

□ Reading time: 3 min.

Dominic Savio arrived at the Valdocco Oratory in the autumn of 1854, at the end of the deadly plague that had decimated the city of Turin. He immediately became friends with Michael Rua, John Cagliero, John Bonetti and Joseph Bongiovanni, with whom he went to school in the city. In all likelihood he knew nothing of the “Salesian Society” that Don Bosco had begun to speak about to some of his young men in January of that year. But the following spring he had an idea that he confided to Joseph Bongiovanni. There were wonderful boys in the Oratory, but there were also lukewarm ones who behaved badly, and there were boys who were struggling with their studies, homesick. Everyone tried to help them individually. Why couldn’t the more willing young people join together, in a ‘secret society’, to become a compact group of little apostles in the mass of others? Joseph agreed. They talked about it with some others. They liked the idea. It was decided to call the group the Immaculate Conception Sodality. Don Bosco gave his consent: they would try it out, draw up a small set of rules. From the minutes of the Sodality preserved in the Salesian Archives, we know that there were about ten members who met once a week: Michael Rua (who was elected president), Dominic Savio, Joseph Bongiovanni (elected secretary), Celestine Durando, John B. Francesia, John Bonetti, cleric Angelo Savio, Joseph Rocchietti, John Turchi, Louis Marcellino, Joseph Reano, Francis Vaschetti. John Cagliero was absent because he was convalescing after a serious illness and was living at home with his mother. The concluding article of the rules, approved by everyone including Don Bosco, said, “A sincere, filial, unlimited trust in Mary, a special tenderness towards her, constant devotion will help us overcome every obstacle, be tenacious in our resolutions, strict with ourselves, loving towards our neighbour, exact in everything.”

The members of the Sodality chose to “look after” two categories of boys, who in the secret language of the minutes were called “clients”. The first category were the unruly ones, those who easily used bad language and their fists. Each member would take one of them in and act as his “guardian angel” for as long as necessary (Michele Magone had a persevering “guardian angel”!). The second category were the newcomers. They helped them through the first few days when they did not yet know anyone, did not know how to play, spoke only the dialect of their hometown, and were homesick. (Francesco Cerruti had Dominic Savio as his “guardian angel”, and recounted their first encounters with simple enchantment).

In the minutes one can see the unfolding of each meeting: a moment of prayer, a few minutes of spiritual reading, a mutual exhortation to go to Confession and Communion; “then the entrusted clients are discussed. Patience and trust in God was urged for those who seemed entirely deaf and insensitive; prudence and gentleness towards those who were easy to persuade.”

Comparing the names of the participants in the Immaculate Conception Sodality with the names of the first to enrol in the Pious Society, one has the moving impression that the "Sodality" was the "dress rehearsal" for the Congregation that Don Bosco was about to found. It was the small field where the first seeds of Salesian flourishing germinated. The "Sodality" became the leaven of the Oratory. It turned ordinary boys into little apostles with a very simple formula: a weekly meeting with a prayer, listening to few good pages, a mutual exhortation to go to the Sacraments, a concrete programme on how and whom to help in the environment where they lived, a good-natured chat to share successes and failures of the days just gone by. Don Bosco was very pleased. And he wanted it to be transplanted in every new Salesian work, so that there too it would be a focus for committed youngsters and future Salesian and priestly vocations. In the four pages of advice that Don Bosco gave to Michael Rua who was going to found the first Salesian house outside Turin, at Mirabello (they are one of the best summaries of his educational system and would be given to every new Salesian director) we read these two lines: "Try to start the Immaculate Conception Sodality, but you will only be its promoter and not its director; consider it as a work of the young people themselves." In every Salesian work a group of committed young people, named as we see fit, but a photocopy of the ancient "Immaculate Conception Sodality"! Would this not be the secret that Don Bosco confided to us to make Salesian and priestly vocations germinate again? It is a certainty: the Salesian Congregation was founded and expanded by involving young people, who allowed themselves to be convinced by Don Bosco's apostolic passion and his dream of life. We must tell young people the story of the Congregation's beginnings, of which young people were the "co-founders". The majority (Rua, Cagliero, Bonetti, Durando, Marcellino, Bongiovanni, Francesia, Lazzeri) were companions of Dominic Savio and members of the Sodality; and twelve were faithful to Don Bosco until their death. It is to be hoped that this "founding" fact will help us to involve today's young people more and more in the apostolic commitment for the salvation of other young people.