

□ Reading time: 10 min.

He was one of the many young migrants in 19th century Turin. He had the good fortune to meet Don Bosco early on and became his first “true” lay Salesian.

Don Bosco, a very young priest, had arrived in Turin in November 1841. Looking around, and going down into the prisons alongside Fr Cafasso, he had realised the dramatic situation in which the city’s boys found themselves. He had prayed to the Lord to help him “do something” for them.

On the morning of 8 December, feast of the Immaculate Conception, he had met Bartholomew Garelli, a bricklayer from Asti. In the sacristy attached to the church of St Francis of Assisi, he had given him his first catechism lesson, and made friends with him.

On the afternoon of that same feast day, during the evening celebration, Don Bosco saw three little bricklayers sleeping, one next to the other, on an altar step. The church was crowded with people, and in the pulpit a preacher was weaving his laborious sermon. Don Bosco approached the three on tiptoe, shook the first one, and in a whisper asked him:

What is your name?

“Carlo Buzzetti” replied the boy in confusion, expecting a slap in the face from the priest. “Excuse me, but I tried to pay attention to the sermon. But I didn’t understand anything, and I fell asleep.”

Instead of a scolding, Charles saw a good smile on the priest’s face, who continued in a whisper:

“And who are these?”

“My brother and my cousin” Carlo said, shaking the two little sleepers. “We are bricklayers all week and we are tired.”

“Come with me” Don Bosco whispered again. And he preceded them into the sacristy.

“They were Carlo and Giovanni Buzzetti, and Giovanni Gariboldi” Don Bosco emotionally reminded his first Salesians. Little bricklayers from Lombardy who would be with him for thirty, forty years, and whom everyone in Valdocco knew.

“Back then they were simple errand boys, now they are master builders, esteemed and respected builders.”

Giuseppe, the little brother

The Buzzettis were from Caronno Ghiringhello (now Caronno Varesino), a

large family that lived by working the land. But in Antonio and Giuseppina's family seven children had been born, too many arms for a small piece of land. As soon as they had come out of childhood, their father Antonio had thought of sending the two older sons to Turin, where there was a colony of bricklayers from Lombardy who earned good money, and came back with a good amount of savings.



The entire Buzzetti family. In the centre in the second row Giuseppe (with beard). On his left his brother Carlo; on the right the other three brothers.

Charles and John told Don Bosco that they had left on wagons from Caronno, in a group with other older villagers who were familiar with the long journey (about a hundred kilometres). Partly on the cart, partly on foot, they had walked carrying a bundle of their poor clothes, and had slept at some farmstead. "Now the dead season is coming for us masons" said Charles. "In a few days we will take the road back to our hometown. We will return in spring, and we will take our third brother, Giuseppe, with us."

In those few remaining days, Don Bosco made friends with them. Charles and John returned three days later, on Sunday, at the head of a team of cousins and countrymen. Don Bosco said Mass and gave a lively sermon to them. Then they had

breakfast together, sitting in the sunshine in the little courtyard behind the sacristy. They talked about the distant families they would soon see again, about work, about the first savings they could bring home. They got on well with Don Bosco, it seemed as if they had always been friends.

In the spring of 1842, the Buzzetti brothers returned to Turin from Caronno, accompanied by their little brother who had just turned 10 (he was born on 12 February 1832). Joseph was a pale boy, all bewildered. Don Bosco looked at him tenderly, spoke to him as a friend. Joseph became attached to him like a puppy. He would never detach himself from him again. Even when the brothers, after a new season of work, returned to Caronno, he would stay with “his” Don Bosco (also because the long road exhausted him). From the spring of 1842 to the dawn of 31 January 1888 when Don Bosco died, Joseph would always be at his side, a calm witness to the whole human and divine story of the priest “who loved him”. Many events in Don Bosco’s life would by now be classified as “legends” in our distrustful and demythologising time, if they had not been seen through the simple eyes of the builder from Caronno, who was always there, a stone’s throw from “his” Don Bosco.

“Would you come and stay with me?”

Don Bosco went from building site to building site to meet his boys and check that the working conditions imposed on them were not inhuman. He watched with sorrow as Joseph carried bricks and limestone from dawn to dusk. There was so much goodness and intelligence in those eyes. In a few years he would call him and offer to share his life. Michael Rua, the one who would become the second Don Bosco, was still a four-year-old child. But the one who would be his strong arm, his first, true “coadjutor” (brother) in the construction of the Salesian Work, had already arrived. He was Giuseppe (Joseph) Buzzetti.

The Oratory moved from the sacristy of St Francis to the Marchioness Barolo’s ‘Little Hospital’, from a cemetery to a mill, from a hovel to a meadow. It ended up under a shed in Valdocco. Meanwhile, Don Bosco told his boys that they would have a grand oratory, workshops and courtyards, churches and schools. More than one said that Don Bosco had gone mad. Joseph Buzzetti stood beside him. He listened to him, he lit up at his smile, he did not even think Don Bosco could be wrong.

In May 1847 Providence and endless rain brought Don Bosco the first boy who needed to be housed “day and night”. In the same year six others arrived: orphans left alone from one day to the next, young migrants looking for their first job. For them Don Bosco transformed two neighbouring rooms into a small dormitory, placed the beds, and hung a sign on the wall saying “God sees you”. To

manage that first microscopic community (nourished by Mamma Margaret's vegetable garden and pots and pans), Don Bosco needed a young helper he could trust with his eyes closed, a boy who would stay with him forever, and be the first of those clerics and priests that Our Lady had promised him so many times in a dream. That boy would be Joseph Buzzetti.

Joseph himself recounts: "It was a Sunday evening, and I was observing the recreation of my companions. That day I had received Communion with my brothers, so I was really happy. Don Bosco was at recreation with us, telling us the nicest things in the world. Meanwhile night was coming, and I was preparing to go home. When I approached Don Bosco to say goodbye to him, he said:

"Bravo, I am happy to be able to speak to you. Tell me, would you come and stay with me?"

"To be with you? Explain."

"I need to gather some young men who want to follow me in the Oratory venture. You would be one. I'll start schooling you. And, God willing, you could be a priest in due course."

"I looked into Don Bosco's face and thought I was dreaming. Then he added":

"I will talk to your brother Charles, and we will do what is best in the Lord."

Invoker of "miracles"

Charles agreed, and Joseph came to live with Don Bosco and his mother Margaret. Don Bosco entrusted him with the money and finances of the house, with total trust. And in two years he prepared him to wear the black habit of the clerics. He was called by all "the cleric Buzzetti". It was he who took Michael Rua aside in an asphyxiating August, and gave the heat-worn young man a serious rethink because he was no longer committed to his studies.

Year after year, Joseph Buzzetti took over from Don Bosco and developed the choir and band, the workshops (especially the printing press of which he became the total manager), the supervision of building works, the administration of the Work that was getting bigger and bigger, the organisation of the lotteries that were for years the indispensable oxygen for the Oratory.

He was the involuntary instigator of two famous "multiplications" by Don Bosco. In the winter of 1848, during a solemn feast, at the moment of distributing Communion to three hundred boys, Don Bosco realised that there were only eight or nine hosts in the ciborium. Joseph, who was serving Mass, had forgotten to prepare another ciborium full of hosts to be consecrated. When Don Bosco started to distribute the Eucharist, Joseph began to sweat because he saw (while holding

the patten) the hosts growing under Don Bosco's hands, until there were enough for everyone. The following year, on All Souls Day, Don Bosco returned from his visit to the cemetery with the crowd of hungry youngsters to whom he had promised cooked chestnuts. Mamma Margaret, whom Joseph had told to prepare but misinterpreted Don Bosco's words, had only prepared a small pot of them. Joseph, in the general uproar, tried to make Don Bosco understand that there was only a small quantity of chestnuts. But Don Bosco began to distribute them in a big way, ladling them out. Even that time Joseph began to break out in a cold sweat, because the pot never emptied. At the end everyone's hands were full of hot chestnuts, and Joseph looked in amazement at the "magic pot" from which Don Bosco continued to fish happily...

Then there was the time when several people wanted to do away with Don Bosco, and Joseph (who had grown an impressive red beard) became his guardian and defender. "We used to see him almost with envy" recounts John Baptist Francesia, "leaving the Oratory to go and meet Don Bosco who had to return to Valdocco from Turin. A strong hand and a full heart were needed, and Buzzetti was just the right person." When Joseph was missing with his red beard, a mysterious dog with grey hair appeared, which Mamma Margaret, Michael Rua and Battistin Francesia watched with respect and fear, and which Joseph had to defend from the stones of other frightened boys...

The days of melancholy

On 25 November 1856 Mamma Margaret died. It was a bitter day for Don Bosco and for all his followers. It was also the day that marked the end of the "Family Oratory" that Joseph had seen and helped to grow. The boys had become so many, and every month they grew in number. A mother was no longer enough, teachers, professors, superiors were needed. Little by little, Joseph handed over the administration to Fr Alasonatti, the choir and the band to Fr Cagliero, the printing shop to Cavalier Oreglia di Santo Stefano. He had taken off the black clerical robes long ago, because too many occupations had never allowed him to continue his studies seriously. Now he saw himself engaged in more and more menial jobs: he assisted in the refectory, set the tables, sent out the *Catholic Readings*, went into town to look for work for the workshops.

And one day melancholy and discouragement got the better of him, and he decided to leave the Oratory. He talked to his brothers (who had positions of responsibility in Turin's construction industry), found a job and went to take leave of Don Bosco. With his usual bluntness he told him that by now he was becoming the last wheel on the wagon, that he had to obey those he had seen arriving as

children, whom he had taught to blow their noses. He expressed his sadness at having to leave the house he had helped to build from the days of the canopy. For Don Bosco it was a tremendous blow. But he did not say "Poor me! You leave me in a fine mess!" Instead, he thought of him, his dearest friend, with whom he had shared so many happy and painful hours.

"Have you found a place yet? Will you get good pay? You will need money for the first few days." He mentioned the drawers of his desk: "You know these drawers better than I do. Take whatever you need, and if it is not enough, tell me what you need and I will get it for you. I don't want you, Joseph, to have to suffer any deprivation because of me." Then he looked at him with that love that only he had for his boys: "We have always loved each other. And I hope you will never forget me." Then Joseph burst into tears. He cried for a long time and said: "I don't want to leave Don Bosco. I will stay here forever."

When Don Bosco, in December 1887, had to surrender to his final illness, Joseph Buzzetti went to stand beside his bed. He was now 55 years old. His fabulous red beard had become all white. Don Bosco could hardly speak any more, but he still tried to joke by giving him a military salute. When he managed to murmur a few words he said to him: "Oh, my Dear! You are always my beloved boy."

30 January was the last day of Don Bosco's life. Around one o'clock in the afternoon Joseph and Fr Viglietti were beside his bed. Don Bosco opened his eyes wide, tried to smile. Then he raised his left hand and greeted them. Buzzetti burst into tears. In the night, towards dawn, Don Bosco died.

Now that his great friend had gone with God, Buzzetti felt his life was empty. He looked tired. "We used to look at Joseph" recalls Fr Francesia, "so fond of Don Bosco, like one of those precious things that remind us of so many and so many memories. He spent much of the day in church, by the tabernacle, in front of the painting of Mary Help of Christians."

They encouraged him to go to the Salesian house in Lanzo, to breathe better air. "I go there willingly" he said at the end, "because Don Bosco also went there, and because dear Fr Alasonatti died there. I'll go up there, and then I'll go to see Don Bosco again."

He died clasping the rosary in his hands. He was 59 years old. It was 13 July 1891.