

## I. CONFIDENTIAL LETTERS TO THE POPE CONCERNING THE POLITICAL SITUATION (1858-1867, 1873)

*In the years immediately preceding and following Italian Unity (1858-1866), Don Bosco kept constantly in touch with Pius IX by letter. He did this not only for interests directly relating to his work, but also in reference to the worrying situation the Church was going through in Piedmont, to encourage him in his defence of the faith against the enemies of religion, and to pass on to him any likely reserved information in his possession. As already indicated, Don Bosco was with Pius IX and his Secretary of State, Card. Antonelli, on the Roman question. Slowly however, he became convinced that a too vigorous resistance to the “revolution” was becoming ever more pointless, even risked worsening the situation, so after the capture of Rome he chose, also politically, the principle of doing whatever good could be done<sup>2</sup>.*

*Here then, we reproduce ten reserved letters he sent the pontiff over the years of Italian Unity, using people he could trust, not the normal post which Don Bosco knew was controlled by the public authorities.*

*In 1858 he was concerned with the unresolved question of the bishop of Turin, archbishop Fransoni. On his journey to Rome he was involved in this by the brother of the president of the Council, Marquis Gustavo Cavour (no. 54)<sup>3</sup>.*

*The following year he informed the pontiff of the possible infiltration of “revolutionaries” into the Papal States and the imminent proposal, by Government, of candidates for vacant Episcopal sees (no. 55). Still in 1859 he communicated his disapproval of the expansionist policy of the Kingdom of Savoy to the detriment of the Papal States and of his constant efforts to defend the faith of the people and the education of his boys (no. 56).*

*He had similar concerns the following year even if he had some hope that after this difficult moment the Church would have the final triumph (no. 57). On the*

<sup>2</sup> For Don Bosco's position on the Roman question cf. Francesco MOTTO, *Orientamenti politici di don Bosco*, in RSS 12 (1993) 9-37. Cf. various letters of the Saint to the Pope with relevant comment in Arthur J. LENTI, *Don Bosco, his Pope and his Bishop*. Roma, LAS 2006, pp. 11-64.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Francesco MOTTO, *Don Bosco mediatore fra Cavour e Antonelli*, in RSS 5 (1986) 3-20.

*vigil of the proclamation of the new Kingdom of Italy, including territories taken from the Papal States (1860), he repeated the same concerns and hopes, despite not excluding a possible new expulsion of the Pope from his See in Rome (no. 58).*

*In his letters in 1863-1864 he noted the essential stability of the situation (nos. 59, 60), while in a letter in 1865 he indicated that the suffering caused by marriage legislation about to be approved by parliament was compensated by the joy of beginning the building of the church of Mary Help of Christians and his hopes for the approval of the Salesian Society and its Constitutions (no. 61).*

*The following year (1866) he returned both to the matter of Papal approval for this, and to the difficult question of Church-State relationships (no. 62).*

*Some years later, in 1873, he announced the Pope's awaited exile in prophetic and symbolic language (no. 63), before returning to Rome. The value of this message was owed to the fact that it came from someone whose earlier predictions had come true<sup>4</sup>.*

#### **54. To Pope Pius IX**

Critical ed. in E(m) I, pp. 352-354.

Turin, 14 June 1858

Most Holy Father,

Back among my boys, I cannot say enough of the things heard and seen in the eternal city, those things that especially have to do with Your Holiness, for my heart overflows with gratitude toward Your Holiness' sacred person.

The spiritual favours that you so kindly granted me are already bearing their intended good fruit: in thirty or more different towns, people immediately set about planning the celebration of the month of May in honour of Mary, Mother of God. This effort found encouragement in the indulgences you granted for the singing of sacred hymns.

<sup>4</sup> Peter STELLA dedicates some pages to his predictions on events in 1870-1874, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Vol. II. *Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*. Roma, LAS 1981, pp. 532-547 (Appendix, *Note per uno studio sui sogni di don Bosco*).

Also I find satisfaction now in being able to provide more accurate information about things [religious] in Rome, and this offsets insinuations coming from people who whether through malice or ignorance distort the meaning of even the holiest things.

One thing however has been a source of heartfelt regret to me after leaving Rome—not to have had more time at my disposal so that I could come to see Your Holiness again, since in your kindness you had offered to receive me. I believe it had to do with our archbishop. Be that as it may I would again recommend our diocese in its pitiable state to Your Holiness' good and fatherly heart. I entreat Your Holiness with the words that the faithful of Lyons of old spoke to St Eleutherios, your worthy predecessor: "Holy Father, act to bring peace to our Church and help us in our need." True, we are not suffering outright persecution and there is no bloodshed, but evil is rampant and the damage immense. We still have a lot of good people but they are oppressed and helpless. The evil get bolder by the day; the weak are daily led astray in great numbers. If by height of misfortune the heretics were to come to power legally, I have reasons to believe that defections would reach frightening proportions even from the ranks of those who occupy posts of responsibility in this diocese. I say this in the Lord: may Your Holiness forgive me.

I do not know if the idea expressed by Mr de Cavour<sup>5</sup> has anything in it to commend it to Your Holiness. If it is a question of establishing a principle, I would not trust the proposal, while if it is a particular case one could hope for some success, especially if he still shows the same good intentions. In any case, Your Holiness needs to act in some way for the good of the Turin diocese, because the evils that would result from inaction would be irreparable. I speak in the Lord.

<sup>5</sup> It concerns Marquis Gustavo de Cavour (brother of Count Camillo, president of the Council) who had written to him while he was in Rome, about the Holy See taking steps to promote the archbishop of Turin, Archbishop Fransoni, exiled in Lyon, as Cardinal, and appointing a coadjutor bishop with right of succession.

Rumour has it, and it has also been reported in the press, that Father Genta, parish priest of St Francis de Paula in this capital should be named Bishop of Asti<sup>6</sup>. I would like to bring to Your Holiness's attention, that he is very much the liege of the government. Not long ago he was decorated with the Cross of Sts Maurice and Lazarus for his *enlightened zeal*: these were the words of the citation. He is a follower of Gioberti, and shows signs of supporting the Bill on civil marriage.

I beg Your Holiness' kind indulgence for the words that a son kneeling at Your Holiness' feet addresses to you, for he loves you more than he loves himself. I humbly ask your apostolic blessing on myself and on my poor boys. I assure you of our constant prayers, that the Lord may grant Your Holiness many more years for the good of the Church. As for me it is my hope and firm resolve, with God's help, to work with all my strength for the good of the Church to my dying breath.

Your Holiness' and holy Church's most indebted, humble son

Fr John Bosco

### 55. To Pope Pius IX

Critical ed. in E(m) I, p. 368.

[Turin, February 1859]

Most Holy Father,

A trusted person leaving for Rome, Canon Sossi from the cathedral in Asti<sup>7</sup>, affords me the opportunity of kneeling before Your Holiness and of conveying to you a piece of information that I believe to be urgent. From some written messages that happened to pass through my hands I learned that some evil-intentioned persons are planning to set up revolutionary cells at Civitavecchia, Ancona, and Rome. Obviously their aim is to foster revolutionary sentiment

<sup>6</sup> Giovanni Antonio Genta (1810-1888), who was not appointed bishop.

<sup>7</sup> Antonio Vitaliano Sossi (died 1891) probably went to Rome also to support the appointment of a bishop to Asti, vacant since the resignation of Bishop Filippo Artico.

so as to be ready to move into action by the end of March. I have not been able to learn the names of these people: the letters were simply signed F. Δ · • ·

The situation in our diocese is becoming steadily more murky: evil is on the rise. Cavour<sup>8</sup> shows good will, if he is sincere, but is surrounded by vicious rogues who are dragging him God only knows to what extreme. Only this morning he told me he wanted to present other candidates for vacant dioceses.

Forgive the liberty I take in writing: I, my boys, clerics and priests pray to God daily to give Your Holiness health and grace and to keep you many more years for the good of the Church.

Kneeling at your feet we humbly implore, with the greatest respect, your holy and apostolic blessing. In their name I profess that I am,

Your Holiness' most devoted son in Christ,

Fr John Bosco

### **56. To Pope Pius IX**

Critical ed. in E(m) I, pp. 386-388.

Turin, 9 November 1859

Most Holy Father,

It was with anxious anticipation that I waited for a safe means to reach Your Holiness by letter. My purpose was respectfully to ask for your blessing to strengthen us in the midst of our present trials. I also wanted to assure Your Holiness of our filial Catholic devotion to your sacred person. You are the successor of St Peter, the Vicar of Christ and supreme shepherd of the Church, and whoever is not united to it has no hope of salvation. I am now able to fulfil this desire of mine through the kindness of Marquis Scarampi. This zealous confrere in the Society of St Vincent de Paul, and our steadfast collaborator in the work of the oratories is leaving for Rome where he will spend the winter.

<sup>8</sup> This would be Count Camillo (see note 5), whom Don Bosco had met after his return from Rome in 1858.

First of all, Holy Father, we strongly disapprove of what our Government has done or had instigated in Romagna; although we could not stop this evil we have always disapproved of what they were doing there in word and in writing<sup>9</sup>. Most of the clergy and almost all parish priests, and I could say most of the lay people share these same sentiments although they do not dare show it publicly. But a vicious, hostile press, threats, promises of those in government have unfortunately won over many who were hesitant or afraid to the point where the number of courageous Catholics is greatly diminished.

Faced with such a disastrous religious situation good Catholics have closed ranks around their bishops, offering their services. But we in Turin were and are exposed to much greater danger by far. Our archbishop is in exile; the vicar general is threatened as soon as he opens his mouth; the Protestants who are protected by the authorities spare neither money nor effort to propagate their errors; the press is given freedom and teaching is unchecked; these things have poisoned the moral and religious life of the people with their deadly contagion.

Despite all this we have done and do what we can to lessen the consequences of these evils. We have formed a kind of society especially of clergy: we do what we can to spread good books and good newspapers; we preach; we give retreats, triduums and novenas and catechetical instruction always with a view to teaching the fundamentals of our Catholic religion and respect for the supreme head of Christianity. In this way up until now we have succeeded in preserving healthy religious principles in many young people. My estimate is that over three thousand youngsters attend our festive oratories or evening or day classes. All of them show good disposition, receive the sacraments of confession and communion, and are eager to hear God's Word.

There are around five hundred boys attending our schools. Those we have taken in are around three hundred, and of those, eighteen this year have donned the clerical habit; two entered the Dominicans. Two have even become priests; another three we hope, with God's help, will do so this year.

<sup>9</sup> It was about annexing territories from the Papal States to the Kingdom of Sardinia and Piedmont.

Divine Providence has seen in a truly marvellous way that our schools are calm and we can teach all our classes without interference of any kind.

But, Holy Father, I should not hide the fact from you that this raging storm is far from spent. I fear a Government based on revolution; I fear the daily diminishing number of good Catholics; I fear the great number of enemies of the social order taking refuge amongst us or swelling the ranks of rebels in Romagna; I fear, and may God hold this scourge at bay, I fear that Your Holiness may yet be harassed and perhaps persecuted in who knows what way.

I say this as a most affectionate son who always fears that some evil may happen to his beloved father; I pray to the holy and Immaculate Virgin to obtain better times from God for the people and the peace of the Church. For Your Holiness' consolation I tell you that as soon as events broke out in the State belonging to the Holy See my boys began saying special prayers every day for you and a dozen or so began alternating in going to holy communion asking God to give you health, and grace and to preserve Your Holiness.

I have told you these few things, perhaps failing to show due respect in my sentiments and words: please be forbearing.

Meanwhile I kneel at Your Holiness' feet, along with many of the clergy working alongside me in the sacred ministry, and fifty or so clerics who aspire to the ecclesiastical state, and about two hundred boys who want to join the Church's ranks [clergy]; for all my boys living here, and all who come to the oratories, for all who kneel at your feet we beg your apostolic blessing as though it were coming from Jesus Christ himself. May it be a blessing that keeps us firm in the holy Catholic religion, and makes us strong and ready to give our lives rather than to say or do the least thing that goes against its precepts. Amen.

Your Holiness' most affectionate, indebted son ...,

Fr John Bosco

## 57. To Pope Pius IX

Critical ed. in E(m) I, pp. 400-401.

Turin, 13 April 1860

Most Holy Father,

For some time, Holy Father, my boys have wanted to show a sign of gratitude and veneration for Your Holiness in whom we see a kind father and the Vicar of Jesus. But times were so difficult, that in order not to compromise ourselves uselessly, we had to limit ourselves to praying to God in corners in our homes and churches.

Now, although revolution continues, nevertheless my boys, of their own spontaneous will, have taken up a collection to offer their mite or better their pittance for Peter's Pence. And those who on account of their poverty could offer nothing, have offered their holy communions for the intentions of Your Holiness and for the peace of the Church.

Seconding their outburst of religious fervour I take the liberty of placing humbly at Your Holiness' feet a message from them signed by all contributors. I do so with the same heartfelt sentiment with which they themselves express their hearts' affection towards you, the best of fathers.

The small sum of money collected has been entrusted to the editors of *L'Armonia* for safe delivery.

Holy Father, we are at the moment living through most dangerous and trying times. Up until now the Piedmontese clergy has stood firm. Now however, threats, promises, gifts of money and the bad example of clergy from regions that have been *annexed* give us cause to fear for the future. In some diocese a number of clergy have publicly signified their support of current government policy. Some religious corporations have even put on light displays to celebrate the *much-touted annexation*.

The revolutionary plan now calls for the invasion not only of Romagna, but also all the other provinces of the Holy See, Naples, Sicily etc.<sup>10</sup>. Our holy

<sup>10</sup> Twelve days later the expedition of 'The Thousand' set sail from Genoa to Sicily, led by Giuseppe Garibaldi.



religion is legally opposed and reviled. We have no means to defend it except our little popular pamphlets, and our classroom teaching and catechism classes.

Holy Father, in view of the present situation, were we to rely on human help, we would have to be prepared for the worst: destruction of the faith and bloodshed for those who would rise in its defence.

However, Holy Father, take heart in the Lord. The holy and Immaculate Virgin from heaven is preparing a great triumph for her Church. this triumph will take place in the near future. True, it will be preceded by horrible catastrophes, but God will shorten the evil times. Meanwhile we pray that the reign of sin may come to an end and that God's holy will be done. As soon as peace comes again to the Church, I hope to be able to visit the Eternal City and gaze once more, before the end of my days, on Your Holiness' venerable countenance.

Meanwhile my priests, seminarians, students and working boys kneel with me at Your Holiness' feet and humbly beg you to accept our small offering and the expressions that accompany it. We ask for your holy apostolic blessing to confirm us in the holy religion of Jesus Christ until death. *Amen.*

Your Holiness' and holy Church's most humble and devoted son,

Fr John Bosco

### **58. To Pope Pius IX**

Critical ed. in E(m) I, pp. 440-442.

Turin, 10 March 1861<sup>11</sup>

Most Holy Father,

A devoted reporter from the newspaper *L'Armonia* is travelling to Rome, and this affords me with the opportunity of addressing a few words to Your

<sup>11</sup> Ten days later, March 17, the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed, following the annexation of territories taken from the Papal States and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Holiness. How many things would this humble priest like to say to the Head of Christendom! But my report shall be brief.

After being made the object of repeated harassment, peace has returned. I am allowed to work for my youngsters and to publish the *Catholic Readings* undisturbed. During this year our school has grown fourfold. Our boarders now number about five hundred. They are youngsters with good promise and are studying with the priesthood in mind.

For the moment our clergy is showing courage and standing firm. But very severe trials are in store, and if the Lord does not sustain us with his grace, I fear the worst. We have been subjected to attacks with promises, threats and repression. Now the time of persecution is at hand.

Many of the laity are still practising, but a great number daily fall from apathy into complete indifference, the bane of Catholicism in our area. However, many that have been in hiding have thrown off fear and are showing the courage of their Christian convictions.

Holy Father, you may take some comfort in the fact that here in Piedmont you have a great number of devoted children. United in the Spirit we are, God willing, ready to lay down our life and forfeit our possessions for that most holy religion of which you are the visible Head on earth. May God help us from heaven.

What causes most pain are the catastrophes that hang over the Universal Church. But take courage, Holy father, we have been praying and are now intensifying our prayer for the preservation of your sacred person. One of our youngsters who for some years has given evidence of being favoured with special lights from God<sup>12</sup> has this to say: "The present trials will greatly sadden Pius IX's fatherly heart. The Immaculate Virgin is offering to the Holy Father a glorious bouquet of roses, but he must grasp them by their thorny stem."

Another person believes that unless God's designs are changed Your Holiness will again have to leave Rome under duress. A great good, however, will come from this evil, for whole nations will flock to you to pay you

<sup>12</sup> The boy's name is not known.

homage. Millions of people will then embrace Catholicism moved only by the fortitude evinced by the Vicar of Jesus Christ in his trials. By this means many souls redeemed by our Saviour will receive the light of grace.

Briefly put, the most terrible calamities are to befall us shortly, more terrible than any in history. But Your Holiness will win the most glorious triumph when after bloodiest engagements you will again enjoy peaceful possession of your States, be received with love by your people and blessed by kings and nations.

And what about those rulers and their followers who are the cause of all these evils? Those who caused these evils or who could but did not prevent them, are the cudgel that God wields to punish people's misdeeds. The cudgel is then broken and thrown into the fire.

In any case we have been and are praying without ceasing that the merciful God may preserve and protect God's Vicar and give peace to the Church. Hope in human beings is of no avail; now God alone can help.

Holy Father, you have been generous with me in the past; be generous to me once more and out of the great goodness of your heart overlook the too familiar tone of this letter. Put everything down to the great love I cherish for your revered person.

In your kindness be pleased to bestow on my youngsters and myself your holy and apostolic blessing, while I kneel at your feet as,

Your Holiness' most devoted son,

Fr John Bosco

### **59. To Pope Pius IX**

Critical ed. in E(m) I, pp. 552-554.

Turin, 13 February 1863

Most Holy Father,

I hope that Your Holiness will show his usual kindness to me and allow this poor but devoted son of holy mother Church, by means of the good

Catholic Marchioness Landi, to have the consolation of kneeling before you and expressing some filial thoughts coming straight from the heart.

First of all may I express warm gratitude on my own behalf, that of my colleagues and boys for the many spiritual favours you have bestowed on us on many occasions. For us these favours have been a powerful encouragement to keep striving, praying and working to promote the glory of God and good of souls with what little we have.

For two years now religion and priests have been exposed to severe trials in our towns, due to the amount of money the Protestants have, threats, and even oppression by the authorities, and by the misguided actions of not a few of those whom God had placed in charge of looking after the Lord's house. To this we need to add the lack of Catholic education for youth in our primary and secondary schools which has brought about two very sad effects; it has led to a craze for reading irreligious and seductive materials, and rejecting the fundamentals of religion. Then there has been a notable lessening of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, and those who feel they are called are often laughed at.

Newspapers and impious books continue to be printed, there are many more of them, and they are more widespread, but with much less benefit to the enemies of religion. This is because of the increase in good books and newspapers and the greater care Catholics are taking in promoting the press and propagating it.

But amongst the many reasons for feeling sorry for ourselves there are also some consoling ones. Respect and veneration for Your Holiness has very much grown amongst good Catholics; it has likewise increased amongst the enemies of the Faith. This is due to Your Holiness' irrefutable behaviour, good works and steadiness. *Omnia ad majorem Dei gloriam.*

The death or exile of more than a few bishops<sup>13</sup> has confounded the less fervent and has meant that the clergy have come together more, leading them

<sup>13</sup> Around fifty bishops were exiled during the brief Rattazzi term in office in 1862 (March-December).

more exclusively and directly to truth's core, to the Vicar of Jesus Christ. The bishops continue to be incredibly united; the Piedmontese clergy are of one mind with the bishops and with Rome; the clergy of other Provinces (*flens dico*) have in no small manner disgraced themselves. The only consolation in this disastrous scene is the steadiness and prudence of the bishops which has prevented many from defecting and not a few to repent. Let me say something strange but true. It seems that at the moment the bishops are achieving greater good from exile or prison than they would if in their dioceses. They are publishing, defending the principle of divine authority in its visible head which is at the basis of our holy Catholic religion.

Although we are often witness to the frequent plundering of sacred places and people, thus far divine worship has not been neglected. Many churches have been built or restored. In Turin alone four parish churches are being built, one of which will be dedicated to *Maria Auxilium Christianorum*.

Since Your Holiness has already been willing to hear me speak about the oratories I will also say something about these. We have five of them and there is a more than satisfactory flow of young people to them who come to hear God's Word and receive the sacraments. There are regularly more than three thousand who turn up at weekends. The oratory of St Francis de Sales has a shelter, classrooms and boys coming from all over the city on weekends. There are seven hundred who live with us; of these five hundred and fifty want to be priests; each year a few of them become priests and go to various towns to exercise their priestly ministry.

Meanwhile, Holy Father, the youngsters in our oratories continue to pray for Your Holiness that he may be preserved for many years, and for the triumph of holy mother Church. There are a considerable number of communions every day; morning and evening we pray to the Blessed and Immaculate Virgin; during the day there are many visits to the Blessed Sacrament and all of this is to call on the divine and merciful God to lessen the serious and terrible scourge that has been felt across our cities and towns now for some years. May wonderful days of peace for the Church and the people be restored.

Unfortunately, Holy Father, we still have to make the great journey *per ignem et aquam*, and what once seemed so far away is now very close. May it please Your Holiness to follow up the thought that God inspires in you by proclaiming that wherever possible there will be veneration of the Blessed Sacrament and devotion to the Blessed Virgin. These are the two anchors for the salvation of our poor human race. Many of the faithful are praying for you, Holy Father that the Holy Virgin may sustain you in this time of trial. You can be sure of this. They are praying that Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament will deliver you from danger.

Having had this great consolation of being able to speak this way to Your Holiness I ask you to bear with my boldness which is driven by the great affection that we here have for your sacred person.

And finally, we ask you to be especially kind and impart your holy blessing on this large group of priests, seminarians, lay people and youngsters who all join with me in humbly requesting this. In their name I have the great consolation of kneeling at Your Holiness' feet.

Your poor but devoted son,

Fr John Bosco

### 60. To Pope Pius IX

Critical ed. in E(m) II, pp. 69-70.

Turin, 25 August 1864

Most Holy Father,

Fr Emiliano Manacorda, doctor of theology and law, and zealous supporter of our oratories<sup>14</sup> is returning to Rome to pursue the exercise of his sacred ministry. By God's providence he is a person of means but he has no other aim than to devote life and possessions to those things that Your Holiness may judge to be for the greater glory of God.

<sup>14</sup> Emiliano Manacorda (1833-1909), a priest from Asti working in the Roman Curia, a great friend of Don Bosco, who supported him as a candidate for bishop of Fossano: cf. E(m) III, pp. 382-383.

Through this benefactor of our young people I have the opportunity to express my gratitude to you, Holy Father. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for so kindly taking into consideration the proposal submitted for the Society of St Francis de Sales. I have already obtained a decree of general approval of the Society with a number of critical observations on the constitutions. I will carefully try to implement them and then submit the constitutions again to Your Holiness so that you may graciously expedite to its completion the work begun under your holy auspices. It appears that God has wanted to be lavish with his blessings in our regard. The Society is already over a hundred members strong. It has four houses and five oratories attended by young people of every age and condition. Their number often surpasses three thousand.

The religious situation in our area seems to have come to a head. But the visible signs of God's powerful presence among us are in evidence every day. *Est Deus in Israel*. In the provinces of the former Sardinian kingdom perfect union continues to be maintained amongst the bishops and clergy of every category. True, the religious press is often threatened, fined and penalised. Nevertheless no one is deterred by fear, and no one has any other point of reference than Rome and the Vicar of Jesus Christ.

Take heart, then, Holy Father, because the time is at hand and relief from distress is in store for you. God is with you. Meanwhile morning and evening we offer special prayers to God and the Holy Virgin for the preservation of your sacred person *ad multos annos*. May you live to see with your own eyes the triumph of our holy religion and the glory of the holy Church.

Most Holy Father, please overlook the liberty I am taking, I the poorest and least of your children. But you are our father and will kindly bear with me. Priests, seminarians and thousands of young people join with me in placing their possessions, hearts and their lives at your service. For your part please give us your holy apostolic blessing, and that will be reward enough for us.

With the highest esteem, deepest gratitude and most tender devotion, I kneel at Your Holiness' feet, unworthy as I am to be,

Your Holiness' most humble and devoted son,

Fr John Bosco

## 61. To Pope Pius IX

Critical ed. in E(m) II, pp. 128-130.

Turin, 30 April 1865

Most Holy Father,

It is ever a source of joy and comfort for me, Most Holy Father, to have the opportunity of addressing, also on behalf of my friends and associates, the dearest and most beloved of fathers. The bearer of this letter is the Marquis Fassati who is travelling to Rome for devotional purposes. He is a great benefactor of our house, so much so that if the church of Mary Help of Christians is now rising above ground, I owe it in great measure to the generosity of the Fassati family.

The church is rising steadily, Most Holy father, but I find myself in very straitened circumstances financially. I have therefore decided to use the very means that you yourself were so kind to suggest through one of our benefactors: I am planning a raffle. I therefore take the liberty of asking Your Holiness for your blessing on those who are involved in the building and to send us some gifts to head the list of objects in the catalogue.

These days we have been following with consternation the Bill on civil marriage, and our apprehension was all the keener for the fact that its introduction is attributed to Bishop Di Giacomo<sup>15</sup>. We hope that the bishops' negotiations in progress will bring about modifications in the Bill—who knows??

On Thursday (April 27) the bishop of Susa blessed the cornerstone of the church of *Mary Help of Christians* as this was taking place by a happy coincidence something wonderful happened. The sacred service was held from 2 to 3 P.M. with several thousand people from the first families in this city in attendance. Now as everyone was kneeling and praying that the great Mother of God would bring to naught our enemies' attacks on the religious

<sup>15</sup> Gennaro Di Giacomo (1796-1878), bishop of Alife (Caserta); friend of King Victor Emmanuel II, who appointed him as senator of the Realm in 1863; in the preceding days in the Senate they had discussed the Marriage Bill.



corporations and on Church properties, at that very moment the Bill in the House of Representatives ran into trouble. The debate was suspended and the Bill, which in the morning had appeared to be headed for passage without opposition, was withdrawn<sup>16</sup>.

Also, most Holy Father, we offer prayer in common morning and evening that God would help you find a way to repair the ruinous damage that threatens each day to become more serious, if that were possible. I am referring to the problem of returning bishops to their sees and appointments for vacant sees<sup>17</sup>. The whole world is anxiously awaiting with bated breath the Holy Father's decision in the matter, although all are convinced that whatever the Pope does is well done and valued by the faithful.

Last March I submitted to the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales revised in accordance with the observations I received. I leave everything in Your Holiness' hands, whose fatherly goodness I have so often experienced. Our membership has risen above a hundred. We have seven houses in operation. The observance of the rules and of religious discipline is as good as can be humanly expected.

Take courage, Holy Father; we are intensifying our prayer for the day when Your Holiness will personally intone the great *Te Deum* in thanksgiving for peace restored to the Church and for the glory of Pius IX's pontificate. I think the day is about to dawn, but not before we fight new dreadful battles.

May God bless Your Holiness and may the Blessed Virgin keep you *ad multos annos* for the good of the Church. In your kindness please bless my poor youngsters and myself, as I humbly kneel with them at your feet, happy and honoured to be,

Your Holiness' most humble and devoted son,

Fr John Bosco

<sup>16</sup> On Thursday April 27 Giuseppe Vacca had requested suspending discussions on his legal plan to administer ecclesiastical goods ; on 28 April a royal decree ordered that the plan be withdrawn.

<sup>17</sup> Negotiations were going on between Cardinal Antonelli and the government envoy, Saverio Vegezzi, to overcome difficulties in appointing bishops to many vacant sees in Italy. Don Bosco perhaps played a part in resumption of these negotiations: cf. note 20.

## 62. To Pope Pius IX

Critical ed. in E(m) I, pp. 201-202.

Turin, 25 January 1866

Most Holy Father,

The Marchioness Amat di Villarios, a fervent Catholic and our generous benefactress is travelling to Rome, and I take this opportunity to voice some concerns of mine, also on behalf of my numerous associates in the sacred ministry, and of my youngsters.

The work of the oratories is going forward without hindrance. Last year we opened a new oratory and another one, God willing, will be opened next summer.

The young people given shelter in three separate hospices are 1200 in number. About a 100 of them take the clerical habit every year. Most of them return to their diocese of origin and enter the seminary there. Those of them who have the proper spirit remain with us and join the Society of St Francis de Sales, which at present is 110 members strong.

Morning and evening we continue to offer special prayers for the present needs of the Church, and in particular for the preservation of Your Holiness' precious days.

Our fear is that a great trial is in store for us before this year is over. Will it be pestilence? War? Famine? May God's will be done. Only may God not take from us the vineyard of our evangelical labours because God has found better workers for it.

A great calamity for us has been the passing of the Bill on civil marriage that went into effect on New Year's Day<sup>18</sup>. It is bound to dishearten the faithful and sow seeds of strife between civil and Church authorities, not to speak of its immoral consequences. What gives us hope in this crisis is the close union

<sup>18</sup> The reference is to new laws that came into force in the Kingdom of Italy at the beginning of the year, also involving new marriage legislation—see the previous letter.

existing among the faithful, with priests and bishops, and with the Supreme Head of the Church.

In any case we are actively engaged in writing, preaching and in catechetical instruction with excellent results. We are very busy in the confessional and the sacrament of communion is well attended. Our focus and our devotion are focused, one might say, on Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and on devotion to Mary Immaculate. With regard to our devotion to the Mother of God, you may be pleased to learn that the Church of Mary Help of Christians has made great progress. The walls and the roof are completed, and hopefully we will be able to see God's work through to the end with the help of Divine Providence. It isn't the richest church in the city but people are saying that it is the most imposing and the most apt to inspire devotion in the faithful.

The *Catholic Readings* continue to be published and the Association is 12,00 members strong. It seems they are keenly read. This is the 14th year of their publication. We ask your blessing that they may continue.

The Society of St Francis de Sales is making good progress. The religious discipline and zeal of its members leave nothing to be desired.

We now look to the Holy See in the hope that our Constitutions will be definitively approved, at the time and in the manner that Your Holiness will judge to be for the greater glory of God and the good of souls.

My associates, pastors and simple priests, the members of the Society of St Francis de Sales, the young people of our hospices and of our oratories, join me in kneeling at Your Holiness' feet for your holy Apostolic blessing. All of us are ready to sacrifice our health and possessions, and our very lives for that holy religion of which you are the Head.

More fortunate than they, but also on their behalf, I have the honour to be with gratitude and reverence,

Your Holiness' most devoted and humble son,

Father John Bosco

### 63. Dreamlike message reserved for Pope Pius IX

Critical ed. in Cecilia ROMERO, *I sogni di don Bosco*. Leumann (Torino), ElleDiCi 1978, pp. 29-32.

24 May - 24 June 1873

It was a dark night, and people could no longer find their way back to their own countries. Suddenly a most brilliant light shone in the sky, illuminating their way as at high noon. At that moment from the Vatican came forth, as in procession, a multitude of men and women, young children, monks, nuns, and priests, and at their head was the Pope.

But a furious storm then broke out, somewhat dimming that light, as if light and darkness were locked in battle. Meanwhile the long procession reached a small square littered with dead and wounded, many of whom cried for help. The ranks of the procession thinned considerably. After a two-hundred-day march, all realised that they were no longer in Rome. In dismay they swarmed about the Pontiff to protect him and minister to him in his needs.

At that moment two angels appeared, bearing a banner that they presented to the Supreme Pontiff, saying: *Take the banner of Her who battles and routs the most powerful armies on earth. Your enemies have vanished; with tears and sighs your children plead for your return.*

One side of the banner bore the inscription: *Regina sine labe concepta*; and the other: *Auxilium Christianorum*.

The Pontiff accepted the banner gladly, but he became very distressed to see how few were his followers.

But the two angels went on: *“Go now, comfort your children. Write to your brothers scattered throughout the world that people must reform their lives. This cannot be achieved unless the bread of the Divine Word is broken among the peoples. Teach children their catechism and preach detachment from earthly things. The time has come”, the two angels concluded, “when the poor will evangelise the world. Priests shall be sought among those who wield the hoe, the spade and the*

*hammer, as David prophesied: God lifted the poor man from the fields to place him on the throne of the princes of His people.”*

On hearing this, the Pontiff moved on, and the ranks began to swell. On reaching the Holy City, the Pontiff wept at the sight of its desolate citizens, for many of them were no longer. He then entered St Peter’s and intoned the *Te Deum*, to which a chorus of angels responded, singing: *Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.*

When the song was over, all darkness vanished and a blazing sun shone. The population had declined greatly in the cities and in the countryside; the land was mangled as if by a hurricane and hailstorm, and people sought each other, deeply moved, and saying: “*Est Deus in Israel.*”

From the start of the exile until the intoning of the *Te Deum*, the sun rose two hundred times. All the events described covered a period of four hundred days.

The person reporting these things is the same who unerringly predicted what happened to France a year before it took place.

These predictions were widely known and were fulfilled day by day, as if a script were being followed.

According to this same person, France, Spain, Austria and a German power would be the instruments of Divine Providence in preventing the collapse of civil society and restoring peace to the Church, which for so long and in so many ways has been fought against. These events would start in the spring of 1874 and would be completed within a year and a few months, unless new iniquities should be perpetrated against God’s will.