

V. EDUCATIONAL READING AND SPREADING GOOD BOOKS (1860-1885)

“Don Bosco,” Fr Michael Rua writes in a brief note in 1867 “sad at seeing the great evil that was happening especially amongst young students because of bad literature, planned to set up an association of good classical and modern literature.”

The plan became a reality the following year, when he began publishing the “Library for Italian Youth” or “Library of Italian Classics.”⁴¹

The initiative was part of accomplishments established previously and of many more others which were to be implemented later. In reality, “Don Bosco gave no truce as a writer, publisher and propagandist because he was personally convinced that preaching the good news in printed form was a service he simply could not fail to render to Religion, a necessary way of carrying out his vocation as an educator of the young and people.”⁴²

Alongside the programme he published in 1868, this section includes four circular letters where he takes up the matter of educational reading, from different perspectives and with varying emphases. The two circulars published in 1884 and 1885 are of special interest. In the first, Don Bosco focuses on a point he considers “very important” regarding the “books to be removed from the hands of our boys” and “those that should be used for individual reading or reading in common.” The second, in a broader and more articulated fashion, develops the matter of “spreading good books” amongst the people in general and young people in particular, which, Don Bosco assures us, “is one of the principal ends” of the Salesian Congregation.

⁴¹ Eugenio CERIA, *Annali della Società salesiana. Dalle origini alla morte di S. Giovanni Bosco (1841-1888)*. Torino, SEI [1941], pp. 147-118, 686; cf. Francesco TRANIELLO (ed.), *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*. Torino, SEI 1987; Francesco MALGERI, *Don Bosco y la prensa*, in José Manuel PRELLEZO GARCÍA (ed.), *Don Bosco en la historia. Actas del Primer Congreso Internacional de Estudios sobre San Juan Bosco*. Roma/Madrid, LAS/CCS 1990, pp. 441-450.

⁴² Pietro STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. First volume: *Vita e opere*. Second edition revised by the author. Roma, LAS 1979, p. 247.

Along these lines we also include a personal letter addressed to Fr J. B. Lemoyne, Rector/Director of the boarding school at Lanzo⁴³.

167. Circular: Donations for spreading good books

Critical ed. in E(m) I, p. 397.

Turin, 6 March 1860

Donations for spreading good books

Last year some pious people came together to provide donations so we could disseminate good books to hospitals, especially amongst the military. This went very well; many bad books were collected and consigned to the flames and then substituted by good books.

The effort to propagate perverse literature continues even now. Many priests and religious who are preaching during Lent or at Retreats, as also some parish priests and others, have sought to oppose this growing evil by asking for religious books or other devotional items that they can usefully distribute when teaching catechism or on many other occasions, but they lack the means for getting hold of them.

With this in mind I am appealing to charitable Catholics inviting them to take part and send along whatever donation they consider suitable for the needs of these times. The undersigned, in agreement with other priests, will try to satisfy the various requests made in this regard.

The Lord God will not fail to richly reward this work on behalf of our holy Catholic Religion.

Fr John Bosco.

⁴³ John Baptist Lemoyne (1839-1916), Priest, Salesian, writer, secretary of the Superior Council, collaborator and compiler of the Biographical Memoirs of Don Bosco.

168. Library of Italian Youth

Critical ed. in MB IX, 429-430 [1868]

The universally felt need to educate young students in the Italian language should encourage all lovers of this noble language of ours to use the means in their power to facilitate study and knowledge of it.

It is with this in mind that we have created the *Library of Italian Youth*. Its purpose is to publish these texts of ancient and modern language that can more closely interest educated youth. To succeed in this enterprise a society of worthy and famous professors and doctors in literature has been set up, and they propose:

1. To collect and publish the best classics in Italian in modern spelling so the young reader can read and understand them;
2. Choose those among them which are best suited for this purpose for their agreeable content and purity of language;
3. Where commentary is needed, it will consist of only brief notes which help with the literal meaning of the text and these will follow the interpretations of the most respected commentators;
4. We consider it fit to omit some and in fact all authors, no matter how respected they are, containing material which is offensive to religion or morals;
5. The utmost care will be taken to see that the typography leaves nothing to be desired for the clarity of the characters, the quality of the paper and the accuracy of the printing.

That said, we are ready to go about this work in the hope that it will be a great success for the educators of the young and all who love the glory of the Italian language and the greater good of the young.

Terms of association

1. The Library of Italian Youth will comprise around a hundred volumes of about 200 pages each.

2. The association is obligatory for a year and we will publish a volume per month in such a way that every year there will be a complete set.

3. The cost of association is 6 lire a year to be paid in advance. The volumes will be shipped free within Italy. Proportionate costs apply abroad.

4. Whoever finds ten members will receive a free copy. Houses of education or others who subscribe for 50 copies will receive 60.

5. Payment will be made to the correspondents with whom the subscription was made, either in person or by postal order and also with stamps.

6. The central office is in Turin; every package, letter or any other correspondence should be franked.

The address is simply:

To the Director of the Library of Italian Youth.

Oratory of St Francis de Sales

Turin

169. Letter to Fr John Baptist Lemoyne

Critical ed. in E(m) II, pp. 476-477.

Turin, 8 January 1868

Dear Fr Lemoyne,

Your letter eventually arrived along with the collection and special letters from the boys. I read them with great consolation and I must say I was very moved at so many signs of affection, benevolence. I regret that I have not had time to respond to each, one by one; I hope to do that personally shortly. Meanwhile I would ask you to tell them three things from me:

1. That I thank you all for the good will and affection you have shown me more than I deserve. I will try to do this by remembering you every day at holy Mass just as if you were all there around me.

2 This year I absolutely need charity to reign from the most important to the least in the house by patiently bearing with others' faults and by giving good advice and counsel every time the opportunity presents itself. This is the key that opens the door to happiness for the whole year.

3. Encourage frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament as an effective, indeed the only way of keeping at bay the many scourges that will trouble us this year in public and in private.

At the right time these things will be duly explained and made the topic of moral observations. I will let you know about these when it is appropriate.

This year we need to hinder bad literature and promote good literature and therefore I would be very pleased if all our dear pupils would subscribe to the *Catholic Readings*, while all the superiors and even the youngsters should try to present and propagate them amongst anyone who shows good hope of accepting the idea. I am including some programmes here; you and Sala can put a programme in with the most important letters, with some words of encouragement.

Tu vigila, in omnibus labora, opus fac evangelistae, ministerium tuum imple; argue, obsecra, increpa in omni patientia et doctrina, et in perdifficilibus rebus dic constanter: omnia possum in eo qui me confortat.

May God bless you and your efforts, the teachers, assistants and all the young people; pray for me. I am always,

Yours affectionately in Jesus Christ,

Fr John Bosco

P.S. De Magistris wrote me a letter—it contains some startling things. If these are really what he thinks I believe he is almost ready for a stroke.

Try to speak to him about this. When I go to Lanzo I will do the rest.

170. Circular: Disseminating the Catholic Readings and the Library of Italian Classics

Critical ed. in E(m) IV, pp. 582-583.

[Turin, second half of December 1875]

To our worthy correspondents and kind readers,

We are happy to announce, worthy Correspondents and kind Readers, that the *Catholic Readings* and the *Library of Italian Classics*, often recommended to your zeal, will continue to be published with the same regularity in 1876.

Indeed we can assure you that we will add a special effort regarding paper, printing and shipping, and even more so in the choice of articles so that as far as possible they can be useful, pleasant, interesting and moral.

But our efforts need your support and help in promoting and propagating these publications in ways and places that you judge appropriate given your enlightened prudence.

Many bishops, archbishops and the Holy Father himself have blessed and recommended that these booklets be disseminated and this helps ensure the value of this work. In fact the *Catholic Readings* are aimed at preserving the healthy principles of our holy religion amongst the people, while the expurgated *Italian Classics* are aimed at promoting and preserving the morals of our young students.

The sad consequences resulting from bad literature and the efforts that some go to spread it, certainly say to the good Christian that if bad people do so much to spread evil, should not good people at least do the same to propagate good?

Someone else not long ago had this to say: whatever you do to spread good books can be compared to the offering given to a poor hungry person.

So we trust in your cooperation and unable as we are to show our gratitude in any other way, we ask God to fill you with heavenly blessings and grant you

many years of happy life. In the name of all I have the honour of being, for the Management and our collaborators,

Your most indebted servant,

Fr John Bosco

171. Circular: Reading material

ASC A1750409 Circolari ai Salesiani, with authentic signature; printed ed.
in *Lettere circolari di DB*, pp. 15-20 (cf. MB XVII, 197-200).

Feast of All Saints[1884]

My beloved sons in Jesus Christ,

A very serious reason has led me to write this letter to you at the beginning of the school year. You know how much affection I have for the souls that Our Blessed Lord Jesus, in his infinite goodness, has chosen to entrust to me, on the other hand you should not misconstrue the responsibility that weighs upon the educators of the young and the strict account they will have to render for their mission to Divine Justice.

But I have to share this responsibility fully with you, my beloved sons, and I want it to be for you and for me the origin, source and cause of glory and eternal life. Therefore I have thought about drawing your attention to a very important point on which the salvation of our pupils may depend. I am speaking of the books that should be removed from the hands of our pupils and those that ought be used for individual reading, or reading in common.

First impressions on virgin minds and tender hearts of the young last for the rest of their lives, and books today are one of the main causes of this. Reading has a lively attraction for them and tickles their eager curiosity. Very often the final choice they make for good or for evil depends on this. The enemies of souls know the power of this weapon and experience teaches us how wickedly they use it to the detriment of innocence. Interesting titles, beautiful paper, sharp typeface, refined drawings, acceptable prices, popular style, varied plots, focused descriptions, all done with art and diabolical care.

So it is up to us to oppose weapons with weapons, wresting the poison from the hands of our youngsters that impiety and immorality is offering them: opposing bad books with good books. Woe to us if we are asleep while our enemy remains awake and is always at work sowing darnel [mischief-making].

Therefore, from the beginning of the school year practise what the Rules prescribe, carefully observe the books the boys bring with them when they enter the college, appointing someone who takes it upon himself to inspect trunks and packages. As well as that the Director in each House should ask the boys to conscientiously draw up a list of every book and give it to the superior himself. This is not a superfluous approach both because it makes it easier to see if some books have escaped attention, and because if these lists are kept, they can help in a particular situation to take action against someone who has maliciously hidden a bad book.

Similar vigilance should continue throughout the year, by asking pupils to hand over every new book bought during the school year or brought in by relatives, friends, day students; by observing that, either out of ignorance or malice, parcels for the boys are not wrapped in filthy newspapers; by carrying out prudent inspection in the study hall, dormitories, classrooms.

The care taken to achieve all this can never be too much. The teacher, the one looking after the study hall, the assistant should also see what is being read in church or in recreation, at school, in study. Unexpurgated dictionaries should also be removed. For many boys this is where malice and the traps set by bad companions begin. A bad book is a plague that affects many young people. The Director may consider he has done well when he has succeeded in wresting one of these books from a pupil.

It is unfortunate that the very boys who own these books find it difficult to obey and use every trick around to hide them. The Director has to fight greed, curiosity, fear of punishment, human respect, unbridled passion. That is why I believe it is essential to conquer the heart of the young and convince them through kindness. Often in the year from the pulpit, in the evenings, in class, take up this topic of bad books, let them see the evil they cause; convince the

boys that we only have the salvation of their souls in mind, and that after God this is what we love above everything else.

Do not be harsh, unless a young man is ruining others. If someone hands over a bad book through the year, gloss over his earlier disobedience and accept the book as a very fine gift. Even more so because sometimes it could be the confessor who asked him to hand it over and it would be imprudent to delve further into the matter. And if the superiors are known for their kindness it could also lead some boys to reveal that others are hiding books of this kind.

When a book is found that is prohibited by the Church or is immoral, it should be immediately thrown into the fire. We have seen priests and clerics ruined by books taken from the boys.

By acting in this way I hope that bad books will not enter our colleges or where they have entered, they will be quickly destroyed.

But as well as bad books it is necessary to keep an eye on certain other books which, while good or indifferent in themselves, can also be dangerous because not suited to the age, place, studies, inclinations, budding passions, vocation. These must also be removed. As with books of a good and enjoyable kind, where these can be excluded it will help with study; by regulating homework, teachers can help the pupils use their time well. But because there is an almost uncontrollable urge to read today, and because many good books too can fire up passions and imagination, if the Lord lets me live long enough I have thought of arranging and printing a collection of enjoyable books for boys.

This refers to books that are read privately. But for reading done in common in refectories, dormitories and the study hall, I would say firstly that no books should ever be read unless first approved by the Director and novels of any kind should be excluded unless they have come from our printing press.

In the refectory you can read the *Bulletin*, the *Catholic Readings* as they come out, and between these editions you can read books printed at the Oratory: the *History of Italy*, the *Church History* and the history of the Popes, stories about America and other subjects published in collections of the *Catholic Readings*, and history books or stories from the *Library of Youth*.

These latter could be read in study where the custom still exists of reading something in the last quarter of an hour before singing practice.

With regard then to reading in the dormitories, I would like to absolutely ban any kind of pleasant leisure reading but would like books to be used that put good thoughts into their minds as they prepare to sleep, thoughts that will make them better. So in this situation it would be good to use books that are attractive but with content that is rather holy or ascetic. I would begin with biographies of our boys *Comollo, Savio, Besucco*, etc., and would continue with the booklets from the *Catholic Readings* that deal with religion; I would finish with the lives of the Saints but choosing the more attractive and appropriate ones. I am certain they do more good with these books than could be achieved in a whole Retreat, following the brief talk in the evenings which comes from a heart that desires the salvation of their souls.

To fully achieve the desired effect and to see that our books are an antidote against bad books, I ask and beg you to love our own confreres' publications, avoiding any feeling of envy or contempt. Where you find them lacking something, then offer advice or if you have time volunteer yourself to help, so corrections can be done either by telling the author himself or telling the superiors who are responsible for overseeing our publications. But never let a word of criticism issue from your lips. The honour of one is the honour of us all. If the boys hear a teacher or assistant praising a book, they too will respect it, praise it and read it.

Recall one of the great things that our Holy Father Pius IX said one day to the Salesians: "Imitate the example of the Jesuit Fathers. Why are their writers so respected? Because the confreres involve themselves in reviewing and correcting as if the work of another confrere was their own; and in public, with all the newspapers and magazines they can find, by praising its merits they give him an outstanding reputation, and in private all you hear are words of praise. You will never hear one of these priests, and there are thousands of them, criticise or lessen the reputation of a confrere."

Do this amongst our boys and you can be certain that our books will produce immense good.

My dear sons, Listen, think about and practice this advice of mine. I feel that my life is coming to an end. Your years too will pass quickly. So let us work zealously so that an abundant harvest of souls saved can be presented to the good Father, who is God. May the Lord bless you, and may he bless our young pupils with you. Greet them for me, and recommend this poor old man to their prayers. He loves them so much in Jesus Christ.

Yours affectionately in Jesus Christ,

Fr John Bosco

172. Circular to the Salesians on spreading good books

ASC A1750411 Circolari ai Salesiani, Diffusione dei buoni libri; printed ed. in *Lettere circolari di DB*, pp. 15-20.

Turin, 19 March, St Joseph's Feast day, 1885

My dearest sons in Jesus Christ,

The Lord knows how keen my desire is to see you, be in your midst, speak with you about our things, and console myself with the mutual confidence of our hearts. But unfortunately, dear sons, my failing strength, the remnants of earlier illnesses, the urgent matters that call me to France, are preventing me for now at least, to follow the impulse of my affection for you.

Being unable to visit you in person, I am arriving by letter, and I am sure you will be happy with the constant remembrance I have of you, you who are my hope, my glory and also my support. I want to see you grow in zeal and in merit before God, every day, and so I will not hesitate to suggest various means to you from time to time which I believe will be an improvement so your ministry will be more fruitful.

One of these that I want to warmly recommend to you, for the glory of God and the good of souls, is the spreading of good books. I don't hesitate to call this means 'Divine', since God Himself used it to regenerate humankind. There were books inspired by Him that have brought correct teaching to all the world. He wanted all the cities and villages of Palestine to have copies and

that each Sabbath there would be reading in the religious assemblies. At the beginning these books were the sole patrimony of the Hebrew people but, once the tribes were taken into captivity in Assyria and amongst the Chaldeans, the Sacred Scriptures were translated into the Syro-chaldean language, and all of central Asia had them in their own languages.

Once Greek was in the ascendancy, the Hebrews brought their colonies to every corner of the world and with them the Sacred Books were multiplied 'ad infinitum'; and they even enriched the libraries of pagan peoples through their version of the Septuagint. Orators, poets and philosophers of those times drew not a few truths from the Bible. God prepared the world for the coming of the Saviour principally through his inspired writings.

It behoves us, then, to imitate the work of the Heavenly Father. Good books, spread amongst the people, are one of the active ways to preserve the kingdom of the Saviour in so many souls. The thoughts, principles, the morals of a Catholic book have substance drawn from the Apostolic books and tradition. They are so much more necessary today in the face of the army of impiety and immorality wreaking havoc in the sheepfold of Jesus Christ, leading on and dragging down to perdition those who are careless and disobedient. It is necessary to fight weapon with weapon. You can add that the book, even if on the one hand it does not have the power of the living word, on the other hand offers even greater advantages in certain circumstances. The good book can enter a house where the priest cannot, it is even tolerated by bad people as a gift or remembrance. It does not get embarrassed when presenting itself, and does not worry if it is neglected; when read it teaches truths calmly; if not liked, it does not complain, yet it leaves feelings of misgiving that sometimes spark a desire to know the truth. Meanwhile it is always ready to teach.

Sometimes it remains gathering dust on the table or in the library. No one gives it a thought. But come a time of loneliness, or sadness, or boredom or a need for relaxation, or a time of anxiety about the future, and this faithful friend shakes off its dust, opens its pages and the wonderful conversions of St Augustine, Blessed Columbine and St Ignatius happen all over again. Polite in dealing with those who are fearful through human respect, it arouses

suspicion in no one. Familiar with those who are good, it is always ready to talk things over; it goes with them at every moment, everywhere. How many the souls saved by good books, how many preserved from error, how many encouraged in doing good! Someone who gives a good book might have no other merit than to awaken some thought of God, but has already gained an incomparable merit before God. And yet how much more is gained. Even if not read by the one to whom it was given or for whom it was intended, a book in a family is read by a son or daughter, a friend or neighbour. A book in a village then passes into the hands of a hundred people.

God alone knows the good that a book given as a mark of friendship produces in a city, a travelling library, a worker's club, a hospital. No one should fear that a book would be refused by someone just because it is good. The contrary is the case. A confrere of ours used to take his store of good books with him every time he went down to the wharves at the port in Marseilles, to give to the stevedores, the craftsmen, the sailors. These books were always accepted happily and gratefully and sometimes read immediately with keen interest.

Having said all that, and leaving aside much of what you already know, I want to point out why, not only as Catholics but especially as Salesians, you should be enthusiastic and spare no effort or means to spread wholesome books:

1. This was amongst the main tasks Divine Providence entrusted to me, and you know how much effort I spent on it, notwithstanding the thousand and one other occupations I had. The raging hatred of the enemies of good, and attacks on me personally, show how error recognises a formidable opponent in these books and how they are an undertaking blessed by God, for exactly the opposite reason.

2. In fact, the marvellous distribution these books have had is an argument that proves God's special assistance. In less than 30 years the total number of publications and books we have spread among ordinary people amounts to about twenty million. If some of them have been ignored, others have had hundreds of readers, and thus we can certainly reckon that the number of

people who have benefited from our books is much greater than the number of books we have published.

3. This spreading of wholesome literature is one of the principal purposes of our Congregation. Article 7 of the first paragraph of our Regulations says of the Salesians: “They shall devote themselves to spreading good books among the people, using all the means which Christian charity inspires. By word and writing they will seek to counteract the godlessness and heresy that is trying in so many guises to creep in amongst the uncultured and unlearned. They should direct the sermons they preach to the people from time to time, triduum, novenas and the spreading of good books, to this end.”

4. Amongst the books to be spread I propose that we stick to those that have a reputation for being good, moral and religious, and we should give preference to those produced by our own presses. The reason is that the material benefit that results becomes charity through the support it provides for the many poor young people we have, and because our publications tend to form an orderly system, that embraces on a vast scale all the classes that make up human society. I won't dwell on this point; rather I am pleased to look at just one class, that of young people, to whom I have always striven to do good not only with the spoken but also with the printed word.

While I sought to instruct all the people with the *Catholic Readings*, its purpose was to get into the houses, let people know about the spirit in our Colleges, and attract young people to virtue, especially with the biographies of Savio, Besucco and others. With *The Companion of Youth* my aim was to lead them to church, instil the spirit of piety in them and get them to love going to the sacraments. With the collection of edited Italian and Latin classics and the *History of Italy* and the other historical or literary books I wanted to be at their side in school and preserve them from so many errors and passions that would be fatal for them now and for eternity. Like in the old days I wanted to be their companion in the hours of recreation, and I have thought about arranging a series of enjoyable books which I hope will not be long in coming.

Finally, amongst my many aims for the *Salesian Bulletin* I also had this one: to keep the spirit of St Francis de Sales and his sayings alive in boys who

have returned to their families, and to make these boys the saviours of other young people. I will not tell you I have reached my ideal of perfection. On the contrary, I am telling you that it is up to you to co-ordinate it in such a way that it will be complete in all its parts.

I ask and beseech you then not to neglect this most important part of our mission. Work at it not only amongst the young people Providence has entrusted to you, but with your words and example make them into many other apostles who spread good books.

At the start of the year the pupils, especially the new ones, are alight with enthusiasm at the offer of our associations, even more so when it costs so little. But make sure that they join spontaneously and are not forced in anyway to belong. With well reasoned encouragement lead the young people to join, not just for the good the books will do them, but also for the good they can do to others, sending them home as soon as they are published, to their father, mother, brothers, benefactors. Besides, parents who do not practise their religion much are moved by this thoughtfulness of a son or brother who is away from home, and they are easily lead to read the book out of curiosity if for no other reason.

Let them be careful though that what they send never looks like preaching or talking at their relatives, but is always and only a thoughtful gift and an affectionate memento. When they return home, they should strive to increase the merits of their good works, by giving them as presents to their friends, lending them to relatives, giving them as thanks for a favour done, passing them on to their parish priest, asking him to distribute them and get more members.

Be convinced, my dear sons, that such industriousness will draw the Lord's choicest blessings down on you and on our young people.

I will finish: draw the conclusion to this letter yourselves by seeing that our young people get hold of moral and Christian principles especially by means of our productions, without despising other publishers' books. I must tell you, however, that I was cut to the quick when I got to know that the

books we printed were at times not known or held in no regard, in some of our houses,. Do not love, nor lead others to love, the knowledge which the Apostle says *inflat* (pumps up, makes us proud). And remember that even though St Augustine was an eminent teacher of fine letters and an eloquent orator, after he became a bishop, he preferred the incorrect use of language and the absence of stylish elegance rather than running the risk of not being understood by the people.

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ always be with you. Pray for me.

Yours affectionately in Jesus Christ,

Fr John Bosco