

□ Reading time: 7 min.

Young Giovanni's relationships with his two brothers were very different. Antonio, his difficult half-brother who was orphaned at nine, was hostile towards Giovanni's studies and burdened by farm work. Despite the tensions, Don Bosco forgave him and helped his children after Antonio's premature death in 1849. Giuseppe, his beloved brother, was, by contrast, a great support: he gave his inheritance to Giovanni, provided supplies for the Oratory, and actively participated in Salesian life. A generous and religious man, he built a house with a chapel at Becchi, which became a centre of devotion. He died in Don Bosco's arms in 1862.

Because he lived intensely what "family" means

Antonio Bosco. The half-brother

On 16 June 1811, Francesco Bosco married Margherita Occhiena of Capriglio, with whom he had two more sons (Giuseppe and Giovanni). Francesco died on 11 May 1817. Antonio was thus left an orphan of both father and mother at the age of nine.

As he grew up, he proved to be more difficult. He is described as disobedient and disrespectful towards his stepmother, despite the gentleness and attention she showed him. Later, we see him stubborn and opposed to Giovanni's schooling. The two also had incompatible characters that made their relationship tense. It seems that after the death of their paternal grandmother, Margherita Zucca († 1826), the eighteen-year-old Antonio became even more sullen. On the other hand, it was he who bore the greatest burden of the farm work. The concern that the conflict at home could become more serious and dangerous finally convinced Margherita that it was best to send Giovanni to work as a farmhand on a nearby farm.

Antonio signed his last son's birth certificate with his own name (as was required from 1842), so he was not entirely illiterate. His brother Giuseppe, by contrast, always signed with a cross and with the assistance of two witnesses. The image we might form from reading the Memoirs of a coarse and ignorant Antonio should, therefore, be revised.

After the division of the family property on 22 March 1831, Antonio married Anna Rosso of Castelnuovo, with whom he had seven children. These are Don Bosco's nephews and nieces on his half-brother's side. We do not know how Antonio was able to support his family with the small plots of land he had inherited; he probably also worked as a day labourer. In any case, the family must have lived in great hardship.

Little by little, the descendants of Antonio and Giuseppe left I Becchi and moved elsewhere. Between 1891 and 1926, their properties at I Becchi were either donated or sold to the Salesians. Their portions of the little house were donated in 1919 (by Antonio's heirs) and in 1926 (by Giuseppe's heirs). From 1929, the historic centre, which includes the little house, the brother Giuseppe's house, and the Cavallo-Graglia house, and a large part of the hill, including the Biglione property, passed into the hands of the Salesians. The Rector Major, Fr. Philip Rinaldi, planned to transform the entire hill into a sanctuary in view of Don Bosco's beatification (1929).

The small house built by Antonio opposite the little house was demolished in 1915 to make way for the sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians, erected between 1915 and 1918 to commemorate both the centenary of Don Bosco's birth and the institution of the feast of Mary Help of Christians. One might think that the two half-brothers never resumed contact with each other after 1831. This is not true. It is more plausible that they reconciled in some way over time.

Antonio came to the Oratory quite often to visit Mamma Margherita and Don Giovanni. Antonio died almost suddenly on 18 January 1849, at the age of 41, after a few days of an illness that had not seemed dangerous.

Don Bosco, who was about to set off for Becchi, received the sad news from his brother Giuseppe. He, who had not let any opportunity pass to show his sincere affection for his adversary Antonio, once he was dead, took solicitous care of his children. One, named Francesco, he later welcomed to the Oratory, had him trained in the trade of a carpenter, and made a good Christian of him. The other, who remained at Becchi, received help from Don Bosco in times of need.

Thus do the saints take their revenge.

Don Bosco stated that he had dreamt of Antonio between 1831 and 1832 and again in 1876. From these passages, it is clear that he bore no grudge against his half-brother. Unfortunately, Antonio is remembered negatively in the Salesian biographical tradition, even though at a certain point in the Biographical Memoirs, Lemoyne writes a "eulogy" for him.

Giuseppe Bosco. The beloved brother

He appears as a shy, gentle, sometimes stubborn child. "Giuseppe, of a sweet and tranquil disposition, all goodness, patience, and prudence, willingly followed his father's condition; but he had a subtle mind for taking advantage of everything, even those things that might seem of little use; so that he would have become an expert merchant, had he not loved the peaceful life of the fields." We find him alongside Giovanni in the episode of the sale of the turkey. The two brothers were

very fond of each other.

Giuseppe, however great his straits sometimes were, never asked Giovanni for anything, though Giovanni was very grateful to him. To allow him to study with Fr. Calosso, Giuseppe promised that he would take his place in the farm work. When the family property was divided, he decided to stay with Giovanni and Mamma Margherita. In the years when Giovanni was attending school in Chieri or was in the seminary, he would accompany his mother on visits to his brother. He gave Giovanni his share of the inheritance so that he could prove to the Curia that he possessed the necessary patrimony to enter major orders.

Don Bosco had total and affectionate confidence in his older brother, sharing with him his joys as well as his sorrows, and they were of one heart and one soul.

Giuseppe came to Turin several times a year to stay at the Oratory, for a longer or shorter time as he was able. His aim was to enjoy a few hours in the company of Giovanni and Mamma Margherita, who was overjoyed to see her firstborn. The good mother had good reason to be proud of this son. He was deeply religious, a diligent and affectionate father, generous and charitable of heart and, although he had numerous children, he felt the boys of the Oratory were his own.

Not content with sending his own provisions of food every year at harvest time, he would go in search of help from relatives and friends, and he knew how to convince them so well that he managed to load several carts with walnuts, wheat, potatoes, and grapes and send them to the Oratory.

One day, on his way to the market in Moncalieri to buy two calves, he passed through Valdocco to visit his brother. But seeing the poverty in which the Oratory found itself, which on that very day had to face very heavy debts, he pulled out his wallet and said to Don Bosco, "I came to spend 300 lire at the fair in Moncalieri, but I see that your need is much more urgent than mine. Therefore, with all my heart, I give you this money." Don Bosco had tears in his eyes. "And you?"

"I'll wait for another time."

"But wouldn't it be better if you just lent it to me? I'll pay you back as soon as I can."

"When will you ever find this money, Gioanin? You're always full of debts. No, no! I'm giving it to you, and that's that."

When he appeared at the Oratory, all the boys would run to him with affection and confidence as to a father. They called him "Uncle Giuseppe". In features, he bore a great resemblance to Don Bosco and was about the same height. His appearance manifested the goodness of his great heart. Don Bosco always presented him with pride even to the most distinguished personages. He often invited him to give the "goodnight talk" to the boys from the platform he usually used. Giuseppe, being a

simple farmer, would resist a little but then accept, and in the Piedmontese dialect, he was listened to with immense pleasure.

On 18 March 1833, Giuseppe married Maria Calosso (1813-1874). They had ten children; of the boys, only two reached adulthood: Francesco was the only one to carry on the Bosco surname, Luigi never married and caused Don Bosco a great deal of grief due to his not-so-exemplary way of life.

In 1839, Giuseppe returned to Becchi, where with his own savings and with loans he built a beautiful house in front of the old cottage.

During the germinal phase of the Oratory (1844-1846), Don Bosco would return to Becchi from time to time to rest. In the summer-autumn of 1846, to recover from the serious illness that had brought him to the brink of death, he spent more than three months with his family. In Giuseppe's house, there was always a room at his disposal, at the far west of the second floor, next to the family's bedrooms.

In 1848, a door was opened in the west part of the house and one of the rooms, with the approval of the Vicar General of Turin, was converted into a chapel, blessed on 12 October by Fr. Pietro Antonio Cinzano, parish priest of Castelnuovo. Dedicated to Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, the chapel was the first "sanctuary" in the history of Becchi and became a devotional centre for the hamlet and a place of pilgrimage for the boys of the Oratory. Here Michael Rua received the cassock in 1852, and two years later Dominic Savio met Don Bosco for the first time.

In 1848, for the blessing of the chapel, Don Bosco had brought sixteen boys with him from Turin. The trip is considered the first of the "autumn walks" which followed every year until 1864.

Giuseppe was an excellent "assistant". He kept an eye on the boys so that they would not wander into others' fields and vineyards. He was obeyed; but there was no lack of rare infractions of his orders. One Sunday morning he saw a little boy in the courtyard, and without further ado, he reprimanded him for having gone into the vineyards. The boy denied it, but he, with his sly smile, replied, "Don't you realise you have the spy with you? Don't you see the grass that's stuck to your trousers?"

Giuseppe was at Mamma Margherita's bedside on 26 November 1856. He listened to her last words and advice and, after her passing, informed Don Bosco, who had left the room at his mother's own request. Shortly after his mother's death, Giuseppe also fell ill with pneumonia during a visit to the Oratory. Don Bosco prayed to Our Lady for his recovery and Giuseppe recovered and was able to return to I Becchi.

Lemoyne recounts that Giuseppe had a premonition of his own death when he went to the Oratory to confess and speak with Don Bosco about "a certain problem".

Returning home, he arranged things as if he were certain of his imminent death, although he felt in perfect shape. A week later he fell ill. Don Bosco rushed to him. The following day, 12 December 1862, Giuseppe died in his brother's arms.

Fr Arthur J. LENTI, SDB - Don Bosco: History and Spirit, volume 1, p. 179