

# **The ‘educational presence’ in the biographies of young people written by Don Bosco**

## **The Salesian educator present as a help in the vocational realization**

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Analysing the educational presence, like presented by Don Bosco in the biographies, means that we have to analyse these documents to see how he in a narrative way describes his own role in the lives of these youngsters. Even if he doesn't mention himself by his own name, sometimes we find, certainly in the lives of Savio, Magone and Besucco, direct and indirect references to himself. Because the lives of these three boys are well known we want to add to our analysis three other names of less known biographies written by Don Bosco: Pietro, Valentino and Severino. In their biographies, we can find similar indications concerning the educational presence, and we learn what the absence of a good educator means for the life of youngsters.

The biographies are for Don Bosco a narrative way to talk about the goal of his pedagogy in the Oratory and thus they contain a lot of elements regarding his theoretical educational concepts. Before analysing in the second paragraph the educational presence and his influence on the choices youngsters have to make, we start recalling some other writings of Don Bosco himself in which the role of the educator is explained.

### **1. The reference figure and the educational presence in some writings of Don Bosco**

In his «Memorie dell'Oratorio» (MO) John Bosco writes that before he completed his studies Chieri, the fifth year of the *retorica*, he was looking for answers to what he should do. Follow the dream he had when he was still young or go back home. At that particular moment he is making the following reflection by himself.

Oh, if only I had had a guide to care for my vocation! What a great treasure he would have been for me; but I lacked that treasure. I had a good confessor who sought to make me a good Christian, but who never chose to get involved in the question of my vocation.<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to a discerning process we can find according to the Salesian tradition two key-elements, both present in the reflection made by Don Bosco: the guide to take care of the vocation and a good confessor. Both are important figures in the process of deciding one his

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<sup>1</sup> MO, 98

state of life. In the first part of this paragraph we will try to clarify what the right meaning of the “good confessor” for Don Bosco is. We are convinced that the confessor or the spiritual director is one of the most important figures who is accompanying the young. In the second part we are referring to some figures who helped Don Bosco in his own discernment process. So we will learn what it means for Don Bosco to be a good guide. In the last part of this paragraph we will briefly study the way in which Don Bosco presents the different stages of discernment in the *Giovane Provveduto* (GP) these stages can be considered the theoretical proposal of Don Bosco.

### *1.1. The double meaning of the sacrament of reconciliation*

One of the first things one learns about Saint Ignatius of Loyola is learn to find God in all things. Likewise one of the first things a young Salesian learns about their founder is the importance of de holy communion. The confession is, in the pedagogical system of Don Bosco very valuable because of its multiple purposes.

Together with the sacrament of communion, confession and stable confessor are the indispensable means to reach heaven.<sup>2</sup> Or as Comollo said: “Confession and communion were my support in all the dangerous years of my youth.”<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising that this sacrament takes an important place in the spiritual life of a youngster. Confession has a double meaning and purpose. First of all is the sacrament the reconciliation of the sinner with God, the forgiveness of sins, the recommencement and the “turning back” to the right path in life. Secondly it is necessary for the immediate preparation to the holy communion, without a good confession it was impossible to go to communion and to receive the body of Christ.<sup>4</sup> And thirdly, the relationship with the stable confessor means a moment of spiritual direction, the moment in which the spiritual director has the possibility of accompanying, guiding and directing the young person in his human and spiritual growth.<sup>5</sup>

According to Don Stella, the sacrament of confession is the most developed in the GP, precisely because of the double meaning.

For Don Bosco the confession done in a good way was the resumption of true life and the nourishment of it. In the confessional, Don Bosco gave the young man (to each young man) his particular guiding; for this reason he wanted the youngsters to keep in mind the advices received in confession and put them into practice. The confessor is the loving father, to whom with

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<sup>2</sup> FS, 1055-1056. Cf. FS, 1015.

<sup>3</sup> FS, 990.

<sup>4</sup> P. STELLA, *Valori spirituali nel «Giovane provveduto» di San Giovanni Bosco*, Roma, P. Athenaeum Salesianum, 1960, 116.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

utmost trust one must manifest any guilt and his word has above all definitive value in the choice of the state.<sup>6</sup>

But also in the biographies of Savio, Magone and Besucco we find separate chapters on confession.<sup>7</sup> These chapters describe the value and meaning of confession and above all the way in which, step by step, one has to prepare and make his confession. Together with spiritual accompaniment it can be considered as the beginning of the path to become truly happy. The beginning of accompaniment in biographies means a change in their lives. A change that will lead them to find a deeper and more lived form happiness, not the superficial one they used to live. The clearest example is the one described in the life of Magone. He finds from himself that his happiness is superficial and it is the “companion” who tells him how to deepen his personal life. “Go to the confessor, open the state of your mind; he will give you all the advice you need. We always do this when we have problems; and therefore we are always happy.”<sup>8</sup> Then follows the general confession and communion. So he leaves his old life behind to start a new life in the Oratory.<sup>9</sup>

The confession, the sacrament of reconciliation, in Don Bosco his proposal of spiritual life receives much of its importance from the value he attributes to communion. God became man for the first time in the incarnation of his only Son, and after his death on the cross, he became real every time again in the Eucharist in bread and wine, body and blood. The young who wants to receive the body of Christ must therefore prepare himself properly and with great care. As if to underline the importance of this sacrament, Don Bosco when he speaks of confession in the biography of Magone, changes his register and addresses himself directly as a writer to the reader: “A word to the youth”.<sup>10</sup> In this chapter he repeats to the young very synthetic the appeal to not fall into the temptation and sin. And when it happened to ask for forgiveness. Remember, Don Bosco writes, that the confessor is like a father who has the boy’s good in mind and wants to help him in any way he can. It will be the same confessor who will decide on the frequency of communion.<sup>11</sup> The strong link between confession, the stable confessor and the sacrament of confession indicates, according to Desramaut, clearly that Don Bosco had in mind a spiritual pedagogical path. They are not single facts, detached from each other.

The forgiveness of God procures to the soul the indispensable security for one’s own progress. It is a generator of joy and peace. The peace of the son of God reconciled with his father excludes the paralyzing alienation, but it is not a form of free safety, because from confession to confession, the penitent, who is also a soul that accepts spiritual direction, must feel stimulated to reject every form of evil and to practice the virtues that are most necessary for

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Rispettivamente per Savio capitolo XIV (FS, 1055-1058), Magone capitolo V (FS, 1099-1101) e Besucco capitolo XIX (FS, 1139-1140).

<sup>8</sup> FS, 1096-1097.

<sup>9</sup> FS, 1041.

<sup>10</sup> FS, 1099.

<sup>11</sup> FS, 1012.

him. Always purified by the blood of Christ in the sacrament, he is encouraged to constant progress. Especially since Don Bosco did not separate penance from the Eucharist, the most marvellous engine of Christian charity. It is necessary, in order to grow in holiness, to confess and to communicate oneself! ...<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, besides from the “spiritual” meaning of the sacrament of reconciliation, the confession had also a strong pedagogical meaning. The sacrament is not only a way to help the youngster in his spiritual growth, but helps also in his human evolution. This is already clear from the words of Comollo when he says it helped him to overcome those difficult years of his youth.<sup>13</sup> In the actions of Don Bosco there was no difference between the formal confession and the few words he said to the youngsters on the *cortile* of the Oratory. He asks them to open their hearts, because the confession is more than the singular fact of forgiving sins, it is the accompaniment of the youngster in his getting older, wiser more human and more Christian. Don Bosco wanted to talk with them in confession in the same way as he did on the playground, as a father, a friend, a guide.<sup>14</sup>

The accompaniment of the youngsters in the sacrament has, as shown a double sense. The first one is truly sacramental, and stresses the forgiving of the sins, and the preparation for the Holy Communion, the second one concerns the accompaniment of the youngsters in the daily life. They go always side by side, because true happiness is only reached being a good Christian and a honest citizen.<sup>15</sup>

## 1.2. *The young and even older Giovanni Bosco guided by others*

After Don Vojtáš analyses in his contribution “The Art of Salesian Encounter, Accompaniment and Discernment” Don Bosco’s way of accompanying the youngsters Domenico Savio, Michele Magone and Francesco Besucco, he states that the saint himself was only able to do this because he experienced in his life, during his youth how it was to be guided. Don Bosco became what he was because he found guides on his path.

It would be one-sided to describe Don Bosco’s way of accompanying young people without dwelling on his experience of being accompanied. It seems logical and convincing to affirm that if one believes in accompaniment, one will allow himself to be accompanied or desire to do in the different phases of his life. But before being accompanied “in fact”, the basis is to be a disciple with the attitude of the search for the signs of the Spirit in concrete situations and of practice the virtues connected with being a disciple.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> F. DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco e la vita spirituale*, Torino, Elle Di Ci, 1970, 111.

<sup>13</sup> FS, 990.

<sup>14</sup> P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica. Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*, vol. 2, Roma, LAS, 1981, 310–311.

<sup>15</sup> Valentino, 4.

<sup>16</sup> M. VOJTÁŠ, *The Art of Salesian Encounter, Accompaniment and Discernment*, Torino, 2018, 8.

Using the MO don Vojtáš stresses three significant moments in the life of Don Bosco, in which is clearly shown how others guide Giovanni Bosco. First of all by don Calosso, secondly in by the uncle of his friend Comollo and thirdly by don Cafasso in the Convict at the church of Saint Francis.

The encounter with don Calosso signed the life of the young Bosco. In this meeting Don Vojtáš recognizes in this the same structure as Don Bosco later describes the encounters with Savio, Magone and Besucco. This structure seems to be an important part of the way the Salesian educator is present in the life of the youngsters.<sup>17</sup>

A second important moment is the vocational discernment of Bosco, more specially the moment in which he, while living in Chieri, has to decide whether joining a religious congregation or entering the seminary.

John Bosco retrospectively tells it in the Memoirs of the Oratory in a context of discernment and prayer that can be described phenomenologically as the creation of a vision of the future permeated by trust in God's Providence. John makes a novena according to this intention and receives the sacraments with great fervour. John Bosco entrusted to the advice of the uncle priest of Luigi Comollo, In fact, the advice of the uncle of Comollo goes in this direction, suggesting John to enter the seminary where he will be able to know better what God wants from him. In these situations the discipleship of John Bosco made a transformative leap, perceiving himself as a disciple in the permanent search for the voice of the Spirit in concrete situations. The centre of his discipleship is the attitude of the search and not the "materiality" of the accompaniment that would seem to become more occasional and less profound.<sup>18</sup>

Very interesting is to see how, in a narrative way Don Bosco described his discernment applying to himself the theory he will later publish in the GP.<sup>19</sup> The third moment of discernment according to Vojtáš is the moment in which Don Bosco, as a cleric and later on a young priest decides to give his life for the poor and abandoned youth. This is expressed in the description of the meeting of the young priest with the boy from Asti, Bartolomeo Garelli, in the sacristy of the church of St. Francis of Assisi. It is there, after that meeting, that Don Bosco himself describes the purpose of his actions.

It was on those occasions that I noticed how many were brought back to that site because they were abandoned to themselves. Who knows, he said to me, if these young men had a friend outside, who took care of them, helped them and instructed them in religion on holidays, who knows they can not keep away from ruin or at least reduce the number of those, who return to prison?<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> We will talk about this structure in the second paragraph.

<sup>18</sup> M. VOJTÁŠ, *The Art of Salesian Encounter, Accompaniment and Discernment*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> The theoretical description of the different stages of the vocational discernment will be presented later in this paragraph.

<sup>20</sup> MO, 129.

It is correct to say that the realization of this decision is the result of a guiding process and the insight of Cafasso. He was the confessor and spiritual director of Don Bosco in the Convict.

There is however one priest, Giovanni Borel, who stays and stayed out of the spotlight for all the years in which he was aside Don Bosco and helped him, accompanied him in his pastoral work and his endless zeal for the youngsters. When we read attentively the MO and other testimonies we can discover the importance of this person and his role in the process of purifying his decision. Giovanni Borel who never became a Salesian, was for many years the one who stayed aside Don Bosco in the field. He is not the spiritual director of Don Bosco, nor the inspirer of the saint, but he is present in the most significant moments of the development of the work with the youngsters and the founding of the Salesian congregation. Which makes us think that his role in the accompaniment of Don Bosco is unknown and largely underestimated.

The history of the relationship between Giovanni Borel and Don Bosco began when he was a student of the first year of theology in the seminary of Chieri (1-3 November 1837)<sup>21</sup> and ended with the death of the theologian on 9 September 1873. It is not until Don Bosco went to the Convict in the city of Turin that Borel appears very often in his life. From the reading of the MO he can be considered as a kind of tutor of Don Bosco.

During his time in the convict Don Bosco mentions twice how he encounters Borel. Borel is presented twice as an example of priesthood before him. The first time is when he is going to the school of San Francesco da Paola where he is going to learn how to preach. Borel in that time was spiritual director in that school for the nobility of Turin and held on Saturdays and Sundays homilies and sermons for the students.

At that time I began to preach publicly in some of the churches in Turin, in the Hospital of Charity, in the Hospice of Virtue, in the prisons, and in the College of St Francis of Paola. I preached triduums, novenas, and retreats.<sup>22</sup>

In the same period Don Bosco sees him in the prisons of the city where he goes to do some practical experience of apostolate. Borel was one of those priests who took at heart the situation of the youngsters in the prisons of the city. It is Cafasso who is sending Don Bosco there to learn how to win the hearts of those guys.

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

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<sup>21</sup> A. GIRAUDO, *Clero, seminario e società. Aspetti della restaurazione religiosa a Torino*, Roma, LAS, 1993, 263-265.

<sup>22</sup> MO, 132.

of work. We often had long discussions about procedures to be followed in order to help each other in visiting the prisons, fulfilling the duties entrusted to us, and at the same time helping the youngsters whose moral condition and neglect drew the priests' attention everyday more.<sup>23</sup>

This still could be a coincidence. Twice in a row Borel is there to “teach” Don Bosco how to do his job and become a good shepherd for the youth. But as we investigate the history more in detail, it is hard to interpret these two facts as a coincidence. At the end of his years in the Convict Don Bosco couldn't decide what he wanted to do. Because he has no idea, Cafasso gives him three choices of which he can choose. The three proposals are a) “vicecurato” in Buttigliera d'Asti; b) teaching in the convict and; c) spiritual director of the “ospedaletto” next to the Rifugio. Because Don Bosco can't decide Cafasso sends him to don Borel. “Get your things and go with T. Borel; there you will be director of the small Hospital of S. Filomena; you will also serve in the Work of the Refuge. In the meantime God will put in your hands what you must do for the youth.”<sup>24</sup> Don Bosco in fact didn't want to leave the youngsters, but Cafasso found that he probably had to have some help in developing the beginning Oratory. It will be in fact the Borel and Bosco, together with third priest, who in the beginning, when the Oratory will be transferred from the church Saint Francis of Assisi to the Ospedaletto, will work together. In process of time Don Bosco will become the only responsible of the work of the Oratory.

But even if Don Bosco became the leader of the works of the Oratory, Borel stays in the neighbourhood. There are a series of facts, which are showing how Borel doesn't disappear from the scene. When Don Bosco was ill, Borel took his place and continued the Oratory<sup>25</sup>, when the marchioness di Barollo is worried about the health of Don Bosco and Borel defends him,<sup>26</sup> at the beginning of the “wandering-oratory” Borel preaches<sup>27</sup>. Not to speak of his financial contributions, his help in introducing Don Bosco by some benefactors...

The Salesian historiography does not bother to highlight other opportunities of collaboration by Borel. After the Oratory has established itself in a fixed place and the Don Bosco has found and trained his own staff, the MO and «*Memorie Biografiche*» (MB) only sporadically report his presences at Valdocco. This is due to two reasons. The first, of course, is that Lemoyne and his followers, after having documented the first steps of the work, focus mainly on the person and action of Don Bosco, leaving aside other aspects. The second reason, certainly linked to the first, is that over time the role of Giovanni Borel changes. If at the beginning he puts into play all his prestige and his commitment to signing contracts of rent and purchase and in supporting the young Bosco or even replacing him in times of illness; afterwards, as the position of the Don Bosco consolidates, he leaves room for him and

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<sup>23</sup> MO, 133.

<sup>24</sup> MO, 133.

<sup>25</sup> MB II, 496.

<sup>26</sup> MO, 210-212.

<sup>27</sup> MO, 138-140.

full responsibility, limiting himself to a pastoral cooperation as a preacher and confessor. The last significant encounter of Don Bosco and Borel is described by Caviglia.

Last encounter, the most significant one of his life, which I will call without any other, Salesian. – We are in the year 1869. After endless difficulties overcome with the direct intervention of miracles, in Rome, on 19 February, the Salesian Congregation is canonically approved, and on 2th of March the decree is returned to Don Bosco. – On March 25 he arrives in Turin, and at half past seven in the evening he enters the Oratory. – Borel is ill in bed, with his heart always ready to hear the voices coming from the nearby Oratory. – At that moment he hears the shouting, the hymns, the music. And then the poor old man leaps from his bed, and dragged himself to the Oratory and asks Don Bosco: Is the *Pia Società* approved? – Yes, it's approved! – Deo gratias! Now I can die happy. – And without adding something else he turned home, and got back to bed.<sup>28</sup>

It is pure speculation, but if we count together all the interventions, of which we have mentioned only a few, we can see two types of presence of Borel in the life of Don Bosco. Once the Oratory rooted from a little initiative to an institution, Borel is no longer the one who accompanies Bosco and he becomes a collaborator in the true sense of the word. But in the beginning certainly he is more than a collaborator. Cafasso sends him to Borel, during his time at the Convict, and afterwards he almost forced him to go and live with Borel. It is the same Borel who guarantees the success and the continuity of the Oratory, while Giovanni Bosco, the young priest has the time to grow in responsibility and matures the idea of what he wants to achieve with the Oratory. They lived for several years together, they worked together at the same project... in that sense we can only conclude, reading the indications Don Bosco himself gave in the MO and the testimonies we can read from others that Borel has been for Don Bosco a kind of tutor or supervisor in the beginning of his priesthood. The constant presence of someone who accompanies and guides in choices was an experience Don Bosco had during his time as a young priest. The question that remains is if this is only a coincidence, willed by Cafasso because of the situation of Don Bosco or if it was a rule that young priests in the diocese of Turin were accompanied by a conferrer who helped in the first years of the priesthood.

### 1.3. *The short method "concerning the choice of one's state of life" in the Giovane Provveduto*

When we look at the theoretical proposal concerning the choice of the proper state, we are able to put the narrative proposal in the right perspective. It seems that the guide or the companion is almost a *conditio sine qua non* for almost every choice one has to make. When we read the chapter on the discernment in the GP we get a clearer and nuanced view on this process and the role of the guide.

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<sup>28</sup> A. CAVIGLIA, *L'amico di Don Bosco, dattiloscritto*, in *Fondo Don Bosco*, 553 B1-E1, 20-21. Cf. MB IX, 557.



The GP is a “modest manual of prayers and simple principles of asceticism for youngsters”.<sup>29</sup> In it we find the values, the practices of piety, the principles dear to Don Bosco explained in a simple way, without them being part of a concrete experience like in the biographies of the youngsters.<sup>30</sup> Not in the first edition, but in the subsequent editions, the author inserts after the six Sundays and the novena of San Luigi Gonzaga, some pages about the “choice of one’s state of life”, which thus concludes the first part entitled: “The things necessary for a youngster to become virtuous”. The theme of the choice of state is introduced gradually in the GP. In the 1863 edition, the first edition of the GP was in 1847, Don Bosco added the “Prayer to know his vocation”. The prayer instead was almost at the end of the second part the “Particular Exercises of Christian Piety”. In the GP of 1878 (GPC) the prayer is slightly modified and inserted at the end of the chapter “concerning the choice of the state”.<sup>31</sup>

When Don Bosco adds the chapter on the “discernment” he inserts two paragraphs before prayer. From the first paragraph, but also from the title, it is clear that when Don Bosco speaks about the choice of the state, he does not only think of the ecclesial vocation, but of every state of life. The discernment is important because it is about knowing God’s will over one’s life, doing what He has planned for the boy. According to Don Bosco, and in the mentality of the nineteenth century, God in his eternal plan decides for every man his destiny and gives him to fulfil what has been entrusted to him. “God has destined for each man a condition of life and the relative graces.”<sup>32</sup> In imitation of Christ himself, the young man must accept what belongs to him, and not do for which he was not elected.

Not everyone has extraordinary gifts to know the will of God and generally He does not manifest Himself in a special way to men, therefore one needs to learn how to recognize how the Lord “will direct you on the right path in the usual ways according to his providence, so you do not neglect the appropriate means He has given you for a prudent determination.”<sup>33</sup> The means to know the will of God are in themselves a kind of itinerary. This itinerary is divided into four moments. The first thing the young man has to do to know the will of God is to pass his youth as he should do, and in the case that it was not so, to repair the defects and start over.<sup>34</sup> The second medium presented is prayer. Don Bosco suggests to pray with the words of the Bible.

It will help you to repeat with s. Paul: *Lord, what do you want me to do?* [Acts 9,6] Or with Samuel: *Speak, O Lord, that your servant is listening to you.* [1 Reg 3:10] Or with the Psalmist:

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<sup>29</sup> P. STELLA, *Valori spirituali nel «Giovane provveduto» di San Giovanni Bosco*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Per una analisi delle fonti usate da Don Bosco per compilare questo capitolo vedi: *Ibid.*, 76–78.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 6-13.

<sup>32</sup> GPC, 75.

<sup>33</sup> GPC, 76.

<sup>34</sup> GPC, 76.

*Teach me to do your will, because you are my God.* [Ps 142,10] Or another similar affectionate aspiration.<sup>35</sup>

One can, if needed say some extra prayers in mass, to make a special holy communion, start a novena or *triduo*, make a pilgrimage to a sanctuary, or invoke the Virgin Mary or some favourite saint.

The third step in discernment is to make the decision. “Propose to follow the will of God.”<sup>36</sup> Follow the will of God in spite of everything. Don Bosco’s words are very clear. Even if the opinion of adults and specially when the opinion of the own parents is different, the young man must respect and follow the will of God and not the will of the parents. Obeying God is more important than obeying men. In the second paragraph the author returns to the same topic, giving an example of the life of St. Francis de Sales, showing how he, despite the opposition of his father and his mother, follows his ecclesiastical vocation.

The fourth tool that helps in the choice of one’s proper state in life is the advice of people “fearful of the Lord and wise, especially the confessor”.<sup>37</sup>

Although they are not written in the same order as in the GPC, it is very easy to recognise in the four stages in the way Bosco talks about his own discernment process. After a dream where the young Bosco talked to a friar he decided not to enter the convent of the Franciscans and went for help, seeking the advice of his best friend Comollo, because he didn’t know how to tackle the obstacles concerning the choice of his state of life.

And since the obstacles were many and difficult, I decided to reveal it all to my friend Comollo. He advised me to make a novena. Meanwhile he would write to his uncle the provost. On the last day of my novena, I went to confession and communion with this incomparable friend. I attended one mass and served another at the altar of Our Lady of Grace in the cathedral.

Then we went home and found a letter from Father Comollo which contained something like this: “Having given careful consideration to what you wrote me, I advise your friend not to enter a monastery at this time. Don’t let him vest the clerical habit. As he goes on with his studies he will better understand what God wants him to do. He must not fear to lose his vocation because withdrawal from the world and honest piety will help him overcome every obstacle.

I followed this wise advice and applied myself seriously to those things which would help prepare me to take the clerical habit.<sup>38</sup>

The method of knowing God’s will over one’s life and way of discerning as described in the GPC is very similar to the way in which the spiritual directors habitually advised this kind of discernment. Think, for example, of the “Brief Method of Knowing the Will of God” of St.

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<sup>35</sup> GPC, 76.

<sup>36</sup> GPC, 76-77.

<sup>37</sup> GPC, 77.

<sup>38</sup> MO, 99.

Francis de Sales in the «Treatise of God's Love».<sup>39</sup> The saint describes in some lines the four phases of the process of discernment.<sup>40</sup> Or, much closer to the text of Don Bosco, the French Jesuit François Nepveu explains in one of his meditations «*The way of knowing God's vocation above our state*».<sup>41</sup> The method presented is exactly the same as in the GPC.

## 2. Choosing the own state of life and the role of the educator in the biographies written by Don Bosco

Very briefly we will describe now the process of accompaniment in the lives of Savio, Magone and Besucco, to see and examine in the second part of the paragraph the importance of the role of the educator and educators in their discernment process and their stay in the Oratory. The educator as we can foresee has got an important role in the spiritual and intellectual growth of the youngsters. Without their help a good education and a good outcome is almost impossible.

Don Bosco however did not write alone the biographies of the three known youngsters, but also less or even unknown youngsters. Although the goal of these biographies is not the same, we can analyse them in the same way we did with the lives of Savio, Magone and Besucco.

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<sup>39</sup> F. DI SALES, *Trattato dell'amor di Dio*, vol. 4, a cura di G. GIOIA, Roma, Città Nuova, 2011, 478-480.

<sup>40</sup> «Bisogna essere molto essere molto umili, e non pensare di scoprire la volontà di Dio a forza di esami e di sottigliezze di ragionamento; ma, [1] dopo aver chiesto la luce dello Spirito Santo, [2] applicando la nostra riflessione alla ricerca del suo beneplacito, [3] ascoltato il consiglio del nostro direttore e, se non c'è, di due o tre persone spirituali, [4] bisogna decidersi e scegliere in nome di Dio e, dopo, non ritornare più con i dubbi sulla scelta che abbiamo operato, ma coltivare e sostenerla devotamente, pacificamente e con costanza. [...] Una volta presa santamente la risoluzione non bisogna mai dubitare della santità dell'esecuzione...» In: *Ibid.*, 480.

<sup>41</sup> François Nepveu (° Saint-Malo 1639 - † Rennes 1708) pubblica per la prima volta i quattro volumi «*Pensées et Réflexions Chrétiennes pour tous les jours de l'année*» a Parigi nel 1695 e scrive nel terzo volume nella meditazione del 14 settembre: «Per conoscere la volontà di Dio sul nostro stato, bisogna consigliarci con noi medesimi, bisogna consultarci con Dio, bisogna domandar consiglio a coloro che ci stanno in sua vece. Bisogna consigliarci con noi medesimi, e col nostro proprio cuore: ma non col nostro cuore debole e contaminato, ma col nostro cuore che ascolta la ragione; col nostro cuore disimpegnato dalle sue fiacchezze e passioni col nostro cuore tocco da un desiderio sincero di conoscere la volontà di Dio e di seguirla, attento e docile alla voce del Signore che sopra ciò sempre ci parla quando ascoltar lo vogliamo. Perchè Iddio principalmente dee esser da noi consultato affine di conoscere la sua volontà. Chi può meglio di lui, se vuole, farcela sapere? Ma come non lo vorrà? sei obbliga a seguirla, obbliga sè stesso a farcela nota. Perchè, come potrei essere obbligato a seguire la volontà di Dio, se non mi concedesse per conoscerla i lumi? E impegnato a concedermeli, ma vuole che a lui li dimandi. Diciamo dunque, ma sovente, con S. Paolo, *Act.9.6. Mio Dio, che volete che io faccia?* Con Samuelle; *1.Reg.3.10. Parlate, Signore, che ascolta il vostro servo*. O finalmente con Davide: *Psal.142.8. Fatemi conoscere, o Signore, la strada per cui volete che io cammini.*» In: F. NEPVEU, *Pensieri ovvero riflessioni cristiane per tutti i giorni dell'anno. Nuova edizione con molte correzioni*, Vol. 3, Bergamo, Stamperia Mazzoleni, 1826, 241–245. Cf. sempre dello stesso autore il capitolo «Combien il est important d'entrer dans un état par la vocation de Dieu, e la maniere de la connoitre [sic.]» In: F. NEPVEU, *Conduite Chrétienne ou Reglement des principales actions e des principaux devoirs del la vie Chrétienne*, Paris, Chez Louis Guerin e Jean Boudot, 1704, 282–301.

## 2.1. *The formative proposal in the biographies of Domenico Savio, Michele Magone and Francesco Besucco*

The life of Domenico Savio, and the biographical profiles of Michele Magone and Francesco Besucco can be considered as exemplary biographies, not only for the young people of the Oratory of Valdocco, but also for the youngsters outside the Salesian environment. After the use of some lives of young saints, such as the one of Luigi Gonzaga, Don Bosco began to shape and model the stories of the lives of young people that had been students in the Oratory. The purpose is clear and well described by the author himself in the introduction of the life of Savio.

Some of you may wonder why I have prepared a Life of Dominic Savio, and not of other youths who were here at school, and lived lives of eminent virtue. It is quite true that Divine Providence deigned to send us several boys who were examples of holiness, such as Gabriel Fascio, Louis Rua, Camillus Gavio, John Massiglia and others; but the incidents connected with these are not so conspicuous and remarkable as those of Savio, whose whole life was wonderful. However, if God gives me health and grace, I intend to publish a collection of facts concerning these other companions, both to satisfy your desires and my own, and so that you may imitate what may be compatible with your state.<sup>42</sup>

The same reason, the exemplarity of the life lived, is also the motivation to write the biography of Magone<sup>43</sup> and Besucco<sup>44</sup>. The purpose of these biographies is that the reader takes advantage of the reading. The recognisability of the environment and the character of the young person is a huge advantage for the reader who knows the Oratory. But also readers who aren't familiar with the Oratory can recognize themselves in one of the characters. Savio is the model of holiness, the prototype to which all must mirror themselves. Magone is the boy in which almost everyone recognizes, lively and full of energy, the one who sometimes has difficulty adapting to the environment of Valdocco. And finally Besucco, the young shepherd of the Alps, representing those young people willing to learn and study. In his life we find the fullness of the spiritual and pedagogical vision of Don Bosco in a narrative way.

The formative approach in all three lives is almost the same and coincides with the structure of the work. First of all there is the presentation of the life of the boy until the moment of the encounter with Don Bosco. This indicates the first moment of transition. The educator accepts the boy in his religious and human situation and checks if he is willing to change and wants to start a new way of life. We recognize this phase in the words of Magone when he is talking to Don Bosco near the Carmagnola station.

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

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<sup>42</sup> Vite, 39-40.

<sup>43</sup> Vite, 113-114.

<sup>44</sup> Vite, 161-162.

— I would certainly like that, he replied, because this sort of life does not appeal to me - some of my friends are already in prison and I fear that I will follow, but what can I do? My father is dead, my mother is poor, so who can help me?<sup>45</sup>

Something similar happened on the first Monday of October 1854 when Don Bosco met Domenico and his father for the first time.<sup>46</sup> Even in the letter of the parish priest of Besucco, writing to Don Bosco and asking to accept the young man in the Oratory, we can find the same elements.<sup>47</sup> When the boy's answer is positive, Don Bosco invites him to accompany him and enter the educational environment of Valdocco. It is the young man himself who must respond to the challenge made by Don Bosco and it is he himself who must choose to go to the Oratory. When the young man responds positively, the transfer follows and the process of insertion into life in Valdocco begins.

Once arrived in Valdocco the difficulties or the problems of adaptation begin. Being part of a vivid environment, with so many boys, where a companion takes the role of guardian angel and explains the rules of the life in the Oratory is not that easy. This is the beginning of a second transition, generally called the moment of crisis.<sup>48</sup> For Savio this happens after six months in the Oratory while hearing the sermon on the easy way to become a saint. He is so impressed and confused that he remains silent for a few days.<sup>49</sup> The same melancholy hits Magone. After a while he feels bad, not because he is ill but because he sees his companions happy and he does not understand the reason or the motive of it.<sup>50</sup> And it doesn't take a lot of time for Besucco to enter the crisis after his arrival in Turin.

In his humility Francis looked upon his companions as more virtuous than himself and he rated himself poorly when comparing his conduct with theirs. A few days later he again approached me with a rather perturbed look on his face.<sup>51</sup>

It is in this moment of crisis when young people go to talk to Don Bosco, which is considered the crucial and decisive moment of the pedagogical accompaniment. Don Bosco asks the boys to entrust themselves to him in order to be able to accompany or guide them to a successful life. Savio says: "Tell me, therefore, how I must regulate myself to begin such an undertaking."<sup>52</sup> Magone responds to Don Bosco's proposal: "Go ahead, he said, I am willing to do anything that you command me. [...] I am desperate and I do not know how to do it."<sup>53</sup> Even for Besucco, happiness is a reason to go ask for help: "I am here in the midst of

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<sup>45</sup> Vite, 116.

<sup>46</sup> Vite, 53.

<sup>47</sup> Vite, 189.

<sup>48</sup> M. VOJTÁŠ, *The Art of Salesian Encounter, Accompaniment and Discernment*, Torino, 2018; Vedi saggio introduttivo di Aldo Giraudò in: G. BOSCO, *Vite di giovani*.

<sup>49</sup> Vite, 61-62.

<sup>50</sup> Vite, 120-121.

<sup>51</sup> Vite, 197.

<sup>52</sup> Vite, 62.

<sup>53</sup> Vite, 121.

so many good friends, I would like to make myself very good for them, but I do not know how to do it, and I need you to help me.”<sup>54</sup>

From this moment begins the “new life” of the boy. At the beginning of this new transition the educator gives some advice to help them to get to the right track. These elements consist in some attitudes, common in the three biographies, which are essential in the Salesian pedagogy. The first recommended attitude is happiness. The moment of crisis, of melancholy, of sadness is overcome joy. It is the fundamental and almost primordial attitude recommended to Savio, Magone and Besucco.<sup>55</sup> The second element is to fulfil one’s duties, always adapted to the proper state and age.<sup>56</sup> The third attitude is to have a profound spiritual life that is characterized by piety, confession and communion. These three elements are summarized in the biography of Besucco. In fact in the “presentation” to the “exemplary biographies” in the «Fonti Salesiane» (FS), don Aldo Giraudo writes:

It is here that we find expressed, and then fully illustrated chapter after chapter, the formula “joy, study, piety”, considered the most complete and concise enunciation of the spiritual pedagogy of Don Bosco.<sup>57</sup>

The way these attitudes are put into practice is different for the three boys. For Savio his membership of the “Immaculate Conception Sodality”, his devotion to the “Most Holy Sacrament” is important.<sup>58</sup> While in the life of Magone other accents appear: his devotion to the Virgin Mary, the virtue of purity and friendship with others.<sup>59</sup> In Besucco the accent is placed on the description of the way of making confession, communion, veneration of the sacrament and the spirit of prayer.<sup>60</sup>

By doing and living according to the pedagogical proposal of Don Bosco, the young man saves his soul and becomes a saint. We cannot but affirm the thesis of Don Stella that Don Bosco made an extraordinary and personal interpretation of the idea of Christian perfection in writing these biographies. The purpose of the education explained in the biographies is the lived holiness “not linked to the psychophysical maturity of man” but related to the reality. “There is a holiness, the perfect state of life even for the young. A young man is holy when he fulfils with assiduous exactness the duties of his state, which Don Bosco summarized in the formula of Dominic Savio: *Piety, Study, Recreation*; in the great program left in Besucco, with the words: *Happiness, Study, Piety*.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Vite, 196.

<sup>55</sup> Vite, 62, 121, 195-196.

<sup>56</sup> Vite, 62, 129, 195

<sup>57</sup> FS, 987.

<sup>58</sup> Vite, 71-74; 78-82.

<sup>59</sup> Vite, 132-134; 134-137; 137-139.

<sup>60</sup> Vite, 199-201; 201-203; 203-204; 204-206.

<sup>61</sup> P. STELLA, *Valori spirituali nel «Giovane provveduto» di San Giovanni Bosco*, Roma, P. Athenaeum Salesianum, 1960, 95.

## 2.2. *The role of the educator in the life of the youngsters*

In the pedagogical process described in narrative form in the biographies there are some key elements that return. Elements that help youngster develop and grow as human beings and as Christians. One of these important elements is certainly the role of the educator. But if we look closely, we discover also other people that have an important influence in this pedagogical process.

The first key element in the life of the youngster is the educator. In the first place, as we read the biographies, this role is taken by the own parents. Already in the first chapter of the biography of Domenico Savio, Don Bosco describes how it was the preoccupation of his parents to give him a good education.

His parents dearly loved their son and had only one idea – to bring him up as a good Christian. Dominic was naturally good, with a heart which was a fertile field for the things of God. He learned his morning and night prayers readily and could already say them by himself when he was only four years old.<sup>62</sup>

The importance of the parents is stressed by the testimony of the letter of the vice-parish priest of Carmagnola. When he writes a letter of presentation or recommendation for Michele Magone to Don Bosco he states that his mother is occupied by her work in order to provide food on the table. She has no time to help or assist him in his education.<sup>63</sup> Another educator can never replace the own parents taking care of the education of their children. When the three youngsters arrive in the Oratory of Valdocco the role of the parents is taken over by others.

There is in de three lives a main character who takes care of the boys. This Person can be called the reference figure. This educator is the point of reference in the youngster's education. The quality of this educator is of extreme importance because he accompanies the key moments in the formation process of the boys. He is there when the discernment is done to go to Valdocco, in the very first beginning. He is present when the second transition takes place and the youngsters ask to be educated. He helps them making decisions and afterwards he guides them trough the whole process, and accompanies them in big and little choices, adjusts their temperament...

One of the very important characteristic of this reference figure is that he doesn't take or make decisions for the youngsters. He lets them free, it is their free choice and they have to decide by themselves. They themselves have to agree with the terms and the conditions. Therefore the reference figure accompanies the discernment process without intervening. The boy decides for himself to go to the Oratory and expresses the will to be educated. During this second transition the boy decides to go to his reference figure, because he told to do so or he

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<sup>62</sup> Vite, 42.

<sup>63</sup> Vite, 117.

is already used to do so. After he explained and discovered the source of his sadness he decides to change his life. It is the educator who accompanies the process. He indicates the path, but it is the boy himself who has to walk the road. He adjusts, but never decides for him. Like in the life of Savio, Don Bosco adjusts the rules of the company of the Immaculate<sup>64</sup> and in the life of Magone he asks him not to run too fast about the vocation to the priesthood. Afterwards this educator remains a point of reference for the whole of his stay at the Oratory. The reference figure shows empathy, but also helps the self-awareness of the boy. He improves the boy his life and develops his strengths not only on a short term basis, but he takes in account also the far future. He is coaching the youngsters to take their lives in their own hands, but in a very democratic way. He sometimes looks more like a counsellor even if he knows what changes are required in the lives of the youngsters and knows clearly what directions the boy has to go to become fully human and Christian at the same time. The reference figure only guides the process.

Apart from the fact that the decision-making process is accompanied by this reference figure, there are a lot of other people surrounding the young guys while they are in the Oratory. The new, but also the older boys, are accompanied by others who explain them the “do’s and don’ts” of the Oratory. In the biography of Michele Magone they are literally called “Guardian Angel”.<sup>65</sup> And the second number of the rules “The Immaculate Conception Sodality” obliged to help others and explain the rules and help them to live a good life in the Oratory.<sup>66</sup> Interesting to see is how, once they found the right track, they themselves become guardian angels for the others.

In that sense the biographies are not only an example for the reader of the successful life, but in life itself the boys were examples for their companions. Precisely for this they have become pedagogical model. Already in their life they were examples for other young people, Savio, Magone and Besucco were the guardian angels. Young people who educate young people are a necessary element and fundamental aspect of Salesian pedagogy. Regarding for example the lessons of catechism we remember the countless interventions of Dominic Savio. He taught catechism in Valdocco, gathered his companions during the holidays at home, approached friends to talk about religion... almost in every free moment he had.<sup>67</sup> Also Besucco even before arriving at Valdocco, he was for four years instructing the children of his village.

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<sup>64</sup> Vite, 79-81.

<sup>65</sup> Vite, 120.

<sup>66</sup> Vite, 79.

<sup>67</sup> Vite, 63-66.



A catechist for the young people was needed and Francis filled the position for four years. He taught carefully and enthusiastically, the boys were pleased to have him and showed him great respect. Hence the parish priest chose him to teach catechism to a large class in Lent.<sup>68</sup>

And Michele Magone started helping youngsters to prepare themselves for the confession and the communion. In one of the episodes in his biographies we can read how Don Bosco describes the way a “guardian angel” has to do his task. They become themselves reference figures.

One of his companions was always in trouble. He was handed over to Michael to see what could be done to bring him to his senses. Michael set to work on him. He started by getting to know him and befriending him. He played with him in recreation; he gave him little presents; he passed on to him little notes on which were written pieces of advice and so got to know him very closely but did not speak about religion with him.<sup>69</sup>

It was Don Bosco himself who recommended “the always troubled companion” to Magone.

The reference figure and the guardian angel are however not the only two elements who help the youngsters in their spiritual growth and their human wellbeing. Important are the environment, the formative community, the programs, the activities, the education, larger structures... Together they form the frame of reference in which the youngster is accompanied.

### *2.3. When the educator is not what he is supposed to be*

The edifying biographies can be considered as “the ideal”, those boys were the successful ones. The three young people accept the proposal made by Don Bosco and willingly entrust themselves with confidence and dedication to Salesian education in the Oratory. We have shown how the reference figure, but also the companions are among the important elements which have a decisive influence in the education of the young people. Now we will look into the biographies of Pietro, Valentino and Severino, where, unlike the three known biographies, the conditions of education are not ideal, sometimes far from the ideal. In this way we can find out what can be the result of the absence or lack of the reference figure. Perhaps sometimes the non-ideal conditions and the consequences or wrong choices will be closer to today’s everyday reality.

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<sup>68</sup> Vite, 182.

<sup>69</sup> Vite, 138.

### 2.3.1. Brief presentation of the biographies of Pietro, Valentino

Pietro is the main character of the story published for the first time in the «*Letture Cattoliche*» in November 1855 under the title: “The power of good education. Curious contemporary episode” (Pietro). It was modified and republished five years later. In 1881 it was published in its final version. In this edition the name of “Pietro” was also added in the title.<sup>70</sup> The first edition of “Pietro” has 108 pages divided into 14 chapters and is published before the life of Domenico Savio (1859).

In the year in which Don Bosco writes the fourth edition of the life of Savio, Valentino’s biography is published. The complete title is: “Valentino or the impeded vocation. Contemporary episode” (Valentino). Valentino “appeared in a printed edition of December 1866, in the collection of «*Letture Cattoliche*» in one of the typical small-sized and small-sized booklets.”<sup>71</sup> The life of Valentino is told in 61 pages divided into 10 chapters.

The biography of Severino is in 1868 the last of the three biographies we take in consideration to be published. His story appeared in the month of February in the «*Letture Cattoliche*». The complete title is “Severino or adventures of an Alpine lad, told by himself” (Severino). It is the largest biography of the three, has 186 pages in 26 chapters and a conclusion. In the story there are extensive descriptions of Protestantism, in particular of the Waldensians and the Calvinists, which makes the work considerably more voluminous.

The purpose for which the lives of Pietro, Valentino and Severino have been written is very different from that of the famous lives. The accent in these less known biographies is not the description of the successful life caused by the Salesian education.

The biography of Pietro has as subtitle “the power of good education, a curious contemporary episode”. In the introduction “To the reader” Don Bosco writes that Pietro is not entirely written by himself but “was modelled on a work entitled: *Un mari comme il y en a beaucoup, une femme comme il y en a peu.*” Then he continues “the reader will see in fact what force the good education has on the destiny of sonship; you will see a model mother, an exemplary son. A mother who, in the midst of a thousand difficulties, succeeds in giving the best education to her son and bringing her husband back to the good path.”<sup>72</sup> The precise purpose is to show the power of good education and how Pietro becomes an instrument of God helping his father and his friends to rediscover the faith and to convert back to the Catholic Church.

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<sup>70</sup> J. SCHEPENS, «*La forza della buona educazione*» *Etude d'un écrit de Don Bosco*, in J. M. PRELLEZO (Ed.), *L'Impegno dell'educare. Studi in onore di Pietro Braido promossi dalla Facoltà di scienze dell'educazione dell'Università Pontificia salesiana*, Roma, LAS, 1991, 417-434: 417 Noi useremo per il nostro studio la versione del 1881: G. BOSCO, *Pietro. Ossia la forza della buona educazione*, Torino, Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1881.

<sup>71</sup> G. BOSCO, *Valentino o la vocazione impedita. Introduzione e testo critico*, a cura di M. Pulingathil, Roma, LAS, 1987, 25. Noi useremo per il nostro studio la versione del 1866: G. BOSCO, *Valentino o la vocazione impedita. Episodio contemporaneo*, Tip. dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, 1866.

<sup>72</sup> Pietro, v-vi.

The booklet with the biography of Valentino strangely does not have an introduction, the author does not address the reader with a few words to indicate what he is going to tell and what the reader must pay attention to. The subtitle triggers the reader and reveals the content: “the impeded vocation”. This father impeded the religious vocation of his son Valentino. He is “frustrated in his ideal” as Stella says.<sup>73</sup> The biography shows the consequences of the impediment. The aim is therefore to warn the reader about the danger of going against the will of God in the choice of the proper state, in particular in the case of Valentino the ecclesial one.

The subtitle “adventures of an alpine lad” of Severino’s biography does not reveal anything of the content of the story. The biography begins immediately with the first chapter that serves to introduce the story. The reader has to read some chapters before he understands the fundamental point of the story and the reason why so many people are gathered, as Don Bosco tells, around the sickbed of Severino. “Don Bosco wrote the story of Severino with apologetic and educational concerns.”<sup>74</sup> On one hand there are, as in the other biographies, the indications of the Salesian educational proposal, on the other hand there are a lot of apologetics against the Waldensians and Protestantism and warnings against their doctrine.

#### a) Pietro, the power of the good education

In the story of Pietro we hear how his mother does everything to educate her son good. She teaches him to be a good Christian and wants to send him to school. His father, Giovanni, thinks in a different way, it was important that his firstborn earns some money to help feeding his three brothers. According to him his son has to go to work. His mother does everything possible to protect her child from bad influences, ideas and behaviour in the workplace. Nonetheless Pietro and his mother find a way for his preparation for the first communion. We read here in a narrative way the pedagogical and spiritual vision of Don Bosco on the sacraments of reconciliation and communion.

Seeing the result of the journey made by his son while preparing him for his first communion, his father becomes confused. He is so touched that he himself decides to convert and become a good Christian. The return of the father to the Catholic religion means happiness and prosperity for the whole family.

The resistance of his father is partially repeated when, as a young adult, Pietro is going into military service. According to his mother the first danger in the army is not the opponent but it is the danger to the soul. Pietro remembers his good education and manages to win the hearts of his companions. He “always remembered the promise made to God to be faithful to

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<sup>73</sup> P. STELLA, *Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*, Vol. 2, 212.

<sup>74</sup> B. DECANCO, «Severino», *Studio dell’opuscolo con particolare attenzione al «primo oratorio»*, 254.

him, in spite of the bad examples and the wicked counsel of his companions, in many of which, after their first and second communion, no improvement in life appeared.”<sup>75</sup>

#### b) Valentino and the impeded vocation

Already from the first pages it is clear that Valentino’s father, Osnero, is not a very Christian person and did not care about the religious education of his only son. So like in the story of Pietro, the mother of Valentino takes care of the religious education. Very brief the writer talks about some religious practices and attitudes, but he doesn’t go into detail. The problems start when suddenly Valentino’s mother dies “when he was beginning to need her the most”<sup>76</sup>. The mother begs her son before she dies to remain a good Christian.

The father immersed in his work does not have much time for the education of his son and sends him to a boarding school in the city. The choice of the school was made very quick and superficial. The education was good but partial, because there was no or insufficient religious education. When Valentino talks with his father about this lack of religious education, he replies: “If you can not pray, confess and go to mass every day [...] you can compensate everything during holidays.”<sup>77</sup> But Valentino slowly leaves behind practices of piety and when, as a result of this his behaviour changes his father starts to worry. Osnero needs the help of his provost change his sons bad behaviour.

After the summer holidays Osnero chooses to send Valentino to the Collegio di Valdocco. There he enjoys good education for several years. And with the good education his priestly vocation matures. His father is totally opposed to the idea. Valentino is his only son and is predestined to help him in business. Again he asks someone else, a friend, Mari, to help him to change the mind of his son and erase the thought of the priesthood out of his mind. Don Bosco writes “The saddest misfortune that a young man can catch is an evil guide; Unfortunately, our Valentino was also a victim of it. My pen shakes in my hand as I write.”<sup>78</sup> Bad friends, drunkenness, games, bars, dancing, theatres, prostitution and money become part of Valentino’s life. The father, seeing his son walking towards the abyss, begs him to change his path. In jail, because Valentino was involved in a murderer, he asks his father: “Why have you prevented my vocation?”<sup>79</sup>

#### c) Severino, the adventures of an alpine lad

Severino himself tells his adventures. He start with the good education received from father Gervasio. He is the pillar of the family, educates his son and brothers in catholic

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<sup>75</sup> Pietro, 106.

<sup>76</sup> Valentino, 7.

<sup>77</sup> Valentino, 11.

<sup>78</sup> Valentino, 35.

<sup>79</sup> Valentino, 42.

religion, accompanies him in the preparation for communion, and maintains his family economically with great success. His father is the example of a good Christian and honest citizen. The situation of the mother, Emilia, is different. She is worried about external things, and a little can't handle money. She will be, together with the bad luck in the business of the father, the reason why Severino and his father must go to work in the city as masons. Despite everything they remain faithful to the religion. "If God provides the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the lilies of the field, why shouldn't he provide for us? We place our trust in him and do all we can to sweeten the bitterness of a sad future. Courage then, work, prayers are our program of life."<sup>80</sup> The situation gets worse when the father dies. Severino remains orphans at fifteen with his five brothers and remains in the city to work.

Severino has an interest in studying and reading. This is his great gift but also becomes his weakness. He cannot distinguish what is good for reading and what is bad, like he cannot distinguish good friends from bad friends. Driven by economic reasons, falls into the hands of the Waldensians.

Even if he did not intend to be a Protestant, he remained in their circles for many years. From Turin he moved to Pinerolo, after to Luzern and finally to Genève. In these moments Don Bosco, through Severino, explains the origins of the Waldensians and Calvinists and the doctrinal differences with the Catholics. The death of Bordis, a convert like Severino who was denied the last sacraments, makes him understand fully the value of the Catholic faith and its sacraments.<sup>81</sup> By evaluating his own health, his moral state and remembering his father's advice, he goes at home like a real prodigal son.<sup>82</sup>

Once in Turin the Protestants still make some attempts to prevent the reconversion, but with the help of the Director of the Oratory he succeeds. "I was born a Catholic, I want to live and die Catholic."<sup>83</sup> Don Bosco listens to the confession of Severino, administers the sacrament of the sick and advises to begin a novena to Mary Help of Christians.<sup>84</sup> Severino gets better and returns with his mother to his country of origin. "My days returned to be a source of consolation, proving that only the practice of religion can consolidate harmony in families and the happiness of those who live in this valley of tears."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Severino, 22.

<sup>81</sup> B. DECANCO, «Severino», *Studio dell'opuscolo con particolare attenzione al «primo oratorio»*, 223-224.

<sup>82</sup> Severino, 1; 153-154; 167.

<sup>83</sup> Severino, 167.

<sup>84</sup> Severino, 171.

<sup>85</sup> Severino, 175.

### 2.3.2. The role of the educator in the life of the youngsters

For the kind of analysis and interpretation that we will make, it is important to distance us from a rather technical and historical analysis of the writings. For critical technical analysis, Father Schepens did it this for the story of Pietro<sup>86</sup>, and the Fathers Pulingathil and Decancq respectively for the lives of Valentino<sup>87</sup> and Severino<sup>88</sup>. We look at young people as Don Bosco described them in their biographies. It is certainly useful to know, as he himself writes in the story of Pietro, that the basis of the story is a French book. But we must be aware that Don Bosco had a reason to describe us to this type of boy, even if he added details or changed or interpreted the history. Don Bosco had therefore his reasons and did it on purpose. We have to look at the story as it was transmitted by the Don Bosco to know the role of the educator.

Different elements have a significant impact on the choices these youngsters make. Pietro's education, due to the effort of his mother, causes a change in the life of his father. The fact that the father of Valentino don't want him to become a priest, destroys his life. The adventures of Severino with the Waldensians were initiated by having one bad friend. In the biographies of the last two it is certainly a question of negative or wrong choices. Both boys have lost their good life. The stories written by Don Bosco can also be seen as a warning for the young readers, their parents and educators. Don Bosco shows the result of the absence of a good education.

The first and probably the most important element to have a good education is the presence of a qualitative reference figure. This is, like we mentioned before, the educator who accompanies the young person in his process of growth, which transmits values, which teaches the art of life. He is an indispensable figure. We recognize this figure in many people in the three biographies like in the mothers of Pietro and Valentino and Severino's father. They contribute and help their sons with their education and help them to make wise choices. Very clear in the description of Pietro's biography we see how the mother, despite the hostile environment, manages to guide the educational process of her child. The fact that she remains faithful to her educational principles and is loyal to her son, the fact that he listens to her, she advises him what to do in certain situations, is exemplary for the accompanying process and role of the educator. The mother says the day before Pietro starts working:

Poor Pietro (she tells him) you owe obedience to your father and mother. In this tender age we force you to work because you have to earn your part of your nourishment. Poor boy! Be patient: we are very poor. It is therefore we, even if your still little, must put you to work. You will find yourself with some little companions; always remember the good advice I gave you. You know, dear Pietro, that we must love God, so obey him and never offend him. If like not

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<sup>86</sup> J. SCHEPENS, «*La forza della buona educazione*» *Etude d'un écrit de Don Bosco*.

<sup>87</sup> G. BOSCO, *Valentino o la vocazione impedita. Introduzione e testo critico*.

<sup>88</sup> B. DECANCQ, «*Severino*» *Toepassing van een opvoedingsideaal*, vol. 7, Sint Pieters Woluwe, Don Bosco Provinciaal, 1996; B. DECANCQ, «*Severino*», *Studio dell'opuscolo con particolare attenzione al «primo oratorio»*.

working, to go and steal something, disobey your parents, do not stop and don't listen to them. Take care, my dear Pietro, to tell me every night what your companions have told you during the day. So I will always be able to give you appropriate advice on what you need to do and what you need to escape. Be punctual to your bosses, courteous with your companions; if someone beats you do answer, because you know that God does not want it.<sup>89</sup>

And Pietro works diligently and obeys the directions given. We repeatedly hear how Pietro tells his mother what happened. The reading of Valentino and Severino shows instead what the consequences are of the absence of the reference figure. When Valentino's education is entrusted to the teachers of the first college, where there is no religious education and accompaniment, he gets is lost. The absence of religious education has a negative influence on his behaviour. It is without doubt that being left in the hands and under the influence of evil people determined Valentino's bad choices. In the case of Severino the loss of the father figure and the absence of the maternal figure have as a result that he himself went looking for reference figures that could help him. But they helped him making the wrong choices. The youngsters need figures, not to choose for them, but to help them make choices, as clearly shown in the life of Pietro. They need a guide along road who is present and who can give some advice, which can help, support in all circumstances.

The "guardian angel" as shown earlier is part of the educational system of Don Bosco. It is the friend who helps and who guides his companion, but in the biographies of Pietro, Valentino and Severino they also help to make the wrong choices. They are "bad friends" trying to convince Pietro to eat meat or cheese on Friday. The bad friend is Severino's companion who takes him to the Protestant church. In Valentino's biography we meet the prototype of a bad friend. Mari, as he is called, has deliberately helped Valentino make the wrong choices to make him forget his vocation. This shows clearly that youngster, at least in the biographies written by Don Bosco, need good advice, need people who indicate the right road to take.

We find in the three lives explicit indications regarding the danger of bad friends. The mothers of Pietro and Valentino repeat it insistently; Severino's father repeats it, together with the warning for the bad books, right before he dies.

You, O Severino, as the eldest of your brothers, never cease to give them a good example with the practice of virtue. Remember every time that your father loved to be reduced to poverty, than that he betrayed the duties of honest man and good Christian. Then you have something that makes me fear much of your future. This is your great eagerness to read as it is, regardless of whether they are good or bad readings. Take care therefore to avoid bad books and bad newspapers, and at the same time those companions who try to get away from the path of virtue.<sup>90</sup>

There are good friends and bad friends and Don Bosco is very realistic about this. It is important for the educator to help the young to understand and manage these different

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<sup>89</sup> Pietro, 4-5.

<sup>90</sup> Severino, 33.

friendships. The good friend helps in the choices that must be made and helps in the personal growth of his friend. Bad friends also offer advice but they only help to do the wrong things. If the boys are strong enough and have had a good education, were guided well, these bad friends also can offer them opportunities to grow personally by resisting their temptations like we see in the life of Pietro. Otherwise, when the education is not sufficient and the boy isn't that strong, he ends up like Valentino.

As in the lives of Savio, Magone and Besucco, also Pietro and Severino become the prototypes of good friends. They themselves will become a reference figure, set a good example, help others make choices. When Pietro is forced to join the army, his behaviour becomes exemplary for his companions.

When it was time to eat or to put himself to bed he regularly made the sign of the holy cross and his usual prayers, and the mourners diminished so that in a few days those who laughed with him became his admirers. But the wonder is this: some comrades who, out of pure human respect, did not do their prayers, gradually began to follow his example and three months weren't finished since Pietro was among them, that all started praying regularly. He thanked God for the courage he had given him and was happy seeing so many of his companions doing their religious duties.<sup>91</sup>

At the end of Severino's biography we read how he himself gives concrete advice that helps the listeners that gathered around his sickbed. And obviously he helps adult-readers in educating well the children and the younger ones in making good choices. He himself is very conscious of having made wrong choices.

The personality or character of young people, like earlier mentioned, has an important this educational process. Pietro, who knows how to convert his father and his friends, and Severino who finally find the strength to go back home, we see the match between character and education to stay or return on the good path. Valentino, according to Don Bosco is not so strong. The wrong choices he made, had to make, determine the rest of his life. If the boy's character is rather weak, and Don Bosco is convinced that youth is a very difficult age and young people are very easily influenced, good quality reference figures are vital for these boys.

The presence of other significant qualitative adults only happens sporadically in the biographies studied. In Pietro, the good boss who supports Pietro's choices is mentioned twice. And when he is a soldier, he meets a superior who encourages him in his devotional life. Valentino at one moment meets an important adult who gives him accommodation during the winter. But Don Bosco does not elaborate this storyline further.

Several times in the stories we meet a priest. When Pietro's father is converted he seeks advice in the Oratory. When Valentino wants to change school and while discerning his vocation, a priest helps in the process. When Severino is in Genoa at the hospital with Bordis

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<sup>91</sup> Pietro, 80.



and afterwards in Turin finds himself in difficulty, a priest enters the scene. The priest in these cases helps to clarify the motivations and choices. The conversation with the priest is always short, but very clear and simple. He explains without superfluity of words, without making the truth more beautiful, without complicating things more, and without choosing for the youngster. He is the one who puts in order the thoughts and the feelings of the youngster. The priest is sympathetic and he says what matters, he can convince, but without making the decisions. The priest, a man of God, a point of reference, who has the ability to listen, to help to discern, respects the boy's freedom and accompanies him on his journey.

In the lives of Pietro, Valentino and Severino we can still find other elements that complete the effort of the educator. For example the presence of a clear, integral, and well-defined educative project. Pietro's mother, when it becomes clear that her son could not go to school as she wanted, makes a very smart choice regarding the education of her child. She adapts the education she wants to give to her son to the situation. She doesn't think everything is lost when he has to go to work or enter the army. The environment where he works is not good, so every evening she devotes time to him to reflect together on the situation. In Valentino's life it is very easy to compare the two schools where he was sent. The college at Valdocco offered a complete educational proposal, having professional, human and religious training. The first college was good but not sufficient because not only did the religious aspect. Valentino wanted to be educated, he explicitly asked his father, but it was denied. Severino throws himself into the hands of the Protestants due to a lack of alternative proposal. Not only the presence of a reference figure is important, but also a proposal for the youngsters. An alternative for the lives they had prior, not something general, but something made personal, fitted to the situation

“Not judging” and “giving new opportunities” is in this sense an important attitude for the educator. When Pietro's father wants to re-start his religious life, he finds in the person of the director of the Oratory someone who is capable to listen. “Speak my friend, I am a poor priest that has seen already every kind of misery, not one human story does trouble me. Speak, open your heart, talk to me as a friend.”<sup>92</sup> Without judging, the director welcomes him and gives the opportunity to explain his thoughts. Afterwards they reflect together on how to face the new challenge and become a true father of his family and a new child of God. Similarly for Severino, when after his stay at the hospital in Genoa he returned to the house of his mother in Turin. He talks for a long period with the director of the Oratory. It was for him very easy to open his heart and talk to the priest about what he did for ten years. The director does not condemn him, but gives him the sacramental absolution with which he takes away from Severino's shoulders all the weight of the past.<sup>93</sup> More than once the story of Severino reminds us of the biblical passage of the prodigal son and of the merciful father (Lk 15: 11-

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<sup>92</sup> Pietro, 42.

<sup>93</sup> Severino, 167-168.

32). “He was dead and now he lives.” This is precisely the attitude described by Don Bosco regarding the wrong choices.

## Abbreviations

GP = *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi doveri degli esercizi di cristiana pietà per la recita dell'Uffizio della B. Vergine e de' principali vespri dell'anno coll'aggiunta di una scelta di laudi sacre.*

GPC = BOSCO Giovanni, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi doveri degli esercizi di cristiana pietà per la recita dell'Uffizio della B. Vergine e de' principali vespri dell'anno coll'aggiunta di una scelta di laudi sacre*, Torino, Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1879.

FS = PRELLEZO José Manuel – MOTTO Francesco. – GIRAUDO Aldo., *Fonti salesiane. I. Don Bosco e la sua opera: raccolta antologica*, Roma, LAS - Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 2014.

MB = Memorie Biografiche

MO = Memorie dell'Oratorio

OE = Opere Edite

Pietro = BOSCO Giovanni, *La forza della buona educazione. Curioso episodio*, Torino, Tipografia Paravia e Comp., 1855.

Severino = BOSCO Giovanni, *Severino. Ossia avventure di un giovane alpigiano raccontate da lui medesimo*, Torino, Tip. dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, 1868.

Valentino = BOSCO Giovanni, *Valentino o la vocazione impedita, Episodio contemporaneo*, Torino, Tipografia dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales, 1866.

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### **English version**

For the English version of the biographies of Domenico Savio, Michele Magone and Francesco Besucco we used the online versions of the Australian Salesian Province: <https://www.salesians.org.au/info/resources/publications-by-don-bosco> If needed we adjusted the translation closer to the original Italian text.

For the English version of the MO we used <http://www.sdb.org/en/don-bosco/opere-edite/217-writings-of-don-bosco/909-memoirs-of-the-oratory-from-1815-to-1855>