

QUO VADIS THE WRITING OF RELIGIOUS HISTORY: SOME OBSERVATIONS REGARDING THE WRITING OF SALESIAN HISTORY

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Preface

I should like to begin this talk with a somewhat provocative statement: the members of the Salesian Family are the heirs of an “Historian Father” even though we may not always take it sufficiently into consideration or allow ourselves to be inspired by his interest in history. Without going into any detailed historical analysis of Don Bosco the historian, it seems more than sufficient to point to two significant factors for our present study.

The first observation would be that Don Bosco had a strong inclination towards historical literature. This can be seen especially during his years at the seminary in Chieri. At this time he did a lot reading of books concerned with historical events. His love for the classical authors is well-known. He also read the lives of the saints with great interest¹. Already in the seminary he had his own ideas about history. It is important to bear in mind in order to understand him – and then naturally his “disciples” – that for him history without God would not be comprehensible. For him even though some points about human events are not entirely clear just by moral criteria, God would be the “*universal key*” for the interpretation of history. For this reason he judges the actions of people according to clear *moral and ethical criteria*. According to him no one can avoid being responsible for his own actions. He judged a man’s actions in the light of eternity, since only this gives to human events a special dimension, and at the same time can be considered as a source of new energy.

The second observation: that John Bosco, even as a priest gave great importance to the study and the dissemination of history is confirmed by the fact that among his first writings can be found the *Storia Ecclesiastica*². It was published in

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¹ Cf Pietro STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Vol. I. *Vita e opere*. Roma, LAS 1979², pp. 66-75; Pietro BRAIDO, *L’ISS realtà nuova radicata in una tradizione*, in RSS 1 (1982) 18.

² *Storia ecclesiastica ad uso delle scuole, utile ad ogni ceto di persone, dedicata all’Onorat.mo Signore F. Ervé de la Croix Provinciale dei Fratelli D.I.D.S.C., compilata dal sacerdote B. G. Torino, Tipografia Speirani e Ferrero, 398 p.*

1845. Two years later he published the *Storia Sacra*³. And that is not the only sign of his interest in history. In 1855 he had a History of Italy printed⁴. These few observations are sufficient to give us some idea of the interest in history that the seminarian and the young priest John Bosco had.

Premise

With this contribution the intention is, after a look at the ideological background to the “springtime of the writing of Salesian history”, to examine even briefly, our situation and relationship with the writing of Salesian history—to deal with the writing of history directly associated with the religious Institutes founded by Don Bosco, limiting myself however, to the Salesian Society. With regard to the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians the well-known scholar Sr Piera Cavaglià will speak⁵.

It has to be said at once that what we have is only a limited amount of research material on the history of the SDB⁶, and with little in the pipeline. Nonetheless the debate organised by the Salesian Historical Institute for its XXV anniversary, an event to which various scholars from outside Salesian circles⁷ contributed can be considered an attempt at contributing to this. Without any pretensions at actually filling this “gap” an attempt will be made to examine what exists and to propose some reflections with regard to the

³ *Storia sacra per uso delle scuole, utile ad ogni stato di persone, arricchita di analoghe incisioni, compilata dal Sacerdote Giovanni Bosco*. Torino, Tipografia Speirani e Ferrero 1847, 212 p.

⁴ *La storia d'Italia raccontata alla gioventù da' suoi primi abitatori sino ai nostri giorni, corredata di una carta geografica d'Italia dal sacerdote Bosco Giovanni*. Torino [1855], tipografia Paravia e compagnia, 558 p.

⁵ Piera CAVAGLIÀ, *Tappe della storiografia dell'Istituto FMA* (see pages 251-290 of this volume).

⁶ Except those proposed at the conclusion of the Congresses, organised by the Association of Salesian Historians (ACSSA), in collaboration with the Salesian Historical Institute (ISS). For example see Francesco CASELLA, *L'educazione salesiana dal 1880 al 1922. Istanze ed attuazioni in diversi contesti. Un bilancio*, in Jesús Graciliano GONZÁLEZ – Grazia LOPARCO – Francesco MOTTO – Stanisław ZIMNIAK (a cura di), *L'educazione salesiana dal 1880 al 1922. Istanze ed attuazioni in diversi contesti. Volume II. Relazioni regionali: America*. Acts of the 4th International Congress on the History of Salesian Work – Ciudad de México, 12-18 February 2006. (= ACSSA – Studi, 2). Roma, LAS 2007, pp. 391-410; Grazia LOPARCO – Stanisław ZIMNIAK, *Introduzione*, in ID., *L'educazione salesiana in Europa negli anni difficili del XX secolo*. Acts of the European Seminar on the History of Salesian Work – Krakow, 28 October – 1 November 2007 (= ACSSA – Studi, 3). Roma, LAS 2008, pp. 7-16; G. LOPARCO – S. ZIMNIAK, *Appunti conclusivi*, in ID., *Don Michele Rua primo successore di don Bosco. Tratti di personalità, governo e opere (1888-1910)*. Acts of the 5th International Congress on the History of Salesian Work – Torino, 28 October – 1 November 2009. (= ACSSA – Studi, 4). Roma, LAS 2010, pp. 1037-1046.

⁷ These are various contributions gathered together under the following title: *Venticinquesimo dell'Istituto Storico Salesiano*, in RSS 51 (2008) 141-214; regarding our sub-

changes that have taken place in the area of the writing of Salesian history, as well as progress made in recent decades. Using some examples an attempt will be made to indicate current trends in Salesian research.

Finally a longstanding question will be touched upon regarding the science of history and Christianity⁸: is historical research capable of dealing with a subject of theological origin without reducing it to a merely human phenomenon? Is there not the danger of presenting the Salesian institution, a living part of the universal Church of Christ – and therefore a subject of a theological nature – as a human organisation? Can the historian who studies something of theological origin, prescind from this transcendent phenomenon in his researches? Is it [not] his task to highlight the ideal self-fulfilment of any religious subject? Is he not also obliged to concern himself with the self-understanding of the subject (in this current case the Salesian Society) which considers itself to be an institution of a transcendent origin? Is it not his duty to study the demonstration of the charismatic identity of a structure connected with religion?

While the historical sciences are freeing themselves from ideological presuppositions, religious historical writing is also passing through a time of great change, giving up the hagiographical spirit from which it drew for too long so as to move towards a dimension which is only horizontal, almost engaged in obliterating its own origin, the principle that brought it to life, in other words its idealistic vocation⁹. One has the feeling that in modern historical research it is not permitted to go beyond this horizontal measure, as though all that exists in this world were of

ject the following article is important *Storiografia salesiana: prospettive e possibili piste di ricerca. Sintesi degli interventi della tavola rotonda (28 November 2007)*, pp. 207-214.

⁸ For example the question is re-considered by Andreas HOLZEM, *Der „katholische Augenaufschlag beim Frauenzimmer“ (Friedrich Nicolai) – oder: Kann man eine Erfolgsgeschichte der „Konfessionalisierung“ schreiben?* in Thomas BROCKMANN – Dieter J. WEISS (Hrsg.), *Das Konfessionalisierungsparadigma – Leistungen, Probleme, Grenzen*. Bayreuth 2009 [im Druck]; ID., *Gott und Mensch. Zwischen Kulturanthropologie und historischer Theologie*, in Urs BAUMANN (Hrsg.), *Gott im Haus der Wissenschaften. Ein interdisziplinäres Gespräch*. Frankfurt/Main 2004, pp. 80-87.

⁹ “Historical writing today has now distanced itself from the idealist approach to history and its understanding of the spirit as the absolute protagonist of history. Hosts of scholars well-trained and authoritative nowadays tend to approach the interpretation of religious facts with more varied keys: sociology, psychology, ethnology, linguistics, anthropology, human geography. Religion has been removed from the throne on which theologies tended to place it. At the most one can speak of an all-embracing tendency [...]. It no longer concerns itself so much with saints, as rather with hagiography and sanctity itself as an expression of a collective mentality. And this in so far as it is of interest, in that it can help to explain certain choices that otherwise would seem to be irrational, as contrary to the objectivity of economic and political facts” [Pietro STELLA, *Fare storia salesiana oggi*, in RSS 1 (1982) 41-42]. On this topic see the studies by Alphonse DUPRONT, *Antropologie religieuse*, in AA. VV., *Faire de l'histoire*, sous la direction di J. LE GOFF et Pierre NORA. Vol. II. Paris, Gallimard 1974; trad. ital.: *Fare storia. Temi e metodi della nuova storiografia*. Torino, Einaudi 1981.

human origin and therefore solely the result of a culture in continuous evolution in which any reference to a transcendental reality becomes inadmissible.

1. The *Vaticanum Secundum*: the decisive impetus for a new direction being taken in writing religious history

In general it is recognised that the new methodological approach and the subsequent flowering of modern historical studies within the Catholic Church is due to the opening up to the modern world so much desired by *Vaticanum Secundum*. In the specific case of the religious orders in the Catholic Church a decisive impetus and direction were given by the decree on the renewal of religious life *Perfectae Caritatis*, promulgated on 28 October 1965¹⁰.

The Council addressing itself to religious families, to societies of common life without vows and to secular institutes, categorically asked them to preserve “each one their own features.” In the second paragraph of this decree it explained: “The renewal of religious life involves a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community, and at the same time an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of the times”.

This call to “renewal” involves a profound re-thinking of the ideological and methodological organisation of historical research. Studies are turned decisively towards the “return to the sources”, that is to the documentation preserved in the archives of the institutes or to be sought in another places where that are preserved. The full appreciation of the sources thus becomes an absolute priority for the research that would then be undertaken in the area of religious life.

2. Don Bosco at the centre of the renewal of the writing of Salesian history

If we look at the renewal in historical writing within the religious institutions founded by John Bosco, the influence of the Council can be clearly observed, which had been anticipated in some exceptional cases¹¹. It is quite understandable that the focus of interest in the new historical research should be

¹⁰ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 58 (1966) 702-712.

¹¹ As for that matter often happens in the history of humanity, there were cases, even if limited to certain areas, of farsighted minds, whose presentations, sometimes bitterly opposed, were then accepted by the majority of scholars. It is enough to think of some scholars accused of “modernism”. In Salesian circles one of the first should be recalled, Alberto Caviglia (for information about his work we refer readers to the book of Cosimo SEMERARO, *Don Alberto Caviglia 1868-1943. I documenti e i libri del primo editore di don Bosco tra erudizione e spiritualità pedagogica*. Torino, SEI 1994). He was followed by such people as Eugenio Valentini, Domenico Bertetto, Francis Desramaut, Pietro Braidò, Pietro Stella, who produced in a more systematic manner and paying attention to the modern historical sciences around the fifties of the XX century the first pioneering researches. In reference to the approach to the writing of history of Stella, decisive for the Salesian change of direction,

the Founder himself. The first works of an academic nature on him, inspired by this new openness of the Church to modern times were published in the years after the Council. Among the many Salesian scholars we recall the more well-known: Pietro Stella (1930-2007), Francis Desramaut, Pietro Braido, Francesco Motto, Aldo Giraud, Arturo Lenti, Gioachino Barzaghi, Antonio Ferreira da Silva. In the 80s a first attempt was made to draw up a summary of the historical research work undertaken on Don Bosco and to assess the results of this period of study and to locate it in the context of contemporary historical writing both ecclesiastical and lay.

In this context should be indicated at least the account proposed by Pietro Stella¹², who also provided some interesting possibilities for further research, and the useful methodological suggestions of the Frenchman Francis Desramaut¹³ for further investigations in research into Don Bosco. A more detailed presentation on this issue was given by Francesco Motto¹⁴, who at the centre of his extraordinary number of research projects has the most important person in Salesian history: Giovanni Melchiorre Bosco.

3. Some background to the “springtime of the writing of Salesian history”

Reference has already been made to the epoch-making event of the *Vaticanum Secundum*, which established new forms of real relationship with creation, with the world of culture, in particular with the universe of the modern sciences. Therefore it comes as no surprise that a “springtime of Salesian historical writing” is the fruit of that event in the Church. In fact one can see a special interest in historical studies, founded on modern critical methods regarding the Salesian society from the end of the ‘70s in the XX century. To this internal motivation of an ecclesiastical nature need to be added cultural and ideological conditioning factors, some of that time but also even going back to the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s. Here we want to refer especially to the contrast or better the conflict with the ideological world of materialistic inspiration,

see Pietro BRAIDO, *Pietro Stella, storico professionale, maestro di storiografia di don Bosco e salesiana*, in RSS 51 (2008) 187ss.; Maria LUPI – Aldo GIRAUDO (a cura di), *Pietro Stella. La lezione di uno storico*. Roma, LAS 2011; in this volume it is recommended that one reads the contribution of A. GIRAUDO, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità...*, pp. 53-71.

¹² Pietro STELLA, *Le ricerche su don Bosco nel venticinquennio 1960-1985: bilancio, problemi e prospettive*, in Pietro BRAIDO (a cura di), *Don Bosco nella chiesa a servizio dell'umanità. Studi e testimonianze*. (= ISS – Studi, 5). Roma, LAS 1987, pp. 373-396; P. STELLA, *Bilancio delle forme di conoscenza e degli studi su don Bosco*, in Mario MIDALI (a cura di), *Don Bosco nella storia*. Acts of the 1st International Congress of Studies on Don Bosco (Salesian Pontifical University – Roma, 16-20 January 1989). Roma, LAS 1990, pp. 21-36; ID., *Fare storia salesiana oggi*, in RSS 23 (1993) 391-400.

¹³ Francis DESRAMAUT, *Come si scrive la storia oggi*, in RSS 23 (1993) 375-390.

¹⁴ Francesco MOTTO, *Storia della storiografia di don Bosco* (see pages 215-249 of this volume).

above all the Marxist version¹⁵. This opposition requires on the part of the Church a different kind of methodological and ideological approach to its own past. In a certain sense, materialism and Marxism force the Christian cultural world to review more critically the scientific value of its own historical production and as one might say re-write a “new history” that would be credible in the face of a cultural mentality little favourable or even hostile to every kind of reference to the “vertical” dimension of the religious world. Only by using modern methods would it be possible to enter into a public cultural debate and propose one’s own reasons for taking a place and acting in the delicate sector of education, the field of the Salesian apostolate¹⁶. It would be no exaggeration to say that the new intellectual breeze (the highpoint of which being the explosion on a world scale around 1968, the period of the so-called “cultural revolution” which set out to break every link with tradition and the past) was at the foundation of a decisive change, of a serious rethink regarding the material of an hagiographical-ecclesiastical character, with a strong apologetic stamp. Indeed one can speak about a very real break with previous schemes, even though not always well thought-out: lacking authoritative guides, the abrupt change was not without limitations and contradictions, at the expense of historical science understood in its entirety. A step had been taken which in Christian circles led to a decided diffidence and an attitude which gave little consideration to such research projects, while in lay circles there was a marked negative approach an almost rejection of the traditional religious writing of history. As far as Salesian circles are concerned, it is sufficient to about a certain “perplexity” regarding the *Memorie biografiche di Giovanni Bosco*¹⁷. It can be seen how in various Salesian centres of religious, intellectual, spiritual formation there came about a abandonment of the traditional interpretations, including those recommended by Don Bosco himself (or by his most faithful collaborators) also without giving valid reasons for such an approach. A kind of divide opened up between the traditional and the modern way of understanding one’s own past. This was a

¹⁵ See *Marxista (storia)* by R. Paris in *Dizionario di scienze storiche*. Edited by André Burguière. (Italian edition edited by Franco Pierini). Cinisello Balsamo (Milano), Edizione Paoline 1992, pp. 500-503.

¹⁶ “Research projects coming from Salesian circles until after the Second World War were in substance outside the great debates of historical writing, from the age of liberalism and of positivism to idealism, from marxism to the school of the «Annales»” [P. STELLA, *Le ricerche su don Bosco nel venticinquennio 1960-1985: bilancio, problemi e prospettive*, in P. BRAIDO (a cura di), *Don Bosco nella chiesa...*, pp. 379-380].

¹⁷ Francis DESRAMAUT, *Come hanno lavorato gli autori delle memorie biografiche*, in M. MIDALI (a cura di), *Don Bosco nella storia...*, pp. 37-65. It is interesting to note in this regard the judgement of P. Stella who wrote: “The worries of the younger generation tended to become mistrust in relation to the *Memorie biografiche* of Don Bosco: the monumental work begun to be drawn up by Don Giambattista Lemoyne while Don Bosco was still alive, progressively published in nineteen volumes between 1898 and 1939” (P. STELLA, *Bilancio delle forme di conoscenza...*, p. 24).

process which at a certain point found the Salesian Family faced with a gap in historical writing, because the historical-critical studies by the new researchers were still *in their infancy*. Above all there was no academically drawn up synthesis of Salesian historical writing available that was worthy of being presented not only to the new generations of the followers of Don Bosco and of Mary Domenica Mazzarello, but also to the lay world.

4. The kind of “synthesis of the writing of Salesian history” that is available

A highly relevant question remains about the synthesis of historical writing in relation to the institutions created by Don Bosco, which in a relatively short space of time have spread throughout the world.

Considering that in 2009 the 150 anniversary of the founding of the SDB was celebrated, in this year 2011 occurs the 135 anniversary of the founding of the Association of the Salesian Cooperators and next year there will be the 140 anniversary of the institution of the FMA, this enquiry is even more justified. Naturally this is not the place to refer to some of the exceptions which regard the history of a country or of a region, which in general can claim a valid and scientifically/academically well-founded synthesis of historical writing about their own past. As examples could be quoted the studies by the Slovene Salesian Bogdan Kolar¹⁸, the Philippine Salesian Nestor Impelido¹⁹ and the Polish Salesian Jan Pietrzykowski²⁰. There are other examples, but nonetheless always limited to a regional, or at most a national situation.

The justified question that is asked is whether there exists a synthesis which reviews the by now numerous studied undertaken in various places whether central or local²¹. Obviously one is thinking of research that has been done based on broad examination of archives, not the limited consultation of the Salesian Central Archives in Rome. Similarly one asks what attention has been given to other historical studies undertaken in other places, both ecclesiastical and lay, and their reception. For understandable reasons we are interested in an examination of a synthesis of historical writing, in the first place about Salesian bodies such as the SDB, the FMA²² and the Association of the Salesian Cooper-

¹⁸ Bogdan KOLAR, *Salezijanci – Sto let na Slovenskim 1901-2001* [Salesians. One hundred years in Slovenia 1901-2001]. Ljubljana, Salve 2001.

¹⁹ Nestor C. IMPELIDO, *Salesians in the Philippines. Establishment and development from delegation to province (1951-1963)*. (= ISS – Studi, 24). Roma, LAS 2007.

²⁰ Jan PIETRZYKOWSKI, *Salezianie w Polsce 1945-1989* [Salesians in Poland 1945-1989]. Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Salezjańskie 2007.

²¹ See the collection of historical studies in the Magazine RSS 50 (2007) from the Istituto Storico Salesiano, produced on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of its foundation.

²² For the FMA see the volumes edited by Giselda CAPETTI (a cura di), *Cronistoria [dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice]*. Vol. II. Roma, Tip. FMA 1973/1974; ID., *Cronistoria [dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice]*. Vol. III. Roma, Tip. FMA 1976; ID.,

ators. It can therefore be stated that there is no synthesis of historical writing available on the Association of the Salesian Cooperators. What is more, up to now, no research has been done, valid from the scientific point of view on this “Third Branch” of the Salesian Family. It is a very serious gap in the picture of Salesian historical writing, difficult to justify.

As will be seen, there is not much to boast about. And the results of the synthesis that we will try briefly to present, for various reasons, do not satisfy the demands of modern historical science starting from a methodological presentation often insecure, since it does not take sufficiently into consideration the results of historical science and the framework of historical writing of the time in which the study was conducted.

In fact there are the historical writings of two authors both quite well-known in Salesian circles. The first is the Salesian Fr Eugenio Ceria²³, the other, who is still alive and teaching at the UPS, Fr Morand Wirth. One could say that each one represents two different worlds or two different generations of Salesian historians. This belonging to “two worlds” is a fact of history, that is to say that their work was carried out in periods that were very different. Fr Ceria is a representative of the first Salesian generation and of the ecclesiastical culture and mentality, formed and developed to a large extent on the basis of doctrinal considerations, drawn up at the Council of Trent. Although Fr Wirth had tasted the “spirit of Trent” (it was in 1955 that he began his Salesian formation in the novitiate at La Crau – La Navarre and was ordained a priest in 1967), nonetheless his later spiritual and intellectual formation took place in the light of the *Second Vatican Council*.

4.1. *Synthesis of the historical writing of Eugenio Ceria*

In the evaluation of the historical writing of Ceria his personal formation and the spirit holding sway in the Salesian institution in the broad sense need to be taken into account. The fact should not be underestimated that in the fields of the theological, pedagogical and philosophical sciences the Salesians were at the beginning of the foundation of their own centres of studies: it is sufficient to re-

Cronistoria [dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice]. Vol. IV. Roma, Tip. FMA 1978; ID., *Il cammino dell'Istituto nel corso di un secolo.* Roma, Istituto FMA 1972; ID., *Il cammino dell'Istituto nel corso di un secolo. Da don Rua successore di don Bosco al nuovo ordinamento giuridico dell'Istituto [1888-1907].* Vol. II. Roma, Istituto FMA 1973; a work from the ideological and methodological point of view, even though dealing with one country, constitutes the pioneering work of Grazia LOPARCO, *Le Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice nella società italiana (1900-1922). Percorsi e problemi di ricerca.* (= Il Prisma, 24). Roma, LAS 2002.

²³ Born 4 December 1870 at Biella (Province of Vercelli); perpetually professed 2 December 1886; ordained priest 30 November 1893 at Randazzo; died 21 January 1957. Certainly he was one of the greatest cultivators of the historical memory regarding Don Bosco, the first Salesians and the Salesian Congregation [DBS 79-81; Eugenio VALENTINI, *Don Ceria scrittore*, in “Salesianum” 2 (1957) 309-337].

call that the foundation of the Pontifical Salesian Athenaeum is dated 3 May 1940²⁴. As far as the issue we are dealing with is concerned, it is important to know that, at the time, the focus of historical interest for the few Salesian scholars there were was the Founder, followed by the first Superior General of the FMA Mother Maria Domenica Mazzarello, with the exception of some of the eminent figures of the early days. All the historical work of Ceria is entirely of an hagiographical nature based on the edifying and apologetic dimension, and written in a rather triumphant spirit, for the most part due the fascination that the political ascendancy of the political systems of an extremely totalitarian character – communism, fascism, national-socialism and “francoism” was exercising on the cultural world including the ecclesiastical one. Therefore to give a balanced judgement on this era of study it is absolutely essential to *Sitz im Leben*, that is to say to take into account everything that forms part of that historical moment of the birth of an organisation or of a person (the cultural formation of the author, currents of ideas, social, religious and political movements). It is of supreme importance to bear in mind a meandering crisis in Catholic university circles, which had arisen in the context of a rigid opposition on the part of the Catholic hierarchy to modernism²⁵, the open approach of which to the contemporary world, from many points of view positive, had to wait until the *Vaticanum Secundum* to be considered as the shared/common patrimony of the Church.

The Salesian Eugenio Ceria is well-known as the author of the nine volumes of the *Memorie biografiche...* [volumes: 11-19 (volume 11 published in 1930 and the final one in 1939)], as well as the important book *Don Bosco con Dio*, printed in 1930, a work which enjoyed considerable popularity in Salesian circles and was recently re-printed. He is also the author of the *Vita del Servo di Dio sac. Filippo Rinaldi*, Torino, SEI 1948, as well as the *Vita del Servo di Dio don Michele Rua, primo successore di san Giovanni Bosco*, which came out in 1949, and he was the editor of the *Epistolario di S. Giovanni Bosco* (vol. I – 1955; vol. II – 1956; vol. III . 1958 e vol. IV – 1959). Torino, SEI.

The work in which we are interested bears the significant title which gives the method employed in its presentation, that is chronological, not thematic²⁶.

²⁴ On the origin of the founding and on the first steps of this Salesian academic institution see: José Manuel PRELLEZO, *Don Pietro Ricaldone e la formazione dei salesiani: alle origini dell'Università Pontificia Salesiana*, in Sabino FRIGATO (a cura di), *Don Pietro Ricaldone quarto successore di don Bosco 1932-1951. A cinquant'anni dalla morte 25 novembre 1951*. Torino, Salesian – Pontifical University FT-Sezione Torino 2001, pp. 31-73.

²⁵ In this regard see the chapter *Il modernismo* in Giacomo MARTINA, *Storia della Chiesa da Lutero ai nostri giorni*. Vol. IV. *L'età contemporanea*. Brescia, Morcelliana 1995, pp. 81-117; as also the word *Modernismo* in *Dizionario storico del cristianesimo* by Carl Andresen and Georg Denzler. Italian edition edited by Marina Airoidi and Dorino Tuniz. Cinisello Balsamo (Milano), Edizioni Paoline 1992, pp. 419-422.

²⁶ The method explicitly confirmed by the Author in the *Premessa* where one reads: “The title *Annali* indicates the chronological method followed in this present work.

These are the four volumes of the *Annali della Società Salesiana*. These constitute the very first attempt at a synthesis of historical writing. The first volume came out in 1941, the second in 1943, the third in 1946 and the final volume in 1951²⁷. The first volume bears the subtitle *Dalle origini alla morte di s. Giovanni Bosco (1841-1888)*. The second and the third deal with the *Il rettorato di don Michele Rua*. The fourth concerns *Il rettorato di don Paolo Albera*. Therefore they cover a period of time from 1841 to 1921, eighty years of the history of the Salesian Congregation. On the other hand the happenings of the FMA and of the Association of the Salesian Cooperators are somewhat in the background, and the number of pages devoted to them various from volume to volume according to the circumstances. It should be noted that Ceria does deal with the beginnings and the further development of the Association of the Past Pupils.

While having placed the very large output of Don Ceria among those works of an hagiographical character²⁸, Valentini acknowledges that “He was called, quite rightly, the second historian of the Salesian Society and of Don Bosco”²⁹. One can agree with that statement provided it leads one to a definition of the “historian” corresponding to criteria by now largely superseded. According to the sharp judgement of Stella, the “specific preparation” of Ceria

“was that of a teacher of literary matters; it was that of a well-mannered humanist man of letters and not that of an historian trained at the school of a Gioacchino Volpe or of a Lucien Febvre. In Don Ceria can be appreciated his narrative style sparse, precise, between Livy and Tacitus. But, in my opinion, the clear gap is even deeper between the advances of modern historical writing and the method which Don Ceria uses in constructing history [...]. In other words, the supernatural nature and the apocalyptic tendency of Don Lemoyne had in Ceria a faithful and consistent follower”³⁰.

The scholar who in a critical fashion wishes to approach the *Annali* of Ceria – still quoted and often even considered some unique form of source – needs first of all to understand how and to what extent he made use of his sources, and in the second place there needs to be considered the attention the work gives to the bibliography of the period, ecclesiastical and civil, in order to see to

Rather than proceed by periods more or less artificially divided, we follow the high road, marked by the passing years; the journey can begin in 1841” (E. CERIA, *Annali della Società Salesiana*. Vol. I. *Dalle origini alla morte di s. Giovanni Bosco (1841-1888)*. Torino, SEI 1941, p. VII).

²⁷ Eugenio CERIA, *Annali della Società Salesiana*. Vol. I. *Dalle origini alla morte di s. Giovanni Bosco (1841-1888)*. Torino, SEI 1941, 779 p; Vol. II. *Il rettorato di don Michele Rua*. Parte I. *Dal 1888 al 1898*. Torino, SEI 1943, 773 p; Vol. III. *Il rettorato di don Michele Rua*. Parte II. *Dal 1899 al 1910*. Torino, SEI 1946, 926 p; Vol. IV. *Il rettorato di don Paolo Albera*. Torino, SEI 1951, 471 p.

²⁸ E. VALENTINI, *Ceria sac. Eugenio, storico umanista*, in DBS, p. 81.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

³⁰ P. STELLA, *Fare storia salesiana oggi...*, p. 399.

what extent it has influenced the writing, and to conclude with a assessment of the framework of historical writing within which the events of Salesian history are placed.

Even though in his *Premessa* Ceria says that he has had free access to the Archives, where he was able to have at his disposal some document³¹, nevertheless it is a question of consultation only of the Central Archives of the Salesian Society (at the time at Valdocco, Turin, now in Rome), certainly a place of great importance but certainly not exhaustive for specific historical research. Therefore the Author of the *Annali* had not addressed himself to other archives ecclesiastical or religious, even less to lay/civil ones. From the point of view of our present day formation as historians, this is a significant limitation, since it implies that the scholar has had total trust in the data collected in a single archive and therefore presents facts, reasons and interpretation solely on the basis of partial documentation. Nor can one ignore another fact, that is, that in the Salesian Central Archives Ceria could have easily consulted all the documentation coming from the outside world, but he gave priority to the Salesian documentary patrimony. To this should be added a manner of quoting that in no way reflects either the archival *classification* or the *collocation*. For example on page 38 we find the note quoted in this way: “Letter of the Cardinal to Don Bosco, Rome 14 October 1860”³²; its place in the archives if not indicated. This is the method employed in all four volumes of the *Annali*.

Another fundamental question is the consultation of bibliographical material relating to the argument being examined. It is not difficult to observe insufficient attention being given to specific bibliography. However, it should not be forgotten that we are dealing with a period in which – as already mentioned – historical studies on the Salesian Society undertaken according to scientific method were not yet available. The few publications of an historical nature – as one might say – on the Work of Don Bosco were not based on careful archival investigations³³, with the appropriate consideration of the bibliography then available, but presented themselves as a “re-visitation” of the *Memorie Biografiche*. Therefore Ceria could not have as his starting point adequate historical studies on the various Salesian institutions³⁴.

³¹ “If archival material were published, I would have to say that everything passed through my hands, since I had every possibility to consult freely the Salesian archives to obtain information, check details and also when it occurred to bring out unpublished material, naturally in what had a close relationship with the history of the Society” (*Annali* I VIII).

³² *Ibid.*, I 38.

³³ To tell the truth, one needs to bear in mind that access to the archives, at the time, was not yet clarified as it is today. This made consultation of the material conserved difficult (when not actually impossible).

³⁴ He explained this fact himself: “I think there is no point in providing a bibliography; since what I wrote so far about Don Bosco I took from either the *Memorie Biografiche*, where they can be consulted, or from works based on them. Where I came across anything new I did not fail to give everyone his due” [*Ibid.*, I, p. VIII].

What is perhaps most striking about the *Annali* is the lack of interest in historical writing of the period, whether ecclesiastical or lay. In fact only very rarely does one find quotations from or references to any publication of historical writing. This method means that the narration is almost entirely lacking in any sort of cultural, social or political background, in any links with various movements of pedagogical thinking, of philosophical trends as well as all the considerations of the evolving world of youth. On the other hand, even though of relative scientific value, what is taken into account is the scarce production of Salesian historical writing, marked in addition by a clear transcendental dimension, by a hagiographical, apologetic and edifying spirit.

While taking into account these limitations, nevertheless the *Annali* still remain valid as the synthesis of historical writing on Salesian Work, a large mass of historical documentation on which one can draw, as in fact have the most well-known modern historians in Salesian circles. Certainly from the point of view of modern historical writing it is not possible to number them among the studies of a scientific nature.

4.2. *Synthesis of the historical writing of Morand Wirth*

The second synthesis of historical writing available on Salesian work – as already mentioned – is from the pen of Morand Wirth, who in 1970 published *Don Bosco et les Salésiens. Cent cinquante ans d'histoire*³⁵. The work was given a warm welcome and was translated into various languages, a success due to the enthusiasm for such projects which was a feature of the years immediately following the Council, the desire for historical writing which was in harmony with the new sensitivities in a social context of such monumental change³⁶. To this should be added a long-standing expectation of the Salesian family, in which the reservations about the Ceria's *Annali* had become quite widespread. Therefore one should not be surprised that this study was widely adopted as a handbook in the formation of the new Salesian generations³⁷. Thirty years later

³⁵ Morand WIRTH, *Don Bosco et les Salésiens. Cent cinquante ans d'histoire*. Leumann-Torino, LDC 1970. Italian translation: *Don Bosco e i salesiani. Centocinquant'anni di storia*. Leumann-Torino, LDC 1970.

³⁶ “The success of the first edition can be explained essentially for two reasons: first of all, for its nature as a summary, elementary and accessible, adapted to teaching ends; in the second place, because it responded to the practical needs of the Salesians, caught up in problems of postcouncil updating and the rethinking of the constitutive elements of their identity, at a time of vistose trasformazioni e di riassetto religioso e istituzionale dell'Opera Salesiana” [Aldo GIRAUDDO, Review: Morand WIRTH, *Da Don Bosco ai nostri giorni. Tra storia e nuove sfide (1815-2000)*. Roma, LAS 2000, 624 p., in RSS 39 (2001) 389-390].

³⁷ “This volume [...] was translated in several languages and was used in courses of formation by the Salesian Family” [A. GIRAUDDO, Review: Morand WIRTH, *Da Don Bosco ai nostri giorni. Tra storia e nuove sfide (1815-2000)*. Roma, LAS 2000, 624 p., in RSS 39 (2001) 389-390].

Wirth re-issued the book, revised and completed in various sections with the Salesian mission, reaching up to the then present year 2000. The modified title, *Da don Bosco ai nostri giorni. Tra storia e nuove sfide (1815-2000)*, would seem to suggest a thematic presentation which in fact is not found, since the chronological presentation remains dominant. In this way Wirth takes up – perhaps without wishing to – the structure of the *Annali*: the chronological order is followed in the successive Rector Majors, and the various sectors of educational and apostolic activities are generally examined in this framework, even though some subjects are treated by topic areas (for example chapter XXIV is devoted to *L'attività legislativa della Congregazione dal 1888-1965* and, in fact the following chapters XXV-XXX are also thematic in form), a method which is used more convincingly especially in the events of the post-council years.

In the evaluation of this synthesis of historical writing on Salesian Work, it should be noted that this is so far the only one available and frequently quoted, and will be further widespread since it is still in the process of being translated into other languages³⁸. To put it in perspective it will be useful to consider a comment in a recent review by A. Giraudo, who – expressing a rather generalised but substantially positive judgement writes:

“The style of writing is narrative, with a preference for a chronological presentation. It fits more readily into the category of «recollection of events», rather than of history as «problem» or history of a «mentality» and of «collective representations». Interpretation and reflection from the point of view of historical writing on the factors which guide, encourage or condition decisions, are limited to critical comments, reported in footnotes”³⁹.

Although in his review of the *Annali* of Ceria Giraudo refers to the chronological presentation, nonetheless it overlooks something of the highest importance. The synthesis of Wirth is in stark contrast with the previous traditional Salesian historical writing in that it gives up entirely the hagiographical literary style, the apologetic and triumphant spirit typical not only of Ceria. We find ourselves faced with a style which is quite sober and well-balanced, without repeated references to the “extraordinary”. The Author carefully avoids personal subjective assessments and leaves the readers and scholars free to give their own interpretations. This is a considerable and praiseworthy step forward.

For our task of a critique of historical writing the fundamental question returns regarding the direct use of sources by Wirth. Surprisingly, with regard to consultation of the archives one is left disappointed: in this synthesis one does not frequently find reference to sources – with the exception of the *Acts of the General Council*, the deliberations of General Chapters and other printed material – and those present are “second hand”, that is taken from other studies. On

³⁸ It already exists in French. Polish and other versions are in preparation.

³⁹ A. GIRAUDO, Review: M. WIRTH, *Da Don Bosco ai nostri giorni...*, p. 390.

the other hand a special comment deserves to be made regarding the bibliographical material in the work of Wirth, surprisingly rich in Salesian and non-Salesian titles. Probably the greatest merit of this synthesis of historical writing is precisely that of providing an extremely up to date bibliography on the issues dealt with, with reference to works published only months before it went to press. The footnotes in general make up for a deeper examination of the many topics and problems dealt with. It was a significant decision that could also be considered a limitation to a work that is however considerable and courageous, even though at times the framework of historical writing in which some questions vital for Salesian history appear seems rather surprising.

Another issue to be considered regarding the period of time examined by Wirth: is it really possible to write a history up to our days? Is it right to deal with questions for which the documentation, from a legal point of view, should not be open to consultation by a researcher? In addition the necessary critical distance in lacking in order to correctly assess the implementation of projects perhaps only just begun, while protagonists and witnesses still alive, and towards whom there could be the danger of being disrespectful, would also be involved.

The analysis, although in summary form, so far undertaken has tried to point out how the two syntheses of historical writing represent, although for different reasons, points of reference for a global knowledge of the Salesian world; it has been indicated that the work of Wirth has even been used as a study manual in various Salesian centres of formation. In addition, a consideration of these works, the only examples of large syntheses of Salesian historical writing, emerge two different ways of approaching the writing of the history of the religious institute founded by Don Bosco.

From this follows not only the invitation to reflect on the method of work, on the instruments and means which also today are used to draw up Salesian history, but also the opportunity to revise the ideal presuppositions in conducting the research so as not to distort the object under historical enquiry. It is not sufficient to have the proposal – already an obvious one – to give up the hagiographical, apologetic and edifying dimension in writing religious history, since by now contemporary sensitivities would now longer accept such a presentation/approach.

In addition to asking ourselves what methods and means are necessary to acquire credibility and authority in the modern academic debate, the historian needs to put himself with sincerity and courage in a position of “moral” correctness regarding the specific material of his research, when it is characterised by a constitutive and ideal originality.

It is part of the work of the historian to verify and confirm how the ideal nature of a phenomenon has been received and interpreted in the objective consequences and in the practical developments, as also it would be his duty to make clear sincerely his own position regarding involvement or distance from that nature. Obviously the question becomes more delicate and complicated when the

object of the historical enquiry is an institution of theological origin, such as a religious Congregation.

5. The contribution of ISS and ACSSA to the renewal of the writing of Salesian history

The “springtime of the writing of Salesian history”⁴⁰, already referred to, was also the result of a new policy regarding culture expressed at the top of the Congregation. In fact the Special General Chapter (1971) recommended that the appropriate steps should be taken to ensure the development of the “Centre of Studies on Don Bosco”; this on 6 February 1973 was entrusted *ad experimentum* to the Faculty of Theology at the UPS⁴¹ together with the care of “a series of publications and studies on the history of the Salesian Missions on the occasion of their centenary”⁴². At the same time in the Acts of the Superior Council news was given that at the Generalate a “Centre of Studies for the History of the Salesian Congregation”⁴³ was being set up; and the following year an autonomous “Centre of Studies of the History of the Salesian Missions” was established at the UPS⁴⁴ which in fact lasted only a short time. Nonetheless these initiatives did not fully respond to the modern challenges in the historical field and so the General Chapter XXI (1977) took the decision to set up the Salesian Historical Institute⁴⁵. It is a department of the “Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco”, erected by a decree of the Rector Major of the Salesians of Don Bosco Fr Egidio Viganò, on 23 December 1981⁴⁶; with its own statutes and regulations⁴⁷ based at the Generalate in Rome.

⁴⁰ It is worth noting that the renewal of historical writing met with strong resistance from within the Salesian Society. Of particular interest in this regard are the observations at the meeting of Provincials from almost all the continents, except America. In the Acts one reads: “With regard to the uncertainties of many confreres in view of the new researches on the life of Don Bosco; above all the confreres should exercise the greatest caution when speaking in public. Experience has shown that confreres at the PAS have created a certain sceptical attitude in the Provinces with modernistic and incautious words” *Congress of Salesian Provincials. Europe, Middle East, Central Africa, United States, Australia*. Acts. II. Discussions (Como 16-23 April 1968). Turin, E. Gilli 1968, p. 20. A quotation from Jacques SCHEPENS, *Das Bild Don Boscos im Wandel. Ein Beitrag zur Don Bosco-Forschung*. (= Benediktbeurer Schriftenreihe, 37). Ensdorf 2000, p. 53. On pages 19-20 the same author shows the perplexity of Salesian Superiors.

⁴¹ Raffaele FARINA, *Il Centro Studi Don Bosco*, in “Salesianum” 37 (1975) 410.

⁴² P. BRAIDO, *L'ISS realtà nuova...*, p. 33.

⁴³ ACS, April-June 1973, pp. 26-27.

⁴⁴ ACS, January-March 1974, pp. 55-56; Raffaele FARINA, *Il Centro di Storia delle Missioni Salesiane*, in “Salesianum” 37 (1975) 129-130.

⁴⁵ *Delibera del Capitolo Generale XXI della Società salesiana*, in RSS 1 (1982) 108.

⁴⁶ *Decreto di erezione dell'ISS*, in RSS 1 (1982) 108-109.

⁴⁷ P. BRAIDO, *L'ISS realtà nuova...*, p. 33; the statutes and the regulations are found in *Istituto Storico Salesiano*, in RSS 1(1982) 5-15.

Without exaggeration, it can be said that thanks to the founding of the ISS, with its own planned and organised activities a new historical sensitivity came into being and was strengthened in the Salesian Family: there was a new trend in historical writing based on the priority and the good use of the archival sources. From a methodological point of view this is the key date for all the valuable academic production of ISS, attentive to the most advanced trends in historical writing in the civil and religious fields, open to the influence of other disciplines: sociology, anthropology, history of thought etc.

In an evaluation of the ISS entrusted to two external expert historians and completed in 2010, was pointed out:

“the valid service which the ISS has so far offered to the whole Salesian Family and to whoever wishes to know its spirit and its history. It is good that the ISS continue with the scientific/academic level it has now attained which helps go «form a school»”⁴⁸.

In fact the scientific/academic production of the ISS (to which was subsequently added that of the ACSSA) is extremely vast, especially considering the small number of personnel thus engaged. Certainly the ISS has begun a new period in the history of Salesian historical writing, even though the penetration of its researches whether into the Salesian world or beyond is still a long way from being fully satisfying.

It is thanks to the ISS that the Association of Salesian Historians came into being (approved with a decree on 9 October 1996 of the Rector Major of the time Fr Juan Edmundo Vecchi⁴⁹). It is an association which ought to be one might say, the “outreach” of the ISS throughout the Salesian world and even beyond it. It was a strategic move, since “in the 90s of the XX century the members of the Salesian Historical Institute saw the need for a sort of «bridge» between the ISS and the Salesian Family to broaden interest in historical research into its own past”⁵⁰.

With the foundation of the ACSSA, the ISS opened up a new form of collaboration at world level. It is proposed to use a method of work which in the meantime can become a platform for academic exchange, through continental seminars (at two-yearly intervals) in the course of which, in addition to the presentation of the results of some research work efforts are made to draw up the topics for International Congresses (held every five years). The last, that is the 5th International Congress was held in Turin from 28 October to 1 November 2009.

The relationship between the ISS and the ACSSA has been seen to be especially effective, particularly on account of the considerable contribution made

⁴⁸ Emanuele BOAGA – Luigi MEZZADRI, *Valutazione dell’Istituto Storico Salesiano, ACSSA e CSDB*. Roma, 25 January 2010, in ASC, Archives of the ISS.

⁴⁹ Stanisław ZIMNIAK, *Cenni storici sull’Associazione Cultori di Storia Salesiana (ACSSA) e sulle sue realizzazioni*, in RSS 51 (2008) 158.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

to the expansion of the new stage in historical writing in the Salesian Family.

In the second place, it should be pointed out that this collaboration has made it possible to examine more deeply topics at international level, directly involving the local researchers. Without this wide-scale involvement it would never have been possible to deal with such questions as: *Iniziativa salesiane dopo don Bosco. Saggi di storiografia*. Acts of the 2nd International Congress-Seminar of the History of the Salesian Work. Rome, 1-5 November 1995; *L'Opera Salesiana dal 1880 al 1922. Significatività e portata sociale*. Acts of the 3rd International Congress of the History of the Salesian Work. Rome, 31 October – 5 November 2000; *The Beginnings of The Salesian Presence in East Asia*. Acts of the Seminar on Salesian History, Hong Kong, 4-6 December 2004; *L'educazione salesiana dal 1880 al 1922. Istanze ed attuazioni in diversi contesti*. Acts of the 4th International Congress of the History of the Salesian Work. Ciudad de México, 12-18 February 2006; *L'educazione salesiana in Europa negli anni difficili del XX secolo*. Acts of the European Seminar of the History of the Salesian Work – Krakow, 31 October – 4 November 2007; *Implantation of the Salesian Charism in Asia. Ideals, Challenges, Answers, Results*. Acts of the Salesian History Seminar East Asia – Oceania Region. Batulao (Manila), 24-28 November 2008; *Don Michele Rua primo successore di don Bosco. Tratti di personalità, governo e opere (1888-1910)*. Acts of the 5th International Congress of the History of the Salesian Work – Turin, 28 October – 1 November 2009.

This experience of intercontinental meetings and exchanges has already changed the methodological approach of researchers in Salesian circles and has certainly contributed greatly to increasing sensitivity in historical writing, spreading and consolidating the awareness that it is possible to compare ideas with the various ideological and methodological trends of historical research.

It will therefore be necessary to continue with this system of collaboration at continental and intercontinental level which also for the future can ensure a high level of scientific/ academic quality in the field of historical research in relation to the two Salesian Congregations.

The conclusion of this short *excursus* on ISS and ACSSA on their relationship and the work undertaken between them in the field of scientific research, is being entrusted, as indeed it should be, to the words of Pietro Stella, the teacher of so many Salesian historians, who in 1993 invited them to reflect on their work:

“Well then, in my opinion the Salesian historian needs to know above all how to value those trends in the writing of history within which he is operating: he even needs to be know how to find the balance, if not precisely regarding the writing of history in his own cultural context at least regarding those aspects which touch most closely Salesian experience; in the second place he needs to know how to construct for himself a model of analysis more suited to the type of historical research he intends to pursue”⁵¹.

⁵¹ P. STELLA, *Fare storia salesiana oggi...*, pp. 393-394.

6. The historian in the face of a situation of theological foundation

From the admittedly summary assessment of the historical writing of Ceria and Wirth the difference of their ideological approach to the same subject, that is the Work of Don Bosco (SDB, FMA, Association of the Salesians-Cooperators, Past Pupils) can be clearly seen. In Ceria the attention given to the theological dimension of what came into being through the initiative of John Bosco predominates, almost as though to explain everything that he did was through divine intervention. The human context is considerably reduced, so as to undervalue the influence of social, cultural and political factors and any other sort of contingent conditioning elements which are subordinated to the divine, as though this were almost the only factor moving and controlling human activities. Wirth does not agree with this presentation of the way things happened in Salesian history. In his work the divine mover appears almost as an echo in the background events connected with Don Bosco and his work. The determining factor in what he did is the human element with all its limitations and weaknesses, man as such in his inevitable involvement in mixture of relationships and social regulations.

These attitudes, almost opposed to each other, re-open the ever relevant question about the approach of the historian to a religious reality, that is whether and to what degree he can prescind from the theological origin of the subject being dealt with.

After the comment made in the premise to this contribution, it is now our intention to try to examine this question further. Is it possible to conduct an enquiry with the useful means at the disposal of the historian, – and without distorting the image of the subject – institutions which in the minds of the founders have their origin mainly in the will of God? This is a very serious problem still little discussed in Salesian circles⁵². But it is question that is inevitably comes into the mind of every serious researcher, when he does not want to run the risk of too easily reducing the historic truth concerning a religious Congregation – its being an institution the result of a transcendent will – to factors which are purely deterministic, to the results of human activities that can be explained in terms which are purely natural, sociological, anthropological, psychological etc.

Without doubt, the exaggerations in past ecclesiastical historical writing, too much imbued with super-naturalism, are at the origin of the strong aversion which historical writing continues to provoke for any interpretation that

⁵² See Paul WYNANTS, *Per la storia di un'istituzione insegnante religiosa: orientamenti di ricerca, fonti e metodi (XIX-XX secolo)*, in RSS 28 (1996) 7-54. The same report has been published in French *Pour écrire l'histoire d'un établissement d'enseignement congréganiste: orientations de recherche, sources et méthodes (XIX-XX siècles)*, in Francesco MOTTO (a cura di), *Insedimenti e iniziative salesiane dopo don Bosco. Saggi di storiografia*. (= ISS – Studi, 9). Roma, LAS 1996, pp. 17-62. Wynants does not deal with this particular problem.

refers to transcendental data. It now seems accepted practice, which however is not lacking in an evident ideological flavour. Many modern day research projects in fact give the impression that the difference has not even been noticed between the history of a Christian institution and that of a lay one since everything – motivations, origins, development – are seen categories which are only human.

It is not simply a matter of opening up again the apologetics question in present day ecclesiastical writing of history, in other words prove the existence of God through the extraordinary achievements of a religious order. The question goes deeper than that: historical research ought to help a religious organisation in its task of being faithful to its own image and evaluate the radical nature of its living out the charism of the Founder. It is a duty of great responsibility and also a service to preserve and to ensure the vital authenticity of an institution.

This argument has recently been re-proposed in public debate, at least within the Catholic world, by the German historian Walter Brandmüller, for many years the President of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences. In his article *Capire la Chiesa nella storia*, published in the daily newspaper “Avvenire” on 31 October 2010⁵³, he invited people not to ignore the theological element in the origins of the Church and subsequently of all Christian institutions. It therefore would also appear to be appropriate in the setting of the historical congress to consider this question. Brandmüller notes that

“already at the beginning of the seventies, the epistemological self-understanding of the history of the Church experienced a crisis which so far has not been overcome. The causes of this situation we can identify in the anthropological change of theology in general. For decades, the humanistic disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, sociology had begun to influence theological thought to a degree until then unknown. In the context of the history of the Church this development has provoked a lively debate on its theological or non theological character, in which faced by the interpretation defended for example by Hubert Jedin, others – such as Victor Conzemius – used to speak about the essential «profane nature» of the history of the Church”⁵⁴.

This is not the right place for a long discussion on this issue. In any case we should not ignore

“the reading a theological terms” because – as Brandmüller says – it is a help “in understanding and interpreting ecclesial people, facts, procedures in a way that is more appropriate and in depth – since it is considered in the light of the Church’s self-understanding which is the object of his research”⁵⁵.

⁵³ Walter BRANDMÜLLER, *Capire la Chiesa nella storia*, in “Avvenire”, 31 October 2010.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

By way of conclusion

I should like to conclude this contribution of mine with a reflection by Carl Gustav Jung as an opportunity to reflect on the value of a knowledge of one's own past, understood as the starting point for self-knowledge in the present and as providing secure guidance towards a future rooted in history.

“Our souls like our bodies are composed of individual elements which were already present in the long line of our antecedents. The «novelty» of the individual psyche is a varied combination of an infinite number of ancient components. Therefore the body and the soul have an eminently historical character which is not really at ease on what has just begun, that is to say, the ancestral features find themselves only partially at home. We are far from having left behind us the middle ages, classical antiquity and the primitive era, as our psyche would have us believe. Rather we are caught up in the raging flood of a progress projecting into the future with a violence ever greater the more we are detached from our roots. But if a breach is opened on the past it collapses and there is nothing to restrain us. But it is precisely the loss of this link, the lack of any roots, which produce such an «unease in civilisation» and such haste which results in us living more in the future and in its false promises of a golden age than in the present, to which in fact our personal historical evolution has not yet even arrived. We throw ourselves frenetically towards the new, urged on by an increasing sense of insufficiency, of dissatisfaction, of restlessness. We no longer live with what we have, but with promises, we no longer live in then light, in the present, but in the darkness of the future, in which we await the real dawn. We refuse to recognise that the one can only obtain the best at the cost of the worse. The hope of a greater freedom is destroyed by a growing slavery to the state, not to mention the frightening dangers to which the most brilliant scientific discoveries expose us. The less we understand what our fathers and antecedents were looking for, so much the less do we understand ourselves, and we strive with all our strength to deprive the individual more and more of his roots, and of his instincts so that he becomes a small particle in the mass, and only follows the «law of gravity».

The improvements which take place through progress, that is with new methods or techniques, have an immediate power of persuasion, but with time they reveal themselves to be of doubtful usefulness, and in any case are paid for at a high price. In no way do they contribute to the satisfaction, the content, or the happiness of humanity taken as a whole. Even more, they are false sweeteners of life, like the swifter forms of communication which accelerate the rhythm of life and leave us with less time available than we had before. *Omnis festinatio ex parte diaboli est*: all haste comes from the devil, as our old teachers used to say.

On the other hand, reforms which are carried out by returning to the past are usually less costly and in addition more long-lasting, because they take us back to the more simple and well-proven ways of the past, and require much less use of newspapers, radio and television, and of all those novelties which it is thought help us gain time”⁵⁶.

⁵⁶ *Ricordi, sogni, riflessioni di C.G. Jung raccolti ed editi da Anela Jaffé*. Translation by Guido Russo. Milano, Il Saggiatore 1965, pp. 266-268. See the original text in *Erinnerungen, Träume, Gedanken von C.G. Jung*. Annotated and published by Aniela Jaffé, Walter-Verlag, Solothurn e Düsseldorf 1971⁹, pp. 239-240.

In concluding this study, another reminder of our Salesian DNA seems opportune, that is remembering that members of the Salesian Family are heirs of an “Historian Father”, and therefore ought to do their best not only to preserve but above all to make good use of the patrimony of their historical memory and make it known in a diligent and attractive way to the world of today. Therefore they should let themselves be inspired by the approach of Don Bosco, who knew how to take care of both aspects the archival and the writing of history⁵⁷, even though his output of historical writing was not directly aimed at the historical science of the time but rather at education and instruction which are the origin and the purpose of all knowledge.

⁵⁷ Confirmation of this is the short chapter IX of the oldest *Regolamento per l'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales (1851-1852)* in which the first part is dedicated to the importance of the archivist and in short chapter V, to the librarian (MB III 104, 107; cf BM III 448, 452).