

SECTION ONE
EXEMPLARY BIOGRAPHIES

Presentation

The biographical profiles of Louis Comollo (in the 1854 edition), Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco are among the spiritual and pedagogical documents which are most representative of Don Bosco's outlook. From these stories comes a horizon of meaning, a way of thinking and acting thoroughly rooted in his cultural context. At the same time however, beyond historical contingencies, they highlight a range of elements which better illustrate the characteristic features of the saint's spiritual pedagogy.

The primary beneficiaries of these edifying lives were boys of the mid-nineteenth century and their educators, but the narrative tool – which Don Bosco was a master at – allows the attentive reader to discover a deeper discourse in them on the experience of their main characters and the settings they lived in, on a complete educational humanism and the fascinating culture of the spirit which frames all this.

In the first place we have the life of Louis Comollo (no. 305), in its second edition (January 1854). It is a document of important spiritual relevance. The saint had recently set up at Valdocco a residence for students who were interested in the priesthood, so he took another look at the Sketch of the life of a friend, published ten years earlier, to offer the boys a substantial example of a well-rounded Christian life in accordance with his own perspectives. The basic text and structure are identical to the first edition (1844), but numerous additions— shown here in italics—mark a relevant shift of emphasis. Now Don Bosco is not only concerned with commemorating a deceased companion and offering him for imitation by seminarians, but he wants to illustrate a proposal of spiritual life which he considers suited to the new generations. If we look at the editions and emphases we see an awareness that has matured over a decade of educational and pastoral experience, and this allows him to highlight precise spiritual dynamics and point to interior processes that go beyond simply registering words and deeds. We find all the religious topics that are dear to him, already seen in the Companion of Youth,

but framed in real life now. In this regard the recommendation Don Bosco added at the foot of the Regulations for the Immaculate Conception Sodality is relevant (1856). The Regulations were written by Joseph Bongiovanni, Dominic Savio and friends: "Before accepting anyone get them to read the Life of Louis Comollo." ⁶ It is this edition he is referring to.

Regarding St Aloysius Gonzaga, the young Comollo was able to be a more eloquent and stimulating model: perfect imitator of the saint in the way he gave himself totally to God and in the ascetic and virtuous life, but within a historic, cultural and social context which was closer to that of his young readers. The publication of the Life of Dominic Savio (1859) would put Comollo in the shade, but it would also demonstrate the impact the biography had on the teenage saint.

The second source in this section is the Life of Dominic Savio (no. 306), in the final edition which Don Bosco (1878) saw to personally. Here we note the consolidation and precise detail of formation processes at the Oratory, "the advent and proposal of a living model of youthful spirituality par excellence, embodied in the earthly life and biography" of the young pupil ⁷. Dominic expresses "in reality a complete adolescent Christian holiness", and Don Bosco makes this explicit by making it readily available for others who were "determined and ardent". The difference compared to Comollo, is that this one is also largely the story of Don Bosco as formator and spiritual guide, "mirroring the spirituality he practised and taught", an illustration of his unmistakable way of acting as the priest educator, spiritual guide, "in accordance with a mentality shaped by his priestly, theological formation and experience." ⁸

But the life of Savio, and even more so the attractive and interesting one of Michael Magone (no. 307)—the third text in this section—also effectively illustrate the lively and intense formative climate at Valdocco, so "saturated with frank humanity and intense spirituality." ⁹

⁶ See above no. 207, p. 799.

⁷ P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani...*, I, p. 301.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 327-328.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

In Savio's spiritual life, the author recognises, along with the merits of family education, "the work that Divine grace had already produced at such a tender age"¹⁰, thanks to the boy's extraordinary receptivity. But in Michael Magone's spiritual adventure he unequivocally highlights the effectiveness of his own educational method. The moral and spiritual transformation of this teenager and his rapid progress appear, in fact, to be mostly the result of his work as educator and spiritual guide, the result of the formation strategy he employed and the fervent youthful community at Valdocco where the "General" from Carmagnola had been taken in.

As for the Life of Francis Besucco, The Shepherd Boy from the Alps, we include only the second part (no. 308), since the first fourteen chapters are almost completely taken from a long testimonial letter sent by the parish priest of Argentera. Don Bosco intervenes only from chapter 15 onwards, but very effectively, to the point where Alberto Caviglia considers this text to be a valuable "document made up of the saint's spiritual and moral pedagogy ... inasmuch as the author, more than in any other book of the kind, comes to the theory, and expresses his ideas with the clear intention of teaching them." At the time of its publication (1864), in fact the saint was "at the end of his pedagogical self-formation, with ideas by now formulated in definitive terms."¹¹ It is here that we find the formula "cheerfulness, study, piety" expressed, and then fully illustrated chapter by chapter. This is considered the most complete and synthetic expression of Don Bosco's spiritual pedagogy. But it is also the text that best makes the Saint's spiritual intentions explicit, since, "with the episodic series of devotions, he illustrates the first principle, which is to have the taste for and spirit of prayer" and shows it as it takes shape. Up to the "highest and most intense degree, which is continuous prayer, when the attitude of the heart is such that prayer never ceases" and the habit of praying

¹⁰ Giovanni BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales con appendice sulle grazie ottenute per sua intercessione*. Ed. 5. Torino, Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana 1878, p. 28 (n. 306, p. 1039)

¹¹ Alberto CAVIGLIA, "La vita di Besucco Francesco scritta da don Bosco", in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di don Bosco*. Vol. VI. Torino, Società Editrice Internazionale 1965, p. 16.

becomes “a kind of gravitation of the mind towards God, which comes from love and practising the divine presence.”¹²

Along with the question of union with God we have the explicit Salesian idea of mortification of the senses, “which is not to be added to life but must come out of life itself, as it is the life which is lived which has to be mortified”; life that Don Bosco “considers as being austere and poor and limited, made up of work and temperance.”¹³ Don Bosco teaches us that there is no need to go looking for mortification outside the concrete nature of our lives, but it consists simply in guarding the senses and accepting with patience, fortitude and love everything that for us is difficult about the common duties and the daily situations of life: the heaviness of work, the limits imposed by our circumstances, the rough edges of people around us, exhausting work, small humiliations, health problems.

305. Life of Louis Comollo

Printed ed. in Giovanni BOSCO, *Cenni sulla vita del giovane Luigi Comollo morto nel seminario di Chieri ammirato da tutti per le sue rare virtù*. Torino, Tipografia P. De-Agostini 1854.

*To the reader*¹⁴

Since the example of virtuous actions is worth much more than any elegant discourse, it would not be unreasonable to offer an account of the life of a young man who in a short period of time practised *such beautiful virtues that he could be proposed as a model for any faithful Christian who looks to the salvation of his own soul. There is nothing extraordinary here, but everything is done with outstanding perfection so that we could apply to young Comollo the words of Holy Scripture: “Qui timet Deum nihil negligit”*¹⁵; “whoever fears God neglects nothing that can contribute to making progress in the ways of the Lord.”

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

¹⁴ In italics are the important facts added in by Don Bosco in 1854 compared with the first edition text from (1844).

¹⁵ Cited from the Vulgate (Qo. 7:19); cf. Qo 7:18.

Here we find many deeds and just a few reflections, leaving each one to apply whatever seems appropriate to his own state. Everything you read here was almost always something passed on in writing at the time of his death, and already published in¹⁶. I take great consolation in being able to promise you assuredly of the truth of what I write. They are all public matters that I have heard or seen personally or have come to know from others of whose faith I would have no doubts.

So, Christian reader, read on gladly and if you stop to meditate on something along the way, you certainly will have something to savour, and something to gain for a truly virtuous tenor of life. And if, while you are perusing what I have written, you should feel encouraged to pursue one of the virtues highlighted here, give glory to God to whom alone I dedicate these pages. I pray that you will gain every benefit.

Chapter 1 – Louis Comollo’s childhood

Louis Comollo was born on April 7, 1817 in the fertile countryside and town of Cinzano¹⁷ in the hamlet of Prà. His parents were Carlo and Giovanna Comollo, *both farmers by occupation*. Although their circumstances were not easy they had other fine things, much better than precious wealth, such as virtue and fear of the Lord. Louis grew up as a naturally good soul, compliant, docile and gentle of heart, and when he had reached the age of reason the first seeds of virtue and devotion were seen to be taking root in him. They then continued to grow wonderfully towards perfection throughout the course of his life. From the time he had learned to pronounce the holy names of Jesus and Mary, from then on he kept them as the object of tenderness and reverence. He never showed aversion to or slackness in prayer, something common in children; in fact the longer the prayer time, the more content and happy he was. *And it often happened that when he had finished saying his usual*

¹⁶ [Giovanni BOSCO], *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo morto nel seminario di Chieri ammirato da tutti per le sue singolari virtù*. Scritti da un collega. Torino, Tipografia Speirani e Ferrero 1844 (OE I, 1-84). This is the first book published (anonymously) by Don Bosco.

¹⁷ Cinzano is an agricultural region of the province and diocese of Turin, 28 kms away the Capital; in 1839 it had 660 inhabitants.

prayers he would tell his mother: "Mother, one more Our Father in suffrage for the poor souls in Purgatory."

He easily learned to read and write *and since charity had already sprung deep roots in his tender heart, he made good use of his early education for his own spiritual advantage.* On weekends and feast days, while others of his age were heading out to play, he would gather a few around him and read to them or explain what little he knew, or tell them a story of some edifying nature. This won the respect and admiration of his peers such that when he was around, nobody dared use indecent or questionable language. If something like that happened inadvertently, they would soon warn one another: "Quiet, or Louis will hear you." On his arrival, any even slightly 'off' conversation would immediately be curbed. If he heard any talk that was unbecoming or disparaging of religious matters he would say, in his admirably pleasant way: "Don't talk like that, words like that don't sound good in the mouth of a young Christian."

As his circumstances required of him, he used to take the cows out to pasture, but always kept away from people of the other sex and took some good books with him to read alone or with others. With this tenor of life, while he edified his companions, he was the admiration of good people who were amazed at such virtue in a boy of that age.

One father said:

"I had a son and I just didn't know what to do with him: I had treated him kindly but firmly, but all in vain. The idea came to me to send him to Louis, and maybe he could succeed in making him more obedient so he would no longer be reason for me thinking so badly of him. My little rascal at first was reluctant to go with someone who had little in common with his view of things but soon, enticed by what he saw of Louis, he became a friend and companion in virtue to the point that he still now shows the moderation and goodness he absorbed from that kind soul.

He was outstanding in his obedience to his parents. He was ready and attentive to whatever his parents asked of him, and was anxious to carry out

any indication of theirs, making every effort even to see what they would want in advance. When drought, hail storms or loss of animals befell them and his parents were affected by it, Louis was the one who comforted them and urged them to see whatever happened as coming from the Lord. "We need this," he would say; "whenever the Lord's hand touches us, he always treats us with kindness; it is a sign that he remembers us and wants us too to remember him."

He would never leave his parents without their express permission. He was always very careful about that. Once he went to visit some relatives, which he had permission to do for a brief time. Attracted by his kind manner and edifying speech, they would not let him go in time. He felt so regretful about it that he went away to cry in private when he saw that he would have to disobey, and as soon as he got home he asked forgiveness for the disobedience that, despite himself, he had committed.

He kept away from others sometimes, but to withdraw to some quiet corner of the house to pray, or meditate. "I often saw him eat in a hurry," one person who had grown up with him told me, "quickly do all his assigned tasks and while others were taking time for some recreation, he would look for a pretext to leave and go off to some furrow amongst the vines, if he was out in the countryside, or in the hay shed if he was at home, and there he would pray aloud, or read devout books and learn to tell edifying stories that he would retell his friends." It is true that even amongst the least of us God knows how to lead the simple and unlearned and guide them towards the sublime paths of holiness.

Real features of devotion and great tenderness in religious matters were tied strictly to these wonderful signs of virtue. This became evident after he made his first Confession. He made a careful examination of conscience, and then went off to present himself to the confessor before whom he became emotional, given his reverence for the sacrament. He felt apprehension over his faults (if indeed he had committed any), and felt so sorry for his sins that he broke down in copious tears and needed to be comforted in order to begin and then continue with his Confession.

He made his first Communion to the similar edification of those around him. From then on he became so fond of the Sacraments of Confession and Communion that approaching them gave him the greatest of consolation; he never let an opportunity go by to benefit from them. *In this regard he once told a close friend and confidant: "Confession and Communion were my support throughout all the perilous years of my youth."*

But however frequently he allowed himself the opportunity for Communion, just the same, when he was not able to satisfy his fervent love for Jesus, he found ways to do this through spiritual communion. When he became a cleric and found himself at the Seminary he was often heard to say: "It was because of the important work of St Alphonse with the title: '*Visits to the Blessed Sacrament*', that I learned how to make a spiritual communion, which I can say has been my comfort through many dangers when I was a lay person."

Frequent visits to the Church were added to spiritual and sacramental communion. He felt so embraced by the presence of Jesus that often he would spend entire hours there, pouring out his fervent and tender feelings of affection.

But someone will be wondering and saying: how come a young lad could learn such exceptional virtue at such a tender age? I can offer a quick answer. His uncle was Joseph Comollo¹⁸, of happy memory, the provost of Cinzano, a truly good soul, who thought of nothing else but the good of the souls entrusted to his care. He loved his nephew, who also loved him tenderly. So it was that Louis, directed by such a prudent and devout director in spiritual and temporal matters, began to emulate those virtues little by little as he grew in years. He was often sent to the church to do things his Uncle gave him to do, and he often went there himself under the pretext of having things to do, but he never left there without spending a while with Jesus and recommending himself to his dear mother Mary. There was no solemn occasion, catechism or sermon, or benediction or other function taking

¹⁸ Fr Giuseppe Comollo (1768-1843).

place at church that he did not attend, happily and contentedly offering whatever service he was able to.

Comollo's nature was so alien to the childish mischief normal to his age. He put up with whatever happened to him so calmly, was friendly and pleasant with his peers, modest and respectful with whoever was his superior, obedient in all things, devout, ready to lend any service which the Church allowed him to and which was compatible with his age, and did everything in such a way that it seemed to predict that the Lord had destined him to a state of greater perfection. Convinced of the great importance he should give to choice of state, he had more than once put the question to his uncle the Provost, in whom he confided every secret of his heart, and he had received an answer inasmuch as he could understand it, that God was calling him to the ecclesiastical state. He was very happy about that since it was also his very keen desire. His uncle, seeing his nephew so keen, and so promising, wanted to encourage him in his holy resolutions. So one day he called him to come and see him: "So you are firmly bent on becoming a priest?" he asked him. "It is precisely this that I want and nothing else," he answered "because priests are people who open heaven to others, so I hope I can also open heaven to myself."

So he was sent to grammar school, the middle school classes at Caselle near Ciriè. And refining even more the virtues which had made him well known as a model of Christian living, there too he was admired by all who had occasion to meet him. Already as a small child he used to make little offerings to Our Lady by abstaining from some food or fruit that would accompany his main meal: "This I should give to Mary" he would say. He went still further in Caselle; as well as offering a fast each week for Mary, he would often, under some pretext, abstain from the best food. It would be enough for there to be something which he particularly liked for him not to choose it, and he always did this out of love for Mary.

Such tenor of life effectively contributed to his progress in his studies and in devotion, because it is a long-proven fact that a sober, moderate disposition in the young, especially in students is especially beneficial to health of mind and body.

Chapter 2 – He goes to Chieri to study

At the beginning of the school year 1835, *when I was attending school in Chieri, I found myself on one occasion at a boarding house where they were talking about the good qualities of some of the students.* “I was told,” the person running the house began “that a very holy student should be coming to such-and-such a place.” I laughed, considering the matter to be a joke. “But it’s true,” he added “he would be the nephew of the Provost in Cinzano, a young man of remarkable virtue.”

I did not take much notice of it, except that one particular fact made me remember it. It was just a few days ago that I had seen a student (without knowing his name) who showed such poise, such modesty as he went on his way, was so pleasant and courteous with whomsoever he spoke, that I really was wonderfully taken up by it all. This wonderment grew when I observed the way he carried out his duties so precisely, and how he always turned up exactly on time at school. As soon as he got there he would take his assigned place and not move, unless there was something he had to do, unless his duties meant he had to. It was the usual custom for the students to pass their time while coming to school joking, playing around, even doing dangerous somersaults and *sometimes wrong things*. This modest young man was also invited to get involved in these things; but he always excused himself saying that he wasn’t the practical type, he didn’t have the skills. Nevertheless one day one of his schoolmates came up to him and wagging a finger at him, told him to take part in the rather wild games they used to engage in at school. “No, my good friend,” he replied kindly, “I’m not very good at that, I’d end up making a fool of myself.” The cheeky friend, when he saw that he wasn’t interested, insolently and quite unacceptably whacked him across the face. I was appalled to see this, and given that the one who did it was not as strong nor as old as the one he had assaulted, I expected that he would give back as good as he had got. But the attack turned entirely in another direction: he turned to the one who had hit him and seemed happy just to say: “If doing this makes you happy, then go in peace, knowing I’m ok with that.” This made me recall what I’d heard said, that there was a saintly lad coming to our school, and when I asked what his name was and where he came from I knew then that he

was Louis Comollo, whom I had heard spoken about in such a praiseworthy manner at the boarding house.

From such a good heart, such well-controlled conduct it is easy to suggest how Comollo went with studies and diligence, I could think of no better way to express this than with the words of this good teacher of his (and my teacher too). He wrote to me in these words (¹⁹):

“Although the character and nature of this fine young man Comollo might well be already well known to you since he was a fellow student, so you would have seen him close up, just the same I most gladly send you this letter with the opinion that I had already formed then when I had him as a student for two years from 1835 to 1836 in Humanities and Rhetoric at the School in Chieri. He was a talented young man with a most pleasant disposition. He worked diligently at his studies, was always so attentive to everything, and was so scrupulous and watchful of every detail concerning his duties that I cannot recall a single instance of having to scold him for something he might not have done properly. I never saw him get into arguments with other friends; instead he would answer injury or insult patiently and pleasantly. He could be proposed as a model for any young person because of his conduct, obedience, pliability; so I wished him all the very best when I heard that he was entering an ecclesiastical career. I saw him as destined to comfort his venerable uncle, the worthy Provost of Cinzano, in his old age, who loved him dearly and had sown such rare and remarkable virtues in his heart. So I was very sad to hear of Louis’ death, and my only comfort was the thought that by his virtuous life he had achieved ahead of time and in such a short time what he might have done over a long ecclesiastical career. Perhaps God wanted to call him to Himself through his untimely death because God looked beyond his age to all the good that he had done and the merit deserved, and we must accept the divine will.

You have asked me to speak of what I observed that was remarkable in him; but what else could I say that is more remarkable than his even-temper,

¹⁹ “Comollo’s teacher was Fr Giovanni Bosco [1812-1889] from Chieri, now professor of philosophy at the Military academy in Turin.” (note in the original text).

his steadfastness at such a young and normally fickle age? From the first day that he came to my school until the end of the two years he was always the same—always good and always intent on practising virtue, piety, diligence ...” These were his teacher’s words.

And outside of school these wonderful gifts were equally put into practice. The man running the boarding house said. “I came to see in young Comollo all the virtues proper not just to his age, but to someone who was long practised in them. He was always happy and even-tempered, unperturbed by whatever was going on, and he was never looking out for what might be particularly of his own taste. He was always happy with whatever was on hand; one never heard him say: this has no taste, or it’s too hot, or very cold; one never heard him say anything that was less than honest or intemperate. He spoke willingly of spiritual matters, and if someone spoke badly of religion, he demanded that they speak about sacred ministers with the greatest reverence and respect. He was very fond of solitude and never went out *without express permission*, always giving the time, place and reasons as to why he would be absent. For all the time he lived here, he was a great encouragement for others to live in a virtuous way, and the others were sorry when he had to change abode to put on the clerical habit and go and live in the Seminary, thus depriving us of an exceptional model of virtue.”

I could also say the same, since on various occasions when I spoke with him, or we worked together, I never heard him complain about things at the time, or about the seasons, or that he had too much work to do or too much study; in fact whenever he had some free time, he would hurry off to see a friend to help him with a problem, or talk about things to do with study or devotion.

He was no less zealous about religious observances and vigilance in everything to do with devotion. This is what the spiritual director of the schools had to write. He would certainly have come to know him very well ⁽²⁰⁾.

²⁰ “The spiritual director at the school in Chieri at the time was Fr Francis Calosso, [1807-1888], Canon and Prior of the college of clerics, completely dedicated to zealous and devout work” (note in the original text).

“You have asked me to say something about this young man whose memory is very dear to me, so I am very happy to respond. Young Louis Comollo is not one of those people about whom I need to speak vaguely, nor will I be exaggerating in giving the most praiseworthy testimony. You already know that he belonged to a very special class of students, of the kind given to devotion and study, but Comollo stood out and shone amongst these. I am sorry to say that the Prefect of the schools, Professor Rubiola²¹, has died, since he would have been able to say many wonderful things about his studies, his excellent conduct including his conduct outside of school hours. As for me, other than assuring you that I never had reason to scold him for any fault, no matter how slight, I can also assure you that he was keenly present at our meetings, very self-assured, always listened attentively to the Word, was very devout in attending Mass and other sacred ceremonies, frequented the Sacraments of Confession and Communion regularly, and was truly diligent in every pious duty, exemplary in every act of virtue. I would willingly have been able to offer him as a shining and exceptional model of virtue to the other students. As for his behaviour in class, the Rhetoric year was a demanding one and only the most outstanding students in study and devotion were granted access to it. We wanted then as we want now, young students of character and habits like Louis Comollo had. His name reminded one of St Aloysius and he emulated many of his virtues in what he did. There’s no other student that I would more willingly give testimony about than this one; I could speak of everything that is good in a young man. *Raptus est, ne malitia mutaret intellectum eius* [Wis 4:11]. I hope he prays for me now in heaven.” These were the words of his spiritual director.

From all these reports each one can easily understand how Comollo’s behaviour was made up of lots of little virtues, but done in such a way that he was universally admired for outstanding virtue. And here I add some things that I noted particularly about his external behaviour. As soon as the exercises of piety, held at weekends in the congregation chapel, were over, most of the students

²¹ It should read: Raviola. Prof. Fr Vincenzo Raviola (1768-1838); before 1802 he was a Friar Minor at the monastery of Our Lady of Peace in Chieri.

would go for a walk or some other form of relaxation. But Comollo, *who preferred fewer such pastimes*, would immediately go off for Catechism classes for youngsters held at the church of the Jesuit fathers and as with all other religious functions, he was a devout participant at these classes. *It could have been the result of his good nature, or it could have been the result of virtue*, but it seemed that he had none of that anxious curiosity which youngsters normally have when they come from the villages into the city and want to see and hear everything around them. Coming to and going from school he was recollected and modest, never dilly-dallied here or there either physically or in looks, other than to offer due respect to Superiors, churches, or some wayside shrine or other statue of the Blessed Virgin. It never happened that he would pass such by without uncovering his head as a sign of veneration. Often when walking with him I saw him tip his cap without knowing the reason why; but looking around I would then notice some picture of the Madonna on some wall or other.

Our Rhetoric year was about to finish when I asked him about some of the interesting features or monuments in the city, and he told me that in fact he was not well-informed about these, as if he were just a visitor. *“How come,” I said to him “that so many people come from far away to see all the exceptional things about Chieri and you live here and never think to go and see them?” “Ah my good friend,” he said jokingly “whatever is not going to help me tomorrow I don’t run around looking for today.” I suspect that he meant that if all these special things could contribute to his eternal welfare, which tomorrow was all about, he would not have neglected them.*

The more Comollo was far from temporal occupations and things of interest, the more he was well informed and instructed on things pertaining to the Church. If there was a Forty Hours devotion or other public religious function he would know about it and, if he had the time, would take part. He had a timetable for prayer, spiritual reading, visit to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and he observed it scrupulously. Circumstances had it that for a few months I went to the Cathedral precisely at the time that Louis went there to spend time with Jesus. So I would be happy to describe what he was like there. He would take up a place near the altar if he could, kneel down, join

his hands, bow his head slightly, cast his eyes down and would stay absolutely still; he would be insensitive to any voice or sound. It would often happen that when I had finished my duties, I wanted to invite him to come home with me. So I would nod my head or, coming a bit closer, would cough, to get him to move; he would always stay the same until I actually came up and touched him. Then, as if woken up from sleep, he would move and although a little unwillingly, would accept my invitation. He willingly served Mass even on school days; but on holidays it would be normal for him to serve as many as four or five.

Although he was so focused on things of the spirit, you would never see him with clouded face or sad but always happy, always content, and with his pleasant way of speaking he made everyone he spoke with happy. He used often say that he liked the words of the Prophet David: “*Servite Domino in laetitia, Serve the Lord in holy cheerfulness.*”²² He liked to talk about history, poetry, the difficulties of Latin or Italian, but humbly, amiably enough such that while offering his opinion he always deferred to others.

He had a special friend, a confidant with whom he would speak of spiritual matters. He gained great consolation when dealing with and speaking of such topics. He considered that Jesus showed immense love by giving himself to us as food in Holy Communion. When he spoke of the Blessed Virgin, one saw him full of great tenderness, and after telling or hearing tell of some grace of healing for the body, at the end he would blush or break down in tears exclaiming: “If Mary is so good to our miserable body, how much more will she do something for the soul of whoever calls on her. *Oh! If everyone was truly devoted to Mary, what happiness there would be in the world.*”

Such was the esteem he had for religious matters that not only did he suffer when someone spoke disparagingly of them but he could not remain indifferent. It happened to me once that I spoke jokingly using the words of Holy Scripture, and I was reminded of the fact immediately. He told me not to joke about the Lord’s words.

²² Ps. 99:2.

When someone wanted to start talking about them, he would jump in saying that either they speak well of them or not at all, because they were ministers of God. This is how Louis prepared himself to receive the clerical habit, speaking of it always with great veneration and joy. “Could it be possible” he used say “that I, a miserable cowherd, could become a priest, a pastor of souls? I don’t feel inclined to do anything else: the confessor tells me this, my own desire tells me, only my sins tell me otherwise. I will go and sit for the exam and the results will judge what is the divine will concerning my vocation.” He often asked some of his close friends to pray for him that the Lord would enlighten him and let him know if he was called to the ecclesiastical state or not. And so it was that with the esteem of his classmates, the love of his superiors, and honoured and considered by everyone as a model of every virtue, he finished his year of Rhetoric in 1836.

Chapter 3 - Clerical clothing day and goes to seminary in Chieri

Comollo’s preparation for his clerical clothing day could certainly serve as a norm for young students wanting to make a choice of state of life, and especially for those who aspire to the ecclesiastical state. The vocation or call to the priestly state must come from God, therefore a young man should not take account of what relatives with their temporal interests might say, or what vainglory and the desire for earthly comforts might suggest. Do you want to be sure of your vocation? First of all choose a good confessor, and open your heart to him and inasmuch as it is possible, never change confessor. When for some reasonable motive you might have to change, at the time you are making your choice of a state of life open your conscience to him and ask him for his opinion, and then regard it as certain and follow the Lord’s voice; because he says in the Gospel: “Qui vos audit, me audit”²³, that is, whoever listens to the voice of his spiritual director, listens to God’s voice; this is with regard to the moral qualities which are essential, indeed absolutely necessary for a young man wanting to embrace the ecclesiastical state.

As far as study is concerned, and it is very necessary, submit to the judgement of your examiners and recognise the will of God in your exams.

²³ Lk 10:16.

This is what Comollo did when he found himself in a similar situation in life. Having presented for the exam and obtained a favourable result he then prepared himself for his clothing day as a cleric with keen sentiments of fervour and devotion. I would not know how to clearly express all the feelings of tenderness that he experienced in that situation. He prayed and asked others to pray for him, fasted, often broke down in tears, spent a lot of time in church so that when the day arrived for his feast (as he called the day he received the clerical habit) he made a general confession and received Communion with great fervour. He was as happy as if he had received the most honourable job in the world. He was caught up in a spirit of devotion and religious sentiment, recollected and modest. He seemed like an angel, dressed as he was in the ecclesiastical habit that he so much longed for and respected²⁴. That day was always a memorable one for him and he used to say that his heart was completely changed: from a pensive and gloomy type he became amiable and cheerful, and every time he thought back to that day his heart was overwhelmed with fondness and joy.

Meanwhile the opening day of the Seminary had arrived. He would duly take up residence and stand out not so much for extraordinary virtues, but for accomplished ones. *Having arrived at the Seminary he was soon convinced that the place alone was not sufficient to take in knowledge and virtue, but detailed observance of the rules was necessary and the exact fulfilment of one's duties. The greatest concern for his duties of study and devotion, a burning desire for mortification were the thoughts that occupied Comollo during his Seminary days. So that he would never forget, he had written on a piece of paper kept in a book or an exercise book which he would use every day: "Whoever does a little does a lot by doing what he must do; but he who does a lot does nothing if he is doing what he shouldn't be doing."*

He had read how Saint Alphonsus made a vow never to waste time. This was cause for his highest admiration and he sought to imitate him in it in every way possible. So from the very moment he first entered the Seminary he applied himself with such diligence to study and devotion that he benefited

²⁴ The Clothing took place on October 21, 1836.

from whatever occasion, whatever means would keep him busy all the time. When the bell went he immediately interrupted what he was doing to answer God's voice (which was what he called the sound of the bell), calling him to his duty. I noticed more than once that even if the bell rang just once, it was impossible for him to continue what he had in his hands; he became confused and didn't know what to do. The virtue of obedience was so firmly rooted in him.

I won't speak of the superiors, for whom his obedience *was prompt and cheerful* without ever asking why he was being asked to do something. But the college assistants, and his equals received the same attention and ready obedience to any order or advice, as well as his superiors. When the bell went for study he was there most punctually, and applied himself in such a recollected way that any noise, chatter, or frivolous behaviour from anyone else went as if he did not notice it. He did not move unless there was another bell. One day it happened that a classmate, passing behind him, knocked his coat to the floor. He was content to make a simple remark about it being better if he looked where he was going next time. His classmate, *forgetting that he too was a cleric, and forgetting that charity demands we put up with the faults of others and not insult them*, got angry and raised his voice using offensive and threatening words. So Comollo, taking no notice of the insults thrown at him, settled himself again at his desk and continued to study calmly as if nothing had happened or been said.

In recreation, in groups, when going out for a walk he liked to always talk about academic matters, and in fact at study time he used to mentally prepare a series of things that he didn't fully understand so that he could soon raise them with a classmate in free time, someone he had special confidence in and who could explain them. He knew how to liven up conversations with various items of useful research and with anecdotes, but constantly observed his praiseworthy trait of good manners, keeping quiet when someone else was talking. And often enough he would stop halfway through a word to make room for someone else to speak.

He greatly abhorred the spirit of criticism or complaints about others; he spoke of his superiors but always reverently and respectfully; he spoke of his friends but always charitably and with moderation; he spoke about the timetable, the constitutions and rules of the Seminary, meals, but always expressing satisfaction and contentment. He did this in such a way that I could in all honesty say that in the two and a half years that I was at the Seminary I never heard him once offer a word that was against the principle he had firmly established in his mind: *speak well of others or not at all*. When he was forced to offer his opinion on someone else he always tried to interpret them in the best sense, saying that he had learned from his uncle that if an action had a hundred possibilities, ninety-nine of which were bad, one ought to take the one that was good and judge things favourably. On the other hand speaking of himself he remained quiet about anything that might redound to his benefit without ever speaking about things that would give him importance or honour.

One of his friends, full of wonder at seeing a young cleric adorned with so many virtues, told him one day: "Comollo, you are a saint." Without comment on these words of praise, he took two sticks of bread which we Piedmontese call grissini, and placing them on his head like two horns, answered jokingly: "Here's your saint."

Those little 'flowers' of devotion that we had seen him adorned with amongst the clods, in the fields, in his studies, far from withering with the years, flowered in all their charm and perfection. *It was wonderful to see how Comollo, given the bell for prayer or other sacred function, immediately ran there with the greatest diligence and kneeling or sitting up straight, in edifying recollection, he carried out his religious practices; one never saw the least reluctance in him about going to chapel or any other place to be there for his religious duties. In the morning at the first sound of the bell he got straight out of bed and adjusting whatever he needed to was there in church a quarter of an hour before everyone else to ready himself for prayer.*

Every time the seminarians attended solemn functions in church they no longer recited the Rosary there, but Comollo never left that devotion aside, so once the public functions were over he would, with another friend, withdraw

to the chapel to 'pay his debt' as he used say, to his good Mother by reciting the most holy Rosary. On holidays and especially over the Christmas holiday period, or Carnival, and the Easter solemnities, he would, even more than once a day, draw apart from common entertainments and recite the penitential psalms, or the Office of the dead, or of the Blessed Virgin in suffrage for the souls in Purgatory.

He loved Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and as well as frequent visits or spiritual communion, he took advantage of any occasion for sacramental communion to the great edification of those who were nearby. He would fast for a day in honour of Mary most holy before receiving Communion. After Confession he did not want to speak about anything except the greatness, goodness and love of Jesus whom he was going to receive the following day. When it was time for him to approach the sacred table I saw him taken up with the most lofty and devout thoughts. With full composure, walking slowly and deliberately with his eyes cast down, and at times trembling with emotion, he would approach the Holy of Holies. When he had returned quickly to his place he seemed beside himself, deeply moved and fully taken up in devotion. He prayed, but his prayer was interrupted by sobs, groans and tears; he could not quieten his rapture of affectionate piety until Mass was over and the morning hymn began. He was often warned to curb his external show of emotion since it might offend others: "I feel so full of affection and so happy of heart" he told me "that if I can't express it I feel I will suffocate." "On the day I go to Communion," he said at other times "I feel so full of joy and goodness that I cannot understand or explain it." From this anyone can see clearly that Comollo was well advanced on the way of perfection. Those movements of love of God, of gentleness, of contentment in spiritual matters are the result of his keen faith, his burning charity which was deeply rooted in his heart and constantly guided him in his actions.

The exemplary mortification of all his external senses went hand in hand with his inner devotion. He was modest in the use of his eyes when there was often an outing to gardens or villas, so that he saw little of the remarkable things around him which all the others used to admire. He never let his eyes wander but would carry on a conversation with a friend in Latin taking

no notice of anything else that was happening around him. It sometimes happened that on return from an outing he would be asked if he had seen his father, since they had passed nearby and if he had greeted him. He would answer that he hadn't seen him. He was often visited by some of his cousins in Chieri, but he found this a real cross, having to talk to people of the opposite sex. So as soon as they had said what they wanted to and needed to, he would encourage them kindly to visit him as little as possible, then would quickly take his leave. He was sometimes asked if his relatives (those he treated with such reserve) were little or big, or particularly pretty, and he would reply that they looked tall in the shade but he knew nothing else about them since he had never ever looked at them fully in the face. What a wonderful example and worthy to be emulated by youth especially those who aspire to or find themselves in the ecclesiastical state!

The simplest and most indifferent of activities became a way for him to exercise virtue. He had a habit of crossing his legs and resting his elbow on the table when at the table or in the study hall or in school. Out of love for virtue he wanted to correct this too, and to succeed he asked a friend to tell him as soon as he did it and even to give him a small penance every time he saw him take up that position. This is where his exterior composure in church came from; from the study hall, in school or in the refectory he edified and charmed anyone who saw him.

Mortification in food was something he practised daily: ordinarily the more he felt the need to take something (breakfast), that's when he would stay away. He was extremely frugal at table: he drank little wine and what he did drink was watered down. Sometimes he did not eat the main course or drink wine but was content to eat bread dipped in water, using the specious pretext that it was better for his health, but in reality it was his spirit of mortification. In fact, when he was told that this way of eating would be bad for his head or his stomach, he replied: "For me it's enough that it doesn't harm my soul." Every Saturday he fasted out of love for the Blessed Virgin; and on other vigils in Lent even before he was obliged to fast, he fasted so severely and took food in so small quantities that a friend he sat near at table said on a number of occasions that Comollo wanted to commit suicide! These were the main

external acts of penance that I noticed, from which one can imagine what he practised in his heart, and how Comollo's soul was constantly taken up in affectionate love for God, active charity towards his neighbour and a burning desire to suffer for love of Jesus Christ.

"The life Comollo led in the seminary," one of his superiors said²⁵ "always gave the idea that he was holy and excellent, always exact in his duties be it study or piety, exemplary in his moral conduct so that his entire approach showed up the most docile, obedient, respectful and religious character."

He liked talking, so if anyone felt a bit down, speaking with him brought some consolation. He was so modest, edifying in word and in dealing with people that even the most indiscreet individuals were obliged to recognise in him a mirror of modesty and virtue. One of his companions used to say that Comollo for him was a constant sermon; he was like honey that sweetened hearts, including the most bizarre types. Another said several times that he wanted to do everything possible to become a saint and to succeed he had decided to copy Comollo; and although he saw himself way behind such a model of virtue he was, just the same, very happy with the little he had been able to emulate.

As far as his behaviour during the holidays was concerned, it was the same as in the Seminary. He went very regularly to the Sacraments, frequented sacred functions, was punctual in teaching Catechism to the youngsters at church (he did this even from the time he was still dressed in lay attire), and also those whom he met along the way each time.

This is how he described his timetable in a letter he wrote to a friend. "I have already spent some two months on holidays which, even though it has been very hot, have been very good for my health. I have already studied what was left over from logic and ethics, which I had left aside during the year. I would willingly take up reading Giuseppe Flavio's *Church History* as you suggested²⁶, but I have already started reading the history of heresies, so

²⁵ "Fr [Innocenzo] Arduino da Carignano [1806-1880], then professor of theology and now canon provost and vicar forane in Giaveno" (note in the original text).

²⁶ Giuseppe Flavio (37-100), *Antichità giudaiche*; narration of the history of the Hebrew people from the origin till A.D. 66.

I won't have time. I hope I can do it another year. As for the rest my room is a little piece of earthly paradise; I go in and do exercises, laugh, study, sing, and the only thing missing is you to joke with. At table. at recreation, going for a walk I always enjoy the company of my dear uncle who, despite his age is always happy and gracious and every time he tells me something better than the one before, all of which makes me very content. I am waiting for the moment we agreed on, be happy; and if you think well of me then pray to the Lord for me etc."

He was extremely fond of anything regarding the ecclesiastical ministry and was very happy when he could be busy about those things, a clear sign that the Lord was calling him to the state that he aspired to. His uncle the Provost, in order to nurture such fertile soil and encourage his nephew's inclinations, gave him the task of giving a sermon in honour of Mary most holy. He wrote about this task in another letter addressed to the usual friend.

"I have to tell you about something that makes me happy on the one hand but has left me a bit worried on the other. My uncle has given me the job of preaching on the glorious Assumption of the Virgin Mary. My heart is full of joy and excitement at being able to speak of my dear Mother. But on the other hand, knowing my own inadequacy I can clearly see how I am far from being able to worthily thread her praises together. Be that as it may, with her support, which I must speak of, I am ready to obey; I have already written it out and studied it a bit; on Monday I will come to you and you can listen to me give it and make observations which I will find very acceptable, regarding gestures and content. Recommend me to my Angel Guardian for the trip ... See you."

I still have this sermon with me which, although he used various quotes from creditable sources, is no less written by himself, and one notes expressions of those keen sentiments with which his heart burned regarding the great Mother of God. And he was a great success in delivering it. "Just as I was about to stand before the people," he wrote "my strength and my voice failed me, and my knees were knocking together. But Mary quickly put her hand on me and I became vigorous and strong; I started and then continued without the least hesitation. Mary did this, not I. Praise to her."

A few months later when I was in Cinzano, I asked what people were saying about the cleric Comollo and the sermon he had given. Everyone answered full of praise for him. His uncle said he saw God's work in his nephew. It was a sermon delivered by a saint, someone said. "Oh," another exclaimed "he seemed like he was an angel in the pulpit, so modest and so clear in his argument." Others spoke of the wonderful manner in which he preached. And then they repeated some of the ideas and even the very words which were still fixed in their memory.

Without doubt a farmer of such good will would have done great good in the Lord's vineyard. Such were his uncle's expectations, such was the hope his parents had, and such was the desire of his townsfolk, superiors, and friends. But God saw that he was pretty much ready for heaven. And so the evils of the world might not affect his intellect, he wanted to recompense his good will and call him to enjoy the fruits of the merits already acquired and the merits he earnestly still wanted to acquire.

Chapter 4 – Circumstances preceding his illness

It is not my intention to talk about matters I consider to be supernatural; I intend only to speak of facts that happened, leaving everyone free to judge as they see best.

In the autumn holidays of 1838 I went to Cinzano to arrange for some matters pertaining to the coming school year. One nice day I went walking with Comollo up a hill where we could look down on the vast expanse of fields, meadows and vineyards. "See, Louis," I began to say "how poor the harvest is this year! Poor farmers! So much work and almost all of it in vain!"

"It is the hand of the Lord," he replied "weighing on us. Believe me, our sinfulness is the reason. In the coming year I hope the Lord will give us more abundant results."

"I hope so too, and good for those who can enjoy them."

"But let's keep going and leave these melancholy thoughts aside. We'll be patient this year, but next year we will have a more abundant harvest and make better wine."

“You will be drinking it.”

“Maybe you intend to keep drinking your usual water.”

“I hope to be drinking a better wine.”

“What do you mean by that.”

“Forget it, forget it ... the Lord knows what he is doing.”

“That’s not what I asked. I asked what you meant by the words: ‘I hope to be drinking a better wine.’ Would you like to be going to heaven, perhaps?”

“Although I only expect to be able to get to heaven after death purely through the Lord’s mercy, just the same for some time now I have had a strong desire to taste the ambrosia of the Blessed and the feeling that my days are numbered.”

Comollo said this with a smile on his face at a time when he was in the best of health and was getting ready to go back to the Seminary.

He said almost the same once when he came to Turin. At the end of the holidays he went to the Capital and spent a few days at the home of someone who was a good judge of things²⁷, and I quote the following words of his: “We were very much edified by the modesty of good Louis; Courteous, pleasant, simple, he inspired devotion in every thing he did, but especially when he prayed, he seemed like another St Aloysius. It was our great wish that he would spend some more days with us, but he really wanted to go. As he was leaving I said: ‘Goodbye, perhaps we will not see each other again.’ ‘No, no,’ he replied ‘we will not see each other again.’ ‘It wasn’t you I was thinking of when I spoke that way,’ I replied ‘but because of my advanced age I would like, indeed I hope, that you will come to celebrate one of your first Masses.’ ‘Well then,’ he replied, frankly and resolutely: ‘I will not be saying a first Mass; you will still be here in the coming year, but I will not be. So pray to the Lord for me. Goodbye.’ These last words, said so frankly by someone so beloved, left us quite moved and we found ourselves often asking if good Louis had some inkling of his death. So when we heard the sad news of his death we said, full of admiration, that he knew all too well.”

²⁷ “The home of Mr Fassone, administrative officer at the Royal Park de’ tabacchi” (note in the original text).

I lend much credence to this story since I have checked it out with other people and noted the same ideas and words.

When these holidays were over and he was heading back to the Seminary, he reached a spot from which he could look back over his home town. While he paused, he looked out over the countryside and with unusual seriousness said to his father: “I cannot take my gaze off Cinzano”, and when asked what he saw, or if he was sorry he was going back to the seminary, he said: “Not only am I not sorry, but I want to get to that peaceful place as soon as possible; what I am looking at is our dear Cinzano that I am looking at for the last time.” When he was asked again if he was not feeling well, if he wanted to return home, he said: “Nothing, it’s nothing; I’m fine, let’s move on happily, the Lord is waiting for us.” “These words,” his father says “we have often repeated in the family, and every time I go past that spot, even now, I find it hard not to burst into tears.” This detail was reported to me and others before Comollo’s death.

Despite these forebodings concerning the end of his mortal life, ones that Comollo had uttered on more than one occasion, in his usual calm way and with his customary imperturbability and even-temper he got back to his studies again and continued to be exemplary in his practices of piety. At the half yearly exam he won (as he had done the previous year) a prize of seventy lire which was usually awarded each year to the one who stood out most for studies and devotion. *Although he showed the same care in carrying out all his duties, the same cheerfulness and conviviality in discussions and at recreation, nevertheless I had noticed something mysterious about his behaviour, I’m not sure what. He seemed even more attentive in prayer and all the other exercises of piety.* He always wanted to talk about the Tonkin Martyrs²⁸: “These are real pastors of the Lord Jesus Christ’s sheep,” he said “since they gave their lives to save the lost sheep. How much glory will be reserved for them in heaven.” At other times he exclaimed: “Oh, if I could at least, as I am about to depart this world, hear the Lord’s consoling words—*euge, servei bone*; come faithful servant!”

²⁸ These are the martyrs Andrew Dung-Lac (decapitated in 1839) and companions. In Comollo’s time the persecution was still happening. The martyrs of Tonkin (Vietnam) canonised in 1988 were 117 in number (96 Vietnamese, 11 Spaniards and 10 French).

He spoke about paradise in joyful rapture; and one of the most beautiful things he used say was this: “When I am alone or unoccupied or when I can’t sleep at night then I go for the most beautiful walks. I imagine that I am on a high mountain and from its peak I can see all the beauties of nature. I contemplate the sea, the land, towns, cities, and all the magnificent things about them; I exalt when I see the peaceful sky, I admire the firmament where all the scattering of stars form the most wonderful spectacle. Then to all this I add the idea of beautiful music, that with voice and sound seems to echo through the mountains and valleys. My mind takes delight in my imagination, I turn around, lift up my eyes and there I am before the City of God. I see it from the outside, then I come closer and can penetrate within; just imagine all the innumerable things I then see up close.”

Continuing on his ‘walk’ he would then talk about all the interesting and edifying things that he would inspect closely during these sessions in Paradise.

It was in this year, too, that he discovered the secret of praying at length without distraction. “Do you want to know,” he told me, “how I begin to pray? It is a very material image that will make you laugh. I close my eyes, and in my thoughts I am carried into a large hall whose ceiling is held up by many columns that are most exquisitely decorated, and towards the back of the hall a huge throne rises up above which I imagine God is in all his majesty; then around him all the choirs of the Blessed. I prostrate myself before this and then with all the respect I can muster, I begin to pray.” Following what the spiritual teachers say, this demonstrates how much Comollo’s mind was detached from sensible things and how much control he could exercise in gathering up all his faculties of mind when he wanted to.

In this same year, while he was hearing Mass during weekdays, he would read meditations on hell by P. Pinamonti²⁹, and I heard him often comment on this: “During this year I have been reading meditations on hell in the chapel. I had already read them and I read them again, and even though

²⁹ *L'inferno aperto al cristiano perché non v'entri, ovvero considerazioni delle pene infernali proposte a meditarci per evitarle* (1693). Giovanni Pietro Pinamonti (1632-1703) Jesuit, preacher, confessor and spiritual director.

the contents are sad and frightening, I want to keep on reading since while considering the intensity of those torments while I am still alive, I might not have to experience them in real terms after death.”

During Lent (1839), and with keen devotion, he also made his retreat. After this, he said that he did not have long to wait in this world and that the greatest favour the Lord could grant a Christian was that of making a retreat. “It is the greatest of graces,” he told his friends rapturously “that God can give a Christian, to give him time to arrange matters of soul in full awareness, at his leisure, and with the support of all kinds of favourable circumstances such as meditation, instructions, readings, good example. Oh! How good you are to us, Lord. How ungrateful is the one who does not make use of all this goodness from God.”

Chapter 5 – Becomes ill and dies

While I attempt to tell about matters regarding Comollo’s final illness and death, I consider it good to repeat that what I say here is what was written down during his illness and immediately after his death: things that were read and re-read by his superiors at the Seminary and by friends who were eyewitnesses, before it was all sent to the press. They all say that there is nothing here that does not conform to the truth.

It is also good to note that an innocent soul adorned with so many virtues as was Comollo’s, tells us that there is nobody who does not dread the approaching hour of death. He too experienced great apprehension. Ah, if good souls are so afraid to present themselves before the divine Judge and render account of their actions, *what will happen, O readers, what will happen to someone who gives no thought to anything but the pleasures of life! What a terrible moment that will be for the sinful person!*

It was the morning of March 25, 1839, the Feast of the Annunciation, when I met Comollo in the corridors as I was going to the chapel. He was waiting for me. I asked him if he had slept well and he replied frankly that he was all done in. I was very surprised, given that the day before we had walked a good bit together and I had left him in perfect health. I asked him why he had

spoken thus. He replied: "I feel cold throughout all my body, my head aches and my stomach seems blocked; but my bodily ills don't hurt all that much, what terrifies me (this he said in trembling voice) is that I must present myself before God's grand judgement." I encouraged him not to be so anxious, even though these were serious matters, but rather remote for him and he still had time to prepare himself. We went into the chapel. He heard Mass after which he suddenly became very weak and had to immediately go to bed. Once the functions were over in the chapel, I went to visit him in the dormitory. As soon as he saw me amongst those standing around, he made a sign for me to come closer, as if he had something of great importance to show me, and then he began saying: "You were telling me that it was something remote and that I still had time to prepare myself before going, but that's not the case; I am certain that I must appear before God soon; I have little time left to get myself ready; need I say it more clearly? We will be saying goodbye." Nevertheless I encouraged him not to worry and not to make himself anxious with ideas of the kind. "I am not worried, and I am not anxious," he interrupted, and then said "I am only thinking that I must go before this great judgement, judgement which has no appeal, and this makes me feel agitated." I was much affected by these words; so I was constantly asking if there was any news about him and every time I visited him he repeated the same things: "The time to present myself to divine judgement is at hand; we must say goodbye." During his illness he would have said this not once but more than fifteen times. And from the first day of his illness he told others the same when they went to visit him. He also said that his illness would be misunderstood by the doctors, that operations and medicines were to no avail; and this in fact was the case. These matters which at first I attributed to mere fear of divine judgement, when I saw that little by little things were happening as he had said, I spoke about them with some friends and with our Spiritual Director. At first he did not take much notice but then he was very surprised when he began to see the effects³⁰.

³⁰ "The Spiritual Director at the seminary in Chieri at the time was Fr Giuseppe Mottura [1798-1876], now canon of the famous college at Giaveno." (note in the original text).

Meanwhile Comollo was still in bed and feverish on the Monday; Tuesday and Wednesday he got up but seemed sad and melancholy, all taken up with the thoughts of divine judgement. On Wednesday evening he went to bed sick again and never got up again. On the Thursday, Friday and Saturday of that week (Holy Week), he was bled three times, took various medicines, broke into copious sweats, but there was no improvement. On the Saturday evening, Easter Vigil, I went to visit him: "Since we must leave one another and soon I must present myself before the judgement seat," he said to me "I would dearly like you to stay beside me tonight." Since I had spoken to the Director, who immediately knew some of the symptoms that the illness was getting worse, gave me permission to spend the night at his bedside. It was March 30, just before the solemn day of Easter. Around eight o'clock the fever became very strong; at a quarter past eight he began to go into convulsions and lost his senses. At first he cried out at length as if he were terrified by some frightening object or some grim spectre. From then until half past eight he came back to his senses somewhat and looking at those standing around he cried out in a loud voice: "Oh, judgement." Then he began writhing with such strength that five or six of us around him could hardly keep him in the bed.

This went on for a good three hours after which he returned fully to his senses. He spent a long time then looking pensive as if caught up in serious reflection, then discarding all that atmosphere of mournfulness and terror that he had shown for the last few days concerning divine judgement, he began to look peaceful and calm. He spoke, laughed, answered questions and we thought that he had almost returned to his regular condition of health again. He was asked why the sudden change given that he was so melancholic earlier and now so happy and amiable. He seemed a bit embarrassed to answer that question; then, with his eyes darting here and there as if nobody would hear him he began to speak in a whisper to someone near him: "Up until now I dreaded dying for fear of divine judgement; this terrified me utterly; but now I am at peace and have no fear of what is to come for the following reasons which I will tell you about in friendly confidence. While I was extremely agitated out of fear of divine judgement, I seemed suddenly to be transported into a wide, deep valley where the power of the wild currents and a strong wind sapped

all the strength of anyone who was there. In the middle of this valley was a great abyss like a huge deep furnace, with flames flaring up from it. Every now and then I saw souls, some of whom I recognised, fall into it and then huge bouts of fire and smoke went up into the heavens. At this frightening scene I cried out for fear of falling into that frightful chasm. So I turned back to flee and there was a countless number of monsters all of horrible and different shapes trying to hurl me into that abyss ... I cried out more loudly and even more terrified, without knowing what I was doing and I made the Sign of the Cross. When I did that all the monsters sought to bow their heads but unable to do so they began squirming in agony and drawing away from me somewhat. Still I was unable to flee and get away from that accursed place; then I saw a multitude of armed men like strong warriors coming to my aid. They vigorously attacked the monsters, some of whom were torn apart, others were lying on the ground while others still hurriedly took flight. Freed from danger I began walking through that broad valley on foot until I reached the foot of a tall mountain which could only be climbed by a staircase. But the stairs were full of fat serpents ready to devour anyone who tried to climb up. But there was no other way and I did not dare to go forward, fearing that I would be devoured by the serpents. I was beaten by weariness and anxiety, without any more strength left in me, when a lady whom I consider to have been the Mother of us all, dressed in great magnificence, took me by the hand and made me stand up straight, saying: 'Come with me. You have worked in my honour and called upon me many times, therefore it is right that now I take pity on you. The Communion in my honour deserve that you escape from the danger that the enemy of souls has put you in.' Meanwhile she signalled that I should follow her up the stairs. As she put her feet on the steps, all the serpents turned their deadly heads away and did not look at us until we were quite a distance from them. When we had reached the top of the staircase I found myself in a delightful garden where I saw things that I could never have imagined existed. These things filled my heart and made me feel at peace so that instead of fearing death I wanted it to come quickly so I could join the angels in heaven and sing the praises of my Lord." These were his words.

Whatever you might want to say about this story, the fact was that however great was his fear of appearing before God, he then demonstrated his desire that this moment should come immediately. There was no more melancholy or sadness on his face. He was all smiles and happily wanted to sing psalms, hymns or spiritual praises. Although Comollo's state of health apparently seemed to have improved, nevertheless when dawn came I judged it to be a good thing for him to receive the Sacraments given that it was the Easter Sunday Solemnity. "Willingly," he replied "and since they say that the Lord rose from the tomb about this hour (it was four thirty in the morning) I would like him to rise in my heart with the abundance of his grace. There is nothing that bothers my conscience, but just the same given the situation I am in, I would like to speak to my confessor for a moment before receiving Holy Communion."³¹ Here is something worthy of note: a young man of our time, in the bloom of life, convinced that he must soon present himself before the divine judgement, says frankly that there is not the least thing to reproach his conscience ... that he is at peace. You might say that it was his well-regulated life, his pure heart and pure soul.

Good reader, may this be an encouragement to me and to you from now on to settle matters concerning our soul so that at the final moment of our lives we can also say: I have nothing that weighs on my conscience. May God grant us this.

His Communion was a truly edifying and wonderful spectacle. When he had finished his Confession and prepared himself to receive Holy Viaticum, the Director, who was the minister, followed by the seminarians, entered the infirmary; as soon as he appeared the patient, deeply moved, his face bloomed, his appearance changed, and in holy rapture he cried out: "Oh what a beautiful sight. So wonderful to see. Look how the sun is shining! Look at the crown made by the stars! Look how many are prostrate in adoration and do not dare to lift their heads! Oh! Let me go and kneel with them and adore that sun like I've never seen it before." While he was saying this he tried to get

³¹ "Comollo's regular confessor was Fr (Francesco) Bagnasacco, canon of happy memory in the honourable college of canons in Chieri. In his two years at school and in the two and a half at the Seminary, he had always gone to the same confessor." (note in the original text).

up and made strong efforts to approach the Blessed Sacrament. I made every effort to hold him down in bed; I was crying tears of affection and wonder; I did not know what to say nor how to answer him. And he struggled all the more to approach the Holy Viaticum; he was not satisfied until he had received it. After Communion, all focused on his affectionate thoughts of Jesus, he remained unmoving for a while then, *breaking into raptures of joy once again, cried*, “Oh! Marvel of love! Who am I to be made worthy of such a precious treasure! Oh! The Angels in heaven exult, but I have more reason to be happy since He whom the prostrate Angels respectfully see revealed in heaven, is now held within me to look after: ‘*Quem coeli capere non possunt, meo gremio conféro; magnificavit Deus facere nobiscum et facti sumus laetantes*’: the Lord has done wonders for me, and I am filled with heavenly joy and divine consolation.” These and many other similar brief prayers he continued to pronounce for a good period of time. Finally he lowered his voice, called me to him and then asked me not to speak to him about anything else other than spiritual matters, saying that these final moments were too precious, that there was not much life left in him, and that he had to spend all the time glorifying God; therefore he would answer no other questions other than something to do with these matters.

In fact all that time when he was writhing and convulsing and being asked about temporal matters, he was raving; but when asked about spiritual matters his answers were more lucid.

Given that his condition was getting worse, his relatives sought opinions from various good doctors who proposed remedies and did various things: in other words they did what doctors do and what surgeons could suggest but all without effect, verifying in every way what Comollo had already predicted.

Meanwhile the patient, looking very weak and drifting off to sleep, was left to rest awhile. The seminarians went off to the sacred functions at the Cathedral. After a short sleep he awoke and finding himself alone with just his usual friend he began to speak thus and I offer it here word for word. “Here we are my dear friend, we are just about at the moment when we must leave one another for some time. We thought we would comfort one another

through life's vicissitudes, help one another, advise one another in everything that would be of benefit to our eternal salvation. But it was not written thus in the holy and ever adorable will of the Lord. You have always helped me in spiritual matters, in gaining knowledge and in temporal matters too, and now I thank you. God will reward you. But before leaving one another, listen to some reminders from your friend. Friendship is important not only to do what your friend asks while he is alive, but to do the same as we promised one another after death. Therefore the agreement that we made, our many promises to pray for one another to be saved, I want that to extend not just as far as the death of one of us, but of both of us; as long as you spend your days down here, promise and swear to pray for me." Although hearing these words from my friend I felt like weeping, I held back my tears and promised to do as he wanted. He went on. "So this is what I can say concerning yourself: you do not know if your days on earth will be short or long; but however uncertain may be the hour of death, it will certainly come; therefore do things so that your entire life is a preparation for death, for judgement ... Men only think of death occasionally, they believe that this hour will come even though they don't want it to, but they do not ready themselves, so when the moment arrives they are agitated and afraid, greatly embarrassed in finding themselves needing to sort out matters of their soul. Whoever dies amidst such confusion must be very afraid of eternal perdition. Happy those who spend their days doing holy and devout works and find themselves ready for that moment. If you are called by the Lord to become a guide for other souls, always nurture this idea of death, judgement, respect for the church, because one sees even important people who have little reverence for God's house; it sometimes happens that simple people, simple servants have holier attitudes while the minister of the Sanctuary goes around without reflecting that he is in the house of the living God!

"Since for all the time that we struggle in this vale of tears we have no other more powerful advocate than Mary most holy, you must therefore profess a special devotion to her. Oh! If people could be persuaded of the happiness that comes at the hour of death from devotion to Mary, everyone would be competing to find new ways to give her special honour. It will be her, with her

son in her arms, who will be our defence against the enemy of our soul at the final hour. Even though all of hell might be arrayed against us, with Mary in our defence, victory will be ours. Look at the lives of those who recite some prayer to Mary, or offer some simple mortification, and then believe they are protected by her, while they lead a shameless life. Instead of this kind of devotion it would be better not to be devout at all, because if they act like this, it is pure hypocrisy to think they will be favoured in their evil designs and even more so, if it were possible, given approval for their dissolute lives. May you always be truly a devotee of Mary by imitating her virtues, and you will experience the sweet effects of her goodness and love.

“Add to this frequenting the sacraments of Confession and Communion which are the two tools or two weapons with which you will overcome the assaults of our common enemy, and all the shoals in this stormy sea of the world. *Try to have a steady confessor: open your heart to him, obey him and you will have a secure guide in him for the way that leads to heaven, But Alas... so many go to confession without any results: confessions and sins, sins and confessions, but no change. So remember that the sacrament of Penance is supported by sorrow and good resolutions, and where one of these essentials is missing all our confessions become sacrilegious.*

“Finally, be careful with whom you deal, speak and where you go. I am not speaking of people of the opposite sex or other lay people, who are evidently a danger for us and whom we should avoid; I am speaking of our very companions, clerics and even seminarians. Some of them are bad, others are not so bad but not very good, while others still are truly good. The first group you must absolutely avoid, and deal with the second group when you have to, without developing any particular familiarity; it is the last group you must spend time with and draw both spiritual and temporal benefit from. It is true that they are few, but precisely for this reason you need to exercise the greatest caution looking for them, and then when you find them, spend time with them. Form spiritual friendships with them and draw much profit from this. With the good ones you will be good. With the bad ones you will be bad.

“I have one thing still to ask of you and I ask you this kindly. When you go out for a walk and you pass by my grave you will hear our classmates say: ‘our classmate Comollo is buried here.’ Suggest prudently to each of them that they say a *Pater* and a *Requiem* for me. This way I can be freed from the pains of Purgatory. There are many other things I would like to say to you, but my illness is getting worse and weighs on me, so recommend me to our friends’ prayers, pray for me to the Lord, and we will see each other again when he wishes that to happen.”

Sentiments like these expressed from the depths of his heart draw a true picture of his soul. These thoughts about eternal maxims, frequenting the Sacraments, tender devotion for the Blessed Virgin, fleeing dangerous companions, seeking out those from whom to draw some benefit for one’s studies, devotion, were the scope of all his activity.

On the evening of Easter day he was attacked by an even stronger bout of fever, with painful convulsions to the point where it was very difficult to talk to him. *But our holy Catholic religion makes such an impression on the heart of good souls that it was of great help to Comollo to calm him down.* Despite losing consciousness, or agitated by the violence of his illness, as soon as someone said: “Comollo, who are you suffering for?” He would immediately smile and become amiable, “For the crucified Jesus.”

Without a single complaint about his severe pain he spent the night and almost all the following day in this state. Meanwhile he was visited by his parents whom he barely recognised but he recommended to them that they be resigned to the divine will. These words were like barbs which stung the heart of his sorrowing mother who so loved such a loving son, and who so loved her. “Louis,” she said, holding back her tears “do you feel a little better? Take courage, your uncle the Provost is praying for you and has others doing so as well.”

“Yes, my dear mother, I do feel a little better, but from here on I hope to feel even better. This is the time for courage; let’s hope in the Lord. Greet my uncle, continue to pray for me, I will await him in heaven. Do not cry mother, this is what God wants. Courage, courage.”

From time to time he began to sing in an extraordinary voice and kept this up in such a way that you would have thought he was in good health. He sang the *Miserere*, the Litany of Our Lady, the *Ave Maris Stella*, spiritual hymns. But since the singing wore him out completely and worsened his illness, we suggested some prayers to him; so he stopped singing and recited what we suggested to him.

At seven in the evening of the 1st April, things began to get worse and the Spiritual Director considered it wise to administer the Holy Oils. He had hardly begun the sacred function when the patient seemed to appear to be perfectly recovered, answered whenever he needed to, to the point where the priest commented that while a few minutes ago he seemed to be in agony he was now able to assist correctly and respond to all the prayers and responses which are part of this rite. The same thing happened at eleven thirty when the Rector, seeing a cold sweat break out over his pallid face, gave him the papal blessing³².

Once he had received all the comforts of our holy Catholic religion, he seemed no longer to be a sick patient, but someone lying in bed to take a rest; he was fully aware, his soul at peace; he was happy and did nothing else but say brief prayers to the Crucified Jesus, Mary most holy, the Saints. The Rector said that he did not need others to recommend his soul; he was doing this sufficiently for himself. An hour after midnight on April 2, he asked one of those around him how much time there was still; he told him: "Still half an hour." "There is more" the patient added. "Yes," he replied believing that he was raving "still half an hour and then we start the tutoring." "Ah my good friend," he replied smiling, "what a great tutoring! There is more than tutoring." When a friend asked him to remember him in Paradise, he replied: "I will remember all of you, but especially those who help me escape from Purgatory." At half past one, although his face was as serene as usual, he seemed to be very weak and unable to breathe. Rallying a little soon after and gathering what strength he had left, with halting voice, eyes raised to heaven, he broke into this prayer:

³² "The Rector of the Seminary was Fr Sebastian Mottura [1795-1876], Canon, Archpriest of the Chieri College of Canons." (note in the original text).

“Holy Virgin, kind mother, dear mother of my beloved Jesus, of all creatures you alone were worthy to bear him in your immaculate womb. Through the love with which you gave him suck, held him on your arms, suffered with him in his poverty, saw him ill-treated, spat upon, flogged and finally die suffering terribly on the cross; through all of this obtain for me the grace of courage, keen faith, firm hope, ardent charity, sincere sorrow for my sins; and to all the favours that you have granted me throughout my life add the grace that I might die a holy death. Yes, dear and merciful Mother, assist me at this moment when I am about to present my soul to divine judgement; you yourself can present me in the arms of your divine Son; if you promise me this here I am with ardent and frank spirit, dependent on your clemency and goodness and I present my soul through your hands to the Supreme Majesty from whom I hope to receive mercy.”

These were the exact words he said so emphatically and penetratingly that everyone around him was deeply moved to the point of tears.

When he had finished this fervent prayer he seemed suddenly overcome by a mortal lethargy. To keep him with us I asked him if he knew at what age St. Aloysius had died and he answered, “St Aloysius was twenty three and I am dying when I’ve not yet turned twenty two.” Seeing that his pulse was failing, I thought about getting close to him right at the moment that he was about to abandon this world and his friends; so I thought of saying something to him that come to mind in similar circumstances. He was all attention to what was being said to him, his face and lips smiling, maintaining his peacefulness, eyes fixed on the Crucifix which he held tightly between his hands joined on his breast, and he made every effort to repeat every word suggested to him. For about ten minutes before he expired, he called each of those standing around him by name, and said, “If you want something for eternity, I ... goodbye.” These were his last (spoken) words. Because his lips and tongue had stiffened he was unable to vocalise the brief prayers we whispered to him, but he mouthed them with his lips. There were also two Deacons present who read him the *Proficiscere*. When that was finished and as they were recommending his soul to the Holy Virgin and to the Angels to offer him to the Most High, just as they were saying the holy names of Jesus and Mary, his beautiful soul

quietly left his body and flew, as we devoutly hope, to its rest in the Lord's peace. His happy release took place at two after midnight, before the first rays of dawn on April 2, 1839. In another five days he would have turned 22. Thus was the death of the youthful cleric Louis Comollo, he was able to plant the seeds of virtue in his heart through the most ordinary of occupations, nurture them amidst all the world's illusions, perfect them in two and a half years as a cleric, then bring them all to maturity through his painful illness. And while everybody counted himself fortunate to have had him either as a model, or to be guided by his advice, or as a loyal friend, he left us all in the world in order to go to heaven and protect us from there.

It would seem, at first, that such a good Christian soul as was our Comollo would have nothing to fear of divine judgement. But if we observe things well, this is the ordinary behaviour of God's elect. When they consider that they must present themselves before the rigorous divine seat of judgement, they are filled with fear; but God comes to their aid in his own time and instead of the fear of a sinner, which continues in agitation, remorse and desperation, the fear of the just changes to courage, confidence and resignation and produces the most wonderful happiness in the soul. This is really the point where God has the just savour the hundredfold of their good works as the Gospel promises. The bitterness of death is sweetened by tranquillity of soul, contentment and inner joy which restores faith, confirms hope and inflames charity. Evil loses its violence and there is the advance sense of the enjoyment of the goodness that God is about to share with them for all eternity. This should be sufficient encouragement to lead us through the travails of life and to help us to put up with them with resignation and govern all our actions according to the divine precepts.

Chapter 6 – His Funeral

Once daylight came and word spread of Comollo's death, the entire Seminary was in a state of great consternation. One said: "Comollo is already in paradise praying for us"; while another said: "How well he predicted his death." And another: "He lived as a just man and died as a saint"; while yet another: "If as a human judgement we can say that a soul departing this world

flies to heaven, we can certainly say that about Comollo.” So each person competed with the other to find something especially relevant to him. One did his best to get his crucifix, others to have some of his holy pictures. Others considered themselves fortunate if they could have one of his books. There was one even who, not able to get hold of anything else, took his collar as a way of preserving the memory of such a beloved and venerated colleague.

The Rector of the Seminary, also very much moved by the special circumstances that had accompanied his death, and unhappy at the thought that his body would be brought to the town cemetery, went to Turin to ask the civil and Church authorities for permission to bury him in the church of St Philip adjacent to the Seminary itself³³. The professor for the morning conference, Fr Prialis, began school at the usual hour, but when it came time for him to speak, seeing the sadness written across the faces of all his listeners, also became emotional, and left the hall sobbing and in tears, without the strength to continue his conference³⁴.

The other professor also came to class in the afternoon but instead of his usual talk offered a eulogy on Comollo’s death wherein he expressed the sorrow that everyone felt at the loss of such a beloved companion. He also indicated that each one should take heart in the hope that given such an edifying life and wonderful death, he would now have a protector in heaven. He urged everyone to take him as a model of propriety and virtuous clerical behaviour. He described his death in various ways: the death of a just person, a death which was special in the eyes of the Lord, and concluded by recommending that we cherish this moment as a dear memory and try to imitate him in virtue.

³³ The Rector’s request has still been preserved: “The deceased, cleric Peter Aloysius Comollo of Cinzano, died at the archiepiscopal seminary in Chieri. The undersigned, wanting to bury him in the catacombs of the Church of the said seminary known as St Philip’s, has recourse to your Royal Majesty, humbly requesting that he grant permission not only for this one but for others whose death might occur in the future.” (State archives, Turin, *Grande Cancelleria* m. 128/345 *Sepulture e trasporti di cadaveri*, 1839).

³⁴ He was Fr Lorenzo Enrico Prialis (1803-1868).

On the morning of April 3, with all the Seminarists present, along with the superiors, the Parish Priest (Canon) and the other Canons and clergy, the body was carried in through the streets of Chieri and after a lengthy procession during which funeral hymns and prayers were sung, was brought to the Church of St Philip. The bier was placed in the church accompanied by the funeral music and the Director presided at the sung Mass *with the body present*. After Mass the coffin was laid in a prepared grave close to the communion rails, almost as if Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, to whom he had turned with such love and with whom he had conversed so willingly, also wanted him close to him in death.

Seven days later there was a solemn funeral Mass again celebrated with all pomp and circumstance, lights and decorations. These were the final honours bestowed on him by his fellow clerics who, despite their sorrow spared nothing to celebrate such a dear friend.

Chapter 7 – Consequences of his death

It is an undeniable truth that the memory of good souls does not finish with their death but that their example is passed on to the benefit of posterity. An illness and death accompanied by such signs of lively faith and sentiments of virtue and devotion reawakened in many Seminarists the desire to imitate Comollo. Not a few, therefore, began to follow the advice he gave them whilst still alive, and others followed his example and virtue such that some who earlier had not demonstrated much the vocation they aspired to, used his death to make firm resolutions to become models of virtue.

“It was at the time of Comollo’s death,” one of his friends said “that I decided to lead the life of a good cleric and become a holy ecclesiastic; and although my determination might thus far have not had great effect, just the same my commitment will continue, indeed I will redouble my efforts each day.” Comollo’s virtue did not just produce these first good resolutions, but they have continued even until today. The Rector of the Seminary a short time ago assured me that “the change of behaviour in our Seminarists on Comollo’s death has continued until today.”

But we have not spoken so much, amongst all these details, of the virtue of modesty that was precisely the characteristic feature of Comollo. Such good outward behaviour, such exact conduct, such edifying composure, mortification made with all the senses but especially the eyes, leads us to say that he possesses such a virtue to an eminent degree. And I do not believe I am exaggerating when I say and maintain the view that he took the beautiful stole of baptismal innocence into the next life. I argue this not just from his scrupulous reserve in dealing with or speaking with the opposite sex but more so from certain theological subjects that he could not understand at all, and from the questions he would ask, that demonstrated his simplicity and purity. My view was confirmed by what his spiritual director revealed when, after a long talk with him concerning Comollo, he concluded that he saw in him an angelic behaviour as he fervently and devoutly tried to imitate St Aloysius. In fact whenever he spoke about this Saint (other than the fact that he said a special prayer to him morning and evening), he always spoke in tones of rapture and joy. He glorified in the fact that he bore the same name. "Ah," he would say "my name is Aloysius! Maybe I could be Aloysius in fact, one day." It follows that if he did his best to emulate St Aloysius' virtues, he would certainly have emulated what is that Saint's special characteristic: his innocence and purity of behaviour.

It seems appropriate for me here to observe that the reason why Comollo's death made such a great impression was the two appearances he made after his death. One of these was witnessed by the entire dormitory. It may also be appropriate to speak of certain heavenly favours obtained through the intercession of Comollo. Although I have a precise recall of all these things, I consider it best for now to omit them³⁵, happy to conclude this account with three facts to which I add the character and dignity of the people who attest to them, which for me lends credence to the facts.

The first regards someone who was freed from serious temptation. She was someone very much involved in God's service but had been tempted for a long time, now by one thing then by another but she had always succeeded in overcoming the temptation. One day the temptation was so strong that it seemed she would succumb and the more she tried to distance herself from

³⁵ One of these "apparitions" is narrated in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, 2nd decade, Chap. 6 (cf. no. 309).

her sinful imagination the more it went wild. She was unable to pray - her prayer was arid, dry; but turning her gaze to the table she saw something on it that had belonged to Comollo and it reminded her pleasantly of him. "I began to cry out," the same person says, "You are in Paradise, O virtuous Louis, so if you can intercede with the Lord, ask him to free me from this terrible predicament. Then something wonderful happened. I had hardly uttered these words and was about to say something else when this unwanted temptation ceased and I found myself at peace. From then on I have never neglected to invoke that young angel in all my needs, and I was always answered."

The other fact I write just as the person, who was an eyewitness, put it to me. "One morning I was called to go quickly to recommend the soul of a friend to the Lord. He was in his last agony. Having arrived there, I found things just as they had been described to me. Deprived of his senses and unable to reason, his eyes were watery, his lips stiffened, and he was bathed in a cold sweat. It seemed his blood had ceased to flow and one would have said that he would breathe his last breath within a few minutes. I spoke to him several times but he did not respond. Not knowing what else to do, I broke down in tears; in that predicament I suddenly thought of the cleric Comollo and all the wonderful virtues of his I had heard about. To vent my pain I thought of calling on him. "Come on," I said, "If you can do something with the Lord, pray to him to raise up this poor soul and free him from the anguish of death." As soon as I had said this the dying man suddenly dropped the end of the sheet which was clenched between his teeth, shook himself, and then began to speak almost as if he had not been ill. His improvement was such that after eight days he was fully recovered from his illness, although he needed several months more of convalescence, and he was able to resume his previous work."

The final fact I consider should be provided just as the person who received the heavenly favour wrote it. He declares that he recognises it as coming from the Lord through Comollo's intercession. He is Mr Giovanni Battista Paccotti, geometrician and landowner in Cinzano, eyewitness to the admirable virtues which Comollo practised in this town. Here is the content of his report.

Cinzano, 16 September 1847.

Very Reverend Sir,

Following up on the promise made last autumn to Your Reverence, where I said I would write down the facts that happened before and after the death of the cleric Comollo, I am now fulfilling that task, although late, by informing you of a fact that happened to me in 1845, again in 1846 and then again last August in this current year, 1847.

I was troubled by an acute illness which at a certain time of the year turned much nastier. In October and November of 1845 I had a particularly violent attack. It had reached the point that despite all the suggestions of the medical profession and especially those of the celebrated Mr Cavalieri, Professors Ribì and Gallo, as well as others of equal merit, it got much worse and intolerable, and was declared to be without remedy.

On the night of the said month, November 1845, as I said, lying in bed as usual and almost exhausted, I thought more seriously than ever before of the sad situation I had been reduced to and to what lay ahead; as I dozed until morning came and after a difficult night, I don't know if I awoke or just thought I had but the fact is that I heard something saying to me: "why not ask Louis Comollo who could help you in this critical situation?" I believed I was truly awake. Giving serious reflection to these words and since I believed that the behaviour of this very worthy cleric was irreproachable, indeed an example to everyone, I resolved to invoke him, saying: "If you are amongst the Blessed, Louis, ask the Lord to heal me and I will inform Don Bosco about it so that along with other details about you, he can include this to redound to your glory." I was a little calmer after I had said this and then the following day I found myself almost free of an illness that I felt I would succumb to or I would at the very least become a burden and inconvenience to the family.

Meanwhile, when I had fully recovered my health, amongst business matters, and my profession as a measurer, I completely forgot to do what I had promised cleric Louis Comollo I would do. But the following year, that is in autumn 1846, the illness returned suddenly and more strongly; that is when I remembered the obligation I had taken on. In fact, renewing the same promise that I have just described to Your Reverence, and freed as before, I was overcome by feelings of

affection. But since Your Reverence had in a certain way obliged me to make a genuine account of what had happened to me and I, having accepted that, had not done it, the illness assailed me a third time just a few days later. It got more serious by the day and I became of the opinion that this derived from the fact that I had not fulfilled the obligation I had taken on. And indeed, having renewed my promise by saying that if I felt better today I would write to Your Reverence without further delay and fully explain what had happened to me, yet a third time I was granted a notable improvement I can say that I am almost certainly healed of an illness that the medical profession almost certainly would not be able to free me from.

And since I fully recognise that my recovery is due to the intercession of the cleric Louis Comollo, I hasten to ask Your reverence to publish this true and sincere fact that has happened to me for the greater glory of God and so that in the future respect and veneration for this model of virtue, Louis Comollo, may grow more amongst others and especially amongst those who had the good fortune to know him while he was alive.

Herewith what I can and must confirm by this act with which I have the honour ... etc.

Your Reverence's,

Most devoted and humble servant

Pacotti Giovanni Battista

From what has been written thus far each one can easily understand how Comollo's virtues, although not extraordinary, are nevertheless singular and accomplished such that I can propose him as an example for anyone be he lay or religious; certainly, whoever follows Comollo will become a virtuous young man, an exemplary cleric, a true and worthy minister of the Sanctuary.

However, while we admire Comollo's virtuous actions I would like us to fix our thoughts on the divine Religion which forms such wonderful models of virtue. Someone who belongs to the Catholic Religion alone has the Saints and other people outstanding in virtue; only in this Religion is there an abundance of means to comfort one in all of life's needs; she instructs and guides one through adolescence

along the way of truth; she comforts one with the Sacraments, with the word of life into adulthood; she doubles her care during illness leaving aside nothing that could contribute to one's spiritual and eternal benefit, as well as temporal benefit. She alone comforts one at the hour of death, in death or after death.

O Catholic, holy, divine Religion! How great are the good things you procure for the one who practises you, hopes in you and confides in you! How fortunate are those who are in your bosom and practice your precepts!

Meanwhile, good reader, while we admire the virtuous actions of the heroes of Catholicism, let us even more keenly give thanks to God who through his goodness has created us and kept us in the holy catholic religion. And as a pledge of our gratitude, let us show that we are zealously observant of the precepts of this divine Religion of ours. Let us never cease to implore God's mercy with all our heart, so that he may preserve us in this religion until the last moments of our life.

So, dear reader, we will also be very happy, and when our soul abandons earthly things to present itself for the first time to the Supreme and Divine Majesty, we can be certain that we too will hear the sweet invitation proclaimed by Jesus Christ in the Gospel: "Come, O faithful servant, come, you were faithful to me in life, now come and be crowned with glory in heaven where you will enjoy for eternity the joy of the Lord: intra in gaudium Domini tui."³⁶

May the Lord God grant this grace to the one who writes, to you who are reading, and to all faithful Christians. Amen.

³⁶ Cf. Mt 25:21-23.

306. Life of the young Dominic Savio, pupil at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales

Printed Ed. in Giovanni BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales con appendice sulle grazie ottenute per sua intercessione*. Ed. 5. Torino, Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana 1878³⁷.

My Dear Boys,

You yourselves have often asked me to write you something about Dominic Savio, and having done what I could to satisfy your earnest wishes, here then is his life briefly and simply written. I know you will like it.

There have been two difficulties in particular in writing this life for you. The first one is the comments that come from writing about things many people still living have witnessed. I think I have got around this by only writing about the things which you or I saw ourselves, and almost all of which have been written and noted in your own hand.

The second one is that, since Dominic lived here for three years, I have had to speak about myself in different ways since they were things in which I also had a part. I have tried to overcome this by treating things in as historical a way as possible, writing about the truth of the facts, without reference to individuals. If, however, in spite of this I seem to refer to myself unduly, consider it to be the result of the the great affection I have for our deceased friend and for you all; this lets me talk freely to you and keep no secrets from you.

You might ask me why it is I have written Dominic's life and not that of some of the other boys who had such a reputation for virtue and whom you were so fond of—Gabriel Fascio, Louis Rua, John Massaglia come quickly

³⁷ The fifth edition, the last that Don Bosco saw to, is considered the definitive one (cf. Alberto CAVIGLIA, "Savio Domenico e Don Bosco. Studio", in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di Don Bosco nuovamente pubblicati e riveduti secondo le edizioni originali e manoscritti superstiti*. Vol. IV. Torino, Società Editrice Internazionale 1943, p. xv). Of the earlier editions (1859; 1860; 1861; 1866), only the first is published in OE XI, 150-292. we draw on text and notes from: Giovanni BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, in ID., *Vite di giovani. Le biografie di Domenico Savio, Michele Magone e Francesco Besucco*. Introduction and historical notes by Aldo Giraud. Rome, LAS 2012, pp. 37-109.

to mind, apart from many others. It is quite true that the goodness of these boys would make their lives very well worth writing, but Dominic stood out even above these. But if God gives me the health and grace, I have in mind to collect information about these other virtuous friends of yours and satisfy both yours and my wish to read about them and imitate them in whatever is compatible with your state in life.

In this fifth edition, I have added various items of information that I hope will also make it interesting for those who have already read what was in the earlier printed editions.

In the meantime, reading about Dominic's life, say to yourselves what the great St Augustine said in similar circumstances: "*Si ille, cur non ego?*" That is, if a boy of my age, just like me in every way, who had to meet the same temptations as I have to or worse, could follow Christ with such courage and wholeheartedness, why should I not do the same? Remember that true religion does not mean simply saying things, but doing them. If you read something that you admire, don't content yourself with saying "This is great. I like this" but rather: "*I want to do the things I have read about others. They make me wonder.*"

May God give you and all those who read this little book the grace to benefit from it. May the Blessed Virgin whom Dominic loved so much, grant that we may be of one heart and soul in loving our Creator who alone is worthy of being loved above all things, and faithfully served every day of our life.

Chapter 1 – Home – This boy's character – His early virtuous life

The parents of this young lad whose life we are undertaking to write were Savio Charles Savio and his wife Brigid³⁸, poor but upright citizens of

³⁸ Carlo Baldassarre Savio (1815-1891); in 1871 he came to live at the Oratory in Valdocco. Brigida Rosa Gaiato (1820-1871). They married on 1st March 1840 and had 10 children: Domenico Carlo (who lived but a few days: 3-18 Nov. 1840); our Dominic (1842-1857); Carlo (15-16 Feb. 1844); Remondina (1845-1913); Maria (1847-1859); Giovanni (1850-1894); Guglielmo (1853-1865); Caterina (1856-1915); Teresa (1859-1933); Luigia (1863-1864); cf. Michele MOLINERIS, *Nuova vita di Domenico Savio. Quello che le biografie di san Domenico Savio non dicono*. Colle Don Bosco, Ist. Sal. "Bernardi Semeria" 1974, p. 24.

Castelnuovo d'Asti³⁹, a town about ten miles from Turin. In 1841, finding themselves in dire straits without work, they went to live in Riva⁴⁰, a town two miles from Chieri, where the husband began working as a blacksmith, a trade he had already practised as a young man. While they were living there, God blessed their marriage and gave them a son who would be their consolation. He was born on April 2, 1842. When they brought him to be reborn in the waters of baptism, they gave him the name Dominic⁴¹, which although not important in itself it would just the same be a name the boy would give much thought to, as we shall see.

When Dominic was two, to make things easier for the family, his parents decided to return to their home town and went to Morialdo to live, a hamlet of Castelnuovo d'Asti.

The good parents' only concern was to give their boy a Christian upbringing. Up till now he had given them much pleasure. Dominic was naturally good, with a heart which was easily given to piety. He learned his morning and night prayers readily and could already say them by himself when he was only four

³⁹ "In olden days it was called Castelnuovo di Rivalbae because it depended on Counts Biandrate who were landed gentry in this town. Around 1300 it was conquered by Asti and so was from then known as Castelnuovo d'Asti. At the time it was populated with hard-working people who were very active in business, which they carried out in various cities throughout Europe. It was the hometown for many famous men. The famous Giovanni Argentero, known as the great doctor in that century, was born in Castelnuovo d'Asti in 1513. He wrote many works of great erudition. He was very pious and devoted to the great Mother of God, and in her honour he built the chapel of the B. V. of the people in the parish church of St Augustine in Turin. He was buried in the cathedral church and given an honourable inscription on his tomb, still visible. This town saw many other famous people. Recently there was Fr Joseph Cafasso, a man of great piety, theological learning and love for the sick, prisoners, those condemned to be hanged and unfortunate people of all kinds. Born in 1811 he died in 1860." (note in the original text).

⁴⁰ "Known as Riva di Chieri to distinguish it from other towns with the same name. It is four kilometres from Chieri. Emperor Federico in 1164 appointed Count Biandrate to have dominion over Riva di Chieri. It was then given to Asti. In the sixteenth century it came under the control of the House of Savoy – Monsignor Agostino della Chiesa, and Bonino in their *Medical Biography* speak at length of many famous personages who were born there" (note in the original text).

⁴¹ He was born at nine in the morning, and baptised the same day, "at five in the evening" and given the names Domenico Giuseppe (in honour of his grandparents).

years old. He was constantly beside his mother, eager to help her in every way. If he did go off sometimes, it was only to go into some corner of the house and try to say some prayers.

“From his earliest years,” said his parents, “when children find it very difficult to keep still, and are always wanting to touch and pull things about, Dominic was not only obedient and ready to do anything we asked but was also always trying to do whatever made us happy.”

It was interesting and at the same time pleasing how he greeted his father when he saw him coming home after his day’s work. Dominic would run to meet him, take his hand, or jump up into his arms, “dear dad,” he would say “how tired you must be. True? You work so hard for me and I’m not always good, in fact I cause trouble. I pray to God to give you health and to make me good.” And with that he would offer him a chair or stool to sit on, would keep him company and do a thousand little things for him. This was real comfort for me in my work,” the father said, “and I was impatient to get home and kiss my Dominic who had won over my heart completely.”

His love did not stop at his parents; his love of God was older than his years. He wanted to say his prayers and never had to be reminded, much less driven, to say them at night and before and after meals. The *Angelus* too. Rather, it was he who reminded others, should they happen to forget.

One day, distracted by something unusual, his parents sat down to the meal without saying grace. Dominic immediately said: “Dad, we have not said our grace yet”, and began to make the Sign of the Cross and say the prayer.” On another occasion there was a visitor in the house who was asked to stay for dinner. When the meal was put on the table, the man sat down and began eating without making the Sign of the Cross or saying any prayer. Dominic did not presume to correct the visitor, but left the table and stayed away until the visitor had gone. When asked by his parents why he had acted in this very unusual way, he said, “I did not like to be at table with one who eats just like animals do.”

*Chapter 2 – His conduct at Morialdo – Beautiful signs of virtue –
He attends the village school*

In this chapter there are facts which some might find difficult to believe if the one who states them were not to get rid of our doubts. I am drawing from a note that the chaplain of the hamlet⁴² was courteous enough to write up for me concerning his dear pupil.

“Soon after I came to Morialdo, I would often see a small boy about five years old coming into the church with his mother. I was very struck with the serenity of his face and his unaffected piety, and was not surprised that others noticed the same. If, when he came to church in the morning it was locked, you would see something very interesting. He would quietly kneel down and say his prayers, instead of beginning to play about in some way or other as boys of his age would do. It did not matter if the ground was muddy or the snow was thick on it, he knelt down just the same. Curious to know who he was, I made inquiries and found out that he was the son of the blacksmith, Charles Savio.

If ever I met him on the road he would wave while still some distance away and his face would light up with a smile. At school he made rapid progress not simply because he was clever, but also because he tried very hard. Some of the boys he had to mix with were rather rowdy and far from good, but I never saw him quarrelling. If they did try to involve him in some disturbance, he would patiently hold on and at the first opportunity quietly slip away. If they wanted him to join with them robbing orchards, damaging property, making fun of old people or suchlike, he not only refused, but stated quite convincingly why he thought it was wrong to do so.

This spirit of piety did not drop off as he grew older. He was only five years old when he learned to serve Mass and he always did so with great attention. He tried to be at Mass every day, and if there was someone else serving he would hear Mass, otherwise he would serve in a most edifying way. Since he

⁴² “The chaplain at the hamlet then was Fr Giovanni Zucca [1818-1878] from Moriondo; he now lives in his home town.” (note in the original text).

was so young and also small in size⁴³, he could not carry the missal across; it was interesting so see him approach the altar anxiously, stand on tip-toe, extend his arms as far as he could and make every effort to reach the missal stand. If the priest saying Mass wanted to please him, on no account should he change the missal over himself, but pull the stand right to the edge where Dominic could get hold of it and carry it triumphantly to the other side.

He used to go regularly and frequently to confession, and since he already knew how to distinguish heavenly bread from the earthly kind, he was allowed to make his First Communion. Communion was something he did with great devotion. Seeing how grace was working in his soul so marvellously, I often thought to myself, ‘What promise there is here for the future; may God open up the way for him to reach the heights he is capable of attaining.’” (*These are the words of the Chaplain from Morialdo*).

Chapter 3 – Admitted to first communion - Preparation – Recollection and memories of the day

Nothing stood in the way of Dominic’s being allowed to make his First Communion. He knew the basic catechism by heart, and understood very well what the Holy Eucharist was. He had also a great desire to receive Jesus into his heart. There was only one difficulty, his age. At that time boys and girls did not normally make their First Communion until they were eleven or twelve years old. Dominic was only seven. To look at him, he seemed even younger, and so the parish priest hesitated to put him forward. He sought advice from some of the other priests and they, knowing Dominic’s precocious knowledge, the instruction he had received and his keen desire, said that he need not hesitate. The way was now clear and Dominic was told that he could receive the food of the Angels for the first time.

It is not easy to describe the joy which filled him at this news. He ran home trembling with excitement and joy to tell his mother. Much of his time was

⁴³ Dominic’s height at the time of his death according to Prof. Francesco Volante who did the recognition of the body, “would be around 1.50 metres” (cf. ASC A4920119 letter of Francesco Volante to Fedele Giraudi, 18 February 1950).

given to praying and reading; he spent a lot of time in church before and after mass and it seemed as though his soul was dwelling with the angels in heaven. The evening before he went to his mother and said: "Mother, tomorrow I am receiving Jesus in Holy Communion for the first time; forgive me for anything I have done to displease you in the past: I promise you I am going to be a much better boy in every way. I will be attentive at school, obedient, docile, respectful to whoever tells me what to do." Having said this, he burst into tears. His mother, who had only received consolation from him, was also emotional and found it difficult to hold back her tears, but she consoled him saying: "It's ok dear Dominic, everything is forgiven. Ask God to always keep you good, and also pray for me and your father."

Dominic was up early next morning, dressed himself in his best clothes and hurried off to church. It was not yet open so he knelt down on the steps, as was his custom, and tried to pray until the other children arrived and the church was opened. Between Confessions, preparation, thanksgiving and sermon, the service lasted five hours. Dominic went into church first and was the last to leave. All that time he scarcely knew if he was in heaven or on earth.

It was a wonderful and never-to-be-forgotten day for him; it was a renewal of his life for God, a life that can be taken as an example by anyone. If one got him to talk about his First Communion several years later, his face lit up with joy and happiness as he said: "That was the happiest and most wonderful day of my life." He made some promises on that day which he preserved carefully in a little book, and often re-read them. He let me have this little book to look at and I give them here in their original simplicity. They were as follows: "Promises made by me, Dominic Savio, when I made my First Communion in 1849 at seven years of age: 1. I will go often to Confession and I will go to Holy Communion as often as I am allowed by my confessor. 2. I will try to keep Sundays and holy days holy. 3. My friends will be Jesus and Mary. 4. Death, but not sin."

These promises, which he often went over, were the guiding light of his life until he died.

If among those who read this book there are any who have yet to make their First Communion, I would urge them strongly to take Dominic as their model. But I also recommend to parents, teachers and all those who are responsible for the young, to give the greatest importance to this religious act. Be assured that the First Communion very well made is a solid moral foundation for the rest of the child's life. It will certainly be an extraordinary thing to find anyone who has made this great act with real devotion and care and has afterwards not lived a good and virtuous life. On the other hand there are thousands of young people who have gone astray and who are the despair of their parents and those responsible for them; I would not hesitate to say that the trouble began with the little or no real preparation for the First Communion. It is better to delay making it, or not to make it at all, than to make it badly.

Chapter 4 – School at Castelnuovo d’Asti – An edifying episode – A wise response to bad advice

It was clearly high time for Dominic to go to another school as he had gone as far as he could in the little village school. Both his parents and himself desired this very much but how could this happen without financial means. They could only turn to God, the supreme master of everything, and who would see to all that was needed to follow the career to which he was calling him. “If only I were a bird,” Dominic would say sometimes “I would fly morning and evening to Castelnuovo, and so I would be able to carry on with my lessons.”

His keen desire finally overcame all difficulties, and it was decided that he should go to the county school, although this was about three miles away. Dominic cheerfully walked the six miles there and back every day. The varieties of weather, the very hot sun in summer, mud, rain, storms and fierce winds at other times of the year, never got him down or stopped him from going to school, although he was barely ten years old when he started. He was obedient to his parents, which helped him to look after his health and to put up with any discomforts. A local farmer used sometimes to see Dominic on the road,

and one afternoon when the sun was beating down mercilessly he approached the boy and started talking:

“Aren’t you afraid to be on your own on this lonely road?”

“But I am not alone: my guardian angel is with me all the way.”

“But don’t you get fed up in this heat having to go backwards and forwards four times a day?”

“No, I am doing it for a Master who pays well.”

“Oh, and who is that?”

“God the Creator, who rewards even a cup of water given for his sake.”

This same individual recounted this episode to some friends and finished by saying: “A young lad of such tender age who nurtures thoughts of this kind, will certainly make a name for himself in whatever career he undertakes.”

Some of his school companions were not very good, and he ran the serious risk of doing wrong.

In the heat of summer many boys usually went swimming in the ditches, streams, water pools and the like. Bathing has its physical dangers and, not infrequently, the death by drowning of young people and adults has to be lamented. It can also have its dangers for the soul in certain circumstances, when boys are stripped together in public places. How many youngsters deplore their loss of innocence saying that the reason was they went swimming with boys of that kind in those accursed places!

Some of Savio’s classmates were in the habit of going there. He did not want to go there but they wanted him to go with them and succeeded in inducing him to go on one occasion. But when he saw how bad it was, he was deeply grieved and it was never possible to induce him to go again, and in fact he often regretted the risk he placed both soul and body in. But two of the worst boys tried again and they said to him:

“Dominic, are you coming to play?”

“What are you going to play?”

“We’re going swimming.”

“I’m not going. I’m not a good swimmer and I am afraid of drowning.”

“Come on it’s good fun. If you go swimming you don’t feel the heat any more, you have a good appetite and it’s very healthy.”

“But I’m afraid of drowning.”

“Don’t be afraid. We’ll teach you and you can follow what we do. Soon you will be swimming like a fish, and leaping about like the rest of us.”

“But isn’t it wrong to go to such dangerous places to swim?”

“Not at all. If so many go, how can it be wrong?”

“Just because everyone does it doesn’t mean it is not sinful.”

“If you don’t want to dive into the water, start by watching the others.”

“Still, I feel uneasy about it and don’t know what to say.”

“Come on, take our word for it, there’s nothing wrong and we’ll look after you.”

“Before doing what you tell me I want to ask my mother’s permission. If she says yes I’ll come, otherwise no.”

“Don’t be stupid—don’t say anything to your Mum. She won’t let you go, and she will also tell our parents and we will be in for a good hiding.”

“Well if my mother won’t let me go, it’s a sign that it’s not a good thing and so I won’t go. In any case if you want the truth I’ll tell you. I went once before, but never again; simply because it is easy to get drowned there, but more still because from what I saw last time it is also easy to offend God; so don’t talk to me any more about swimming. In any case if your parents don’t want you to go, you know you should not go. God punishes children who disobey their parents.”

This is how Dominic answered the harmful suggestions of his companions and in doing so avoided a grave danger through which, if he had allowed himself to go, he might well have lost his innocence, the loss of which leads on to so many sad consequences.

*Chapter 5 – His behaviour at school in Castelnuovo d’Asti –
His teacher’s words*

From his experiences at this school Dominic learned how to get on properly with the other boys. If he saw one who did his best, was obedient, tried hard at his lessons, he made him his friend. Those who were always giving trouble, making no effort to learn, ready with bad talk and such like, he avoided like the plague. Those who were in between he tried to help, if he could, in whatever way was possible; but he never made them his close friends.

Dominic’s life at the school at Castelnuovo can be a model and an inspiration for any boy who wants to get on with learning and in piety. In this regard I am copying here the good report given by his teacher, Fr Alessandro Allora⁴⁴, still the district head teacher for this school. It is as follows:

“I am very glad to write what I know about Dominic Savio, who in a very short time won my admiration, since I loved him with the tenderness of a father. I am happy to respond to this invitation because I have a keen, clear and complete memory of his study, conduct and virtue.

I cannot say very much about his piety and devotion as he was excused from taking part in the school religious services, on account of his living so far away. Had he taken part he would have stood out for these.

He completed his first elementary in Morialdo and so this good lad gained admission to my school for 2nd elementary on June 21, 1852, the day that students dedicate to St Aloysius, Patron of youth. He was not very strong physically, but he had a very pleasant appearance and was very well mannered. He was always cheerful and good tempered and never imposed himself on anyone. He was like this both in school and beyond, in church and everywhere. Whenever the teacher would see him, think about him or speak to him, he left a very good impression. This is one of the best compensations for the hard work of a teacher, and made up for some of the others who never bothered or showed interest, no matter what was done for them. He lived up to his name [Savio=wise] not only in his lessons, but in everything he did and said, his

⁴⁴ Alessandro Giuseppe Allora (1819-1885).

study and his piety. Right from the first moment he came to my school and until the end of the school year, and for the four months of the following year he made extraordinary progress in his studies. He quickly got to the top of his class and remained there getting high marks in all subjects. This was not simply because he was clever but because he worked very hard and came to have a great love for his lessons. It was also because his studies were not simply for himself but because of his great love for study and virtue.

Also worthy of special admiration was his diligence in fulfilling even the smallest detail as a Christian student and his admirable consistency in attending school. As weak as he was he seemed always in good health walking 4 kilometres between coming and going to school every day—and doing that four times a day. He did all this with wonderful peace of soul and even-temper even in the bad winter months in cold, rain or snow. This had to at least be recognised by his teacher for its difficulty and for the rare merit of it. In the course of the same year, 1852-53, he became ill; parents then changed their abode, so it was to my great regret that I could not continue teaching such a dear pupil. I had great and wonderful hopes for him but was increasingly afraid that he would not be able to continue his studies either because of poor health or lack of finances.

It was a great joy for me when I heard later that he had been accepted at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. I knew that the way was now open for him to nurture his special intellect and his outstanding piety.” (*These are his teacher’s words*).

Chapter 6— School in Mondonio ⁽⁴⁵⁾ - He puts up with a great injustice

It seems that Divine Providence wanted to help Dominic to realise that this world is a place of exile where we have no resting place, it may be, on the other hand, that it was God’s design that he should be known in as many

⁴⁵ “Mondonio, or Mondomio, or Mondone is a small village of around 400 inhabitants two miles from Castelnuovo d’Asti. It is easy to get to Castelnuovo from there by a tunnel through a nearby hill. Some records of this town go back as far as 1034. It came under the House of Savoy through the treaty of Cherasco in 1631” (note in the original text).

places as possible, so that his goodness and strong virtue might be a source of inspiration to all who saw him.

Towards the end of 1852 his parents left Murialdo and set up house in Mondonio, a village near Castelnuovo. Here Dominic continued the same way of life and I need to repeat what other teachers had said about him earlier. His teacher, Father Cugliero⁴⁶, who had him as a student, offers a similar report, though I have been selective in order not to repeat myself too much.

“I can truthfully say that in twenty years of teaching boys I have never had one to equal Dominic. He was only a boy in age but he had the sense and judgement of a fully mature man. He was very diligent and applied himself to his lessons, and his good-naturedness and readiness to help won him the affection both of his companions and teachers. I could not help marvelling at the way he could fix his attention in church, and I often said to myself “This is certainly an innocent boy, whose heart and affections are already in heaven.”

The following is an incident among others recounted by his teacher: “One day, an incident of so serious a nature took place at the school such that expulsion was the obvious punishment for those responsible. The culprits realised this and sought to save themselves by coming to me and laying all the blame on Dominic. I could not imagine that the boy had done anything so stupid, but his accusers were so insistent and emphatic about it that I believed them. I was very annoyed and went to the classroom. I left the boys in no doubt as to what I thought about the whole affair, and then I turned to Dominic and minced no words in telling him off, saying that he deserved to be expelled and that he would have been, had it not been the first time he had done such a thing, and that he should make sure it would be the last time. Dominic did not say a word, but stood there with his head bowed, accepting humbly all that was said to him.

God, however, protects the innocent, and next day it came out who the real culprits were. Somewhat ashamed of all the abuse I had heaped on his

⁴⁶ “Fr Giuseppe Cugliero [1808-1880], was chaplain for some years at Pino di Chieri, and after an exemplary life went to sleep in the Lord in the same town.” (note in the original text).

head, I took him aside and asked him: ‘Why did you not tell me you were not responsible?’ He replied: ‘I knew that these boys had already been up to so much mischief that this would certainly earn them expulsion, and I thought I would try to save them, as I probably would not be expelled, seeing that it was my very first time ... also, I remembered that Jesus had been blamed unjustly and had not said anything, and I thought I should do the same’.

No more was said, but all admired Dominic’s patience, which was able to return good for evil and was even ready to accept serious punishment to save those who had told such lies about him.” (*Fr Cugliero*).

Chapter 7 – I first get to know him – Interesting episodes to do with this

What follows in the succeeding pages can be given with more detail, because I shall be dealing with things which happened before my own eyes and also in the presence of many boys who can bear testimony to their truth. This period begins in 1854 when Father Cugliero, already mentioned, came to see me about one of his pupils whose intellect and piety deserved special consideration. “You may have in your house,” he said, “boys equally good and clever, but there are none who are better than him. Give him a chance and you will find you have another St. Aloysius.” It was arranged that Dominic should come to see me when next I visited the Becchi. It was my custom to spend a few days there each year with some of my boys round about the time of the Feast of the Most Holy Rosary.

It was early on the morning of the first Monday of October⁴⁷ that I saw a boy coming towards me with his father. His serene expression, and charming but respectful manner captured my gaze.

“Who are you and where do you come from?” I asked him.

“I am Dominic Savio. Father Cugliero has spoken to you about me and I have come with my father from Mondonio.”

⁴⁷ Monday October 2, 1854.

I took him aside and asked him about himself and his studies. We found common ground immediately and a relationship of trust and mutual confidence sprang up spontaneously.

I recognised in him a soul where the Holy Spirit reigned supreme, and I marvelled at the way grace had already worked in his young heart and mind.

We talked together for quite a time and, as I was going to call his father over, Dominic said to me: “Well, what do you think? Will you take me to Turin to study?”

“Well, I think there is good material in you.”

“Good material for what?”

“To make a beautiful garment for Our Blessed Lord.”

“Wonderful! I am the cloth and you are the tailor. You will work on me to make something beautiful for the Lord.”

“I wonder if you are strong enough for a long course of studies?”

“Don’t worry, Our Blessed Lord has helped me so far and I am sure he will continue to do so.”

“And what are you going to do when you finish studying Latin?”

“I should love to be a priest, if that were God’s will.”

“Very good. And now let’s try a little intelligence test. Take this little book, go over this page (it was a copy of the *Catholic Readings*), learn it by heart and tomorrow come back and both explain it to me and recite it by heart.”

I then left him free to go and play with the other boys while I had a talk with his father. No more than eight minutes had gone by when suddenly Dominic appeared, smiling, by my side and said: “If you wish I will repeat my lesson now.” I took the book and, to my surprise, he not only recited the page by heart but explained simply and clearly the meaning, showing that he understood it very well.

”Splendid,” I said “you have been quick and so shall I. I will take you to Turin, and from this moment I consider you one of my chosen sons. From now onwards, often ask God to help us both to do God’s holy will in all things.”

Not knowing how better to express his happiness and his gratitude he took my hand and kissed it several times and then said: “I hope always to act in such a way that you will never have reason to complain of me.”

Chapter 8 – He comes to the Oratory of St Francis de Sales – His early attitude

It is characteristic of youth to change suddenly. Not infrequently does it happen that what is wonderful today is far from being so tomorrow. At one time a boy can show great promise and soon after he can act in a way that would show the exact opposite. And if one is not careful, a career that began with the highest hopes can end with disappointment and sorrow to all concerned. It was not so with Dominic. All the virtues which had begun to grow at different stages of his life now continued their growth in a wonderful way, without any of them impeding the others.

As soon as he arrived at the Oratory, he came immediately to my room in order to put himself, as he used say, completely in my hands. Almost immediately his gaze fell on the wall where a piece of cardboard displayed a saying in large letters, which I often used: *Da mihi animas caetera tolle*. He looked at them attentively and I helped him to translate them as follows: *Give me souls, and take away everything else*. He thought for a moment and then said: “I understand; here you do business not with money, but with souls; I hope that my soul will have its share in this business.”

For a time his life was quite ordinary. He studied very hard and was very faithful in carrying out the rules of the House. He applied himself well to his studies and did all his duties zealously. He always listened to sermons with great joy, as he was already convinced that the word of God was a sure guide along the road to heaven. Every idea he heard in a sermon was an essential reminder for him which he never forget.

Every talk, catechism lesson, sermon, no matter how long seemed to be a delight for him. If there was anything he did not understand, he never hesitated to ask for further explanations. This was the root and source of his exemplary life and steady progress in virtue which could hardly have been surpassed.

In order to make sure that he understood the rules and discipline of the school well, he went to one of the teachers and asked him to help and advise him how best to be faithful to them and to correct him if he neglected any of his duties. His relations with his companions showed the same wisdom. He refused to have anything to do with those who were rowdy, disobedient and who showed little respect for the things of God. If there was an exemplary, studious and diligent pupil praised by his teacher he soon became a close friend of Dominic's.

December 8th, Feast of the Immaculate Conception, was drawing near. It was the director's custom to say a little word of encouragement and exhortation to the boys so as to prepare them to keep the feast in a way worthy of Mary Most Holy. He insisted especially that they should ask Mary for the grace they had greatest need of.

That year, 1854, the whole Catholic world was in a state of excitement because of the approaching definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception at Rome. At the Oratory we did our very best to keep the feast with fitting solemnity and devotion.

Savio was among those who had a great desire to keep the feast very well. He wrote out nine deeds to be done in honour of Our Lady and drew out one by lot each day. He prepared himself well, and made a general confession so that his soul might be as pleasing as possible to Mary Most Holy.

On the eve of the feast he went to Our Lady's altar and, on the advice of his Confessor, renewed the promises he had made at his First Communion, and then he repeated many times: "Mary, I give you my heart, please keep it always as your own. Jesus and Mary, always be my friends. Please, please, rather let me die, than that I should ever offend you seriously."

So he took Mary as the guide for his spiritual life, and with such effective results that I began from that time to note down the different incidents or facts of his life, so that I should not forget them.

I have thought it better in what follows to group together the various facts according to their relationship with each other, and not just to give them in chronological order as they happened. This will make for greater clarity and understanding. Accordingly I will divide the remainder into as many chapters as there are matters to be treated of, beginning with his classical studies which were the chief reason for his coming to this House in Valdocco.

*Chapter 9 – Grammar year – Interesting incidents – Behaviour in class –
He stops a fight – He avoids danger*

Dominic had begun his grammar year at Mondonio and, with the progress he made by his hard work and more than ordinary intelligence, he was very soon moved to the fourth class or, as we say today, second year Latin grammar.⁴⁸ Here he came under the care of the devout and kindly Joseph Bonzanino⁴⁹ because secondary classes had not yet been set up at the Oratory like we have them now. I have to speak of his behaviour and example even here along the same lines as earlier teachers have done. I will just pick a few things from this year and two in particular which were noted by others who knew him and admired him for them. Prof. Bonzanino said on a number of occasions that he could not remember having had a better pupil than Savio one who was more attentive, better behaved, more respectful. He was a real model in everything. His clothes were poor, but he was always neat and clean and his manners and bearing were easily equal to those of boys who came from richer and nobler families, a good number of whom went to this school.

⁴⁸ He should have said *seconda ginnasiale* (or second year of secondary); with the Casati legislation (1859) the curriculum of classical studies, earlier divided into 3 classes of *latinità inferiore* (sixth, fifth, fourth), 3 classes of *latinità superiore* (third or grammar, humanities, rhetoric) and two years of philosophy (physics and logic), became two: *ginnasio* (5 classes) and *liceo* (3 classes).

⁴⁹ Carlo Giuseppe Bonzanino (died 1888) had a private school for 20 pupils at home. He became a Salesian Cooperator.

They liked spending time with Dominic not only for his learning and piety but also for his civil and pleasant way of treating them. Whenever there was a boy who was a bit scatterbrained and talkative the teacher would put him beside Dominic, and his influence and example would lead the boy to better behaviour and application.

It was during the course of this year that an incident took place which shows clearly the heroic stuff of which Dominic was made, something hard to believe in a young man at his age. Two of the boys fell out very badly. It began by them insulting one another's families. They became so angry with each other that they determined not only to have a fight but to have a stone fight. Dominic got to hear of it, but he wondered how he could manage to stop the duel, as the boys were both older and much stronger than he was. He tried to reason with them and persuade them to give up and become friends again. They refused. He wrote a letter to each of them. He threatened to report them, and thereby got it stopped, but this only increased their anger and determination to have it out at all costs. Dominic was very worried both on account of the serious injury which was likely to happen and also for the serious offence against God. Dominic had no idea what to do but divine inspiration led him to act thus: he waited for them after school and since he was able to speak with both parties he said: "Since you are determined to see your wretched argument through to the end, I want you to agree to just one condition." "We agree," they said "as long as you don't stop our challenge." "He's a rascal," one of them said of the other, while the other one said he could never be at peace with his opponent until he had bashed his head in. Savio was quite scared by this fighting talk but was determined to stop worse things happening, so he controlled himself and said: "The condition I want to impose will not stop you from facing up to each other."

"What's the condition?"

"I'd simply like to indicate the place where you can start throwing stones at each other."

"You're trying to trick us or stop us."

"I will be with you and I won't try to trick you. Don't worry."

“Maybe you’re going to call someone.”

“I should, but I won’t. Let’s go. I’ll be with you. Just give me your word.”

They promised and immediately set off for the Cittadella fields past Porta Susa⁵⁰.

Dominic had his work cut out stopping them from coming to blows as they went to the spot.

Once they had got there, Savio did something certainly nobody would have thought of. He let them take up positions opposite one another. They already had stones in their hands, five each, when Dominic spoke to them as follows: “Before you start I want you to fulfil your promise”, and having said that he took out the small crucifix hanging around his neck and, holding it high, said, “I want each of you to look at this crucifix and throw the first stone at me, saying clearly these words: ‘Jesus Christ who was innocent died forgiving his enemies⁵¹; I, a sinner, am going to offend him by this deliberate act of revenge.’”

Then he ran to the angriest boy and, kneeling before him said: “Throw the first stone at me: throw it strongly at my head.” The boy, who wasn’t expecting anything like this, began to tremble and said, “No, no, I have nothing against you, and would be only too willing to defend you against anyone else if they attacked you.”

When Dominic heard that he went to the other and said the same things. This boy too was upset and trembling he said that he was his friend and would not do anything bad to him.

Then Dominic rose to his feet and standing between them with his crucifix and a stern look on his face said: “How is it that you are ready to tackle even serious danger to defend me, just a poor creature, but you are not ready to forgive an insult that happened at school to save your own soul? Your soul cost

⁵⁰ “These fields are now all built over and the site of the altercation corresponds to the place where the parish church of Saint Barbara now stands.” (note in the original text). Saint Barbara’s church was opened on April 18, 1869.

⁵¹ Cf Lk 23:4.

the Saviour's blood, and yet you are ready to lose it through this sin?" He fell silent at that point, holding the crucifix up high above his head.

The boys gave in at the sight of such courage and kindness. "At that moment I was shaken to the depths and began to shiver all over. I felt thoroughly ashamed that a boy like Dominic had had to go so far to make me see sense. I had no difficulty in forgiving my companion and I asked Dominic to take me to some understanding priest to whom I could make a good confession and do better in the future. He agreed and a few days later I went with my opponent and we made our confession. After we had made friends again I was reconciled with the Lord whom I would certainly have seriously offended through hatred and desire for revenge."

This example is well worth imitating by any Christian lad if he were to see some similar attempt at revenge or be offended or hurt by others.

Dominic never mentioned anything about this incident and nothing would have been known of the part he played in it if the boys concerned had not related all that happened to their companions.

For boys from the country not very used to the excitement and varied activity of the town, going backwards and forwards to school from the Oratory had its dangers and difficulties. Dominic used it as an opportunity to do something virtuous. He carried out implicitly whatever was laid down by his superiors, and made the journey without letting his eyes roam everywhere or his ears listen to things that were far from good. If he saw someone stopping, running, jumping, throwing stones or going to places that were not allowed he would immediately leave those sorts of boys behind. One day he was invited to go on a walk without permission, and on another was invited to play truant and have fun, but he always refused. "The best way for me to have fun," he told them, "is to do my duty and if you were true friends you would be advising me to do that exactly and not do other things." Nevertheless he was nearly caught out one day when the group he was with decided to play truant and spend the day at the fair which had come to the town. Dominic had agreed and had started off with them, when he suddenly realised what it was he was doing, and refused to go any further. He called them back and told

them: “I am going to school. If we stay away we are displeasing God and also our superiors. I am sorry I agreed to do wrong, and I hope this is the last time you will try to persuade me to follow you in doing wrong. If it is not, we will not be friends any more.”

Dominic won the other boys over and they all went to school, and there was no more trouble in the future. At the end of the year his hard work won him promotion to a higher class, but, when the new school year began,, the third year of grammar, it was decided to let him study privately at the Oratory, as he seemed to be failing in health. In this way it was felt he could be better looked after with proper rest, study and recreation.

The humanities year or 1st rhetoric he seemed a little better and was sent to Fr Picco Matteo⁵². His classes were considered to be among the best in Turin, and Dominic was admitted free, because of the good things this good priest already heard said of him.

There are many edifying things said or done by Savio during this next year at school and the one to follow, and we will continue to tell you about them bit by bit as we outline the deeds connected with them.

Chapter 10 – His decision to become a saint

Now that we have given an indication of his studies we will speak of his great decision to become a saint.

When he had been about six months at the Oratory, Savio heard a talk about an easy way to become a saint. The preacher made three points which made a huge impact on Dominic: it is God’s will that each one should become a saint; it is easy to become a saint; there is a great reward waiting in heaven for those who try to become saint. This talk was like a spark that set off into a consuming blaze the love of God in his heart. For some days he said nothing, going about very quietly without his usual joyful spirit. His companions noticed this, and I did also. My first thought was that he was not feeling well, and I asked him was there something wrong. “No”, he said “it is something

⁵² Matteo Picco (1810-1880); he ran a private school at home.

good.” “What do you mean?” “I mean that I must become a saint. I never saw before that it was both possible and easy. Now that I see it, I can have no peace inside until I really begin to do so. Please will you show me how I should go about it?”

I praised Dominic’s good desires but urged him not to let himself get too worked up, because in that state it is not easy to know what God wants. I said to him that for the moment he should regain his customary cheerfulness, persevere in his regular life of study and piety, and especially not neglect being with his companions in games and recreation.

I said to him one day I would like to make him a present of something that would please him, and that I would leave the choice completely to him. His prompt and immediate reply was: “I want you to help me to become a saint. I want to give up everything to Jesus and for always. If I am not trying to be a saint, I am doing nothing at all. God wants me to be a saint so I have to be one.”

On another occasion the Rector wanted to show his affection for the boys and make them a little present, so he said that they could ask for whatever they wished and, if it were possible, he would give it to them. The requests were to be written down, and it can be imagined that there were some strange and bizarre requests made by some of the boys. Dominic took a piece of paper and wrote these words: “I ask one thing only, that you help me to save my soul and make me a saint.”

Another day explanations were being given about the meaning of words. “What does Dominic mean?” he asked. The reply was: “Belonging to God.” “There you are,” he said, “you see how right I am in asking you to make me a saint. Even my name says that I belong to God, so I must at all costs become one. I can’t be happy if I do not.”

This ‘bee in his bonnet’ that Dominic had about becoming a saint, did not spring from the fact that he was not living a saintly life but from the fact that he wanted to go the whole way, including severe penances and long hours in prayer, and his Rector would not allow these on any account, because they were not compatible with his age or health or duties.

Chapter 11 – His zeal for the salvation of souls

The first advice Dominic was given to help him become a saint was to set out to win souls for God, because there is no holier work in this life than to work for the good of souls for whom Jesus Christ shed the last drop of his blood. Dominic grasped this completely and often was heard to say: “How happy I would be if only I could win all my companions for God!” He never let any occasion slip for giving a friendly word of advice or of quietly recalling anyone to duty who said or did anything contrary to God’s law.

What really shook him, affecting him even physically, was hearing any form of blasphemy or God’s name being taken in vain. If, going through the streets, he happened to hear anything of the kind, he bowed his head in sorrow and reparation, saying fervently to himself: “Praised be Jesus Christ.”

One day when they were walking through the town a companion noticed him taking off his cap and murmuring something to himself: “What are you doing? What did you say?” he asked. “Did you not hear that carter, cursing and swearing? If I thought it would have done any good I would have spoken to the man, but as he is in a temper I am afraid it would only make things worse. So I was trying to make a little act of reparation by taking my cap off and saying: ‘Praised be Jesus Christ.’”

His companion admired Dominic’s behaviour and courage, and to this day never tires of inspiring others by telling them about it.

One day on his way back from school he heard an elderly man utter a horrible blasphemy. He trembled when he heard it and said his short prayer. Then, on a sudden, he went to the man and with great respect and politeness asked him if he could tell him the way to the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. The man was completely taken by the boy’s charm and politeness, and said very affably: “I am very sorry, I am afraid I have no idea.”

“Oh,” said Dominic “I wonder, since you can’t do that, could you do me another favour?”

“Certainly, certainly. What is it?”

Dominic then went very close to the man, and speaking softly into his ear he said,

“Do you think that, when you are in a temper, you could say something else instead of blasphemies about God?”

The man was both astonished and full of admiration for the boy, and said: “Well said, you are quite right. I see that I have a very bad habit and I promise you I will try to overcome it.”

Another day, near the gates of the school, he came across two boys of about nine years old, quarrelling. While doing so, one of them used the Holy Name of Jesus in a curse against the other. Dominic felt justly indignant but, restraining himself, he separated the two boys and got them to make peace. Then he said to the one who had sworn: “Come with me. I’ve something special for you.” The boy agreed because of his nice approach and Dominic took him by the hand and led him into church in front of the altar, then got him to kneel beside him while he told him: “Tell Jesus you are sorry for having taken his Holy Name in vain.” As the boy did not know the act of contrition, he said it with him. Then he said: “In reparation say after me: ‘Praised be Jesus Christ. May his holy and adorable name be always praised.’”

Among the lives of the saints his preference was for those who stood out for their work for souls. He spoke readily of those on the missions who endure so much to save souls. He had no money to send them, but he prayed for them every day and never failed to offer his Holy Communion once a week.

Several times I heard him say: “How many souls there are in England waiting for our help. If only I were strong enough and good enough, I would go there immediately and by preaching and example try to win them all for our Blessed Lord.”

He also often remarked to his friends what little zeal there was among many to instruct children in the truths of faith. “As soon as I am a seminarian, I will go to Mondonio and get the children together so that I can teach them their catechism, tell them stories and encourage them to become saints. How many young people may perhaps lose their souls, for want of instruction and encouragement.”

These were not only words. He used to teach catechism at the Oratory. And he would coach individual boys privately at any time they wanted, gladly giving up his recreation for this purpose. He was always happy if he could speak to them of spiritual things and lead them to an understanding of the importance of saving their soul.

One day a light-headed companion made fun of him for telling a good story to a group of boys in recreation. "Why do you bother telling stories like those?" he asked. "Why do I bother?" replied Dominic. "I bother because we are all brothers and we should all help each other in the most important thing of all, the saving of our souls, which cost the blood of Jesus. I bother because God himself has urged us to do this and because I know also that, if I can succeed in saving one soul, I will make sure of saving my own."

This concern for others was not simply a term-time one. During the holidays when he was at home he kept up his good work. Any little gifts he got, or prizes that he won during the term time, were set aside carefully so that he could use them during the holidays. He would also make the rounds of his superiors before he went home, to ask them if they had any little things to spare, which he might take home with him, "to make my companions happy." Very soon after he got home he would be in touch with many boys, big and small and his own age, and they liked being with him. He would give out his presents at the right moment to encourage them to pay attention to his questions on the catechism or about their duties.

With the ascendancy he gained over them he could get boys to go with him to Mass, to Sunday school and other practices of piety.

I am assured that he devoted not a little time to instructing one of his friends. "If you succeed in making the Sign of the Cross really well," he used to say "I will give you a medal and I will recommend you to a priest who will give you a good book. But I want it done properly, saying the words with your mouth, your right hand starting at the forehead, then to your chest, then to the left and right shoulders and finishing up with your hands joined, saying *Amen*." He had a great desire to see the sign of the cross well made, and was

never shy to make it well in front of others, so as to encourage them to do likewise.

As well as making sure he carried out every minute little task of his, he took two little boys living nearby under his special care, teaching them to read and write and to learn their catechism. He would say morning and night prayers with them and take them to church, show them how to bless themselves properly with holy water, and how to behave well while there. Time that he might have legitimately spent in walks and various pastimes was spent in helping others, by word or by any other means possible. He made a point of making a visit to the Blessed Sacrament every day, and it was a great joy for him when he managed to get someone to come with him. It may be safely said that he never let slip any occasion of helping anyone or of speaking a word which could do good to a soul.

Chapter 12— Various episodes and his way of dealing with his friends

The thought of winning souls to God never left him. He was the life of the games at recreation, but whatever he did or said was for either his own good or for the good of others. He did not monopolise the conversation or keep butting in but if silence came he was always ready with something interesting, a difficulty which had cropped up in class or an interesting story. The others were always glad to be with him. If someone started grumbling or criticising, he would raise a laugh over something else and so distract them and dispel any word of criticism or anything that might be an offence against God.

His cheerful smile and spirit of zest made him popular also with those who were not too fond of religious things. They were always glad to be in his company and whenever he gently chided them it was taken in good part.

On one occasion a companion wanted Dominic to go with him to a fancy-dress event. Dominic would not go, and said to the boy. “Would you really like to be what you are going to dress up as—two horns, a big nose and a clown’s costume?” “Of course not”, replied the other. “Well, why make yourself look like something you would not want to be and in addition deface the nice face that God has given you?”

Another time a stranger came into the playground. He soon had a group around him which quickly became a crowd as the laughter of the boys at his stories attracted more and more. As soon as he had a crowd he changed his tune and was soon trying to poison the minds of the boys with all sorts of horrors, including making fun of holy things and persons. Some of the boys who did not like all this filth but did not dare oppose him, were happy to move away. A good number were silly enough to stay and listen to him. Meanwhile Savio happened to come along. As he grasped what was going on he overcame any human respect, and immediately turned to his friends: "Come on, let's get away from this unfortunate man who wants to ruin us." The boys were obedient when they heard such a kind and virtuous friend and they all left the man who was the devil's envoy himself. The man found himself completely alone, so he left and was never seen again.

On another occasion some wanted to go swimming. This can be dangerous anywhere, but much more so around Turin where apart from the danger of immoral behaviour, there is so much deep and fast-moving water that often boys' lives are lost. Dominic heard about it and tried to make them forget it by occupying their time with him in an interesting way. But when he saw that their minds were made up he spoke out boldly:

"Don't go, it's better not to."

"But we are not doing any harm."

"You are being disobedient, you are putting yourselves in danger and running the risk of getting drowned and you say you are not doing any harm?"

"Yes, but this heat is terrible."

"Maybe, but it is not as hot as another place I know, and what will you do if you end up there?"

Moved by Dominic's attitude they changed their minds and also did not dodge the evening service in church as they had intended to.

Some of the boys had formed a little group pledged to try to lead the not so good to better things. Dominic was one of its most earnest members and

used to use various things given him - an apple, orange, crucifix, little book - to help him in this work. He would appear in the playground holding up whatever he had, and crying out: "Who wants it, who wants it?" There were many cries of "I do" and there would be a concerted rush.

"Just a moment," he would say "I will give it to the one who answers this catechism question best." He would confine himself to the least good boys, and as long as they made a shot at it the prize was theirs.

Others he won over in other ways: he would go and get them and invite them to go for walks with him, give them little talks if needs be, play with them. He was sometimes seen carrying a large stick on his shoulders like Hercules with his club, playing a game called *rana* (frog), commonly called *cirimella*, showing them that he absolutely loved playing that game⁵³. At a certain point he would pause and say: "Do you want to come to confession on Saturday?" The other boy, because Saturday seemed a long way off, and because he was anxious to get on with the game, or just to please Dominic, would say: "Oh, all right." Dominic did not say any more, but in the succeeding days he kept his quarry in view, and when Saturday came, would go with him to church, make his own Confession first of all, and if necessary ask the priest to go out of his way to help the boy coming in after him. He would then stay in church with the boy and they would make their thanksgiving together. These incidents were by no means uncommon and were a great source of joy and consolation to Dominic. They were of great benefit to his companions and boys who were insensible to sermons and exhortations in church would often yield to his gentle but persistent persuasion.

It also happened sometimes that a boy did not keep his promise and at Confession time on Saturday, Dominic would look for him in vain. When next he ran into him, he said, good-humouredly: "Hey, you rascal, you led me up the garden path properly!" "Well, I wasn't ready. I didn't feel like it." "My poor friend," Dominic would reply "it was the devil who was tempting

⁵³ *Cirimella*: the game consisted in hitting the tip of a wooden cylinder a foot long with sharp and blunt ends, with a bat, making it lift into the air then striking it again on the fly and throwing it as far as possible.

you and you fell for it completely. I can see that you are not in the mood for it now, but I promise you, if you take the plunge and go to Confession, you will be much happier than you have been for a long time.” In most cases, after the boy had taken Dominic’s advice, he would come to him smiling and full of happiness: “What you said was quite true. I am very happy and I have made up my mind to go to Confession regularly in the future.”

In any community of boys of any size there are always some who are left on their own by their companions. This can be because they are rough in their ways, labouring under some disability, difficult to get on with. What they need is to experience real friendship, and as this is what they normally do not find, they suffer accordingly.

Dominic made it his business to be their friend. He would play with them during recreation, willingly talk to them, so that when they were ready to do something wrong and he suggested otherwise, they would listen, because they realised it was a friend who spoke to them, who wanted only what was best for them.

So it was when boys were sick, Dominic was always asked for: those who were discouraged and in trouble would go to him and pour their troubles into his ear. Thus the way was opened to him to do good to those around him at all times and to increase in merit before God.

Chapter 13 – His spirit of prayer – Devotion to the Mother of God – Mary’s month

Among the gifts with which God had enriched Dominic was fervour in prayer. As a result of his efforts he got so accustomed to talk with God, that no matter where he was, or what noise was going on round about him, he could briefly recollect himself, sending his heart soaring to God.

When he was praying with others, he seemed to be quite angelic. There was no fidgeting and continually changing position; he knelt there motionless, his face radiant, head slightly bowed, eyes lowered. Just to see him this way was to see another St Aloysius. In 1854 Count Cays became President of Honour

of the Sodality of St Aloysius which was established in the school. On the occasion of his first visit to take part in the church services, he noticed a boy obviously praying with great devotion and attention and he was so struck that he afterwards asked who he was; he was told that it was Dominic Savio.

He used to try to spend a part of his free time in reading a good book, or in making a visit to the church. He would normally have some other boys with him and they would pray together in suffrage for the souls in purgatory or in honour of Our Lady.

There was no limit to his devotion to the Mother of God. Every day he made some little act of mortification in her honour. He never let himself gaze or stare at a girl, and when walking through the streets, did not let his eyes roam about. Sometimes he would walk past a public show that his other friends couldn't take their eyes off and even forget where they were. If Savio was asked if he liked the show he would answer that he never even saw it. When on one occasion he was asked what he thought about something which he had not even noticed, one of his companions burst out impatiently: "What is the use of having eyes, if you don't use them to look at what is going on around you?" Dominic replied: "Instead of using my eyes on useless things, I should like to keep them to gaze on the beauty of Mary Most Holy, when, by God's mercy, I shall be in heaven."

He had a very special devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Every time he went to church he would pay a visit to her altar, and kneeling there before her, beg her to keep his heart free from all impurity. "O Mary, I want to be your son always. Please let me die rather than that I should ever sin against modesty."

Every Friday he would get some of his friends together and take them to church with him where they would say together the prayer of the Seven Sorrows of Mary or the Litany⁵⁴.

⁵⁴ Cf. "Prayer to Our Lady of Sorrows", in *The Companion of Youth* (cf. no. 184, pp. 749-751).

He was not only very devoted to Mary but loved bringing someone else to Mary's feet to honour her and ask her help. One winter Saturday he asked one of his companions to make a visit to Our Lady and they would say the Vespers of Our Lady's Office together. The boy objected that his hands were cold; so Dominic took off his own gloves and gave them to him. Another time in similar circumstances he gave the other boy his coat and made him put it on so he would come with him to the church and pray. Who could not be filled with admiration at such acts of generosity?

But it was in the month of May that his devotion to Mary reached its peak. He arranged with a group of his friends to do some special deed in her honour every day. He got together a collection of interesting stories and facts about Our Lady and willingly told them to others in order to inspire them with devotion to her. He urged his companions during recreation to frequent Confession and Communion every day, showing great recollection and devotion.

An interesting episode lets us see his great love of devotion to Mary. The boys in his dormitory had decided to put up in their dormitory a little altar for Our Lady. They had a meeting to decide what each one should give, and Dominic, who was enthusiastic about the project, found that he had no money to pay his share. He was at a loss wondering what to do and then an idea struck him. He hurried off and got a very nice book that had been given him as a prize, and brought it back to his companions telling them to raffle it and so get money that way.

Others were inspired by his generosity and produced little treasures of their own; a very successful raffle was held and with the proceeds all the required materials were brought.

The boys worked hard to get the altar ready but in order to finish it in time it was necessary that some of them stay up late the night before the feast. "I would gladly spend the night working" Dominic said. But because he had recently been ill, his friends told him he needed to go to bed. He was very disappointed, but accepted the decision as an act of obedience. He did not want to give in and only went to bed out of obedience. "At any rate," he

said to one of his companions, “come and wake me up as soon as you have finished; I want to be one of the first to see our altar in honour of Mary Most Holy.”

Chapter 14 – He goes frequently to the Sacraments of Confession and Communion

He is proof of the experience that the greatest helps and aids to development in time of youth are the sacraments of Confession and Communion. Give me a boy who receives these sacraments regularly and well, he will develop in time of youth, reach great maturity and go on to old age, if God spares him, exemplifying a way of life which is an inspiration to all who know him. Would that all our young people could grasp this and try to carry it out; and that all those concerned with their upbringing and education could grasp it likewise, in order to help in its fulfilment in the young.

Before coming to live at the Oratory Dominic used to go to Confession and Communion once a month as was usual. After he came here he started going more frequently. One day he heard a talk in church which recommended three things. Go often to Confession: go often to Communion: choose a priest as confessor that you can easily talk to and open your heart to and don't change to another priest unless there is real need for it. Dominic grasped these counsels immediately and completely.

He chose a priest as confessor and went regularly to him all the time he was here. So that the priest might know him completely and thereby be better able to help him, he made a General Confession to him. He began by going to Confession and Communion every fortnight and then every week. His confessor seeing what great progress he had made spiritually, suggested receiving the Holy Eucharist three times a week and at the end of the year suggested to him to go every day.

For a time he was troubled with scruples and wanted to go to Confession every three or four days and even more often, but his spiritual director would not allow this, and kept him at weekly Confession.

Dominic had the most complete confidence in his spiritual guide and would speak to him with the greatest simplicity about his soul and matters of conscience also outside the confessional. Someone advised him to go to another priest sometimes, but he would not hear of it. He replied. “The confessor is the doctor of the soul. People do not go about chasing one doctor after another unless they have lost confidence in their own doctor or their case is pretty desperate. I have full confidence in my confessor who is so kind and helpful to me and I don’t think I have any trouble that he cannot cure.” Nevertheless his confessor did suggest that occasionally, e.g. at the time of retreat, he should go to another priest and Dominic did so without any hesitation.

Dominic was very pleased with this state of affairs. He said: “If I have any problem I take it to my confessor and he solves it for me according to what God wants. Jesus has said that the voice of the priest is the voice of God. If I have some particular need I go to Holy Communion in which I receive the body, blood, soul and divinity *quod pro nobis traditum est*. What more do I need to make me happy? Nothing in the wide world. Only one thing remains—one day to see him whom we can only see with the eye of faith here below revealed in heaven.”

Filled with this spirit, Dominic’s days were full of happiness. This was the source of that wonderful cheerful spirit which was the soul of all his actions. It should not be imagined that he went about in a dream half the time or that he did not realise what sort of life it was necessary to live, if one went to daily Communion. He was fully alive to everything and his conduct was irreproachable. I have asked his companions to tell me of anything wrong they found in him or any good quality which he did not show evidence of, during the three years he lived amongst us and all have agreed that there never was anything that they needed to correct in him, or anything they could suggest for him to do that he was not already doing.

His preparation for Holy Communion was most thorough. Before going to bed the previous evening, he said a special prayer to prepare himself, which always ended as follows: “Blessed and praised every moment be the most holy

and divine sacrament.” In the morning he carried on his preparation, but his thanksgiving was liable to have no end to it. If he were not reminded he would forget about breakfast, recreation and even morning school, so caught up was he in prayer or rather, in contemplation of the divine goodness who wonderfully and mysteriously passes on to mankind the treasures of his infinite mercy.

It was really a joy for him to be able to pass some time before the Blessed Sacrament, something he did invariably at least once a day and as often as he could he would get others to come with him. There was a little group of prayers⁵⁵ in reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the many sins of mankind—heretics, unbelievers and bad Christians—which he was very fond of saying when making such visits.

In order to make his Holy Communion as fruitful as possible and to encourage himself to renewed fervour every day, he made a plan for his Communions as follows:

Sunday: In honour of the Most Blessed Trinity .

Monday: For all those who have been kind to me and done me good .

Tuesday: In honour of my guardian angel and St. Dominic.

Wednesday: To Our Lady of Sorrows for the conversion of sinners.

Thursday: For the Holy Souls.

Friday: In honour of the Passion of Jesus.

Saturday: In honour of Mary Most Holy, and to obtain her protection in life and in death.

He took part with great joy in any ceremonies connected with the Blessed Sacrament. If when out in the town he met the Viaticum being taken to the sick, he knelt down no matter where he was and if he were free he would reverently accompany the little procession to its destination.

⁵⁵ “This prayer is printed in many books amongst which *The Companion of Youth*, on page. 105” (note in the original text). Cf. no. 184, pp. 747-748.

One day when such a little procession with the Viaticum was passing by, it was raining and the ground was very muddy. Dominic knelt down without any hesitation. His companion said that in such circumstances it was not necessary, God did not expect you to dirty your clothes like that. Dominic replied quite simply: "Everything belongs to God including our clothes and so everything must do him honour. I would not only kneel down in the mud when He passes by, but I would throw myself into a furnace if by so doing I would gain a spark of that love which moved him to give us this wonderful sacrament."

On a similar occasion a soldier was standing near him but made no effort to kneel down. Not daring to ask him to do so, he took out his handkerchief and spread it on the muddy ground in front of him. The soldier looked a bit startled but took the hint and went down on his knees there on the road, not on the handkerchief.

On the Feast of *Corpus Christi* he was sent with some of his companions to take part in the procession of the Blessed Sacrament being held in the parish. Dressed in cassock and surplice, Dominic was overjoyed. No other present could have given him more joy.

Chapter 15 – Penances

Dominic's youth, his far from robust health and his innocent life would certainly have dispensed him from any sort of penance; but he knew and understood that only with the greatest difficulty can a boy keep himself intact without some penance, and so the path of mortification seemed to him to be strewn with roses. By penance and mortification I do not mean patience in meeting the unpleasant things of daily life, nor do I mean the self-control and sacrifice necessary to be able to pray at all times and in all places; such things were part and parcel of his ordinary way of living.

I am referring only to penances which affected him physically. He decided in honour of Our Blessed Lady to fast every Saturday on bread and water; his confessor forbade him to do this. He started off fasting for Lent, but after a week his Rector heard about it and stopped it. He wanted at least to go

without breakfast, but this was not allowed him either. The reason of course was that his superiors did not want his health to be ruined. What was he to do then?

Dominic was not daunted; he took to afflicting his body in other ways. He put pebbles or bits of wood under his sheet so that he would be uncomfortable in bed. He got hold of a very rough shirt, very irritating to the skin and wore it. These penances were also forbidden him. He tried again. When summer passed into autumn and winter he did not add any blankets to the very thin covering which was sufficient in the hot summer. In the bitter cold of January this was all he had. His Rector came to see him once when he was sick in bed. When he got to the bed he saw Dominic lying there shivering violently and he realised that there was only thin summer covering over him. "What on earth are you up to?" he asked him. "Do you want to die of cold?" "No," he replied "I will hardly die of cold, but Jesus in the stable of Bethlehem was much worse off than this."

He was then forbidden absolutely to undertake any kind of penance whatsoever without express permission. Dominic accepted this obedience, but one day I came across him looking somewhat sad, saying: "You've got me in a real bind. Our Blessed Lord says that if I don't do penance I will not get to heaven. I am forbidden to do any penance; what chance then have I of heaven?"

"The penance Jesus wants from you is complete obedience; obey and that's enough."

"Can't I do some other penance?"

"Yes, you can allow yourself the penance of being patient with others and the unpleasant things of life; to accept equally the heat and the cold and the rain; to be cheerful when tired and not feeling so well and whatever God wants to give you."

"But," said Dominic "these things come to you whether you like it or not."

"Precisely," I replied "offer them willingly to God; there is nothing that will please him more, and you will be doing real penance."

Thus reassured, Dominic was very happy and completely at peace.

Chapter 16 – Mortification of all his external senses

Whoever looked at Savio's outward composure would have found him so natural that he would have said he was made this way by the Lord. But anyone who knew him closely, or was involved in his upbringing, can tell you that it was his super human efforts helped by God's grace.

His eyes were very alert and it was no little effort for him to keep them more to himself. He told a friend more than once, "At first when I gave myself a rule to control my eyes I found it hard and I often had a severe headache." The reserve he managed over what he looked at was such that anyone who knew him cannot ever remember him giving a single glance that would exceed even the strictest limits of modesty. "The eyes," he used to say "are like two windows." Anything that wants to can come through those windows. We can let an angel come through those windows or a devil with his horns; either one or the other will be master of our hearts."

One day it happened that a young man from outside the House unadvisedly brought a newspaper with him with obscene and irreligious pictures in it. A crowd of boys gathered around him to look at the pictures that would have disgusted even Turks or pagans. Savio came too, thinking from a distance that they might be some religious pictures.

But when he got closer he pretended to be surprised then almost laughing he took the page and tore it into pieces. His friends were amazed and looked at each other without saying a word.

Then he said: "Poor us! The Lord gave us eyes to contemplate the beauty of the things he created and you are using them to look at such filth invented by human malice which will damn our souls? Have you forgotten what we've heard preached so often? The Saviour tells us that even an evil glance is enough to stain our souls; and here you are feeding your eyes on things of this kind?"

"No," one said "we were looking at the pictures so we could laugh at them."

"Ah yes, laugh, and meanwhile you are preparing to go to hell laughing ... but will you still be laughing if you go there?"

Another one said, "But we don't think those pictures are so bad."

"Worse still. Not seeing much harm in gazing at smut like this is a sign that your eyes are already accustomed to looking at it, and these habits do not excuse you from harm, but make you more guilty. O Job, Job! You were older, you were a saint, you were burdened with a disease which had you lying on a dunghill, but you made a covenant with your eyes not to give them any freedom around immodest things!"

At these words they all fell silent and nobody dared reprimand him or make any other kind of observation.

Along with modesty of the eyes he was also very reserved in speech. When anyone was speaking, whether it be right or wrong he kept quiet and often stopped mid-speech to give room for others to speak. His teachers and superiors all agree in saying that they never had any reasons to chide him for a word out of place in study, the classroom or in church or while he was doing any of his homework or other duties. Even when someone had been unkind to him he was able to keep his tongue and temper under control.

One day he told off a friend who had a bad attitude. Instead of accepting the reprimand gratefully the boy attacked him. He accused him of all kinds of things then began punching and kicking him. Savio could have followed up his words with deeds since he was older and stronger. But the only response he gave was a Christian one. He went red in the face but restraining his anger he simply said: "I forgive you; you did wrong; please don't treat others like this."

What can we say about mortification of other bodily senses? Let me just indicate a few things.

In winter time he suffered from chilblains on the hands. But although he felt pain he was never heard to offer any indication or word of complaint. Rather, it seemed that he took pleasure in it. "The bigger the chilblains," he said, "the better it is for my health", wanting to indicate the health of the soul. Many of his companions assert that in the bitterly cold winter he used to go to school at a slower pace and that the desire to suffer and do penance in everything gave him that opportunity. "Several times I saw him," says a friend

“in the coldest winter cutting his skin with needles and pen nibs so that these lacerations would become sores and make him more like his Divine Master.”

In a community of boys you meet those who are not content with anything. Some complain about religious functions, someone else about discipline, or sleep, or the meals; they find something to complain about in everything. These are a real cross for their superiors because one unhappy boy spreads his unhappiness to the others, sometimes causing a real problem in the community. Savio's behaviour was the complete opposite. You never heard a word of complaint from his lips about summer heat or winter cold. Whether the weather was good or bad he was always happy. Whatever was on the table he was satisfied with. He even had the admirable ability to mortify himself there. When the others complained about something being overcooked or not enough, or with too much or too little salt, he would say he was happy, saying it was just to his taste.

It was his routine practice to remain in the refectory after the others had left, picking up the crumbs of bread on the table or the floor and eating them as if they were a tasty morsel. To some who showed surprise he would hide the fact he was doing penance by saying: “We don't eat bread rolls whole and if they are in crumbs that's work already done for the teeth”. Any left-over soup or second course or other kinds of food he would collect and eat. This wasn't out of greed because he often also gave it to other boys. When he was asked why he was so concerned about left-overs that others wouldn't bother with, he answered: “Whatever we have in the world is a precious gift from God; but of all his gifts, after his grace, the greatest is the food that keeps us alive. So even a little bit of this gift is worthy of our gratitude and it is certainly worth being scrupulously collected.”

Cleaning shoes, brushing his friends' clothes, doing menial tasks for the sick, sweeping and other kinds of work were like an enjoyable pastime for him. “Let everyone do what he can,” he used to say. “I am unable to do big things but what I can do I would like to do for the greater glory of God. I hope God in his infinite goodness is happy to accept my miserable offerings.”

Eating things he didn't like, avoiding things he would have liked; custody of the eyes even in unimportant things; staying around even when there was a bad smell; denying his will; being perfectly resigned in putting up with everything that hurt body or spirit were acts of virtue which Dominic carried out daily, we could say every moment of his life.

There are many things of this kind that I won't mention but they all demonstrate Dominic's great spirit of penance, charity and mortification of the senses, and at the same time they show how active was his virtue in being able to benefit from any opportunity big or small, even the littlest things to sanctify himself and grow in merit in God's eyes.

Chapter 17 – The Immaculate Conception Sodality

The whole of Dominic's life can be said to be an act of love for Mary most holy. He never let slip any occasion of pleasing and honouring her. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was solemnly defined in 1854. Dominic had a very great desire to leave behind him at the school some lasting reminder of this great event. He said: "I would like very much to do something in honour of my Mother Mary; but I will have to do it quickly, as I do not think I have much time left."

Spurred on by his present desire to help his companions, he asked some of those whom he knew well and relied upon to join him in forming the Sodality of Mary Immaculate. The aim was to obtain the special protection of the Mother of God in life, and especially at the hour of death. Dominic proposed two means to this end: to honour, and to bring others to honour, Mary by different means, and to encourage frequent Communion. In agreement with his friends and after much careful thought, he drew up a set of rules. On June 8th, nine months before he died, he went with his friends before the altar of Our Lady and they read it over together. I give these rules here so that they may be an inspiration and guide to others. Here is how it went:

"We, Dominic Savio, etc. (the names of the others follow), after receiving the sacraments of Confession and Communion, this day, June 8, give ourselves completely to Mary Immaculate and promise to work unceasingly for her and

with her: to help ourselves to do this and to maintain our love for her we, here before her altar, solemnly promise, in agreement with our spiritual director, to follow in Louis Comollo's footsteps to the best of our ability. Here we bind ourselves as follows: ...⁵⁶

Chapter 18 – His special friends – His relationship with Camillo Gavio

Everybody was friendly with Dominic. Those who could not understand him completely, at least respected him for his good qualities. He could get on well with everyone. He was so confirmed in the things of God that he was asked on occasion to associate with boys who were far from good, so that he might try to win them over to God. To do this he made use of free time, different kinds of games, conversation, using them all in different ways for the spiritual advantage of those concerned. His best friends, however, were the other boys in the Sodality of Mary Immaculate. With these he had regular meetings, and they would gather together also for acts of devotion. These meetings had the permission of the Rector, but they were presided over and carried through by the boys themselves. In the meetings they decided how best to help an active participation in the novenas and solemn feasts, how to maintain and increase love for the Blessed Sacrament and frequent Communion; how to help boys who easily got into trouble and were going astray and each boy was assigned to someone who made him his special *client*, someone he protected and used every means suggested by Christian charity to set him on the path to virtue. Dominic was the soul of the meeting, its guide and mentor.

There is much I could say about many of the boys who took part in those meetings, but as most of them are still alive, it is better I should not. I will mention two only who are already dead: Camillo Gavio of Tortona, and John Massaglia of Marmorito⁵⁷. Camillo Gavio was only two months with us but it was long enough to leave a wonderful memory of himself.

⁵⁶ At this point Don Bosco offers, with some variations, the *Regulations for the Immaculate Conception Sodality* from the original manuscript which can be found at no. 207.

⁵⁷ Both died before the Immaculate Conception Sodality was founded (9 June 1856): Gavio died on December 29, 1855 and Massaglia on May 20, 1856.

His outstanding character and the great promise he showed in painting and sculpture encouraged his town council to send him to Turin, so that he might have a real chance of developing his talents. He had been very ill not long before and was not yet fully recovered; also it was his first time away from home, and among so many boys whom he did not know, it was little wonder that he was somewhat downcast and stood sadly watching the others playing their game with great zest. Dominic saw him and immediately went over to talk to him and make friends. The following dialogue took place. Dominic began:

“Hello, don’t you know anyone yet?”

“No, but I am enjoying watching the others playing.”

“What is your name?”

“Camillo Gavio, and I come from Tortona.”

“How old are you?”

“Fifteen.”

“You are looking sad; have you not been well?”

“Yes, I have been very ill with some sort of heart trouble and I am not yet fully better.”

“You would like to be completely better soon, wouldn’t you?”

“No, not absolutely. I only want to do God’s will.”

These last words made Dominic realise that Gavio was a boy of more than ordinary piety, and his heart warmed to him. With renewed interest he went on:

“Anyone who only wants God’s will has a real desire to become a saint, do you want to become a saint?”

“Oh yes; I want that more than anything else.”

“That’s great; you can be one of our special group, if you like, and share completely what we do together to help us to live for Jesus and Mary.”

“Yes, I would like to do that; but what have I got to do?”

“I will tell you in a few words. For us here it means making holiness consist in being happy. We hate and detest sin as something that robs us of God’s grace and makes us very unhappy inside; we try to be very faithful to all our duties and to be foremost in taking an active part in all exercises of piety. Try taking for your own special motto: *Servite Domino in laetitia* - Serve the Lord in gladness.”

These few words were like a ray of sunshine in the gloom, and greatly comforted the boy. From that day he became a close friend of Dominic and followed him faithfully in the path which he trod. However, his illness flared up again after two months and despite every care he grew steadily worse and in a few days he died. He received the last sacraments with great reverence and joy and gave up his soul to God on December 30, 1856⁵⁸.

Dominic visited him regularly while he was ill and as the end drew near wanted to spend the night at his bedside. This he was not allowed to do. As soon as he heard that death had come, he went to his bedside and with tears in his eyes said:

“Goodbye Camillo; I am sure you have gone straight to heaven—get a place ready for me there also. I will always be your friend as long as I live. I will pray for the repose of your soul.”

Afterwards he got the boys of the Sodality of Mary Immaculate together and they all went to pray beside the body. They also said many other prayers for him and received Holy Communion in reparation for his soul. Dominic himself did this a number of times.

He said to his friends several times: “Do not let us forget the soul of our friend. Please God he is already in heaven, but we must carry on praying for him. All that we do for him God will get done for us in due course, when our own time comes.”

⁵⁸ He should have written: December 29, 1855.

Chapter 19 – His relationship with John Massaglia

Dominic’s relationship with John Massaglia was more intimate and maintained over a longer period of time. He was from Marmorito, a village not far from Mondonio.

They both came to the Oratory at the same time, they were from neighbouring villages, both wanted to become priests, and they had a common desire to become saints.

Dominic said to his friend one day, “Don’t let us stop at saying we want to be priests, but let us get busy trying to grow in the virtues that are needed by a priest.”

“Quite true,” the other replied, “but if we do all we can, God in his goodness will give us the great grace of becoming Ministers of Jesus Christ.”

At Easter time there was the annual retreat; this they made with great fervour. When it was over, Dominic said to John:

“Let us be friends in the best way possible, anxious for the welfare of each other’s soul. We could be that if we were to correct each other in whatever way might be needed. So will you tell me whenever you notice me doing anything I should not, or if you see there is some good I can do and I am not doing, please point it out.”

“Very gladly, although you don’t really need anything like that. It’s me that needs it, as I am older and exposed to greater temptations. So will you do that for me?”

“Let’s cut out the compliments and be really serious about helping each other.”

From that moment Dominic and John became true friends. Their friendship was lasting because it was founded on their life for God, striving earnestly together to help each other to resist evil and do good.

After the examinations at the end of the school year, the boys used to go home for the holidays. Some boys for a variety of reasons used to ask to remain

at the school during the holiday period. Dominic and John were among these. I knew that their parents were very anxious to have them at home and I also thought it would do them a lot of good to go home for a while since neither of them was very strong, so I suggested: "Why not go home for some days of holidays?" Instead of replying they both began to laugh. "What are you laughing at?" Dominic replied: "We know that our parents would be very glad to have us at home, but we know also that while the bird in the cage loses its liberty, still it is safe from the claws of the vulture; outside the cage he may fly where he likes but also at any moment he can fall a victim to the evil bird of prey."

In spite of this, I judged it advisable for them both to go home for some time and they went without hesitation in a spirit of obedience, remaining just the time that I suggested.

If I were to write about the good example and virtues of John Massaglia I should be largely repeating what I have already written about Dominic, whose faithful follower he was, as long as he lived. He enjoyed good health and showed great promise in his studies. When he had finished his humanities, he passed with distinction the exam prior to receiving the clerical habit. But he was not able to wear the cassock for long that he had looked forward so eagerly to having. After a few months he became unwell, but not thinking much of it, he did not want to interrupt his studies. His parents were worried, however, and took him home, so that he might have a good rest away from his books. But, he did not improve and after some weeks Dominic received the following letter:

Dear friend,

I thought I should only be a few days at home, so I did not bring any books or notes home with me. However, my sickness is going on and on, and I am wondering how it will all end up. The doctor says I am getting better; my own private opinion is that I am getting worse. We shall see who is right!

I am lonely, dear Dominic, so far away from you and the others; there are not the same opportunities here for all the spiritual things we had at school. I comfort myself with the memory of the days we helped each other to prepare well for Holy Communion. I am sure we are still united in spirit.

Would you go to my desk in the study and get the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis which you will find there and some notes which are lying beside it? Please parcel them up and send them to me. I am tired of doing nothing, but the doctor won't let me study. I sometimes walk up and down my room thinking, "Shall I ever get better? Shall I ever rejoin my companions at school? Is this my last illness?" God alone knows the answers. I think I am quite ready to do his holy will, whatever it may be.

Send me any advice you think will help me. Let me know how you are getting on and remember me in your prayers, especially when you receive Holy Communion. Let our friendship be sealed in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and if we are not destined to be united long in this life, please God we shall be together for ever in heaven.

Tell all the boys I was asking for them and remember me especially to those of the Sodality of Mary Immaculate. God be with you.

Your affectionate friend,

John Massaglia

Dominic sent John what he had asked him to get from his desk and together with it he sent the following letter:

My dear Massaglia.

You don't know how pleased I was to get your letter - at least it let me know that you were still alive. As no news had come since you left, we did not know quite, whether to say the "Glory be to the Father" or the "Out of the depths" for you. I am sending what you asked me to. I should like to say that Thomas à Kempis is a good friend, but he is dead. He needs to be made to come alive

by your own efforts to understand what he says. Think it over, and see how it can be carried out in your own life.

You sigh for the wonderful chances we have here for spiritual things; so did I when I was at Mondonio. I tried to make up for them by a daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament and when going I tried to get as many others to come with me as possible.

Besides the *Imitation* I read *The Treasure Hidden in the Holy Mass* by St. Leonard⁵⁹. If you feel like it, read that also. You say you don't know if you will ever come back to the Oratory. To tell you the truth I have a feeling that I am coming quickly to the end of my own life. At any rate we can pray for each other so that both of us may die happily in God's grace. The one who goes to heaven first can prepare a place for the other and when he arrives stretch out a helping hand to pull him in!

May God keep us always in his holy grace and help us to become saints, but quickly because there is little time left. All your friends look forward to your coming back and send their very best wishes. With theirs I send you my own best wishes and prayers.

Always with fraternal love and affection I declare myself,

Your loving friend

Dominic Savio

John Massaglia's illness at first seemed of little consequence. Several times he seemed completely recovered only to relapse again, and then suddenly he was at death's door.

"There was time to give him the Last Sacraments and he received them with the greatest devotion. He died the death of the just man who leaves this

⁵⁹ Cf. Leonardo DA PORTO MAURIZIO, *Il tesoro nascosto, ovvero pregi ed eccellenze della S. Messa, con un modo pratico e divoto per ascoltarla con frutto*. Torino, Giacinto Marietti 1840.

world to go straight to heaven” said Fr Valfrè, his spiritual father during the holidays ⁽⁶⁰⁾.

Dominic grieved deeply at the loss of his friend and although he accepted it completely as God’s will, he was in tears for several days. It was the first time that I had seen that wonderful face of his sad and tear-stained. His only comfort was to pray for his friend and get others to do likewise. He could be heard to say sometimes: “Dear John, you are dead, and I hope you are already with Camillo in heaven; when shall I be with you in that happy place?”

He never forgot John Massaglia in his prayers right up to the time of his own death. He never assisted at Holy Mass or at any exercise in church without remembering him before God. Dominic’s sensitive heart suffered greatly from this loss and even his health was affected.

Chapter 20 – Special graces and particular details

There is nothing extraordinary in what I have written about so far, although we might call Dominic’s exemplary and innocent life, and his extraordinary spirit of penance extraordinary. The liveliness of his faith, his constant hope, his tireless zeal in doing good and helping others might also be called extraordinary. This went on until his last breath. Here I would like to tell you about some special graces and uncommon facts. I am conscious that these may give rise to some doubt in those who read about them. I should like to state categorically that anything recounted here which seems paralleled by

⁶⁰ “Fr Carlo Valfrè was born in Villafranca in Piedmont on July 23, 1813. He was truly exemplary and successful in his studies; following his vocation he embraced the ecclesiastical state. With apostolic zeal he worked several years in the sacred ministry until he was judged worthy of the parish of Marmorito. He was indefatigable in the performance of his duties. Instructing poor children; caring for the sick; helping poor people were the characteristic qualities of his zeal. For his kindness, charity and selflessness he could be proposed as a model for any priest who has to look after souls. When his parish duties allowed he went elsewhere also to give retreats, triduums, novenas and the like. The Lord blessed his labours which were always crowned with abundant results. But when we most needed him God found him ready for heaven. After a short illness, with the death of the righteous, he went to a life of bliss at the beautiful age of 47 on February 12, 1861. This loss deprived the Church of a worthy minister, took from Marmorito a pastor who rightly was called the father of the people, but we are all not a little comforted in the hope that we have found a benefactor with God in heaven.” (note in the original text).

incidents in the Scriptures or the lives of the saints, was seen with my own eyes and that the accounts written of them are written with a scrupulous concern for the truth. I leave each one free to form his own opinions.

On a number of occasions when I have been in church when Dominic was making his thanksgiving after Holy Communion, or visiting the Blessed Sacrament exposed, I have seen him obviously quite oblivious to what was going on around him; he would continue in this state without noticing the time unless he was reminded it was time for something else. One day he was missing from breakfast, morning lessons, the midday meal and no one knew where he was, he was not in the study room, not even in bed! The matter was referred to the Rector, who suspected what might be the case, that he would be in the church. He went to the Church and there in the little chapel behind the high altar he saw Dominic standing motionless like a statue. One foot was on top of the other, one hand resting on the reading lectern; his other hand was on his breast and his gaze was fixed immovably on the tabernacle. His lips were not moving. He called him but there was no response. He shook him, and he looked around at him saying: "Oh, is Mass already over?" "Look," said his director, showing him his watch, "it is two o'clock." He asked pardon very contritely for having been absent without permission, and the director sent him to get some dinner, saying to him: "If anyone asks you where you have been, say you were doing something for me." He said this so that he might be spared the curious questions of his companions.

Another time, as I was going out of the sacristy after finishing my thanksgiving, I heard a voice which seemed to be engaged in argument. It came from the little chapel behind the high altar and when I went there I saw Dominic. He was speaking and then stopping as though waiting for someone else's reply. Among other things I heard quite clearly these words:

"Yes, my God, I have already said it and I say it again: I love you and I wish to go on loving you till my last breath. If you see that I am going to offend you, let me die: I much prefer to die than to offend you by sin."

I asked him sometimes what went on at these times and he replied with great simplicity: "It is silly of me; I get a distraction and lose the thread of

my prayers and then I see such wonderful things that the hours pass by like minutes.”

One day he came into my room saying: “Come quickly! There is some good work to be done.” “Where do you want to take me?” I asked him. “Come quickly! Come quickly” he said. I hesitated, but on his renewed insistence, went with him: similar instances had happened before. We left the house and silently he led me through one street after another for quite a distance. Finally we arrived at a block of flats and he led me up to the third floor. “Here you are. This is where you are wanted”, he said as he rang the bell and immediately went away.

The door was opened: “Oh come in, come in quickly before it is too late. My husband lapsed from the church and became a Protestant: now he is dying and begging for a priest so he can die a good Catholic.”

I entered and there saw the dying man, overcome with anxiety to set his conscience in order. Speedily I set matters right with a good Confession, and as I was just finishing, the local priest from St Augustine’s parish arrived with the holy oils. As he was in the act of administering the last anointing the man died.

One day I asked Dominic how he could have known that there was a dying man there. He looked at me somewhat sadly and burst into tears. I did not question him any further.

The innocence of his life, his love of God and great desire for the things of God so developed Dominic’s mind that he came to be habitually united with God. Sometimes he would stop playing a game and withdrawing from his companions walk by himself. When asked why he did this he replied: “These distractions come to me suddenly, and sometimes I seem to see heaven open above me and I have to go away from my companions so that I do not say things which could only seem ridiculous to them.”

One day during playtime the conversation turned to the great reward God has prepared in heaven for those who preserve their innocence. Among other things it was said that those who have kept their innocence are the nearest in

heaven to the person of our Divine Saviour and that they sing a special hymn reserved to them for all eternity. This was enough to send Dominic's spirit soaring towards God; he stood still completely motionless and then fell as though dead into the arms of his companions.

These moments of rapture would happen sometimes during study time and even in the street on his way to and from school.

He often spoke of the Holy Father and how much he would like to see him before he died. Several times he said that he had something very important to tell him. I asked him what this very important thing was.

"If I could speak to the Holy Father, I would say that in spite of his many worries and cares he should not cease to give his special attention to England; God is preparing a great triumph for the faith in that country."

"What makes you say that?"

"I will tell you, but please don't tell anyone else, as I don't want them to laugh at me. If you go to Rome perhaps you will tell Pius IX about it. One morning as I was making my thanksgiving after Communion, a very strong distraction took hold of me. I thought I saw a great plain full of people enveloped in thick fog. They were walking about like people who had lost their way and did not know which way to turn. Someone near me said: 'This is England.' I was just going to ask some questions, when I saw Pope Pius IX just like I have seen him in pictures. He was robed magnificently and carried in his hand a torch alive with flames. As he walked slowly towards that immense gathering of people, the leaping flames from the torch dispelled the fog, and the people stood in the splendour of the noonday sun. 'That torch', said the one beside me, 'is the Catholic Faith, which is going to light up England.'"

When I went to Rome in 1858, I told Pius IX about this, and he listened to it with great joy and pleasure and said to me: "What you say strengthens me in my determination to do everything possible for England, already the object of my care and solicitude. The message you give me, if no more, is at least the advice of a privileged soul."

There are many other similar incidents, but I do not give them here. I have, however, written them down and leave it to others to publish them when it will be for God's greater glory.

Chapter 21 – His thoughts about dying and his preparation for a holy death

Those who have read what I have written so far about Dominic will easily realise that his life was a continual preparation for death. For Dominic the Sodality of Mary Immaculate was a sure means of securing the protection of Our Lady at the hour of his death, which many now felt could not be far off. I cannot say whether he had some revelation from God of the day and circumstances of his death or whether it was just a presentiment. He certainly spoke about his death long before it happened, and so clearly that he could not have described it more accurately after it did happen.

In view of his state of health everything was done to put a brake on his life of study and piety. However, by reason of his constitution, various physical weaknesses and the ardour of his spirit, each day saw his strength decreasing. He was aware of this himself and sometimes he would say: "I must hurry up or I will be overtaken by night, while I am on the way." By this he meant that he had not much longer to live and that he must do as much good as he could before death caught up with him.

It is the custom in this House for the boys to make the exercise for a Happy Death each month⁶¹. Part of this exercise consists in making a Confession and Communion as though they were to be the last. Pope Pius IX in his goodness has enriched this exercise with many indulgences. Dominic used to make it with great earnestness. It is the custom at the end of the exercise to say one Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory be to the Father for 'the one amongst us who will be the first to die.' One day he said smiling: "It should not be for the one amongst us who will be the first to die, but for Dominic Savio who will be the first to die amongst us." He said this many times.

⁶¹ Cf. no. 184, pp. 761-762.

At the end of April he went to his Rector to ask him how he might keep Our Lady's month in the best way possible.

He was told to fulfil all his duties as well as he could for Our Lady, to tell some story or fact about her every day and act in such a way that he could go to Holy Communion worthily every day.

"I will do that faithfully: what grace shall I ask for?"

"Ask our Lady to obtain from God health and the grace to become a saint."

"Yes, may she do this and also be with me when I am dying and lead me to heaven."

In fact he showed so much fervour during that month that he seemed like an angel in human clothes. If he wrote something it was about Mary, or if he was studying, singing, going to class, it was all done in her honour. He always had his story about her ready each day and would tell it sometimes to one group of boys, sometimes to another. One boy said to him one day: "But if you do everything this year what will be left for next year?" "Let me do what I can this year; if I am here next year I'll let you know what my plans are."

In order to do everything possible for his health, I called in several doctors to consult together. All were taken by his brightness, his cheerfulness and his quick and ready replies. One of them, a very eminent physician, Doctor Vallauri by name, now of happy memory, said to me with admiration: "What a wonderful boy!"

"What is the underlying trouble which is steadily sapping his strength?" I asked him.

"There is no basic disease: but given his delicate constitution, the keenness of his mind and the intensity of the spirit continually at work in him are gradually wearing him away."

"What is the best remedy?"

"To my mind the best remedy would be to let him go to heaven: he seems to me to be very ready for it. The only thing which is likely to preserve his

life is to take him away from all study and keep him busy with manual work proportionate to his strength.”

Chapter 22 – His care for the sick – He leaves the Oratory – What he said on that occasion

Dominic’s ill health was not such as to confine him to bed. He passed his time between some classes, some study and little jobs about the house. It gave him great joy to help in the school infirmary when there were any of his companions sick there. He said sometimes:

“I don’t get any merit for working in the sick room or visiting the sick , because it is something I like doing very much.”

While attending to their physical needs he would also with due prudence suggest things for their spiritual benefit. “Our bodies are not made to last for ever; it is understandable that they gradually wear out until finally death comes. Think how wonderful it will be when our souls, freed from hindrances of the body, fly straight to God to begin an eternity of happiness and joy!”

It happened one day that a boy refused to take his medicine because of its bitter taste. Dominic said to him. “Medicines also come from God who has made them so that we can get better and stronger. When we take them we are doing what God wants us to do and if they do not taste very nice we get all the more merit. However unpleasant they are, it is nothing to what Jesus suffered on the cross for us.” These observations of Dominic’s were said so unaffectedly and with such sincerity that they always won the boys over.

Dominic’s health was steadily deteriorating but he did not want to go home: he wanted at all costs to try to keep up his studies and his life for God at the school. A few months previously I had sent him home, but a few days afterwards he turned up at the Oratory again. I have to confess that the unwillingness was on both sides. I wanted to keep Dominic with me at all costs. My affection and esteem for him were those of a father for his special favourite son. But I felt that the doctor’s recommendation should be carried out and this especially so as he had recently developed a bad cough. I wrote to Mr Savio and Dominic’s departure was fixed for March 1, 1857.

He accepted this decision and offered it as a sacrifice to God. “Why are you so unwilling to go home?” I asked him. “You should be glad to be going to your parents.” “I want to end my days here at the Oratory” he said.

“All right; when you get better at home then you can come back.”

“No. no, I shall never come back.”

The evening before his departure, he could hardly be persuaded to leave my side—there was always a new question to be answered. Amongst other things he asked: “What is the best thing a sick person can do to gain merit before God?”

“Frequently to renew the offering of his sufferings to God.”

“What else can he do?”

“Offer his life to Jesus.”

“Can I be certain that my sins are forgiven?”

“I assure you in God’s name that all your sins have been forgiven.”

“Can I be certain of being saved?”

“Yes, through the mercy of God which shall never be lacking for you, you can be certain of being saved.”

“If the devil comes to tempt me what shall I say to him?”

“Tell him that you have sold your soul to Jesus and he has paid for it with his Precious Blood. If the devil continues to worry you, ask him what he has ever done for your soul, and remind him that Jesus shed his blood so that you might be free from his power.”

“When I am in heaven, shall I be able to see my companions here at the Oratory and my family at home?”

“Yes, you will see everything from heaven—what is happening here, at home and lots of other things besides.”

“Shall I be able to visit you here?”

“Yes, if it is according to God’s will and for his greater glory.”

From these and many other questions which he put to me it was easy to see that Dominic was already standing on the threshold of eternity, wondering greatly about the joys it had in store for him.

Chapter 23 – He says goodbye to his friends

The morning of his departure Dominic made the Exercise of a Happy Death with his companions. He showed such devotion in his Confession and Holy Communion. It is quite impossible for me to try to describe it.

“I must make this exercise very well,” he said, “because it will be indeed my preparation for death. If I were to die on the journey, I should already have received the Holy Viaticum.”

He spent the rest of the morning putting his things in order: he packed his trunk with the care of one who is doing something for the last time. Then he went round saying goodbye to his companions, saying a little word of encouragement to one or trying to spur another on to greater efforts.

He owed a few pence to one of his companions and he took care to settle this little debt so that, as he said, his accounts would be all right with our Blessed Lord. He had a farewell meeting with the members of the Sodality of Mary and with great earnestness he exhorted them to persevere in keeping the promises they had made to Mary Immaculate, and to put no limit to their confidence in her.

About to depart, he came to me and spoke exactly as follows:

“You will have nothing of this body of mine (this carcase or skeleton) so I have to take it with me to Mondonio. You would only have been troubled with me for a little time longer ... but God’s holy will be done. If you go to Rome, don’t forget the message for the Holy Father about England. Please pray for me that I may die a holy death: and goodbye till we meet again in heaven.”

He kept a firm hold of my hand and when we got to the door he said to his friends who were waiting to wave goodbye to him:

“Goodbye, everyone, goodbye! You are all my friends, pray for me and we will all meet again once more where we will not be separated ever again.”

He had moved off a few paces when he turned and came back to me: “Would you give me a keepsake to remember you by?”

“Certainly, with all my heart, what would you like, a nice book?”

“No, something better still.”

“What, money for your journey?”

“Yes, that’s it, money for my journey to heaven. You told us that you had got from the Holy Father some plenary indulgences at the hour of death that you could give to people. Will you give one to me?”

“Yes, my son, I will put your name on the list as soon as you have gone.”

Then he went off; he had been three years with us. It had been a time of great joy for him, and a great edification for his companions and superiors. Now he had gone never to return.

There was general surprise at his solemn farewell. It was known that his health was far from good, but as he generally managed to keep out of bed, his illness was never considered to be very serious. In addition as he was always bright and cheerful, no one guessed that he was suffering so much anguish of body and spirit. And so it was that although everyone was a bit shaken by the finality of his farewell, there was a general expectancy that he would soon be back again.

But it was not to be so: he was ripe for heaven. What he had done for God and the saving of souls in his few short years of life was as though he had lived to an advanced age. God wanted to take him to himself in the flower of his youth, also to free him from the perils and dangers in which even the best of souls can be shipwrecked.

*Chapter 24 – Progress of his illness – Last confession, and receives viaticum
– Some edifying facts*

It was two o'clock on the afternoon of March 1 when Dominic left Turin. He had a pleasant journey, and the change of air and being with his parents seemed to be doing him good. The first four days at home, he went about as usual, but his lack of appetite and his increasing cough, made his parents send him to the doctor. He was quite alarmed when he examined Dominic and immediately sent him to bed.

The doctor diagnosed inflammation and had recourse to bleeding.

Knowing how young people are afraid at the sight of blood, he told Dominic not to be afraid and to turn his head the other way, and he would not see anything. The boy smiled and said: "What is this compared with the piercing of Jesus' hands and feet with the nails?" He then quite calmly watched the doctor at work, and showed no alarm at the sight of his blood streaming out. This was done several times and there seemed to be an improvement. The doctor felt quite certain there was, and Dominic's parents were quite reassured. Dominic, however, thought differently and being quite convinced that it was better to receive the sacraments too early rather than too late, he said to his father when the doctor had gone: "Dad, let us give the heavenly doctor a chance: I would like to go to Confession and receive Holy Communion."

To please him his parents sent for the parish priest, although they felt it was unnecessary, as he was apparently getting better. The parish priest came and heard his confession⁶², and then to satisfy him brought the Holy Viaticum. It can easily be imagined with what devotion and love Dominic received communion. Every time he went to the sacraments he seemed like St Aloysius. Now that he considered this would really be the last communion of his life, who could express the fervour, the tender affection this innocent heart had for his beloved Jesus?

He called to mind the promises he had made at his first Holy Communion. He often said: "Yes, yes; Jesus and Mary, you are my greatest friends, now and

⁶² Fr Domenico Grassi (1804-1860).

for always. A thousand times, death rather than sin.” When he had finished his thanksgiving he said peacefully: “Now I am happy; I have a long journey to eternity but with Jesus by my side I fear nothing. How I wish I could say it to the whole world, when Jesus is with us there is no fear of anything—not even of death itself.”

His patience had been exemplary throughout all of life’s little difficulties but in his final illness he was a true model of holiness. He made great efforts to do everything by himself. “As much as I can,” he said “I want to be the least trouble for my dear parents. They have put up with many inconveniences for me; the least I can do is recompense them in some way!” Unpleasant medicines he took without any sign that they were unpleasant, and he submitted to being bled ten times without showing any sign of resentment.

After four days of illness the doctor congratulated Dominic and told his parents: “Let us thank Divine Providence. We are at a good stage. The illness has been overcome and all we need to do now is wait for a good convalescence.” His parents were overjoyed to hear this, but Dominic smiled and said: “The world has been overcome, it only remains to make a good appearance before God.” He then asked that he might receive the last anointing. His parents agreed to please him though neither they nor the parish priest could see in Dominic’s serene and joyful face any sign of death. In fact from the happiness in his voice one could only judge he was improving. Dominic, though, either moved by devotion or inspired by the divine voice speaking to his heart, was counting the days and the hours almost arithmetically and wanted to devote every moment to preparing himself for death. Before being anointed Dominic said these words aloud: “Oh Lord, forgive me my sins. I love you and I wish to love you for all eternity! Let this sacrament wipe out all the sins I have ever committed by my eyes, my ears, my lips and my feet: may my soul and body be made holy by the merits of your Sacred Passion. Amen.”

He then made all the responses in a strong clear voice, like the voice of one who is in perfect health.

It was March 9, his fourth day in bed, his last on earth. He was very weak now on account of his sufferings and ten bleedings and other remedies, so

he was given the papal blessing. He said the *Confiteor* himself and made the necessary responses. He was filled with consolation when he was told that with this blessing of the Holy Father he received a plenary indulgence.

“*Deo gratias,*” he whispered, “*semper Deo gratias.*” Then fixing his eyes on the crucifix he murmured this little verse which he knew by heart: “O Jesus, my liberty I give completely to you: My body with all its powers I give completely to you. Everything I have is yours, O God, And I abandon myself completely To your holy will.”

Chapter 25 – His final moments and his wonderful death

It is a truth of faith that at the hour of death we gather the results of what we have done during life. *Quae seminaverit homo, haec et metet*⁶³. If during his life he has worked for God at his last moments he will be wonderfully consoled. It does sometimes happen nevertheless that good people are very afraid at the approach of death, in spite of the fact that they have led holy lives. This is part of God’s providence which wishes to purify these souls of the results of their weaknesses in life, and so prepare them for a more glorious crown in heaven. It was not like that with Dominic. I believe that God willed to give him that hundredfold which he reserves for his chosen souls before they enter the glory of heaven. Without any doubt, his such strong faith, his spirit of prayer and penance, his never having offended God grievously, his work for the saving of souls, had all merited for him peace and joy at the hour of death.

And so as death came to him he looked at it serenely and unafraid. Normally the body suffers considerable desolation and distress at the great stress of the soul separating itself from the body; but with Dominic it was not so—he fell asleep rather than die.

It was the evening of March 9, 1857; he had received all the helps that the Church has for us at the approach of death. Anyone who just heard him talking quietly and saw the peace and serenity on his face could only have

⁶³ Gal 6:7.

thought that he was having a quiet rest in bed. If you add to this his complete mastery over himself and his happy spirit, it is little wonder that nobody imagined that his end was near.

About an hour and a half before he died the parish priest came to visit him and was quite amazed to hear the brief prayers with which he so calmly and constantly recommended his soul to God. All the phrases expressed his great desire to go quickly to heaven. “What can I suggest to recommend the soul in this case?” the parish priest asked. After saying some prayers with him the parish priest was about to leave when Savio called him back saying: “Father, before going, leave me a parting thought to keep with me.” “Really I don’t know what to suggest.” “Something that will strengthen and comfort me.” “All right; try to keep in mind the Passion of Our Saviour.” “*Deo gratias*,” replied Dominic “May the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ be always in my mind and heart and on my lips. Jesus, Mary and Joseph help me now when I am dying; Jesus, Mary and Joseph, may I die at peace with you.” After that he fell asleep for half an hour. When he woke up he looked round him and said to his parents: “Dad, here we are.”

“Here I am son, what do you want?”

“Dad, it is time; get my *Companion of Youth* ⁽⁶⁴⁾ and read the prayers for a happy death for me.”

At these words his mother burst into tears and hurried from the room. His father’s eyes filled with tears, but choking back his sobs, he got the book and read the prayers. As he went through them Dominic answered clearly and said every word himself at the end of each one: “Merciful Jesus, have mercy on me ...” When his father reached the final part which runs: “When for the first time my soul will see the wonderful majesty of God, do not drive it away, but take it to heaven to sing your praises for all eternity ...” he said, “Yes, Dad—that is what I want so much, to sing the praises of Jesus for all eternity!”

⁶⁴ “He was indicating a book addressed entirely to young people, with the title: *The Companion of Youth in fulfilling their duties, for the exercises of Christian piety, for reciting the Office of the Blessed Virgin, Vespers throughout the year, etc.*” (note in the original text).

He dropped off to sleep again, but it was like he was reflecting on things of great importance. He awoke after a short while. Then in a clear voice he said: “Goodbye, Dad, goodbye ... what was it the parish priest suggested to me ... I don’t seem to remember ... Oh, what wonderful things I see ...” And so saying, with a beautiful smile on his face, and his hands joined on his breast he gave up his soul to God without any struggle⁶⁵.

Return, pure soul, to your Creator; heaven is open to you, the angels and saints are waiting for you. Jesus, whom you loved so much, calls you with sweet words: “Come, good and faithful servant, you have fought the good fight and gained the victory; enter into the joy of your God: *intra in gaudium Domini tui.*”

Chapter 26 – Announcement of his death – His teacher Fr Picco’s words to his pupils

When Dominic’s father heard him say these last words and saw his head bending forward as though in sleep, he really thought he had fallen asleep again. He waited a few moments and then suddenly filled with apprehension he called to the boy and as he looked again he saw that he was dead. It can easily be realised how great was the sorrow of Dominic’s parents at the death of their wonderful son whose innocent life and appealing ways had spread such happiness in their home!

At the Oratory we were anxiously waiting for news of how he was getting on, when a letter came from his father which began as follows:

“With my heart full of grief I send you this sad news. Dominic, my dear son and your child in God, like a white lily, like Aloysius Gonzaga, gave his soul to God on March 9 after having received with the greatest devotion the Last Sacraments and the Papal Blessing.”

His companions were stunned by the news and some wept at the loss of a great friend who never failed them when in need; others were sad at realising

⁶⁵ He died at 11 p.m. on Monday March 9, 1857; the burial was held on Wednesday 11 (cf. ASC A4920159 *Estratto dell’atto di morte*).

that they would no longer be helped by his constant inspiration. Others got together to pray for the repose of his soul; but the majority said: “He was a saint, he is already in heaven.” Some began immediately to pray to him and there was great competition to try to get hold of something which had belonged to him.

When Father Picco, head of the school where Dominic went for special classes, heard the news, he was profoundly moved and gave the sad news to his boys in the following terms:

“Only a short time ago I was speaking to you of the uncertainty of life and how death does not spare even your years. As an example I pointed to someone two or so years ago who had gone to this same school, sat here amongst you and listened to me, full of life and vigour and who a few days later passed from this life, his parents and his friends⁶⁶. When I said that to you I was very far from imagining that one of those listening to me would very soon testify to the truth of my words. It is with great sorrow that I tell you that your companion Dominic Savio, so exemplary in his life, died a few days ago. You will remember how he was racked with a painful cough during his last days at the school, and it was no surprise to any of us that he had to stay away from school. He went home on the advice of his doctors to be better looked after but already foretelling his death as he had told some of you. But the illness was advanced and continued, and after just four days he gave up his innocent soul to his Creator.

“Yesterday I read the letter describing his death, which his father wrote to Don Bosco. He had no other words to describe him than to call him another St Aloysius Gonzaga both for the holiness of his life and the beautiful resignation of his death. I am very sorry that he was not long at our school and that his state of health prevented me from knowing him better and dealing with him in a large school like this. I will leave it to the superiors to speak to you about his holiness, his fervour, devotion and piety. I will leave it to his friends and companions who were around him daily to speak of his modest

⁶⁶ “Leone Cocchis student in 2nd rhetoric, a young man with much promise, died on March 25 1855 at 15 years of age.” (note in the original text).

behaviour, his conversations. I will leave it to his parents to tell you about his obedience, respect, his docile nature. And what can I say myself that you would not already know?

“I shall never forget he used to come to school with such recollection, how eagerly and attentively he used to listen to what I said, do his duty. I would be so happy if each of you decided to follow his holy example.

“Before he was old enough or had done sufficient study to come to our school, he was enrolled at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales. I often had occasion to speak with the Rector of the Oratory and had heard him talk of one of his students who was amongst the best students and the most virtuous boys in the House. Such was his zeal for study, the rapid progress he made in his early studies that in brief I was anxious to have him enrolled amongst my own students and had great hopes for this. Before he came here I heard some of my own students speak of him as a model as much in study as in virtue. In my frequent visits to the Oratory I noted his good character which you all know of, and he looked so innocent that you couldn't but love and admire him. And as for the fine hopes I had he did not disappoint me in this scholastic year. I appeal to you, my beloved young people, who have witnessed his recollection and application, not only when it was his duty to listen to me but equally at other times when many youngsters have no scruples about getting lost, even those who are diligent and well-behaved. I ask you, who have been his companions not only in school but in other ordinary ways, if you have ever seen him overlook any of his duties.

“I still see him coming to school with that special modest style he had, entering the classroom, taking his place not with the light-headedness of so many boys of his age, but following his lessons, taking notes, or doing some useful reading. And then classes would begin with him applying himself - I recall his angelic face as he hung on every word from me! It is no wonder that despite his young age and poor health he profited so much from his studies. The proof is that amongst so many boys, most somewhat ordinary in their efforts, even though he had an illness that would take him to the grave and was often absent as a result, he was always amongst the best in the

class. One thing struck me most of all and attracted my admiration. This was seeing how close he was to God as a young lad, how affectionate and fervent in his prayer. It is something we see in the better boys, even where there is a natural liveliness and distraction common to your age, where there is very little reflection given to prayers they have to say and little heart given to the effort. For most of them there is little in it except lips and voice. If there is such habitual distraction in youth even in prayers said in the silence and peace of the church, or quietly in their room, in daily prayer, so, boys, know how this can happen even more so for the brief prayers we say usually before and after class. It was here that he showed such piety and union of his soul with God. How many times I saw him with his face fixed on heaven, the heaven that would soon be his place of abode, recollecting his thoughts and offering them to the Lord and his Blessed Mother. He did so with the kind of affection that our prayers should really have. These thoughts, my beloved boys, were the thoughts that enlivened his fulfilment of his duties. They made everything he did and said holy. They directed his entire life to the glory of God. Blessed are the boys who take their inspiration from this! They will be happy in this life and the next, they will make their parents who have brought them up just as happy, their teachers who have taught them, and everyone who did something with and for them.

“Beloved boys, life is a precious gift that God has given us so we can gain merit for heaven. That’s how it will be if everything we do is to offer ourselves to the supreme Giver like Dominic did. What can we say of a young man who spends his entire life forgetful of the purpose for which God has created him, has never found a moment to think of his Creator, never had a place in his heart to lift up a prayer to God? What can we say of the boy who does everything possible to distance himself from these sorts of things or smothers or fights against them? Think about the holy life and the holy death of your beloved friend and his happy lot, something we can be sure he now enjoys. Examine yourselves and see what is lacking for you to be like him and how you would be if, like him, you found yourself before the Judgement Seat of God who asks you for a strict account of every little failing. Set your life beside Dominic’s and whatever difference you find between his and yours, take him

as your example, imitate him in his Christian virtues, prepare your soul to be like his, pure and clean in God's eyes, so that at the sudden call, which will not fail to come sooner or later, and we all have to hear it, we can answer with joyful mien, a smile on our lips as your angelic companion did. Just listen to me once more as I conclude these words. If I see any of you better in fulfilling your duties or better at your prayers, I will attribute it to the effects and example of our Dominic and will see it as a grace from above coming from his prayers and from his being amongst you as his companions and me as the teacher."

Thus we have the testimony of Fr Picco to the boys, expressing his deep sorrow and sense of loss at the news of the death of his beloved pupil Dominic Savio.

Chapter 27 – Emulating Savio's virtues – Many pray to him for heavenly favours and are heard – A reminder for everyone

It will not come as a surprise to those who have read what I have written about Dominic that God soon deigned to favour him with special gifts, making his virtues stand out in many ways. While he was alive, many were careful to follow his advice, his example and imitate his virtues. Many were also moved by his outstanding conduct, holiness of life, his innocence and his habits and prayed to him. There are stories of many graces obtained by young Savio's prayers while he was still alive. After his death confidence in his intercession and veneration grew rapidly.

As soon as news came of his death a few of his friends were already calling him a saint. They met to recite the Litany for the Dead but instead of saying "Pray for him" that is, "Holy Mary pray for the repose of his soul", they said "Pray for us: Holy Mary, pray for us." "Because," they said, "by now Savio is enjoying the glory of Paradise and no longer needs our prayers."

Others added: "If Dominic has not gone straight to heaven or is not there by this time who on earth is going to manage it?" From then on many of his friends and companions made him a model. They had admired his virtue in life and tried to make him a model for good works. They began to pray to him as a heavenly protector.

No day passed without favours being received for soul and body, not only in the school but also by people outside. I saw a young lad suffering from severe toothache who recovered from it. He prayed to Savio his friend with a short prayer and was immediately recovered. Many prayed to him to be freed from fever and were heard. I witnessed one who immediately obtained the grace of being freed from a raging fever⁶⁷. I have received many accounts and testimonies from a great variety of people. Although the character and authority of these witnesses are worthy of trust whichever way you look at it, just the same, since they are still alive I think it better to leave them out for now and be content to refer to just one special grace concerning a seminarian who had known Dominic personally. It was 1858 and he became very ill and what with being in the hospital for a long period of treatment and having to rest after it, he was not able to take the examination at the end of the school year. He thought he would at least manage it in the autumn for the Feast of All Saints and so avoid the loss of a school year, but when he returned to Turin and started to study again his illness returned with renewed force. "It was getting close to the exams, and my health was in a deplorable state. Stomach aches and headaches robbed any chance of sitting for my exam which was of the greatest importance to me. I turned to my beloved friend Dominic and begged him to help me. I made a novena in Dominic's honour. Amongst the prayers I set myself to do was this one: Dear friend, you were my schoolmate, to my consolation and in my good fortune, for more than a year. You worked

⁶⁷ "Such veneration and confidence in young Savio grew largely from an event told by Dominic's father, who is ready to confirm what he says in any place and in the presence of anyone. He puts it this way: "The loss of my son," he says "was a source of deep sorrow for me and was further stirred by the desire to know what had happened to him in the next life. God wanted to give me consolation. About a month after Dominic's death, one night after I had been unable to sleep, I thought I saw the ceiling of the room spring wide open and there, surrounded by a bright light, Dominic appeared, smiling and happy but majestic and striking. I was beside myself at such a sight and cried out to Dominic: 'How are you? Where are you? Are you already in heaven?' 'Yes, yes father,' he answered 'I really am in heaven.' 'Well,' I replied, 'if God has been so good as to let you enjoy the happiness of heaven, pray for your brothers and sisters so they may be with you one day.' 'Yes father,' he answered 'I will ask God on their behalf that they may be able to enjoy the immense happiness of heaven with me one day.' 'And pray for me, for your mother too,' I said 'so that we may be saved and be together with you one day in heaven.' 'Yes, yes, I will pray for that.' And having said that he disappeared and the room returned to darkness as before."

at your studies with me in our class so you know how much I need to pass this exam. Ask the Lord for me, I beg you, for sufficient health so I may prepare myself.”

By the fifth day of the novena my health improved remarkably and I was able to resume studying. With extraordinary ease, I was able to make up for lost time and very successfully pass the necessary examination. The great improvement in my health has continued for more than a year. I acknowledge this grace obtained from God through the intercession of my friend, my companion in life, my help and my comfort.”

With this fact I bring this life of Dominic Savio to an end, reserving an occasion to print other facts by way of an appendix⁶⁸, so they can give greater glory to God and be of greater advantage to souls. For now, good reader, so that you will benefit from what has been written about this virtuous young man I would like to make the conclusion a very practical one for me, for you and for anyone who should read this book. We should be moved to follow young Savio in whatever good ways are compatible with our state in life. In his poor situation he still lived a very happy, virtuous and innocent life, crowned by a holy death. Let’s imitate him in his way of life and we will have a chance to be like him also in his wonderful death.

Let us not fail, too, to imitate Savio in his frequenting the Sacrament of Confession. This gave him support in his regular practice of virtue and it was a firm guide which brought him to life’s end so gloriously. We should go frequently and with the right attitude to draw from this source of salvation in our life. Whenever we go we should not fail to consider past confessions to assure ourselves that they were well made, and if not we should remedy this. It seems to me that through these sacraments received well and often we can live happily in the midst of the sorrows and trials of this life, and like Dominic, when our time comes, see death approach with peace and joy in our hearts. How happy we will be then to meet Jesus Our Saviour who will judge us according to his mercy, and in his goodness lead us to an eternity of happiness. Amen.

⁶⁸ We are leaving out the appendix on *Graces obtained from God through the intercession of Dominic Savio*.

307. Historical sketch of young Michael Magone a pupil at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales

Printed ed. in Giovanni BOSCO, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell'Orat. di S. Franc. di Sales*. Seconda edizione accresciuta. Torino, Tip. dell'Orat. di S. Franc. di Sales 1866⁶⁹.

Dear boys

One of you who was anxiously awaiting the life of Dominic Savio to be published was Michael Magone. All the time he was collecting things that were said about this model of Christian life; he was trying his very hardest to imitate him, anxious that everything that was being said be written down, as he wanted to model his life on him. He only had time to read a few pages of this life before the Lord brought his mortal life to an end to enjoy, as we most ardently believe, the peace of the just in the company of the friend he had made up his mind to imitate.

The singular, or better, the exciting life of your companion Michael aroused in you a desire to see it in print. You pestered me to do it. Therefore, motivated by these requests and by the affection that I had for our mutual friend, as well as by the hope that this small work would be both pleasing and helpful to your souls, I made up my mind to write down what I knew about him and have it printed in a booklet.

In the life of Dominic Savio you saw innate virtue cultivated to a point of heroism right throughout his life. In Magone's life we have a lad who, left to his own devices was in danger of treading the sad road of evil but fortunately the Lord invited him to follow Him. Michael listened to this loving call and constantly corresponding with divine grace reached such maturity as to be

⁶⁹ This second edition, with various corrections and significant additions compared with the first one in 1861 (OE XIII, 155-250), is considered to be the definitive one (cf. Alberto CAVIGLIA, *Il "Magone Michele" una classica esperienza educativa. Studio*, in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di Don Bosco*. Vol. V. Torino, Società Editrice Internazionale 1965, pp. 131-132). We have taken the text and notes from: Giovanni BOSCO, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, in *ID., Vite di giovani...*, pp. 111-157.

admired by all who knew him, thus demonstrating how marvellous are the effects of God's grace on those who make use of it.

You will find here many things you can admire and imitate. You will also come upon certain acts of virtue, expressions that seem beyond a fourteen-year-old boy. But just because they are uncommon I felt that they merited being written down. Every reader, anyway, is aware of the truth of these incidents. I do nothing more than write down what happened under the gaze of a whole crowd of living individuals who can be questioned about the authenticity of what I have written.

In this fifth edition I have added a few facts that were not known to me when I wrote the first. There are other facts that are better explained due to special circumstances regarding them that I was able to draw on later from sources I am certain about.

May Divine Providence, which instructs human beings by the lives of old sinners as well as young saints, grant us all the grace to find ourselves prepared at that last moment, the moment upon which depends a happy or unhappy eternity. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be our help in life and at our death and keep us safely on the road that leads to heaven. Amen.

Chapter 1 – An interesting encounter

One evening in autumn⁷⁰ I was returning from Sommariva del Bosco⁷¹, and had reached Carmagnola where I had an hour's wait for my train to Turin⁷². It was already seven o'clock, the weather was cold and the whole place was shrouded in a heavy fog, turning into a misty rain. This made the whole place so dark that a person could not be recognised a few feet away. The dull glow of the light on the station lit up with a pale glow a very limited area. All the rest was in darkness. Only a gang of boys drew the attention of everyone as they romped around and deafened the spectators with their racket. The words

⁷⁰ This encounter happened in the first fortnight of October 1857.

⁷¹ Sommariva del Bosco: farming community 40 km from Turin.

⁷² Carmagnola: city about 30 km from the capital; in those years it had around 12,894 inhabitants.

“Wait! Catch him! Run! Grab this! Stop that one” kept travellers’ thought busy. But in the midst of all this shouting one voice stood out and dominated all the rest. It was the voice of a leader whose commands demanded respect and obedience. I felt that I wanted to get to know this lad who obviously was able to gain ascendancy over this unruly mob. I waited until everyone was crowded around him and then with a couple of quick steps I stepped in amongst them. They all fled as if terrified - only one remained and he stood in front of me, his hands on his hips and, with an imperious air, began to speak:

“Who are you, breaking up our game like this?”

“I’m a friend.”

“And what do you want of us?”

“If you are agreeable, I’d like to play with you and your friends.”

“But who are you? I don’t know you.”

“I repeat! I’m a friend. I want to join you and your friends in the game you are playing. But who are you?”

“Me? I’m ...” he said in a serious voice, “I’m Michael Magone⁷³, the general in charge of this game.”

Whilst he was saying this, the other boys, who had fled in panic, surrounded him once more. After saying a few words to some of them, I once more addressed myself to Magone:

“My dear Magone, how old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

“Have you made your first confession?”

“Oh, yes” he replied with a smile.

“And your First Communion?”

⁷³ In the baptism register the name is: Michele Giovanni Magone, son of John and Joanna Maria Stella, tailor by profession, born on September 19, 1845, at 1 in the morning, baptized on the same day at 7 in the evening. The father had passed away before the birth of the son.

“Yes.”

“And have you learned some sort of a trade?”

“Yes, I have learned the art of doing nothing?”

“Up until now, what have you done?”

“I’ve gone to school.”

“How far?”

“I’ve done third elementary.”

“And have you still got a father?”

“No, my father’s dead.”

“And your mother?”

“Yes, my mother is still alive and does work for others. She does what she can to earn bread for me and my brothers who do nothing but drive her to desperation.”

“And what do you intend to do with yourself in the future?”

“I want to do something but I don’t know what.”

This frankness of speech, combined with a certain air of wisdom and logic, made me realise in what great danger this lad would be if he continued in this abandoned state. On the other hand, I realised that if his lively nature and evident leadership qualities were to be cultivated he would do great things. I took up the conversation once more:

“My dear Magone, would you like to leave this kind of life and learn a trade or even take up some studies?”

“I would certainly like that,” he replied “because this sort of life does not appeal to me—some of my friends are already in prison and I fear that I will follow, but what can I do? My father is dead, my mother is poor, so who can help me?”

“This evening say a fervent prayer to our Father in heaven; pray with all your heart, trust in Him and He will look after me, after you, after everyone.”

At that moment the station bell rang and I had to leave. “Take this,” I said “take this medal and go to the assistant priest, Fr Ariccio⁷⁴ tomorrow; tomorrow. Tell him that the priest who gave it to you wants to know something about you.” He accepted the medal respectfully. “But what is your name? What town do you come from? Does Fr Ariccio know you.” These and other questions Magone put to me, but I could not give him an answer because the train was already in the station and I had to depart for Turin.

Chapter 2 – His earlier life and his arrival at the oratory of St Francis de Sales

Not being able to learn the name of the priest he had been talking to made Magone very curious and he could not wait until the next day but went straight away to Fr Ariccio and told him what had happened. The assistant priest understood everything and the following day he wrote me a letter in which he gave me details of our little “General’s” life.

“Young Michael Magone is a poor lad who has no father. His mother is so busy providing bread for the family that she cannot look after him and so he spends his time on the street with all the local hooligans. He is of above-average intelligence, but his liveliness and unruly behaviour have caused him to be suspended more than once from his school. All the same he did fairly well in third elementary. As far as behaviour is concerned I feel he has a good and simple heart but he is hard to manage. At school and in the catechism classes he is forever a disturbing element. When he’s away all is peaceful and when he leaves all breathe a sigh of relief. His age, poverty, nature and intelligence make him very worthy of charity. He was born on September 19, 1845.”

On the basis of this information I decided to enrol him amongst the boys at this house, either as a student or in the trade section. As soon as he had received his letter of acceptance, our friend was impatient to come to Turin. He dreamed of all the delights of this earthly paradise and how great it would

⁷⁴ Francesco Alberto Ariccio (1819-1884).

be to live in the Capital City. A few days later I saw him⁷⁵. “Here I am” he said, running to meet me. “Here I am—I’m that Michael Magone you met at the Carmagnola railway station.”

“I know. I know. And have you come along willingly?”

“Yes, I’m not lacking in good will.”

“If you have good will, make sure you don’t turn this place upside down then.”

“Don’t worry, I have not come to cause you any trouble. I haven’t behaved all that well in the past but I don’t want it to be like that in the future. Two of my friends are already in prison and I ...”

“It’s ok. Just tell me if you’d prefer to study or take up a trade.”

“I’m prepared to do whatever you wish but, if the choice is left to me, I would prefer to study.”

“And if I put you to study, what do you intend to do when you are finished?”

“If a ruffian . . .” he said, bowing his head and laughing.

“Carry on—*if a ruffian* ..”

“If a ruffian like me could become good enough to be a priest, I would most willingly become one.”

“We’ll see then what a ruffian can do. I will put you to study; whether or not you will become a priest will depend on your progress in your studies, your conduct and the signs that will point out whether you have a vocation or not.”

“If good will is all that is needed I can assure you that I will succeed and will never do anything to displease you.”

⁷⁵ He arrived at the Oratory in Valdocco on October 17, 1857 (cf. ASC E720 *Censimento dal 1847 al 1869*, p. 10).

First of all he was assigned a companion who acted as his ‘Guardian Angel’. It is the custom of this House that whenever we take in a boy whose behaviour is suspect or we don’t know much about him he is entrusted to an older boy in the house, whose is of proven conduct, to assist him, correct him as needed until he can settle in with his other companions without risk of any kind. Without Magone realising it, this lad, in the most practical and charitable way, never let him out of his sight. He was in the same class and study as well as in recreation. He played and joked with him. But whenever the need arose he said: “Don’t speak that way because it’s not right, don’t say that word or call upon the name of the Lord in vain.” And, for his part, even though he showed his impatience from time to time, Michael responded: “Good, you did the right thing to warn me; you are a good friend to have. If in the past I had had such a friend I would not have formed these bad habits which I now find so hard to break.”

In the first few days the only things he really enjoyed were the recreations. To sing, to yell out, to run, jump, play around were the things which most appealed to his lively nature. When, however, a companion said to him: “Magone, the bell has rung to go to class”, or to Church, to prayers or the like, he gave a longing glance at the games and then went off to wherever duty was calling him without any further objection.

But it was great to see him when the bell rang to signal the end of some duty and recreation lay ahead! He appeared as if he were shot out of a cannon! He simply flew to all parts of the yard. Whenever a game required bodily agility he was its leading light. The game that we call *Barrarotta* was his favourite and he was very good at it⁷⁶. So by mixing in recreation with his other school tasks he found his new lifestyle very much to his liking.

Chapter 3 – Difficulties and a reformed boy

Michael had been at the Oratory for a month now and his many occupations helped the time to pass quickly. He was happy provided he was only jumping

⁷⁶ *Barrarotta*: game based on fast reflexes, fast running and group strategies.

around and enjoying himself without reflecting that true happiness must have its origin in peace of heart and tranquillity of conscience. All of a sudden he began to lose that mad desire to play! He became very pensive and began to take no part in the games unless he was expressly invited. The 'Guardian angel' noticed this and took the occasion one day of saying to him:

"My dear Magone, for some days now I have noticed your face has lost its happy smile; are you sick or something?"

"No, no my health is very good."

"Then why are you looking so sad and downcast?"

"I am sad because I see my friends taking part in all the practices of piety. To see them so happy whilst praying, going to Confession and Communion makes me feel very sad."

"I don't understand how the devotion of others should be the reason for your sadness."

"The reason is easy to understand: my friends, who are already good, practise their religion and become better still whilst I am a 'no-hoper' and can't take part and this is the cause of great remorse and uneasiness."

"What a silly kid you are! If your friends' happiness makes you envious, why don't you follow their example? If you have something on your conscience, why don't you get rid of it?"

"Get rid of it! That's very easy to say! But if you were in my shoes, you'd even say that...", and with that, throwing his cap down in anger and frustration he fled into the sacristy.

His friend followed him, and when he caught up with him he said: "My dear Magone, why are you running away from me? Tell me what's bothering you. Who knows I might even be able to suggest a way to get over it."

"You're right, but I'm in such a mess."

"Whatever mess you're in, you have a way to get out of it."

“But how can I find peace when it seems there’s a thousand devils in me?”

“Don’t worry.. Go to your confessor, open up your heart to him and he will give you all the advice you need. When we have something on our conscience that’s what we do. That’s why we are always happy.”

“That’s O.K. but ...” Michael broke down and started sobbing. Several days went by and he grew more despondent. He no longer enjoyed his games. He no longer laughed and smiled. Many times when his companions were enjoying the recreation he retreated to some corner to think, reflect and to cry. I was keeping a close watch on him so one day I called him and the following conversation took place.

“My dear Magone, I want you to do me a favour and I will not take ‘no’ for an answer.”

“What is it? I am ready to do anything you ask.”

“I want you to give me your heart for a while and tell me what is causing you to be so sad these days.”

“It’s true—I have been sad . . . but I am desperate and I don’t know what to do.”

Having said this he broke down crying. I let him cry for a little while then, jokingly, I said: “Come on now! Are you the same ‘General Micky’, the leader of the Carmagnola gang? What a fine general you are! You are not even able to tell me, in a few words, what is weighing on your soul.”

“I’d like to but I don’t know how to begin—I don’t know how to express myself.”

“Just say one word and I’ll say the rest.”

“I have a mixed-up conscience.”

“That’s enough—I understand everything. You had only to say that for me to say the rest. I don’t want to enter into matters of conscience just for the moment. I’ll just tell you what to do to put everything right. So listen: if your

conscience bothers you regarding the past, simply make a good confession, relating what you have done wrong since your last confession. If out of fear or for any other reason you did not confess something or if you feel your confessions lacked some necessary conditions, then go back to your last good confession and confess what is lying heavy on your conscience.”

“Here’s where the difficulty is. How can I remember all that has happened over the past years?”

“That’s easy to put right. Just tell your confessor that there is something in the past that is troubling you and he will take up things from there and put certain questions to you which you will only have to answer yes or no to, and how many times you committed that sin.”

Chapter 4 – He makes his confession and begins to frequent the sacraments

Michael spent that day examining his conscience. So great was his desire to put things right that he did not want to go to bed before he made his confession. “The Lord” he said, “has waited for me so long and may not be prepared to wait until tomorrow. So if I can go to confession this evening, I should not put it off: it is time to make a definite break with the devil.” He made his confession with great feeling and many times broke down crying. Before leaving he said to his confessor: “Do you think all my sins have been forgiven? If I were to die tonight would I be saved?”

“Go in peace,” was the answer “the Lord in His great mercy has waited until now for you to make a good confession so I am sure He has pardoned all your sins and if, in His adorable plan, called you to Himself tonight you are absolutely certain of your eternal salvation.”

He was very moved by these words and blurted out: “Oh, how happy I am.” Then, sobbing once more, he went to bed. It was to be a night of excitement and emotion. Later on he was to speak to his friends about all the thoughts that went through his mind that night. “It is difficult to put into words all that I felt that unforgettable night. I hardly slept at all. In some little

time I dozed off but soon my imagination made me see hell open before me, populated with hosts of devils. I drove that thought away as I reflected that all my sins had been forgiven. Then I saw a whole host of angels who showed me paradise, saying to me: ‘See what happiness lies in store for you so long as you keep your resolutions!’

About halfway through the night I was so overcome by emotion that I had to get up, kneel by my bed and say over and over again: Oh, how wretched are those who fall into sin! But how much more unhappy are those who live in sin. I believe that if they could only experience for even a single minute the great consolation that being in the state of grace brings they would all go to confession to placate the anger of God, to remove remorse of conscience and to experience peace of heart. Oh, sin, sin! What a terrible curse you are to those who allow your entry into their hearts. If I ever have the misfortune to commit even the smallest sin again I am determined to go to confession immediately.”

In this way Magone expressed his remorse for having offended God as well as his firm resolution to be faithful in His service in the future. He began to frequent the sacraments of Confession and Communion and began to find great joy in those practices of piety he previously found boring. He also found confession so pleasing that I had to ask him to go less frequently lest he become a victim of scruples. This is a real danger to young people when they make up their minds to serve the Lord with all their hearts. This wreaks great havoc since the devil uses this means to disturb the mind and the heart and so make the practice of religion burdensome. It often causes those who have already made great strides in virtue to retrace their steps.

The most powerful means to avoid this disaster is to abandon oneself to complete obedience of one’s confessor. When he says something is bad, let us do everything to avoid it. If he assures us that such and such a thing is not evil, then let us follow his advice and go ahead in peace. In summary, obedience to the confessor is the most effective means to be free of scruples and to persevere in God’s grace.

Chapter 5 – A word to young people

The uneasiness and the worries of young Magone on the one hand and the frank and resolute way he went about putting his soul in order on the other, gives me an opportunity, beloved young people, to suggest some things that I believe would be useful for your souls. Receive them as a sign of affection from a friend who so ardently desires your eternal salvation.

In the first place I recommend that you do whatever you can not to fall into sin, but if unfortunately you should commit sin, never allow yourself to be convinced by the devil to be silent about it in confession. Always remember that the confessor has power from God to remit every kind of sin, any number of sins. The more serious the sins confessed, the happier his heart will be because he knows quite well that the mercy of God by which your sin will be pardoned will be manifested all the more and that the infinite merits of the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ by which He will wash away the sins from your soul will the more be applied.

My dear young people, remember that the confessor is a father who ardently desires to help you as much as possible and who tries to keep every evil far from you. Do not be afraid that a confessor will think less of you because you reveal to him serious faults you have committed nor should you be afraid that he will speak of these faults to others. A confessor cannot make use of any information he has received in the confessional no matter what it costs him. Even if he had to pay for it with his life he could not divulge even non-important things he has heard as a confessor. I can even assure you that the more open and sincere you are with him, the greater his confidence in you will become and the more likely will he be in a position to give you the best advice possible for the welfare of your soul.

I have stressed these matters lest the devil tempt you to keep back some sin when you go to confession. I assure you, my dear young friends, that as I pen these lines my hand begins to tremble as I think of that great number of Christians who are eternally lost because they either did not confess their sins or were insincere in confession! If anyone of you, going back over your lives,

discover that you deliberately kept back a sin or if you have any doubts about the validity of past confessions, I say to you immediately, friend, for the love of Jesus Christ, and for His Blood shed for the salvation of souls, I beg you to put your conscience in order the very next time you go to confession, putting all in order as if you were at death's door. If you do not know how to explain yourself, just tell your confessor that there is something in your past life that is worrying you. The confessor will understand. Follow the advice he gives you and you will be certain that everything is in order.

Go to your confessor regularly, pray for him, follow his directions. When you have chosen a confessor who is able to understand and help you, do not go to another unless you have solid reasons for doing so. Until you have a regular confessor in whom you can put all your trust, you will always lack a friend for your soul. Trust in the prayers of your confessor who prays every day in his Mass for his penitents that God may grant you the grace to make good confessions and persevere in doing good; also pray for him.

You can change your confessor without scruple if he goes elsewhere and it would be most inconvenient to go regularly to him or if he is sick or, on the occasion of some great solemnity, there are great numbers wishing to go to him. Likewise if you have something on your conscience which you do not want to divulge to your ordinary confessor change your confessor a thousand times rather than commit a sacrilege.

If what I have written is read by someone who is destined by divine providence to hear the confessions of the young I would like, among countless other things, humbly and respectfully to suggest the following:

1. Lovingly receive every class of penitents but especially the young. Help them to open their hearts and insist that they come to confession frequently. This is the most secure means of keeping them away from sin. Make use of every means to see that they put into practice the advice given them to avoid sin in the future. Correct them with kindness; never scold them because if you shout at them today they will not come to confession tomorrow or, if they do, they will not speak of those matters which upset you.

2. When you have gained their confidence, prudently find out whether all their confessions in the past were well made. I say this because famous, experienced authors in both the field of morals and ascetics, and especially a famous author who warrants belief, agree in stating that the first confessions are often null or, at least, defective because of the lack of instruction or the wilful omission of matters for confession. Invite the penitent to ponder the state of his conscience well from when he was seven up until he was ten or twelve. At this age he is already aware of certain serious sins but makes little of them or does not know how to confess them. The confessor whilst he must be most prudent and reserved must not avoid asking questions in the area of the holy virtue of modesty.

I would like to say much more about this topic but I will not as I do not want to appear an expert in those fields where I am simply a poor and humble learner. Here I have only said those things in the Lord that I felt would be useful for the souls of the young to whom I am determined to consecrate every moment of that life which the Lord leaves me here on earth. Now let us return to young Magone.

Chapter 6 – His exemplary concern for the practices of piety

In addition to the frequent reception of Confession and Communion, Michael added a lively faith, an exemplary concern and an edifying attitude for all the practices of piety. In recreation he was like an unbridled horse. At first he was ill at ease in church but soon controlled himself so as to become a model for any fervent Christian. He prepared himself well for Confession⁷⁷. Whilst waiting he allowed others to go in ahead of him; as he waited till the confessor was free, he was recollected and patient. Sometimes he was seen to wait four, even five hours in recollection, still, on his knees on the bare floor, waiting for the chance to go to confession. One of his friends wanted to imitate him, but after two hours he fainted and decided never again to imitate his friend in that kind of penance. This would seem almost unbelievable for someone of such a tender age if the one who is writing about it had not been

⁷⁷ Cf. no. 184, p. 741.

an eyewitness to the facts. He took delight in speaking of the edifying way in which Dominic Savio went to the sacraments and tried his hardest to imitate him.

When he first came to the Oratory he barely tolerated going into church. After several months he found religious functions very comforting no matter how long they lasted. He used to say that what we do in church we do for the Lord and what we do for the Lord never goes unrewarded. One day the bell had already gone for a church function when a friend urged him to finish off the game. "Yes," he answered "provided you pay me the same wages as the Lord will." The boy fell silent at those words and went with him to fulfil his religious duty.

Another friend said to him one day:

"Don't you get fed up with functions in the church when they are long?"

"Oh" he replied, "You are just like I was some time back; you don't know what's good for you. Don't you know that the church is the Lord's House? The more we go to church here, the greater chance we will have to be with Him in the eternal triumph of paradise. As well as that, if practice makes perfect in temporal things, why can't this happen with spiritual things? By remaining in the material house of the Lord in this world we acquire the right to stay with Him one day in heaven."

After the customary thanksgiving after Confession or Communion or after the sacred functions he remained a long time before the Blessed Sacrament or before the Blessed Virgin to recite some special prayers. He was so attentive, recollected and composed that he seemed insensible to all external activity. Sometimes his companions, going out of church or passing him, gave him a bump; often they stood on his toes and even hit him. But he carried on with his prayers or meditation as if nothing had happened.

He had great esteem for all kinds of devotional items. A medal, a little crucifix, a holy picture, were all objects of great veneration for him. At any time when he discovered that Communion was being distributed, or some

hymn was being sung inside or outside of church, he immediately broke off his recreation and joined in with the singing or the practice of piety.

He had a great love for singing and had a very fine voice which he cultivated. In a short time he was proficient enough to take an active part in solemn and public functions. He assured me, and I leave it in writing, that he did not want to open his lips to utter a word if that was not for the greater glory of God. “Unfortunately,” he said to me “this tongue of mine has not always performed in the past as it should have done; at least it is in my power to right that for the future!” He left his resolutions written down on a page, one of which was: “O my God, make this tongue of mine shrivel up between my teeth rather than to utter a word displeasing you.”

In 1858 he took part in the Christmas Novena which took place during a retreat in this capital. One evening his companions were singing his praises for the part he had played in the day’s function. He became embarrassed and went off on his own. When someone asked him why he acted like that, he started crying and said: “I have laboured in vain because I enjoyed myself so much when I was singing and lost half of the merit; now this praise has made me lose the other half; all that’s left now for me is that I am tired.”

Chapter 7 – Punctuality with duties

Michael’s fiery nature, his vivid imagination, his heart full of affections naturally made him a lively lad and, at first sight, distracted. By constant effort he learned self-control. As we have already said, he was completely at home during recreation. In a few moments after beginning a game all corners of the courtyard echoed to the sound of his feet. There was no game in which he did not excel. But once the bell went for study, classes, rest, meals, church functions, he at once broke off what he was doing and ran to fulfil his duty. It was marvellous to see him who, a few minutes before, had been the soul and inspiration of recreation suddenly being the first to arrive, almost machine-like, wherever duty called him.

As regards his scholastic duties I feel it could be useful to quote the assessment made by his Latin teacher Fr John Francesca.

“I most willingly and publicly testify to the virtues of my dear student Michael Magone. He was in my class all the scholastic year of 1857 and for a part of 1858-59. As far as I remember there is nothing extraordinary to note in his first year. He conducted himself well. By his application and diligence he did two years of Latin in one so that, at the end of the year, he was able to go into Third Year High School. This is enough to show that his progress was out of the ordinary. I do not remember ever having scolded him because of his behaviour. He was very quiet in class despite his natural liveliness which he gave full vent to in the playground. He made friends of the better elements and tried to copy their example. In 1858-59 I had a very fine class who were determined not to waste a minute of time and were most anxious to make progress in their studies. Michael Magone stood out. Among other things I was amazed by the change in him both physically and morally. He became more and more serious and thoughtful. I believe that this change was brought about by his determination to grow in piety and he could really be put forward as an example of virtue to others. I can still see you there in front of me, my dearly lamented pupil, in that attitude of rapt attention to me, your teacher whilst I was, at the same time, a great admirer of your virtue! He really gave the impression that he had completely put off the old Adam. In seeing him so attentive to his duties, so unusual for a boy of his age, I could not help applying to him those words of Dante, *Under these fair locks lay hid an old mind*⁷⁸.

I recall how, one day, to test how well he was paying attention and how much he was absorbing, I asked my dear student to scan some lines I had just dictated to him. “I’m *not very good at it*,” Michael modestly replied. “Well then, let’s hear your *‘not very good’*”, I said. He did it so well that I could not restrain in joining in the spontaneous applause of the class! From then on that ‘I’m *not very good at it*’ became a catch phrase in the school to indicate a student outstanding for his diligence and attention.” These were his teacher’s words.

⁷⁸ He should have said: Petrarch (1304-1374); it is a verse from Sonnet 213 of the *Canzoniere*.

He was an example to all in the way he fulfilled his duties. The Superior of the House had often said that every moment of time is a treasure. Therefore, he used to say, "if I waste a moment I am throwing away a treasure." Motivated by this thought he did not let a minute go by without doing all that his strength permitted. I have here before me his marks for conduct and diligence for all the time he was with us. In the first weeks he had only 'fair', then they changed to 'good', then 'very good'. After three months they became 'excellent' and that is how they stayed for the rest of the time he was in this House.

In preparation for the Easter of 1858 he made his Retreat to the great edification of his companions and to the consolation of his heart. He wanted to make a general confession and then to write down some resolutions to guide him for the rest of his life. Among them was a proposal to make a vow to never waste a moment of time. He was not given permission to do this. "At least go ahead" his director answered "so long as this promise is not a vow." He then got a notebook in which he wrote down the days of the week: "With the help of the Lord and under the protection of Mary most holy I want to spend: Sunday excellently; Monday excellently; Tuesday etc."

Every morning his first act was to look up this notebook which he read through several times a day and each time he renewed his promise. If he did happen to make some minor slip he punished himself with some sort of penance such as to miss out on some game, to abstain from something he really liked, to say a special prayer and the like.

This notebook was found by his companions after his death and they were very much edified by the holy efforts he employed to advance in virtue. He wanted to do all things excellently. Therefore when the signal was given to do something, he broke off his recreation or cut short his conversation and even put down his pen leaving a line unfinished to promptly go wherever duty was calling him. He often said that it was a good thing to finish off what he had in hand but he got little satisfaction out of doing it and he was often disturbed about it. He said he found the greater satisfaction in performing his duties as indicated by his superiors or by the bell."

Exactness in performing his duties did not prevent him from showing all those signs of courtesy which good manners and charity require. Therefore he was quick to write letters for those who asked him; to clean the clothes of others; to help carry water; to make beds; to sweep; to serve at table; to give up a game, to teach catechism or singing; to explain difficulties in various school subjects to weaker students—these were all things which he did most willingly as the occasion arose.

Chapter 8 – His devotion to the Virgin Mary

It must be said that devotion to the Blessed Virgin is the support of every faithful Christian. This is especially true for young people. This is how the Holy Spirit speaks of her: “*Si quis est parvulus, veniat ad me.*”⁷⁹ Magone was aware of this important truth, which was revealed to him in a providential fashion. One day he received a holy picture of the Blessed Virgin at the bottom of which was written: “*Venite, filii, audite me, timorem Domini docebo vos*” meaning: “Come, children, listen to me and I will teach you the fear of the Lord.”⁸⁰ He began to consider this invitation seriously and wrote a letter to his Rector in which he stated that the Blessed Virgin had made her voice known to him and called upon him to be good and that she herself had taught him how to fear, love and serve God.

He began to perform certain practices in honour of her whom he invoked as his heavenly Mother, his divine teacher, his most loving shepherdess. Among the main ways in which he manifested his filial devotion was to go to Communion every Sunday for the soul in purgatory who was most devoted to Mary whilst on earth.

He most willingly forgave anyone who offended him, as an act of devotion in honour of Mary. Cold, heat, nuisances, tiredness, thirst, and similar inconveniences due to climate were for him so many ways he could utilise by joyfully offering them up to God through his heavenly and loving mother, Mary.

⁷⁹ If you are a child, come to me (Pr 9:4) (cf. no. 184, p. 697-698).

⁸⁰ Ps 34:12.

Before settling down to study, to writing, he took out from one of his books a holy picture of Mary on which was written: “*Virgo parens studiis semper adesto meis*, Virgin Mother, always help me in my studies.”

He recommended himself to her at the beginning of everything he did. He used to say that whenever he found any difficulties in his studies, he had recourse to his divine Teacher and she explained everything to him. One day a boy congratulated him for the good marks he got for one of his assignments. “You should not rejoice with me,” he replied, “but with Mary who helps me and brings to my mind many things of which I was ignorant before.”

To always have present before him some object that would remind him of Mary’s patronage in his ordinary occupations, he wrote, wherever he could: *Sedes sapientiae, ora pro me*: Mary, Seat of Wisdom: pray for me. This was written on all his books, on the covers of his exercise books, on his desk, on his seat and on any other surface that could be written on and you could read: *Sedes sapientiae, ora pro me*.

In May 1858 he decided to do everything possible to honour Mary. Throughout that month he practised mortification of the eyes, tongue and all the other senses. He wanted to deprive himself of part of his recreation, to fast, spend whole nights in prayer, but he was forbidden to do these things because they were not compatible with his age.

Towards the end of that month he presented himself to his director and said: “If you think it is a good idea, I would like to do something beautiful in honour of the great Mother of God. I know that St Aloysius Gonzaga was very pleasing to Mary because he consecrated to her the virtue of chastity⁸¹. I would like to make her this gift also and I would also like to take a vow to become a priest and be chaste forever.” The director told him he was too young to make such important vows. “Yet,” he broke in “I have a strong urging to give myself totally to Mary; and if I consecrate myself to her she will help me to keep that promise.” “Do this,” suggested his director “instead of taking a vow just make a simple promise to embrace the ecclesiastical state if,

⁸¹ Cf. no. 184, p. 724.

at the end of your classical studies, it seems that there are evident signs calling you to do this. Instead of a vow of chastity, simply make a promise to the Lord that you will in the future, take every precaution not to do anything or say anything, even jokingly, that would be contrary to this virtue. Every day call upon Mary with some special prayer to help you keep this promise.”

He was happy with this proposal and joyfully promised to do all he could to put it into practice.

Chapter 9 – His concern and what he did to preserve the virtue of purity

Besides the practices already mentioned he had received some suggestions to which he gave the greatest importance and which he used to call the fathers, guardians and even policemen of the virtue of purity. We have evidence of this in a reply given by him in a letter written by one of his companions towards the end of the above mentioned month of Mary. This letter had been written to Michael asking him to suggest some practices which would help in the preservation of that queen of virtues, purity.

The friend passed the letter on to me and I quote as follows: “To give you a complete answer I would have liked to speak with you personally rather than write to you. I will merely pass on the advice given to me by my director on how to preserve the most precious of all virtues. One day he gave me a little note on which was written: “Read and put into practice.” I opened it and this is what it said: “*Five recommendations that St. Philip Neri gave to young people to help them preserve the virtue of purity*: Flee bad companions. Do not pamper the body. Flee idleness. Frequent prayer. Go to the sacraments often, especially confession.” He often enlarged upon these five hints and I will explain them as I heard them from his lips. He said to me:

“1. Place yourself with total confidence under the protection of Mary. Confide in Her, trust in Her. It has never been the case in the whole world that someone had recourse to Her and was not satisfied. She will be your defence against the assaults aimed at your soul by the devil.

2. When you realise you are being tempted, make yourself busy immediately. Idleness and modesty cannot coexist. Therefore, by combating idleness, you will at the same time combat temptations against this virtue.

3. Often kiss a medal, or the crucifix, make the Sign of the Cross with keen faith saying: *Jesus, Mary and Joseph, help me to save my soul.* These are the three names which are most terrible and formidable to the devil.

4. If the temptation continues, turn to Mary with the prayer proposed by Holy Mother the Church: *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners.*

5. Besides not pampering the body, and custody of the senses, especially the eyes, be on your guard against bad literature. Even if you feel there is no danger for you in reading these things, put such literature down immediately. On the contrary, read good books and, amongst these, prefer those that speak of the glories of Mary and the Blessed Sacrament.

6. Flee from bad companions, instead choose good companions, namely those who are praised by your superiors for their good conduct. Speak willingly with these, play with them but especially try to imitate them in their carrying out of their duties and especially the practices of piety.

7. Go to Confession and Communion as often as your confessor suggests and, if what you have to do allows it, visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament often.”

These were the seven counsels that Magone in his letter calls “the seven policemen given to us by Mary to act as guardians of the holy virtue of purity.” To have some particular inspiration for each day, he practised one of these counsels, adding something in honour of Mary. Thus his first counsel was joined to a consideration of the first joy which Mary enjoyed in heaven and this was for each Sunday. The second of Mary’s joys was for Monday and so on⁸². Throughout the following week, Michael meditated upon the Sorrows of Mary so that the advice indicated in the 1st item was done on Sunday in honour of the 1st sorrow of Mary, and so on for the rest⁸³.

⁸² Cf. “The Seven Joys of Mary in Heaven” (no. 184, pp. 751-752).

⁸³ Cf. “The Seven Sorrows of Mary” (no. 184, pp. 749-751).

Perhaps some will say these sort of practices are trivial. But it has been my experience that the splendour of virtue can be obscured and even lost by the slightest whiff of temptation, so if anything, no matter how small, can help to preserve virtue, then it is to be treasured. For this reason I most heartily recommend simple things that do not frighten or tire people, especially young people. Fasts, long prayer and similar harsh practices are either put aside or endured with reluctance and difficulty. Let us keep to easy things but let us persevere in them. This was the path that led Michael to an outstanding degree of holiness.

Chapter 10 – Exquisite charity shown to others

In addition to his lively faith, his fervour and his devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Michael was outstanding for the charity he showed to others. He knew that the exercise of this virtue was the most efficacious means to grow in the love of God. He practised this virtue on every occasion offered him, even if it be a very minor one. He enjoyed recreation to such a degree that he did not know whether he was in heaven or on earth. But if he happened to notice that a companion wanted to play the game he was involved in, he immediately gave way and got involved in something else. More than once I saw him withdraw from a ball game or some other game to make place for someone else; or get down off his stilts, give them to someone else and help him get balanced on them to make the game more enjoyable and to see that his friend did not have a fall.

If he saw a friend in trouble, he went up to him immediately to see if he could help in any way, or to tell him a story to make him forget his hurt or worries. If he came to know the reason for the trouble, he tried to give some counsel or advice or to mediate for him with a Superior or to find someone who could help.

Whenever he could he explained a problem to a companion, got him a drink, made his bed—anything to help. He found great delight in all this. One winter's day he noticed a boy standing out of recreation because he had chilblains—he also discovered he could not carry out his duties for the same

reason. Michael wrote out his assignment for him; he helped him to dress, made his bed and even gave him his own gloves to keep out the cold. What more could a lad of his age do? Because of his fiery nature, he easily lost his temper but it was enough to say to him: "Magone, what are you doing? Is this the way a Christian gets even?" This was enough to cool him down, even to humiliate him so he often went to apologise to his companion immediately, beg pardon for any scandal he may have given.

But if in his first months at the Oratory he had to be corrected quite often for his outbursts of bad temper, soon, with his goodwill, he conquered himself and even became a peacemaker among his own companions. However, if some argument arose he put himself, small as he was, between the litigants and even used force to calm them down. "We are rational beings," he used to say "and must act as such and not solve our arguments by means of brute force." At other times he used to comment: "If the Lord were to use force every time we offended Him, we could all be exterminated very soon. Therefore, if Almighty God, when offended, uses mercy in pardoning the offender, why do we miserable creatures not use our reason and tolerate displeasures and even insults without seeking revenge?" He said to others: "We are all sons of God, therefore we are all brothers; he who takes revenge on his companion ceases to be a son of God, and by his outburst of temper becomes a brother of Satan."

He willingly taught catechism; he willingly made himself available to serve the sick and earnestly asked to spend the night with them if their sickness was serious. A friend, moved by the many kindnesses he had done for him, said to him: "What can I do for you, dear Magone, to repay you for all the trouble I am giving you?" "Nothing else but a single offering of your sickness in penance for my sins" was the reply.

One of his friends was always in trouble. He was handed over to Michael to see what could be done to bring him to his senses. Michael set to work on him. He started by getting to know him and befriending him. He played with him in recreation; he gave him little presents; he passed on to him little notes on which were written pieces of advice and so got to know him very closely but did not speak about religion with him. Seizing the opportunity of the feast of St Michael, Magone approached him:

“In three days time we have the feast of St Michael; I want you to give me a present.”

“Of course, but I am sorry you did not speak about it before as you have caught me unprepared.”

“I wanted to speak to you about it because I want to choose the gift.”

“Yes—go ahead. I am ready to do what I can to please you.”

“Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“If it costs you quite a bit, will you still do it?”

“Yes, I promise you I will do it just the same.”

“I want you on the feast of St Michael to give me the present of the gift of a good Confession and to prepare yourself for a fervent Holy Communion.”

Considering the situation and because of his promises his companion did not dare to refuse this request; he surrendered and the three days previous to the feast he was occupied in practices of piety. Magone used all his best efforts to prepare his friend for this spiritual feast, and on the day itself both went to Confession and Communion to the satisfaction of the Superiors and to the edification of their companions.

Michael spent a happy day with his friend and, as evening came, he said to him: “We have had a beautiful feast, I’m very happy and you have really given me great pleasure. Now tell me: Aren’t you pleased with what we’ve done?”

“Yes, I am extremely pleased and, more so, because you have prepared me for it. I thank you for the invitation you gave me. Now if you have some good advice for me, I would welcome it.”

“For sometime now, my friend, your conduct has left much to be required. Your way of living has displeased your Superiors, hurt your parents, cheated yourself, deprived you of peace of heart and then ... one day you will have to give an account to God for all the time you have wasted. So, from now on you must flee from idleness, be as happy as you like provided you do not neglect your duties.”

The companion he had half converted was now fully converted. He became Michael's close friend, began to imitate him in carrying out his duties fully and eventually by his diligence and morality he became the consolation of all who had anything to do with him.

I thought I would give this episode some importance and develop it in a detailed fashion because it emphasises Michael's character and also because I would like to report in full what his companion himself told me.

Chapter 11 – Facts and sayings from Magone

What we have recounted so far deals with easy and simple things that anyone could imitate. Now I want to relate certain facts and sayings that are to be admired because they are agreeable and pleasing but not necessarily easy to follow. However they are useful to underline the goodness of heart and religious courage of this young lad. Here are some among many which I have witnessed.

One day he was talking with his companions when some of them introduced topics that a young well-educated Christian should avoid. Magone only listened to a few words—he then put his fingers in his mouth and gave such a loud whistle that it almost split open the brains of the bystanders. “What are you doing?” said one of the lads, “Are you mad?” Magone said nothing and gave a whistle even louder than the first. “Where are your good manners?” yelled another. “Is that the way to act?” Magone then replied: “It's you who are mad, talking like that, so why can't I be mad too, to stop such talk? If you want to break the rules of good manners by introducing talk that is not fitting for a Christian, why can't I do the same to stop it.” Those words, one of his companions assured me, were a wonderful sermon to them all. “We looked at each other; no-one dared to carry on with the talk which consisted of a lot of grumbling. From then on every time we noticed Michael in our company we chose our words well for fear we would have our heads split open by his whistle!”

Accompanying his Superior one day in Turin they came upon a hooligan taking the Holy Name of God in vain. Hearing those words Michael seemed

to go crazy; without thinking about the place or the danger, with two jumps he flew at the blasphemer and gave him two punches whilst saying: "Is this the way to treat the name of the Lord?" But the hooligan was taller than he was and, without thinking and urged on by the shouts of his companions and by the blood running freely from his nose, he flew at Magone angrily. There followed kicks, blows, punches that did not give either time to draw breath. Fortunately, the Superior ran to the scene and, putting himself between the two belligerents, managed with a great deal of difficulty to re-establish the peace to the satisfaction of both parties. When Michael was master of himself once again, he realised his lack of prudence in correcting that silly fellow like that. He repented of his action and gave an assurance that he would be more cautious in the future and limit himself to giving friendly advice.

On another occasion some lads were discussing the eternity of the pains of hell and one of them said facetiously: "I'll do my best not to go there, but if I do ... patience" Michael pretended he had not heard the remark but he quietly left the group, found a box of matches and then returned. Lighting a match he put it under the hand of the lad who made the remark. "Ouch!" was the startled cry. "That hurts, are you crazy?" "I am not crazy," Michael answered "but I was just trying to test your patience; considering that you reckon you could bear with patience the pains of Hell, you should not be unduly upset by a burning match, the pain of which only lasts for a minute." Everyone burst out laughing, but the burnt companion had to admit: "Hell must be an awful place to go to."

Other companions wanted him, one morning, to go with them to make their confessions to a confessor who would not know them, and they offered a hundred excuses for doing so. He refused, saying that he did not want to go anywhere without the Superior's permission. He also added he was not a bandit, afraid of being recognised by the police, feeling he had to go to places and persons unknown for fear of being recognised. "I have my own confessor and I confess all my sins to him without fear, big or small. The mania for going to confession elsewhere must be due to the fact that you do not love your confessor or you have very serious sins to confess. At any rate, it's wrong to leave the House without permission. If you really have a serious reason to

change your confessor you should make use of the extraordinary confessor who comes along to hear the confessions of all the Oratory boys on feast days.”

For all the time he was with us he only went home for his holidays once. He would not go again although I advised him to and his mother and relatives were affectionately expecting him. He was often asked the reason for this but his only reply was a smile. Finally one day he gave the reason to someone he trusted. “I went once” he said “to spend some days of the holidays at home but, unless I am forced to do so, I will not do that again.”

“Why?” asked his friend.

“Because at home there are still the dangers that were there previously. The places, the amusements, the friends tempt me to live as I did previously and this I do not want to do.”

“You should go with good intentions, determined to put into practice all the pieces of advice our Superiors give us.”

“Good intentions are like a fog that disappears bit by bit as you live away from the Oratory; the advice helps for the first few days and then companions help you to forget all about it.”

“Then, according to you, no-one should go home for the holidays, not even to see one’s relatives.”

“No, according to me, only those who feel they are strong enough to resist temptations should go. I do not feel strong enough to do that. I strongly believe that if our companions could see inside themselves many would be discouraged from going home because they go with the wings of an angel and return with two horns on their heads like so many devils.”

From time to time Michael had a visit from an old friend whom he tried to win over to a life of virtue. This friend used to argue that this was not necessary since he knew a person who had not gone to church for a long time yet was doing very well, was thriving and prosperous looking. Michael took his friend by the arm and brought him over to a carter who was unloading building materials in the courtyard and said: “See that big mule? He is prosperous

looking, big and fat, yet he has never been to Confession and never goes to church. Would you like to become like this animal who has neither soul nor reason. His only concern is to work for his owner and then fertilise the fields after his death.” His friend was silent and never again offered such frivolous motives for not carrying out his religious duties.

I will pass over many other anecdotes; these are enough to make his goodness of heart better known as well as his great hatred for sin which often led him to excesses when, in his zeal, he tried to prevent an offence against God.

Chapter 12 – Holidays at Castelnuovo d’Asti – Virtues on that occasion

Seeing that Michael was most unwilling to spend his holidays at home, it was decided, in order to give him some relaxation after the pressure of his studies, to bring him with me to Murialdo, a district of Castelnuovo d’Asti, where the boys from the House often went to enjoy the countryside, especially those who had no relatives or place to go where they could spend the autumn season⁸⁴. Taking into consideration his good conduct I asked him and several others, by way of a reward, to accompany me on the trip. Whilst we were walking together I had a chance to talk with this young lad and to discover that he had reached a degree of virtue much greater than I had ever imagined. Leaving aside the beautiful and edifying conversations he had with me on this occasion, I will limit myself to revealing several incidents that serve to let you know how advanced in virtue he was, especially as regards the virtue of gratitude.

Along the road we were caught by a sudden downpour of rain and reached Chieri like a bunch of drowned rats. We took refuge in the home of Chev.

⁸⁴ In those days, Don Bosco celebrated, with the youngsters, the feast of the Madonna of the Rosary; the event is reported in one of papers of Turin: “Feast of the Holy Rosary. On the 3rd of this month about sixty youngsters of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, led by their good director Don Bosco, went to a place called the Becchi in Castelnuovo d’Asti to celebrate the feast of the Holy Rosary. The solemnity was edifying beyond measure as one saw those devout youngsters approaching the holy table together with many people who had come from the nearby places. The music for the solemn mass and for the benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, played by the youngsters themselves, succeeded in being both devout and splendid.” (*L’Armonia*, 8 October 1858, p.4).

Marco Gonella⁸⁵, a benefactor, who welcomed this little band from the Oratory every time they went to or returned from Castelnovo d'Asti. He dried our clothes and then prepared a feast which was worthy of a Lord on his part and met a corresponding appetite on the boys' part.

After a couple of hours rest we set out once more. For some time Michael lagged behind the group and one of his friends, thinking that perhaps he was tired, fell back with him. He found him quietly speaking to himself.

"Are you tired, Micky?" his friend asked. "Are your feet feeling the effects of this long walk?"

"Oh, no! I am not at all tired; I could walk to Milan."

"What were you saying to yourself just now as I came along?"

"I was saying the Rosary for the intentions of that kind gentleman who was so kind to us; I cannot repay him in any other way and so I am asking the Lord and the Blessed Virgin for many graces for his family that he might be repaid a hundredfold for all he did for us."

It is well here to mention in passing that Michael had the same grateful thought for even the smallest favour, but towards his benefactors he was most sensitive. I would be tiring the readers if I transcribed the many letters and notes he wrote me to express his gratitude for having accepted him into this House. I just say that he went nearly every day to make a visit to Jesus in the Blessed sacrament and that each morning he would say three 'Our Fathers, 'Hail Marys and 'Glory bes for anyone who had been his benefactor.

Not infrequently he took my hand affectionately and looking at me, eyes filled with tears, he would say: I don't know how to express my gratitude for the great charity you showed me by accepting me into the Oratory. I will try to repay you with my good behaviour and by praying to the Lord every day to bless you and your efforts." He often mentioned his teachers, those who had gained him admission into the Oratory or who had helped him in any way; he always spoke of them with respect and was never ashamed to mention his poverty on the one hand and his gratitude on the other. "I regret" he was

⁸⁵ Marco Gonella (1822-1886), banker.

often heard to say, “that I have not got the means of showing my gratitude as I should but I know full well what I owe to so many people and as long as I live I will continue to pray to the Lord that He will reward them for all they have done.”

He also expressed his gratitude when the parish priest of Castelnuovo invited our boys to his house for a meal⁸⁶. That evening he said to me: “If you think it is a good idea, I would like to go to Communion tomorrow for the intentions of the parish priest who entertained us today”. I not only approved of the gesture but made it a point to recommend the same thing to all the boys, since we must always be grateful to our benefactors.

Whilst we were at Murialdo I noted another fine act of virtue which bears relating. One day our boys went for a walk in the nearby woods. Some went looking for mushrooms, whilst others searched for chestnuts and other nuts; others heaped up leaves or other things - in short, they were really enjoying themselves. Whilst they were busy Michael quietly slipped away and went back to the house. One lad saw him, however, and fearing that he might not be well, followed him. Michael, convinced that no-one had seen him, reached the house but, without saying a word to anyone, he went straight to the church⁸⁷. The boy who followed him found him kneeling before the altar of the Blessed Sacrament wrapt in fervent prayer.

Questioned later why he had disappeared so suddenly from the company of the rest to pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, he replied with all simplicity: “I greatly fear that I might fall into sin again and so I go to beseech the dear Lord in the Blessed Sacrament that He will give me the help and the strength to persevere in His grace.”

Another striking incident occurred at the same time. One evening all the boys had gone to bed when I heard someone sighing and sobbing. I went

⁸⁶ The priest was Fr Antonio Pietro Michele Cinzano (1804-1870), parish priest of Castelnuovo from 1834. Every year he took in Don Bosco's boys after the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary (cf. Luigi DEAMBROGIO, *Le passeggiate autunnali di don Bosco per i colli monferrini*. Castelnuovo Don Bosco, Istituto Salesiano Bernardi Semeria 1975, pp. 112-113; 121-123).

⁸⁷ At the ground floor of the house of Joseph Bosco, the brother of the saint, there is a chapel dedicated to the Madonna of the Rosary, inaugurated on October 8, 1848.

quietly up to the window and I saw Michael in a corner of the threshing floor, looking up at the moon and crying his heart out. “What’s wrong, Michael?” I asked, “Aren’t you feeling well?”

He thought he was alone and that no-one could see him and he did not know what to say. I repeated my question, he replied with these exact words: “As I admire the moon I cannot help crying because it has for so many centuries regularly lit up the night without once disobeying the orders of its Creator. I, instead, who am so young and a rational creature who should have been faithful to the laws of God, have disobeyed Him so many times and have offended Him in a thousand ways.”

Having said this, Michael broke down once more. I comforted him with a few words, calmed him down and saw him back to sleep.

It is certainly a matter for admiration that a boy scarcely fourteen years old had already attained such wisdom and has such beautiful thoughts. But this is a fact and I could bring forward many other episodes that would show how young Michael was capable of reflections much superior to his age, especially in recognising in everything the hand of God and the obligation all creatures have of obeying their Creator.

Chapter 13 – His preparation for death

After the holidays spent at Castelnuovo, Michael lived for only about three months longer. He was rather small but healthy and well-built. He was quite intelligent and had no trouble in mastering anything he took up. He had a great love for study and was making better than average progress. As regards his piety, he had reached a standard where I could honestly say that I would not know what to add or subtract in order to present him as a model for young people. He was lively by nature but he was pious, good, devoted and highly appreciative of the little acts of religion. He performed them joyfully, naturally and without scruples - because of his piety, his love for study and his affability he was loved and esteemed by all whilst, at the same time, because of his liveliness and gentle manners, he was the idol of the playground.

There is no doubt that it was our earnest wish that this model of Christian living would be spared to us until his ripe old age so that, whether he felt his calling was to be a priest or a layman, he would have done honour to his country and his faith. But God had decreed otherwise and wished to take this beautiful flower from the garden of the Church militant unto Himself and transplant it in the Church triumphant in Paradise. Michael, too, without realising it was preparing for his approaching death with an even better and more perfect way of life.

He made the novena for the feast of the Immaculate Conception with particular fervour. I want to put before you those things he proposed to himself for these days and they are as follows: "I, Michael Magone wish to make this Novena well and I promise: 1. To detach my heart from all earthly things so as to give it completely to Mary. 2. To make a general Confession in order to ensure a peaceful conscience at the hour of my death. 3. To skip breakfast every morning as a penance for my sins and to recite the Seven Joys of Mary to merit her assistance at the last hours of my life. 4. To go to Communion every day provided my confessor advises it. 5. To tell my companions an anecdote in honour of Mary each day. 6. To place this sheet at the feet of Our Lady's statue and, with this act, to consecrate myself completely to Her and, for the future, I wish to be entirely hers until the very last moments of my life."

All these resolutions were approved except the General Confession which he had made only a short time before. Instead of skipping his breakfast he was advised to say a prayer each day for the souls in Purgatory.

Magone's behaviour certainly gave rise to much amazement in those nine days of novena for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception - he showed extraordinary happiness, but this was always accompanied by efforts to tell good little stories to the others, or invite others to do the same. He gathered whichever friends he could to go and pray before the Blessed sacrament or the statue of Our Lady. During the novena he gave up sweets, fruits, other snacks. He gave away to some of the less devout boys any little books, holy pictures, medals, crucifixes or other items he had been given. He did this either to

reward them for their good behaviour during the novena or to encourage them to take part in the practices of piety he suggested to them.

With similar fervour and recollection he celebrated the novena and feast of Christmas. “I really want to make every effort to make this novena well,” he said as he began it “so that the Baby Jesus will come and be born in my soul with an abundance of His graces.”

On the eve of the last day of the year (1858), the Superior of the House urged all the boys to thank the Lord for all the favours granted to them over the past year. He encouraged them to promise strongly that they would pass the New Year in God’s grace because, he added, this may be the last one for one of you⁸⁸. While saying this his hand was resting on the head of the lad nearest him and that was Magone. “I understand” Michael said with an air of surprise, “that it is I who should get things packed up to depart for eternity.” His words were greeted with laughter, but his companions remembered these words and Michael himself often recalled them. Notwithstanding this thought he did not lose his joviality and air of happiness and continued to perform his duties faithfully and well.

The last day of his life was really close at hand and God wanted to give him an even clearer warning of it. On Sunday, January 16, the members of the Sodality of the Blessed Sacrament to which Michael himself belonged got together for their usual Sunday meeting⁸⁹. After the opening prayers and the usual reading and having discussed those matters that seemed most opportune,

⁸⁸ John Bonetti wrote this down in his diary (December 31 1858); Don Bosco had left some reminders for the new year: “For the clerics, exemplary behaviour, always reminding themselves they are the *lumen Christi*. For the students, go to the Eucharist as often as possible. For the workers ... Go regularly to the sacraments on Sundays. For everyone in general, good confessions: open your heart to the confessor, because if the devil can do what he can to make one keep silent in confession then the boy will be in an even worse state. So in all your confessions there needs to be sorrow, and a firm resolution. One thing we have, and we don’t realise how effective it is, is recourse to the Virgin Mary. Say and become familiar with those beautiful words of the Angel Gabriel: *Ave Maria*” (ASC A0040601 *Memoria di alcuni fatti 1858-1861*, ms by Giovanni Bonetti, p. 35).

⁸⁹ In a note in the original text he includes some of the main articles of the Sodality; you can read these in no. 208, pp. 799-800.

one of the members took the little box which contained little slips of paper on which were written maxims to be practised over the following week. This did the rounds and each boy picked one out at random. Michael plucked his out only to read: *At the judgement seat of God you will be on your own.* He read it and then, as if caught unaware, he said aloud to his companions, "I am sure that this is a message sent me by the Lord to warn me to hold myself in readiness." After this he went to his Superior and said with a little anxiety that he considered it as a warning from the Lord who was soon to summon him into His presence. His Superior urged him to keep himself in readiness not because of what was written on the slip of paper, but because of the advice that Jesus clearly gives in the Gospel where he urges us to be always ready.

"Then tell me" insisted Michael, "how much longer I have to live?"

"You will live as long as God wants you to."

"But will I live until the end of this year?" he begged again with a trembling voice.

"Courage, Michael, calm down. Our life is in the hands of God who is a good Father. He knows how long to preserve us. Besides, it is not necessary to know the hour of our death to go to heaven. It is sufficient to prepare for it with good works."

Then he grew sad: "If you don't want to tell, it is a sign that my end is near."

"That is not necessarily so but, even if it were, I am sure you would not be afraid of going to pay a visit to the Blessed Virgin in heaven."

"That's true! That's true." He became his old cheerful self and ran out to take part in the recreation.

He was as happy as ever on Monday, Tuesday and the morning of Wednesday. His health was good and he was punctual in all his duties. Only on the afternoon of Wednesday did he stand on the balcony watching the

games and taking no part. This was most unusual and surely a sign that he was not feeling well.

Chapter 14 – His illness and accompanying circumstances

On the evening of that day (Wednesday, January 19, 1859) he was asked what was the matter with him and he answered that there was nothing. He had an upset stomach which was nothing unusual for him. He was given some medicine and went to bed. He passed the night peacefully. He got up the following morning at the usual time with his companions, went to church and received Holy Communion for the dying which was his usual custom every Thursday. Later he went into the playground but he could take no part because he was feeling very tired and experienced difficulty in breathing. He was given some more medicine, the doctor was called but, finding nothing serious, advised him to keep on taking the same remedy. His mother was in Turin at this time and was told of his sickness. She came to see him and told us that he had suffered similar illnesses ever since he was quite young and the remedies we were giving him were the same as she had given.

He wanted to get up on the Friday to go to Holy Communion in honour of the Passion of Christ which he used to do every Friday to obtain the grace of a happy death. He was not allowed to do this as he seemed to have got worse. He had had problems with worms, so he was given some more medicine and something special to relieve his breathing. Up to this time, there were no signs that he was seriously ill. At about two in the afternoon matters suddenly changed for the worse. He was experiencing great difficulty in breathing and was beginning to cough and spit up blood. Asked how he felt, he replied that he was still feeling a certain heaviness in his stomach. However, I noticed that he was by now a very sick boy so the doctor was called for once more, to dispel doubt and make sure we were doing the right thing. At that moment his mother, in a true Christian spirit, asked him “Michael, while waiting for the doctor would it not be best to go to Confession?” “Yes, mum, yes! I only went to Confession yesterday and went to Holy Communion but if the sickness is serious I would like to go to Confession once again.”

He prepared himself for a few minutes and made his Confession. After that he calmly and smilingly addressed himself to me and his mother: “Who knows but this Confession will be for the Exercise for a Happy Death for the real thing!”

“What do you think? Would you like to get better or go to heaven?”

“The Lord knows what is best for me; I only want to do what pleases him.”

“If the Lord gave you the choice of getting better or going to heaven, what would you choose?”

“Who would be mad enough not to choose heaven?”

“So you would like to go there?”

“For sure I would! I would like to go there with all my heart. That’s what I have been asking the Lord for now for some time.”

“When would you like to go?”

“Right away if that is according to the Lord’s pleasure.”

“Right, let us say together: In everything, whether in life or in death, may the adorable will of God be done!”

Just at that moment the doctor arrived. He found that the sick boy’s condition was serious. “The case is very serious,” he confided. “The lad has a haemorrhage in the stomach, and I am doubtful whether we can stop it.” He did what he could. Blood letting, blistering, medicines—anything possible was done to stop the internal bleeding that at times hindered his breathing. All in vain. At nine o’clock that night (Friday, January 21) Michael asked to go to Communion once more before his death, “More so,” he said “because I couldn’t go this morning.” He was very anxious to receive Communion which he had been receiving now for some time with so much fervour. Before he received it he said to me and those around his bed: “I recommend myself to the prayers of my companions; may they pray that the sacramental Christ be my Viaticum, my companion for eternity.” He received the sacred Host, then made his thanksgiving helped by someone beside his bed.

After a quarter of an hour he stopped repeating the prayers that were suggested to him and, since he did not say anything we thought he had suddenly passed away. But after a few minutes he opened his eyes and in a seemingly joking way, said: “On that slip of paper last Sunday there was a mistake! It said ‘*At the judgement seat of God you will be on your own.*’ That’s not true. I shall not be alone. The Blessed Virgin will be there to help me so I have nothing to fear—I am ready to go at any time. Our Lady wants to be by my side at the judgement seat of God.”

Chapter 15 – His last moments and a beautiful death

It was ten o’clock and Michael’s condition worsened. It seemed that he would not last the night. Therefore it was arranged that Fr Zattini⁹⁰, a cleric and the young nurse should spend half the night with him, then Fr Alasonatti, the prefect of the House⁹¹, with another cleric and nurse would be there for the rest of the night until daylight. I did not think there was any immediate danger so I said to the patient: “Michael get a bit of rest. I am going to my room for a few moments and then I will return.”

“No, please don’t abandon me,” Michael begged.

“I’m only going to say some of my breviary and then I’ll come back.”

“Then come back as soon as you can.”

I gave instructions that I was to be called at the first sign of a worsening condition because I loved that young lad very tenderly and I wanted to be at his side in his last moments. I was no sooner in my room than I was called back to the sick-bed because it seemed that Michael had entered upon his death agony.

⁹⁰ Agostino Zattini, priest from Brescia, professor of philosophy, political refugee taken in by Don Bosco at the Oratory at the end of 1857.

⁹¹ “This virtuous priest after a life fully spent in the sacred ministry and in various works of charity, died in Lanzo after a long illness on October 8, 1865. We are now completing a biography which we hope will give pleasure to his friends and anyone who would like to read it.” (note in the original text).

This was so. He was slipping away quickly so the Holy Oils were administered by Fr Zattini. Michael was still fully conscious.

He answered the various prayers of the ceremony for the administration of this august sacrament. At every anointing he added some special prayers of his own. I remember his words at the anointing of his lips: "O my God, if only you had struck me dumb before I had used my tongue to offend you, how many fewer offences there would have been! My God, pardon the sins of my tongue—I repent of them with all my heart." At the anointing of the hands he added: "How many times have I not punched my companions with these hands! Pardon me, O God, and help my companions to be better than I am."

The Anointing over, he was asked whether he would us to call his mother who had gone to take rest in a nearby room, also considering his condition was not serious.

"No" he replied, "it is better not to call her. Poor Mum! She loves me so much that witnessing my death would deeply disturb her. Poor Mum! When I'm in heaven I'll pray much for her."

He was urged not to excite himself and to prepare himself for the papal blessing, with a plenary indulgence. During his life he had always held religious practices in high esteem to which indulgences were attached and did his best to utilise them. Hence he was delighted to receive the Papal Blessing. He took part in all the prayers but wanted to recite the *Confiteor* himself. He pronounced every word with the greatest fervour, devotion and lively faith and the bystanders were moved to tears.

He then seemed to drowse off and so we did not disturb him but he soon awoke. His pulse indicated that death was fast approaching but his face was calm. He smiled, and was as fully conscious as a man in perfect health. This was not because he did not feel any pain because his internal bleeding caused suffocation—he was panting and was generally exhausted. But Michael had often asked God to allow him to do all his Purgatory on earth so that he could go straight to heaven. It was this thought that enabled him to suffer with joy and that very pain which normally brings sadness and distress produced in

him nothing but joy and pleasure. Therefore through a special grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Michael not only seemed insensible to pain but showed that he felt only consolation in putting up with these very sufferings. It was not necessary to suggest any prayers to him because he himself, from time to time, was making moving spontaneous prayers. It was 10:45 when he called my name and said to me: "This is it. Help me."

"Take it easy," I replied "I shall not abandon you until you are safe with the Lord in heaven. But if you are really convinced you are about to leave this world, don't you want to say a last good-bye to your mother?"

"No, Father. I don't want to hurt her."

"Then, won't you give me a message for her?"

"Yes, ask her to pardon me for all the suffering I caused her. Tell her that I am sorry. Tell her that I love her and that she should courageously continue her good work. Tell her that I die willingly and that I am leaving this world in the company of Jesus and Mary and that I will be waiting for her in heaven."

At these words, all those present began to sob. I controlled myself and, to fill those last moments with good thoughts, I kept on asking him questions.

"And what do you want to leave as a message for your companions?"

"Tell them to always make good confessions."

"Michael, tell me what thing of your past life gives you the greatest consolation at this moment?"

"What consoles me most at this moment is the little I have done to honour Mary. Yet, this is the greatest consolation. O Mary, O Mary, how happy are those at the hour of death who have been devoted to you!" "But," he continued "there is one thing that puzzles me. When my soul is separated from my body as I enter heaven, what must I do? To whom must I turn?"

"If Our Lady wants to accompany you, leave all that to Her. But before you leave for Paradise I would like to give you a commission."

“Go ahead, I’ll do all I can to obey you.”

“When you are in heaven and you see the Blessed Virgin, give her our humble and respectful good wishes, from me and from everyone in this House. Beg Her to give us all Her blessing, to take us all under Her powerful protection. Beg Her to make sure that none of us who are in this House at present or anyone that Providence will send us in the future will lose their soul.”

“I’ll do that willingly. Is there anything else?”

“Not for the present” I replied.

It seemed as if he wanted to have a sleep. He appeared quite calm although his weakening pulse signalled his imminent death. For this reason we began to recite the *Proficiscere*; towards the middle of the prayer he awoke as if from a deep sleep and, with a smile on his lips, said to me: “Within a short time now I will deliver your message. I’ll do my best to make a good job of it. Tell my companions I await them all in heaven.” He took the crucifix in his hands, kissed three times and then uttered his final words. “Jesus, Joseph and Mary, I place my soul in your hands.” He parted his lips as if to smile and gently fell back in death.

That blessed soul left this world to fly, as we ardently hope, to the bosom of God at 11 p.m. of January 21, 1859, barely fourteen years old. He suffered no agony. He was not agitated or in pain nor did he manifest any of the symptoms that naturally accompany the terrible separation of the soul from the body. I hardly know how to describe his death except by calling it a sleep of joy that bore away that soul from the sorrows of life to the joys of eternity.

The bystanders were more moved than saddened. Fr Zattini could no longer control his emotions and exclaimed: “O Death, you are not a punishment for innocent souls! For these you are the great benefactor who opens the doors to joys that will last for ever. Oh, why cannot I be in your place, Michael? At this moment your soul has been judged and the Blessed Virgin has already conducted you to the enjoyment of the great glory of heaven. Dear Magone, may you live happily for all eternity. Pray for us—we will fulfil our duties as friends by offering fervent prayers to God for the eternal repose of your soul.”

Chapter 16 – His funeral; final thoughts; conclusion

At daybreak Michael's good mother came into the room to see her son. Her sorrow was great when she learned that he was dead! That Christian woman just stood there for a moment without saying a word, or giving a sigh, then broke forth in these words: "Great God, you are the Master of all things ... Dear Michael, you are dead ... I'll always weep for you as a son I have lost but I will thank God who allowed you to die here with every help possible. Such a death is precious in the eyes of the Lord. Rest with God in peace, pray for your mother that loved you so dearly on this earth and will love you even more now that I believe that you are with the just in heaven. As long as I live, I will continue to pray for your soul and hope one day to join you in the homeland of the saints." Having said these words, she broke down sobbing and went to the church to find comfort in prayer.

The loss of such a companion caused great sadness to all the boys in the House and to all who knew him. He was well known for his physical and moral qualities and was most esteemed for the rare virtues that adorned his life. It can be said that his companions passed the following day in praying for the repose of his soul. They found comfort only in saying the Rosary, the Office of the Dead, going to Confession and Communion. All mourned him as a friend yet all consoled themselves by saying: At this moment Michael is already with Dominic Savio in heaven."

The feelings of his companions and of his teacher Fr Francesia are summed up in the following lines he penned: "On that day after Michael's death I went into class. It was a Saturday. Michael's seat was unoccupied so I told the class that we had lost a student on earth but perhaps heaven had gained another citizen. I nearly broke down as I said this. The boys were appalled and in the general silence only one thing was said and that was: "*He is dead.*" All the class broke into sobs. All loved him and who could not but love a lad adorned with so many virtues? The great reputation he had acquired was only realised after his death. Pages written by him were vied for. One of my distinguished colleagues thought himself very fortunate to have a notebook that belonged

to Michael⁹², and to have his name on a piece cut off from an examination paper of the previous year.

For my part, because of the virtues practised by him with so much perfection, I did not hesitate to invoke him in all my needs and I must confess he never once let me down. Please accept my sincerest thanks, dear friend, and I beg of you to keep on interceding for your old teacher before the throne of God. Instil into my heart a spark of your great humility, Michael! Pray for all your companions that they may meet with you one day in heaven.” (*His teacher’s words*).

In order to give an external sign of the great affection we had for our departed friend, he was given as solemn burial as was compatible with our humble circumstances. With lighted candles, funeral hymns and the brass band, we accompanied the body to the grave where, praying for the repose of his soul, we said our last fond farewell with the hope that we would one day be companions in a better life than this.

A month later we celebrated the Month’s Mind. The celebrated orator, Fr Zattini, preached Michael’s eulogy in moving words. I regret that there is no room in this little booklet for it to be reported in full. However, I want to quote the final part as a conclusion to this biography.

After having reminded us of the principal virtues that enriched his soul, he invited his sorrowing and moved audience not to forget him. He asked them to remember him often, to comfort him with their prayers and to follow the wonderful example he had given them. Finally, he concluded this way: “These examples and these words in death our friend Michael Magone of Carmagnola places before us. Today he is no more, death has caused him to vacate his seat here in church where he often came to pray—that prayer that he found so beautiful and which brought him so much peace. He is no more and, with his departure, teaches us that every star sets here below, every treasure consumed, every soul reclaimed. Thirty days ago we committed his

⁹² In the first ed. (1861) he gives the name of this person: Giovanni Turchi (1838-1909), one of the clerics who stayed at Valdocco after the government took over the seminary in Turin. He gained his doctorate, and stayed at the Oratory (1861) teaching, then similarly in various private and public institutions.

mortal remains to the earth. If I had been present I would have followed the usual custom of the people of God and would have plucked a handful of grass by the graveside and thrown it in to the coffin whilst repeating in sad tones the words of the Son of Judah: "They will flower like the grass of the fields", from their bones will arise other dear young people who will remind us of you, will repeat their example and will multiply their virtues!

Therefore, a final farewell, O sweet, dear, faithful companion of ours, our good, brave Michael! Goodbye! You, the hope of your wonderful mother who shed tears over you more of piety than that of nature and blood ... You, the beautiful hope of an adopted father who received you in the name of God, who called you to this beautiful and blessed sanctuary where you learned so well and so quickly the love of God and esteem for virtue ... You, the friend of those who followed along with you, respectful to your Superiors, docile to your teachers, kindly to all! You dreamed of the priesthood ... even there you would have been a master and example of heavenly wisdom ... You have left a void, a wound in our hearts! But you have gone from us or, better, death has stolen you from our esteem and affection ... has death anything to teach us? Yes, to the fervent, to the less fervent and the sinners; the negligent, the sleepy, the lazy, the weak, the tepid, the cold. We pray you to let us know whether you are in the land of the living, in the place of joy; let us hear that you are at the fountain-head, in the sea of grace and your musical voice now with the heavenly choirs so pleasing to the ears of God! Give us your zeal, your love, your charity ... help us to live good, chaste, devout, virtuous lives ... may we die happy, peaceful, calm deaths, trusting in divine mercies. We beg you that death may not touch us with its torments as it respected you. *Non tangat nos tormentum mortis!* Pray for us with those angelic youths from this House who preceded you into God's presence: Camillo Gavio, Gabriel Fascio, Aloysius Rua, Dominic Savio, John Massaglia. Pray with them above all for the most beloved head of this House. We will always remember you in our prayers, we will never forget you until we have been granted the joy of reaching the stars. O, blessed be God who formed you, nourished you, supported you and took you to Himself. Blessed be He who takes away life - blessed be he who surrenders it."

308. The Young Shepherd Boy from the Alps, or the Life of Young Francis Besucco from Argentera

Printed ed. in Giovanni BOSCO, *Il pastorello delle Alpi ovvero vita del giovane Besucco Francesco d'Argentera*. Edizione seconda⁹³. Torino, Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana 1878.

Dear boys,

Just as I was about to write the life of one of your companions, Francis Besucco died unexpectedly and I decided that his life was the one to write. I feel that as well as pleasing both yourselves and those from his district back at home, my effort will be useful to you; hence I have researched Francis' life and written it up in an orderly fashion in this small booklet.

Some of you might question whether what I have written really happened and what were my sources.

Briefly this is how I went about it. For the years that Francis spent at home⁹⁴, I collected information from the parish priest, the school teacher, his parents and his friends. You could almost say that I have simply rewritten and rearranged what they sent me. For the time he spent with us it was simply a matter of collecting the information from many witnesses; these testimonies were written and signed by the witnesses themselves.

It is true that some of the facts recorded will appear far-fetched, and that is one reason why I have been very careful in writing them down. If the facts were unimportant there would be no need to publish them. When you note this boy speaking with a knowledge normally superior to one of his age, you must remember that he showed great diligence in learning, that he was blessed with a good memory and that he was favoured by God in a special way. All

⁹³ This second edition is considered the definitive one (cf. Alberto CAVIGLIA, *Un documento inesplorato. La Vita di Besucco Francesco scritta da Don Bosco e il suo contenuto spirituale*, in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di don Bosco*. Vol. VI. Torino, Società Editrice Internazionale 1965, pp. 7-8). We take the text and notes from: Giovanni BOSCO, *Il pastorello delle Alpi ovvero vita del giovane Besucco Francesco d'Argentera*, in ID., *Vite di giovani...*, pp. 191-231.

⁹⁴ Francis Besucco's home town is the alpine village of Argentera (1684 m. above sea level), in the province of Cuneo, 6 km from the border with France. In 1860 its population was 299 people.

of these facts contributed in no small degree to advance him well ahead of his years.

You will also have to take something into account about myself; possibly I have been over indulgent in writing about things which happened between the two of us; for this I ask your forbearance. Please look upon me as a father who is speaking about a son whom he loves tenderly; a father who gives his time to the one he loves and who speaks to his dear sons; he opens his heart to them to please them and to instruct them in the practice of virtue which Besucco was a model of. Read his life then, my dear boys, and if, as you read, you feel yourself moved to turn away from something wrong or to practice some virtue, render thanks to God the giver of all good things.

May the Lord bless us all and preserve us in His holy grace here on earth so that we can one day bless him forever in Heaven ...⁹⁵

Chapter 15 – Events and the trip to Turin

Early next morning he said goodbye to his dear mother, his brothers and his sisters; they were crying, but although he felt the parting, he remained quite calm. He encouraged them all to have perfect resignation to the will of God. But when he recommended himself to their prayers so that he would always follow the voice of God who was calling him to His service, he burst into tears. His parish priest bade him farewell with these final words: “Go, my dear Francis, God who is taking you away from us is calling you to the Oratory where you will be able to sanctify your soul by emulating the virtues which opened Paradise to Dominic Savio and Michael Magone. During your last months with us you obtained your desire to go to the Oratory of St Francis of Sales from your reading of their lives and holy deaths.”⁹⁶

⁹⁵ We only include the second part of Francis Besucco’s life here, the part written by Don Bosco. We are leaving out the first fourteen chapters since they are copied from a letter from the parish priest (ASC A2280701 *Vita del pio giovanetto Besucco Francesco* [gennaio 1864], ms. by Francesco Pepino, with original notes by Don Bosco, 22 pp.).

⁹⁶ Francis’ godfather was the parish priest of Argentera, Fr Francesco Pepino (1817-1899).

His father accompanied Francis to Turin; he took a small trunk with him: they left on August 1, 1863. As they left Argentera behind, his father asked Francis whether he was sorry to leave his home, his family and above all his mother. Francis' reply was always the same: "I am sure that I am doing God's will, and the further I get from home, the greater is my happiness." After answering, he continued with his prayers and his father attested that the journey from Argentera to Turin was for Francis almost one continuous prayer.

They reached Cuneo at about four in the morning of August 2. As they passed the Bishop's palace Francis asked: "Whose is that beautiful house?" "The Bishop's" came the reply. Francis signalled to his father that he wanted to stop for a moment. His father went on a little; when he turned around he saw Francis kneeling in front of the Bishop's gate. "What are you doing now?", he asked him. "I am praying to God for His Lordship that he also might help me to get enrolled in the Oratory at Turin and that in due time he might number me amongst his clerics and hence do something useful for me and for others."

When they arrived in Turin, his father pointed out the wonderful sights of the Capital. His father observed the symmetrical streets, the large squares, the tall majestic porticoes and the well-decorated arcades; he admired the height and the elegance of the buildings; he thought that he was in another world. "What do you think of it, Francis?" he asked the boy, full of wonder. "Doesn't it seem to you that we are already in Heaven?" Francis smiled and answered: "All these things mean little to me. I won't be happy until I have been accepted at the Oratory to which I have been sent."

Finally they reached the longed-for place and full of joy he exclaimed: "Now we are here." Then he said a short prayer to thank God and Our Lady for the successful journey they had made and for granting his wishes.

His father was moved to tears when leaving him, but Francis comforted him saying: "Don't worry about me, the Lord won't fail us; I shall pray to Him every day for all our family." Further moved his father asked him: "Do you need anything?" "Yes, dear dad, thank my Godfather for the care that he has taken of me; assure him that I shall never forget him and by my concentration

on study and my good conduct I shall make him quite pleased. Tell all those at home that I am very happy and that I have found my paradise.”

Chapter 16 – Lifestyle at the Oratory – First discussion

What I have written about Francis Besucco so far forms the first part of his life, I obtained my information from those who knew him and those who lived with him in his home environment. I am now going to write about the second part of his life; but I shall recount things I heard myself, saw with my own eyes or things I was told by the hundreds of boys who were his companions during the time he spent with us. I have been particularly helped by a long and detailed account prepared by Father Ruffino, teacher and director of classes at the House⁹⁷. He had the time and the opportunity to witness and note down the many acts of virtue practised by Besucco.

For a long time Francis was very eager to come to this Oratory but when he actually arrived he was quite bewildered. More than 700 boys soon became his friends and companions in recreation, at table, in the dormitory, in church, in school and in the study-hall. It seemed impossible to him that so many boys could live together in the same house without turning everything upside down. He wanted to ask questions of them all, he wanted to know the reason and explanation for everything. Every bit of advice given by the Superiors and every inscription on the walls became for him the subject of reading, meditation and deep reflection.

It was the beginning of August 1863, and I had never seen him before. All I knew of him was what Archpriest Pepino had told me by letter. One day I was out with the boys at recreation when I saw a boy dressed like the mountain people; he was of medium build, a freckle-faced country boy. He stood there, eyes wide-open, watching the others play. When his eyes met mine, he smiled respectfully and came over to me.

“Who are you?” I asked him, smiling.

“I am Francis Besucco from Argentera.”

⁹⁷ Domenico Ruffino (1840-1865), ordained priest on May 30 that year.

“How old are you?”

“I’ll soon be fourteen.”

“Have you come to us to study, or to learn a trade?”

“I’m keen to study.”

“How far have you gone in school?”

“I finished elementary school back home.”

“Why do you want to continue going to school rather than learn a trade?”

“My greatest wish is to be a priest.”

“Whoever advised you in this?”

“I have always wanted it, and I have always prayed to the Lord for help to realise my aim.”

“Have you ever asked anyone for advice?”

“Yes, I spoke about it many times with my Godfather; yes, with my Godfather ...” He became emotional as he said this, and tears welled up in his eyes.

“Who is your Godfather?”

“My Godfather is the Parish priest, the Archpriest at Argentera. He is so good to me. He taught me my catechism, he taught me school subjects, he clothed me, he kept me. He is such a good man; after teaching me for two years he recommended me to you so that you would accept me at the Oratory.”

He began to cry again. His recognition of the benefits he had received and his affection for his benefactor gave me a good idea of his character and good-heartedness. Then I remembered the recommendations of his parish priest and of Lieutenant Eysautier⁹⁸ and I thought to myself: This boy, with proper education, will become a very good boy. Because experience shows that gratitude in young people is a good pointer to a successful future: on

⁹⁸ Giovanni Stefano Eysautier, originally from Argentera, friend of Fr Pepino’s, was a lieutenant in the King’s personal bodyguard.

the other hand those who easily forget the favours they have received and the attention given to them stay insensitive to advice and to religious training; they are therefore difficult to educate and their results are uncertain. So I said to Francis: "I am very pleased that you like your Godfather so much, but I don't want you to be worried. Love him in the Lord, pray for him, and, if you want to really please him, try to conduct yourself in such a manner that I can send him good reports about you; or, if he comes to Turin, he will be able to appreciate your progress and conduct. Meanwhile go and play with your companions." He wiped away his tears, smiled affectionately at me and then went to take part in the games with his companions.

Chapter 17 – Happiness

In his humility Francis looked upon his companions as more virtuous than himself and he rated himself poorly when comparing his conduct with theirs. A few days later he again approached me with a rather perturbed look on his face.

"What's the matter, my dear Besucco?" I asked him.

"Here I am with so many real good companions; I'd like to be as good as they are but I don't know how to go about it. I need your help."

"I'll help you in every way I can. If you want to be good, practise three things only and all will go well."

"What are these three things?"

"They are: Cheerfulness, Study, Piety. This is the grand programme. Following it you will be able to live happily and do a lot of good for your soul."

"Cheerfulness ... cheerfulness—I am already too cheerful. If being cheerful is enough for me to be good, I'll go and play from morning to night. Will that be all right?"

"Not from morning to night, but only during the hours of recreation."

He took my advice too literally; convinced that he was doing something pleasing to God by playing, he became very impatient waiting for play time. He was not very good at some of the games, and often knocked into things or fell over. He wanted to walk on stilts, and had a tumble, he wanted to exercise on the parallel bars and fell head over heels. At bocce he either hit others on the legs with the ball or he spoilt the game for others. To sum up, his games always ended up by his falling over or some such mishap. One day a worried Francis limped up to me.

“What is it, Besucco?” I asked him.

“I’m bruised all over.” he answered.

“How did that happen?”

“I’m not very good at the games they play here; I’ve fallen on my head, I’ve hurt my legs and my arms; yesterday I collided with a companion and we both finished up with blood noses.”

“You poor boy! Use a bit of sense, take it easy.”

“But you told me that these recreations pleased God; and I want to do well in all the games with my companions.”

“You don’t quite understand; you must learn these games gradually and play them in accordance with your ability. They are meant to be a means of recreation and not of harm to the body.”

He then understood that recreation should be taken in moderation and directed to the relief of the spirit, otherwise it can cause bodily harm. He continued to be a willing participant in the games, but he was more careful. Also, if free time was somewhat prolonged, he would break off from a game and talk to a studious companion about the rules and discipline of the house or about some scholastic difficulty. Furthermore he learned the secret of doing some good to himself and to his companions in the recreations themselves, by giving some good advice or courteously warning others when an occasion presented itself, just as he used to do at home in a far more restricted setting. By spending part of his recreations in this way, in a short time Besucco became a model in study and in piety.

Chapter 18 – Study and diligence

One day Besucco read these words on a placard in my room: *Every moment of time is a treasure.*

He was puzzled and he said: “I don’t understand what these words mean. How can we gain a treasure in every moment of time?”

“But it’s true. In every moment of time we can learn some scientific or religious fact, we can practice some virtue, we can make an act of the love of God; before the Lord there are so many treasures which will help us in time and in eternity.”

He made no further comment, but he wrote the words down on a piece of paper, and then said: “I understand.” He understood how precious time was and, recalling a recommendation of his parish priest, he added: “My Godfather also had told me that time is very precious and that we must occupy it well, beginning in our youth.”

After that he set about his various tasks with even greater application. To the glory of God I can say that, in all the time he spent in this house, there was never any need to encourage him or advise him in the carrying out of his duties.

It is a custom in this house to read out every Saturday marks the boys are given for their conduct and study during the previous week. Besucco’s marks were always the same, namely, excellent. When it was time to go to the study-hall, he went immediately without a moment’s hesitation. It was wonderful to see him so absorbed in his study and writing away like someone doing something really to his liking. He never left his place for any reason whatever; and no matter how long the study period lasted he never took his eyes off his text books or exercise books.

One of his greatest fears was that he would involuntarily break the rules; and, particularly in his first few days, he often asked if he could do this or that. For example, he once asked in all simplicity if he were allowed to write in the study hall, since he thought that they weren’t supposed to do anything else there except study. Another time he asked whether he was permitted to put his

books in order during study time. He asked the help of the Lord for proper use of his time. Once some companions saw him make the Sign of the Cross during study time; then raise his eyes to Heaven and pray. Afterwards they asked why he did that and he answered: “I often have difficulties in learning and so I ask the Lord to give me his help.”

He had read in the life of Michael Magone that before study Michael always said: “*Maria, sedes sapientiae, ora pro me.* Mary, Seat of Wisdom, pray for me.” He began to do this also. He wrote these words on his books, on his exercise books and on some strips of paper which he used as book-marks. Sometimes he wrote notes to his companions and either at the beginning or on a separate sheet of paper he wrote for them the same invocation to his heavenly mother as he used to call her. I read one of the letters he wrote to a companion. It stated: “You have asked me how I have been able to keep going in Second Year⁹⁹, when had I been following the usual routine I would barely have made First Year. I answer frankly that this is a special blessing of the Lord, who has given me health and strength. Besides that I have discovered three secrets which I have used to great advantage. They are:

1. Never to waste a moment of time when it comes to duties in school or in the study hall.
2. On holidays or other days when recreation is lengthened I go to study after half an hour, or I discuss school matters with some companions who are further advanced in study than I am.
3. Every morning before going out of church I say an Our Father and a Hail Mary to St. Joseph. This is the means that has helped me advance in knowledge. From the time I began saying this Our Father I have always found it easier either to learn my lessons or to overcome the difficulties that I often meet in scholastic matters.”

“Try it yourself,” the letter concluded “and you’ll certainly be happy with it.”

⁹⁹ Second year of ‘ginnasiale’.

We should not be surprised to read that, with such great diligence, he was able to make such rapid progress in school.

When he came to us he almost gave up hope of being able to cope with First Year, but after only two months he was already getting quite satisfactory marks in his class. In school he dwelt on every word spoken by his teacher who never had to reprimand him for inattention.

What has been said about Besucco's diligence in matters of study must also be said about all his other duties, even the smallest: he was exemplary in everything. He had been given the task of sweeping the dormitory. He won admiration for the exactitude with which he discharged this duty without giving the least sign that it was a burden to him.

When he was sick and could not get out of bed, he apologised to the assistant for not being able to do his usual task and he profusely thanked a companion who took his place.

Besucco came to the Oratory with a fixed purpose; in his life here he always had in view the point to which he was aiming, namely to dedicate himself completely to God in the priesthood. To this end he sought to make progress in knowledge and virtue. He was speaking with a companion one day about their studies and the reason why each of them had come to the house. Besucco gave his own reasons and then concluded: "To sum it all up my reason is to become a priest; with the help of the Lord I'll do everything possible to achieve this."

Chapter 19 – Confession

You can say what you like about various systems of education, but I have not found any other firm basis for education than frequent confession and communion; and I believe that I am not exaggerating if I assert that morality is endangered when these two elements are missing. Besucco, as we have seen, was trained to approach these two sacraments frequently. When he arrived at the Oratory he grew in fervour in going to confession and communion.

At the beginning of the Novena for the Birthday of Mary Most Holy, he went to his director and said: "I would like to make this Novena well, and, amongst other things, I want to make a general Confession. When he had heard the reasons for this request the director replied that he did not see any reason for a general confession and he added: "You needn't worry, especially as you have made a general confession at other times to your parish priest." "Yes," he replied "I did so on the occasion of my First Communion and also at a Retreat in my parish, but, as I want to put my soul in your hands, I want to reveal to you everything that is on my conscience so that you can with greater surety give me the advice best adapted to help me save my soul."

The director agreed; he praised him for his decision to choose a regular confessor; he exhorted him to think well of his confessor, to pray for him, and to always lay open before him anything which troubled his conscience. Then he helped him prepare for the general confession he wanted to make. He performed this act with very great expressions of sorrow for his past and resolutions for the future even though, as anyone could judge from what was known of his life, he had never committed any fault which could be deemed a mortal sin. Once he had made a choice of Confessor he did not change him for the whole time that the Lord spared him to us.

He had full confidence in him, he consulted him even outside of confession, he prayed for him and he was very pleased every time he was able to get from him a piece of good advice for his rule of life.

One day he wrote a letter to a friend who had told him that he too would like to come to the Oratory. He recommended that he pray to the Lord for this grace and then he suggested some practices of piety to him, such as the Stations of the Cross; but above all he advised him to go to Confession every week and to go to Communion several times during this week.

Whilst I greatly praise Besucco in this matter, I recommend with all my heart, to all people, but especially to young people to choose a regular confessor in good time, never to change him, except for reasons of necessity. Let them avoid the mistake of some people, who change the confessor almost every time they go to confession, or, when they have to confess something of greater

importance, go to another confessor and then return to their regular confessor. When they act this way they are not committing any sin, but they will never have a sure guide who thoroughly knows the state of their conscience. They will meet the same fate that befalls a sick man who goes to a different doctor each time. The doctor will find it difficult to diagnose the illness, and hence will be uncertain as to what remedies to prescribe.

If by any chance this booklet should be read by anyone who is destined by Divine Providence to be engaged in the education of young people, I would strongly recommend three things to him. First, zealously encourage frequent Confession as a prop to the instability of young people and do everything to assist regularity at this Sacrament. Secondly let them insist on the great usefulness in choosing a regular confessor who is not to be changed without necessity, but let there be a supply of confessors so that everyone can choose him who seems best adapted to the needs of his own soul. But let them always bear in mind that if one changes confessor he does not do anything wrong and that it is better to change him a thousand times than to keep back any sin in confession.

Let them never fail to speak very often about the great secret of Confession. Let them explicitly teach that the Confessor is bound by a secret which is natural, ecclesiastical, divine and civil, and that he cannot for any reason at all, cost what it may, even death, reveal to others what he has heard in confession or make use of it for his own purposes; that, moreover, he cannot even think of things heard in this Sacrament; that the confessor is not greatly surprised nor does he lose his esteem and affection for people because of serious things heard in the confessional; on the contrary the penitent goes up in his eyes. A doctor is quite pleased when he finds out why his patient is seriously ill, because he can then apply the correct remedy; the confessor who is the doctor of the soul does the same thing. By absolution he cures in God's name all the ills of the soul. I am convinced that we shall obtain wonderful moral results among our boys if these things are recommended and explained; and the results will be the wonderful moral effect the Catholic religion has in the sacrament of penance.

Chapter 20 – Holy Communion

The second prop for young people is Holy Communion. Fortunate are those boys who begin in good time to go to Communion frequently and with the right dispositions. Besucco had been taught to go to communion often and with fruit by his parents and by his parish priest. At home he used to go to Communion every week; then on Feast Days and even some times during the week. When he came to the Oratory he continued to go to Communion with the same frequency, then he went several times a week, and during novenas even every day.

Although his innocent soul and his very exemplary conduct made him worthy to receive Communion frequently, nevertheless he considered that he was not worthy of it. His apprehensions grew when a person who came to this house told Besucco that it was better to go less frequently so that he could make a longer preparation and receive Communion more fervently.

One day he went to his superior and told him all his worries. He tried to satisfy him, saying:

“Don’t you eat material bread for your body with great frequency?” the superior asked him.

“Yes, I do.”

“If we eat material bread so frequently for the body which is only meant to live for a short time on this earth, why should we not often, even every day, take spiritual bread for the soul, i.e. Holy Communion.” (*St. Augustine*).

“But anyone who eats less frequently has a better appetite.”

“Anyone who eats sparingly and goes for days without food either faints through weakness or dies of hunger, or when he does decide to eat he runs the risk of getting indigestion.”

“If that is the case, I’ll try to go more frequently to Holy Communion in the future, because I really know that it is a powerful means for making me good.”

“Go as frequently as your Confessor suggests.”

“He tells me to go every time that there is nothing disturbing my conscience.”

“Good; follow that advice. Meanwhile I want to tell you that Our Lord Jesus Christ invites us to eat His Body and drink His Blood every time that we are in spiritual need, and we live in continual need in this world. He goes so far as to say: ‘If you do not eat my body and drink my blood, you shall not have life in you!’ For this reason, at the time of the apostles the Christians were persevering in prayer and in feeding themselves with the Eucharistic Bread. In the first centuries all of those who went to hear Mass received Holy Communion. And anyone who heard Mass every day, also went to Communion every day. The Catholic Church at the Council of Trent recommended that Christians assist at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as often as possible, and amongst others there are these beautiful words: ‘It is the wish of the Council that when the faithful go to Mass they go to Communion not only spiritually but also sacramentally so that the fruit which comes from this Most August Sacrifice may be found more copiously in them.’” (Sess. 22, c.6)

Chapter 21—Reverence for the Blessed Sacrament

Francis showed his great love for the Blessed Sacrament not only by going frequently to Communion, but whenever an occasion presented itself. At home he was always very pleased to accompany the priest carrying Holy Viaticum. Whenever he heard the bell he immediately asked his parents for permission to go out, and they willingly granted it; then he ran to the Church to offer his services in a manner befitting his age. He was always delighted to do whatever was required, such as, ring the hand bell, carry a lighted torch, carry the *ombrellino*, say the *Confiteor*, the *Miserere* or the *Te Deum*. At home he would willingly help companions who were younger or less instructed than he was to prepare to receive Communion worthily and afterwards to make the appropriate thanksgiving.

His fervour continued at the Oratory and, amongst other things, he formed the very commendable habit of making a short visit to the Blessed Sacrament every day. He was often seen with a priest or cleric when they were taking a group of boys to say some special prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament. It was also edifying to witness the way he managed to take a companion with him into Church. One day he invited a companion saying: "Come with me and we shall go and say an Our Father to Jesus, who is there all alone in the tabernacle." The companion who was completely absorbed in his game answered that he did not want to go. Besucco went in alone just the same. The companion felt sorry the next day for having refused the kind invitation of his virtuous companion and went up to him and said: "Yesterday you invited me to go into the Church with you and I refused; today I am inviting you to keep me company in doing what I didn't do yesterday." Besucco smiled and answered: "Don't worry about yesterday. I prayed for both of us. I said three Our Fathers for me and then three for you in front of the Blessed Sacrament. However, I shall go most willingly now and whenever you want to have me for company."

More than once I have had to go into the church after the evening meal to perform some duty whilst the boarders were happily engaged in a lively recreation in the yard. I did not have a lamp in my hands and I tripped over what seemed to be a sack of wheat. I was quite surprised to find out that I had bumped into Besucco who was kneeling in the dark behind the altar but quite near it. He was praying to his beloved Jesus asking for heavenly help to make himself better, or even to make him a saint. He would serve Mass very willingly. He took delight in preparing the altar, lighting the candles, taking out the cruets and in helping the priest to vest. Whenever someone else wanted to serve the Mass, he willingly gave way and then heard it with great recollection. Those who have observed him assisting at Mass or at Benediction in the evening are unanimous in asserting that it was impossible to look at him without being struck and edified by the fervour he showed in praying, and by his composure.

He was also very eager to read books and to sing hymns about the Blessed Sacrament. Among the many little prayers he recited throughout the day, his

favourite was: *Blessed and praised every moment be the most holy and divine Sacrament*¹⁰⁰. “With this prayer” he would say, “I gain 100 days indulgence every time; and moreover every time I began saying it all the bad thoughts running through my mind disappear. This brief prayer is a hammer with which I am certain to break the horns of the devil whenever he comes to tempt me.”

Chapter 22 – Spirit of prayer

It is so difficult to get boys to enjoy prayer. Their fickle age makes anything which requires serious mental attention seem nauseating and heavy. A boy is very fortunate if he has been trained in prayer and likes it. The fountain of divine blessings is always opened by prayer.

Besucco belonged to the number of these boys. The assistance given him by his parents from his earliest years, the care taken by his teacher and especially the help of his parish priest all produced the desired end in our Francis. He was not accustomed to meditate, but he recited many vocal prayers. He uttered the words clearly and distinctly and he pronounced them in such a way that he seemed to be speaking to Our Lord, or Our Lady or some saint to whom he was directing his prayers. He got up and dressed himself as soon as he was called in the morning, made his bed and then went straight to church or else he knelt down by his bedside to pray until the bell called him elsewhere. His punctuality in going to church meant that he could sit next to those companions or go to those places where he knew he would not be distracted. He was always upset whenever he saw anyone talking or acting in a dissipated manner. One day as soon as he left the Church he went looking for a boy who had misbehaved in this way. When he found him he told him what he had done and, having made him see he had done wrong, he urged him to be more recollected in church.

He had a special devotion towards Mary most holy. He was particularly fervent towards her during the novena in preparation for her birthday. Every evening the Rector used to propose some practice in his exercise book. This

¹⁰⁰ Don Bosco suggests saying this little prayer at the elevation of the host and at visits to the Blessed Sacrament (cf. no. 184, pp. 739 and 747).

way, he would say, I shall have a fine present to give to Our Lady at the end of the year. Throughout the day he repeated the practice and reminded his companions of it. He wanted to know the exact spot where Dominic Savio used to kneel to pray in front of Our Lady's Altar; he would go there to pray also. He used to say that he would dearly like to stay there from morning till evening to pray to Our Lady. "Because I seem to have Savio praying with me; he seems to answer my prayers, and his fervour instils itself into my heart." Generally he was the last to leave the church because he used always to stop for a short time in front of Our Lady's statue. This often caused him to miss breakfast. Those who noticed it were amazed that a strong, healthy boy of fourteen years would forget his bodily food in favour of the spiritual food of prayer.

Often, especially during holiday time, he went into the church with some of his companions to pray the seven joys of Mary, the seven sorrows of Mary, the litanies or the prayer to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. He never wanted to let others lead these prayers. On Friday whenever he could, he made or at least read the Stations of the Cross. This was one of his special practices of piety. "The way of the Cross," he used to say "is a spark of fire for me; it helps me to pray and it drives me to put up with anything for the love of God."

He loved praying so much, and he was so used to it that whenever he was on his own or had nothing to do, he would immediately say some prayers. He often began to pray during recreation, and at times involuntarily used little spontaneous prayers during his games. One day he saw his Superior, ran up to him, greeted him by name and then said to him: "*Holy Mary*". Another time he wanted to call out to a companion with whom he was playing and he shouted: "*Our Father*". Whilst these actions caused his companions to laugh at him, they also showed his love for prayer and his ability to recollect himself, to raise his mind to God. According to masters of the spiritual life this denotes a high degree of perfection which is rarely seen in people even far advanced in virtue.

After night prayers said in common every evening he went to the dormitory and knelt down on top of his trunk—not a very comfortable position—for

a quarter of an hour or even half an hour to pray. When he was told that this disturbed his companions who were already in bed, he shortened his prayers and made sure that he was in bed at the same time as his companions. However, as soon as he settled into bed, he joined his hands on his breast and prayed until he fell asleep. If he woke up during the night he immediately began to pray for the souls in purgatory and he experienced great displeasure if sleep overtook him before he finished his prayers. "I'm sorry," he told a companion "that I can't spend some time in bed without sleeping. I'm quite distressed. How much good I could do for the souls in Purgatory if I could pray as I want to."

In short, if we examine the spirit of prayer of this boy we can say that he literally followed the precept of Our Saviour who commanded us to pray always, because he passed his days and nights in continuous prayer.

Chapter 23 – His penances

Boys generally get frightened when you speak to them of penance. But when the love of God takes possession of a heart, nothing in this world and no suffering distress it; on the other hand every affliction in this life is a source of consolation. Tender hearts believe that suffering brings great results, and that a glorious reward in heaven is reserved for those who suffer during life.

From the earliest years Besucco had a great desire to suffer. Here at the Oratory he redoubled his fervour for suffering. He went to his Superior one day and said:

"I am very worried: Our Lord says in the Gospel that you can only gain entrance to Paradise by innocence or by penance. I can't go there through innocence because I've already lost it. Therefore I have to go there through penance".

The Superior replied that he should accept as his penances diligence in study, attention in school, obedience to his superiors, putting up with the inconveniences of life such as heat, cold, wind, hunger, thirst.

"But," Besucco interjected "we must suffer these things as a matter of necessity."

“That’s right. But if you add suffering for the love of God to what you must suffer as a matter of necessity, it will become real penance, it will please the Lord, and it will bring merit to your soul.”

He quietened down for a time, but he always asked to be allowed to fast, to give up this or that at breakfast, to wear something uncomfortable under his clothing or to put things in his bed. These were always forbidden him. On the Vigil of All Saints Day he asked as a special favour to be allowed to fast on bread and water, but this was changed to abstinence at breakfast time. This pleased him greatly because, as he said he would be able, at least in something, to imitate the Saints in Paradise who saved their souls by walking the path of suffering.

It is not necessary to speak of the custody of the senses, especially of the eyes. Anyone who for any length of time had observed his very composure, his behaviour towards his companions, his modesty both inside the house and outside of it would not hesitate to affirm that he could be proposed as the perfect model of mortification and external behaviour of young people.

Although he was prohibited from performing corporal penances, he obtained permission for penances of another kind, namely doing the most humble tasks in the house. Some of the things he tackled with pleasure and great satisfaction were: running messages for his companions, carrying water, cleaning shoes, serving at table when he was allowed to, sweeping the refectory, sweeping the dormitory, carrying away the rubbish, carrying parcels and trunks, provided he was strong enough. These are all examples which could be imitated by certain young people who, when away from home, find it hard to lend a helping hand when they could do so. Sometimes there are young people who are ashamed to accompany their parents because they are not well dressed. It is as though being away from home changes their condition and makes them forget their duty of reverence, respect and obedience to their parents, and of charity towards everyone.

But these small mortifications contented Besucco for a short time only; he wanted bigger mortifications. Sometimes he was heard to complain that he had performed bigger penances at home and his health had never suffered.

His Superior always answered that real penances do not consist in what pleases us, but in what pleases the Lord and promotes his glory. “Be obedient,” added the Superior “and diligent in your duties, be kind and charitable towards your companions, put up with their defects, give them good advice and you will be doing something which pleases the Lord more than any other sacrifice.”

Taking literally to heart what he had been told about patiently putting up with cold, he did not clothe himself properly when winter came along. One day I saw him looking very pale and asked him if he were sick.

“No,” he answered “I’m quite all right.”

I took his hand and then realised that he was still in summer clothing even though we were within the novena for Christmas.

“Haven’t you any winter clothing?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s in my room.”

“Why aren’t you wearing it?”

“Ah ... for the reason you already know: put up with the cold of winter for the love of God.”

“Go and put it on immediately. See that you are well protected against the cold of winter. If you need anything ask for it and you’ll be given it straightaway.”

Despite all this, however, we could not prevent one behaviour which was possibly the beginning of the illness which carried him to the grave, but more about that later.

Chapter 24 – Particular deeds and sayings

There are some things Besucco said and did which have no direct relation to what we have already described, so they will now be recounted separately. I shall begin with his conversations. When speaking he was somewhat reserved, but jovial and witty. He would willingly talk about his experiences as a shepherd when he took sheep and goats out to pasture. He spoke of the

bushes, pastures, valleys, caves and storms in the mountains of Roburent and Drec as so many other wonders of the world.

He also had some proverbs which for him were undisputed truths. Whenever he wanted someone not to think too much of the things of the world, but rather to think of heavenly things he would say: *“It is very difficult for Heaven to open to anyone who looks at the earth like a goat.”*

One day a companion was speaking about religion and he let slip a few seriously mistaken points of view. Both because he was young and because he wasn't sufficiently well instructed, Besucco kept quiet but he was uneasy and annoyed. Later he gained courage and with a smile on his face he spoke to all those present: “Listen, some time ago I read in the dictionary the meaning of the word *“trade”* and amongst other things I noted this phrase: ‘Let everyone stick to his own trade’. My father said the same thing in different words: *Anyone who does what he doesn't know spoils what he does.*”

They all understood his meaning; the one who had spoken indiscreetly kept quiet whilst the others admired Besucco's shrewdness and prudence.

He was always happy with the arrangements of the superiors. He never complained about the timetable, the setting of the table, the organisation at school, and so on. He always found everything to his liking. When asked how it was that he was always happy with everything he replied:

“I am made of flesh and bones like the others, but I want to do everything for the glory of God; therefore everything that does not suit me will certainly be pleasing to God; hence I always have a good reason for being contented.”

One day he was with some boarders who had recently come to the house and who could not settle down to the new kind of life. He comforted them saying:

“If we joined the army, would we be able to determine our own timetable? Would we be able to go to bed and get up when we liked? Or would we be free to go for a walk?”

“No,” they answered “but a little bit of freedom ...”

“We are definitely free,” interrupted Francis “if we are doing the will of God and we only become real slaves when we fall into sin, because then we are the slaves of our greatest enemy, the devil.”

“But at home I was able to eat better and sleep more comfortably than here.” complained one of them.

“I grant that what you say is true, that is, that at home the food was better and the beds more comfortable, but I’m telling you that you were fostering two great enemies—gluttony and laziness. I’ll go further and tell you that we weren’t born just to sleep and eat as the goats and sheep do, but we have to work for the glory of God and flee idleness which is the father of all vices. Moreover, haven’t you heard what our Superior said.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Yesterday our Superior said, amongst other things, that boys remain here voluntarily and not by force. If anyone is unhappy, he concluded, let him tell me and I’ll try to satisfy him; anyone who doesn’t want to remain here is free to go, but if he does stay I don’t want him spreading discontent.”

“I would go elsewhere, but that would cost money and my parents can’t afford it”.

“All the more reason for you to be happy here; if you can’t pay you should show yourself more satisfied than others, because *you never look a gift horse in the mouth*. And so, my friends, we must be aware that we are in a house of Divine Providence; some pay a little, some pay nothing; and where could we get something else at this price?”

“What you say is true, but if we could have something better to eat ...”

“Since you’re dying for want of something better to eat, I’ll tell you how to get it; go and board elsewhere.”

“But I haven’t got the money to pay board.”

“Well then, keep quiet, and be content with the food they give you. Especially so since all our other companions are happy with it. If you really want me to speak my mind, my friends, I’ll tell you that strong young people such as we are should not give too much attention to the niceties of life. As

Christians we must do some penance if we want to go to heaven; we must mortify our tendency to gluttony in good time. Believe me, this is an easy way for us to obtain the blessings from the Lord and to gain some merit for Heaven.”

It was by these and other similar ways of speaking that he helped his companions and became a model to them of Christian politeness and charity.

Whilst we're on this point, he used to write proverbs and moral sayings on his exercise-books. He was also quite eloquent in his letters and I think it worthwhile to reproduce some of these, which were kindly given to me by those to whom they were written.

Chapter 25 – His letters

These letters are a manifest sign of the goodness of heart and the sincere piety of our Besucco. It is a rare thing, even in older people, to find letters written without human respect and full of religious and moral sentiments. Yet this we should expect of every Christian. But it is indeed very rare to find young people doing this. I should like all of you, dear young readers of mine, to avoid the kind of letter which has nothing religious in it, a letter which could well be written by the pagans themselves. No, let us use this wonderful means to communicate our thoughts and our plans to those who are far away from us, but let us always distinguish between the Christian and the pagan in our correspondence; and let us never forget some moral thought. Hence I am including some of young Besucco's letters which I think will please my readers because of their simplicity and tenderness.

The first bears the date September 27, 1863, and was addressed to his Godfather, the Archpriest of Argentera. In it he informs him how happy he is at the Oratory and thanks him for sending him there.

This is the nature of the letter:

My dear Godfather,

Four days ago my companions went home for twenty days' holiday. I am very pleased to see them have a happy holiday, but I am better off than they

are because by staying here I have time to write this letter to you. I hope that you will be pleased with it. First of all I must tell you that I cannot find sufficient words to thank you for all the good you have done for me. Apart from the favours you have done me, especially that of teaching me in your home, you have also taught me so many things, both spiritual and temporal, that are of great help to me. But the greatest of these favours was to send me to this house where nothing is lacking for my soul or my body. I thank the Lord more and more that he has given me this great favour in preference to so many other boys. I ask him with all my heart to give me grace to correspond with so many signs of heavenly kindness. I am more than happy in this place, there is nothing that I want, my every wish is taken care of. I thank you and all the other benefactors for the things you have sent me. I had hoped last week for the consolation of seeing you here in Turin so that you could speak with my superiors about my conduct. Patience, the Lord wants to defer this consolation for me.

From your letter I learned that my dear ones at home cried when they heard my letter read out. Tell them that they have reason to rejoice and not to cry, because I am very happy. I thank you for the precious advice that you gave me, and I assure you that so far I have done all I could to put them into practice. Thank my sister for the Communion that she made especially for me; I'm sure that it has helped me with my studies. Although it seems impossible in such a short time I have been able to get into Second Year. Greet my parents for me and tell them to pray for me and not to be worried because I am in good health, have everything I need and in a word am very happy. Please excuse me for the delay in writing; over recent days I have had a lot to do preparing for the exams, which I did better in than I expected to. I really want to express my gratitude to you, but having no other way to do so, I will try to make recompense by asking the Lord to give you good health and happy days.

Give me your blessing, and consider me always as,

Your devoted godson,

Francis Besucco

Francis' father, a knife-grinder by trade, spent summer working in the fields and looking after the animals at Argentera, but in autumn he left and went to other districts to earn his and his family's bread, working with his trade. On October 26, Francis wrote him a letter in which, noting how happy he was to be in Turin, he expressed his tender filial affection in the following way:

My dearest father,

Time is coming, dear father, when you will have to set out through the countryside to provide what the family needs. I cannot possibly accompany you on your trip but I will be with you in my thoughts and prayers. I assure you that every day I ask the Lord to give you health and his holy grace.

My Godfather was here at the Oratory and that gave me great pleasure. Amongst other things he told me you were afraid I am going hungry; no, don't worry, I have bread in abundance, and if I were to put aside what I didn't need, you would be able to make a huge loaf out of it, as we say¹⁰¹. You just need to know that we eat four times a day and always as much as we want; there is soup for dinner, as well as a second course, and for supper, soup. Once we had wine each day but it has become so expensive that now we have it just on Sundays. So don't worry about me. I have nothing else I want since everything I want is given me.

There are two things which give me great pleasure, and these are that my Superiors are very happy with me and I with them. The other was the visit from the Archbishop of Sassari. He came to see the Rector; he visited the house, spent time talking to many of the boys, and I had the pleasure of kissing his hand and receiving his blessing.

Dear father, greet all the family for me and especially my dear mother. Give my news to my Godfather and keep thanking him for what he has done for me. Do well on your trip through the countryside and should you find a fixed place to stay somewhere let me know and I will quickly give you more news.

¹⁰¹ This was a broth made of meat with bread, oil and cheese.

Pray for me,
Your affectionate son always,

Francis.

From the time his Godfather came to visit him, he was very keen to get letters from him. There was one letter which satisfied this burning desire, in which the zealous priest gave him some advice for his spiritual and material well-being. Francis wrote back saying how happy he was; he thanked him and promised to put his advice into practice.

The letter, written on November 23, expressed the following sentiments:

My dear Godfather,

I received your letter on the 14th of this month. You can imagine what a consolation it gave me. I spent that whole day like a feast day. I read it and reread it many times and the more I did so the more courage I gained for my study and to be a better person. I know now what a great gift you gave me by sending me here to the Oratory. I cannot possibly express my heartfelt gratitude except by going to the church and praying for my benefactors and especially for you; and in order not to lose study time, I go during recreation. Perhaps I should slow down a little because as much as I find great contentment in study and prayer, I should be at recreation with the others because that's what our Superiors tell us to do as something that would be useful and necessary for our study and our health.

Now all classes have started up and from morning to evening, between school, study, singing practice, music, religious practices and relaxation I have no time left to think about myself.

I am happy to say that Lieutenant Eysautier often comes to visit; some days ago he brought me such a beautiful cloak that if you saw me in it you would think I was a little lord.

He recommended that I find a good companion and I did so immediately. This boy is better than me at studies and also more virtuous. As soon as we met we became firm friends. We speak of nothing else between us but study

and matters of piety. He also likes recreation but after we have run around for a while we start walking up and down discussing things to do with school. The Lord is helping me in noticeable ways; I am always going ahead with things here: of the ninety in my class there are only fifteen still ahead of me.

I am consoled to think my friends still remember me; tell them I love them very much and to be diligent in their study and piety. Thank you for the beautiful letter you wrote me and I will try to put into practice the advice contained in it. I have a burning desire to be good because I know that God has prepared a great reward for me and for those who love and serve him in this life.

Forgive me for taking time to write and if I have not put into practice the advice you have given me, my dear benefactor. I ask you to greet everyone at home for me, and since I cannot greet my father personally I do so in my heart, praying to God for him. May God's will, not mine, be done in everything.

Your devoted godson in the most lovable hearts of Jesus and Mary,

Francis.

Francis enclosed a letter with this one to his parish priest; it was addressed to his friend, a virtuous cousin named Anthony Beltrandi, also of Argentera.

The construction, the diction, the thoughts of the letter make it worthy of inclusion here as a model of letters that can be exchanged by two good young friends.

My dear friend Anthony,

My Godfather has given me good news of you. He tells me that you should take up study like I did. I can tell you that this is a very good idea and you will be very happy if you go on with it.

Since our good parish priest is prepared to teach you, try to repay him by diligence in the fulfilment of your duties. Throw yourself into the study but accompany it with prayer and devotion; this is the only way to succeed in this undertaking and to be truly satisfied. I am pleased to think that next year you will be my companion in this house.

There is just one little thought I want to leave you: obedience and submission to your parents and your parish priest. And I recommend that you give good example to your companions.

And I want to ask a favour of you. During this winter make the Stations of the Cross after the sacred functions as I used to do when I was home. Endeavour to promote this pious practice and you will be blessed by the Lord. Time is precious, try to use it well; if you have any free time, gather some boys together and get them to revise the Christian Doctrine lesson taught on the previous Sunday. This is a very good way of earning God's blessing. Tell my Godfather to give me some news about you when he writes to me, and in that way I shall be ever surer of your good will. Dear friend, what great suffering I endure when I think of the time that I have wasted and that I could have spent in study or in other good works.

I hope that you will take my letter in good part and if there is anything that displeases you, I ask your forgiveness. Do your very best to ensure that next year we shall be schoolmates here in Turin, if this is pleasing to the Lord.

Cheerio, dear Anthony, pray for me.

Your loving friend,

Francis Besucco.

Chapter 26 – Final letter – Thoughts for his mother

The great piety of Francis is revealed in his letters in the previous Chapter. Every spoken or written word contributes to a network of delicate love and holy thought. It seems however that, as he gradually approached the end of his life, he became even more inflamed with God's love. Indeed, it seems from certain expressions that he had some forewarning. When his Godfather received his last letter he exclaimed: "My godson wants to leave me; God wants him for himself."

I refer to it here in its entirety as a true model for whoever wants to wish someone a Happy New Year in a Christian manner. It bears the date, December 28, 1863.

My beloved Godfather,

Any well brought up young lad would certainly commit a serious act of culpable ingratitude if he were not to write to his parents and benefactors at this time of the year to wish them every blessing and happiness. But what should I say to you my beloved and illustrious benefactor? From the day I was born you began to be good to me and look after my soul. My first learning about life, about piety, fear of God, I owe to you. If I have completed some years at school, if I have been able to fly from dangers to my soul, is all due to your advice and your care.

However can I recompense you for this then? Since I have no other way to do so, I will at least try to give you a sign of my continual gratitude by keeping in mind all the benefits I have received, and in these few days left to me I will try with all my strength to wish you copious blessings from Heaven, a good end to the current year and a good beginning to the new year.

There is an ancient proverb which says: Well begun is half done; so I too want to begin this new year well, begin it according to the Lord's will and continue it according to his will.

My studies are going well right now; my conduct in study, dormitory and in piety have always been *excellent*. I have had news that my father and brother are in good health. Give this news to those at home and I am sure they will be pleased about it. Tell them not to be worried about anything. I am well and lack nothing.

Could I ask you too to greet my good teacher Antonio Valorso, and tell him that I ask forgiveness for the times I was disobedient and the many times I upset him while I was at school there.

Finally, I renew my assurance that not a day will pass without my asking God to keep you healthy and give you a long life. My dear Godfather, I ask your forgiveness too for all the bother I have been; keep helping me with your advice. I have no other wish than to be good and to correct all my faults. May God's will and not mine always be done.

With great respect and affection,

I remain,

your devoted godchild,

Besucco Francesco

In the letter to his godfather he enclosed a note for his mother, the last one he wrote and which can be considered as his last testament or final words to his parents.

My beloved mother,

We are at the end of the year. God has helped us to live it well. Indeed, I can say that for me this year was a continual run of heavenly favours. While I wish you a good conclusion to the few days that remain, I ask the Lord to give you a good beginning to the new year and one which continues and is filled with all kinds of spiritual and temporal good things. May the Blessed Virgin Mary obtain for you from her Son a long life and happy days.

Today I received a letter from my father, from which I know that both he and my brother are in good health and this gives me great consolation. I am sending you here a note of some items they still need.

My dear mother, I was a lot of bother to you at home, and I still am. But I will try to make up for it through my good conduct and my prayers. I ask you to do whatever you can so my sister Maria can study, so that through this she can be better instructed in her religion.

Goodbye, my dear mother, goodbye. Let's offer the Lord our actions and our hearts and recommend the salvation of our souls especially to him. May the Lord's will always be done.

For my part, wish every good to all those at home, pray for me,

Your affectionate son,

Francis

From these last letters we see clearly that Besucco's heart seemed no longer of this world but of someone who though walking with feet on the earth

has his soul already with God whom he wants to constantly speak and write about.

As his fervour grew for religious things, so too did his keen desire to withdraw himself from the world. If I could, he often said, I would like to separate my soul from my body so that I could better understand what it means when we say we love God. “If it weren’t that I am not allowed,” he went so far as to say “I would like to abstain from all food so that I could enjoy at length the great pleasure experienced in suffering for the Lord. What great consolation the martyrs must have experienced in dying for the faith!”

In short, he exemplified by word and deed what St. Paul said: “I desire to be annihilated so as to be glorified with my Lord.”¹⁰² God saw the great love that this little heart had for Him and to prevent the evil of the world from ruining him, He decided to call him to Himself; he allowed an inordinate love of penance to a certain extent to be responsible for it.

Chapter 27 – A badly chosen penance and the beginning of his illness

Francis had read in the life of Dominic Savio how once he had imprudently let the cold of winter set in without putting heavy blankets on his bed. Besucco decided to imitate him. He deemed that the order given to him to be warmly clothed applied only to the daytime, and that he was free to mortify himself in bed at night. He said nothing to anybody, took the woollen blankets issued to all the boys but, instead of putting them on his bed he folded them up and put them under his pillow. Things seemed to be all right until the early days of January, when one morning he was so benumbed with cold that he couldn’t get up with the others. The Superiors were told that Besucco stayed in bed because he was ill, and the infirmarian was sent to see him and find out what he needed. When he arrived, he asked what was the matter.

“Nothing at all” Francis replied.

“If it is nothing, then why did you stay in bed?”

“Well—I’m just a little off-colour.”

¹⁰² Cf. Phil 1:23.

The infirmarian went to pull up his blankets and found that he was covered by only one summer blanket.

“Where are your winter blankets, Besucco?”

“Here under the pillow.”

“Why did you do this?”

“No special reason—when Jesus was on the cross he wasn’t covered any better than I am.”

It didn’t take long to realise that Besucco was quite ill and he was transferred immediately to the infirmary. The doctor was called at once, he thought at first that the illness was not serious and diagnosed it as a simple cold.

But on the following day he noticed that instead of going away, the illness was causing inflammatory congestion in the stomach, and that it had taken a turn for the worse. The usual remedies were applied—laxatives, emetics, blood-letting and doses of various medicines, but nothing seemed to work.

One day he was asked why he had been so careless as not to cover himself sufficiently in bed. He replied: “I am sorry that this has displeased my superiors, I hope however that the Lord will accept my little penance in satisfaction for my sins.”

“But what of the consequences of your imprudence?”

“I shall leave the consequences in the hands of the Lord. I am not interested in what the future holds out for my body provided everything turns out to the greater glory of God and to the advantage of my soul.”

Chapter 28 – Resigned to his illness – Edifying words

His illness lasted for eight days; for him it was an exercise, for his companions an example, in patience and Christian resignation. The illness hampered his breathing and this led to severe, continual headaches; he had to submit to further painful surgical treatment; they tried several drastic remedies. But nothing they did was able to alleviate the illness and it served only to highlight his admirable patience. He never gave any sign of resentment nor

did he complain. If it was suggested that the medicine did not taste nice he would immediately reply: “If it tasted sweet, it would be more pleasant in my mouth, but it is only right that I should do some penance for my greediness in the past.” Another time I said to him: “You are suffering a lot, is that right?” “Yes, it is true that I am suffering a lot, but what is this compared to what I should suffer because of my sins? I should like to assure you, however, that I am quite happy; I had never thought that I would get so much pleasure from suffering for the love of the Lord.”

If anyone did something for him, he thanked him profusely, saying immediately: “May the Lord reward you for your kindness towards me.” Not sure as to how to express his gratitude to the infirmarian, he said to him more than once: “May the Lord reward you for me, and if I go to Heaven, I’ll pray with all my heart for you that the Lord will bless and help you.” One day the infirmarian asked him whether he was afraid of dying. “My dear infirmarian,” he replied “if the Lord wanted to take me to Paradise with him I should be very pleased to obey his call; however, I fear that I am not sufficiently prepared. But despite this I place hope in his infinite mercy and I recommend myself wholeheartedly to Mary Most Holy, to St. Aloysius Gonzaga and to Dominic Savio. I hope that with their protection, I shall have a happy death.”

On the fourth day of his illness, the doctor began to fear for the life of our Francis. Beginning to speak to him of this last moment, I said:

“My dear Francis, would you like to go to Heaven?”

“Can you imagine me not wanting to go to Heaven? But I have to earn it first.”

If you had a choice between being cured and going to Heaven, what would you choose?”

“These are two different things: to live for the Lord, or to die to go to the Lord¹⁰³. The first pleases me, and the second pleases me even more. But who can assure me of Heaven after the many sins I have committed?”

¹⁰³ Cf. Phil 1:22-23.

“In making such a proposal to you, I took it for granted that you are sure of going to Heaven. But, if you are assuming that you might go elsewhere, I only wish that you would forget about it.”

“How then can I deserve Heaven?”

“You can lay claim to Heaven through the merits of the Passion and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Will I go to Heaven then?”

“Most surely, but when the Lord wants it.”

He then looked at those present, rubbed his hands and joyfully exclaimed: “It’s a contract then: Heaven and nothing else; to Heaven and nowhere else. Don’t speak to me of anything else, only Heaven.”

“I am happy” I then told him, “that you show such a strong desire to go to Heaven, but I want you to be ready to do the holy will of God ...”

He interrupted what I was saying with: “Yes, yes, let the holy will of God be done in everything, both in Heaven and on earth.”

On the fifth day of the illness he asked to receive the Sacraments. He wanted to make a general Confession: this was denied him. There was no need for it as he had made one a few months previously. However, he was deeply moved as he prepared for that last confession with very great fervour. After confession he appeared to be very happy and he said to the person who was assisting him: “In the past I promised Our Lord a thousand times that I would not offend him any more, but I did not keep my word. I have renewed this promise today and I hope to be faithful right up to my death.”

That evening he was asked if he had any messages for any one.

“Yes” he told me, “tell everyone to pray that my time in purgatory may be short.”

“What would you like me to tell your companions on your behalf?”

“Tell them to avoid scandal, and to always make good confessions.”

“And to the clerics?”

“Tell the clerics to give the boys good example and good advice whenever it is needed.”

“And your Superiors?”

“Tell my superiors that I thank them for all their kindness towards me; tell them to keep working for the salvation of souls; and when I am in Heaven I shall pray to God for them.”

“And what have you to say to me?”

He was quite moved by these words, he looked at me straight in the eye and then replied: “I ask you to help me to save my soul.” For a long time I have been praying to the Lord that I may die in your arms. I ask you to carry out this work of charity and help me until the last moments of my life.”

I assured him I would not abandon him whether he recovered or remained ill, and even more so if he found himself at the point of death. He was very happy after that and wanted only to receive the Holy Viaticum.

Chapter 29 – He receives viaticum – Other edifying words – A regret

On the sixth day of his illness (January 8), he asked to go to Holy Communion. “How I would like to go to Communion with my companions in church” he said, “it is eight days since I last received my dear Jesus with them.” Whilst he was preparing to receive Communion he asked someone who was helping him the meaning of the word Viaticum.

“Viaticum,” came the reply “means help and a companion for the journey.”

“Oh, what wonderful help shall be mine, having with me the bread of Angels for the journey I am about to undertake.”

“Not only will you have this heavenly bread,” he was told “but you will have Jesus himself as your help and companion on the great journey you are preparing to make to eternity.”

“If Jesus is my friend and companion I have nothing to fear; on the other hand I have everything to hope for in his great mercy. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul.”

Then he made his preparation. He did not need help as he had his usual prayers which he recited one after the other. He received the Holy Host with those signs of piety which are better imagined than described.

After Communion he settled down to make his thanksgiving. When asked if he needed anything, he answered nothing other than: “Let us pray.” After a long thanksgiving he turned to those standing by and asked them not to speak of anything to him except Heaven.

During this time he was visited by the bursar of the House¹⁰⁴, and this gave him great pleasure.

“Oh, Father Savio,” he said with a smile “this time I’m going to Heaven.”

“Courage now! Let us place both life and death in the hands of God; let us hope to go to Heaven but when God wants it.”

“Father Savio, please pardon me for all the trouble I’ve given you; pray for me, and when I’m in Heaven I’ll also pray to God for you.”

Some time later when I saw that he was reasonably at ease, I asked him if he had any messages for his parish priest. This seemed to disturb him, “My parish priest” he answered, “did a lot for me. He did his utmost to help me save my soul. Tell him that I have never forgotten his advice. I shall not have the pleasure of seeing him again in this world, but I hope to go to Heaven and I shall pray to the Blessed Virgin to help him keep all my companions on the right track and then one day I’ll be able to see him and all his parishioners in Heaven.” He was choking with emotion as he finished speaking.

After he had rested I asked him if he wanted to see his parents. “It is not possible for me to see them,” he answered “because they are too far away, they are poor and they can’t afford to come here. And also, my father is working

¹⁰⁴ This was Fr Angelo Savio (1835-1893).

away from home. Tell them that I die resigned, cheerful and happy. Tell them to pray for me. I hope to go to Heaven. I'll wait for them all there. To my mother ...” He could not go on.

Some hours later I asked him: “Have you by any chance a message for your mother?”

“Tell my mother that God has heard her prayer. Many times she told me: ‘My dear Francis, I want you to live for a long time in this world but I would rather have you die a thousand times than see you become the enemy of God because of sin.’ I hope that my sins have been forgiven and I hope I am the friend of God and that I shall soon go to enjoy Him for eternity. Bless my mother, O my God, give her courage to accept my death with resignation; give me the grace to see her and all the family in Heaven, where we shall enjoy your glory.”

He wanted to go on talking, but I told him to be quiet and rest a while. He became worse on the evening of January 8 and it was decided to give him Extreme Unction. When asked if he wanted to receive this Sacrament he answered:

“Yes, with all my heart.”

“Have you perhaps anything bothering your conscience?”

“Yes there is something that has been on my mind all my life, but I never imagined that it would give me so much sorrow at the point of death.”

“What is it that is troubling you and causing remorse?”

“I have the deepest sorrow for not having loved God as much as he should have been loved in my life.”

“Don't worry about that for in this world we can never love God to the extent that he deserves to be loved. We need only do our best; only in Heaven can we love him as he should be loved. There we shall see Him as He really is, we shall know him and enjoy his goodness, his glory and his love. How fortunate you are because shortly you're going to have this wonderful opportunity. But

now prepare to receive Extreme Unction, which is the sacrament that wipes away the stain of sin and also gives us bodily health if this is good for the soul.”

“I don’t want to discuss the health of the body any more,” he replied, “as for my sins, I ask forgiveness and I hope that they will be completely forgiven. I trust also that I shall obtain the remission of the punishment I must suffer for them in Purgatory.”

Chapter 30 – He receives the holy oils – His spontaneous prayers on this occasion

When everything had been prepared for the last sacrament that man receives in this mortal life, he wanted to say the *Confiteor* himself, along with the other prayers; and he said his own prayer at each anointing.

Father Alasonatti, Prefect of the house, was administering it to him. At the anointing of the eyes, our pious sick boy said: “O my God, pardon me for looking at things I should not have looked at and for reading things I should not have read”. At the ears: “O my God, pardon me for all that I have listened to that was contrary to your holy law. Please grant that while being closed for ever to the world they may be opened to hear your voice calling me to enjoy your glory.”

At the anointing of the nostrils: “Pardon me, O Lord, for all the satisfaction I have taken in smelling things.”

The mouth: “O my God, pardon me for my gluttony and for all the words which have offended you in one way or another. Grant that as soon as possible my tongue may sing your praises for all eternity.”

At this point, the Prefect was quite overcome with emotion and said: “What beautiful thoughts, how wonderful in a boy so young!” Continuing with the administration of the Sacrament he anointed the hands, saying: “By this holy anointing and by his most compassionate mercy, may God pardon you every sin committed by the sense of touch.” The sick boy continued: “O my great God, with the veil of your mercy and through the merits of the

wounds in your hands cover and wipe out all the sins I have committed by my actions throughout my life.”

The feet: “Pardon, O Lord, the sins that I have committed with these feet, either by going where I should not have gone or by not going where my duties summoned me. May your mercy pardon all the sins I may have committed by thought, word, deed or omission.”

He was told more than once that it was sufficient to say these spontaneous prayers silently in his heart and that God did not ask for the great effort he was making to pray aloud. He was silent for a few moments but then continued in the same tone of voice as before. At the finish he seemed so tired and his pulse was so weak that we thought that he was about to draw his last breath. Shortly afterwards he recovered slightly and, in the presence of many people, he addressed these words to the Superior: “I have prayed a lot to the Blessed Virgin so that I would die on a day dedicated to her and I hope I shall be heard. What else could I ask of the Lord?”

In answer to his question he was told: “Ask the Lord to grant you to do all your Purgatory in this world so that when you die your soul will go straight to Heaven.” “Oh, yes,” he immediately replied “I ask for this with all my heart. Please give me your blessing. I hope that the Lord will make me suffer in this world to the point that I have done all my purgatory and so, when my soul is separated from my body, it will fly straight to Heaven.”

It would seem that the Lord heard his prayer as he improved somewhat and his life was prolonged for about twenty-four hours.

Chapter 31 – A marvellous fact – Two visits – A beautiful death

Saturday, 9th January, was the last day on earth for our dear Besucco. He had perfect use of his senses and his reason throughout the day. He wanted to pray all the time, but he was told not to as it tired him too much. “Well, at least,” he said “let someone near me do the praying and I shall repeat in my heart the words he says aloud.” Just to please him it was necessary to have someone by his bed praying continuously. Amongst those who visited him

that day there was a companion who was a bit troublesome. “How are you Besucco?” he asked. “My dear friend,” he replied “I am at the end of my life. Pray for me in these my last moments. But remember that one day you too will find yourself in a similar state. Oh, how happy you will be if you have been good! But, if you don’t change your way of life, how sorry you are going to be at the moment of death.” His companion began to cry and from that moment onwards thought more about his soul; today he is still one of the good boys.

At ten in the evening he was visited by Lieutenant Eysautier and his wife. The Lieutenant had had a hand in Francis’ admission to the Oratory and he had helped him considerably. Besucco was very happy to see them and he showed lively signs of gratitude. This courageous man was greatly edified when he saw the happiness in the boy’s face, also the signs of devotion which he demonstrated and the assistance he was getting, and he said:

“Dying like this is a real pleasure, and I would like to find myself in a similar state.” Then he turned to the dying boy and said: “Dear Francis, when you get to Heaven pray for me and for my wife ...” But he was overcome with emotion and could not continue; he departed after giving the sick boy a final wave of his hand.

About half past ten it seemed that Francis had only a few more minutes to live. He moved his hands from under the blankets and tried to lift them up. I took them and joined them together on top of the bed. He separated them and lifted them up again. He was smiling and his eyes were fixed as if gazing at something he liked. Thinking that perhaps he wanted a crucifix, I put one in his hands. He took it, kissed it, and put it on the bed, and straight away lifted up his arms again in an outburst of joy. His face appeared to be stronger and to have more colour in it than when he had been healthy. Its beauty and radiance was such that it eclipsed the infirmary lights. The ten bystanders were dumb-founded and their astonishment grew when the dying boy lifted his head a little and stretched out his hands as if to shake hands with someone he loved. Then in a joyful resonant voice he sang: *“Praise Mary, Oh you faithful tongues; let your harmony resound in the heavens.”*

Afterwards he made several efforts to lift himself up and devoutly stretching out his hands, he began to sing again: “*Oh Jesus, on fire with love, would that I had never offended you. Oh my dear good Jesus, I do not want to offend you any more.*” Without interruption he intoned the hymn: “*Pardon, dear Jesus, Mercy, my God, Before sinning again I want to die.*”

We all listened in stunned silence. Our eyes were riveted on Francis who seemed to have become an Angel with the Angels in Paradise. To break the tension the director said: “I believe that at this moment our Besucco is receiving some extraordinary grace from the Lord and his heavenly Mother, to whom he has been so devoted during his life. Perhaps she has come to take his soul to Heaven.”

Fr Alasonatti, the prefect, exclaimed: “No one should be afraid. This boy is in communication with God.” Besucco continued to sing, but his words were all truncated as if he were answering questions. I was only able to catch these phrases: “King of Heaven ... so beautiful ... I am a poor sinner ... I give you my heart ... Give me your love ... My dear good Lord ...” Then he fell back on the bed without a sign of life. But when he realised that no one was praying and no one was suggesting spontaneous prayers to him he immediately turned to me and said: “Help me. Let us pray. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, assist me in this my agony. Jesus, Mary and Joseph may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you.”

I suggested to him that he rest, but without paying any attention to me he continued: “Jesus in my mind, Jesus in my mouth, Jesus in my heart: Jesus and Mary I give you my soul.” It was eleven o’clock when he wanted to speak again, but he could say only two words: “The crucifix.” He asked to be blessed with the crucifix to gain the plenary indulgence at the moment of death, something he had often asked for and that I had promised him.

When he had given this blessing the Prefect began reading the *Depart, Christian soul* whilst the others prayed on their knees. At eleven fifteen Besucco looked intently at me, and tried to smile; then he raised his eyes heavenward indicating that he was departing. A few moments later his soul left his body and flew gloriously, as we fondly hope to enjoy heavenly glory in the company

of those who have served God by the innocence of their life in this world and who are now enjoying him and blessing him in Heaven.

Chapter 32 – Suffrages and upset

One cannot describe the grief and sorrow caused throughout the whole house by the loss of such a dear friend. Many prayers were said there and then around the bedside. Next morning the news spread amongst his companions, who gathered in the Church to find some comfort in their sorrow and also to pay a tribute to their dead friend. They prayed for the repose of his soul, if indeed he still had need of prayers. Many went to Communion for this purpose. The Rosary, the office, prayers in common, and in private, Communions, Mass, in short, all the practices of piety which took place in our Church on that Sunday were directed to God for the eternal repose of the soul of our good Francis.

Something rather unusual happened that day. His features became so handsome and his face took on such a healthy glow that in no way did he seem to be dead. As a matter of fact he had never seemed so extraordinarily good-looking even when he was in good health. His own companions far from displaying the morbid fear boys generally have for the dead were eager to go to see him and they all said that he really looked like an angel from Heaven. That is why in the portrait drawn after his death he looks better than when alive.

Then, those who spotted objects connected in some way or other with Besucco vied with one another to get them and to keep them as remembrances of him. It was commonly voiced about that he had gone straight to Heaven. Some said that he did not have any need of our prayers for he is already enjoying the glory of Heaven here and now.

“For sure,” added another boy “he is certainly enjoying the sight of God and praying for us.”

“I believe” stated a third boy “that Besucco already enjoys a throne of glory in Heaven and that he is invoking divine blessings on his companions and friends.”

On the following day, January 11, Mass was sung by his companions here in the Church at the Oratory. Many went to Communion as always for the greater glory of God, and also to pray for the eternal repose of the soul of Francis, if indeed he still had need of prayers. After the Mass the boys escorted the coffin to the parish church and then to the cemetery.

Francis was buried in grave number 147 in the fourth row on the western side.

Chapter 33 – Commotion in Argentera and Reverence for young Besucco

The virtues which had shone forth in this young boy for the space of about fourteen years at Argentera appeared even more resplendent when he died and when news arrived of his holy death. Fr Francis Pepino sent me a moving account of what occurred there; it possesses something of the supernatural. I shall keep the full story for a more opportune time but I'll give a few excerpts here. "When news of the serious illness of Francis arrived there were public prayers with a sung Mass, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and prayers *for the sick*. The news of his death reached us on the evening of January 13 and it quickly spread. In less than an hour Francis was being presented by most of the parents as an example to their respective children. I cannot say enough about the sorrow of the parents and the benefactors of this dear boy, who always pleased everybody with his exemplary conduct and who never offended anyone. Mary, the younger sister of Francis, clearly told me of his death on January 10. She told me that at about midnight of the previous night, when she was in bed with her mother, she heard a loud noise in the upstairs room where Francis used to sleep. She clearly heard a handful of sand fall on the floor, and fearing that the noise would make her mother suspect that Francis was dead, she began speaking to her in a loud voice - something this girl did not usually do. Several other people, convinced of his holiness, prayed to him for favours and obtained what they sought." I don't want to discuss what I have just quoted; I intend only to be factual and to leave whatever inferences can be drawn from these facts to the judgement of my readers. Here are a few more excerpts from the source previously quoted: "During February a two year old boy was in danger of death. The parents considered the case

hopeless and turned to our Besucco, whose virtues were being proclaimed by everyone. They promised furthermore that if the boy were cured they would promote the practice of the Stations of the Cross in imitation of Francis. The boy recovered quickly and is now in perfect health. A few days ago I myself recommended to the prayers of our dear boy the father of a family who was seriously ill. At the same time I also recommended him to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament to whose honour and glory this man had consecrated himself as a cantor. I am not giving the names of these people simply to save them from any undue criticism. The sick man showed immediate improvement and within a few days appeared perfectly cured.

Anna, Francis' oldest sister, was married in March. She was later troubled with an affliction which gave her no peace, day or night. In a moment of greater pain she called out: My dear little Francis, help me in my need, obtain some rest for me. No sooner said than done. From that night on she began to sleep peacefully and she has continued to do so.

Encouraged by the success of her prayer Anna again turned to Francis for help at a time when her life was in great danger, and again her every wish was granted.

Whilst, for the greater glory of God, I have collected accounts of what happened to others, I must not omit telling you that I used to recommend myself to the prayers of my godson when he was alive and I continued to do so with greater faith after his death. As a result of my faith I have obtained favours at different times."

Chapter 34 – Conclusion

I have come to the end of the life of Francis Besucco. I would like to have said much more about this virtuous boy, but, since this could be the cause of certain criticism from those who do not recognise the wonders of the Lord in his servants, I shall await a more opportune time to publish them, if the divine goodness allows me to live long enough.

Meanwhile, my dear readers, before I finish writing, I would like both of us to come to a conclusion which will be to our mutual advantage. It is certain

that sooner or later death will come for both of us, and it is possible that it will come sooner than we think. It is equally certain that if we don't perform good works during our life we won't be able to reap their fruit at the point of death, nor can we expect any reward from God. Now since Divine Providence gives us time to prepare for this last moment, let us occupy this time in good works and so be assured that we shall collect the reward we merit at the appropriate time. We can expect to find people who will laugh at us because we practice our religion. Don't pay any attention to them. Whoever listens to them acts wrongly and betrays himself. If we want to be wise before the face of God, we must not be afraid of appearing stupid before the world, because Jesus Christ assures us that the wisdom of the world is foolishness in the eyes of God. Only the continuous practice of our religion can make us happy in time and in eternity. Anyone who does not work in summer has no right to enjoyment during winter, and anyone who does not practice virtue during his life cannot expect any reward after death.

I encourage you, Christian reader, I encourage you to perform good works whilst we have time; our sufferings are of short duration and what we shall enjoy lasts forever. I call down the divine blessings upon you, and in your turn please pray to the Lord God to have mercy on my soul, so that after having spoken about virtue, about the method of practising it, and about the great reward that God has prepared in the next life for those who practice it, I may not suffer the terrible misfortune of neglecting to do it myself with irreparable harm to my own salvation.

O Lord, help me, help me to persevere in the observance of your precepts during the days of my life so that we can one day go to Heaven to enjoy great happiness for ever and ever. Amen.