

□ Reading time: 7 min.

Joseph Buzzetti, a young bricklayer captivated by Don Bosco, was among the first and most faithful collaborators of the Oratory. A serious accident prevented him from becoming a priest, but he dedicated his entire life to serving the boys and the Salesian mission, carrying out humble yet crucial tasks: administration, catechism, assistance, organising raffles, and the daily running of the house. Feeling the Oratory was his family, he went through a crisis when the Congregation became more structured, fearing he would be sidelined. Don Bosco's charity convinced him to stay for good. From this experience, the figure of the Salesian "coadjutor" (lay brother) matured. In 1877, Buzzetti officially joined the Salesian Society, remaining an example of silent and total dedication until his death.

Because he never abandoned anyone.

"What are you doing at the Oratory?"

Born in Caronno Ghiringhello (Milan, Italy) on 7 February 1832; professed in 1877; died in Lanzo on 13 July 1892.

Joseph Buzzetti was one of the many boys who flocked to Turin to work as bricklayers' labourers while hoping for better fortune. He was lucky enough to meet Don Bosco early on and was so captivated by him that he diligently attended his festive gatherings during the period of the travelling Oratory. He continued to do so until 1847 when, at the Saint's invitation, he and three companions began studying to become priests; but Providence had other plans.

The Congregation was born. Don Bosco felt great joy. But I believe that on that day, a wrinkle of melancholy remained deep in his soul. Among the seventeen who had accepted, his dearest Joseph Buzzetti was not there.

While handling a pistol (to guard the items displayed in the first raffle), he had a

serious accident. The index finger of his left hand had to be amputated. At that time, this was considered a serious impediment to becoming a priest. The accident, “combined with his humility,” observes Fr. Lemoyne, had persuaded Buzzetti to renounce the clerical habit.

But he dedicated every hour of his day to “his” Don Bosco and the Oratory. He handled the maintenance of the house—lists Fr. Lemoyne—, assisted in the refectory, set the tables, took care of the cleaning, taught catechism, managed the administration, and handled the dispatch of the Catholic Readings. He also directed the school choir until 1860, when he handed it over to John Cagliero. “With his sharp mind and swift action, he was the soul of all the raffles, he went in search of work for the workshops, ordered the bread, and took care of the shopping.”

He felt the Oratory was part of his very being. When the nearly finished building had collapsed, he had meticulously examined the invoices. He had found orders for substandard materials and had confronted the contractor with harsh words. Don Bosco himself had to calm him down.

— We must have patience. You will see that the Lord will help us.

— Yes, yes, He will help us! But in the meantime, you stay up, working day and night to get a few hundred lire, and these people steal thousands from you in a moment. They need to be taught a firm lesson.

— Let it go. If they deserve it, the Lord will give it to them.

Buzzetti (continues Lemoyne, from whom we have taken the dialogue) acted as a guard for Don Bosco, accompanying him when danger was feared, and meeting him in the evening. His sturdy figure and his very thick red beard put off several ill-intentioned people from attacking the priest of Valdocco.

His bricklayer brothers (Carlo had become an excellent master builder) told him several times, “If you don’t want to become a priest, what are you doing at the Oratory? If Don Bosco were to die, with no trade in your hands, how would you manage?”

And he would reply, “Don Bosco has guaranteed me that even after his death, there will always be a piece of bread for me. That’s fine by me.”

And yet this young man (in 1859 he was 27) who would have given his life for Don

Bosco, did not feel he could take vows, to become a Salesian.

The first “layman” admitted into the Salesian Society was Joseph Rossi. The “chapter of the Salesian Society” met to decide on his admission on 2 February 1860. With Rossi, the word “coadjutor” made its appearance in the Congregation’s vocabulary, with the meaning of “lay Salesian”.

Giuseppe Buzzetti’s crisis

The 14th of May 1862, marked a new stage in the consolidation of the Salesian Society. Gathered in Don Bosco’s usual small room, the “confreres”, responding to Don Bosco’s invitation, “promised God to observe the Rules by taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience for three years.” There were twenty-two of them, not including the founder.

At the end, Don Bosco said, “While you were making these vows to me, I was also making them to this Crucifix for my entire life, offering myself as a sacrifice to the Lord.”

In the group of twenty-two were two other laymen, very different from each other. The first, Joseph Gaia, would be the cook at the Oratory for many years. The second, Federico Oreglia of St. Stefano, belonged to the Turin aristocracy. Don Bosco had won him over during a course of Spiritual Exercises, bringing an end to a period of “adventurous and gallant life”. For nine years he would render many services to the Oratory, then he would join the Jesuits.

An easy temptation, in the years that followed and which saw other laymen join the Congregation, was to consider the non-priests and clerics as “servants” of the house, or at least as a “second-class category”.

It was probably in this context that Joseph Buzzetti’s “crisis” arose. It is narrated in the fifth volume of the Biographical Memoirs, from which we summarise.

He sensed that the old patriarchal family life would be changed by regulations. He saw the running of the house, the duties that were once entrusted to him, gradually passing into the hands of the clerics. Melancholy and discouragement made him decide to leave. He found himself a job in Turin and went to take his leave of Don Bosco. With his usual frankness, he told him that he was now becoming the last cog

in the machine, that he had to obey those he had seen arrive as children, whom he had taught to blow their noses. He expressed his great sadness at having to leave that house he had seen rise from the days of the woodshed.

Don Bosco did not say to him, "You are leaving me alone. What will I do without you?" He did not pity himself. He thought of him, his dearest friend. "Have you already found a place? Will they give you a good wage? You have no money, and you will certainly need some for the initial expenses." He opened the drawers of his desk, "You know these drawers better than I do. Take whatever you need, and if it's not enough, tell me what you need and I will get it for you. I do not want, Joseph, for you to suffer any hardship because of me." Then he looked at him with that love that only he had for his boys, "We have always loved each other. And I hope you will never forget me."

Then Buzzetti burst into tears. He cried for a long time, and said, "No, I don't want to leave Don Bosco. I will always stay with you."

The "coadjutor" that Don Bosco held in his heart

It was perhaps this event that spurred Don Bosco to better define the figure of the lay Salesian, the "coadjutor" in the Salesian Congregation.

31 March 1876. In a "good night" talk reserved for the artisans, he indicated what the vocation of the lay Salesian consisted of. "Note that among the members of the Congregation there is no distinction whatsoever; they are all treated in the same way, artisans, clerics, and priests; we all consider ourselves as brothers."

In 1877, Joseph Buzzetti decided to apply to enter the Salesian Society. Don Bosco himself wanted to present his application to the "Superior Chapter", which was made up almost entirely of those little boys whom Joseph "had taught to blow their noses". He was accepted unanimously, and I believe that was one of the most intimately beautiful days for Don Bosco.

Many other "coadjutors" were now part of the Salesian Society with a wide variety of duties: Pelazza and Gambino were workshop directors; Marcello Rossi was the porter; Nasi the infirmarian; Giuseppe Rossi the administrator; Enria the factotum; Falco and Ruffato the cooks. But all of them "assisted the priest" with apostolic

responsibilities: they taught catechism, they were assistants and educators.

The “temptation” we spoke of just now returned in the last years of Don Bosco’s life. In the third “General Chapter” of the Congregation, held in 1883, someone said, “We must keep the coadjutors down, create a distinct category for them.” Don Bosco reacted with spirit, “No, no, no. The coadjutor confreres are like all the others.” And speaking in the same year to the lay Salesians, he affirmed forcefully, “You must not be the ones who work directly or toil, but rather the ones who direct. You must be like masters over the other workers, not like servants... This is the idea of the Salesian coadjutor. I have such a great need for many to come and help me in this way! I am therefore happy that you have suitable and clean clothes; that you have proper beds and cells, because you must not be servants but masters, not subjects but superiors.”

Pietro Braido, a scholar of the issue, states, “The figure of the coadjutor (in Don Bosco’s mind) did not arise suddenly as a completely new and original creation, but emerged gradually, amidst hesitations and uncertainties.”

We dare to suggest that perhaps the “ideal figure” of the coadjutor that Don Bosco carried in his heart for so many years was that of Joseph Buzzetti: most trustworthy, humble, always present in difficult and delicate moments, who felt the Oratory was his family, the living flesh of his life, who felt fulfilled because “his family” was being fulfilled, who did not understand much about legal matters but at all costs “wanted to be with Don Bosco”.

And yet this man, who would have given his life for Don Bosco and who loved his work with an intense love, did not consider himself worthy of being a Salesian.

Finally, in 1877, he decided to apply to be enrolled in the Society, to which he already belonged in spirit, if not in name. Don Bosco himself wanted to propose his application to the Superior Council, which unanimously welcomed the oldest living attendee of the Oratory.

Truly, he had to change nothing in his way of life. For almost forty years the Oratory had been his whole world, the life of the Oratory his whole life, and the Salesian Congregation his ideal on earth. After Don Bosco’s death, he lived for another three and a half years; but one might say that his mission on this earth was over. As his health problems worsened considerably, he gladly accepted to go to Lanzo. He spent his days there in prayer.

A perfect tranquillity reigned in his spirit; an unalterable calm accompanied him on his bed of suffering until his last day.