 Reading time: 4 min.

The story of Don Bosco’s eyes reveals a surprising and deeply human trait of the Saint. Among the numerous images portraying him, the photograph taken in Genoa in 1886, most truthfully captures his physiognomy: a luminous gaze, capable of captivating and hinting at his fatherly heart, despite the fact that at the time, his right eye was already blind and his left severely weakened. From a young age, Don Bosco suffered from vision problems, aggravated by incidents related to thunderstorms, a life of tireless study, and continuous sacrifices. Despite this, he never stopped dedicating himself to young people and the mission entrusted to him, facing even increasing blindness with patience and faith.

Because his feet were planted firmly on the ground and his eyes were fixed on the heavens.

Among all the photographs of Don Bosco, there is one that, according to those who knew him, best reproduces his true physiognomy. It is the photograph taken by Angelo Ferretto, from the Gustavo Luzzati Establishment in Genoa, on 16 March 1886, when Don Bosco, at 71 years old, on a trip to Spain, had stopped for a few days in Sampierdarena.

This photograph was later retouched in 1888 by the painter Giuseppe Rollini for the famous oil portrait preserved in Don Bosco’s “Camerette”. It was also used by Giovanni Crida for his well-known paintings of the Saint.

In the Genoese portrait, Don Bosco’s eyes shine with a particular light that pervades and captivates you, revealing the fatherly heart he possessed.

Yet who would imagine it? When Don Bosco posed for that photograph, his right eye was already blind and his left eye tired and diseased.

Don Bosco’s sight

From a young age, Don Bosco suffered from burning eyes, due to long vigils and continuous reading and writing by candlelight or oil lamp.

In 1840, in the seminary of Chieri, while he was at the window observing the threatening sky, lightning struck the parapet and some loose bricks hit him in the stomach, throwing him to the ground unconscious (MB I, 488).

Years later, on a stormy night, while he was in Sant’ Ignazio above Lanzo for the Spiritual Exercises, the glass door of the corridor where he was, burst open with a roar under the force of the storm and lightning struck, amidst a deluge of rain, at his feet. He miraculously remained unharmed; however, he contracted an eye ailment that often recurred, while his right eye remained always clouded (MB V, 513).

That was not the last time lightning bothered Don Bosco. In Valdocco, on the night of 15 May 1861, it again took the trouble to torment him. After that incident, his eye ailment worsened to the point of completely blinding his right eye and so weakening his left that the worst was feared. He was then prescribed not to read or write after sunset (MB VI, 937ff).

It does not appear that Don Bosco adhered to the prescription, but he was forced to wear dark glasses (“the blue glasses,” the Memoirs say). A former student from Borgo San Martino, Carlo Rampini, recalls in “La Voce del Collegio” (“La Voce del Collegio” Year XIII, no. 4) a visit from Don Bosco that remained indelible in his memory. He says, “As soon as he descended into the courtyard, there was an immediate general rush around him to kiss his hands and listen to his fatherly recommendations. And Don Bosco, always good with his dear boys, adopted an almost prophetic attitude and, putting on his glasses, scrutinising our eyes from beneath the lenses, jokingly said: — At this moment, dear children, I not only see you, but I also see your thoughts.”

So, Don Bosco, at least for a certain period, even wore… sunglasses!

He was also forced to ask for a dispensation from reciting the Breviary for periods when he could not read without great effort. He himself once told Blessed Father Filippo Rinaldi, who, as a young cleric, had told him he needed an ophthalmologist:

— You see, I too have always had weak eyesight and then it became so weak that at certain times I cannot read anything, absolutely nothing, while at others I read and write with less or more effort (MB XIX, 400).

Father Rinaldi then understood that the same would happen to him. And so it was, because Fr. Rinaldi too, for a long time could not even recite the Breviary, which he later managed to do without effort.

From various letters of Don Bosco, interesting details about the state of his sight are available. Writing to Countess Callori on 14 November 1873, he told her, “My ophthalmological consultations resulted in the verdict, little hope for the right eye; the left can be preserved in status quo by abstaining from reading and writing. So, eat, drink well, sleep, walk, etc. etc. Thus, we will go on” (E 1126). To the same Countess on 25 November 1878, he wrote, “Here we are all generally well. Only my sight is rapidly worsening. God sees well this way, because I did not use it as I should have” (E 1866).

On his trip to France in 1879, Don Bosco, writing to Fr. Rua from Marseille on 11 January, informed him, “My health in general is quite good. The left eye has not worsened; the right has gained somewhat. At this moment I am reading the words *Le Citoyen*, something that for two months had become absolutely impossible for me” (E 1891).

On his trip in 1880, he visited the houses of Saint-Cyr and Navarre, before returning to Marseille. He was accompanied by Fr. Ronchail, later replaced by Fr. Cagliero. The latter found that Don Bosco “had good legs for walking, but poor sight for seeing.” Don Bosco himself observed that year, “It is true. With one eye I see less than with two. However, I hope that the Lord will preserve this one for me because otherwise I would no longer be able to work. Oh! The Lord will surely find a way to fix things!” (MB XIV, 51).

After 1880, his condition worsened considerably, so much so that on 14 October 1884, Don Bosco was forced to ask the Sacred Penitentiary for an indult to celebrate the votive mass of the Blessed Virgin on feast days and the mass for the deceased on weekdays. Yet he never complained about it, nor did he pray for healing. His children, however, prayed; but the Lord had His ways. And Don Bosco, despite his illness, continued with immense effort to take care of everyone and everything to promote the glory of God and the good of souls, until his death.

Natale CERRATO, Don Bosco and his style, p.48