

SECTION TWO

“MEMOIRS OF THE ORATORY”

Presentation

Written over several occasions between 1873 and 1875, the manuscript of the Memoirs of the Oratory remained unpublished by Don Bosco's explicit will. However Fr John Bonetti drew on it abundantly for his History of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, (which found its way into English under a different title Don Bosco's Early Apostolate) published as a series in the Salesian Bulletin between 1879 and 1886. And Fr John Baptist Lemoyne included it in its entirety in the first volumes of the Biographical Memoirs, adding in other information and anecdotes drawn from other witnesses. The first complete edition of the Memoirs appeared in 1946. The decision to put the book in the public domain in its entirety was motivated by the universal dimension that the Saint has taken on, as Eugene Ceria wrote in the presentation: "Today Don Bosco has become part of history and also been listed among the saints." ¹⁰⁵

The text—which is an original testimony of events and also a reflection interpreting a lifetime and a charismatic vocation—has been of major importance. There are certain events in it that have taken on the role of symbolic events in the Salesian mission and method, such as the dream at nine years of age and the description of the encounter with Bartholomew Garelli. Through his recounting of all this the author presents his own educational model embodied in the attitudes of key individuals such as Mama Margaret, Fr Calosso, the teachers at the schools in Chieri, Fr Cafasso and Fr Borel. The Memoirs of the Oratory have contributed in a special and determining way to building up and affirming an image of Don Bosco and his characteristic features: the tenacious and enterprising young man, the lively leader amongst his young friends, the dreamer called to an extraordinary mission, the friend of youthful yearnings, the affectionate father who looks after his boys and opens up a way for their formation, the apostle enlightened from on high, creative, tenacious and a fighter.

¹⁰⁵ Giovanni BOSCO (san), *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*. Torino, Società Editrice Internazionale 1946, p. 4.

But the document's interest goes further still, because in it Don Bosco shows that he is inspired "by the primary concern of defining the meaning of an overall educational experience" and formulating "a programme of action" for his disciples. "Before being a story of the past ... the Memoirs are the result of coherent reflection, ending up in a spirituality and pedagogy."¹⁰⁶ Thus the Memoirs become "a History of the Oratory which is more "theological" and pedagogical than real, perhaps the "theoretical" document which Don Bosco had long wanted to write."¹⁰⁷ This way it can be considered as 'Memoirs of the future' because Don Bosco uses it to show his intention of passing on his experience so it can become a "programme of life and action for those who would continue it."¹⁰⁸

These purposes are explicitly suggested by the author in his introductory pages to guide the reading of the text in a specific direction: in recognition and interpretation of the past he links the birth of the oratory as an institution with his own spiritual journey. This is an experience of faith and openness to the movement of the Spirit which requires constant discernment. There is a range of attitudes, interior dispositions and choices posed as a charismatic norm for his disciples.

So reading this document, since it is in narrative form, would seem to be easy to interpret, but it requires a certain awareness if we are to understand the messages it is passing on. Right from the first lines Don Bosco's narrative strategy guides readers along well-defined paths. He suggests both the general key for interpreting it—a providential history led directly by God for the "salvation" of the young—and a series of other indications opening up two fundamental possibilities for interpretation: the dynamics of the spiritual life and the model of the pastor and educator.

¹⁰⁶ Pietro BRAIDO, revision of Giovanni BOSCO (san), *Memorie*. Written in today's language. Leumann (Torino), Elle Di Ci 1985, in RSS 5 (1986) 169.

¹⁰⁷ Pietro BRAIDO, *L'esperienza pedagogica di don Bosco nel suo "divenire"*, in "Orientamenti Pedagogici" 36 (1989) 27.

¹⁰⁸ Pietro BRAIDO, "Memorie" *del futuro*, in RSS 11 (1992) 97.

309. "Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855"

Ed. in Giovanni BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*.
Saggio introduttivo e note storiche a cura di Aldo Giraud. Roma, LAS 2011, pp. 55-206¹⁰⁹.

Memoirs of the Oratory from 1815 to 1835 written exclusively for Salesians

Many a time I have been urged to write my memoirs concerning the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales. Though I could not readily say no to the authority of the one who advised me to do this, I found it hard actually to set about the task because it meant too often speaking about myself. But now there has been added the command of a person of supreme authority, an authority that brooks no further delay. Therefore I am now putting into writing those confidential details that may somehow serve as a light or be of use to the work which Divine Providence has entrusted to the Society of Saint Francis de Sales. But I must say at the outset that I am writing these for my beloved Salesian sons; *I forbid that these things be made public during my lifetime or after my death.*

Now, what purpose can this chronicle serve? It will be a record to help people overcome problems that may come in the future by learning from the past. It will serve to make known how God himself has always been our guide. It will give my sons some entertainment to be able to read: about their father's adventures. Doubtless they will be read much more avidly when I have been called by God to render my account, when I am no longer amongst them.

Should they come upon experiences related maybe with complacency or the appearance of vainglory, let them indulge me a little. A father delights in speaking of his exploits to his dear children. It is always to be hoped that

¹⁰⁹ This edition of the *Memoirs* is from the second edition of the critical text published by the Salesian Historical Institute (Giovanni BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*. Introduction, notes and critical text by Antonio da Silva Ferreira. Roma, LAS 1992), but corrects it here and there after careful comparison with the original manuscripts.

the sons will draw from these adventures, small and great, some spiritual and temporal advantage.

I have chosen to divide my account into ten-year periods, because each decade saw a notable development of our work.

So, my dear children, when you read these memoirs after my death, remember that you had a loving father who left these memoirs as a pledge of fatherly affection before he abandoned this world. And remembering that, pray for the happy repose of my soul.

Ten years of childhood – Father’s death – Family difficulties – Widowed mother

I was born on the day dedicated to Mary Assumed into Heaven in 1815¹¹⁰ in Morialdo, a hamlet of Castelnuovo d’Asti¹¹¹. My mother’s name was Margaret Occhiena and she was from Capriglio. My father’s name was Francis¹¹². They were farmers who made their living by hard work and thrifty use of what little they had. My good father, almost entirely by the sweat of his brow, supported my grandmother, in her seventies¹¹³ and prey to frequent illnesses; three youngsters and a pair of farm helpers. Of the three children, the oldest was Anthony, born of his first wife¹¹⁴, the second was Joseph¹¹⁵, and the youngest was me, John.

¹¹⁰ Parish register and civil documents show that the date of birth was August 16. The second name, Melchior, was in honour of his maternal grandfather, his godfather.

¹¹¹ Castelnuovo d’Asti (today Castelnuovo Don Bosco), a district in the province of Asti and diocese of Turin, had 3,000 inhabitants at the time, between the town itself and four outlying hamlets, Morialdo, Bardella, Nevissano and Ranello.

¹¹² Margaret Occhiena (1788-1856). Capriglio is a small town 9 km from Castelnuovo. Francesco Luigi Bosco (1784-1817), widowed (1811), married Margaret Occhiena on June 6, 1812.

¹¹³ Margaret Zucca, mother of Francesco (1752-1826).

¹¹⁴ Anthony Joseph Bosco (1808-1849), born of Francis’ first marriage with Margaret Cagliero (1784-1811).

¹¹⁵ Joseph Aloysius Bosco (1813-1862).

I was not yet two years old when the merciful Lord hit us with a sad bereavement. My dearly loved father died unexpectedly. He was strong and healthy, still young and actively interested in promoting a good Christian upbringing for his offspring. One day he came home from work covered in sweat and imprudently went down into a cold cellar. That night he developed a high temperature, the first sign of a serious illness. Every effort to cure him proved vain. Within a few days he was at death's door. Strengthened by all the comforts of religion, he recommended to my mother confidence in God, then died, aged only thirty-four, on May 12, 1817¹¹⁶.

I do not know how I reacted on that sad occasion. One thing only do I remember, and it is my earliest memory. We were all going out from the room where he had died, and I insisted on staying behind. My grieving mother addressed me, "Come, John, come with me." "If papa's not coming, I don't want to come" I answered. "My poor son," my mother replied "come with me; you no longer have a father."

Having said this, she broke down and started crying as she took me by the hand and led me away. I began crying too because she was crying. At that age I could not really understand what a tragedy had fallen on us in our father's death.

This event threw the whole family into difficulty. Five people had to be supported. The crops failed that year because of a drought and that was our only source of income. The prices of foodstuffs soared. Wheat was as much as 25 francs an *emina*,¹¹⁷ corn or maize 16 francs. Some people who lived at that time have assured me that beggars hesitated to ask for even a little bran to put in broth of chickpeas or beans for nourishment. People were found dead in the fields, their mouths stuffed with grass, with which they had tried to quell their ravenous hunger.

My mother often used to tell me that she fed the family until she exhausted all her food. She then gave money to a neighbour, Bernard Cavallo, to go

¹¹⁶ Died May 11 1817.

¹¹⁷ An ancient grain measure equivalent to around 23 litres.

looking for food to buy. That friend went round to various markets but was unable to buy anything, even at exorbitant prices. After two days he came in the evening bringing back nothing but the money he had been given. We were all in a panic. We had eaten practically nothing the whole day, and the night would have been difficult to face. My mother, not allowing herself to be discouraged, went round to the neighbours to try to borrow some food. She did not find anyone able to help. "My dying husband," she told us "said I must have confidence in God. Let's kneel then and pray." After a brief prayer she got up and said, "Drastic circumstances demand drastic means." Then she went to the stable and, helped by Mr Cavallo, she killed a calf. Part of that calf was immediately cooked and the worst of the family's hunger satisfied. In the days that followed, cereals bought at a very high price from more distant places enabled us to survive.

Anyone can imagine how much my mother worked and suffered in that disastrous year. The critical lack of wheat supplies was overcome by constant hard work, by continuous thrift, by attention to the smallest details and by occasional providential help. My mother often told me of these events, and my relatives and friends confirmed them.

When that terrible scarcity was over and matters at home had improved, a convenient arrangement was proposed to my mother. However she repeated again and again, "God gave me a husband and God has taken him away. With his death the Lord put three sons under my care. I would be a cruel mother to abandon them when they needed me most." On being told that her sons could be entrusted to a good guardian who would look after them well, she merely replied, "A guardian could only be their friend, but I am a mother to these sons of mine. All the gold in the world could never make me abandon them."

Her greatest care was given to instructing her sons in their religion, making them value obedience, and keeping them busy with tasks suited to their age. When I was still very small, she herself taught me to pray. As soon as I was old enough to join my brothers, she made me kneel with them morning and evening. We would all recite our prayers together, including the

rosary. I remember well how she herself prepared me for my first confession. She took me to church, made her own confession first, then presented me to the confessor. Afterwards, she helped me to make my thanksgiving. She continued to do this until I reached the age when she judged me able to use the sacrament well on my own.

I had reached my ninth year. My mother wanted to send me to school, but she felt very uneasy because of the distance. The distance to Castelnuovo from where we lived was more than three miles; my brother Anthony was opposed to my boarding there. A compromise was eventually agreed upon. During the winter season I would attend school at the nearby village of Capriglio. In this way I was able to learn the basic elements of reading and writing. My teacher was a devout priest called Joseph Delacqua¹¹⁸. He was very attentive to my needs, seeing to my instruction and even more to my Christian education. During the summer months I went along with what my brother wanted by working in the fields.

A dream

It was at that age that I had a dream. All my life this remained deeply impressed on my mind. In this dream I seemed to be near my home in a fairly large yard. A crowd of children were playing there. Some were laughing, some were playing games, and quite a few were swearing. When I heard these evil words, I jumped immediately amongst them and tried to stop them by using my words and my fists. At that moment a dignified man appeared, a nobly dressed adult. He wore a white cloak, and his face shone so that I could not look directly at him. He called me by name, told me to take charge of these children, and added these words: "You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love. Start right away to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue."

Confused and frightened, I replied that I was a poor, ignorant child. I was unable to talk to those youngsters about religion. At that moment the kids

¹¹⁸ Giuseppe Lacqua (1764-1847).

stopped their fighting, shouting, and swearing; they gathered round the man who was speaking:

Hardly knowing what I was saying, I asked, "Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?" "Precisely because it seems impossible to you, you must make it possible through obedience and the acquisition of knowledge." "Where, by what means, can I acquire knowledge?" "I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her, all wisdom is foolishness."

"But who are you that speak so?"

"I am the son of the woman whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day."

"My mother tells me not to mix with people I don't know unless I have her permission. So tell me your name."

"Ask my mother what my name is." At that moment, I saw a lady of stately appearance standing beside him. She was wearing a mantle that sparkled all over as though covered with bright stars. Seeing from my questions and answers that I was more confused than ever, she beckoned me to approach her. She took me kindly by the hand and said, "Look." Glancing round, I realised that the youngsters had all apparently run away. A large number of goats, dogs, cats, bears, and other animals had taken their place. "This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong, and energetic. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children."

I looked round again, and where before I had seen wild animals, I now saw gentle lambs. They were all jumping and bleating as if to welcome that man and lady.

At that point, still dreaming, I began crying. I begged the lady to speak so that I could understand her, because I did not know what all this could mean. She then placed her hand on my head and said, "In good time you will understand everything."

With that, a noise woke me up and everything disappeared.

I was totally bewildered. My hands seemed to be sore from the blows I had given, and my face hurt from those I had received. The memory of the man and the lady, and the things said and heard, so occupied my mind that I could not get any more sleep that night. I wasted no time in the morning in telling all about my dream. I spoke first to my brothers, who laughed at the whole thing, and then to my mother and grandmother. Each one gave his own interpretation. My brother Joseph said, "You're going to become a keeper of goats, sheep, and other animals." My mother commented, "Who knows, but you may become a priest." Anthony merely grunted, "Perhaps you'll become a robber chief." But my grandmother, though she could not read or write, knew enough theology and made the final judgement, saying, "Pay no attention to dreams."

I agreed with my grandmother. However, I was unable to cast that dream out of my mind. The things I shall have to say later will give some meaning to all this. I kept quiet about these things, and my relatives paid little attention to them. But when I went to Rome in 1858 to speak to the Pope about the Salesian Congregation, he asked me to tell him everything that had even the suggestion of the supernatural about it. It was only then, for the first time, that I said anything about this dream which I had when I was nine or ten years old. The Pope ordered me to write out the dream in all its detail and to leave it as an encouragement to the sons of that Congregation whose formation was the reason for that visit to Rome¹¹⁹.

First decade 1825-1835

1. First entertainment for children – Sermons – Acrobat – Bird-nesting

Many times you have asked me at what age I began to take an interest in children. When I was ten years old, I did what was possible at my age and

¹¹⁹ Don Bosco visited Rome the first time in 1858 and was given several papal audiences. At a meeting on March 21, Pius IX had him tell "things that only had the appearance of the supernatural." (MB V, 882). On the same occasion Don Bosco presented the project of the foundation of the Salesian Society (cf. P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani...*, vol. I, pp. 378-390).

formed a kind of festive oratory. Take note. Though I was still pretty small, I was studying my companions' characters. When I looked closely at someone, I could usually gauge what he was thinking. This gift won me the love and esteem of the boys my own age, and I was thus in demand as judge or friend. For my own part, I tried always to help and never to hurt. So my companions were quite fond of me. I would take their side when quarrels broke out. Though I was not very big, I was strong and brave enough to stand up even to older companions. Whenever arguments, questions, or quarrels of any kind arose, I acted as arbiter, and everyone accepted my decisions with good grace.

But it was to hear my stories that they flocked round me. They loved them to the point of folly. I drew on many sources for my anecdotes-sermons, catechism lessons, and stories I had read in *The Kings of France*, *Wretched Guerino*, and in *Bertoldo, Bertoldino*¹²⁰. When I appeared, my companions and even grown-ups would run to me in a crowd and clamour for a story from a fellow who scarcely understood what he had read. At times, along the road to Castelnuovo or in some field I would be surrounded by hundreds of people, anxious to hear what a poor child had to say. Apart from a good memory, I lacked any knowledge; but they seemed to think I was a great scholar in their midst. *Monoculus rex in regno caecorum*¹²¹.

In the wintertime, everyone wanted me in the stable to tell stories. All sorts of people used to gather to spend five or even six hours of their evenings listening, motionless, to selections from *The Kings of France*. The poor speaker used to stand on a bench so that all could hear and see. These occasions were described as "listening to a sermon" since we would always begin and end the storytelling with a sign of the cross and a Hail Mary. 1826.

When the weather was fine, especially on Sundays and feast days, a few strangers would come along to swell the ranks. Things were getting a bit more serious now. The entertainment now extended to tricks I had picked up from

¹²⁰ *Reali di Francia and Guerino Meschino*: French chivalric stories, put into Italian by Andrea Mangiabotti da Barberino (1370-1431). *Bertoldo e Bertoldino*: burlesque novels by Giulio Cesare Croce (1550-1609).

¹²¹ In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

acrobats and magicians I had watched in the marketplaces and at fairs. I used to watch them closely to get the hang of the tricks, then go home and practise till I had mastered the skill. You can imagine all the falls and tumbles and bumps and crashes I was always having! But would you believe that by the time I was eleven I could juggle, do mid-air somersaults and the swallow trick, and walk on my hands. I could walk, jump, and even dance on the tightrope like a professional acrobat.

From the programme of one holiday in particular you can get an idea of our general routine.

At Becchi there was a field in which grew several trees. One of them, a *martinello* pear tree¹²² that is still there, was very helpful to me then. I used to sling a rope from it to another tree some distance away. I had a table with a haversack on it, and on the ground a mat for the jumps. When I had everything set up and everyone was eager to marvel at my latest feats, I would invite them to recite the rosary and sing a hymn. Then standing on the chair, I preached to them or, better, repeated as much as I could remember from the explanation of the gospel I had heard in church that morning; or sometimes I recalled episodes from something I had heard or read. After the sermon there was a short prayer, and then the show began. At that point you would have seen, just as I am telling you, the preacher transformed into a professional acrobat. I did the swallow trick and somersaults, walked on my hands, tied the pouch around my waist, swallowed coins and then produced them from someone's nose. I multiplied balls and eggs, changed water into wine, killed and chopped up a chicken and then brought it back to life again so that it crowed better than before. These were part of my stock in trade. I walked the tightrope like an ordinary path, jumped and danced on it. and hung by one foot or one hand, sometimes by two. This went on for several hours. At the end of it I was tired. A short prayer brought proceedings to a close, and everyone went about his business.

Those who cursed or engaged in bad talk or refused to join in the prayers were not allowed to watch the show.

¹²² Variety of pear (*Martin sec*) typical of Piedmont, with small fruit.

At this point you might ask me: Going to fairs and markets, watching magicians, getting props for my shows—all these took money; where did I get it? I had several ways. Any money that my mother or others gave me to buy some tidbit, little tips, gifts, all this I saved for this purpose. I was also quite clever at catching birds in cages, snares, and nets and with birdlime; I was very good at finding birds' nests. Whenever I had gathered enough of these, I knew where I could get a good price for them. Mushrooms, plants used for dyes,¹²³ heather¹²⁴ were all another source of money for me.

Now you might ask me, Did my mother mind my wasting my time playing magician? I assure you that my mother loved me dearly, and I had boundless trust in her. I would not take one step without her approval. She knew everything, saw everything, and let me do it. Indeed, if I needed something, she willingly came to my help. My companions and generally all the spectators gladly gave me what was necessary to provide them with those amusements.

2. First communion – Mission sermons – Fr Calosso – School at Morialdo

One thing that gave me serious concern was the lack of a church or chapel where I could sing, pray with my friends. To hear a sermon or go to catechism, you needed to go about ten kilometres, there and back, either to Castelnuovo or the nearby town of Buttigliera¹²⁵. This was the reason why they willingly came to listen to the acrobat's sermons.

I was eleven years old when I made my first holy communion¹²⁶. I knew my catechism well. The minimum age for first communion was twelve years. Because we lived far from the parish church, the parish priest did not know us, and my mother had to do almost all the religious instruction. She did not want me to get any older before my admission to that great act of our religion,

¹²³ Erba tintoria, (*isatis tinctoria*), used for dyeing fabrics.

¹²⁴ Treppio. A variety of erica (*erica scoparia*) used for making small brooms or brushes.

¹²⁵ Buttigliera d'Asti: agricultural centre 2.5 km from Castelnuovo; in 1834 it had 2170 inhabitants.

¹²⁶ The function took place in the Easter period. John, who was 11 on August 16, 1826, was presumably admitted to Communion at Easter 1827.

so she took upon herself the task of preparing me as best as she could. She sent me to catechism class every day of Lent. I passed my examination, and the date was fixed. It was the day on which all the children were to make their Easter duty.

In the big crowd, it was impossible to avoid distractions. My mother coached me for days and brought me to confession three times during that Lent. "My dear John," she would say "God is going to give you a wonderful gift. Make sure you prepare well for it. Go to confession and don't keep anything back. Tell all your sins to the priest, be sorry for them all, and promise God to do better in the future." I promised all that. God alone knows whether I have been faithful to my resolution. At home, she saw to it that I said my prayers and read good books; and she always came up with the advice which a diligent mother knows how to give her children.

On the morning of my first communion, my mother did not permit me to speak to anyone. She accompanied me to the altar and together we made our preparation and thanksgiving. These were led by Father Sismondi¹²⁷, the vicar forane, in a loud voice, alternating responses with everyone. It was my mother's wish for that day that I should refrain from manual work. Instead, she kept me occupied reading and praying.

Amongst the many things that my mother repeated to me many times was this: "My dear son, this is a great day for you. I am convinced that God has really taken possession of your heart. Now promise him to be good as long as you live. Go to communion frequently in the future, but beware of sacrilege. Always be frank in confession, be obedient always, go willingly to catechism and sermons. But for the love of God, avoid like the plague those who indulge in bad talk."

I treasured my mother's advice and tried to carry it out. I think that from that day on there was some improvement in my life, especially in matters of

¹²⁷ Giuseppe Sismondo (1771-1827) parish priest of Castelnuovo since 1812. Vicar forane: title given to a parish priest who coordinated the parishes in a vicariate (Today we might say a deanery). The Diocese of Turin at the time had 463,400 inhabitants; there were 242 parishes divided into 27 vicariates.

obedience and submission to others. It was not easy for me to be submissive because I liked to do things my way and follow my own childish whims rather than listen to those who gave me advice or told me what to do.

That year (1826)¹²⁸ there was a solemn mission in Buttigliera. It gave me a chance to hear several sermons, The preachers were well known and drew people from everywhere. I went with many others. We had an instruction and a meditation in the evening, after which we were free to return home.

On one of these April evenings, as I was making my way home amid the crowd, one of those who walked along with us was Fr Calosso of Chieri¹²⁹, a very devout priest. Although he was old and bent, he made the long walk to hear the missioners. He was the chaplain of Murialdo. He noticed a capless, curly-headed lad amidst the others but walking in complete silence. He looked me over and then began to talk with me:

“Where are you from, my son? I gather you were at the mission?”

“Yes, Father, I went to hear the missioners’ sermons.”

“Now, what could you understand of it? I’m sure your mother could give you a better sermon, couldn’t she?”

“Yes, my mother does give me fine instructions. But I like to hear the missioners as well. And I think I understand them.”

“If you can remember anything from this evening’s sermons, I’ll give you two pence.”

“Just tell me whether you wish to hear the first sermon, or the second?”

“Just as you wish,” he said “as long as you tell me anything from it. Do you remember what the first sermon was about?”

¹²⁸ He should have said: 1829; Fr Calosso, whom we will speak of shortly, set up at Morialdo only in the first months of 1829. There were two jubilees celebrated those years: one called by Pope Leo XII for the holy year 1826, the other granted as an exception by Pope Pius VIII on June 12, 1829. Here Don Bosco confuses one with the other.

¹²⁹ Giovanni Melchiorre Felice Calosso (1760-1830), doctor of theology, was parish priest at Bruino (a town 25 km from Turin) between 1791 and 1813; he had to retire from there due to tensions with the important *Jacobins* in the town.

"It was about the necessity of giving oneself to God in good time and not putting off one's conversion."

"And what was in the sermon?" the venerable old man asked, somewhat surprised,

"Oh, I remember quite well. If you wish I will recite it all." Without further ado, I launched into the preamble and went on to the three points. The preacher stressed that it was risky to put off conversion because one could run out of time, or one might lack the grace or the will to make the change. There, amidst the crowd, he let me rattle on for half an hour. Then came a flurry of questions from Father Calosso: "What's your name?" "Who are your family?" "How much schooling have you had?"

"My name is John Bosco. My father died when I was very young. My mother is a widow with a family of five to support. I've learned to read, and to write a little."

"You haven't studied Donato¹³⁰ or Grammar?"

"I don't know what they are, Father."

"Would you like to study?"

"Oh, indeed I would."

"What's stopping you?"

"My brother Anthony."

"And why doesn't Anthony want you to study?"

"Because he never liked school himself. He says he doesn't want anyone else to waste time on books the way he did. But if I could only get to school, I would certainly study and not waste time."

"Why do you want to study?"

¹³⁰ "Donato" was the name of the text used in lower secondary (*latinitas*) classes (*Donato ossia rudimenti di lingua latina ed italiana*. Torino, Stamperia Reale 1815); "Grammar" was the text used in the upper classes. (*Nuovo metodo per apprendere agevolmente la lingua latina tratto dal francese . . . a uso delle scuole regie*. Torino, Stamperia Reale 1817, 2 vols.).

“I’d like to become a priest.”

“And why do you want to become a priest?”

“I’d like to attract my companions, talk to them, and teach them our religion. They’re not bad, but they become bad because they have no one to guide them.

These bold words impressed the holy priest. He never took his eyes off me while I was speaking. When our ways parted, he left me with these words: “Cheer up now. I’ll provide for you and your education. Come to see me on Sunday with your mother. We’ll arrange something.”

The following Sunday my mother and I went along to see him. He undertook to take me for one lesson a day. To keep Anthony happy I was to spend the rest of the day helping him in the fields. He was pleased enough with the scheme because my classes would not start till the autumn, when the rush of field work would be over.

I put myself completely into Fr Calosso’s hands. He had become chaplain at Murialdo only a few months before. I bared my soul to him. Every word, thought, and act I revealed to him promptly. This pleased him because it made it possible for him to have an influence on both my spiritual and temporal welfare.

It was then that I came to realise what it was to have a regular spiritual director. a faithful friend of one’s soul. I had not had one up till then. Amongst other things he forbade a penance I used to practise: he deemed it unsuited to my age and circumstances. He encouraged frequent confession and communion. He taught me how to make a short daily meditation, or more accurately, a spiritual reading. I spent all the time I could with him; I stayed with him on feast days. I went to serve his Mass during the week when I could.

From then on I began to savour the spiritual life; up to then I had acted in a purely mechanical way, not knowing the reasons.

In mid-September, I began a regular study of Italian grammar, and soon I was able to write fairly good compositions. At Christmas I went on to study Latin. By Easter I was attempting Italian-Latin and Latin-Italian translations. All this time I persevered with my usual acrobatics in the field, or in the barn during the winter. Everything my teacher said or did—his every word, I could say—provided edifying material for my audiences.

Just as I was patting myself on the back because everything was going so well, a new trial came; a heavy blow fell that shattered my hopes.

3. *Schoolwork and farmwork – Good and bad news – Fr Calosso's death*

During the winter, when there was no pressure of farm work, Anthony was reasonable enough about the time I gave to my books. When Spring came, however, and work was more pressing, he began to grumble that he was left to tackle all the chores while I was wasting my time and acting the gentleman. After some lively exchanges involving Anthony, my mother, and me, it was decided in the interest of family peace that I should go to school early in the morning and spend the rest of the day working in the fields. But how could I study? How could I manage the translations?

Take note. The walk to and from school afforded me some time to study. When I got home, I would take the hoe in one hand and my grammar the other, and along the way I would study "When *qui, quae quod* you'd render", until I reached the place of work¹³¹; then glancing longingly at the grammar, I would put it in a corner and begin hoeing, weeding, or gathering greens according to the need.

When there was a rest break, I went off on my own to study, a book in one hand, a hunk of bread in the other. I did the same thing on my way home. Written work had to be done in short periods snatched at mealtimes or in time borrowed from sleep.

¹³¹ The beginning of a grammatical rule put into rhyme (but not in English!): "*Qui, quae, quod* qualora is put / after the antecedent, / but tied to it / only in number, and gender" (cf. *Nuovo metodo...*, vol. I, p. 484).

Despite all my work and good will, Anthony still was not happy. One day he announced very decisively, first to my mother and then to my brother, Joseph, that he could stand it no more. "I've had it up to here" he blustered. "I've had my fill of this grammar business. Look at me," he said "I've grown big and strong without ever setting eyes on such books." "That's nonsense." Carried away by blind rage, I retorted in a way I should not have: "Our donkey is bigger and stronger than you are, and he never went to school either. Do you want to be like him." This so angered him that only speed saved me from a volley of blows and smacks.

My mother was heartbroken, I was in tears myself, and the chaplain was upset too. In fact when that worthy minister of God got to know how matters stood in our family, he took me aside one day and said, "Johnny, you've put your faith in me, and I won't let you down. Leave that troublesome brother of yours and come and live in the presbytery. I'll be a loving father to you."

My mother was elated when I told her of this generous offer. In April I moved into, the priest's house, though I returned home to sleep.

No one can imagine how supremely happy I was. I idolised Fr Calosso, loved him as if he were my father, prayed for him, and tried to help him in every way I could. My greatest pleasure was to work for him. I would have died for him. I made more progress in one day with the good priest than I would have made in a week at home. That man of God lavished affection on me, and he would often say, "Don't worry about the future. As long as I'm alive I'll see that you want for nothing. And I'll make provision for you after my death."

Things were going unbelievably well for me. I could say my cup of happiness was full. There was nothing else I could wish for. Then a fresh disaster blighted all my hopes.

One morning in April 1828¹³² Fr Calosso sent me home on an errand. I had only just made it to the house when a messenger dashed in at my heels.

¹³² He should have said: November 1830; Fr Calosso died on 21 November 1830, as we see from parish registers.

He said I was to get back to Fr Calosso as fast as I could. He was very ill and wanted to see me. I did not run; I flew. I found my benefactor in bed suffering from a stroke and unable to speak. He recognised me and tried to talk but no words came. He gave me the key to his money and made signs that I was not to give it to anyone. After two days of suffering, Fr Calosso gave up his soul to God. His death shattered my dreams. I have always prayed for him, and as long as I live I shall remember my outstanding benefactor every day that dawns.

When Fr Calosso's heirs turned up, I handed over to them the key and everything else.

4. Fr Cafasso – Doubts – Dividing the inheritance – School at Castelnuovo d'Asti – Music – The tailor

That year Divine Providence brought a new benefactor into my life. He was Fr Joseph Cafasso from Castelnuovo d'Asti¹³³.

It was the second Sunday of October, 1827, and the people of Murialdo were celebrating their patronal feast, the Motherhood of Mary. There was a great air of activity about the place; some were preparing the church, others engaged in family chores; some were playing games, others looking on.

One person I noticed was taking no part in the festivities. He was a slightly-built, bright-eyed cleric¹³⁴, kindly and pure in appearance. He was leaning against the church door. Though I was only twelve years old, I was struck by his appearance and felt I would like to meet him. I went over and spoke to him: "Father," I said "would you care to see what's going on at our feast? I'd like to act as your guide."

He kindly beckoned me closer. He asked me how old I was, what studies I had done, if I had made my first communion, how often I went to confession, where I went to catechism, and so on. I was spellbound by his manner of

¹³³ Joseph Cafasso (1811-1860), later he would be Don Bosco's confessor and spiritual director.

¹³⁴ Joseph Cafasso took on the clerical cassock on July 1, 1827, at 16 years of age.

speaking and answered all his questions without hesitation. To show my gratitude for his friendliness, I once more offered to show him round the various entertainments and novelties.

“My dear friend,” he replied “the entertainments of a priest are church ceremonies. The more devoutly they are celebrated, the more pleasurable do they turn out for us. The new attractions are the practices of religion. These are ever new and therefore should be diligently attended. I’m only waiting for the church to open so I can go in.”

I plucked up my courage to add to the discussion. “But Father,” I suggested “though what you say is true, there’s a time for everything, a time to pray and a time to play.”

He smiled. But I have never forgotten his parting words, which were his plan of action for his whole life: “A cleric gives himself to the Lord. Nothing in the world must be more important to him than the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls.”

I was struck with admiration and longed to know the name of the cleric whose words and bearing so breathed the spirit of the Lord. I learned that he was the seminarian Joseph Cafasso, a student in his first year of theology. I already knew him by reputation as a model of virtue¹³⁵.

Fr Calosso’s death was a great loss to me. I wept inconsolably over my dead benefactor. I thought of him in my waking hours and dreamt of him when I was asleep. It affected me so badly that my mother feared for my health. She sent me for a while to my grandfather in Capriglio¹³⁶.

At this time I had another dream. In it I was sorely reproached for having put my hope in men and not in our good heavenly Father. Meanwhile I thought a great deal about how to go ahead with my studies. I would see good priests working at their sacred ministry, but I could not strike up a close relationship with them.

¹³⁵ Cf. no. 295, pp. 1078-1080.

¹³⁶ Melchior Occhiena (1752-1844).

Often I would meet on the road our parish priest or his curate¹³⁷. I would greet them at a distance and bow to them as they passed. In their distant and courteous manner, they would return my greeting and go on their way. Often, I used to cry and say to myself and even to others, "If I were a priest, I would act differently. I would approach the children, say some kind words to them, and give them good advice. How happy I would be if I could talk with my parish priest. I had this comforting experience with Fr Calosso. Shall I never have it again."

My mother, seeing how upset I was because of the obstacles in the way of my studies, and not having any hope of getting the consent of Anthony, who was now over twenty, thought about dividing our inheritance¹³⁸. There were serious difficulties, however, since Joseph and I were minors. Division of the property would be a complicated and costly business. Nevertheless she went ahead. My grandmother had died some years previously, so our family now consisted of my mother, Joseph, who did not want to be separated from me¹³⁹.

This division took a load off my mind and left me completely free to go ahead with my studies. However, it took some months to complete all the formalities of the law. It was around Christmas before I was able to enrol at the elementary school in Castelnuovo. It was 1828, and I was thirteen years old¹⁴⁰.

Since I had done my studies privately and was starting a public school with a new teacher, these things were for me a disconcerting experience. Practically, I had to begin my Italian grammar all over before I could start studying Latin. For some time, I walked from home to school every day. But that was nearly impossible during the harsh winter; I had to make four trips back and forth, covering twelve and a half miles daily. I found lodgings with an upright man,

¹³⁷ Parish priest of Castelnuovo was Fr Bartolomeo Dassano (1796-1854). He had two curates: Fr Emanuele Virano (1789-1834) and Fr Nicolao Moglia (1755-1838).

¹³⁸ The inheritance was divided in 1830 when Anthony was 21.

¹³⁹ Margaret Zucca died February 11, 1826.

¹⁴⁰ He should have said: December 1830 (a couple of weeks after Fr Calosso's death); John was 15.

a tailor, John Roberto; he had a taste for singing, especially plain chant. Since I had a good voice, I took up music wholeheartedly. In a few months, I could go up to the choir loft and sing the solo parts. Eager to use my free time, I took up tailoring. Before long I was able to make buttonholes and hems and sew simple and double seams. Later I learned how to cut out underwear, waistcoats, trousers, and coats. I fancied myself already a master tailor.

In fact my landlord, seeing how I had taken to the trade, made me a good offer to get me to stay with him and carry on the business. I had other ambitions, however. I wanted to pursue my studies. While I tried my hand at a variety of jobs to keep myself busy, I never lost sight of my main objective.

That year some of my companions tried to tempt me into danger; they wanted to take me gambling during school time. When I said I had no money, they suggested stealing it from my landlord or even my mother. One of them, pressuring me, said, "My dear chap, it's time you woke up. You must learn to live in the world. Putting your head in a sack gets you nowhere. Just get the money and you can have the same fun as the rest of us."

I well remember what my reply was: "I fail to understand what you're getting at. Am I to believe you're urging me to play truant and steal? But in your daily prayers, don't you say, 'The seventh commandment, You shall not steal'? Anyone who steals is a thief, and thieves come to a bad end. Besides, my mother loves me dearly, and if I need money for lawful purposes she gives it to me. I've never done anything without her permission, and I have no intention of starting to disobey her now. If your pals are doing that, they're evil. And if they're not doing it but recommending it to others, they're scoundrels."

News of this episode got to the ears of my other companions, and no one else proposed to me anything wrong. My teacher heard of it as well and from then on was very kind to me. Even many relatives of well-to-do youngsters heard of it and urged their sons to associate with me. I was therefore in a position to choose my friends, who loved me and would listen to me like the boys of Murialdo.

Things were going well for me. But I was in for another upset. My teacher, Fr Virano, was made parish priest of Mondonio in the diocese of Asti¹⁴¹. In April 1830 our beloved teacher went to take up his appointment. The man who replaced him could not keep order. In fact he almost scattered to the wind all that Fr Virano had taught in the preceding months.

5. *Schools in Chieri – Kindness of teachers– The first four grades (grammar)*

After the loss of so much time, it was finally decided to send me to Chieri, where I could continue seriously with my schooling. That was in 1830¹⁴². One who is raised in the backwoods and has never seen anything beyond a few small country villages is easily impressed by any little novelty [to be found in a larger city]. I lodged with a woman from my own town, Lucy Matta, a widow with one son who was moving to the city to help him and keep all eye on him¹⁴³. The first person I met was Fr Eustace Valimberti¹⁴⁴ of revered memory. He gave me a lot of good advice on how to keep out of trouble. He invited me to serve his Mass and thus he could always advise me well. He brought me to see the headmaster¹⁴⁵ in Chieri and introduced me to my other teachers. Up to now, my studies had been a little of everything and amounted almost to nothing. Accordingly, I was advised to enrol in the sixth class¹⁴⁶, which today would correspond to the class preparatory to the first year of *ginnasio*.

¹⁴¹ Emanuele Virano (1789-1834) curate and teacher; he looked after Mondonio in April 1831.

¹⁴² He should have said: 1831. The school year began November 1 and ended on June 21.

¹⁴³ Lucy Pianta (1783-1851), widow of Giuseppe Matta (cf. Secondo CASELLE, *Giovanni Bosco a Chieri: 1831-1841. Dieci anni che valgono una vita*. Torino, Edizioni Acclaim 1988, p. 24).

¹⁴⁴ He was called Placido Michele Filippo Valimberti (1803-1848), chaplain at the church of St William (near Lucy Matta's house) and 5th grade teacher from 1830 to 1839.

¹⁴⁵ Dominican Pio Eusebio Sibilla (born 1770), professor of philosophy. The 'Prefect of schools' (official title), according to the *Regolamento*, had to be a member of the clergy. His job was to "keep good order in the classrooms and the congregation (Sunday meetings) and exact fulfilment of what was prescribed for professors and teachers, and students in the city" (cf. *Regie patenti colle quali S. M. approva l'annesso Regolamento per le scuole tanto comunali che pubbliche, e Regie*, in data 23 luglio 1822. Torino, Stamperia Reale 1822, pp. 32-34).

¹⁴⁶ The upper school consisted of 3 classes of *latinità inferiore* (*sixth; fifth; fourth*) and 3 classes of *latinità superiore* (*third or grammar, humanities; rhetoric*).

My teacher was Dr Pugnetti¹⁴⁷, also of dear memory. He was very kind to me. He helped me in school, invited me to his home, and was very sympathetic to me because of my age and my goodwill. He went out of his way to help me as much as he could.

My age and my size made me look like a pillar amongst my little companions. I was anxious to get out of that situation. After two months of the sixth class, I was at its head. I took an examination and moved up to the fifth class. I went gladly to my new class because my classmates were more my size, and my teacher was the beloved Fr Valimberti. After two more months, I led the class again and, by exception, was allowed to take another examination and so was promoted to the fourth class, which is equivalent to the second year of *ginnasio*.

Here my teacher was Joseph Cima, a strict disciplinarian¹⁴⁸. When he saw this student as big and stocky as himself coming into his class in midyear, he joked in front of the whole class, “He’s either a simpleton or a genius. What do you make of him?” Taken aback by that harsh introduction, I answered, “Something in-between. I’m just a poor young fellow who has the goodwill to do his work and get along in his studies.”

He was mollified by my reply and went on with unusual kindness, “If you have goodwill, you’re in good hands. I’ll see that you won’t be idle here. Don’t worry; if you have any problems, tell me promptly and I’ll sort them out for you.” I thanked him with all my heart.

After a couple of months in this class, something happened that gave rise to a good deal of comments about me. One day the teacher was explaining the life of Agesilaus in Cornelius Nepos. I did not have my book with me that day, and to cover my forgetfulness, I kept my *Donato* open in front of me. My companions noticed, and first one and then another began to laugh. Suddenly the whole classroom was in an uproar.

¹⁴⁷ Valeriano Giovanni Domenico Pugnetti (1807-1868).

¹⁴⁸ Vincenzo Giuseppe Cima (1810-1854), not a priest but a tonsured cleric.

"What's going on here?" shouted the teacher. "What's going on?" he shot at me, this time. Everyone was looking at me. He told me to construe the text and repeat his explanation. I got to my feet, still holding my *Donato*. From memory I repeated the text, construed it, and explained it. Instinctively my companions expressed their admiration and burst into applause. The teacher was angry beyond description. It was the first time, according to him, that he had failed to maintain discipline. He swung at me, but I saw it coming and ducked. Next he placed his hand on my *Donato* and demanded of my neighbours the reason for all the commotion. "Bosco had his *Donato* in front of him all the time," my companions explained "but he read and explained the lesson as if he had the Cornelius text."

The teacher took the *Donato* and insisted I go on for two sentences more. Then he said to me, "In tribute to your wonderful memory, I'll overlook your forgetfulness. You're blessed. Only see that your gift is put to good use."

At the end of that school year (1830-1831)¹⁴⁹ as a result of my high marks, I was promoted to the third class, equivalent to the third year of *ginnasio*.

6. My companions – Society for a good time – Christian duties

All this time I had to use my own initiative to learn how to deal with my companions. I put them in three groups: the good, the indifferent, and the bad. As soon as I spotted the bad ones, I avoided them absolutely and always. The indifferent I associated with only when necessary, but I was always courteous with them. I made friends with the good ones, and then only when I was sure of them. As I knew few people in the town, I made it a rule to keep to myself. I sometimes had to discourage people I did not know too well. Some wanted to get me to a show, others into 'some gambling, and still others to go swimming¹⁵⁰. And there were suggestions that I should steal fruit from the town gardens or country orchards.

¹⁴⁹ He should have said: 1831-1832.

¹⁵⁰ These activities were forbidden by school rules "without permission of the prefect of studies" (*Regie patenti...*, pp. 20-21, articles 42-43).

One companion was so bold as to suggest that I should steal a valuable object from my landlady so that we could buy some sweets. Gradually I got to know the undesirables and firmly avoided their company. Usually I had a counter to these suggestions. I used to tell them that my mother had asked my landlady to look after me, and out of love for my mother I did not want to go anywhere nor do anything without good Lucy's consent.

This firm obedience to the good woman led to a very happy and practical conclusion. With much pleasure, Lucy asked me to take charge of her only son,¹⁵¹ a lively youth more interested in games than in school work. She depended on me to check his homework even though he was in the class above me.

I took him in hand as if he were my brother. I used little prizes as bribes to get to him. I played indoor games with him and helped him to be faithful to his religious duties. Little by little he became more tractable, obedient, and studious. After six months he had become so good and diligent that his teacher was satisfied and he won honours in class. His mother was so delighted that she refused to accept my monthly rent.

Since the companions who tried to coax me into their escapades were the most careless about everything, they began to come to me with the request that I do them the kindness of lending them my homework or dictating it to them. The teachers frowned on this. They said that it was a false kindness that only encouraged laziness, and they strictly forbade me to do it. I then resorted to less obvious ways of helping them, such as explaining problems to them and lending a helping hand to those who needed it. Thus I made everyone happy and won the goodwill and affection of my companions.

At first they came to play, then to listen to stories or to do their homework, and finally for no reason at all, just as the boys at Murialdo and Castelnuovo used to do. That these gatherings might have a name, we called ourselves the Society for a Good Time. There was a reason for the name, because everyone

¹⁵¹ "Matta Giovanni Battista of Castelnuovo d'Asti, already mayor of his town for years, now a businessman at the drugstore in the same town" (note by Don Bosco on the original manuscript). Giovanni Battista Matta (1809-1878), mayor of Castelnuovo from 1863 to 1867.

was obliged to look for such books, discuss such subjects, or play such games as would contribute to the happiness of the members. Whatever would induce sadness was forbidden, especially things contrary to God's law. Those who swore, used God's name in vain, or indulged in bad talk were turned away from the club at once. So it was that I found myself the leader of a crowd of companions. Two basic rules were adopted: (1) Each member of the Society for a Good Time should avoid language and actions unbecoming a good Christian. (2) Exactness in the performance of scholastic and religious duties. All this helped my reputation, and in 1832 my companions respected me like the captain of a small army. I was much in demand for entertainments, for helping pupils privately, or for giving lessons or reviews at home. Thus Divine Providence enabled me to supply my own clothes, school necessities, and other things without having to disturb my family in any way.

7. *Good companions and practices of piety*

Amongst the members of our Society for a Good Time I discovered some who were truly exemplary. Worthy of mention are William Garigliano from Poirino and Paul Braje from Chieri¹⁵². They were always ready for some good recreation, but only after they had done their homework. Both were reserved and pious, and they gave me plenty of good advice. On feast days, after the practices of piety in common at the college¹⁵³, we used to go along to St Anthony's Church, where the Jesuits gave marvellous catechetical instructions¹⁵⁴, with plenty of stories that I still recall.

During the week, the Society for a Good Time used to meet at the home of one of the members to talk about religious matters. Anyone was welcome

¹⁵² Guglielmo Garigliano (1819-1902) would go to the seminary with John and become a priest. Poirino: agricultural town 5 km from Chieri. Paolo Vittorio Braje (1820-1832) died that year from a lung infection.

¹⁵³ The *Regolamento* envisaged a spiritual director and chapel (called a *Congregation*) for each school, where students attended daily mass, and on Sundays (cf. *Regie patenti...*, p. 20, art. 37-40).

¹⁵⁴ *Praefectus catechismi* in St Anthony's church was Jesuit Isaia Carminati (1798-1851); in 1849 he was called to the Gregorian University to teach Church Law (cf. S. CASELLE, *Giovanni Bosco a Chieri...*, pp. 50-52).

to come to these gatherings. Garigliano and Braje were amongst the most conscientious. We entertained ourselves with some pleasant recreation, with discussions on religious topics, spiritual reading, and prayer. We exchanged good advice, and if there were any personal corrections we felt we should hand out to each other, whether these were our own personal observations or criticisms we had heard others make, we did that. Without realising it, we were putting into practice the excellent adage, "*Blessed is he who has an advisor*"; and that saying of Pythagoras, "*If you have no friend to tell you your faults, pay an enemy to do it.*" Besides these friendly activities, we went to hear sermons and often went to confession and holy communion.

Here it is good to recall that in those days religion was a basic part of the educational system. A teacher faced instant dismissal should he make any statement unbecoming or irreligious. If this was the way teachers were treated; you can imagine how severely pupils were dealt with for any unruly conduct or scandal! We went to Holy Mass every morning; classes began with the devout praying of the *Actiones* and the *Ave Maria*; they ended with the *Agimus* and an *Ave Maria*.

On feast days all the pupils attended the college church. Before Mass we had spiritual reading, followed by the chanting of the Little Office of Our Lady. Then came Mass and the explanation of the gospel. In the evening we had a further catechetical instruction, vespers, and another sermon. Everyone was expected to approach the holy sacraments; to prevent the neglect of this important obligation, once a month the students had to present a card to prove that they had gone to confession. If one failed to do this, he was barred from end-of-year examinations, no matter how good he was at studies. This strict training produced marvellous results. Many years went by without any swearing or unbecoming words being heard. The pupils were as docile and respectful at school as they would have been at home. And it often happened that in very large classes everyone won promotion at the end of the year. This was the case with my own classmates in the third class, humanities, and rhetoric.

I had the great good fortune of choosing as my regular confessor Doctor Maloria, canon of the chapter in Chieri¹⁵⁵. He always had a warm welcome for me. Indeed, he encouraged me to go to confession and communion more often, advice not too commonly given in those days, I do not remember that any of my teachers ever advised me along these lines. Those who went to confession and communion more than once a month were considered very virtuous; and many confessors would not permit it. Consequently, I have to thank my confessor if I was not led by companions into certain unfortunate pitfalls that inexperienced boys in large schools have to regret.

During these two years, I never forgot my friends at Murialdo. I kept in touch with them and sometimes went to visit them on Thursdays. During the autumn *holidays*, as soon as they got wind of my arrival they ran to meet me and always made a big fuss over me. A branch of the Society for a Good Time was started amongst them, too. Those whose good conduct throughout the year recommended them were enrolled. Bad conduct—especially swearing or evil talk—warranted expulsion from the club.

8. *Humanities and rhetoric – Louis Comollo*

When we had finished the first courses of *ginnasio*, we had an inspection. The man who came to examine us on behalf of the School Reform Board¹⁵⁶ was a lawyer of outstanding merit, Prof. Fr Joseph Gazzani. He was very kind to me, and I have always retained grateful memories of him; we have maintained a close, friendly relationship ever since. This good priest is still living in Upper Moltedo near Oneglia, (more precisely, near Portomaurizio, which is a mile west of Oneglia on the Ligurian coast. The communes were united in 1923 as the city of Imperia. It is sixty miles southwest of Genoa where he was born.) Amongst his many charitable works, he endowed a scholarship at our college in Alassio for a boy desirous of studying for the priesthood.

¹⁵⁵ Giuseppe Maloria (1802-1857), canon of the Chapter at Chieri. He would be John Bosco's confessor during his seminary years too.

¹⁵⁶ Reform Board, ancient institution for higher studies.

Though the examinations were conducted strictly, all forty-five in our class were promoted to the next class, which corresponds to our fourth year of *ginnasio*. I myself nearly failed for giving a copy of my work to others. If I was let through, I am indebted to the protection of my revered teacher Fr Giusiana, a Dominican¹⁵⁷, He set an extra paper for me, at which I did very well, and I was passed unanimously.

In those days there was a praiseworthy practice by which the town awarded a prize to at least one student in each grade, remitting the twelve-franc tuition (*minervale*)¹⁵⁸. To win this prize one had to be approved unanimously in both studies and conduct. I was lucky enough to be excused from this fee every year.

That year I lost one of my dearest companions. Young Paul Braje, my dear, intimate friend, died on [July 10] [1832] after a long illness. He was a model of piety, resignation, and living faith. He thus went to join St Aloysius. He was mourned by the whole college, and all the students turned out for his funeral. For a long time afterwards, during their holidays they would receive holy communion and recite the Little Office of Our Lady or the rosary for the soul of their dead friend. To make up for this loss, however, God sent me another companion every bit as virtuous as Paul, and even more remarkable in his deeds. This was Louis Comollo, of whom I will have more to say in a moment¹⁵⁹.

At the end of the humanities year, I did very well. On the strength of my results, my teachers, especially Doctor Peter Banaudi¹⁶⁰, suggested I should ask to take the exam in philosophy, and, in fact, I was promoted. But as I enjoyed my study of literature, I thought it better to continue my programme normally and take the rhetoric course or fifth *ginnasio* in 1833-4¹⁶¹. It was

¹⁵⁷ Giacinto Giussiana (1774-1844).

¹⁵⁸ Minervale: school fee.

¹⁵⁹ Luigi Pietro Comollo (1817-1839).

¹⁶⁰ Pietro Banaudi (1802-1885), had a doctorate, professor of rhetoric in the 1833-1834 school year.

¹⁶¹ He should have said: 1834-1835.

during that year that I met Comollo. The life of this precious friend has been told elsewhere, and those who want can read it there¹⁶². Here I mention only the incident that led to my noticing him amongst the humanities group,

There was a rumour in the top form that a saintly pupil was to join us that year¹⁶³. He was said to be the nephew of the provost of Cinzano, an elderly priest with a reputation for sanctity. I was keen to get to know him, but I did not know his name. This is how we met: At that time it was already the practice [among the students] to play the dangerous game of *cavallina* while waiting to go in for classes. The giddy and less studious ones loved it, and generally they were the most skilful at it.

For several days they watched a reserved youngster of fifteen years who had just registered at the college take his seat and settle down to read or study, heedless of the din going on round him. A boorish fellow came up to him, grabbed his arm, and insisted that he join them at *cavallina*¹⁶⁴.

"I don't know how," was the other's mortified and humble reply "I don't know how: I've never played these games before."

"You better join us," said the aggressor "or I'll kick and beat you till you do."

"You can treat me as you please, but I don't know what the game is, nor do I care to learn."

His crude and ill-natured fellow student grabbed his arm, shoved him, and gave him two slaps that were heard all over the room. That made my blood boil. But I held back for a moment to see if the boy under attack would give the offender what he had coming. He could easily have done so because he was

¹⁶² [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 suo collega*. Torino, Tipografia Speirani e Ferrero 1844 (OE I, 1-84); Here in this volume we have the second edition (1854), cf. no. 305.

¹⁶³ Fr Giuseppe Comollo (1768-1843).

¹⁶⁴ *Cavallina*: popular game involving jumping over one another, onto the back of another boy until he falls to the ground.

older and stronger than the bully. You can imagine everyone's astonishment when the good youth, countenance red and almost livid, looked with pity at his malicious companion, and replied only, "Are you satisfied? Now go in peace; I've already forgiven you."

That heroic act made me want to know his name. It was, in fact, Louis Comollo, nephew of the provost of Cinzano, whose praises I had heard so often. From that moment on, he became my close friend, and I can say that from him I began to learn how to live as a Christian. I trusted him completely and he trusted me. We needed each other: I needed spiritual help; he needed a bodyguard. The shy and retiring Comollo never even tried to stand up to the vicious insults of our companions, whereas all of them—including those older and bigger than I—respected my mettle and my strength. That became evident one day when certain boys were bent on making fun of and beat up Comollo and another good-natured lad called Anthony Candelo. I wanted to intervene on their behalf, but the bullies gave me no heed. Another day when the harmless pair were being abused again, I shouted, "You'd better watch out. I'll deal with the next one who lays a finger on them."

A considerable number of the taller and bolder spirits ganged together to threaten me while Comollo got two smacks in the face. At that I forgot myself completely. Brute strength moved me, not reason. With no chair or stick within reach, I grabbed one of my fellow students by the shoulders and swung him round like a club to beat the others. I knocked down four of them; the rest took to their heels yelling for mercy. Then what? At that moment the teacher came into the room. Seeing arms and legs flying everywhere amidst an out-of-this-world uproar, he began to shout and to strike blows left and right. The storm was about to burst upon me when he learned the cause of the disturbance. He demanded a replay of the action, or at least a show of my strength. The teacher laughed, and so did all the pupils. Everyone was so amazed that I escaped the punishment I deserved.

Comollo had a different lesson to teach me. When we could speak between ourselves, he said to me, "John my friend, your strength frightens me. But, believe me, God didn't give you strength to massacre your companions. His

will is that we should love one another, forgive one another, and return good for evil."

I could only wonder at my companion's charity. I put myself entirely into his hands and let him guide me where and how he wished. By agreement with our friend Garigliano, we went together for confession, communion, meditation, spiritual reading, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and serving Holy Mass. Comollo knew how to organise us with such gentle courtesy and sweetness that we could not refuse him.

I remember one day when we were passing a church; I was so engaged in chattering with a companion that I forgot to raise my cap. He corrected me at once, but so graciously: "John my friend," he said "you're so lost in talking to men that you forget even the Lord's house."

9. *Waiter and bartender – Name day – A tragedy*

We pass on from school affairs to certain events by way of diversion.

I changed lodgings during my humanities year to be nearer my teacher, Fr Banaudi, and to help John Pianta¹⁶⁵, a friend of the family, who came to Chieri that year to open a café. The lodging certainly had its dangers, but as I was moving in with exemplary Catholics and was continuing my friendship with good companions, I was able to make the change without fear of moral danger. When I finished my homework, I had a lot of spare time; I used to devote part of it to reading the Latin and Italian classics and the rest to making liquors and jams. Halfway through that year I was in a position to prepare coffee and chocolate; I knew the recipes for many kinds of sweets, drinks, ices, and various refreshments. My landlord began by giving me free lodging. Then, gauging the boost I could give to his business, he made me an attractive offer; he tried to induce me to give up my other concerns and work full time for him. But I was doing that work only for fun and relaxation; I had no intention of giving up my studies.

¹⁶⁵ Giovanni Pianta, brother of Lucy Matta; he stayed in Chieri only that year (cf. S. CASELLE, *Giovanni Bosco a Chieri...*, p. 84).

Professor Banaudi was a model teacher. Without having recourse to corporal punishment, he succeeded in making all his pupils respect and love him. He loved them all as if they were his own sons, and they loved him like an affectionate father.

To show our appreciation, we planned a surprise for his feast day. We decided to write both poetic and prose pieces for the celebration and we had little presents which we thought he would especially like.

The event was a splendid success. Our teacher was pleased beyond words, and as a token of appreciation, he took us on a picnic in the country. It was a wonderful day; both teacher and pupils were of one spirit, and each of us strove for ways to express the joy in his heart.

As we made our way back to Chieri, our teacher met someone we did not know, and he had to go off with the man; we were left by ourselves on the road for a little while. At that point some of our companions from the upper classes came up to us and invited us to go swimming with them at a place called *Fontana Rossa*, about a mile from Chieri. I was against the idea, and so were some of my companions; but it was no use. A few came home with me while the others wanted to go swimming. It was a regrettable decision. A few hours after we got home, two of our picnic group ran in, breathless and frightened: “Oh, if you only knew what a terrible thing’s happened” they gasped, “Philip N., who insisted so much that we go swimming, is dead!”¹⁶⁶

“What?” we all exclaimed. “Philip was a good swimmer.”

“Maybe he was” the excited messenger went on. “To encourage us to dive in with him, he jumped in full of confidence, but unaware of the dangerous whirlpools in the *Fontana Rossa*. We waited for him to surface, but he did not appear. We raised the alarm. When help arrived, the rescuers tried everything, even at risk to themselves. It was an hour and a half later before they recovered the body.”

¹⁶⁶ Filippo Maurizio Camandona, died May 18, 1834 (cf. S. CASELLE, *Giovanni Bosco a Chieri...*, p. 117).

The tragedy depressed all of us. There was no more talk of swimming that year nor the following one (1834)¹⁶⁷. Some time ago I happened to meet a few of my old friends from those days. We recalled the drowning of our companion at the *Fontana Rossa* whirlpool with real regret.

10. *Jonah the Jewish boy*

While I was still a humanities student lodging at John Pianta's café, I got to know a Jewish youngster called Jonah¹⁶⁸. He was about eighteen, was remarkably good looking, and had an exceptionally fine singing voice. He was a good billiards player too. We met at Elijah's bookstore, and he would always ask for me as soon as he came into the shop. I liked him a lot, and he was very attached to me. Every spare minute he had, he spent in my room; we sang together, played the piano, or read. He liked to hear the thousand little stories I used to tell. One day he got into a difficult quarrel which could have had sorry consequences for him. He came running to me for advice. "Jonah, my friend" I said to him, "if you were a Christian, I would advise you to go to confession. But in your case, that's not possible."

"But we Jews can go to confession, if we want to."

"Go to confession by all means, but your confessor is not obliged to secrecy. Neither can he forgive your sins or administer any sacraments."

"If you'll take me, I'll go to a priest."

"I could do that for you, but a lot of preparation is necessary."

"What sort of preparation."

"Confession takes away sins committed after baptism. If you wish to receive any of the other sacraments, you must receive baptism first."

"What must I do to be baptised?"

¹⁶⁷ He should have said: 1835.

¹⁶⁸ Jonah: pseudonym for Jacob Levi (1816-1870).

“You must be instructed in the Christian religion. You must believe in Jesus Christ, true God and true man. After that you can be baptised.”

“What good will baptism do me?”

“It wipes out original sin, and actual sins too. It opens the way to the other sacraments. Finally, it makes you a child of God and an heir to heaven.”

“We Jews cannot be saved?”

“No, my dear Jonah; since Jesus Christ came, the Jews cannot be saved unless they believe in him.”

“If it comes to my mother’s ears that I want to become a Christian, heaven help me.”

“Don’t be afraid; God is the master of all hearts. If he calls you to become a Christian, he will do it in such a way’ as to satisfy your mother, or provide in some way for the good of your soul.”

“You are such a good friend of mine; if you were in my place, what would you do?”

“I would begin to take instruction in the Christian religion. Anyway, God will show you what to do in the future. Take this little catechism and begin to study it. Pray that God will enlighten you, and he will help you to know the truth.”

From that day onward Jonah became attracted to the Christian faith. He used to come to the café and, after he played a game of billiards, he would come looking for me to discuss religion and the catechism. In a few months he had learned to make the sign of the cross, could say the *Pater*, the *Ave Maria*, and the *Credo*, and knew the other principal truths of the faith. He was very happy and became better every day in his speech and his actions.

Jonah had been left fatherless as a child. His mother Rachel had heard vague reports about Jonah’s intentions, but as yet she knew nothing certain. This is how the news broke: one day, while making Jonah’s bed she came across his catechism, which he had inadvertently left under his mattress.

She went screaming through the house, took the catechism to the rabbi, and suspecting what was afoot, rushed to the student Bosco's lodgings. She had often heard her son speak of him. Picture to yourselves ugliness itself, and you will have an idea of Jonah's mother. She was blind in one eye and deaf in both ears; she had a big nose, hardly any teeth, and a long, pointed chin; she was thick lipped, with a twisted mouth; her voice sounded like the squeal of a foal. The other Jews used to call her "Lilith the Witch" a name they use for the ugliest thing they can imagine.

I got a fright when I saw her. Before I had time to recover, she opened up on me: "I swear you've done wrong! Yes, you! You have ruined my Jonah. You've brought public disgrace on him. I don't know what will become of him. I'm afraid he'll end up a Christian, and you'll have been the cause of it.

I understood then who she was and of whom she was speaking; as calmly as I could, I explained that she ought to be happy about it and to thank me for doing him so much good.

"And what's the good of that? Is it a good thing for a person to deny his own " religion?"

"Calm down, my good woman," I said to her. "Listen, I didn't go looking for your son Jonah. We met in Elijah's bookshop. We became friends without any special reason. He's very fond of me, and I like him too. As his true friend, I want him to save his soul and to get to know our religion, because outside it no one can be saved. Good mother of Jonah, please note that I only gave your son a book and told him to study it. If he becomes a Christian, he does not abandon his Jewish religion; he perfects it."

"If Jonah should have the misfortune to become a Christian, he would have to abandon our prophets, because Christians do not believe in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, nor in Moses and the prophets." "We do believe in all the holy patriarchs and prophets of the Bible. Their writings, their sayings, and their prophecies are the foundation of the Christian faith." "If our rabbi were only here, he would know how to answer you. I know neither the *Mishnah* nor the *Gemara* (the two parts of the Talmud). But what is to become of my poor Jonah?"

So saying, she left. It would be too long to recount the many attacks that the mother, the rabbi, and Jonah's relatives made on me. Neither threats nor violence had any effect on that courageous young man; he withstood them all and continued to take instruction. Since he was no longer safe amongst his family, he had to leave home and live almost as a beggar. Many people came to his aid. And that all might be done with due prudence, I recommended my pupil to a learned priest who took a fatherly interest in him. When Jonah's religious instructions were completed, he was impatient to become a Christian. A solemnity¹⁶⁹ was arranged that set a good example for all the people of Chieri. Other Jews were impressed too, and later several others embraced Christianity.

Jonah's godparents were Charles and Octavia Bertinetti¹⁷⁰, who provided what the neophyte needed. After becoming a Catholic, he was able to earn an honest livelihood by his own efforts. The newly-baptised's name was Aloysius.

11. Games – Conjuring tricks – Magic – Self-defence

In the midst of my studies and other interests, such as singing, music, speech training, and dramatics, which I undertook wholeheartedly, I also learned a variety of new games: card tricks, tarots, marbles, quoits, walking on stilts, running and jumping, all of which I enjoyed and in which I was by no means mediocre, even if I was no champion. Some of these activities I had learned at Murialdo, others at Chieri. If in the fields of Murialdo I was only a beginner, that year I developed into something of a master. At that time, not much was known about these sports because they had not been much publicised; so in the popular estimate they were a source of wonder. What shall I say of these skills?

¹⁶⁹ The baptism was celebrated on August 10, 1834 (S. CASELLE, *Giovanni Bosco a Chieri...*, p. 113).

¹⁷⁰ From the baptism register we learn that Ottavia Maria Bertinetti was the godmother; but instead the godfather was Giacinto Bolmida. The newly baptised, in honour of his godparents, chose the name Luigi Giacinto Ottavio Maria and surname Bolmida, since, being a minor, he was adopted by his godfather. (cf. S. CASELLE, *Giovanni Bosco a Chieri...*, pp. 110-115).

I often gave performances both in public and in private. Since I had an exceptional memory, I knew by heart long passages from the classics, the poets particularly. I could quote at will from Dante, Petrarch, Tasso, Parini, Monti, and others as if they were my own. Likewise, I could thus improvise without any trouble. In those entertainments or concerts, sometimes I sang, sometimes I played an instrument, or sometimes I composed verses which were highly praised - though in reality they were nothing more than excerpts from various authors adapted for the occasion. That is why I have never given any of my compositions to anyone. Whatever I did write down, I have burned.

Conjuring was a source of wonder. People sat wide-eyed at the sight of an endless stream of balls coming out of a little box too small to hold even one, or eggs tumbling out of a little bag. But when they saw me producing balls from bystanders' noses, or heard me tell accurately how much money people had in their pockets, or when they watched me crush coins to dust between my fingers, or I caused all [the people in] the audience to take on a monstrous appearance or even to appear headless; they began to whisper that I was a sorcerer, that I had to be in league with the devil.

My landlord, Thomas Cumino, added to the credibility of this idea¹⁷¹. Thomas was a fervent Christian, and he loved a joke. I knew how to take advantage of his character, and I would say, his simplicity, to play all sorts of tricks on him. One day, for his feast day he had very carefully prepared chicken and jelly as a treat for his lodgers. But when he carried the dish to the table and uncovered it, out popped a live cock, flapping about and cackling in a thousand ways. Another time he had a pot of macaroni cooked and ready to serve, but at the last moment he found the pot full of dry bran. Sometimes when he filled the bottle with wine, he would find as he poured it out that it had turned to water. When he wanted a drink of water, he would find his glass full of wine instead. Sweets changed into pieces of bread, coins in his purse into pieces of rusty tin. A hat became a nightcap; nuts changed into pebbles right in the sack. These were everyday occurrences.

¹⁷¹ Tommaso Cumino (1765-1840), tailor; Joseph Cafasso also was a student living with him (cf. S. CASELLE, *Giovanni Bosco a Chieri...*, p. 121). John Bosco lived with Cumino in 1834-1835.

Good Thomas was nonplussed. “These things are not human” he would mutter to himself. “God does not waste time with such frivolities. It must be the work of the devil.” He did not dare mention these matters at home, so he sought advice from a nearby priest, Fr Bertinetti¹⁷². Suspecting “white magic” as the explanation of these tricks, he decided to refer the matter to the school superintendent, who was at that time a respected cleric, Canon Burzio, archpriest and parish priest of the cathedral¹⁷³. The canon was a learned man, pious and prudent, and without speaking to others asked me *ad audiendum verbum*. When I arrived at his house, I found him saying his Office. Smiling at me, he made a sign, for me to wait. When he had finished, he asked me to follow him into his study. There he began to question me, very politely, but with a serious look: “My friend, so far I am quite pleased with your conduct and the progress you have made in your studies. Now, however, you are the subject of much talk. They tell me you are a mind reader, that you can guess how much money people have in their pockets, that you can make black seem white, that you can tell what is happening at a distance, and similar things. That makes people talk about you. In fact, some have gone farther and suspect you of being a sorcerer or even that the devil is at work here. Tell me now, who taught you this knowledge? Or where did you pick it up? Tell me everything in complete confidence. I assure you that I will not use it except for your own good.”

Keeping a straight face, I asked him for a few minutes to think over my reply. Then I asked him to tell me what time it was. He put his hand into his pocket, but his watch was not there. “If you haven’t got your watch,” I suggested “could you give me a five-soldi coin?” He checked all his pockets but could not find his purse. “You rascal,” he shouted angrily “either you are the devil’s servant, or he’s yours! You’ve already stolen my purse and my watch. I can’t keep quiet any longer; I must denounce you. Even now I don’t know what keeps me from giving you a good thrashing!” However, when he saw that I was smiling serenely, he got hold of himself and went on more calmly. “Now

¹⁷² Luigi Bertinetti (1794-1848), priest, brother of Carlo Bertinetti mentioned earlier.

¹⁷³ Massimo Giuseppe Burzio (1777-1847), canon and archpriest of the Chapter. He was the highest church authority in Chieri; he was also delegate for the Reform Board looking after the city schools.

let's take this quietly. Explain these mysteries to me. How was it possible for my watch and my purse to vanish from my pocket unknown to me. Where are they?"

"Well, Father," I began respectfully "I'll explain in a few words. It's all a matter of sleight of hand, information, and preparation."

"What information could you have about my watch and purse?"

"I'll explain it all quickly. Just after I came in, you gave some alms to a beggar. You left your purse on a *priedieu*. Then you went into another room, leaving your watch on that side table. I hid them both; you thought you had them on your person, while they were really under this lampshade." So saying, I lifted the lampshade and recovered both objects that the devil was supposed to have taken away.

The good canon had a hearty laugh. He asked me to give him a demonstration of sleight of hand, and how to make things appear and disappear. He enjoyed it all and gave me a little gift. Finally, he told me, "Go and tell your friends that *ignorantia est magistra admirationis*." ¹⁷⁴

12. A race – A jump – Magic wand – Treetop

Now that I had been cleared of white magic in my amusements, I began to collect my companions round me again and to entertain them as before. Just at that time, there was a certain acrobat whom some folks praised to the skies. He had put on a public show, racing from one end of Chieri to the other in two and a half minutes, almost as fast as a speeding train.

Paying little attention to the consequences, one day I said that I would like to take on this braggart. An imprudent companion told the acrobat, so I found myself with a challenge on my hands: *schoolboy challenges professional runner!* The course chosen was a stretch of road known as the Porta Torinese¹⁷⁵.

¹⁷⁴ Wonderment is the result of ignorance; taken broadly from the *Confessions* of St Augustine (lib. XIII, c. 21: "Ignorantia mater admirationis").

¹⁷⁵ Porta Torinese (or Vajro): ancient gate in the Chieri walls that opened towards Turin; it was knocked down in 1850 (cf. S. CASELLE, *Giovanni Bosco a Chieri...*, p. 101).

There was a side bet of 20 francs. I did not have that kind of money, so some of my friends in the Society for a Good Time had to come to the rescue. The event attracted a big crowd. When the race began, my opponent got a lead on me. I soon caught up with him, however, passed him, and before we had reached the halfway mark he was so far behind that he dropped out.

“Well,” he said to me “I challenge you to a long jump, but this time I want to raise the wager to 40 francs, and more if you wish.” I took him on. He picked the place where we were to jump. The landing area was close to the parapet of a little bridge. He had the first jump and he landed so close to the wall that you could not jump any further. It looked like there was no way I could win. But my skill came to the rescue. I landed in his tracks, and putting my hands on the bridge wall, I vaulted not only the parapet itself but a ditch beyond it. There was a great cheer.

“I want to challenge you, yet again,” he said “to any test of skill you want to name.” I accepted, choosing the game called the magic wand. The wager this time was 80 francs. Taking the rod, I hung a hat on one end of it while I placed the other in the palm of my hand. Then, without using the other hand, I made the rod hop from the tip of my little finger to ring finger, middle finger, index finger, and thumb; then to the knuckles, elbow, shoulder, chin, lips, nose, forehead; and then, by the same route, back to the palm of my hand.

“No problem,” my rival remarked “this is my favourite event.” He took the same rod and, with consummate skill, he made the rod travel up to his lips; unfortunately for him, his long nose got in the way and the rod lost its balance. He had to grab at it to save it from falling.

Seeing his money vanish again, the poor fellow blurted out in a rage, “No humiliation could be worse than being beaten by a schoolboy. I have one hundred francs left. That much I’ll bet you I’ll get my feet nearer the top of that tree than you will.” He pointed to an elm tree beside the road. We accepted again, though we were sorry for him and half wished him to win; we did not want to ruin him.

He climbed the elm first. He got his feet so high that had he gone any farther, [the tree] would have broken and thrown him to the ground. Everyone said it was impossible to climb any higher. Now it was my turn. I climbed as high as I could without bending the tree. Then I grasped the trunk firmly in both hands, raised my body, and swung my feet up till they were about three feet above the spot that my rival had reached.

Who could ever describe the applause of the crowd, the joy of my companions, the anger of the acrobat, and my own pride at having defeated not just some fellow student but this swaggering braggart? He was absolutely devastated; however, we tried to comfort him. Moved to pity by the poor man's sadness, we said we would return his money on one condition: that he treat us to a dinner at Muretto¹⁷⁶. He agreed gratefully. Twenty-two of us went, so many were my supporters. The meal cost 25 francs, so he got back 215 francs.

It had indeed been a Thursday of great joy. I was covered in glory for having beaten in skill a braggart. My companions were delighted too, for they could not have been better entertained than by a good laugh and a good dinner. The braggart himself was pleased because he had got back nearly all his money and enjoyed a good meal besides. As he took leave of us, he thanked us all, saying: "In handing back this money, you've saved me from ruin. You have my heartfelt gratitude. I'll always remember you gratefully, but I won't make any more bets with schoolboys."

13. *Classical studies*

You might be asking how I could afford to give so much time to these dissipations without neglecting my studies. I will not hide the fact that I could have studied harder. But remember that by paying attention at school I was able to learn as much as was necessary. In fact, in those days, I made no distinction between reading and studying, and I could easily recall material from books I had read or heard read. Moreover, my mother had trained me

¹⁷⁶ He should have said: Muletto. The inn was in Piazza d'Armi, today Piazza Cavour.

to get by on very little sleep, so I could read for two-thirds of the night at will, thus leaving the whole day free for activities of my own choice. I liked to devote some time to coaching and private lessons, and even though I often did this out of charity or friendship, others paid me.

At that time, there was in Chieri a Jewish bookseller called Elijah¹⁷⁷. I had come to an understanding with him because of my interest in the Italian classics. For a *soldo* per volume I could borrow books, returning them as soon as they were read¹⁷⁸. I read a volume a day from the Popular Library series¹⁷⁹. In my fourth year of *ginnasio*¹⁸⁰ I spent much time reading the Italian authors. During the rhetoric year, I turned to the study of the Latin classics. I began to read Cornelius Nepos, Cicero, Sallust, Quintus Curtius, Livy, Tacitus, Ovid, Vergil, and Horace amongst others. I read them for pleasure, and enjoyed them as if I had understood everything. Only much later did I realise that I had not. After my ordination when I took on teaching these masterpieces to others, I quickly found how much concentration and preparation were necessary to penetrate their true meaning and beauty. My studies, extensive reading, and coaching of students took most of the day and a good part of the night. Often when it was time to get up in the morning, I was still reading Livy, which I had taken up the previous evening. This practice so ruined my health that for some years I seemed to have one foot in the grave. Consequently, I always advise others to do what they can and no more. The night is made for rest! Except in cases of necessity, after supper no one should apply himself to scientific things. A robust person might take it for a while, but it will always prove detrimental to his health.

¹⁷⁷ Elijah Foa, businessman dealing in fabrics, in a joint business with his brother-in-law's bookshop, Tobias Iona (cf. S. CASELLE, *Giovanni Bosco a Chieri...*, p. 108).

¹⁷⁸ A *soldo* was worth 5 cents.

¹⁷⁹ *Biblioteca Popolare Morale e Religiosa* (Popular Library Series): collection of pocket books published weekly between 1828 and 1830 by Giuseppe Pomba (1795-1876), sold cheaply at 50 cents each.

¹⁸⁰ Fourth *ginnasio*: humanities class.

14. Preparation – Choosing a state in life

So the end of the rhetoric year¹⁸¹ approached, the time when students usually ponder their vocations. The dream I had had in Murialdo was deeply imprinted on my mind; in fact it had recurred several times more in ever clearer terms, so that if I wanted to put faith in it I would have to choose the priesthood towards which I actually felt inclined. But I did not want to believe dreams, and my own manner of life, certain habits of my heart, and the absolute lack of the virtues necessary to that state, filled me with doubts and made the decision very difficult.

Oh, if only I had had a guide to care for my vocation! What a great treasure he would have been for me; but I lacked that treasure. I had a good confessor who sought to make me a good Christian, but who never chose to get involved in the question of my vocation.

Thinking things over myself, after reading some books which dealt with the choice of a state in life, I decided to enter the Franciscan Order. If I become a secular priest, I told myself my vocation runs a great risk of shipwreck. I will embrace the priesthood, renounce the world, enter the cloister, and dedicate myself to study and meditation; thus in solitude I will be able to combat my passions, especially my pride, which had put down deep roots in my heart. So I applied to enter the Reformed Conventuals. I took the examination¹⁸² and was accepted. All was ready for my entry into Chieri's Monastery of Peace¹⁸³. A few days before I was due to enter, I had a very strange dream. I seemed to see a multitude of these friars, clad in threadbare habits, all dashing about helter-skelter. One of them came up to me and said: "You're looking for peace,

¹⁸¹ Rhetoric: the last class in *latinità superiore*. John Bosco did this in 1834-1835. The problem of choice of state of life had already appeared earlier: the question of being admitted to the Franciscans, which he speaks of later, came up in March 1834.

¹⁸² The exam was held on April 18, 1834 in the monastery of Our lady of the Angels in Turin; admissions were on the 28th of that month (cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica...*, I, p. 45n).

¹⁸³ It was the monastery of the Friars Minor (Observant) in Chieri, connected to the church of Our Lady of Peace.

but you won't find it here. See what goes on! God's preparing another place, another harvest for you."

I wanted to question this religious but a noise awakened me and I saw nothing more. I revealed everything to my confessor, but he did not want to hear of dreams or friars. "In this matter," he said "everyone must follow his own inclinations and not the advice of others."

Then something cropped up which made it impossible for me to carry out my intention. And since the obstacles were many and difficult, I decided to reveal it all to my friend Comollo. He advised me to make a novena. Meanwhile he would write to his uncle the provost. On the last day of my novena, I went to confession and communion with this incomparable friend. I attended one Mass and served another at the altar of Our Lady of Grace in the cathedral. Then we went home and found a letter from Fr Comollo which went something like this: "Having given careful consideration to what you wrote me, I advise your friend not to enter a monastery at this time. Let him don the clerical habit. As he goes on with his studies he will better understand what God wants him to do. He must not fear to lose his vocation because aloofness from the world and earnest piety will help him overcome every obstacle."

I followed this wise advice and applied myself seriously to those things which would help prepare me to take the clerical habit. I took the rhetoric examination and then I also took the entrance examination for the seminary in Chieri, in the very rooms of the house which Charles Bertinetti willed us at his death, in the rooms Canon Burzio rented. That year the exam was not held in Turin as was usual, because of the cholera which threatened our area¹⁸⁴.

I would like to note something about the college at Chieri that certainly exemplifies the spirit of piety that flourished there. During my four years

¹⁸⁴ The cholera spread through Piedmont between spring and autumn 1835. To avoid contagion the archbishops arranged that the exams for admission to clothing not be done in Turin but by the local Church authority (cf. *Circular* to parish priests on September 1, 1835, in the Archbishop's Archives, *Provvisioni semplici 1835*).

us a student in the college, I do not remember ever hearing any talk, not a single word that could be considered immoral or irreligious. At the end of rhetoric course, of the 25 students, 21 embraced the clerical state, three became doctors, and one became a merchant.

When I got home for the holidays I gave up acrobatics. I dedicated myself to reading good books which, I am ashamed to say, I had neglected up to then. I still kept up my interest in the youngsters, entertaining them with stories, pleasant recreation, sacred music; especially, finding that many of them, even the older ones, were almost ignorant of the truths of faith, I also undertook to teach them their daily prayers and other things more important at that age.

It was a kind of oratory, attended by about fifty children, who loved me and obeyed me as if I were their father.

Second decade 1835-1845

1. Clerical clothing – Rule of life

Having made up my mind to enter the seminary, I took the prescribed examination. I prepared carefully for that most important day because I was convinced that one's eternal salvation or eternal perdition ordinarily depends on the choice of a state in life. I asked my friends to pray for me. I made a novena, and on the feast of St Michael (October 1834)¹⁸⁵ I approached the holy sacraments. Before the solemn high Mass Doctor Cinzano, the provost and vicar forane of my region¹⁸⁶ blessed my cassock and tested me as a cleric. He instructed me to remove my lay clothing, praying: "*Exuat te Dominus veterem hominem suis.*"¹⁸⁷ As he did so, I thought, *Oh, how much old clothing there is to cast off. My God, destroy in me all my evil habits.* When he gave me the collar he said: "*Induat te Dominus novum hominem, qui secundum*

¹⁸⁵ He should have said: 1835; clothing took place on Sunday 25 October 1835. On the 24th the feast of St Raphael was celebrated (St Michael was on 29 September).

¹⁸⁶ Antonio Pietro Michele Cinzano (1804-1870), doctor of theology, parish priest of Castelnuovo from 1834.

¹⁸⁷ cf. Col 3:10.

Deum creatus est in iustitia et sanctitate veritatis!"¹⁸⁸. Deeply moved, I thought to myself, *Yes, O my God, make me henceforth to lead a new life in complete conformity with your holy will. May justice and holiness be the constant objects of my thoughts, words, and actions. Amen. O Mary, be my salvation.*

After the ceremonies in church, the provost wanted another, more worldly celebration. He brought me to the celebration of St Michael at Bardella (a district of Castelnuovo). He meant well, but I looked on it as a kindness misplaced. I felt like a newly dressed puppet on public display. After my weeks of preparation for that long-awaited day, I now found myself sitting down to dinner amongst people of every sort, men and women, who were there to amuse themselves, to laugh and chatter, to eat and drink. These people, for the most part, spent their time in pleasure-seeking, sport, dancing, and amusements of every kind; what association could such people have with one who that very morning had put on the robe of holiness to give himself entirely to the Lord?

The parish priest saw that I was ill at ease. When we got home he asked me why I was so thoughtful and reserved on a day of such public rejoicing. I replied quite frankly that the morning's ceremony at church contrasted in gender, number, and case with the evening ceremony. "Moreover," I added "seeing priests the worse for drinking and indulging in buffoonery with the guests, aroused in me almost a revulsion for my vocation. Should I ever turn out to be a priest like them, I would prefer to put this habit aside and live poorly as a layman but a good Christian."

"That's the world as it is," answered the provost "and you must take it as you find it. You must see evil if you are to recognise it and avoid it. No one becomes a battle-tried warrior without learning how to handle arms. So we, too must do who are engaged in continual war against the enemy of souls."

I kept quiet then but in my heart I said, "I will never again attend public festivals, unless obliged because of religious ceremonies."

¹⁸⁸ cf. Eph 4:22-24.

After that day I had to pay attention to myself. The style of life I had lived up to then had to be radically reformed. My life in the past had not been wicked, but I had been proud and dissipated, given over to amusements, games, acrobatics, and other such things. These pursuits gave passing joy, but did not satisfy the heart.

I drew up a fixed rule of life. To impress it more vividly on my memory, I wrote up the following resolutions:

1. For the future I will never take part in public shows during fairs or at markets. Nor will I attend dances or the theatre, and as far as possible I will not partake of the dinners usual on such occasions.

2. I will no longer play games of dice or do conjuring tricks, acrobatics, sleight of hand, tightrope walking. I will give up my violin-playing and hunting. These things I hold totally contrary to ecclesiastical dignity and spirit.

3. I will love and practise a retiring life, temperance in eating and drinking. I will allow myself only those hours of rest strictly necessary for health.

4. In the past I have served the world by reading secular literature. Henceforth I will try to serve God by devoting myself to religious reading.

5. I will combat with all my strength everything, all reading, thoughts, conversations, words, and deeds contrary to the virtue of chastity. On the contrary, I will practise all those things, even the smallest, which contribute to preserving this virtue.

6. Besides the ordinary practices of piety, I will never neglect to make a little meditation daily and a little spiritual reading.

7. Every day I will relate some story or some maxim advantageous to the souls of others. I will do this with my companions, friends, relatives, and when I cannot do it with others, I will speak with my mother.

These are the resolutions which I drew up when I took the clerical habit. To fix them firmly on my mind, I went before an image of the Blessed Virgin and, having read them to her, I prayed and made a formal promise to my heavenly benefactress to observe them no matter what sacrifice it cost.

2. *Departure for the seminary*

I had to be in the seminary on October 30 of that year, 1835. My little wardrobe was ready. My relatives were all pleased and I even more than they. It was only my mother who was pensive. Her eyes followed me round as if she wanted to say something to me. On the evening before my departure she called me to her and spoke to me these unforgettable words: “My dear John, you have put on the priestly habit. I feel all the happiness that any mother could feel in her son’s good fortune. Do remember this, however: it’s not the habit that honours your state, but the practice of virtue. If you should ever begin to doubt your vocation, then—for heaven’s sake!—do not dishonour this habit. Put it aside immediately. I would much rather have a poor farmer for a son, than a priest who neglects his duties. When you came into the world, I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin. When you began your studies, I recommended to you devotion to this Mother of ours. Now I say to you, be completely hers; love those of your companions who have devotion to Mary; and if you become a priest, always preach and promote devotion to Mary.”

My mother was deeply moved as she finished these words, and I cried. “Mother,” I replied “thank you for all you have said and done for me. These words of yours will not prove vain; I will treasure them all my life.”

The following morning I went off to Chieri, and on the evening of that same day I entered the seminary. After greeting my superiors, I made my bed, and then, with my friend Garigliano, strolled through the dormitories, the corridors, and finally into the courtyard. Glancing up at a sundial, I saw written: *Afflictis lentae, celeres gaudentibus horae*¹⁸⁹. “That’s it,” I said to my friend “that’s our programme. Let’s always be cheerful, and the time will pass quickly.”

The following day I began a three-day retreat, and I went out of my way to make it as well as I could. At the end of the retreat I approached Dr Ternavasio of Bra¹⁹⁰ the lecturer in philosophy. I asked him for some rule of life by which I

¹⁸⁹ The hours drag for the sad, fly for the happy.

¹⁹⁰ Francesco Ternavasio (1806-1886).

might fulfil my duties and win the goodwill of my superiors. "Just one thing," replied the good priest "the exact fulfilment of your duties."

I made this advice my norm and applied myself with all my soul to the observance of the rules of the seminary¹⁹¹. I made no distinction between the bells that called me to study, to church, to the refectory, to recreation, or to bed. This diligent observance won me the affection of my companions and the esteem of superiors. Consequently, my six years at the seminary were a very happy period.

3. *Seminary life*

As there is little variety in the daily round of seminary life, I shall give a brief sketch of the general background and then an account of some events in particular. I will begin with a word about the superiors¹⁹².

I was greatly attached to them, and they always treated me with the greatest kindness; but my heart was not satisfied. The rector and the other superiors usually saw us only when we returned after the holidays and when we were leaving for them. The students never went to talk to them, except to receive corrections. The staff members took weekly turns to assist in the refectory and to take us on walks. That was all. How often I would have liked to talk to them, ask their advice, or resolve a doubt, and could not. In fact if a superior came on the scene, the seminarians, with no particular reason, would flee left and right as if he were a monster. This only served to inflame my heart to become a priest as quickly as I could so that I could associate with young people, help them, and meet their every need.

And as for my companions, I stuck to my beloved mother's advice. That is, I fraternised only with companions who had a devotion to Mary and who loved study and piety. Here I must give a word of warning to seminarians. In

¹⁹¹ The *Regolamento* of the seminary in Chieri had been approved by Archbishop Luigi Fransoni nel 1832.

¹⁹² There were six superiors: The Rector, Sebastiano Mottura (1795-1876), the Spiritual Director, Giuseppe Mottura (1798-1876), the theology professor, Lorenzo Prialis (1803-1868), his assistant (tutor) Innocenzo Arduino (1806-1880), the philosophy professor, Francesco Ternavasio, Fr Matteo Testa (1782-1854) confessor and Rector of the church of St Philip connected with the seminary.

the seminary there are many clerics of outstanding virtue, but there are others who are dangerous. Not a few young men, careless of their vocation, go to the seminary lacking either the spirit or the goodwill of a good seminarian. Indeed, I remember hearing some companions indulging in very bad language. Once a search amongst some students' personal belongings unearthed impious and obscene books of every kind. It is true that these later left the seminary, either of their own accord or because they were expelled when their true character came to light. But as long as they stayed, they were a plague to good and bad alike.

To avoid such dangerous associates I chose some who were well known as models of virtue. These were William Garigliano, John Giacomelli of Avigliana¹⁹³ and, later, Louis Comollo. For me, these three friends were a treasure.

The practices of piety were well conducted. Each morning we had Mass, meditation, and rosary; edifying books were read during meals. In those days Bercastel's *History of the Church* was read¹⁹⁴. We were expected to go to confession once a fortnight, but those who wished could go every Saturday. We could only receive holy communion, however, on Sundays and on special feasts. We did receive communion sometimes on weekdays, but doing so meant that we had to act contrary to obedience. It was necessary to slip out, usually at breakfast time, to St Philip's Church next door, receive holy communion, and then join our companions as they were going into the study hall or to class. This infraction of the timetable was prohibited. But the superiors gave tacit consent to it since they knew it was going on and sometimes observed it without saying anything to the contrary. In this way, I was able to receive holy communion much more frequently, and I can rightly say it was the most efficacious support of my vocation. This defect of piety was corrected when, through an order of Archbishop Gastaldi, things were arranged so as to permit daily communion, provided one is prepared.

¹⁹³ Giovanni Francesco Giacomelli (1820-1901), would succeed Don Bosco as chaplain at St Philomena's little hospital and would be his confessor from 1873 onwards.

¹⁹⁴ Antoine Henri BÉRAULT-BERCASTEL, *Storia del cristianesimo*. Venezia, F. Stella 1793-1809, 36 vols.

[3A.] Amusements and recreation

The game known as *Bara rotta* was the most popular game we played. I used to play it in the beginning, but since this game was very similar to those acrobatics which I had absolutely renounced, I wanted to give this up too. There was another game called tarots which was permitted on certain days, and for a while I also played this game. Even here sweetness and bitterness intermingled. I was not a great player, but I was rather lucky and nearly always won. At the end of a game my hands would be full of money, but seeing how distressed my companions were at losing it made me more miserable than they. I should add that my mind would become so fixed during a game that afterwards I could neither pray nor study; the troubling pictures of the King of Cups and the Jack of Spades, of the 13 and the fifteen of tarots filled my imagination. So I resolved to give up this game as I had given up the others. This was in 1836, mid-way through my second year of philosophy.

In the longer recreation periods, the seminarians went for walks to the many delightful places round Chieri. These walks were useful for learning too. We tried to improve our academic knowledge by quizzing one another as we walked. If there was no organised walk, students could spend the recreation time walking about the seminary with friends, discussing topics of common interest, or edifying and intellectual matters.

During the long recreations, we often gathered in the refectory for what we called the "study circle."¹⁹⁵ At this session, one could ask questions about things he did not know or had not grasped in our lectures or textbooks. I liked this exercise and found it very helpful for study, piety, and health. Comollo, who was a year behind me, made a name for himself with his questions. A certain Dominic Peretti¹⁹⁶, now parish priest of Buttigliera, always had plenty to say and was always ready to venture an answer.

¹⁹⁵ Study Circle: teaching activity aimed at going over the treatises and arguing about them. It took place for half an hour in the afternoon, under the tutor's guidance. He would ask one student to defend a thesis and another to refute it.

¹⁹⁶ Domenico Peretti (1816-1893), would become parish priest of Buttigliera Alta, a town 26 km from Turin, near Avigliana (not to be confused with Buttigliera d'Asti).

Garigliano was a good listener and limited himself to an occasional interjection. I was president and judge of last appeal. Sometimes it happened in our friendly discussions that certain questions were asked or problems of knowledge raised that nobody was able to answer adequately. In these cases we divided up the problems; each one was responsible for looking up the parts assigned to him before the next meeting.

Comollo often interrupted my recreation time, leading me by the sleeve of my cassock and telling me to come along with him to the chapel; there we would make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament for the dying, saying the rosary or the Little Office of Our Lady for the souls in purgatory.

This marvellous companion was my fortune. He could, as the occasion demanded, advise me, correct me, or cheer me up, but all with such charm and charity that I even welcomed his admonitions and looked for them. I dealt familiarly with him, and I was naturally led to follow his example. Although I was a thousand miles behind him in virtue, if I was not ruined by dissipation but grew in my vocation, truly I remain in his debt above all. In one thing alone I did not even try to emulate him, and that was in mortification. He was a young man of nineteen, yet he fasted rigorously for the whole of Lent and at other times laid down by the Church. In honour of the B.V., he fasted every Saturday. Often he went without breakfast, and sometimes his dinner consisted of bread and water. He put up with insults and affronts without the least sign of annoyance. When I saw how faithful he was in even the slightest demands of study and piety, I was filled with admiration. I regarded my companion as an ideal friend, a model of virtue for any seminarian.

4. Holidays

Holidays were dangerous times for clerical students. In those days our summer break ran to four and a half months¹⁹⁷. I spent my time reading and writing; but not having as yet learnt how to use my days profitably, I wasted many of them in fruitless activity. I tried to kill time by sheer manual labour. On the lathe I turned spindles, pegs, spinning tops, and wooden balls. I made

¹⁹⁷ Holidays began June 24 and finished October 30.

clothes and shoes and I worked wood and iron. To this very day there are in my house at Murialdo a writing desk, a dinner table, and some chairs, masterpieces to remind me of my summer holiday activities. I worked in the fields, too, harvesting hay and wheat. I trimmed the vines, harvested the grapes, and made the wine, and so on.

I also found time for my youngsters, as I used to, but this was possible only on feast days. It was a great consolation for me to catechise many of my companions who were sixteen or seventeen years old but were deprived of the truths of the faith. I also taught some of them quite successfully to read and write. They were so anxious to learn that many youngsters of a variety of ages surrounded me. I charged no tuition, but I insisted on *diligence*, *concentration*, and *monthly confession*. At first some were not inclined to accept these conditions. They went their own way, but their departure served to inspire and spur on those who stayed.

I also began to preach and to lecture with the permission of my parish priest, and with his help. In Alfiano¹⁹⁸, I preached on the Holy Rosary in the holidays after my year of physics¹⁹⁹; In Castelnuovo d'Asti, at the end of my first year of theology, I spoke on St Bartholomew the Apostle. In Capriglio I preached about the nativity of Mary. But I do not know how much fruit this bore. Everywhere I got high praise. In fact vainglory somewhat carried me away, till I was brought down to earth as follows. One day, after my sermon on the birth of Mary, I asked someone who seemed to be one of the more intelligent what he thought of it. He was full of praise for it but spoiled it by saying, "Your sermon was on the souls in purgatory." And I had preached the glories of Mary! The parish priest of Alfiano, Joseph Peleto²⁰⁰, was a learned and holy man. I also asked for his opinion of my sermon there.

"Your sermon," he said "was very good. It was well put together, well delivered, and embellished with scriptural quotations. Go on like that and you will be a success as a preacher."

¹⁹⁸ Alfiano Natta: town some 27 km from Castelnuovo.

¹⁹⁹ Physics: second year of philosophy (summer 1837); the first year of philosophy was called "logic".

²⁰⁰ Giuseppe Pellato (1797-1864).

“Did the people understand it?” I asked him.

“Hardly,” he replied. “Only my brother priest and I, and perhaps a few others, knew what it was about.”

“How is it,” I wanted to know “that such simple concepts were not understood?”

“To you they are simple,” he explained “but to ordinary people they appear difficult. Allusions to the Bible, philosophising on one or another aspect of church history, are things the people do not understand.”

“What do you suggest I do?”

“Give up your high-sounding language and stick to dialect where possible, and when you use Italian, speak the language of the people, the people, the people. Instead of speculations, use examples, analogies, and simple, practical illustrations. Bear in mind always that the common people understand hardly anything you have to say because the truths of the faith are never sufficiently explained to them.”

This fatherly advice has served as a guiding principle for the rest of my life. I still have copies of those early sermons in which, to my shame, I can now see nothing but affectation and vanity. But God, in his goodness, saw to it that I should have that kind of correction. It was a lesson for me which henceforth bore fruit in my sermons, catechism classes, instructions, and in the writing in which I began to engage.

5. Feast day in the country – Playing the violin – Hunting

When I said that holidays in the country were a time of danger, I was speaking for myself. A poor cleric will often find himself in grave danger without realising it. I learned this through experience. One year I was invited to celebrate a feast day at the home of some relatives of mine. I did not want to go, but discovering that there was no cleric to serve in church, I yielded to the insistent invitations of one of my uncles and went. When the sacred ceremonies, at which I served and sang, were over, we went to dinner. All went well till the wine began to go to the heads of some of the party.

When they began to use language which should not be tolerated by a cleric. I tried to protest but my voice was drowned out. Not knowing what to do, I decided to leave. I got up from the table, got my hat, and was ready to go; my uncle stopped me. At that moment, there was an outburst of even more objectionable language as someone began to insult all the others at table. In a flash, all was pandemonium. There were angry shouts and threats, backed up by horrible racket of glasses, bottles, plates, spoons, forks, and then knives. In this extremity, I beat a hasty retreat. When I got home, from the bottom of my heart I renewed the resolution so often made before to remain withdrawn if I wanted to avoid falling into sin.

A different kind of experience, none the less unpleasant, befell me at Crovaglia, a district of Buttigliera²⁰¹. It was the feast of St Bartholomew. I was invited by another uncle to assist at the church services, to sing, and even to play the violin, which I had given up, though it was my favourite instrument. The church services went very well. My uncle was in charge of the celebrations, and the dinner was at his house. So far, so good. Dinner over, the guests asked me to play something of a light nature for them. I refused. "At least play along with me," one of the musicians said. "I'll take the lead, and you play the accompaniment."

The wretch that I was! I did not have it in me to say no. Taking up the violin, I played for a while. Then I heard the murmur of voices and the sound of a lot of dancing feet. I went to the window, and out in the courtyard was a crowd dancing happily to the sound of my violin. Words could not describe the anger that welled up in me at that moment. Turning on the dinner guests, I addressed them vehemently: "How is it, after I have so often spoken against public shows, that I should have become their promoter? It will never happen again." I smashed the violin into a thousand pieces. I never wanted to use it again, though opportunities for doing so were not lacking at sacred ceremonies.

²⁰¹ He should have said: *Crivelle*, a hamlet of Buttigliera d'Asti, 6.5 km from Castelnuovo. Croveglia is a hamlet belonging to the district of Villanova d'Asti.

Another incident happened to me while I was hunting. During the summer, I used to go bird-nesting; in the autumn, I'd catch the birds with birdlime, use traps, or even shoot them. One morning, I found myself running after a hare. From field to field, from vineyard to vineyard, up hill and down dale, I chased my quarry for several hours. Eventually I got near enough to take a shot at him. The poor animal, its ribs broken by the shot, rolled over, leaving me deeply upset at the sight of the poor creature in its death throes. The gunshot brought some of my companions on the scene. While they were delighted at the kill, I took a long look at myself. There I was in my shirt-sleeves, my cassock discarded, wearing an old straw hat that made me look like a smuggler. I realised I was more than two miles from home.

I was quite mortified. I apologised to my companions for the bad example I had given them by throwing off my cassock. I went straight home, once more making a resolution to be done with every kind of hunting. This time, with the Lord's help I was able to live up to my word. May God forgive me for that scandal.

These three incidents taught me a terrible lesson. Henceforward I resolved to be more reserved. I was convinced that he who would give himself entirely to the Lord's service must cut himself off from worldly amusements. It is true that often they are not sinful; but it is certain that on account of conversation, of the manner of dressing, of speaking, and of acting, there is always some risk to virtue, especially to the most delicate virtue of chastity.

[5A.] Louis Comollo's friendship

As long as God preserved the life of this incomparable companion, we were always very close to each other. During the holidays, we often corresponded and visited back and forth. In him I saw a holy youth, and I loved him for his rare virtue. He loved me for the help I gave him with his studies. When I was with him, I modelled myself on his conduct.

Once during the holidays, he came to spend a day with me. Just then, my relatives were in the fields for harvest. He asked me to check over a sermon he was to preach on the feast of the Assumption. Afterwards, he practised his

delivery, accompanied by gestures. We talked with delight for hours. Suddenly we realised it was nearly dinner time. There was nobody in the house but us. What were we to do? "Just a minute," said Comollo "I'll light the fire. You get a pot ready and we'll cook something."

"Right you are," I replied "but first let's catch a chicken in the yard. It'll provide us with soup and dinner. That's what mother would like us to do."

In no time we had our chicken. But which of us felt up to killing it? Neither of us. So as to come to the conclusion that we wanted, we decided that Comollo was to hold the bird down on a block, and I was to cut off its head with a sickle. The blow was struck, and the head dropped from the body. The two of us got squeamish and took off screaming.

"We're just childish" Comollo said after a while. "The Lord gave us the beasts of the earth for our use. Why should we be so squeamish?" Without further difficulty we picked up the chicken, plucked it, cooked it, and had our dinner.

I would have gone to Cinzano to hear Comollo's Assumption sermon, but I myself had to preach on the same theme at another venue. When I went the next day, I heard praise of his sermon from all sides. That day (August 16) was the feast of St Roch. It was popularly known as "the Feast of the Kitchen" because relatives and friends took occasion to invite their loved ones to enjoy some public entertainment. Here something happened which showed the extent of my audacity.

They waited for the preacher for that solemn occasion right up till the moment when he was to go to the pulpit, and he had not turned up. In an effort to help the provost of Cinzano out of his embarrassment, I did the rounds of the many priests present, begging and insisting that someone say a few words to the numerous people assembled in the church. There were no takers. Some even got annoyed by my repeated pleading and turned harshly on me: "You're a fool²⁰² you know! It's no joke to preach off the cuff on St

²⁰² The word is *Minchione*, from Piedmontese *mincion*, fool (cf. Michele PONZA, *Vocabolario piemontese-italiano*. Vol. II. Torino, Stamperia Reale 1832, p. 227).

Roch. Instead of pestering others, why don't you do it yourself?" Those words brought applause from everyone. I was humiliated, my pride wounded. "I certainly wasn't looking for this," I said "but as everyone else has refused, I accept." The people in church sang a hymn to give me time to collect my thoughts. I had read the life of the saint. I recalled his story as I mounted the pulpit. I have always been told that the sermon I preached that day was the best I have ever given.

It was on this vacation and on this same occasion (1838) that my friend and I went walking together²⁰³ to the top of a hill, where we had a wonderful view of the meadows, fields, and vineyards below.

"Look, Louis," I began to say to him "what a lean harvest there will be this year! The poor farmers! So much work for such poor returns."

"The hand of the Lord weighs heavily upon us," he replied. "Believe me, our sins have brought this on us."

"I hope the Lord will give us better crops next year."

"So do I. I hope there will be good times for those who are here to enjoy them."

"Come on, away with such gloomy thoughts. Let's be patient for this year. Next year we'll have a bumper grape harvest and we'll make better wine."

"You'll drink it."

"Perhaps you mean to keep drinking water as usual?"

"I'm looking forward to a much better wine."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Never mind, never mind. The Lord knows what he's doing."

"That's not what I asked. I want to know what you mean by I'm looking forward to better wine. Do you mean you'll be in paradise?"

²⁰³ From here until the end of the chapter he includes part of the life of Louis Comollo (cf. no. 305, pp. 1142-1143).

"Though I have no guarantee of going to heaven when I die, yet I have a well-grounded hope of it. For some time I've had such a burning desire to taste the happiness of the blessed that it seems impossible for my life to last much longer."

As Comollo spoke these words, his face glowed with cheer. He was bubbling with good health and looking forward to returning to the seminary.

6. *Comollo's death*

The memorable events surrounding the edifying death of this dear friend have already been described in another place. Whoever wishes can read them at his pleasure. But here I would like to mention something that caused a lot of talk, something hardly touched upon in the memoirs already published. Given our friendship and the unlimited trust between Comollo and me, we often spoke about the separation that death could possibly bring upon us at any time. One day, after we had read a long passage from the lives of the saints, we talked, half in jest and half in earnest, of what a consolation it would be if the one of us who died first were to return with news about his condition. We talked of this so often that we drew up this contract: "Whichever of us is the first to die will, if God permits it, bring back word of his salvation to his surviving companion." I did not realise the gravity of such an undertaking and frankly, I treated it lightly enough. I would never advise others to do the like. We did it, however, and ratified it repeatedly, especially during Comollo's last illness. In fact, his last words and his last look at me sealed his promise. Many of our companions knew what had been arranged between us.

Comollo died on April 2, 1839. Next evening he was solemnly buried in Saint Philip's Church. Those who knew about our bargain waited anxiously to see what would happen. I was even more anxious because I hoped for a great comfort to lighten my desolation. That night, after I went to bed in the big dormitory which I shared with some twenty other seminarians, I was restless. I was convinced that this was to be the night when our promise would be fulfilled. About 11:30 a deep rumble was heard in the corridor. It sounded as if a heavy wagon drawn by many horses were coming up to the dormitory

door. It got louder and louder, like thunder, and the whole dormitory shook. The clerics tumbled out of bed in terror and huddled together for comfort. Then, above the violent and thundering noise, the voice of Comollo was heard clearly. Three times he repeated very distinctly: “Bosco, I am saved.” All heard the noise; some recognised the voice without understanding the meaning; others understood it as well as I did, as is proved by the length of time the event was talked about in the seminary. It was the first time in my life I remember being afraid. The fear and terror were so bad that I fell ill and was at death’s door. I would never recommend anyone to enter into such a contract. God is omnipotent; God is merciful. As a rule he does not take heed of such pacts. Sometimes, however, in his infinite mercy he does allow things to come to fulfilment as he did in the case I have just described.

7. Prize – Sacristy – Dr John Borel

In the seminary I was quite fortunate in that I always enjoyed the affection of my companions and of all my superiors. At the mid-year examinations it was customary to give a 60 franc prize, for each of the different years, to the person who obtained top marks for study and conduct. God truly blessed me; for the six years I spent at the seminary, I won this prize. In the second year of theology I was made sacristan. It was not a post that carried much weight, but it showed one was appreciated by the superiors and it did carry with it another sixty francs. All this meant that I could provide for half my fees, while good Fr Cafasso provided the rest. The sacristan has the job of seeing to the cleanliness of the church, the sacristy, and the altar; he also has to look after the lamps, candles, and all the other objects needed for divine services.

This was the year in which I had the good fortune of making the acquaintance of a man who was really zealous in the sacred ministry. He had come to preach our seminary retreat. He appeared in the sacristy with a smiling face and a joking manner of speaking, but always seasoned with moral thoughts. When I saw the way he celebrated Mass, his bearing, his preparation, and his thanksgiving, I realised at once that here was a worthy priest. He turned out to be Dr John Borel of Turin. When he began to preach,

I noted the simplicity, liveness, clarity, and fire of charity that filled all his words; we were unanimous in rating him a man of real holiness.

In fact we all raced to go to confession to him in order to speak of our vocations and receive some advice. I too wanted to discuss the affairs of my soul with him. When, at the end, I asked him for some advice on how best to preserve the spirit of my vocation during the year and particularly during the holidays, he left these memorable words with me: "A vocation is perfected and preserved, and a real priestly spirit is formed, by a climate of recollection and by frequent communion."

The retreat preached by Dr Borel was a landmark in the life of the seminary. Even after many years had passed, the holy points he had made in his preaching, or given in personal advice, were remembered and repeated to others.

8. Study

I had some mistaken notions about my studies that could have had sad consequences had I not been saved by a truly providential event. Accustomed to reading the classics all during my school days, I had grown so familiar with the outstanding characters of mythology and pagan fables that I found little satisfaction in anything ascetic. I had reached the point where I could convince myself that fine language and eloquence could not be reconciled with religion. The very works of the holy Fathers appeared to me as the products of limited intellects, excepting always the principles of religion which they expounded with force and clarity.

At the beginning of my second year of philosophy, I paid a visit to the Blessed Sacrament one day. I had no prayer book with me, so I began to read *The Imitation of Christ*. I went through some chapters dealing with the Blessed Sacrament. I was so struck by the profound thoughts expressed, and the clear and orderly way these great truths were clothed in fine language that I began to say to myself: "*The author of this book was a learned man.*" Again and again, I went back to that golden little work. It was gradually borne in on me that even one verse from it contained so much doctrine and morality as I had found

in whole volumes of the ancient classics. To this book I owe my decision to lay aside profane literature. Subsequently, I went on to read Calmet's *History of the Old and New Testaments*²⁰⁴; Next I tackled the *Jewish Antiquities* and *The Jewish War* of Flavius Josephus; Bishop Marchetti's *Discussions on Religions*²⁰⁵ followed; then Frayssinous, Balmes, Zucconi²⁰⁶ and many other religious writers. I even enjoyed Fleury's *Church History*²⁰⁷, unaware that it was a book to avoid. With yet more profit I read the works of Cavalca, Passavanti, Segneri²⁰⁸ and all of Henrion's *History of the Church*²⁰⁹.

Perhaps you will say that with so much time given to extraneous reading I must not have been studying the treatises. This was not the case. My memory continued to be a blessing to me. Paying attention at lectures and just reading the treatises were sufficient for me to perform my duties. Thus I was able to spend the hours of study reading different books. The superiors knew all about this and left me free to do it.

²⁰⁴ Augustin CALMET, *Storia dell'Antico e del Nuovo Testamento e degli Ebrei*. Torino, G. Pomba 1829-1832, 18 vols.

²⁰⁵ Giovanni MARCHETTI, *Trattenimenti di famiglia su la storia della religione*. Torino, Bianco 1823, 2 vols.

²⁰⁶ Denis de Frayssinous (1765-1841), vicar general, Paris; His conferences were published in 4 volumes: *Défense du Christianisme ou Conférences sur la religion* (1825). Jaime Luciano Balmes (1810-1848), philosopher and Spanish publisher; the work that made him famous throughout Europe – *El Protestantismo comparado con el Catolicismo en sus relaciones con la civilización Europea* (1842-1844) – was translated into various languages (certainly Don Bosco did not read it at the seminary but later). Ferdinando Zucconi (1647-1732), Jesuit, author of *Lezioni sacre sopra la divina Scrittura* (5 vols.), of which there were many editions.

²⁰⁷ Claude Fleury (1640-1723), French academic and confessor of King Louis XV. His *Histoire ecclésiastique*, in 20 volumes, is considered to be the first systematic history of the Church.

²⁰⁸ Domenico Cavalca (m. 1342) and Iacopo Passavanti (1297-1357), Dominic Friars and authors of much loved ascetic works in the 19th century for their pure literary style. Paolo Segneri (1624-1694), Jesuit, author of collections of sermons considered master-pieces of sacred eloquence.

²⁰⁹ Mathieu Richard Auguste Henrion (1805-1862), lawyer, author of historical and apologetic works amongst which *Histoire générale de l'Eglise pendant les XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles* (1836) and his monumental *Histoire generale de l'Eglise depuis la predication des apotres jusqu'au pontificat de Gregoire XVI* in 12 volumes (1834-36).

One subject close to my heart was Greek. In my secondary classical studies I had already mastered its basic elements. With the help of a dictionary, I had worked my way through the first translations after I had studied the grammar. A good opportunity soon arose for me to deepen my knowledge of it. When cholera threatened Turin in 1836, the Jesuits had to send the boarders from Our Lady of Mount Carmel College away to Montaldo²¹⁰. This move meant that they had to double their teaching staff because they had to cover the classes for the day students who continued to come to school. Fr Cafasso, who was consulted, proposed me for a Greek class. This spurred me to get down to the serious study of the language to make myself capable of teaching it. Besides that, I was lucky enough to meet a priest of the Society, named Bini, who had a profound knowledge of Greek. I learned a lot from him. In only four months he pushed me to translate almost the whole New Testament, the first two books of Homer, and a selection of the odes of Pindar and Anacreon. That worthy priest, admiring my goodwill, continued to help me. For four years, each week he corrected a Greek composition or translation which I sent him, and he returned it promptly with suitable comments. By this means I managed to be able to translate Greek almost as well as I could Latin.

At this time, too, I studied French and the principles of Hebrew. These three languages, Hebrew, Greek, and French, always remained my favourites after Latin and Italian.

9. Ordinations – Priesthood

The year Comollo died (1839) I received the tonsure and the four minor orders, the third year of theology²¹¹. When the school year ended, I got the idea of attempting something for which one was rarely given permission in those days—to cover the course of a year's theology during my holidays. With this in mind and without telling anyone, I presented myself to Archbishop

²¹⁰ Our Lady of Carmel College: institute of higher education for the ruling class only. Montaldo Torinese is a town about 8 km from Chieri.

²¹¹ He should have said: fourth year. John Bosco received the tonsure and 4 minor orders on March 29, 1840.

Fransoni to ask permission to study the fourth-year texts during the holidays. In the following school year (1840-1) I would complete the quinquennium. I quoted my advanced age—I was 24—as the reason for my request.

That holy bishop made me very welcome and, after verifying the results of the exams I had taken till then in the seminary, granted the favour I was asking on condition that I take all the treatises in the course I wanted to take. My vicar forane, Dr Cinzano, was charged with carrying out the wishes of our superior. After two months of study, I finished the prescribed treatises, and for the autumn ordinations I was admitted to the subdiaconate²¹². When I think now of the virtues required for that most important step, I am convinced that I was not sufficiently prepared for it. But since I had no one to care directly for my vocation, I turned to Fr Cafasso. He advised me to go forward and trust in his advice. I made a ten-day retreat at the House of the Mission in Turin.²¹³ During it I made a general confession so that my confessor would have a clear picture of my conscience and would be able to give me suitable advice. Though I wanted to complete my studies, I quaked at the thought of binding myself for life. Before I took the final step I wanted to receive the full approbation of my confessor.

Henceforward I took the greatest care to practice Doctor Borel's advice: a vocation is preserved and perfected by recollection and frequent communion. On my return to the seminary I was put into the fifth year and made a prefect. This is the highest responsibility open to a seminarian.

Sitientes day of 1841 saw my ordination as deacon²¹⁴, on the Ember Days of summer I would be ordained a priest. I found the day I had to leave the seminary for the last time very difficult. My superiors loved me and showed continual marks of benevolence. My companions were very affectionate towards me. You could say that I lived for them and they lived for me. If

²¹² It was September 19, 1840.

²¹³ Province centre for the Vincentians in Turin. The Turin Diocese had entrusted them with preaching the retreats to ordinands.

²¹⁴ *Sitientes*, Saturday before Passion Sunday; it was March 27, 1841.

anyone wanted a shave or his tonsure renewed, he ran to Bosco; if he wanted someone to make a biretta for him, to sew or patch his clothes, Bosco was the man he turned to. So you can imagine how sad was the parting from that place where I had lived for six years, where I received education, knowledge, an ecclesiastical spirit, and all the tokens of kindness and affection one could desire.

My ordination day was the vigil of the feast of the Blessed Trinity²¹⁵, I said my first Mass in the church of St Francis of Assisi, where Fr Cafasso was dean of the conferences. Though a priest had not said his first Mass in my home place for many a day, and my neighbours were anxiously waiting for me to say mine there, I preferred to say it without fuss in Turin. That day was the most wonderful day of my life. At the *Memento* in that unforgettable Mass I remembered devoutly all my teachers, my benefactors spiritual and temporal, and especially the ever-lamented Fr Calosso, whom I have always remembered as my greatest benefactor. On Monday I said Mass in the Church of Our Lady of Consolation to thank the great Virgin Mary for the innumerable graces she had obtained for me from her divine Son Jesus.

On Tuesday I went to say Mass in St Dominic's Church in Chieri, where my old professor Fr Giusiana was still living. With fatherly affection he was waiting for me. He was so moved that he cried all through the Mass. I spent the whole day with him, one I can call a day in paradise.

Thursday was the solemnity of *Corpus Christi*. I went home and sang Mass in the local church and there I officiated at the procession of the Blessed Sacrament²¹⁶. The parish priest invited to dinner my relatives, the clergy, and the the leading citizens of the town. They were all happy to be a part of it because everyone was happy for anything that would turn out to my advantage. I went home that evening to be with my family. As I drew near the house and saw the place of the dream I had when I was about nine, I

²¹⁵ Saturday June 5, 1841. John Bosco was ordained priest in the church attached to the archbishop's palace, dedicated to the Immaculate.

²¹⁶ June 10, 1841.

could not hold back the tears. I said: “How wonderful are the ways of Divine Providence! God has truly raised a poor child from the earth to place him amongst the princes of his people.”

10. Priestly work begins – Sermon at Lavriano and John Brina

In that year (1841) my parish priest was looking for a curate. I helped him out for five months. I found the work a great pleasure. I preached every Sunday. I visited the sick and administered the holy sacraments to them, except penance since I had not yet taken the exam. I buried the dead, kept the parish records, wrote out certificates of poverty, and so on. My delight was to make contact with the children and teach them catechism. They used to come from Murialdo to see me, and on my visits home they crowded round me. I was also beginning to make companions and friends in town. Whenever I left the presbytery there was a group of boys, and everywhere I went my little friends gave me a warm welcome.

As I had a certain facility in expounding the word of God, I was in much demand as a preacher, to give festal homilies in the nearby villages. At the end of October that year I was invited to preach on St Benignus at Lavriano²¹⁷ I was happy to accept because that was the birthplace of my friend Fr John Grassino, now parish priest in Scalenghe²¹⁸. I was anxious to do justice to the occasion and so prepared and wrote out my address carefully, trying to make it popular and at the same time polished. I studied it well, determined to win glory from it. But God wanted to teach a terrible lesson to my pride. It was a feast day, and I had to say holy Mass for the people before setting off. To get there in time for the sermon I had to go on horseback. Sometimes trotting, sometimes galloping, I was about halfway along and had reached

²¹⁷ Lavriano: farming and commercial community 24 km from Castelnuovo.

²¹⁸ Giovanni Grassino (1821-1902), companion of Don Bosco's in the seminary and at the Pastoral Institute (*Convitto*); he helped him at the Oratory in Valdocco and at the Guardian Angel oratory; he was director of the junior seminary at Giaveno, when it was entrusted to Dn Bosco (1860-1862). Scalenghe: a town 30 km from Turin.

the valley of Casalborgone between Cinzano and Berzano²¹⁹. As I passed a millet field, a flock of sparrows took sudden flight. The noise of their flight frightened the horse, and he bolted down the road and across the fields and meadows. Somehow I managed to stay in the saddle, but then I realised that it was slipping under the horse's belly. I tried an equestrian manoeuvre, but the saddle was out of place and forced me upwards, and I fell head first onto a heap of broken stones.

From a hill close by, a man could see this regrettable accident; he ran to my assistance with one of his workers and, finding me unconscious, carried me to his house and laid me on his best bed. They gave me the most loving care, and after an hour I came to and realised that I was in a strange house. "Don't let that worry you," my host said "and don't be upset that you're in a strange house. Here you'll want for nothing. I've sent for the doctor, and someone has gone to catch your horse. I'm a farmer, but I have everything I need. Do you feel any pain?"

"God reward you for your charity, my good friend" I said. "I don't think I've done much damage. A broken collar bone, maybe. I can't move it. Where am I?"

"You're on Bersano Hill in the house of John Calosso, better known as Brina. I'm at your service. I, too, have got round a bit and know what it is to need help. How many adventures I've had going to fairs and markets."

"While we're waiting for the doctor, tell me some of your stories."

"Oh," he said "I have lots of things I could tell you. Like this one. One autumn a few years ago, I was going to Asti on my donkey to collect winter provisions. On my way home, when I got to the valley of Murialdo, my poor beast, quite overloaded, fell in a mud hole and lay there in the middle of the road unable to move. Every effort to get her up again proved useless. It was midnight, dark and wet. Not knowing what else to do, I shouted for help. In a few minutes someone answered from a little house nearby. They came, a

²¹⁹ Berzano S. Pietro is 8 km from Castelnuovo; Casalborgone is 6 km further on.

seminarian and his brother, and two other men with a lamp to light their way. They got her out of the muck, having first unloaded her. They took me and all my baggage to their house. I was half dead and covered with mud. They cleaned me up and put new life into me with a magnificent supper. Then they gave me a nice, soft bed. In the morning before I left I wanted to pay them for all they had done for me, but the seminarian turned everything down flat, saying, ‘Who knows? Someday we may need your help.’”

I was moved to tears by his words. When he saw my reaction, he asked me if I were ill.

“No,” I replied “your story gives me great pleasure, and that’s what moves me.”

“How happy I would be” he went on, “if I knew what I could do for that good family! What fine people.”

“What was their name?”

“Bosco” he said, “popularly known as Boschetti. But why are you so moved? You know them, maybe? How is that seminarian?”

“That seminarian, my good friend, is this priest whom you have repaid a thousand times for what he did for you. The very one whom you’ve carried to your home and put into this bed. Divine Providence wants to teach us through this incident that one good turn deserves another.”

You can imagine the wonder, the pleasure, that good Christian and I both felt, that in my hour of need God had let me fall into the hands of such a friend. His wife, his sister, his other relatives, and his friends were delighted to know that the one who had so many times featured in their conversation was actually in their house. I was treated with every possible attention. The doctor arrived a short time later. He found no bones broken. After a few days I could head home on the recaptured horse. John Brina came the whole way home with me. For as long as he lived we remained fast friends.

After this warning, I firmly resolved that in the future I would prepare my sermons for the greater glory of God, and not to appear learned and erudite.

11. *The Pastoral Institute (Convitto Ecclesiastico) of St Francis of Assisi*

At the end of the holidays, I had three situations to choose from. I could have taken a post as tutor in the house of a Genoese gentleman with a salary of a thousand francs a year. The good people of Murialdo were so anxious to have me as their chaplain that they were prepared to double the salary paid to chaplains up to then. Last, I could have become a curate in my native parish. Before I made a final choice, I sought out Fr Cafasso in Turin to ask his advice. For several years now he had been my guide in matters both spiritual and temporal. That holy priest listened to everything, the good money offers, the pressures from relatives and friends, my own goodwill to work. Without a moment's hesitation, this is what he said: "You need to study moral theology and homiletics. For the present, forget all these offers and come to the *Convitto*." I willingly followed his wise advice; on 3 November 1841, I enrolled at the Pastoral Institute.

The Pastoral Institute [from now on we will use the English term, or call it simply the Institute] completed, you might say, the study of theology. In the seminary we studied only dogma, and that speculative; and in moral theology only controversial issues. Here one learnt to be a priest. Meditation, spiritual reading, two conferences a day, lessons in preaching, a secluded life, every convenience for study, reading good authors—these were the areas of learning to which we had to apply ourselves. At that time, two prominent men were in charge of this most useful institution: Doctor Louis Guala²²⁰ and Fr Joseph Cafasso. Doctor Guala was the work's founder. An unselfish man, rich in knowledge, prudent, and fearless, he was everyone's friend in the days of the regime of Napoleon I. He founded that extraordinary seedbed where young priests fresh from their seminary courses could learn the practical aspects of their sacred ministry. This proved very valuable to the Church, especially as a means of eradicating the vestiges of Jansenism that still persisted in our midst.

Amongst other topics the most controversial was the question of Probabilism and Probabiliorism²²¹. Chief amongst the former's advocates were

²²⁰ Luigi Fortunato Guala (1775-1848).

²²¹ Probabiliorism and probabilism: schools of moral theology developed between 17th and 18th centuries, one more rigorous the other more moderate.

Alasia²²², and Antoine, along with other rigourist authors. The practice of this doctrine can lead to Jansenism. The Probabilists followed the teaching of St Alphonsus²²³, who has now been proclaimed a Doctor of the Church. His authority can be called the theology of the Pope since the Church has proclaimed that his works can be taught, preached, and practised, as they contain nothing worthy of censure. Dr Guala took a strong stance between the two parties; starting from the principle that the charity of O.L.J.C. should be the inspiration of all systems, he was able to bring the two extremes together. Things came together so well that, thanks to Doctor Guala, St Alphonsus became our theological patron. This was a salutary step, long desired, and now we are reaping its benefit.

Fr Cafasso was Guala's right-hand man. His virtue, which withstood all tests, his amazing calm, his shrewd insight, and his prudence enabled him to overcome the acrimony that was still alive in some probabiliorists against the Liguorians.

A hidden gold mine amongst the Turinese clergy, Dr Golzio Felice²²⁴, was also at the Institute. In his modest life-style he was hardly noticeable. But he was a tireless worker, humble and knowledgeable; he was a real support, or better, Guala and Cafasso's right-hand man. The prisons, hospitals, pulpits, charitable institutes, the sick in their homes, the cities, the villages, and we might add, the mansions of the rich and the hovels of the poor felt the salutary effects of the zeal of these three luminaries of the Turinese clergy.

²²² Giuseppe Antonio Alasia (1731-1812), professor at the University of Turin; published a powerful treatise used at the Atheneum and the Turin seminaries: *Commentaria theologiae moralis auctore Josepho Antonio Alasia*. Editio altera recognita et aucta. Augusta Taurinorum, Typis Heredum Botta 1830-1831, 8 vol. Paul Gabriel Antoine (1678-1743), Jesuit, author of a *Theologia universa speculativa et dogmatica* (1723) and a *Theologia moralis universa* (1726) with many editions in Europe between the mid-17th and 18th centuries.

²²³ St Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori (1696-1787), avid theological writer and of spiritual literature too. Here the reference is to the 7 volume *Theologia moralis* (1753-1755). His most influential spiritual works were: *Visite al SS. Sacramento e a Maria SS.* (1745); *Le glorie di Maria* (1750); *Apparecchio alla morte* (1758); *Del gran mezzo della preghiera* (1759); *Pratica di amar Gesù Cristo* (1768). Guala and Cafasso were amongst the most fervent disseminators of Alphonsus' thinking.

²²⁴ Felice Golzio (1808-1873), first a professor at the Institute then Rector of the Consolata; Don Bosco's confessor after Fr Cafasso died.

These were the three models placed in my path by Divine Providence. It was just up to me to follow their example, their teaching, their virtues. Fr Cafasso, who for six years had been my guide, was also my spiritual director. If I have been able to do any good, I owe it to this worthy priest in whose hands I placed every decision I made, all my study, and every activity of my life. The first thing he did was to begin to take me to the prisons, where I soon learned how great was the malice and misery of mankind. I saw large numbers of young lads aged from 12 to 18, fine, healthy youngsters, alert of mind, but seeing them idle there, infested with lice, lacking food for body and soul, horrified me. Public disgrace, family dishonour, and personal shame were personified in those unfortunates. What shocked me most was to see that most of them, when they were released, left with firm resolutions to lead a good life, and yet in a short time they landed back in prison, which they had left only a few days earlier.

On such occasions I found out how quite a few were brought back to that place; it was because they were abandoned to their own resources. "Who knows," I thought to myself: "if these youngsters had a friend outside who would take care of them, help them, teach them religion on feast days ... Who knows but they could be steered away from ruin, or at least the number of those who return to prison could be lessened." I talked this idea over with Fr Cafasso. With his encouragement and inspiration I began to work out in my mind how to put the idea into practice, leaving to the Lord's grace what the outcome would be. Without God's grace, all human effort is vain.

12. Feast of the Immaculate Conception and beginning of the festive Oratory

Hardly had I registered at the Convitto of St Francis, when I met at once a crowd of boys who followed me in the streets and the squares and even into the sacristy of the church attached to the Institute. But I could not take direct care of them since I had no premises. A humorous incident opened the way to put into action my project for the boys who roamed the streets of the city, especially those released from prison

On the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (December 8, 1841), I was vesting to celebrate holy Mass at the appointed time. Joseph

Comotti, the sacristan, seeing a boy in a corner, asked him to come and serve my Mass. "I don't know how" he answered, completely embarrassed.

"Come on," repeated the sacristan "I want you to serve Mass."

"I don't know how," the boy repeated "I've never served Mass."

"You big blockhead," said the sacristan, quite furious "if you don't know how to serve Mass, what are you doing in the sacristy." With that he grabbed a feather duster and hit the poor boy about the head and shoulders.

As the boy beat a hasty retreat, I cried loudly, "What are you doing? Why are you beating him like that? What's he done?"

"Why is he hanging round the sacristy if he doesn't know how to serve Mass?"

"But you've done wrong."

"What does it matter to you?"

"It matters plenty. He's a friend of mine. Call him back at once. I need to speak with him."

"*Tuder, tuder!*"²²⁵ he began to shout, as he ran after him. Promising him better treatment, he brought the lad back to me. He came over trembling and tearful because of the blows he had received.

"Have you attended Mass yet?" I asked him with as much loving kindness as I could.

"No" he answered.

"Well, come to Mass now. Afterwards I'd like to talk to you about something that will please you." He promised to do as I said. I wanted to calm down the poor fellow's spirit and not leave him with that sad impression towards the people in charge of that sacristy. Once I had celebrated my Mass and made due thanksgiving, I took my candidate into a side chapel. Trying to allay any fear he might have of another beating, I started questioning him cheerfully:

²²⁵ "Tuder": dialect term for a rough, uneducated type.

"My good friend, what's your name?"

"My name's Bartholomew Garelli."

"Where are you from?"

"Asti."

"Is your father alive?"

"No, my father's dead."

"And your mother?"

"My mother's dead too."

"How old are you?"

"I'm sixteen."

"Can you read and write?"

"I don't know anything."

"Have you made your first communion?"

"Not yet."

"Have you ever been to confession?"

"Yes, when I was small."

"Are you going to catechism classes now?"

"I don't dare."

"Why?"

"Because the other boys are smaller than I am, and they know their catechism. As big as I am, I don't know anything, so I'm ashamed to go."

"If I were to teach you catechism on your own, would you come?"

"I'd come very willingly."

"Would you come willingly to this little room?"

"I'd come willingly enough, provided they don't beat me."

"Relax. No one will harm you. On the contrary, you'll be my friend and

you'll be dealing with me and no one else. When would you like us to begin our catechism?"

"Whenever you wish."

"This evening?"

"Okay."

"Are you willing right now?"

"Yes, right now, with great pleasure." I stood up and made the sign of the cross to begin; but my pupil made no response because he did not know how to do it. In that first catechism lesson I taught him to make the sign of the cross. I also taught him to know God the Creator and why he created us. Though Bartholomew's memory was poor, with attentive diligence in a few feast days he learned enough to make a good confession and, soon after, his holy communion.

To this first pupil some others were added. During that winter, I concentrated my efforts in helping grown-ups who needed special catechism, above all those who were just out of prison. I was beginning to learn from experience that if young lads just released from their place of punishment could find someone to befriend them, to look after them, to assist them on feast days, to help them get work with good employers, to visit them occasionally during the week, these young men soon forgot the past and began to mend their ways. They became good Christians and honest citizens. This was the beginning of our Oratory. It was to be blessed by the Lord with growth beyond my imagining at that time.

13. The Oratory in 1842

All my efforts that winter were concentrated on getting the little Oratory established. My aim was to bring together only those children who were in greatest danger, ex-prisoners by preference. Nevertheless, as a foundation on which to build discipline and morality, I invited some other boys of good character who had already been taught. These helped me maintain order, and they read and sang hymns. From the very beginning I realised that without

songbooks and suitable reading matter, these festive gatherings would have been like a body without a soul. In those days, the feast of the Purification (February 2) was still a holy day of obligation. On that day in 1842, I already had about twenty children with whom we were able to sing for the first time "Sing Praises to Mary, O Tongues of the Faithful."

By the feast of the Annunciation to the Virgin, our numbers had risen to thirty. On that day we had a small celebration. In the morning, the pupils went to the holy sacraments. In the evening we sang a hymn, and after catechism we had a story by way of a sermon. Because the side chapel we had been meeting in could no longer contain our numbers, we moved into the sacristy chapel, which was nearby.

Our Oratory programme ran along these lines. On every feast day, the boys were given a chance to receive the holy sacraments of confession and communion. But one Saturday and Sunday each month was set aside for fulfilling this religious duty. We came together in the evening at a fixed time, sang a hymn, had a catechism lesson followed by a story, and then the distribution of something, sometimes to all, sometimes by lot.

Amongst the boys who came to the Oratory in its earliest days I would like to single out Joseph Buzzetti²²⁶, who came regularly and gave good example. He had such an affection for Don Bosco and that feast day gathering that he refused to go home to his family (at Caronno Ghiringhello²²⁷) His three brothers, Charles, Angelo, and Joshua²²⁸ were also outstanding. John Gariboldi and his brother were mere labourers at the time, and now they are master bricklayers.

²²⁶ Giuseppe Buzzetti (1832-1891) remained with Don Bosco for the rest of his life, first as a collaborator then a Salesian layman (cf. *Memorie biografiche di Giuseppe Buzzetti, coadiutore salesiano*. S. Benigno Canavese, Scuola Tip. Salesiana 1898; Eugenio PILLA, *Giuseppe Buzzetti, coadiutore salesiano*. Torino, Società Editrice Internazionale 1960).

²²⁷ Caronno Ghiringhello (today Caronno Varesino) town in Varese province, 148 km from Turin.

²²⁸ Carlo (1829-1891) and Giosuè (1840-1902), became building entrepreneurs and worked for Don Bosco with the buildings at Valdocco and the church of Mary Help of Christians

As a rule the Oratory boys included stonecutters, bricklayers, stuccoers, road pavers, plasterers, and others who came from distant villages. They were not church-goers, and had few friends; so they were exposed to the dangers of perversion, especially on feast days.

Good Doctor Guala and Fr Cafasso enjoyed these assemblies of the children. They gladly supplied me with holy pictures, leaflets, pamphlets, medals, small crucifixes to give as gifts. At times they provided me with the means to clothe some of those in greater need, and to feed others for weeks at a time until they were able to support themselves by their work. Moreover, as the boys' numbers grew they sometimes gave me permission to gather my little army in the adjoining courtyard for recreation. If space had allowed, we would have been a hundred; but we had to restrict ourselves to about eighty.

When they went to the sacraments Dr Guala or Fr Cafasso used to pay us a visit and and tell some edifying stories.

Dr Guala wanted to make a special feast in honour of St Anne, the feast of the bricklayers; after the morning ceremonies he invited all of them to breakfast with him. Almost a hundred gathered in the big conference hall. There all were provided with ample provisions of coffee, milk, chocolate, pastries, cakes, semolina, and other sweet dainties much loved by children. Anyone can imagine the stir that celebration caused, and the numbers that could have come if we had had the room!

On feast days, I gave all my time to my youngsters. During the week I would go to visit them at their work in factories or workshops. Not only the youngsters were happy to see a friend taking care of them; their employers were pleased, gladly retaining youngsters who were helped during the week, and even more on feast days, when they are in greater danger.

On Saturdays, my pockets stuffed sometimes with tobacco, sometimes with fruit, sometimes with rolls, I used to go to the prisons. with the object always to give special attention to the youngsters who had the misfortune to find themselves behind bars, help them, make friends with them, and thus encourage them to come to the Oratory when they had the good fortune of leaving that place of punishment.

14. Priestly work – Taking a job at the Refuge (September 1844)

At that time I began to preach publicly in some of the churches in Turin, in the Hospital of Charity, in the Hospice of Virtue, in the prisons, and in the College of St Francis di Paola²²⁹. I preached triduums, novenas, and retreats. After two years of moral theology I did my examination for faculties to hear confessions. This put me in a better position to cultivate discipline, morality, and the good of the souls of my youngsters in the prisons, at the Oratory, and wherever there was need of it.

It was consoling for me to see forty or fifty youngsters outside my confessional during the week and especially on feast days, waiting hours and hours for their turns for confession. This is how things normally ran at the Oratory for nearly three years, up to the end of October 1844.

Meanwhile, new things, changes, and even tribulations were being prepared by Divine Providence.

When I had completed three years of moral theology, I had to undertake some specific sacred ministry. Comollo's uncle Fr Joseph Comollo, parish priest of Cinzano, was now advanced in years and sick. He was advised by the archbishop to ask me to help him administer his parish, which he was too old and infirm to handle any longer. Dr Guala himself dictated my letter of thanks to Archbishop Fransoni; he was preparing me for something else.

One day, Father Cafasso took me aside and said, "Now that you've finished your studies, you must get to work. These days the harvest is abundant enough. What is your particular bent?"

"Whatever you would like to point me towards."

"There are three posts open: curate at Buttigliera d'Asti, tutor in moral theology here at the Pastoral Institute, and director at the Little Hospital beside the Refuge. Which would you choose?"

²²⁹ Charitable Hospital and Hotel of Virtue: charitable institutes going back to the 16th and 17th centuries, looking after the elderly and abandoned children, the second for education of children of working families. The College of St Francis di Paola was one of the secondary public schools in the city.

“Whatever you judge best.”

“Don’t you feel any preference for one thing rather than for another?”

“My inclination is to work for young people. So do with me whatever you want: I shall know the Lord’s will in whatever you advise.”

“At the moment what’s the wish nearest your heart? What’s on your mind?”

“At this moment I see myself in the midst of a multitude of boys appealing to me for help.”

“Then go away for a few weeks’ holiday. When you come back I’ll tell you your destination.”

I came back from the holiday, but for several weeks Fr Cafasso never said a word. And I asked him nothing. One day he said to me, “Why don’t you ask me about your destination?”

“Because I want to see the will of God in your choice, and I don’t want my desires in it at all.”

“Pack your bag and go with Dr Borel. You’ll be director at the Little Hospital of St Philomena, and you’ll also work in the Refuge. Meanwhile God will show you what you have to do for the young.”

At first this advice seemed to cut across my inclinations. With a hospital to take care of, preaching and confessions in an institute for more than four hundred girls, there would be no time for anything else. Nevertheless this was the will of heaven, as I was soon assured.

From the first moment that I met Dr Borel, I always judged him to be a holy priest, a model worthy of admiration and imitation. Every time I was able to be with him, he always gave me lessons in priestly zeal, always good advice, encouraging me in doing good. During my three years at the Institute, he often invited me to help at the sacred ceremonies, hear confessions, or preach for him. Thus I already knew and was somewhat familiar with my field of work.

We often had long discussions about procedures to be followed in order to help each other in visiting the prisons, fulfilling the duties entrusted to us, and at the same time helping the youngsters whose moral condition and neglect drew the priests' attention everyday more. But what could I do? Where could I bring these youngsters together?

Dr Borel said, "For the time being you can bring the boys who are coming to St. Francis of Assisi to the room set aside for you. When we move to the building provided for the priests beside the Little Hospital, we can scout around for a better place."

15. A new dream

On the second Sunday in October that year (1844²³⁰) I had to tell my boys that the Oratory would be moving to Valdocco. But the uncertainty of place, means, and personnel had me really worried. The previous evening I had gone to bed with an uneasy heart. That night I had another dream, which seems to be an appendix to the one I had at Becchi when I was nine years old. I think it advisable to relate it literally.

I dreamt that I was standing in the middle of a multitude of wolves, goats and kids, lambs, ewes, rams, dogs, even birds. All together they made a din, a racket, or better, a bedlam to frighten the stoutest heart. I wanted to run away, when a lady very handsomely dressed as a shepherdess signalled me to follow her and accompany that strange flock while she went ahead. We wandered from place to place, making three stations or stops. Each time we stopped, many of the animals were turned into lambs, and their number continually grew. After we had walked a long way, I found myself in a field where all the animals grazed and gambolled together and none made attacks on the others.

Worn out, I wanted to sit down beside a nearby road, but the shepherdess invited me to continue the trip. After another short journey, I found myself in a large courtyard with porticoes all round. At one end was a church. I then saw that four-fifths of the animals had been changed into lambs and their number greatly increased. Just then, several shepherds came along to take care

²³⁰ Sunday, October 13.

of the flock; but they stayed only a very short time and promptly went away. Then something wonderful happened. Many of the lambs were transformed into shepherds, who as they grew took care of the others. As the number of shepherds became great, they split up and went to other places to gather other strange animals and guide them into other folds.

I wanted to be off because it seemed to me time to celebrate Mass; but the shepherdess invited me to look to the south. I looked and saw a field sown with maize, potatoes, cabbages, beetroot, lettuce, and many other vegetables.

“Look again,” she said to me. I looked again and saw a wondrously big church. An orchestra and music, both instrumental and vocal, were inviting me to sing Mass. Inside the church hung a white banner on which was written in huge letters, *Hic domus mea, inde gloria mea*.

As my dream continued, I wanted to ask the shepherdess where I was. And I wanted to know the meaning of that journey with its halts, the house, the church, then the other church. “You will understand everything when you see in fact with your bodily eyes what you are looking at now with the eyes of your mind.” Thinking that I was awake, I said, “I see clearly, and I see with my bodily eyes. I know where I’m going and what I’m doing.” But at that moment the bell of the Church of St Francis sounded the *Ave Maria*, and I woke up.

This [dream] lasted most of the night. I saw it all in great detail. But at the time I understood little of its meaning since I put little faith in it. But I understood little by little as the dream began to come true. Later, together with another dream, it served as a blueprint for my decisions.

16. *The Oratory goes to the Refuge*

On the second Sunday of October, feast of the maternity of Mary, I broke the news to my youngsters that the Oratory would be moving to the Refuge. At first they were somewhat upset; but when I told them of the spacious grounds waiting just for us to sing, run, jump and enjoy ourselves, they were pleased. They eagerly looked forward to the next Sunday, to see the new situation which seized their imaginations. The third Sunday of October²³¹,

²³¹ It was October 20, 1844.

was dedicated to the purity of the Virgin Mary. A little after noon a mob of youngsters of all ages and conditions descended on Valdocco looking for the new Oratory.

"Where's the Oratory? Where's Don Bosco?" they shouted to all and sundry. No one knew what they were talking about. No one in that neighbourhood had heard of either Don Bosco or the Oratory. The questioners, believing that they were being teased, raised their voices more insistently. The locals, believing that they were being insulted, shouted indignant threats. Matters were getting serious when Dr Borel and I heard the commotion and came out of the house. At sight of us, the noise died down and calm was restored. The boys crowded round us asking where the Oratory was.

We had to tell them that the real Oratory was not ready yet, but meantime they could come to my room. It was quite big and would serve us well enough. In fact things went quite well that Sunday. But on the following Sunday, so many pupils from the locality came in addition to the old ones that I no longer knew where to gather them. My room, the corridor, the stairs were all thronged with children. On the feast of All Saints, Dr Borel and I prepared to hear confessions. But everybody wanted to go; what could we do? There were more than two hundred children but only two confessors. One boy was trying to light the fire; another decided to put it out. The one brought wood, the other water. Buckets, tongs, shovel, jug, basin, chairs, shoes, books—everything was turned topsy-turvy while they were trying to tidy things up!

"We can't go on like this," said the dear Doctor, "we really must find a more suitable place." Yet we spent six feast days in that restricted space, which was the room above the main entrance hall of the Refuge.

Meantime, we went to speak to Archbishop Frasoni. He understood how important our project was. "Go," he told us "and do what you think best for souls. I give you all the faculties you may need. Speak with Marchioness Barolo²³². She may be able to provide better accommodations for you. But tell me, couldn't these boys be taken care of in their own parishes?"

²³² Giulia Vittorina Barolo, nee Colbert de Maulévrier (1785-1864); together with her husband Tancredi she provided new educational and social works (cf. Ave TAGO, *Giulia Colbert di Barolo, madre dei poveri. Biografia documentata*. Città del Vaticano, LEV 2007).

“For the most part,” [I replied] “these youngsters are foreigners who spend only a part of the year in Turin. They don’t have any idea what parishes they belong to. Many of them are badly off, speaking dialects hard to understand, so that they understand little and are little understood by others. Some are already grown up and don’t like associating in classes with little boys.”

“That means,” continued the archbishop “they need a place of their own, adapted to their own needs. Go ahead, therefore. I bless you and your project. If I can be of service to you, come by all means, and I will always help in any way I can.”

I went in fact to speak with Marchioness Barolo. As the Little Hospital was not to be opened till August of the following year, that charitable lady was happy to put two large rooms at our disposal for use as a chapel. They were intended for the recreation of the priests of the Refuge when they transferred their residence there. Access to the new Oratory, therefore, was through where the door of the hospital is now, along an alley running between the Cottolengo Institute²³³ and the aforementioned building, to what is now the priests’ residence, and inside up to the 3rd floor.

That was the site Divine Providence chose for the first Oratory church. We began to call it after St Francis de Sales for two reasons: first, because Marchioness Barolo had in mind to found a congregation of priests under his patronage, and with this intention she had a painting of this saint done, which can still be seen at the entrance to this area and, because we had put our own ministry, which called for great calm and meekness, under the protection of this saint in the hope that he might obtain for us from God the grace of being able to imitate him in his extraordinary meekness and in winning souls. We had a further reason for placing ourselves under the protection of this saint: that from heaven he might help us to imitate him in combating errors against religion, especially Protestantism, which was beginning to gain ground in our provinces, and more especially in the city of Turin.

²³³ Opera Cottolengo (*Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza*): founded by St Joseph Cottolengo (1786-1842) for poor sick or chronically ill, physically and psychologically disabled people, the elderly and beggars as well.

On December 8, 1844, a day dedicated to the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the long-awaited chapel was blessed, with the archbishop's permission. It was a bitterly cold day. There was deep snow, and it was still snowing heavily. Holy Mass was celebrated, and many youngsters went to confession and communion. I finished that sacred liturgy with a few tears, tears of joy, because in a certain way I saw that the work of the Oratory was now established, with the object of entertaining the more abandoned and endangered youths after they had fulfilled their religious duties in church.

17. The Oratory of St Martin's of the Mills – Problems – The Lord's hand

At the chapel beside St Philomena's Hospital the Oratory was making a very good start. On feast days, youngsters came in big numbers to make their confessions and go to communion. After Mass there was a short explanation of the gospel. In the afternoon we had catechism lessons, hymn singing, a short instruction, the litany of our Lady, and benediction. Various intervals were filled with games and amusements which took place in the alley which still runs between the convent of the Little Magdalens²³⁴ and the public road. We spent seven months there. We thought that we had found heaven on earth; then we had to leave our beloved asylum and go look for another.

Marchioness Barolo, though she cast a kindly eye on every charitable work, still, as the opening of her Little Hospital approached (it opened 10 August 1845), wanted our Oratory far away before then. True, the premises used as chapel, class rooms and the youngsters' recreation had no communication of any sort with the interior of the establishment. Even the shutters were fixed in place and turned upwards. None the less we had to obey. We positively pestered the municipal government of Turin. Through the kind offices of Archbishop Fransoni, we were allowed to move our oratory to the church of St Martin at the Great Mills, that is to say, the public mills.²³⁵

²³⁴ Monastery of the Penitential Sisters of Mary Magdalene founded by Marchioness Barolo in 1833, adjacent to the Little Hospital and the Refuge.

²³⁵ Molazzi (Dora Mills): large complex for milling grain going back to the 14th century, extended and modernised between 1700 and 1800. Archival research tells us that the events in this chapter happened later, after those in chapter 18; cf. Francesco MOTTO, *L'Oratorio di don Bosco presso il cimitero di S. Pietro in Vincoli in Torino*. Una documentata ricostruzione del noto episodio, in RSS 5 (1986) 199-220.

Imagine us then, on a July Sunday in 1845, making our way laden with benches, kneelers, candlesticks, some chairs, crucifixes, and pictures large and small. Everyone carried some object suited to his strength. We must have looked like emigrants on the move; with din, laughter and regret, we marched out to establish our headquarters in the place just indicated.

Dr Borel gave an appropriate talk before we set out and another when we arrived at our new church.

That worthy minister of the sanctuary, in that common-folk style of his that could be said to be more unique than rare, spoke these thoughts: "My dear boys, cabbages never form a big, beautiful head unless they are transplanted. The same is true of our Oratory. So far it has been moved from one place to another many times, but in the different places where it has stopped it has always grown bigger, with no little advantage to the boys involved. We started at St Francis of Assisi with catechism and a little singing. That was as much as we could do there. At the Refuge we made just a whistle stop, as train travellers say, so that our boys might receive spiritual help by way of confession, catechism classes, sermons, and games during the months we were there. There, beside the Little Hospital a real Oratory began, and we thought we had found true peace, a place suitable for us. But Divine Providence ordained that we had to move again and come here to St Martin's. How long will we stay here? We don't know. We hope we'll be here a long time; but however long our stay, we believe that like transplanted cabbages, our Oratory will grow in the number of boys who love virtue, will increase their desire for music, singing, evening classes, and even day courses. Will we be here long, then? We mustn't let this thought worry us. Let's throw all our worries into the Lord's hands; he'll take care of us. It's certain that he blesses us, helps us, and provides for us. He'll show us a good place for contributing to his glory and the good of our souls. Now the Lord's graces form a kind of chain with each link locked into the next; so if we turn to good account the graces he gives us, we are sure that God will grant us bigger graces. And if we fall in with the aims of the Oratory, we will progress from virtue to virtue, till we reach that blessed homeland where the infinite mercy of Our Lord Jesus Christ. will reward each of us as his good works deserve."

An immense crowd of youngsters attended that solemn ceremony, and a *Tè Deum* of thanksgiving was sung with the greatest emotion.

We carried out our religious devotions as we had at the Refuge, though we could not celebrate Mass or give benediction in the evening. This meant that the boys could not receive communion, which is the fundamental element to our institution. Even our recreations were often disturbed, broken up because the lads were forced to play in the street and in the little square in front of the church where a constant stream of people on foot, carts, horses, and carriages passed by. Since we had nothing better, we thanked heaven for what we had been given and hoped for some better spot.

But fresh problems fell upon us. The millers, their apprentices, and other employees could not put up with the jumping, the singing, and the occasional shouting of our pupils. They grew alarmed and agreed to lodge a complaint with the municipal government. It was then that people began to say that such meetings of youngsters were dangerous, that at any moment they could erupt in riots and revolution. This fear was founded on the prompt obedience with which the boys responded to every little order of the superior. Without any foundation, it was added that the kids were doing untold damage in the church, outside the church, on the pavement. It seemed that if we continued meeting there Turin must be ruined.

Our troubles came to a head when a secretary at the mills wrote a letter to the mayor of Turin. In it he included all the vague rumours and amplified the imagined damages. [The mayor sent an inspector, who found the walls, the outside pavements, the floor, everything about the church in good order. The only damage consisted of a little scratch on one wall, which a lad might have made with the end of a nail]. He said that the families connected with those businesses could not go about their duties in peace.

People went so far as to say that the Oratory was a hotbed of immorality. Though the mayor was convinced that these charges were unfounded, he wrote a stiff letter ordering us to take our Oratory elsewhere at once. General disappointment, useless sighing! We had to go.

It is worth noting, however, that the secretary, whose name is cussetti (never to be published), author of that famous letter, never wrote anything else. He was suddenly stricken by an uncontrollable shake in his right hand. Within three years he was dead. God permitted his son to be abandoned, thrown out into the street and obliged to seek food and lodging at the hospice which was later opened in Valdocco.

18. The Oratory at St Peter in Chains – Chaplain's housekeeper – A letter – A sad event

Since the mayor and the city council in general were persuaded that the charges brought against us had no foundation, it was an easy matter for us, especially since we had the backing of the archbishop, to get permission to hold our meetings in the church and courtyard of the Cemetery of Christ Crucified, popularly known as *St Peter in Chains*²³⁶. So, after a two-month stay at St Martin's, we had to move to a new place. Though we felt a bitter sadness about moving, the new place was more convenient for us. The long portico, the spacious yard, and the church for our sacred functions all so aroused the youngsters' enthusiasm that they were overcome with joy. But in that place we came up against a formidable and unsuspecting rival. This was not the ghost of one of the great numbers of the dead who slept peacefully in the nearby tombs. This was a living person, the chaplain's housekeeper. No sooner had she heard the pupils singing and talking, and, let us admit, their shouting too, than she rushed out of the house. In a furious rage, with her bonnet askew and her arms akimbo, she launched into tongue-lashing the crowd of merrymakers. Joining in her assault upon us were a small girl, a dog, a cat, all the hens, so that it seemed that a European war was about to break out. I tried to approach her to calm her down, pointing out to her that the kids meant no harm, that they were just playing innocently. Then she turned and gave it to me.

²³⁶ The events in this chapter happened on Sunday May 25, 1845, before transferring to the Molazzi (Mills). St Peter in Chains: cemetery built in 1777, square in shape with porticoes on three sides and a church on the fourth; it had not been used since 1832.

At that point I decided to end the recreation. I gave a short catechism lesson, and after we recited the rosary in church, we broke up hoping to come back the next Sunday to a better reception. Quite the contrary! When the chaplain came home that evening, the good housekeeper went to work on him, denounced Don Bosco and his sons as revolutionaries and desecrators of holy places. All of them rascals of the worst kind, she said. She prevailed upon the good priest to write a letter to the civil authorities.

He wrote while the servant dictated, but with so much venom that a warrant was issued immediately for the arrest of any of us who should return there. Sad to say, that was the last letter written by Fr Tesio, the chaplain. He wrote it on Monday, and within a few hours he suffered a stroke from which he died very soon afterwards²³⁷. Two days later a similar fate befell the housekeeper. News of these events spread like wildfire and deeply impressed the souls of the boys and of everyone who heard it. Everyone had a mad desire to come and hear about these sorry cases. But since we were forbidden to meet at St Peter in Chains, and the time was so short to make alternative arrangements, no one, not even I, had any idea where our next meeting would take place.

19. The Oratory at the Moretta house

On the Sunday following that prohibition, a large number of youngsters went to St Peter in Chains because it had not been possible to send them word of the ban. When they found everything locked up, they came in a body to my room beside the Little Hospital. What was I to do? I had a pile of equipment for church and for recreation; a mob of children trailing me wherever I went; but not an inch of ground on which to assemble them.

Trying to conceal my dismay, I put on a cheerful face for everyone and tried to keep their hopes up by telling them a thousand wonderful things about the future Oratory, which at that moment existed only in my own mind and in the decrees of the Lord. To entertain them on feast days, I took

²³⁷ Giuseppe Tesio (1777-1845), ex-Capuchin, died Wed. May 28.

them sometimes to Sassi, sometimes to Madonna del Pilone, to Our Lady of the Field²³⁸, to the Mount of the Capuchins²³⁹ and finally to the Superga²⁴⁰. In these churches I arranged to celebrate Mass for them in the morning and explain the gospel. In the afternoon we had a little catechism, hymn singing, and some stories. Then we toured or hiked till it was time to head for home. It seemed that this critical state of things would have to bring any thought of an Oratory to nothing, but instead the number of boys coming increased extraordinarily.

In the meantime, we had moved into November (1845), not a very practical season for outings or walks to places outside the city. In agreement with Dr Borel, we rented three rooms in the house belonging to Fr Moretta²⁴¹, which is the one near, almost in front of, the Church of Mary Help [of Christians] today. Now the house is practically a new one because of renovations. We spent four months there, confined in that restricted space, yet happy at least to be able to collect our pupils in those rooms and give them instructions and especially an opportunity to go to confession. That same winter we began night classes. It was the first time that this kind of school was spoken of in our area. Consequently it was much discussed: some favoured it; others were against it.

At that time, also, some strange rumours began to get round. Some called Don Bosco a revolutionary; others called him a madman, or even a heretic. This was their reasoning: “This Oratory alienates youngsters from their parishes. As a result, the parish priests will find their churches empty and will no longer know the children, for whom they must render an account before

²³⁸ Sassi: a town 3 km from Turin. Madonna del Pilone: suburb 2.5 km from town with a Marian sanctuary. Our Lady of the Fields: parish attached to a Capuchin monastery on the road between Turin and Venaria, 3 km from the capital.

²³⁹ Monte dei Cappuccini: beautiful 15th century church overlooking Turin on the right bank of the Po.

²⁴⁰ Superga: basilica on hill overlooking Turin; built by architect Filippo Juvarra. Some members of the Royal Family are buried in the crypt.

²⁴¹ Two-storey building, with nine rooms on the ground floor (cf. F. GIRAUDI, *L'Oratorio di don Bosco...*, pp. 49-50).

the tribunal of the Lord. Therefore Don Bosco should send the children to their own parishes and stop gathering them in other places."

This is what two respectable parish priests of this city told me when they called on me, also on behalf of their colleagues.

"The young men whom I gather," I told them "have no adverse effect on parish church attendance. For the most part they know neither parish nor pastor."

"Why?"

"Because almost all of them are visitors who have been abandoned by their relatives in this city; or they have come here looking for work and failed to get it. Boys from Savoy, Switzerland, the Val d'Aosta, Biella, Novara, Lombardy are the ones who most frequently come to my activities."

"Couldn't you send these youngsters to their various parishes?"

"They don't know where their parishes are."

"Why not teach them?"

"It isn't possible. They're far from home, they speak diverse dialects, they have no fixed places to stay, and they don't know the city. These considerations make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to belong to any parishes. Besides, many of them are grown men already: 18, 20, even 25 years old. And they are completely ignorant in matters of religion. Who could ever expect them to mix with kids of 8 or 10 who are much better instructed."

"Couldn't you go with them yourself and teach them catechism in their parish churches?"

"At most I could go to one parish, but not to all. It could be done if every parish priest would come himself, or send someone to fetch these children and accompany them to their respective parishes. Even that would be difficult because many of these boys are dissipated, even dissolute. These, attracted by the games and outings which we organise, decide to attend the catechism classes and the other practices of piety too. Therefore it would be necessary

for every parish to establish a fixed place where these youngsters could be assembled and entertained in pleasant recreation.”

“Those things are impossible. There aren’t any places, nor do we have priests free on feast days for these activities.”

“What then?” I asked.

“Then do as you think best. In the meantime, we’ll decide amongst ourselves what it’s best to do.”

The problem then became a talking point amongst the parish priests of Turin. Should the oratories be promoted or opposed? Some were for, some against. The parish priest of Borgo Dora, Fr Augustine Gattino, and Dr Ponzati, parish priest of St Augustine, brought me their decision: “The parish priests of Turin, meeting in their regular conference, discussed the advisability of the oratories. After weighing the fears and the hopes, the pros and the cons, they concluded that each parish priest could not provide an oratory in his own parish and that they would encourage the priest Bosco to continue until some other decision should be reached.”

While these things were going on, the spring of 1846 arrived. The tenants at the Moretta house were upset by the shouting and the din of the constant coming and going of the youngsters. They complained to the landlord, all telling [him] that they would all quit their rented quarters [and leave] if these noisy meetings did not stop. So the good priest Moretta had to tell us to look immediately for another place to gather our young men if we wished to keep our Oratory going.

20. The Oratory in a field – Outing to Superga

With deep regret and no little inconvenience to our assemblies in March of 1846, we had to leave the Moretta house and rent a field from the Filippi brothers²⁴². Today an iron foundry or smelting works occupies this ground. There I was, under the open sky, in the middle of the field bounded by a

²⁴² Pietro Antonio and Carlo Filippi, owners of houses and land next to Fr Moretta’s house.

broken-down hedge, which gave free admission to all and sundry. The youngsters, between three and four hundred of them, looked upon their Oratory as heaven on earth, even though its ceiling and walls were the sky.

But in a place like this, how could one hold religious services? Doing the best we could, we held catechism classes, sang hymns, sang vespers. Then Dr Borel or I would stand on a hillock or on a chair and give a short sermon to the youths, who came up close to hear it.

For confessions, this is how we managed: I would be in the field early on feast day mornings, where many would already be waiting for me. I would sit on a hillock hearing one's confession while others were preparing or making their thanksgiving. Afterwards many went back to their games. At a fixed time of the morning, all the boys assembled in answer to a bugle call. A second blast on the bugle brought them to silence, giving me a chance to speak and tell them where we were going for Mass and holy communion.

Sometimes, as I said, we went to Our Lady of the Fields, to the Church of Our Lady of Consolation, to Stupinigi²⁴³ or to the places mentioned earlier. Since we often trudged to centres a good distance away, I will describe one hike we did to Superga, which was typical of the others.

When the boys had collected in the field, we let them play *bocce*, *piastrelle*, stilt-walking, etc., for a while. A drum was sounded, then a bugle call, to call them together and signal that we were ready to move out. We usually arranged that all of them should have heard Mass beforehand. Soon after 9:00 we set out for Superga. Some carried baskets of bread, some cheese, salami, fruit, or other provisions for the day. They kept quiet till we were outside the populated parts of the city, but from then on they began yelling, singing, and shouting, though they kept ranks.

On reaching the foot of the hill, where the path climbs to the basilica, I found a lovely little pony, already saddled up, which Fr Joseph Anselmetti²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Stupinigi: 8 km from the city with a building used by the King when he went hunting, flanked by a large park and wooded area.

²⁴⁴ Giuseppe Maurizio Anselmetti (1778-1852), priest at the parish of Our Lady's Nativity, not far from the Basilica at the Superga.

pastor of the church, had put at my disposal. There was also a note from Dr Borel, who had gone on ahead. It read: "Come along with our dear boys, and don't worry. The soup, the dinner, and the wine are ready." I mounted the horse and read the letter aloud. They all crowded round the horse, and after hearing the message, broke into applause and cheers, shouting and singing. Some pulled the horse by his ears, others by the muzzle or the tail, bumping sometimes into the poor beast, sometimes into his rider. The gentle animal took it all with more patience than his rider would have shown.

Amid that uproar the music struck up, provided by a tambourine, a bugle, and a guitar. It was absolute discord, but it served as a backing for the noisy voices of the boys. The result was wonderfully harmonious.

Worn out with all the laughing, joking, singing, and I would say, the yelling, we reached our destination. The perspiring youngsters gathered in the courtyard of the shrine and were soon given food enough to satisfy their voracious appetites. When they had a while to rest, I called them all round me and told them all the details of the wonderful history of the basilica, with its royal tombs in the crypt, and the Ecclesiastical Academy which Charles Albert²⁴⁵ had established there and the bishops of the Kingdom of Sardinia supported.

Dr William Audisio, the president²⁴⁶, generously provided the soup and main course for all the guests. The parish priest donated the wine and the fruit. We took a couple of hours for a tour of the area and later assembled in the church, where many people had already taken their places. At 3:00 p.m. I gave a short discourse from the pulpit, after which some of the best choir boys sang a *Tantum ergo*. Their clear voices and the novelty of it won everyone's admiration. At six we sent up some balloons to signal our departure. With renewed and lively thanks to our benefactors we struck out again for Turin, singing, laughing, running, and sometimes praying on our way. When we got

²⁴⁵ King Charles Alberto of Savoy-Carignano (1798-1849), came to the throne in 1831.

²⁴⁶ Guglielmo Antonio Audisio (1802-1882), president of the Superga Academy until 1849; then went to Rome where he took up the Chair of *Natural and people's Law* at La Sapienza University.

to the city, the boys dropped out of our procession a few at a time at points along the route closest to their homes and returned to their families. When I got back to the Refuge, I still had with me 7 or 8 of the strongest lads, who had carried the equipment used during the day.

21. *Threats from Marquis Cavour – Oratory in trouble again*

Words cannot describe the enthusiasm these expeditions aroused in the youngsters. They thoroughly enjoyed the mixture of devotions, games, and outings, and they became so attached to me that they not only obeyed my every command, but they were eager that I should give them some task to do. One day, a *carabiniere* saw me bring four hundred chattering and playful boys to silence in the field by raising my hand; he exclaimed, "If this priest were an army general, he could take on the most powerful army in the world." Really, the obedience and affection of my pupils bordered on folly. This very thing gave renewed credence to the rumour that Don Bosco and his sons could start a revolution at a moment's notice. It was a ridiculous claim, but local authorities swallowed it again, especially Marquis Cavour²⁴⁷, father of the famous Camillo²⁴⁸ and Gustavo²⁴⁹. At that time he was vicar of the city, which means he was in charge of the civil power. He therefore summoned me to city hall and reasoned with me at length about the silly stories about me which were then doing the rounds. He ended up by saying, "My good priest, take my advice: let these scoundrels go their own way. They will bring only trouble on you and the public authorities. I have been assured that these meetings are dangerous, and therefore I cannot permit them."

I replied, "Lord Marquis, I have no other aim but the betterment of these poor sons of the people. I do not ask for financial assistance but only for

²⁴⁷ Michele Giuseppe Benso, Marquis Cavour (1781-1850), from 1835 to 1847 he was *Vicar General of policy* and police for the capital (*Vicar of the City*), looking after public order.

²⁴⁸ Camillo Benso, Count Cavour (1810-1861), second born son of Michele, Prime Minister from 1852 to 1860, promoted a liberal policy and brought about national unity (17 March 1861).

²⁴⁹ Gustavo Filippo Benso, Marquis Cavour (1806-1864), first-born son of Michele, scholar of philosophy and followed Rosmini's thinking; he was one of the founders of the *L'Armonia*.

a place where I can bring them together. In this way I hope to reduce the number of loafers and those headed for prison.”

“You’re fooling yourself, my good priest. You’re labouring in vain. Because I regard such meetings as dangerous, I cannot give you any place for such assemblies. And where will you get the money you need to pay rent and to meet the expenses that care of these vagabonds entails? Let me say again: I cannot allow you to hold these meetings.”

“My Lord Marquis, the results so far convince me that I am not working in vain. Many totally abandoned youngsters have been gathered, freed from dangers, apprenticed to some trade, and are no longer dwelling in the prisons. So far, material support has not been lacking to me. This matter is in God’s hands, who sometimes uses worthless instruments to accomplish his sublime designs.”

“Have patience, and do as I say. I cannot allow such meetings.”

“My Lord Marquis, don’t grant this concession for my sake, but for the good of so many abandoned youngsters who would, most likely, come to a sad end.”

“Quiet! I’m not here to argue. This is a disorder, and I wish to and must put a stop to it. Don’t you know that every meeting is banned, unless held with lawful permission?”

“My meetings have no political scope. I teach catechism to poor boys, and I do so with the archbishop’s permission.”

“Does the archbishop know what is going on?”

“He is fully informed. I have never taken a step without his consent.”

“But I cannot allow these gatherings!”

“I cannot believe, Lord Marquis, that you want to forbid me to teach catechism when my archbishop permits it.”

“And supposing the archbishop were to tell you to drop this ridiculous undertaking of yours, would you put difficulties in the way?”

"None whatsoever. I undertook this work on the advice of my ecclesiastical superior, and I have continued with it. At the least sign from him I would be ready to do his bidding."

"Go. I shall speak with the archbishop. But don't be obstinate in accepting his orders, or I shall be forced to take severe measures which I would prefer not to use."

At this stage of the proceedings, I believed that we would be left in peace for at least a while. Imagine my disappointment, therefore, when I arrived home to find a letter from the Filippi brothers, ordering me out of the place leased to me!

"Your boys," they told me " have killed the grass down to the very roots with their continuous trampling on our field. We are prepared to forgo the rent owing if you are out of the field in two weeks. There can be no extension beyond that."

When my friends got wind of these latest difficulties, many came to advise me to quit. Others, noting my preoccupation and seeing me always surrounded by boys, began to say I had gone mad.

One day, in the presence of Fr Sebastian Pacchiotti²⁵⁰ and others, Doctor Borel suggested to me: "Let's cut our losses now and salvage what we can. Let's send away all the youngsters except for about twenty of the youngest. While we continue to teach catechism to them, God will open the way and opportunity of doing more."

"There's no need to wait for further opportunity" I told them. "The site's ready: a spacious courtyard, a house with many children, a portico, a church, priests, clerics, all at our disposal."

"But where are these things?" Dr Borel broke in.

"I don't know where they are, but they do exist, and they are ours".

²⁵⁰ Pacchiotti Sebastiano (1806-1885), chaplain at the Barolo Work along with Borel and Don Bosco.

At this Dr Borel burst into tears. “Poor Don Bosco,” he exclaimed, “he’s losing his mind.” He took me by the hand, embraced me, and went off with Fr Pacchiotti, leaving me alone in my room.

22. Goodbye to the Refuge – Fresh imputations of insanity

Marchioness Barolo became alarmed by all that was being said about Don Bosco, especially because the city council of Turin were opposed to my projects.

One day she came to my room to speak to me. She began, “I am very pleased with the care you take of my institutions. Thank you for all you have done to introduce in them hymn-singing, plainchant, music, arithmetic, and even the metric system.”

“No thanks necessary. These are duties which priests must perform. God will repay everything. No need to mention it further.”

I wanted to say that I regret very much how your multiple occupations have undermined your health. You cannot possibly continue to direct my works and that of your abandoned boys, especially now when their number has increased beyond counting. I propose to you that from now on you concentrate just on your obligations, that is, the direction of my Little Hospital. You should stop visiting the prisons and the Cottolengo and give up all your care for the youngsters. What do you say to that?”

“My Lady Marchioness, God has helped me up to now and will not fail me in the future. Don’t worry about what should be done. Fr Pacchiotti, Dr Borel, and I will do everything.”

“But I cannot allow you to kill yourself. Whether you like it or not, so many diverse activities are detrimental to your health and my institutions. And then there are the gossip about your mental health and the opposition of the local authorities, which oblige me to advise you ...”

“Advise me to do what, My Lady Marchioness?”

“Give up either the work for boys or the work at the Refuge. Think about it and let me know.”

"I can tell you right now. You have money and will have no trouble in finding as many priests as you want for your institutes. It's not the same with the poor youngsters. If I turn my back on them at his time, all I've been doing for them now will go up in smoke. Therefore, while I will continue to do what I can for the Refuge, I will resign from any regular responsibility and devote myself seriously to the care of abandoned youngsters."

"But how will you be able to live?"

"God has always helped me, and he'll help me also in the future."

"But your health is ruined; you're no longer thinking straight. You'll be engulfed in debt. You'll come to me, and I tell you here and now that I'll never give you a soldo for your boys. Now take my motherly advice. I'll continue to pay your salary, and I'll increase it if you wish. Go away and rest somewhere for a year, three years, five years. When you're back to health, come back to the Refuge and you'll be most welcome. Otherwise you put me in the unpleasant position of having to dismiss you from my institutes. Think it over seriously."

"I've thought it over already, My Lady Marchioness. My life is consecrated to the good of young people. I thank you for the offers you're making me, but I can't turn back from the path which Divine Providence has traced out for me."

"So you prefer your vagabonds to my institutes? In that case, you are dismissed from this moment. This very day I shall arrange for somebody to take your place."

I pointed out to her that such a sudden dismissal would give rise to conjectures that would do neither of us credit. It would be better to act calmly and preserve between us that charity about which we should both have to answer before the Lord's tribunal.

"In that case," she concluded "I give you three months' notice. After that you will leave the direction of my Little Hospital to others."

I accepted my dismissal, abandoning myself to whatever God's plan for me might be.

Meanwhile, the reports that Don Bosco had gone mad were gaining strength. My friends were grieved; others were amused. But they all kept far away from me. The archbishop did not interfere. Fr Cafasso advised me to bide my time; Dr Borel kept quiet. Thus all my helpers left me alone in the midst of about four hundred boys.

At that time some respectable persons wanted to take care of my health. "This Don Bosco," they said amongst themselves "has some fixations which will inevitably end up in madness. Perhaps he would benefit by treatment. Let's take him to the asylum and leave it to them to do whatever they think best." Two of them were appointed to come with a carriage to pick me up and escort me to the asylum. The two emissaries greeted me politely and then inquired about my health, the Oratory, the future building and church; they sighed deeply and exclaimed aloud, "It's true." After that they invited me to go for a drive with them. "A little air will do you good. We have a carriage at hand. We'll go together and have time to converse."

At this point I understood their game, and without letting on that I had them figured out, I walked with them to the carriage, insisting that they get in first and take their places. But instead of getting in there myself, I slammed the door shut and called out to the coachman, "Straight to the asylum with all speed. They're expecting these two priests there."

23. Transfer to the present Oratory of St Francis de Sales in Valdocco

While all this was going on, we came to the last Sunday on which I was allowed to keep the Oratory in the field (March 15, 1846)²⁵¹. I said nothing at all, but everybody knew how troubled and worried I was. On that evening as I ran my eyes over the crowd of children playing, I thought of the rich harvest awaiting my priestly ministry. With no one to help me, my energy gone, my health undermined, with no idea where I could gather my boys in the future, I was very disturbed.

²⁵¹ The event described here happened, probably, the Sunday before, March 8, as we can deduce from a letter of Don Bosco's to the Vicar of the City dated March 13, 1846 (see above, no. 1).

I withdrew to one side, and as I walked alone I began to cry, perhaps for the first time. As I walked I looked up to heaven and cried out, "My God, why don't you show me where you want me to gather these children? Oh, let me know! Oh, show me what I must do."

When I had finished saying this, a man called Pancrazio Soave²⁵² came up. He stammered as he asked me, "Is it true that you're looking for a site for a laboratory?"

"Not a laboratory, but an oratory."

"I don't know the difference between an oratory and a laboratory, but there's a site available. Come and have a look at it. Mr Joseph Pinardi²⁵³, the owner, is an honest man. Come and you'll get a real bargain."

At that very moment my faithful colleague from the seminary, Fr Peter Merla, showed up. He was the founder of a pious work named the *Family of St Peter*²⁵⁴. Filled with zeal for his sacred ministry, he had begun his institute because so many single girls and disgraced women, after suffering imprisonment, found themselves sadly abandoned. For the most part, honest society abhorred them, and they could find neither bread nor employment. When he had a little free time, that worthy priest hastened eagerly to help his friend. Usually he found me alone amongst a mob of boys.

"What's wrong?" he asked as soon as he saw me. "I've never seen you so down. Has something bad happened?"

"Misfortune, no. But I'm in a real predicament. Today is the last day on which I'm allowed to use this field. It's evening already, two [hours] to

²⁵² Pancrazio Soave: businessman who rented the Pinardi house from November 10, 1845 (cf. F. GIRAUDI, *L'Oratorio di don Bosco...*, p. 66).

²⁵³ He should have said Francesco Pinardi. He bought the house on July 14 1845 from the Filippi Brothers; on Nov. 10 the same year he let it to Pancrazio Soave, except for the shed "being built behind the house", and the land around it; (cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica...*, p. 75).

²⁵⁴ Pietro Merla (1815-1855), Don Bosco's companion in the seminary; chaplain of the female prisons; in 1848 he founded the *Ritiro di San Pietro* (also called the *Family of St Peter*) to take in women who had come out of prison.

nightfall. I have to tell my sons where to assemble next Sunday, and I don't know where. This friend here says he knows of a place that might do. Can you keep an eye on the recreation for a while? I'll go take a look, and I'll be back before long."

When I reached the place indicated, I saw a shabby little two-storey house with a worm-eaten wooden stairway and balcony. All round were gardens, pastures, and fields. I was about to climb the stairs, but Pinardi and Pancrazio stopped me.

"No," they told me. "The place we have in mind for you is here at the back" There was a long shed; one side of its roof leaned against the wall of the house, and the other ended about three feet above the ground. If it were necessary, it could be used as a woodshed, but not much else. To get into it I had to bend my head so as not to bump against the ceiling.

"I can't use it," I said "it's too low."

"I'll fix it to suit your needs," Pinardi graciously suggested. "I'll dig it out, I'll make steps, I'll put in a new floor. I really would like you to establish your laboratory here."

"Not a laboratory, but an oratory, a little church where I can bring together some youngsters."

"Better still. I'll gladly help with the work myself. Let's draw up a contract. I can sing too, so I'll come along and give a hand. I'll bring two chairs, one for me and one for my wife. And I have a lamp at home, too; I'll bring that as well." The good man seemed to be beside himself with joy at having a church in his house.

"Thank you, my good friend," I said "for your kindness and goodwill. I accept these generous offers. If you can lower the floor at least a foot (20 in.), I'll take it. But what's your price."

"Three hundred francs. I have better offers but I prefer yours because you're going to use the place for the public good and religious purposes."

"I'll give you three hundred and twenty if you'll throw in the strip of ground round the house as a playground for the boys, and if I can bring my kids here as soon as next Sunday."

"I understand. It's a deal. Come, by all means. Everything will be ready."

I made no more demands. I ran right back to my boys. I gathered them round me and began to shout in a loud voice, "Great news, my sons! We've got a place for our Oratory, a more reliable one than we've had till now. We'll have a church, a sacristy, classrooms, and a place to play. Sunday, next Sunday, we'll go to our new Oratory, which is over there in Pinardi's house." And I pointed the place out to them.

Wild enthusiasm greeted this announcement. Some ran around shouting and jumping for joy; some stood stock still; some raised their voices, I would say, to yelling and screaming. They were moved like people who feel so intensely happy that they cannot express their feelings. Overcome with deep gratitude, we thanked the holy Virgin for hearing and answering the prayers which we had made to her that very morning at Our Lady of the Fields. Now we knelt for the last time in that field and said the holy rosary. After that, everyone went home. Thus we said good-bye to that place which each of us had loved out of necessity, but which each of us, hoping for something better, left behind without regret.

On the following Sunday, April 12, which was Easter Sunday, all the church furniture and the equipment for recreation were brought there, and we went to take possession of our new place.

Third decade 1846-1855

1. The new church

Even though this new church was really a hovel, still, since we held our lease by a formal contract, we were freed from the anxiety and the grievous inconvenience of having to move so often from one place to another. To me it seemed then truly to be the place of which I had dreamed and seen written:

Haec est domus mea, inde gloria mea. Heaven, however, had other plans. The house close beside us caused no little difficulty: it was a house of ill fame; and there were difficulties from the Gardener's Inn, now called the Bellezza House²⁵⁵, where all the good-time Charlies of the city congregated, especially on feast days. Nevertheless, we were able to overcome all the problems and began to hold our meetings regularly.

When our work was done, the archbishop on April [10] granted the faculty of blessing and consecrating that humble building for divine worship. That was done on Sunday April [12], 1846. To show his satisfaction the archbishop renewed the faculty already granted while we were at the Refuge to have sung Masses; to offer triduums, novenas, and retreats; to admit to confirmation and to holy communion; and to certify *that all those who regularly attended our programme had fulfilled their Easter duty.*

A regular meeting place, the signs of the archbishop's approval, our solemn ceremonies, the music, the noise from our play garden attracted children from all directions. Several priests began to drift back. Amongst those who helped in our work should be noted Dr Joseph Trivero, Dr Hyacinth Carpano, Dr John Vola, Dr Robert Murialdo²⁵⁶, and the intrepid Dr Borel.

This is how we arranged our functions. The church was opened early in the morning on holy days, and we heard confessions until it was time for Mass, which was scheduled for eight o'clock. Often, because there were so many for confession, Mass had to be put off till nine or even later. One of the priests, when they were present, assisted, and the prayers were recited in alternating choirs. Those who were prepared went to holy communion during Mass. When Mass was over and the vestments put away, I stood up on a low rostrum to explain the gospel. Then this was changed in order to begin

²⁵⁵ It was a tavern, in the house belonging to Mrs Teresa Caterina Novo, widow Bellezza, a few metres from the Pinardi house.

²⁵⁶ Young priests, friends of Don Bosco's, involved in pastoral and social activity. Giuseppe Trivero (1816-1894); Giacinto Carpano (1821-1894), who from 1847 to 1852 would run the St Aloysius Oratory; Giovanni Vola (1806-1872) collaborator and successor to Fr Pietro Merla; Roberto Murialdo (1815-1882), Royal chaplain, would be director of the Guardian Angel Oratory from 1849.

a regular presentation of Bible history. These narratives were presented in simple and popular language, vividly portraying the customs of the times, the places, the [ancient] geographical names with their [modern] counterparts. This pleased very much the youngest, the adults, and even the priests who were present. After the instruction, there were classes till noon.

At one o'clock in the afternoon, recreation began, with bocce, stilts, rifles, wooden swords, and our first gymnastics equipment. At two-thirty we started catechism. On the whole, ignorance abounded. Many times I began to sing the *Ave Maria*, but not one of the approximately four hundred youngsters present could continue if I stopped.

After catechism was over, since we were not yet able to sing vespers, we recited the rosary. Later we began to sing *Ave Maris Stella*, then the *Magnificat*, then the *Dixit*, and on to the other psalms, and finally an antiphon. In the space of a year, we had become capable of singing the whole vespers of Our Lady.

These practices were followed by a short sermon, usually a story in which some virtue or vice was personified. It all concluded with the singing of the litanies and with benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

When we came out of church, there was a period of free time for each to do as he pleased. Some continued their catechism class, some practised their singing, some worked at their reading. Most of them, however, jumped about, ran, and enjoyed themselves in various games and pastimes. All those exploits of jumping, running, juggling, tightrope walking, stick balancing that I had learned long before from acrobats, were practised under my instruction. In this way I could control that crowd, which, in the main, could be described thus: "*Sicut equus et mulus, quibus non est intellectus*"²⁵⁷. Like a horse or a mule, without understanding."

I must say, however, that despite their great ignorance I always admired the great respect they had for everything in church and for the sacred ministers, and their eagerness to learn more about their religion.

²⁵⁷ Cf. Ps 31:9.

I made use of that unorganised recreation period to introduce my pupils quietly to thoughts of religion and use of the holy sacraments. To one I might, with a word in the ear, recommend to be more obedient, to be more prompt in attending to his duty; to another I would suggest regular attendance at catechism, or at confession, or so on. In this way these play periods provided me with an opportune means of making personal contact with a crowd of youngsters who, on Saturday evening or Sunday morning, would willingly come for confession.

Sometimes I would even call them away from their games to lead them to confession when I had seen some resistance to that important obligation. I will mention one case out of many. One youngster had been constantly reminded about his Easter duty. Every Sunday he promised to do it, but then he never kept his word. One feast day when our devotions were over, he was in the thick of the games, running and jumping everywhere and bathed in perspiration, his face flushed; he no longer knew whether he was in this world or in the other. I stopped him in his tracks and asked him to help me with something in the sacristy. He wanted to come just as he was, in shirt sleeves. “No” I told him, “put on your jacket and come.” When we got to the sacristy, I led him to the apse and said, “Kneel on this *priedieu*.” He did, but he wanted to move the kneeler.

“No,” I replied “leave everything as it is.”

“Then what do you want me to do?”

“Make your confession.”

“I’m not ready.”

“I know.”

“What then?”

“Then get ready, and I’ll hear your confession.”

“Fine, that’s fine,” he exclaimed “I really need it. You did well to catch me like this; otherwise I wouldn’t have come, out of fear of my companions.”

While he prepared, I read part of my breviary. Then he made a good confession and a devout thanksgiving. From that time on, he was always

amongst the most diligent boys in fulfilling his religious duties. He used to tell the story to his companions, concluding thus: "Don Bosco used a clever stratagem to cage the blackbird."

As night fell, we all returned to church when the bell rang. There we said a few prayers or recited the rosary and the Angelus, and everything ended with the singing of the "Praised for ever be."

As they left the church, I went in their midst and accompanied them while they sang and shouted. When we reached the Rondò, we would sing a verse from some hymn. Then I would invite them back for the following Sunday, and with a loud chorus of "good nights" all round, each went his way.

Quite unusual was the scene of the departure from the Oratory. As they came out of church, each would wish the others good night a thousand times without making any move to leave his companions. "Off home with you," I would urge them repeatedly. "It's getting late. Your people are waiting for you." To no avail. I had to let them gather round. Six of the strongest made a kind of seat by linking hands, and on this improvised throne I had to sit. Then they organised a procession, carrying Don Bosco over the heads of the tallest boys on that platform of arms, and wended their way with laughter, song, and yelling to the roundabout commonly called the Rondò. There they sang some more hymns and ended with a solemn rendition of "Praised for ever be." When they finally settled into a deep silence, I was able to wish them all a good night and a happy week. They all answered as loud as they could, "Good night." And then I was let down from my throne. Each headed for his own family, while some of the oldest accompanied me as far as my home; I would be half dead with fatigue.

2. Cavour again – City council – Police

In spite of the order, discipline, and tranquillity that reigned in the Oratory, Marquis Cavour, vicar of the city, demanded that our assemblies, which he claimed were dangerous, come to an end. Knowing that I had always proceeded with the consent of the archbishop, he called a city council meeting at the archbishop's residence because that prelate was rather ill just then.

The city council was a select group of municipal department heads. In their hands rested the whole power of the civil administration. The council's head, called the council president, the first councillor, or also the vicar of the city, was more powerful than the mayor²⁵⁸.

Said the archbishop: "When I saw all those dignitaries assembled in that hall, I thought I was at the last judgement." There was much discussion for and against, but in the end they decided that these meetings absolutely should be blocked and dispersed because they threatened public order.

One member of the council was Count Joseph Provana of Collegno, our outstanding benefactor. At that time he was comptroller general, or minister of finance, in King Charles Albert's government. Many times he had sent me donations both on his own behalf and on behalf of our sovereign. This prince was very pleased to hear all about the Oratory. When we had a celebration of any kind he would gladly read the account which I would send him in writing, or which Count Collegno would give him orally. Many a time he informed me how much he esteemed this kind of priestly ministry, comparing it to work in the foreign missions. He expressed a sincere wish that every city and province in his kingdom should establish similar institutions. At New Year's, he always used to send me a subsidy of 300 lire with this greeting: "For Don Bosco's little rascals."

When he found that the council was threatening to ban our meetings, he charged Count Collegno to communicate his will in these words: "It is my wish that these assemblies be promoted and protected. If there is danger of disorders, ways should be studied to forestall them and prevent them."

The count had listened in silence to the whole lively debate. When he observed that they were resolved on the banning order and final break-up, he got to his feet and requested the floor. He conveyed the sovereign's wishes and let them know that the king meant to protect that microscopic work.

²⁵⁸ Government of Turin City was entrusted to two bodies, one a restricted group, the *Civic administration or Council* (2 mayors, 1 treasurer, 6 councillors and 1 secretary), and a larger group, the *decurion* (comprising the Council or 50 others).

These words silenced the vicar and silenced the city council. Without delay the vicar ordered me to appear again, continued his menacing tone, and told me I was obstinate. He concluded with these well-meant words: "I have no wish to harm anybody. You work with good intentions, but what you're doing is fraught with danger. Since I have a duty to safeguard public order, I'm going to send men to watch you and your meetings. Should the slightest thing compromise you, I'll immediately scatter your rascals; and you shall be accountable to me for anything that might occur."

Perhaps it was pressure he was subject to, perhaps it was some illness he was battling. In fact, that was the last time that Vicar Cavour went to city hall. He was stricken with very painful gout, and within a few months he was dead.

But for the six months that he lived, every Sunday he sent some agents or policemen to spend the whole day with us, watching all that was said or done in church or outside it.

"Well," Marquis Cavour said to one of these guards "what did you see and hear in the midst of that rabble?"

"Lord Marquis, we saw a huge crowd of boys enjoying themselves in a thousand ways. In church we heard some hair-raising sermons. They said so many things about hell and devils that it made me want to go to confession."

"And what about politics?"

"Politics weren't even mentioned. Those boys wouldn't understand anything about politics. Now if you were to start a discussion about bread and butter, that is a subject each of them would be qualified to speak about."

When Cavour died, no one else at city hall bothered us. In fact, whenever there has been an occasion the Turin authorities were always favourable to us until 1877.

3. Sunday and evening classes

At St Francis of Assisi, I was already conscious of the need for some kind of school. Some children who are already advanced in years are still completely ignorant of the truths of the faith. For these, verbal instruction would prove

long and mostly tedious. They quickly would stop coming. We did try to give them some lessons, but we were beaten by lack of space and of teachers ready to help us. At the Refuge and later at the Moretta house, we started a regular Sunday school, and when we came to Valdocco we also started a regular night school²⁵⁹. As we wanted to get some good result, we took just one subject at a time. For example, one or two Sundays were devoted to going over and over the alphabet and the structure of syllables. Then we started right off on the small catechism and, syllable by syllable, pupils were taught to read one or two of the first catechism questions. That served as a lesson for the week. The following Sunday that work was reviewed and a few more questions and answers were added. In this way in about eight weeks I could succeed in getting some to read and study on their own a whole page of catechism. This was a great time-saver. With the other method, the older boys would have had to come to catechism for some years before they could be properly prepared just for confession.

The Sunday school project was a boon to many. But that was not enough: not a few of the slower pupils forgot what they had learned the previous Sunday. It was then that we introduced night courses. We had begun them at the Refuge, put them on a more regular basis at the Moretta house, and better yet as soon as we had our established place at Valdocco.

The night courses brought two good results. They inspired the youngsters to come to learn to read, which they realised was very important. At the same time, these classes gave us an excellent opportunity to instruct them in religion, which was the object of our concern.

But where could I find so many teachers, when almost every day brought the need of adding new classes?

To meet this need, I myself began to give lessons to some youngsters from the city. I taught Italian, Latin, French, and arithmetic without a fee. In return they were obliged to help me teach catechism and run the Sunday and night schools. These young teachers of mine, at first numbering eight or ten, continued to increase. This is how our academic programme started.

²⁵⁹ Northern outskirts of the city, then market gardens, and where the work of Barolo and Cottolengo were located.

When I was still at the St Francis of Assisi Institute, amongst my students was John Coriasco, who is now a master carpenter. Felix Vergnano is now a dealer in ribbons and braids. Paul Delfino is now a technical instructor. At the Refuge was Anthony Melanotte, who now has a spice shop. John Melanotte is a confectioner. Felix Ferrero is a broker. Peter Ferrero is a compositor. John Piola has his own carpentry shop. There were others too: Louis Genta, Victor Mogna, and others who came only once in a while. I had to spend a lot of time and money, and as a general rule the bulk of them let me down when I needed them.

To these I can add other pious gentlemen from Turin. Mr Joseph Gagliardi, a dealer in knick-knacks; Joseph Fino, in the same business; Victor Kitner, a jeweler; and others were dependable. Priests used to help me especially by celebrating holy Mass, preaching, and teaching catechism to the more mature young men.

Books presented a major problem because when we had worked through the short catechism we had no other textbooks. I took a look at all the little Bible Histories which were used in the schools. None of them suited my need. Lack of a popular style, unsuitable stories, and long or outdated questions were common defects. Many events were presented in a fashion dangerous to the morality of the youngsters. All of them failed to focus on points that should serve as the foundation for the truths of our faith. The same could be said of facts referring to external worship, purgatory, confession, the Eucharist, and the like.

With a view to providing for this area in education that the times absolutely demanded, I set about compiling a Bible History I aimed for a simple and popular style, free of the defects already mentioned. That was my reason for writing and publishing the text called *Bible History for use in schools*²⁶⁰. I could not guarantee an elegant production, but I worked entirely with the good intention of helping young people.

²⁶⁰ Giovanni BOSCO, *Storia sacra per uso delle scuole utile ad ogni stato di persone*. Torino, Speirani e Ferrero 1847 (OE III, 2-212).

After a few months of school, we gave a public exhibition of our feast day teaching. The pupils were questioned on all of Bible history, on the geography of the Bible, and all the related questions. Present as spectators were the distinguished Fr Aporti²⁶¹, Boncompagni, Dr Peter Baricco, professor Joseph Rayneri²⁶²; all applauded the experiment.

The success of the Sunday and night courses encouraged us to introduce arithmetic and art to our classes in reading and writing. These schools were the first of their kind in these parts. Everybody talked of them as a great innovation. We often had visits from professors and other persons of distinction. Even the city sent a deputation under the direction of Comm. Joseph Duprè²⁶³ to see for themselves if the results of our night school were as good as they were reported to be. They themselves examined the boys in pronunciation, arithmetic, and recitation. They found it hard to explain [how young men] who were illiterate until they were 18 and even 20 years of age had progressed so well in manners and instruction in a few [months]. After seeing such a great number of young adults gathering at night to go to school instead of roaming the streets, those gentlemen left full of enthusiasm. When they reported back to the full city council, an annual prize of three hundred francs was assigned to the Oratory. This prize was given every year up to 1878 when, for some reason that could never be learned, it was withheld and given to another institute.

At that time, Chev. Gonella²⁶⁴, whose zeal and charity are leaving a glorious and imperishable memory in Turin, was director of the work called the *Schools*

²⁶¹ Ferrante Aporti (1791-1858), priest and pedagogue, the first in Italy to open infant schools (1828). In 1848 he sought refuge in Turin where he became a Senator, President of the University Council, Commission for Secondary Schools and inspector general for the infant schools.

²⁶² Carlo Boncompagni (1804-1880), magistrate, pedagogue and politician. Pietro Baricco (1819-1887), priest, member of the Turin city council and headmaster of two important schools, the Liceo Gioberti and the Liceo Cavour. Giovanni (not Giuseppe) Antonio Rayneri (1810-1867), priest, professor of anthropology and pedagogy at the University of Turin, cf. José MANUEL *Prelezzo*, *G. A. Rayneri negli scritti pedagogici dei salesiani*, in "Orientamenti pedagogici" 40 (1993) 1039-1063.

²⁶³ Giuseppe Luigi Duprè (died 1884), banker, city councillor, administrator of various charitable works.

²⁶⁴ Andrea Gonella (1770-1851), banker and industrialist (textiles). His son Marco Guglielmo (1822-1886), enthusiastic supporter of Don Bosco's, became a Salesian Cooperator.

*for the Poor*²⁶⁵. He often came to visit us, and a year later (1847) he introduced the same kind of schools and the same methods in the work entrusted to him. And when he reported everything to the administrators of that work, in full session they voted an award of a thousand francs for our schools. The city government followed his example, and within a few years night schools were established in all the principal cities of Piedmont.

Another need showed up: a prayer book suitable for the times. There is no shortage of prayer books which have been put together by excellent people and are available to everyone. But, on the whole, these books were written for educated people, for adults, and most of them could be used by Catholics, Jews, or Protestants. Seeing how insidious heresy was spreading quietly every day, I undertook to compile a book suitable for the young, adapted to their religious ideas, based on the Bible, and setting out the foundations of the Catholic religion clearly and concisely. This was *The Companion of Youth*²⁶⁶.

I had to do the same thing to teach arithmetic and the metric system. True, the metric system did not become obligatory until 1850, but it was introduced in the schools in 1846. Though it was introduced by law in the schools, there were in fact no textbooks. I supplied this need with a booklet entitled *The Metric System Simplified*²⁶⁷, etc.

4. *Illness – Recovery – Planning to stay at Valdocco*

My many commitments in the prisons, the Cottolengo Hospital, the Refuge, the Oratory, and the schools meant I had to work at night to compile

²⁶⁵ *Opera della Mendicità Istruita*: Schools for the Poor: charitable institute in Turin, founded in 1743 to educate poor youth. It managed 15 primary schools for boys, 12 for girls in the poorest parts of the city.

²⁶⁶ Cf. no. 184.

²⁶⁷ Giovanni BOSCO, *Il sistema metrico decimale ridotto a semplicità preceduto dalle prime operazioni dell'aritmetica ad uso degli artigiani e della gente di campagna*. Torino, G. B. Paravia e Comp. 1849 (OE IV, 1-80). The shift from the old system of weights and measures to the new metric decimal system, established by Royal Decree (September 11, 1845), came into force on January 1, 1850.

the booklets that I absolutely needed²⁶⁸. On account of that, my already frail health deteriorated to such a degree that the doctors advised me to stop all my activities. Doctor Borel, who loved me dearly, for my own good sent me to spend some time with the parish priest of Sassi²⁶⁹. I rested during the week and went back to work at the Oratory on Sunday. But that was not enough. The youngsters came in crowds to see me; the boys from the village came too. So I was busier than in Turin, while I was causing a great deal of inconvenience to my little friends.

Not only those who attended the Oratory hastened, one could say, every day, to Sassi, but also the pupils of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. This episode is one of many. A retreat was being preached to the students in the St Barbara Schools²⁷⁰ which were under the care of these same religious. As I was confessor to a great number of the boys, they came in a body to the Oratory looking for me at the end of the retreat. Not finding me there, they set out at once for Sassi, two and a half miles from Turin. It was raining. The boys were not sure of the way and went wandering about the fields, meadows, and vineyards looking for Don Bosco. Eventually about four hundred of them, all worn out by their hike and by hunger, bathed in perspiration and covered with dirt, and mud too, showed up and asked to go to confession. “We’ve made the retreat,” they said “and we want to be good. We all want to make a general confession. So we got our teachers’ permission to come here.” They were told to return at once to their college in order to keep their teachers and families from worrying, but they insisted that they wanted to go to confession.

²⁶⁸ As well as the *Bible History, the Companion of Youth, the Metric decimal system*, over those years Don Bosco published others: *Historical sketch on the life of Louis Comollo* (1844, in OE I, 1-84); *The devotee of the Guardian Angel* (1845, in OE I, 87-158); *Church History for use in schools* (1845, in OE I, 160-556); *Exercise of devotion to God’s mercy* (1847, in OE II, 71-181); *The Christian guided by virtue and civilisation according to the spirit of St Vincent de Paul* (1848, in OE III, 215-503).

²⁶⁹ Dr (Fr) Pietro Abbondioli (1812-1893). Sassi is about 4 km from Turin city centre, on the right bank of the river Po.

²⁷⁰ Primary schools run by the de la Salle Brothers, located near the old cittadella beside St Barbara’s parish.

The local school master, the parish priest, his assistant, and I heard as many as we could, but we would have needed at least fifteen confessors.

But how to restore, or rather to appease, the appetite of that multitude? That good parish priest (it was Dr Abbondioli) gave those pilgrims all the food he had: bread, polenta, beans, rice, potatoes, cheese, fruit—everything was prepared [cooked] and served up to them.

Imagine the consternation when the preachers, teachers, and some prominent persons invited for the closing of the retreat arrived for Mass and the general communion and found not one pupil in the college! It was a real mess. Measures were taken to ensure that it would never happen again.

Back home again, I collapsed [fainted] and was carried to my bed. I had bronchitis, combined with coughing and violent inflammation. A week later, I was judged to be at death's door. I had received holy Viaticum and the anointing of the sick. I think that just then I was ready to die. I was sorry to abandon my youngsters, but I was happy that before I departed I had given a solid foundation to the Oratory.

When the news spread that my illness was grave, the show of widespread, serious regret could not have been greater. Constant streams of tearful youngsters came knocking at the door to inquire about my health. The more they were told, the more they wanted to know. I heard the conversations between them and the housekeeper, and I was deeply moved by them. I heard later what their affection for me had moved them to do. Without prompting they prayed, fasted, went to Masses, and received holy communions. In turns they prayed all night and day for me before the image of Our Lady of Consolation. In the morning they lit special candles for me, and until the late evening large numbers were always praying and imploring the august Mother of God to preserve their poor Don Bosco.

Some made vows to recite the whole rosary for a month, others for a year, some for their whole lives. There were some who promised to fast on bread and water for months, years, and even their whole lives. I know that some bricklayer apprentices fasted on bread and water for entire weeks, without

lessening from morning to evening their heavy work. In fact, when they had any bit of free time they rushed to spend it before the Most Blessed Sacrament.

God heard their prayers. It was a Saturday evening, and it was believed that it would be the last night of my life. So said the doctors who came to see me, and so was I convinced myself. I had no strength left because of a continuous loss of blood. Late in the night I grew drowsy and slept. When I woke I was out of danger. Next morning when Doctor Botta and Doctor Cafasso²⁷¹ examined me, they told me go thank Our Lady of Consolation for the grace received.

My boys could not believe it if they did not see me. They saw me in fact soon after, when I went with my walking stick to the Oratory. The emotion can be imagined but not easily described. A *Te Deum* was sung. There were a thousand acclamations and indescribable enthusiasm.

One of the first things to be done was to change into something manageable all the vows and promises which many had made without due thought when my life was in danger.

This illness overtook me at the beginning of July 1846, just at the time I was due to leave the Refuge and move elsewhere.

I went home to Murialdo to spend some months of convalescence with my family. I would have stayed longer there in my home town, but the youngsters began to turn up in crowds to see me, indicating that it was no longer possible to enjoy either rest or tranquillity. Everyone advised me to get away from Turin for a few years and go to some unknown place to recover my former health. Fr Cafasso and the archbishop were of this opinion. But that seemed too drastic to me; it was agreed that I could return to the Oratory provided that for a couple of years I would refrain from hearing confessions and preaching. I disobeyed. When I got back to the Oratory, I continued to work as before, and for 27 years I had no need of either doctors or medicine. This leads me to believe that work does no damage to bodily health.

²⁷¹ Giovanni Botta and Gaetano Cafasso were doctors who looked after the city's poor.

5. *Permanent residence at the Valdocco Oratory*

After convalescing for several months at home, I felt I could return to my beloved sons. Every day many of them were coming to see me or were writing to me, urging me to come back to them soon. But where could I find lodging? I had been sent away from the Refuge. What means did I have to keep my work going, work that was daily becoming more demanding and expensive? How was I to support myself and the persons who were indispensable to me?

At that time, two rooms fell vacant in the Pinardi house, and these were rented as a dwelling for me and my mother.

"Mother," I said to her one day "I should take up residence in Valdocco, but considering the people who live in that house, I can't take anyone with me but you. She knew what I was hinting at and replied straightaway, "If you think such a move is God's will, I'm ready to go right now." My mother made a great sacrifice. At home, even though we were not well off, she was in charge of everything, everyone loved her, and to young and old she was a queen.

We sent ahead some of the more necessary items, and together with my things from the Refuge, these were delivered at our new lodgings. My mother filled a hamper with linen and other things we would need. I took my breviary, a missal, and some of the more important [books] and copybooks. This was our entire fortune. On foot, we set out from Becchi towards Turin. We made a short stop at Chieri, and on the evening of November 3, 1846, we arrived at Valdocco.

When my mother laid eyes on those barren rooms, she said jokingly, "At home I had so many worries about administration and direction. Here I'll be much more at ease: I have nothing to manage, nobody to command."

But how were we to live? What were we to eat? How could we pay the rent and supply the needs of the many children who constantly asked for bread, shoes, clothes, or shirts, which they needed to go to work? From home we had brought some wine, corn, beans, wheat, and so forth. To meet initial expenses, I had sold some pieces of land and a vineyard. My mother sent for her wedding trousseau, which up to then she had jealously preserved intact.

From some of her dresses we made chasubles; from the linen we made amices, purifiers, surplices, albs, and altar cloths. Everything passed through the hands of Mrs. Margaret Gastaldi²⁷², who since then has helped look after the needs of the Oratory.

My mother also had a little gold necklace and some rings; they were quickly sold to buy braid and trimmings for the sacred vestments. My mother was always in good humour. One evening, she laughingly sang to me: “*Woe to the world if it should learn / We’re just penniless strangers!*”

When our domestic affairs were somewhat organised, I rented another room, which was intended for a sacristy. As we lacked classrooms, for the time being we had to use the kitchen or my room. But the students—prime little rascals—either destroyed everything or put everything topsy-turvy. When we started, some classes met in the sacristy, in the apse, or in other parts of the church. But the noise, the singing, the coming and going of one group disturbed whatever the other groups were trying to do. After a few months, we were able to rent two other rooms and so organise our night classes better. As was said above, during the winter of 1846-7(1) we got excellent scholastic results. Let it be remembered that the first night school set up in Turin was the one opened at the Moretta house in 1845. We could take only two hundred students into three rooms or classes. The good results from the school prompted us to re-open it the following year as soon as we had fixed quarters in Valdocco.

6. Regulations for the Oratories – St Aloysius Sodality – Visit by Archbishop Fransoni

When we got firmly settled at Valdocco, I gave my full attention to promoting the things that could work to preserve our unity of spirit, discipline, and administration.

In the first place, I drew up a set of regulations in which I simply set down what was being done at the Oratory, and the standard way in which things

²⁷² Margherita Volpati Gastaldi (1790-1868), mother of the future archbishop of Turin, Lorenzo Gastaldi.

ought to be done. Since this has been printed elsewhere, anyone can read it as he wishes²⁷³. This little Rule brought this notable advantage: Everybody knew what was expected of him, and since I used to let each one be responsible for his own charge, each took care to know and to perform his appointed duties. Many bishops and parish priests asked for copies, studied them, and adopted them when they introduced the work of the oratories to the cities and villages of their respective dioceses.

When the framework for the smooth running and administration of the Oratory had been set up, it was necessary to encourage piety by means of a set of standard practices. We did this by starting the St Aloysius Sodality. The Regulations were drawn up in a style that I believed suitable for young people. I sent them to the archbishop. Having read them, he passed them on to others who studied them and then reported back to him. He praised and approved them, and he granted special indulgences on [April 12, 1847]. These Regulations can be read elsewhere.²⁷⁴

The St Aloysius Sodality caused great enthusiasm amongst our youngsters: they all wanted to enrol in it. Two conditions were demanded for membership: good example in and out of church; and avoidance of bad talk and frequent reception of the holy sacraments. A very notable improvement in behaviour was soon evident.

To encourage all the boys to celebrate the six Sundays in honour of St Aloysius²⁷⁵ we bought a statue of the saint and had a banner made. The boys were given the opportunity of going to confession at any time of day, evening, or night. Because hardly any of them had yet been confirmed, they were prepared to receive that sacrament on the feast of St Aloysius. What a

²⁷³ The Regulations were published right at the time he was writing the *Memoirs: Regolamento dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales per gli esterni*. Torino, Tipografia Salesiana 1877 (OE XXIX, 31-94); cf. no. 180.

²⁷⁴ Cf. no. 206.

²⁷⁵ The *pious practice of the six Sundays in honour of St Aloysius Gonzaga* came about through Jesuit colleges with the aim of encouraging the pupils to imitate the Saint's virtues; published in the *Companion of Youth* (cf. no. 184, pp. 722-731).

crowd! With the help of various priests and gentlemen (1) however, they were prepared and all was in readiness for the saint's feast day.

It was the first time that celebrations of this kind were held at the Oratory, and it was also the first time the archbishop came to visit us.

In front of our little church was erected a kind of pavilion under which we received the archbishop. I read something appropriate for the occasion. Then some of the boys put on a little comedy entitled *Napoleon's Corporal*. It was just a caricature of a corporal who, to express his surprise at that solemnity, came out with a thousand pleasantries. That made the prelate laugh a great deal and he really enjoyed it; he said that he had never laughed so much in his life. He responded very kindly to all, expressing the great consolation which our institution gave him. He praised us and encouraged us to persevere and thanked us for the cordial welcome which we had given him.

He celebrated holy Mass and gave holy communion to more than three hundred youngsters; then he administered the sacrament of confirmation.

It was on that occasion that the archbishop, just as the mitre was being put on his head, forgot that he was not in the cathedral; he raised his head too quickly and banged into the church ceiling. That amused him and all those present. He often used to relate this incident with pleasure, thus recalling our meetings. Father Rosmini²⁷⁶ said that it reminded him of similar happenings in the countries and churches of the foreign missions.

I must add that two canons from the cathedral and many other churchmen came to assist the archbishop at these sacred ceremonies. When the ceremony ended, we wrote a record of the event, noting who had administered the sacrament and the name of the sponsor, and the place and day. Then the certificates were collected, sorted according to the various parishes, and passed on to the diocesan chancery to be sent to the parish priests concerned.

²⁷⁶ Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855), one of the most important Italian philosophers of the 1800s; theologian, pedagogue and master of spirituality; in 1828 he founded the *Institute of Charity*, congregation of simple vows. His philosophical and political writings aroused enthusiasm and debate to the extent that they were censured. He had excellent relations with Don Bosco whom he helped financially. He was beatified on November 18, 2007.

7. *The start of the hospice – first boys admitted*

While we worked to set up ways of supplying instructions in religion and literacy, another crying need became evident; it was urgent to make some provision for it. Many youngsters from Turin and migrants [were] quite willing to try to live hard-working and moral lives; but when they were encouraged to begin, they used to answer that they had no bread, no clothing, and no shelter where they could stay at least for a while. To accommodate at least some of those who in the evening knew not where to go, a hay loft had been made ready where they could spend the night on a bit of straw. But some of them repeatedly made off with the sheets, others with the blankets, and in the end even the straw itself was stolen and sold.

Now it happened that late one rainy evening in May [1847] a lad of fifteen showed up soaked to the skin. He asked for bread and shelter. My mother took him into the kitchen and put him near the fire; while he warmed himself and dried his clothes, she fed him a bowl of soup and some bread.

As he ate, I asked him whether he had gone to school, whether he had family, and what kind of work he did. "I'm a poor orphan" he answered me. "I've come from the Sesia Valley²⁷⁷ to look for work. I had three francs with me, but I spent them all before I could earn anything. Now I have nothing left and no one to turn to."

"Have you been admitted to first communion?"

"I haven't been admitted yet."

"And confirmation?"

"I haven't received it yet."

"Have you been to confession?"

"I've gone a few times."

"Now where do you want to go?"

²⁷⁷ Valle di Sesia (Valsesia): Eastern area in Piedmont, with the Sesia river running through it, down from the eastern slopes of Mount Rosa; the most important city is Varallo 120 km from Turin.

“I don’t know. For charity’s sake, let me stay in some corner of your house tonight.”

At this point he broke down and cried. My mother cried with him. I was moved.

“If I could be sure you weren’t a thief, I would try to put you up. But other boys stole some of the blankets, and you might take the rest of them.”

“Oh no, Sir. You needn’t worry about that. I’m poor, but I’ve never stolen anything.”

“If you wish,” replied my mother “I will put him up for tonight, and tomorrow God will provide.”

“Where?” I asked.

“Here in the kitchen.”

“You’re risking even your pots.”

“I’ll see that it doesn’t happen.”

“Go ahead, then.”

The good woman, helped by the little orphan, went out and collected some bricks. With these she built four little pillars in the kitchen. On them she laid some boards and threw a straw mattress on top, thereby making the first bed in the Oratory. My good mother gave the boy a little talk on the necessity of work, of trustworthiness, and of religion. Finally she invited him to say his prayers.

“I don’t know any,” he answered.

“You can say them with us,” she told him. And so he did.

That all might be secure, the kitchen was locked, and opened only in the morning.

This was the first youngster at our hospice. Very soon we had a companion for him, and then others. But during that year, lack of space prevented us from taking more than two. It was the year 1847.

Convinced that for many children every effort would prove useless unless they were offered shelter, I set about renting more and more rooms, even though the cost was exorbitant.

Thus, besides the hospice, we were also able to start our school of plainchant and vocal music. Since it was the first time (1845) that public music lessons were offered, the first time that music was taught in class to many pupils at the same time, there was a huge crowd.

The renowned musicians Louis Rossi, Joseph Bianchi, Cerutti, and Canon Louis Nasi²⁷⁸ came and *attended* eagerly every evening my classes [as observers]. This contradicted the Gospel dictum that the disciple is not above his teacher: there was I, not knowing a millionth of what those illustrious men knew, playing the master amongst them. They came to see how the new method was applied, the same method which is practised today in our houses. In times past, any pupil who wished to learn music had to find a teacher to give him individual lessons.

8. *St Aloysius Oratory – Moretta house – Seminary land*

In proportion to our efforts to extend our schools and provide instruction, the number of our pupils increased. On feast days, only some of the pupils could fit into the chapel for the ceremonies or into the playground for games. Then, always in agreement with Dr Borel, to meet this growing need a second oratory was opened in another quarter of the city. For this purpose, we rented a small house at Porta Nuova²⁷⁹ on Viale del Re, commonly called the Avenue of the Plane Trees after the trees lining the street

To secure that house, we had to engage in a very fierce battle with the inhabitants. It was occupied by a group of washerwomen who believed that

²⁷⁸ Luigi Felice Rossi (1805-1863), the most outstanding of Turin's musicians at the time; Giuseppe Bianchi (1827-1899), organist and composer; Luigi Nasi (1821-1897), theologian, musician, canon of the Turin cathedral.

²⁷⁹ Porta Nuova: recently expanded commercial and residential area where they were building the railway station, opened the following year (1848). The Viale del Re (Corso Vittorio Emanuele II), marked the south of the city and connected Piazza d'Armi with Parco del Valentino and the Po.

abandoning their ancient abode would cause the end of the world. But we used a gentle approach and offered some compensation, and so a deal was struck before the belligerents reached a state of war.

Mrs Vaglienti owned that site and the play garden, which she later left in her will to Chev. Joseph Turvano. The rent was 450 francs. We called this new foundation the Oratory of St Aloysius Gonzaga, a name by which it is still known ⁽²⁸⁰⁾.

Dr Borel and I opened the new oratory on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, 1847. The extraordinary mob of youngsters there relieved somewhat the crowded ranks of those at Valdocco. Direction of that oratory was entrusted to Dr Hyacinth Carpano, who for several years laboured entirely gratis. The same Regulations drawn up for the institution at Valdocco were adopted at the St Aloysius Oratory, without any modifications being introduced.

In that same year, with a desire of giving shelter to a multitude of children asking for it, we bought the whole Moretta house. But when we looked into the work of adapting it to our requirements, we found the walls were not strong enough. Because of this, we thought it wiser to resell it, especially since we were offered a very attractive price.

Then we acquired a section of land (.944 acres) from the Turin seminary. This is the site where the Church of Mary Help of Christians was later built, and the building which at present houses the workshops for our trade boys.

9. 1848 – Growth in number of trade boys and their way of life – Brief evening talk – Archbishop grants privileges – Retreat

In this year, political events and the public mood presented a drama, the outcome of which nobody could foresee.

Charles Albert had granted the Constitution! Many thought that the Constitution also granted freedom to do good or evil at will. They based

²⁸⁰ “The current church of St John the Evangelist now covers the site where there was the church, sacristy and small house for the doorkeeper at St Aloysius oratory” (note by Don Bosco in margin of original ms).

this assertion on the emancipation of the Jews and Protestants, claiming as a consequence that there was no longer any distinction between Catholics and [those of] other faiths. This was true in politics, but not in matters of religion⁽²⁸¹⁾.

Meantime, a kind of frenzy seized the minds even of youngsters; they would get together at various points in the city, in the streets and squares, believing that it was praiseworthy to insult priests or religion. I was attacked many times at home and in the street. One day as I was teaching catechism, a harquebus shot came through the window, passing through my cassock between my arm and my ribs, and making a large hole in the wall. On another occasion, a certain well-known character attacked me with a long knife in full daylight while I stood in the middle of a group of children. It was a miracle that I was able to get away, beating a hasty retreat to the safety of my room. Dr Borel was also able to escape miraculously from a pistol shot, and from the blows of a knife one time when he was mistaken for someone else. It was, therefore, quite difficult to control such aroused young people. In that perversion of thought and ideas, as soon as we could provide additional rooms, the number of artisans was increased, coming to fifteen, all amongst the most abandoned and endangered.

There was a big problem, however. Because we had no workshops in our institution yet, our pupils went to work and to school in Turin, with ensuing harm to morality. The companions they mixed with, the conversations they heard, and what they saw frustrated what was said to them and done for them at the Oratory.

It was then that I began to give very short little sermons in the evening after prayers with a view to presenting or confirming some truth which might

²⁸¹ "In December 1847 King Charles Albert was presented with a petition signed by 600 illustrious citizens, many of them clergy, demanding the famous emancipation. They gave reasons, but took no notice of the heretical expression in that petition, against religion. After that period the Jews came out from the ghetto and became the people who owned most things. The Protestants were let loose, and although their numbers were few as far as we were concerned, nevertheless supported by the civil authority they caused problems for religion and behaviour." (note by Don Bosco in margin of original ms).

have been contradicted during the day. What happened to the artisans was likewise to be lamented regarding the students. Because the most advanced scholars were divided into various classes, they had to be sent to Prof. Joseph Bonzanino for grammar and to Prof. Fr Matthew Picco for rhetoric. These were most distinguished schools, but going to and from was fraught with danger. In the year 1856, to everyone's advantage, workshops and classes were permanently established at the Oratory itself.

At that time the perversion of ideas and actions seemed such that I could no longer trust the domestic staff. As a consequence my mother and I did all the housework. To my lot fell cooking, setting the table, sweeping, chopping firewood, cutting out and making trousers, shirts, jackets, towels, sheets, and doing the necessary mending. But these things turned out very advantageous, morally speaking, for I could conveniently give the boys some advice or a friendly word as I went round handing out bread, soup, or something else.

Discerning the need to have someone come and help me in both domestic and scholastic matters in the Oratory, I began to take some [of the boys] with me into the country and others to spend the holidays at Castelnuovo, my native country. Some of them came for dinner with me, others in the evening to read or write something, always with the purpose of providing an antidote to the poisonous opinions of the day. This was done with greater or lesser frequency from 1841 to 1848. I adopted every means to pursue also my own particular objective, which was to observe, get to know, and choose some individuals who had a suitable inclination to the common life, and to take them with me into my house. With this same purpose, in that year (1848) I put it to a test with a little spiritual retreat²⁸². About fifty boys gathered at the Oratory house for it. They all ate with me; but because there were not enough beds for all, some had to sleep with their own families and return to the Oratory in the morning. This coming and going to their homes risked almost all the benefit to be reaped from the sermons and instructions which

²⁸² The Retreat was preached by Blessed Federico Albert (1820-1876), from 1852 parish priest at Lanzo Torinese (cf. MB II, 221-223), and in 1864 would convince Don Bosco to take on the boarding school in the city.

are customary on such occasions. The retreat began on Sunday evening and finished on the following Saturday evening. It succeeded quite well. Many boys for whom I had laboured in vain for a long time really gave themselves to virtuous living. Several entered religious life; others, while continuing in the secular life, became models in their regular attendance at the Oratory ⁽²⁸³⁾.

More will be said on this point in the History of the Salesian Society.

In that same year some parish priests, especially those of Borgo Dora, Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, and St Augustine, complained anew to the archbishop because the sacraments were being administered in our oratories. When they did, the archbishop issued a decree giving us full faculties to prepare and present the children for confirmation and holy communion and [for them] to fulfil their Easter duty in the oratories, as long as they came regularly. He renewed the faculty allowing us to hold every religious ceremony ordinarily held in parish churches. These churches, the archbishop said, will be parish churches for those young, abandoned strangers as long as they are resident in Turin.

10. Progress in music – Procession to the Consolata – Award from the city and Schools for the poor – Holy Thursday – The Lavabo

The dangers to which youngsters were exposed in matters of religion and morality called for greater efforts to safeguard them. In the night school, as well as in the day programme, we thought it would be good to add courses in piano, organ, and even instrumental music to those in vocal music. So I found myself as teacher of vocal and instrumental music, of piano and organ, though I had never truly been a student of them myself. Goodwill made up for everything. Having prepared a group of the best soprano voices, we began to sing at church services at the Oratory; afterwards we ventured

²⁸³ "Arnaud Giacinto, Sansoldi, both deceased; Buzzetti Giuseppe; Galesio Nicola; Costantino Giovanni, deceased; Cerutti Giacomo, deceased; Gastini Carlo; Gravano Giovanni; Borgialli Domenico, deceased, are listed amongst those who made the retreat that year and were always good Christians" (note by Don Bosco on the original ms).

into Turin, to Rivoli, Moncalieri²⁸⁴, Chieri and other places. Canon Louis Nasi and Fr Michelangelo Chiattellino²⁸⁵ were willing helpers in training our musicians, accompanying them, and conducting them at public church services in various towns. Since choirs of boy sopranos had not been heard on choir lofts [of churches] up till then, and our solos, duets, and full choral renderings were so novel, our music was spoken of everywhere and our singers were much sought after for various solemn occasions. Canon Louis Nasi and Fr Michelangelo Chiatellino were generally the two accompanists of our emerging philharmonic society.

Every year we used to go to perform at a religious function at the Church of Our Lady of Consolation. This year we marched in procession from the Oratory. The singing along the way and the music in church drew a numberless crowd of people. Mass was celebrated, holy communion received, and then I gave a short sermon suited to the occasion in the underground chapel. Finally, the Oblates of Mary²⁸⁶ put a fine breakfast for us in the cloisters of the shrine. In this way we began to overcome human respect, we gathered youngsters, and we had opportunities to inculcate with the greatest prudence a spirit of morality and respect for authority and to encourage frequent reception of the holy sacraments. But such novelty gave rise to rumours.

This year, too, the city of Turin sent another deputation composed of Chev. Peter Ropolo, Capello called Moncalvo²⁸⁷, and Comm. Duprè to assess the vague reports that were being put about. They were highly satisfied with us. When their report was sent in, an award of 1000 francs was decreed, and a very flattering letter. From that year the city assigned an annual subsidy that was paid until 1878, when the 300 francs, which the judicious rulers of Turin

²⁸⁴ Rivoli: city 8.5 km west of Turin. Moncalieri: city 12 km south of Turin.

²⁸⁵ Michelangelo Chiattellino (1822-1901), became a Salesian Cooperator.

²⁸⁶ Oblates of the Blessed Virgin: congregation founded by Pio Brunone Lanteri (1759-1830).

²⁸⁷ Pietro Ropolo (born 1805), industrialist and member of the city council since 1853. Gabriele Capello known as "il Moncalvo" (1806-1877), furniture maker, worked for the Royal Palace, was a councillor along with banker Giuseppe Luigi Duprè. All three were part of the presidency for the first raffle Don Bosco organised in 1851 (cf. no. 6).

had budgeted to provide lighting for the night school for the benefit of the sons of the people, was withdrawn.

The Schools for the Poor also sent a deputation, headed by Chev. Gonella, to visit us. That work had also introduced night schools and music schools, using our method. As a mark of their approval, they gave us another award of a thousand francs.

Every year on Holy Thursday, we used to go together to visit the altars of repose. But because of the ridicule - we would even say contempt - not a few of the boys no longer dared to join their companions. To encourage our young men ever more to disdain human respect, in that year for the first time we marched in procession to make those visits, singing the *Stabat Mater* and chanting the *Miserere*. Then youngsters of every age and condition were seen joining us along the route and racing to join our lines. Everything went off in a peaceful and orderly fashion.

That evening was the first time that we performed the ceremony of the washing of the feet. For this purpose twelve youngsters were chosen, who are usually called the twelve apostles. When the ritual washing was finished, a moral exhortation was preached to the public. Afterwards, the twelve apostles were all invited for a frugal supper, and each one was given a small gift which he proudly carried home.

Likewise in that year the stations of the cross were erected according to the prescriptions of the Church and solemnly blessed. At each station there was a brief little Sermon, and an appropriate motet was sung.

In such ways our humble Oratory continued to consolidate at the same time that grave events were running their course, events which were destined to change the face of Italian politics, and perhaps the world's.

11. 1849 – Seminaries closed – Pinaridi house – Peter's Pence – Rosaries from Pius IX – Guardian Angel Oratory – Parliamentarians, visit

This year was very memorable. The war between Piedmont and Austria, begun the previous year, had shaken all Italy. Public schools were suspended. The seminaries, especially those in Turin and Chieri, were closed and occupied

by the army. As a consequence, the diocesan clerics had neither teachers nor a place to gather. It was then, to have at least the consolation of doing what we could to mitigate these public calamities, that we rented the whole of the Pinardi house. The tenants screamed; they threatened me, my mother, even the proprietor. Though great financial sacrifices had to be made, we still succeeded in getting possession of the whole building. Thus that den of iniquity, which for twenty years had been at the service of Satan, was at our disposal. It embraced the whole site which now forms the courtyard between the Church of Mary Help of Christians and the house behind it.

In this way we were able to increase our classes, to extend the chapel, and double our playground space. The number of young men rose to thirty. But the main aim, as in fact happened, was to be able to gather together the diocesan seminarians. We can say that our Oratory house for almost 20 years became the diocesan seminary.

Towards the end of 1848, political events forced the Holy Father Pius IX to flee Rome and seek refuge at Gaeta²⁸⁸. This great Pontiff had already shown us many times his customary kindness. When the rumour got about, that he was in financial straits, a collection was taken up in Turin. It was called *Peter's Pence*. A committee composed of Dr. Canon Francis Valinotti²⁸⁹ and Marquis Gustavo Cavour came to the Oratory. Our collection amounted to 35 francs. It was a small sum, which we tried to make a bit more acceptable to the Holy Father with a message that pleased him very much. The Pope expressed his pleasure in a letter to Card. Antonucci, at that time nuncio in Turin, and now archbishop of Ancona²⁹⁰. He asked the nuncio to convey to us how much consolation he received from our offering, but even more from the sentiments accompanying it. Finally, with his apostolic blessing he sent us a parcel of 60 dozen rosaries, which were solemnly distributed on July 20 of that year

²⁸⁸ Gaeta: fortified city belonging to the Kingdom of Naples. The *political events* referred to are what happened when Pius IX condemned the war, culminating on 15 November 1848 with the assassination of Minister Pellegrino Rossi followed by outbreaks of violence in Rome.

²⁸⁹ Francesco Michele Valinotti (1813-1873), who would be the administrator for the *Catholic Readings*.

²⁹⁰ Benedetto Antonio Antonucci (1798-1879), archbishop of Ancona from 1851.

(1850). See the booklet printed on that occasion, and various newspapers²⁹¹. Letter of Card. Antonucci, at that time nuncio to Turin.

The growing number of youngsters attending the oratories made it necessary to consider opening another centre. This was the Holy Guardian Angel Oratory in Vanchiglia²⁹², near the place where, especially through the work of Marchioness Barolo, the Church of St Julia was later built.

Fr John Cocchi had some years previously established that oratory with a scope somewhat like ours. But consumed by love of his country, he judged it better to teach his pupils the use of rifle and sword, put himself at their head, and march against the Austrians, which he did in fact.

That particular oratory was closed for a full year. When we rented it, Dr John Vola, of happy memory, was entrusted with its direction. This oratory continued until 1871, when it moved alongside the parish church. Marchioness Barolo left a legacy for this need, on condition that the boys' centre and the chapel be attached to the parish, as has been done.

A solemn visit was paid to the Oratory at that time by a committee of deputies and others appointed by the ministry of the interior, who came to honour us with their presence. They inspected the whole place, talking to everyone in a friendly way. They then made a full report to the Chamber of Deputies. This report was the subject of long and lively debate, as may be seen in the *Gazzetta Piemontese* of 29 March 1850. The Chamber of Deputies gave a grant of 300 francs to our boys. Urban Rattazzi²⁹³, who was then minister of the interior, designated a sum of 2000 francs for us. The documents may be consulted.

²⁹¹ Giovanni BOSCO, *Breve ragguaglio della festa fattasi nel distribuire il regalo di Pio IX ai giovani degli oratorii di Torino*. Torino, G. B. Paravia 1850 (OE IV, 93-119).

²⁹² Vanchiglia: popular suburb on the northeast outskirts of Turin.

²⁹³ Urbano Rattazzi (1808-1873), held various government positions; member of the anti-clerical party (his is the law of 1855 to suppress religious bodies), had sincere regard for Don Bosco and helped him financially (cf. no. 148).

Amongst my pupils at last I had one who donned the clerical habit. Ascanio Savio, presently rector of the Refuge, was the first seminarian from the Oratory. His clothing ceremony took place at the end of October of that year.

12. *National festivals*

In those days a strange event took place which caused no little upset to our meetings. People wanted our humble Oratory to take part in public demonstrations which were being staged in cities and towns under the name of national festivals. Those who took part in them and wished to make a public display of their patriotism parted their hair in the middle and let it fall in curls in the back; they wore tight-fitting jackets of various colours, and a national flag, a medal, and a blue cockade on the breast. Thus attired, they went in procession singing anthems to national unity.

Marquis Robert d'Azeglio²⁹⁴, was chief promoter of these demonstrations and he sent us a formal invitation. Despite my refusal, he sent us whatever we would need to make an honourable appearance with the rest. A spot was reserved for us in piazza Vittorio, amongst all the organisations of whatever name, purpose, and condition. What was I to do? To refuse was to declare myself an enemy of Italy. To acquiesce would mean accepting principles which I judged would have disastrous results.

"My Lord Marquis," I answered the above-mentioned d'Azeglio "this family of mine, these boys who come here from all over the city, are not a corporation. I would make a laughingstock of myself were I to pretend to make my own an institution which depends entirely on civic charity."

"Exactly. Let civic charity know that this newborn work isn't against modern institutions. That will work to your advantage. Support for your work will increase. The city council and I myself will give you generous help."

"My Lord Marquis, it is my firm system to keep out of anything political. Never *pro*, never *con*."

²⁹⁴ Roberto Taparelli d'Azeglio (1790-1862).

"What do you want to do, then?"

"To do what little good I can for abandoned youngsters, using all my powers to make them good Christians in regard to religion, honest citizens in civil society."

"I understand all that," replied the marquis "but you're making a mistake. If you persist in this principle, everybody will abandon you, and your work will become impossible. One must study the world, understand it, and shape both old and new institutions to the needs of the times."

"Thank you for your goodwill and the advice you offer. Invite me anywhere that a priest can exercise charity, and you'll find me ready to sacrifice life and means. But I want now and always to remain outside politics."

That renowned nobleman went away satisfied. From that day on he had no further dealings with us. After him many other laymen and priests deserted me. More than that, I was left quite alone after the incident I am now about to relate.

13. A particular episode

On the Sunday following the festival just mentioned, at two in the afternoon I was at recreation with the youngsters. One of them was reading *L'Armonia* when the priests who usually came to give me a hand in the sacred ministry appeared in a body. They were decked out with medals and cockades and carried a tricolour flag. Worse, they had a copy of a truly immoral newspaper called *Opinione*²⁹⁵. One of them, a man of respectable zeal and learning, came right up to me. Noticing the boy reading *L'Armonia* beside me, he sneered, "This is outrageous! It's time we get rid of these dewy-eyed [sentimental] bigots (*rugiadosi*)."²⁹⁶ With that, he grabbed *L'Armonia* from the boy's hand, tore it into a thousand pieces, threw them on the ground, spat on them, and stomped all over them. Having thus freely expressed his

²⁹⁵ *L'Armonia*: Catholic conservative journal run by Fr Giacomo Margotti (1823-1887). *L'Opinione*: anticlerical left-wing daily.

²⁹⁶ *Rugiadosi*, negative reference to Catholic conservatives.

political fervour, he stood facing me. “Now this is a worthwhile paper” he said, thrusting *L’Opinione* in my face. “This paper and no other should be read by every true and honest citizen.”

His manner of speaking and acting took my breath away. Not wishing to compound the scandal in a place where good example should be given, I limited myself to asking him and his colleagues to discuss such matters in private and amongst ourselves only. “No sir,” he answered “no longer should anything be either private or secret. Let everything be brought into the clear light of day.”

At that moment the bell called us all to church. It summoned also one of those priests, who had been charged with preaching a short sermon on morality to the poor youngsters. But on this occasion it was really immoral. Liberty, emancipation, and independence resounded through the whole sermon. I was in the sacristy, impatient for a chance to speak and put an end to this disorder. But the preacher left the church immediately after finishing the sermon, and no sooner was benediction given than he invited priests and boys to join him. Heartily intoning national songs and passionately waving the flag, they marched straight to the Mount of the Capuchins. There a formal promise was pronounced not to go back to the Oratory again unless they were invited and received with all their national insignia²⁹⁷.

While all this was going on, I had no way to express either my thoughts or my reasoning. But I was not afraid of anything that clashed with my duty. I let those priests know that they were strictly forbidden to come back to me. The boys then had to report to me one by one before they were readmitted to the Oratory. Everything ended well for me. None of the priests tried to come back. The boys apologised, pleading that they had been misled and promising obedience and discipline.

²⁹⁷ All the expressions they used then: national flag, blue cockade and patriotic hymns.

14. *New problems – Some comfort – Fr Rosmini and Archpriest Peter de Gaudenzi*

But I remained alone. On feast days I was obliged to begin hearing confessions early in the morning, to celebrate Mass at nine and preach afterwards; then there were singing classes and literature lessons until midday. At one in the afternoon there was recreation, and then catechism, vespers, an instruction, benediction, more recreation, singing, and school until night.

On weekdays, I was obliged to work during the day for my artisans, and to give *ginnasio* courses to a group of about ten youngsters. In the evening, lessons in French, arithmetic, plainchant, vocal music, piano, and organ all had to be attended to. I do not know how I was able to keep going. God helped me! A great support and a great consolation to me in those days, however, was Doctor Borel. That marvellous priest, though burdened with his other important duties of the sacred ministry, tried to help me every moment he could. He frequently stole from his hours of sleep to come and hear the boys' confessions. He denied rest to his weary body to come and preach to them. This critical situation lasted until I was able to get some relief from the seminarians Savio, Bellia, Vacchetta. But soon I was left without their help. For, following advice given them, they left without a word to me and entered the Oblates of Mary²⁹⁸.

On one of those feast days, I had a visit from two priests whom I think it appropriate to name. At the beginning of the catechism period, I was totally occupied with arranging my classes when two clergymen arrived. They were coming with a humble, respectful bearing to commend me and seek information about the origin and system of the Oratory. As my only answer, I said, "Would you be good enough to help me." One I asked, "Would you come to the apse and take the big boys?" To the taller one I said, "I entrust you with this class which is the wildest."

²⁹⁸ Ascenio Savio entered the Oblate novitiate in 1852, and was ordained priest on May 29 1858, but left them and entered the diocese in 1866. Giacomo Bellia (1834-1908), made his novitiate in 1853; he left the Oblates in Feb. 1862 and was incardinated in the diocese of Biella. Giuseppe Stefano Vacchetta (1827-1898) was professed as an Oblate in October 1854; ordained priest in 1856, finished his days in the Oblate house in Nice (France).

Realising that they were excellent catechists, I asked one of them to give a short sermon to our boys, and the other to give benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Both accepted graciously.

The shorter priest was Father Antonio Rosmini, founder of the Institute of Charity. The other was Canon Archpriest De Gaudenzi, the present bishop of Vigevano²⁹⁹. From that time, both of them were always kindly disposed towards our house; in fact they were benefactors.

15. Buys the Pinardi and Bellezza Houses – 1850

The year 1849 was painful and sterile, even though it had cost great fatigue and enormous sacrifice. But it was a preparation for 1850, which was less turbulent and much more fruitful. Let us begin with the Pinardi house. Those who had been dislodged from this house found it hard to take. “Isn’t it disgusting,” they went round saying, “that a house of entertainment and relaxation should fall into the hands of a priest, and an intolerant priest at that!”

Pinardi, moreover, was [offered] a rent almost twice as great as ours. But he felt considerable remorse at getting more money by sinful means. So several times he had offered to sell [the house] if ever I wished to buy it. But his price was exorbitant. He was looking for eighty thousand francs for a building whose value must have been one-third that. God wished to show that he is the master of hearts, and he showed it here.

One feast day, while Doctor Borel was preaching, I was at the courtyard gate to prevent assemblies and disturbances when Mr Pinardi came along. “Hello there,” he said, “Don Bosco should buy my house.”

“Hello there,” I replied. “Mr Pinardi should sell it to me for what it’s worth, and I’ll buy it at once.”

“Of course I’ll sell it for what it’s worth.”

²⁹⁹ Pietro Giuseppe de Gaudenzi (1812-1891), canon and parish priest of the cathedral at Pavia, then bishop of Vigevano from 1871.

"How much?"

"The price I've been asking."

"I couldn't think of it."

"Make me an offer."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Because your price is excessive. I don't want to insult you."

"Offer what you wish?"

"Will you sell it to me for what it's really worth?"

"On my word of honour, I will."

"Shake hands on it, and I'll make my offer."

"How much, then?"

I suggested to him, "I've had it valued by a friend of yours and mine. He assured me that in its present state we ought to be discussing [a price] between 26 and 28 thousand francs. And, to close the deal, I'll give you 30,000 francs."

"Will you throw in a brooch worth 500 francs as a gift for my wife?"

"I'll give her that" I said.

"Will you pay cash?"

"I'll pay cash."

"When can we sign the papers?"

"Whenever you please."

"Two weeks from tomorrow. Payment in one instalment."

"Everything just as you wish."

"A fine of one hundred thousand francs on whoever backs out."

"Amen."

That transaction took only five minutes. But where was I to get that sum at such short notice? Then began a beautiful stretch of Divine Providence. That same evening, Fr Cafasso did something unusual on a feast day; he came to visit me, and he told me that a devout lady, Countess Casazza-Riccardi³⁰⁰, had entrusted him with ten thousand francs for me, to be spent on whatever I considered to be for God's greater glory. The next day a Rosminian who had come to Turin to invest 20,000 francs came to ask my advice in the matter. I proposed that they should lend it to me for the Pinardi contract. In that way the sum I was looking for was put together. The three thousand francs for related costs were donated by Chev. Cotta, in whose bank the much-desired deed was drawn up.

Having thus secured ownership of that building, I turned my attention to the so-called Gardener's Inn. This was a tavern where pleasure-seekers used to gather on feast days. Music from accordions, fifes, clarinets, guitars, violins, basses and double-basses, and songs of every kind flowed there from all day long. Indeed it was not seldom that all those sounds issued at once in concert. As only a simple wall divided our courtyard from this building, the Bellezza house, it often happened that the hymns from our chapel were confused and drowned out by the din of the music and of the bottles of the Gardener's Inn. In addition there were the constant comings and goings between the Pinardi house and the Gardener's Inn. One can easily imagine the disturbance this caused us, and the danger for our boys.

To free ourselves from this odious situation, I tried to buy the house, but I did not succeed. I tried to rent it, and the landlady was willing; but the tavern keeper claimed exorbitant damages. Then I proposed to take over the whole tavern, pay the rent, and buy all the furnishings of the bedrooms, table service, cellar, kitchen, etc.

By paying dearly for it all, I was able to have the place under my control. I changed their character immediately. In this way was destroyed the second seedbed of iniquity which up to then had existed in Valdocco alongside the Pinardi house.

³⁰⁰ Sabina Casazza (died 1888) was sister of Archbishop Alessandro Ottaviano Riccardi di Netro.

16. Church of St Francis de Sales

Freed from the moral vexations of the Pinardi house and the Gardener's Inn, we had to think about a more decorous church for our worship, better suited to our growing needs. The old one, it is true, had been considerably enlarged; it was situated where the superiors' refectory is now (1875). But it was uncomfortable on account of its capacity and its lack of height. To enter one had to go down two steps; as a result in winter and when it rained we were flooded out. In summer the heat and the bad odours suffocated us. Few feast days passed without some pupil fainting and being carried out limp. So it was necessary to start a building more proportionate to the number of youngsters, better ventilated, and more healthy.

Chev. Blachier drew up plans for what we now know as the Church of St Francis and the building that stands round the courtyard beside the church. The contractor was Mr Frederick Bocca.

When the foundations had been dug, the cornerstone was blessed on 20 July 1850³⁰¹. Chev. Joseph Cotta placed the stone in position; Canon Moreno, royal almoner, blessed it; the renowned Fr Barrera³⁰², moved by the sight of such a large crowd, stood upon a mound of dirt and improvised a marvellously appropriate speech. He began with these exact words: *"Ladies and gentlemen, the cornerstone which has just been laid in the foundations of this church has a twofold significance. It is like the grain of a mustard seed destined to grow into a mystical tree in which many boys will find refuge; it symbolises also that this work is founded on a cornerstone which is Jesus Christ, against which the enemies of the faith will hurl themselves in vain."*

Then he proved both points, to the great pleasure of his audience, who thought that the eloquent preacher was inspired.

³⁰¹ He should have said: July 20, 1851, as we see from the curia document drawn up at the time (in ASC A0210411). Don Bosco confuses two events: distribution of the rosaries from Pius IX to the boys (July 21, 1850) and the blessing of the foundation stone for the new church (July 20, 1851); Fr Barrera was involved on both occasions.

³⁰² Andrea Barrera (1802-1879), superior of the Priests of Christian Doctrine.

Here is the record etc. The record of that solemn occasion was written down³⁰³.

Such well-publicised occasions attracted youngsters from all over. Many turned up at all hours of the day; others begged for shelter. That year their number passed fifty, and we began some workshops in the house; for we were finding it ever more ruinous for the boys to go out to work in the city..

The sacred building for which we longed was beginning to rise above ground, when I realised that my funds were completely exhausted. I had collected 35 thousand francs by selling some property, but these disappeared like ice in the sun. The treasury³⁰⁴ granted us nine thousand francs, but they were to be turned over only when the work was nearing completion. Bishop Peter Losana of Biella realised that the new building and that whole institution especially benefited the bricklayer apprentices from Biella. He sent out a circular letter to his parish priests encouraging them to help with contributions. *The circular read thus*³⁰⁵.

The appeal brought in one thousand francs³⁰⁶. But that was only a drop in the ocean; and so a lottery of various small prizes was conceived. This was the first time that we appealed in such a way to the charity of the general public, and the project was favourably received. Three thousand, three hundred prizes were collected. The Supreme Pontiff, the king, the queen mother, the queen consort³⁰⁷, and in general the whole royal court distinguished themselves with their gifts. The tickets sold out (50 cents each). When the public drawing took place at city hall, one individual was trying to buy a ticket; even though he offered five francs for one, there was not a ticket to be had. *The plan and the rules of the lottery can be obtained*³⁰⁸.

³⁰³ Cf. MB IV, 277-279.

³⁰⁴ Royal Apostolic Treasury General: depended on the Ministry for Grace and Justice for administration of ecclesiastical goods.

³⁰⁵ Found in MB IV, 319-321.

³⁰⁶ Cf. no. 110.

³⁰⁷ The King was Victor Emmanuel II who came to the throne in March 1849 after the abdication of his father, Charles Albert. The Queen Mother was Maria Teresa d'Asburgo-Lorena (1801-1855), widow of Charles Albert. The Queen Consort was Maria Adelaide d'Austria (1822-1855).

³⁰⁸ Cf. no. 6.

Many of the prize-winners gladly left their prizes to help the church. This proved to be an extra bonus. Though there was considerable outlay, still the net gain came to 26 thousand francs.

17. The powder magazine blows up – Gabriel Fassio – Blessing of the new church

While the items were on public show, the powder magazine near the Cemetery of St Peter in Chains blew up (26 April 1852). The concussion that followed was horrible and violent. Many buildings near and far were shaken and suffered heavy damage from it. Of the workmen, 28 were killed. That the disaster was not even worse was due to a certain sergeant named Sacchi³⁰⁹, who at great personal risk prevented the fire from reaching a bigger supply of powder. This could have destroyed the whole city of Turin. The Oratory house, which was badly constructed, suffered serious damage; the deputies sent us an offering of 300 francs to help repair it.

In connection with this incident, I would like to recall a fact which refers to one of our young artisans, Gabriel Fassio³¹⁰. The previous year he fell ill and was at death's door. At the height of his delirium he kept saying over and over, "Woe to Turin! Woe to Turin!"

His companions asked him, "Why?"

"Because it's threatened by a terrible disaster."

"What kind of disaster?"

"A horrible earthquake," he answered.

"When's it coming?"

"Next year. Oh, woe to Turin on April 26."

"What should we do?"

"Pray to St Aloysius to protect the Oratory and those who live in it."

³⁰⁹ Paolo Filippo Sacchi (1807-1884).

³¹⁰ Fassio Gabriele (1838-1851), one of the first boys taken in at the Oratory home.

It was then that, at the request of all the youngsters of our house, a *Pater, Ave,* and *Gloria* addressed to this saint were added to our common morning and evening prayers. In fact, relative to the danger, our house suffered slight damage, and there were no injuries to our boarders.

Meanwhile, the work on the Church of St Francis de Sales went on with incredible speed, and in the space of eleven months it was completed. On 20 June 1852, it was consecrated for divine worship with a solemnity that was more unique than rare amongst us. At the entrance to the courtyard an arch of colossal height was erected. On it in outsized letters was written: *In letters of gold - we shall write on every side - may this day live for ever.*

From every side echoed these verses which had been put to music by Maestro Joseph Blanchi, of happy memory:

Sooner shall the setting sun / Return to its rising, / Sooner shall every river / Return to its source, / Than shall the memory / Of this beautiful day / Be forgotten amongst us.

The following words were recited and sung with ardent enthusiasm:

As a bird flits from branch to branch / Goes searching for trusty shelter, etc. This was written down³¹¹.

Many newspapers reported this celebration³¹²; see the *Armonia* and the *Patria* of those days.

On June 1 that same year a Mutual Aid Society was established to stop our boys from enrolling in the so-called Workers Society, which right from its start showed that its principles were anything but religious. *One may refer to the booklet we published*³¹³. It served its purpose wonderfully. Our aid society

³¹¹ Cf. MB IV, 437-438.

³¹² The article in the *Armonia* came out on 23 June 1852 with the title: "Blessing of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales". *La Patria*, a moderately liberal paper was published in Turin from 1852 to 1855.

³¹³ *Società di mutuo soccorso di alcuni individui della Compagnia di san Luigi eretta nell'Oratorio di san Francesco di Sales*. Torino, Tipografia Speirani e Ferrero 1850 (OE IV, 83-90); cf. no. 4.

later converted into an affiliated conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society, which is still functioning³¹⁴.

The church was built but needed all kinds of furnishings. Civic charity did not let us down. Comm. Joseph Dupré undertook to decorate a chapel dedicated to St Aloysius and buy a marble altar which still adorns the church. Another benefactor undertook to fit out the choir loft, where a small organ was set up for the day boys. Mr. Michael Scannagatti bought a complete set of candlesticks; Marquis Fassati undertook to supply our Lady's altar and provided a set of bronze candlesticks, and later the statue of our Lady. Fr Cafasso paid all the expenses incurred for the pulpit. The high altar was provided by Doctor Francis Vallauri and completed by his son Fr Peter, a priest³¹⁵. Thus in a short time the new church was fitted with everything needed for both private and solemn ceremonies.

18. *The year 1852*

The new church, complete with sacristy and bell tower, enabled us to provide for those youngsters who wished to attend sacred services on feast days, the night school, and day classes too. But how were we to provide for the multitude of poor children who were appealing for shelter all the time? This was the more acute because the explosion of the powder magazine the year before had almost ruined our ancient building. In that moment of supreme need, we decided to build a new wing on the house. In order to continue using the old building, we began the new one on a site a bit apart. It stretched from the end of the present refectory to the print foundry.

The builders made rapid progress. Although autumn was already well along, they reached roof level. In fact, all the trusses had been put in place, all the crosspieces nailed in, and the tiles were stacked up on the beams ready to

³¹⁴ The constitution for the St Vincent de Paul youth conferences in Don Bosco's three Oratories came into being around 1855; they were recognised by the General Council in Paris on May 11 1856 (cf. Francesco MOTTO, "Le conferenze "annesse" di S. Vincenzo de' Paoli negli oratori di don Bosco", in José Manuel PRELLEZO (ed.), *L'impegno nell'educare. Studi in onore di Pietro Braido*. Roma, LAS 1991, pp. 467-492.

³¹⁵ Pietro Marcellino Vallauri (1829-1900).

be laid down neatly. Then a torrential rain interrupted all work. Water poured down for days and nights, flowing from the beams and the crosspieces; it wore and washed away the fresh mortar, leaving the walls only of soaked bricks and stones. Around midnight, when we were all in bed, we heard a loud rumble which became louder and more frightening by the moment. Everyone woke up and, completely ignorant of what was happening, utterly terrified, wrapped in blankets and sheets, ran from the dormitory and fled in confusion with no idea where to go, with only the idea of putting distance between himself and the danger, as one can imagine. The noise and the chaos got worse. The roof framework and the tiles mixed with the wall materials as everything collapsed into ruins with a mighty roar.

Since that construction had stood against the wall of the lower, older building, the fear was that everyone lay crushed under the falling rubble. But, as it proved, the only harm was the horrendous noise, which caused no personal injury.

City engineers came to inspect things in the morning. When Chev. Gabetti³¹⁶ saw another pillar cracked at the base and leaning over a dormitory, he exclaimed: "You should go and give thanks to Our Lady of Consolation. Only a miracle is keeping that pillar up. If it had fallen, it would have buried in rubble Don Bosco and the thirty boys sleeping in the dormitory below."

As the building was still unfinished, most of the loss was the builder's. Our damage was estimated at 10,000 francs. The accident took place at midnight on 2 December 1852.

Amid the continual sad afflictions which befall the poor human race, there is always the loving hand of the Lord to lighten our misfortunes. If the disaster had happened a couple of hours earlier, it would have buried our night school pupils. They finished their lessons at ten, and when they came out of their classrooms, about 300 of them, they used to run round the empty building under construction for half an hour or so. A little later the collapse occurred.

Not only did the advanced season no longer allow work on our ruined house to be completed; we could not even begin to rebuild part of it. In the

³¹⁶ Carlo Gabetti, city architect responsible for testing the construction.

meantime, who would provide for us in such straits? What could we do for so many boys with such limited facilities, and these half ruined? We made a virtue of necessity. After the walls of the old church had been reinforced, it became a dormitory. We then transferred classes to the new church, which was therefore a church on feast days, a school during the week.

The bell tower beside the Church of St Francis de Sales was also built in this year. Our benefactor Mr Michael Scanagatti presented us with an elegant set of candlesticks for the high altar, which are still one of the most beautiful furnishings of this church.

[19.] 1853

As soon as the weather permitted, we began promptly to rebuild the ruined house. Work went ahead rapidly, and by October the building was finished. Because we so badly needed room, we rushed at once to move in. The room which I first took is the one which, by God's grace, I still occupy. The classrooms, refectory, and dormitory were permanently established, and the number of our pupils went up to sixty-five.

Various benefactors continued to look after us. Chev. Joseph Duprè at his own expense presented a marble altar rail for the St Aloysius chapel; he adorned the altar and had the whole chapel stuccoed. Marquis Dominic Fassati gave us the small altar rail for the altar of our Lady and a set of bronze gilt candlesticks for that altar. Count Charles Cays, our outstanding benefactor, prior of the St Aloysius Sodality for the second time, paid a long-standing debt for us, twelve hundred francs owed the baker, who was beginning to give us problems with our bread deliveries. He bought a bell, which was the object of a charming ceremony. Dr Gattino, our parish priest of happy memory, came to bless it; then he took the opportunity to give a little sermon to the many people gathered from the city. After the religious services, a comedy was presented which everyone enjoyed. The count also gave us a handsomely decorated set of drapery (*panta*)³¹⁷, the current baldacchino and other items for the church.

³¹⁷ "Panta": Piedmontese word for drapery.

With the new church thus furnished with what was essential for worship, we were finally able for the first time to fulfil the shared desire to celebrate the forty hours devotion. Though the church was not very richly adorned, there was an extraordinary assembly of the faithful. To comply with their religious fervour and to provide all of them with an opportunity to satisfy their devotion, when the forty hours finished we followed with an octave of preaching, which was literally spent hearing the confessions of the crowds. That unexpected attendance was our reason in the years that followed for continuing to organise the forty hours devotion with regular preaching; many people came to receive the holy sacraments and attend the other practices of piety

[20.] *Catholic Readings*

That year [1853], in March, periodic publication of the *Catholic Readings*³¹⁸. In 1847, when the emancipation of the Protestants and the Jews took place, it became necessary to put some antidote into the hands of the Christian faithful in general, and of the young in particular. From that act it appeared that the government meant only to grant freedom to those beliefs and not to harm Catholicism. But the Protestants did not understand it in this light. They produced propaganda with all the means available to them. They distributed three newspapers (*La Buona Novella*, *La Luce Evangelica*, *Il Rogantino Piemontese*) and many books both biblical and non-biblical. They gave assistance freely, found employment, supplied work, offered money, clothing, and food to those who came to their classes or attended their lectures or simply joined them at church. They used all these means to make proselytes.

The government was aware of all this and allowed it to go on; with its silence it gave them effective protection. The Protestants, moreover, were organised and furnished with every means both moral and material. Catholics, on the other hand, had relied on the civil law for protection and defence up till then; they possessed a few newspapers, a few classic or learned works, but no newspapers or books to put into the hands of the working classes.

³¹⁸ Cf. no. 9. It is a monthly publication in small format, for youth and ordinary folk founded with the financial support of bishop Luigi Moreno, bishop of Ivrea, and had wide dissemination; from 1863 it was printed at the Oratory Press. The print run in the first years was three thousand, then rose to more than ten thousand (cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica...*, pp. 347-368). It ceased publication in 1954.

At that time, advised by necessity, I began to draw up some summaries about the Catholic Church, and then some posters entitled "*Reminders for Catholics*" I handed them out to both children and adults, especially at missions and retreats.

These handouts and pamphlets were eagerly welcomed, and I had soon given away thousands and thousands of them. This convinced me of the need for some popular means of spreading knowledge of the fundamental Catholic doctrines. So a pamphlet entitled "*Advice to Catholics*"³¹⁹ was printed. Its aim was to put Catholics on the alert lest they let themselves be caught in the nets of the heretics. Its distribution was extraordinary; in two years it sold more than two hundred thousand copies. This pleased the good, but it enraged the Protestants, who had begun to think that they had the field of evangelisation all to themselves.

It was then that I began to see that the matter of preparing and printing books for the people was urgent, and I laid out plans for the so-called *Catholic Readings*. I wanted to get them printed at once. But an obstacle loomed up, as unexpected as it was unforeseen. No bishop wanted to take the lead. Those from Vercelli, Biella, and Casale refused, saying that it was dangerous to tangle with the Protestants. Archbishop Fransoni was then in exile at Lyons. He approved and recommended [the project], yet no one was willing even to undertake the ecclesiastical review. Canon Joseph Zappata³²⁰, the vicar general, was the only one who acceded to the archbishop's request and reviewed half of one issue: Then he sent the manuscript back to me with this comment: "Take your work. I can't see my way to signing it. The cases of Ximenes and Palma⁽³²¹⁾ are far too recent. You challenge and take the enemy head on, but I prefer to sound the retreat before it's too late."

³¹⁹ Giovanni BOSCO, *La Chiesa apostolica-romana è la sola vera Chiesa di Gesù Cristo. Avvisi ai cattolici*. Torino. Tipografia Speirani e Ferrero 1850 (OV IV, 121-143); ristampato nel 1851 e nel 1853.

³²⁰ Giuseppe Zappata (1796-1883).

³²¹ "Fr Ximenes, director of a Catholic paper, *The Contemporary* in Rome, was murdered. Bishop Palma, papal secretary and writer for the paper, was struck by a bullet (*arqebus*) in the hall of the Quirinale itself" (note by Don Bosco on the original manuscript).

With the vicar general's consent, I explained everything to the archbishop. His reply was accompanied by a letter to Bishop Moreno of Ivrea³²², asking that prelate to take under his patronage the publication I was planning and to assist it through his censor and with his authority. Bishop Moreno readily agreed. He delegated his own vicar general, the canon lawyer Pinoli, to act as censor, stipulating that the censor's name was not to be published. A programme was quickly put together, and the first issue of *The Catholic Companion*³²³ came out on March 1, 1853.

[21.] 1854

The *Catholic Readings* were warmly received, and the number of readers was extraordinary. But they also aroused the anger of the Protestants. They fought back in their own newspapers and their *Gospel Readings*, but they lacked readers. So they launched attacks of every kind against poor Don Bosco. Now one, now another would come to dispute, convinced, they said, that no one could withstand their arguments, that Catholic priests were just so many simpletons and therefore could be easily confounded.

At first they came to assault me one at a time. Later they came in pairs and finally in groups. I always listened to them, and I always recommended that they should refer back to their own ministers those problems which they did not know how to answer, and then kindly relay the answers to me. Those who came were Amadeus Bert³²⁴, then Meille³²⁵, the evangelist Pugno³²⁶, then

³²² Luigi Moreno (1800-1878), bishop of Ivrea from 1838; espoused Catholic Action; he was a believer in the press, and was amongst those who founded *L'Armonia*.

³²³ He should have said *Il cattolico istruito*; Giovanni BOSCO, *Il cattolico istruito nella sua religione. Trattamenti di un padre di famiglia co' suoi figliuoli secondo i bisogni del tempo*. Torino, Tipografia P. De-Agostini 1853 (OE IV, 195-646).

³²⁴ Amedeo Bert (1809-1883) ran the Waldensian parish (1849-1864); he dedicated himself to social work: founded a hospital, school, the Claudiana Publishers and promoted building the Waldensian church in Turin.

³²⁵ Jean Pierre Meille (1817-1887) in 1851 founded the journal *The Good News*; Waldensian pastor who led the community in Turin from 1865 to 1884.

³²⁶ Leading member of the Evangelical community in Turin.

others and still others. But they could make no headway towards getting me to cease speaking or publishing our discussions. This aroused them to absolute fury. I think it good to relate some episodes on this subject.

One Sunday evening in January I was informed that two gentlemen had come to speak with me. They came in and, after a long series of compliments and flattery, one of them began to say, "Good Doctor, nature has favoured you with the great gift of being able to make yourself read and understood by the common person. So we'd like to ask you to use this precious gift in the service of humanity and for the benefit of science, commerce, and the arts."

"At the moment," I said "I am taken up with the *Catholic Readings*, and I intend to devote myself wholeheartedly to that project."

"It would be much better if you were to write a good book for young people on, say, ancient history, geography, physics, or geometry, but not the *Catholic Readings*."

"Why not the *Catholic Readings*?"

"Because its topics have already been dealt with over and over again by many authors."

"These topics have already been dealt with by many authors, but in learned volumes and not for ordinary people. That is precisely my aim with the *Catholic Readings*."

"But this project is of no advantage to you," they argued. "On the other hand, if you were to take on the projects which we are recommending to you, you'd gain a nice sum for the wonderful institute that Providence has entrusted to you. Here, take this advance (they were four thousand franc notes). And it won't be the last donation you'll get. You'll get even more."

"What's all this money for?"

"To encourage you to undertake the works we've been suggesting, and to help you with your most praiseworthy institute."

“You’ll pardon me, gentlemen,” I said, “if I return your money. At present I can’t take on any scholarly project other than the *Catholic Readings*.”

“But if a project is useless ... “ they started to say.

“If it’s a useless project, why are you worrying about it? Why are you offering me this money to get me to stop?”

“You don’t realise what you’re doing,” they persisted. “Your refusal endangers your work, exposes you to certain consequences, certain dangers ...”

“Gentlemen, I understand what you’re trying to tell me; but I tell you clearly that when I stand up for the truth I’m not afraid of anyone. When I became a priest, I was consecrated to the good of the Church and the good of poor humanity. And I intend to continue with my weak efforts to promote the *Catholic Readings*.”

“You’re making a mistake!” Their tone and attitude changed as they got to their feet. “You’re making a mistake. You’ve insulted us, and who knows what might happen to you, here, and,” they added menacingly “if you leave the house, will you be sure of coming back?”

“Gentlemen, you don’t know Catholic priests. While they have life they try to do their duty. If they must die because of their labour, that they would consider their good fortune and their greatest glory.”

By then they both seemed so annoyed that I was afraid they were about to attack me. I got to my feet and put a chair between them and me. Then I said, “If you wish to use force, I’m not cowed by your threats. But a priest’s strength rests on patience and forgiveness. Now please go.”

I walked round the chair and opened the door of my room. “Buzzetti,” I said “take these gentlemen to the front gate; they’re not accustomed to the stairs.”

That command confused them. “We’ll meet again under more favourable circumstances,” they said as they left, their faces and eyes afire with indignation. Several newspapers, especially *L’Armonia*, carried reports of this encounter.

[22.] *Attempt on my life*

It looked as if some group of either Protestants or Freemasons had organised a conspiracy against me. I shall narrate a few short examples.

One evening, I was amidst the boys teaching school when two men called me to hurry to a man who was dying³²⁷ at the *Golden Heart*. I went immediately, but I wanted to take some of the bigger boys with me.

"There's no need," they explained, "to bother your pupils. We'll take you to the sick man and bring you back home. Their presence might upset the patient." "Don't worry," I replied, "my pupils will take a little stroll and then wait downstairs while I attend to the sick man."

When we arrived at the house where the Golden Heart was, they told me, "Wait here a minute; relax a bit while we go to let the patient know you're here."

They showed me into a ground-floor room where some good-time Charlies were eating chestnuts after their supper. They welcomed me profusely with praise and applause, and they wanted me to help myself and eat some of their chestnuts. I would not taste them, alleging that I had just finished my supper.

"Then at least drink a glass of our wine," they answered. "You won't find it unpleasant. It comes from around Asti."

"I don't feel like it. I'm not accustomed to drinking outside of meals. It doesn't agree with me."

"A small glass certainly won't upset you." With that they poured wine for everyone. But when they came to mine, they took a bottle and glass that had been put to the side. Then I understood their wicked ruse; nevertheless I accepted the glass and joined in their toast, but instead of drinking, I tried to put the wine back down on the table.

"You can't do that," one said. "It's offensive."

³²⁷ The *Cuor d'Oro*: inn along via Cottolengo, 300 metres from the Oratory.

“It’s an insult,” another chimed in. “You can’t put us off like that.”

“I don’t feel like, I cannot, and I will not drink.”

“You’ll drink it for sure!” one exclaimed as he grabbed my left shoulder. An accomplice grabbed my right shoulder and added, “We can’t let this insult pass. Drink it by choice or by force.”

“If you really insist that I drink, I’ll oblige you. But let me go. And since I can’t drink it myself, I’ll get one of my sons to drink it in my place.”

With this misleading remark, I moved towards the door, opened it, and invited my young men to come in.

“There’s no need for anybody else to drink it, none at all!” they cried. “Never mind, then. We’ll go [up] shortly to forewarn the sick man. These boys can stay downstairs.”

I certainly would never have given that glass to anybody else, but I acted as I did the better to expose their treachery in trying to get me to drink the poisoned wine.

I was then taken to a room on the second floor where instead of a sick man I discovered lying there the very fellow who had come to the Oratory to fetch me. He put up with some of my questions but then burst out laughing. “I’ll go to confession tomorrow morning,” he said.

I left promptly to get back to my own business.

A friend of mine made some enquiries about the people who had summoned me and about their intention. I was assured that a certain individual had treated them to a big meal on the understanding that they should try to get me to drink a little wine that he had prepared.

[23.] Attacks – A hail of blows

These attacks that I am recounting may seem like fables, but sadly, they are all too true. Many people witnessed them. Here is an even stranger attempt on my life.

One August evening around six o'clock, I was standing at the gate that gave access to the Oratory courtyard, surrounded by my young men. Suddenly a cry went up: "A murderer! A murderer!"

And there was a certain man whom I knew quite well and had even given assistance to. He was in his shirt sleeves and was brandishing a big knife. Rushing wildly at me, he was shouting, "I want Don Bosco! I want Don Bosco!"

All of us scattered in every direction, and the intruder chased one of the seminarians, mistaking him for me. When he realised his mistake, he turned and came running furiously in my direction. I just had time to beat a retreat to the stairs of the old house, and the lock to the gate was barely secured when the madman reached it. He hammered, shouted, and bit at the iron bars to open them, to no avail. I was safe inside. My young men wanted to overpower the unfortunate man and break him apart, but I repeatedly forbade them and they obeyed me. We sent word to the police, to police headquarters, to the *carabinieri*. It was not till 9:30 that evening, however, that two *carabinieri* arrested the rogue and took him to the barracks.

Next day, the chief of police sent an officer to ask whether I would drop the charges against my attacker. I answered that I forgave that assault and all other injuries. But in the name of the law, I demanded of the authorities greater protection for the persons and property of citizens. But would you believe it? At the very same time when I had been attacked, as I was leaving the house, there was my attacker waiting for me a short distance off.

A friend of mine, seeing that I could not expect police protection, decided to speak to the wretched man. "I've been paid," he was told. "If you give me as much as the others do, I'll go away peacefully."

He was paid 80 francs for back rent, another 80 to book him into new lodgings well away from Valdocco, and so ended that first comedy.

The second which I am going to relate was not like that. About a month after the episode just narrated, one Sunday evening, I was asked to hurry to

the Sardi house near the Refuge to hear the confession of a sick woman who was said to be dying. Because of my previous experiences, I asked several of the bigger boys to come along with me. “There’s no need,” I was told. “We’ll accompany you. Leave these lads at their games.”

This was enough for me not to go alone. I left some of them in the street at the foot of the stairs. Joseph Buzzetti and Hyacinth Arnaud³²⁸ were on the first-floor landing not far from the door of the sick woman. I went inside and saw a woman gasping as if she were about to breathe her last. I asked the men in attendance, four of them, to move off a little so that we might speak of her soul. “Before I make my confession,” she said in a strong voice, “I want that blackguard there in front of me to take back the calumnies he has been spreading about me.”

“No!” one of them answered.

“Shut up!” added another, rising to his feet.

Then they all stood up from their chairs. “Yes”, “No”, “Watch it”, “I’ll strangle you”, “I’ll cut your throat.” These shouts, mixed with horrible curses, echoed diabolically all over the room. In the midst of that melee, the light was put out. As the din increased, a hail of blows began to be aimed over where I was sitting. I quickly figured out their game, the point of which was to do me in. In that predicament with time neither to ponder nor to reflect, necessity became the mother of invention. I grabbed a chair, put it over my head, and as I edged towards the door under that helmet, a shower of blows from sticks fell with a tremendous racket upon the chair.

Exiting that hotbed of Satan, I flew into the arms of my young men; when they heard that noise and those yells, they were determined to break in, come what may. I had suffered no serious wound. One blow struck my left thumb, which was exposed against the back of the chair. The nail and half the tip were ripped away, so that I carry the scar to this day. The worst harm was the fright.

³²⁸ Giacinto Arnaud (b. 1826) lived at the Oratory house from 1847 till February 1856 (cf. ASC E720 *Censimento dal 1847 al 1869*, p. 1).

I never could discover the real reason for this persecution, but it seems that all these attempts on my life were intended to make me stop, they would say, calumniating the Protestants.

[24.] *Grigio the dog*

The grey dog was the topic of many conversations and various conjectures. Many of you have seen him and even petted him. Now, laying aside the fantastic stories which are told of this dog, I will tell you plainly only what is pure truth.

The frequent attacks which had been made against me made it inadvisable for me to walk to or from the city of Turin alone. In those days, the asylum was the last building on the way to the Oratory. The rest of the way was land covered with hawthorn and acacia trees. One dark evening, rather late, I was making my way home with some trepidation when a huge dog appeared beside me, which at first sight gave me a start. But he seemed friendly and even nuzzled me as if I were his master. We quickly became friends, and he accompanied me as far as the Oratory. Many other times that evening's experience was repeated. Indeed, I may say that *Grigio* did me valuable service. Here are a few examples.

On a wet, foggy night at the end of November 1854, I was coming from the city. So as not to have a long way to go alone, I took the street connecting Our Lady of Consolation and the Cottolengo. At one point along the street I noticed two men walking a little in front of me. They matched their pace to mine, quickening or slowing down as I did. When I crossed the road to dodge them, they crossed right over in front of me. I attempted to turn back but was not in time. For with two quick leaps backward, keeping an ominous silence, they threw a cloak up against my face. I fought to keep from getting tangled up but it was no use. Then one also tried to stuff a rag into my mouth. I was trying to shout but could no longer do so. At that moment *Grigio* appeared, and growling like a bear he leapt into the face of one man while snapping viciously at the other. They plainly would have to tangle with the dog before finishing with me.

“Call off your dog,” they began to cry, trembling with fear.

“I’ll call him off,” I said, “when you agree to leave passers-by alone.”

“Call him off quick,” they exclaimed. Grigio continued growling like an enraged wolf or bear.

The two men took to their heels, and Grigio stayed by my side, accompanying me until I went into the Cottolengo Institute. After recovering from my scare, and refreshed by a drink which that charitable institute always seems to come up with at the right moment, I went on home with a good escort.

Every evening when I had no other company, as I passed the [last] buildings I would see Grigio bound out of nowhere along the way. Many times the Oratory boys saw him. Once he was the centre of an amusing incident. The boys saw him coming into the courtyard. Some wanted to strike him, and others wanted to throw stones at him.

“Don’t tease him,” Joseph Buzzetti ordered, “that’s Don Bosco’s dog.”

They turned to patting and stroking him then as they brought him along to me. I was in the refectory having supper with some seminarians and priests and with my mother. They were alarmed at the unexpected sight of the dog.

“There’s no need to be afraid,” I said. “It’s my Grigio. Let him come in.” In fact he made a wide tour round the table and came joyfully up to me. I patted him too and offered him soup, bread, and meat, but he refused all of it. He would not even sniff at what I offered. “Well, what do you want?” I asked. He only cocked his ears and wagged his tail. “Eat or drink, otherwise be on your way,” I concluded. He continued to evidence contentment, resting his head on my napkin as if he wanted to speak to me and say “Good night.” Then the boys, wondering a great deal and quite happy, led him outside. I remember that I had come home late, and a friend had brought me in his carriage.

The last time that I saw Grigio was in 1866 while I was going from Murialdo to Moncucco to see my friend Louis Moglia³²¹. The parish priest of

³²¹ Luigi Moglia, owner of a farm near Moncucco where John Bosco had been taken in as a farmhand as a boy.

Buttigliera³²⁹ wanted to accompany me part of the way, and as a consequence I was surprised by nightfall only halfway on my journey. "Oh, if only I had my Grigio," I thought to myself, "how fortunate I would be." Having said that, I started across a field to take advantage of the last rays of light. Just then Grigio came bounding up to me, full of affection. He accompanied me for the stretch of road that I still had to travel, which was three kilometres.

When I got to my friend's house, where I was expected, they asked me to go round another way, fearing there would be a fight between my Grigio and the family's two mastiffs.

"If they got into a fight," said Moglia "they would tear each other to pieces." I talked a lot with the whole family before we sat down to supper. My companion was left to rest in a corner of the room. When we had finished our meal, my friend said, "We must also give Grigio his supper." He took a little food to bring to the dog; he looked in every corner of the room and of the house, but Grigio was not to be found. We all wondered, since neither door nor window was open, nor had the family dogs given any sign of his departure. We renewed our search upstairs, but no one could find him.

That is the last news I had of the grey dog that was the subject of so much enquiry and discussion. I never was able to find out who was his owner. I only know that the animal was truly providential for me on many occasions when I found myself in danger.

³²⁹ Giuseppe Vaccarino (1805-1891), parish priest of Buttigliera for 59 years.