

## **New Information on the Salesians' Coming to New York:**

### **A Letter from Fr. Celestine Durando to Archbishop Michael Corrigan**

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The Spring 2000 issue of the *Journal* contained my article on the founding of the Salesian work in the Eastern United States: *The Zeal of the Salesians Is Just the Thing...* Since the writing of that article an important new find was made in the archives of the archdiocese of New York, the sort of discovery that always surprises and delights historical researchers. The find was a letter from Father Celestine Durando to Archbishop Michael Corrigan which turned up in "a folder among Mother Cabrini material" where the archdiocesan archivist, Sister Marguerita Smith, OP, was doing research.<sup>1</sup>

How did a letter from a member of the superior chapter of the Society of Saint Francis de Sales wind up in "a folder among Mother Cabrini material"? Through the coincidence that until around 1897 Mother Cabrini's Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart called themselves the Salesian Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart,<sup>2</sup> and that Mother Cabrini arrived in New York with her sisters in 1889, more than nine years in advance of Don Bosco's Salesians. Somehow Sister Marguerita's predecessors in the archives confused the two Salesian congregations.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter, June 1, 1999, from Sr. Marguerita to the author. The Durando letter may be found in the Archdiocese of New York Archives, G-94. An attempt to incorporate the new material in the article before *JSS* published it was not successful.

<sup>2</sup> They dropped 'Salesian' from their name 'to avoid confusion with orders of the same name,' Mary Louise Sullivan, MSC, explains in *Mother Cabrini: Italian Immigrant of the Century* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1992), p. 41, n. 2.

As we already knew, Archbishop Corrigan, coadjutor to New York's Cardinal John McCloskey, had written twice to Don Bosco to ask for pastoral help with the Italian immigrant population, first on December 15, 1883, and again on March 7, 1884.<sup>3</sup> We also knew that Don Bosco had refused the request, having jotted on the first letter, "Rimandato a trattare nell' 1886,"<sup>4</sup> deferring until at least then any further consideration—in view of the already existing Salesian commitment to Patagonia. What was lacking was hard evidence of a reply from Turin to New York, conveying Don Bosco's refusal. That evidence turns up in Father Durando's long-missing letter of April 1, 1884. We may presume that this is a response to the March 7 letter; whether there was a separate response to the December letter remains unknown, though it is probable.

Celestine Durando, a native of Farigliano di Mondovi, Italy, was born in 1840 and came to Don Bosco's Oratory in Turin in 1856. On his very first day there he met fourteen-year-old Dominic Savio,<sup>5</sup> with whom he helped found the Company of Mary Immaculate. On December 18, 1859, with other seminarians he joined Don Bosco in forming the Society of St. Francis de Sales.<sup>6</sup> He was ordained in 1865, and the following year became a member of the superior chapter<sup>7</sup> of the Society, an office he held for nearly forty years. From 1886 to 1903 he also served as provincial of a loose unit of Salesian houses in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Father Durando was well known for several highly praised school publications. In 1869 Don Bosco directed him to compile the collection *Italian Classics for the Young*.<sup>8</sup> Between 1869 and 1885 two hundred and four volumes were published, nineteen of them edited by Father Durando himself. He also authored an excellent Latin grammar and dictionary. Apart from his scholarly achievements, he distinguished himself by a zealous ministry in the confessional. "A silent man," Father Michael Rua wrote of him, "he lived

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<sup>3</sup> Corrigan to Bosco, Rome, Dec. 15, 1883, Salesian Central Archives 3318 D10-12. Corrigan to Bosco, New York, Mar. 7, 1884, *ibid.* 3318 El-2. Both letters are cited briefly by Philip Pascucci, "Once Upon a Time in Old New York," *JSS* 3:1 (Spring 1992), 8, and nearly in full by Michael Mendl, "The Zeal of the Salesians Is Just the Thing," *JSS* 11: 1 (Spring 2000), 98-99.

<sup>4</sup> Noted by Pascucci, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Savio, who died Mar. 9, 1857, just shy of his 15th birthday, was canonized in 1954.

<sup>6</sup> See Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, trans. Diego Borgatello, vol. 6 (New Rochelle, 1971), 181-183.

<sup>7</sup> Now termed the general council.

<sup>8</sup> See Lemoyne, *The Biographical Memoirs*, V, 9 (New Rochelle, 1975), 51, 196-197, 391.

a career of good works, rich in merit. Wherever he passed he left the image of a truly priestly Salesian spirit." He died at the Oratory in 1907.<sup>9</sup>

It was in his capacity as a member of the superior chapter that Father Durando was delegated to write to Archbishop Corrigan. Here is a transcript of the letter, followed by an annotated translation.

### transcript

Sia lodato G.C.

Oratorio

di

San Francesco di Sales

Torino, Via Cottolengo, N. 32<sup>10</sup>

1 Aprile 1884

Eccellenza Reverendissima

Dolorose veramente sono le notizie che V.E. si degnò mandarci della tristissima condizione in cui trovasi cotesia popolazione cattolica[.] Piacesse a Dio che potessimo subito accorrere a prestare la debole opera nostra per togliere di mezzo a sì gravi pericoli tante buone anime! Ma pur troppo dobbiamo per ora contentarci del vivo desiderio. La recente erezione del Vicariato Apostolico e della Prefettura della Patagonia è per la nostra umile Congregazione cosa di grave importanza; dobbiamo corrispondere con zelo ed eziandio con grandi sacrifici all'insigne benevolenza del S. Padre, e perciò rivolgere in questo tempocolà il nostro pensiero e le nostre cure. Se Dio ci continuerà il suo affito, del che non possiamo dubitare, ed avremo un po' di aumento nel personale, posso assicurare l'E.V. che è desiderio vivissimo di D. Bosco e degli altd superiori di accondiscendere all'ottima proposta e di venire al più presto possibile ad aprire in cotesta grande città una casa per l'educazione della povera gioventù e per l'istruzione religiosa ai disgraziati italiani che si recano costi a cercar la fortuna e trovano invece la miseria dell'anima e del corpo.

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<sup>9</sup> Eugenio Ceria, "Sac. Celestino Durando," in Eugenio Valentini and Amedeo Rodino, ed., *Dizionario biografico dei Salesiani* (Turin: Ufficio Stampa Salesiano, 1969), 113-114; Diego Borgatello and Michael Mendl, "Celestine Durando," in Eugenio Ceria, *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, V, 16 (New Rochelle, 1995), 360.

<sup>10</sup> Letterhead printed on the stationery.

La prego di porgere a Sua Eminenza gli umili ossequii e ringraziamenti di D. Bosco e degli altri Superiori della congregazione; si ricordi qualche volta di noi dinanzi al Signore e mi voglia sempre credere,

di V.E.Rev<sup>ma</sup>  
Dev<sup>mo</sup> Servo  
Sac. Celestino Durando  
Dirett. degli Studi nella Congreg. Salesiana

**translation**

Praised be J[esus] C[hrist]

Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales Turin, 32 Via Cottolengo<sup>11</sup>

April 1, 1884

Very Reverend Excellency:<sup>12</sup>

Truly sad is the news which Your Excellency has graciously sent us concerning the very unhappy condition in which the Catholic population there<sup>13</sup> finds itself.<sup>14</sup> Would to God that we could rush at once and lend our feeble endeavors to help deliver so many good souls from such grave perils! But unfortunately we must be content now with our great desire to do so. The recent erection of the vicariate apostolic and prefecture [apostolic] of Patagonia<sup>15</sup> is for our humble Congregation a matter of grave importance;<sup>16</sup> we must respond to the Holy Father's<sup>17</sup> singular benevolence with zeal and even with great sacrifices, and therefore at the moment turn there our attention and our concern. If God

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<sup>11</sup> The motherhouse of the Society of St. Francis de Sales (Salesian Congregation) and, until 1965, its general headquarters.

<sup>12</sup> Although his name is not given anywhere in the letter, this is evidently Abp. Corrigan, the only New York prelate in touch with the Salesians in the 1880s (so far as anyone knows).

<sup>13</sup> In New York.

<sup>14</sup> See the details in Corrigan's March 7 letter, *loc. cit.* 99.

<sup>15</sup> The Salesians had begun to evangelize the native peoples of Patagonia in Argentina in the 1870s; in July 1883 they petitioned the Holy See to erect ecclesiastical jurisdictions, and on Nov. 16, 1883, the Holy See acceded to the petition, naming Fr. John Cagliero and Fr. Joseph Fagnano as provincial and prefect apostolic, respectively.

<sup>16</sup> See Ceria, *The Biographical Memoirs*, trans. Diego Borgatello and Michael Mendl, XVI, 16:295-298.

<sup>17</sup> Pope Leo XIII.

continues to help us—which we cannot doubt—and we get a little more personnel, I can assure Your Excellency that it is the most lively wish of Don Bosco and the other superiors<sup>18</sup> to comply with your very fine proposal and to come as soon as possible to open a house for the education of impoverished youngsters<sup>19</sup> and the religious instruction of hapless Italian people who emigrate to seek their fortune only to find misery of both soul and body.

Please convey to His Eminence<sup>20</sup> humble regards and thanks from Don Bosco and the other superiors of our Congregation; remember us from time to time to the Lord, and believe me always,

Your Very Reverend Excellency's  
humble servant,  
Fr. Celestine Durando  
Director of Education of the Salesian Congreg.

In spite of Don Bosco's "great desire" it would be fourteen more years and more insistence on Archbishop Corrigan's part—in his own name, after Cardinal McCloskey's death in 1885—to draw the Salesians to New York. That part of the tale has already been told in detail in the pages of this *Journal*.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The superior chapter.

<sup>19</sup> 'The [Salesians'] first work of charity shall be that of gathering poorer and neglected boys, in order to instruct them in our holy religious...' (Constitutions, ed. 1874, art. 3)

<sup>20</sup> Card. McCloskey, in whose name Corrigan had written.

<sup>21</sup> See the two articles cited in n. 2.