

□ Reading time: 7 min.

Mr Pietro Giuseppe ENRIA, SDB, (20 June 1841–21 June 1898), nurse to Don Bosco

The memoirs of the coadjutor brother Pietro Enria are a source of great importance for understanding the final decades of Don Bosco's life. Orphaned by cholera, he was welcomed into the Oratory in 1854, along with a brother and remained there for his entire life, carrying out the most diverse practical and organisational duties. Endowed with great willingness, he became one of the main internal collaborators and, above all, Don Bosco's trusted nurse during the serious illnesses of the 1870s and 1880s, leaving behind meticulous accounts. He also assisted the Saint during his final illness and testified to his holiness in the beatification process. He died in 1898, after a long period of suffering, leaving behind precious autobiographical memoirs.

Because those who knew him loved him.

The rather extensive autobiographical memoirs of the coadjutor brother Pietro Enria, spread across five notebooks, are second in importance only to those of Viglietti as a source for various periods of Don Bosco's life, particularly for his final days. The account begins by recalling the circumstances in which, in 1854, Don Bosco welcomed him and his brother Giovanni, who had been orphaned by the cholera epidemic, into the *House attached* to the Oratory. It concludes with the narration of the last days and holy death of Don Bosco, as the devoted nurse experienced and remembered them. This last section is titled "1887. The final illness of Don Bosco".

Biographical notes

As he himself recounts, Pietro Giuseppe Enria (1841-1898) was born in San Benigno Canavese (Turin). He was just over seven years old when his mother died and his father remarried. In 1852, the family migrated to Turin and prospered for some time, until it was struck first by malaria and then, in 1854, by cholera, which left Pietro and his brothers orphans. They were taken in at the temporary orphanage opened by the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul for the cholera orphans. It was here that he met Don Bosco. Enria movingly recounts how Don Bosco took him and one of his brothers from the orphanage and brought them to the Oratory, where he remained for the rest of his life. The Saint first placed him as an apprentice with a blacksmith in the city, then, as soon as the internal workshops were established, the young Enria worked “in-house”.

Finally, he was employed in the storeroom managed by the coadjutor brother Giuseppe Rossi and became one of the main organisers of the Oratory’s activities. A musician in the band, stage manager, cook, painter, etc., Enria was continually in demand for his practical skills.

But even more significant was the care he gave to Don Bosco during the serious illnesses that afflicted him in the 1870s and 1880s. When Don Bosco fell ill in Varazze in 1871, he specifically requested Enria’s help, and Enria cared for him during the two months of his illness. In the numerous letters written to the coadjutor brother Giuseppe Buzzetti and others, as well as in his own memoirs, Enria describes the symptoms and condition of his patient day by day. His accounts allow today’s doctors to formulate a precise diagnosis of the pathologies that afflicted Don Bosco.

In April 1878, the Saint fell ill while staying in Sampierdarena, at the institute where Enria resided, who once again cared for him for two or three weeks. In the autumn, Enria was part of the group that founded the “Manfredini” Salesian school in Este (Padua), and it was there that he made his religious profession and became *de jure* what he had always been *de facto*: the Salesian coadjutor brother Enria.

But he rendered his most devoted service to Don Bosco during his final illness, and it is to this period that the last section of the memoir he wrote is dedicated.

The death of the father seemed to foreshadow the decline of the son himself. In an appendix to his own memoir, he recounts that in 1890, he was given the task of assisting the Salesian cleric Augusto Czartoryski, who was in Lugano (Switzerland), ill with tuberculosis. Enria felt extremely depressed and was struck by a spinal

disease. He almost immediately lost the use of his right hand. The hotel staff put him to bed. It was then that he invoked Don Bosco and eventually felt better. By now, however, he was a sick man. He died in 1898, from a cerebrospinal disease, amidst great physical and mental suffering. However, during this period he rendered his beloved master one last service. He testified in the process for his beatification and, at the request of Fr. Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, wrote his own memoirs.

His testimonies are contained in the manuscript of the ordinary process, public copy, on folios 982-1043.

"I met Don Bosco in September 1854, in the Dominican convent, where the children orphaned by the cholera epidemic that was raging (*in Turin and Italy*) were gathered. One day, Don Bosco came to visit us there (there were about a hundred of us) accompanied by the Director of the Orphanage. I had never seen him before. He had a cheerful and kind air that made you love him even before you spoke to him. He smiled at everyone, and then asked for our first and last names, if we knew our catechism... He finally came near me and I felt my heart beat, not out of fear but out of the affection I felt for him. He asked for my first and last name and then said to me, 'Do you want to come with me? We will always be good friends until we can go to Heaven. Are you happy?'

And I replied, 'Oh, yes, sir'.

Then he added, 'And is this one with you your brother?'

'Yes, sir,' I replied. 'Well, he will come too'."

The very serious illness in Varazze

(6 December 1871. While at Varazze station, Don Bosco collapses, having fainted. Those present carry him to the Salesian house directed by Fr. Francesia. The illness proves to be very serious. Fr. Rua sends Pietro Enria from Valdocco to assist him. I report his sworn testimony concerning this event).

I left at once, ready to give my life so that Don Bosco might regain his health. Don Bosco was grateful for the smallest service I did for him, and he thanked me with all his heart. Sometimes, when I had to perform somewhat unpleasant services for him, he would say to me, "You see, Enria, the state I am reduced to. Do this for the love of God!"

And I would reply, "What are you saying, Don Bosco? What I do is nothing in return for what you have done for me and for my companions. Ah! You have done far lowlier services for us. You washed us, combed our hair, sewed our clothes, you did for us what only our mothers could do, and even more than them. And you don't want me to do these services for you? How many of my companions would call themselves fortunate if they could be in my place!"

I received letters from Turin full of filial tenderness. (Giuseppe) Buzzetti, my companion, would say to me, "Look, Enria, our father is in your hands, woe to you if you do not assist him well; you will have to answer to God for it! Tell him that we are praying with all our hearts to the Lord and Mary Help of Christians that he may soon return to us in good health."

Meanwhile, the illness worsened and the fever kept rising. The eruption of miliaria (*blisters on the skin*) was very copious and caused him great torment. But he never complained. His worries were always for us who feared losing him, and he would say to us with great faith, "God provides for the birds of the air, so he will also think of the poor sons of the Oratory."

Meanwhile, they wanted news from Turin, and I could not give good news because the illness was still serious. Many young men from the Oratory, as I later learned, had gone to the church at the altar of Mary Help of Christians and had offered their lives to God for the preservation of Don Bosco. Hearing these and other letters read, Don Bosco wept with consolation and said, "Poor young men, how they love this poor Don Bosco!" and he instructed me to thank them.

Don Bosco wanted to make his confession to the parish priest, and Fr. Francesia (*director of the Salesian house*) brought him the Holy Viaticum the following day. Don Bosco spent that day in thanksgiving.

The next day the illness subsided somewhat. He did not complain, and to those who said to him, "You must be suffering so much!", he would reply, laughing, "I am a lazy man and I am enjoying this bed, and the ones who are suffering are those who

have to assist me.”

A boy who was crying

The illness ran its course. Don Bosco had to stay in bed for more than two months without moving. The skin on his back was broken in several places, and he shed all his skin. Yet he never uttered a complaint and always said he was in God’s hands, ready to do His will.

While he was seriously ill, he heard a boy crying. He could not resist and said to me at once, “Do me a favour, Enria, go and see what’s wrong with that boy.” I ran, and I learned that it was a young boy who was crying because his mother, who had come to visit him, had left. Don Bosco’s heart could not bear for his young people to suffer.

He enjoyed it when someone spoke to him about the early years of the Oratory. Often, while he was ill, I spoke to him about them. “Do you remember, Don Bosco, when your mother used to scold you because you were always taking in new boys? She would say to you, ‘You always take them in, but how can we feed them, clothe them? There is nothing in the house, and it’s starting to get cold!’ It happened to me that I had to sleep for several nights on a few leaves with nothing on but a small blanket. And in the evening, when we were in bed, you, Don Bosco, and your mother would mend our trousers and worn-out jackets, because we only had one of each.” Don Bosco would smile at hearing this, and say, “How my good mother toiled!... a holy woman!... But Providence never failed us!”

The day Don Bosco got out of bed, I telegraphed my friend Buzzetti in Turin, and there was a great celebration at the Oratory, and the band played.

Arthur J. LENTI, Don Bosco: History and Spirit, volume III, p. 488