 Reading time: 16 min.

During the eleventh General Chapter of the Salesian Congregation, the first Rector Major, Fr. Paolo Albera, was elected. Although he formally represents the second successor of Don Bosco, he was actually the first to be elected, as Don Rua had already been personally appointed by Don Bosco, through divine inspiration and at the request of Pope Pius IX (Don Rua's appointment was officially confirmed on November 27, 1884, and subsequently ratified by the Holy See on February 11, 1888). Let us now be guided by the narrative of Fr. Eugenio Ceria, who narrates the election of Don Bosco's first successor and the works of the General Chapter.

It hardly seems possible to speak of ancient Salesians without starting from Don Bosco. This time it is to admire divine Providence, which led Don Bosco to meet the indispensable men along the arduous path in various roles and offices of his newly established Congregation. Men, I say, not made, but to be made. It was up to the founder to seek out young boys, to raise them, educate them, instruct them, inform them of his spirit, so that wherever he sent them, they would represent him worthily among the members and before outsiders. This is also the case with his second successor. The small and slender Paolino Albera, when he came to the Oratory from his native village, did not stand out among the crowd of companions for any of those characteristics that draw attention to a newcomer. Yet Don Bosco soon noticed in him the innocence of his character, intellectual ability veiled by natural shyness, and a childlike disposition, which gave him good reason to hope. He accompanied him up to the priesthood, sent him as Director to Sampierdarena, then Director to Marseille and Inspector for France, where they called him *petit Don Bosco*, until 1886 when the trust of his brothers elected him General Catechist or Spiritual Director of the Society. But his progress did not stop there.

After Don Rua's death, according to the Rule, the governance of the Society passed into the hands of the General Prefect, Fr. Filippo Rinaldi, who therefore presided over the Superior Chapter and directed the preparations for the General Chapter to be held within the year 1910. The great meeting was set to open on August 15, preceded by a course of spiritual exercises, conducted by the Chapter members and preached by Fr. Albera.

An intimate diary of Fr. Albera, in English, allows us to know what his feelings were during the waiting period. Under April 21, we find: "I spoke at length with Fr. Rinaldi and with great pleasure. I wholeheartedly desire that he be elected to the position of Rector Major of our Congregation. I will pray to the Holy Spirit to

obtain this grace.” And under the 26th: “Rarely is there talk of Fr. Rua’s successor. I hope that the Prefect is elected. He has the necessary virtues for the position. Every day I pray for this grace.” Again, on May 11: “I accept to go to Milan for Fr. Rua’s funeral. I am very happy to obey Fr. Rinaldi, in whom I recognise as my true Superior. I pray every day asking that a Rector Major be elected.” Under June 6, he reveals the reason for his strong inclination towards Fr. Rinaldi, writing about him: “I have a high opinion of his virtue, his ability, and initiative.” Shortly after going to Rome in his company, he wrote on the 8th in Florence: “I see that Fr. Rinaldi is well-received everywhere and regarded as Fr. Rua’s successor. He leaves a good impression on those with whom he speaks.”

If it had been permissible to campaign, he would have been a great elector. Numerous Salesians thought the same way, not to mention the Spaniards, among whom he had left a great legacy of affection. Inspectors and delegates, when they arrived from Spain for the General Chapter, did not make many mysteries even when speaking with him. However, he showed all the indifference of a deaf person who does not understand a word of what is said to him. In this, his attitude was such that it impressed his cheerful interlocutors. There was a true sense of mystery.

On the evening of the Assumption, the opening meeting was held, in which Fr. Rinaldi “spoke very well,” as noted by Fr. Albera in his diary. The election of the Rector Major took place in the session the following morning. From the beginning of the voting, the names of Fr. Albera and Fr. Rinaldi alternated at short intervals. The former appeared increasingly troubled and astonished. The latter, on the other hand, showed no sign of emotion. This was noted, not without a hint of curiosity. A great applause greeted the vote, which reached the absolute majority required by the Rule. Fr. Rinaldi, having completed the last act in his capacity as President of the Assembly with the proclamation of the elected, asked to read a memorandum. Upon receiving consent, he had a sealed envelope returned to him by Fr. Lemoyne, Secretary of the Superior Chapter, which had been given to him on February 27 and bore the inscription: “To be opened after the elections to take place upon the death of dear Fr. Rua.” Having received it in his hands, he unsealed it and read: “Fr. Rua is seriously ill, and I feel it is my duty to put in writing what I keep in my heart for his successor. On November 22, 1877, the usual feast of St. Charles was celebrated in Borgo San Martino. At the table presided over by the Venerable John Bosco and Msgr. Ferrò, I too was seated next to Fr. Belmonte. At a certain point, the conversation turned upon Fr. Albera, with Don Bosco recounting the difficulties posed by the clergy of his country. It was then that Msgr. Ferrò wanted to know if Fr. Albera had overcome those difficulties: — Of course, replied Don Bosco. He is my second… — And running his hand over his forehead, he stopped the phrase. But I

immediately calculated that he did not mean the second who entered nor the second-ranked, since he was not from the Superior Chapter, nor the second Director, and I concluded that he was the second successor. However, I kept these things in my heart, waiting for events. Turin, February 27, 1910." The electors then understood the reason for his demeanour and felt their hearts expand. They had therefore elected the one preconised by Don Bosco thirty-three years earlier.

Fr. Bertello was immediately entrusted with formulating two telegrams to inform the Holy Father and Cardinal Rampolla, Protector of the Society. The message to the Pope was: "Fr. Paolo Albera, new Rector Major of the Salesian Society and General Chapter, who with the utmost concord of spirits today, the ninety-fifth anniversary of the birth of the Venerable Don Bosco, who elected him and celebrates him with the greatest joy, and thank Your Holiness for the precious advice and prayers and declare profound respect and unlimited obedience." His Holiness promptly replied by sending his Apostolic Blessing. The telegram alluded to a pontifical autograph of August 9. It read as follows: "To the beloved sons of the Salesian Congregation of the Venerable Don Bosco gathered for the election of the General Rector, in the certainty that all, setting aside any human affection, will cast their vote for that Brother, whom they judge in the Lord to be the most suitable to maintain the true spirit of the Rule, to encourage and guide all the Members of the religious Institute towards perfection, and to make the many works of charity and religion to which they have dedicated themselves prosper, we impart with paternal affection the Apostolic Blessing. From the Vatican, August 9, 1910. Pius PP. X."

The Cardinal Protector also addressed a "fatherly word of encouragement and blessing" to the Moderator and Electors of the Chapter on August 12, saying among other things: "Your beloved Don Bosco, with the most intense affection of a father, undoubtedly turns his gaze from Heaven towards you and fervently implores the Divine Paraclete to pour upon you the heavenly light, inspiring you with wise counsel. The holy Church awaits from your votes a worthy successor to Don Bosco and Fr. Rua, who knows how to wisely preserve their work, and indeed to increase it with new growth. And I too, with the most vivid interest, united with you in prayer, transmit warm wishes that, with divine favour, your choice may be content in every respect and bring me the sweet consolation of seeing the Salesian Congregation ever more flourishing for the benefit of souls and in honour of the Catholic Apostolate. Therefore, let your hearts be far from human concerns and personal feelings in such a sacred and solemn act, so that, guided solely by right intentions and a burning desire for the glory of God and the greater good of the Institute, united in the name of the Lord in the most perfect concord and charity, you may choose as your leader the one who, by the sanctity of life, is an example to you, by

the goodness of heart a loving father, by prudence and wisdom a sure guide, by zeal and firmness a vigilant guardian of discipline, religious observance, and the spirit of the Venerable Founder." His Eminence, receiving Fr. Albera not long after, gave him unmistakable signs of believing that the choice had been made in accordance with the wishes he had expressed.

The very early moments of the feelings of the elected one were expressed in the diary, in which under August 16 we read: "This is a day of great misfortune for me. I have been elected Rector Major of the Pious Society of St. Francis de Sales. What a responsibility on my shoulders! Now more than ever I must cry out: *Deus, in adiutorium meum intende*. I have prayed a lot, especially in front of Don Bosco's tomb." In his wallet, a yellowed sheet was found, on which this programme was outlined and signed: "I will always have God in view, Jesus Christ as a model, the Helper in aid, myself in sacrifice."

At the same time, all the members of the Superior Chapter had expired, and it was necessary to hold the election, which took place in the third session. The General Prefect was elected first. The votes on the name of Fr. Rinaldi were overwhelmingly in favour. Of the 73 voters, 71 voted for him. Thus, there was only one vote missing, which went to Fr. Paolo Virion, the French Inspector. The other, most likely his, was for Fr. Pietro Ricaldone, Inspector in Spain, whom he greatly esteemed. He therefore resumed his daily toil, which was to last another twelve years, until he himself became Rector Major.

Having done this, the Chapter moved on to electing the remaining members, who were: Fr. Giulio Barberis, General Catechist; Fr. Giuseppe Bertello, Economer; Fr. Luigi Piscetta, Fr. Francesco Cerruti, Fr. Giuseppe Vespignani, Councillors. The latter, Inspector in Argentina, thanked the assembly for the act of trust, stating that he was obliged for particular reasons and also for health to decline the nomination, asking to proceed to another election. But the Superior did not believe he should accept the resignation so readily and asked him to suspend any decision until the next day. The next day, invited by the Rector Major to notify the resolution taken, he replied that, following the Superior's advice, he fully submitted to obedience with the intention of taking on the role.

The first act of the re-elected General Prefect was to officially inform the members of the election of the new Rector Major. In a short letter, briefly mentioning the various phases of his life, he appropriately recalled the so-called "Dream of the Wheel," in which Don Bosco saw Fr. Albera with a lantern in his hand illuminating and guiding others (BM VI, 910). He then concluded very appropriately: "My dear brothers, let the loving words of Don Bosco in the testamentary letter resonate once again in your ears: 'Your Rector is dead, but another will be elected

for you, who will take care of you and your eternal salvation. Listen to him, love him, obey him, pray for him, as you have done for me.'"

To the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Fr. Albera deemed it appropriate to issue a communication without too much delay, especially since he was receiving a good number of letters from them. He therefore thanked them for their congratulations, but above all for their prayers. "I hope," he wrote, "that God will grant your wishes and that He will not allow my ineptitude to be detrimental to those works to which the Venerable Don Bosco and the unforgettable Fr. Rua dedicated their whole lives." He finally hoped that among the two branches of Don Bosco's family there would always be a holy competition in preserving the spirit of charity and zeal left as a legacy by the founder.

Now let us take a brief look at the works of the General Chapter. It can be said that there was only one fundamental theme. The previous Chapter, having completed a rather summarised revision of the Regulations, had decided that, as they were, they would be practiced for six years *ad experimentum* and that Chapter XI would resume their examination, establishing the definitive text. There were six Regulations: for the Inspectors, for all Salesian houses, for the novitiate houses, for the parishes, for the festive oratories, and for the Pious Union of Cooperators. The same Chapter X, with a petition signed by 36 members, had requested that the administrative issue be addressed during the XIth, and especially on how to make the income sources granted by Providence to each Salesian house increasingly fruitful. To facilitate the arduous work, a Commission, so to speak, of technicians was appointed for each Regulation, with the task of conducting the relevant studies and presenting the conclusions to the Chapter itself.

The discussions, which began during the fifth session, went on for another 21. In order to close the matter, it would have been necessary to prolong the works much longer. Still, the General Chapter unanimously deferred the task of completing the review to the Superior Chapter, which promised to carry it out by appointing a special Commission. Nevertheless, in order to show that it was not disinterested and to assist the work, the General Chapter expressed the desire to create a Commission with the task of formulating the main criteria that should guide the new Commission of Regulations in its long and delicate task. So, this was done. Therefore, ten directive norms, elaborated by its delegates under the presidency of Fr. Ricaldone, were brought to the assembly's attention and approved. Their context was to maintain the spirit of Don Bosco intact, preserving those articles that were recognised as his, and to eliminate anything that was purely exhortative from the Regulations.

I will remember nothing more than two episodes from the XIth General

Chapter, which seem to have particular importance. The first refers to the Regulations of the festive oratories. The extra-chapter Commission had deemed it appropriate to simplify it, especially for the part concerning the various roles. Fr. Rinaldi felt that the concept of Don Bosco regarding the festive oratories was thus abolished, hence he rose up saying: “The Regulations printed in 1877 were truly compiled by Don Bosco, and Fr. Rua assured me of this four months before his death. I therefore wish that it be preserved intact, for if it is practiced, it will be seen that it is still good even today.”

At this point an animated discussion arose, of which I will highlight the most notable points. The speaker declared that the Commission was completely unaware of this particularity, but he also noted that this Regulation had never been fully practiced in any festive oratory, not even in Turin. The Commission opined that the Regulations had been commissioned by Don Bosco based on the Regulations of the Lombard festive oratories. In any case, the intention was only to simplify it and to introduce what was practical as found in the best Salesian oratories. Yet Fr. Rinaldi did not calm down, and he insisted upon Fr. Rua’s desire that these Regulations be respected, as a work of Don Bosco, even with the introduction of what was deemed useful for young adults.

Fr. Vespignani reinforced this thesis. Having come to the Oratory already a priest in 1876, he had received from Fr. Rua the task of transcribing the Regulations from Don Bosco’s original writings, and he still retained the early drafts. Fr. Barberis also assured that he had seen the autograph. The opponents had objections regarding the roles, but Fr. Rinaldi did not disarm. On the contrary, he uttered these forceful words: “Nothing of Don Bosco’s Regulations should be altered, otherwise they would lose their authority.” Fr. Vespignani confirmed his thoughts once again with examples from America and especially Uruguay, where, when at the time of Msgr. Lasagna there was an attempt to try differently, nothing was achieved. Finally, the controversy was closed by voting the following order of the day: “The XI General Chapter decides that the ‘Regulations of the festive oratories’ of Don Bosco, as printed in 1877, be preserved intact, making only in the appendix those additions deemed appropriate, especially for the sections of older youth.” The sensitivity of the assembly in the face of an attempt at reform in matters sanctioned by Don Bosco is commendable.

The second episode belongs to the penultimate session for a matter not unrelated to the Regulations, as it might seem at first glance. Once again, it was proposed by Fr. Rinaldi, who became the interpreter of the desire of many, that the position of the Directors in the houses be defined after the decree on confessions. Until 1901, being ordinary confessors of the members and students meant that in

directing, they acted habitually with a paternal spirit (this topic is extensively covered in Annals III,170-194). After that, however, it began to be observed that the paternal character desired by Don Bosco in his Directors and insinuated in the Regulations of the houses and elsewhere was being abandoned. The Directors indeed began to attend to material, disciplinary, and school affairs, thus becoming Rectors and no longer Directors. “We must return,” said Fr. Rinaldi, “to the spirit and concept of Don Bosco, especially manifested to us in the ‘Confidential Memories’ (Annals III,49-53) and in the Regulations. The Director should always be a Salesian Director. Except for the ministry of confession, nothing has changed.”

Fr. Bertello lamented that the Directors had believed that with confession they had to leave the spiritual care of the house as well, dedicating themselves to material offices. “Let us hope,” he said, “that it was just a momentary thing. We must return to the ideal of Don Bosco, as described in the Regulations. Let those articles be read, meditated upon, and practiced” (He cited them according to the edition of the time; in the present they would be 156, 157, 158, 159, 57, 160, 91, 195). Fr. Albera concluded by saying: “It is an essential issue for the life of our Society that the spirit of the Director be preserved according to the ideal of Don Bosco; otherwise, we change the way of educating and will no longer be Salesians. We must do everything to preserve the spirit of fatherhood, practicing the memories that Don Bosco left us: they will tell us how to do it. Especially in the reports, we will be able to know our subjects and direct them. As for the young, fatherhood does not mean caresses or unlimited concessions, but caring for them, allowing them the opportunity to come and see us. Let us not forget the importance of the evening talk. Let the sermons be done well and with heart. Let us show that we care about the salvation of souls and leave the unpleasant parts to others. Thus, the Director will retain the halo that Don Bosco wanted him surrounded with.”

This time as well the Capitulars found a General Exhibition of the Salesian Professional and Agricultural Schools open in the Oratory, the third, which lasted from July 3 to October 16. Having already described the two previous ones, there was no need to stop and repeat more or less the same things (Annals III, 452-472). Naturally, the past experience served for a better organisation of the exhibition. The criterion already stated twice by the organiser Fr. Bertello prevailed, namely, according to an arrangement desired by Don Bosco, that every Exhibition of this kind is an event intended to be repeated periodically for the teaching and encouragement of the schools. The opening and closing were graced by the presence of city authorities and representatives of the Government. Visitors were never lacking, including high-ranking personalities and even true experts. On the last day, Professor Piero Gribaudi made the first presentation of about 300 former

Turin students to the new Rector Major. Deputy Cornaggia, in his final speech, pronounced this judgment worthy of being remembered (Salesian Bulletin, Nov. 1910, p. 332): “Whoever has had the opportunity to delve into the study of the organisation of these schools and the concepts that inspire them cannot help but admire the wisdom of that Great One, who understood the workers’ needs in the conditions of new times, anticipating philanthropists and legislators.”

Fifty-five houses participated in the exhibition with a total of 203 schools. The examination of the exhibited works was entrusted to nine distinct juries, which included 50 of the most distinguished professors, artists, and industrialists from Turin. Since it was necessary that the Exhibition have an exclusively educational character, the works were judged according to this criterion, and the prizes were awarded. These were substantial, offered by the Pope (a gold medal), by the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce (five silver medals), by the Municipality of Turin (one gold medal and two silver medals), by the Agricultural Consortium of Turin (two silver medals), by “Pro Torino” (one *vermeil* medal, one silver, and two bronze), by the former students of the “Don Bosco” Circle (one gold medal), by the “Augusta” Company of Turin (500 Lire in typographic material to be divided into three prizes), and by the Salesian Superior Chapter (a golden laurel crown as the *grand prize*) (Those awarded are listed in the cited issue of the Salesian Bulletin).

It is worth reporting the last periods of the report that Fr. Bertello read before the winners were announced. He said: “About three months ago, at the inauguration of our small Exhibition, we lamented that due to the death of the Rev. Fr. Rua, we had lost he to whom we intended to pay tribute with our studies and our works on his priestly jubilee. Divine Providence has given us a new Superior and Father in the person of the Rev. Fr. Albera. Therefore, in closing the Exhibition, we place our intentions and hopes in his hands, confident that the artisan, who was first cared for by the Venerable Don Bosco and then the joy of Fr. Rua, will always have a fitting place in the affection and concerns of their Successor.”

That was Fr. Bertello’s last achievement. A little more than a month later, on November 20, an unexpected illness suddenly extinguished such an industrious existence. His robust intellect, solid culture, firmness of character, and goodness of spirit made him first a wise Director of the college, then a diligent Inspector, and finally for twelve years an expert General Director of the Salesian professional and agricultural schools. He owed everything, after God, to Don Bosco, who had raised him in the Oratory since he was little and had formed him in his image and likeness.

Fr. Albera did not delay in fulfilling the great duty of paying homage to the Vicar of Jesus Christ, to the One whom the Rule calls “the arbiter and supreme Superior” of the Society. Immediately on September 1, he left for Rome, where,

upon arrival on the 2nd, he already found the audience ticket for the morning of the 3rd. It almost seemed that Pius X was eager to see him. From the Pope's lips, he gathered some kind expressions, which he kept in his heart. In response to the thanks for the autograph and the blessing, the Pope said he believed he acted this way to make known how much he appreciated the worldwide activity of the Salesians and added: "You were born recently, it is true, but you are spread all over the world and everywhere you work a lot." Being informed of the victories already obtained in the courts against the slanderers of Varazze (Annals III, 729-749), he warned: "Be vigilant, for your enemies are preparing other blows against you." Finally, when humbly asked for some practical guidelines for the governance of the Society, he replied: "Do not stray from the customs and traditions introduced by Don Bosco and Fr. Rua."

1910 had already come to an end, and Fr. Albera had not yet made a communication to the entire Society. New and incessant occupations, especially the many conferences with the 32 Inspectors, always prevented him from sitting down at the table. Only in the first half of January, as noted in the diary, did he write the first pages of a circular, which he intended to be somewhat lengthy. He sent it with the date of the 25th. Apologising for the delay in making himself known, commemorating Fr. Rua and praising Fr. Rinaldi for his good interim governance of the Society, he elaborated on particular news about the General Chapter, his own election, the visit to the Pope, and the death of Fr. Bertello. In all, he had the air of a father who converses familiarly with his children. He also shared with them his worries about the events in Portugal. After the monarchy was overthrown in Lisbon in October 1910, the revolutionaries had fiercely targeted the religious, attacking them with wild fury. The Salesians did not have any victims to mourn, however, the brothers at Pinheiro near Lisbon had a bad day. A gang of thugs invaded and looted that house, not only mocking the priests and clerics but also sacrilegiously profaning the chapel and even more sacrilegiously scattering and trampling the consecrated hosts. Almost all the Salesians had to leave Portugal, seeking refuge in Spain or Italy. The revolutionaries occupied their schools and laboratories, from which the students were expelled. The persecution also extended to the colonies, so that it was necessary to abandon Macao and Mozambique, where much good was being done (Annals III, 606 and 622-4). But even then, Fr. Albera could write: "Those who have scattered us recognise that they have deprived their country of the only professional schools it possessed."

He, who in the early days of the Society had often heard Don Bosco predict the multiplication of his children in every even remote nation, and then saw those predictions marvellously fulfilled, certainly felt the weight of the immense legacy

received and believed that for some time it was not appropriate to embark on new works, but it was necessary to focus on consolidating the existing ones. He therefore deemed it necessary to instil the same thing in all the Salesians. To achieve this, it was not enough for the Superiors alone. He strongly recommended common cooperation. Since in those years modernism was also posing threats to religious families, he warned the Salesians, urging them to flee every novelty that Don Bosco and Fr. Rua could not have approved.

Together with the circular, he also sent each house a copy of the circulars of Fr. Rua, who from his deathbed had entrusted him to collect in a volume. The typographic work had already been completed about two months earlier. In fact, the publication included a letter from Fr. Albera dated December 8, 1910.

For the upcoming anniversary of Don Bosco's death, he therefore sent the houses a double gift, the circular and the book. He held this second one in special regard because he knew he was offering a great treasure of asceticism and Salesian pedagogy in it. He had proposed to follow the traces of Fr. Rua, especially aiming to imitate his charity and zeal in procuring the spiritual good of all the Salesians.

Annals of the Salesian Society, Vol. IV (1910-1921), pp. 1-13