 Reading time: 7 min.

“Be good, trust in God and paradise will be yours” (Blessed Michael RUA)

Blessed Michael Rua (1837-1910), Don Bosco’s first successor, as studies, research and conferences held on the occasion of the centenary of his death have shown, goes beyond the traditional cliché of being a ‘copy of Don Bosco’, sometimes with less attractive traits or even in opposition to the founder, to release a more complete, harmonious and sympathetic figure.

Fr Rua is the consecration and exaltation of Salesian origins. It was testified during the process: ‘Fr Rua is not to be placed in the ranks of Don Bosco’s ordinary followers, even the most fervent, because he precedes them all as a perfect exemplar, and for this reason all those who want to know Don Bosco well must also study him, because the servant of God made a study on Don Bosco that no one else can make.’ No one like him understood and interpreted the founder in his educational and ecclesial action and spirituality. Fr Rua’s vocation and ideal were the life, intentions, works, virtues, holiness of the father and guide of his youthful, priestly and religious existence. Frn Rua always remains of vital relevance to the Salesian world.

When it came to finding the rector for the first house outside Turin, at Mirabello Monferrato in 1863, Don Bosco chose Fr Rua “admiring in him, in addition to his exemplary conduct, his indefatigable work, his great experience and spirit of sacrifice that one would say was unspeakable, as well as his good manners, so much so that he was loved by all.” More directly Fr Cerruti, after affirming that he had found in the young rector the portrait and image of the Father (Don Bosco), testifies: “I always remember that tireless industriousness of his, that prudence so fine and delicate of government, that zeal for the good not only religious and moral, but intellectual and physical of the brothers and young people entrusted to him. These aspects summarise and embody the Salesian motto ‘work and temperance’. A true disciple of Don Bosco *verbo et opere*, in an admirable synthesis of prayer and work. A disciple who followed his master from his earliest childhood, doing everything by halves, assimilating in a vital form the spirit of his charismatic origins; a son who felt generated by a unique love, like so many of the first boys of the Valdocco Oratory, who decided to ‘stay with Don Bosco’” and among whom the first three successors of the father and teacher of the young excelled in a paradigmatic way: Fr Michael Rua, Fr PaulAlbera, Fr Philip Rinaldi.

1. Some of the traits of Fr Rua's virtuous life, an expression of continuity and fidelity

It is a matter of the tradition of one who receives a gift and in turn passes it on, trying not to lose the dynamism and apostolic, spiritual and affective vitality that must permeate institutions and works. Don Bosco had already intuited this: "If God told me: Prepare yourself that you must die and choose a successor because I don't want the Work you started to fail and ask for this successor as many graces, virtues, gifts and charisms as you think necessary, so that he can carry out his office well, which I will give him all, I assure you that I wouldn't know what to ask the Lord for for this purpose, because I already see that Fr Rua already possesses everything." This was the fruit of assiduous frequentation, of treasuring every piece of advice, of continuous study in observing and noting every act, every word, every ideal of Don Bosco.

Exemplary Conduct

The testimony of Salesian Brother Giuseppe Balestra, Fr Rua's personal assistant, is significant. Balestra was very attentive to the aspects of daily life and in them he was able to grasp the traits of a holiness to the full that would also mark his religious journey. Even today in Don Bosco's rooms one can see the sofa that was Blessed Michael Rua's bed for 20 years. Having succeeded Don Bosco, and taken his place in this room, Fr Rua never wanted his own bed. In the evening, Brother Balestra spread two sheets on that sofa, which Fr Rua used to sleep on. In the morning, the sheets were folded and the sofa resumed its usual shape. "I have the conviction that the servant of God was a saint, because in the 11 years that I had the good fortune to live right next to him and to observe him continually, I have always and in all things found the greatest perfection; hence my conviction that he was most faithful in the fulfilment of all his duties and therefore in the most exact observance of all the Commandments of God, of the Church and the obligations of his own state.".

1.2. Tireless work, tireless industriousness and extraordinary activity

It seems incredible that a man with such a frail body, with health that was anything but florid, could have been able to undertake such an intense and untiring activity, so vast, taking an interest in the most diverse sectors of the Salesian apostolate, promoting and implementing initiatives that if they appeared extraordinary and daring at the time, are also a very valid indication and spur today. This untiring industriousness, a typical trait of Salesian spirituality, was recognised in Fr Rua by Don Bosco from his youth, as Fr Lemoyne attested: "It is

true, in the oratory one works a lot, but it is not work that is the cause of death. There is only one here in the Oratory who should, without God's help, die of fatigue, and that is Fr Rua, who always continues to work harder than the others."

This dedication to work was an expression of the spirit and practice of poverty that singularly distinguished Fr Rua's life and actions: "He loved poverty immensely, which was a most welcome companion to him from childhood and he possessed the spirit of it perfectly… He practised it with joy." The practice of poverty, expressed in many forms, emphasised the value of the example of life and of taking divine Providence into account. He admonished: "Persuade yourselves that to a much higher end my exhortations tend, it is a matter of ensuring that the true spirit of poverty, to which we are obliged by vow, reigns among us. If economy is not taken care of, and too much is given to our bodies in treatment, in clothing, in travel, in comfort, how can we have fervour in the practices of piety? How can we be disposed to those sacrifices that are inherent to Salesian life? It would be impossible to make any real progress in perfection, impossible to be true sons of Don Bosco."

1.3. Great experience and prudence of governance

Prudence defines better than any other quality the virtuous profile of Blessed Michael Rua: from his earliest childhood he set out to follow St John Bosco, hastening under his guidance to embrace the religious state; he formed himself through assiduous meditation and diligent examination of conscience; he eschewed idleness, worked tirelessly for good and led an irreproachable life. And as an adolescent he remained so as a priest, educator, vicar superior and successor of Don Bosco.

In the sphere of a Congregation dedicated to the education of the young he introduced into the formation process the practice of practical training, a period of three years during which the young Salesians "were sent to the houses to carry out different tasks, but mostly as assistants or teachers, for the main purpose that they might live together with the young, study their mentality, grow with them, and this under the guidance and supervision of the catechist and Rector." He also offered precise indications and clear directives in the most varied fields of the Salesian mission, with a spirit of evangelical vigilance.

This exercise of prudence was characterised by a docility to the Spirit and a marked capacity for discernment regarding the persons called to hold positions of responsibility, especially in the field of formation and governance of the houses and provinces, regarding the works and the different situations; as when, for example, he chose Fr Paul Albera as Visitor of the houses in America or Fr Philip Rinaldi as

Prefect General. “He inculcated in all the confreres, especially the rectors and provincials, the exact observance of the Rules, the exemplary fulfilment of practices of piety and always the exercise of charity; and he himself preceded them all by example, saying: ‘A means of gaining the confidence of those under us is to never neglect one’s duties.’”

The practice of prudence, especially in the exercise of government, produced as its fruit the filial confidence the confreres had in him, considering him as an expert counsellor and spiritual director, not only for matters of the soul, but also for material things: “The prudence of the servant of God shone in an extraordinary way in jealously preserving the confidential secret which he buried in his soul. He observed with the greatest caution the secrecy of personal correspondence: this was a general confession, and therefore the confreres approached him with great confidence because he answered everyone in the most delicate way.”

1.4. “Priest of the Pope”.

This expression of Pope John XXIII in front of Don Bosco’s casket in 1959, expresses very well how Fr Rua, following Don Bosco in his daily journey, saw and found in the pope the light and the guide for his action. “Providence reserved even harder and I would say heroic trials of this fidelity and docility for Fr Rua than for Don Bosco. During his time as Rector Major, various decrees came from the Holy See that seemed to break traditions considered important and characteristic of our spirit in the Congregation. Fr Rua, while deeply feeling the blow of the sudden measures and being afflicted by them, immediately made himself a champion of obedience to the Holy See’s dispositions, inviting the Salesians, as true sons of the Church and of Don Bosco, to accept them serenely and with confidence.”

This is one of the maturing elements of the Salesian charism in obedience to the Church and in fidelity to the founder. Certainly, it was a very demanding ordeal, but one that forged both the holiness of Fr Rua and the *sentire cum ecclesia* and that fidelity to the Pope of the entire Congregation and Salesian Family which were characteristic and indispensable features in Don Bosco. Obedience made of faith, of love, translated into humble but cordial service, in a spirit of filial docility and fidelity to the teachings and directives of the Holy Father.

It is interesting to note how even in the process of beatification Fr Rua went halfway with Don Bosco, but not according to a repetitive stereotype, but with originality, highlighting precisely those aspects that in Don Bosco’s process had aroused the most controversial *animadversiones*: “Some surprise and perplexity may arise from the most obvious conclusion reached by comparing the two

Positiones, that is the fact that the same virtues most frequently invoked to delineate Fr Rua's holiness are those constantly set out to challenge Don Bosco's holiness. It is true in fact that it is precisely prudence, temperance and poverty that are in the forefront of the *animadversiones* collected in the Founder's *Positio."*

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