 Reading time: 9 min.

From the very beginning, the Salesian Society had, like many other religious orders, a cardinal protector. Over time, up to the Second Vatican Council, there were nine cardinal protectors, a role of great importance for the growth of the Salesian Society.

The institution of cardinal protectors for religious congregations is an ancient tradition dating back to the early centuries of the Church, when the Pope appointed defenders and representatives of the faith. With the passage of time, this practice extended to religious orders, to which a cardinal was assigned with the task of protecting their rights and prerogatives at the Holy See. The Salesian Society of St John Bosco also enjoyed such favour, having several cardinals to represent and protect it in ecclesiastical offices.

Origin of the role of Cardinal Protector

The custom of having a protector dates back to the first centuries of the Roman Empire, when Romulus, the founder of Rome, created two social orders: patricians and plebeians. Each plebeian could elect a patrician as protector, establishing a system of mutual benefit between the two social classes. This practice was later adopted by the Church as well. One of the earliest examples of an ecclesiastical protector is St Sebastian, appointed by Pope Caius in 283 A.D. as defender of the Church of Rome.

In the 13th century, the assignment of cardinal protectors to religious orders became an established practice. St Francis of Assisi was one of the first to request a cardinal protector for his order. Following a vision in which his friars were being attacked by birds of prey, Francis asked the Pope to assign a cardinal as their protector. Innocent III agreed and appointed Cardinal Ugolino Conti, the Pope’s nephew. From then on, religious orders followed this tradition to obtain protection and support in their dealings with the Church.

This practice spread almost as a necessity, since the new mendicant and itinerant orders had a different lifestyle from that of the monks with fixed abode, well known to the local bishops. The geographic distances, the different political systems of the places where the new religious orders operated and the difficulties in communication at the time required an authoritative figure who was thoroughly

familiar with their problems and needs. This figure could represent them at the Roman Curia, defend their rights and interests and intercede with the Holy See in case of need. The cardinal protector had no ordinary jurisdiction over religious orders; his role was that of a benevolent protector, although in particular circumstances he could receive delegated powers.

This practice also extended to other religious orders and, in the case of the Salesian Society, the cardinal protectors played a crucial role in ensuring the recognition and protection of the young congregation, especially in its early years when it was trying to consolidate itself within the structure of the Catholic Church.

The choice of the Cardinal Protector

The relationship between Don Bosco and the ecclesiastical hierarchy was complex, especially in the early years of the congregation's foundation. Not all the cardinals and bishops viewed favourably the educational and pastoral model proposed by Don Bosco, partly because of his innovative approach and partly because of his insistence on addressing the poorer and disadvantaged classes.

The choice of a cardinal protector was not random, but was made with great care. Usually, a cardinal was sought who was familiar with the order or who had shown an interest in the type of work carried out by the Congregation. In the case of the Salesians, this meant looking for cardinals who had a particular focus on youth, education or missions, since these were the Society's main areas of activity. Of course, the final appointment depended on the Pope and the Secretariat of State.

The role of the Cardinal Protector for the Salesians

For the Salesian Society, the Cardinal Protector was a key figure in its interaction with the Holy See, helping to mediate any disputes, ensuring the correct interpretation of canonical rules and ensuring that the needs of the Order were understood and respected. Unlike some older Congregations, which had already established a strong relationship with the ecclesiastical authorities, the Salesians, born in an era of rapid social and religious change, needed significant support to face the initial challenges, both internally and externally.

One of the most important aspects of the Cardinal Protector's role was his ability to support the Salesians in their relations with the Pope and the Curia. This role of mediator and protector provided the congregation with a direct channel to the higher echelons of the Church, allowing them to express concerns and requests that

might otherwise have been ignored or postponed. The cardinal protector was also responsible for ensuring that the Salesian Society complied with the directives of the Pope and the Church, ensuring that their mission remained in line with Catholic teaching.

On one of his visits to Rome in February 1875, Don Bosco asked the Holy Father Pius IX for the grace of having a cardinal protector:

“During the same audience he asked the Pope if the Salesians should request a Cardinal Protector as was customary with religious Congregations. The Pope replied, ‘As long as I live, I myself shall be Protector both to you and to your Congregation.’”(BM XI, 102).

However, realising the need for a reference person who had the authority to carry out various tasks for the Salesian Society, in 1876 Don Bosco returned to ask the Pope for a Cardinal Protector:

‘*Then, when I asked him to appoint a cardinal protector for our Congregation to expedite communication with the Holy See – as other congregations have – he smilingly answered, “How many protectors do you want? Aren’t you satisfied with one?” meaning: I want to be your cardinal protector. Isn’t that enough? Before such graciousness, I thanked him with all my heart and said, “Holy Father, I need no other protector.”’* (BM XII, 161).

After this satisfying reply, Don Bosco still obtained a Cardinal Protector in the same year, 1876:

‘3. *I asked that a cardinal protector be appointed to act as our spokesman to the Holy Father. At first it seemed as if he himself wished to be our protector, but I pointed out that this cardinal would act as our representative with the Pope on matters which we could not personally discuss with the Holy See’s congregations because of distance. Actually, the Holy Father himself would be our real protector, while the cardinal would manage our affairs with the Holy See. Hearing this explanation, he concluded, “Then it’s all right. I shall so inform the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars.” And so, His Eminence Cardinal Oreglia will become the protector of our missions, the Salesian cooperators, the Sons of Mary, the archconfraternity of Mary, Help of Christians, and the whole Salesian Congregation in all matters which have to be cleared through the Holy See.*’ (BM

XIII, 386)

Don Bosco mentioned this cardinal in his writing ‘The loveliest flower of the apostolic college’ or rather the election of Leo XIII (pp. 193-194):

“XXVIII. Card. Luigi Oreglia *Luigi Oreglia dei Baroni di S. Stefano honours Piedmont as does Cardinal Bilio, as he was born in Benevagienna in the diocese of Mondovì on 9 July 1828. He did his theological studies in Turin under the teaching of our valiant professors, who admired his discerning mind and indefatigable love for work. He then went to Rome to the Ecclesiastical Academy, where he commendably completed his religious education, and devoted himself to the study of languages, especially German, in which he is very good. Having entered the prelature, he was appointed on 15 April 1858 as the reference point for the Signatura, then was sent as internuncio to The Hague in Holland, from whence he went to Portugal, after having been proclaimed Archbishop of Damiata, succeeding the most eminent Cardinal Perrieri in that important diplomatic office. He found certain traditions of Pombal still alive in Portugal, which he fought against with great intelligence and courage. For which he was not too pleasing to those who then ruled. And he returned to Rome and the Holy Father, to show that if he ceased to represent the Holy See in Portugal it was not for any fault of his, created and made him a Cardinal in the Consistory of 22 December 1873, as titular of Saint Anastasia and appointing him Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Indulgences and Sacred Relics. Cardinal Oreglia added the virtues of the exemplary priest to his noble manners of the gentleman. Pius IX always held him dear and loved his conversation full of reserve and grace. He sets about matters slowly, but when he puts in a word, he does not care about labours and troubles as long as it succeeds. He is very frugal. The new Pontiff holds him in high regard and has confirmed him in the office of prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Indulgences and Sacred Relics.”*

Cardinal Luigi Oreglia remained protector of the Salesians from 1876 to 1878, although he had already performed this task informally before 1876.

However, officially, the first Cardinal Protector of the Salesians was Lorenzo Nina, who held this office from 1879 to 1885. Leo XIII agreed to Don Bosco’s request to have a cardinal protector for the Society, and the official notification came after an audience on 29 March 1879:

“Six days after his audience with the Pope, Don Bosco was officially informed that

his cardinal protector had been appointed in a communication from the secretariat of state, signed by Monsignor Seraphim Cretoni, and couched in words of praise: 'The Salesian Congregation daily merits greater thoughtful consideration from the Holy See because of its works of mercy and its accomplishments in evangelizing various areas of the world. It is the Holy Father's wish that it be granted a special protector, and he has graciously appointed Cardinal Lawrence Nina, his secretary of state.' At the time of Pius IX, Cardinal [Louis] Oreglia had been the nominal protector of the Salesians since that Pope had taken the Salesian Congregation under his personal protection because at its origins it needed his special fatherly assistance. Now it had a true cardinal protector as did the other religious congregations. Nor could his choice have fallen on a more benevolent prelate, for, having known Don Bosco before he became cardinal, the secretary of state had a lofty admiration and a warm love for him, having declared himself more than willing when Don Bosco had first asked him to be the Salesians' protector. "I could not volunteer for this to the Holy Father on my own," he told Don Bosco, "but if he asks, I shall accept immediately." He gave eloquent proof of his good intentions when Don Bosco proposed that, in view of His Eminence's responsibilities, he might appoint an official of his with whom Don Bosco could deal in matters concerning the foreign missions. 'No,' the cardinal replied, 'I want to handle this myself. Come tomorrow at half past four so we can discuss this at greater ease. It is a wonder that your Congregation can thrive in such times as these others fall to pieces and everything is threatened.' Don Bosco frequently experienced the benefits of such a loving patronage. After he returned to Turin and told the superior chapter that the Pope had appointed a protector, he wrote a letter of thanks to the cardinal on behalf of the entire Congregation, paying him a most cordial tribute and soliciting his help for the Salesian missions and perhaps also for the granting of privileges. This seems to be brought out by His Eminence's reply. (BM XIV, 56-57)

From then on, the Salesian Congregation would always have a cardinal protector with great influence in the Roman Curia.

In addition to this official figure, there were always other cardinals and high prelates who understand the importance of education, and supported the Salesians. These include Cardinals Alessandro Barnabò (1801-1874), Giuseppe Berardi (1810-1878), Gaetano Alimonda (1818-1891), Luigi Maria Bilio (1826-1884), Luigi Galimberti (1836-1896), Augusto Silj (1846-1926) and many others.

List of the Protectors of the Salesian Society of St. John Bosco:

	Cardinal Protector SDB	Period	Appointment
	Blessed Pope Pius IX		
1	Luigi OREGLIA	1876-1878	
2	Lorenzo NINA	1879-1885	29.03.1879 (MB XIV,78-79)
3	Lucido Maria PAROCCHI	1886-1903	12.04.1886 (ASV, Segr. Stato, 1886, prot. 66457; ASC D544, Cardinal Protectors, Parocchi)
4	Mariano RAMPOLLA DEL TINDARO	1903-1913	31.03.1093 (Cardinal Rampolla's card to Don Rua)
5	Pietro GASPARRI	1914-1934	09.10.1914 (AAS 1914-006, p. 22)
6	Eugenio PACELLI (Pius XII)	1935-1939	02.01.1935 (AAS 1935-027, p.116)
7	Vincenzo LA PUMA	1939-1943	24.05.1939 (AAS 1939-031, p. 281)
8	Carlo SALOTTI	1943-1947	29.12.1943 (AAS 1943-036, p. 61)
9	Benedetto Aloisi MASELLA	1948-1970	10.02.1948 (AAS 1948-040, p.165)

The last protector of the Salesians was Cardinal Benedetto Aloisi Masella, as the role of the protectors was annulled by the Secretariat of State at the time of the Second Vatican Council in 1964. The incumbent protectors remained until their death, and with them the office they received also died.

This happened because, in the contemporary context, the role of the cardinal protector lost some of its formal relevance. The Catholic Church underwent numerous reforms during the 20th century, and many of the functions that were

once delegated to the cardinal protectors were incorporated into the official structures of the Roman Curia or were made obsolete by changes in ecclesiastical governance. However, even if the figure of the cardinal protector no longer exists with the same prerogatives as in the past, the concept of ecclesiastical protection remains important.

Today, the Salesians, like many other Congregations, maintain a close relationship with the Holy See through various dicasteries and curial offices, in particular the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. In addition, many cardinals continue to personally support the mission of the Salesians, even without the formal title of protector. This closeness and support remain essential to ensure that the Salesian mission continues to respond to the challenges of the contemporary world, particularly in youth education and missions.

The institution of cardinal protectors for the Salesian Society was a crucial element in its growth and consolidation. Thanks to the protection offered by these eminent ecclesiastical figures, Don Bosco and his successors were able to carry out the Salesian mission with greater serenity and security, knowing they could count on the support of the Holy See. The work of the cardinal protectors proved to be essential not only in defending the rights of the congregation, but also in favouring its expansion throughout the world, helping to spread Don Bosco’s charism and his educational system.