

Souls and horsepower

Don Bosco wrote at night by candlelight, after a day spent in prayer, talks, meetings, study, courtesy visits. Always practical, tenacious, with a prodigious vision of the future.

“Da mihi animas, cetera tolle” is the motto that inspired all of Don Bosco’s life and action from time of the wandering Oratory in Turin (1844) to his final initiatives on his deathbed (January 1888) for the Salesians to go to England and Ecuador. But for him souls were not separated from bodies, so much so that since the 1950s he had proposed to dedicate his life so that young people would be “happy on earth and then in heaven.” Earthly happiness for his “poor and abandoned” young people consisted in having a roof, a family, a school, a playground, friendships and pleasant activities (games, music, theatre, outings...) and above all a profession that would guarantee them a serene future.

This explains the “arts and trades” workshops at Valdocco – the future vocational schools – that Don Bosco created from nothing: an authentic start-up, to put it in today’s terms. He had initially offered himself as the first instructor for tailoring, bookbinding, shoemaking... but progress did not stop and Don Bosco wanted to be at the forefront.

The availability of engines

Starting in 1868, at the initiative of the mayor of Turin, Giovanni Filippo Galvagno, some of the Ceronda stream, which had its source at an altitude of 1,350 m, were captured by the Ceronda Canal to be distributed to various industries that were springing up in the northern area of the Piedmontese capital, Valdocco to be precise. The canal was then divided into two branches at the height of the Lucento district, the one on the right, completed in 1873, after crossing the Dora Riparia with a canal, continued to run parallel to what is now Corso Regina Margherita and Via San Donato to then discharge into the Po. Don Bosco, ever vigilant to what was happening in

the city, immediately asked the City Hall for “the concession of at least 20 horsepower of water power” from the canal that would pass alongside Valdocco. Once the request was granted, he had the two inlets built at his own expense, arranged the machines in the workshops so that they could easily receive the motive power, and had an engineer study the engines needed for the purpose. When everything was ready, he asked the authorities on 4 July 1874 to proceed with the connection at his own expense. For several months he received no answer, so on 7 November he renewed his request. The response this time came fairly quickly. It seemed positive, but he asked for some clarifications first. Don Bosco replied in the following terms:

“Your Excellency the Mayor,

I hasten to convey to Your Excellency, the clarifications that I was pleased to ask you for in your letter of the 19th of this month, and I have the honour of notifying you that the industries to which the horsepower from the Ceronda water will be applied are:

1st Printing works for which no fewer than 100 workers are employed.

2nd Pulp factory with no fewer than 26 workers.

3rd Typeface foundry, copper engraving with no fewer than 30 workers.

4th Iron workshop with no fewer than 30 workers.

5th Carpenters, cabinet-makers, turners with hydraulic saw: no fewer than 40 workers.

Total workers more than 220.”

This number included instructors and young students. Given the situation, besides being subjected to unnecessary physical exertion, they would not have been able to withstand the competition. In fact, Don Bosco added: “These works are now done at the expense of a steam engine for the printing works, but for the other workshops they are done by manpower, in such a way that they could not withstand the competition of those

who use water power.”

And in order to avoid possible delays and fears on the part of the public authorities, he immediately offered a warning: “We do not object to depositing a bill of public debt as security, as soon as it can be known what it should be.”

He always thought big... but was content with the possible

He had to think about the future, about new laboratories, new machines and so the demand for electricity would necessarily increase. Don Bosco then raised the demand and cited existential and contextual reasons:

“But while I accept the theoretical strength of ten horsepower, I find myself needing to note that this is totally insufficient for my needs, since the project which is being carried out was based on 30 [?] as I had the honour of expounding in my letter of November last. For this reason, I would ask you to take into consideration the construction work already underway, the nature of this institute, which lives on charity alone, the number of workers involved, the fact that we were among the first to subscribe and therefore be willing to grant us, if not the 30 horsepower promised, at least the largest amount available...”

“Word to the wise, one might say.

A successful entrepreneur

The amount of water granted to the Oratory on that occasion has not come down to us. The fact remains that Don Bosco once again demonstrates the qualities of a capable entrepreneur that everyone at the time recognised and still recognises in him today: a story of moral integrity, the right mix of humility and self-confidence, determination and courage, communication skills and an eye to the future. Obviously, the fuel for all his ambitions and aspirations was a single passion: souls. He had many collaborators, but somehow everything fell on his shoulders. Tangible proof of this are the thousands of letters, just one of which we have published here, corrected and re-corrected several times: letters he

usually wrote in the evening or at night by candlelight, after a day spent in prayer, talks, meetings, study, courtesy calls. While drawing up his plans by day, by night he was then able to dream up how they would develop. And these would come in the following decades, with the hundreds of Salesian vocational schools scattered around the world, with tens of thousands of boys (and then girls) who would find a springboard to a future full of hope in them.