

To the heights! Saint Pier Giorgio Frassati

“Dearest young people, our hope is Jesus. It is He, as Saint John Paul II said, ‘who awakens in you the desire to make something great of your life [...], to improve yourselves and society, making it more human and fraternal’ (XV World Youth Day, Prayer Vigil, 19 August 2000). Let us remain united to Him; let us remain in His friendship, always, cultivating it with prayer, adoration, Eucharistic Communion, frequent Confession, generous charity, as the blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati and Carlo Acutis, who will soon be proclaimed Saints, taught us. Aspire to great things, to holiness, wherever you are. Do not settle for less. Then you will see the light of the Gospel grow every day, in you and around you” (Pope Leo XIV – homily for the Youth Jubilee– 3 August 2025).

Pier Giorgio and Fr. Cojazzi

Senator Alfredo Frassati, ambassador of the Kingdom of Italy to Berlin, was the owner and director of the Turin newspaper La Stampa. The Salesians owed him a great debt of gratitude. On the occasion of the great scandalous affair known as “The Varazze incidents”, in which an attempt was made to tarnish the honour of the Salesians, Frassati had defended them. While even some Catholic newspapers seemed lost and disoriented in the face of the heavy and painful accusations, La Stampa, having conducted a rapid inquiry, had anticipated the conclusions of the judiciary by proclaiming the innocence of the Salesians. Thus, when a request arrived from the Frassati home for a Salesian to oversee the studies of the senator’s two children, Pier Giorgio and Luciana, Fr. Paul Albera, Rector Major, felt obliged to accept. He sent Fr. Antonio Cojazzi (1880-1953). He was the right man: well-educated, with a youthful temperament and exceptional communication skills. Fr. Cojazzi had graduated in literature in 1905, in philosophy

in 1906, and had obtained a diploma enabling him to teach English after serious specialisation in England.

In the Frassati home, Fr. Cojazzi became more than just the 'tutor' who followed the children. He became a friend, especially to Pier Giorgio, of whom he would say, "I knew him at ten years old and followed him through almost all of grammar school and high school with lessons that were daily in the early years. I followed him with increasing interest and affection." Pier Giorgio, who became one of the leading young people in Turin's Catholic Action, listened to the conferences and lessons that Fr. Cojazzi held for the members of the C. Balbo Circle, followed the Rivista dei Giovani with interest, and sometimes went up to Valsalice in search of light and advice in decisive moments.

A moment of notoriety

Pier Giorgio had it during the National Congress of Italian Catholic Youth in 1921: fifty thousand young people parading through Rome, singing and praying. Pier Giorgio, a polytechnic student, carried the tricolour flag of the Turin C. Balbo circle. The royal troops suddenly surrounded the enormous procession and assaulted it to snatch the flags. They wanted to prevent disorder. A witness recounted, "They beat with rifle butts, grab, break, tear our flags. I see Pier Giorgio struggling with two guards. We rush to his aid, and the flag, with its broken pole, remains in his hands. Forcibly imprisoned in a courtyard, the young Catholics are interrogated by the police. The witness recalls the dialogue conducted with the manners and courtesies used in such contingencies:

- And you, what's your name?
- Pier Giorgio Frassati, son of Alfredo.
- What does your father do?
- Italian Ambassador in Berlin.

Astonishment, change of tone, apologies, offer of immediate freedom.

- I will leave when the others leave.

Meanwhile, the brutal spectacle continues. A priest is thrown, literally thrown into the courtyard with his cassock torn and a bleeding cheek... Together we knelt on the ground, in the courtyard, when that ragged priest raised his rosary and said, 'Boys, for us and for those who have beaten us, let us pray!'"

He loved the poor

Pier Giorgio loved the poor. He sought them out in the most distant quarters of the city. He climbed narrow, dark stairs; he entered attics where only misery and sorrow resided. Everything he had in his pockets was for others, just as everything he held in his heart. He even spent nights at the bedside of unknown sick people. One night when he didn't come home, his increasingly anxious father called the police station, the hospitals. At two o'clock, he heard the key turn in the door and Pier Giorgio entered. Dad exploded:

– Listen, you can be out during the day, at night, no one says anything to you. But when you're so late, warn us, call!

Pier Giorgio looked at him, and with his usual simplicity replied:

– Dad, where I was, there was no phone.

The Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul saw him as a diligent co-worker; the poor knew him as a comforter and helper. The miserable attics often welcomed him within their squalid walls like a ray of sunshine for their destitute inhabitants. Dominated by profound humility, he did not want what he did to be known by anyone.

Beautiful and holy Giorgetto

In the first days of July 1925, Pier Giorgio was struck down by a violent attack of poliomyelitis. He was 24 years old. On his deathbed, while a terrible illness ravaged his back, he still thought of his poor. On a note, with handwriting now almost indecipherable, he wrote for engineer Grimaldi, his friend. Here are Converso's injections, the policy is Sappa's. I forgot it; you renew it.

Returning from Pier Giorgio's funeral, Fr. Cojazzi immediately

wrote an article for the Rivista dei Giovani. "I will repeat the old phrase, but most sincerely: I didn't think I loved him so much. Beautiful and holy Giorgetto! Why do these words sing insistently in my heart? Because I heard them repeated; I heard them uttered for almost two days by his father, by his mother, by his sister, with a voice that always said and never repeated. And why do certain verses from a Deroulède ballad surface, "He will be spoken of for a long time, in golden palaces and in remote cottages! Because the hovels and attics, where he passed so many times as a comforting angel, will also speak of him." I knew him at ten years old and followed him through almost all of grammar school and part of high school... I followed him with increasing interest and affection until his present transfiguration... I will write his life. It is about collecting testimonies that present the figure of this young man in the fullness of his light, in spiritual and moral truth, in the luminous and contagious testimony of goodness and generosity."

The best-seller of Catholic publishing
Encouraged and urged also by the Archbishop of Turin, Monsignor Giuseppe Gamba, Fr. Cojazzi set to work with good cheer. Numerous and qualified testimonies arrived, were ordered and carefully vetted. Pier Giorgio's mother followed the work, gave suggestions, provided material. In March 1928, Pier Giorgio's life was published. Luigi Gedda writes, "It was a resounding success. In just nine months, 30,000 copies of the book were sold out. By 1932, 70,000 copies had already been distributed. Within 15 years, the book on Pier Giorgio reached 11 editions, and was perhaps the best-seller of Catholic publishing in that period." The figure illuminated by Fr. Cojazzi was a banner for Catholic Action during the difficult time of fascism. In 1942, 771 youth associations of Catholic Action, 178 aspiring sections, 21 university associations, 60 groups of secondary school students, 29 conferences of St. Vincent, 23 Gospel groups... had taken the name of Pier Giorgio Frassati. The book was translated into at

least 19 languages. Fr. Cojazzi's book marked a turning point in the history of Italian youth. Pier Giorgio was the ideal pointed out without any reservation; one who was able to demonstrate that being a Christian to the core is not at all utopian or fantastic.

Pier Giorgio Frassati also marked a turning point in Fr. Cojazzi's history. That note written by Pier Giorgio on his deathbed revealed the world of the poor to him in a concrete, almost brutal way. Fr. Cojazzi himself writes, "On Good Friday of this year (1928) with two university students I visited the poor outside Porta Metronia for four hours. That visit gave me a very salutary lesson and humiliation. I had written and spoken a lot about the Conferences of St. Vincent... and yet I had never once gone to visit the poor. In those squalid shacks, tears often came to my eyes... The conclusion? Here it is clear and raw for me and for you; fewer beautiful words and more good deeds."

Living contact with the poor is not only an immediate implementation of the Gospel, but a school of life for young people. They are the best school for young people, to educate them and keep them serious about life. How can one who visits the poor and touches their material and moral wounds with their own hands waste their money, their time, their youth? How can they complain about their own labours and sorrows, when they have known, through direct experience, that others suffer more than them?

Not just existing, but living!

Pier Giorgio Frassati is a luminous example of youthful, contemporary holiness, 'framed' in our time. He testifies once again that faith in Jesus Christ is the religion of the strong and of the truly young, which alone can illuminate all truths with the light of the 'mystery' and which alone can give perfect joy. His existence is the perfect model of normal life within everyone's reach. He, like all followers of Jesus and the Gospel, began with small things. He reached the most sublime heights by forcing himself to avoid the compromises of

a mediocre and meaningless life and by using his natural stubbornness in his firm intentions. Everything in his life was a step for him to climb; even what should have been a stumbling block. Among his companions, he was the intrepid and exuberant animator of every undertaking, attracting so much sympathy and admiration around him. Nature had been generous to him: from a renowned family, rich, with a solid and practical intellect, a strong and robust physique, a complete education, he lacked nothing to make his way in life. But he did not intend to just exist, but to conquer his place in the sun, struggling. He was a man of strong character and a Christian soul.

His life had an inherent coherence that rested on the unity of spirit and existence, of faith and works. The source of this luminous personality lay in his profound inner life. Frassati prayed. His thirst for Grace made him love everything that fills and enriches the spirit. He approached Holy Communion every day, then remained at the foot of the altar for a long time, nothing being able to distract him. He prayed in the mountains and on the road. However, his was not an ostentatious faith, even if the signs of the cross made on public streets when passing churches were large and confident; even if the Rosary was said aloud, in a train carriage or in a hotel room. But it was rather a faith lived so intensely and genuinely that it burst forth from his generous and frank soul with a simplicity of attitude that convinced and moved. His spiritual formation was strengthened in nocturnal adorations, of which he was a fervent proponent and unfailing participant. He performed spiritual exercises more than once, drawing serenity and spiritual vigour from them.

Fr. Cojazzi's book closes with the phrase: "To have known him or to have heard of him means to love him, and to love him means to follow him." The wish is that the testimony of Pier Giorgio Frassati may be "salt and light" for everyone, especially for young people today.

The Little Lambs and the Summer Storm (1878)

The dreamlike tale that follows, recounted by Don Bosco on the evening of 24 October 1878, is far more than just simple evening entertainment for the young people of the Oratory. Through the delicate image of lambs caught in a violent summer storm, the saintly educator paints a vivid allegory of school holidays: a seemingly carefree time, but one fraught with spiritual dangers. The inviting meadow represents the outside world, the hailstones symbolise temptations, while the protected garden alludes to the safety offered by a life of grace, the sacraments, and the educational community. In this dream, which becomes a catechism, Don Bosco reminds his boys – and us – of the urgency to be vigilant, to seek divine help, and to support each other in order to return to daily life unscathed.

No information has been left us about the boys' leaving for their fall vacation and their return, save for a dream which Don Bosco had concerning the effects of vacation. He narrated it after night prayers on October 24 to an audience which became excited the moment he mentioned it.

I am glad to see that my army of soldiers *contra diabolum* [against the devil] has returned-he began. This is Latin, but even Cottino 12 understands it! I have lots of things to tell you since this is the first chance I've had to talk to you after your vacation, but let me just tell you a dream. You know that dreams come in sleep and don't have to be believed. However, just as there is nothing wrong in disbelieving them, sometimes there is no harm in believing them, and they can teach things.

So, too, this dream.

I was at Lanzo during the first spiritual retreat, when I dreamed one night that I was in some unknown region, but near a village which had a fine garden and an adjacent huge meadow. Some friend I was with told me to go into the garden. I did so and there I saw a numerous flock of lambs cavorting and prancing about. The sheepgate leading into the meadow was open, and the lambs scampered out to graze.

Many, however, remained inside browsing here and there, though the pasture was nowhere as abundant as in the meadow where most of the lambs had gone. "Let me see what those lambs are up to over there," I said. We went and saw that they were all quietly grazing. Suddenly the sky darkened, flashed with lightning and rolled with thunder.

"What will happen to all those poor little things if they are caught in the storm?" I asked. "Let's get them under a shelter." We all spread out and tried to herd them together toward the sheepgate, but they kept dodging us and their legs were a lot swifter than ours. Meanwhile, rain began to fall in heavy drops, and soon came a downpour. I could not herd the lambs together. One or two did find their way into the garden, but the rest, the greater number, remained in the meadow. "Well," I said, "if they won't come back, all the worse for them! Let's go." And we returned to the garden.

There stood a fountain bearing an inscription in black capitals: FONS SIGNATUS [Sealed Fountain]. It was covered, but now it opened, and as the water shot high into the air, it sprayed out and formed a rainbow vault over us, something like this arch.

Meanwhile, the lightning and thunder grew worse, and hailstones began to pelt us. With the young lambs that had come into the garden, we took shelter beneath that arching vault which shielded us from rain and hail.

"What's this all about?" I kept asking my friends.

"What will become of those poor little lambs out there?"

"You will see!" they answered. "Look at the foreheads of these lambs."

I did so and read on each the name of an Oratory boy.

"What does it mean?"

"You shall see!"

Too impatient to wait, I decided to dash out and find out what had happened to the lambs outside. I will gather those that were killed and send them back to the Oratory, I thought to myself. As soon as I left the rainbow shelter I was deluged with rain. There, on the ground, were those poor lambs struggling in vain to raise themselves and limp toward the garden. I opened the gate and shouted to them, but they were too weak. Rain and hail kept pelting them so hard that they were truly a pitiful sight, wounded in the head or eyes or legs and other parts of their bodies.

The storm gradually spent itself.

"Look at their foreheads," someone at my side told me.

I did. Again, each forehead bore the name of an Oratory boy. "Why," I cried, "know these boys but they do not look like lambs."

"You will see," was the reply I got. Then he handed me a golden jar covered with a silver lid.

"Apply this ointment to the wounds of these lambs," he told me, "and they will instantly be healed."

I called out to them, but none of them stirred. Again and again I called, but they would not budge. I stepped toward one of them, but it dragged itself away. "Well, so much the worse for you," I exclaimed and turned to another, but that too dragged itself away. And so it was with every lamb I tried to reach. Finally, I managed to get close to one lamb whose badly battered eyes were protruding from their sockets. It was a pitiful sight. I touched it, and the lamb, instantly healed, skipped off into

the garden.

On seeing that, many other lambs allowed me to heal them, and they too scampered back into the garden. Still, many stayed outside, the most battered of them all, but I could not get near them.

"If they do not want to be healed, they can only blame themselves," I said, "but how can I herd them back into the garden?"

"Leave them alone," a friend told me. "They will come back."

"Let's wait and see," I replied and, returning the gold jar, I went back to the garden. It was completely changed. Over the gate I read the word

"Oratory." As soon as I stepped in, the lambs that had formerly avoided

me now inched forward and entered the garden stealthily, quickly

squatting anywhere. But even then I couldn't get close to them. A few

reluctantly let me rub the ointment on them, but it turned into poison on

them and reopened their wounds.

At this point one of my friends said, "Do you see that banner?"

I turned around to where he was pointing and saw a large banner in the air, blazoned with the word "VACATION" in tall letters.

"Yes," I answered.

"All this happened during vacation," one of my friends told me, as I

bewailed the destruction, beside myself with grief. "Your boys leave the Oratory honestly intent upon avoiding sin and being good, but no sooner come storm and rain-signs of the devil's temptations and assaults and the pelting hail than the poor little wretches fall into sin. Some recover through a good confession. Others receive the sacrament carelessly or avoid

it altogether. Bear this in mind: never tire of reminding your boys that a vacation is a devastating tempest for their souls."

Gazing at those lambs again, I noticed that some were dying of their wounds. Just as I sought ways to heal them, Father Scappini, who was then getting out of bed next door, made some noise and I too awoke.

And this was my dream. Even though it is only a dream, it carries a message which will not harm those who accept it. I can also say that, as I matched the names of the lambs' foreheads with the boys being identified, I could agree that they were really behaving as did the lambs of my dream. Be that as it may, however, let us accept God's mercy and heal our wounds by a good confession during this novena in honour of All Saints. We are all to be determined to wage war against the devil. With God's help, we shall win and will one day receive the heavenly crown of victory.

Doubtless this dream effectively helped give the new school year a good start. Everything was moving along so smoothly during the novena of the Immaculate Conception that Don Bosco remarked with warm satisfaction, "The boys have already reached a point which they would have barely attained in February in past years. "On the feast of the Immaculate Conception they once more witnessed the inspiring farewell ceremony of the fourth missionary expedition.

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Novena to Mary Help of Christians 2025

This 2025 Novena to Mary Help of Christians invites us to rediscover ourselves as children under Mary's maternal gaze. Each day, through the great apparitions – from Lourdes to Fatima, from Guadalupe to Banneaux – we contemplate an aspect of her love: humility, hope, obedience, wonder, trust, consolation, justice, gentleness, dream. The meditations by the Rector Major and the prayers of the “children” accompany us on a nine-day journey that opens the heart to the simple faith of the little ones, nourishes prayer, and encourages us to build, with Mary, a healed world full of light, for ourselves and for all those who seek hope and peace.

Day 1 – Our Lady of Lourdes

Being Children – Humility and faith

Children trust, children rely on others. And a mother is close by, always. You see her even if she is not there.

As for us, are we able to see her?

Little Bernadette Soubirous

11 February 1858. I had just turned 14. It was a morning like any other, a winter's day. We were hungry, as always. There was this cave, with a black mouth; in the silence I felt a rush of air. The bush moved, shaken by some force. And then I saw a young woman, in white, no taller than me who greeted me with a slight bow of her head; at the same time she moved her outstretched arms away from her body a little, opening her hands, like the statues of Our Lady; I was afraid. Then it occurred to me to pray: I took the rosary beads that I always carry with me and began to say the rosary.

Mary showed herself to her daughter Bernadette Soubirous. She who could neither read nor write; she who spoke in dialect and

did not go to catechism class. A poor girl, pushed around by everyone in the village, yet ready to trust and rely on others, like someone who has nothing. Nothing to lose. Mary entrusted her secrets to her and did so because she trusted her. She treated her with loving kindness, spoke to her kindly, and said 'please' to her. And Bernadette let herself go and believed her, just like a child does with its mother. She believed in her promise that Our Lady **would make her happy not in this world, but in the next.** She remembered this promise for the rest of her life. A promise that would allow her to face all her difficulties with her head held high, with strength and determination, doing what Our Lady asked her to do: pray, always pray for all of us sinners. She also made a promise: she would look after Mary's secrets and give voice to her request for a Shrine in the place where Mary appeared. And as she lay dying, Bernadette smiled, thinking back to Mary's face, her loving gaze, her silences, her few but intense words, and above all, that promise. And she still felt like a daughter, the daughter of a Mother who keeps her promises.

Mary, the Mother who promises.

You, who promised to become the mother of humanity, stayed your children, starting with the youngest and the poorest. You drew close to them and revealed yourself to them.

Have faith: Mary will also shows herself to us if we are able to strip ourselves of everything.

The Rector Major's words

We can say that the Virgin Mary is a beacon of humility and faith for us, accompanying us through the centuries, accompanying our lives, accompanying the experience of each and every one of us. Let us not forget, however, that Mary's humility is not simply outward modesty, it is not a facade, but rather a profound awareness of her smallness before the greatness of God.

Her 'yes, here am I, the servant of the Lord' spoken before the angel is an act of humility, not presumption. It is the

trusting abandonment of someone who recognises herself as an instrument in God's hands. Mary does not seek recognition; Mary simply seeks to be a servant, placing herself in the last place with silence, humility and simplicity that we find disarming. This humility, this radical humility, is the key that opened Mary's heart to divine grace, allowing the Word of God, with his greatness and immensity, to become incarnate in her human womb.

Mary teaches us to place ourselves as we are, with our humility, without pride, without needing to depend on our authority or self-referentiality, placing ourselves freely before God so that we may receive fully, with freedom and openness, like Mary; so that we may live his will with love. This is the second point, this is Mary's faith. The humility of the servant places her on a constant path of unconditional adherence to God's plan, even in the darkest, most incomprehensible moments, which means courageously facing the poverty of her experience in the cave at Bethlehem, the flight into Egypt, the hidden life in Nazareth, but above all at the foot of the cross where Mary's faith reaches its peak.

There, beneath the cross, with a heart pierced by pain, Mary does not waver, Mary does not fall, Mary believes in the promise. Her faith, then, is not a passing feeling, but a solid rock on which the hope of humanity, our hope, is founded. Humility and faith in Mary are inextricably linked.

Let us allow Mary's humility to enlighten our human condition, so that faith may also sprout in us, so that, recognising our smallness before God, we do not abandon ourselves because we are small, we do not allow ourselves to be overcome by presumption, but we place ourselves there, like Mary, with an attitude of great freedom, with an attitude of great openness, recognising our dependence on God, living with God in simplicity but at the same time in greatness. Mary therefore urges us to cultivate a serene, firm faith, capable of overcoming trials and trusting in God's promise. Let us contemplate the figure of Mary, humble and believing, so that we too may say our yes generously, as she did.

As for us, are we able to grasp her promises of love with the eyes of a child?

The prayer of an unfaithful child

Mary, you who show yourself to those who are able to see...

make my heart pure.

Make me humble, little, able to lose myself in your mother's embrace.

Help me rediscover how important the role of a child is and mark my steps.

You promise, I promise in a covenant that only a mother and child can make.

I will fall, mother, you know that.

I won't always keep my promises.

I won't always trust you.

I won't always be able to see you.

But you will stand there in silence, smiling, your arms and hands outstretched.

And I will take the rosary and pray with you for all children like me.

Hail Mary...

Day 2 – Our Lady of Fatima

Being Children – Simplicity and Hope

Children trust, children rely on others. And a mother is close by, always. You see her even if she is not there.

As for us, are we able to see her?

The little shepherd children in Cova di Iria

In Cova di Iria around 1:00 pm, the sky opened and the sun appeared. Suddenly, at about 1.30 pm, the improbable happened: before an astonished crowd, the most spectacular, grandest and most incredible miracle that has happened since biblical times took place. The sun began a frantic and frightening dance that would last more than ten minutes. A very long time.

Three little shepherd children, simple and happy, were there and spread news of the miracle that shocked millions of people. Nobody could explain it, from scientists to people of faith. Yet, three children saw Mary, heard her message. And they believed it, they believed the words of the woman who showed herself and asked them to return to Cova di Iria every 13th of the month. They do not need explanations because they placed all their hope in Mary's repeated words. A difficult hope to keep alive, one which would have frightened any child: Our Lady revealed suffering and world conflicts to Lucia, Jacinta and Francesco. Yet they had no doubt: those who trust in the protection of Mary, the mother who protects, can face everything. And they knew this so well; they knew it first-hand, risking being killed so as not to betray the word they gave to their heavenly mother. The three little shepherd children were ready for martyrdom, imprisoned and threatened with a pot of boiling oil.

They were afraid:

"Why do we have to die without hugging our parents? I'd like to see Mum."

Yet they decided to keep hoping, believing in a love greater than themselves:

"Do not be afraid. We will offer this sacrifice for the conversion of sinners. It would be worse if Our Lady never came back."

"Why don't we say the Rosary?"

A mother is never deaf to the cries of her children. And the children placed their hope in her. Mary, Mother who protects, stayed with her three children from Fatima and saved them by keeping them alive. And today she still protects all her children around the world who go on pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima.

Mary, the Mother who protects.

You, who have taken care of humanity from the moment of the Annunciation, have remained beside your simplest and most hopeful children. You drew close to them and revealed yourself

to them.

Place your hope in Mary: she will be able to protect you.

The Rector Major's words

The Virgin Mary, hope and renewal

The Virgin Mary is the dawn of hope, an inexhaustible source of renewal.

Contemplating the figure of Mary is like turning our gaze towards a bright horizon, a constant invitation to believe in a future full of grace. And this grace is transformative. Mary is the personification of Christian hope in action. Her unshakeable faith in the face of trials, her perseverance in following Jesus to the cross, her confident expectation of the resurrection are the most important things for me. They are a beacon of hope for all humanity.

In Mary, we see how certainty is, so to speak, the confirmation of the promise of a God who never fails to keep his word. That pain, suffering and darkness do not have the last word. That death is overcome by life.

Mary, then, is hope. She is the morning star announcing the coming of the sun of justice. Turning to her means entrusting our expectations and aspirations to a motherly heart that presents them with love to her risen Son. In some way, our hope is sustained by Mary's hope. And if there is hope, then things do not remain as they were before. There is renewal. The renewal of life. By welcoming the incarnate Word, Mary made it possible to believe in God's hope and promise. She made possible a new creation, a new beginning.

Mary's spiritual motherhood continues to generate us in faith, accompanying us on our journey of growth and inner transformation.

Let us ask Mary for the grace necessary so that this hope that we see fulfilled in her may renew our hearts, heal our wounds, and enable us to pass beyond the veil of negativity to embark on a journey of holiness, a journey of closeness to God. Let us ask Mary, the woman who stands with the apostles in prayer,

to help us today, believers and Christian communities, so that we may be sustained in faith and open to the gifts of the Spirit, so that the face of the earth may be renewed.

Mary urges us never to resign ourselves to sin and mediocrity, but, filled with the hope fulfilled in her, to long for a new life in Christ. May Mary continue to be our model and support so that we may always believe in the possibility of a new beginning, of an inner rebirth that conforms us ever more closely to the image of her son Jesus.

The prayer of an unfaithful child

As for us, are we able to hope in her and be protected with the eyes of a child?

The prayer of a discouraged child

Mary, you who show yourself to those who are able to see...
make my heart simple and full of hope.

I trust you: protect me in every situation.

I entrust myself to you: protect me in every situation.

I listen to your word: protect me in every situation.

Give me the ability to believe the impossible and do everything in my power

to bring your love, your message of hope and your protection to the whole world.

And please, my Mother, protect all humanity, even those who do not yet recognize you.

Hail Mary...

Day 3 – Our Lady of Guadalupe

Being Children – Obedience and dedication

Children trust, children rely on others. And a mother is close by, always. You see her even if she is not there.

As for us, are we able to see her?

Young Juan Diego

Juan Diego," said the Lady, "the little favourite among my

children..." Juan sprang to his feet.

"Where are you going, Juanito?" asked the Lady.

Juan Diego replied as politely as he could. He told the Lady that he was going to the church of Santiago to hear the Mass in honour of the Mother of God.

"My beloved child," said the Lady, "I am the Mother of God, and I want you to listen to me carefully. I have a very important message to give you. I want a church to be built on this spot, from where I can show my love to your people.

A gentle, simple and tender dialogue like that of a mother with a child. And Juan Diego obeyed: he went to the bishop to report what he had seen but he did not believe him. Then the young man returned to Mary and explained what had happened. Our Lady gave him another message and urged him to try again, and so on and so forth. Juan Diego obeyed, he did not give up: he would complete the task that the heavenly Mother was entrusting him with. But one day, overcome with the problems of life, he was about to skip the appointment with Our Lady: his uncle was dying. **"Do you think I would forget someone I love so much?" Mary healed his uncle, while Juan Diego obeyed once again:**

"My beloved child," the Lady said, "go up to the top of the hill where we first met. Cut and pick up the roses you will find there. Put them in your tilma (cloak) and bring them to me. I'll tell you what you have to do and say." Despite knowing that there were no roses growing on that hill, and certainly not in winter, Juan ran all the way to the top. And there was the most beautiful garden he had ever seen. Castilian roses, still shining with dew, stretched as far as the eye could see. He gently cut the most beautiful blooms with his stone knife, filled his cloak, and quickly returned to where the Lady was waiting for him. The Lady took the roses and placed them back in Juan's tilma. Then she tied it behind his neck and said, "This is the sign the bishop wants. Quickly, go to him and don't stop along the way."

The image of Our Lady had appeared on the cloak and at the sight of this miracle, the bishop was convinced. And today the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe still preserves this miraculous effigy.

Mary, the Mother who does not forget

You, who do not forget any of your children, leave no one behind, have looked upon the young people who have placed their hopes in you. You drew close to them and revealed yourself to them.

Obey even when you do not understand: a mother does not forget, a mother does not leave you on your own.

The Rector Major's words

The Virgin Mary, motherhood and compassion

Mary's motherhood does not end with her yes that made the incarnation of the Son of God possible. Certainly, that moment is the foundation of everything, but her motherhood is a constant attitude, a way of being for us, of relating to the whole of humanity.

Jesus on the cross entrusts John to her with the words, 'Woman, behold your son,' symbolically extending her motherhood to all believers of all times.

Mary thus becomes the mother of the Church, the spiritual mother of each one of us.

We see how this motherhood manifests itself in tender and thoughtful care, in constant attention to the needs of her children and in a deep desire for their good. Mary welcomes us, nourishes us with her expression of fidelity, protects us under her mantle. Mary's motherhood is an immense gift that brings us closer to her; we feel her loving presence accompanying us at every moment.

Mary's compassion is the natural corollary of her motherhood. Compassion is not simply a superficial feeling of pity, but a profound participation in the pain of others, a 'suffering with'. We see it manifested in a touching way during her son's

passion. In the same way, Mary does not remain indifferent to our pain; she intercedes for us, consoles us, and offers us her maternal help.

Thus, Mary's heart becomes a safe refuge where we can lay down our burdens and find comfort and hope. Motherhood and compassion in Mary become, so to speak, two sides of the same human experience in our favour, two expressions of her infinite love for God and for humanity.

Her compassion is then the concrete manifestation of her being a mother, compassion as a consequence of motherhood. Contemplating Mary as a mother opens our hearts to the hope that finds its fullest expression in her. Our Heavenly Mother who loves us.

Let us ask Mary to see her as a model of authentic humanity, of a motherhood capable of 'feeling with', capable of loving, capable of suffering with others, following the example of her son Jesus, who for love of us suffered and died on the cross.

The prayer of an unfaithful child

As for us, are we sure that a mother never forgets, just as children do?

The prayer of a lost child

Mary, you who show yourself to those who are able to see...
make my heart obedient.

When I'm not listening, please insist.

When I don't come back, please come and look for me.

When they do not forgive me, please teach me forgiveness.

Because we human beings get lost and we will always get lost

But you don't forget us, your wandering children.

Come and get us,

come and take us by the hand.

We do not and cannot be alone here.

Hail Mary...

Day 4 – Our Lady of La Salette

Being Children – Amazement and reflection

Children trust, children rely on others. And a mother is close by, always. You see her even if she is not there.
As for us, are we able to see her?

Little Melanie and Maximin from La Salette

On Saturday, September 19, 1846, the two boys climbed the slopes of Mount Planeau, above the village of La Salette, each leading four cows to graze. Halfway there, near a small spring, Melanie was the first to see a ball of fire on a pile of stones, "as if the sun had fallen there", and she pointed it out to Maximin. From that shining sphere a woman began to appear, sitting with her head in her hands, her elbows on her knees, deeply sad. Faced with their astonishment, the Lady stood up and in a soft voice, but in French, said to them, "Come closer, my children, do not be afraid, I am here to tell you great news." Heartened, the boys approached and saw that the figure was crying.

A mother announced great news to her children and did so in ears. Yet the youngsters were not surprised by these tears. They listened, in the tenderest of moments between a mother and her children. Because even mothers are sometimes worried, because even mothers entrust their children with their own feelings, thoughts and reflections. And Mary entrusted a great message to the two little shepherds, poor and neglected in their affection: "I am worried about humanity, I am worried about you, my children, who are distancing yourselves from God. And life away from God is a complicated, difficult life, made up of suffering." That is why she was crying. She cried like any mother and told her youngest and purest children a message as amazing as it was great. A message to be proclaimed to everyone, to be brought to the world.

And they would do so, because they could not keep such a beautiful moment for themselves: the expression of a mother's love for her children must be proclaimed to everyone. The Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette, which stands on the site of the apparitions, lays its foundations on the revelation of

Mary's pain in the face of the pilgrimage of her sinful children.

Mary, the Mother who proclaims/who tells us who she is

You, who give yourself completely to your children so much that you are not afraid to tell them about yourself, have touched the hearts of your youngest children, who are able to reflect on your words and welcome them in wonder. You drew close to them and revealed yourself to them.

Be amazed at a mother's words: they will always be the most authentic.

The Rector Major's words

The Virgin Mary, love and mercy

Do we feel this dimension of Mary, these two dimensions? Mary is the woman whose heart overflows with love, attention and also mercy. We feel that she is a harbour, a safe refuge in times of difficulty or trial.

Contemplating Mary is like immersing ourselves in an ocean of tenderness and compassion. We feel surrounded by an environment, by an inexhaustible atmosphere of comfort and hope. Mary's love is a maternal love that embraces all of humanity, because it is a love that has its roots in her unconditional yes to God's plan.

By welcoming her son into her womb, Mary welcomed God's love. As a result, her love knows no boundaries or distinctions; it bends over human frailty and misery with infinite delicacy. We see this manifested in her attention to Elizabeth, in her intercession at the wedding at Cana, in her silent, extraordinary presence at the foot of the cross.

Behold, Mary's love, this maternal love, is a reflection of God's own love, a love that draws near, that consoles, forgives, never tires, never ends. Behold, Mary teaches us that to love means to give oneself completely, to be close to those who suffer, to share the joys and sorrows of our brothers and sisters with the same generosity and dedication that animated her heart. Love, mercy.

Mercy then becomes the natural consequence of Mary's love, a compassion, we might say, that is visceral, when faced with the sufferings of humanity, the world. We look at Mary, we contemplate her, we encounter her with her maternal gaze and we feel it resting on our weaknesses, on our sins, on our vulnerability, without aggression, indeed with infinite tenderness. It is an immaculate heart, sensitive to the cry of pain.

Mary is a mother who does not judge, does not condemn, but welcomes, consoles and forgives. We feel that Mary's mercy is a balm for the wounds of the soul, something that warms the heart. Mary reminds us that God is rich in mercy and never tires of forgiving those who turn to him with a contrite, serene, open and willing heart.

Love and mercy in the Virgin Mary merge in an embrace that envelops the whole of humanity. Let us ask Mary to help us open our hearts to God's love, as she did, and to let this love fill our hearts, especially when we feel most in need, most weighed down by trials and difficulties. In Mary, we find a tender and powerful mother, ready to welcome us into her love and to intercede for our salvation.

The prayer of an unfaithful child

As for us, are we still able to wonder like a child when faced with a mother's love?

The prayer of a distant child

Mary, you who show yourself to those who are able to see...
make my heart capable of compassion and conversion.

In silence, I find you.

In prayer, I hear you.

In reflection, I discover you.

And faced with your words of love, Mother, I am amazed
and discover the strength of your connection to humanity.

Far from you, who will hold my hand in times of difficulty?

Far from you, who will comfort me in my tears?

Far from you, who would advise me when I am taking a wrong

turn?

I will return to you, as one with you.

Hail Mary...

Day 5 – Catherine's Medal

Being Children – Trust and prayer

Children trust, children rely on others. And a mother is close by, always. You see her even if she is not there.

As for us, are we able to see her?

Little Catherine Labouré

On the night of July 18, 1830, around 11:30, she heard herself called by name. It was a child who told her, "Get up and come with me." Catherine followed the child. All the lights were on. The chapel door opened as soon as the child touched it with his fingertips. Catherine knelt down.

At midnight Our Lady came and sat in the armchair next to the altar. "Then I jumped up near her, at her feet, on the steps of the altar, and I placed my hands on her knees," Catherine said. "I stayed like this, I don't know how long. I thought it was the sweetest moment of my life..."

"God wants to entrust you with a mission," the Virgin said to Catherine.

Catherine, who lost her mother at 9 years of age, was not resigned to living without her mother. And she approached the Mother of Heaven. Our Lady, who was already looking at her from afar, would never abandon her. In fact, she had big plans for her. She, her caring and loving daughter, would have a great mission: to live an authentic Christian life, a personal relationship with God that was strong and firm. Mary believed in the potential of her child and entrusted her with the Miraculous Medal, capable of interceding and working graces and miracles. An important mission, a difficult message. **Yet Catherine was not discouraged. She trusted her Heavenly Mother and knew that she would never abandon her.**

Mary, the Mother who gives confidence

You, who are trusting, and entrust missions and messages to each of your children, have accompanied them on their journey as a discreet presence, remaining close to all, but especially to those who have experienced great suffering. You drew close to them and revealed yourself to them.

Trust: a mother will always entrust you only with tasks that you can complete and will be by your side all the way.

The Rector Major's words

The Virgin Mary, trust and prayer

The Virgin Mary presents herself to us as a woman of unshakeable trust, a powerful intercessor through prayer. Contemplating these two aspects, trust and prayer, we see two fundamental dimensions of Mary's relationship with God.

We can say that Mary's trust in God is a golden thread that runs through her entire existence, from beginning to end. That 'yes' pronounced with awareness of the consequences is an act of total abandonment to the divine will. Mary entrusts herself, Mary lives her trust in God with a heart firmly fixed on divine providence, knowing that God would never abandon her.

So, for us, in our daily lives, looking to Mary, this abandonment, which is not passive but active and trusting, is an invitation not to forget our anxieties and fears, but in some way to look at everything in the light of God's love, which in Mary's case never failed, and neither will it fail in our lives. This trust leads to prayer, which we can say is almost the breath of Mary's soul, the privileged channel of her intimate communion with God. Trust leads to communion. Her life of abandonment was a continuous dialogue of love with the Father, a constant offering of herself, of her concerns, but also of her decisions.

The visit to Elizabeth is an example of prayer that becomes service. We see Mary accompanying Jesus to the cross, after the Ascension we see her in the Upper Room united with the

Apostles in fervent expectation. Mary teaches us the value of constant prayer as a consequence of total and complete trust, abandoning oneself into God's hands, precisely to encounter God and live with God.

Trust and prayer and Mary Most Holy are closely interconnected. A deep trust in God gives birth to and brings forth persevering prayer. Let us ask Mary to be our example so that we may feel urged to make prayer a daily habit because we want to feel continually abandoned in God's merciful hands.

Let us turn to her with filial trust so that, imitating her, imitating her trust and perseverance in prayer, we may experience the peace that only when we abandon ourselves to God can we receive the graces necessary for our journey of faith.

The prayer of an unfaithful child

As for us, are we able to trust unconditionally like children?

The prayer of a mistrustful child

Mary, you who show yourself to those who are able to see...
make my heart capable of praying.

I am unable to hear you, open my ears.

I am unable to follow you, guide my steps.

I am unable to keep faith with what you wish to entrust to me;
make my soul steadfast.

The temptations are many, let me not give in.

The difficulties seem insurmountable, let me not fall.

The contradictions of the world shout loudly, let me not follow them.

I, your worthless child, am here for you to use.

Making me an obedient child.

Hail Mary...

Day 6 – Our Lady of Sorrows of Kibeho
Being Children – Suffering and healing

Children trust, children rely on others. And a mother is close by, always. You see her even if she is not there.
As for us, are we able to see her?

Little Alphonsine Mumiremana and her companions

The story began at 12:35 on a Saturday, November 28, 1981, in a boarding school run by local Sisters, attended by just over a hundred girls in the area. A rural, poor school, where one learned to become a teacher or secretary. The building was not equipped with a Chapel and, therefore, there was not a particularly strong religious atmosphere. That day all the girls from the school were in the refectory. The first of the group to "see" was 16-year-old Alphonsine Mumureke. According to what she herself wrote in her diary, she was serving her companions at the table, when she heard a female voice calling her: "My daughter, come here." She headed for the corridor, next to the refectory, and there a woman of incomparable beauty appeared to her. She was dressed in white, with a white veil over her head, which hid her hair, and which seemed joined to the rest of the dress, which had no seams. She was barefoot and her hands were clasped on her chest with her fingers pointing towards the sky.

Subsequently, Our Lady appeared to other of Alphonsine's school friends who at first were sceptical but then, faced with Mary's appearance, they had to reconsider. Mary, speaking to Alphonsine, described herself as the Lady of Sorrows of Kibeho and told the children about all the cruel and bloody events that would soon take place with the outbreak of war in Rwanda. **The sorrow would be great, but so too would be the consolation and healing from that sorrow, because she, the Lady of Sorrows, would never leave her children in Africa on their own. The children remain there, stunned by these visions, but they believed in this mother who reached out her arms to them, calling them "my children."** They knew that only in her would there be consolation. And in order to pray that the consoling mother would alleviate the suffering of her

children, a shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows of Kibeho was erected, now a place marked by extermination and genocide. And Our Lady continues to be there and embrace all her children.

Mary, the Mother who consoles

You, who comforted your children like John beneath the cross, have looked upon those who live in suffering. You drew close to them and revealed yourself to them.

Do not be afraid to go through suffering: the mother who consoles will wipe away your tears.

The Rector Major's words

The Virgin Mary, suffering and invitation to conversion

Mary is an emblematic figure of suffering transfigured, and a powerful invitation to conversion. When we contemplate her painful journey, it is a silent yet eloquent warning, a profound call to review our lives and our choices, and a call to return to the heart of the Gospel. The suffering that runs through Mary's life, like a sharp sword, prophesied by the elderly Simeon, marked by the disappearance of the Child Jesus, to the indescribable sorrow at the foot of the cross, Mary experiences all this, the weight of human fragility and the mystery of innocent suffering in a unique way.

Mary's suffering was not sterile suffering, passive resignation, but in some way we notice that there is an activity, a silent and courageous offering, united with the redemptive sacrifice of her son Jesus.

When we look at Mary, the woman who suffers, with the eyes of our faith, that suffering, rather than depressing us, reveals the depth of God's love for us, which is visible in Mary's life. Mary teaches us that even in the most acute pain we can find meaning, a possibility for spiritual growth, which is the fruit of union with the Paschal Mystery.

Thus, from the experience of transfigured pain, a powerful call to conversion emerges. Looking at Mary, contemplating how

she endured so much for love of us and for our salvation, we too are called not to remain indifferent to the mystery of redemption.

Mary, the gentle and motherly woman, urges us to abandon the ways of evil and embrace the path of faith. Mary's famous words at the wedding at Cana, 'Do whatever he tells you', still resound for us today as an urgent invitation to listen to the voice of Jesus in times of difficulty, in times of trial. In times of unexpected and unknown situations.

We immediately notice that Mary's suffering is not an end in itself, but is intimately linked to the redemption wrought by Christ. Her example of faith is unshakeable in pain. May it be a light and guide for us to transform our sufferings into opportunities for spiritual growth and to respond generously to the urgent call to conversion, so that the depth that still resounds in the heart of every person, the invitation of God, of a God who loves us, may find meaning, an outlet and growth through Mary's intercession, even in the most difficult moments, in the most painful moments.

The prayer of an unfaithful child

As for us, do we let ourselves be comforted like children?

The prayer of a suffering child

Mary, you who show yourself to those who are able to see...
make my heart capable of healing.

When I am down, hold out your hand to me, Mother.

When I feel broken, put the pieces back together, Mother.

When suffering takes over, open me to hope, Mother.

Because I am not only seeking healing for my body, but also
realising how much my heart
needs peace.

Lift me up from the dust, Mother.

Lift me up and all your children who are in distress.

Those beneath bombing,
those who are persecuted,
those who are unjustly imprisoned,

those who are harmed in rights and dignity,
those whose lives are cut short too soon.
Lift them up and console them.
because they are your children. Because we are your children.

Hail Mary...

Day 7 – Our Lady of Aparecida

Being Children – Justice and dignity

Children trust, children rely on others. And a mother is close by, always. You see her even if she is not there.
As for us, are we able to see her?

The little fishermen Domingos, Felice and Joao

At dawn on October 12, 1717, Domingos Garcia, Felipe Pedroso and Joao Alves pushed their boat into the waters of the Paraiba River that flowed near their village. They didn't seem lucky that morning: they cast their nets for hours without catching anything. They had almost decided to give up when Joao Alves, the youngest, wanted to give it one last try. So he cast his net into the waters of the river and slowly pulled it up. There was something there, but it wasn't a fish... it looked more like a piece of wood. When he freed it from the meshes of the net, the piece of wood turned out to be a statue of the Virgin Mary, unfortunately minus its head. Joao threw the net back into the water and this time, pulling it up, he found another piece of rounded wood entangled in it that looked just like the head of the same statue: he tried to put the two pieces together and realized that they matched perfectly. As if obeying an impulse, Joao Alves threw the net back into the water and, when he tried to pull it up, he realized he couldn't do it, because it was full of fish. His companions threw cast nets into the water in turn and the fishing that day was really abundant.

A mother sees the needs of her children, Mary saw the needs of the three fishermen and went to their rescue. Her children

gave her all the love and dignity that can be given to a mother: they put the two pieces of the statue back together, placed it on a hut and turned it into a shrine. From the top of the hut, Our Lady of Aparecida – which means She Appeared – saved one of her slave sons who was running away from his masters: she saw his suffering and restored his dignity. And today, that hut is the largest Marian shrine in the world and bears the name of the Basilica of Our Lady of Aparecida.

Mary, the Mother who sees

You, who have seen the suffering of your abused children, starting with the disciples, have stood beside your poorest and most persecuted children. You drew close to them and revealed yourself to them.

Do not hide from a mother's gaze: she also sees into your most hidden desires and needs.

The Rector Major's words

The Virgin Mary, dignity and social justice

The Virgin Mary is a mirror of fully realised human dignity, silent but powerful and inspiring for a just sense of social life. Reflecting on the figure of Mary in relation to these themes reveals a profound and surprisingly relevant perspective.

Let us look to Mary, the woman full of dignity, as a gift that helps us today to see her original purity, which does not place her on an inaccessible pedestal but reveals Mary in the fullness of that dignity to which we all feel a little attracted, called.

Contemplating Mary, we see shining forth the beauty and nobility, precisely the dignity of the human being, created in the image and likeness of God, free from the game of sin, fully open to divine love, a humanity that is not lost in details, in superficial things.

We can say that Mary's free and conscious 'yes' is the gesture of self-determination that elevates Mary to the level of God's

will, entering in some way into God's logic. Her humility then makes her even freer, far from being diminished by humility. Mary's humility becomes an awareness of the true greatness that comes from God.

Here, then, is this dignity that Mary helps us to see how we are living it in our daily lives. The theme of social justice may seem less explicit, but from a careful contemplative reading of the Gospel, especially the Magnificat, we can grasp, feel and encounter the revolutionary spirit that proclaims the overthrow of the powerful from their thrones and the raising up of the humble, that is, the reversal of worldly logic and God's privileged attention to the poor and hungry. These words flow from a humble heart, filled with the Holy Spirit. We can say that they are a manifesto of social justice ante litteram, a foretaste of the kingdom of God, where the last will be first.

Let us contemplate Mary so that we may feel attracted to this dignity that is not limited to closing in on itself but is a dignity that in the Magnificat challenges us not to remain closed in our own logic but to become open, praising God and seeking to live the gift we have received for the good of humanity, with dignity for the good of the poor and for the good of those who are rejected by society.

The prayer of an unfaithful child

As for us, do we hide or do we say everything like children do?

The prayer of a child who is afraid

Mary, you who show yourself to those who are able to see...
make my heart capable of restoring dignity.

In a time of trial, look at my shortcomings and make them whole.

In a time of fatigue, look at my weaknesses and heal them.

In a time of waiting, look at my impatience and heal it.

So that when I look at my brothers and sisters I can look at their shortcomings and make them whole,

see their weaknesses and heal them, feel their impatience and heal it.

Because nothing cares like love and no one is as strong as a mother seeking justice for her children.

And then I too, Mother, will stop at the foot of the hut, look with confident eyes at your image and pray for the dignity of all your children.

Hail Mary...

Day 8 – Our Lady of Banneaux

Being Children – Gentleness and everyday life

Children trust, children rely on others. And a mother is close by, always. You see her even if she is not there.

As for us, are we able to see her?

Little Marietta of Banneaux

On January 18, Marietta was in the garden, praying the rosary. Mary came and took her to a small spring on the edge of the forest, where she said, "This spring is for me", and invited the little girl to immerse her hand and the rosary in it. Her father and two other people followed Marietta in all her gestures and words with indescribable amazement. And that same evening the first to be conquered by Banneaux's grace was Marietta's father, who ran to go to confession and receive the Eucharist: he had not been to confession since his first communion.

On January 19, Marietta asked, "Ma'am, who are you?" "I am the Virgin of the poor."

At the spring, she added, "This spring is for me, for all the nations, for the sick. I come to console them!"

Marietta was a normal girl who lived her days like all of us, like our children, our grandchildren. Hers was a small and unknown village. She prayed that she would stay close to God. She prayed to her Heavenly Mother to keep the bond with her alive. **And Mary spoke to her gently, in a place familiar to**

her. She would appear to her several times, confide secrets to her and tell her to pray for the conversion of the world: this was a strong message of hope for Marietta. All children are embraced and consoled by their Mother, all the sweetness that Marietta found in the “Gentle Lady” she passed on to the world. And from this encounter came a great chain of love and spirituality that found its fulfilment in the Shrine of Our Lady of Banneaux.

Mary, the Mother who stays beside us

You who remained beside your children without ever losing a single one, have enlightened the daily path of the simplest people. You drew close to them and revealed yourself to them.

Abandon yourself into Mary’s embrace: do not be afraid, she will comfort you.

The Rector Major’s words

The Virgin Mary, education and love

The Virgin Mary is an incomparable teacher of education, because she is an inexhaustible source of love, and those who love educate, truly educate those they love.

Reflecting on the figure of Mary in relation to these two pillars of human and spiritual growth, we have here an example to contemplate, to take seriously, to incorporate into our daily choices.

The education that emanates from Mary is not made up of precepts or formal teachings but is manifested through her example of life. A contemplative silence that speaks, her obedience to God’s will, both humble and great, her profound humanity.

Here, the first educational aspect that Mary communicates to us is that of listening.

Listening to the word of God, listening to that God who is always there to help us, to accompany us. Mary keeps this in her heart, meditates on it carefully, encourages attentive listening to the word of God and, in the same way, to the

needs of others. Mary teaches us that humility which does not choose to remain detached and passive, but rather the humility which, while recognising our smallness before God's greatness, places us as people who are active in his service. Our hearts are open to truly be those who accompany, living the plan that God has for us.

Mary is an example that helps us to let ourselves be educated by faith. She teaches us perseverance, remaining steadfast in love for Jesus, even at the foot of the cross.

Education and love. Behold, Mary's love is the beating heart of her existence. It continues to be for us. Every time we draw close to Mary, we feel this maternal love that extends to all of us. It is a love for Jesus that becomes a love for humanity. Mary's heart opens with the infinite tenderness that she receives from God, which she communicates to Jesus and to her spiritual children.

Let us ask the Lord that in contemplating Mary's love, which is a love that educates, we may allow ourselves to be moved to overcome our selfishness and our closed attitudes and to open ourselves to others. In Mary, we see a woman who educates with love and who loves with a love that is educational. Let us ask the Lord to give us the gift of love, which is the gift of his love, which in turn is a love that purifies us, sustains us and makes us grow, so that our example may truly be an example that communicates love and, by communicating love, we may allow ourselves to be educated by her and let her help us so that our example may also educate others.

The prayer of an unfaithful child

As for us, are we able to abandon ourselves as children do?

The prayer of a child of our times

Mary, you who show yourself to those who are able to see...
make my heart gentle and docile.

Who will put me back together after breaking under the weight of the crosses I carry?

Who will bring light back to my eyes after seeing the ruins of

human cruelty?

Who will alleviate the sufferings of my soul, after the mistakes I have made on my journey?

Mother, only you can comfort me.

Hold me tight and keep me with you to keep me from falling apart.

Let my soul rest in you and find peace like a child in its mother's arms.

Hail Mary...

Day 9 – Mary Help of Christians

Being Children – Building and dreaming

Children trust, children rely on others. And a mother is close by, always. You see her even if she is not there.

As for us, are we able to see her?

Little John Bosco

At the age of 9, I had a dream. All my life this remained deeply impressed on my mind. In this dream I seemed to be near my home in a very large yard. A crowd of children were playing there. Some were laughing, some were playing games, and quite a few were swearing. When I heard these evil words, I jumped immediately amongst them, and tried to stop them by using my words and my fists. At that moment, a dignified man appeared, a nobly-dressed adult.

"You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love."

"Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?"

"Precisely because it seems impossible to you, you must make it possible through obedience and the acquisition of knowledge."

"Where, by what means can I acquire knowledge?"

"I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her all wisdom is foolishness."

At that moment I saw a lady of stately appearance standing beside him. She was wearing a mantle that sparkled all over as

though covered with bright stars.

"This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong and energetic. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children.

I looked around again and where before I had seen wild animals, I now saw gentle lambs. They were all jumping and bleating as if to welcome that man and lady. At that point, still dreaming, I began crying. I begged the lady to speak so that I could understand her, because I did not know what all this could mean. She then placed her hand on my head and said, "In good time you will understand everything."

Mary guided and accompanied young John Bosco throughout his life and mission. He, a child, thus discovered his vocation from a dream. He would not understand it but he would let himself be guided. He would not understand it for many years but in the end he would be aware that "she did everything". And his mother, both the earthly and the heavenly one, would be the central figure in the life of this son who would provide bread for his children. And after meeting Mary in his dreams, John Bosco, by then a priest, would build a Shrine to Our Lady so that all her children can rely on her. And he would dedicate it to Mary Help of Christians, because she had been his safe haven, his constant help. Thus, all those who enter the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin are taken under the protective mantle of Mary who becomes their guide.

Mary, a Mother who accompanies/guides

You who accompanied your son Jesus throughout his journey, offered yourself as a guide to those who listened to you with the enthusiasm that only children can have. You drew close to them and revealed yourself to them.

Let yourself be accompanied: your Mother will always be by your side to show you the way.

The Rector Major's words

The Virgin Mary, our help in conversion

The Virgin Mary is a powerful and silent help on our journey of growth.

It is a journey that constantly needs to free itself from whatever blocks its growth. It is a journey that must continually renew itself, so as not to turn back or stop in the dark corners of our existence. This is conversion.

Mary's presence is a beacon of hope, a constant invitation for us to continue walking towards God, helping our hearts to remain focused on God and his love. Reflecting on Mary, on her role, means discovering Mary who does not impose, who does not judge, but rather supports, encourages, with her humility, with her maternal love, helping our hearts to remain close to her so that we may draw ever closer to her son Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life.

Mary's 'yes' at the Annunciation, which opens up the history of salvation to humanity, remains valid for us too. Her intercession at the Wedding at Cana supports those who find themselves in unexpected, unprecedented situations. Mary is a model of continuous conversion. Her life, a life of the Immaculate, was a gradual adherence to God's will, a journey of faith that led her through joys and sorrows, culminating in the sacrifice of Calvary.

Mary's perseverance in following Jesus becomes an invitation for us to live this continuous closeness, this inner transformation, which we know well is a gradual process, but one that requires constancy, humility and trust in God's grace.

Mary helps us in our conversion through her attentive and focused listening to the Word of God. Listening that helps us find the strength to abandon the ways of sin, because we recognise the strength and beauty of walking towards God. Let us turn to Mary with filial trust, because this means that, while recognising our frailties, our sins and our faults, we want to foster those desires for change. A change of heart that seeks to let itself be accompanied by the maternal heart

of Mary. And in Mary, let us find that precious help to discern the false promises of the world and rediscover the beauty and truth of the Gospel. May Mary, the Help of Christians, be for all of us a constant help in discovering the beauty of the Gospel. And in accepting to walk towards goodness, the greatness of God's word, alive in our hearts so that we can communicate it to others.

The prayer of an unfaithful child

As for us, are we capable of being taken by the hand like children?

The prayer of a motionless child

Mary, you who reveal yourself to those who are able to see...
make my heart capable of dreaming and building.

I who do not let anyone else help me.

I who get discouraged, lose patience and never believe I have built anything.

I who always believe I am a failure.

Today I want to be a son or daughter who can give you their hand, my Mother

to be accompanied on life's paths.

Show me my field,

show me my dream

and make sure that in the end I too can understand everything and recognise that you were there in my life.

Hail Mary...

Young people's gifts to Mary

(1865)

In a dream recounted by Don Bosco in the Chronicle of the Oratory, dated May 30th, Marian devotion transforms into a vivid, symbolic judgment of the Oratory's youth: a procession of boys comes forward, each bearing a gift, before an altar magnificently adorned for the Virgin. An angel, the community's guardian, accepts or rejects these offerings, unveiling their moral meaning—fragrant or withered flowers, thorns symbolizing disobedience, animals embodying grave vices such as impurity, theft, and scandal. At the heart of this vision resonates Don Bosco's educational message: humility, obedience, and chastity are the three pillars for earning Mary's crown of roses.

Don Bosco found consolation in acts of devotion to Mary, Help of Christians, whom the whole Oratory honored particularly in the month of May. Of his "Good Nights" the chronicle records but one—a most precious one—which he gave on the 30th:

30th May

I dreamed that you boys were heading in procession toward a lofty, richly decorated altar of Our Lady. You were all singing the same hymns to Her but not in the same way: many sang beautifully, others rather poorly and some totally out of tune. I saw too that some kept silent, strayed from the ranks, yawned or kept disturbing others.

Everyone carried gifts, mostly flowers, to Our Lady. The bouquets differed in size and kind. There were bouquets of roses, carnations, violets and so on. Some boys carried very odd presents, such as pigs' heads, cats, slimy toads, rabbits, lambs and so on. A handsome youth stood by the altar. A close look would show that he had wings. He may have been the Oratory's guardian angel. As you boys presented your gifts, he took each and placed it on the altar.

The first to reach the altar offered gorgeous bouquets which

the angel silently placed on it. From other bouquets, instead, he had to remove decayed or scentless flowers, such as dahlias, camelias and the like, because Mary is not satisfied with mere looks. Some bouquets even had thorns and nails which, of course, were promptly plucked out and thrown away. When a boy carrying a pig's head came up, the angel said to him, "How dare you offer this to Our Lady? Don't you know that this animal symbolizes the ugly vice of impurity? Mary Most Pure cannot tolerate such a sin. Step aside. You are not worthy to stand in Her presence."

To those who offered a cat the angel said: "Don't you know better? A cat represents theft, and you dare present it to Mary? Those who take what does not belong to them, those who steal food from the house, tear their clothes out of spite or waste their parents' money by not studying as they ought, are nothing but thieves!" These too the angel ordered to withdraw. He was equally indignant with boys offering toads. "Toads symbolize the shameful sin of scandal, and dare you offer them to Our Lady? Step aside.

Join the unworthy ones." These boys too shamefully withdrew. Some lads came up with a knife stuck in their hearts, a symbol of sacrilege. "Don't you realize that there is death in your soul?" the angel asked them. "If it weren't for God's mercy, you would be lost forever. For heaven's sake, have that knife removed from your heart!"

Eventually the rest of the boys reached the altar and presented their gifts-lambs, rabbits, fish, nuts, grapes and so on. The angel took them and placed them before Our Lady. Then he lined up all the boys whose gifts had been accepted in front of the altar. I noticed to my deep regret that those who had been made to step aside were much more numerous than I had thought.

Two other angels now appeared at each side of the altar carrying ornate baskets filled with gorgeous, exceedingly beautiful crowns of roses. They were not earthly roses, but heaven-grown, symbolizing immortality. With these the guardian angel crowned all the boys ranged before Our Lady's altar. I

noticed among them many whom I had never seen before. Another remarkable thing is this: some of the most beautiful crowns went to boys who were so ugly as to be almost repulsive. Obviously, the virtue of holy purity which they eminently possessed amply made up for their unattractive appearance. Many other boys possessed this virtue too, though not to the same degree. Youngsters excelling in obedience, humility, or love of God were also crowned according to their deserts.

The angel then addressed all the boys as follows: "It was Our Lady's wish that you should be crowned today with these beautiful roses. See to it that they may never be taken from you. Humility, obedience and chastity will safeguard them for you. With these three virtues you will always find favor with Mary and one day receive a crown infinitely more beautiful than that you wear today."

All of you then sang the first stanza of the *Ave Maris Stella*. Afterward you turned around and filed away as you had come, singing the hymn *Lodate Maria* so full-heartedly that I was really amazed. I followed you for a while; then I went back to take a look at the boys whom the angel had pushed aside, but they were no longer there.

My dear children, I know who was crowned and who was turned down.

The latter I will warn privately so that they may strive to bring gifts pleasing to Our Lady.

Now let me make a few observations:

1. All you were carrying a variety of flowers, but unfailingly every bouquet had its share of thorns-some more, some less. After much thinking I came to the conclusion that these thorns symbolized acts of disobedience, such as keeping money instead of depositing it with Father Prefect, asking leave to go to one place and then going to another, being late to school, eating on the sly, going to other boys' dormitories although knowing that this is always strictly forbidden, lingering in bed after rising time, neglecting prescribed practices of

piety, talking during times of silence, buying books and not submitting them for approval, sending or receiving letters on the sneak, and buying and selling things among yourselves. This is what the thorns stand for.

“Is it a sin to break the house rules?” many will ask.

After seriously considering this question, my answer is a firm “yes.” I will not say whether it is mortal or venial. Circumstances will determine that, but it certainly is a sin.

Some might counter that the Ten Commandments say nothing about obeying house rules. Well, the Fourth Commandment says: “*Honor thy father and thy mother.*” Do you know what “*father*” and “*mother*” stand for? Not only parents, but also those who take their place. Besides, doesn’t Holy Scripture say: “... *Obey your superiors*”? [Heb. 13, 17] If you must obey them, it follows that they have the power to command. This is why we have rules, and these must be obeyed.

2. Some bouquets had nails among the flowers, the nails which crucified Jesus. How could that be? As usual, one starts with little things and goes on to more serious ones ... He allows himself undue liberties and falls into mortal sin. This is how nails managed to find their way into those bouquets, how they again crucified Jesus, as St. Paul says: “... crucifying again ... the Son of God.” [Heb. 6, 6]

3. Many bouquets contained rotten or scentless flowers, symbols of good works done in the state of mortal sin – and therefore unmeritorious – or from human motives such as ambition, or solely to please teachers and superiors. That’s why the angel, after scolding those boys for daring to offer such things to Our Lady, sent them back to trim their bouquets. Only after they had done this did the angel accept them and place them on the altar. In returning to the altar, these boys did not follow any order, but went up to the angel as soon as they had trimmed their bouquets and then joined those to be crowned.

In this dream I saw both your past and your future. I have

already spoken of it to many of you. I shall likewise tell the rest. Meanwhile, my children, see to it that the Blessed Virgin may always receive gifts from you which She will not have to refuse.

(*BM VIII, 73-76*)

Opening photo: Carlo Acutis during a visit to the Marian Shrine of Fátima.

St Dominic Savio. The places of his childhood

Saint Dominic Savio, the “little great saint,” lived his brief but intense childhood among the hills of Piedmont, in places now steeped in memory and spirituality. On the occasion of his beatification in 1950, this young disciple of Don Bosco was celebrated as a symbol of purity, faith, and devotion to the Gospel. We retrace the principal places of his childhood—Riva presso Chieri, Morialdo, and Mondonio—through historical testimonies and vivid accounts, revealing the family, scholastic, and spiritual environment that forged his path to sainthood.

The Holy Year 1950 was also the year Dominic Savio was beatified, which took place on 5 March. The 15-year-old disciple of Don Bosco was the first lay saint ‘confessor’ to ascend the altars at such a young age.

On that day, St Peter’s Basilica was packed with young people who bore witness, by their presence in Rome, to a Christian youth entirely open to the most sublime ideals of the Gospel. It was transformed, according to Vatican Radio, into an immense and noisy Salesian Oratory. When the veil

covering the figure of the new Blessed fell from Bernini's rays, a frenzied applause rose from the whole basilica and the echo reached the square, where the tapestry depicting the Blessed was uncovered from the Loggia of Blessings.

Don Bosco's educational system received its highest recognition on that day. We wanted to revisit the places of Dominic's childhood after re-reading the detailed information of Fr Michele Molineris in his *Nuova Vita di Domenico Savio*, in which he describes with his well-known solid documentation what the biographies of St Dominic Savio do not say.

At Riva presso Chieri

Here we are, first of all, in [San Giovanni di Riva presso Chieri](#), the hamlet where our "little great Saint" was born on 2 April 1842 to Carlo Savio and Brigida Gaiato, as the second of ten children, inheriting his name and birthright from the first, who survived only 15 days after his birth.

His father, as we know, came from Ranello, a hamlet of Castelnuovo d'Asti, and as a young man had gone to live with his uncle Carlo, a blacksmith in Mondonio, in a house on today's Via Giunipero, at no. 1, still called 'ca dèlfré' or blacksmith's house. There, from 'Barba Carlòto' he had learned the trade. Some time after his marriage, contracted on 2 March 1840, he had become independent, moving to the Gastaldi house in San Giovanni di Riva. He rented accommodation with rooms on the ground floor suitable for a kitchen, storeroom and workshop, and bedrooms on the first floor, reached by an external staircase that has now disappeared.

The Gastaldi heirs then sold the cottage and adjoining farmhouse to the Salesians in 1978. And today a modern youth centre, run by Salesian Past Pupils and Cooperators, gives memory and new life to the little house where Dominic was born.

In Morialdo

In November 1843, i.e. when Dominic had not yet reached the age of two, the Savio family, for work reasons, moved to [Morialdo](#), the hamlet of Castelnuovo linked to the name of St John Bosco, who was born at Cascina Biglione, a hamlet in the Becchi district.

In Morialdo, the Savios rented a few small rooms near the entrance porch of the farmstead owned by Viale Giovanna, who had married Stefano Persoglio. The whole farm was later sold by their son, Persoglio Alberto, to Pianta Giuseppe and family.

This farmstead is also now, for the most part, the property of the Salesians who, after restoring it, have used it for meetings for children and adolescents and for visits by pilgrims. Less than 2 km from Colle Don Bosco, it is situated in a country setting, amidst festoons of vines, fertile fields and undulating meadows, with an air of joy in spring and nostalgia in autumn when the yellowing leaves are gilded by the sun's rays, with an enchanting panorama on fine days, when the chain of the Alps stretches out on the horizon from the peak of Monte Rosa near Albugnano, to Gran Paradiso, to Rocciamelone, down as far as Monviso. It is truly a place to visit and to use for days of intense spiritual life, a Don Bosco-style school of holiness.

The Savio family stayed in Morialdo until February 1853, a good nine years and three months. Dominic, who lived only 14 years and eleven months, spent almost two thirds of his short existence there. He can therefore be considered not only Don Bosco's pupil and spiritual son, but also his countryman.

In Mondonio

Why the Savio family left Morialdo is suggested by Fr Molineris. His uncle the blacksmith had died and Dominic's father could inherit not only the tools of the trade but also the clientele in Mondonio. That was probably the reason for the move, which took place, however, not to the house in Via Giunipero, but to the lower part of the village, where they

rented the first house to the left of the main village street, from the Bertello brothers. The small house consisted, and still consists today, of a ground floor with two rooms, adapted as a kitchen and workroom, and an upper floor, above the kitchen, with two bedrooms and enough space for a workshop with a door on the street ramp.

We know that Mr and Mrs Savio had ten children, three of whom died at a very young age and three others, including Dominic, did not reach the age of 15. The mother died in 1871 at the age of 51. The father, left alone at home with his son John, after having taken in the three surviving daughters, asked Don Bosco for hospitality in 1879 and died at Valdocco on 16 December 1891.

Dominic had entered Valdocco on 29 October 1854, remaining there, except for short holiday periods, until 1 March 1857. He died eight days later at [Mondonio](#), in the little room next to the kitchen, on 9 March of that year. His stay at Mondonio was therefore about 20 months in all, at Valdocco 2 years and 4 months.

Memories of Morialdo

From this brief review of the three Savio houses, it is clear that the one in Morialdo must be the richest in memories. San Giovanni di Riva recalls Dominic's birth, and Mondonio a year at school and his holy death, but Morialdo recalls his life in the family, in church and at school. '*Minòt*', as he was called there – how many things he must have heard, seen and learnt from his father and mother, how much faith and love he showed in the little church of San Pietro, how much intelligence and goodness at the school run by Fr Giovanni Zucca, and how much fun and liveliness in the playground with his fellow villagers.

It was in Morialdo that Dominic Savio prepared for his First Communion, which he then made in the parish church of Castelnuovo on 8 April 1849. It was there, when he was only 7 years old, that he wrote his "Reminders", that is, the resolutions for his First Communion:

1. I will go to confession very often and take communion as often as the confessor gives me permission;
2. I want to keep feast days holy;
3. My friends will be Jesus and Mary;
4. Death but not sin.

Memories that were the guide for his actions until the end of his life.

A boy's demeanour, way of thinking and acting reflect the environment in which he lived, and especially the family in which he spent his childhood. So if one wants to understand something about Dominic, it is always good to reflect on his life in that farmstead in Morialdo.

The family

His was not a farming family. His father was a blacksmith and his mother a seamstress. His parents were not of robust constitution. The signs of fatigue could be seen on his father's face, his mother's face stood out for its delicate lines. Dominic's father was a man of initiative and courage. His mother came from the not too distant Cerreto d'Asti where she kept a dressmaker's shop "and with her skill she made it possible for the local inhabitants to get clothes there rather than go elsewhere." And she was still a seamstress in Morialdo too. Would Don Bosco have known this? His conversation with little Dominic who had gone to look for him at the Becchi was interesting:

"Well, what do you think?"

"It seems to me that there is good stuff (in piem.: Eh, m'a smia ch'a-j'sia bon-a stòfa!)."

"What can this fabric be used for?"

"To make a beautiful suit to give to the Lord."

"So, I am the cloth: you be the tailor; take me with you (in piem.: ch'èmpija ansema a chiel) and you can make a beautiful suit for the Lord." (OE XI, 185).

A priceless conversation between two countrymen who understood each other at first sight. And their language was just right for the dressmaker's son.

When their mother died on 14 July 1871, the parish priest of Mondonio, Fr Giovanni Pastrone, said to his weeping daughters, to console them: "Don't cry, because your mother was a holy woman; and now she is already in Paradise."

Her son Dominic, who had preceded her into heaven by several years, had also said to her and to his father, before he passed away: "Do not weep, I already see the Lord and Our Lady with open arms waiting for me." These last words of his, witnessed by his neighbour Anastasia Molino, who was present at the time of his death, were the seal of a joyful life, the manifest sign of that sanctity that the Church solemnly recognised on 5 March 1950, later giving it definitive confirmation on 12 June 1954 with his canonisation.

Frontispiece photo. The house where Dominic died in 1857. It is a rural dwelling, likely dating from the late 17th century. Rebuilt upon an even older house, it is one of the most cherished landmarks for the people of Mondonio.

Don Bosco International

Don Bosco International (DBI) is a non-governmental organisation based in Brussels, representing the Salesians of Don Bosco to the institutions of the European Union, with a focus on the protection of children's rights, youth development, and education. Founded in 2014, DBI collaborates with various European partners to promote inclusive social and educational policies, paying attention to vulnerable individuals. The organisation promotes youth participation in policy-making, emphasising the importance of informal education. Through networking and advocacy activities, DBI aims to create synergies with European institutions, civil society organisations, and Salesian networks globally. The

guiding values are solidarity, the integral formation of young people and intercultural dialogue. DBI organises seminars, conferences, and European projects aimed at ensuring greater youth presence in decision-making processes, fostering an inclusive environment that supports them in their journey of growth, autonomy and spiritual development, through cultural and educational exchanges. The Executive Secretary, Sara Sechi, explains the activities of this institution.

Advocacy as an act of responsibility for and with our youth

Don Bosco International (DBI) is the organisation that manages the institutional representation of the Salesians of Don Bosco to the European institutions and civil society organisations that revolve around them. DBI's mission is centred on *advocacy*, which can be translated as "political influence", meaning all those actions aimed at influencing a decision-making-legislative process, in our case the European one. The DBI office is based in Brussels and is hosted by the Salesian community of Woluwe-Saint-Lambert (FRB Province). Working in the European capital is dynamic and stimulating. Nevertheless, the proximity of the community allows us to keep the Salesian charism alive in our mission, avoiding getting trapped in the so-called "European bubble", that world of 'privileged' relationships and dynamics often distant from our realities.

DBI's action follows two directions: on the one hand, bringing the Salesian educational-pastoral mission closer to the institutions through the sharing of good practices, youth requests, projects and related results, creating spaces for dialogue and participation for those who traditionally would not have access to them. On the other hand, they deal with bringing the European dimension within the Congregation through monitoring and information on ongoing processes and new initiatives, facilitating new contacts with institutional representatives, NGOs and confessional organisations that can give rise to new collaborations.

A question that often arises spontaneously is how

DBI manages to concretely create political influence. In *advocacy* actions, networking with other organisations or entities that share principles, values, and objectives is fundamental. In this regard, DBI ensures an active presence in alliances, formal and informal, of NGOs or confessional actors who work together on issues dear to Don Bosco's mission: the fight against poverty and social inclusion, the defence of the rights of young people, especially those in vulnerable situations, and integral human development. Whenever a Salesian delegation visits Brussels, we facilitate meetings for them with Members of the European Parliament, Commission officials, diplomatic corps, including the Apostolic Nunciature to the European Union, and other actors of interest. We often manage to meet groups of young people and students from Salesian schools who visit the city, organising a moment of dialogue for them with other youth organisations.

DBI is a service that the Congregation offers to give visibility to its works and bring the voice of those who would otherwise not be heard to institutional forums. The Salesian Congregation has a potential for *advocacy* that is not fully expressed. The presence in 137 countries to protect young people at risk of poverty and social exclusion represents an educational and social network that few organisations can count on. However, it is still difficult to strategically present good results at decision-making tables, where policies and investments are outlined, especially at the international level. For this reason, ensuring a constant dialogue with the institutions represents both an opportunity and an act of responsibility. It is an opportunity because in the long term visibility facilitates contacts, new partnerships, funding for projects and the sustainability of the works. It is also a responsibility because, not being able to remain silent in the face of the difficulties faced by our boys and girls in today's world, political influence is the active testimony of that civic commitment that we often try to generate in young people.

By guaranteeing rights and dignity for young

people, Don Bosco was the first actor of political influence of the Congregation, for example through the signing of the first Italian apprenticeship contract. *Advocacy* represents an intrinsic element of the Salesian mission. Salesians do not lack experience, nor success stories, nor concrete and innovative alternatives to face current challenges, but often a cohesion that allows for coordinated networking and clear and shared communication. By giving voice to the authentic testimonies of young people, we can transform challenges into opportunities, creating a lasting impact in society that gives hope for the future.

Sara Sechi

Don Bosco International – DBI, Brussels

Sara Sechi, Executive Secretary of DBI, has been in Brussels for two and a half years. She is the daughter of the Erasmus+ generation, which together with other European programmes has guaranteed her life and training experiences that would otherwise have been denied. She is very grateful to Don Bosco and the Salesian Congregation, where she has found meritocracy, growth, and a second family. And we wish her good and fruitful work for the cause of young people.

Social inclusion according to Don Bosco

Don Bosco's far-sighted proposal for the 'unaccompanied minors' of Rome.

The history of the church of the Sacred Heart in Rome, now a basilica, is quite well known, and it is much frequented by

people hurrying through the adjacent Termini station. A history fraught with problems and difficulties of all kinds for Don Bosco while the church was under construction (1880-1887), but also a source of joy and satisfaction once it was completed (1887). Less well known, however, is the story of the origin of the "house of charity capable of accommodating at least 500 youngsters" that Don Bosco wanted to build next to the church. A work, an extremely relevant reflection for today... from 140 years ago! Don Bosco himself presented it to us in the January 1884 issue of the *Salesian Bulletin*: "Today there are hundreds and thousands of poor children wandering the streets and squares of Rome, their faith and morals at risk. As already pointed out on other occasions, many young people, either alone or with their families, come to this city not only from various parts of Italy, but also from other nations, in the hope of finding work and money; but disappointed in their expectation they soon fall into misery and the risk of doing badly, and consequently of ending up in prison."

Analysing the condition of young people in the "eternal city" was not difficult: the worrying situation of "street kids", whether Italian or not, was there for all to see, for the civil and ecclesiastical authorities, for the Roman citizens and the multitude of "buzzurri" and foreigners who had arrived in the city once it had been declared capital of the Kingdom of Italy (1871). The difficulty stemmed from not knowing what solution to propose and whether there was the ability to implement it once identified.

Don Bosco, not always well liked in the city because of his Piedmontese origin, proposed his solution to the Cooperators: "The aim of the Hospice of the Sacred Heart of Jesus would be to take in poor and abandoned youngsters from any city in Italy or any other country in the world, to educate them in knowledge and religion, to instruct them in some art or trade, and so remove them from the prison cell, give them back to their families and to civil society as good Christians, upright citizens capable of earning an honourable livelihood

through their own labours.”

Ahead of the times

Reception, education, training for work, integration and social inclusion: but is this not the prior objective of all youth policies in favour of immigrants today? Don Bosco had experience in this regard on his side: for 30 years at Valdocco they took in youngsters from various parts of Italy, for some years in Salesian houses in France there were children of Italian and other immigrants, since 1875 in Buenos Aires the Salesians had the spiritual care of Italian immigrants from various regions of Italy (decades later they would also take an interest in Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the future Pope Francis, the son of Piedmontese immigrants).

The religious dimension

Naturally, Don Bosco was interested above all in the salvation of the soul of the young, which required the profession of the Catholic faith: *Extra ecclesia nulla salus*, as they used to say. And in fact he wrote: “Others then from the city and foreigners, because of their poverty, are exposed daily to the risk of falling into the hands of the Protestants, who have, so to speak, invaded the city of St. Peter, and especially intend to ambush poor and needy youngsters. Under the guise of providing them with food and clothing for their bodies, they spread the poison of error and unbelief to their souls.”

This explains how, in his educational project in Rome (we would prefer to call it his “global compact on education”), Don Bosco does not neglect faith. A path of true integration into a “new” civil society cannot exclude the religious dimension of the population. Papal support came in handy: an extra stimulus “for people who love religion and society”: “This Hospice is very dear to the heart of the Holy Father Leo XIII. While with apostolic zeal he strives to spread faith and morality in every part of the world, he leaves no stone unturned on behalf of the children most exposed to danger. This Hospice should therefore be dear to the hearts of all

people who love religion and society; it should be especially dear to the hearts of our Cooperators, to whom in a special way the Vicar of Jesus Christ entrusted the noble task of the Hospice itself and of the attached Church.”

Finally, in his appeal to the generosity of benefactors for the construction of the Hospice, Don Bosco could not fail to make explicit reference to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to whom the adjoining church was dedicated: “We can also believe for certain that this Hospice will be well pleasing to the Heart of Jesus... In the nearby Church the divine Heart will be the refuge of adults, and in the adjoining Hospice he will show himself to be the loving friend, the tender father of the children. He will have a group of 500 children in Rome every day to divinely crown him, pray to him, sing hosannas to him, ask his holy blessing.”

New times, new peripheries

The Salesian hospice, built as a school of arts and crafts and an oratory on the outskirts of the city – which at the time began in Piazza della Repubblica – later became absorbed by the building expansion of the city itself. The first school for poor boys and orphans was moved to a new suburb in 1930 and was replaced in successive stages by various types of other schools (elementary, middle, high school). It also gave hospitality for a time to Salesian students attending the Gregorian University and some faculties of the Salesian Athenaeum. It always remained a parish and oratory as well as the headquarters of the Roman Province. For a long time it housed some national offices and is now the headquarters of the Salesian Congregation: structures that have animated and still animate Salesian houses that have mostly come into being and grown on the outskirts of hundreds of cities, or on the “geographical and existential peripheries” of the world, as Pope Francis put it. Just like the Sacred Heart in Rome, which still preserves a small sign of Don Bosco’s great “dream”: it offers assistance to non-EU immigrants and with the Youth Centre’s “Talent Bank” provides food, clothing and

basic necessities to the homeless at Termini station.

The dream of the 22 moons (1854)

In March 1854 on a feast day, after evening prayer Don Bosco gathered all the pupils in the back sacristy saying he wanted to tell them about a dream. Among others present were young Cagliero, Turchi, Anfossi, clerics Reviglio and Buzzetti. Our narration is based on their accounts. All of them believed that Don Bosco's dreams were true supernatural revelations. Don Bosco spoke as follows:

I was with you in the playground, delighted to see all of you so lively and happy, jumping, shouting, and running about. Suddenly, however, one of you came out of the building wearing some sort of top hat and began strolling around in the playground. The transparent headgear was lit from the inside and revealed the picture of a moon with the number '22' in its center. Amazed, I was about to walk up to the boy and tell him to cut off that nonsense when suddenly all of you stopped playing as if the bell had rung and lined up as usual on the porch by classes. It was now semi-dark. While all of you looked frightened, nearly a dozen of you were deathly pale. I passed in front of these pale ones for a closer look, and among them I saw the boy with the top hat. He was even paler than the rest, and a black drape-like those used at funerals was hanging from his shoulders. I was about to ask him what his strange garb meant when a grave and dignified-looking stranger stopped me and said: "Wait! Know that this boy has only twenty-two moons to live. Before these are over, he will die. Take care of him and prepare him!" I wanted some

explanation of this message and his sudden appearance, but the stranger had already vanished. My dear boys, I know who that lad is. He is right here among you.

Terror gripped all of the boys. This was the very first time that Don Bosco had ever predicted the death of anyone in the house publicly and so solemnly. He could not help noticing their fear, and so he continued: "Don't be afraid! True, I know that boy, and he is here now, but this is a dream, as I have said, and you know that dreams are only dreams. One thing is certain, though-we must always be prepared, just as Our Divine Savior has warned us in the Gospel, and never commit sin. If we follow this rule, death will not frighten us. Put your conscience in order, therefore, and resolve not to offend God anymore. On my part, I shall look after the boy of the twenty-two moons. These moons signify twenty-two months. I hope that he will die a good death."

Understandably, this announcement frightened the boys, but in the long run it did them good because their attention was focused on death as they kept themselves in God's grace and counted the months. Now and then when Don Bosco would ask: "How many more moons?" they would reply "Twenty" or "Eighteen" or "Fifteen" and so on. Sometimes those who paid the closest attention to

everything he said would tell him that so many moons had already gone by, attempting at the same time to make their own predictions or guesses, but Don Bosco would say nothing. When [John Baptist] Piano entered the Oratory as a young student in November, 1854, he heard his companions say that nine moons had already passed. He then found out about Don Bosco's prediction and he too began keeping track of the moons.

The year 1854 went by, and so did many months of 1855, and then came October, the twentieth month. At this time the cleric [John] Cagliero was in charge of three adjoining rooms in the old Pinardi house. They served as a dormitory for several boys, including Secundus Gurgo a handsome, healthy,

seventeen-year-old from Pettinengo (Biella) who seemed destined to live to a ripe old age. His father had asked Don Bosco to take him in as a boarder. The youth, an excellent pianist and organist, studied music assiduously and earned good money by giving lessons in town. From time to time during the course of the year Don Bosco had asked Cagliero about the conduct of his charges with more than routine interest. In October he called him and asked: "Where do you sleep?"

"In the last room," Cagliero answered. "From there I can keep an eye on the other two."

"Wouldn't it be better if you moved your bed into the middle room?"

"If you say so, but I think I'd better tell you that it is rather damp because one of its walls is actually the wall of the church tower, which is still very porous. Winter is coming and I might get sick. Besides, I can watch all the boys in the dormitory quite well from where I am!"

"I know you can," Don Bosco replied, "but it would be better if you moved into the middle room." Cagliero complied, but after a while he asked Don Bosco's permission to move his bed back to the last room. Don Bosco did not let him do so. "Stay where you are and don't worry," he told him. 2You won't get sick!"

Cagliero felt at ease again. A few days later Don Bosco summoned him again. "How many sleep in your room?"

"There are three of us: Gurgo, Garavaglia, and myself-four, if you include the piano!"

"Good," Don Bosco said. "You are all musicians and Gurgo can teach you to play the piano. Make sure that you look after him well." That was all he said, but Cagliero's curiosity was aroused.

Suspecting something, he tried to question Don Bosco, but he cut him short, saying: "You'll know in due time." The secret, of course, was that the boy of the twenty-two moons was in that room.

One evening, at the beginning of December, after night prayers, Don Bosco mounted the podium as usual to give the Good Night and announced that one of the boys would die before Christmas. We must note that no one at the Oratory was sick at that time. Naturally this announcement, coupled with the fact that the twenty-two moons would soon be over, made everyone jittery. There was much talk about what he had said as well as fear that it would come true.

During these days Don Bosco once more sent for the cleric Cagliero. He asked him how Gurgo was behaving and whether he returned to the Oratory punctually after giving his music lessons in town. Cagliero replied that the boy was doing fine, as were the other boys. "Good," Don Bosco said. "See that they keep it up, and let me know if anything goes wrong."

About the middle of December Gurgo had a sudden attack of abdominal pains so violent that the doctor, who had been summoned at once, recommended that the boy receive the Last Sacraments. The pains continued for eight days, but, thanks to Dr. Debernardi's care, they at last began to subside and Gurgo was able to get up again. The trouble apparently vanished, but – in the doctor's opinion – the boy had had a narrow escape. Meanwhile, his father had been informed. No one had, as yet, died at the Oratory, and Don Bosco wanted to spare the boys the sight of a funeral. The Christmas novena had begun and Gurgo – now almost completely recovered – was planning to go home for Christmas. Nevertheless, Don Bosco seemed to doubt the good news of the boy's recovery. His father arrived and, finding his son in good condition, asked permission to take him home for some further convalescence. He then went to book two seats on the stagecoach, intending to leave on the next day for Novara and Pettinengo. It was Sunday, December 23

[1855]. That evening Gurgo felt a craving for meat, although the doctor had forbidden it. Thinking that it would help to build his strength, his father went out to buy some and cooked it in a little pot. The boy drank the broth and ate the half-cooked meat-perhaps to excess. At bedtime his father retired for the night while Cagliero and the infirmarian remained with the boy. Sometime during the night Gurgo suffered another very severe attack of colic. "Cagliero, Cagliero!" he gasped. "I'm through giving you piano lessons."

"Come now, don't say that!" Cagliero protested.

"I'll never see home again. Pray for me. Oh, what pains. Pray to Our Lady for me."

"Of course I'll pray, and you do likewise."

Cagliero began praying but, overcome by fatigue, he soon fell asleep. He was suddenly awakened by the infirmarian who pointed to Gurgo and ran out to call Father Alasonatti whose room was next door. He came immediately, but within minutes Gurgo was dead. That morning Cagliero met Don Bosco as he was coming down the stairs on his way to say Mass. He had been informed of the death and looked very, very sad.

The whole Oratory was stunned. The twenty-second moon was not yet over. By dying shortly before dawn on December 24 Gurgo had also fulfilled Don Bosco's second prediction-namely that one of the boys would die before Christmas.

After lunch, the boys and the clerics silently gathered around Don Bosco. The cleric John Turchi asked him point-blank whether Gurgo had been the boy of the moons. "Yes," Don Bosco replied, "it was he; he was the one I saw in my dream." Then he added: "You may have noticed that some time ago I had him sleep in a special room. Into that same room I also moved one of the best clerics, John Cagliero, so that he could look after him constantly." As he said this, he turned to Cagliero

and said: "The next time you'll know better than object to Don Bosco's arrangements. Do you understand now why I did not allow you to leave that room? I did not let you have your way because I wanted Gurgo to have someone to look after him. If he were still alive, he could tell you how often I spoke to him of death in a roundabout way and prepared him for it."

"I understood then," Bishop Cagliero later wrote, "why Don Bosco had given me those instructions. I learned to appreciate more and more his words and fatherly advice."

"I still remember," Peter Enria stated, "that on the evening of that day-Christmas Eve-at the Good Night Don Bosco was looking about as though searching for someone. After a while he said: 'Gurgo is the first boy to die here at the Oratory. He was well prepared and we hope he is now in heaven. I exhort you to be ever ready. . .' He could say no more, so great was his grief at the loss of one of his boys."

(BM V, 243-247)

The Cemetery Boys

The ordeal of abandoned young people continues to resonate in the contemporary world. Statistics speak of approximately 150 million children forced to live in the streets, a reality that is also dramatically evident in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. To mark the feast day of St. John Bosco, a campaign was held in Vienna, promoted by Jugend Eine Welt, an initiative that highlighted not only the local situation but also the difficulties encountered in distant countries, such as Liberia, where the Salesian, Lothar Wagner, dedicates his life to giving these young people hope.

Lothar Wagner: A Salesian who dedicates his life to street

children in Liberia

Lothar Wagner, a German Salesian Cooperator, has dedicated over twenty years of his life to supporting children in West Africa. After gaining extensive experience in Ghana and Sierra Leone, over the last four years he has focused his passion on Liberia, a country marked by prolonged conflicts, health crises, and devastation such as the Ebola epidemic. Lothar has become a spokesman for a reality that is often ignored, where social and economic scars compromise opportunities for young people to grow.

Liberia, with a population of 5.4 million, is a country where extreme poverty is accompanied by fragile institutions and widespread corruption. The consequences of decades of armed conflict and health crises have left the education system among the worst in the world, while the social fabric has frayed under the weight of economic hardship and lack of essential services. Many families are unable to guarantee their children's basic needs, thus pushing a large number of young people to seek refuge on the streets.

In particular, in Monrovia, some young people find refuge in the most unexpected places: the city's cemeteries. Known as the "cemetery boys," these young people, lacking a safe home, take refuge among the graves, a place that becomes a symbol of total abandonment. Sleeping outdoors, in parks, in landfills, even in sewers or inside tombs, has become the tragic daily refuge for those who have no other choice.

"It is truly very heart-breaking when you walk through the cemetery and see boys coming out of the tombs. They lie down with the dead because they no longer have a place in society. Such a situation is scandalous."

A multiple approach: from the cemetery to detention cells

The cemetery boys are not the only focus of Lothar's attention. The Salesian also dedicates himself to another dramatic reality: that of underage prisoners in Liberian

prisons. The Monrovia prison, built for 325 inmates, now houses over 1,500 prisoners, including many young people incarcerated without a formal charge. The cells, extremely overcrowded, are a clear example of how human dignity is often sacrificed.

"There is a lack of food, clean water, hygienic standards, medical and psychological assistance. Constant hunger and the dramatic spatial situation due to overcrowding greatly weaken the boys' health. In a small cell, intended for two inmates, eight to ten young people are locked up. They sleep in shifts, because this cell size only offers standing space to its many inhabitants."

To cope with this situation, he organises everyday visits to the prison, bringing drinking water, hot meals, and a psycho-social support that becomes a lifeline. His constant presence is essential to try to re-establish a dialogue with the authorities and families, also raising awareness of the importance of protecting the rights of minors, who are often forgotten and abandoned to a dire fate. "We do not leave them alone in their solitude, but we try to give them hope," Lothar emphasises with the firmness of someone who knows the everyday pain of these young lives.

A day for awareness in Vienna

Support for these initiatives also comes from international attention. On January 31, in Vienna, Jugend Eine Welt organised a day dedicated to highlighting the precarious situation of street children, not only in Liberia, but throughout the world. During the event, Lothar Wagner shared his experiences with students and participants, involving them in practical activities – such as using barrier tape to simulate the conditions of an overcrowded cell – to give them a first-hand understanding of the difficulties and anguish of young people who live in minimal spaces and in degrading conditions every day.

In addition to daily emergencies, the work of Lothar and his collaborators also focuses on long-term interventions. The Salesian missionaries are in fact involved in rehabilitation programmes ranging from educational support to vocational training for young prisoners, to legal and spiritual assistance. These interventions aim to reintegrate young people into society once they are released, helping them build a dignified and fulfilling future. The goal is clear: to offer not only immediate help, but to create a path that allows young people to develop their potential and actively contribute to the rebirth of the country.

The initiatives also encompass the construction of vocational training centres, schools, and reception facilities, with the hope of expanding the number of young beneficiaries and ensuring constant support, day and night. The success story of many former “cemetery boys” – some of whom have become teachers, doctors, lawyers, and entrepreneurs – is tangible confirmation that, with the right support, transformation is possible.

Despite the commitment and dedication, this path is fraught with obstacles: bureaucracy, corruption, the children’s distrust, and the lack of resources represent daily challenges. Many young people, marked by abuse and exploitation, struggle to trust adults, making the task of establishing a relationship of trust and offering real and lasting support even more difficult. However, every small success – every young person who regains hope and begins to build a future – confirms the importance of this humanitarian work.

The path undertaken by Lothar and his collaborators testifies that, despite the difficulties, it is possible to make a difference in the lives of abandoned children. The vision of a Liberia in which every young person can realise their potential translates into concrete actions, from international awareness to the rehabilitation of prisoners, through

educational programmes and reception projects. The work, based on love, solidarity, and a constant presence, represents a beacon of hope in a context in which despair seems to prevail.

In a world marked by abandonment and poverty, the stories of rebirth of street children and young prisoners are an invitation to believe that, with the right support, every life can rise again. Lothar Wagner continues to fight to guarantee these young people not only shelter, but also the possibility of rewriting their destiny, demonstrating that solidarity can truly change the world.

A Mysterious and Prophetic Wheel (1861)

The wise man's heart," we read in Holy Scripture, "knows times and judgments; for there is a time and a judgment for everything. Yet it is a great affliction for man that he is ignorant of what is to come; for who will make known to him how it will be?" [Eccl. 8, 5-7]

That Don Bosco knew when to toil and when to pause and explain, that he was not ignorant of things past and future concerning his mission, is further proven by the unswerving dedication inspiring the chronicles of Father Ruffino and Father Bonetti and the memoirs of Bishop John Cagliero, Father Chiala, and others who were privileged to hear Don Bosco's words.

With remarkable accord, they report another dream in which Don Bosco saw the Oratory and its beneficial results, the spiritual condition of his pupils, their vocation – as Salesian priests or brothers or as laymen in the world – and,

lastly, the future of his budding congregation.

Don Bosco's dream occurred during the night of May 1, 1861 and lasted about six hours. At dawn on May 2, he arose and jotted down the dream's highlights and the names of some of the various people he had seen in it. He narrated it after night prayers on three successive nights from the little rostrum in the porticoes. The first night, May 2, he spoke for nearly forty-five minutes. The introduction, as usual, seemed somewhat obscure and strange for reasons we have already explained and for others we shall soon give.

After announcing his topic, he continued:

This dream concerns the students only. Very much of what I saw simply defies description. I seemed to have just started out of my house at Becchi on a path leading to Capriglio, a village near Castelnuovo. I wanted to see a field belonging to my family in a little dale behind a farmstead called "Valcappone." As a boy I had often worked there. The field was very sandy and its yield barely equaled the taxes on it. As I was nearing it, I met a man in his forties, of average height, suntanned, and with a long, well-trimmed beard. He wore a tunic reaching to his knees and fastened around his waist, and a white beret. He seemed to be waiting for somebody. He greeted me cordially, like an old acquaintance, and then asked, "Where are you going?"

"To a nearby field of mine," I answered. "And what brings you around here?"

"Don't be so curious," he replied. "You don't have to know that."

"Very well. Will you at least tell me your name? You seem to know me, but you are a stranger to me."

"You don't have to know that, either. Just come along with me."

I followed him and after a few steps saw a large fig orchard. "Look at those figs!" the man exclaimed. "Aren't they luscious? Go ahead, help yourself!"

Taken aback by the sight, I replied, "That's funny! There never were figs here before!"

"There are now!" he replied.

"But this isn't the season for figs! They can't be ripe."

"But some are! If you want to pick them, hurry because it's getting late." I did not stir and so my friend insisted: "Hurry, don't waste time because it will soon be dark."

"Why do you rush me? Besides, I don't want any. I like to look at them and give them away, but I personally don't care very much for them."

"In that case, let's go on. But remember what St. Matthew's Gospel says about great events menacing Jerusalem: 'From the fig tree learn a parable: When its branch is now tender and leaves break forth, you know that summer is near.' [Matt. 24, 32] It's all the nearer now that the figs are already beginning to ripen."

We resumed our walk and came to a vineyard. "Perhaps you care for grapes," the man said. "Take some!"

"Not now! In due time I'll pick them from my own vineyard."

"But you have grapes right here!"

"Not now!"

"Can't you see how ripe they are?"

"I can hardly believe it. This isn't the season for grapes!"

"Hurry because it's getting dark. You can't afford to lose time."

"What's the hurry? It will be soon enough if I get home before dark." "Hurry, I say, because night is coming."

"So what? Morning will follow!"

"You are wrong. There will be no morning!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that night is coming."

"What kind of night? Are you trying to say that I have to pack up for eternity?"

"I repeat: Night is coming! You haven't much time left."

"Tell me, at least, if it will be very soon."

"Don't be so curious. *Non plus sapere quam oportet sapere*. [Don't try to know more than is good for you.]"

"That's what my mother used to say about nosy people," I thought. Then I said aloud: "All right, but I still don't want any grapes!"

So we continued along the road and soon came to my field. My brother Joseph was there loading a wagon. He greeted us both, but, seeing that the stranger ignored him, asked me if he was a schoolmate of mine.

"No," I answered. "I never saw him before."

My brother then turned to him. "Would you please tell me your name?" There was no response. In amazement my brother again asked me, "Who is he?"

"I don't know. He won't tell!"

We both again pleaded with the stranger to identify himself but he kept repeating, "*Non plus sapere quam oportet sapere*. [Don't try to know more than is good for you.]"

My brother gave up and left us alone. The stranger then turned to me and said, "Would you like to see something unusual?"

"Certainly!" I replied.

"Would you like to see your boys as they are now and as they will be in the future? Would you want to count them?"

"Very much so!"

"Come here then."

From I don't know where he pulled out a strange contraption housing a large wheel and set it on the ground.

"What's this wheel?" I asked.

"The wheel of eternity," he replied, and, seizing the handle, he gave it a spin.

"Now, you try it," he said.

I did so.

"Look inside."

I looked and saw a large lens encased in the

wheel. The lens was about five feet in diameter, and its edge bore the inscription: *Hic est oculus qui humilia respicit in caelo et in terra*. [This is the eye that sees the lowly things in heaven and on earth.]

I immediately looked through the lens. What a sight! All the Oratory boys stood there before my eyes. "How can this be?" I said to myself. "I have never before seen anyone around here and now the place is full of boys. Aren't they in Turin?" I carefully examined the whole contraption; only through the lens could I see anybody. I looked at the stranger in amazement. After a few moments, he ordered me to turn the handle once more. Something startling happened: the boys were separated into two groups: the good and the bad; the former beaming with joy, the latter – not many, thank God – a sorry sight. I recognized them all. How different they were from what their companions believed them to be! Some had tongues pierced through with holes, others had pitifully squinting eyes, and still others had ugly sores covering their heads or worms gnawing at their hearts. The longer I looked, the more I grieved for them. "Can these possibly be my boys?" I asked. "What can these strange ailments mean?"

"I will tell you," the stranger replied. "Pierced tongues symbolize foul talk; squinting eyes indicate a lack of appreciation of God's graces by setting earthly things above the heavenly. Sores on the head show that they neglect your advice and cater to their own whims; worms symbolize evil passions gnawing at their hearts. There are boys, too, who do not want to hear your words lest they have to put them into practice."

At a nod from him, I spun the wheel again and pressed my eyes to the lens. Four boys bound with heavy chains came into view. I looked at them carefully and recognized them. I asked the stranger what that meant. "That shouldn't be hard to figure out," he replied. "These are the boys who pay no attention to your advice. If they do not mend their ways, they run the risk of ending up in jail and rotting there for their crimes."

"Let me jot their names down lest I forget," I said, but the stranger objected, "You don't have to! Their names are in this book."

I noticed then that he carried a notebook. At his word I gave the wheel another turn and looked. This time I saw seven other boys, defiant and distrustful, their lips padlocked. Three were also clamping their ears shut with their hands. Again I wanted to write their names down, but again the stranger firmly forbade it.

Painfully amazed to see those boys in their predicament, I asked why their lips were padlocked.

"Can't you see it for yourself?" the stranger replied. "These are the boys who refuse to tell."

"Tell what?"

"They won't tell, that's all!"

I understood then that he meant confession. These are boys who, even when questioned by their confessor, will not answer or will answer evasively or contrary to the truth. They say "no" when the answer should be "yes." My friend then went on: "Do you see those three clamping their hands over their ears? Aren't they a sorry sight? Well, they are boys who not only do not tell their sins, but even refuse to listen to their confessor's advice, warnings, and orders. They hear your words, but pay no heed to them. They could unplug their ears, but won't. The other four boys, instead, listened to your exhortations and warnings but did not put them into practice."

"How can they get rid of that padlock?" I inquired.

"*Ejiciatur superbia e cordibus eorum*" he replied. [Let pride be cast out of their hearts.]

"I will speak to these boys," I went on, "but there is little hope for those who willfully shut their ears." That stranger then advised that whenever I say a few words by way of sermon, half those words should be on making a good confession.

I promised that I would. I don't mean to say that I will carry out that injunction to the letter because I would

make myself tiresome, but I will do my best to impress the importance and need of good confessions upon all and as often as possible. In fact, more people are eternally lost through bad confessions than in any other way because even the worst people occasionally do go to confession. There are very many, however, who make bad confessions.

When, at the stranger's command, I gave the wheel another turn, I was horrified to see three boys gripped from behind by three husky monkeys armed with horns. Each beast gripped its victim's throat by its forepaws so tightly that the boy's face became flushed and his bloodshot eyes almost popped out of their sockets. Moreover, the beast's hind legs and long tail bound the boy's thighs and legs so as to almost completely immobilize him. These were boys who go through a spiritual retreat and still remain in mortal sin, guilty especially of impurity, of a serious offense against the Sixth Commandment. The devil chokes them to keep them from speaking when they should; he makes them blush to the point of losing their heads so that they no longer realize what they are doing. A false shame then overwhelms them and leads them to perdition. The devil has them by their throats so tightly that their eyes seem to pop from their sockets, and they can no longer see their miserable condition and the way to get out of their horrible mess. A senseless fear and repugnance keep them from the sacraments. The devil grips their thighs and legs to make it impossible for them to take a step in the right direction. So strong are their bad habits that these boys become convinced they can no longer help themselves.

I assure you, my dear boys, that I wept at that sight. I wanted to rescue those unfortunate lads, but as soon as I drew away from the lens I could see them no more. I also wanted to take down their names, but my friend would have none of it. "It's unnecessary," he kept saying, "because they are all written down in this notebook."

Grieved by this sight beyond words, I tearfully turned to my companion, sobbing, "How is this possible? How can these boys be in such miserable shape after I lavished so

much care on them in confession and out of confession?"

"*Labor, Sudor, Fervor*," was his scrambled, mumbled reply.

"I didn't quite get it," I said. "Please speak more clearly."

Again he muttered, "*Labor, Sudor, Fervor*"

"It's no use," I said. "As long as you keep mumbling, I can't make out what you are saying."

"Are you making fun of me?" he asked.

"Not at all! I just can't understand you."

"Listen, you know your grammar. Just pay attention: *Labor* – comma; *Sudor* – comma; *Fervor* – period. Do you get it now?"

"I get the words," I replied, "but what's the message?"

"All right, I'll make it clearer: *Labor in assiduis operibus* [Constant hard work]; *Sudor in poenitentiis continuus* [Incessant, painstaking mortification]; *Fervor in orationibus ferventibus et perseverantibus* [Fervent and persevering prayer]. For these boys, however, your sacrifices, no matter how great, will be of no avail. You will not win them over, because they do not want to shake off Satan's yoke of slavery."

Meanwhile I kept staring through the lens, fretting and thinking, "How is this possible? Are those boys really doomed, even after a spiritual retreat? Were all my sacrifices, efforts, sermons, suggestions, and warnings to no avail? Were all their promises a sham? What a letdown!"

These thoughts utterly disheartened me. My friend noticed it. "How proud and conceited you are!" he chided me. "Do you expect your boys to be converted just because you work for them, to respond to your cares just because you love them? Do you perhaps think that you love, work, and suffer more than Our Blessed Savior? Do you expect your words to be more effective than His? Do you preach better than He did? Do you believe you have been more loving and anxious for your boys than Our Lord was for His Apostles? Aren't you aware that they

lived constantly with Him, endlessly benefited from all kinds of graces and favors, heard His admonitions and precepts, and witnessed His divine example? Shouldn't all this have effectively spurred them to saintly lives? Didn't He do all He could for Judas? And yet Judas betrayed Him and died impenitent. Are you better than the Apostles? Didn't they carefully choose seven deacons? They chose but seven and one of them went astray. Are you surprised and upset if among five hundred boys a few will not respond to your care? Are you so conceited as to expect that none of your boys will turn out badly and be lost? How proud can you be?"

These words silenced me, but for all that I still felt very much disheartened.

"Cheer up!" my friend went on. "Turn the wheel again and see how generous God is! See how many souls He wants to give you! Look at all those boys."

I peered again into the lens and saw a very large number of boys totally unknown to me.

"I see them," I remarked, "but I don't know any of them."

"Well," he replied, "the Lord will give you all these boys to make up for the fourteen who do not cooperate with you. For each one of them He will give you a hundred!"

"Poor me!" I exclaimed. "The Oratory is full already. Where shall I put them?"

"Don't worry. Right now that's no problem. Later, He who sends them will make room for them."

"I'm not too worried about that," I said. "My greatest worry is feeding them!"

"Don't worry about that either! The Lord will provide."

"In that case, I am quite happy!" I replied in deep relief.

Delightedly I kept looking at those boys, studying the features of very many so as to be able to recognize them if I ever met them.

Thus ended Don Bosco's talk on the night of May 2,

1861.

Don Bosco resumed his story on the following night, concisely and vividly. Through the lens he had also seen the vocation of each of his boys. However, he did not disclose any names and postponed to a later account the questions he had put to his guide and the latter's answers concerning symbols and allegories of the dream.

The cleric Dominic Ruffino was nevertheless able to gather a few names confidentially from the boys themselves to whom Don Bosco had more privately manifested what he had seen about them. Ruffino recorded the names in 1861 and gave us the list. To make our narration clearer and avoid repetitions, we shall insert names and explanations, mostly in non-dialogue form, while still reporting the chronicle word by word. Don Bosco resumed his narration on May 3, as follows:

was rejoicing to see so many new boys when the stranger, still standing by his apparatus, asked me: "Would you like to see something even more delightful?"

"Certainly!" I replied.

"Then give the wheel another turn."

I did and peered through the lens. I saw the boys separated into two groups, some distance apart, in a broad area. At my left I could see a vast field, in which all sorts of vegetables were growing, and a meadow lined at its edge with a few rows of wild vines. The first group of boys was working this field with spades, hoes, picks, shovels, and rakes. They were broken up into squads, each with a foreman. The whole group took orders from Chevalier Oreglia who was busy handing out tools and prodding sluggish workers. Farther away, near the edge of the field, I saw other boys sowing seed. A second group was working on my right in a vast field covered with golden wheat. A long trench separated this field from other fields which stretched out as far as the eye could see. All the boys were busy harvesting – bundling into sheaves, piling them, gleaning, carting, threshing, sharpening sickles, and handing them out.

Some boys were also playing guitars. I assure you,

it was quite a scene. Nearby, in the shade of ancient trees, were tables laden with food; a little further off, one could see a gorgeous garden with all kinds of flowers in full bloom. The two groups of boys symbolized different vocations: the lay state and the priesthood. I did not know this at the time, and so I asked, "What's the meaning of all this?"

"Can't you see it yet?" he replied. "Boys tilling the soil are those who work for themselves alone. They are not called to be priests."

I understood then that this applied to the artisans. In their state of life they only think of saving their own souls and feel no special obligation to work at saving the souls of others.

"And the second group?" I asked. But then it dawned on me that these boys were called to be priests. Now I knew who were called to the priesthood and who were not.

As I watched very interestedly, I noticed that Provera was handing out sickles. I took this to mean that he might become the rector of a seminary, a religious community, or a house of studies; perhaps he might become something even more important. I observed that not all the reapers received their sickles from him. The boys who did are those who are destined to join the [Salesian] Congregation. The others, instead, are to become diocesan priests. The sickle symbolized the Word of God. Another detail: Provera did not readily give a sickle to all who asked. Some he just ordered to take either one or two morsels of food. The first morsel signified piety, the second knowledge. James Rossi was sent to take one. The boys had to report to the cleric [Celestine] Durando who was in the little grove setting tables and serving the reapers – the task of those who are particularly destined to promote devotion to the Most Blessed Sacrament. Matthew Galliano was busy serving beverages. Costamagna, too, asked for a sickle, but was first sent by Provera to pick two flowers from the garden. The same happened to Quattroccolo. Rebuffo was promised a sickle on condition that he first pick three flowers. Olivero also was there.

Meanwhile, all the other boys were scattered here and there in the wheatfield, some working abreast with larger or narrower rows to cultivate. Father Ciattino, the pastor of Maretto, was using a sickle he had received from Provera. Francesia and Vibert were cutting wheat. So too were Hyacinth Perucatti, Merlone, Momo, Garino, and Jarach – an indication that they would save souls by their preaching if they persevered in their vocation. Some reaped more than others. Bondioni was cutting wheat like mad, but how long could he last? Others hacked at the wheat with all their strength but cut nothing. Vaschetti took hold of a sickle, began to cut, and went at it zestfully until he found himself working in another field. He wasn't the only one, either. Some sickles were dull or blunted or in such poor condition that they actually did more harm than good.

Dominic Ruffino had a long row to take care of. His sickle was very sharp, but blunted at the point, signifying lack of humility and an ambition to outdo his companions. He went to Francis Cerruti to have his sickle fixed. The latter had been given that task, a symbol that one day he would become a teacher and instill knowledge and piety into students. Hammering, in fact, is the task of those charged with forming priestly candidates. Provera handed the blunted sickles to Cerruti and the dull ones to Rocchietti and others – an indication that they would one day form priestly vocations to piety. Viale came up for a sickle and picked out a dull one, but Provera made him take one he had just sharpened. I also saw Rinaudo servicing farm tools.

While all this was going on, Fusero was tying sheaves. This meant that his task would be to keep souls in God's grace, particularly the souls of those called to the priesthood. In other words, he would one day form young clerics.

Others were helping him; among them I saw Turchi and Ghivarello. This meant that they would work especially in setting consciences right, as, for example, in hearing confessions, particularly of priests or priestly candidates.

Others were loading sheaves on a wagon symbolizing God's grace. Converted sinners must climb upon this wagon in order to make a start on their way to heaven. When the wagon was fully loaded, oxen – a symbol of strength and perseverance – started pulling it. Some boys led them, following Rua. This means that Rua's task will be to lead souls to heaven. [Angelo] Savio trailed behind, gleaning ears of wheat or sheaves which fell from the wagon.

Scattered about the field were John Bonetti, Joseph Bongiovanni, and others, busily gleaning. Their task will be to rescue obstinate sinners. Bonetti, especially, is called by God to seek such unfortunate people.

Fusero and Anfossi were preparing sheaves for threshing. Perhaps this suggested a teaching career. Others, like Father Alasonatti, stacked them; they are those who administer finances, watch over the observance of rules, and teach prayers and hymns – in short, those who materially and morally contribute in directing souls to heaven.

One strip of land had been cleared and smoothed out for threshing. John Cagliero, who had just gone to the garden for flowers and had handed them out to his companions, betook himself to the threshing area, still holding a little bouquet of flowers. Threshing grain symbolizes God's call to instruct the common people.

Far off, black columns of smoke were rising to the sky. Some boys had gathered cockle and were burning it outside the field. This symbolized those who would remove the bad from the good as directors of our future houses. Among them I saw Francis Cerruti, John Baptist Tamietti, Dominic Belmonte, Paul Albera, and others, who are now studying in the lower Latin grades.

All the above scenes kept unfolding simultaneously. I saw some boys in that crowd hold lighted lanterns, though it was broad daylight. Evidently they were destined to be beacons, giving good example to other workers in the Lord's vineyard. Among them was Paul Albera, who, besides carrying a lamp, also played the guitar. This means

that not only will he guide priests, but he will also encourage them to persevere. It suggested, too, some high post in the Church.

Amid so much hustle and bustle, however, not all the boys were busy. One fellow was holding a pistol, an indication that he was inclined to a military career, though he was as yet uncertain. Others just stood about idly, watching the reapers, with no intention of joining them. Some looked undecided; being too lazy for action, they couldn't make up their minds. Others instead ran for a sickle, but a few of these did nothing on reaching the field. There were also some who swung the sickle wrongly. Molino was one of them. These are boys who always do the opposite of what they should. Quite a few others kept roaming about or picking wild grapes, denoting those who waste their time in tasks not pertaining to them.

The boys tilling the soil in the field at the left were also an odd sight. While most of those sturdy lads worked very diligently, a few were using their hoes the wrong way or only pretending to work. Some knocked the blade off the handle at every blow. The handle symbolized the right intention.

I also observed artisans reaping wheat and students hoeing. I again tried to jot down some notes, but my guide would immediately show me his notebook and stop me. I could also see that very many boys stood idly about because they couldn't make up their minds. Instead, the two Dalmazzo brothers, Primo Gariglio, Monasterolo, and many others seemed determined to make a decision one way or the other. I saw some quit hoeing to go and do some reaping. One boy was in such a hurry that he forgot to get a sickle. Shamefacedly, he went back for one, but the person in charge refused to give it to him despite his insistence. "It's not time yet!" he told him.

"Yes, it is!" the lad insisted. "I want it now!"

"Not now!" was the reply. "First go to the garden and pick two flowers."

"All right," he exclaimed, shrugging his shoulders. "I'll pick all the flowers you want."

"Two will do!"

He ran to the garden but, on getting there, realized he had not asked which two flowers he should pick. He rushed back to ask.

"Pick the flower of charity and that of humility," he was told.

"I've got them already."

"You only think you have them!"

The boy fumed, clenched his fists, and raged.

"This is no time for a tantrum," the one in charge told him, and he absolutely refused to hand him a scythe. The lad bit his fists in rage.

After this I stopped looking through the lens, which had enabled me to learn so much. I felt stirred, too, by the moral applications my friend had suggested. I again asked for a few more explanations. The stranger repeated: "The wheat field is the Church; the harvest is the fruit reaped; the sickle is the tool – the Word of God especially – to harvest the fruit. The dull blade means lack of piety; the blunted point signifies lack of humility. Leaving the field while reaping means leaving the Oratory and the Salesian Society."

The following night, May 4, 1861, Don Bosco concluded his narrative. The first part had shown him the Oratory pupils, especially the students; the second indicated those who were called to the priesthood. The third part was a succession of visions: the Salesian Society in 1861, its prodigious growth, and the gradual disappearance of the first Salesians and their replacement by others. Don Bosco spoke thus:

After I had leisurely taken in the richly varied harvest scene, the obliging stranger said, "Now give the wheel ten turns and look."

I obeyed. Marvelously, those very lads whom I had patted as children a few days before were now virile, bearded men, some with greying hair.

"How could this happen?" I inquired. "That man was a mere youngster the other day!"

My friend answered, "Don't be surprised! How many turns did you give the wheel?"

"Ten."

"Then they are all ten years older. We have gone from 1861 to 1871."

"Oh!" Through that mysterious lens I saw new places, new houses of ours, and many pupils in the care of my dear Oratory boys, now priests, teachers, and directors.

"Give the wheel ten more turns, and we shall reach 1881," the stranger told me. I complied and peered into the lens. Now I saw only about half the boys I had seen before. Nearly all were grey-haired, a few stooping.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"Gone into eternity," he replied.

This striking loss grieved me considerably, but I was consoled by the sight of an immense tableau of new and unknown regions and a multitude of boys led by teachers unknown to me but pupils of my first boys, some already mature in years.

I gave the wheel ten more turns and then saw only one-fourth of the boys I had seen but a few moments before. They were much older and white-haired.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"Gone into eternity. This is now 1891."

I then beheld a very touching sight. My toil-worn priests were surrounded by boys I had never seen; many were of a different race and color.

I turned the wheel ten more times. I could only see a few of my first boys, tottering and bent with age, gaunt and thin. Among others I remember seeing Father Rua, so old and haggard as to be hardly recognizable.

"What about all the others?" I asked.

"Gone into eternity! We are now in the year 1901."

I saw many houses of ours, but none of my old Salesians. The directors and teachers were all unknown to me. The multitude of boys kept growing, as was the number of houses and personnel.

"Now," the stranger said, "turn the wheel ten more times, and you will see things that will both cheer and sadden you." I complied.

"Nineteen hundred and eleven!" my friend exclaimed.

My dear boys, I saw new houses, new boys, new directors, and teachers dressed differently from us. And what about my first Oratory boys? I searched and searched through the great multitude and could find only one of you, white-haired, bent with age. Surrounded by boys, he was telling them about the Oratory's beginnings and repeating things he had learned from Don Bosco, while pointing out to them his picture hanging on the parlor wall. And what about the first pupils and superiors that I had just seen as old men? . . .

At a nod from the stranger, I again gave the wheel several turns. All I could see was a vast solitude, with nobody in sight. "Oh!" I gasped. "There is nobody here! Where are all the cheerful, lively, strong boys that are at the Oratory with me right now?"

"Gone into eternity! Remember that a decade goes by with every ten turns of the wheel."

I figured that I had given the wheel fifty turns and that around 1911 the boys that are now at the Oratory would all be gone into eternity.

"Now," the stranger said, "would you like to see something really startling?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Watch! Give the wheel as many turns counterclockwise as you did clockwise."

I did so.

"Now look!" the stranger cried.

I saw an immense crowd of boys of countless nations, features, and tongues. So vast was the throng that I could single out only a small fraction with their superiors.

"I don't know any of them," I said to the stranger.

"Still," he replied, "they are all your sons."

Listen. They are talking about you and your first boys, their superiors, now long dead, and the teaching you and your first sons handed down to them.”

Again I looked intently, but on removing my gaze from the lens, I saw the wheel begin to spin by itself so fast and so noisily that I awoke and found myself in bed, exhausted.

Now that I have told you all these things, you may think that Don Bosco is an extraordinary man, a great man, a saint, no doubt! My dear lads, before you entertain such foolish notions about me, feel absolutely free to believe or not believe these things and to make whatever you want of them. I only ask that you do not make fun of them, whether among yourselves or with outsiders. Bear in mind, though, that Our Lord can manifest His will in many ways. Sometimes He makes use of the most unsuitable, unworthy instruments, as when He made Balaam’s donkey speak and even used Balaam himself – a false prophet – to foretell many things concerning the Messiah. Such may be the case with me. I warn you, then, not to follow my example blindly. What you must do is to pay close attention to all I say because that at least, I hope, will always be in accordance with God’s will and helpful to your souls.

As for what I do, never say, “Don Bosco did it and so it has to be good.” Examine it first. If you see it is good, do likewise, but if it were, perchance, bad, beware of imitating it. Don’t! [Good night!]

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