

The Exercise for a Happy Death in Don Bosco's educational experience (3/5)

[*\(continuation from previous article\)*](#)

2. The litany for a happy death in the context of the youthful spirituality promoted by Don Bosco

The litany for a happy death included in the *Companion of Youth* deserves a separate discourse. It was but one moment in the exercise, the emotionally more intense one. The heart of the monthly practice, in fact, was the examination of conscience, well-made confession, fervent communion, the decision to give oneself totally to God, and making good resolutions of a moral and spiritual nature. In the volumes or manuals dedicated to preaching, in previous centuries we do not find texts similar to this litany we find in the *Companion of Youth*, the composition of which Don Bosco attributes to “a Protestant woman converted to the Catholic Religion at the age of 15, and died at the age of 18 with a reputation for holiness.”^[1] He had drawn it from pious books published at that time in Piedmont.^[2] The prayer, “given an indulgence by Pius VII, but already circulating at the end of the 18th century”,^[3] could serve as an effective tool for moving the affections through the imaginative dramatisation of the last moments of life: it placed the faithful on their deathbed, inviting them to review the various parts of the body and the corresponding senses, considered in the state they would be in at the final moment, to shake them up, urge confidence in divine mercy and spur them on to resolutions of conversion and perseverance. It was an exercise in which the romantic spirit found relish and which Don Bosco considered particularly suitable on an emotional and spiritual level, as can be seen from some of his narrative texts. The formula was very popular during the 19th century: we find it reproduced in

various collections of prayers even outside Piedmont.[\[4\]](#) We find it interesting to reproduce it in its entirety:

Lord Jesus, God of goodness and Father of mercies, I approach you with a contrite and humble heart: to you I recommend my last hour and the decision of my eternal doom.

When my feet, benumbed, shall warn me that my mortal course is drawing to a close, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my hands, cold and trembling, shall no longer be able to clasp the crucifix, and against my will I am forced to let it fall on my bed of suffering, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my eyes, dim and troubled at the approach of death shall fix themselves on you, my last and only support, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my lips, cold and quivering, shall pronounce for the last time your adorable name, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my face, pale and livid, shall inspire the bystanders with compassion and awe, and my hair, bathed in the sweat of death, and stiffening on my head, shall forebode my approaching end, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my ears, soon to be shut forever to the words of men, shall be open to hear your voice pronouncing the sentence by which my condition is to be fixed irrevocably for all eternity, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my imagination, agitated by fearful and horrible spectres, shall be drowned in an abyss of anguish; and my spirit, troubled with the memory of my ill-doings, and the fear of your justice, shall wrestle with the powers of darkness, who will strive to take from me the consoling sight of your mercies and plunge me into the pit of despair, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my weak heart, weighed down with the pain of my illness, shall be overtaken with the horror of death, and be exhausted by the efforts it has made against the enemies of my salvation, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When I shall have shed my last tear, the sign of my

dissolution, receive it as a sacrifice of expiation so that I may expire a victim of penance, and then in that dreadful moment, merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.

When those present encircling my bed shall be moved with compassion for me, and invoke your clemency on my behalf, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When I shall have lost the use of my senses and when the world shall have vanished from my sight; when my agonising soul shall feel the sorrows of death, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my last sigh shall summon my soul from my body, accept it as a sign of holy impatience to come to you, and you, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my soul, trembling on my lips, shall bid adieu to this world, and leave my body lifeless, pale and cold, receive this separation as a homage which I willingly pay to your Divine Majesty and then, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When at length my soul, admitted to your presence, shall first behold the immortal splendour of your Majesty, reject it not but receive me into the loving bosom of your mercy where I may ever sing your praises: *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

Let us pray: Oh God, who have doomed all men to die but concealed from all the hour of their death, grant that I may pass my days in the practice of holiness and justice and that I may deserve to quit this world in your holiness and love. Through Jesus Christ Our Lord, who lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit ... Amen..[\[5\]](#)

Eighteenth-century rationalism and the Baroque taste for the macabre and funereal, still found in the *Preparation for Death* by Saint Alphonsus Liguori,[\[6\]](#) was surpassed in the 19th century by the romantic sensibility that preferred to follow the path of sentiment, which, “in order to reach the intellect, goes first directly to the heart, and by making the heart feel the strength and beauty of religion, fixes the intellect’s attention, and facilitates its consent”, as Monsignor Angelo Antonio Scotti wrote.[\[7\]](#) Therefore, even

in the consideration of death, it was considered an excellent thing to insist on the emotional levers and affections to provoke a generous response to the absolute gift of self made by the divine Saviour for the salvation of humanity. Spiritual authors and preachers considered it important and necessary to describe “the afflictions and oppressions that are inseparable from the efforts that the soul must naturally make in breaking the bonds of the body”,[\[8\]](#) together with the depiction of the serene death of the righteous. They wanted to bring faith into the concreteness of existence to stimulate the reform of morals and the purpose of a more genuine and fervent Christian life: “Certainly the hope of deserving a good few final moments and a holy death has been and always will be the most powerful incentive to induce men to abandon vice; as the spectacle of a wicked man who dies as he lived, is a great lesson for all mortals.”[\[9\]](#)

The litany for the happy death included in the *Companion of Youth* should be considered, therefore, entirely functional to the success of the monthly recollection and to the ideals of Christian life that the Saint proposed to the young, as well as being particularly suited to the emotional and cultural sensitivity of that precise historical moment. If the reading of those formulas generates a felling of disquiet today, as evoked by Delumeau and offers an “altogether distressing” representation of Don Bosco’s religious pedagogy,[\[10\]](#) this happens above all because they are extrapolated from their frames of reference. Instead, as can be seen from the educative practice of the Oratory and from the narrative testimonies left by Don Bosco, not only did those youngsters find pleasure and encouragement in reciting them, but they effectively contributed to making the exercise for a happy death fruitful in moral and spiritual results. To probe their educational fruitfulness, we need to anchor them to the whole of the substantial proposal of Christian life presented by Don Bosco and to the fervid and industrious experience of the Oratory.

The overall horizon of reference can already be

grasped in the small meditations that introduce the *Companion of Youth*, where Don Bosco intends above all to present “a scheme of life, brief and easy enough, which will enable you to be a joy to your parents, and a glory to your country, making you good citizens upon earth, and one day blessed inhabitants of Heaven.”[\[11\]](#) First and foremost, he encourages them to “lift up their gaze”, to contemplate the beauty of creation and the very high dignity of man, the most sublime of creatures, endowed with a spiritual soul made to love the Lord, to grow in virtue and holiness, destined for Paradise, for eternal communion with God.[\[12\]](#) Consideration of the boundless divine love, revealed to us in Christ’s sacrifice for the salvation of humanity, and of God’s special predilection for children and young people, must move them to correspond with generosity, to “direct every action” to the attainment of the end for which they have been created, with a firm resolve to do all those things that may please the Lord and to avoid “those things that might disgust Him”.[\[13\]](#) And since a person’s salvation “ordinarily depends on the time of youth”, it is indispensable to begin *serving the Lord* at an early age: “ if we lead a good life when we are young, we shall be good when we are old, and our death will be happy, the beginning of eternal bliss. On the other hand, if vice takes hold of us in youth, it will gradually grow in the course of the different stages of our life until death, which will be the terrible herald of a most unhappy eternity.”[\[14\]](#)

Don Bosco therefore invites the boys to give themselves “in time to God”, to commit themselves joyfully to his service, overcoming the prejudice that Christian life is sad and melancholic: “It is not true, the one who serves the devil will be melancholic, and however he tries to be happy, he will always have a heart that weeps, saying to him: you are unhappy because you are the enemy of God [...]. Courage therefore, dear boys, give yourselves in time to virtue, and I assure you that you will always have a cheerful and contented heart, and you will know how sweet it is to serve the Lord.”[\[15\]](#)

The Christian life consists essentially in serving the Lord in "holy cheerfulness"; this is one of the most fruitful and special ideas of Don Bosco's spiritual and pedagogical heritage: "If you do this, how many consolations you will feel at the point of death! On the contrary, if you do not expect to serve God, how many regrets you will feel at the end of your days." [16] He who puts off conversion, who consumes his days in idleness or in useless and harmful dissipations, in sins or in vices, runs the risk of no longer having the opportunity, the time and the grace to return to God with danger of eternal damnation. [17] Indeed, death may surprise him when he least expects it: "Woe to the one who has fallen out with God at that moment." [18] But divine mercy offers the repentant sinner the sacrament of Penance, a sure means of regaining grace and with it peace of heart. Celebrated regularly and with the proper dispositions, the sacrament not only becomes an effective instrument of salvation, but also a privileged educational moment in which the confessor, the "faithful friend of the soul", can securely direct the young person on the path to salvation and holiness. Confession is prepared with a good examination of conscience, asking the Lord for light: "Enlighten me with your grace, that I may know my sins now as you will make them known to me when I come before your judgement. Let me, O my God, detest them with true sorrow." [19] The regular celebration of the sacrament guarantees the serenity necessary to live a truly happy life: "It seems to me that this is the surest means of living happy days in the midst of the afflictions of life, at the end of which we too will calmly see the moment of death approaching." [20]

The friendship with God regained through Confession finds its summit in Eucharistic Communion, a privileged moment in which the young person offers all of himself so that God may "take possession" of his heart and become its undisputed master. In the act in which he opens himself unreservedly to the sanctifying and transfiguring action of grace, he experiences the ineffable joy that

accompanies a genuine spiritual experience and is led to ardently desire eternal communion with God: "If I want something great, I go to receive the holy host in which is found the *corpus quod pro nobis traditum est*, that same body, blood, soul and divinity, which Jesus Christ offered to his eternal Father for us on the cross. What am I lacking in order to be happy? Nothing in this world: I only lack being able to enjoy, unveiled in heaven, the one whom now with the eyes of faith I adore on the altar." [\[21\]](#)

Despite the strong emotional accent that connotes 19th century religious sentiment, the spirituality proposed by Don Bosco is very concrete. In fact he presents conversion as a process of appropriation of the baptismal promises, which begins at the moment when the young person, in a "frank and resolute manner", decides to correspond to the divine call, [\[22\]](#) to detach his heart from the affection for sin in order to love God above all else and let himself be docilely moulded by grace. Conversion thus translates into a hard-working and ardent living, animated by charity, in a positive and joyful striving for perfection, beginning with the small everyday things. The fervour of charity inspires a "positive" mortification of the senses, focused on overcoming oneself, reforming one's life, the punctual fulfilment of duties, cordiality and service to one's neighbour. Such mortification has nothing afflictive about it, because it is generous adherence to life with its unexpected events and difficulties, it is the ability to endure daily adversities, it is steadfastness in fatigue, it is sobriety and temperance, it is fortitude. Every occasion, therefore, can become an expression of the love of God, a love that drives the person to live and work "in His presence", to do everything and endure everything for His sake.

Charity animates prayer in a special way, since, through small practices, brief prayers, visits to the Blessed Sacrament and devotions, it nourishes the desire for affectionate communion, translates into unconditional self-offering, joyful adaptation to the divine will, desire for

mystical union and yearning for the eternal communion of Paradise.

Don Bosco summarises his proposal in simple formulas, but he does not lower the level, and constantly reminds the young people that it is necessary to decide resolutely: "How many things, then, do we need in order to make ourselves holy? Only one thing: you *must want it*. Yes; as long as you want it, you can be a saint: all you need is the *will*." This is shown by the examples of saints "who lived in lowly circumstances, and amid the travails of an active life", but sanctified themselves, simply "by doing well all that they had to do. They fulfilled all their duties to God, suffering everything for his sake, offering him their pains, their travails: this is the great science of eternal health and holiness."[\[23\]](#)

The experience of Michael Magone, a pupil at the Valdocco Oratory, is enlightening. "Left to himself," wrote Don Bosco, "he was in danger of beginning to tread the sad path of evil"; the Lord invited him to follow him; "he listened to the loving call and by constantly responding to divine grace came to draw in admiration all those who knew him, thus showing how marvellous the effects of God's grace are on those who work to correspond to it."[\[24\]](#) The decisive moment is when the boy, having become aware of his situation and overcome, with the help of his educator, the deep sense of anguish and guilt that was tormenting him, felt that "it was time to break with the devil" and decided to "give himself to God" through a good confession and a firm resolution.[\[25\]](#) Don Bosco recounts the teenager's emotions and reflections on the night following his confession: restored to the grace of God and reassured of his eternal salvation,[\[26\]](#) he experiences irrepressible joy.

It is difficult to put into words all that I felt that unforgettable night. I hardly slept at all. In some little time I dozed off but soon my imagination made me see hell open before me, populated with hosts of devils. I drove

that thought away as I reflected that all my sins had been forgiven. Then I saw a whole host of angels who showed me paradise, saying to me: See what happiness lies in store for you so long as you keep your resolutions!

About halfway through the night I was so overcome by emotion that I had to get up, kneel by my bed and say over and over again: Oh, how wretched are those who fell into sin! But how much more unhappy are those who live in sin. I believe that if they could only experience for even a single minute the great consolation that being in the state of grace brings they would all go to confession to placate the anger of God, to remove remorse of conscience and to experience peace of heart. Oh, sin, sin! What a terrible curse you are to those who allow your entry into their hearts. If I ever have the misfortune to commit even the smallest sin again I am determined to go to confession immediately.[\[27\]](#)

We find here the keys to interpreting the horizon of meaning in which Don Bosco places the pedagogical and spiritual function of the exercise for a happy death.

[\(continued\)](#)

[\[1\]](#) Bosco, *The Provident Young Man*, 140.

[\[2\]](#) We find the same formula, with minor variations, in an anonymous pamphlet entitled *Mezzi da praticarsi e risoluzioni da farsi dopo una buona confessione per mantenersi nella grazia di Dio riacquistata*, Vigevano, s.e., 1842, 33-36. Cf. also *Il cristiano in chiesa, ovvero affettuose orazioni per la Messa, per la Confessione e Comunione e per l'adorazione del Santissimo Sacramento*. Operetta spirituale del P. Fulgenzio M. Riccardi di Torino, Min. Oss., Torino, G.B. Paravia 1845, where the attribution of the sequence is, in the wording, similar to that of Don Bosco: "Litanie per ottenere una buona morte composte da una Damigella nata tra i Protestanti,

convertasi alla Religione Cattolica all'età di quindici anni, e morta di diciotto in istima universale di santità" (*ibid.*, 165).

[3] Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Vol. II: *Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*, Roma, LAS, 1981, 340. Cf. also Michel Bazart, *Don Bosco et l'exercice de la bonne mort*, in "Chahiers Salésiens" N. 4, Avril 1981, 7-24.

[4] For example, it can be found, with some stylistic reworking and minor amplifications, under the title "Gemiti e suppliche per la buona morte", in Giuseppe Riva, *Manuale di Filotea*. Twenty-first edition again revised and expanded, Milan, Serafino Majocchi, 1874, 926-927.

[5] Bosco, *The Companion of Youth*, 138-142.

[6] See for example the first consideration "Ritratto d'un uomo da poco tempo morto", in Alfonso Maria de Liguori, *Opere ascetiche*, vol. 8, *Apparecchio alla morte*, Torino, Giacinto Marietti, 1825, 10-19.

[7] Angelo Antonio Scotti, *Osservazioni sulle false dottrine e sulle funeste conseguenze dell'opera del Lauvergne intitolata "De l'agonie et de la mort dans toutes les classes de la société"*. Dissertazione letta nell'Accademia di Religione Cattolica in Roma il dì 4 luglio 1844, Roma, Tipografia delle Belle Arti, 1844, 3. Scotti disputes the French author, a physician and scientist, who believes the statement that only true Catholics die peacefully is false: atheists or adherents of other religions or even immoral and bad individuals can also die peacefully, while it happens not infrequently that holy men, people of great virtue and ascetics, especially among Catholics, suffer death throes that are agonising and desperate, since it all depends on the type of illness, cerebral lucidity, the state of physiological or psychic debilitation and the anxieties induced by religious

fanaticism, cf. Hubert Lauvergne, *De l'agonie et de la mort dans toutes les classes de la société sous le rapport humanitaire, physiologique et religieux*, 2 vols, Paris, Librairie de J.-B. Baillière et C. Gosselin, 1842.

[8] John Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, Turin, Tip. G.B. Paravia e Comp., 1859, 116.

[9] Scotti, *Osservazioni sulle false dottrine*, 14-15.

[10] Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, vol. II, 341.

[11] Bosco, *The Companion of Youth*, 7.

[12] Cf. *ibid.*, 10.

[13] *Ibid.*, 10-11.

[14] *Ibid.*, 6.

[15] *Ibid.*, 13.

[16] *Ibid.*, 32.

[17] Cf. *ibid.*, 32-34.

[18] *Ibid.*, 38.

[19] *Ibid.*, 93.

[20] Bosco, *Life of Young Dominic Savio*, 136.

[21] *Ibid.*, 69.

[22] Giovanni Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, Torino, Tip. G.B. Paravia e Comp., 1861, 4-5.

[23] John Bosco, *Vita di santa Zita serva e di sant'Isidoro contadino*. Turin, P. De-Agostini, 1853, 6-7

[\[24\]](#) Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele*, 5.

[\[25\]](#) *Ibid.*, 20-21.

[\[26\]](#) “He made his confession with great feeling and many times broke down crying. Before leaving he said to his confessor: ‘Do you think all my sins have been forgiven? If I were to die tonight would I be saved’?

‘Go in peace’, was the answer. ‘The Lord in His great mercy waited until now for you to make a good confession so I am sure He has pardoned all your sins and if, in His adorable plan, called you to Himself tonight you are absolutely certain of your eternal salvation.’ (*ibid.*, 21).

[\[27\]](#) *Ibid.*, 21-22.