

HISTORY OF THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF DON BOSCO¹

*Francesco Motto**

A very recent bibliographic review of publications in various languages relative to Don Bosco and included in the bibliographic repertoires of the review “Salesian Historical Researches”², comprises 958 titles, almost all concerning works edited in the last twenty-five years. The datum is significant as it indicates that the literature on Don Bosco, started when he was still living, is still very much alive today³.

As for any other literature, also this one had obviously to be subjected to the laws of history and of life, and particularly to the law of evolution. As we limit our study therefore to the Salesian historiographic production, we can see that it too, in fact, has passed from the first modest and moderated biographical profiles of the Saint of the 70's of the XIX century, to the numerous eulogistic biographies initiated at the end of the XIX century and continued up to, and beyond half way through the XX century, to the historic-scientific studies of the post-conciliar period and finally, almost as a normal development of that phase, to the editions of the most important *bosconian* sources of these last three decades.

By attempting a kind of history of the Salesian historiography, the work could, in utmost synthesis, be divided in three historical periods:

1. The long initial period (1870-1960) that reached its climax in the writings of the time of the beatification-canonisation, and has, as its highest point of reference, the “Biographical Memoirs”.

* A Salesian, the director of the Salesian Historical Institute (Rome).

¹ A text edited with little variations in “Cuadernos de Formación Permanente” 14 (2008), 57-81, with the title *Una breve introducción a la historiografía de don Bosco*.

² RSS n. 50 (2007).

³ For the bibliography of Don Bosco and on Don Bosco there are several volumes: Saverio GIANOTTI, *Bibliografia generale di don Bosco*. Vol. 1°. *Bibliografia italiana 1844-1992*. Roma, LAS 1995, 410 p.; Herbert DIEKMANN, *Bibliografia generale di don Bosco*. Vol. 2°. *Deutschsprachige don Bosco – literatur 1883-1994*. Roma, LAS 1997, 114 p.; Jacques SCHEPENS, *Bibliografia generale di don Bosco*. Vol. 3°. *Bibliographie Française 1853-2006. Nederlandstalige Bibliografie 1883-2006*. Roma, LAS 2007, 240 p.; Jesús G. GONZÁLEZ, *Bibliografía general de don Bosco y de otros temas salesianos. Bibliografía en lengua castellana 1877-2007*. Roma, ISS 2008 (ediz. provvisoria).

2. The next short period (1960-1982) of the immediate post-Council, which proposed afresh the reflection of the Salesians on Don Bosco and on themselves, making however use of frames proper of the historic moment. Its greatest point of reference is the production of Fr Pietro Stella.

3. The present period (1983...), of the publication of the sources, the work proper to the Salesian Historical Institute.

1. The early historiography or historiography of narration (1860-1960)

Inspired by a theological-anecdotic-wonder working reading of the life and work of Don Bosco, and definable as annalistic historiography, narrative, commemorative, is lived on the conviction, highly respectable and fundamental, of the importance of the first Salesian experience, born and consolidated during the founder's life.

It had its humble origins in the very environment of Valdocco, when some young collaborators, toward the end of the 50's [of the XIX c], began to write what they saw or heard narrated by Don Bosco. In the year 1860 a group of about a dozen of them, convinced that "something supernatural" was taking place under their eyes, formed a "society" for the purpose of collegially collecting and controlling everything that concerned the life and the activity of Don Bosco. They intended also to gather as much information as possible on facts of the past, which evidently they could not have witnessed:

"The great and luminous gifts that are resplendent in Don Bosco, the extraordinary facts that happened with him and which all of us admire, his singular way of guiding the young along the arduous roads of virtue, the great plans he shows to have in mind for the future, reveal in him something supernatural and make us foresee more glorious days for him and for the oratory. All this imposes on us a strict duty of gratitude, an obligation to prevent that nothing of what belongs to Don Bosco may ever fall into oblivion, and to do on our part everything possible to preserve his memory, so that his deeds may shine as luminous beacons to enlighten the whole world for the benefit of the young. This is the purpose of the society established by us"⁴.

Though the "society", had started well under the direction of Don Rua, it had only a brief life. On its wake, however, something emerged: chronicles, memorials, annals, remembrances, testimonials written by the same "witnesses". The well-known "cronachette" (small chronicles) preserved in the Central Salesian Archive, will merge abundantly in the "Biographical Memoirs", where the aspect of the "marvellous" had great weight in the selection and in the collection of the documentary material, also following Don Bosco in this aspect who accentuated it in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* written in the seventies.

⁴ ASC A008 *Cronaca* di Domenico Ruffino 1861-1864, pp. 1-3.

As it is known, this manuscript work of Don Bosco, integrally published only very late⁵, is at the same time historical re-evocation, apologetic and theological demonstration, paradigmatic and programmatic proposal for the Salesians. Not a historical autobiography, but a true, edifying pedagogical document in which intervene three particular realities: those that truly happened in the past, the ones of the present that give meaning and interpret the past, the future ones that would be built on the experience of the past and of the present. It is by referring to them that during the annual “Conferences of St Francis de Sales”, on February 2nd, 1876, Don Bosco affirmed:

“Here there is no longer a question of anything regarding Don Bosco or anything else; I see that the life of Don Bosco is all mixed up with the life of the Congregation and therefore let us talk about this; there is need, for the greater glory of God and for the salvation of souls, for the greater increment of the Congregation, that many things may be known. Because, let us say it now among ourselves: the other congregations or religious orders had, at their initial stages, some inspiration, some visions, some supernatural fact which gave the push to the foundation and reassured the establishment; but for most of them the extraordinary thing stopped at one or at few of these facts; here among us, instead, the thing proceeds very differently; we can say that there is [no] thing that is not known before; the Congregation did not move a step without being advised by some supernatural fact, no chance or amelioration, or expansion took place if it was not preceded by an order of the Lord”⁶.

Obviously, in the Archives other documents are preserved which testify that not everything at the Oratory of that time was idyllic. It is sufficient to quote the volume of J. M. Prellezo on Valdocco⁷, besides the well-known “two letters from Rome”⁸ and the “circular on punishments” produced in the very ambient of Turin⁹.

In addition to these manuscripts, while Don Bosco was still living, some printed publications appeared. During the years 1875-1880 many acclaiming booklets were published in Padua, Marseilles, Rome. But the first and true biographer of Don Bosco was the doctor of Nice, Charles D’Espiney, whose intention was “above all to highlight the prodigious intervention of Mary Help of Christians”¹⁰. The small volume, written in anecdotic form, had an exceptional

⁵ By E. Ceria: GIOVANNI (SAN) BOSCO, *Memorie dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*. Torino, SEI 1946. Two other editions of the Salesian Historical Institute have been edited by Antonio da Silva Ferreira (Roma, LAS 1991, 1992) and later on by Aldo Giraudò (Roma, LAS 2011).

⁶ ASC A0000403 *Confereenze*, ms di Giulio Barberis.

⁷ José M. PRELLEZO (a cura di), *Valdocco nell’Ottocento tra reale e ideale (1866-1889)*. *Documenti e testimonianze*. (= ISS – Fonti, Serie seconda, 3). Roma, LAS 1992.

⁸ Pietro BRAIDO (a cura di), *Don Bosco educatore. Scritti e testimonianze*. Roma, LAS 1997, pp. 344-390.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 300-333.

¹⁰ Charles D’ESPINEY, *Don Bosco*. Nice, impr. Malvano-Mignon 1881.

resonance: translated in many languages, it spread everywhere, especially in Europe and Latin America.

From 1883 to 1887 Fr Giovanni Bonetti, published in instalments in the “Salesian Bulletin” the *History of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales*, using the manuscripts of the “Memoirs of the Oratory” which, as already mentioned, offered an epic-Providence-infused reading of the personal vicissitudes of Don Bosco and of his first Oratory. The director of the Bulletin tried to show how the Madonna had made use of Don Bosco to work great things, and in that way he perhaps intended to encourage the collaborators of Don Bosco who, during those years, were very rapidly growing in numbers.

A third biography was that of the learned French magistrate, Albert Du Boys, whose work – translated in Italian the same year and later on in other languages – had the honour of various editions¹¹. The author hailed Don Bosco as a genial poet of charity, a person who was able to intuit the necessities of the times and give them an adequate answer.

Four months after the death of Don Bosco, came the first true biography edited by J. Melchior Villefranche¹². The French journalist, though not producing a historical masterpiece, elaborated and diffused a better product than those who preceded him, so much so that his work lasted in France until the times of the beatification.

Then followed the *Biographical Memoirs* edited by three well-known compilers: Lemoyne, Amadei and Ceria¹³. A varied series of documents had been collected since 1885 by Fr Giovanni Battista Lemoyne. They helped him to compile 45 great volumes which, still today, carry long strips of paper pasted on, on which are printed the elaborated report of Fr Lemoyne, documents properly called, reproduced from the original manuscripts and printed matters. The *preface* of the first volume (1898) indicated immediately the tone given by the author to his own work:

“I wrote the history of our most loving father Fr John Bosco. I don’t believe that in the world there has been a man who loved more than he, and had been loved in turn by the young more than he was. With the marvellous treasures of facts, words, fatigues, and supernatural gifts, I have also gathered minor facts and events [...] They are a miscellany and also disorderly [...] I needed to work in a hurry. Some of the judgments will need to be pondered over, especially where Don Bosco tells anecdotes which concern him or dreams, or predictions of the future”¹⁴.

¹¹ Albert DU BOYS, *Don Bosco et la pieuse Société des Salésiens*. Paris, Jules Gervais 1884.

¹² Jacques Melchior VILLEFRANCHE, *Vie de don Bosco fondateur de la société salésienne*. Paris, Bloud et Barrau 4, 1888.

¹³ Giovanni Battista LEMOYNE – Angelo AMADEI – Eugenio CERIA, *Memorie Biografiche di don/del Beato/di San/Giovanni Bosco*. (19 + 1 vol.). S. Benigno Canavese, 1898-1948 (edizione extracommerciale).

¹⁴ ASC A0500101, p. 1.

The collected “Documents” have become from 1898 to 1938 the nineteen volumes of the “Biographical Memoirs”; this is a literary genre quite diffused which tends to register in rigorous chronological order “everything which would serve to place or preserve someone or something for future memory”.

The compiler of the first 9 volumes (1898-1917) was precisely Fr Lemoyne, who could enjoy a greatly privileged situation of closeness to Don Bosco. Having a very remote intuition of the exceptionality of the personage, with honesty and loyalty, he took notes of what was happening under his eyes. A poet, a superb narrator rather than a historian, at times he let himself be carried by feelings, by the will to “show” the *digitus Dei* (the finger of God) in the life of Don Bosco. His, therefore, is a history not properly scientific: the sources are accepted without preventive criticism, cited in incomplete manner, often re-touched, sewed together as in a mosaic, with additions of gloss and laudatory sentences. As a consequence it is necessary to verify the facts in their details on the basis of sources which are still preserved, see and judge them at a distance in order to evaluate them historically and according to new instruments and perspectives. For the general public then, Fr Lemoyne wrote in 1913 the biography of Don Bosco in two volumes with a limited purpose: collect documents for the history and present them in the form of an elegant account voluntarily edifying. The work was re-printed many times and was the source of many models for briefer profiles in various languages, for over half a century¹⁵.

Fr Angelo Amadei, for a long time director of the “Salesian Bulletin”, published the X volume in 1939 somehow in the style of Fr Lemoyne, whose “Documents” he made use. Many of his re-constructions however are hypothetical, not always guaranteed by attentive analysis of the sources. He, however, was very precise in the reproduction of the documents.

The third compiler, Fr Eugenio Ceria, a learned man and a scholar, was called to Turin in 1929 in order to continue the work of Lemoyne from volume XI onward. Working at a very tight rhythm, starting always from the “Documents” left by Don Lemoyne, from 1930 to 1939 he published 9 volumes. He grouped together narrations and documents around homogeneous “concepts”, which for him were equivalent to “topics”. It was a step ahead as compared to annalistic or chronicle-writing, but it was still something outside the methodology and the models that were opposing one another between positivist historiography and historicism. His work was certainly solid and meritorious. Precise limits are the ones that he himself has fixed. He was certainly not a master of the method of historical criticism. He, no doubts, was able to derive much from the sources. His intelligence, thoughtfulness and capacity of synthesis have certainly helped him in his work.

In the meantime, the “Salesian Bulletin” in the various languages was carrying out the work of enthusiastic presentation of the activity of Don Bosco and

¹⁵ Giovanni Battista LEMOYNE, *Vita del venerabile [santo] Giovanni Bosco*. 2 voll. Torino, SEI 1911-1913.

of the Salesians. Don Bosco was proclaimed in every event as “a prodigy of the XIX century, one of those rare men that Providence gives to the Church along the centuries”. His power was contemplated as that of the beginner of a movement that everywhere, in every situation, in every context, under every sky was continually expanding at the service of every youth work or in favour of people of the working classes. The Salesians of the whole world felt they were instruments of a vast programme conceived by Don Bosco and blessed from above. Don Bosco was celebrated, admired, loved on the wake of likeable, pleasant, able Salesians ready for sacrifice, enthusiastic, gifted for the humblest missionary work. Many founders in Italy and abroad were inspired by his works, to the point of assuming his own name: the “Don Bosco” of their city or town.

Scholars of social phenomena, of pedagogy and of historical sciences during the twenty years between the two wars, even though slowly, became interested in the phenomenon of Don Bosco. The educator from Turin was admired as the apostle of Christian charity, as an expression of the “mystical Italy”, as for example by famous scholars as Salvemini¹⁶. Always between the two wars, with the insertion of Don Bosco among the Catholic educationists proposed for the school, a notable historic-pedagogical movement began, which however only lasted for the space of thirty years¹⁷. During the same lapse of time, also abroad, especially in Germany, educationists became interested in Salesian pedagogy and did not fail to offer theoretical contributions not conditioned by national allegiances or by confessional readings.

1.1. *Evaluation*

The most common historic schemes in the mentality of the Salesians until the fifties have been more or less those that were subjected to that most authoritative and reliable document of the *Memoirs of the Oratory*. Don Bosco was presented as an “instrument of the Lord” according to the “needs of the time” in favour of poor and abandoned youth. “Designs of providence, ways of the Lord, prophetic dreams”: everything was seen in that perspective. On the trail of the documents of Valdocco, rich in pathos, singularly sensitive to the fascination of the protagonist – though concerned with the historical objectivity – the majority of the writings on Don Bosco and the very “lives” of other Salesians (Rua, Cagliero, Albera, etc.) were placed between minute chronicle and miracle, between gifts of grace and correspondence of the subjects to these gifts. The expansion of the Salesian work in the world became the tangible sign of the blessing of God on the Congregation.

¹⁶ Gaetano SALVEMINI, *Lezioni di Harvard*. Milano, Feltrinelli 1966.

¹⁷ See the chapter *Studi e Interpretazioni* in Pietro BRAIDO, *Il sistema preventivo di don Bosco*. Zürich, Pas Verlag 1964, pp. 21-46 and also ID., “Poveri e abbandonati, pericolanti e pericolosi”: *pedagogia, assistenza, socialità nell’esperienza preventiva* di don Bosco, in “Annali di storia dell’educazione e delle istituzioni educative” 3 (1996) 183-236.

The image of Don Bosco from the 20's onward, above all after the apotheosis in Saint Peter and the triumph at the Campidoglio as "the most Italian of the saints" in 1934, had vast resonances in the whole world. Given the dominant tone of acclamation of the personage, there followed optical illusions which made of Don Bosco the initiator of the Oratories in Turin, the inventor of evening schools, the first populariser of the decimal metric system, the first operator of contracts of apprenticeship. All this contributed to create the myth of the precursor of everything and the one who from nothing was able to "create" everything. On the other side, having become almost a "legendary figure", Don Bosco was rightly considered a "popular saint"; the devotional forms were increasing among the lower classes, because he was understood as a significant personage and event. The optimism then of the last decades of the XIX century and the first of the XX century among Catholics, conscious of their strength and the efficacy of their interventions, found in Don Bosco a forerunner of their action. Moreover, the literature of this time offered historical documents of great value, since it was fed by the direct knowledge of Don Bosco. Therefore, full recognition of well proven honesty is given to the first biographers or writers of memoirs, for their great scruple and care in offering to posterity what they considered to be the "true history" of Don Bosco.

Having said this, we must also add that it was not a matter of "true history", neither as was intended at the end of the XIX century by the positivist and historicist historiography that was developing in Germany, France and was also storming in Italy especially by the work of Croce and Gentile; nor, still less, as it is understood today. The fascination or charm of the personage led, in fact, to dissipate the reality of the environment in which he lived, the living and working powers of his time, the context in which he had inserted himself as collector of initiatives, organiser and amplifier of works, often already existing or on the way to be fulfilled also by others.

The only voice to sing out of the choir was that of the Salesian scholar Fr Borino, who a few years after the canonization of Don Bosco criticized the presentation of the saint only in anecdotal key, as a thaumaturgy, theological, edifying, as a "stitching together of memoires" or, worse, in rhetoric form. He then hoped for the coming of a "fortunate writer" who could have the triple fortune "of complete information, of perfect freedom to say that he will have a limit (and it will not be a limit) in holiness, and some sense of art: the art of knowing how to imagine well and of being able to write well"¹⁸.

2. The new Salesian Historiography or "of the attentive reflection" (1960...)

In the 50's the generations of the new Salesians began to express a sense of anxiety at the hagiographic literature of the past. The need emerged for a ha-

¹⁸ Giovanni Battista BORINO, *Don Bosco, sei scritti e un modo di vedere*. 1938.

giography of the founder that would not so much aim at edification as at the truth of his figure of man-saint in all its multiple aspects. The need was felt for promoting a re-visitation of the history of Don Bosco philologically seen, screened in the sources, and historically handled according to updated methods.

The Salesian clerics at Bollengo began to express reservations on the historical value of the “Biographical Memoires”. They asked whether Fr Lemoyne was a history novelist rather than a biographer; whether so many facts could hold up to the more benevolent criticism; whether Don Bosco, in his *Memoirs of the Oratory*, even though for educational purposes, had modified and added in the way more convenient for his thesis, how the contradictions could be undone, especially in the first volumes of Lemoyne; whether also the volumes edited by Fr Ceria were fully historical or rather encomiastic and laudatory. Obviously, the reservation could not be missing on the absence of any shadow in Don Bosco, and of the link with the historical events of the nation. The elderly Fr Ceria, then, had to work very hard in order to answer to all this in his own name and in the name of his two “colleagues”, without however being able to succeed entirely.

For quite a long time then, new perspectives of study and of closer examination of the figure of Don Bosco were heralded. It was asked what some determined concepts of Don Bosco could mean in the context in which they were born and what they meant during the years of the Council, since they, as all the “historic” concepts, are always contingent for some of their aspects, relative to the socio-cultural environment that created them, even though, for the Salesians, they have a “nucleus” of constant value which, however, it will have to be “interpreted”, re-expressed in new “modern” language. To the most critical minds of the beginning of the 60’s, the duality of such elements began to appear clearly: the substantial/permanent one and the relative/variable one, both necessarily present in the “charism” of Don Bosco. The Salesians, along the decades after the death of Don Bosco, had preserved the relative with the substantial. They had tried to repeat Don Bosco: “Don Bosco did this...said this...”: expressions which were simply understood in the exterior, material aspect. They had not become aware that the “let us keep to the Rule”, the “avoid the restless desire for reform” would lead to *fixism*, to a precise reproduction of principles and attitudes of Don Bosco and attributed to him in different climates and times.

In historical terms above all, it was asked, what was the use of what the Salesians were writing about Don Bosco? Not much for the historians, as the mention of Don Bosco in history books, in the history of the Italian and extra-Italian Church of the post-war period was secondary and very modest. They were only useful to the Salesians and the FMA for their common reading, for spiritual conferences. It is significant that for the Italian Catholic area, the most widespread book was a booklet of practical virtues and anecdotes, *Smiling Don Bosco* of Luigi Chiavarino.

There was therefore need to change the reading of Don Bosco in line with the accelerated evolution of the socio-cultural environments, that was increasing the distance from Don Bosco in the line of “culture” (scientific knowledge); it

should take into account the disappearance of the immediate disciples of Don Bosco and also of the second generation of Salesians; of the concrete difficulties of the apostolate which made almost impossible the material application of the ways of acting, speaking and thinking of Don Bosco.

The awareness of a better definition of the very historical figure of Don Bosco on the basis of the demands of the new historiographic criteria became a must. It was no longer possible to accept a Don Bosco “island” in the “sea” of his time. In order to understand him all the way, there was need to see with exactness how he lived in concreteness his convictions, his values, under what influences he acted, what were the collective and personal reactions to his actions and work. In other words, it was a matter of confronting, at the different levels of his life and action, the ideas and mental structures. The theological reading of the sources had to be amplified with the social, economic, political reality, by the use of adequate methods. Not the whole Don Bosco was explainable with the supernatural intervention, or better, the supernatural could not avoid “taking into account” the natural elements and factors as: the demographic explosion, the incipient industrialisation, the untimely death which would leave many orphans, the parents’ abandonment of children for reasons of work, the emerging classes, the increment of the clergy, the demands of the youth market... all “facts” not adequately taken into consideration until then. In short, the historiography had to place Don Bosco in a complex frame, more ample of the one on which it had reflected before; it had to be placed in line with *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*.

It was precisely from the II Vatican Council that came the strong urge to go back to the genuine human and spiritual realities of the origins of the Founder, in view of the necessary renewal of Salesian religious life. And this required – as indispensable and unavoidable condition – the historical datum: without a solid reference to the roots, the adaptation and the updating were in fact at risk to become arbitrary and misleading invention.

Thus, in the new cultural climate of the end of the 60’s, through assumptions, addresses, modern instruments of investigation shared by the more serious historiographic research, the knowledge of Don Bosco and of his hereditary patrimony was deepened, the historical meaning of the personage and of his message were detected, the inevitable limitations were defined: personal, cultural, institutional limitations which, almost paradoxically, prefigured (and prefigure still today) the conditions of vitality in the present and in the future.

Thanks above all to the powerful works of Fr Francis Desramaut concerning the philological literary research of the “Biographical Memoirs”¹⁹, Fr Pietro Braido concerning the educative dimension²⁰ (Rome, 1964) and Fr Pietro Stella

¹⁹ Francis DESRAMAUT, *Les Memoire I de Giovanni Battista Lemoyne. Etude d'un livre fondamental sur la jeunesse de saint Jean Bosco*. Lyon, Imprimerie de Louis-Jean de Gap 1962.

²⁰ Pietro BRAIDO, *Il sistema preventivo di don Bosco*. Zürich, Pas Verlag 1964. There have been updated versions and renewed ones, among which the most recent P. BRAIDO, *Prevenire non reprimere. Il sistema educativo di don Bosco*. (= ISS – Studi, 11). Roma, LAS 1999.

concerning a global re-interpretation of the personage²¹, a new historiography came to be, that could be defined as post-conciliar from the chronologic point of view, but of “careful reflection”, concerning the interpretative hypotheses and the models of research undertaken. Though retaining the previous historiography to be an exquisite fruit of a historic moment, necessarily to be respected and utilised, it considered it one among the many materials offered to the historian to go over the facts again, to interpret them according to methods widespread at that moment a bit everywhere in the scientific world of those years.

It is symptomatic that in the pioneer studies of P. Stella – and later on of F. Desramaut and P. Braido as we shall see – he preferred even in the title not to present merely the protagonist as “powerful and solitary”, but rather in his precise context, thus placing himself at the antipodes of the criteria adopted by Fr Ceria who wrote: “First of all I renounced every fanciful ambition of inserting the life of the Blessed in the frame of his own times”²².

2.1. *Reflections in the non-Salesian historiography*

Following the Salesians, in the realm of the historiographic analysis of ecclesiastic nature, the vicissitude of Don Bosco was read in a positive key. He was usually placed among the saints of charity, and his peculiar characteristic as founder of religious families like the Salesian Society and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was underlined.

Some simple examples:

Rogier-Aubert-Knowles presented Don Bosco as an initiator of new activities in the Church and innovator of the concept of religious life²³. In his turn, the Benedictine Gregorio Penco, a few years later, placed Don Bosco in the ambit of charitable activities and offered a vast description of his work, of his work as founder and organiser, as well as inventor of an educative system which became a true school of spirituality²⁴. Such spirituality, according to him, had to be made to emerge from the experience of Don Bosco founder of oratories, from his very vast apostolic perspectives, from his charismatic and wonder-working gifts. Also the Jesuit Giacomo Martina gave a positive evaluation of Don Bosco, especially for the pliability and enterprise of the Saint, in the religious-political-cultural frame of a Catholicism which had great difficulty to renew itself in its rapports with society²⁵.

²¹ Pietro STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. 3 voll. Roma, LAS 1969-1988; ID., *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale 1815-1870*. Roma, LAS 1980.

²² MB XI, Preface, p. 7.

²³ Luis J. ROGIER - Roger AUBERT - M. David KNOWLES (edited by), *Nuova storia della Chiesa* (5° v.). Torino, Marietti 1971.

²⁴ Gregorio PENCO, *Storia della Chiesa in Italia*. Milano, Jaca Book 1978.

²⁵ Giacomo MARTINA, *Pio IX (1867-1878)*. Roma, PUG 1990.

In lay historiography, instead, the presence of Don Bosco continued to be rather scarce, especially in works of scientific character, mostly subjected to preconceptions and presuppositions which, at least partially, would condition it. Also Gian Mario Bravo, gave a restrictive and negative evaluation of Don Bosco on the basis of the events read in the light of the historic Marxist and class-based concept. Don Bosco was presented as one who took interest in the poor, but leaning on the support of the dominant classes, by which he is considered foreign to the real movements of the masses and a faithful ally of the master and bourgeois classes²⁶. A few years later, Valerio Castronovo, answering to the negative evaluation of Bravo, placed Don Bosco among that fringe of Catholics animated by innovatory and popular stirrings, committed to willingly and daringly assisting the poorest, destitute and unhappy people. He however, did not single out the differences between Don Bosco and his contemporaries²⁷.

The historical dictionary of the Catholic Movement (1981-1984) dedicated to Don Bosco a specific biographic voice and a vast mention on the theme of printing and professional schools. Within the entry, *The means of social communication. Popular literature and educative theatre*, edited by Stefano Pivato²⁸, Don Bosco was placed among Catholic popular narrators, intending essentially to mediate to the masses of the faithful the ethic-social principles of the Catholic doctrine according to some literary serials identifiable with the superiority of the ecclesiastic *Magisterium* over the civil one, concerning the defence of the temporal power and the values of Catholicism against Protestantism, with the defence of social *immobilism* [i.e. maintaining the *status quo*] and with the exaltation of some values as those of obedience and of submission. If to all this we add that the literary and grammatical form left much to be desired, the judgment is negative at least in Desanctis' and Gramsci's logic. For what instead concerns the educative theatre, Pivato recognised that the "Rules for the little theatre" became the cornerstone of the pedagogy of educative theatre until the most recent years.

2.2. Evaluation

In the light of what said so far, it is very easy to see how the "new historiography", overcoming brilliantly the limits of the preceding historiography, has cleared Don Bosco from the shallows of Salesian self-reference, and inserted it in the circuit of the community of the historians both of the Church and of civil society. The historical reconstruction of the personage of Don Bosco, of his moving about among the people of his time with his personal limits and within

²⁶ G. M. BRAVO, *Torino operaia. Mondo del Lavoro e idee sociali nell'età di Carlo Alberto*. Torino, Einaudi 1968.

²⁷ Valerio CASTRONOVO, *Il Piemonte*. (= Storia delle regioni dall'unità ad oggi, 1). Torino, Einaudi 1977.

²⁸ *Dizionario storico del Movimento cattolico in Italia. 1860-1980. I/1 I fatti e le idee*. Torino, Marietti 1981, pp. 296-303.

the socio-cultural-political coordinates of the time, has re-produced his human and Christian dimensions, giving a more complete image, more reliable, that of a saint – a son of his own time – to which he gave much and from which he received much.

Such results of the new historiography, definitely inedited and unforeseen in its reconstruction and in its deepening, have however found – and still find even now – not a few obstacles in trying to be accepted within and outside the Salesian environment. Among them, were not missing those who spoke of demythologization of the saintly educator, of the dangerous casting of doubts on episodes which were more laden with Salesian symbolism, of the risk of the “new historiography”. It is certainly not easy to change mentality for those who were brought up in the shade of the mythical “Biographical Memoirs” or, still worse, of a hagiography of sugary tones and by the miracle-working sensationalism, of edifying biographies full of sacred jinks and excessively indulgent towards the marvellous.

To pull down barriers and stem such dangerous drift, some writers have intervened, who, though starting from diverse cultural orientations, have honestly derived from critical studies, and have divulged in their most appreciated work, what was contained in works not-always-tasty to the easy palate of modern, ever busy readers²⁹.

However, it was a matter of no-return, to the point that in the 80’s, the General Chapter decided the foundation of a Historical Institute, that, on the footsteps of the previous historiography, which in the footsteps of the previous historiography, should place “at disposition, in ideally and technically valid forms, the documents of the rich spiritual inheritance left by Don Bosco and developed by his successors”, and should promote “their study and diffusion in the most suitable ways”³⁰.

3. A development of the new historiography: the critical editions of the sources and the history of the Congregation (1982...)

If in 1989 the first Congress had tried to open new thematic and methodological horizons for the research on Don Bosco, the Salesian Historical Insti-

²⁹ Among them we cannot fail to mention the deserving work of the prolific writer Teresio Bosco, who in the 70’s and 80’s published a wonderful biography (*Una biografia nuova*) which today should obviously be reviewed and updated in the light of new; several books of his of a spiritual nature have been translated in various languages. Here we should call to mind also the seven volumes of Arthur LENTI, *Don Bosco, History and Spirit*. Roma, LAS 2008-2009, which are being abridged and translated in Spanish.

³⁰ In 1996 through the Salesian Historical Institute the “Association of Cultivators of Salesian History” (ACSSA) was founded, with the aim of assisting research, updating and collaboration among the members, and also the animation of the Salesian Family from the historiographic aspect, spreading knowledge about Don Bosco, his Congregations, Associations and Groups originating from him.

tute was already trying since a number of years to give its contribution in that line by offering to the more attentive scholars adequate sources for an ever more ample knowledge of the Piedmontese Saint. The best historiography from the 60's onward was able to go beyond the sources in the sense of exceeding what the sources would present at first sight to a superficial and banal reading, but had not been able as yet to proceed to a complete revision of the documents because it did not have the critical edition of the same documents. The primary moment and unavoidable requirement for every study is, in fact, the availability of the sources, presented in the most correct and reliable way possible, purified of errors of interpretation and of involuntary distortions, exactly like those often handed down by the narrative-hagiographic volumes³¹. This is why the most consistent and valid historical works of the previous two decades had been the contribution of those scholars who had worked a long time on the original documents preserved in the Salesian archives in Turin first, and later on in Rome.

It was also then a matter of recovering the greatest number possible of sources, not only the ones preserved in the Central Salesian Archive of Rome. Now, the arrangement or re-arrangement of the peripheral Salesian archives, the consultation of public and private archives made possible by making available inventories and paper or digital repertoires, the greater availability of Salesian and non-Salesian personnel to work in the sector of critical editions, has already made possible a noteworthy enrichment of the sources for historiographic research, which today, also thanks to the modern instruments of communication and of multiplication, is greatly facilitated compared even to the recent past.

In this way are by now placed at everyone's disposal, on paper and also *on line*, the main pedagogical-spiritual writings of Don Bosco scientifically edited, revised in their authenticity and in their value, so as to make possible the indispensable, even if at times sophisticated, philological analysis.

Secondly, all this material, of old or recent finding – if we only think of the hundreds of letters of Don Bosco recently recovered – now scrupulously and accurately presented, has already made it possible to carry out some researches with great competence and completeness, and the results by themselves already acquired originality and novelty of content.

The volumes of Fr Desramaut³² (1996) and of P. Braido³³ are two of the examples showing that, having the possibility to avail themselves of inedited documents and of new interpretations suggested by the documents made available in a critical form, were able to correct arbitrary reconstructions and distorting superstructures. With those of P. Stella already quoted, they constitute the

³¹ According to such logic, the photographic edition of the 37 volumes of the “Opere edite” of Don Bosco, edited in 1976-1977 by the “Don Bosco Study Centre” of the Salesian University of Rome is also particularly important.

³² Francis DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco en son temps*. Torino, SEI 1996.

³³ Pietro BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*. (= ISS – Studi, 20-21). Roma, LAS 2003².

reaching point of a fifty-year historiographic season which, obviously, has many other scholars from Jesús Borrego to Antonio Ferreira da Silva, from Jesús M. PELLEZO to Jacques Schepens, from Francesco Motto to Grazia Loparco, from Aldo Giraudò to Morand Wirth, from Ramón Alberdi to Maria Andrea Nicoletti and many others. The series of the Salesian Historical Institute and the review "Salesian Historical Researches", already filled with over 10 thousand pages, show the results. All this is available, without counting the interventions of the other very numerous scholars on the occasion of the historical and pedagogical Conventions for the centenary of the death of Don Bosco. It is not possible to give an account of all.

Next to them, during the same period of time but starting from philosophical, psychological, psychoanalytical assumptions, many Salesian scholars have committed their contribution (Sabino Palumbieri³⁴, Xaver Thévenot³⁵, Carlo Nanni³⁶...); interesting approaches of non-Salesians were not missing, as for example, the studies of Giacomo D'Acquino on the psychology of Don Bosco³⁷ or Maria Teresa Trebiliani on woman in the mentality and educative experience of Don Bosco³⁸.

At this point we could also mention some "particular", unusual interpretations of Don Bosco: the one of a distorting and grimly upsetting personality, by Ceronetti³⁹; that of a saint of a paternalistic, assistential charity by now obsolete, by Quinzio⁴⁰; that of one who took advantage of his own paranormal gift and a violent and unrelenting enemy of the Waldenses, by Straniero⁴¹; that of an disturbing personage for the powerful of his time, by Socci⁴² etc. But here we are in a rather journalistic ambit, outside the true and proper historiographic ambit.

And finally, careful consideration should be given to the section of *bosconian* historiography produced by the Salesian Historical Institute which has tried to

³⁴ Sabino PALUMBIERI, *Don Bosco e l'uomo nell'orizzonte del personalismo*. Torino, Gribaudi 1988.

³⁵ Several were his contributions published in 1988 and 1989, we quote the most recent: Xavier THEVENOT, *Eduquer à la suite de don Bosco*. Paris, Desclèe e Browuer/Cerf 1996.

³⁶ Carlo NANNI (a cura di), *Don Bosco e la sua esperienza pedagogica: eredità, contesti, sviluppi, risonanze*. (= Quaderni di Orientamenti Pedagogici, 31). Roma, 1989.

³⁷ Giacomo D'ACQUINO, *Psicologia di don Bosco*. Torino, SEI 1988.

³⁸ Maria Luisa TREBILIANI, *Modello mariano e immagine della donna nell'esperienza educativa di don Bosco*, in Francesco TRANIELLO (a cura di), *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*. Torino, SEI 1987, pp. 187-207.

³⁹ Guido CERONETTI, *Antiagiografia di don Bosco in Albergo Italia*. Torino, Einaudi 1985.

⁴⁰ Sergio QUINZIO, *Domande sulla santità. Don Bosco, Cafasso, Cottolengo*. Torino, Gruppo Abele 1986.

⁴¹ Michele STRANIERO, *Don Bosco rivelato*. Milano, Camunia 1987.

⁴² Antonio SOCCI, *La società dell'allegria. Il partito piemontese contro la chiesa di don Bosco*. Milano, SugarCo 1989.

better know the protagonist Don Bosco through the study of the Valdocco environment, of the Salesians who worked with him, of their formation, of their correspondence with Don Bosco. The epistolary collections of Don Bosco, those of Msgr. Franson, of the missionaries Fr Francesco Bodrato, Fr Domenico Tomatis, Fr Luigi Lasagna, of the visitors to America, Fr Paolo Albera and Fr Calogero Gusmano, the circulars and the programmes of Fr Cerruti, the chronicle of the secretary of Don Bosco, Fr Viglietti⁴³ are still waiting for divulggers able to utilise them adequately in order to further enrich the knowledge of the figure of Don Bosco and of the Salesian Society.

In such perspective, also the modalities of living the faithfulness to the Founder by the generations who had lived with Don Bosco are not without significance for the understanding of Don Bosco and of his educative charism. As a consequence, the Acts of the various international Congresses promoted by the Salesian Historical Institute and by the Association of Experts of Salesian History (ACSSA) acquire their value. Both the volumes relative to the installations and to the first development of the Salesian Work, which spread to the four cardinal points in the decades straddling the XX century, and those that enquired on the rich typology of the initiatives in the various continents (schools of all kinds, oratories, boarding schools, children's homes, management of seminaries, catechism, youth, school and popular press, assistance to workers, migrants, true and proper missions, works of social openness) make it possible to better understand the originality and the meaning of the contribution given by Don Bosco and by the institutions founded by him, to the society and to the Church⁴⁴.

The Rector Major, Fr Juan Edmundo Vecchi, as well became perfectly aware of this, and, toward the end of the last century, underlining the importance of Salesian historiography⁴⁵. Concerning the commemorative volumes usually edited on the occasion of Salesian jubilees, he wrote: "The urgency is felt [...] for a greater historical completeness and a better setting up of the studies that may adequately render the image of our insertion in a concrete context"⁴⁶.

The anticipations of Fr Borino, the accelerated evolution of the socio-cultural environments, the Second Vatican Council, the year 1968 [and its consequences], the diminishing of Salesian vocations, the difficulties of the apostolate, the appeals of community of experts, the natural and uncontrollable progress of historical studies, have not come to pass to no avail.

⁴³ The Salesian Historical Institute has already completed three series of *sources* (of Don Bosco, of the Salesians and environs), for a total of 23 volumes, to which one has to add 27 volumes of *Studi*, the last one among which, *Don Rua nella storia* (Roma, LAS 2010, edited by F. Motto) – obviously has a deep connection with Don Bosco.

⁴⁴ Here we call to mind only the series *Studi* spearheaded by ACSSA which comprises of 4 volumes, while the extra-commercial series *Varia* comprises of 7 volumes.

⁴⁵ Lett. *Io per voi studio*, in ACG 361 (1997) 35.

⁴⁶ Lett. *Avvenimenti di Chiesa e di Famiglia*, in ACG 364 (1998) 25.

4. Points of no return... towards the future

Almost half a century after the Council, it is necessary above all to be aware that the erudite historical research on the human and spiritual vicissitude of Don Bosco, though in its limitations, has led to take important steps ahead for the purpose of showing the genuine face of Don Bosco and his true greatness as man, as educator, as promoter of numberless works at the service of the young and of the working classes, as saint.

Secondly, it is logical that where there are critical texts available, it makes no sense for lecturers, hagiographers, preachers, writers, journalists, superiors, general and provincial chapters to use texts which are not verified, at times not faithful, often re-touched and interpolated. Whoever did so has fallen into slips, mistakes, ambiguities and false attributions which were thought to have been surpassed a long time ago.

In the third place, the very lay historiography which up to a few decades ago felt a kind of allergy to Don Bosco and would not dedicate to him more than very few lines, today, on the contrary, takes Don Bosco rather seriously, although, obviously, the way of presenting his figure cannot avoid experiencing the impact of the historiographic criteria of the various authors, of their mentality, of their different levels of reading and of the cultural time of their publication.

Finally, regarding the charismatic appropriation, the re-thinking and the actualisation of the message of Don Bosco, in which the entire Salesian family is interested, the critical and historiographic bases have been laid down for the application of hermeneutic criteria, without whose guidance the interpretation of the theoretical and practical stand of Don Bosco, of his concrete way of living his rapport with God and with society, of his very expressions, could turn out to be even counterproductive and self-defeating.

In the light of the studies of the last half century, it should be evident to all that fidelity to Don Bosco is quite another thing than the constant quotation of passages from the "Biographical Memoirs" without preventive and arduous cultural operations. It does not mean either that repeating the formulas of Don Bosco, printing them on holy pictures, posting them on notice boards and painting them on walls, would mean to understand and to actualise Don Bosco. We run the big risk to let ourselves be lulled in a lethal illusion. Time, history and eras are not interchangeable at pleasure. The golden legends on Don Bosco that made the Salesian generations of the past happy, are now part of the "history of historiography" and must urgently leave the place to scientific research which, not only is not an obstacle to the knowledge of Don Bosco, but it helps to discover and make our own the tension that he lived between ideal and realisation, between the intuition that he had of the modern sense and the incarnation of such intuit in the social fabric where he was working.

The present Rector Major himself, Fr Pascual Chávez, has become aware of the danger of the spreading in the Congregation of an image of Don Bosco on

the basis of “the commonplace, of anecdotes” and has encouraged the Salesians to know him as a master of life, as founder, as educator, as legislator⁴⁷.

The hoped-for “return to Don Bosco” will be valid in the measure in which his human and Christian greatness, his operative geniality, his gifts as educator, his spirituality, his work as significant event for us, for the educators and the young of today, will be historically appraised. His many-sided figure must be represented, re-thought and above all re-elaborated according to the cognitive models used at the present time; it must be constantly re-visited through ever more shrewd and updated methodologies in the context of the great history, resorting also to the sciences available today, as cultural anthropology, pedagogy, sociology, economy, etc.

History does not stop nor does historiography. It is the task of the Salesian Family to update its own members on the development of the *bosconian* historiography; it is also its duty to contribute toward widening the horizons of understanding through the study of the first top-rated personages who helped him in the foundation enterprise. The figures of Fr Rua, Fr Cagliero, Fr Barberis, Fr Cerruti, Fr Belmonte etc., are waiting for biographers of value; the same can be said for the Salesian works started in the decades straddling the XX century, which felt the effects of the charismatic “presence” of Don Bosco. It is the task of the experts of “Salesianity” to be equipped with new and adequate instruments for a correct understanding of the inherited documentary patrimony, so as to offer to all, not only a historically correct image of Don Bosco and of his work, but above all a proactive and interpellant one, because it corresponds to our scientific wealth, and above all to the cultural questionings of this beginning millennium of ours.

Small bibliography for deepening

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⁴⁷ Lett. *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*, in ACG 394 (2006) 9. On the same theme, Strenna 2012 “Let us make the young our life’s mission by coming to know and imitate Don Bosco” is centred. It constitutes the theme for the first year of preparation to the bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco.