 Reading time: 10 min.

“We will always go halves!”
At 9 years of age Michael (already fatherless) was admitted to First Communion. He was a pious, serious and diligent boy. On his way to or from school, Michael sometimes met Don Bosco. He would run to him happily kiss his hand and ask, “Will you give me a medal?” Don Bosco, as if he hadn’t heard, smilingly put his priest’s biretta on his head, held out the left palm of his hand, and with his right he made a gesture as if to cut it in half: “Take it, Michelino,” he told him, “take it!” Michelino was bewildered. He shook Don Bosco’s hand and thought “What was that all about?” On 3 October 1852, during the outing that the best young men of the Oratory made every year to the Becchi for the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, Don Bosco clothed him in the cassock. Michael was 15 years old. In the evening, returning to Turin, Michael overcame his shyness and asked Don Bosco, “Do you remember our first meetings? I asked you for a medal, and you made a strange gesture, as if you wanted to cut off your hand and give it to me. What did that mean?” Don Bosco said, “But dear Michael, you still don’t get it? Yet it is very clear. The more you go on in years, the better you will understand that I wanted to tell you that in life, the two of us will always do everything by halves. Sorrows, cares, responsibilities, joys and everything else we will share together.” Michael remained silent, full of silent happiness: Don Bosco, in simple words, had made him his universal heir.
It is traditional and well established to read the figure of Fr Rua in the light of Don Bosco: it is Don Bosco who welcomed him as a boy, accompanied him in his formation for the priesthood, formed him as an educator and one who was responsible for a society of educators. Perhaps more surprising is the role played by Fr Rua in sharing Don Bosco’s call in the beginning and the consolidation of Salesian work. A choice made from the very first years at the Oratory, reaffirmed at some decisive turning points and which matured with a dedication and delivery . No going back or uncertainty. A commonality and harmony of life that matured in a daily experience of joys and sorrows, of commitments and responsibilities, of communication and collaboration that not only marked the Salesian work in a charismatic way, but also characterised it in its future development, in that vocational flowering that would see an impressive expansion precisely in the rectorate of Fr Rua.

A trusted disciple of Don Bosco

As part of the Valdocco environment, as a diligent and generous student,

soon to be the recognised leader of the Oratory, Michael Rua was present from the very beginning of the foundation of the Salesian Society, coming from the ranks of that breeding ground of vocations and youthful holiness that was the Immaculate Conception Sodality founded by St Dominic Savio. These first Salesians put themselves at the service of the young: exhausting days at the oratory, evening classes, assistance, theatre, gymnastics or music rehearsals, lively recreations, studies, attendance at the sacraments. They had before them the shining example of Don Bosco: “I drew more profit”, Michael Rua would later say, “from observing Don Bosco, even in his most humble actions, than from reading and meditating on a treatise on asceticism.” In the spirit of obedience to God’s will, lived in unconditional surrender to Don Bosco, Michael Rua matured not only through the different responsibilities, which to an increasing extent rested on his shoulders, but above all in the climate of trust and spiritual intensity which led him, almost naturally and recognised by all, to become Don Bosco’s worthy successor. Michael became the saint’s main collaborator, despite his young age. He won his total trust, even helping him in transcribing the drafts of his books, often at night, stealing hours from his sleep. During the day he went to the St Aloysius Oratory near Porta Nuova, in an area full of immigrants. Rua, doing catechism and teaching primary schools notions, knew countless stories of misery. Already in these years he began to relieve Don Bosco of some of his duties, as he showed him day after day that he had perceived his values, his ideals and was willing to share his charismatic and founding concerns.

On 28 July 1860, Fr Rua was ordained a priest. Don Bosco gave him certain warnings in writing: “You will see better than I do, that the Salesian Work will go beyond the borders of Italy and establish itself in many parts of the world. You will have much work to do and much to suffer; but, you know, it is only through the Red Sea and the desert that you will reach the Promised Land. Suffer courageously; and, even down here, you will not lack consolations and help from the Lord.” His brief but significant experience as a young rector of the Mirabello boarding school (1863-1865) saw him able to transfer the style and spirit of Valdocco to this first Salesian presence outside Turin. Among the invaluable advice given to him by Don Bosco, we note the concern to avoid the very young rector of twenty-six years of age encountering the stumbling block of activism and lack of concern for the physical or moral suffering of those in his charge. The chronicle at the time indicated: “Fr Rua is acting at Mirabello as Don Bosco does here. One sees him continually surrounded by pupils won over by his kindness or by the desire to hear him talk about a thousand interesting subjects.”

Recalled back to Valdocco after two years, Fr Rua imposed himself as a very

valuable first collaborator both in the daily life of the oratory and the college, and in the various enterprises set up by Don Bosco: from his commitment in following the construction and opening of the church of Mary Help of Christians (1865-1868), which would bring him to the end of his life, to following with painstaking patience the long process of drafting the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales (1858-1874). Even in the bitter disputes with Archbishop Gastaldi (1872-1882) he distinguished himself by his calm, balanced style of intervention, and always striving for mediation that explained, justified or simply kept silent. He tackled the innumerable tasks thanks to his mind as orderly as it was methodical, his mastery of nerves, his prodigious memory, his tenacity in his work, the ability he had to get help, but above all because he loved Don Bosco and wanted to help him. He strove to make his whole day a continuous prayer. His action takes place under the gaze of God and Mary.

In the implementation of the missionary project (1875- 1877), which would find a miraculous development in his time as Rector Major, Fr Rua was the first and most active collaborator of the absolute protagonist (Don Bosco), and in the celebration of the first four General Chapters (1877-1886), held while Don Bosco was alive, he gave an ample and competent contribution. The decade 1878-1888 was certainly Fr Rua's most intense and responsible period. The more Don Bosco advanced in years, the more the responsibilities of the Prefect, more and more de facto Vicar, and that finally also *de jure*, grew. Fr Rua, a mature Salesian and expert in governance, became, on the strength of his long experience and the esteem in which he was held by all, the charismatic and institutional heir to Don Bosco's charism that would bring copious fruits to the life of the Church and society.

Don Bosco's faithful successor

In 1888 Fr Michael Rua, at the request of his confreres, was confirmed by the Holy See in the office of Rector Major. The inheritance was a heavy one. The governance of the institutions founded by Don Bosco – the Salesian Society, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators – was not easy. Despite the enthusiasm aroused by the charismatic figure of the Founder, the situation appears fragile in many respects. Systematic work is needed to consolidate formation courses, strengthen identity, organise governance and coordinate activities. It was important to manage delicate relations with national governments and civil society at a time of social tensions and ideological contrasts. It is also necessary to respond to the growing expectations placed on the Salesian educational mission.

Having become Rector Major of the Salesian Society and Don Bosco's first

successor, Fr Rua was his faithful interpreter, the one who realised, consolidated and continued the charism in all its dimensions, with a very clear objective from the very beginning of his mandate: “The other thought that remained fixed in my mind was that we must consider ourselves very fortunate to be children of such a Father. Therefore, our concern must be to support and in due time to develop more and more the works he began, to faithfully follow the methods he practised and taught, and in our manner of speaking and acting, and to seek to imitate the model which the Lord in his goodness has given us in him. This, beloved sons, will be the programme that I will follow in my office; let this also be the aim and study of each one of the Salesians.”

This is why he became a missionary and tireless traveller, travelling many kilometres, visiting the houses of the Congregation scattered around the world, coordinating them as one big family. He said his travels had made him see “poverty everywhere”. The Salesians took many children off the streets, opening oratories and schools that, despite their simplicity, quickly became centres of welcome and education. He was a great innovator in education: in addition to schools, where he introduced vocational courses, he organised hostels and social clubs. As head of the Congregation he dealt scrupulously with administrative matters, which sometimes led him to be tough with his co-workers. An ardent apostle of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Fr Rua wrote to the Salesians: “This devotion is all that is most Salesian, for it is from the Sacred Heart of our Master that we go to draw, in our capacity as educators, the purest love of youth, the gentleness and indulgence that must accompany our words and actions, patience in the trials and tribulations connected with our task, the spirit of sacrifice and zeal for souls.”

In his governance Frn Rua had as his point of reference Don Bosco and his charism, Salesian tradition, the Constitutions and Regulations, the deliberations of the General Chapters, the teachings of the Church, the civil law of the countries where Salesians live and work, the needs of the young and the demands of the times. In his animation, Fr Rua was always careful to warn the Salesians of all the dangers that could threaten the stability of the Congregation, and at the same time he draws their attention to the ideals they must pursue and live out in the concrete circumstances of history. In the decision-making area he gives expression to the spirit of Don Bosco by updating the Salesian Constitutions and Regulations, the structures of government and the multiform variety of Salesian foundations scattered throughout the world. Instruments of this governing action were the General Chapters (GC) that he decided to hold at Valsalice at Don Bosco’s tomb so that the Chapter itself could be an experience of charismatic harmony with Don Bosco, of his spirit and his pastoral and educational method; the Superior Chapter

that aimed at giving concrete institutional expressions to Don Bosco's charism with respect to structures, persons, rules, spirituality, guidelines for action, presence in the Church and in the world.

Fr Rua projected the style of action of his government at all levels: worldwide, provincial, local. His was a compact government, centred on the figure of the Rector Major, who, according to the Salesian Family spirit, acts hierarchically and collegially together with the other superiors. Above all, it is a charismatic and exemplary government: Fr Rua himself was a charismatic and exemplary person, i.e. he governed by good example, being a true model. Don Rua did not project himself, but Don Bosco and his charism, always and everywhere: before his Salesians, before the Church and civil society. Therefore it can be said that while he governed with intelligence, his governance was even more strengthened by the holiness and moral quality of himself as a person.

Fruits of this animation and government were the expansion of Salesian foundations almost always opened with the poverty of means and shortage of personnel and in many places with very difficult situations; the missionary expeditions sent to support and bring to full development the works already open and to attempt new openings, particularly among peoples not yet evangelised. During his 22 years of government Fr Rua increased the number of Salesian foundations: from the 64 houses present at Don Bosco's death this rose to 341 houses in 1910, the year of Fr Rua's death. When Fr Rua took over the leadership of the Congregation there were only 6 provinces, in 1910 this increased to 34.

Another fruit of this action blessed from above and supported by tireless commitment is the growth in vocations. In this perspective Fr Rua applied the method of assiduous motivation, frequent appeals and reminders, persuasive reprimands, approving and praising every initiative to achieve the goal of cultivating vocations. For Fr Rua, the excellence of any Salesian work consists in its capacity to promote vocations, and this is an indication of fidelity to Don Bosco's charism, as well as being a sign of the fruitfulness of the Salesian pastoral and pedagogical system. He never tired of recommending that Salesians lead exemplary lives and strive for perfection in their daily lives as the primary means of attracting vocations. At Don Bosco's death there were 768 Salesians; at Fr Rua's death there were 4001 professed Salesians and 371 novices. This work of vocational promotion was accompanied by a stabilising action in the formation process, with the establishment of formation centres: novitiates and philosophical and theological studentates.

The result was a superior endowed with an unusual ability to follow local events, to courageously indicate solutions or suggestions, full of respect and, at the same

time, determined, after having carefully examined the situations. Behind this interest one glimpses a Father, Teacher, Friend concerned for the highest good, that is, fidelity to the charism donated through Don Bosco to the Church and society to foster the maturation of young people as ‘good Christians and honest citizens’. This work of governance and animation found its source in fidelity to Don Bosco and his charism, through the mediation of the Constitutions and the Regulations, the lived experience of Salesian community life, direct contact with his writings either in the original or in translation, and the approach to those who had lived alongside him. Fr Rua was convinced that insisting on Salesians living in close communion with the person and figure of Don Bosco was a sure way to overcome individualism, isolation and the liberal tendencies visible in external society, to strengthen a strong sense of belonging to the congregation and to create prayerful, harmonious, fraternal and apostolic Salesian communities, united under the directors and firmly linked to the Provincial, Rector Major and Chapter Superior.

Blessed Rua, among many satisfactions (in 1907 Don Bosco was declared venerable, in 1908 the Roman church of Maria Liberatore was completed), certainly did not lack trials and difficulties. In 1895, a Salesian priest was assassinated by a half-crazed pupil. Five months later, Bishop Lasagna, one of the greatest hopes of the Salesian Society, his secretary and four sisters of Mary Help of Christians, were victims of a train accident. Four years later, a flood destroyed the material achievements of ten years of missionary work in Argentina. In 1896, the anticlerical government of Ecuador expelled the Salesians from the country. In France, when the law known as the Law of Associations was promulgated (2 June 1901), the government demanded the closure and alienation of Salesian institutes. In 1907, a moraly scandal was fabricated at a boarding school in Varazze and raised a violent storm against the Salesians throughout Italy. This affair will seriously undermine his health and affect the end of his life.

We conclude with a short passage from the masterful homily given by Paul VI on the occasion of his beatification (29 October 1972), which deserves to be read in its entirety. “Who is Don Rua? He is the first successor of Don Bosco, the Holy Founder of the Salesians. And why is Don Rua now beatified, that is, glorified? He is beatified and glorified precisely because he is his successor, that is to say, his continuator: son, disciple, imitator; who has made, with others who are well known, but first among them, of the Saint’s example a school, of his personal work an institution extended, one could say, over the whole earth; of his life a history, of his rule a spirit, of his holiness a type, a model; he has made of the spring, a current, a river.”

To know the figure and work of Blessed Michael Rua

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