and instruction on Christian doctrine in the afternoon), and the daily catechism lesson. The school of St Francis of Paola was located in the former convent of the Minims, which also housed a university hall of residence.

Borel also collaborated with Canon Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo, founder of the Little House of Divine Providence. The institution housed the chronically physically and mentally ill, especially the poor. Despite his other commitments, he dedicated many years to the spiritual needs of the Little House, as he himself testified at the diocesan beatification process of Cottolengo, which took place between 1863 and 1873.

We cannot say with certainty when he began his pastoral service among prisoners. Certainly in 1840, he was already collaborating with Fr. Cafasso and probably continued this cooperation for the rest of his life. It is certain that Don Bosco, when, as a student at the College, he assisted Cafasso in the prison ministry, also found Borel there, along with Canon Borsarelli and Fr. Mathias, director of the

Confraternity of Mercy. Together with Fr. Cafasso, Borel took particular care of those condemned to death. The *Biographical Memoirs*, moreover, offer us interesting details about his method with the prisoners.

On 29 December 1840, Fr. Borel was appointed spiritual director of the Refuge, as successor to the late Fr. Luigi Delrivo. From that day on, he dedicated himself with zeal to the Barolo institutions for over 30 years. This was, of all his ministries, the most important, for its breadth, intensity, and dedication, but also the most demanding due to the great responsibility it entailed. He was spiritual director and teacher to the young women housed in the Refuge and to the Sisters of St Joseph who cared for them. He was also spiritual director of the Penitent Sisters of St Mary Magdalene (popularly called the Magdalenes), who lived in semi-enclosure in their monastery next to the Refuge. His work included the daily celebration of Mass, preaching, catechism, confessions and spiritual direction, and the pastoral care of the sick.

From the archives of the Opera Pia Barolo, we find the names of various priests who collaborated with the theologian Borel in the institutions founded by the Marchioness: Fr. Pietro Ponte (1821-1892), chaplain of the St Anne Institute; Fr. Sebastiano Pacchiotti (1806-1884), associate chaplain of the Refuge; Fr. Bosco, associate chaplain of the Refuge and designated chaplain of the Ospedaletto di Santa Filomena from 1844 to 1846; Fr. Giovanni Giacomelli (1820-1901), chaplain of the Ospedaletto from 1854; Fr. Marcantonio Durando (1801-1880), a Vincentian, official religious superior of the Magdalene sisters.

Borel’s name appears repeatedly in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, in Don Bosco’s correspondence, and in the *Biographical Memoirs,* as a friend and supporter. Don Bosco had met him for the first time when he was a seminarian, during a spiritual retreat. He had discussed with him the means of persevering in his vocation and had memorised his response, “With withdrawal and with frequent communion, one perfects and preserves one’s vocation and forms a true ecclesiastic.”

He later saw him again several times during the years spent at the College, sharing pastoral ministry in the prison and in other charitable institutions in the city. “From the first moment I met T. Borel,” we read in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, “I have always observed in him a holy priest, a model worthy of admiration and imitation. Whenever he could spend time with me, he always had lessons of priestly zeal, always good advice, encouragement to do good. In the three years spent at the College, I was invited by him several times to serve in sacred functions, to hear

confessions, to preach with him. So that the field of my work was already known and, in a way familiar. We spoke at length several times about the rules to be followed to help each other in visiting the prisons and fulfilling the duties entrusted to us, and at the same time to assist the young boys, whose morality and abandonment increasingly drew the attention of the priests."

In the autumn of 1844, Borel — at the request of Fr. Cafasso, and with the consent of the Marchioness Barolo — took Don Bosco with him to the Refuge, as he needed a place to live and paid work while waiting for the Ospedaletto to be finished. From that moment on, he became his closest and most trusted supporter. He gradually put him in touch with wealthy people from the Turin nobility and bourgeoisie. He helped and defended him during the phase of the wandering Oratory (1844-46), standing up for him, as when he was driven out of San Pietro in Vincoli and moved to the chapel of the Mulini, or when, at the beginning of 1846, the parish priests of the surrounding area expressed their fear that the Oratory would interfere with the activities of the parishes. Above all, he did not abandon him in the most difficult moments. He was by his side during the break with the Marchioness Barolo, helped him financially with the rent and, later, with the purchase of the Pinardi property. When the Oratory finally settled in Valdocco, it was he who blessed the chapel-shed. In the following years, he continued to collaborate with Don Bosco in preaching, confessions, public relations, and the administration of the Oratory. He kept the account books, recorded income, expenditure, and noteworthy things (for example, in 1846 he noted that 650 young people participated in the feast of St Aloysius).

When, at the end of 1845, Don Bosco's health deteriorated, he informed the Marchioness, who was in Rome at the time. The Marchioness was also worried and wrote to Borel, "You will remember how many times I recommended that you take care of him and let him rest etc. etc. You didn't listen to me; you said that priests had to work." Finally, when Don Bosco fell seriously ill in the summer of 1846, he gave him every care, and during his convalescence at the Becchi (between August and November) he took responsibility for the Oratory with the help of the theologians Vola and Carpano, and the priests Trivero and Pacchiotti.

Goffredo Casalis writes, "These [the aforementioned priests], for the space of four months, in agreement with the theologian Borelli, substituted in everything for the absent Founder of the institute, and promoted its wide implementation in such a way that they soon earned the esteem and affection of all the young people. It was esteem and affection that they had to procure, like the Founder, at the price of very great patience, and of innumerable sacrifices. In its beginnings, this institution was

much poorer than it is at present, and they had to deal with unruly youths devoid of any education, many of whom many times did not have a piece of bread to satisfy their hunger. They were extremely ragged and dirty, and in addition to this, they had to endure, as happens to all those who want to do good, not a few, not small contradictions. On his return, Don Bosco found greater decorum in the chapel, and saw a host of new boys who for the first time greeted their benefactor. Things were well under way […].

Borel was a skilled preacher; he used a popular and lively style that was much appreciated. For this reason, he was often invited to deliver panegyrics and missions in the diocese of Turin and elsewhere. He always lent himself to this with generosity and apostolic zeal. His sermons were simple, pleasant, full of humour and anecdotes, but substantial, deeply Christian, moving, and of great effect. Fr. Cafasso said of him that “he was perhaps the best orator in the whole diocese for his facility in speaking our good Piedmontese, for the proverbs, the quips, the witty phrases that blossomed on his lips, and for the clarity in explaining any doctrinal difficulty, using the most appropriate similes for the purpose; all the more so when it came to speaking to the youth who were his delight.”

In this ministry, he was also always available for Don Bosco. One Sunday, after spending the entire morning in various churches celebrating, preaching, and hearing confessions, he was told that he was needed at the Oratory for a sermon. The person who had gone to call him found him in the vegetable garden eating bread and a pepper. He did not delay. After a few minutes, he was in the pulpit of the Pinardi chapel preaching to a crowd of boys. He also preached in the church of St. Francis de Sales, after 1852. His public dialogues with Don Bosco were famous. He would sit among the boys and very amusingly play the part of a naive young man, a scoundrel, an artless penitent, while Don Bosco instructed and preached from the pulpit. The news that on a certain Sunday the theologian would “converse” was enough to fill the church with attentive listeners. In 1849, with the help of Fr. Borsarelli, Fr. Ponte, and Fr. Gastaldi, he successfully preached to the boys of the three oratories gathered in the church of the Confraternity of Mercy for a seven-day spiritual retreat (22-28 December).

His lifestyle was evangelically simple and frugal. He never worried about himself. In the 1860s, his health deteriorated. He was often forced to stay in bed or was stuck in a chair at the Refuge. On 25 March 1869, Don Bosco returned from Rome with the news of the approval of the Salesian Society. From his rooms, Borel heard the boys of the Oratory cheering and the band playing. He understood what was

happening. It was about eight o’clock in the evening. He got out of bed, went down into the street leaning on his stick, and entered the Oratory courtyard. Here he met Don Bosco and learned the good news. “Thank you, O Lord, now I can die happy!” he exclaimed, and without adding another word, he returned to the Refuge.

On 8 May 1870, in recognition of his merits, he was awarded one of the most prestigious honorary titles of the Kingdom: Knight of the Order of Saints Maurice and Lazarus. He still carried out some priestly activities, but he spent the last two years of his life confined to bed. He died on 8 September 1873, at the age of 72, perhaps from a cerebral haemorrhage. He was so poor that he did not even leave enough money for his burial. His coffin was carried to the cemetery by the Salesian directors gathered in Valdocco for the autumn conferences, accompanied by the Oratory’s band and all the young people of the house.

Under the image of St Francis de Sales hanging in his poor little room, he had written the words of St Paul, *“Omnibus omnia factus sum”* I have become all things to all people.

Arthur J. LENTI, Don Bosco history and spirit, vol. I, p. 383