 Reading time: 9 min.

The testimony of Fr. Giovanni Battista Francesia covers almost forty years of familiarity with Don Bosco, whom he met as a boy at the Oratory. What emerges is the family atmosphere, the maternal role of Mamma Margherita, the walks in Monferrato as an educational and apostolic tool, and the birth of the Salesian Congregation with astonishment at its rapid expansion. Francesia recalls Don Bosco's profound Marian devotion, episodes of pastoral charity, significant conversions, and his unwavering trust in Providence. The result is a portrait of an ardent educator, always striving for the salvation of souls, capable of reading hearts, instilling courage, and turning every circumstance into an opportunity for good.

Because step by step he climbed to heaven.

I am Giovanni Battista Francesia, 55 years old, from S. Giorgio Canavese, a Salesian, Provincial of the Piedmontese province. I have a degree in fine arts.

I met Don Bosco in 1850 (*Francesia was 12 years old*). I had been in Turin with my relatives for a few days when, on All Saints' Day (*7 November*), I was invited by a cousin of mine to go and see Don Bosco. He said to me, "Come to Don Bosco, he's a good priest; he loves young boys very much. Today is All Saints' Day and he will give us chestnuts." I went. Upon entering the courtyard, I saw a priest coming towards me. It was Don Bosco. He placed his hand on my head, and then spoke to me in a low voice, saying, "Would you be willing to say a couple of words in my ear?" "Yes, yes," I replied. "But do you know what I mean?" "You mean for me to come to confession." "Well done, you've guessed it exactly." I stayed at the Oratory until late in the evening, taking part in the singing of vespers, the talk, and the blessing. Afterwards, Don Bosco accompanied us about three hundred metres outside the Oratory, where we sang a hymn, and then everyone went home.

From that moment, I began to attend the festive Oratory, and two years later I was welcomed into the house as a student. Later, I was a cleric and a priest of Don Bosco, as I am now, and so I enjoyed the familiarity of Don Bosco for thirty-eight years.

“Mamma Margherita couldn’t cope anymore in her final years”

Don Bosco’s parents were Francesco and Margherita Occhiena, a native of Capriglio. I only knew his mother, because his father, as I heard, had died when Don Bosco was only a few years old… His mother was held in high esteem by all who knew her, as a woman who looked after her children well, raising them as Christians. And truly, having then known her for seven years at the Oratory, I find that her reputation was not at all exaggerated. She dressed modestly and like a simple peasant woman. She took care of all the affairs of the Oratory; she was a mother to everyone, and everyone called her “Mamma”. When Don Bosco wanted to introduce her to some stranger, you could see that she suffered in her humility. It is my opinion that this good woman felt much sorrow in seeing herself, in her final years, unable to manage all the chores, due to the increased number of boys. She often went to Don Bosco and said to him, “There are so many things to do, and I can’t do it anymore.” To which he would reply, “Don’t worry. Don’t work so much! What you can’t do, we’ll have others do.” In her old age, Don Bosco had her treated with all the care she so well deserved.

The walks in Monferrato (1852-1864)

When Don Bosco had to think about rest (*for his boys*) after the year’s labours, he thought of taking walks in Monferrato, bringing with him about a hundred boys with the band. At first glance, it would seem that those walks, which sometimes lasted for fifteen days, were solely for the relief and recreation of the boys. But we saw how Don Bosco directed them towards the Christian good of the people. In the villages where the boys stopped, in the morning they would approach the sacraments in the parish church, sing the Mass with music; in the evening, the litanies, the blessing with the Blessed Sacrament, a religious service in which the people participated with singular reverence. After the service, a theatrical performance was often given, in a place where everyone could attend.

These wholesome entertainments prevented public dances and other worldly shows. In the evening, we were guests in seminaries, parish houses, or the homes of good people designated by the local parish priest. Some of us, the older ones, supervised good moral conduct.

On one of these walks, it was decided to celebrate the feast of the Sacred Heart of Mary in Vignale (*Alessandria*). The entire service was entrusted to Don Bosco, his priests, and his boys. Word of the feast drew many people from the surrounding areas as well, and the village church was packed with people.

At the time of the sermon, everyone was hanging on Don Bosco's lips, but most of all the parish priest. From the very first words, he planted himself in front of the pulpit and did not miss a single word. When Don Bosco recounted the story of the establishment of the Archconfraternity of the Sacred Heart of Mary in Paris, the parish priest began to cry, and he cried until the end. Then he ran to the sacristy, where Don Bosco was just coming down the pulpit steps. He threw himself at his feet, exclaiming between sobs, "You have not come to preach to the little sheep, but to the shepherd." Don Bosco wanted to lift him up, but there was no way. Little by little, as he regained his composure, he entered into intimate conversation with Don Bosco, and they arranged to give a popular mission to the people. He tasked Don Bosco with sending the preachers, among whom was Fr. Giovanni Cagliero, now a bishop (*The event took place in the autumn of 1862*).

The birth of the Salesian Congregation

The Salesian Congregation took more and more shape in Don Bosco's mind. (…) In 1862, perhaps in May, vows were professed by him and by those who were enrolled, including myself. (*There were 22 plus Don Bosco, and it was 14 May*).

I remember that Don Bosco then said these words: that we should consider ourselves as soldiers of the Church and the Pope, and that with God's help and ours, that humble society would number no less than a thousand members in the space of 25 or 30 years, and would spread to many parts of the world.

We who heard him thought it impossible that that society, which he called humble and which it was, should multiply so much. Today, after 32 years (*Fr. Francesia gives this testimony in 1894*), we see Don Bosco's word amply fulfilled, since the enrolled and professed members (*of the Salesian Congregation*) exceed one thousand five hundred, among whom are over four hundred priests.

“When Don Bosco blessed my mother who was struck by cholera”

He often told us that everything that had been done at the Oratory, God had willed to happen through the intercession of Mary Most Holy. In the last conference he gave to the Salesians in 1886, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, he often repeated: “God willed to give us everything through the hands of Mary.”

I remember that in 1854 (*Francesia was 16*), I went to call him to come and hear the confession of my mother who had been struck by cholera. Before seeing her, as he passed in front of the Sanctuary of the Consolata, he said to me, “If you promise me that when you are a priest, you will preach devotion to Our Lady, and propagate her cult, your mother will be cured.” And my mother not only recovered, but lived for another twenty years and more.

The conversion of Cavalier Federico Oreglia di S. Stefano

I remember the effort Don Bosco made to win over to the Lord a young man, well known to me, who was very given to the pleasures of the world. It was also hoped in his family (*Federico’s uncle was Cardinal Oreglia*) that being close to Don Bosco would do him good. They urged him to go on a spiritual retreat to S. Ignazio near Lanzo, because it was known that Don Bosco was there. He would talk with this young man about gymnastics, music, and many other small things. This gentle behaviour began to win him a little friendship, and then his full confidence.

Don Bosco never said anything else to him but, “Signor Cavaliere, look, we have a lot of business to attend to…”. “And what might that be?” And Don Bosco, “You ask me? We have to deal with the business of the soul!”

This frank language penetrated the heart of that vain young man, who began to frequent Don Bosco, and then to say to him, “I want to go to confession.” Don Bosco on that day was tormented by a boil that was giving him a fever, but he did not give up and calmly listened to the young cavalier’s confession. After some time, however, he fainted and fell into his arms. This was the final grace. Believing him to be dead, he laid him on the bed and called for people. Everyone was standing around the bed when Don Bosco came to, and looking around he said, “What am I doing here?” He got up and wanted to continue the confession. This whole combination of circumstances served to win over the soul of that young man more

and more. He decided to leave the world and retired to our Oratory. Then he went to become a religious in the Society of Jesus.

“Don’t you see that everyone is leaving us?”

As soon as the work of the Congregation had begun, once the external difficulties were overcome, the internal ones began.

I remember that once, seeing that many were leaving, I took the liberty of saying to Don Bosco, “Don’t you see that everyone is leaving us?” He replied, “God has no need of anyone. It is we, his poor creatures, who must be grateful to Him for having called us! If we do not do it, God will call others, who will listen better to His voice. You will see how the Lord will provide to fill the places left vacant! Look, I remember that when at the beginning of the Oratory I was abandoned by everyone, God showed me the church, the house, the clerics, the priests… I was asked, ‘But where are they?’ And I would answer, ‘They are not here yet, but I see them. If you have patience, you too will see all these things!’ ‘But what habit will these clerics and priests have?’ I would answer, ‘They must have the habit of virtue’. This answer convinced them that I was mad. But in the meantime, the Oratory came, the church, the porticoes, the clerics, and the priests. Do not doubt; we will overcome this difficulty too.”

“God still wants a lot from me, I must be quick”

When Don Bosco began the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, one of us said to him, “Dear Don Bosco, with all the debts the Oratory has, why are you making more?” He replied, “What do you want? I feel I have little time left to live, and God still wants so much from me. I must be quick; I can’t help it.” Everything he put his hand to was for the great love he had for the salvation of souls, and for the glory of the Lord.

“**Don Bosco, if he starts a work, he finishes it”**

We were all of the opinion that Don Bosco must always succeed in his undertakings,

because he was supported by God’s Providence. Once I became convinced that people on the outside thought so too. I was on the tram along the Po, in the year 1884 or 1885. A person, looking towards the hill, saw a church that was not yet finished (and it is not even now in 1894). He said, “What is that building up there?” “It must be a church.” “Is it perhaps Don Bosco’s?” Another replied, “Certainly not. That man, if he starts a work, he finishes it. I assure you that that building must not be Don Bosco’s.” (It was a temple started by Canon Ortalda, director of the Propagation of the Faith in Turin. The construction of that temple was interrupted for lack of funds, and it remained unfinished for about 80 years).

Meanwhile, the tram had brought us in front of the church of St. John the Evangelist, and the same individual concluded by saying, “This one is Don Bosco’s!” I did not know that person who spoke with such precision about Don Bosco, who with the help of Providence had accomplished so many works.

In the last years of his life, Don Bosco joyfully awaited the courier with registered and insured letters, which he generally called “his providence”. Happy then with what he received, even if it were only five lire, he would say several times, “Deo gratias! Thanks be to God! Better this than a punch in the eye, however hard.”

The mules and their drivers

I remember one day Don Bosco was passing where the courtyard is now (*next to the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians*), which was then a public road and a stable for mules. He, avoiding getting close to the animals, said smiling to the drivers, “My mother recommended that I keep my distance from those who do not go to confession.” They understood and replied, “This is for us, Don Bosco. You mean we are…”. “Christians,” interrupted Don Bosco. “But with little faith. I’ll be waiting for you, and I assure you that you will be pleased.”

“Don Bosco read my heart”

It was evening, and I was kneeling near Don Bosco for confession. I was distressed in matters of conscience; I did not know how to express myself to Don Bosco in confession, and I said to myself, “If Don Bosco, without me speaking to him, were to

say to me, ‘Go to holy Communion’, I would understand that I must disregard all these anxieties.” I had barely thought this when Don Bosco called me and said, “Tomorrow, go peacefully to receive holy Communion.” I wanted to say another word, but Don Bosco repeated, “Do not worry about anything; go to holy Communion.” And that was precisely what I had thought and desired.

The former pupil

In the 38 years that I had the good fortune to have him as a father, teacher, and director, I always admired in Don Bosco the same ardour for the salvation of souls. I cannot forget that the last time he went for a walk, a former pupil, having heard from the newspapers that Don Bosco was unwell, wanted to meet him. “My dear,” Don Bosco said to him, “how are things?” “So-so,” he replied, “pray for me.” “And how is your soul?” “I try to always be a worthy pupil of Don Bosco.” “May God reward you; pray for me too. I commend to you the salvation of your soul. Always live as a good Christian.” And he dismissed him with a blessing.

Giovanni Battista FRANCESIA, Salesian priest.

His testimonies are contained in the manuscript of the ordinary process, public copy, folios 1555-1771.