

acts

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“Successor of Don Bosco: son, disciple, apostle”

**THE HUMAN AND SPIRITUAL PROFILE
OF BLESSED MICHAEL RUA**

On the hundredth anniversary of his death

1. Don Rua “the most faithful son of Don Bosco”. The six mysterious word which keep coming back. - Two urgent matters: one for Don Bosco and the other for Michael. - A prophetic letter on the bedside table. - Being Don Bosco at Mirabello Monferrato. - “Being Don Bosco here at the Oratory”. **2. Don Rua “the living Rule”.** All the work is finished. Is Don Rua finished too? - Don Bosco shares with him his mind and heart. - Becoming Don Bosco day after day. - The ‘Rule’ once approved becomes the path of holiness. - “Don Rua studied me and I studied Don Rua”. - Don Bosco’s hand in that of Don Rua. **3. Don Rua: fidelity to consecrated life “for a whole lifetime”.** Fruitful fidelity to Don Bosco. - Jesus: food in the Eucharist and merciful love in his Heart. - “All that we have we owe to Mary the Most Holy Help of Christians”. - Obedience. - Poverty. - Chastity. **4. Don Rua: “the evangeliser of youth”.** New fields of pastoral work. - Among the workers and the sons of workers. - Among the miners in Switzerland. - Emigrant among the emigrants. - Risking everything that can be put at risk like Don Bosco. - “That simplicity with which he tried to accompany what he did”. **Conclusion.** - Prayer to intercede for the canonisation of Blessed Michael Rua.

Rome, 16 August 2009

My Dear Confreres,

It is some time since I last wrote to you. It was not a matter of my neglect and even less of a lack of will; just the opposite, you know how much I care for you and keep you in my heart. Visiting the Provinces I noticed once again that the circular letters, as for that matter the various documents of the Congregation, travel at different speeds; this is due to a number of reasons not least delays in the translations. So it happens that they pile up and in the end there is the risk, by no means imaginary, that they are not read; in this case the opportunity is lost of re-enforcing our charismatic identity and of reflecting together on our life and mission. After speaking with the General Council, therefore, I took the decision to reduce to three – rather than the present four – the circular letters each year, one of which will be dedicated to the presentation of and the commentary on the Strenna. The Acts of the Council too will thus come out every four months, being published in January,

May and September. I hope that this decision will help us to appreciate our Salesian literature more, to reflect on it more deeply and to make it become life. Only in this way will it be able to achieve the fundamental objective of creating a “Salesian culture” in the Congregation.

In this period there have been some quite significant and interesting events involving in particular the Rector Major, which you have been able to follow through ANS on our site *sdb.org* and in some cases through television transmissions or by live streaming. I remind you of some of them: preaching the Retreat for the Rectors of the ICC, ICP, ILE, INE Provinces belonging to the Italy and Middle East Region, which is one of the Rector Major’s more important services of animation aimed at promoting vocational development; taking part in the ‘Youth Festival’ of the INE Province in Jesolo, which gave me the opportunity to see and appreciate one of the more successful Youth Ministry experiences; the meeting with the Provincials of Poland and the EST Circumscription, in which we reflected together on the relationship between these Provinces and those of the North Europe Region, with the rest of Europe and with the Rector Major and the General Council, in the new context so different from that of the years of Nazism and of Communism, in which these Provinces find themselves living the Salesian charism today, and on the role of these Provinces in the ‘Project for Europe’; the visit to the EST Circumscription which had the purpose of assessing the progress made since it was established, of examining the challenges and the proposals made by the Provincial Council and by the Ukraine Delegation and the other parts of the Circumscription, to indicate the lines to be followed at the present moment.

Then there were other events in which I took part: the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Congregation in the ICP Province in Turin, which in some ways is an indication of what the other Provinces are doing and which will reach a climax on 18 December, the day on which we are invited to renew our profession; the first *Forum* of the SYM of the new ICC

Circumscription, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the inauguration of the Don Bosco Temple at Cinecittà and the start of the pilgrimage of Don Bosco's casket; the conclusion of the ADMA National Congress in Spain at Albacete; preaching the Retreat to the Province of Valencia and visiting the Seville Province; participation in various meetings of the Union of Superiors General, as President, and in the Half-yearly Assembly on the subject "Geographical and cultural changes in Institutes of Consecrated Life: challenges and future prospects"; the plenary session of the General Council in June and July, including a pilgrimage in the steps of Saint Paul; welcoming the Holy Father to our house at Les Combes; finally the first meeting of the Commission for the 'Project for Europe.'

I should like to begin this new stage in our communication with a letter about the first Successor of Don Bosco, in this way launching the **Year dedicated to Don Rua in the Centenary of his death**, which took place on 6 April 1910. To study him more deeply, we shall shortly be holding in Turin the Fifth International Congress on the History of the Salesians, organised by the ACCSA and the ISS, in preparation for the International Congress of the Salesian Congregation which we will be celebrating in Rome in 2010. I thank right away the Salesian Historians' Association, the Salesian Historical Institute and the Committee for the International Congress who, with dedication, responsibility and skill have taken on this commitment which I entrusted to them.¹

"Remembering Don Rua", we can come to know a fundamental part of the history of our Congregation and a person who embodies its identity. This letter of mine is not meant to be a minibiography, an alternative to the work written by Fr F. Desramaut,

¹ The Committee for the International Congress on Don Rua, chaired by Fr Francesco Motto, has also organised the computerisation of all Don Rua's letters undertaken by the Salesian Brother Giorgio Bonardi and made available on the site of the Direzione Generale, and the biography written by Fr F. DESRAMAUT, entitled "*Vie de Don Michel Rua, Premier successeur de Don Bosco*", published in French by the Libreria Ateneo Salesiano and shortly to be translated and printed in other languages.

which I invite you to read, but an approach to his human and spiritual profile, through a study of what has so far been written about him, and drawing especially on the “*Positio*”² prepared in view of his cause of beatification. We hope that soon we may see Don Rua canonised; for this we will invoke him, asking for God’s help and graces through his intercession.

1. DON RUA “THE MOST FAITHFUL SON OF DON BOSCO”

«Don Rua was the most faithful, therefore the most humble and at the same time the most valiant of the sons of Don Bosco».³ With these words spoken with great conviction, on 29 October 1972 Pope Paul VI delineated for always the human and spiritual figure of Don Rua. In that homily, proclaimed under the Cupola of Saint Peter’s, the Pope described the new Blessed with words which as it were hammered home this fundamental characteristic of his: fidelity. «*Successor of Don Bosco, that is continuer: son, disciple, imitator... He made the example of the Saint a school, his life a history, his rule a spirit, his holiness a type, a model; he made the spring a stream a river*». The words of Paul VI raise to a higher level the earthly life of this “slight and worn-out profile of a priest”. They disclose the diamond which glistened in the meek and humble fabric of his days.

It had all started long before with a strange gesture. Eight years of age and having lost his father, with a broad black band fixed to his jacket by his mother he had stretched out his hand for a medal from Don Bosco. But instead of a medal Don Bosco had given him his left hand while making a sign as though cutting it in half. And he said to him: “Take it, little Michael, take it”. And before those wide-open eyes which gazed on him transfixed, he said six words which were to be the secret of his life: “*We two will always go halves*”.

² Sacra Rituum Congregatione. TAURINEN. Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Michaëlis Rua – POSITIO SUPER VIRTUTIBUS – Romae, Typis Guerra et Belli 1947

³ PAUL VI, *Homily for the beatification of Don Rua*, Rome, 29 October 1972

And slowly the remarkable shared process began between the holy master and the disciple who went halves with him in everything and always. In the early years Don Bosco wanted Michael to stay with him but also that every evening for supper and to sleep he should return to his mother Mrs John Mary. However, when he came to the Oratory, already in those early years Don Bosco wanted him at his side at table.⁴ In this way Michael began to take in Don Bosco's way of thinking and behaving. He was to say later: "Watching Don Bosco even in his tiniest actions made a greater impression on me than reading and meditating any holy book".⁵ Being with Don Bosco, he had to build up in that tiny body enough calm powerful resources to last him for the whole of his life in which he would have to show unflinching strength.

The six mysterious words that keep coming back

On 3 October 1852, during an outing which the best of the boys at the Oratory had each year to the Becchi for the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, Don Bosco clothed him in the clerical habit. Michael was 15. That evening returning to Turin, Michael overcame his shyness and asked Don Bosco: «Do you remember the time we first met? I asked you for a medal and you made a strange gesture, as though you wanted to cut your hand in half and give it to me and you said: 'We two will always go halves'. What did you mean?». And he replied: «My dear Michael, haven't you understood yet? And yet it is so clear. The older you get the more you will understand what I wanted to say to you: In our lives we two will always go halves. Sorrows, concerns, responsibilities, joys and all the rest we shall share together.» Michael was quiet, full of silent happiness: Don Bosco, with simple words had made him his sole heir.⁶

Fr Giulio Barberis had been chosen as the first Salesian Novice Master, because in him Don Bosco had discovered a very fine searcher and educator of souls. Ten years younger, he lived beside

⁴ M. WIRTH, *Da Don Bosco ai nostri giorni*, LAS Rome 2000, p. 265.

⁵ A. AMADEI, *Il Servo di Dio Michele Rua*, vol I, SEI Turin 1931, p. 30.

⁶ Cf. A. AUFRAY, *Don Michele Rua*, SEI Turin 1933, p. 30.

Michael Rua for 49 years as disciple, confrere, confidant, friend. And in the process of beatification described in this way his inner self: "He was always determined to enter into Don Bosco's ideas, to give up his own views, his own opinions, to be conformed" to Don Bosco's way of seeing things. "As soon as he got to know that he intended founding the Salesian Congregation, he at once was the first to make a vow of obedience to him". It was 25 March 1855, Michael was 18. "From then on his only thought was to put aside his own will in order to do the will of God as expressed by Don Bosco".⁷

Don Bosco did not give him any commands; he only let him know the things he wanted doing. And for Michael these were commands, without his giving any thought to what it might cost him. They were the wishes of Don Bosco, promptly put into effect by Michael: teaching religion to the young boarders, attending to the cholera victims during the terrible pestilence of 1854, teaching the new and complicated decimal system, assisting constantly in the huge refectory, in the playground, in church, directing the Sunday Oratory of Saint Aloysius when Fr Leonardo Murialdo had to withdraw, copying out, at night time in his neat and orderly handwriting, the muddled pages of Don Bosco's *History of Italy* and the heavily corrected pages of the first *Rules of the Society of Saint Francis of Sales*.

At the beginning of 1858 Don Bosco had to go to Rome to see the Pope and he took Michael Rua with him. He has the fresh and sharp memory of his 21 years, which takes in all the details. He listens as the Pope speaks with Don Bosco. In the following days he accompanies Don Bosco on his visits to Cardinals and important dignitaries and sees the extraordinary esteem that they all have for him.

Two urgent matters: one for Don Bosco and the other for Michael

When in April of that year 1858 they return to Turin there are two urgent matters to attend to. Don Bosco sees to one of them and entrusts the other to Michael. Leaving for Rome, Don Bosco

⁷ *Positio*, p. 912.

had entrusted the direction of the Oratory to Fr Vittorio Alasonatti, a pious but rather strict priest, three years older than he was, who had come to help him. Don Bosco always saw the Oratory as a large family. Fr Alasonatti, during the months of Don Bosco's absence had transformed it into a disciplined barracks. Don Bosco told Michael: "As soon as possible we have to recreate the large family. You see to it". And he did see to it. He set himself the task of 'doing a Don Bosco'.

Don Bosco, who followed his work with satisfaction, had to devote himself completely to the second urgent matter: now that he had the encouragement of the Pope he had to found the Salesian Congregation. Many fine young men who had grown up with his help had in the past promised to devote themselves to the poorest boys at his side, joining together in a Society. But when it came to the "crunch" they did not feel they could carry on, and they had left him on his own. Now Don Bosco, in the months that followed, had to speed things up, meet one by one the twenty or so very young men who seemed to have decided to form the first Salesian Society. He had often to gather them together, apart from the others, speaking calmly, explaining, clarifying, clearing up doubts, overcoming uncertainties. Sometime he was successful, as with John Cagliero, sometimes not, as with Joseph Buzzetti.

To Michael Rua he didn't need to say anything. Michael Rua spent those days in December 1859 leading up to the first official meeting of those 'enrolled' in the Salesian Society, making a Retreat in preparation for being ordained Sub-deacon on 17 December. For him it was obvious: as soon as possible he would be a priest of Don Bosco.

The 18 December 1859 was a Sunday. In the evening, eighteen people gathered in Don Bosco's room, which at that moment is the Salesian Bethlehem. The foundation meeting of the "Pious Society of Saint Francis of Sales", that is of the Salesians, is taking place. The eighteen pray, declare that they want to join together in a Society for their own sanctification and to devote their lives to the young and boys at risk. They hold the first elections. Don Bosco, the founder is called by all of them to be the first Superior General.

The sub-deacon Michael Rua, at 22 years of age, is elected Spiritual Director of the Society. With Don Bosco he will have to work on the spiritual formation of the first Salesians. Michael does not take this new task as an “honorary” role. Giulio Barberis, who is among the youngest and attends his lessons of formation testifies: “He was extremely diligent in preparing the lessons and encouraging us to study”.⁸

A prophetic letter on the bedside table

On 29 July 1860 Michael Rua was ordained priest. John B. Francesia, who, as always, was at his side, testifies: “His preparation was extraordinary. He spent the night before in prayer and pious meditation”.⁹ On the evening of that festive and most important day Don Rua goes up to the attic which serves as his bedroom and finds on the bedside table a letter from Don Bosco. He reads: “Better than me you will see the Salesian Work pass beyond the frontiers of Italy and become established in many parts of the world. You will have much work to do and much to suffer; but, as you know, only through the Red sea and the desert does one arrive at the Promised Land, Suffer with courage, even down here consolations and the Lord’s help will not be lacking”.

Having become ‘Don Rua’, he quickly took up all his occupations again. John B. Francesia, to whom Don Rua’s load of work seemed to be excessive, asked Don Bosco in those days: “Why do you have him do so many things?” He received the reply: “Because there is only one Don Rua”.¹⁰ As the years passed the Oratory becomes a huge house. Every year the number of boys increases in an incredible manner. They reach 800, of whom 360 are artisans. The Salesians, who are also growing in number each year, are engaged in the class rooms, in the work shops, in the vast courtyards. Working and coordinating everyone’s work, under the supervision of Don Bosco, is Don Rua.

⁸ *Positio*, p. 51.

⁹ *Positio*, p. 72.

¹⁰ Cf. *Positio*, p. 71.

Fr Giulio Barberis, having become the wise Master of Novices, years later will testify: "So many occupations for one person could have taken away the time for prayer and the religious spirit. In Don Rua the spirit of prayer and meditation were second nature. Obedience to his Superior was at an admirable level. At that time he had begun a life of mortification and self-denial that was quite extraordinary. I, who had only recently entered Don Bosco's House, was amazed. I recall that speaking with friends we were all convinced that he was a saint. Don Bosco was convinced of it too, and he used to say so".¹¹

Being Don Bosco at Mirabello Monferrato

In 1863 Don Bosco took a decisive step for his Work. It was functioning well at Valdocco, because running it was the charismatic and fatherly figure of Don Bosco himself. But transplanted elsewhere without Don Bosco, would it work? In the spring of that year Don Bosco had a confidential and very serious meeting with Don Rua, who was 26 years of age. "I have to ask you for a big favour. In agreement with the Bishop of Casale Monferrato I have decided to open a 'Junior Seminary' at Mirabello. I am thinking of sending you to direct it. It is the first house the Salesians are opening outside Turin. There will be a thousand eyes watching us. I have full confidence in you. I am giving you three helps: five of our more sound Salesians, including Fr Bonetti who will be your "Deputy"; a group of boys, chosen from the best, who will come from Valdocco and continue their studies there, to be the yeast among the new boys you will be getting; and going with you will be your Mamma".

Don Rua left in October. Don Bosco had written four pages of precious pieces of advice for him which will then be transcribed for every new Salesian Rector: they are considered one of the clearest statements about Don Bosco's educational system. Among other things he wrote: "Every night you should sleep at least six hours.

¹¹ *Positio*, pp. 48-49.

Seek to make yourself loved before being feared. Try to be among the boys during the whole of recreation. If questions arise about material things, spend all that is necessary provided that charity is preserved". Don Rua sums up all these pieces of advice which for him are commands, in a single phrase: "At Mirabello I shall try to be Don Bosco".

After some months, the chronicle of the Oratory, written by Fr Ruffino, reports: "Don Rua at Mirabello is behaving like Don Bosco in Turin. He is always surrounded by boys attracted by his friendliness, and also because he is always telling them something new. At the beginning of the school year he advised the teachers not to be too demanding for the present". After two years the 'Junior Seminary' was overflowing with boys who gave good signs of a vocation to the priesthood for the diocese of Casale and for the Salesian Congregation. Among these is Luigi Lasagna, a very lively boy would become the second Salesian missionary Bishop in South America.

In the summer of 1865 at the Salesian House in Valdocco things are not going well. The administrator general Fr Alasonnatti is dying; he will pass away on 7 October. Four other Salesians among the best are out of action because of the stressful work. The number of boys has gone over 700. The building of the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians is going ahead rapidly and requires ever greater funding. Don Bosco is under intense pressure with the need to raise funds by travelling, and through lotteries, with a huge amount of correspondence. Someone is needed to take the situation firmly in hand: a well-disciplined life for the boys, the material management of the work-shops and the schools, supervision of the work on the Sanctuary. Of that calibre of person Don Bosco knows only one: Don Rua. And he at once sends for him.

Fr Provera, a great Salesian semi-invalid to whom Don Bosco entrusted the more delicate and difficult tasks arrives at Mirabello. He goes into the Rector's Office of the Junior Seminary and finds Don Rua writing a letter. "Don Bosco asks you to leave the Rector's post giving the responsibility to Fr Bonetti and to come

at once to Valdocco. Fr Alasonatti is dying. When you are ready we can leave". Don Rua calls Fr Bonetti and hands things over to him. Then he goes to say good bye to the boys in the class-rooms. He embraces his Mamma telling her: "Don Bosco has called me. For the present you stay here, the kitchen and the linen-room need you. Then I shall let you know". Then he takes his Breviary and says to Fr Provera: "I'm ready, let's go".

Fr Wirth astutely notes: "The Mirabello experience served to develop his spirit of personal initiative, which would have been perhaps a little restricted had he never been away from Don Bosco".¹² In Don Rua's activity in Mirabello, there was more however: it was proof that Don Bosco's Work could be transplanted, that it could live and prosper even without the physical presence of Don Bosco, provided that there was a person in charge who was sound from a Salesian point of view: on this account, Don Rua's successful experiment opened up unlimited horizons for the Salesian Congregation.

"You will be Don Bosco here, at the Oratory"

Don Rua arrives at Valdocco without a fuss. He has a long talk with Don Bosco who in synthesis tells him: "You have been Don Bosco at Mirabello. Now you will do the same here at the Oratory". On his narrow shoulders he confidently places every responsibility: the schools, the work-shops, the young Salesians to be formed and encouraged in their studies and examinations, the publication of the *Catholic Readings* which every month reached thousands of subscribers, the imposing building of the Sanctuary, the greater part of the correspondence addressed to him, which Don Rua has to read, annotate and give to a trustworthy Salesian for a reply. "I have to go to Rome again for the approval of our Rule. I shall be away more or less two months and I shall take Don Francesca with me. I leave everything to you. There are some excellent Salesians around you. See what

¹² M. WIRTH, *o. c.*, p. 267.

their talents are, decide and put them to work where you think best. As well as working, you will have to coordinate the work of the others”.

Don Rua gets up very early. He says Mass, makes his meditation on his knees and prays like an angel. Then he gets down to work with that special concentration that only he has. The Salesians and the boys who had not seen him for two years notice that there has been a deep change in him. He is no longer the ‘prefect of discipline’. Among the eighty boys at Mirabello and now among the seven hundred at Valdocco, he has learned to be like Don Bosco the ‘Rector-Father’. The hand which takes command is firm, but its manner is kind and loving.

There are certainly many things to be done. They become exhausting in the months leading up to the completion of the building of the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians: autumn 1866, the laying of the last stone of the cupola; eight months of intense work for the internal construction and finishing off; 9 June 1867 the solemn opening followed by eight days of high-level functions. “For the whole of that month of June”, – notes the diligent A. Auffray – “he did not sleep more than four hours each night. He had to see to everything, organise, decide, supervise, encourage”,¹³ while Don Bosco was submerged in a crowd of people who wanted to talk to him, receive his blessing, obtain a grace from the Madonna, give him a donation.

2. DON RUA “THE LIVING RULE”

All the work is finished. Is Don Rua finished too?

When all the work on the Sanctuary was finished, it seemed that Don Rua was finished too. One morning in July, in the torrid heat of a Turin July, at the main entrance to the Oratory on the way out, he collapsed into the arms of a friend who was at his side.

¹³ A. AUFFRAY, *o. c.*, p. 104.

'Galloping peritonitis' was the verdict of the doctor who had been called immediately. 'There is nothing more to be done. Give him extreme unction'. Penicillin had still to be discovered, surgery was still in its early stages. Don Rua, with a high fever and suffering a great deal, called for Don Bosco; but he was in the city. Someone was sent to find him. When he arrived and he was told that Don Rua was nearing his end he acted in an incomprehensible manner. The boys were in church for the monthly day of recollection and he went straight to hear their confessions. 'Don't worry, Don Rua won't go without my permission', he said going into the church. He came out much later, and instead of going to the infirmary he went for the modest supper put on one side. Then he went up to his room to leave his briefcase and papers and finally, when everyone was on tenterhooks, he went to Don Rua's bedside. He saw the holy oils and was almost angry: "Who on earth had that idea?" Then he sat down next to Don Rua and said to him: "Listen to me. I don't want this, understand? I don't want you to die. You have got to get better. You will have to work and work very hard at my side, anything but die. Listen carefully; even if you were to jump out of the window just as you are you wouldn't die".¹⁴ Francesia and Cagliero had seen and heard everything, and they became convinced that Don Bosco, who in his dreams used to speak to the Madonna and extract from her impossible favours, had had the guarantee that the Madonna would leave "that lad" the only one of his brothers to have survived, at his side for his whole life.

On 14 August 1876 a Salesian, after supper, asked him straight out: "Is it true that several Salesians have died from too much work?" Don Bosco replied: "If it were true, the Congregation would not have suffered any damage, just the opposite... But it is not true. One who might deserve the title of a victim of work, is Don Rua, and you can see him in good shape; but fortunately for us the Lord keeps him strong and healthy".¹⁵

¹⁴ Cf. A. AUFRAY, *o. c.*, p. 104; E. CERIA, *Vita del Servo di Dio Don Michele Rua*, SEI Turin 1949, p.71.

¹⁵ A. AUFRAY, *o. c.*, p. 136.

Don Bosco gives him his mind and his heart

After three weeks of convalescence, Don Rua returns, slight and strong as before, to be the most faithful son of Don Bosco, who year after year entrusts him with the most important tasks: the selection and the formation of those who ask to join the Salesians, the assignment of the confreres to the various houses which are being opened in the north of Italy, the first visitation of these houses in 1872 to guide them and keep them on the path of the genuine Salesian spirit. In 1875 he shares with him the preparation of the first missionary expedition to South America. In 1876 he entrusts to him the General Direction of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, founded four years before, in the place of Fr Cagliero who had left for the missions. He wanted him with him on the long and tiring journeys he took, begging for alms in France and Spain. Day after day, Don Bosco 'makes' Don Rua his successor at the head of the Salesian Congregation. More by his way of doing things than by his words, he passes on to him his thoughts, his guidance, his way of dealing with things, his total, calm trust in God and in Mary Help of Christians. Especially on the last journeys, Don Bosco talks very confidentially with him, speaking to him about the present and the future, about the Salesian Congregation which is the work of the Madonna. The two of them haven't to think of it as their work but just love it and keep it from harm and from decay, keeping close to the confreres, encouraging them to keep the Rule as the way that leads to salvation and to holiness. In a word: Don Bosco shares with him his mind and his heart. "Don Rua found his spiritual path in the contemplation of Don Bosco".¹⁶

Becoming Don Bosco day after day

Among all his responsibilities, during all those years, Don Rua is always the Rector of the large number of boys who crowd Valdocco: students, artisans, Salesian aspirants, very young Salesians.

¹⁶ M. WIRTH, *o. c.*, p 273.

Don Rua is striving to “become Don Bosco’ in everything, also in his outward manner. Certainly his physique and temperament are different. “His behaviour, his voice, his features, his smile don’t have that mysterious fascination which attracted and tied the boys to Don Bosco. But for everyone he was the attentive and affectionate father, striving to understand, encourage, support, forgive, enlighten, love”, as he had started to be at Mirabello.¹⁷ And the boys at Valdocco, infallible judges like all young people in the world when it comes to recognising who really cares for them and who, on the other hand, is only pretending to, show by their deeds that they know him to be a father and friend.

Next to Don Bosco’s confessional in the sacristy of the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians was that of Don Rua. And for thirty years the boys sought him out every morning, thronging the confessional almost like that of Don Bosco. And when he was miraculously cured from his serious illness and returned to show himself timidly under the porticos he was surrounded by the evident joy of waves of boys. At recreation time, as he had regularly done at Mirabello, he returned to be present among the boys, the most cheerful and the most lively of the Salesians. At first he did not dare to join in the vigorous chases of the ‘barra rotta’, but crouched down with the small boys playing a form of miniature skittles or “marbles”, intent like them, and in the beautiful evenings of that summer, under the starlit sky, joining in with the youthful voices, he sang with all his heart and with great delight.

Leading a crowd of youngsters like that and making them into a large family as Don Bosco always wanted, since that was his educational system, was not always easy. It was necessary to give free rein to the better ones, encouraging them to form apostolic groups, such as the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception, that of the Blessed Sacrament, of St Joseph, of St Aloysius, of the Altar Servers, identifying them through a general secret vote which indicated the best in conduct, earning them small prizes, discretely presenting them as models to be imitated. These are the *élites* who

¹⁷ A. AUFRAY, o. c., p. 151.

draw the crowd along with them! Don Rua and the Salesians were familiar with these educational methods which Don Bosco had used with them when they were boys, and they made good use of them.

It was also necessary to push the mediocre ones, to rein in the worse, of whom in a large group there are always some. To do this, every week Don Rua presided at a meeting of the assistants and the teachers. In a register a note was kept of the corrections to be given, the disorders to be prevented and the advice to be offered. Don Rua saw to most of these himself on the following days. One of his disciples of those days writes: "He was loved because he treated everyone well. Even when he had to give someone a correction, a reproof, or impose some punishment, he knew how to sugar the pill, and he used to praise the one needing to be corrected before blaming him, mentioning his previous good conduct and expressing hope for the future. Then the culprit would be moved to be sorry and repent, and promise to do better even before any reproof or punishment, which often were not needed and were avoided, to the great joy of the one who was to have been on the receiving end, and who then felt even more inclined to love and admire the kindness of his Superior".¹⁸

However, it would be a serious mistake to think of the Oratory as a place where it was necessary to have recourse to punishments to keep the boys in order. Among those boys, great Salesians grew up, those who, year after year, carried and would carry the light of faith throughout South America as far as the edge of the South Pole. The second generation of Salesians, which would soon be spread out in a dozen countries of Europe, America and Asia, was growing up in that mass of boys who crowded the class-rooms, the apostolic groups, shouting happily in the noisy games of 'barra rotta', and who in church prayed like angels, at break-time emptied the baskets of fragrant bread straight out of the ovens under the Sanctuary, and in the evening joyfully sang under the stars. It was a constellation of famous names of "young men" Unia, Milanesio, Balzola, Gamba, Paseri, Rota, Galbusera,

¹⁸ A. AUFRAY, *o. c.*, p. 103.

Rabagliati, Fassio, Caprioglio, Vacchina, Forghino... on to the ‘children’ Versiglia and Variara, whom we now venerate among the saints and the blessed. Among them there were boys who had nothing to envy in Saint Dominic Savio.

In 1876 – Don Vespignani relates in a memorable page of his “A year at the school of Don Bosco” – the Bishop of Rio de Janeiro, Pietro Lacerda from Brazil came to visit Don Bosco. He had read about Dominio Savio and had been struck by the extraordinary gifts which God had given him. He made a disconcerting request of Don Bosco: to be able to speak with some boys who were as good as Dominic, “because I need to resolve some fears concerning my responsibility before God. Don Bosco brought five boys with calm serene faces who were very respectful towards the Bishop”,¹⁹ The Bishop put before each one of them “his case: a large city of almost a million souls whose salvation weighed on his conscience. He had few priests. There were many enemies of God united in sects; when he preached he had been stoned... Did he the Bishop have the responsibility, would he be blamed?... They were frightened and stunned by the fearful picture... All freed me of every fault – the Bishop told me – and they took from me the great weight of the responsibility, promising to pray for me”.²⁰ These were the boys who were living at Valdocco under the loving direction of Don Bosco and Don Rua. However, Don Bosco saw that the role of ‘corrector’ could harm the figure of Don Rua, in whom only sweetness and amiable fatherliness ought to shine out, in order to soon become the ‘second Father’ of the Congregation. And this task was entrusted to others.

The ‘Rules’ approved by Rome become the path to holiness

On 3 April 1874 Valdocco was celebrating: a telegram from Don Bosco sent from Rome announced that the Holy See had definitively approved the ‘Rules’ of the ‘Pious Society of Saint Francis of Sales’. The Salesians had officially come into existence in the

¹⁹ G. WIRTH, *Un anno alla scuola di Don Bosco*, Scuola Tipografica Don Bosco, SAN BENIGNO CANAVESE 1930, pp. 29-30.

²⁰ G. VESPIGNANI, *o. c.*, p. 30.

Church and taken their place beside the great religious families centuries old: the Benedictines, the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Jesuits,... That thin booklet of 47 pages, divided into 15 short chapters, was the guide which the Lord, through the Pope, gave to the Salesians as ‘the path of holiness’. Among the 15 short chapters the three central ones stand out, those which deal with consecration to the Lord through the vows of obedience, poverty and chastity. In the letter with which he presented the Rule to his sons, Don Bosco wrote: “In observing our Rules we rest upon a firm, secure, and I may add, infallible basis, since the judgement of the supreme Head of the Church sanctioning them is infallible”.

From that moment – the witnesses testify – Don Rua was most faithful in their observance. Each prescription was translated by him into practice with extraordinary exactitude. In fact he was rebaptised ‘*the living Rule*’. For him there was no distinction between rules more or less important. He declared: “Nothing can be called small, once it is contained in the Rule”.

In Don Rua’s process of beatification Fr Giulio Barberis testified: “When the Rules were approved by the Holy See, it was as though the Lord Himself had composed them, and it would have been considered gravely culpable to have transgressed just one of them... Neither I nor his companions, with whom he had to deal, can say that we ever saw him commit an act of disobedience... The promptness with which he obeyed, even the smallest rule, for example regarding silence, was always admirable... He had no other thought than to destroy in himself his own will in order to do in everything the will of the Lord”.²¹ “He constantly told us that the Lord did not expect extraordinary things from us, but perfection in the small things, he wanted every rule to be kept, giving the greatest importance to every rule, and that this was the means to raise up the great edifice of holiness”.²²

Fr John B. Francesia, his companion from the earliest days of the Oratory and close friend, testified: “He was most exemplary in the observance of the Rules of our Pious Society... Obedience to the

²¹ *Positio*, pp. 912-913.

²² *Positio*, p. 699.

Rule was for him superior to any other consideration. The love he had for the Rule drew out from his heart words of tenderness: ‘God has given us a rule-book which is to guide us on the way to Paradise. Let us love this rule-book, consult it often, and when we finish reading it let us kiss it as a sign of love and gratitude to God’.²³

“Don Rua studied me and I studied Don Rua”

Fr Joseph Vespignani, who would become a great Salesian and missionary in South America, arrived at Valdocco in 1876. Newly ordained priest, 23 years of age, he had come from Faenza to stay with Don Bosco. In his simple “A Year at the School of Don Bosco” he has given us a lively picture of the activity of Don Rua, one of whose secretaries he was from the start. With a sensitivity which in general is not possessed by someone who lives the daily routine of every day, he captures the atmosphere and the setting of Valdocco, animated by the presence of two saints, Don Bosco and Don Rua.

“From that day”, he writes – “I placed myself with my whole heart at the disposal of my dear Superior, Don Rua. Oh what beautiful lessons I learned at that school of piety, charity and Salesian activity! His was a cathedra of knowledge and holiness; but above all it was a training ground of Salesian formation. More and more every day did I admire in Don Rua punctuality, untiring constancy, religious perfection, self-denial joined to the gentlest kindness. How much charity, what kind ways he used to give a subject the charge he wished to give him! What delicate study, what penetration to know and test their views in order to educate them so as to make them useful to the Works of Don Bosco!...

The office of Don Rua was a place of piety and prayer. As soon as we were in he recited the Ave Maria devoutly and then read a thought from Saint Francis of Sales; we ended in the same way reading a line from our Saint and then the Ave Maria. In the morning he prepared a large number of letters with marginal notes. Often they were marked by Don Bosco himself, who left to Don

²³ *Positio*, p. 923.

Rua's judgement the carrying out of commissions, accepting boys without charge, expressing thanks for offerings, requests from aspirants. I replied according to the marginal notes, feeling happy to be able to interpret the thought and feelings of the Superiors and also to imitate their style, short, kind, to the point, which I saw was the Salesian way. Thus, Don Rua studied me so as to make me able to fulfil the duties of my vocation; but I too studied him, and in him Don Bosco, for he seemed the faithful copy and living image of Don Bosco in everything he did... Even the work itself was founded on sentiments of piety, because all those notes of Don Bosco and of Don Rua, that I had to use in my letters of reply, were an inspiration to faith and trust in the Lord and in Mary Most Holy: they were invitations to prayer, to resignation, to accept everything from God's hands, to rest in his Goodness; there were letters of consolation, of encouragement, of advice; with the promise of prayers, assurance of the boys' prayers and of Don Bosco's blessing. Often there was advice and suggestions about vocations, the conditions for being accepted as aspirants or Sons of Mary were indicated... This was a genuine apostolate of piety and charity, while assisting Head Office, in other words the Direzione Generale of Don Bosco's whole Operation.

Besides this, the Office was often visited by Priests, Rectors, and Cooperators of all sorts, as well as by the boys. If it was not a private matter the secretary too heard what the visitors had to say, and learned more about the comings and goings of the Oratory inside and out, and how in all things to seek only the glory of God and the good of souls... The room and office of Don Rua was for me a high observation post from where I watched the Salesian Society at work with all its characteristics; it was like the bridge of a great ship where the captain stands and studies the way ahead in order to avoid the rocks and come safely to harbour while giving orders for the government of all his people... With Don Rua I was coming to an idea of the grandeur and beauty of all that the Congregation and the whole Work of Don Bosco really was".²⁴

²⁴ G. VESPIGNANI, *o. c.*, pp. 19-22 *passim*.

From up there Fr Vespignani was able to watch the courtyard packed with boys who with their assistant took part in a variety of games, or cheerful conversations. He continues: "It was explained to me that those priests and clerics in the class room and in the studies had a special system or method to lead their disciples to carry out their own duties. It was the same in the workshops. Don Rua took the formation of the clerics very much to heart, the classes of philosophy and theology were objects of his care. 'So this, I thought, is how all these Salesians, priests, clerics and brothers, *are working* with the same aim and, all in agreement, with the one intention of saving souls'"²⁵ He also learned just how the Salesians lived their lives together. When Don Rua sent him to the external Prefect Fr Bologna, to have his personal details recorded in the general register, hearing his age, 23, Fr Bologna looked at him and half-joking; "asked me: 'So what makes you so serious?' (in the seminaries in those days priests were taught to preserve a 'priestly *gravitas*'). These words made me reflect on the expression I would have to have on my face, in my words and in my manner to give me the appearance of a Salesian and a true son of Don Bosco. All around me everyone was smiling, including Don Bosco: they all looked at me and treated me as a friend and brother; they seemed old friends and long-standing companions"²⁶.

"I had read in the Rules that from time to time it was a good thing for the Salesians to speak with the Superior and Father on spiritual matters". But Don Bosco was very busy and I asked Don Rua, who was the Rector, if I could speak with him. He had to go to Valsalice to hear the boys' confessions. He told me: "Take your hat and we'll go. On the way we can speak together". "So I made my first manifestation". Don Rua asked what had made a good impression on him, in the first days, and then what had made a bad impression. "What I found most to admire was not only seeing Don Bosco's holiness, but also to find Superiors every-

²⁵ G. VESPIGNANI, *o. c.*, pp. 37, 41.

²⁶ G. VESPIGNANI, *o. c.*, p. 12.

where so united with him. Indeed you can also say that they are like him in his bearing, in his way of acting and dealing with people so that in everyone and in everything you find the spirit of the Founder and the Father". "You are right, my friend; this unity of thought and of affections and of method comes from the family-style of teaching that Don Bosco has given to his own which has won over our hearts, impressing on them all his ideals. And anything you find displeasing?" "Everything has edified me. The altar servers, the band, and especially the Sodalities of Saint Aloysius, of Saint Joseph, of the Blessed. Sacrament... Their members have such a strong influence for good on their companions".²⁷

Don Bosco's hand in that of Don Rua

Between 1875 and 1885 was the decade in which Don Bosco lived most intensely, but also inexorably consumed his life. At his side, more and more his right hand man Don Rua worked intensely and silently, being given more and more responsibility: day after day in everyone's eyes he became "the second Don Bosco". In 1875 the first Salesian missionary expedition left for South America. In the following years Don Bosco founded the Salesian Cooperators and started the 'Salesian Bulletin'; the first Daughters of Mary Help of Christians for whom Don Rua was the General Director left for the missions; Fr John Cagliero became the first Salesian Bishop; and Don Rua was appointed by the Pope 'Vicar' of Don Bosco, ready to succeed him. And he, on the night between 30 and 31 January 1888, takes the hand of the dying Don Bosco and guides it in a last blessing for the Salesian Family. The hand which Don Bosco held out to the little boy saying: "Take it, little Michael, take it", now for the last time squeezes the hand of little Michael who had become his Vicar, and hands on to him everything, everything that he had achieved on earth for the Kingdom of God.

²⁷ G. VESPIGNANI, *o. c.*, pp. 23-24.

3. DON RUA: FIDELITY TO CONSECRATED LIFE “FOR A WHOLE LIFETIME”

In the letter sent on 30 December to all the Salesians giving them the latest news about Don Bosco's health, Don Rua wrote: “During a brief moment yesterday evening when he was able to talk with less difficulty, as we were all gathered around his bed, Bishop Cagliari, Fr Bonetti and I, he said among other things: *I recommend to the Salesians devotion to Mary Help of Christians and frequent Communion.* Whereupon I said: *This counsel might serve as a strenna for the New Year to be sent to all the houses. Let this be a strenna for a whole lifetime,* he rejoined”.²⁸ Don Bosco's every suggestion was for Don Rua a command. Those words which from then on were to guide his whole life, were impressed on Don Rua's heart: that was to be the way, Don Bosco was telling him, that the Congregation was to follow ‘for a whole lifetime’. As always Don Rua was utterly faithful to the charge: Jesus in the Eucharist, Mary Help of Christians, the three vows and total fidelity to Don Bosco. With his heroic example as well as his words, he would incessantly confirm that this was the Salesian path to holiness.

Fruitful fidelity to Don Bosco

More than one Cardinal in Rome, on the death of Don Bosco, on 31 January 1888, was persuaded that the Salesian Congregation would rapidly run out of steam; Don Rua was scarcely 50 years of age. It would be best to send a Papal Commission to Turin to prepare the way for the Salesians to be joined to another Congregation with a proven tradition. “In great haste” Fr Barberis testified under oath, “Bishop Cagliari called together the Chapter (in other words the Superior Council of the Congregation) with some of the older ones, and a letter to the Holy Father was drawn up in which all the Superiors, and the older confreres, declared that in total agreement they would accept Don Rua as Superior,

²⁸ *Memorie Biografiche* XVIII, pp. 502-503.

and not only would they submit to him, but would receive him with great joy. I was among those who signed... On 11 February the Holy Father confirmed and declared Don Rua in office for twelve years according to the Constitutions”.²⁹

Pope Leo XIII had known Don Rua personally and knew that the Salesians under his direction would continue their mission. And so it was. The Salesians and the Salesian works multiplied like the bread and fish in the hands of Jesus. In his life time Don Bosco had founded 64 works; Don Rua took these to 341. At the death of Don Bosco, there were 700 Salesians; Don Rua, in 22 years as Superior General, took this to 4,000. The Salesian missions, with which Don Bosco had struggled and started, during his life-time reached Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego; Don Rua multiplied the missionary outreach, and Salesian missionaries arrived in the forests of Brazil, in Ecuador, Mexico, China, India, Egypt and Mozambique.

To ensure that, over such enormous distances, fidelity to Don Bosco might not diminish, Don Rua was not afraid to travel far and wide on the uncomfortable trains of the time, always in third class. His whole life was studded with journeys. Fr Barberis testifies: “On a number of his travels he took me as a companion. Don Rua went to his Salesians wherever they might be, spoke to them about Don Bosco, re-awakened in them his spirit, informed himself in fatherly fashion but carefully about the life of the confreres, about the Works, and left written instructions and words of advice so that fidelity to Don Bosco might flourish”. “Not only did he give his attention to the good of the Congregation abroad”, – Fr Barberis’ testimony continues, – “but his main concern was to ensure better consolidation of the Congregation at home. For this purpose, in 1893, he took me and two other Superiors as companions to Rivalta Torinese, so that together we might establish the various means so that the Congregation would make more and more progress, re-touching the regulations and adding to them others which were considered necessary”.³⁰

²⁹ *Positio*, pp. 54-55.

³⁰ *Positio*, p. 57.

Jesus: food in the Eucharist and merciful love in his Heart

In the letter-testament that he wrote to all the Salesians before he died, Don Bosco declared: “Your first Rector is dead. But our true Superior, Jesus Christ, will never die. He will always be our Master, our guide, our model. But remember that he in his own time will also be our judge and the rewarder of our faithfulness in his service”.³¹

This, from his infancy, was a conviction of Michael Rua. In the circular letter he sent on 21 November 1900 he repeated and developed these words, saying to all the Salesians: “What is more sublime in this world that to stir up in ourselves, to make known and stir up in others, the immense love of Jesus in the redemption; to stir up in ourselves, to make known and stir up in others the love of Jesus in his birth, in his life, in his teaching, in his example, in his sufferings... in instituting the Most Holy Eucharist, in bearing his most painful passion, in leaving us Mary as our Mother, in dying for us..., and, I would say, even more in wanting to remain with us until the end of time in the Adorable Sacrament of the Altar”.³²

Concerning his love for Jesus in the Eucharist, the witnesses at the process for beatification are very explicit. Fr John B. Francesia and Fr Barberis declare that arriving in a Salesian house his first request was: “Take me to greet the Master of the house”. By this he meant the church where he spent a long time on his knees before the tabernacle. Fr Francesia adds that he often spent ‘a large part of the night’ to keep company – as he used to say – with the Solitary one in the Tabernacle. Again he testifies: “He wanted the Blessed Sacrament to be the centre of all our hearts. He used to repeat: ‘Let us make a tabernacle of our hearts and keep always united to the Blessed Sacrament’.”³³

³¹ FROM THE SPIRITUAL TESTAMENT OF SAINT JOHN BOSCO, cf. “Constitutions of the Society of St Francis of Sales”, Edition 2003, p. 270 (DB, Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6, ASC 132, quaderni-taccuini 6)

³² *Lettere circolari di Don Michele Rua ai Salesiani*, Direzione Generale delle Opere Salesiane, Torino 1965, pp. 276-277.

³³ *Positio*, p. 306.

The feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, established in 1856, spread more and more around the Christian world devotion to this symbol of the merciful love of Jesus. Pope Leo XIII gave a particular impetus to this devotion, and especially in the days which marked the passage from the XIXth to the XXth century he exhorted all Christians to consecrate themselves to the Heart of Jesus, composing a lengthy formula of consecration himself. Don Rua wanted the Salesians, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Cooperators and all the young people in the Salesian houses to make this consecration on the night between 31 December 1899 and 1 January 1900. In the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians he himself, together with the Major Superiors, the Salesians and the young people spent the night in prayer, and around mid-night his voice, joined by all those present, slowly and solemnly pronounced the Act of Consecration.

“Everything we have we owe it Mary the most holy Help of Christians”

Michael Rua became the first Salesian on the day of the Annunciation of the Angel to Mary. He himself recalls this in his statement to the Process of beatification of Don Bosco: “In 1855, the day of the Annunciation of Mary Most Holy, I was the first, while I was doing the second year of philosophy, to make the vows for a year”. Living at Don Bosco’s side for 36 years he absorbed his spirit, an essential element of which was devotion to Mary Help of Christians. The witness Lorenzo Saluzzo affirms: “I remember particularly hearing from the Servant of God these words: ‘You cannot be a good Salesians if you are not devoted to Mary Help of Christians’”.³⁴

Don Bosco built the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians, Don Rua restored, embellished and decorated it. The solemn ‘crowning’ of the picture of Mary Help of Christians which took place in the Valdocco Sanctuary in 1903, was obtained by him from the Pope and performed by Cardinal Richelmy, Papal Legate. On 17 Febru-

³⁴ *Positio*, p. 339.

ary he announced the great event to the Salesians saying: "Let us strive to make ourselves less unworthy of our heavenly Mother and Queen, and let us preach with ever greater zeal her glories and maternal tenderness. In a prodigious manner she inspired and guided our Don Bosco in all his great undertakings; She continued and still continues today such maternal assistance in all our works, so that with Don Bosco we can repeat, all that we have we owe it to Mary the Most Holy Help of Christians".³⁵ The day of the crowning, 17 May, was a most solemn one with a veritable sea of people. Fr Melchiorre Marocco testifies: "Fr Ubaldi and I were assistants to the throne of the Papal Legate and therefore we were able to observed the truly ecstatic expression of Don Rua, who when he saw His Eminence place the holy crowns on the heads of the Child and of the Madonna burst into copious tears, which surprised us not a little since we knew the absolute self-control he had".³⁶

On 19 June, giving an account of the events to all the Salesians in the world, Don Rua wrote: "I am very pleased to think that the coronation of the miracle-working image of Mary Help of Christians will produce among the Salesians spread around the world the most fertile fruits. She will increase our love, our devotion, and our gratitude to our heavenly Patroness, to whom we owe all the good that we have been able to do... In these memorable solemnities of ours the name of Mary Help of Christians was always linked with that of Don Bosco, who, with extraordinary sacrifices, raised up this Sanctuary, with his words and with his pen he became the apostle of devotion to her, and he placed all his trust in her most powerful intercession. How beautiful it was to see so many pilgrims, after having satisfied their devotion in church, all lining up to visit, with profound veneration, the rooms of Don Bosco! I have no doubt at all that with an increase among Salesians of devotion to Mary Help of Christians, there will also be an increase in esteem and affection for Don Bosco, as well as in a commitment to preserve his spirit and imitate his virtues".³⁷

³⁵ A. AMADEI, *o. c.*, vol III, p. 12.

³⁶ *Positio*, p. 426.

³⁷ A. AMADEI, *o. c.*, III, p. 43.

We Salesians owe to Don Rua the daily recital of the prayer of consecration to Mary Help of Christians after meditation, and also the procession of the statue of Mary Help of Christians through the streets of Turin which he first arranged in 1901, and which quickly became a beautiful and venerable tradition for the city and for the whole of Piedmont.

In the notes for his sermons to the people one reads: "In all our needs we find in the Most Holy Mary our advocate; never has anyone had recourse to her in vain. We are therefore fortunate to be sons of such a Mother... Let us honour her, let us love her and get her to be loved by others, working to make her known as the support of Christians, let us turn to her as our secure defence in illness, in mixed fortunes, in families in which there is discord, to prevent certain grave scandals, in towns and in cities. But if we want to honour her in the most acceptable way, let us make sure that we take extra-special care of youth... Then in particular let us take care of poor youth".³⁸

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, called by the people, the "Sisters of Don Bosco", were founded by the Saint in 1872, and were called by him "the living monument of his gratitude to the Holy Virgin".³⁹ They expanded very quickly and did incalculable good for poor and marginalised young people. Don Rua, extremely devoted to Mary Help of Christians, associated himself very closely with her 'Daughters'. On the death of Don Bosco, the Superior General Mother Daghero wrote to Don Rua entrusting the Institute of the FMA to him with total confidence. He who had seen them begin and had followed their gradual development, took care of them as a sacred inheritance left him by Don Bosco, and with great commitment he generously offered them the treasures of his mind and heart.

His presence is to be found on every page of the history of the FMA for over twenty years. It is a period of considerable expansion and activity. Houses are opened in many countries in Europe, in

³⁸ A. AMADEI, *o. c.*, III, pp. 746, 748.

³⁹ ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Cronistoria I*, Roma 1974, p. 298.

Palestine, in Africa and in several Republics in America. New works, according to the needs of the times, appear, especially for the assistance of young working girls; new front-line mission fields are opened; the schools are given a new look.

In his many travels Don Rua also included the houses of the FMA in his visits: everywhere he left his words – those of a saint; he enlightened, supported, guided. Everywhere he showed his interest in everything, never tired, never in a hurry. He made suggestions and gave advice always and only aimed at doing good. His letters in a clear small hand, written perhaps on scraps of paper, had the quality of simplicity and the fragrance of the interior life.

Obedience

The consecration to God of all religious is expressed in the offering of themselves to Him through the evangelical counsels of obedience, poverty and chastity. The first of these counsels, according to Salesian tradition, is obedience.

At the end of 1909 Don Rua was 72 and his health was seriously undermined. On 1 January of that year he wrote his penultimate letter to all the Salesians. In it he said: “The Constitutions coming from the paternal heart of Don Bosco, approved by the Church, infallible in its teachings, will be your guide, your defence in every danger, in every doubt and difficulty. With Saint Francis of Assisi I say to you: Blessed is the religious who observes his Holy Rules. They are the book of life, the hope of salvation, the kernel of the Gospel, the life of perfection, the key of heaven, the expression of our covenant with God”.⁴⁰

Throughout his whole life Don Rua had shown an absolute obedience, so ‘absolute’ that Don Bosco sometimes joked about it. In his statement for the process of beatification, the Rector Major Fr Philip Rinaldi testified: “Don Bosco used to say: ‘You don’t give orders to Don Rua, not even as a joke’, such was his promptitude in carrying out whatever was said by the Superior... For Don Rua

⁴⁰ *Lettere circolari di Don Michele Rua ai Salesiani, o. c., p. 499.*

obedience was very easy, because he was profoundly humble. Humble in his attitude, humble in his words, humble with the great and with the lowly".⁴¹ Yet even the humble obedience of Don Rua was sorely tried on two occasions. He received two orders from the Holy See which would deeply wound his sensitive nature.

*Until 1901 "Salesian superiors and rectors, faithful to Don Bosco's example, saw the great advantage of themselves hearing the confessions of both the religious and the pupils in their houses. Don Rua use to hear confessions at the Oratory and elsewhere, so convinced was he that this tradition was one of the keys of the Salesian method. On this account he was painfully surprised when a decree of 5 July 1899 forbade the Rectors of the houses in Rome to hear the confessions of the pupils. According to the Holy Office, this norm was to safeguard the freedom of the penitents and to avoid any potential suspicion about the superior's government. Fearing, with just cause, that more extreme measures were on the way, Don Rua tried to play for time. But a second decree of 24 April 1901, explicitly forbade all Salesian superiors to hear the confessions of any person dependent on them. Then, finding himself torn between two loyalties, he tried to manoeuvre, which led to him being summoned to Rome, where he had to submit to a personal dressing down from the Holy Office; he was then told to leave Rome immediately. He obeyed without hesitation, but with a very sorrowful heart"*⁴²

Fr Barberis, who spent those sorrowful and tense days at Don Rua's side, testified: "I am perhaps the only one who knows about these things in all their detail... Don Bosco introduced the practice in our Houses that the Rector was also the Confessor: he did not make this obligatory; it is not mentioned in any article of the Constitutions, nor of the Regulations, it became the custom and no one found any difficulty with it... Being a matter of a custom introduced by Don Bosco, a custom that was undisturbed for about 70 years, and it being mentioned in the Decree that 'The Superiors are to make provision within the year...', Don Rua believed himself au-

⁴¹ *Positio*, pp. 979, 981.

⁴² M. WIRTH, *o. c.*, p. 272.

thorised to delay somewhat... to have time to seek advice... from very important people, among whom I recall Cardinal Svampa, Archbishop of Bologna... But as soon as he became aware of the import of the Decree to its full extent, he immediately set himself to communicate it to the whole Congregation, on 6 July 1901".⁴³

In 1906 another decision of the Holy See subjected his obedience to a new severe trial, seeing that once again the heritage received from Don Bosco was under attack. From its foundation, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was aggregated to the Salesians. The union of the two Congregations was ensured by a common direction. "The Institute of the FMA", – their Rule used to say – "is subject to the high and immediate authority of the Superior General of the Society of St. Francis of Sales... In practice, this superior used to delegate his powers to a Salesian priest, who had the title of the Director General of the Institute of the FMA. At local level he was represented by the Provincials. The internal government of the Institute, on the other hand, was in the hands of the Superior General and her Chapter. Don Bosco observed this practice".⁴⁴

To organise the religious families which in the previous decades had proliferated, the Holy See issued a Decree which ordained that a female Congregation of simple vows should in no way depend upon a male Congregation of the same nature. The fifth General Chapter of the FMA, which met in 1905, expressed some fear and anxiety in the face of this decision. While declaring their obedience to what the Church disposed, by a unanimous vote they said that it was their desire to depend upon the Successor of Don Bosco: under his direction the Institute had had its rapid and unexpected development, to the Salesians they had had recourse whenever any difficulty had arisen with the civil and religious authorities, in this they felt their safety rested for the future, in the spirit of the common Founder. But Rome replied obliging them to obey. When the General Chapter was informed about it, writes

⁴³ *Positio*, pp. 292-294.

⁴⁴ M. WIRTH, *o. c.*, p. 399.

Fr Ceria, it was like a bolt from the blue. Pope Pius X, receiving the Mother General and the Councillors, with great and almost heart-felt understanding said: "Don't worry: it is only a matter of a material separation and nothing else".

In 1906 the Holy See sent to Don Rua the modified text of the FMA Constitutions. In 1907 the text was given to the Extraordinary Chapter of the FMA. "The fundamental provision was concerned with the total independence of the two Congregations, with regard to both government and administration and financial accounting. The Salesians were to be involved with the FMA – limited to religious matters – solely if this were requested by the Bishops".⁴⁵

Blessed Fr Philip Rinaldi, Rector Major of the Salesians, declared under oath regarding Don Rua: "I remember his submission without reserve to the Decree for the separation of the Sisters of Mary Help of Christians from the Salesian Institute. After this Decree he maintained such detachment that he did not dare to intervene in their affairs unless invited to do so by the Superiors, or unless consulted in more important matters. This reserve he maintained until Pius X told him that the Sisters still needed and always would the direction of the Salesians, particularly in the management of material affairs, and in scholastic matters, in order to preserve the spirit of Don Bosco. Then he took heart again and returned to being not only Father but also director".⁴⁶

Poverty

Fr Francesia tells how one day the cleric Rua, having found a strip of red carpet decided to put it under his desk. Don Bosco saw it and said with a smile: "Ah Don Rua! So you like elegance, eh?" Rua, confused, said it was only a remnant, but Don Bosco observed: "Luxury and elegance easily make their appearance, if we are not careful". Don Rua never forgot those words, and treasured them all his life.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ M. WIRTH, *o. c.*, p. 400.

⁴⁶ *Positio*, p. 979.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Positio*, p. 924.

Poverty was Don Rua's uniform. He dressed in a very poor manner, he never sought to be well-off, he economised in even the smallest things. And he took care to see that all Salesians loved and practised poverty in a spirit of faith, as Don Bosco wanted. His cassock was full of patches. A pair of shoes lasted him for years; yet he did a lot of walking so as not to take the tram and gave in alms the ten centesimi for the ticket. In the house, until he died, he used an old overcoat formerly worn by Don Bosco, and he wore it with devotion.

A Daughter of Mary Help of Christians who for many years used to repair the clothes of the Salesians at the Oratory said that only rarely was she given anything of Don Rua's; and when they gave her his cassock she was told to repair it urgently because Don Rua was working in his room wearing his overcoat since he had never wanted a second cassock.

During his journey to Constantinople in 1908, after making many visits in the city, he returned with his legs swollen and his feet wet through. He asked the Rector of the Salesians for a pair of woollen stockings to change into. In the whole house they could not find a pair of woollen stockings. Don Rua smiled and said: "I'm happy! This is true Salesian poverty".⁴⁸

During the 23 years he was Rector Major, Don Rua sent the Salesians 56 circular letters. In them he summed up all his love for Don Bosco and all the Salesian spirit. Among these letters, his "masterpiece" is considered the circular letter entitled "Poverty". It contains twenty pages and has the heading: "Turin, 31 January 1907, the anniversary of the death of Don Bosco". I quote some passages from his very relevant letter,⁴⁹ to revive in us the true spirit of Salesian poverty.

"It is natural to consider poverty a calamity"

Poverty in itself is not a virtue; it is one of the consequences of original sin, intended by God for the expiation of our sins and the

⁴⁸ Cf. A. AMADEI, *o. c.*, III, pp. 104-121.

⁴⁹ All the passages below regarding poverty are taken from the *Lettere circolari di Don Michele Rua ai Salesiani, o. c.*, pp. 430-445.

sanctification of our souls. It is natural therefore that man has a horror of it, considers it a disaster, and does everything he can to avoid it.. Poverty becomes a virtue only when it is voluntarily embraced for the love of God, as those who enter religious life do. Nonetheless, even then poverty does not cease to be bitter; for religious too the practice of poverty imposes great sacrifices as we ourselves have experienced thousands of times.

One should not be surprised therefore if poverty is always the most delicate factor of religious life, if it is used as a touch-stone to distinguish a flourishing community from a slack one, a zealous religious from a negligent one. Unfortunately it will be the stumbling block against which so many generous good resolutions, so many vocations which at the beginning and as they developed were so wonderful will come to grief. Hence the need on the part of Superiors to speak often about it and on the part of all the members of the Salesian Family to keep their love for it alive and put it into practice.

“The first evangelical counsel”

Poverty is the first of the evangelical counsels. From the beginning of his public life Jesus Christ makes the most terrible threats against the rich who find their consolations on this earth. On the other hand the sufferings of the poor move his most sweet Heart to pity, he consoles them, and he calls them blessed, assuring them that their’s is the kingdom of heaven. To someone who asks what he ought to do to be perfect, he replies: “Go, sell what you have and follow me”. To his Apostles who offer themselves to follow him he makes the first condition that they leave their nets, the tax office and their possessions. And this voluntary stripping of all the goods of this earth is practised by all the disciples of Jesus Christ, all the saints who down the centuries have distinguished the Church.

“Don Bosco’s poverty”

Our revered Father lived a poor man until the end of his life. Having had in his hands huge amounts of money, one never saw in him the least concern about providing himself with any temporary

satisfaction. He used to say: "You have to have poverty in the heart in order to practise it". And God rewarded him abundantly for his trust and for his poverty, so that he succeeded in undertaking works which even the princes of this world would not have dared. Speaking of the vow of poverty, Don Bosco wrote: "Let us remember that on the observance of this depends to a large extent the well-being of our Pious Society and the welfare of our soul".

"Not only are the poor evangelised, it is the poor who evangelise"

Church history teaches us that there were those who the more they were detached from the world the more they were noted by their faith, hope and charity, whose life was a tissue of good works and a series of wonders for the glory of God and the salvation of their neighbour.

We would be working in vain if the world did not see and was not convinced that we were not seeking riches and comfort. We should keep firmly fixed in mind what Saint Francis of Sales wrote: Not only are the poor evangelised, it is the poor who evangelise.

Among us too, it is certainly not Salesians who are looking for a comfortable life who undertake really fruitful work, who go into the jungle of Mato Grosso or to Tierra del Fuego, or put themselves at the service of lepers. This will always be the boast of those who generously practise poverty.

"The works of Don Bosco are the fruit of charity"

Then it should also be borne in mind that the works of Don Bosco are the fruit of charity. It should be known that many of our benefactors, themselves poor or at least of modest means, make very great sacrifices in order to be able to help us. How heartless it would be to use that money to provide ourselves with comforts not suited to our state! Wasting the fruits of so many sacrifices, even just using them without due consideration is a real act of ingratitude towards God and towards our benefactors.

Allow me to let you into a secret. Many perhaps seeing our works growing more and more think that the Pious Society has many means available and that therefore my repeated and insistent exhortations to make savings, to observe poverty are inop-

portune. How far from the truth! It would be possible to show these people just how many boys are entirely or in large part dependent for their food, clothing, books etc on the Congregation. Whoever gives a little thought to our expansion, can appreciate the houses and the churches that are being built, the damages suffered which need to be repaired, the missionaries' journeys which have to be paid for, the help that is being sent to the Missions, the huge expenses that are incurred in the formation of personnel.

Whoever does not live according to the vow of poverty, who in food, clothing, accommodation, travels, in the comforts of life goes beyond what our state of life permits ought to feel remorse for having deprived the Congregation of the money that was destined to provide bread for the orphans, foster vocations, spread the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. He should remember that he will have to give an account of it at the judgement seat of God.

“The heroic times of the Congregation”

The good Salesian will come to possess the spirit of poverty, that is, he will truly be poor in thought and desire, he will be seen to be such in his words, he will really behave as a poor man. He will willingly accept those privations and those inconveniences which are inevitable in community life, and will generously chose for himself the things less beautiful and less comfortable.

I conclude recalling the memory of those which we call the ‘heroic times’ of our Pious Society. Many years passed in which an extraordinary exercise of virtue was needed to remain faithful to Don Bosco and to resist the pressing invitations which were made to abandon him on account of the extreme poverty in which we were living. But we were sustained by the intense love we had for Don Bosco; his exhortations to remain faithful to our vocation in spite of the hard privations and the great sacrifices gave us strength and courage. So I am certain that the more lively our love for Don Bosco is the more ardent the desire to continue to be his worthy sons and to correspond with the grace of the religious vocation, so as to practise in all its purity the spirit of poverty.

Chastity

John B. Francesia, a small working lad entered Don Bosco's Oratory at 12 years of age. There he met the student Michael Rua, who was 13. It was 1850. From then on they were companions and inseparable friends for sixty years until 6 April 1910. In the morning of that day John B. Francesia was sitting next to Michael Rua who was dying and suggested to him the first invocation which together as boys they had learned from Don Bosco: "Dear Mother, Virgin Mary, help me to save my soul". And Michael answered: "Yes, saving your soul is everything!"

When in 1922, at 82 years of age Fr John B. Francesia was called upon to say under oath what he thought about the holiness of Don Rua, at the word 'chastity' he was overcome and quietly gave a testimony which reading even today is very moving and enchanting: "The splendour of the angelic virtue appeared transparent from the whole being of Don Michael Rua. It was sufficient to look at him to understand the candour of his soul, It seemed that more than on the things of this world he had his eyes constantly fixed on those of heaven. Don Rua was the real image of Saint Aloysius, and I can attest that in all the time that I was close to him I never found in him a word, a gesture, a look that was not marked by this virtue. His way of acting and the way he behaved at all times and in all places always reflected the most exquisite delicacy and modesty. On this account he was always edifying whether in public or in private, in the playground or on the street, in church or in his room. In his long private interviews with whomsoever he might be speaking, he maintained such a reserved manner but at the same time one so paternal that he edified and won over all hearts... He was so full of delicacy and respect for the angelic virtue that in fostering it his words had an especial efficacy. The advice he used to give to the Salesians about how to behave among the boys is affectionate and full of wisdom: 'Love the boys entrusted to your care but do not let your heart be attached to them'... Other times he used to say... that we have to take care of all souls but not to let our hearts be stolen by anyone... When he

was preaching, the most gentle words flowed from his heart, and the beautiful and attractive images won the boys over to the beautiful angelic virtue so that he seemed a real Angel of the Lord... This virtue, for the testimony I can give from my own knowledge, he cultivated in a perfect manner from childhood until death".⁵⁰

The days of agony

And yet it was precisely in the area of morality, which he rightly considered the most precious value for an educational institute, such as the Salesian Congregation, that Don Rua had to face the most ignominious attack, which literally turned his life upside down. Those dark times are remembered as the 'Varazze incident'. The Rector of the Salesian school in that city was Fr Carlo Viglietti, Don Bosco's last private secretary. On the morning of 29 July 1907 the police stormed into the house. The Salesians were arrested, the boys – only a few because the others had already left for the holidays – taken off to the police-station. Fr Viglietti had to listen to a slanderous accusation: a boy, Carlo Marlario, 15 years of age, an orphan adopted by the widow Mrs Besson, with a free place in the school, had written a 'diary' which was now in the hands of the police. In it the Salesian house is described as a disgusting centre of paedophilia. The vigorous denials of Fr Viglietti and the Salesians were of no avail, nor even the unanimous denials of the pupils subjected to insistent questioning.

The news was leaked. All the anticlerical press began an incessant campaign of defamation against the Salesians and priests' schools. Large groups of hooligans committed acts of violence in Savona, La Spezia and Sampierdarena. There were other attacks on priests and Catholic centres in Livorno and Mantova. It was hunt the priest time. There were calls for the closure of all the schools run by religious in Italy.

"During that terrible trial, some witnesses have reported that Don Rua was in deep depression, unrecognisable".⁵¹ In those months he had been afflicted by a serious form of infection, he was

⁵⁰ *Positio*, pp. 928-930

⁵¹ M. WIRTH, o. c., p. 273.

greatly weakened, and he was seen to weep like a child. But the whole set-up collapsed. Lawyers among the most famous in Italy offered their services free of charge to the Salesians. Members of Parliament, past pupils of the Salesians, came to the defence of the Salesian schools in Parliament. On 3 August, just five days after the beginning of the defamation, Don Rua, helped by the Superiors to overcome his dejection, went to court with an action for libel and calumny, with the assistance of three distinguished lawyers. When the case was completed, the Court of Appeal in Genoa declared that the diary was a tissue of fantastic fabrications, written as a result of "incessant instigation by outsiders wanting to create an anticlerical scandal".⁵²

On 31 January 1908, when the storm had calmed down, Don Rua sent to all the Salesians a circular letter, the title of which said everything: "Vigilance". In it he gave a brief resumé of the events, invited them to thank God and Mary Help of Christians and asked everyone to reflect on two extracts from the words of Don Bosco, which he spoke on 20 September 1874, and on an article of the Constitutions: "The Public sometimes deplores immorality which has occurred resulting in the ruin of morals and terrible scandals. It is a great evil and a disaster; and I pray the Lord to ensure that all our houses are closed rather than that similar misfortunes should occur in them".⁵³ And again: "It can be established as an invariable principle that the morality of the pupils depends on those who teach them, assist them and direct them. One who does not have cannot give, as a proverb says. An empty sack cannot produce grain nor a bottle full of dregs good wine. Therefore before setting ourselves up as teachers of others, it is essential that we possess what we want to teach others".⁵⁴ Then he commented on article 28 of the Constitutions saying: "In spite of his (Don Bosco's) great desire to have many collaborators in his work yet he did not want anyone who does not have a well-grounded hope of being able, with divine help to preserve the virtue of

⁵² A. AMADEI, *o. c.*, III, p. 348.

⁵³ *Lettere circolari di Don Michele Rua ai Salesiani*, *o. c.*, pp. 464-465.

⁵⁴ *Lettere circolari di Don Michele Rua ai Salesiani*, *o. c.*, p. 465-466.

chastity in word, in deed and in thought to make profession in this Society”⁵⁵.

4. DON RUA: “THE EVANGELISER OF YOUTH”

In his homily at the beatification, Pope Paul VI – as I have already partly noted – at one point said: «Let us mediate for a moment on the characteristic aspect of Don Rua, the aspect which defines him... Son, disciple, imitator (of Don Bosco), he made the example of the Saint a school, and his personal work an institution, extended, it may be said, all over the earth;... he made the spring a stream, a river... The marvellous fruitfulness of the Salesian Family had in Don Bosco its origin, in Don Rua its continuation. It was this follower of his that served the Salesian work in its expansion, developed it according to the letter but with ever-inspired newness... What does Don Rua teach us? To be continuers... Imitation in the disciple is not passiveness or servility... Education (is) an art that guides the logical, but free and original expansion of the pupil’s potential qualities... Don Rua is really qualified as the first continuer of the example and the work of Don Bosco... We are aware that we have before us an athlete of apostolic activity, which (operates) still in the mould of Don Bosco, but with growing dimensions of its own... We give glory to God who wished... to offer for his apostolic labours new fields of pastoral work, which the impetuous and disordered social development opened to Christian civilisation».⁵⁶

New fields of pastoral work

Just reading rapidly the impressive number of Don Rua’s letters, his circulars, the volumes which summarise his 22 years of work as the Successor of Don Bosco, one discovers most emphati-

⁵⁵ *Lettere circolari di Don Michele Rua ai Salesiani, o. c.*, p. 467.

⁵⁶ PAUL VI, *Homily for the beatification of Don Rua*, Rome, 29 October 1974.

cally that what the Pope says is true: his fidelity to Don Bosco is not something static, but dynamic. He really is conscious of the changed times, of the needs of the young, and without fear directs Salesian work into new fields of pastoral ministry.

Among workers and the children of workers

In the last decades of the 1800s and the first of the 1900s the struggles of the workers in the factories multiplied everywhere. The conditions of the workers are wretched: deadly hours of work, the worst possible unhygienic conditions, non-existent insurance and pensions. Urged on by Don Rua the Salesians and the FMA begin a variety of social works: orphanages, schools of arts and trades, agricultural schools, parishes on the outskirts, with oratories for the children of the workers families': oratories where they can play on the green grass and pray in chapels, three hundred, five hundred, a thousand youngsters. Don Rua was very happy with it and exhorted the Provincials to give special attention to these 'fundamental works of Don Bosco'.

In the final years of the century, Turin becomes the sorry cradle of the Italian proletariat. In May 1891 Leo XIII publishes his Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. In it the Pope condemns the situation in which "a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery" (RN 3). Immediately the Encyclical makes a strong impact on the Christian world, and Don Rua feels that the time has come for Salesians to expand and intensify their social activity.

In 1892 at Turin Valsalice the 6th General Chapter of the Congregation is held. Among the questions to be considered Don Rua proposes the practical application of the teaching of the Pope regarding the question of workers. The Salesians accept the task of introducing into the school programmes of the young students teaching about capital and labour, the right to property and the right to strike, wages, rest, savings. It is suggested that Past Pupils be encouraged to join the *Catholic Workers Society*.

Among miners in Switzerland

In 1898 work began on the Simplon tunnel between Switzerland and Italy: one of the longest tunnels in the world, two parallel galleries 19,800 metres long. On the Swiss side a camp was set up for over two thousand Italian workers: Piedmontese, Lombards, Venetians and above all Abruzzesi and Sicilians, with their wives and children. Don Rua did not hesitate to send among these workers Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. They stayed there seven years, that is until the work was finished. Information about how they attended to the needs of those poor families is scarce: they got on with the job and no one had time to keep a record. One day a Socialist member of Parliament, Gustavo Chiesi, went to observe the situation. He saw what the Salesians and the Sisters were doing, the Workers Centre they had started which was the favourite place for the Italians to meet together. He sent a letter which was published in the *Tempo* newspaper of Milan. There one reads: "We have said a great deal about the conditions of our workers at Simplon, we have written and complained a lot. But nothing practical has been done for them until now. What little has been done so far has been done by the priests... On every occasion they are the first to do something, to help, to relieve the sufferings of others. It is like that at Simplon, it is like that everywhere".

Emigrant among the emigrants

Other even more numerous waves of emigrants left Italy to escape the poverty of the south. For North and South America, in the decade 1880-1890, according to the statistics of the economist Clough, each year on average 165,000 people emigrated. To Argentina alone 40,000 Italians emigrated each year. In the next decade the number of emigrants increased: it reached and surpassed half a million each year. Referring to the extreme poverty in the south, the Hon Giuseppe Toscano in 1878 told the Chamber of Deputies: "Driven to desperation, what do you want the proletariat to do? There are only two paths open to them: the path of

crime and brigandage or that of emigration". Twelve years later the situation had not changed and the Hon Vittorio E. Orlando, from Palermo, cried out in Parliament that for his fellow countrymen their dilemma could be summed up in two words: "Either emigrants, or brigands!"

Don Rua, while he was covering Italy with a net-work of works for the children of working -class families sent Salesian missionaries to North America in 1897 and 1898. In New York, Paterson, Los Angeles, Troy our confreres set to work to welcome the emigrants who did not know the language, did not know where to find lodgings nor where to find work. Side by side with the heroic Sisters of Mother Cabrini and many other men and women missionaries, they tried to help them find accommodation, to join the unions. They took their children into their schools and provided religious assistance. At the same time the presence of the Salesians in South America was consolidated and multiplied, and prospered under the guidance of Bishop Cagliero and the new Salesian Bishop Luigi Lasagna.

The Salesians made an appearance in new continents. Social works, orphanages, schools of arts and trades, parishes and oratories on the outskirts, were opened in far off lands: Cape Town, Tunisia, Smyrna, Constantinople. New works were opened in clusters in northern and western Europe. One of the beneficial consequences was that the Salesian missions could soon count on confreres of different nationalities. Polish emigrants in Buenos Aires could find a Polish Salesian in charge of a secretariat set up for them; in London the Polish community had a church available to them at which a Polish Salesian officiated; German emigrants in the central Pampas or in Chile could find German Salesians there. In Oakland, California, a whole district of Portuguese had the assistance of a Portuguese Salesian.

Risking everything that can be put at risk like Don Bosco

Apostolic boldness led Don Rua to give his support to the most difficult enterprises. With the same courage as Don Bosco he was

ready to risk everything that could be put at risk to bring the Kingdom of God and the love of Mary Help of Christians everywhere.

In Palestine he had no hesitation in accepting among the Salesians the well-established religious Family of Fr Antonio Belloni, which was dedicated to the poorest children. In Poland he did not go against the difficult and questionable personality of Fr Bronislaw Markiewicz, who seemed to want to rebel against the authority of the Superiors, but who today is venerated as a Blessed and the founder of a Congregation which forms part of the Salesian Family. In Colombia he supported the new apostolate, which some people were uncomfortable with, among the lepers in Agua de Dios, started by Fr Unia and continued by Fr Rabagliati and Fr Variara. He supported Fr Balzola and Fr Malan who were trying to penetrate among the *Bororo* Indians of Mato Grosso in Brazil. He encouraged the extremely difficult attempts to establish a mission among the *Shuar* Indians in Ecuador. He sent seven Salesians to open an oratory and schools in Oran, in Algeria, where many children were wandering the streets.

In 1906 he blessed the first Salesians who were leaving to found missions in India and in China, these latter led by the young Fr Versiglia, whom we venerate today as a martyr and a saint. It was a very tentative start, almost reckless, but now the work of Don Bosco in India, in China and in the whole of Asia arouses wonder in everyone.

On the eve of his 'Golden Jubilee of ordination', announced in the *Bollettino Salesiano* and anticipated by all the Salesians, a serious infection which had troubled him for years and had led to his being covered with painful sores, cut short his life. God came to meet him on the morning of 6 April 1910.

“That simplicity with which he tried to accompany what he did”

Anyone who examines just the last 20 years of the life of this slight priest, has the overwhelming impression of tireless and gigantic-scale activity. Truly, as Paul VI declared in his homily at

the beatification, “we will never be able to forget the operative aspect of this small but great man, all the more so in that we, in the mentality of our times which is inclined to measure the stature of a man by his capacity for action, are aware that we have before us an athlete of apostolic activity”.

And yet, Don Rua undertook all this human and spiritual activity in silence and in humility. So much so that his dear friend Fr Francesca, settling down to write his biography using, as was then the custom among authors, the “royal we” wrote: “We who were accustomed to living with him, who almost always heard him speak, who were used to dealing with him as one does with a close intimate confidant, found it all so natural and unremarkable. ‘This, he used to say, is what I would do! This is what Don Bosco would have done. What is extraordinary about that? Nothing, it seems to me!’ And yet, thinking about it, one would have to say that that simplicity, with which he tried to do everything, that constant expression: ‘everything for the Lord, and nothing else but for the Lord’, already caused us to marvel, just as it will always be the finest commendation of the hard-working and humble life of Don Michael Rua”.⁵⁷

Conclusion

As a conclusion, I should like to take up again what I wrote in the letter of 24 June 2009, entitled “Remembering Don Rua”. I said there that we want to spend the year 2010 especially as a *spiritual and pastoral journey*. So as to make this year dedicated to the first Successor of Don Bosco a fruitful one, in the letter I indicated “some focal points, to be borne in mind for your spiritual and pastoral planning for the coming year, at personal, community and Province level”.

The first is that of re-enforcing our sense of being the faithful disciples of Jesus, the model for Don Bosco, re-discovering the

⁵⁷ G.B. FRANCESIA, *Don Michele Rua*, Torino 1911, p. 6.

ways in which to preserve **fidelity to the vocation of consecration**, with a practical invitation to draw deeply from the wells of the life of the disciple and of the apostle, from the daily fountains of fidelity to our vocation: Sacred Scripture, through “lectio divina”, and the Eucharist in its celebration, in adoration and in frequent visits.

The second point to bear in mind is that of adopting the attitude of Don Rua who, sent to Mirabello, summed up all the advice received from Don Bosco in a single expression: “In Mirabello I shall try to be Don Bosco”. And the whole of Don Bosco can be found in our **Constitutions**. Becoming Don Bosco, day after day, is precisely what the Constitutions set before us in practical terms. Moved by the special witness given by the first successor of Don Bosco, I invite you this year, especially on the occasion of the Retreat, to re-discover the importance and the spirit of our Salesian Constitutions and to look again at your personal Plan of Life, with particular reference to Chapter four: that which deals with our mission and is entitled “sent to the young”.

In the third place, recalling how Don Rua, moved by the passion of the *Da mihi animas*, gave a great impetus to the Salesian mission, I invited you to imitate him in his dedication to responding to the needs of the young and to find pastoral ways suited to reaching them with the proclamation of the gospel. Don Rua’s apostolic zeal, therefore, demands that we too during this year express in practical terms the commitment to **evangelising the young**. The second key issue in the GC26 requires it from us; the 2010 Strenna sets it before us as it invites us to let ourselves be caught up in the commitment to evangelisation as the Salesian Family of which Don Rua was a convinced promoter.

In this Year of the Priest let us all turn to Don Rua also as the model of the Salesian priest. Let us rediscover and examine more thoroughly his identity, composed of spiritual fervour and pastoral zeal, in the exercise of the ministry, characterised by experience of apostolic consecrated life.

May the Spirit of Christ animate us in our journey of pastoral renewal, and may Mary Help of Christians support us in our apostolic commitment. As always, may Don Bosco be our model and guide.

Cordially in the Lord,


Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva
Rector Major

Prayer to intercede for the canonisation of Blessed Michael Rua

Almighty and merciful God,
you placed in the footsteps of Saint John Bosco
Blessed Michael Rua, who imitated his example,
inherited his spirit and spread his works;
now that with his beatification you have raised him
to the glory of the altars,
be pleased to multiply his patronage to those who invoke him
and to hasten his canonisation.

We ask you this through the intercession of Mary Help of Christians,
whom he loved and honoured with a son's heart,
and through the mediation of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.