 Reading time: 4 min.

In 1935, following the canonisation of Don Bosco in 1934, the Salesians took care to collect testimonies about him. A certain Pietro Pons, who as a boy had attended the festive oratory in Valdocco for about ten years (from 1871 to 1882), and who had also attended two years of primary school (with classrooms under the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians) on 8 November gave a beautiful testimony of those years. We excerpt some passages from it, almost all unpublished.

The figure of Don Bosco

He was the centre of attraction for the whole Oratory. This is how our former Oratorian Pietro Pons remembers him at the end of the 1970s: “He no longer had vigour, but he was always calm and smiling. He had two eyes that pierced and penetrated the mind. He would appear among us: he was a joy for everyone. D. Rua, D. Lazzero were at his side as if they had the Lord in their midst. D. Barberis and all the boys were running towards him, surrounding him, some walking beside him, some backwards, facing him. It was a fortune, a coveted privilege to be able to be close to him, to talk to him. He strolled along talking, and looking at everyone with those two eyes that turned every which way, electrifying hearts with joy.” Among the episodes that have stuck in his mind 60 years later, he recalls two in particular: “One day… he appeared alone at the front door of the sanctuary. Then a flock of boys rushed to run him over like a gust of wind. But he held the umbrella in his hand. It had handle and a shaft as thick as that of the peasants. He raised it and, using it like a sword, juggled it to repel that affectionate assault, o the right, to the left, to open up a passage. He pointed it at one, then off to the side, but in the meantime the others approached from the other side. So the game, the joke continued, bringing joy to hearts, eager to see the good Father return from his journey. He looked like a village priest of the good-natured kind.”

Games and teatrino

A Salesian oratory without games is unthinkable. The elderly former pupil recalls: “the courtyard was occupied by a building, the church of Mary Help and at the end of a low wall… a sort of hut rested on the left corner, where there was always someone to watch over those who entered… As soon as you entered the playground on the right, there was a swing with only one seat, then the parallel bars and the fixed bar for the older children, who enjoyed doing their spins and somersaults, and also the trapeze, and the single flying step, which were, however, near the sacristies beyond St Joseph’s chapel. And again: “This courtyard was of a beautiful

length and lent itself very well to speed races starting from the side of the church and returning there on the way back. Barra rotta, sack races and a game called pignatte were also played. The latter games were announced on the previous Sunday. So was the greasy pole but the pole was planted with the thin end at the bottom so that it would be more difficult to climb. There were lotteries, and the ticket was paid for with a penny or two. Inside the house was a small library kept in a cupboard."

As well as games there was the famous teatrino "little theatre" where genuine dramas such as "The Crusader's Son" were performed, Don Cagliero's romanze were sung, and musicals such as the Cobbler were presented by the legendary Carlo Gastini [a brilliant past pupil leader]. The play, attended free of charge by the parents, was held in the hall under the nave of the church of Mary Help, but the former oratory boy also recalls that "once it was performed at the Moretta house" [today's parish church near the square]. Poor people lived there in the most squalid poverty. In the cellars that can be seen under the balcony there was a poor mother who would carry her son Charles outside at midday. She had to carry him on her shoulders to sunbathe."

Religious services and formation meetings

At the festive oratory there was no lack of religious services on Sunday mornings: Holy Mass with Holy Communion, prayers of the good Christian; followed in the afternoon by recreation, catechism, and Don Giulio Barberis' sermon. By now an old man, "Don Bosco never came to say Mass or to preach, but only to visit and stay with the boys during recreation… The catechists and assistants had their pupils with them in church during the services and taught them catechism. A little lesson was given to everyone. The lesson was required to be memorised every Sunday and then also an explanation." The solemn feasts ended with a procession and a snack for all: "On leaving church after mass there was breakfast. A young man on the right outside the door would give us a loaf of bread, another on the left would put two slices of salami on it with a fork." Those boys were content with little, but they were delighted. When the boarders joined the oratorians for the singing of vespers, their voices could be heard in Via Milano and Via Corte d'appello!

Formation group meetings were also held at the festive oratory. In the house near the church of St Francis, there was "a small, low room that could hold about twenty people…In the room there was a small table for the lecturer, there were benches for the meetings and conferences for the older boys in general, and a meeting of the St Aloysius sodality, almost every Sunday."

Who were the Oratorians?

Of his 200 or so companions – but their number diminished in the winter due to the return of seasonal workers to their families – our sprightly old man recalled that many were from Biella “almost all ‘bic’, that is, they carried the wooden bucket full of lime and the wicker basket full of bricks to the bricklayers at the buildings.” Others were “apprentice bricklayers, mechanics, tinsmiths.” Poor apprentices: they worked from morning to night every day and only on Sundays could they afford a bit of recreation “at Don Bosco’s” (as his oratory was called): “We played Asino vola, under the direction of the then Br Milanesio [a future priest who was a great missionary in Patagonia]. Br Ponzano, later a priest, was a gym teacher. He made us do free exercises, with sticks, on the equipment.”

Pietro Pons’ memories are much broader, as rich in distant suggestions as they are pervaded by a shadow of nostalgia; they wait to be known in full. We hope to do so soon.