

□ Reading time: 4 min.

At the most critical moment of the origins of the Oratory, Don Bosco finds himself isolated, opposed by the civil authorities, suspected of mental imbalance, and without a stable place for his boys. Even friends and collaborators urge him to scale back or abandon the work. In this climate, the Marchioness of Barolo forces a choice upon him: continue with her institutions or devote himself to poor young people. Don Bosco answers without hesitation, renouncing positions, financial security, and protection in order to consecrate himself totally to abandoned children. He accepts losing everything, trusting solely in Providence. Left almost alone with hundreds of boys, he lives a decisive act of abandonment and fidelity to the mission he has received.

Because he never looked back.

Various rumours had spread. "Don Bosco with his troop of more or less rascally boys is a public danger. He disturbs good order; he could at any moment stir up a revolution," (the meeting with the "City Vicar," Marquis Michele di Cavour, who threatens to forbid every gathering of boys). On the other hand, "this poor priest, worn out, assailed by difficulties, does not cease to speak of a marvellous future: he is ill, obsessed, on the way to madness." Moreover, he does not know where to gather his young people. He has received the order to leave the last place rented for them, the Filippi meadow. Even his friends advise him to abandon the work, or at least a good part of it. In such circumstances, he is put up against the wall by the Marchioness of Barolo. The dialogue that follows is a high point in the apostolic and spiritual life of Don Bosco. In the solitude of a kind of agony, the heroic choice, total abandonment into the hands of God.

And this, without hesitation. "My answer is already thought out... I have already thought about it..."

“God has always helped me”

The many things that were being said about Don Bosco began to trouble the Marchioness of Barolo, all the more since the Municipality of Turin showed itself opposed to his plans.

“One day, coming into my room, she began to speak to me as follows: — I am very pleased with the care you take of my institutions. I thank you for having worked so much to introduce into them the singing of sacred hymns, plainchant, music, arithmetic, and even the metric system.

— No thanks are necessary. Priests must work as their duty. God will repay everything, and let us say no more about it.

— What I meant to say is that I am very sorry that the multitude of your occupations has undermined your health. It is not possible that you can continue the direction of my works and that of the abandoned boys, all the more now that their number has grown beyond measure. I am inclined to propose that you do only what is your obligation, that is, the direction of the Ospedaletto, no longer go to the prisons, to the Cottolengo, and suspend every concern for the children. What do you say?

— Madam Marchioness, God has helped me up to now and will not fail to help me. Do not worry about what must be done. Between myself, Fr. Pacchiotti, and Fr. Borrelli we will do everything.

— But I can no longer tolerate that you kill yourself. So many and such varied occupations, whether one wants it or not, turn to the detriment of your health and of my institutions. And then the rumours circulating about your mental health, the opposition of the local authorities, compel me to advise you...

— To what, Madam Marchioness?

— Either to leave the work of the boys, or the work of the Refuge. Think about it and you will answer me.

— My answer is already thought out. You have money and will easily find as many priests as you want for your institutions. With poor children, it is not so. At this moment, if I withdraw, everything goes up in smoke. Therefore, I will continue to

suffer what I can for the Refuge. I will cease from the regular position and will devote myself deliberately to the care of abandoned children.

— But how will you live?

— God has always helped me and will help me also in the future.

— But you are ruined in health, your head no longer serves you; you will get bogged down in debts; you will come to me, and I protest from now on that I will never give you a penny for your boys. Now accept my advice as a mother. I will continue your salary, and I will increase it if you wish. Go and spend one, three, five years somewhere; rest; when you are well restored, return to the Refuge and you will always be welcome. Otherwise, you put me in the unpleasant necessity of dismissing you from my institutions. Think seriously.

— I have already thought about it, Madam Marchioness. My life is consecrated to the good of youth. I thank you for the offers you make me, but I cannot depart from the path that divine Providence has traced for me.

— So, you prefer your vagabonds to my Institutions? If that is so, you are dismissed at this moment. Today itself I will provide for who is to replace you.

I made her see that so precipitous a dismissal would lead one to suppose motives not honourable either to me or to her. It was better to act calmly and preserve between us that same charity with which we must then both speak at the tribunal of the Lord.

— Therefore, she concluded, I will give you three months, after which you will leave the direction of my Ospedaletto to others.

I accepted the warning, abandoning myself to what God would dispose for me.

Meanwhile, the rumour increasingly prevailed that Don Bosco had gone mad. My friends showed themselves distressed; others laughed; but all kept their distance from me. The Archbishop let things be; Fr. Cafasso advised temporizing; Father Borel kept silent. Thus, all my collaborators left me alone in the midst of about four hundred boys...”

d. CERIA, Epistolario di San Giovanni Bosco, p. 161