

Paolo Albera's Instructions Early Efforts to Inculcate the Spirit of Don Bosco

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When Saint John Bosco died on January 31, 1888, there was some concern in Church circles that the work he began would not last another generation. The saint's own genius and charismatic leadership had brought together an army of laity who promoted the cause of poor and abandoned youth. He had gathered a group of disciples. Many had become attached to him in their growing years; others were attracted to a community where they could work as a team on behalf of young people and children in need. These core groups grew until he formed them into the Salesian Society with the "aggregated institute" of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: a flourishing religious family with over 1,500 members at the time of his death, but would it last? Many, including the Holy See, had their doubts.

Among Saint John Bosco's early disciples, Paolo Albera (1845-1921) was one who was called upon to articulate and defend the founder's spirit. Even as a youth, he had been numbered among Don Bosco's most beloved. He served in a variety of leadership positions from his teenage years until his election as rector major in 1910.

Perhaps his most significant role before becoming superior general was that of spiritual director general of the Salesian Society, a post he held from 1892 until 1910. During this period he was responsible for the spiritual and religious formation of the membership. He saw to the general ordering of all phases of formation among the Salesians, and exerted a major

influence among the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in this same sector. Beyond the technical and administrative, Paolo Albera promoted the spiritual renewal of Salesians through pastoral visits, days of recollection, the Spiritual Exercises (otherwise known as the annual retreat), and in his writings.

1. John Bosco Remembered in Paolo Albera's Pastoral Visits

1.1. Trained in Leadership by the Founder

It is important to note that Don Albera came to his "office job" on the Superior Chapter after many years of active ministry. The change caused him intense moral suffering, for he was forced to give up any ongoing direct contact with young people. However, his early roles in both Italy and France had taught him how to articulate the Salesian mission. While director in Sampierdarena he had learned to be Don Bosco's spokesperson in Genoa's ecclesiastical and civic circles. Increased authority and distance forced him to perfect this role while provincial in France. It was Don Albera who represented Salesian thinking and Don Bosco's apostolic project before Marseilles' social and administrative experts; Don Albera made the connections for funding, stirring the Catholic public to embrace Salesian ideals on behalf of poor youth, so that the Marseillaises saw him as a faithful reproduction of Don Bosco himself.²¹²

During his early years as provincial in France, Don Albera was indeed present when Don Bosco came to engage in negotiations with local bishops, civic authorities or business and social leaders. He accompanied Don Bosco on his visits across the country, and even though it was Don Albera himself who had done the groundwork to arrange these encounters, he withdrew into the background to let Don Bosco take the center

²¹² Cf. "Moteur et Moteur," *Bulletin Salésien* 13.4 (April 1891): 67.

stage. Those who were present on such occasions noticed the provincial's humility,²¹³ but for Don Albera such a stance was only natural. Remembering Don Bosco's journeys in France, he spoke of the universal enthusiasm with which the saint was received. This enthusiasm was translated into concrete support—financial, moral and political—for his work among the young and the poor. Yet, more than social activism, it was the holiness of the “good priest” that impressed him and the French public most.

The echo of the enthusiastic reception Don Bosco received in Paris, Lille, and the other great cities of France reached the furthest regions of America. Humanly speaking, no one could offer an explanation either in America or in Europe why such a prodigious movement should center on this foreign priest. He was nothing to look at; he was incapable of preaching in French; he could not capture the hearts of the crowds with his eloquence. As diverse as were the beliefs of individuals, everyone agreed that the enthusiasm of the people was a response to the holiness that shone on the face of the good priest, that was reflected in every one of his acts, and inspired his every word. Now the reputation for holiness of the father, spread throughout the world by the newspapers of France, did much among the young nations in America to increase the desire to have his sons launch his work among their children.²¹⁴

²¹³ Cf. Domenico Garneri, *Don Paolo Albera, secondo successore di D. Bosco. Memorie biografiche* (Torino: SEI, 1939), 78.

²¹⁴ Paolo Albera, *Mons. Luigi Lasagna, Memorie biografiche* (San Benigno Canavese: Scuola Tipografica Libreria Salesiana, 1900), 184. NB: No English translation exists for this or any of the texts written by Don Albera which I quote in this paper. All the translations of his writing, published or unpublished, presented in this paper are mine.

1.2. Believing in Don Bosco's Holiness

Don Bosco's holiness: this was the key to Don Albera's appreciation as he presented the life and words of the founder to people. Even as a teenager, Paolino was convinced of Don Bosco's holiness. This is what attracted all the young people at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. This is what made them feel as if they belonged, for it was Don Bosco's spiritual depth that united young hearts to his own. "We were his because each of us was thoroughly certain that he was truly a man of God, in the most complete, the most expressive sense of the word."²¹⁵

One of Don Albera's biographers claims that he prudently refrained from formally speaking about Don Bosco until Rome had accepted testimony forwarded by the Archdiocese of Turin for his beatification and opened the "apostolic process" in 1907. Presumably, any enthusiastic promotion would jeopardize the Servant of God's chances for canonization.²¹⁶ This is a logical and legitimate presupposition, but it simply was not the case. Paolo Albera did speak about Don Bosco!

A case in point is the 1897 Silver Jubilee of the Salesian presence in Sampierdarena and the Italian region of Liguria. The steering committee for the anniversary events was composed of Sampierdarena's leading past pupils. They invited Don Albera, the founding director, to give the farewell address at the conclusion of the three-day celebration on July 6, 1897. After

²¹⁵ Paolo Albera, *Lettere Circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai Salesiani* (Torino: SEI, 1922), 342.

²¹⁶ Cf. Guido Favini, *Don Paolo Albera, le petit D. Bosco*. Secondo Successore di S. Giovanni Bosco; Primo Visitatore delle Missioni Salesiane in America nella vita e nella storia della Società Salesiana (Torino: SEI, 1975), 158.

citing many memories, Don Albera expressed his emotion at hearing the love expressed by the past pupils toward the man who had made the Salesian mission in Liguria possible. He spoke of Don Bosco: the center of unity, who even after his death continued to inspire numerous initiatives on behalf of needy youth.

We, members of that Society which had a *Don Bosco* for Founder and Father, it is as if we only live off his memory. We, who are indebted to him for all that we are and have, we are happy when he is the topic of conversation. For this reason, how could it not be sweet for us to hear every pious sigh? How can we pronounce his name without feeling unutterable joy and affection? What delight to realize that neither time nor distance can separate us, not even death has been able to lessen the affection you feel for our common Benefactor and Father? When the speaker in the name of all of you broke into that shout: "Don Bosco! We are and will always be with you," we Salesians recognized you as members of our family; we found on your lips the language of true brothers: that word that more than any other finds a direct route to our hearts and produces the deepest stirrings of emotions within us. Therefore I make bold to offer you the most heart-felt thanks in the name of the entire Salesian Family and of the Successor of Don Bosco himself, even if to another voice that is much more authoritative than mine that mission is reserved. I assure you that we are justly proud of pupils such as you, and we are happy that you will continue to be our Cooperators in the work of charity.²¹⁷

We know that "in the family," Don Albera was already speaking about Don Bosco. He prepared his talks for the Foglizzo novices' "Exercise of a Happy Death" from February 5 to 7, 1896, around formation themes dear to Don Bosco, and following "what Don

²¹⁷ Paolo Albera, "L'Addio," in *Ricordo delle feste giubilari celebrate dai Salesiani di S. Pier D'Arena*, introduced by Giovanni Tamietti (San Pier D'Arena: Scuola Tipografica Salesiana, 1897), 148.

Bosco prescribed."²¹⁸ During that same month, Don Albera celebrated daily mass in the founder's private chapel at Valdocco, and preached on Don Bosco's example.²¹⁹ Speaking frequently about Don Bosco was a way of measuring his own zeal, Don Albera reasoned,²²⁰ and so in November 1898 he did not hesitate to call his confreres in Nice to renew their religious commitment to be representatives of Jesus Christ as true sons of Don Bosco.²²¹

If one wants to argue that these were closed environments, we find that Don Albera spoke increasingly of the founder during his trips abroad. His secretary, Don Calogero Gusmano, testifies that the more he spoke of Don Bosco, the more his speeches impressed and thrilled his audiences during the American tour of 1900-1903.²²²

The characteristic note is, without doubt, the ever growing enthusiasm experienced throughout his visit to the houses of

²¹⁸ ASC, B0320102, entry for Feb. 6, 1896.

²¹⁹ Cf. ASC, B0320102, entries for Feb. 11 and 25, 1896.

²²⁰ Cf. ASC, B0320104, entry for Aug. 4, 1898.

²²¹ Cf. ASC, B0320104, entry for Nov. 9, 1898.

²²² Blessed Michele Rua (1837-1910), successor of Don Bosco as rector major of the Salesian Society, sent Don Albera to Argentina as his personal representative to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of Salesian presence on the American continent. Accompanied by the newly ordained Calogero Gusmano, who acted as his personal secretary, Don Albera visited every house, institute, mission, dispensary, parish, school and agricultural complex conducted by the Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in South and North America. The journey began in August 1900 and ended on Holy Saturday 1903. The journey excited a lot of interest on the part of Salesians and their benefactors. See: Calogero Gusmano, "Il Rappresentante del Successore di Don Bosco in America: Relazione della Visita del Rev. Sig. Don Albera alle nostre Case d'America," *Bollettino Salesiano* 24-29 (1900-1905): published in monthly installments.

America. The demonstrations were incredible: ecclesiastical and civil authorities led entire populations. As soon as he set foot on American soil, at Montevideo in Uruguay, Bishop Cagliero from Patagonia sent Don Albera a long, candid, enthusiastic telegram that concluded with the phrase: "Visita nos in salutare tuo." Gradually as he advanced during the course of the visit, that was the common expression that greeted him. You couldn't have found anyone who better represented Don Bosco.

And Don Albera had spent so many years at the founder's side and he had learned his spirit so well and had accompanied him so often: it was about Don Bosco that Don Albera always spoke. Every speech he made was marvelous; every suggestion he made somehow brought Don Bosco into the picture—his thought and his word. Because it came from a heart that was convinced and persuaded, his words were convincing and persuasive, and after every one of Don Albera's conferences you began to see opinions change and you especially began to see people change their ways of doing things. Cooperators and others who approached him did not know how to pull themselves away from him, for he approached everyone in a way that was noble, polite, attractive and at the same time full of humility.²²³

On his return from America, Paolo Albera was invited to address Salesian Cooperators gathered at Turin's shrine to Mary Help of Christians for the Third International Congress of Salesian Cooperators. In his spiritual journal, Don Albera wrote in broken English that "the meeting of the Salesian cooperators began this day with great solemnity. I took also the word. The hearers were so patient that have supported my ignorance."²²⁴

Patient? According to accounts offered by the *Bollettino Salesiano*, he received a colossal welcome and a thunderous ovation!²²⁵

²²³ Calogero Gusmano, "Appunti alla rinfusa, 1935," AMsS, ASC, Fondo Don Albera, B0330315, 19-20.

²²⁴ ASC, B0320106, entry for May 14, 1903.

²²⁵ Cf. "Il terzo Congresso dei nostri Cooperatori." *Bollettino Salesiano* 27.6 (June 1903): 165.

The bulletin describes his words as simple and moving, but they do not reproduce his speech. Therefore, we would have no inkling of the contents of his address from contemporary reports, except that the Central Archives of the Salesian Society preserves the handwritten notes that Don Albera prepared for that occasion. According to this text, we are certain that Don Albera was by no means hesitant to extol Don Bosco.

When I was very young I often heard Don Bosco say that many, many souls would be saved through his sons, who for this reason would one day be so numerous that their institutes would cover the face of the globe. Such words interpreted that pious, burning desire of a heart that was as vast as the world, and manifested a zeal that had no bounds. Now what jubilation for me, his unworthy son, to see the words of this father come true not only in old Europe, but even among the distant and young peoples of the lands of Columbus! For as great and sublime an idea I may have formed of Don Bosco and his works, once I visited the more than 200 institutes of the Salesians and the Sisters of Mary Help of Christians in America, my horizons have widened beyond measure. Don Bosco's figure has become gigantic in my mind. That tree which he planted has become immensely more majestic in my eyes as I have seen its branches reach across the seas to give abundant and delicious fruit. The activity of the Salesians will have also contributed in a large part, but they do everything in Don Bosco's name; he cleared the way, he overcame the obstacles, he won hearts, he initiated relationships, and (why not say it?) he loosened the purse-strings and found the means with which to found houses, workshops, classrooms, youth centers, churches, hospitals, and whatever was needed for the salvation of innumerable souls. Nor has this been a passing enthusiasm that with the passage of time has become less attractive. The name of Don Bosco makes a salutary impression upon hearts in America, and continues to be pronounced with veneration and gratitude by

Prelates, Presidents, government ministers, by every class of people, and by entire nations.²²⁶

All these speeches, liturgies and talks took place during the same period in which our conscientious Spiritual Director General became more deeply involved in retreat ministry. Consequently, we are not surprised to find frequent and detailed references to Don Bosco in the instructions Paolo Albera prepared for his confreres' yearly spiritual exercises. Let us now examine these talks more carefully.

2. John Bosco in Paolo Albera's Retreat Instructions

The "Spiritual Exercises" became a vehicle by which to foster renewed commitment among priests and religious, and much of Don Albera's own ministry centered on organizing and conducting the Exercises. With time, his retreat instructions became the forum for handing on the Salesian spirit. The present study explores the content of Paolo Albera's teaching on the Salesian spirit as he voiced it in his spiritual conferences, particularly in reference to the person and figure of Don Bosco.²²⁷

²²⁶ Paolo Albera, "Discorso del Sig. Don Albera durante il Terzo Congresso dei Cooperatori, Torino," AMs, May 14, 1903, ASC, B0500329, 2-3.

²²⁷ During the 18 years that Don Albera served as Spiritual Director General, he preached retreats for many groups within the Salesian Family. For our purposes, we narrow the field to 6 courses of spiritual exercises in which Don Albera's purpose was to "Salesianize" his confreres according to Don Bosco's legacy. These 6 retreats, listed in chronological order, are as follows:

Paolo Albera, "Tutto per Gesù: Istruzioni per gli Esercizi Spirituali" [All for Jesus: Instructions for the Spiritual Exercises], 4 notebooks, AMs, 1893. ASC, Fondo Paolo Albera, B0480111, B0480112, B0480113, B0480114, [Afterwards cited as "TG," and followed by the volume number, e.g. TG 1].

Reference to Don Bosco is frequent in all the retreats. Don Albera is apt to call him "our father" and "venerated founder." Typically he refers to him simply as "Don Bosco." Of course, there is a chronological point that is obvious. Paolo Albera began his ministry as Spiritual Director General within five years of Don Bosco's death. For preacher and retreatants, Don Bosco was not a distant figure. They had been touched by the founder personally. His words and writings carried the warmth of a personal relationship.

2.1. Handing Down the Founder's Teachings

Early in his apostolic life, Don Bosco began to write and publish popular works that would nourish the faith of the young and the common people. Don Albera had grown up reading the Catholic Readings, the monthly magazine-like series published by Don Bosco. Even in his mature years, Don Albera made use of some

"Raccolta di Istruzioni predicate dal Sign. Don Albera, Catechista Generale de' Salesiani, in occasione degli Esercizi Spirit[uali]. Tenuti in Foglizzo agli Ascritti Salesiani il Marzo 1894" [Instructions given to Salesian Novices in Foglizzo, March 1894], Ms, 1894. ASC, Fondo Paolo Albera, B0480115 [Afterwards cited as "IA"].

Paolo Albera, "L'Esercizio della Buona Morte," [Recollection Day Conferences, ca. 1896] AMs, 1896. ASC, Fondo Albera, B0480127 [Afterwards cited as "EBM"].

Paolo Albera, "Istruzioni Direttori," [Retreat Instructions given to Salesian Directors: Valsalice] AMs, 1903. ASC, Fondo Paolo Albera, B0480139, B0480137 [Afterwards cited as "ID"].

Paolo Albera, "Ordinandi," [Retreat Instructions given to young Salesians preparing for Ordination: Valsalice, September 9-16, 1909] AMs, 1909. ASC, Fondo Paolo Albera, B0480137 [Afterwards cited as "IO"].

Paolo Albera, "Esercizi Direttori 1910," [Instructions for the Spiritual Exercises preceding the Eleventh General Chapter of the Salesian Society] AMs, 1910. ASC, Fondo Paolo Albera, B0480137, B0480138 [Afterwards cited as "CG11"].

of Don Bosco's writings for his own meditation. He never ceased to be inspired by Don Bosco's *Giovane Provveduto*.²²⁸ As the decades progressed, he read all that was published on Don Bosco, including Giovanni Bonetti's *Cinque Lustri*,²²⁹ and the volumes of Giovanni Battista Lemoyne's *Memorie Biografiche* as they were being prepared for publication.²³⁰

The most important of all Don Bosco's writings had to be the Salesian Rule, or Constitutions of the Pious Salesian Society.²³¹ Don Bosco as Founder of the Salesian Society

²²⁸ Cf. ASC, B0320109, entry for Jan. 3, 1910.

²²⁹ Giovanni Bonetti, *Cinque lustri di storia dell'Oratorio S. Francesco di Sales* (Torino: Tip. Salesiana, 1892). English edition: *History of Don Bosco's Early Apostolate*, (Declared Venerable, July 23, 1907), a translation from the work of G[iovanni] Bonetti, SC, with a preface by His Grace [Francis Bourne] the Archbishop of Westminster (London: Salesian Press, 1908). Don Albera read this edition; see: ASC, B0320107, entries for Nov. 14, 18 and 26, 1908.

²³⁰ Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, Amadei Angelo and Eugenio Ceria, *Memorie Biografiche di Don Giovanni Bosco*. 19 vols.; index (S. Benigno Canavese/Torino: Tipografia Salesiana/SAID/SEI, 1898-1917, 1930-1938, 1948). Cf. ASC, B0320107, entry for Jun. 7, Jul. 14, 1907; B0320108, entry for Jan. 16, Jul. 11 and 30, 1909.

²³¹ "Regole o Costituzioni," in *Deliberazioni dei Sei Primi Capitoli Generali della Pia Società Salesiana, precedute dalle Regole o Costituzioni della Medesima*, [edited by Paolo Albera], introduction by Michele Rua (S. Benigno Canavese: Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1894). This edition reprinted the constitutions as approved by the Holy See in 1874 and printed by Don Bosco in 1875. One of Don Albera's first tasks assigned him by Don Rua after his election to the superior chapter in 1892, was to assemble an integrated edition of the acts of all the general chapters held to date. These were prefaced with the *Constitutions*—"regole o costituzioni"—with all their attendant introductions and appendixes, and with a prayer service for religious profession. Each member of the Society received a personal copy. Given that Don Albera worked on these texts during his first months on council, he would often call his confreres, especially

personally wrote the constitutions. Don Albera emphasized this fact, citing the Rule as a channel of Don Bosco's convictions: an invitation to share his own way of life. Considerations like this were meant to evoke a warm attachment to the founder.

What was the relationship between Don Bosco and the Rule? Don Albera refers to the Rule as Don Bosco's word, a gift received from his hand. How many of Don Albera's confreres had made their profession "in the hands" of Don Bosco himself! This was motive enough for loyalty.²³² Should they accept this book reverently, Don Albera asks, as the key to peace in this life and happiness with Christ forever?²³³ If Salesians value Don Bosco's words, his advice, relics and writings, how much more should they value the rule and study it all their lives?²³⁴

Our Rule: from whom does it come? We can say that it was inspired by the Lord who gave it to Don Bosco. This was his thought all his life. A number of superiors keep copies of the rules that were written or even printed, but which have many corrections in Don Bosco's own handwriting. He corrected, studied every way to give us in these few pages the quintessence of holiness. How we should esteem them then! You think you are fortunate to possess a little relic of Don Bosco: a piece of clothing, for example. How much more fortunate are those who possess a souvenir from him! Others remember some word of advice, others read the books he wrote, but all these things are nothing compared to the rule. It is this which is the greatest gift that Don Bosco could have ever given us, the most precious relic, the most significant piece of advice. All Don Bosco's spirit is

provincials and directors, to deepen their knowledge of the workings and contents of the Salesian *Constitutions*.

²³² Cf. TG 2:34. In an earlier statement, without specifically mentioning Don Bosco by name, Don Albera highlighted his role at profession, calling him "our most venerated superior, a living image of Jesus." (cf. TG 1:23).

²³³ Cf. TG 2:7.

²³⁴ Cf. TG 2:61.

contained in these rules, and whoever would not observe them cannot love Don Bosco.²³⁵

In this “dear” book, Don Bosco explained the “immense advantages” of religious life. He took the teachings of monasticism, specifically of Saint Bernard, and applied them to his own small community. Through flight from the world, the religious saved himself, but Don Albera added a mystical facet: the religious who observed the rule made reparation for sinners.

Let me point out to you that in these unfortunate times in which so many sins are committed, the Lord turns to us. As the Eternal Father who saw his son on the cross and forgave the world of so much sin, so now he also looks at us and through our prayers, through our zeal perhaps, he will forgive so many poor sinners.²³⁶

Another aspect of “observance” is the duty of filial piety. Don Bosco, venerated father and founder, gave the rule as his testament to his spiritual sons much as did Saint Dominic,²³⁷ Saint John Leonardi,²³⁸ and Saint Vincent de Paul.²³⁹ Don Albera tells stories of how the sons of these great founders knew how to reverence their rule, even to the point of outward veneration.²⁴⁰ The Salesians will truly be Don Bosco’s sons when they know and live their Rule.²⁴¹

The Rule is binding on the Salesians,²⁴² but this is not an invitation to legalism. Religious life is not a matter of law: it is a call to love; religious do not govern their conduct by the dictates

²³⁵ IA, 26.

²³⁶ TG 1:96; see also: EBM, 1.

²³⁷ Cf. IA, 26.

²³⁸ Cf. TG 4:43; IA, 109.

²³⁹ Cf. TG 2:7.

²⁴⁰ Cf. TG 2:5-6.

²⁴¹ Cf. IA, 26-27.

²⁴² Cf. TG 1:98, 2:117.

of a text, but by the appeals of the heart.²⁴³ Thus, more than regulating the life of the community or making explicit applications of the commandments of God, the Constitutions teach Salesian Spirit. Without this spirit, Salesians cannot help but come up short in their ministry and in the very life of grace. Like the apostles who went to fish without Christ, they can work all night but come up empty handed, says Don Albera citing Lk 5:5. Those, on the other hand, who learn to love the Rule are guided toward grace. The Constitutions teach the spirit, and the “golden pages” that Don Bosco wrote to introduce the Rule are, in Don Albera’s opinion, a condensation of all the best masters of spiritual life. These instructions and Don Bosco’s own example are a deep well that can refresh and nourish every member who approaches them.²⁴⁴

Well aware of the anti-Catholic sentiment of his own day, Don Albera told his confreres that the hallmark of Don Bosco’s sons was not an outward religious habit or uniform institutions. Their identity card must be the “Salesian spirit.” When this spirit flourishes, the Salesian movement grows; without it, the Congregation will begin to unravel.²⁴⁵

2.2. Recalling the Founder’s Example

Salesians need to model themselves on Don Bosco.²⁴⁶ It is not enough that they remember Don Bosco’s goodness, they need to imitate his example and implement his teaching in their own lives.²⁴⁷ Even on this point, however, Don Albera wants to make

²⁴³ Cf. TG 1:7, 14, 24-25, 27, 58, 59, 97, 3:40; ID Q3:42; CG11 Q3:139; 142. These considerations would find their maturity in Don Albera’s tenth circular letter, “Contro una riprovevole ‘legalità’,” in *Lettere Circolari*, 231-241.

²⁴⁴ Cf. TG 1:118-120.

²⁴⁵ Cf. TG 1:120-121.

²⁴⁶ Cf. ID Q3:39; CG11 Q3:134, 142.

²⁴⁷ Cf. CG11 ul.

sure that his confreres do not limit themselves to the material reproduction of Don Bosco's actions. Imitation is less a matter of copying procedures than it is of assimilating the attitudes—the mind and heart of the model. Don Bosco lived his entire life in union with God,²⁴⁸ and this deep relationship helped him to perceive God, not as distant or abstract, but as intimately close. He realized that God's will was not arbitrary in our regard, but personal, trusting. He was convinced that God desired to plan with us; that God wanted some special contribution from each person for the good of souls.²⁴⁹ This is how he understood life and vocation: each person was called to a specific role, and whoever corresponded generously to his or her own calling would be consoled at the moment of death.²⁵⁰

God offers us many helps so that we may remain ever faithful to his call. First among these are the sacraments. Don Bosco inculcated a sacramental spirituality by way of a myriad of instructions, but more powerfully, he taught the value of the sacraments by his own example. Don Albera highlighted Don Bosco's approach to the sacrament of Reconciliation.²⁵¹ This was one of his constant themes, natural to retreat talks, and Don Bosco had recommended that every retreat feature an instruction on this topic, for though Confession was, by rule, a weekly practice,²⁵² one must never approach the sacrament out of a mere

²⁴⁸ Cf. ID Q1:35.

²⁴⁹ Cf. EBM, 14.

²⁵⁰ Cf. EBM, 3.

²⁵¹ In keeping with the usage of the times, Don Albera spoke of the sacrament of *Penance* (cf. TG 1:5, 88, 120, 4:60, 52; IA, 5, 59, 61-62, 64, 66; CG11 Q3:124), or more colloquially, of *Confession* (cf. TG 1:45, 3:91, 4:57-73; IA, 33, 53, 58-75; EBM, 1, 4, 20; CG11 Q4:17, 19).

²⁵² Cf. TG 4:69, IA, 67, ID Q3:19; see also: [Paolo Albera, ed.], *Il Salesiano sotto le armi*, non-commercial ed. (Torino: Scuola Tipografica Salesiana, n.d.), 16.

sense of obligation. It was a guiding light for those who wanted to embark on the path of perfection.²⁵³

Don Albera's great regard for the sacrament grew out of his personal experience: Don Bosco had been a wonderful confessor that lifted his spirits. Don Albera transferred his love for that wonderful confessor to love for confession itself; he abstracts from concrete person to process.

Should we not love this Sacrament? We experienced so much consolation when we could speak with Don Bosco. How our hearts were made to feel light! We entered with so many bothersome issues and came out with none. There was even a secular priest who told us: "You really have a magic chamber here, where you bring all your pain and leave it there, and when you leave you are all ready to work." Don Bosco is no longer here. We do have a successor who merits all our affection. Now the confessor does what Don Bosco did for us: he relieves us of our sufferings.²⁵⁴

Don Bosco believed in the power of the sacraments but trembled at the thought of bad confessions. Both in the pulpit and in the confessional, he did all he could to unmask the demon of fear that gagged penitents and hindered them from making sincere, integral confessions.²⁵⁵ Don Albera echoes Don Bosco's great concern for young people whose virtue could be compromised by bad companions,²⁵⁶ unguarded glances that might fire up the imagination,²⁵⁷ unbridled speech,²⁵⁸ intemperate sensuality and self-seeking.²⁵⁹ Whoever would conquer vice must sincerely confess his sins, be firm in making and carrying out good

²⁵³ Cf. IA, 59.

²⁵⁴ IA, 65.

²⁵⁵ Cf. IA, 84-85.

²⁵⁶ Cf. IA, 82, 86.

²⁵⁷ Cf. IA, 88.

²⁵⁸ Cf. TG 4:8.

²⁵⁹ Cf. TG 2:19, EBM, 27.

resolutions of amendment, and be prudent in avoiding the "near occasions" of immorality that are ever present in the world.²⁶⁰ Salesians who must navigate difficult waters in a world of innuendo had best follow Don Bosco's advice. Like their founder and father, let them cultivate a great love for the "beautiful virtue," both in their own hearts and in the hearts of their young people.²⁶¹

2.3. Characteristics needed to join Don Bosco

Don Bosco looked for certain qualities in young people whom he invited to share his mission to the young. He valued obedience, for he felt that even a handful of obedient young people could take on the most difficult apostolic projects,²⁶² whereas the willful and critical became a roadblock to the mission.²⁶³ Don Bosco also set high standards. He rejected the choleric and the proud; they not only brought strife into community, they also became easily exasperated at the least difficulty and consequently could never truly minister to others.²⁶⁴

Nor should those seeking an easy life look to join Don Bosco's ranks. The Salesians were not only to be poor, they were to work hard! Each member must be ready to put in more effort than the common laborer, to do the work of four men.²⁶⁵ This is not "workaholicism;" it is asceticism. Don Bosco worked hard all his life at the cost of great sacrifice, Don Albera recalled:

²⁶⁰ Cf. TG 1:17-18, EBM, 29; IO Q3:107.

²⁶¹ Cf. CG11 Q4:15-16.

²⁶² Cf. IA, 109.

²⁶³ Cf. IA, 110-111.

²⁶⁴ Cf. IA, 16-17.

²⁶⁵ Cf. IA, 17-18; ID Q3:45; IO Q3:116-117.

Don Bosco sacrificed himself, his thoughts, his desires, his words, his works. He never looked for his own pleasure, he never set out to find his own entertainment. Rest in Paradise.²⁶⁶

In a later retreat, Don Albera described Don Bosco's work in graphic terms. The founder worked hard, sweated hard for God's glory and the good of youth, so much so that the Salesian Society was drenched with Don Bosco's sweat!²⁶⁷

The implication was clear. If the founder worked so tirelessly, his sons must be ready to do likewise: to fight sin,²⁶⁸ to "live, work and die" for Jesus,²⁶⁹ for the glory of God and the good of souls.²⁷⁰ Don Albera asserts that those who are afraid of work can never call themselves Don Bosco's sons.²⁷¹

As we might suspect, he showed extreme caution in accepting those who are not chaste into the Salesian congregation. They should not even seek admittance to his Society, for according to Don Bosco, on the one hand, the weak would be exposed to constant danger, and on the other, the dissolute would be like ravenous wolves endangering the innocent.²⁷² Don Albera explains by sharing something he had learned personally from Don Bosco.

Don Bosco was severe when it came to the Lovely Virtue. You can get an idea about this from what he told us in the admonitions that precede the rules where he says to those who want to enter the Congregation: "Whoever does not feel that he can be chaste should not even ask to be admitted, because he would be exposed to grave dangers." Don Bosco said sincerely that he preferred to have few in the Society rather than have those who were not

²⁶⁶ EBM, 47.

²⁶⁷ Cf. CG11 Q3:125.

²⁶⁸ Cf. ID Q3:44, IA, 65.

²⁶⁹ Cf. TG 1:27.

²⁷⁰ Cf. TG 1:68, 4:82.

²⁷¹ Cf. TG 3:74-75.

²⁷² Cf. TG 3:46-48; IA, 17, 90; ID Q3:44.

trustworthy in matters of morality. I saw a young layman come to speak with Don Bosco. He had already completed part of his studies and wanted to become a Salesian. Outwardly he had everything you would want to see, so to speak, and he was someone who would have been accepted into the community very gladly. He made his retreat and edified everyone. Don Bosco spoke with him briefly, and then told me: "He's not for us." "And yet," I answered, "he wants to enter."

"Yes, he asks to enter, but we should not accept him."

"But how come? What's the problem?"

"He does not have the virtue that every good Salesian should have. He's not sure in the matter of his morals. Let him go somewhere else to serve God."

And though it seemed that he had wonderful qualities and could offer many services, Don Bosco did not believe that it was opportune that he should join our Congregation, because he did not have the Lovely Virtue.

My dear [brothers], if Don Bosco were to come down in your midst, who knows if he would not be constrained to discard many, obliged to say to the superiors and members of the Chapter: "Send this one or that other one away." We do not have the lights that Don Bosco had, but we must also say to all of you: either be very chaste or else don't go ahead. You will do no good to yourselves nor to others unless you practice this virtue well. The goal that the Congregation sets for itself on behalf of young people would not be attained. You have heard so much talk about this virtue: let us love purity very much.²⁷³

2.4. Don Bosco: Director of Souls

Don Albera believed in "grace of state." One may approach every confessor, but God appoints certain people to guide specific individuals and groups: the pastor for his parish, the director for his community. Reading between the lines, we understand that Don Albera sees the director as the one graced by God in a personal way to guide the persons entrusted to him.

²⁷³ IA, 90-91.

Turn to the one who is assigned in each house, and don't let your self-love triumph, which seems to have a habit of revolting. We go gladly to visit that person who more than anyone else is a father and friend to us. He is already this simply because he is our superior, but he will be even more when he becomes the director of our soul. Our sufferings are his and therefore he will direct us with greater effect than any other priest. Be vigilant on this point, and the first time that the devil tempts you to turn to someone other than the one whom obedience has named to receive your confessions, stand up courageously against him, for if you give in once, you will give in other times, and soon you will not have the religious spirit of good Salesians. That unity of direction that should exist would cease to be, and the Congregation would be pushed off center and some element of desolation would enter. Please guard against this. If you want to make some good resolution to feel the benefits of this retreat for your entire life, write this down on a sheet of paper: I want to always turn to the person that obedience will assign me as my confessor. He has the necessary light, he has more affection for me than all the others, and he has particular graces for guiding me well.²⁷⁴

A model "director of souls," Don Bosco was ever a father and a friend. As a confessor, he embodied the qualities of gentle encouragement. Though he was demanding in calling penitents to conversion and growth, he seemed to be their advocate in the divine tribunal of the confessional. His almost motherly concern inspired confidence in those whom he counseled, particularly in the young.²⁷⁵ Don Bosco chose directors as his representatives in local communities, so to Don Albera it seemed crucial that they pattern themselves on his experience if they expected to fulfill their ministry.²⁷⁶

Becoming superior is not an award, nor does it afford a life of ease. The director must work harder than his confreres,

²⁷⁴ IA, 69.

²⁷⁵ Cf. IA, 73-74.

²⁷⁶ Cf. CG11 Q3:125-126.

first of all to save himself, for he is conscious that many look to him for example: his sinfulness becomes a license for others to neglect their duties, but his holiness encourages his confreres to strengthen their efforts to be faithful to their vocation.²⁷⁷ He must work hard to impede abuse and sin among those in his charge.²⁷⁸

The director after Don Bosco's heart knows that good liturgy attracts people to love God, and so he fosters devotion in worship.²⁷⁹ The foundation of pastoral work is the monthly cycle of spiritual exercises and spiritual direction. Don Bosco prepared these monthly retreat days well before hand, and saw them as a remedy against discouragement. They renewed love for God and zeal for souls.²⁸⁰

There is a certain spirituality of good example that Don Albera calls a pillar of the great religious orders, drawing inspiration from Saint Bernard²⁸¹ and Saint Bonaventure.²⁸² However, "good example" must also be the hallmark of the secular priest. Every apostle of souls must be conscious of his own need to set a good example for the people and among his fellow priests. This priestly spirituality is something that Don Bosco learned from his own teacher and director, Fr. Cafasso,²⁸³ and he passed it on to his collaborators. He taught this to novices and to directors alike. The principal role of the director: to give good example.²⁸⁴ Unless one gave good example, one could never invite others to repentance, or even growth.²⁸⁵ This is

²⁷⁷ Cf. ID Q1:14.

²⁷⁸ Cf. CG11 Q4:13.

²⁷⁹ Cf. ID Q1:39.

²⁸⁰ Cf. ID Q1:40.

²⁸¹ Cf. ID Q1:14, 34, Q3:5.

²⁸² Cf. ID Q1:45-46.

²⁸³ Giuseppe Cafasso, formator of priest and counselor of prisoners, was born in Castelnuovo d'Asti in 1811, and died in Turin in 1860. He was beatified by Pius XI on May 3, 1925, and canonized by Pius XII on June 22, 1947.

²⁸⁴ Cf. ID Q1:37-38, 40, 46; Q3:50, 58.

²⁸⁵ Cf. IO Q3:101; CG11 s2.

because “zeal” is basically another word for “good example,” and not the least of all reasons for religious observance is to become a blessing for others.²⁸⁶ The young need to see the upright lifestyle of their elders. Indeed, good example has been the root of a tremendous amount of conversions and the source of many vocations.²⁸⁷

Spiritual direction allows an evaluation component to be added to one’s life journey toward virtue, spiritual and apostolic progress. Don Albera presents Don Bosco’s understanding of spiritual direction as a time for accountability, but one that took place in the form of an intimate conversation.²⁸⁸ Don Bosco himself learned from experience, but as time went on he became more explicit in his own guidelines and recommendations for spiritual direction. “Accountability” is the way to maintain one’s vocation and to promote the spirit of the “Pious Society.”²⁸⁹ Beyond the guidelines, Don Albera recalls Don Bosco’s style, taught through word and example.²⁹⁰ He always welcomed his directees most cordially. He received them in his room, inviting the directee to sit by his side in a comfortable chair. He affably and gently put his visitor at ease. He allowed the directee to speak without his interrupting. In this way he inspired confidence to overcome the difficulties and move forward, grounded in God’s grace.²⁹¹ One left these sessions affirmed, filled with consolation, and feeling encouraged to resume one’s work responsibly.²⁹²

²⁸⁶ Cf. TG 2:62; IA, 32.

²⁸⁷ Cf. TG 2:37, 40-41.

²⁸⁸ Cf. ID Q3:6.

²⁸⁹ Cf. ID Q3:14.

²⁹⁰ Cf. ID Q3:23.

²⁹¹ Cf. ID Q3:23; ID Q3:25.

²⁹² Cf. Paolo Albera, *Mons. Luigi Lasagna, Memorie biografiche* (San Benigno Canavese: Scuola Tipografica Libreria Salesiana, 1900), 254.

2.5. A Comprehensive Check-list for Directors

For directors, Don Bosco was the model of all they should become. They must take to heart that they are to be good examples, as the Founder was. Don Albera feared that Don Bosco's style was fast disappearing by the turn of the century.²⁹³ To remedy this, Don Albera offered Salesian directors a comprehensive program for the correct fulfillment of their role. He listed this in eight steps.

Step one: Directors must remain humble and maintain a realistic opinion of themselves. Just as Jesus came to serve and not to be served, directors must understand that they are called to a ministry of service for the good of the community and not for their own prestige. The call to leadership entails a call to service.²⁹⁴

Step two: Directors must use their position to serve. Don Albera reminded his listeners that honors can easily go to one's head, but realism recognizes the contribution of others and the gift of God's grace in one's own life. A superior is no longer "his own." He belongs to the members of the community: their needs shape his role, his time-table, his pastimes and pursuits. Rather than take pride in his position, he would do well to see to the needs of his confreres.²⁹⁵

Step three: Directors must cultivate humility and simplicity. Humility is not just an attitude of mind, it is a manner that is reflected in one's behavior, one's dealing with others. Don Bosco reflected both of these attitudes: he always recognized himself to be a poor cowherder from Becchi whose dignity derived from his vocation and not his personal

²⁹³ Cf. ID Q1:37.

²⁹⁴ Cf. ID Q1:16-17.

²⁹⁵ Cf. ID Q1:17.

accomplishments or titles. He lived humbly and simply without ever putting on airs.²⁹⁶

Step four: Directors must be community oriented. This important ingredient for good direction derives from always recognizing the contribution of others. The director must never think of the school or center as his own: it belongs to the people, to the community. He is only called to lead it for a period of time. Don Bosco was not like a military commander who claimed victory without acknowledging the sacrifice of the fighting men. No, he always recognized the suffering, the efforts and sacrifice of his confreres, coworkers, and young people. He expressed his gratitude, affirmed their contribution, sincerely praised their efforts. Every director must do the same.²⁹⁷

Step five: Directors must seek to work collaboratively. This fifth component in Salesian direction grows out of the previous four. If the director is humble, simple, grateful, he will never act out of whim or command imperiously. He will seek cooperation from his confreres and coworkers, asking their help as well as their input. Don Bosco directed by asking for help, not by commanding, says Don Albera.²⁹⁸

Step six: Directors must recognize and admit their mistakes. Again, realism is the basis for this component of Salesian direction. The director knows his own limits, recognizes that he can make mistakes. This means that, like Don Bosco, he actively seeks the opinion of others, that he consults his council and even the youngest members of his community before he moves toward decision making.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁶ Cf. ID Q1:19-20.

²⁹⁷ Cf. ID Q1:20-21; cf. CG11 Q3:133, 155.

²⁹⁸ Cf. ID Q1:21.

²⁹⁹ Cf. ID Q1:21.

Step seven: Directors must put themselves into the shoes of others. The Salesian works closely with young people and remembers what it was like to be young or without a voice. The director treats everyone with respect. Not only does he make an active effort to listen to all the members of the community, but to learn from each person as well. He leads the community in response to their needs as well as the needs of the mission.³⁰⁰

Step eight: Directors must live and promote pastoral charity. The eighth and final component to good direction demands that the director always focus on the glory of God. True charity, after all, is not self-seeking.³⁰¹ Instead, as Don Bosco exemplified all his life, charity is a virtue that prompts concern for others while it centers everything on God alone. Don Bosco was the model of “sweetness” in his concern for the young and for his own collaborators. Their needs were always a priority for him, especially their need for God. In this he gave an example to all Salesian directors.³⁰²

2.6. The Heart of Don Bosco Director

Having listed the qualities of a director after Don Bosco's heart, Don Albera used a personal anecdote to illustrate the founder's loving care for his “sons.” He tells a story that he claims to have heard directly from Giuseppe Buzzetti, who was among the earliest of Don Bosco's boys and who remained one of his most faithful collaborators.³⁰³

³⁰⁰ Cf. ID Q1:21.

³⁰¹ Cf. 1Cor 13:5.

³⁰² Cf. ID Q1:21; CG11 Q3:133. Don Albera offered a second list of pointers during what seems to have been a more informal setting during the retreat preceding GC11, or during the Chapter itself; his notes are not clear as to the specific occasion. See: CG11 Q3:155-156.

³⁰³ Giuseppe Buzzetti, coadjutor Salesian born on February 7, 1832, and professed in 1877, he died in Lanzo on July 12, 1892.

Giuseppe Buzzetti once told me that in 1860, when he saw that the Cleric Rua and the Cleric Savio were coming close to ordination, and the Cleric Cagliero and Francesia were already helping Don Bosco very much, he thought of withdrawing from the Oratory and looking after himself. He found a job in town, if I'm not mistaken; it was with the Paravia Press. Everything was set, except for the most difficult step, and that was to say good-bye to Don Bosco. Finally he made up his mind. He went to Don Bosco's room and, as was typical of him, laid out his plans concisely and waited for the answer. He knew Don Bosco well and was not afraid of angry or bitter words, but he had a feeling that Don Bosco would be within his rights if he were to be upset by this sudden development. Instead, he saw that Don Bosco's face was as calm as ever. He asked with gentle concern if he had found a job that would support him, and then continued: "Go if you like to work at Paravia, but if you need anything, if you should be unhappy, remember that this is always your home, and that Don Bosco is always your father. You can return here any day, any time." Buzzetti was not easily moved, and yet when he heard these words he felt his heart pound, and he realized that his eyes were filled with tears. He could no longer bear it and ran from Don Bosco's room. He never again spoke about leaving.

To conclude this story, Don Albera adds his own explanation:

That's a father for you; that's an older brother. That's the way he comforted his sons in times of difficulty. If we want to understand our role as directors in the light of such shining examples, let us examine the most hidden corners of our consciences; let us keep humble and treat those who are entrusted to our care as true brothers.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁴ ID Q1:22-23; see also: CG11 Q3:134, r3.

2.7. Don Bosco: Man of Prayer

Don Albera brings up example after example from his experiences with Don Bosco to drive home his point: one does not advance along the path of virtue without determination and effort. Granted, all is a gift from God, but once the gift has been received, Christians must have courage and fight all their lives long so that they may respond ever more generously to God's gifts. Don Albera called his confreres to be "self starters," ready to sacrifice constantly so that they might persevere in virtue.³⁰⁵ However, he made it quite clear that even this spirit of sacrifice was a gift of God sustained by a life of prayer. He cites Don Bosco as a model, recalling the founder as he himself had seen him on many occasions.

I hope that your virtue is solid. You will always have virtue, and all your life long you will draw fruit from this retreat if you have a frank piety like Don Bosco. When he prayed he had nothing extraordinary or particularly noteworthy about him, because there was nothing forced about him. His posture, his way of praying, the tone of his voice—everything was natural. But it was obvious that he had living faith and knew how to speak with God. The many graces he received grew out of that way of praying, and so he obtained all that he needed.

Before everything else, cultivate piety. Don Bosco was accused of being so busy that he had little time for study and so he couldn't delve into piety. You instead know how much he stressed studies. To continue to live with fervor, it is necessary now that you have a forthright piety and that you understand well that this does not consist in pious looks or in reciting so many devotions, but in doing well all that needs to be done in Don Bosco's house. He didn't want us to do many things. Try to pray well those few vocal prayers we have together; make an effort to

³⁰⁵ Cf. IA, 120-121.

approach the Sacraments well. If we become cold in our piety, we will not be able to advance in holiness.³⁰⁶

The spirit of piety is not something abstract or accidental. It is the result of strong conviction, substantial preparation, careful implementation. The prayerful individual begins the day by taking stock of the responsibilities that await him. According to Don Bosco's spirit, he charts out the tasks and time slots that lie ahead, and makes time for the moments he can spend with God between one obligation and the next. Such a practice is essential for the Director, whose day is filled with a variety of problems to be solved.³⁰⁷

Young confreres and novices who pray fervently only because the schedule allots time for prayer, risk letting their prayer-life depend on an atmosphere or convenience. Once they are sent to an active community—which is the norm for Salesians—will their piety dry up? No, Don Albera contends, they must look to God alone as their Master in virtue. They must nourish a deep personal piety while they have the opportunity. In this way they can take on any mission and not be swayed by inconvenience or difficulty.³⁰⁸ Directors who have no time for piety may be great administrators, but they are not directors according to the mind of Don Bosco. They must be the first to drink deeply at the source of life so that they can share deeply with those who are under their care.³⁰⁹ Let them look to Don Bosco, who was a model of prayer from his earliest years, and who knew how to school others in prayer.

Don Albera gives concrete examples:

³⁰⁶ IA, 123-124.

³⁰⁷ Cf. ID Q1:28.

³⁰⁸ Cf. IA, 121-122.

³⁰⁹ Cf. ID Q1:32.

If Don Bosco wrote that prayer for a priest is like water to a fish, air to a bird, a fresh stream to a deer—how much more is it necessary for the Director?

Don Bosco was a model of piety as a young person, as a cleric, as a priest. He edified all who saw him pray, say mass, or participate in any practice of piety whatsoever. But more than long prayers, what was admirable in him was his union with God. After a long conversation with Don Bosco, Cardinal Alimonda came out of Don Bosco's room and said: "I understand why Don Bosco's works are so prosperous. He is always in union with God, therefore his works are works of God. That's why they produce such marvelous fruit."

He prayed much and he bid others to pray before beginning any project. Then he'd throw himself into it completely. That's how he began the work of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. That's how he acted when involved in the nomination of bishops. That's how he was in a thousand other circumstances.³¹⁰

An important element of Don Bosco's piety was his tender devotion to the Virgin Mary. He was confident that his children would find protection from the onslaughts of the Evil One as long as they kept themselves united to the great Mother of God. She would shelter them under her mantle, and they would be peaceful as long as they remained attached to her, their mother and help.³¹¹ Following Don Bosco's lead, Salesians imitate Mary; they must look to the Help of Christians as their mother and guide. She sustains all their works, for they are really her work.³¹²

All Salesians must look to Don Bosco, that intrepid apostle, as their joyful model in his love for the young, and in his tireless energy in promoting their welfare. He was always smiling, calm, simple, joyful and hard working. Following his footsteps, Salesians would never take the wrong road.³¹³

³¹⁰ ID Q1:34-35.

³¹¹ Cf. IA, 125-126; CG11 Q3:125.

³¹² Cf. EBM, 47; ID Q1:42.

³¹³ Cf. EBM, 34-35.

2.8. Don Bosco: Model of Christian Life

Paolo Albera's great affection for Don Bosco is evident throughout his retreat instructions, and in many interventions he prepared during the period that he served as Spiritual Director General. His praise is not "band wagon" glory; it is rooted in his deep gratitude for all that he experienced from his boyhood through his mature years. He links the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales with his own religious vocation: a romantic to the core, he reflects that Don Bosco rescued him and hundreds of his peers at the Oratory from a drowning world. He calls his mentor "another Noah."

We walked on the edge of a horrible precipice, and it was as if our feet were slipping! God took us away from this danger. The world is like a shipwreck in a universal flood of vice. How many innocent doves did not know where to put their feet to find sure ground. Another Noah reached out his hand and pulled us aboard this Arc, which is the Congregation. How lucky we are!³¹⁴

Not only did the Lord choose Don Bosco and gift him with extraordinary grace, raising him up as a father and teacher for youth,³¹⁵ God inspired Don Bosco to found the Salesian Society and compose the rule of life that is nothing other than the Salesians' link with Don Bosco and with Christ himself. By observing these Rules, which were approved by the Church, the Salesian conquers virtue and begins to resemble the divine model, Jesus.³¹⁶

Don Albera compares Don Bosco to saints that were considered great models for religious and apostolic ministers: Aloysius Gonzaga, John Berchmans, Francis de Sales, Charles

³¹⁴ TG 1:80.

³¹⁵ Cf. IA, 8-9.

³¹⁶ Cf. TG 2:57-58.

Borromeo, Francis Borgia, Vincent de Paul.³¹⁷ He recalls with his confreres how deeply Don Bosco impressed those whom he met. Seeing or hearing Don Bosco, one understood that his heart burned with love for God and charity for neighbor, zeal for the salvation of souls.³¹⁸

Don Bosco always saw the spiritual side of life. He had a sense for all that was Gospel, and this was apparent in the way he expressed his feelings and the way he spoke. He faced the world and accepted the events of his life with great trust in God, for he looked upon everything with the eyes of faith. This trust was born of a love for God, and that, says Don Albera, is precisely what Saint Paul would define as *sensum Christi*—the mind of Christ.³¹⁹

This might explain what was so different about Don Bosco. Those who knew him were not tantalized by his charm or struck by his talent: they were moved by that atmosphere of God's presence that pervaded his dealings, his relationships, his ministry. Spending time with Don Bosco was like basking in grace, for this unforgettable priest brought them into the presence of Jesus himself. Even after his death, Don Bosco's sons continued to feel his affection. In a piece written for the Acts of the first American Chapter in 1901, Paolo Albera, in the role of Don Rua's representative, records the sentiments of directors and provincials who had, by that time, gathered for five general chapters in Valsalice, near the tomb of the founder. Echoing the words of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Don Albera implicitly compares Don Bosco with Jesus.

Undoubtedly profound sorrow was felt at not being able, as in Valsalice, to drink in the spirit by praying near the mortal remains of our unforgettable Father and Founder. However it seemed to us that we were at least able to feel his sweet soul stirring among

³¹⁷ Cf. TG 2:7, 3:74, IA, 120, ID Q1:6; CG11 Q3:126, 143, u3.

³¹⁸ Cf. ID Q1:39.

³¹⁹ Cf. IO Q3:95, expanding 1Cor 2:16.

us when we read and commented on his precious *Confidential Reminders* to the Directors, his recommendations to the Missionaries and various letters written by him to the first Superiors in America. As we left those sessions we found ourselves repeating with the Disciples of Emmaus: "Were not our hearts burning within us as he spoke to us?"³²⁰

This comparison between Don Bosco and Jesus was something Don Albera had been toying with for some time. His beloved father reproduced the attitudes of the "Divine Model." Like Jesus, he communicated a deep love for the young and the little ones. Like Jesus, he knew how to penetrate the hearts of those chosen few whom he gathered around him as disciples for a world-wide mission to evangelize youth. In his biography of his own former student, Luigi Lasagna—a book written between retreats—Paolo Albera describes the meeting between Don Bosco and Luigi Lasagna in evangelical terms:

On hearing the distant sound of the musical instruments, those lively boys raced in an instant to line up on Main Street along which the music had to pass. It was not difficult for the man of God to spot that child with red hair and a free and easy manner, who more than all the rest seemed to enjoy the music and looked over every member of the band from head to toe as each one passed.

The scene was not very different from the story in the Gospel that tells of how our Divine Savior Jesus, when he met a young person, seeing him and loving him was all the same thing: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Don Bosco, moved by an irresistible power communicated to him by the mission to which he had been called to exercise among the young, approached that youngster, looked on him with particular affection, put his hand on his head

³²⁰ Paolo Albera, "Confratelli carissimi in G. C.," in *Atti del primo capitolo americano della Pia Società Salesiana* (Buenos Aires: Colegio Pio IX, 1902), iv.

and in his own inimitable way, spoke a few friendly words to him that found their way directly to the boy's heart.³²¹

All this is important for Salesians to consider, for the same God who chose Don Bosco as the apostle of the young, also called them into life, gifted them with faith and prepared them for a sacred mission as members of apostolic communities.³²²

3. John Bosco in Paolo Albera's Circular Letters

3.1. Importance of Paolo Albera's Circular Letters

It was Don Albera who stabilized the form of the circular letter as a forum for the rector major. Whereas Don Bosco and Don Rua's letters were occasional, Don Albera gradually moved to a regular schedule that saw him issue a new letter every so many months. When in 1920 he established the "Acts of the Superior Chapter" as the official organ of the Superior Chapter, Don Albera set new expectations for the future successors of Don Bosco: that they would animate the Salesian Society by means of the circular letter, a practice that has continued to the present time.

Naturally, this was a change in genre. He was no longer preparing instructions for an enclosed group celebrating their yearly spiritual exercises away from the bustle of school and oratory. He was now addressing the world-wide community who read or heard the letters read to them in segments as they carried on a busy apostolate. This meant that his instructions must make concrete and practical suggestions for converting Salesian ideals into educational and religious praxis.

The germ of this practice lies in Don Albera's concern to communicate the Salesian spirit to the upcoming generation—a

³²¹ Albera, *Mons. Luigi Lasagna*, 16-17.

³²² Cf. IO Q3:95-96; ID Q1:7-8; CG11 Q3:128.

generation that had never met the founder yet were calling themselves his sons. The shift in genres was not an automatic step. Reflecting on Don Albera's experiences, we know that he wrote some circulars and that he kept up a sometimes heavy correspondence as spiritual director. His forte, however, was the spoken word rather than written text. He had already visited every Salesian center in the Americas, and made extensive and repeated visits through Northern Europe, Spain, the Middle East and North Africa. When he spoke to communities, student bodies, assemblies of Cooperators, and the public, he had the ability to inspire and enthuse. "Le petit Don Bosco" spoke softly, in measured tones, with a warmth that brought Don Bosco to life among his hearers; they may not have remembered his words, but they came away moved by the experience.

At the beginning of his ministry as rector major, Don Albera appears to have intended to make traveling part of his approach. He visited Salesian works at a pace akin to his pastoral visits as provincial and as catechist general. When the first World War blocked his ability to cross borders, he traveled with his pen, and easily doubled the written output of his predecessor. His circular letters became as regular as the calendar; he wrote as many as 20 personal letters a day at the height of the war. If we listen to the members of the Salesian Family on the Front during the war, his letters, both general and personal, were much appreciated.

3.2. The "Monument"

After World War I, Don Albera wrote more emphatically about Don Bosco. The monument erected in the plaza before the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in 1920 by the past pupils became an important icon for the rector major. Here was what he called "the symbol of love and synthesis of our work." That representation of Don Bosco, he said, was more lively and expressive than one would normally expect from inert marble and bronze. And the reason? Don Bosco had dedicated his entire

life to "seek souls and serve God alone." Those who had benefited from an education received from him had kept his spirit very much alive in their own hearts. This is why the monument appeared so alive. Yet, the real monument must be the living out of Don Bosco's spirit.

There's much to be proud about in being sons of Don Bosco! Consider the sad contrast that still exists today among human beings, who suffer and languish, almost at the end of their energy after the terrible and tragic war that has just afflicted us. Almost everywhere people discuss, argue, and are twisted with hatred; instead an aura of peace, of love, of concord surrounds all the children and admirers of Don Bosco who have come here from every corner of the world to honor him. This deepens our conviction that our Venerable Father was sent by God to regenerate contemporary society, and to recall the world to the source of love and Christian peace.³²³

The *real* monument to Don Bosco, however, was not made of brick or bronze. Don Albera called upon provincials to put behind them the hardships of the war years, and begin to encourage a new type of soldier among their Salesians. He called for a serious effort to prepare missionaries. This entailed a massive commitment of financial resources, of formation personnel, and included taking practical steps for recruitment of new vocations. To provincials who were used to sacrifice, he asked for still more, but any sacrifice made for the missions would reap copious blessings.

The most beautiful monument to Don Bosco—the one most worthy of his great heart as an apostle—is it not the Missionary, who with the Crucifix and the Gospel in hand goes to win new people to the faith and to civilization? Now it is your turn, my good Provincials of Europe, to multiply these living monuments

³²³ Paolo Albera, *Lettere Circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai Salesiani* (Torino: SEI, 1922), 323.

in the most remote regions of the globe which he already visited in his prophetic mind. Do this and you will be blessed by the future generations of those converted to Jesus Christ.³²⁴

The monument and celebrations on one side, and the grave needs of young people in the post-war years prompt the rector major to stress what had been his life long conviction: to be worthy children of such a great father, it is crucial to live "Don Bosco's program" of the "Da mihi animas." This is only possible if the Salesians "clothe ourselves in the spirit of our Venerable Father, which is the spirit of faith, the spirit of piety, the spirit of sacrifice and of constant, untiring work."³²⁵

3.3. Formation in Don Bosco's Spirit

Only by forming themselves in the spirit of Don Bosco will Salesians be able to make their educative work fruitful, Don Albera asserts. This "fruitfulness" will be seen in the spiritual growth of the young whom they serve and in the regeneration of society.

But for this to happen, it is important to know Don Bosco. Let us say that there are many, even among our own ranks, who speak about Don Bosco only as someone they have heard about. It is truly necessary and urgent that Salesians read his life with loving care. They must take a lively interest in his life story, follow his teaching, and imitate his example with filial love.³²⁶

Formation in Don Bosco's spirit begins with knowing his story, learning his teaching, and following his example. Directors especially must cultivate this in-depth learning, in themselves, in

³²⁴ Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 304.

³²⁵ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 324.

³²⁶ Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 324.

the Salesian confreres, and in the wider Salesian movement as well, beginning with the past pupils or alumni.³²⁷

This "knowledge of Don Bosco" must not remain academic, according to Don Albera. Every Salesian has the "continual obligation" of bringing Don Bosco back to life among the young and in the Church. Don Bosco gave an example: he modeled his life on that of the "Divine Exemplar of every holiness." Salesians in turn find their way to Christ by following the example of Don Bosco. In so doing, they "bring him back to life," and develop new energy in reaching out to poor and abandoned youth.³²⁸ Don Bosco found holiness in serving the young. This makes him strikingly different from other founders, who stressed the need for holiness first, and then may or may not have endorsed apostolic outreach. For Don Bosco, holiness and "apostolate" traveled side by side.³²⁹ This can be seen, Don Albera asserted, in Don Bosco's own life and in the "Rule" he prepared for the Salesian Society. The apostolate is the "efficient cause" of Salesian holiness, for those who dedicate themselves to the Salesian mission must practice every virtue they seek to inculcate. "Those who do not feel this need, cannot be apostles, for the apostolate is nothing other than a continual effusion of sanctifying virtues for the salvation of souls. If any apostolate does not aim at spreading holiness, it has no right being called by such a glorious name."³³⁰

What can Salesians learn from Don Bosco? Don Bosco's life was "one incessant, laborious apostolate," and to learn his spirit, Salesians can begin by recalling those "catch phrases" he used to love to repeat:

Following his example, let us make ourselves familiar with one of the many expressions that used to spontaneously escape his

³²⁷ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 326.

³²⁸ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 330.

³²⁹ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 333.

³³⁰ Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 334.

lips, true voices of his heart, the sound of which still seems to me today to be a sweet caress: "You need to always work for the Lord! – As we work let us always lift our eyes to God! – May the devil never find a way to steal the merit of even one of our actions. – Courage! Let us work, let us work always, because up there we will have an eternity to rest. – Work, suffer for love of Jesus Christ, who worked so hard and suffered for you. – We will rest when we reach Paradise! – A little piece of heaven will fix everything. – We will make our vacation in paradise! etc." Work and paradise were inseparable for him, as he wrote in his last testament: "When it comes about that a Salesian shall cease to live while working for souls, then you will say that the Congregation has experienced a great triumph, and abundant blessings shall fall upon it from Heaven!"³³¹

What virtues must they learn from him in order to grow in his spirit? Among Don Bosco's virtues that the Salesian should cultivate in his own life are that great spirit of work, which includes a sense of initiative, ardor, channeling one's efforts for the good of souls.³³² Linked with work is temperance: this is one of the most precious "diamonds" on the Salesian mantle, a column of the spiritual life.³³³ Yet, work and temperance fuse together to forge the quality called zeal. Zeal to do the will of God pushes Don Bosco to love and give himself unstintingly to the service of "souls." It is a virtue that calls to action as it calls to union. The Church encouraged Salesians to imitate Don Bosco's spirit of zeal, and Salesians who did so found that they eventually won over many others to the love of God, Don Albera pointed out.³³⁴

³³¹ Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 335.

³³² Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 26, 57, 198, 207, 210, 228, 230, 238, 338, 431.

³³³ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 210, 338, 431.

³³⁴ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 240-241, 255; see also: 19, 26, 28, 56, 81, 87, 111, 166, 184, 187, 281, 214, 226, 228, 229, 257, 284, 298, 300, 318, 363, 370, 375, 377, 379, 380, 388, 427, 468.

Don Bosco's "most perfect act" was the fact that "he threw himself totally into God's arms!" This was what made his zeal, his spirit of work and temperance a virtue rather than an excess. It implies that he had cultivated a relationship with God, for he was habitually open to God's will and continually at ease in God's presence. This is what gave him his sense of "unalterable calm," evident by his invariable smile.³³⁵ Talented and enterprising though he was, this was not the secret behind his educational successes. He was prompted by charity and fear of the Lord, two virtues that lie at the basis of his preventive system.³³⁶ He was a "man of God," and this was evident to all who dealt with him: union with God and perfect charity (love of God and love of neighbor) were the secret behind his success.³³⁷

3.4. Don Bosco: Model of Holiness

Don Bosco's educative mission was grounded in goodness, kindness and prudence. Salesians need to imitate their "good Father" in the way in which he dealt with his neighbor and in doing good to all, says Don Albera. Don Bosco was always a gentleman, and his holiness was understood by the poor and the powerful alike because he always treated others with respect. His sense of good manners was really an expression of his modesty, humility, self-control, availability and self-sacrifice, and his love of neighbor. In fact, it was this love which shaped his gentle courtesy, his readiness to sacrifice himself for the sake of others, his ability to renounce his own comfort, opinions, advantage.³³⁸ "If we," writes Don Albera, "could learn how to imitate him, we would certainly bring Don Bosco back to life in our person and

³³⁵ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 334-338; see also: 34, 227, 336, 281, 294, 336.

³³⁶ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 342-343; see also: 382-383.

³³⁷ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 341-343.

³³⁸ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 346-347.

in the midst of the world, and we would gain a great number of souls for the Lord.”³³⁹

Don Bosco taught that “we must do good to all,” and this demands that his followers exercise the virtues of goodness, kindness, gentleness, as well as prudence, a spirit of reflection, great calm, a spirit of gratitude. He did not limit his love for others to good thoughts; he prayed for them and prepared himself in useful skills to assist them on their journey.³⁴⁰ This was his program, which he called the “politics of the Our Father... thy kingdom come!” This was all that counted, Don Bosco used to say, and the reign of God is brought about by “doing some good for as many people as possible, and doing evil to no one.”³⁴¹

3.5 Don Bosco: Model of the Salesian Priest

Don Albera wrote of the Founder as model—“Don Bosco our model: in striving after religious perfection; in the education of young people and leading them to holiness; in dealing with our neighbor; in doing good to all”—in his circular letter of October 18, 1920. This date was personally significant for Don Albera: it was the sixty-first anniversary of his first entrance into the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. The following March 19, 1921, he addressed a letter to Salesians who were priests. He offered the letter to the entire group of priest confreres, but wanted them to receive it as if he had written to each one personally: Don Bosco used to write a note to each of his young people individually on important occasions; sheer numbers made this impossible for Don Albera in 1921, but he wanted his priests to know that “this is my intention.”³⁴²

³³⁹ Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 347.

³⁴⁰ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 347-348.

³⁴¹ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 349.

³⁴² Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 388-389.

Just as the Fathers of the Church spoke of the priest as “another Christ,” so the Salesian priest “should be in everything and always another Don Bosco!”³⁴³ The statement, Don Albera realized, might seem very strong, but he made it remembering the Founder’s own continual insistence that “the priest is always a priest, and he should show himself to be such in every instant!”³⁴⁴

Receiving the “the blessings of the Holy Spirit and the grace of the priesthood” with the imposition of hands, Don Albera tells his fellow priests, means that “the strength of the Sacrament descends to pervade and penetrate deeply every fiber of our being.” But beyond receiving the “priestly character,” Don Albera speaks of receiving a call to commit oneself to greater diligence in cultivating a “familiar” relationship with Christ the priest. This is what Don Bosco lived, and this is what the Salesian priest must learn from him. Thus, whereas all Salesians can look to the Founder for inspiration as a model “in the acquisition of religious perfection, in educating and sanctifying youth, in dealing with their neighbor, in doing good to all,” the Salesian priest has an obligation to follow in the Founder’s footsteps, and to read the events of Don Bosco’s life not as a history, but as a spiritual legacy that shapes and directs his own response and his own growth.³⁴⁵

Concretely, the Salesian priest must study, for learning (*scientia*) is not a luxury but a requirement for priests.³⁴⁶ Lest salt become insipid, the Salesian understands that he must cultivate his spirit so that he can share a taste for God with others. Study must be made into an act of deep recollection, of union with

³⁴³ Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 389.

³⁴⁴ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 389, 390, 391.

³⁴⁵ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 389-392.

³⁴⁶ Cf. Mal 2:7: *Labia enim sacerdotis custodient scientiam, et legem requirent ex ore eius*, quoted in Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 392; see also: CG11 Q4:17.

God.³⁴⁷ This is why the study of scripture is a formative experience: "let the holy books be our daily pasture... we would be fortunate if we could form ourselves with language that is entirely scriptural," says Don Albera.³⁴⁸ His point, however, is not academic, but formative. "Worthy sons of Don Bosco" study with "love and diligence," safeguarding "discipline and religious perfection" so that they may perfect their "moral, religious and apostolic life." Like Don Bosco, directors must cultivate learning among their confreres, even to the point of providing an adequate and updated library in the house.³⁴⁹

The scope of Salesian life is only one, says Don Albera: "the glory of God through our sanctification and salvation." This means "serving souls to win them to God," and doing this work of reaching out, saving and sanctifying "in union with Jesus Christ, the eternal priest."³⁵⁰ Here is where the priest learns the most from Don Bosco, who lived "in intimate union with God" and "never tired of inciting us to this same union on every propitious occasion."³⁵¹ Here Don Albera depicts a directive and apostolic Don Bosco, and this image will lead him to speak of the necessity of spiritual direction in the life of the Salesian. Everyone must seek direction, and the Salesian director must cultivate that attitude and those aptitudes that allow him to grow into a spiritual guide—the kind of guide that "is steady and completely filled with the Salesian spirit."³⁵²

Don Bosco was a man of courage, a man of action, and a man of "devotion." He was rich in "human or natural virtues," a man of heart, a man of character who was good, upright, generous and constant. But, he rooted his natural qualities in God. So Salesians must continually cultivate the Christian

³⁴⁷ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 393.

³⁴⁸ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 394.

³⁴⁹ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 401.

³⁵⁰ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 402.

³⁵¹ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 407.

³⁵² Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 420.

virtues: "faith, hope, love of God and neighbor, religion, humility, mortification, poverty, chastity, obedience, justice, and still others. The simple list of these virtues," says Don Albera, "should remind us of what we heard from our Superiors as they exhorted us and incited us during the years of our formation. We must continue our efforts, we must push ourselves to put these virtues into practice."³⁵³

This is what Don Bosco taught and lived. He gave himself entirely, and at great personal sacrifice, "to work constantly for the greater glory of God and the good of his neighbor." Salesians must do the same thing. They must live by "work and temperance" in the service of others. In this they must imitate their "Venerable Father" and give of themselves continually.³⁵⁴ Salesian priests are on the same journey as all other Salesians and the young people themselves, for priesthood among Don Bosco's family is not a matter of status but of service. They must "incite" others to continually set their sights on God and on the goal for which they were created. In this, Don Albera recalls what he had experienced in his relationship with Don Bosco during his own youth. The goal was to learn to love God ever more deeply, and to bring others to do the same. "Let us never forget," Don Albera concludes, "that Don Bosco, even from Heaven, continually asks us to help him to save our soul, that is to become holy."³⁵⁵

Conclusion: Spiritual Experience

Paolo Albera described the "words of the founder" as "inspired." He verifies that these words "burned within our hearts." However, more than quote Don Bosco's words from written texts, Don Albera prefers to cite the founder's example as well as

³⁵³ Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 428.

³⁵⁴ Cf. Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 430-431.

³⁵⁵ Albera, *Lettere Circolari*, 431.

conversations he himself and his peers had with their "common father and benefactor." The impressions that the gentle and fatherly Don Bosco made on Giuseppe Buzzetti, Giovanni Cagliero, Luigi Lasagna, and ultimately on Paolo Albera himself were worth far more than volumes of sermons and published meditations.

Don Bosco comes alive in Paolo Albera's talks as he tries to nurture his listeners in the Salesian spirit. This is not something that can be transmitted through logical calculation: it is experiential. At the same time, Don Albera urges his listeners—be they novices or directors—to "study Don Bosco," study the constitutions, study their own role as religious and as pastoral leaders, using Don Bosco's example as their measuring stick. They must "learn from" their patron Francis de Sales, to treat each person as a brother or sister, as a friend in the Lord, helping them to grow in devotion, that is, in the holiness that God willed for them.

This was not a question of technique or human genius. It was a matter of God's grace at work in the Church, for ultimately the Salesian mission was not a merely human enterprise. It was a response to the Gospel call to announce the Good News and baptize all nations. This perspective made it clear that neither Don Bosco as founder nor Francis de Sales as patron were the originators of the Salesian spirit. What they gave they had themselves received from God for the good of the Church and for the salvation of souls. Now their successors, their spiritual sons and daughters were being entrusted with this same spirit. To respond faithfully, they must cultivate those same virtues that had typified the gentle Bishop of Geneva and the peasant priest from Turin.