 Reading time: 8 min.

Don Bosco was not only a tireless educator and pastor of souls, but also a man of extraordinary resourcefulness, capable of inventing new and courageous solutions to support his works. The economic needs of the Valdocco Oratory, which was constantly expanding, pushed him to seek increasingly effective means to guarantee food, lodging, schooling, and work for thousands of boys. Among these, lotteries represented one of his most ingenious intuitions: true collective enterprises that involved nobles, priests, benefactors, and ordinary citizens. It was not simple, as Piedmontese legislation rigorously regulated lotteries, allowing private individuals to organise them only in well-defined cases. And it was not just about raising funds, but about creating a network of solidarity that united Turin society around the educational and spiritual project of the Oratory. The first, in 1851, was a memorable adventure, full of unforeseen events and successes.

The sums of money that came into Don Bosco's hands remained there for a short time, because it was immediately used to provide food, accommodation, school and work for tens of thousands of boys or to build colleges, orphanages and churches or to support the South American missions. His accounts, as we know, were always in the red; debts accompanied him throughout his life.
Now among the means intelligently adopted by Don Bosco to finance his works we can certainly place the lotteries: about fifteen were organised by him, both small and large ones. The first, a modest effort, was the one in Turin in 1851 for the church of St Francis de Sales in Valdocco and the last, a very big one in the mid-1880s, was to meet the immense expenses of the church and the Hospice of the Sacred Heart at Termini station in Rome.
A true history of these lotteries has yet to be written, although there is no lack of sources in this regard. Just with reference to the first one in1851, have we ourselves recovered a dozen unpublished items. We can use them to reconstruct its eventful history in two episodes.

Application for authorisation

According to the law of 24 February 1820 – modified by Royal Patents of January 1835 and by Instructions of the Azienda Generale delle Regie Finanze on 24 August 1835 and later by Royal Patents of 17 July 1845 – prior governmental authorisation was required for any national lottery (Kingdom of Sardinia).
For Don Bosco it was first of all a matter of having the moral certainty of succeeding in the project. This he gained from the economic and moral support of the very first

benefactors: the noble Callori and Fassati families and Canon Anglesio of Cottolengo. He therefore launched himself into what would turn out to be a genuine enterprise. In a short time, he succeeded in setting up an organising commission, initially comprising sixteen well-known personalities, later increased to twenty. Among them were numerous officially recognised civil authorities, such as a senator (appointed treasurer), two Deputy Mayors, three municipal councillors; then prestigious priests such as Frs Pietro Baricco, Deputy Mayor and secretary of the Commission, Giovanni Borel, court chaplain, Giuseppe Ortalda, director of the Opera Pia di Propaganda Fide, Roberto Murialdo, co-founder of the Collegio degli Artigianelli and the Charity Association; and finally, experienced men such as an engineer, a respected goldsmith, a wholesale trader, etc., all of whom were mostly landowners and had a wealth of experience. All people known to Don Bosco and "close" to the work at Valdocco.
Having completed the Commission, at the beginning of December 1851 Don Bosco forwarded the formal request to the General Intendant of Finance, Cavalier Alessandro Pernati di Momo (future Senator and Minister of the Interior of the Kingdom) as well as a "friend" of the work at Valdocco.

The appeal for gifts
He attached a very interesting circular to the request for authorisation, in which, after outlining a moving history of the Oratory – appreciated by the royal family, the government authorities, and the municipal authorities – he pointed out that the constant need to expand the work at Valdocco to accommodate more and more young people was consuming the economic resources of private charity. Therefore, in order to pay the expenses for the completion of the new chapel under construction, the decision was taken to appeal to public charity by means of a lottery of gifts to be offered spontaneously: "This consists of a lottery of items which the undersigned came up with the idea for, undertaking to cover the expenses for the completion of the new chapel, a venture to which your lordship will no doubt want to lend his support, reflecting on the excellence of the work to which it is directed. Whatever item your lordship would like to offer, be it of silk, wool, metal or wood, or the work of a reputable artist, or of a modest worker, or of a hard-working craftsman, or of a charitable gentlewoman, all will be gratefully accepted, because in the matter of charity every little help is a great thing, and because the offerings, even small ones, of many together can suffice to complete the desired work."
The circular also indicated the names of the promoters, to whom the gifts could be handed over, and the trusted persons who would then collect and guard them. The 46 promoters included various categories of people: professionals, professors,

impresarios, students, clerics, shopkeepers, merchants, priests; on the other hand, among the 90 or so promoters, noblewomen (baroness, marquise, countess and their attendants) seemed to prevail.
He did not fail to enclose the ‘lottery plan’ in all its many formal aspects with the application: collection of items, receipt of delivery of items, their valuation, authenticated tickets to be sold in a number proportionate to the number and value of the items, their display to the public, drawing of winners, publication of the numbers drawn, time for collecting the prizes, etc. A series of demanding tasks that Don Bosco did not shirk. The Pinardi chapel was no longer enough for his youngsters: they needed a bigger church, the planned one of St Francis de Sales (a dozen years later they would need another even bigger one, that of Mary Help of Christians!).

Positive response

Given the seriousness of the initiative and the high “quality” of the members of the proposing Commission, the response could only be positive and immediate. On 17 December the aforementioned Deputy Mayor Pietro Baricco transmitted to Don Bosco the relative decree, with the invitation to transmit copies of the future formal acts of the lottery to the municipal administration, responsible for the regularity of all legal requirements. At this point before Christmas Don Bosco sent the above circular to the printers, circulated it and began to collect gifts.
He was given two months to do this, as other lotteries were also taking place during the year. However, the gifts arrived slowly, so in mid-January Don Bosco was forced to reprint the above circular and asked for the collaboration of all the young people of Valdocco and friends to write addresses, visit known benefactors, publicise the initiative and collect the gifts.
But ‘the best’ was yet to come.

The exhibition hall

Valdocco had no space to display the gifts, so Don Bosco asked the Deputy Mayor Baricco, treasurer of the lottery commission, to ask the Ministry of War for three rooms in a part of St Dominic’s Convent that was available to the army. The Dominican Fathers agreed. Minister Alfonso Lamarmora granted them on 16 January. But soon Don Bosco realised that they would not be large enough, so he asked the King, through the almoner, Abbot Stanislao Gazzelli, for a larger room. He was told by the Royal Superintendent Pamparà that the King had no suitable premises and proposed to rent premises used for a game called Trincotto (or pallacorda: a kind of hand tennis) at his own expense. This room, however, would

only be available for the month of March and under certain conditions. Don Bosco refused the proposal but accepted the 200 lire offered by the King for renting the premises. He then went in search of another hall and found a suitable one on the recommendation of the town hall, behind the church of St Dominic, a few hundred metres from Valdocco.

Arrival of the gifts

In the meantime, Don Bosco had asked the Minister of Finance, the famous Count Camillo Cavour, for a reduction or exemption on the cost of postage for circular letters, tickets and the gifts themselves. Through the Count's brother, the very religious Marquis Gustavo di Cavour, he received approval for various postal reductions.

It was now a matter of finding an expert to assess the amount of the gifts and the consequent number of tickets to be sold. Don Bosco asked the Intendant and also suggested his name: a goldsmith who was a member of the Commission. The Intendant, however, replied through the Mayor asking him for a double copy of the gifts arrived in order to appoint his own expert. Don Bosco immediately carried out the request and so on 19 February the expert valued the 700 items collected at 4124,20 lire. After three months there were 1000 gifts, after four months 2000, until finally there were 3251 gifts, thanks to Don Bosco's continuous "begging" with individuals, priests and bishops and his repeated formal requests to City Hall to extend the time. Don Bosco also did not fail to criticise the estimate made by the municipal assessor of the gifts that continually arrived, which he said was lower than their actual value; and in fact other assessors were added, especially a painter for works of art.

The final figure was such that Don Bosco was authorised to issue 99,999 tickets at the price of 50 cents each. To the catalogue already printed with the gifts numbered with the name of the donor and the promoters a supplement was added with the latest gifts arrived. Among them were gifts from the Pope, the King, the Queen Mother, the Queen Consort, deputies, senators, municipal authorities, but also many humble people, especially women, who offered household objects and furnishings, even ones of little value (glass, inkwell, candle, carafe, corkscrew, cap, thimble, scissors, lamp, tape measure, pipe, key ring, soap, sharpener, sugar bowl). The most frequently offered gifts were books, 629 of them, and pictures, 265. Even the Valdocco boys competed to offer their own small gift, perhaps a booklet given to them by Don Bosco himself.

A huge job until the numbers were drawn

At this point it was necessary to print the tickets in a progressive series in two forms (small stub and ticket), have them both signed by two members of the commission, send the ticket with a note, document the money collected. Many benefactors were sent dozens of tickets, with an invitation to keep them or to pass them on to friends and acquaintances.
The date of the draw, initially set for 30 April, was postponed to 31 May and then to 30 June, to be held in mid-July. This last postponement was due to the explosion at the Borgo Dora powder magazine that devastated the Valdocco area.
For two afternoons, 12-13 July 1852, tickets were drawn on the balcony of the town hall. Four differently coloured wheel urns contained 10 pellets (0 to 9) identical and of the same colour as the wheel. Inserted one by one by the Deputy Mayor into the urns, and spun, eight young people from the Oratory performed the operation and the number drawn was proclaimed loudly and then published in the press. Many gifts were left at the Oratory, where they were later reused.

Was it worth it?
For the approximately 74,000 tickets sold, after deducting expenses, Don Bosco was left with approximately 26,000 lire, which he then divided equally with the neighbouring Cottolengo work. A small capital of course (half the purchase price of the Pinardi cottage the previous year), but the greatest result of the gruelling work he underwent to carry out the lottery – documented by dozens of often unpublished letters – was the direct and heartfelt involvement of thousands of people from every social class in his ‘fledgling Valdocco project’: in making it known, appreciated and then supported economically, socially and politically.
Don Bosco resorted many times to lotteries and always with the twofold purpose: to raise funds for his works for poor boys, for the missions, and to offer ways for believers (and non-believers) to practise charity, the most effective means, as he continually repeated, to ‘obtain the forgiveness of sins and secure eternal life’.

“I have always needed everyone” Don Bosco

To Senator Giuseppe Cotta

Giuseppe Cotta, banker, was a great benefactor of Don Bosco. The following declaration on stamp paper dated 5 February 1849 is preserved in the archives: ‘The undersigned priests T. Borrelli Gioanni of Turin and D. Bosco Gio’ di Castelnuovo d’Asti declare themselves to be debtors of three thousand francs to the ill.mo Cavaliere Cotta who lent it to them for a pious work. This sum is to be repaid by the undersigned in one year with legal interest’. Signed D. Giovanni Borel, D.

Bosco Gio.

At the bottom of the same page and on the same date Fr Joseph Cafasso writes: “The undersigned renders distinct thanks to Ill. mo Sig. Cav. Cotta for the above and at the same time makes himself guarantor to the same for the sum mentioned.” At the bottom of the page, Cotta signs that he received 2,000 lire on 10 April 1849, another 500 lire on 21 July 1849 and the balance on 4 January 1851.