

□ Reading time: 4 min.

An apparently simple letter, yet rich in spiritual and educational meaning: this is what Don Bosco wrote in 1858 to the young seminarian Bartolomeo Alasia. This precious document, jealously guarded through generations, made an extraordinary journey before finding its definitive place in the Historical Archive of Nizza Monferrato. Its story tells us not only the vicissitudes of a piece of paper, but above all reveals the soul of a great educator: Don Bosco, tireless promoter of vocations and master of spiritual life, capable of transforming every occasion into an opportunity for growth for his young people.

A 50 km journey lasting 162 years

On 11 January 1911 the prior of Sommariva Bosco (Cuneo) Fr Celso Giulio Francese, presented himself at the archiepiscopal curia in Turin on appointment, carrying a handwritten letter from Don Bosco. A kind of tribunal awaited him, consisting of a bishop, Vicar General Monsignor Costanzo Castrale, the tax promoter, Fr Carlo Franco and the secretary, Fr Carlo Ferrero. He was asked how he came into possession of the alleged letter from Don Bosco. The prior replied that during a conversation with Miss Anna Betrone, a teacher in Sommariva del Bosco, he had come to know that she possessed "a precious memento of the Venerable Don Bosco". It was a letter written to cleric Bartolomeo Alasia [of Sommariva], who later became a priest, but was now deceased. The teacher had received it from a relative of his, also deceased, who in turn had received it directly from the aforementioned Bartolomeo. The prior then invited Miss Betrone to deliver the letter to the "Ecclesiastical Superior", as was required in the case of beatification processes. She immediately agreed "regretting not having known sooner, because she would have delivered it immediately."

In a nutshell: the letter of 1859 had passed from the hands of the addressee, the former seminarian who had become a priest, to one of his relatives, from these to teacher Betrone, then to Fr Francese. Finally it returned to its rightful owner, Miss Betrone. It is now kept in the Historical Archive at the FMA house in Nizza Monferrato. A journey of just a few dozen kilometres but lasting 162 years. And the Curia in Turin? The secretary immediately made two copies conforming to the original (one to be kept and the other sent the next day to the Sacred Congregation of Rites in Rome), drew up the minutes of the brief session which he had those present sign and authenticated the papers with the stamp of the archiepiscopal curia itself. All for a brief letter... but from a saint!

Prior events

What are the prior events leading up to this story? It had happened that the young Bartolomeo Alasia, born in 1842 in Sommariva del Bosco and already a student at Valdocco from 22 October 1856 until 7 August 1959, had entered the diocesan seminary in Chieri with some of his companions, convinced, on the word of Don Bosco himself, that he would not be paying a boarding fee. Instead a few months later he received a request for payment, probably from the seminary bursar. He immediately wrote to Don Bosco, who immediately, on 6 April 1858, asked the Rector of the Turin Seminary and the person in charge at Chieri as well, Canon Alessandro Vogliotti, to transfer the young Bonetti's free pension – whom he now housed at Valdocco – to the young Alasia. He immediately had (or perhaps presumed to have) the consent of his friend the Rector, so on the same day he reassured the young man by saying that the Rector would inform him of the news directly at the seminary in Chieri.

Is that all? No, there was much more!

Don Bosco, a far-sighted educator, was not content to "intercede" so that the young and poor Bartholomew would have his fee remitted; he took the opportunity to add special recommendations of a spiritual nature, to be passed on to his fellow ex-students at Valdocco. He had already been informed of their good behaviour in the seminary. He therefore wrote to him:

"To enjoy special favours of this kind [free board], one also needs especially good conduct in study and piety. Take courage, therefore. Follow the advice I give you.

1. Absolutely avoid dissolute companions and those not of good conduct
2. Frequent the Holy Sacraments of Confession and Communion
3. Attendance, familiarity, imitation of those better known for their study and moral conduct
4. Go every day to make a visit, even if only for a minute, to the Blessed Sacrament. If you and your companions Vitrotti, Galleano, Piano, Sola practise these counsels, you will do good to your soul, honour to your state and to the place where Divine Providence has disposed that you have come for the study of Latinitas [in view of the priesthood].

Don Bosco closed his letter with an appeal with a Johannine flavour (1 Jn 2:7): 'My dear ones, love one another, help one another with good example and advice, and while I commend myself to your prayers, I ask the Lord to give you health and grace. I am yours affectionately, Fr. Gio Bosco'.

Assured authenticity

There is no doubt that this is a letter from Don Bosco, even if the original handwritten letter may have been lost: the formal authentication by the Turin curia, the epistolary style proper to Don Bosco and above all the content are convincing proof of this. In just a few lines there is all of Don Bosco, namely a tireless promoter of vocations, an attentive teacher of spiritual life, a zealous priest, a passionate heart for the young. How much we still need such educators today!

At this point the interesting and little known chapter of Don Bosco's life on the many priestly vocations that came out of Valdocco could also open up: hundreds and hundreds of them. Don Bosco would have used them very intelligently to "defend" his work and his educational method in his disputes with Archbishop Gastaldi and within ecclesiastical circles in Turin and Rome hostile to Valdocco in general and to the education given there. But the subject deserves a larger space than the one available here.