

□ Reading time: 4 min.

*St John Bosco's devotion to Our Lady is well known. The graces received from Mary Help of Christians, even the extraordinary, miraculous ones, are perhaps also partly known. Probably less well known is the promise made to the Virgin, to take to Paradise those who have combined a Hail Mary with Holy Mass for their entire lives.*

That the saint had an open door in Heaven to his prayers is well known. Even as a cleric in the seminary, his prayers were answered, and to disguise this intervention with Heaven he used the trick of providing bread pills instead of miracles as medicines for a while, until he was discovered by a real pharmacist. The numerous intercession requests and the many miracles that occurred in his life, abundantly recounted by his biographers, confirm this powerful intercession.

The promise of having several thousand young people with him in paradise, which he received from the Blessed Virgin, is confirmed by two seminarians who heard him speak about it during a Retreat to the clerics at the Episcopal Seminary in Bergamo. One of them was Angelo Cattaneo, future Vicar Apostolic of Southern Honan in China, and he testified in a paper addressed to Fr Michael Rua, and another, Stefano Scaini, who later became a Jesuit; he too left a testimony in a paper addressed to the Salesians. Here is the first testimony.

D. Bosco spoke of the snares the devil laid for the youngsters to distract them from Confession and told them he would have liked to reveal to individuals, who asked him, the spiritual condition of their souls.

[...]

When, after a sermon to the seminarians [of Bergamo], one of them [Angelo Cattaneo] presented himself to Don Bosco with a list of sins in his hand, the Saint threw it on the fire and then listed all the sins as if he were reading them. Then he told his attentive listeners that he had obtained a promise from Our Lady to have several thousand young people with him in paradise, on the condition that they recite a Hail Mary every day during Mass throughout their earthly life. (Pilla Eugenio, *I sogni di Don Bosco*, p. 207)

And also the second.

Very Rev. Sir,

*On a certain occasion I was allowed to ask Our Lady for the grace of having several thousand boys with me in heaven (I think he also specified the number, but can't remember) and the Blessed Virgin granted me the favour. If you wish to be included too, I shall be happy to admit you. The only condition is that, for the rest of your life, you say a Hail Mary every day – possibly at Mass and, preferably, at the Consecration.”*

*I don't know what the others made of this proposal, but I myself accepted it joyfully because of the very high esteem I had then acquired for Don Bosco. As far as I can remember, I have never missed my daily Hail Mary for that intention. However, with the passing of years, a doubt came to my mind which I once asked Don Bosco to clear up.*

*On January 3, 1882, as I was passing through Turin on my way to the Jesuit novitiate at Chieri, I obtained an audience with Don Bosco, who received me very warmly. When I told him I was about to become a Jesuit, he said, “I am delighted to hear it! When I learn that someone enters that Society, I am as happy as if he were joining the Salesians.” Then I said to him, “With your permission, I'd like to ask you to clarify a matter I have much at heart. Father, do you remember preaching a spiritual retreat at the Bergamo seminary?” “I certainly do!” “Do you recall telling us of a grace you asked of Our Lady?” I reminded him of his words and of the condition he had stipulated. “Yes, I do.” “Well, I have always said that Hail Mary and will always say it, but you spoke of thousands of boys! I'm afraid I'm no longer one of those lucky ones!”*

*Without hesitation, Don Bosco replied, “Keep on reciting the Hail Mary, and we shall be together in heaven.” After receiving his holy blessing and affectionately kissing his hand, I left with joy and the hope of one day being really with him in heaven. If this can bring glory to God and honour to Don Bosco, I promise that I'm ready to confirm it by oath.*

*Lomello, 4 March 1891.*

Most humble Devoted Servant

V. Stefano Scaini S.I. [[MB](#) VI,846].

These testimonies make it clear how much eternal salvation was at the heart of Don Bosco. In all his educational and social initiatives, very necessary for that matter, he did not lose sight of the ultimate goal of human life, Paradise. He wanted to prepare everyone for this last examination of life, and for this reason he insisted that young people also be accustomed to do the exercise of the good death every month-end, remembering the last things, also called the *novissimos* (*the last things*): death,

judgement, Heaven and hell. And for this he had asked and obtained this special grace from Mary Help of Christians.

Of course it seems strange to us today that this prayer was made during Holy Mass and also at the very moment of the Consecration. But, to understand this, one must remember that in Don Bosco's time Mass was celebrated entirely in Latin, and since the vast majority of the faithful did not know this language, it was easy to get distracted instead of praying. To find a remedy for this human inclination he used to recommend various prayers during the celebration.

Can we say this Hail Mary at the end of the celebration today? Don Bosco himself has us understand: "*If possible* during the time you are listening to Holy Mass...". What is more, today's liturgical norms do not recommend inserting other prayers outside those of the Missal.

Can we hope that this Hail Mary will also add us to the number of beneficiaries of the promise? By living in God's grace, by doing it all our lives, and by Don Bosco's reply to Stefano Scaini, "Keep reciting that Hail Mary and we shall be together in Heaven" we can answer in the affirmative.