

Margaret Occhiena Bosco (1788-1856)

Don Bosco's Mother, Educator and Vocational Support

Arthur J. Lenti, SDB

Introductory Note

The Boscos and Their Social Status

Don Bosco's earliest attested ancestor, a gentleman also named John Bosco, is recorded as married in 1627 in the town of Chieri (province of Turin, region of Piedmont). The records show that the Boscos, from the earliest attested ancestor and on worked as tenant farmers or sharecroppers at farms (*cascine*) located near that town.

Four generations later a young boy named Philip Anthony Bosco was left an orphan in the care of his uncle and godfather, and eventually migrated with that family to Castelnuovo, a town a few miles to the east of Chieri. The "orphan" Philip Anthony Bosco (1735-1802) was to be Don Bosco's grandfather.

Philip Anthony's first wife died after her sixth child. He then married his second wife, Margaret Zucca (Don Bosco's famous grandmother). The fourth of the six children from this second marriage, Francis Louis Bosco (1784-1817), was to be Don Bosco's father.

Hard times and a large family forced Philip Anthony to seek a new situation as tenant farmer and sharecropper at a farm (*cascina*) located some 3 miles south of Castelnuovo (in the Morialdo-Becchi area) and belonging to a Mr. Hyacinth Biglione, a lawyer living in Turin. Philip Anthony died in 1802, but the family continued to run the farm. And so it was that

Francis Louis Bosco (Don Bosco's father) in 1804 took over its management at the age of 20.¹

Francis Louis Bosco and Family

In 1805, at the age of 21, Francis Louis Bosco married his first wife, Margaret Cagliero. From this first marriage were born Anthony Joseph (February 2, 1908) and Theresa Maria (February 16, 1810), who lived for only two days.

Francis Louis' first wife died one year later, leaving him a widower at the age of 27 with a three-year old son (Anthony).

However, that same year (1811) he became acquainted with Margaret Occhiena of Capriglio,² and they were married on June 6, 1812. From this marriage were born Joseph Louis (April 17, 1813) and John Melchior, (August 16, 1815), both of them (like Anthony Joseph) at the Biglione farm.

Meanwhile Francis and Margaret Bosco by hard work and with the help of a couple of farm hands or day laborers were successfully fulfilling their obligation toward the owners. Francis' mother, Margaret Zucca, though physically handicapped, was on hand to mind the children. But Francis and Margaret were also looking to the future and to better their own circumstances. As a matter of fact, Francis had purchased some pieces of land in the vicinity and had increased his stable. But almost immediately a fierce drought set in, while at the same time relations between Francis and the owner began to deteriorate, chiefly because Mr. Biglione had removed a sizable quantity of land from Francis' control.

¹ For a detailed account of Don Bosco's ancestry, see Secondo Caselle, *Cascinali e Contadini in Monferrato [...]* (Roma: LAS, 1975). See also Michele Molineris, *Don Bosco Inedito [...]* (Colle Don Bosco: Istituto Salesiano, 1974) 19-31.

² Capriglio was a small municipal town located 2.6 km. (1.6 mi.) southeast of the hamlet of Becchi.

These circumstances forced Francis to look out for himself and his family. Since he naturally aspired to eventual independence, on February 17, 1817, he bought from a Mr. Francis Graglia a *little house*, in an area known as Canton Cavallo (Cavallo Property, this being the surname of the original owners). The building, purchased for 100 lire, stood a short distance downhill (north) from the Biglione house, and a stone's throw from the little hamlet of Becchi further north at the base of the slope. The *little house* was actually a shed or lean-to in disrepair, supported by the back wall of the larger house, and consisting (at the time of purchase) of a lower room and contiguous small stable, with a similarly small hayloft above it.

Death of Francis Louis Bosco

Obviously this shed needed to be restored and expanded, if it was to house Francis' growing family. And no doubt Francis fully intended to make it a home. However, tragedy struck. Francis Bosco died on May 11, 1817 at the age of 33, seven days after contracting pneumonia while working in the cold cellar. Don Bosco, though not quite 2 years old at the time, recalls the sad event in a touching passage of his *Memoirs of the Oratory*.³

Because of her husband's untimely death, Margaret Bosco was forced to leave Biglione's farm and settle her family in the poor dwelling nearby that Francis had recently purchased and that was to achieve fame as the *Little House of Becchi*.

Who was Margaret Occhiena Bosco? What do we know about her, and how? Don Bosco's biographer, Fr. John Baptist Lemoyne, and ultimately Don Bosco, are our chief sources.

³ *MO-En*, 7f.

Sources for the Biographical Material included by Lemoyne in the *Biographical Memoirs*

The Biographical Memoirs contain abundant biographical material pertaining to Don Bosco's mother. Volume I in particular, especially in its first part (Chapters 2-25), gives much more space to Margaret (affectionately known as Mamma Margaret) than it does to John. Where did Lemoyne get the information?

Father Lemoyne had not known Mamma Margaret personally. She had lived at the Oratory from 1846 until her death in 1856, and Lemoyne had joined Don Bosco only in 1864, 8 years after Mamma Margaret's death. However, passionately engaged as he was in collecting and recording everything that had to do with Don Bosco and his work, he was eager to gather information also on Don Bosco's mother. Lemoyne's main sources may be listed as follows.

(1) Lemoyne had access to Don Bosco's unpublished *Memoirs of the Oratory*. There Don Bosco includes a number of passages pertaining to his mother for the period of his childhood and for succeeding years.

(2) Also Lemoyne had the testimony of a number of early Salesians and other persons who had known Margaret. Some of them as boys at the Oratory had experienced her motherly care. A number of these people also testified at the diocesan (ordinary) process of Don Bosco's beatification in the early 1890s. Lemoyne had access to these testimonies in spite of their being "sealed," for the diocesan authorities made use of Salesian seminarians for the transcription of the official records of the process.

(3) Such sources, however, account for only a small fraction of the total amount of material on Margaret assembled by Lemoyne. Hence, we may assume that Lemoyne either had a large source at his disposal (of which there is no record) or that

he had himself collected the information. It appears that he began to collect this material systematically after his return to Turin in late 1883, from the Salesian Sisters at Nizza (where he served as chaplain), to take up his duties as secretary general. Don Bosco must have been his chief source through their regular extended and familiar conversations.

(4) When in 1885 Lemoyne began to assemble and print the *Documenti*⁴ (for private use) this material was included, though still in loose form.

(5) It seems that Lemoyne, no doubt with Don Bosco's knowledge and encouragement, was planning a short biography of Margaret for publication in the *Catholic Readings*. When Don Bosco, on passing through France on his way to Spain in 1886, was the guest of Count Louis Colle in Toulon, he discussed the biography with the Count, who offered to defray all expenses of publication. Personal secretary Carlo Viglietti (who accompanied Don Bosco on the trip) wrote to Lemoyne conveying Don Bosco's "command." Lemoyne then reworked the material collected in *Documenti* and produced the popular biography entitled, *Scene morali di famiglia [...]*.⁵ The material underwent organization, but the reworking consisted largely in the use of a popular style and in the editing of some episodes.

⁴ From about 1885 and through succeeding years, Lemoyne edited all the biographical material he was collecting in view of a history of Don Bosco and his work. He had it printed for private use in large folio volumes that eventually reached 45 in number and that he appropriately entitled, "*Documenti...*" ("Documents for compiling the History of Don Bosco and the Oratory..."). The *Documenti* served as the immediate source for the nineteen volumes of the *Biographical Memoirs*.

⁵ *Scene morali di famiglia esposte nella vita di Margherita Bosco. Racconto edificante ed ameno* [Moralistic Family-Life Vignettes from the Life of Margaret Bosco. An edifying and entertaining story.] (Torino: Scuola Tipografica Salesiana, 1886.)

He presented the booklet to Don Bosco on his “name day” (celebrated on the Feast of St. John the Baptist, June 24).⁶

(6) Later a few more episodes came to Lemoyne’s knowledge, and these were included in the *Additions* to the *Documenti*. Finally, all this material was compiled and edited in the *Biographical Memoirs*.

Margaret Bosco’s Situation after Her Husband’s Death

The family that settled at the Little House after Francis Bosco’s death in 1817 comprised Margaret Bosco (29 years of age), her invalid mother-in-law Margaret Zucca (65 years old), and the Bosco boys—her stepson Anthony Joseph and her own sons Joseph Louis and John Melchior (9, 4 and 2 years old respectively).

After Francis Bosco’s death, the financial situation of the family headed by Margaret must have deteriorated considerably. They lived in real poverty, made desperately abject by the drought and famine of 1816-1818. For instance, it appears that the stable at the “little house” held only a cow and a calf. Margaret’s debts amounted to the value of all the animals in the stable that Francis had been building up at Biglione’s. Various claims were also lodged against Margaret.⁷

The first pages of the *Memoirs* are mostly a tale of poverty and hardship. Don Bosco gives quite a bit of space to the great drought and famine that gripped the area in the years 1816-1818.⁸ Such periodical calamities were a fact of life in that part of the country, but this one is known to have been especially

⁶ *IBM XVIII*, 57ff.

⁷ A Mrs. Lucia Pennaro claimed payment of a pension established on her behalf by the Bigliones as a lien on the revenues of the farm, and Mr. Biglione started legal action. The case was finally dismissed, but it may have further cut into Margaret’s small savings.

⁸ *MO-En*, 8-9.

severe. People were found dead along country tracks with grass in their mouths. Don Bosco writes:

My mother often used to tell us that she fed the family until she exhausted all her food. She then gave money to a neighbor to go looking for food to buy. That friend went round the various markets but was unable to buy anything even at exorbitant prices. After two days he came in the evening bringing back nothing but the money he had been given. We were all in a panic. We had eaten practically nothing the whole day. [...]

He adds that, after getting the family down on their knees for a brief prayer, his mother said: "Drastic circumstances demand drastic means." Then she and a neighbor friend butchered the calf—a desperate act, for the calf was the family's insurance.⁹

Don Bosco tells us also that at this time his mother received a very advantageous proposal of marriage from an unnamed gentleman—a proposal, however, which did not include the children. On being told that her sons could be entrusted to a good guardian, she firmly declined the offer: "All the gold in the world could never make me abandon these sons of mine."¹⁰

This was a courageous decision on Margaret's part. Widows, like orphans, in the nineteenth century were still, as in antiquity, the most fragile part of society, and on the other hand a widower would immediately look for a new situation. Many a widow would have snatched at the offer. Margaret's refusal was a heroic decision, and the Bosco children were lucky. In the same situation, three generations earlier, Philip Anthony Bosco, Don Bosco's grandfather, had not been so lucky.

Margaret knew what lay ahead for her: in circumstances of real poverty, she must now be the breadwinner. It was only by dint of the hardest kind of labor and at the cost of immense

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

personal sacrifice that Margaret would succeed in making ends meet and in feeding single-handedly a family of five. Anthony could not be expected to make any telling contribution for at least 6 years. Joseph would need 10 more years, and John an even dozen.

Apart from Don Bosco's mention of the hardship suffered by the family during the two years of drought and famine, we have no documentation by which to gauge just how the family fared. Francis Bosco had bought a few strips of land (8 of these have been identified), but they were barely sufficient to keep them fed. Even in good years the yield of the land was never high. The soil was practically depleted through intensive use, and the methods of cultivation were antiquated. The market price of cereals and wine was kept low by a protectionist agricultural policy designed to keep produce from other Mediterranean countries and from Russia off the market. Thus, if there were any surplus wheat, corn or rye to sell, it would fetch only inconsiderable sums.

Furthermore, most of the money available would have to be allocated for clothes and the occasional pair of shoes, and for agricultural and household implements. Some money had to be set aside also for such necessary commodities as oil, salt and sugar (government monopolies), and for such items as cheese and salted fish, which were the usual accompaniment to the daily bread. Otherwise all food, a poor basic fare, was obtained from the few small fields that Margaret worked. The cow in the stable provided some milk and the chicken coop a few eggs. Barnyard fowl would occasionally supplement this diet. Meat (beef or veal) might be had a few times a year. The vineyards produced enough grapes for wine to last a whole season for adults to drink (usually mixed with water).

To make matters worse in 1820-21 revolution broke out, the first of many such social and political upheavals to follow. John Bosco was 6 years old at the time and could not have been aware of this event and its significance. But the news of revolution, of abdication, of armed engagements in the area and

of executions must have reached even the Little House of Becchi, and Margaret Bosco, though busy with farm work and with rearing the children, had to be concerned.

Then there were family problems, to which we will refer shortly.

To recap—after Francis Bosco's death, the household presided over by Margaret was plunged into a deeper condition of poverty, even though they might be regarded as small independent owners. True Margaret's family members were never, as far as we know, just day laborers or certified paupers, hence never on the municipal dole, but they were poor. The small pieces of land they owned and worked, the one cow and calf, etc. barely kept them at subsistence level. Perhaps Margaret's poverty is best gauged from the fact that she could contribute practically nothing to John's education. He had to beg, obtain help from benefactors, compete for awards and gratuities, and rely on his own resourcefulness in order to survive as a student.

When in 1883 Don Bosco checked the galley proofs of his own biography authored by Albert du Boÿs, he came to the statement that Don Bosco's family "were fairly well-to-do peasants." He corrected that line to read, "they were poor peasants."¹¹

Such a personal experience of poverty was bound to be a factor in his vocational commitment to the poor, as well as in his spirituality.

Margaret, Christian Mother and Educator

The three Bosco boys could not have been less like each other. John, was lively, quick-witted, imaginative, enterprising, with a tremendous desire to discover and to learn. He was born, so it seemed, to be a leader. On the other hand, Joseph, John's sibling, was essentially a follower. Although occasionally moody and

¹¹ *EBM XV*, 54.

stubborn, he was generally gentle and mild-mannered, of a patient and retiring disposition.

By contrast, Anthony, Margaret's stepson, seems to have been a problem from the start. An orphan at the age of 9, he found himself a stranger in this home, even though as the eldest Bosco male child, according to Piedmontese custom, he would be the head of the family on reaching majority. But while growing up he appears to have been a somewhat "disturbed" youngster. He is described as disobedient and disrespectful towards his stepmother, in spite of her unfailing kindness and care. Later we see him obstinately and unreasonably opposed to John's further schooling. Eventually strife within the family would become so severe that Margaret would be forced to send John away to work as a stable boy on a neighboring farm until matters could be legally settled through the division of the Bosco estate among the children. But it is Margaret's merit to have nonetheless kept the family together and Anthony from being completely cut off.

Margaret is described as a saintly woman. Many examples of Margaret's spirituality and devotion are recorded in her biography. She was a strong Christian woman, a woman of character and fully devoted to the children and to service of God and neighbor.

But the biographer gives particular attention to her action as a Christian educator. And so do the witnesses at the diocesan process of Don Bosco's beatification. She saw to the religious upbringing of the children, taught them their catechism, took them to church, prepared them for the sacraments, etc. Above all she devoted her best efforts to their development as persons. What Margaret sought to give her children was moral character and inner spiritual resources for life and engagement with life. She trained them to a sense of God's presence, trust in God's loving Providence, honesty and integrity, love of hard work and fidelity to duty, sensibility to other people's needs expressed in concrete acts of service, Christian optimism and a lively hope for God's ultimate reward. These were the basic values by which

she lived and which she passed on to the children, to John in particular.

Margaret Bosco and John's Religious Education

Faith and Devotion

Several components worked together for John's moral, religious and spiritual development. The character of the Piedmontese people (for that was John's racial extraction) should be considered. The Piedmontese, the peasant in particular, was an industrious, hard working and persevering achiever, though not at all an unpleasant or unsociable person. Thus, like all the Boscos of his ancestry, John would be smitten with a passion for work—a passion, however, that in no way affected his temperament and ready smile. The Catholic faith had shaped Piedmontese history from remote antiquity. Catholic religious tradition was deeply rooted in the people, nourished by the parish as the center of religious and social life. New ideas stemming from revolutionary France at the time were globally regarded as suspect and dangerous, in fact unchristian. Only with difficulty would John be able to conceive of a social, religious and spiritual life outside the pale of traditional Roman Catholicism.

Margaret trained her children to a life of hardship and mortification: extremely simple fare, hard straw-filled mattresses and early rising. Above all, she took the greatest pains to teach the Catholic religion to them, to train them to be obedient, while assigning to them tasks that were compatible with their age.

The Bosco family prayed together morning and evening. Don Bosco writes in his *Memoirs of the Oratory*: "When I was still very small, she herself taught me to pray. As soon as I was old enough to join my brothers, she made me kneel with them morning and evening. We would all recite our prayers together, including the rosary."¹²

¹² *Mo-En*, 9.

In those days, praying the daily morning and evening prayers together, as also the Rosary in the evening, was the norm in Piedmontese families. Three times a day the *Angelus* in honor of Mary would be recited. Even though illiterate, Margaret knew by heart the main lessons of the diocesan catechism. As her biographer, Father Lemoyne, writes:

Margaret knew how powerful a force in a child's life such a Christian education is; she knew that teaching God's law every evening from the catechism and recalling it often during the day is the best means of making children obedient to their mothers. She therefore rehearsed the questions and answers of the catechism over and over until the children committed them to memory.¹³

Don Bosco himself confirms this and writes (referring to the time of his first Communion): "I had learnt all [the lessons in] the little catechism. [...] But because we lived far from the parish church and the parish priest did not know me, I had to rely almost exclusively on my good mother for my religious instruction."¹⁴

Thus it was that Margaret imprinted on the minds of her children the idea of a personal God always present to them. God's constant personal presence would always be a deep-rooted conviction of Don Bosco. From that moment on, he began to live under the gaze of the God of the Lord's Prayer, a God of infinite majesty, but also an infinitely loving God who gives us "our daily bread," forgives us our sins, and keeps poor sinners from falling again.

¹³ G. B. Lemoyne, *Scene morali di famiglia esposte nella vita di Margherita Bosco [...]*, 18-19.

¹⁴ *MO-En*, 32.

Margaret and John's Sacramental Life

When John was 7 or 8 years old, Margaret carefully prepared him for his first confession. "Sin" took on a horrible and frightening aspect for him. During Easter of 1827, with even greater care she prepared the boy for his first Communion. Three times during the preceding Lenten season she accompanied him to the confessional. At home she saw to it that he prayed or read a spiritual book, and she lavished on him her motherly advice. When the great day arrived, she kept him apart from everyone in silent recollection. At church she assisted him in his "preparation" and "thanksgiving" for Holy Communion, that is, she helped him repeat the prayers that the priest read aloud from the altar.¹⁵

Thus it was that under his mother's guidance young John had the personal experience of a quality sacramental life that later as a priest he would never tire of instilling in his followers.

Margaret's own personal religious and moral upbringing was of the strictest tradition, and the severe style in parent-child relationships characteristic of Piedmontese families made it even more exacting. These traits, however, were tempered by her constant appeal to reason and religion with lots of personal love and care. Margaret's success may be attributed to her wisdom and to an enlightened educational style that offset any constraining traditional severity.¹⁶

¹⁵ Cf. Francis Desramaut, *Don Bosco en son temps (1815-1888)* (Torino: SEI, 1996), 18-19, 25-26.

¹⁶ Don Bosco's own *Memoirs* (followed by Lemoyne) stress Margaret's educational style as anticipating Don Bosco's own educational method. Such representation is in line with the "agenda" of the *Memoirs*.

Margaret's Educational Style

With reference to her special care of John, in whom she recognized exceptional potentialities, the biographer writes:

She did not thwart the inclinations and natural gifts with which he was so richly endowed, but with foresight and careful solicitude she tempered them and directed them toward God. [...] John was endowed with an intensely sensitive nature; yet, in his early years it could have had lamentable consequences if overindulged. Margaret never debased the dignity of motherhood by unwise caresses or by condoning or tolerating anything less than perfect. And yet she never used harsh or violent ways that might exasperate him or diminish his love for her. Margaret never hesitated to repress his tantrums and caprices from the very start, even when he was too young for any moral responsibility, for there was a certainty and steadfastness of purpose about John—a trait that could easily give rise to pride. But when she saw him emerge as a leader for good among his companions, [...] not only did she allow him a certain freedom of action, but also sacrificed much to give him what he needed. By such loving gentleness she gained his heart and made him pliant to her maternal will.¹⁷

The statement that “Margaret never debased the dignity of motherhood by unwise caresses or by condoning or tolerating anything less than perfect” leaves one somewhat perplexed. But on the whole, in that peasant cultural context, Lemoyne’s portrait of Margaret as an educator rings true. Scores of examples of Margaret’s firmness, gentleness and wisdom as a Christian educator are given by Lemoyne both in the biography and in the Biographical Memoirs.

The biographer, however, is especially concerned with Margaret’s support of John, as she accompanied him step by step on his vocational journey. By the age of nine John had

¹⁷ *EBMI*, 32.

learned to read and write from some local person, but Margaret was now thinking about John's further education.

Margaret Fosters John's Vocation

John Bosco at Father Lacqua's Primary School in Capriglio (1824-25; [1825-26?])—Vocational Significance

Before we engage in a preliminary discussion of the vocation dream of 1824/25, (see below) we should briefly discuss John's first "formal," though not "official," schooling with Father Joseph Lacqua at nearby Capriglio, his mother's hometown.

Before the Napoleonic period there had been no compulsory public education in the Kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont. The children who were lucky enough to receive a primary education did so in some small local private school, usually run by a priest. Other children learned to read and write from some older person who had acquired those skills. But illiteracy was common, and only the clergy and an elite of professional people were "educated."

Napoleon had reorganized the school system and made primary education compulsory. In the Restoration King Charles Felix abolished the Napoleonic system, but as part of his comprehensive school reform of 1822,¹⁸ he decreed that primary schools should be established in every municipal town with compulsory attendance. These were to be tuition-free and locally financed. Although attendance was to be compulsory for all children 7 years of age and older, in practice the children from peasant families attended school in the "dead season" only, November through March, when work in the fields came to a halt. From April to October they would be available to help with farm work.

¹⁸ The school reform document entitled *Regie Paterni* (Royal Charter) was drafted by the Jesuit Luigi Taparelli d'Azeglio, brother of the liberal statesman Massimo d'Azeglio.

Primary school was a two-year program. The curriculum consisted of reading, writing and catechism for the first year, and Italian, arithmetic and Christian doctrine for the second. The teachers were usually priests or “clerics” vested with the clerical habit for that purpose by the bishop. None of them were trained teachers, for normal schools, or teachers’ training colleges, did not come into existence until the 1860s. But they had “an education” and they were available, for many priests opted for a teaching career rather than for ministry.

Since school was financed locally and was tuition-free, it stands to reason that only children living within the municipal jurisdiction should be admitted. The hamlet of Becchi was located in the municipal jurisdiction of Castelnuovo, not of Capriglio. Therefore John would have had to enroll at Castelnuovo. But that would entail walking 5 km (ca. 3 mi.) four times a day.¹⁹ Hence, Margaret tried to enroll him in her hometown of Capriglio, which was closer (2.5 km or 1.5 mi.). But the teacher Father Joseph Lacqua at first refused to admit him for the reasons just mentioned, certainly not because the school was overcrowded, or the teacher overworked.²⁰ Margaret Bosco would probably have to settle for Castelnuovo. But then Father Lacqua, making an exception to the rule, admitted him. This he probably did at Maria Giovanna (Marianna) Occhiena’s request. Margaret’s sister, Marianna, was then entering Father Lacqua’s service as housekeeper.²¹

¹⁹ Distance is the reason given by Don Bosco for not enrolling at Castelnuovo [*MO-En*, 9]. He would have to walk the 3 plus miles of country road in weather both fair and foul four times a day, for he would have to walk home for his midday meal of bread and soup, and then walk back to town for afternoon classes.

²⁰ Letters written by Lacqua to Don Bosco show that enrollment at these small local schools was light. Cf. *EBMI*, 358f and II, 22f.

²¹ *EBM* I, 73-77. For Maria Giovanna Occhiena’s short biographical sketch see later chapter in the *EBMI*.

John attended Father Lacqua's school at Capriglio during the winter of 1824-25, possibly also on and off during the following winter. But strong objections from Anthony (by then 17 years old) probably prevented any further attendance. For John that was the first year of primary school. Five years were to elapse before he could return to primary school at Castelnuovo (1830-31).

Those in-between years, as will be mentioned, were mostly years of trouble and pain: strife with Anthony, working as a stable boy away from home, a brief and contested year with Father Calosso and parting from him in tears after his sudden death.

But John's Capriglio school days, in spite of their short duration, were a profitable and happy experience as well as a turning point in John's life, for several reasons. In the first place, Father Lacqua provided guidance for Christian life. Don Bosco writes, Father Lacqua "was very attentive to my needs, seeing to my instruction and even more to my Christian education."²² It was at this time that John, between the age of 8 and 10, made his first confession and subsequently his first communion (on Easter, March 26, 1826),²³ for which, as noted above, Margaret carefully prepared him.

In the second place, schooling with Father Lacqua was important for its vocational significance. The good priest would certainly have raised the subject of the priesthood, which may have provided a stimulus for the vocation dream.

In addition, by the age of 9 John was becoming a leader among the peasant children in the neighborhood. He had begun to gather them together in order to entertain them with tricks and stories and to teach them their catechism. Margaret not only permitted John to carry on with this activity but also encouraged and supported him, and, perhaps divining the signs, decided to start him on formal schooling.

²² *MO-En*, 9-10.

²³ *Stella*, *DB I*, 7.

It is at this time, and in this conjunction of circumstances, that John had his prophetic vocation dream that disclosed for him, as Margaret interpreted it, the possibility of a priestly vocation. It is our understanding that the vocation dream occurred in a specific historical context with two concurring components: Father Lacqua's schooling and guidance and Margaret's intuition of John's true vocation in connection with his activities with the local children. This would call for further schooling, in fact, for a systematic education.

It was such a decision on Margaret's part that called forth Anthony's obstinate opposition, as will be related. The strife that ensued forced Margaret to send John away both for the sake of peace in the house and for his protection. His further schooling had to be delayed, and could be resumed only after the legal settlement with Anthony (1830).

Text of the *Vocation Dream* in Translation

A Dream

At that age I had a dream²⁴ that remained deeply impressed on my mind my whole life long.

[Children at play, fighting and swearing]

In my sleep [dream] I seemed to be standing near my home, in a very large courtyard, where a great number of children were gathered and were having fun. Some were laughing, some were playing games, not a few were swearing. When I heard those swear words, I immediately rushed among them and began to swing and yell at them to make them stop.

²⁴ The dream text is here translated from Father Joachim Berto's transcription of the original draft (corrected by Don Bosco): *Memoirs of the Oratory*: "Un sogno:" *MO-Berto*, 5-8; *FDB* 60 A9-12, Cf. *FDB* 57 A6-9. Cf. also *MO-En*, 18-21.

[Man of dignified bearing]

At that moment there appeared a man of dignified bearing, mature in years and nobly dressed. He wore a white cloak wrapped all about him, and his face shone with such brightness that I could not look directly at him. He addressed me by name, ordered me to take charge of those children, and added these words: "Not by blows but by gentleness and love will you have to win over these friends of yours. Start at once then with a lesson on the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue."

Confused and frightened, I replied that I was a poor and ignorant child, quite incapable of lecturing those youngsters on religion. At that moment those boys stopped their fighting, shouting and swearing, and gathered around the one who was speaking.

Hardly knowing what I was saying, I asked: "Who are you, and why are you ordering me to do the impossible?" "Precisely because such things seem impossible to you, you must make them possible through obedience and the acquisition of knowledge." "Where, by what means can I acquire knowledge?" "I will give you a teacher. Under her training you can become wise. Without her all wisdom is foolishness." "But who are you that speak in such a manner?" "I am the son of Her whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day." "My mother tells me not to mingle with people I don't know, unless I have her permission. So tell me your name."

[Woman of majestic bearing]

"Ask my mother what my name is." At that moment I saw a woman of majestic bearing standing beside him. She was wearing a mantle that shone all over as though every stitch in it were a very bright star.

[Children turned to animals: field of John's ministry]

Seeing from my questions and answers that I was more confused than ever, she beckoned me to come to her. She took me kindly by the hand and said, "Look." As I looked, I realized that those children had all run away, and saw that a large number of kids, dogs, cats, bears, and several other [kinds of] animals

had taken their place. "This is your field; this is where you are to work. Make yourself humble, steadfast and strong. And what you now see become of these animals, you must bring about for my children."

[Animals turned to lambs]

I looked around then, and in place of wild animals I saw as many gentle lambs, skipping, capering about and bleating as though in celebration of the man and the lady.

[John reassured by the Lady]

At that point, still dreaming, I began to cry, and I begged the lady to speak so that I could understand, because I did not know what the meaning of this could be. She then placed her hand on my head and said, "In good time you will understand everything." With that some noise woke me up, and everything disappeared.

[Confusion and feelings following the dream]

I was totally bewildered. My hands seemed to be sore from the punches I had given, and my face to hurt from the slaps I had gotten. After that, the memory of the Gentleman, of the Lady, and of the things said and heard, so occupied my mind that I could not get any more sleep that night.

[Comments by family members]

In the morning, excited as I was, I wasted no time in telling my dream [to the family]. [I told it] first to my brothers, who laughed at the whole thing, then to my mother and to my grandmother. Each one came up with a different interpretation. My brother Joseph said, "You're going to become a keeper of goats, sheep or other animals." My mother [mused], "Who knows, but you may become a priest." Anthony [quipped] harshly, "Perhaps you'll become the leader of a band of robbers." But grandmother, who, even though illiterate, knew her theology, said with finality, "*One shouldn't pay any attention to dreams.*"

I agreed with my grandmother. However, I was never able to put that dream out of my mind. The things I shall have to say later will show that there was some meaning in all this.

[*Dream later told to the Pope*]

I never mentioned these matters again, and my family paid little attention to them. But when I went to Rome in 1858 to confer with the Pope on the Salesian Congregation, he demanded to be told in detail everything that had even only the suggestion of the supernatural about it. It was only then that for the first time I related the dream I had had at the age of 9 or 10. The Pope ordered me to set it down in writing word for word and in all detail, and to leave it as an encouragement to the sons of the Congregation, which had been the object of my trip to Rome.

Brief Comment the Vocation Dream

(1) As already noted, Don Bosco relates this dream in his *Memoirs of the Oratory* in connection on the one hand with his early schooling under Father Joseph Lacqua, and on the other with his efforts at entertaining the local children. Father Lacqua himself may have set the dream in motion by broaching the idea of a priestly vocation in connection with John's expressing a desire "to study."²⁵ In conjunction with John's early successes with the local lads, the dream would have strengthened the idea of the priesthood. For it should be borne in mind that "study" (as distinct from basic literacy (learning how to read, write and compute) would in most cases relate to the priesthood.²⁶

²⁵ Father Lacqua's influence on John must have been significant, for the two remained in touch and maintained a correspondence: Don Bosco to Father Lacqua, Chieri, April 1840 and Chieri, May 1841 in Motto, *Epistolario*, I, 48. For Father Laqua's replies, cf. *EBMI*, 358-359; II. 22-23.

²⁶ It should be noted that Anthony's objections were against John's "studying," not against his acquiring basic literacy. As archival documents show, Anthony had learned to read and write, since he could sign his name. Joseph, on the other hand, could not sign his name, and was apparently illiterate.

Margaret may also have reinforced the suggestion of the priesthood on noticing John's special aptitudes. Perhaps that is what she had in mind in the first place when she decided to send John to "school." Her comment on the meaning of the dream would then have had a specific context. We are obviously in the field of conjecture, but of this much we may be sure: the dream did not come out of the blue.

(2) The dream may have occurred toward the end of June (1825) in connection with the feast of St. Peter (and St. Paul), to whom the village church was dedicated, when such liturgical texts as "Feed my lambs, Feed my sheep" would have provided the images. Or it could have occurred in connection with the feast of the Annunciation (March 25), the mention of the Angelus prayer in the dream being a possible allusion to it. The pastoral images in the dream could also have been suggested by the preaching heard in preparation of the Jubilee mandated by Pope Leo XII for the year 1825. The theme of the Jubilee was the pastoral ministry of pope, bishops and priests among the people.

(3) Don Bosco states that the dream remained deeply impressed on his mind his whole life long. It was in fact a recurring dream, as Don Bosco tells us expressly speaking of his vocational decision when a student in secondary school at Chieri. He writes: "The Morialdo dream [...] had recurred at other times and in a much clearer way. To follow its suggestion, I would have to choose the priesthood, toward which as a matter of fact I felt inclined."²⁷

(4) However, strangely enough and in spite of the Pope's order, only in 1873/4 (in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*) did he put it in writing, with the note that he had told it to Pius IX in 1858, and the dream had recurred at other times.²⁸ By the time Don

²⁷ *MO-En*, 110.

²⁸ Bishop John Cagliero testified at the process of beatification to having heard the dream from Don Bosco back from Rome, "in 1858 or 1859."

Bosco decided to set the dream in writing in his *Memoirs* (1873/4) a lot of water had passed under the bridge. Don Bosco had gone through vocational discernment, had made the most important vocational choices, and had seen the extraordinary results of his life's work—God's work, as he understood it. Hence the dream was written down with an inbuilt interpretative structure of words and images.

That with the years the dream acquired increasing importance, and was interpreted on the basis of Don Bosco's ongoing experience, may be gleaned from an interesting episode. In 1887 Don Bosco, old and very ill, attended the consecration of the church of the Sacred Heart in Rome. While celebrating Mass he was overcome with emotion and repeatedly broke into tears with loud sobs. Later, he explained to his secretary, Father Charles Viglietti. "With the mind's eye I revisited the scenes of my childhood, when at about the age of 10 I dreamt of the Congregation. I could so clearly see and hear my brothers and my mother arguing over the dream."²⁹

The Trouble with Anthony

It appears that the trouble with John's half-brother Anthony started after that first year of schooling with Father Lacqua in Capriglio (1825) and that it got serious during or after the second year (1826). It was a bitter disagreement accompanied by violent verbal exchanges that threatened to break the household apart, soured the Bosco children's relationship for life, and put Margaret's ability to keep things under control to the severest test. The root cause of the trouble was not Anthony's opposition to John's acquiring literacy, for he himself had learned to read and write and was simply not an illiterate brute. Nor was any great need of help in the fields the basic issue. Rather the issue seems to have been whether John, after acquiring literacy, should

²⁹ Viglietti, *Original Chron*, VII, 4, May 16, 1887, *FDBM* 1226 D8. Cf. *IBM XVIII*, 341.

further his education at school, perhaps with the priesthood or a profession in view. If this was the case, what brought on the confrontation was Anthony's inability (understandable in that socio-cultural context) to see why John should be allowed "to study," indeed at the family's expense.

Margaret, of course, did not agree. This could only mean that she had already come to a decision that John must continue his education ("his studies"), under the circumstances most probably with the priesthood in view.

Margaret's Options

It is probably true, as Lemoyne reports, that due to his intemperate character Anthony threatened John (he may have gone even farther) and was disrespectful toward Margaret.³⁰ Lemoyne may have had this information from Don Bosco himself.

What was Margaret to do? The biographical tradition presents the eventual division of the Bosco estate (1830) as the culmination of a protracted struggle between Margaret and Anthony. It says in effect that Margaret was just waiting for Anthony to reach majority (February 1829) to force her stepson out. In collusion with her brother Michael, with her sister Marianna, and perhaps even with the boys' legal guardian (John Zucca), Margaret "planned" to free John from Anthony's pressure by dividing the Bosco estate. For this action Margaret would have to wait until Anthony reached majority. He would naturally resist this "plan" as disadvantageous to him. But he could be forced to accept it, if the minors Joseph and John requested it through their legal guardian. Meanwhile, to avoid

³⁰ An addition to *Documenti* I, 26 in Lemoyne's hand records that Anthony insulted Margaret by calling her, "marastra del diavolo," (devil of a stepmother) [ASC 110 Lemoyne-Doc., FDB 966 C11]. This is softened in *EBMI*, 48.

further unpleasantness, Margaret decided to send John away until such time as the “plan” could be put into execution.

Over against such a drastic presentation, one should bear in mind that John Zucca was the legal guardian of all the Bosco orphans (Anthony’s as well as Joseph’s and John’s).³¹ And, as Stella remarks, the fact that Anthony was about to reach majority and thinking of marriage casts a different light on the matter of the division of the estate. Such division would then appear to be a less dramatic, if not an entirely normal, property settlement.³² There may have been a council and a plan (probably devised by the legal guardian himself), but the division of the estate itself, while not welcomed by Anthony, was finally agreed to as a practical necessity.

John’s Two Years of Service away from Home

Meanwhile, however, in 1827, two years before Anthony’s majority, something had to be done to ease the strained situation at home. The solution was to put John out of harm’s way by placing him with a friendly family as a stable boy.

It appears that John was first sent to a *cascina* called C ampora, in nearby Serra di Buttigliera, but things didn’t work out. He was then sent to inquire further out, and was hired by the Moglias, in their *cascina* in the township of Moncucco, some 5

³¹ John Zucca was Francis Bosco’s brother-in-law and a nephew of Francis’ mother (Margaret Zucca). In accordance with Piedmontese custom, the guardian was chosen from the line of the first born (Anthony’s).

³² This is Stella’s comment in *DB:LW*, 21, Note 41. In *DB:LW*, 13 and 21, Stella believes that some kind of family council did take place, and a plan was formed to ease the troubled situation. This plan included both sending John away for a while, and dividing the estate once Anthony reached majority. John Zucca as legal guardian, would have been the one to ease Anthony’s anxiety on the matter.

km (ca. 3 mi.) northeast of Castelnuovo. The years 1827-1829 mark the period of John's service away from home.

Mr. Louis Moglia was not going to hire John. One should bear in mind that for young men, and even children, to be hired as stable boys, cowherds, or farm hands was common enough. But hiring normally took place on or after March 25 (the feast of the Annunciation), the beginning of the working season. It would take place through negotiations with the boy's family at the fair of Castelnuovo. John applied directly in February, at least one month too early. This, perhaps in addition to hard times, was the chief reason why Mr. Moglia was not in favor of hiring John. He did so only when his wife intervened. Mrs. Moglia (Dorothy Filippello) was from Castelnuovo; she was certainly an acquaintance, and perhaps a friend of Margaret's, contrary to Lemoyne's statement.³³ The Moglias were never to regret having hired John.

The Moglia period was externally trouble-free. As stable boy and cowherd John's duties were mainly to see that the stable was mucked out and that the animals were fed, watered and taken to pasture. He also did light work on the farm, such as tending vines. It is unlikely that he would be asked to do any heavy work. He received the customary wage as well as a bonus.³⁴ His meals, his room and his bed were probably better than those at home. He was loved and given considerable freedom and leisure for his reading and devotions. He was allowed freedom to attend early daily Mass at the parish church of Moncucco and to gather children for a kind of oratory.³⁵

Nevertheless, the Moglia period must have been a severe trial for John. Although we cannot be certain, he seems to have been cut off from the family. One wonders if he could go home occasionally, or if Mamma Margaret ever visited him.

³³ *EBMI*, 143.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

Nevertheless, this period appears to have been for John one of growth “in maturity, wisdom and grace.”

Don Bosco (for personal reasons?) does not mention this episode in his *Memoirs*, and biographers speculate what the reason might have been. Lemoyne, not having succeeded in his attempts to get information from him on this point, provided a faulty reconstruction of the period.

John's Return from Moglia's after the Feast of All Saints (November 3, 1829)

The Moglia period came to an end, unexpectedly for John, but presumably in accordance with “the plan” mentioned above, through the intervention of John's uncle, Michael Occhiena.³⁶ The time was right because on November 3 (after the feasts of All Saints and All Souls) John's second contract year came to an end. Meanwhile Anthony had turned 21 the previous February. Thus could “the plan” be put into effect. Uncle Michael seems to have been chosen as the “mediator.” Passing through on his way to Chieri, he must have discussed John's release with Louis and Dorothy Moglia, and as a result John left that very day. He showed up at home that evening and Margaret scolded him for leaving his employers, presumably only for Anthony's benefit, as Lemoyne also believes.³⁷

When Uncle Michael arrived, the family must have notified Anthony of what they intended to do. That he resisted the proposal to divide the estate can be argued from the fact that

³⁶ The division of the estate itself seems to have been fairly amicable (at least, not contentious). This may have been due to assurances given to Anthony by the legal guardian John Zucca, and to appeasing concessions by Joseph, John and Margaret. For example, after his marriage and starting a family Anthony was allowed use of the Little House. Margaret had gone to live with Joseph at the Sussambrino farm, and John was at school (Castelnuovo and Chieri).

³⁷ *EBMI*, 156.

he was still a troublesome objector through the following year (1829-1830), when John was studying with Father John Calosso. But finally, perhaps through legal guardian John Zucca's intervention, he was persuaded. Anthony ceased to be a factor in 1831 (after the division of the estate).

A few days after returning home from the Moglia farm, John met Father John Calosso who took John under his protection as teacher and spiritual director. The circumstances and the importance of this encounter are to be noted.

John Bosco's Meeting with Father John Calosso

Each of Castelnuovo's four villages, Morialdo being one of them, had a chapel endowed with a small land benefice. These chapels were often vacant, depending on whether any priest would accept such meager appointment. In the summer of 1829 Father Calosso, at the age of nearly 70 years, came to Morialdo as chaplain, when young John Bosco was still serving as a stable boy at the Moglia farm. The benefice of the chapel had been increased by a generous endowment from a local gentleman, Mr. Spirito Sartoris (The Sartoris family lived in Turin.).

John returned to Becchi after All Saints' Day 1829. As he writes in his *Memoirs*, he met Father Calosso, when the latter had been in that chaplaincy for only a few months.³⁸ Don Bosco simply says that the encounter took place on the occasion of a parish "mission" being preached in the town of Buttigliera. Actually it was on the occasion of the preaching of the special jubilee proclaimed by Pope Pius VIII to mark his election to the Chair of Peter (March 31, 1829).

At the parish church of Buttigliera a triduum preparatory to the jubilee observances was held on the evenings of Thursday-Saturday, November 5-7, 1829. It was on this occasion that Father Calosso and young John Bosco happened to

³⁸ *MO-En*, 36.

meet on the road after the service on the evening of November 5, 1829.

Father Calosso, struck by John's spirit and intelligence, invited Margaret with her son for an interview, and John began taking lessons at the rectory almost immediately. At first John attended classes early in the morning, returning to work in the fields the rest of the day. This arrangement satisfied Anthony only for a while. As Anthony could not be placated, John moved in with Fr. Calosso as a full-time student and servant. Just when it appeared that John's future was assured, for the good priest was determined to see to his education, tragedy struck. Father Calosso died suddenly from a cerebral hemorrhage, on November 21, 1830.

John so grieved over the death of his benefactor that he took sick and deserved to be reprimanded in a dream. Margaret then sent him to her family in Capriglio to convalesce, and upon his return she decided that he must continue his normal schooling—this time at Castelnuovo.

John Bosco at the Primary School of Castelnuovo

John Bosco began to attend the primary school of Castelnuovo in December 1830. His grieving and illness after Father Calosso's sudden death on November 21 were the reasons for this late enrollment.³⁹

In his *Memoirs* Don Bosco writes that he had to walk 5 km (3+ mi.) four times a day to and from school.⁴⁰ This means that he walked to Castelnuovo from Becchi in the morning, returned to Becchi after the morning session for the noonday meal, walked again to Castelnuovo in the early afternoon, and returned to Becchi in the evening—in winter! But since brother Joseph sometime that winter became a sharecropper at the Matta farm on the Sussambrino hill, a mere 2 km. from Castelnuovo,

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 49 (“twelve-and-a-half miles a day”).

and Mamma Margaret moved in with him, John would have a much shorter distance to walk.

By and by Uncle Michael Occhiena found a place for John at Castelnuovo with a Mr. John Roberto, tailor and musician. At first John only used that base for the noonday meal (which he brought with him daily). Then on cold and stormy days he would sleep over (perhaps skipping supper). Finally he became a full time boarder. For a reasonable sum (payable also in corn and wine) Mr. Roberto agreed to provide John with hot soup noon and evening and with a place to sleep (a little opening under the staircase). Margaret would provide bread for John on a weekly basis.

John was now well over 15 years of age and found himself in class with much younger children. His previous schooling and cultural development had been informal and discontinuous. The clothes and the shoes he wore were those of a "cowherd from Becchi." In spite of this, the first four months were a happy experience for John. This was due largely to the fact that the teacher, Father Emmanuel Virano (one of two assistant parish priests), was a capable and concerned person, who gave John a chance to show his character, intelligence and memory.

In the last few months of the school year, however, things took a turn for the worse. In April 1831 Father Virano was appointed pastor of nearby Mondonio, and Father Nicholas Moglia, a 75-year old priest, succeeded him as teacher at Castelnuovo. John had already met this priest at the Moglia farm, and had taken some lessons in Latin from him. Apparently incapable of maintaining discipline and full of prejudices, he dismissed the "cowherd from Becchi" as a hopeless case, humiliated him at every opportunity, and allowed the class to torment him. In his *Memoirs*, Don Bosco does not mention Father Moglia by name; he merely writes that the substitute was

“a man who could not keep order, and fairly scattered to the wind all that I had learnt in the preceding months.”⁴¹

During his stay at Castelnuovo, John met with his first real temptations in the guise of “bad companions” who suggested that he cut classes, gamble, and steal.⁴² This may seem strange but not impossible, even if one takes into consideration the educational purpose of the *Memoirs*.⁴³ In any case, weekly visits from Margaret, his early moral training, prayer and the sacraments (which he continued to practice faithfully and not merely to comply with school regulations), and devotion to the *Madonna del Castello* (the local Virgin) saw him through.

Significance of the Year at Castelnuovo

The year at Castelnuovo was not a total loss, even though progress was meager. First of all, to quote Stella,

John’s schooling with Father Lacqua at Capriglio might be regarded as an episode inserted into the normal life of a peasant [leading no farther]. The year in the municipal school of Castelnuovo, on the other hand, figured as the initial link of the established [educational] network making connection with Chieri and Turin.⁴⁴

Secondly, his disappointment in trying to approach the local clergy, whom he found cold and distant, as contrasted with the availability of Fathers Calosso and Virano, showed him the necessity of a completely different approach to young people, should he ever become a priest. Stella has some pointed comments on John’s adolescent inability to “break the ice” and

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 49-50.

⁴³ In reading the passages regarding the two teachers and the “bad companions” one should keep in mind the “educational purpose” of the *Memoirs*.

⁴⁴ Stella, *DBEcSoc*, 29.

on his critical evaluation, certainly prompted by love, of the behavior of the local priests.⁴⁵

Thirdly, in his free time John began to take up useful hobbies. From Mr. Roberto (musician and tailor) he learnt music, to play the spinet and the organ, and to sew and cut clothes. After consulting his mother, he began to spend a couple of hours a day as apprentice to Mr. Evasio Savio (the local blacksmith). As yet he had no inkling that these skills would later come in handy. But when one bears in mind the educational purpose of the *Memoirs*, one should not attach too much importance to these extracurricular activities in their actual historical setting.

Meanwhile, however, disappointed and somewhat demoralized by his second teacher's perverseness, John simply had to wait for the release of the summer-autumn vacation at the Sussambrino farm.

John Bosco's Summer Vacation at the Cascina Matta of Sussambrino

As already indicated, during the winter of 1830-1831, after the division of the Bosco estate and as John was attending municipal school at Castelnuovo, Joseph Bosco with partner Joseph Febbraro became a tenant farmer at the cascina of a certain Mr. Matta. Margaret went to live with Joseph at Sussambrino, and John joined them after his school year at Castelnuovo, for the summer months of 1831. Rosa Febbraro, Joseph Febbraro's daughter, could recall how John Bosco employed his time studying.

A Mr. Turco, who owned land and a vineyard adjoining the Matta farm at Sussambrino, in the region called *Renenta*,

⁴⁵ Stella, *DB:LW*, 20-21. Don Bosco's evaluation of teachers and clergy in educational-pastoral terms throughout his school and formation days is consonant with the educational purpose of the *Memoirs*.

would encourage John when he looked downhearted. Young Joseph Turco, his son, testified at the Process of Beatification in 1892 that John had told him and his sister Lucy of a dream that reassured him as to his vocation.⁴⁶

Over the summer and early autumn, in the quiet rural isolation of the farm John, brother Joseph and Margaret (joined no doubt by her brother Michael and her sister Marianna) could calmly evaluate the Castelnuovo experience. The decision was for John not to return to Castelnuovo, but “to go for broke” and apply to the “Royal College,” the public secondary school of Chieri.

Mamma Margaret’s decision to enroll John in the public school of Chieri was a landmark decision. It was an act of faith as much as an act of hope. She was launching her son on the sea of life and of his vocation, with full trust in God’s guiding Providence and with inner certainty about the ultimate outcome.

Margaret would always henceforth stand in support and be available with encouragement and advice. But he was set free, and the decisions will be his to make and to live by.

The image that John projects in secondary school is that of an exuberant teenager who experiences relative freedom for the first time, and sees both its dangers and its possibilities. He quickly finds his space, quickly gains moral ascendancy and becomes a leader among his peers. Tackling his schoolwork and study seriously and successfully by the aid of a prodigious memory, he is able to devote quality time to religious exercises, and still finds time for reading, working and playing.

At Chieri John “blooms,” and one is at first led to think that all his troubles are over. This, of course, is not the case. But he is on his way.

⁴⁶ *POCT*, Session 89, July 4, 1892, *ASC* 161: Deposizione dei Testi; *FDBM* 2,135 C2-11.

John Bosco at the Public Secondary School of Chieri (1831-1835). Significance of Margaret's Decision

Chieri is an ancient provincial city located some eight miles southeast of Turin and as many miles west of Castelnuovo, in central Piedmont. In the 1830s it was a city of some 9,000 inhabitants. John found it terribly exciting. Don Bosco writes in his *Memoirs*:

After the loss of so much time, it was finally decided to send me to Chieri, where I could continue seriously with my schooling. [...] One who has been raised in the backwoods and has never seen anything beyond a few small country villages is easily impressed by any little novelty [to be found in a city].⁴⁷

John Bosco would spend a total of ten years in this pretty provincial town, four in secondary school and six at the seminary before his ordination in 1841. The years he spent here at the public secondary school and in the Seminary figure importantly in his overall education and formation, and the school in particular turned out to be a truly formative experience for him.

The public secondary school of Chieri was one of many such schools established in the school reform mandated by King Charles Felix in 1822, after Napoleon's defeat and the Congress of Vienna. Like all schools in the Restoration, it was staffed by Church people and administered (in Chieri's case by the Dominicans) in strict conformity with the Reform.

Basically, the image of John that is projected in Don Bosco's *Memoirs* is that of an exuberant teenager who experiences relative freedom for the first time, and sees both its dangers and its possibilities. He appears as a compatible extrovert who finds his space, quickly gains moral ascendancy, and becomes a leader among his peers. Breezing through his schoolwork and study with the aid of a prodigious memory, he

⁴⁷ *MO-En*, 60 (translation corrected).

devotes most of his time to religious exercises, reading, working and playing.⁴⁸ Yet John shows remarkable interiority and intensity, a persevering striving after holiness.

Enrolling John in the public secondary school was a momentous decision on Margaret's part. It was also a courageous act of faith, for it meant launching her son on a vocational journey over which she would have no further control. It was an act of faith that entailed complete trust in divine Providence as well as on her son's resourcefulness.⁴⁹

He will have to face daunting trials, and Margaret will surely stand in support and remain available in the background, but she will let his advisors and spiritual directors guide him on his vocational journey.

Margaret Bosco in a Supporting Role

Don Bosco's autobiographical Memoirs speak sparingly of his mother from this point on. Lemoyne, in his *Life of Margaret Bosco*, provides abundant anecdotal and edifying material, but not until we see her established at the Oratory caring for her son's "little orphans" do we realize that she was never "absent."

A few significant instances in which Margaret appears and speaks in support are recorded, and are worth mentioning.

When John, still in secondary school (1834-35), was struggling to discern his vocation and was planning to enter the Franciscan novitiate, Margaret, unlike some who were trying to dissuade him, stood by any decision he would make, and her memorable words are recorded:

⁴⁸ In public school John passed the first three years in one. In the seminary he challenged examinations and skipped fourth theology.

⁴⁹ Whereas primary school was gratuitous, substantial fees were charged in secondary school. John had to rely on his own resourcefulness, after-school jobs, help from benefactors and academic prizes. John's family, Mamma Margaret and brother Joseph, were not in a position to make any significant contribution.

I want you above all to consider carefully the step you will take; then follow your vocation without regard to anyone. The most important thing is the salvation of your soul. The pastor urged me to make you change your mind because I might need your help in the future. [...] Don't worry about me. I ask nothing of you, and I expect nothing from you. Remember this: I was born poor, I have lived poor, and I want to die poor. [...] If you decide to become a secular priest and should unfortunately become rich, I will never pay you a single visit!⁵⁰

Following the advice of Father Giuseppe Cafasso of Castelnuovo, professor of moral theology at the Pastoral Institute of Turin, of his schoolmate and friend, Luigi Comollo, and of Catholic laypeople of the parish in Castelnuovo, his benefactors, John resolved his vocations "crisis" by opting for the diocesan seminary of Chieri. He was vested with the clerical habit in his parish church of Castelnuovo (October 25, 1835). The pastor and some generous laypeople supplied all his clerical clothing.

The evening before his departure for Chieri and the seminary, Mamma Margaret spoke "memorable words" to him:

My dear John, you have put of the priestly habit. [...] Remember this, however, It's not the habit that honors your state, but the practice of virtue. If you should ever begin to doubt your vocation, then—for heaven's sake!—do not dishonor this habit. Put it aside immediately. I would much rather have a poor farmer for a son than a priest who neglects his duties. [...]⁵¹

In October 1839 Joseph moved back to Becchi from the farm where he had worked as a sharecropper, with Mamma Margaret and his growing family. (He had gotten married in 1833.) They lived in the house that Joseph had been building.

⁵⁰ *EBMI*, 221-222; 215.

⁵¹ *MO-En*, 126; *EBMI*, 279.

Meanwhile John in the seminary had lapsed into a lingering, and ultimately serious, illness owing to the death of his friend and confidant, Luigi Comollo (1839) and some theological emphases having to do with predestination. It was a protracted sickness of the mind as well as the body. Margaret (totally unaware of the fact) one day paid him a visit and found him sick in bed. She had brought him a loaf of his favorite hearth bread and a bottle of wine. He ate, drank, fell asleep, and awoke "cured."⁵²

But the cure was not instantaneous. Mamma Margaret nursed him back to health through the summer-fall holidays of 1840, and after this he was able to get back to his books. He felt so confident that with the archbishop's consent he challenged examinations and skipped fourth theology.⁵³ After receiving various orders through the fifth year of theology, John was ordained a priest in Turin on June 5, 1841.⁵⁴

The long-awaited day arrived for Margaret: Thursday (June 10), the feast of Corpus Christi, when John (Don Bosco now) celebrated his "solemn-high" Mass in his own parish church in the presence of his family and all the people he loved so well.

When the festivities were over, alone with his family, Margaret took him aside and again spoke to him "memorable words" (recorded by the biographer):

You are a priest, and you celebrate Mass. You are therefore closer to Jesus Christ. But remember that to begin to say Mass is to begin to suffer. [...] I am sure that you will pray for me every day whether I am living or dead, and that's enough for me. From now on you must think only of saving souls, and you must not worry about me.⁵⁵

⁵² *EBMI*, 377f.

⁵³ *MO-En*, 165; *EBMI*, 363-366.

⁵⁴ *MO-En*, 166-167; *EBMI*, 383-388.

⁵⁵ *EBMI*, 388.

After ordination Don Bosco received offers of lucrative employment, relatives and friends of Margaret tried to induce her to persuade her son to accept one of these offers, so that she and the family could better their living condition. She flatly rejected the proposal as unworthy.⁵⁶

Don Bosco himself, on advice of Father Giuseppe Cafasso (his supporter, mentor and spiritual director) rejected those offers, and enrolled in the Pastoral Institute of Turin (November 3, 1841)—and the rest is history.

While in training at Pastoral Institute (1841-1844) Don Bosco, guided by Father Cafasso, initiated the work of the oratory in behalf of young people at risk. While serving as chaplain in the institutions of Marchioness Juliet Barolo (1844-1846), Don Bosco devoted all his spare time and energy to *his* boys (the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales), with no fixed abode, until the Oratory could settle in rented quarters (a shed) on the property of a certain Mr. Pinardi. But wandering from place to place in the dead of winter so undermined his health that he fell ill of a very serious life-threatening illness.⁵⁷

Mamma Margaret and brother Joseph rushed to his bedside. His life was spared, but he had to take a leave of nearly four months (July-October) at brother Joseph's house at Becchi, while Mamma Margaret nursed him back to health. During his absence Father Giovanni Borel, a fellow chaplain at Marchioness Barolo's institutions, with other priests, ran the oratory.

Margaret Bosco's Last Years (1846-1856) as Mother of Don Bosco's "Orphans"

Don Bosco returned to the Oratory on November 3, 1846, but not alone. Mamma Margaret generously offered herself to

⁵⁶ *EBM* II, 30.

⁵⁷ *MO-En*, 291-193; *EBM* II, 381-387.

accompany him, for he had not yet fully recovered. They took up residence in a few rented rooms of the Pinardi house. She would care for him for him as well as for the increasing number of poor boys given shelter at the “Home” established the following year (1847). The biographer writes: “She was the first [woman] to raise the banner of charity in behalf of [Don Bosco’s] poor, forsaken boys, and they rightly called her mother.”⁵⁸ As she saw the crying need, she sent for her cedar chest that contained her wedding trousseau and fineries, and decided to stay. And truly, having accompanied her son on his vocational journey every step of the way, Margaret did not hesitate to give of her very self. She lived her last ten years with him in Turin and became a mother to the children at the Oratory.

Mamma Margaret’s Decade (1846-1856)

Don Bosco’s return to Turin with his mother after his deathly illness ushered in a decade that Don Bosco and the Salesians after him have since regarded as the “heroic age” of the Oratory and of the Salesian Society. It was the decade through which Don Bosco gathered and formed the first nucleus of the Congregation, the period of Don Bosco’s personal and direct involvement in that great educational experiment that produced the Salesian method (later called the Preventive System). It was also Mamma Margaret’s decade. Don Bosco based his educational method on affective relationships, such as would be at work in a good Christian family. He fostered the “family spirit” because it provided a taste of family life to youngsters who had perhaps never had such an experience. The family spirit united everyone by bonds of true love, as “one in heart and soul.” Don Bosco was the father and Margaret the mother figure of this family. She cared for the children of the Oratory as her own, and

⁵⁸ *EBM* II, 402. By and by other women volunteered to help caring for the boys, but none could ever match Mamma Margaret’s constant and total dedication.

they in turn accepted and loved her as their mother. They called her “mamma,” just as Don Bosco did.

Testimonies

Biographer Lemoyne has preserved numerous accounts of Margaret’s activity during her ten years with Don Bosco as mother of the Oratory family.⁵⁹ These reports, no doubt originating with Don Bosco himself or with persons who had known or lived with her, stress in particular her motherly patience, care and loving kindness toward the youngster.

The two earliest and most illustrious sons of Don Bosco, Father Michael Rua (Don Bosco’s first successor) and Bishop John Cagliero (founder and guide of the Salesian work in South America) testified:

I knew her for eight years and lived with her for four. She was a devout and truly Christian woman, endowed with a generous heart, as well as with great courage and prudence. She was totally devoted to the education of us her children, her adopted family. I was struck, as were all my companions, with admiration for the great generosity and self-sacrificing love that prompted her to leave her home and to undertake the difficult and exhausting task of caring for so many little orphans. We all called her “mamma,” for we truly respected and loved her as a mother.

I have known Don Bosco’s mother personally at the Oratory in Turin. She was mother to me for five years, that is, to the day of her death. Good Mamma Margaret, as we called her, was a wonderful woman, endowed with all the virtues of a truly Christian mother. She was gentle, approachable, patient, and full of love for all of us poor little orphans.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Lemoyne edited these reports (first published in his *Life of Margaret Bosco*) in Volumes II-V of the *Biographical Memoirs*.

⁶⁰ *POCT (Processus Ordinarius Curiae Taurinensis)*: Rua, Session 358 (1895) and Cagliero, Session 145 (1893). Young John Cagliero of Castelnuovo was himself an orphan.

The Salesians Father Rua and Bishop Cagliero (who gave those testimonies) had been boarders at the Home of the Oratory. The layman Mr. John Villa, on the other hand, had only attended the weekend youth activities of the Oratory, but his testimony is no different.

I knew Don Bosco's mother whom we, oratory lads, affectionately called Mamma Margaret. She was the typical peasant homemaker, a woman imbued with a genuinely Christian spirit. Back at her home place of Castelnuovo she had enjoyed the esteem and respect of everyone. Once settled at the Oratory in Turin, she truly took on the role of a good and caring mother to all of us young lads. We loved her and trusted her completely, and were greatly edified by her virtue.⁶¹

As time went by, other women joined her in that service, including her own elder sister Marianna Occhiena and Father Michael Rua's mother, Giovanna Maria Ferrero Rua. But Margaret was the first and remained to her dying day the children's mother par excellence.

Mama Margaret's Death and Parting Words

In mid-November 1856: Mamma Margaret was stricken with pneumonia, which quickly developed into a fatal illness. While her sons stood at her bedside, her last words to John were: "God knows how much I have loved you my whole life long. I hope I can love you even more in heaven. [...] Tell our dear boys that I worked for them and loved them as a mother. Please ask them to pray for me."⁶²

⁶¹ POCT (*Processus Ordinarius Curiae Taurinensis*), Villa, Session 211 (1894).

⁶² EBMV, 372.

At these words, Don Bosco broke in tears and loud sobs. Margaret motioned for him to leave the room and died peacefully in her elder son Joseph's arms, "in total poverty" (November 25, 1856).

The Church Looks at Margaret Bosco

The diocesan process for Margaret Bosco's beatification came to a close in April 1996. This was 100 years since the completion of Don Bosco's own diocesan process, and 150 since her leaving the hamlet of Becchi to accompany her son to the city of Turin.

As we look to this extraordinary Christian woman, we ask ourselves, Would John Bosco have been *Don Bosco*, the father and educator of countless young people, without her teaching, example, inspiration, and support? This is why the Church wishes to offer her as an example to all mothers—not because she was the mother of a saint, but because she herself was a saintly Christian mother.