

Don Bosco's Gift to the Church: A Spirituality for Youth

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St. John Bosco (1815-1888) was a product of Piedmont in northern Italy. His seventy-two years spanned a time of industrialization in Turin and other major cities and the complexities of Italian unification.

Despite an often harsh anti-clerical atmosphere and the volatile political situation, a number of saints rose to prominence in nineteenth century Piedmont.

Among the canonized saints were: St. Joseph Cottolengo, St. Joseph Cafasso, Bl. Leonard Murialdo, Bl. Frederick Albert, all noted for qualities suited to a new age: apostolic zeal towards the poor, the sick, and those in need. Don Bosco, in fact, was a student of St. Joseph Cafasso, who was his spiritual director and confessor. Cafasso guided the young priest to a deeply pastoral approach suited to the ordinary people of the time. Rather than remain distant and austere, Don Bosco found his joy in the midst of people, especially the young.

We eventually see a school of apostolic spirituality rise around Don Bosco. He founded the Salesians and, with St. Mary Mazzarello, the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians. Not only has Don Bosco's successor, Michael Rua, been declared Blessed, but one of his students, Dominic Savio, has become the first schoolboy saint.

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What was behind this outpouring of energy and enthusiasm for the Christian life which could prove attractive even to schoolboys? While exact answers are always difficult to obtain, we can at least find some hints in Don Bosco's boyhood experiences in his years of study at the *Convitto* in Turin, and in the religious climate of the times.

Throughout his life, Don Bosco experienced dreams which he took seriously. They covered a wide spectrum of concerns including the founding and spread of his congregations and works. Certainly, the most important dream was his first. This dream foretold a direction in life which became clear over time. Pietro Stella, a ground-breaking Salesian historian and sociologist, says that this particular dream affected Don Bosco's future way of thinking and acting. It especially affected his way of sensing God's presence in the life of an individual and his role in society.¹ The dream takes place near young John's home and finds him with a group of boys who are shouting and cursing. John does not know what to do in the chaotic situation and uses violence to contain violence. At that point, guides appear who suggest a different approach. The guides are Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and Mary as a helping shepherdess. John is told to use gentleness, to make himself humble, courageous, and strong. The new approach works. The boys become calm and attentive, the wild animals have become gentle lambs.²

Joseph Aubry sees the dream as a summary of Don Bosco's spirituality containing themes he would later emphasize with his boys. In the dream, he is called by name (vocation) and he is told to take care of a group of unruly boys (mission). In addition, he is given the method to succeed in this task: "not with blows but with gentleness and love will you make them do your bidding." He is given a guide in the person of Mary. "I will give you a teacher under whose guidance you will become wise, and without whom wisdom is naught."³

Gradually from reflection on this dream and from other experiences of his early life, young John Bosco came to understand his special call. There are several important and relevant factors: the early death of his father and the loving care of his mother; three years of early adolescence spent with the Moglia

¹ Peter Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Work*. (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications) 1985, p. 10.

² John Bosco, *The Spiritual Writing of Don Bosco*, ed. Joseph Aubry, SDB, (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1984) p. 37. (Afterwards cited as *Spiritual Writings*.)

³ Joseph Aubry, SDB, *The Renewal of Salesian Life*, v. 1 (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1984) p. 5. (Afterwards cited as Aubry, *Renewal*.) Fr. Aubry is a French Salesian who has written widely on spiritual themes. He is in residence at the Salesian Generalate in Rome pursuing ongoing study and research.

family, to prevent confrontations with his step-brother, Anthony; the attention of Fr. Calosso who taught him some Latin and befriended him; his schooling in various places and living situations; his eventual seminary life; his contact with friends and his care towards needy youngsters. All these factors helped John see the way in which he should go. Unlike some priests he met, who would not even answer children who greeted them, he would spend his life for the young, the poor, and those in need.

As a young priest, Don Bosco chose to continue pastoral studies at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* of Turin, operated by Don Guala and Don Cafasso. Here Don Bosco was exposed to a less rigorous understanding of the Christian life than that which he had learned at the Chieri seminary. The reforms of the Council of Trent had not really penetrated Piedmont until the nineteenth century, and then they led to renewed interest in religious understanding and a more pastoral approach to priestly ministry. In Turin, this was especially important with the difficult political situation and the great number of people moving into the city in search of work. The writings of St. Alphonsus were favored over less compassionate writers, and such examples as St. Francis of Sales and St. Philip Neri became very important to Don Bosco. Like St. Philip, Don Bosco was more interested in lived Christian experience than in theoretical method. In this, he shared the optimistic piety of the Italian school of the previous centuries.⁴ Like St. Francis of Sales he understood that holiness was for everyone including the young. Don Bosco likely would have appreciated the statement of Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium*: "Thus it is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ and of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity."⁵

Although Don Bosco cannot be considered a theoretical spiritual writer who analyzes the growth of the Christian life in the manner of Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross, yet we still may consider him as a spiritual master. Fr. Aubry states: "Don Bosco appears as a man of Providence who generated a charismatic movement within the Church. He is a teacher capable of inspiring Christians at all levels of society with a new way of life and holiness, and what is more, a holiness officially acknowledged by the Church."⁶ While Don Bosco did not compose spiritual treatises in the traditional sense, he did 'speak' to his

⁴ Pierre Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality: Later Developments*, v. 3. (Westminster: Newman, 1955) p. 259.

⁵ *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, SJ. (New York: Guild Press, America Press, Association Press, 1966). *Lumen Gentium* 40, p. 67.

⁶ *Spiritual Writings*, p. 1.

boys often. "The real and central core of Don Bosco's doctrine is his own life, his own wonderfully rich spiritual experience, an experience that belongs to one of the greatest charismatic figures of the Church."⁷ Thus, we find that one of Don Bosco's outstanding contributions is that of a spiritual master for his boys and for adults as well.

Don Bosco showed his love and understanding for the young throughout his life and also in his biographies of outstanding youngsters: Louis Comollo, Dominic Savio, Michael Magone, and Francis Besucco. Aubry comments: "I would say that in the whole of Christian hagiography there is not a single other saint who, like Don Bosco, identified with the young, who had to the same degree a holy obsession for the happiness of the young, especially the poor, who all his life was afire with the same intensity of love for the young."⁸ Don Bosco, himself, was to say: "My dear lads, I love you with all my heart. The fact that you are young is reason enough for me to love you."⁹ No wonder the young people responded with a return of trust, confidence, and love.

Although Don Bosco did leave numerous writings (e.g. *The Companion of Youth*, a popular spiritual guide for boys; the *History of Italy*, which found its way into many classrooms and was used as the basic source in Collier's *History of Nations*; a *Bible History*; and many more), we find that his biographies of some of his young charges are the most helpful in deducing a pattern of youth spirituality. Don Bosco's years of experience and his intuitive psychology served him well. As an example of this approach, we will consider his well-received *Life of Dominic Savio* which serves as Don Bosco's paradigm of youthful spirituality.

As in any biography, we have some difficulty discerning the structure and themes imposed by the author, in this case Don Bosco, and the subject's personal experience. While Don Bosco's values are clearly evident, I believe we can also recognize the unique events and spiritual experiences of Dominic as very much his own. From the general attitude of Don Bosco, we see that he did not consider the young to be mere burdens to society. He considered the child to be loved by God and to be called to a happy and holy life. An eminently practical man, he was not given to a critical study of adolescence as a state of psychological development. Rather, Don Bosco responded very personally to the circumstances in which he found himself. Such an informal approach often

⁷ *Spiritual Writings*, p. 4.

⁸ Aubrey, *Renewal* p. 21.

⁹ John Bosco, *The Companion of Youth*. (London: Burnes, Oates, and Washbourne, 1938) p. 4.

works well with the young who have little patience with theory. Certainly, the personal approach of Don Bosco was effective with Dominic Savio (1842-1857).

Dominic lived at the Oratory of St. Francis of Sales in the Valdocco section of Turin with Don Bosco from 1854-1857. This was a time of special vitality at the Oratory. The number of students was increasing yearly. Don Bosco was slowly working toward the formation of the Salesian Society. There was a climate of enthusiasm and fervor among the boys and the seminarians who lived with Don Bosco while they continued their studies.

Pietro Stella notes that "this was the golden age of Don Bosco's activity as an educator. He was constantly in direct contact with young people: on the playground, in the confessional, in one-on-one encounters and in his little evening talks."¹⁰ Dominic attended the Oratory at a time when the number of boarding students was relatively small—under one hundred when he arrived. Don Bosco was much involved in their lives and exerted a direct influence over them. Don Bosco's mother, Margaret, and mothers of some of the early Salesians, were also in residence at the Oratory providing another aspect of the care the boys needed.

Don Bosco's admiration for Savio and his insight into the fact that the boy was deeply graced moved him to write Dominic's biography. The first edition was published in 1859, less than two years after Dominic's death. The biography becomes both a factual account as well as a vehicle for Don Bosco, the teacher, who wishes to provide his boys with an example for youthful spirituality. With this in mind, he works in some instructions on the important elements of living a good, Catholic life suited to the adolescent of the time.

In the preface of the book, Don Bosco clearly states that he is writing about Savio so that others could imitate him. He poses the question: "If a companion of mine, at my own age, living right here, open to the same, if not bigger dangers, still found time and means to keep himself a true follower of Jesus Christ, why can't I do the same?"¹¹ For Don Bosco, as well as for others, religious practice is seen in deeds not only in words; hence the emphasis on imitation.

Aubry comments that in writing the book, Don Bosco is an "historian concerned with accuracy; he is a father filled with affection for his sons for whom he is writing; he is a shepherd inviting others to follow him."¹² Don

¹⁰ Stella, *Don Bosco*, p. 119.

¹¹ John Bosco, *St. Dominic Savio*, ed. Paul Aronica, SDB (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1979) p. 24. (Afterwards cited as Bosco-Aronica.)

¹² *Spiritual Writings*, p. 88.

Bosco himself notes difficulties in writing about Savio. "Two problems face me at this writing. The first is the criticism I am sure to meet in writing about matters witnessed by a host of persons who are still alive. This difficulty I think I have overcome by making it a rule to recount only those things which I have witnessed personally. My second difficulty was having to bring myself into the book. But I think I have gotten past this obstacle by staying in the role of biographer, writing the truth regardless of the personalities."¹³

Roughly, Don Bosco divides Savio's life into the time spent at home with his family, his stay at the Oratory, and his final sickness and death. For Dominic Savio, as for everyone, family background was important. His parents were pious, hardworking country people who made religious practices a natural part of their daily lives. We could say that a sense of God's presence and the value of living a life of prayer, church attendance, and good works were part of the air young Dominic breathed. The boy grew up in a warm and happy environment where everyday living mattered. Good Christian common sense made it clear that holiness was not some abstract virtue, but a way of life realized in certain times and places through concrete actions.¹⁴

In keeping with the tradition of the time, First Communion demanded special preparation. For Dominic, this event was truly important. Here we find him, at the age of seven, making serious resolutions which he may not have yet clearly understood. For example, the phrase, "Death but not sin," is found in the common Act of Contrition used in the Turin area at that time.¹⁵ One remembers that Don Bosco had also taken his own First Communion very seriously. He always stressed the proper preparation and follow-up to that encounter. "You can be sure that a First Communion which is well made will establish a solid moral foundation for a lifetime. If one is not properly prepared, it would be better to postpone it, or even omit it, rather than to make it carelessly."¹⁶ Throughout his life Don Bosco would be an apostle of frequent Communion. However, he never saw this as something automatically fruitful. He could not accept a lax, thoughtless approach.

For Don Bosco, life was walking in the presence of God and for young Dominic this was true as well. When people asked him how he could walk the

¹³ Bosco-Aronica, p. 24.

¹⁴ Joseph Aubry, *Savio: A Study Guide for Parents, Priests, and Educators to Accompany Saint Dominic Savio by St. John Bosco*. (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1979) p. 3. (Afterwards cited as Aubry, *Savio*.)

¹⁵ *Spiritual Writings*, p. 88.

¹⁶ Bosco-Aronica, p. 89.

miles to school alone, Dominic responded, "I am not alone, my guardian angel is always with me."¹⁷ Dominic felt comfortable and without fear. For him, the mystery of God was a loving one and not fear-filled.

Attending school is another important experience and time of growth in the life of a child. Dominic attended school at Castelnuovo and later at Mondonio. One of his teachers at Mondonio, Fr. Giuseppe Cagliari, who later recommended him to Don Bosco, said the youth distinguished himself by his personal composure and moral conduct. Friendly to all, he was liked by all.¹⁸ Dominic was not seen as a shy or withdrawn boy. He attracted others and was something of a leader.

After completing his schooling at Mondonio, Dominic was ready for the next step in his education. It was at this decisive moment that Fr. Cagliari introduced Dominic and his father to Don Bosco who was at Murialdo, a nearby hamlet, with a group of boys on their autumn outing. Don Bosco later commented on this meeting: "A great feeling of trust developed between us. I was astounded at what God's grace had already accomplished in one so young."¹⁹ In their conversation, the two joked back and forth and Don Bosco accepted Dominic at the Oratory and offered to make him into a worthy garment. Dominic responded that he wanted Don Bosco "to make him into a worthwhile garment for the Lord."²⁰ Some basics for growth in the spiritual life are present in this simple statement: trust, openness, humble obedience, and the assurance of a guide.

When Dominic arrived at the Oratory in Turin, he immediately went to Don Bosco's room to pay his respects. He quickly noticed a motto on the wall: *Da mihi animas, coetera tolle*. These words interested Dominic and gave Don Bosco the opportunity to express their meaning. Don Bosco explained that his purpose was to bring young people to God.

Joseph Aubry suggests that the transition to the Oratory was of importance for Dominic. Not only was he making the move from family to boarding school, and from country to city, but he was also moving out of childhood into early adolescence. Aubry believes that the movement from being a 'holy' child to becoming a 'holy' adolescent is not something we should take for granted. The need for a guide who can assist Dominic in dealing with uncertainty, excesses, scruples, is clear. Don Bosco fills that need and responds

¹⁷ Bosco-Aronica, p. 37.

¹⁸ Bosco-Aronica, p. 43.

¹⁹ Bosco-Aronica, p. 90.

²⁰ Bosco-Aronica, p. 90.

to the openness and interest of the youngster.²¹ The time at the Oratory was pivotal for Dominic.

Shortly after Dominic's arrival in the fall of 1854, Pope Pius IX declared the Immaculate Conception of Mary as a dogma of faith. The Oratory boys were enthusiastic about this proclamation since the feast had always been celebrated with great festivity at the Oratory. Dominic was inspired to review his life through a general confession at this time, and also to expand on the resolutions made at his First Communion. Now the resolutions became part of his consecration to Mary: "Mary, I give you my heart. Jesus and Mary be my friends. Through piety, let me not fall into the misfortune of one sin; rather let me die."²² Aubry understands purity as important in liberating the person to a life of love.

While Dominic was getting used to the routine of the Oratory, working hard at his books, and enjoying his playtime, he progressed in the life of the spirit as well. We also find him making his way among a new group of boys who had now become his family. We should not suppose that all the oratory boys were from exemplary families and marvelous students. True, many were good youngsters, but a number of them were street boys and far from refined in their manners or behavior.²³

Another turning point in young Dominic's life occurred during a sermon given by Don Bosco on the topic of sanctity. Don Bosco normally limited himself to a simple topic and tried to bring it to life through stories and examples to maintain the interest of his youthful audience. The topic of this particular sermon was direct and inspirational: "It is God's will that we become saints. It is not difficult to become a saint. There is a great reward in heaven for those who become saints on earth."²⁴ These were the words which set Dominic's heart aflame. There was no need for any elaborate system of prayer and penance as he may have expected. Holiness was something within reach. An ideal even for a teenage boy.

However, Dominic did not totally understand what Don Bosco meant and made some false starts. In fact, for some days he was troubled with a great

²¹ Joseph Aubry, "Il Santo educatore di un adolescente santo: Don Bosco e Domenico Savio" in Roberto Giannetelli, ed., *Attualità di un magistero pedagogico*. (Roma: LAS, 1987) p. 153. (Afterwards cited as Aubry, "Il Santo".)

²² Aubry, "Il Santo", p. 168.

²³ Terence O'Brien, SDB, *Dominic Savio: Teenage Apostle*. (London: Guild Publishers, 1969) p. 69.

²⁴ Bosco-Aronica, p. 63.

need and desire to be a saint. Gradually he understood that a person could be happy and cheerful and still be a saint. Aubry comments that Dominic's premise was correct: "the love of God with a heart burning with the urgency to give everything"²⁵ provides the basis for one's spiritual life.

At this point, Don Bosco began to guide Dominic in a more particular manner. Prior to this moment, Dominic had received no clear directives from Don Bosco. Of course, he was experiencing the wholesome atmosphere of the Oratory. A living faith permeated the house with a simple and strong piety, frequent practices of the sacramental and devotional life, attention to the Word of God.²⁶

Don Bosco took advantage of Dominic's confusion to suggest that he turn his thoughts away from an introverted obsession with an ideal. It appears that Dominic had become discouraged saying "If I am not a saint, I am nothing. I will be unhappy unless I am a saint."²⁷ He recalled what he had read in the lives of Aloysius Gonzaga and Louis Comollo (a seminary companion of Don Bosco) and felt he was getting nowhere. Don Bosco tried to break this unrealistic approach and told Dominic not to worry, that it was hard to become a saint when one was troubled. "First of all, I wanted him to achieve a natural and lasting cheerfulness. I also encouraged him to persevere in fulfilling his scholastic and religious duties, and I also recommended that he mix in and enjoy the games in the playground."²⁸ Dominic obeyed.

Terence O'Brien notes that Don Bosco's originality can be seen in his statement that it is easy to be a saint. "He knew that no one could be truly cheerful and happy unless there was interior peace and a clear conscience. By keeping happy and cheerful the boys were doing what was needed to work out their sanctification."²⁹ Of course, arriving at interior peace for most of us is not so easily achieved. Don Bosco's emphasis on being at ease with God through confession and Communion and having confidence in the adults who cared for them, helped the Oratory boys maintain a calm and cheerful outlook. Still, the period of frustration which Dominic experienced had its good results. On Don Bosco's name day, Dominic handed him a note of good wishes, and added the

²⁵ *Spiritual Writings*, p. 92.

²⁶ Aubry, "Il Santo", p. 158-159.

²⁷ Aubry, "Il Santo", p. 170.

²⁸ Bosco-Aronica, p. 63.

²⁹ O'Brien, p. 73.

phrase: "Make me a saint."³⁰ This humble plea had nothing of the "I can do it myself" attitude and allowed for greater understanding.

For Don Bosco, a person saved himself by assisting others. In this way, the apostolate, itself, was the focus of his spirituality. As a first step, Dominic involved himself in teaching catechism to his younger companions. Don Bosco was able to steer Dominic towards an active and personal apostolate as the main road of youthful sanctity.

Aubry finds Dominic's entrance into the apostolate, as another important moment in his development. His sanctity takes on a definite shape in his organizing the Sodality of Mary Immaculate. He is now becoming essentially an apostle, a fact that will later be emphasized in the canonization process. We find Dominic sociable, gentle with others, and able to sacrifice himself for them in the urgency of the moment. We see him at the age of fourteen as the founder, guiding spirit, and principal writer of the rule of the Sodality. The members pray together, reach out to their companions who may need a friend, and offer their assistance in times of need such as the cholera epidemics which struck Turin during those years. Aubry calls the group "a school of holy friendship, and of the apostolate, almost a novitiate."³¹ In fact, when the first Salesians took their vows three years later, nine of the fifteen had been members of Dominic's Sodality of Mary Immaculate. We can almost say that Dominic Savio was a decisive cooperator in the founding of the Salesians.

The apostolate, then, is not just a good thing. It is psychologically necessary for a person in his development of a healthy maturity, filling life with energy and purpose and avoiding self-centered introversion. Dominic moved away from that trap and reached out toward his companions in what we recognize today as peer ministry.³²

How did Don Bosco guide Dominic as he continued his journey of growth in the spirit? One very important means was the Sacrament of Reconciliation. "Here lay the key to understanding Don Bosco as an educator and as one who formed saints. We must see him as a confessor to his boys."³³ These private moments were a privileged time for the boys to clear their consciences in the presence of a priest who represented the love and mercy of God for them. In very few words, he guided them in ways that were helpful. This

³⁰ Aubry, "Il Santo", p. 171.

³¹ Aubry, "Il Santo", pp. 173-176.

³² O'Brien, p. 74.

³³ Alberto Caviglia, SDB, *Opere e scritti editi e inediti*, IV. (Torino: SEI, 1943, 1977) p. 83.

was the basis of Don Bosco's adolescent spiritual direction. Other elements of his unique spiritual direction included sermons, often done in dialogue form and clearly directed to the boys. The celebration of feast days with special recreation, religious services, meals, and entertainment became a high point in the life of the Oratory. The practice of the "good night" after evening prayers helped the boys reflect on the events of that past day and encouraged them for the future.

Of all these means, confession was the most important. Don Bosco told the boys: "It is a well-established fact that the sacraments of confession and Communion are a young man's most valuable supports."³⁴ The confessor was presented as a guide to God; and confession, itself, as a personal and vital act. Don Bosco and the other priests heard confessions informally, we might say, with boys clustered all around. Confession was a heart-to-heart talk between father and son. Don Bosco continually spoke about this matter: "Boys, if you want to stay on the path to heaven, do three things: go to confession regularly, receive Communion often, and choose a regular confessor to whom you can unburden your heart. Don't change unless you have to."³⁵

Dominic too, spoke of the value of confession: "The confessor is the soul's doctor. People change their doctor when they have lost confidence in him or realize they are beyond cure. Neither case is mine. I trust my confessor fully. With fatherly concern and kindness, he cares for my soul. I have no hurt he cannot heal."³⁶ Don Bosco's advice in confession was very brief and to the point. A long exhortation, he often said, would only be forgotten. Dominic was used to these brief encounters and found it an event worth writing home about when he actually spent a whole hour meeting with Don Bosco. Their frequent, brief dialogues were more efficacious than any lengthy meeting. In addition, Don Bosco was a busy and practical man who was not given to flights of fancy, sentimentality, or loss of time in trivial conversation. The result of the confidentiality which grew deeper through these short encounters resulted in serenity and joy.³⁷ The presence of Don Bosco during the three years of Dominic's stay at the Oratory was decisive for the boy's continued development. Just prior to the founding of the Salesians and their worldwide mission, Don Bosco could be seen as still very much the father of the boys with whom he lived and spent most of his time. For many of the boys, including Dominic, this was a vital gift.

³⁴ *Spiritual Writings* p. 97.

³⁵ Bosco-Aronica, p. 83.

³⁶ Bosco-Aronica, p. 84.

³⁷ Aubry, "Il Santo", pp. 164-166.

Adolescence is a period of personal development: a time when one needs a great amount of guidance and individual attention. Teenagers often become very secretive and obstinate at this age. In Dominic Savio, the generosity of the adolescent meets the concern and guidance of a true priest. Dominic Savio's greatest asset is that he has a ready willingness and docility to let himself be guided.³⁸

Certainly in the matter of confession, Don Bosco followed the wise counsel of Philip Neri:

Let us act otherwise (not harshly); by compassion, gentleness, and love, we will strive to win them for Jesus Christ; let us sympathize with their weakness as much as we are able, so that our whole effort may be to inflame them with the love of God, who alone works great things.³⁹

Through the guidance made possible by Dominic's trust in Don Bosco, important messages were communicated. For example, Dominic's initial fervor moved him to attempt rather extreme penances for a schoolboy. He slept with thin blankets in an unheated dormitory; he skimped on food, and even put pebbles in his bed. Don Bosco told him to stop. "What the Lord wants from you at this time is obedience."⁴⁰ Dominic seemed to understand, for he said: "I see now that everyone should do only what he can. I cannot perform great deeds, but whatever I can do, I want to do for the greater glory of God. I hope that God in His infinite goodness, will accept my modest efforts."⁴¹

The movement toward others through apostolate in the Sodality of Mary Immaculate, also opened up the possibility for friendship in Dominic's life. Dominic was neither so aloof nor righteous that no one would associate with him. His close friendships with Camillo Gavio and John Massaglia were both strengthening and moving experiences. At Don Bosco's school, healthy relationships were encouraged and became the hinges on which real family spirit swung freely. Closeness to God, expressed as friendship for Jesus and Mary,

³⁸ Aubry, *Savio*, p. 27.

³⁹ Pourrat, p. 263.

⁴⁰ *Spiritual Writings* p. 100.

⁴¹ *Spiritual Writings* p. 97.

moved to a rapport between teacher and pupil, and among the pupils themselves. We would not be far off the mark if we called Don Bosco's spirituality one of friendship. A friendly concern made it possible for Dominic to draw Gavio out of himself when Camillo arrived at the Oratory a forlorn and homesick boy. When Dominic spotted the sad look on the new student's face, he went to him and told him that at the Oratory sanctity consisted in joyfulness. He then gave Camillo the program Don Bosco had given him: piety, work, study, and cheerfulness. Unfortunately, both Camillo and John died before Dominic. When John died, Dominic was especially moved. Don Bosco writes: "Dominic keenly felt the death of his friend, and though he resigned himself to God's will, he cried for several days. John Massaglia's death was a severe blow to Dominic's sensitive nature, and his health became noticeably worse."⁴²

With the death of his close friends, we move into what Aubry calls the mystical period of Dominic's life. These last months of his life (June 1856 - March 1857) take on a different tone. Don Bosco tended to stand back in admiration of the youth and gave little advice at this stage. His short biography notes special moments of prayer when Dominic was lost in contemplation, without realizing that hours had passed by. At times, Dominic mysteriously sensed the plight of dying persons in the neighborhood. He would lead Don Bosco to them.⁴³ During this period of his life, Dominic became interested in the revival of the Catholic faith in England and the restoration of its hierarchy. He prayed for the conversion of that country. More surprising, yet, were reports from Theresa, Dominic's sister, that the youngster had visited his mother at the time of a difficult childbirth and placed a scapular on her which led the family to believe saved her life.⁴⁴

As Dominic's health began to fail, his stay in the school infirmary lengthened. The doctors who attended him were impressed by his continual cheerfulness, despite his obvious pain. Death was something he did not fear. For years he had participated in the Piedmontese practice of the Exercise for a Holy Death. Moreover, he was no stranger to death—he had seen it strike often, especially among his companions and in his own family. Human mortality was a frequent theme at retreats, sermons, and in other spiritual exercises. To Dominic its message was clear: every moment of life was precious, but it had to be lived with no fear of dying.

⁴² Bosco-Aronica, pp. 113-114.

⁴³ Bosco-Aronica, pp. 115-117.

⁴⁴ Bosco-Aronica, p. 119.

Prior to leaving for home for a period of convalescence, Dominic met with Don Bosco to consider some of the basic questions of life and death. In an intimate conversation on February 28, the eve of his departure, Dominic asked Don Bosco whether he could be sure his sins were forgiven. Don Bosco assured him that this was no problem. He asked whether salvation would be his. Don Bosco reassured him. For a time, he kept up these questions knowing that he would not return to the Oratory again.⁴⁵ In terms of guidance, we see that Don Bosco made use of the “teachable moment” of a very real situation and assured Dominic that he was in God’s hands and had nothing to fear. We see that the boy’s gifts were respected throughout, but he was not asked to walk alone at any time, especially when he needed comfort. A week later he would be dead but not before he had experienced moments of peace in the presence of his family. A final prayer recorded by his father is remarkably similar to that of St. Ignatius, and was likely common in the area.

Lord, I freely give myself to Thee.

Take all of me.

I offer myself to Thee because I have always belonged to Thee, O God, and to Thy holy will I surrender myself.⁴⁶

Don Bosco concluded his brief biography of Dominic by addressing his youthful readers, appealing to them to learn from Dominic’s life. He reminded them of his diligence in school, his friendly ways, and especially the value he placed in prayer and confidence in his confessor. An appendix to the biography includes favors received through Dominic’s intercession. This would be updated through the six editions of Dominic’s biography published during Don Bosco’s lifetime.

Some have called Don Bosco’s approach to youth spirituality as seen in the life of Dominic, a new type of sanctity. Egidio Viganó, the present Salesian Rector Major, said: “Don Bosco was responsible for a ‘great spiritual current’ in the Church, and his living traditions and practical concepts have laid the foundations of a genuine and creative school of holiness and apostolate.”⁴⁷ Was Don Bosco completely original in his presentation of a positive spirituality for youth? Perhaps not. His originality seems traceable more in the fusion of the

⁴⁵ Bosco-Aronica, p. 128.

⁴⁶ *Spiritual Writings*, p. 108.

⁴⁷ Egidio Viganó, SDB, “Rediscovering the Spirit of Mornese”, *Acts of the Superior Council of the Salesian Society of St. John Bosco*, 301 (1981) 24.

elements available to all ordinary Christians in a manner attractive to young people. He rejected uniformity and standardization which only create resentment on the part of the young. He allowed for youthful idealism and liveliness. He even tolerated noise. Holiness makes allowances for age.

The features involved in Don Bosco's spirituality for the young are evident in the life of Dominic Savio. For some critics, the presence of a pattern of holiness has been a problem: What can we see as factual and what is not? Aubry says: "Naturally, he arranged his material with a certain liberty, according to the mentality of those days, enriched it with moral and pedagogical reflections and, in a few instances, dramatized the conversations which had taken place. Yet, he never let his desire to edify interfere with the facts."⁴⁸

As Don Bosco commented in his introduction, his biggest critics would be the Oratory boys themselves. John B. Lemoyne, who wrote the first nine volumes of the twenty-volume life of Don Bosco, reflects on the reception some readers gave the biography.

It was to be expected that there would be no dearth of critics in such a large institution, particularly since Don Bosco gave his boys reasonable freedom of expression. Some boys even intimated that Don Bosco had made up certain episodes so as to present a model for them. Just then an incident came to light that seemed to support the critics.⁴⁹

In his biography Don Bosco had not included an event in which Dominic had gone swimming with a group of boys who had invited him to go along. Most likely, the boys were cautioned to avoid the river because of its dangerous currents. The fact that boys swam in the nude was also disturbing to Don Bosco. The boy who had lured Dominic into joining the swimming party was an oratory boy and he began to spread the news of what had happened at the river. Don Bosco waited several days and then gave one of his 'good night' talks on the subject. Lemoyne wrote that Don Bosco looked unusually severe as he spoke about the incident. He addressed the charges that he had altered some of the events in his biography. He went on to say that the boy was correct, Dominic had indeed gone swimming with his friends. But after his mother had reprimanded him for doing so, he declined a second invitation. Don Bosco said

⁴⁸ *Spiritual Writings*, p. 83.

⁴⁹ G. B. Lemoyne, SDB, *The Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco*, v 6. (New Rochelle: Salesiana, 1971) p. 78.

that he had left the swimming incident out of his narrative lest the youth who had initiated the incident be embarrassed. But since the student had now made the incident public himself, there was no reason for silence. Obviously, the youngster who was listening that evening was embarrassed as all eyes turned on him. From that moment, critical comments about the biography ceased and the incident was included in the next edition.⁵⁰

There were similar objections to the biography during Dominic's canonization process. Francesco Tomasetti, who was the Salesian responsible for advancing Dominic's cause, notes that those who opposed Don Bosco's canonization also opposed Dominic's. For example, he quotes Fr. Henry Quentin, O.S.B., of the history department of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, who had been brought in to study the Savio biography: "All the witnesses who had testified in the Dominic Savio process had been dependent on Bosco's Savio biography; but since this biography had no historical value, none of their testimonies had any value with respect to that youth's holiness." The Salesians saw this as a slur on Don Bosco who had already been beatified. (1930). Quentin portrayed Don Bosco as exaggerating and even inventing facts. Clearly, there were a number of witnesses who could attest to Dominic's herocity of virtue without reference to the biography. At any rate, the process slowed down while responses to the charges were prepared. Pius XI paid little heed to the dispute saying that "Don Bosco may have indeed been selective in his facts, and emphasized or slanted some aspects of Savio's life."⁵¹ A compromise was finally reached. It was decided that Don Bosco's biography would not be used in the canonization process. Consequently statements that attacked or questioned some of Don Bosco's allegations in that work were dropped. Finally, the Pope himself rose to take the floor in defense of Dominic's cause, stating that he had studied the case sufficiently and authorized it to proceed. The debate continued and the cause moved forward.⁵²

There is no doubt that those responsible for the canonization process recognized a pattern of holiness in Don Bosco's biography of Savio. But they were less certain that they could find the real Savio in the biography. The following charges were eventually overcome: a) Don Bosco had invented Savio out of whole cloth and used him as model of youthful holiness; b) he encouraged

⁵⁰ Lemoyne, pp. 79-80.

⁵¹ Francesco Tomasetti, SDB, "Sidelights on Don Bosco's and Dominic Savio's Causes for Beatification and Canonization: Confidential Memoirs", from a presentation to the Superior Council, June, 1944, pp. 13-14.

⁵² Tomasetti, p. 14.

prayers to be said to him; c) he had recorded 'the graces' received, and had thus succeeded in having him raised to the honors of the altar.⁵³ With this opposition overcome, Dominic was beatified in 1950 and canonized in 1954 as the only saint with the title of 'adolescent'. We could say that the title was invented for him with the realization that young people could attain a fullness of holiness appropriate to their years.

Perhaps Karl Rahner's description of saints applies also to young Dominic. "They are the initiators and the creative models of holiness which happens to be right for and is the task of their particular age. They create a new style; they prove that a certain form of life and activity is a really genuine possibility; they show experimentally that one can be a Christian even in 'this' way; they make a certain type of person believable as a Christian type."⁵⁴ In the case of Dominic, we can say that the model of schoolboy holiness is a new type of sanctity as highlighted by Don Bosco.

It is clear in the biography of Savio, that Don Bosco admired the boy and God's work in him. He believed that young people could be holy and this conviction helped him see wonderful possibilities. His hopeful attitude encourages us to walk the way of faith with youth today.

Given Don Bosco's reverence for the popes of his day, we happily look to Pope John Paul II and his capacity to relate well with young people. This fact is obvious as seen in his pastoral visits when youth gatherings are often spontaneous and emotionally moving. The Pope has taken time to write a pastoral letter to the youth of the world,⁵⁵ and create a World Youth Day and participate in the events of that day. On the occasion of the centennial of the death of Don Bosco, January 31, 1988, Pope John Paul II addressed a pastoral letter, *Juvenum Patris*⁵⁶ reflecting on the concerns of youth and the application of a response in Don Bosco's style today. While challenging youth, the Pope also challenges the Church and, in particular, the priests, asking them to be 'saintly pastors of youth'⁵⁷ as Don Bosco was.

Throughout those few precious years of friendship with young Dominic, Don Bosco showed himself to be a loving father and teacher who

⁵³ Tomasetti, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Karl Rahner, SJ, *Theological Investigation* v. 3. (New York: Crossroads, 1982) p. 100.

⁵⁵ John Paul II, "To the Youth of the World", March 31, 1985. (Washington: USCC, 1985).

⁵⁶ John Paul II, "Juvenum Patris" in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 6 (1025), Feb. 8, 1988.

⁵⁷ John Paul II, "Becoming Accessible to Youth" in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 13 (879) April 1, 1985, 10, #4.

provided a model for imitation.“ Perhaps the supreme message of Don Bosco is that sanctity is contagious and a fire that animates others. If holy educators are more numerous there will be more holy young people.”⁵⁸ Such a challenge is enough for anyone. As Don Bosco has shown us, there are creative ways to respond to the difficult questions of our own time if one loves deeply and well enough.

⁵⁸ Aubry, “Il Santo”, p. 183.