

Lotteries: real feats

Don Bosco was not only a tireless educator and pastor of souls, but also a man of extraordinary resourcefulness, capable of inventing new and courageous solutions to support his works. The economic needs of the Valdocco Oratory, which was constantly expanding, pushed him to seek increasingly effective means to guarantee food, lodging, schooling, and work for thousands of boys. Among these, lotteries represented one of his most ingenious intuitions: true collective enterprises that involved nobles, priests, benefactors, and ordinary citizens. It was not simple, as Piedmontese legislation rigorously regulated lotteries, allowing private individuals to organise them only in well-defined cases. And it was not just about raising funds, but about creating a network of solidarity that united Turin society around the educational and spiritual project of the Oratory. The first, in 1851, was a memorable adventure, full of unforeseen events and successes.

The sums of money that came into Don Bosco's hands remained there for a short time, because it was immediately used to provide food, accommodation, school and work for tens of thousands of boys or to build colleges, orphanages and churches or to support the South American missions. His accounts, as we know, were always in the red; debts accompanied him throughout his life.

Now among the means intelligently adopted by Don Bosco to finance his works we can certainly place the lotteries: about fifteen were organised by him, both small and large ones. The first, a modest effort, was the one in Turin in 1851 for the church of St Francis de Sales in Valdocco and the last, a very big one in the mid-1880s, was to meet the immense expenses of the church and the Hospice of the Sacred Heart at Termini station in Rome.

A true history of these lotteries has yet to be written,

although there is no lack of sources in this regard. Just with reference to the first one in 1851, have we ourselves recovered a dozen unpublished items. We can use them to reconstruct its eventful history in two episodes.

Application for authorisation

According to the law of 24 February 1820 – modified by Royal Patents of January 1835 and by Instructions of the Azienda Generale delle Regie Finanze on 24 August 1835 and later by Royal Patents of 17 July 1845 – prior governmental authorisation was required for any national lottery (Kingdom of Sardinia).

For Don Bosco it was first of all a matter of having the moral certainty of succeeding in the project. This he gained from the economic and moral support of the very first benefactors: the noble Callori and Fassati families and Canon Anglesio of Cottolengo. He therefore launched himself into what would turn out to be a genuine enterprise. In a short time, he succeeded in setting up an organising commission, initially comprising sixteen well-known personalities, later increased to twenty. Among them were numerous officially recognised civil authorities, such as a senator (appointed treasurer), two Deputy Mayors, three municipal councillors; then prestigious priests such as Frs Pietro Baricco, Deputy Mayor and secretary of the Commission, Giovanni Borel, court chaplain, Giuseppe Ortalda, director of the Opera Pia di Propaganda Fide, Roberto Murialdo, co-founder of the Collegio degli Artigianelli and the Charity Association; and finally, experienced men such as an engineer, a respected goldsmith, a wholesale trader, etc., all of whom were mostly landowners and had a wealth of experience. All people known to Don Bosco and “close” to the work at Valdocco.

Having completed the Commission, at the beginning of December 1851 Don Bosco forwarded the formal request to the General Intendant of Finance, Cavalier Alessandro Pernati di Momo (future Senator and Minister of the Interior of the Kingdom) as well as a “friend” of the work at Valdocco.

The appeal for gifts

He attached a very interesting circular to the request for authorisation, in which, after outlining a moving history of the Oratory – appreciated by the royal family, the government authorities, and the municipal authorities – he pointed out that the constant need to expand the work at Valdocco to accommodate more and more young people was consuming the economic resources of private charity. Therefore, in order to pay the expenses for the completion of the new chapel under construction, the decision was taken to appeal to public charity by means of a lottery of gifts to be offered spontaneously: “This consists of a lottery of items which the undersigned came up with the idea for, undertaking to cover the expenses for the completion of the new chapel, a venture to which your lordship will no doubt want to lend his support, reflecting on the excellence of the work to which it is directed. Whatever item your lordship would like to offer, be it of silk, wool, metal or wood, or the work of a reputable artist, or of a modest worker, or of a hard-working craftsman, or of a charitable gentlewoman, all will be gratefully accepted, because in the matter of charity every little help is a great thing, and because the offerings, even small ones, of many together can suffice to complete the desired work.”

The circular also indicated the names of the promoters, to whom the gifts could be handed over, and the trusted persons who would then collect and guard them. The 46 promoters included various categories of people: professionals, professors, impresarios, students, clerics, shopkeepers, merchants, priests; on the other hand, among the 90 or so promoters, noblewomen (baroness, marquise, countess and their attendants) seemed to prevail.

He did not fail to enclose the ‘lottery plan’ in all its many formal aspects with the application: collection of items, receipt of delivery of items, their valuation, authenticated tickets to be sold in a number proportionate to the number and value of the items, their display to the public, drawing of winners, publication of the numbers drawn, time for collecting

the prizes, etc. A series of demanding tasks that Don Bosco did not shirk. The Pinardi chapel was no longer enough for his youngsters: they needed a bigger church, the planned one of St Francis de Sales (a dozen years later they would need another even bigger one, that of Mary Help of Christians!).

Positive response

Given the seriousness of the initiative and the high “quality” of the members of the proposing Commission, the response could only be positive and immediate. On 17 December the aforementioned Deputy Mayor Pietro Baricco transmitted to Don Bosco the relative decree, with the invitation to transmit copies of the future formal acts of the lottery to the municipal administration, responsible for the regularity of all legal requirements. At this point before Christmas Don Bosco sent the above circular to the printers, circulated it and began to collect gifts.

He was given two months to do this, as other lotteries were also taking place during the year. However, the gifts arrived slowly, so in mid-January Don Bosco was forced to reprint the above circular and asked for the collaboration of all the young people of Valdocco and friends to write addresses, visit known benefactors, publicise the initiative and collect the gifts.

But ‘the best’ was yet to come.

The exhibition hall

Valdocco had no space to display the gifts, so Don Bosco asked the Deputy Mayor Baricco, treasurer of the lottery commission, to ask the Ministry of War for three rooms in a part of St Dominic’s Convent that was available to the army. The Dominican Fathers agreed. Minister Alfonso Lamarmora granted them on 16 January. But soon Don Bosco realised that they would not be large enough, so he asked the King, through the almoner, Abbot Stanislao Gazzelli, for a larger room. He was told by the Royal Superintendent Pamparà that the King had no suitable premises and proposed to rent premises used for a

game called Trincotto (or pallacorda: a kind of hand tennis) at his own expense. This room, however, would only be available for the month of March and under certain conditions. Don Bosco refused the proposal but accepted the 200 lire offered by the King for renting the premises. He then went in search of another hall and found a suitable one on the recommendation of the town hall, behind the church of St Dominic, a few hundred metres from Valdocco.

Arrival of the gifts

In the meantime, Don Bosco had asked the Minister of Finance, the famous Count Camillo Cavour, for a reduction or exemption on the cost of postage for circular letters, tickets and the gifts themselves. Through the Count's brother, the very religious Marquis Gustavo di Cavour, he received approval for various postal reductions.

It was now a matter of finding an expert to assess the amount of the gifts and the consequent number of tickets to be sold. Don Bosco asked the Intendant and also suggested his name: a goldsmith who was a member of the Commission. The Intendant, however, replied through the Mayor asking him for a double copy of the gifts arrived in order to appoint his own expert. Don Bosco immediately carried out the request and so on 19 February the expert valued the 700 items collected at 4124,20 lire. After three months there were 1000 gifts, after four months 2000, until finally there were 3251 gifts, thanks to Don Bosco's continuous "begging" with individuals, priests and bishops and his repeated formal requests to City Hall to extend the time. Don Bosco also did not fail to criticise the estimate made by the municipal assessor of the gifts that continually arrived, which he said was lower than their actual value; and in fact other assessors were added, especially a painter for works of art.

The final figure was such that Don Bosco was authorised to issue 99,999 tickets at the price of 50 cents each. To the catalogue already printed with the gifts numbered with the name of the donor and the promoters a supplement was added

with the latest gifts arrived. Among them were gifts from the Pope, the King, the Queen Mother, the Queen Consort, deputies, senators, municipal authorities, but also many humble people, especially women, who offered household objects and furnishings, even ones of little value (glass, inkwell, candle, carafe, corkscrew, cap, thimble, scissors, lamp, tape measure, pipe, key ring, soap, sharpener, sugar bowl). The most frequently offered gifts were books, 629 of them, and pictures, 265. Even the Valdocco boys competed to offer their own small gift, perhaps a booklet given to them by Don Bosco himself.

A huge job until the numbers were drawn

At this point it was necessary to print the tickets in a progressive series in two forms (small stub and ticket), have them both signed by two members of the commission, send the ticket with a note, document the money collected. Many benefactors were sent dozens of tickets, with an invitation to keep them or to pass them on to friends and acquaintances.

The date of the draw, initially set for 30 April, was postponed to 31 May and then to 30 June, to be held in mid-July. This last postponement was due to the explosion at the Borgo Dora powder magazine that devastated the Valdocco area.

For two afternoons, 12-13 July 1852, tickets were drawn on the balcony of the town hall. Four differently coloured wheel urns contained 10 pellets (0 to 9) identical and of the same colour as the wheel. Inserted one by one by the Deputy Mayor into the urns, and spun, eight young people from the Oratory performed the operation and the number drawn was proclaimed loudly and then published in the press. Many gifts were left at the Oratory, where they were later reused.

Was it worth it?

For the approximately 74,000 tickets sold, after deducting expenses, Don Bosco was left with approximately 26,000 lire, which he then divided equally with the neighbouring Cottolengo work. A small capital of course (half the purchase price of

the Pinardi cottage the previous year), but the greatest result of the gruelling work he underwent to carry out the lottery – documented by dozens of often unpublished letters – was the direct and heartfelt involvement of thousands of people from every social class in his ‘fledgling Valdocco project’: in making it known, appreciated and then supported economically, socially and politically.

Don Bosco resorted many times to lotteries and always with the twofold purpose: to raise funds for his works for poor boys, for the missions, and to offer ways for believers (and non-believers) to practise charity, the most effective means, as he continually repeated, to ‘obtain the forgiveness of sins and secure eternal life’.

“I have always needed everyone” Don Bosco

To Senator Giuseppe Cotta

Giuseppe Cotta, banker, was a great benefactor of Don Bosco. The following declaration on stamp paper dated 5 February 1849 is preserved in the archives: ‘The undersigned priests T. Borrelli Gioanni of Turin and D. Bosco Gio’ di Castelnuovo d’Asti declare themselves to be debtors of three thousand francs to the ill.mo Cavaliere Cotta who lent it to them for a pious work. This sum is to be repaid by the undersigned in one year with legal interest’. Signed D. Giovanni Borel, D. Bosco Gio.

At the bottom of the same page and on the same date Fr Joseph Cafasso writes: “The undersigned renders distinct thanks to Ill. mo Sig. Cav. Cotta for the above and at the same time makes himself guarantor to the same for the sum mentioned.” At the bottom of the page, Cotta signs that he received 2,000 lire on 10 April 1849, another 500 lire on 21 July 1849 and the balance on 4 January 1851.

The festive oratory at Valdocco

In 1935, following the canonisation of Don Bosco in 1934, the Salesians took care to collect testimonies about him. A certain Pietro Pons, who as a boy had attended the festive oratory in Valdocco for about ten years (from 1871 to 1882), and who had also attended two years of primary school (with classrooms under the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians) on 8 November gave a beautiful testimony of those years. We excerpt some passages from it, almost all unpublished.

The figure of Don Bosco

He was the centre of attraction for the whole Oratory. This is how our former Oratorian Pietro Pons remembers him at the end of the 1970s: "He no longer had vigour, but he was always calm and smiling. He had two eyes that pierced and penetrated the mind. He would appear among us: he was a joy for everyone. D. Rua, D. Lazzero were at his side as if they had the Lord in their midst. D. Barberis and all the boys were running towards him, surrounding him, some walking beside him, some backwards, facing him. It was a fortune, a coveted privilege to be able to be close to him, to talk to him. He strolled along talking, and looking at everyone with those two eyes that turned every which way, electrifying hearts with joy."

Among the episodes that have stuck in his mind 60 years later, he recalls two in particular: "One day... he appeared alone at the front door of the sanctuary. Then a flock of boys rushed to run him over like a gust of wind. But he held the umbrella in his hand. It had handle and a shaft as thick as that of the peasants. He raised it and, using it like a sword, juggled it to repel that affectionate assault, o the right, to the left, to open up a passage. He pointed it at one, then off to the

side, but in the meantime the others approached from the other side. So the game, the joke continued, bringing joy to hearts, eager to see the good Father return from his journey. He looked like a village priest of the good-natured kind."

Games and teatrino

A Salesian oratory without games is unthinkable. The elderly former pupil recalls: "the courtyard was occupied by a building, the church of Mary Help and at the end of a low wall... a sort of hut rested on the left corner, where there was always someone to watch over those who entered... As soon as you entered the playground on the right, there was a swing with only one seat, then the parallel bars and the fixed bar for the older children, who enjoyed doing their spins and somersaults, and also the trapeze, and the single flying step, which were, however, near the sacristies beyond St Joseph's chapel. And again: "This courtyard was of a beautiful length and lent itself very well to speed races starting from the side of the church and returning there on the way back. Barra rotti, sack races and a game called pignatte were also played. The latter games were announced on the previous Sunday. So was the greasy pole but the pole was planted with the thin end at the bottom so that it would be more difficult to climb. There were lotteries, and the ticket was paid for with a penny or two. Inside the house was a small library kept in a cupboard."

As well as games there was the famous teatrino "little theatre" where genuine dramas such as "The Crusader's Son" were performed, Don Cagliero's romanze were sung, and musicals such as the Cobbler were presented by the legendary Carlo Gastini [a brilliant past pupil leader]. The play, attended free of charge by the parents, was held in the hall under the nave of the church of Mary Help, but the former oratory boy also recalls that "once it was performed at the Moretta house" [today's parish church near the square]. Poor people lived there in the most squalid poverty. In the cellars that can be seen under the balcony there was a poor mother who would carry

her son Charles outside at midday. She had to carry him on her shoulders to sunbathe.”

Religious services and formation meetings

At the festive oratory there was no lack of religious services on Sunday mornings: Holy Mass with Holy Communion, prayers of the good Christian; followed in the afternoon by recreation, catechism, and Don Giulio Barberis’ sermon. By now an old man, “Don Bosco never came to say Mass or to preach, but only to visit and stay with the boys during recreation... The catechists and assistants had their pupils with them in church during the services and taught them catechism. A little lesson was given to everyone. The lesson was required to be memorised every Sunday and then also an explanation.” The solemn feasts ended with a procession and a snack for all: “On leaving church after mass there was breakfast. A young man on the right outside the door would give us a loaf of bread, another on the left would put two slices of salami on it with a fork.” Those boys were content with little, but they were delighted. When the boarders joined the oratorians for the singing of vespers, their voices could be heard in Via Milano and Via Corte d’appello!

Formation group meetings were also held at the festive oratory. In the house near the church of St Francis, there was “a small, low room that could hold about twenty people...In the room there was a small table for the lecturer, there were benches for the meetings and conferences for the older boys in general, and a meeting of the St Aloysius sodality, almost every Sunday.”

Who were the Oratorians?

Of his 200 or so companions – but their number diminished in the winter due to the return of seasonal workers to their families – our sprightly old man recalled that many were from Biella “almost all ‘bic’, that is, they carried the wooden bucket full of lime and the wicker basket full of bricks to the bricklayers at the buildings.” Others were “apprentice

bricklayers, mechanics, tinsmiths.” Poor apprentices: they worked from morning to night every day and only on Sundays could they afford a bit of recreation “at Don Bosco’s” (as his oratory was called): “We played Asino vola, under the direction of the then Br Milanesio [a future priest who was a great missionary in Patagonia]. Br Ponzano, later a priest, was a gym teacher. He made us do free exercises, with sticks, on the equipment.”

Pietro Pons’ memories are much broader, as rich in distant suggestions as they are pervaded by a shadow of nostalgia; they wait to be known in full. We hope to do so soon.

The “Good Night”

One evening, saddened by a certain general indiscipline noticed at the Valdocco Oratory among the boarders, Don Bosco came, as usual, to say a few words to them after evening prayer. He stood for a moment in silence on the small desk at the corner of the porticoes where he used to give the youngsters the so-called “Good Night”, which consisted of a short evening sermon. Glancing around, he said:

“I am not satisfied with you. That’s all I can say tonight!”

Then, without allowing them to kiss his hand [a customary mark of respect to a priest] he would slowly walk away toward the stairs leading to his room without saying another word. Stifled sobs could be heard while tears ran down many faces as all went to bed sorrowful and pensive. To them, offending Don Bosco was the same as offending God. (BM IV, 394).

The evening peal

Salesian Fr John Gnolfo says in his study: *Don*

Bosco's "Good Night", points out that the morning is the awakening of life and activity, the evening instead is suitable for sowing an idea in the minds of young people that germinates in them even while sleep. And with a daring comparison he even refers to Dante's 'evening peal':

*Era già l'ora che volge il desìo
ai naviganti e intenerisce il core...*

*"It was the hour when longing stirs
the hearts of sailors and softens their souls..."*

It is precisely at the hour of evening prayer that Alighieri describes, in fact, in the eighth Canto of "Purgatory", the kings in a small valley while they sing the hymn of the Liturgy of the Hours *Te lucis ante terminum...* (Before the light ends, O God, we seek Thee, that Thou mayest keep us).

Don Bosco's "Good Night" was a fond and sublime moment! It began with praise and evening prayers and ended with his words that opened his children's hearts to reflection, joy and hope. He really cared about that evening meeting with the whole Valdocco community. Fr G. B. Lemoyne traces its origin to Mamma Margaret. The good mother, putting the first orphan boy who came from Val Sesia to bed, offered some recommendations to him. From there came the beautiful custom in Salesian boarding schools of addressing brief words to the youngsters before sending them off to rest (BM, 142). Fr E. Ceria, quoting the Saint's words when thinking back to the early days of the Oratory, "I began to give a very short little sermons in the evening after prayers" (MO, 156 New Rochelle, 2010), thinks rather of a direct initiative of Don Bosco. However, if Fr Lemoyne accepted the idea of some of the early disciples, it was because he thought that Mamma Margaret's "Good Night" emblematically fulfilled Don Bosco's purpose in introducing that custom (Annals III, 857).

Characteristics of the "Good Night"

A characteristic of Don Bosco's "Good Night" was the topic he dealt with: some topical time that made an

impression, something actual that created suspense and also allowed questions from the listeners. Sometimes he would ask questions himself, thus establishing a dialogue that was highly attractive to all.

Other characteristics were the variety of topics covered and the brevity of the discourse to avoid monotony and consequent boredom in the listeners. However, Don Bosco was not always brief, especially when he recounted his famous dreams or the journeys he had made. But it was usually a speech of just a few minutes.

These were, in short, neither sermons nor school lessons, but short affectionate words that the good father addressed to his sons before sending them off to rest.

Exceptions to the rule, of course, made an enormous impression, as happened on the evening of 16 September 1867. After every means of correction had been attempted by the superiors, some boys turned out to be incorrigible and were a scandal to their companions.

Don Bosco stood up on the little podium. He began by quoting the Gospel passage where the Divine Saviour pronounces terrible words against those who scandalise the children. He recalled the serious admonitions he had repeatedly made to the boys causing scandal, the benefits they had obtained at the college, the fatherly love with which they had been surrounded, and then he continued:

"They think they are not known, but I know who they are and could name them in public. If I do not name them, do not think that I am not fully aware of them.... That if I wanted to name them, I could say: It is you, A... (and pronounced first and last name) a wolf who prowls among his companions and drives them away from the superiors by ridiculing their warnings... It is you, B... a thief whose words tarnish the innocence of others... You, C... a murderer who with certain notes, with certain books, tears Mary's children from her side... You, D... a demon who spoils his companions and prevents them from attending the Sacraments with your taunts..."

Six were thus 'named'. Don Bosco's voice was calm.

Every time he mentioned a name, a muffled cry from the culprit could be heard echoing amidst the sullen silence of his stunned companions.

The next day some were sent home. Those who were allowed to stay changed their lives: the “good father” Don Bosco was not an easy-going man! And exceptions of this kind confirm the rule of his “Good Night”.

The key to morality

There was a reason why, one day in 1875, Don Bosco listed the secrets employed at Valdocco to those who were amazed that the Oratory did not have certain disorders complained of in other colleges, and among them he pointed out the following: “ Another powerful means of persuasion, exercising a good influence over the boys, was the short fatherly talks addressed to them every evening after prayers. These short talks forestalled any trouble” (BM XI, 203-204).

And in his precious document on *The Preventive System in the Education of Youth*, he left it written that the “Good Night” from the Rector of the House could become “the key to morality, good progress and success in education” (Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales, p. 239-240).

Don Bosco saw that his boys experienced their day between two solemn moments, even if they were of very different kinds. In the morning the Eucharist, so that the day would not dampen their youthful ardour, in the evening, prayers and the “Good Night” so that before sleep they would reflect on the values that would illuminate the night.

Don Bosco and music

For the education of his youngsters Don Bosco made much use of music. Even as a boy he loved singing. As he had a beautiful voice, Mr Giovanni Roberto, head cantor of the parish, taught him Gregorian chant. Within a few months, John was able to join the orchestra and perform musical parts with excellent results. At the same time, he began to practise playing a spinet which was a plucked string instrument with a keyboard, and also the violin (BM I, 173).

As a priest in Turin, he acted as music teacher to his first oratory boys, gradually forming real choirs that attracted the sympathy of the listeners with their singing.

After the opening of the hospice, he started a school of Gregorian chant and, in time, also took his young singers to churches in the city and outside Turin to perform their repertoire.

He composed hymns such as the one to the Infant Jesus, *'Ah, let us sing in the sound of jubilation...'*. He also initiated some of his disciples into the study of music, among them Fr John Cagliero, who later became famous for his musical creations, earning the esteem of experts. In 1855 Don Bosco organised the first instrumental band at the Oratory.

He did not, however, get ahead of the good Don Bosco! Already in the 1860s he included a chapter on evening music classes in one of his Regulations in which he said, among other things:

'From every student musician a formal promise is demanded not to go and sing or play in public theatres, nor in any other entertainment in which Religion and morality could be compromised' (MB VII, 855).

Children's music

To a French religious who had founded a festive Oratory and asked him if it was appropriate to teach music to boys, he replied: *'An Oratory without music is like a body*

without a soul!' (BM V, 222).

Don Bosco spoke French quite well albeit with a certain freedom of grammar and expression. One of his replies concerning the boys' music was famous in this regard. Father L. Mendre of Marseilles, parish priest of St Joseph's parish, was very fond of him. One day, he sat beside him during entertainment in the Oratory of St Leo. The little musicians would occasionally play a flat note or two. The abbot, who knew a lot about music, winced each time. Don Bosco whispered into his ear in his French: "*Monsieur Mendre, la musique de les enfants elle s'écoute avec le coeur et non avec les oreilles*" (Father Mendre, children's music is listened to with the heart and not with the ears). The priest later recalled that occasion countless times, revealing Don Bosco's wisdom and goodness (BM XV, 58 n.3).

All this does not mean, however, that Don Bosco put music before discipline in the Oratory. He was always amiable but did not easily overlook failures of obedience. For some years he had allowed the young band members to go for a walk and a country lunch on the feast of St Cecilia. But in 1859, due to incidents, he began to prohibit such entertainment. The youngsters did not protest openly, but half of them, urged on by a leader who had promised them to obtain permission from Don Bosco, and hoping for impunity, decided to leave the Oratory anyway and organise a lunch of their own accord before the Feast of St Cecilia. They had taken this decision thinking that Don Bosco would not notice and would not take action. So they went, in the last days of October, to lunch at a nearby inn. After lunch they wandered around the town again and in the evening they returned to dine at the same place, returning to Valdocco half-drunk late at night. Only Mr Buzzetti, invited at the last moment, refused to join them and warned Don Bosco. The latter calmly declared the band disbanded and ordered Buzzetti to collect and lock up all the instruments and think of new pupils to start instrumental music. The next morning, he sent for all the unruly musicians one by one, telling each of them that they had forced him to

be very strict. Then he sent them back to their relatives or guardians, recommending some more needy to city workshops. Only one of the mischievous boys was later accepted because Fr Rua assured Don Bosco that he was a naive boy who had allowed himself to be deceived by his companions. And Don Bosco kept him on probation for some time!

But with sorrows one must not forget consolations. 9 June 1868 was a memorable date in Don Bosco's life and in the history of the Congregation. The new Church of Mary Help of Christians, which he had built with immense sacrifices, was finally consecrated. Those who were present at the solemn celebrations were deeply moved. An overflowing crowd packed Don Bosco's beautiful church. The Archbishop of Turin, Archbishop Riccardi, performed the solemn rite of consecration. At the evening service the following day, during Solemn Vespers, the Valdocco choir intoned the grand antiphon set to music by Fr Cagliero: *Sancta Maria succurre miseris*. The crowd of faithful was thrilled. Three mighty choirs had performed it perfectly. One hundred and fifty tenors and basses sang in the nave near the altar of St Joseph, two hundred sopranos and contraltos stood high up along the railing under the dome, a third choir, made up of another hundred tenors and basses, stood on the orchestra that then overlooked the back of the church. The three choirs, connected by an electric device, maintained synchrony at the Maestro's command. The biographer, present at the performance, later wrote:

"The harmony of all three choirs singing in unison cast a spell over the entire congregation. As the voices blended together, the listeners felt that they had been immersed into a sea of voices which rose from all directions. During the singing, Canon John Baptist Anfossi was kneeling behind the main altar with Don Bosco. As far as he could remember, he had never seen or heard Don Bosco stir or say anything while at prayer. On this occasion, however, Don Bosco looked at him with moist eyes full of joy and whispered, 'Dear Anfossi, doesn't it feel like being in heaven?'"

Bullying. A new thing? It was also around in Don Bosco's time

It is certainly no mystery for those who know the "living reality" of Valdocco, so well and not only the "ideal" or "virtual" one, that daily life in a decidedly restricted structure accommodating several hundred youngsters of different ages, origins, dialects, interests 24/7 and for many months a year, posed quite some educational and disciplinary problems for Don Bosco and his young educators. We report two significant episodes in this regard, mostly unknown.

The violent scuffle

In the autumn of 1861, the widow of painter Agostino Cottolengo, brother of the famous (Saint) Benedetto Cottolengo, needing to place her two sons, Giuseppe and Matteo Luigi, in the capital of the newly-born Kingdom of Italy for study, asked her brother-in-law, Can. Luigi Cottolengo of Chieri, to find a suitable boarding school. The latter suggested Don Bosco's oratory and so on 23 October the two brothers, accompanied by another uncle, Ignazio Cottolengo, a Dominican friar, entered Valdocco at a fee of 50 lire a month. Before Christmas, however, the 14-year-old Matteo Luigi had already returned home for health reasons, while his older brother Giuseppe, who had returned to Valdocco after the Christmas holidays, was sent away a month later for reasons of force majeure. What had happened?

It had happened that on 10 February 1862, 16-year-old Giuseppe

had come to blows with a certain Giuseppe Chicco, aged nine, nephew of Can. Simone Chicco from Carmagnola, who was probably paying his fees.

In the scuffle, with lots of beating, the child obviously got the worst of it, and was seriously injured. Don Bosco saw that he was taken in by the trustworthy Masera family, to avoid the news of the unpleasant episode spreading inside and beyond the house. The child was examined by a doctor, who drew up a rather detailed report, useful “for those who had a right to know”.



The bully's temporary removal

So as not to run any risks and for obvious disciplinary reasons, Don Bosco on 15 February was forced to remove the young Cottolengo for a while, having him accompanied not to Bra at his mother's house (she would have suffered too much) but to Chieri, to his uncle the Canon. The latter, two weeks later, asked Don Bosco about Chicco's state of health and the medical expenses incurred so that he could pay for them out of his own pocket. He also asked him if he was willing to accept his nephew back to Valdocco. Don Bosco replied that the wounded boy was now almost completely healed and that there was no need to worry about medical expenses because “we are dealing with upright people.” As for accepting his nephew back, “imagine if I were to refuse” he wrote. But on two conditions: that the boy recognise his wrongdoing and that Can. Cottolengo write to Can. Chicco to apologise on behalf of his nephew and to beg him to “say a simple word” to Don Bosco for him to accept the young man back at Valdocco. Don Bosco assured him that Can. Chicco would not only accept the apology – he had already written to him about it – but had already arranged for the nephew to be admitted “to a relative's house to prevent any publicity.” In mid-March both Cottolengo brothers were welcomed back to Valdocco “in a kindly way.” However, Matteo Luigi remained there only until Easter because

of the usual health problems, while Giuseppe remained until the end of his studies.

A stronger friendship and a small gain

Not yet content that the affair had ended to the mutual satisfaction of both parties, the following year Can. Cottolengo again insisted with Don Bosco to pay for the wounded child's doctor and medicines. Can. Chicco, when questioned by Don Bosco, replied that the total expense had been 100 lire, but that he and the child's family were not asking for anything; but if Cottolengo insisted on paying the bill, he would redirect this sum "in favour of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales." And so it happened.

The culprit had repented, the "victim" had been well cared for, the uncles had come together for the good of their nephews, the mothers had not suffered, Don Bosco and the Valdocco work, after having taken some risks, had gained in friendships, sympathy... and, something always appreciated in that boarding school for poor boys, a small financial contribution. Bringing good from evil is not for everyone but Don Bosco succeeded. There is much to learn.

A very interesting letter that opens a glimpse into the Valdocco world

But let's present an even more serious case, which again can be instructive for today's parents and educators grappling with difficult and rebellious boys.

Here are the facts. In 1865 a certain Carlo Boglietti, slapped for serious insubordination by the assistant in the bookbinding workshop, cleric Giuseppe Mazzarello, denounced the fact to the Borgo Dora urban magistrate's court which opened an enquiry, summoning the accused, the accuser and three boys as witnesses. Wishing to settle the matter with less disturbance from the authorities, Don Bosco thought it best to address the magistrate himself directly and in advance by letter. As the director of a house of education he believed

he could and should do so “in the name of all [...] ready to give the greatest satisfaction to whoever required it.”

Two important legal premises

In his letter he first of all defended his right and responsibility as father-educator of the children entrusted to him: he immediately pointed out that Article 650 of the Penal Code, called into question by the summons, “seems entirely extraneous to the matter at hand, for if it were interpreted in the sense demanded by the urban court, it would be introduced into the domestic regime of families, and parents and their guardians would no longer be able to correct their children or prevent insolence and insubordination, [things] that would be seriously detrimental to public and private morality.”

Secondly, he reiterated that the faculty “to use all the means that were judged opportune [...] to keep certain youngsters in check” had been granted to him by the government authority that sent him the children; only in desperate cases – indeed “several times” – had he had to call in “the arm of public safety.”

The episode, its precedents and the educational consequences

As for the young Charles in question, Don Bosco wrote that, faced with continual gestures and attitudes of rebellion, “he was paternally and warned but without effect several times; that he proved not only incorrigible, but insulted, threatened and swore at Cl. Mazzarello before his class mates”, to the point that “the assistant, of a very mild and meek disposition, was so frightened by this that from then on he was sick, unable to resume his duties, and continues to be ill.”

The boy had then escaped from the school and through his sister had informed his superiors of his escape only “when he knew that the news could no longer be kept from the police”, which he had not done before “to preserve his honour.” Unfortunately, his class mates had continued in their violent

protest, so much so that – Don Bosco wrote again – “it was necessary to expel some of them from the establishment, and, sorrowfully, to hand them over to the public security authorities who took them to prison.”



Don Bosco's requests

Faced with a young man who was “disorderly, who insulted and threatened his superiors” and who then had “the audacity to report those who for his own good [...] consecrated their lives and their money, to the authorities” Don Bosco generally maintained that “public authority should always come to the aid of private authority and not the other way around.” In this specific case, then, he did not oppose criminal proceedings, but on two precise conditions: that the boy first present an adult to pay “the expenses that may be necessary and that he take responsibility for the serious consequences that could possibly occur.”

To avert a possible trial which would undoubtedly be exploited by the gutter press, Don Bosco played his hand: he asked in advance that “the damage that the assistant had suffered in his honour and person be compensated for at least until he could resume his ordinary occupations”, “that the costs of this case be borne by him” and that neither the boy nor “his relative or counsellor” Mr Stephen Caneparo should come to Valdocco “to renew the acts of insubordination and scandals already caused.”

Conclusion

How the sad affair came to an end is not known; in all likelihood it came to a prior conciliation between the parties. However, the fact remains that it is good to know that the boys at Valdocco were not all Dominic Savios, Francis Besuccos or even Michael Magones. There were also young “jailbirds” who gave Don Bosco and his young educators a hard

time. The education of the young has always been a demanding art not without its risks; yesterday as today, there is a need for close cooperation between parents, teachers, educators, guardians all interested in the exclusive good of the young.