

□ Reading time: 4 min.

The concept of “doing nothing” didn’t exist in Don Bosco’s mind, not even when he was a boy. In his youth, his entertainments were games with companions to help them improve, acrobatics training, educating his dog Bracco, horse riding, and more. As a priest, he transformed games and festivities into tools of apostolate for Turin’s youth: from carnival celebrations with piñatas and chapel dialogues to sporting challenges, grand recreations, autumn walks – always maintaining the joyful spirit that characterised him. He used to say, “Idleness is the teacher of many vices” and “May the devil always find us busy.”

The term ‘leisure’ refers to everything that ‘distracts’—that is, what provides rest from work, diverts from one’s worries, and thus ‘entertains.’

One might wonder whether Don Bosco ever took moments of leisure in his life, or some half-hour of ‘relaxation,’ to use a foreign term that sounds refined but ultimately derives from the Latin ‘relaxatio.’

The word ‘leisure’ does not appear in the analytical indexes of the first Salesian history. Instead, one finds entries such as “entertainment,” “games,” and “recreation,” which refer not so much to Don Bosco’s personal leisure as to his initiatives for the benefit of young people.

However, it is known that, as a boy and young student, John did enjoy moments of “relaxation,” such as when he went bird-nesting or amused himself with his neighbourhood friends.

His friendship with the dog of Sussambrino is well-known—the famous ‘pointer’ he trained to catch bread crusts mid-air and not eat them until commanded, to climb and descend the hayloft ladder, and to perform circus-like jumps and tricks.

Similarly, when the parish priest Fr. Dassano in Castelnuovo entrusted him with the care of the stable, John, after learning to ride, would leap onto the horse’s back and delight in spurring it into a gallop.

Even in Chieri, he played with his schoolmates and, in the Seminary, occasionally

joined card and tarot games—though he later stopped as they disturbed his studies and sleep.

They were no longer leisure for him!

The Spectacles of Priests

In Morialdo, during celebrations for the Feast of the Maternity of Mary, the main solemnity of the village, the cleric Joseph Cafasso, invited by Johnny Bosco to enjoy some spectacle, he replied:

“My dear friend, the spectacles of priests are the church services” (MO 42).

John never forgot those words, as seen in his resolutions on the day of his clerical vestition (MO 87-88).

But he applied them in his own way, gradually transforming jokes, games, and various amusements into tools of apostolate. It can be said that from the moment he began his priestly ministry among Turin’s poor and abandoned youth, leisure was solely for his boys.

He used it as a safety valve for those needing freedom, cheerfulness, even noise—anything to lighten hearts and divert them from sad thoughts, indirectly leading them to something more important: study, work, prayer, virtue.

Here, one could describe the festivities, spectacles, and various forms of recreation that Don Bosco devised and realised during his work as a priest-educator.

For the 1847 Carnival, for example, Don Bosco warned the boys that in the final days before Lent, there would be extraordinary entertainments and games. He wanted to steer them away from the unsuitable city carnival. With the Theologian Borel, he first held a delightful instruction in the chapel in dialogue form, sparking everyone’s laughter.

After church services, he organised a lively recreation, including the game of ‘piñatas’ hung from a rope, filled with fruit and sweets—or water. Blindfolded boys,

chosen by their peers and armed with sticks, had to spin around trying to hit the piñatas... with predictable consequences (MB III, 180).

As long as age and duties allowed, Don Bosco was the first in games, the soul of recreation. He played skittles, bocci, and 'barrarotta.' He challenged the boys to outrun him. The last such challenge reportedly took place in 1868. Despite swollen legs, Don Bosco ran so swiftly that he outpaced all the Oratory boys, leaving onlookers astonished (MB III, 127).

But the most distinctive family celebration for the entire Oratory became June 24, deliberately combined with Don Bosco's name day—marked by beautiful church services, a special meal, a show in his honour, theatrical entertainment, and much joy.

Really Never Personal Leisure?

Yet, reviewing Don Bosco's life, we find he had opportunities not only for spiritual relief but also, indirectly, for leisure amid financial struggles, physical and moral suffering, and grave problems of all kinds.

In late August 1850, he travelled to Val Chisone. Asked years later why, he replied that, planning to write a *History of Italy*, he wished to see the mountains where Piedmontese troops fought the heroic Battle of Assietta in 1747 to prevent the invasion of Savoyard states.

Don Bosco was then burdened with serious concerns, and the trip may have served as leisure—though his biographer believes his report concealed its main purpose: an act of devotion and gratitude toward Archbishop Fransoni, then imprisoned at Fort Fenestrelle.

During his first trip to Rome in 1858, he found solace in visiting the Eternal City's holiest sites. History, art, faith, Christian glories, grand basilicas, and catacombs deeply moved his devout and "Roman" soul. This was true spiritual relief—but also genuine leisure.

We might also recall his triumphant 1872 return to Valdocco's boys after a month of

grave illness in isolation at Varazze. That celebration, the joy radiating from his boys' faces, surely brought him unique comfort.

His repeated autumn walks back to Becchi with the boys must also have been leisurely.

And the harvest made in December 1887, among the most intimate disciples, with the grapes of the pergola that adorned the rooms of Valdocco, delayed to wait for the arrival of Mons. John Cagliero, was for Don Bosco, who was seriously ill, truly a last leisure. Sitting in the loggia, he felt at the sunset of his life, the great joy of seeing his best children share with him the bunches of that grape, which reminded him of his native land, his mother, childhood, the dream at nine years of age.