

DON BOSCO'S EXPERIENCE AND SENSE OF THE CHURCH

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1. Don Bosco in the context of the Catholic Restoration

The characteristics and distinguishing features of the Restoration, with its reaction against Jansenism and Gallicanism, had an unmistakable influence on Don Bosco. That brief verdict, repeated by one of the main experts on Don Bosco, might be enough to outline his position and his thinking about the Church. However, one needs to look at the practical implications of such a judgement, which otherwise remains too vague and open to varied interpretations and generalizations.

Discussion of the acute problems presented to the Church by the postulates of the Enlightenment and by the disastrous effects of the Revolution tended to focus upon the question of authority. Two reasons for this appear to me fundamental. The first was the awareness that the Revolution had left ruin in its wake and the conviction that this chaos arose because the principle of authority had been rejected, or at least ignored. The second reason was that, faced with all this political, social and religious disorder, 19th century man felt the need to guarantee some measure of cultural and religious stability. These twin factors easily led to a conviction of the necessity for submission to the authority of the Church and to renewed enthusiasm for its centralization as an antidote to the centrifugal movements of the Revolution. Two famous examples of this point of view will suffice.

Joseph de Maistre presented papal authority as an inescapable condition for the Restoration of Europe. His concept of the Church may be summed up in two theses: first, that the Church can only be understood if seen as completely analogous to the state; and second, that the Church finds its fullest expression in the Pope and in papal infallibility. «There can be no human society without government, no government without sovereignty and no sovereignty without infallibility».¹

¹ Don Bosco quotes this passage in his *Storia d'Italia* and comments: «Humanly speaking

His approach was probably a lot more political than theological and his anxiety to emphasise papal authority clearly derived from the rejection of the prevailing notion of the sovereignty of the people. At all events, his influence on ultramontanist ecclesiology was decisive. I am fond of two of the author's statements which were frequently repeated, in one way or another, throughout the 19th century: «Pour faire court, voici mon sentiment: aux conciles le moins possible, aux papes le plus possible».² And again: «Plus de Pape, plus de souveraineté; plus de souveraineté, plus de unité; plus de unité, plus d'autorité; plus d'autorité, plus de foi».³

Lamennais, for his part, considered that, compared with other human societies, Christianity was the only perfect society, with its own supreme authority, its own dogmas and laws. Rejection of such authority led necessarily to the rejection of the Church and, with it, of God himself. For him it was absurd to talk of an infallible Church if one did not at the same time admit the infallibility of the Pope, since it is only through the latter's infallibility that the infallibility of the Church can be asserted. He made his own the phrase of St. Francis de Sales: «Le Pape et l'Église c'est tout un». We could say that he summed up his doctrine with an affirmation that was often repeated afterwards: «Point de Pape, point d'Église; point d'Église, point de Christianisme; point de Christianisme, point de religion, au moins pour tout peuple qui fut chrétien, et par conséquent point de société».⁴

One could go on, but it seems to me that what has been said is sufficient to indicate a point of reference in the ecclesiastical formation of Don Bosco and most of those who were studying in Italian seminaries in his day. One is dealing with the traditionalism fostered by the Restoration and with the desire to achieve the compenetration of society and religion, of religion and the Church, of the Church and the Papacy. The resulting ecclesiology presents the image of the Church as a society organized and governed by the hierarchy. Don Bosco writes: «The Church is the society of believers governed by its own pastors, under the direction of the Supreme Pontiff»; it is a definition similar to that in the Turin catechism of 1844. On another occasion he summed up his thought with an idea that will appear with a thousand variations in the course of his work: «the Catholic Church is founded on the authority of the Supreme Pontiff, and it can be preserved and propagated only by the faith and reverence we show for that authority [...] that is why it is most important to spread and increase faith and reverence for the authority of the Pope».

temporal sovereignty presupposes infallibility, and to the spiritual sovereignty of the Pope it was divinely promised» (G. BOSCO, *Opere e scritti editi e inediti* III, Torino, SEI 1935, p. 435).

² Quoted by C. LATREILLE, *Joseph de Maistre et la Papauté*, Paris 1906, p. 170.

³ J. De MAISTRE, *Lettres et opuscules inédites* II, Lyon, A. Vatou 1851, p. 296.

⁴ F.R. LAMENNAIS, *Oeuvres Complètes* VII, Paris, Pagnerre 1844, pp. 122, 132, 141.

2. Images of the Church

Don Bosco used to recite this prayer: «Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, may the Catholic Church spread and triumph, the sole true Church of Jesus Christ; may all nations recognise its rights and those of its Head and its bishops; may all minds follow its teaching as the only depository of revealed truth, the divine witness to the authenticity and authority of the sacred books, the infallible teacher of men, the supreme judge in questions of doctrine. May all wills bend to obey her moral and disciplinary laws, so that after her victories on earth she may enjoy the eternal triumphs of heaven, together with the multitudes of souls that have been saved».⁵

In accordance with the prevailing theology of the time, which ignored the eschatological dimension of Jesus's teaching, it was taken for granted that the Church on earth was synonymous with the kingdom of God. Such identification gives rise to the spirit of triumphalism which is constantly announcing the victory of the Church over its opponents. It also produces the vision of a Church that is free from sin and from mistakes and errors in its history.

For Don Bosco the Church as an institution was utterly solid and free from blemishes, since it was based on such authority. She safeguards not only religious life but also life in society, right down to the diocese and the parish. The Church is presented as a monolithic whole, proposing an immutable truth, not subject to historical change but passed on, pure and uncontaminated, throughout the centuries. Other individuals and groups are in error and, consequently, do not have the rights that are enjoyed by the truth. Pius IX himself, in a phrase that is somewhat disconcerting but which typifies the prevailing mentality, used to declare that he demanded freedom of worship in places where Catholics were in a minority, but could not grant it where they were in the majority.⁶

This was the ecclesiology of the perfect society, dominated by the doctrinal and disciplinary centralisation of the Roman Curia and closed to any association with modern currents of thought, as represented at the time by Rosmini,⁷ Dupanloup, Manzoni, Newman, Sailer, Montalembert and Scheeben. In the political, religious and ecumenical fields it was intransigent; the strong piety that characterized it was largely based on devotions, and its theology was that of the Roman schools which was the only accepted interpretation of Catholic thought.

⁵ MB II 272.

⁶ «The Pope demands liberty of conscience in Russia, but not as a general principle» (G. MARTINA, *La Iglesia de Lutero a nuestros días* III, Madrid 1974, p. 148). Cf. the same author's *Pio IX (1851-1866)*, Roma, Pontificia Università Gregoriana 1986, p. 329.

⁷ «Although Don Bosco admired Rosmini's holiness as a priest, he in no way shared this enthusiasm for his particular system of philosophy» (MB XIII 20).

The general impression is of what we would call a *popular Catholicism*: on the one hand the devotional expressions of faith that it fostered often owed more to the imagination than to reason, while, on the other hand, the practical and social expressions of membership that the Church encouraged were educative and tutelary. That kind of pastoral practice promoted the «Catholic world», that is, a form of Catholic civilization distinct and kept strictly apart from the dominant surrounding civilization.

Accordingly, when speaking of the Church, Don Bosco favoured the analogies of a journey, a house, a mother, a ship, a flock, a body,⁸ which he interpreted as referring to a compact human group that was well organised, pyramidal, hierarchical. This also helps us to understand his concentration upon such images as a kingdom, a monarchy, a family, when he was describing the Church.⁹ The same approach had already been used by Bellarmine: *ecclesia quasi status*, and its influence has, in some ways, reached down to our own times. A few years before his death Don Bosco was writing: «Just as in an earthly kingdom there is an order, beginning with the sovereign and descending, step by step, to the least of its subjects, so there is an order in the Catholic Church, what we call the *Church Hierarchy*, beginning with God, who is the invisible head of the Church, and passing on to the Roman Pontiff who is his Vicar and visible head on earth; thence it passes to the bishops and other sacred ministers, and from them the diverse commands are communicated to all the rest of the faithful scattered throughout the world».¹⁰

The Church is the «only ark of salvation», the only place where the teaching of Jesus is preserved in its entirety,¹¹ the one exclusive place within which salvation can be achieved, the only place where the practice of virtue and holiness is possible.

⁸ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 125.

⁹ «The Father: Imagine a family that has to endure until the end of the world: how is it to be preserved?

The Son: This family will only be preserved if it has a good head to govern it.

The Father: Do you now understand what this family is and who its head is?

The Son: Of course, we have understood perfectly. This great family is the Church, and its head is the Roman Pontiff» (G. BOSCO, *Il Cattolico nel secolo. Trattenimenti familiari...*, Torino, Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana 1883, p. 116).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164.

¹¹ «You say that you believe in Christ and in the gospel, but it is not true, because you do not believe in everything that Christ teaches in his gospel: you do not believe the Church and you do not believe that the Roman Pontiff was authorized to govern the Church. Moreover, by allowing everyone to give his own interpretation of Christ's gospel, you open up the possibility of considerable error, and one is almost bound to fall into it, if guided solely by one's own intelligence. Therefore you Protestants are the members of a body without a head, like sheep without a shepherd, like disciples without a master, cut off from the fountain of life, which is J. Christ» (G. BOSCO, *La Chiesa Cattolica-Apostolica-Romana è la sola vera Chiesa di Gesù Cristo*, Torino, Tipografia Speirani e Ferrero 1850, p. 17 et s.).

Against the rationalistic, liberal and pantheistic tendencies, which exalted the value of the individual, and against the individualistic implications of pantheism Don Bosco opposed the Church as «the only ark of salvation», as God's representative endowed with divine authority. «No, outside the Church nobody can be saved. Just as those who were not in Noah's ark perished in the flood, as St. Jerome points out, so anyone who obstinately lives and dies outside the Catholic apostolic, Roman Church, the only Church of Christ and sole repository of true religion, will inevitably be lost».¹²

Don Bosco wrote a great deal about the Church – 20 books and booklets as well as 24 historical works in which the Church featured prominently.¹³ Nevertheless I believe we would be in danger of misunderstanding him if we did not go behind his words to what lies beyond. His insistence upon this topic shows the importance he attached to the institutionalised religion anchored in the Roman hierarchy that we call the Catholic Church. Yet his life shows that other things were even more central: Christ, divine grace, Mary, the sacraments. Without any confusion, his life can show different religious values: his writings emphasise one set of priorities, his pastoral activity exemplifies another set of values.

This Church, holy and divine, is the only one that can lead men to God. That conviction explains Don Bosco's battle against the Waldensians and Protestants in general. We read in his writings that «there is only one true religion», that «the churches of the heretics have no divine character», that «the Church of Jesus Christ is not found in the church of the heretics».¹⁴ He therefore concluded: «Whoever is in union with the Pope is in union with Jesus Christ, and whoever severs that link will be shipwrecked in the stormy sea of error and perish miserably».¹⁵ Elsewhere he says: «Let us be ready to suffer any ill, even death itself, rather than say or do anything contrary to the Catholic religion, the sole true religion of Jesus Christ, outside which nobody can be saved».¹⁶

¹² G. BOSCO, *Fondamenti della Cattolica Religione*, Torino, Tipog. dell'Oratorio di S. Franc. di Sales 1872, p. 13.

¹³ Cf. E. VALENTINI, *Don Bosco e la Chiesa*, in: P. BRAIDO (edit.), *In Ecclesia*, Roma, LAS 1977, pp. 215-234.

¹⁴ [G. BOSCO,] *Avvisi ai Cattolici*, Torino, Tipografia dir. da P. De-Agostini 1853, pp. 10, 14, 17.

¹⁵ G. BOSCO, *Il Centenario di S. Pietro Apostolo*, Torino, Tipografia dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales 1867, p. V.

¹⁶ [G. BOSCO,] *La Chiesa Cattolica* 6.

3. A pyramidal and authoritarian society

Shortly before Vatican I Turin had become a lively centre of the conciliar view opposed to infallibility. In 1869 Döllinger's book *The Pope and the Council* was translated; Passaglia was writing and working in Turin, and within the theological faculty authors critical of ultramontanism and of papal infallibility were known and studied.

Taking this environment into account, we see that one of the best known and most significant aspects of Don Bosco, and one widely commented on, was his limitless devotion to the Papacy and his tireless defence of it. It would be fair to say that this expressed the essence of his theology of the Church.¹⁷ From the very beginning this was a characteristic to which all commentators gave prominence.¹⁸

On his death-bed he confided to the archbishop of Turin: «These are difficult times, your Eminence! I have lived in difficult times... But the authority of the Pope... the authority of the Pope... I have told Mons. Cagliero to tell the Pope that the Salesians are meant to defend the Pope's authority, wherever they work, wherever they may be».¹⁹ Cardinal Alimonda shortly afterwards, during the Saint's funeral, recalled that «his entire life, public and private, is universally recognised as a witness to the Pope».

John XXIII summed it up in a very neat phrase: «Anyone who knows how to read into the life of Don Bosco sees that he was both the priest of youth and the priest of the Pope». And Don Bosco himself, in his conversations and in his writings, used to couple those two aspects, explaining them in detail: «And so, my dear boys, never forget as long as you live that the Pope loves you, and therefore, you should never utter a word that might be insulting towards him, never listen passively to injurious or defamatory things spoken against his sacred person, never read papers or books that make bold to belittle the dignity of the Vicar of Jesus Christ».²⁰

For Don Bosco the instilling of love for the Pope was an infallible antidote to the efforts of religious sects and dissidents; it seems true to say that his favourite theme as a writer was the Pope, and the many lives of the Popes that he wrote were used as an occasion for fostering love for the pa-

¹⁷ In 1845 he asked Gregory XVI to grant him and his family a plenary indulgence *in articulo mortis*. He later explained that «it was not only the indulgences that mattered to him but that he was eager to be in direct touch with the Holy See and with the Roman Congregations» (E I 11).

¹⁸ There exists a whole series of testimonies. The following of Balesio may suffice: «Don Bosco's love of the Pope was the finest fruit of his virtue of faith. As a priest who was totally catholic in his faith and in his works, he had what I should call the instinctive love of the saints for the Church and for the Pope» (L. TERRONE, *Lo spirito di San Giovanni Bosco*, Torino, SEI 1934, p. 64).

¹⁹ MB XVIII 491.

²⁰ MB VIII 720.

pacy and for combating the animosity and mistaken ideas that were widespread. He planned, in effect, to write a history of the Popes in order to demonstrate that «certain authors seem ashamed of speaking of the Roman Pontiffs and of the most illustrious events in the Church's history».²¹

Nor was he content to express himself at only a theoretical, doctrinal level: his attitude was given practical expression in his congregation, since he considered that devotion to the Pope was a prerequisite for anyone to be a superior, or, indeed, for anyone wanting to be a true Catholic.²²

All this was much more than the expression of mere devotion for the person of the Pontiff; it revealed his concept of the Church and of its structure, in line with the prevailing theology of his day. Lemoyne summed it up thus: «Don Bosco held that the pivot of any Church history, round which everything else should revolve, was the Pope, and therefore any true history of the Church had to be in essence a history of the Popes. Is not the Pope the Head, the Sovereign, the Supreme Pastor? [...] Isn't it essential that we should owe him all honour, glory and obedience, since he is the centre of unity, without which the Church is no longer the Church? It is a great mistake to write at great length about the Church with only the rarest mention of its Head».²³

We cannot really blame Don Bosco for his concept of history, since he merely reflected the dominant contemporary view, and one that is still possible. It is so much easier for historians to speak of Popes and their involvement with political situations than to write about their interior life or the presence of divine grace in the community of the Church. Given Don Bosco's spirit of awareness, it is not hard to imagine him writing a Church history whose central theme would be the holiness present in the communion of all faithful Christians. However, as we have seen, one can demonstrate that quite apart from the prevalent view of the time, Don Bosco saw the Church as revolving around the Roman Pontiff.

In his presentation of the Pope he did not allow himself to interpret papal directives in the light of any hermeneutical principle: it was rather a matter of defending the Pope in everything. The desire, moreover, of identi-

²¹ F. MOLINARI, *La «Storia Ecclesiastica» di Don Bosco*, in BRAIDO (edit.), *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 204. We may recall his testimony: «I have often pondered interiorly the best way to soften the hatred and aversion which are manifested by some towards the Popes and their authority in these sad times. It seemed to me that an effective means would be to make known the facts regarding the lives of these supreme pastors, established to act as the vicars of Jesus Christ on earth in order to guide our souls on the way to heaven» (G. BOSCO, *Vita di S. Pietro...*, Torino, Tip. di G.B. Paravia e Comp. 1856, p. 3).

²² «One cannot be a good Catholic unless one shows obedience to the Pope also in this respect. Anyone opposing the Pope is lost. [...] In speaking of the Pope's temporal power, I do so from the point of view of religion and conscience, which cannot be divorced from the visible world» (MB VI 481).

²³ MB V 575.

fyng with the Pope demanded that one should think, feel and speak as he wished. This radical demand is justifiable since the Pope is the vicar of Christ: whoever is for the Pope is for Christ and for God. He once confided to Pius IX: «Holy Father, my sons love you! They carry you in their heart! Your name is linked for them with that of God!».

The impression of the Pope that one takes away from his writings is that of a superman around whom the entire Church revolves: «As the apostles, during their Saviour's life, gathered around Jesus as a safe centre and an infallible teacher, so we too must close ranks around Peter's worthy successor, the great, courageous Vicar of Jesus Christ, the strong and incomparable Pius IX. In every doubt, in every danger, we must have recourse to him as our anchor of salvation, our infallible oracle. Let no one forget that this marvellous Pontiff is the foundation, the centre of all truth, the salvation of the world. Anyone who gathers with him is building for heaven; but whoever does not build with him is scattering and plunging things towards the abyss. *Qui mecum non colligit, disperdit*».²⁴

Some of his statements seem to imply that the clergy at their various levels exist only because it is impossible for the Pope to do everything and reach everyone on his own: «This leader, the Roman Pontiff, since he cannot personally attend to the particular needs of each of the faithful, has to call on other inferior ministers, who depend upon the Pope; these by preaching the word of God and administering the holy sacraments promote doctrine and holiness amongst men».²⁵ Don Bosco's actual practice and his esteem for the priesthood serve to qualify the impression given by these words.

Ecumenical councils were considered by Don Bosco as supreme expressions of the papacy. Such a statement may not, in itself, seem far from the generally held view. However, it does give the impression that such councils are merely a more solemn expression of the ordinary power of the Pope. In fact, though useful they do not seem necessary: «Because the Pope, the supreme pastor of all Christians, can do on his own everything that a general council can do», given that, according to Don Bosco, «a council is infallible in things relating to faith and morals only because this power is communicated to it by the Pope's confirmation, which enables it to enjoy supreme authority in the Church».²⁶

Today we would say that Don Bosco, in fact, saw the Church as a huge diocese whose bishop was, effectively speaking, the Pope. This view was largely reinforced by Catholics after Vatican I. It would not be inaccurate to say that the local churches were seen merely as sectors of the universal

²⁴ MB XII 641.

²⁵ G. BOSCO, *Il Cattolico istruito nella sua Religione*. Trattenimenti..., Torino, Tipografia dir. da P. De-Agostini 1853, p. 4.

²⁶ G.M. MEDICA, *I Concili generali e la Chiesa Cattolica nel pensiero di D. Bosco*, in «Rivista di Pedagogia e Scienze religiose» 1 (1963) 2, p. 22.

Church governed by the Pope.²⁷ That is the view that he expressed, at times, in terms which now surprise us: «The bishops collect the pleas of the people and listen to their needs and then present them to the Supreme Ruler of the Church. The Pope, then, as circumstances require, passes his orders to the bishops of the world, and the bishops pass them on to the simple faithful».²⁸ To what role were the bishops reduced, according to that view? They became mere intermediaries. Don Stella has pointed out that Don Bosco «was easily led to see the bishops not only in a subordinate but also an almost auxiliary role to that of the Pope: they were his representatives and spokesmen amongst the faithful who could not, for various reasons, communicate directly with their common father».²⁹ And so Don Bosco could write: «Our pastors, bishops, unite us with the Pope and the Pope unites us with God».³⁰

He obviously did not intend by those words to imply any lack of respect for the bishops and parish priests: «Therefore I would never be in favour of sending our priests or teachers into a diocese without the full approval of the local ordinary, upon whom we must depend at all times, as our rules lay down».³¹ There were, naturally, limits to this dependence: «That in brief is the reason for my going to Rome and for what I have done there. We have been granted exemptions and privileges, but we shall always be most obedient to the bishops and parish priests, only making use of our privileges after having exhausted all other means, including that of humble deference».³²

Passaglia and some other theologians insisted that the bishops were not merely the delegates of the Pope. To make them so would destroy the unity of the Church, since Christ alone is to be seen as the source of all power in his mystical body. These theologians saw a relationship of complementarity and reciprocity between the Pope and the episcopate, which left intact the rights of both. Don Bosco did not, in truth, develop any strictly theological presentation of either the papacy or the episcopate; however, his anti-Gallican position led him to emphasise the subordination of the bishops to the Pope, who, as the subject of supreme authority over the universal Church, is

²⁷ Cf. P. RIPA, *L'argomentazione delle «note» della Chiesa nell'apologetica popolare di S. Giovanni Bosco*, Colle Don Bosco, Ist. Sal. Arti Grafiche 1971, p. 33.

²⁸ F. DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco e la vita spirituale*, Torino, LDC 1967, p. 93.

²⁹ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 133. When submitting suggestions to Pius IX for the nomination of bishops, he in fact always chose candidates who were docile to the Pope and firmly in favour of infallibility, and therefore unlikely to create difficulties for the Pope and for Church administration.

³⁰ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 122.

³¹ MB XIII 456. In vol. X 931, Don Amadei writes: «He was most anxious that the Salesians should be of help to the parish where their house was located». And in 1861 Don Bosco wrote: «You are well aware that for twenty years I have toiled, and still do, hoping to consume my life in work for our diocese, and I have always recognized the voice of God in that of my ecclesiastical superior».

³² MB IX 565-567.

final teacher and judge in all matters of faith.³³ Faced with this constant insistence on the role of the Pope, one is struck by the almost total absence of any reference to the corresponding co-responsibility of the bishops. Don Bosco made reference to the importance of conciliar decisions not because he was conscious of the principle of collegiality, but because general councils destroy heresies and define truths by virtue of the approval of the Pope which alone makes them infallible.

There is clearly no question here of lack of respect for the bishops or of a failure to value their position in the Church; it is just that the concentration upon the centrality of the Pope tended automatically to diminish the significance of the bishops. On 13 February, 1863, Don Bosco wrote to Pius IX: «The death and exile of quite a number of bishops has created difficulties for the less fervent and has caused the clergy to draw closer together, and to communicate directly with the centre of truth, the Vicar of Jesus Christ. [...] May I say something which seems strange but true. It seems as if the bishops are at present doing more good through their exile and imprisonment than they could do from their dioceses, because by their fidelity to the Pope they advertise and defend the source of divine authority in his visible head on earth which is the basis of our holy, Catholic faith».³⁴

It seems undeniable that in the course of history there has always been a swing towards greater centralization in the Church whenever doctrinal problems and political persecution made it necessary for Rome to give special support to the bishops, whether individually or collectively, in the face of a civil power that could easily dominate and oppress the relative weakness of the bishops. The above quotation from Don Bosco refers indirectly to this fact, but as we read it, we can guess at the division, typical of the last century, that existed between bishops docile to Rome, and therefore good, and those who were more independent and therefore considered in need of reform and conversion.

The author of the *Memorie Biografiche* reflects this latter mentality when he observes that «in France the liberal Catholic newspapers side firmly with the Gallicanists and the Jansenists against the definition of infallibility. The unfortunate publications of Janus, Gratry, Mons. Maret and Dupanloup did the rest».³⁵ The basis for this verdict and for the division between good and bad was not doctrinal orthodoxy but rather whether one supported ultramontanism or not. That explains why such blameless individuals were so unjustly lumped together and condemned. Convinced and determined ultramontanists considered that a Maret, a Dupanloup or a Gratry were as dangerous as Döllinger.

³³ The Holy See «is a supreme authority which grants and limits faculties and regulates their exercise» (E IV 59).

³⁴ E I 258.

³⁵ MB IX 777.

What was the place and function of the laity within this ecclesiastical structure? Obviously a very limited place. Of course Rosmini, in his book *Le Cinque piaghe della Santa Madre Chiesa*, pointed out that the discovery of the laity and their active share in the life of the Church was one of the foundation stones of the Church. He called for greater cooperation between clergy and people, championing the priesthood of the faithful and demanding that the laity participate actively in the nomination of bishops.³⁶ He had recognised the more reasonable demands of reformist groups, including some of the more radical groups which were certainly not listened to or taken into consideration by the Roman Curia or by most of the bishops. The condemnation of *Le Cinque piaghe...* on 30 March 1849 encapsulates the victory of an ecclesiology that was hostile to all change.

Father Curci, the founder of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, for his part defended more active participation in the life of the Church, recalling the first centuries when «the *multitudo fidelium* and the *virii fratres* played a much more important part than one would think, judging by the system that prevails today».³⁷ However, this was a position that he argued during the particularly contentious period when he had already left the Society of Jesus.

An attitude that seemed more widely shared was that of Cardinal Antonelli when he recalled that the Pope considered it «extremely sad that Italy was reduced to upholding the Catholic religion by the means proposed», that is, by the organized action of lay Catholics. The same Pius IX declared vehemently that «the guardianship of religion was reserved *solely* to the Pope and the episcopate».³⁸ It was the Pope himself who underlined the adverb *solely*, thus excluding the laity from any share in this field.

What were Don Bosco's views on the subject? At first sight, when one reads his numerous letters, largely addressed to lay people, one forms the impression that what interested him most about the laity was their purses, their money, without which he could not continue his many enterprises. On the other hand, his almost obsessive insistence on the role and importance of priests can give the impression that the laity were the passive objects of action within the Church. What was the function of the laity? One could really only answer this by pointing out the *raison d'être* of priests, namely their vocation to sanctify the laity and to lead them to salvation. The task of the laity in the Church is to be sanctified by the ministers of religion and to obey them.³⁹ «Let them, therefore, be docile to the voices of their sacred

³⁶ G. MARTINA, *L'atteggiamento della gerarchia di fronte alle prime iniziative organizzate di apostolato dei laici alla metà dell'Ottocento in Italia*, in: *Spiritualità e azione del laico cattolico italiano*, Padova, Ed. Antenore 1969, p. 317.

³⁷ G.D. MUCCI, *Il primo direttore della «Civiltà Cattolica»*, Roma, Ed. La Civiltà Cattolica, 1986, p. 193.

³⁸ MARTINA, *L'atteggiamento della gerarchia* 345.

³⁹ «In the Church there are two classes of persons, those who teach and command, and

ministers, just as sheep obey the voice of their shepherd. God has given us these ministers to instruct us in the knowledge of our religion; let us accordingly go to them and not to worldly teachers in order to be taught. God has provided them as guides on our journey to heaven, so let us follow their teaching». ⁴⁰

The question is a complex one and should not be over-simplified. Desramaut, with his habitual sense of balance, comments: «It is interesting to note that Don Bosco thought of Christians in terms of the kind of existence that was appropriate to them, their missionary task in the Church and sanctification of their daily lives and of their direct apostolate». ⁴¹ But it is clear that his thought on the subject was nearer to that of Pius IX than that of Newman ⁴² and others who propounded a less clerical view of the Church.

The purely pyramidal, hierarchical and centralized approach was, as we have seen, characteristic of an ecclesiology and of a mentality that is well known and adequately researched. ⁴³ I have found in Don Bosco certain arguments that reveal his character and his originality. They reinforce the preceding point, but adopt a less doctrinal, more practical approach.

He was totally convinced that the structure of the Church had been put in place by Christ for the salvation of souls, but I believe that he more or less explicitly considered the Church a huge family in which authority is necessary because it is, above all, beneficent and helpful towards achieving the family's goals. ⁴⁴ It is a homely image that reflects the essence of his pedagogy, ⁴⁵ the style of his new congregation ⁴⁶ and the concept of the Church community which he practised and handed on. ⁴⁷

they constitute the hierarchy, and then those who obey and are subject to the hierarchy: these are the simple faithful, the rich, the poor, kings and princes» (G. BOSCO, *La Chiesa Cattolica e la sua Gerarchia*, Torino, Tip. dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales 1869, p. 67). We may also recall a notable paragraph in the encyclical *Vehementer* of Pius IX: «Only within the body of pastors does there reside the right and the authority needed to impel and direct everyone towards the goal of society. As for the masses, the only right they enjoy is to allow themselves to be led and to follow, like a docile flock, behind their shepherds».

⁴⁰ G. BOSCO, *Il mese di maggio consacrato a Maria SS. Immacolata ad uso del popolo*, Torino, Tip. G.B. Paravia e Comp. 1858, p. 46.

⁴¹ DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco e la vita spirituale* 209.

⁴² MARTINA, *Pio IX* 176.

⁴³ A. ANTÓN, *El misterio de la Iglesia II*, Madrid, BAC 1987.

⁴⁴ «Now this Father is the Pope, and all Christians are his sons, the kingdom is the Church, the supreme but invisible king is Jesus Christ, while the visible king is his Vicar, the Roman Pontiff» (G. BOSCO, *Il Cattolico nel secolo* 173).

⁴⁵ «The pupil will remain the friend of his educator and will always remember with pleasure the guidance he received, looking upon his masters and other superiors as so many fathers and brothers» (*Il sistema preventivo nell'educazione della gioventù*, edited by P. BRAIDO, Roma, LAS 1985, p. 90).

⁴⁶ Cf. MB IX 572 et s. Cf. G. BOSCO, *Scritti spirituali*, edited by J. AUBRY, vol. II, Roma, Città Nuova 1976, pp. 128, 159, 285 et s.

⁴⁷ «I consider that the clergy of the world are like a huge seminary in front of the Pope.

The way he envisaged and governed his religious congregation revealed «his tendency to see himself as a father who enjoyed the complete trust and confidence of the sons who shared in all he did». One result was that the first versions of the rules were very centralized and autocratic.⁴⁸ For example, the fourth General Chapter, after much work, reflection and evaluation, after resolutions and suggestions, ... decided to give Don Bosco total freedom to change or modify things at will.⁴⁹ That attitude, which is seen in other institutes of the period, corresponded to the ecclesiology that produced Vatican I.

In the Salesian family, as in every social organism, authority was necessary and, in this case, indispensable for salvation. At times, probably because his approach is not strictly theological, the basis of Don Bosco's defence of authority seems purely utilitarian: he takes the view that only a homogeneous, compact Church under one sole leadership can possibly respond effectively to the challenges it faces. And so his insistence on the definition of infallibility seems, in practice, to be a response to the constant attacks on the Church and to the need for centralized leadership, «like that of an army at war». He did not want to see the ills of the past repeated. «The dogmatic definition would put an end to the errors of Gallicanism in France and of Febronianism in Germany. It was also necessary for missionary work and to prevent the Supreme Pontiff finding himself in the same sad straits as Pius VII».⁵⁰

The reasoning that missionary success required such a definition should be noted. It was Don Bosco's desire for efficacious missionary work that made him call for one, universal, obligatory catechism, drawn up and promulgated by the Holy See.⁵¹ This reasoning, pragmatic rather than theological,

[...] I note, too, that we should defer to the Pope even as a private teacher, and conform ourselves to his way of thinking. That is the way good children behave towards their father» (MB XIII 21). P. Stella also emphasises this point: «Having been formed in the first four decades of the 19th century, his practice depended on a religious view based on the family and fatherhood, tending to see everything in terms of the father-son relationship, of obedience (or of consecration to God) and of carrying out orders» (STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 253). These expressions recur frequently in Don Bosco's writings: «This great family is the Church, its head is the Pope» (BOSCO, *Il Cattolico istruito* 41 et s.). The Pope, «in the form of a father, rules and governs the entire Catholic family» (BOSCO, *La Chiesa Cattolica e la sua Gerarchia* 22).

⁴⁸ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 158.

⁴⁹ «Only yesterday a Salesian wrote to me: It is enough for me to know that something has been commanded by the superior; I am quite content and don't go looking for any other reasons. I should like all of you to be able to say that» (MB XIII 91). Lemoyne confirmed that Don Bosco «knew how to impose his authority, nor would he let anyone resist it with impunity» (MB VII 118; cf. DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco e la vita spirituale* 91).

⁵⁰ MB IX 779.

⁵¹ MB IX 827. The idea of a universal catechism at Vatican I brought into relief the different ecclesiological trends. Those who opposed the project actually belonged to a minority of the council (cf. L. NORDERA, *Il Catechismo di Pio X. Per una storia della catechesi in Italia* (1896-1916), Roma LAS 1988, p. 45).

extended also to the civil sphere: «The definition of infallibility would be most beneficial to the common good, it would be of help to sovereigns and to the whole of society, since the Pope's infallible declaration that men must be subject to their earthly rulers and his condemnation of any rebellion against such authority, would turn the people into the firmest upholders of kingly thrones and of public order».⁵²

4. A practical and utilitarian mentality

I think it right to draw attention to Don Bosco's practical and utilitarian mentality. Pietro Stella has a felicitous phrase to sum up what I want to say; we are dealing with a peasant turned priest, a practical man who has clear objectives and uses every moral means at his disposal to reach them. This attitude shows how relative was his defence of the centralization of the Church. It was his experience of daily life that made him less absolute in his theology.

Some Italian and German theologians assigned a much more decisive role to the people of God, giving them a place in the Church's hierarchical structure. For Don Bosco such a role was to be limited to the hierarchy. And yet, when it came down to practice, he gives the impression that the overriding factor is the good of Christian people which has to be ensured even at the cost of subterfuge and occasional sharp practice.

In the *Memorie biografiche* there is a delightful sentence that some might consider cynical, but which really amounts to the famous saying that «God helps those who help themselves»: «Don Bosco had also reflected on the importance of occasionally making use of the influence which Father Rosmini exercised in Turin upon certain men newly invested with authority, and therefore on the desirability of having him for a friend and protector. It was Don Bosco's constant method to avail himself of every human means and then, with confident resignation, allow Divine Providence to direct things as it willed».⁵³

As Stella says: «He is a docile, obedient son, but also very capable. He knows how to choose his moment, who to speak to and how. He has respect for the hierarchy but also for the special charism bestowed upon him and upon his works. At times he boldly claims to be speaking for the Lord».⁵⁴ It should be noted that he showed his ability in dealing with the hierarchy and with the Roman Curia. Belardinelli comments that «Don Bosco is ready to use the Pope's infallibility to back up his own works: in an audience on 12

⁵² G. BOSCO, *Fondamenti della Cattolica Religione* 29.

⁵³ MB III 248. Concerning this kind of shrewdness, I find the use of the words and judgements of Gioberti in defence of the Jesuits (MB III 310) quite delightful.

⁵⁴ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 138.

February, he presented Pius IX with the collection of his "Letture Cattoliche" and of his "Biblioteca", thus meriting the Pope's approval. This provided him with a powerful backer for these useful instruments of social communication despite the hesitations of some of the Piedmontese curial offices». ⁵⁵ He used the Pope's protection on other occasions when it was helpful and smoothed the way for him, ⁵⁶ even taking advantage of the emotion aroused by the death of Pius IX to stir up people's generosity: «To Don Bonetti – let him prepare an article for the "Bulletin" about the church of San Giovanni, saying, 1. It is a work undertaken on the advice of Pius IX, and with his help and blessing; 2. That there is no better monument to Pius IX than to finish a work initiated by him, consecrated in his name and carried out according to his final wish: "Take care of poor boys"». ⁵⁷

Asked why he had favoured the nomination of Gastaldi as archbishop of Turin, he replied: «Hitherto I had every reason to believe that he would have been favourable towards me. What do you want me to do? As soon as he became archbishop of Turin, he changed his tune». ⁵⁸ Gastaldi, for his part, complained bitterly about Don Bosco: «He reduces the authority of the archbishop of Turin and causes division amongst the clergy [...] but I have been forced to call on the Holy See to protect me against the attacks of this ecclesiastic, who is possessed by the spirit of independence and autonomy and encourages this in his followers». ⁵⁹ It is worth recalling that Gastaldi's predecessor, Mons. Riccardi, had had deep and lengthy disagreements with Don Bosco, because the latter wanted his institute to enjoy full canonical exemption. ⁶⁰

Don Bosco, in his turn, sought different forms of help as the circumstances varied. While seeking the approval of the constitutions, he used ev-

⁵⁵ M. BELARDINELLI, *Don Bosco e il Concilio Vaticano I*, in: P. BRAIDO (edit.), *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 249.

⁵⁶ He wrote to Don Cagliari: «Write to me about your visit with the Archbishop to Carmen of Patagones. Tell the Archbishop that the Holy Father is anxious for us to try new measures with the savages, and he applauds our efforts to open places of education bordering their territories» (E III 95).

⁵⁷ Letter to Don Rua: E III 305 et s.

⁵⁸ MB XIII 23.

⁵⁹ MB XIII 336. The situation was, of course, extremely complex and these difficulties reflected not only two different ways of thinking and acting but also the objective problem of reconciling episcopal authority with religious exemption. In contrast to the words of the Archbishop we may recall the following words of Don Bosco: «Even if I am convinced that I have not exceeded the permission granted to me in this matter, I shall abstain from using it in the future, because that is what would be pleasing to my ecclesiastical superior» (E II 405). Lemoyne was convinced that «these booklets on the lives of the Popes, based on sermons given by Don Bosco, encouraged in his youthful audience a great respect and spirit of obedience towards the commands not only of the Pope but also of all the bishops and especially of the Archbishop of Turin» (MB VI 52).

⁶⁰ G.C. FRANCO, *Appunti storici sopra il Concilio Vaticano*, edited by G. MARTINA, Roma, Pontificia Università Gregoriana 1972, p. 104.

ery possible means to ensure that they were approved in the form in which he had drawn them up. He spoke to Pius IX about an imminent foundation in Hong Kong that would need prompt approval. To the secretary of the Sacred Congregation he spoke about its prefect, and to the latter he spoke about the Pope. He pointed out that it might be difficult to obtain approval through the bishops, so he appealed firmly to Rome. «Don Bosco had sent the book to the Holy Father for a special purpose: he wanted the Pope to see how diligent the Salesians were in their work and how attached to the Chair of Peter, and how they strove to instil into others obedience and love for the Vicar of Jesus Christ. Don Bosco felt that he had achieved his objective and experienced a holy satisfaction».⁶¹

Although he completely and sincerely accepted the role of the Roman Curia, this did not prevent his refusing to accept the emendations to the rules proposed by the competent Roman congregation. Don Bosco told his sons not to worry, because the congregation had the approval of the infallible authority; but once that approval was obtained he sought to modify or change some articles of the approved constitutions which he considered to be impracticable.⁶²

Perhaps the following text may help to explain his way of acting in this regard. Speaking to Pius IX about the behaviour of Pope Honorius (behaviour widely quoted by the opponents of infallibility as a proof of how the Pope could fall into dogmatic error), he said: «However, I am of the opinion that *si cunctavit*, if he used delaying tactics, he did so out of prudence, and since to delay is not necessarily to sin, I consider that Pope Honorius did not even commit a venial sin».⁶³

It is also worth recalling his claim that the congregation should enjoy full financial independence not only from the diocesan authority but also from the Holy See.⁶⁴ Don Stella seems to link Rome's rejection of this claim with the subsequent condemnation of Catholic liberalism and with the Christian democracy of Murri. There is certainly an interesting historical thread discernible, but it seems to me more interesting to ask whether this claim did not reveal a changed attitude towards Roman authority. In fact, in our days analogous cases have occurred with some more recent ecclesial institutions.

On the other hand, this man knew how to make the most of various authorities when they were necessary to him. He appealed to Rome to ob-

⁶¹ MB XIII 517.

⁶² MB XIV 229. On this topic it is essential to consult P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco per i giovani: l'oratorio. Una «congregazione degli oratori»*. Documenti, Roma, LAS 1988. Also P. STELLA, *Le costituzioni salesiane fino al 1888*, in J. AUBRY - M. MIDALI (edit.), *Fedeltà e rinnovamento*. Studi sulle costituzioni salesiane, Roma, LAS 1974, p. 52.

⁶³ MB IX 817.

⁶⁴ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale (1815-1870)*, Roma, LAS 1980, p. 399. See also the *Epistolario* III, pp. 505-508, 540-544.

tain the approval of the Salesians, but when he encountered difficulties from the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars regarding the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, he did not hesitate to appeal to the bishop of Acqui and to other diocesan bishops, who gave the approval he sought.

It was not really a question of Machiavellianism or of a surprising ability for moving his ground; it was rather that he possessed an innate instinct for compromise when this was needed to achieve the main objective he had in view. For example, on quite a different plane, during those same years, Father Curci, in his book *Il moderno dissidio della Chiesa e l'Italia*, was pleading the need for a «concordat» while Manning, in *The Independence of the Holy See*, was showing that it was absurd to contemplate any such agreement. Don Bosco, for his part, favoured a «concordat», «but in such a way as to ensure, above all, the love of God, the honour of the Church and the good of souls». Faced with two doctrinal positions, he proposes a pragmatic approach which allows him to remain on good terms with both parties at a time when that seemed to be impossible.⁶⁵

It is clear that in his dealings with the bishops, he sincerely desired to collaborate with them in the pastoral work of the diocese,⁶⁶ but equally obvious is his desire to advance his own work in accordance with his own special spirit and inspiration, and therefore with all the autonomy that this implied. It becomes evident, for example, in connection with the ordination of Cagliari, that while Don Bosco adopted a respectful and submissive tone, he kept intact his fully independent position.⁶⁷ In 1854 Rosmini asked him to inform the Vicar General of a shared project for a printing house, a project that was already at an advanced stage. Don Bosco replied: «As to talking to our Vicar General, I should consider it advisable to wait a little. It might be better to use the opportunity when someone from the institute goes to Lyons, to talk to the Archbishop himself. But to talk of the project to our Vicar (a holy man but little practised in the ways of the world) might only give rise to difficulties where, in my opinion, they do not exist».⁶⁸ This is merely an anecdote of no real importance, but it may serve to illustrate how neatly he sidestepped authorities who were likely to be a problem and turned to those more sympathetic to his case. It is probably true to say that Don Bosco always considered that the good of souls was more important than the formalities of administration.

⁶⁵ On 11 February 1872, he wrote to Giovanni Lanza, president of the government: «I can assure you with great confidence that, while I acknowledge myself a Catholic priest and most devoted to the head of our religion, I have always shown great affection towards the government, for whose subjects I have constantly expended all my limited resources, my energies and my life» (E II 195).

⁶⁶ P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco per i giovani* 10.

⁶⁷ MB I 89.

⁶⁸ E I 88 et s.

As for the restrictions and complications of Church laws, I am not at all sure that Don Bosco accorded them the importance that was usually attached to them.⁶⁹ Students who left the congregation were allowed to continue to belong to it as external members. Could that be a sign that he did not, in fact, attach great importance to juridical ties? Pietro Stella asks: «What was the novitiate in Don Bosco's mind? A house of studies? A seeding ground for vocations to the Salesians or any other religious institute? A way of establishing contact with the Salesian work, with the clerical and religious life? [...] As one reads the Salesian necrology one is tempted to ask how many of these knew the precise reason why they were in Don Bosco's house».⁷⁰

He showed the same freedom of spirit as regards contemplative religious. Convinced as he was that the most important thing was the *salus animarum* he did not hesitate to affirm that contemplatives should express their zeal in other spheres: by teaching catechism to the young, by giving religious instruction to adults, by hearing confessions. Rules and customs were for him subordinate to the needs of souls, not *vice versa*, as is illustrated by the following comment: «When cardinals raised difficulties over doing him some favour that was needed to assist the work of his congregation, he used to say: "I need you to help me to remove obstacles, not to create them. I would ask you to consider not the person of Don Bosco but the good of religion and of souls, since I am working for the Church"».⁷¹ Obviously the cardinals were also working for the Church, but they considered it necessary to stick to the rules of Canon Law, rules which, in the present instance, created difficulties that Don Bosco had to get around.⁷²

There is no doubt that Don Bosco well understood the situation of the Roman Curia and the various factions and influences at work within it. Such awareness enabled him to move with caution, and with corresponding success, in the complex Roman milieu. Referring to the fact that a booklet of his, *Centenario di S. Pietro*, was almost condemned, he wrote to a friend: «I was threatened with this in Rome and also after I left, and a great friend of mine gave me the main reason why: it was because I had chosen to be very friendly with the Jesuits. But this calls for much prudence so I'm keeping quiet».⁷³ This was clearly a golden rule of his and it shows his skill as a negotiator, the way he knew how to survive in the choppy waters of Rome and how to move between the different levels of authority.⁷³

⁶⁹ See, for example, the case of Conte Cays (E III 352-354, 364).

⁷⁰ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 155 et s.

⁷¹ MB XIII 504.

⁷² E I 461.

⁷³ As soon as Leo XIII was elected, Don Bosco sent him a letter which «he considered as coming from the Lord». Amongst other things, he said: «These new institutions need to be helped, assisted and sustained by those to whom the Holy Spirit has given the task of ruling and governing the Church of God» (E III 304).

By way of concluding what has been said on this last question, I would underline the practical, empirical view of the Church taken by Don Bosco. The Roman Curia, bishops and parish priests are given more or less attention according as they can give him more or less help in working for boys. He was totally convinced that his work was of God and so he had no hesitation in using the hierarchy as a means of furthering that work. We are dealing with a man, a saint, who in practice treated lightly any theology inclined to make itself out to be absolute.

In this sense it has to be said that when it came to practical action, Don Bosco is close to the reformers: in his way of acting, in his daily life, in his contacts and practical decisions, he in fact adapted the authority of the hierarchy, which he continued to affirm and defend.

5. Don Bosco and Pius IX

The interesting relationship between these two men is amply documented and I fancy that enough had been written about it. I personally would simply like to raise a question: why was it that, despite this Pope's benevolence and obvious sympathy for the founder of the Salesians, Don Bosco encountered such difficulty in getting his rule approved? Is there some contradiction between their intimacy, between Don Bosco's insistence that his work was almost initiated by Pius IX⁷⁴ and the reservations expressed by the Roman Curia? When he wrote to the Pope: «*Societas Salesiana quam Tu, Beatissime Pater, opere et consilio fundasti, direxisti, consolidasti, nova beneficia a magna clementia Tua postulat*», did he consider that the Pope's protection would suffice to overcome the existing difficulties? Did he consequently undervalue the emendations sent to him by Rome?

Were the Pope's promises and favours real? The saint's biographer thought so: «... We have more than once had occasion to record how, for the internal government of the society, Pius IX had orally granted him very wide faculties, such was his trust in Don Bosco's prudence».⁷⁵ Don Bosco himself on several occasions stated that he had received dispensations from Pius IX «*vivae vocis oraculo*».⁷⁶

I fully agree with Don Braido when he writes: «One is left somewhat

⁷⁴ «Following upon that audience (and one or more others), Don Bosco will tend to emphasise one aspect above all others: the part played by Pius IX, described in the story as the one who sketches out for a not-so-convincing babe-in-the-woods the shape of a "new" religious congregation, which on the other hand coincides point for point with what Don Bosco himself would continue to defend in the face of the rules for religious that were then generally accepted» (P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco per i giovani* 96).

⁷⁵ MB XIII 237.

⁷⁶ E II 126; III 347 and 361.

perplexed by the fact that the Pope's loudly advertised benevolence towards Don Bosco did not elicit from them a clear, firm and timely statement: unless they were dissuaded from it by the adamant persuasions of this Turinese founder, who was so convinced of the worthiness of his cause, of his own tactical ability and of the power of his friends». ⁷⁷ One may certainly ask whether Pius IX really promised as much as Don Bosco imagined or whether the latter interpreted the Pope's words too optimistically.

Pius IX probably dealt with the holy priest of Turin in the normal political manner: he enthused over what the saint said to him, promised him the earth, then found he had to backtrack. Perhaps that is the explanation why, on the one hand, the Pope made such promises to Don Bosco (or at least the latter thought he did), whilst on the other, the cardinal prefect and the secretary of the Sacred Congregation in question followed a more restrictive line of action, without the Pope's saying or doing anything. ⁷⁸

The two men clearly had a great deal in common, so that their meetings were serene and agreeable. ⁷⁹ For them the devil was very much present in their activities and in the life of the Church. ⁸⁰ They both defended a broad personal infallibility ⁸¹ and confided in each other.

On the subject of infallibility, all Don Bosco's utterances followed a curious line of argument: «The Lord has given infallibility to his Church: we have only to decide where it resides. Every bishop on his own is certainly fallible, so the individual bishops do not possess this gift; and if each bishop is fallible, the bishops cannot become infallible through the mere fact of coming together. What then makes them infallible, giving them something they did not possess? It is their union with the Pope». ⁸² In those same years Newman was writing that, after the Council of Nicaea, most of the bishops had fallen into error and that right doctrine had been preserved thanks to the laity. On this point, too, the sentiments of Pius IX were a lot nearer to those of Don Bosco than to those of the English ecclesiastic.

⁷⁷ P. BRAIDO, *L'idea della società salesiana nel «Cenno storico» di Don Bosco del 1873/74*, in RSS 6 (1987) 304.

⁷⁸ One needs to note that it was not uncommon for Pius IX to contradict himself (cf. MARTINA, *Pius IX* 605).

⁷⁹ On the very day of Pius IX's death, Don Bosco wrote: «Within a very short time he will most certainly be canonized» (E III 294).

⁸⁰ P.G. CAMALIANI, *Il diavolo, Roma e la Rivoluzione*, in «Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa» 8 (1972) 485-516; MB V 694; XVII 140-142; G. BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 301.

⁸¹ As when he declared that one ought to accept the Pope's opinion as a private teacher even on topics that are open to discussion (cf MB VIII 277 et s.).

⁸² BELARDINELLI, *Don Bosco e il Concilio Vaticano I* 246.

6. A Church that is holy and makes others holy

Those most familiar with the writings of Don Bosco insist that they can only be read and understood in the light of his experience.⁸³ His theory is frequently not original; he openly copies, repeats what he has studied and what suits his needs. His true originality is rather to be found in his way of acting, in his experiences and in his daily life.

Two different approaches are also discernible in his view of the holiness which he considered a key feature in the nature of the Church. From a strictly doctrinal point of view, belief in the holiness of the Church as proposed in the Apostles' Creed involved, as he saw it, the denial that the Christian community taken collectively had ever been guilty of sin or of infidelity and offences against the gospel. It equally involved the denial that the Church was guilty of faults and errors throughout history, or even that it had been slow to respond to problems and human needs.

This demanded a neat distinction between the sins of Catholics and the holiness of the Church. This ideological notion was used to protect the Church, that is the institution or the hierarchy, from having to answer for its own past mistakes. There was, however, a price to pay: it involved a form of double-think; if certain Christians, either individually or as a group, are guilty of error or of infidelity to the gospel, then they are seen as no longer belonging to the Church. In more precise terms, the sublime side of the Church was identified with the hierarchy, while the fact that the sins of believers constantly made the Church a less efficacious sign of salvation in each moment of history was not appreciated.

This general attitude was probably tempered and made more acceptable for Don Bosco because he did not use the analogy of the mystical body, preferring that of the mother of a family.⁸⁴ The latter image was more in keeping with his vision of the Church's vertical structure in all its complexity.

Don Bosco, in effect, identified the Church with religion,⁸⁵ and religion with the holiness which for him was the most theological of the Church's four distinguishing marks. As was pointed out in apologetics, the Church reveals its holiness because within it are found the means of sanctification, as

⁸³ «The true Don Bosco is the one that emerges from an overall view of his writings, his undertakings, the choices he made, in short his entire life. That Don Bosco is consistent and alive»: R. FARINA, *Leggere Don Bosco oggi. Note e suggestioni metodologiche*, in: P. BROCARDO (edit.), *La formazione permanente interpella gli istituti religiosi*, Leumann-Torino, LDC 1976, p. 351.

⁸⁴ «The fact that there are sinners in the Church does not raise any grave doctrinal problem for him. In fact, when Don Bosco talks of sin and of sinners, he uses not the analogy of the Mystical Body but that of a family and its mother. Holy Mother Church is without stain or wrinkle. She remains holy, even if many of her sons are sinners, and even if her sons oppose and deny her» (P. STELLA, *Don Bosco II* 140).

⁸⁵ Cf. G. BOSCO, *Fondamenti della Cattolica Religione* passim.

well as many holy people and remarkable miracles.⁸⁶ It seems that his basic concept, the source of his actions as well as of his theoretical formulations, is the holiness of Christians. He subordinates everything to that holiness and more or less explicitly sees all aspects of the Church's structure as determined by it. According to our saint, the Church was founded by Christ «while he was living on earth since it was formed within his own bosom, sanctified and consecrated by his own blood. It was filled with his Holy Spirit which he sent down upon it to teach it all truth until the end of the ages».⁸⁷ «What Don Bosco had most at heart», writes the author of the *Memorie Biografiche*, «was the salvation of souls», or, «the salvation of souls was the only goal of his life», or as he expresses elsewhere, «souls are the treasure entrusted to a priest».⁸⁸ It was for that reason that the priesthood was, as we shall see, one of the constant preoccupations of his life.

Viewed within the framework of salvation history, the Church, according to Newman, is the people of God. Christ's people is, naturally, organized as a society, but Newman placed most emphasis upon the spiritual aspect. The fundamental equality shared by all the members of that people by virtue of their faith and other supernatural gifts which spring from being Christian takes priority over the different categories of person that result from their specific functions within the body of the Church. «For Newman», writes Congar, «the Church was not primarily a doctrinal system, still less an institution. It was constituted by the gift of grace offered to men by God, and by accepting that grace men are united and form one body».⁸⁹

Although Don Bosco never wrote anything quite like that, I have the impression that his actions reflected that kind of instinct. In his writings he certainly developed and emphasised almost exclusively the individual nature of salvation: «The priest's every word must be the salt of eternal life, in every place and for every person. Anyone approaching a priest should always take away some truth that does good to his soul».⁹⁰ And it is a salvation that always remains linked to the figure of the Pope: «Happy the people who are united with Peter through the person of his successors, the Popes. They are walking in the path of salvation, while those outside that path, who do not remain in union with Peter, have no hope of salvation; for Jesus Christ assures us that holiness and salvation can only be found in union with Peter, upon whom he built the immovable foundations of his Church».⁹¹

⁸⁶ RIPA, *L'argomentazione delle «note»* 36.

⁸⁷ MOLINARI, *La «Storia Ecclesiastica» di Don Bosco* 221 et s.

⁸⁸ Don Bosco wrote in his *Memoirs*: «A priest does not go to heaven or hell alone. If he does good, he goes to heaven with the souls saved by him and by his good example; if he does evil or gives scandal, he goes to perdition with the souls lost through his bad example» (G. BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 314).

⁸⁹ Quoted by ANTON, *El misterio de la Iglesia* 275.

⁹⁰ MB VI 381.

⁹¹ G. BOSCO, *Vita di San Pietro* 164 et s.

In his *Storia Ecclesiastica* holiness is seen as one of the purposes of the life of the Church and as a distinctive badge. It is clear that the lives and deeds of the saints occupy the main place in his history, which thus becomes an implicit proclamation of the holiness which distinguishes the Church. He claims that saints do not exist in other churches,⁹² going even so far as to assert that immorality and heresy go hand in hands.⁹³ «In the course of his history of the Church, Don Bosco, after dealing with the Waldensians, came to the lurid, impious and bloody figures of Luther, Calvin and Henry VIII. In contrast to them he presented the heavenly vision of the sons of the Catholic Church who were their contemporaries: St. Cajetan of Thiene and many others. Holiness is one and the same thing as the truth».⁹⁴ In line with this argument he equates the teaching and practice of religion with morality.⁹⁵

«Oh, the Catholic religion, holy and divine! What wonderful benefits you bring to those who practice you, hope in you and trust in you. How fortunate are those who live within your bosom and observe your precepts!».⁹⁶ Don Bosco was so sure of this that he devoted his life to founding a congregation designed to help young people and others in general to achieve these benefits. It was this conviction that nourished his constant concern for the missions. «When giving retreats, triduums, novenas, sermons or catechism lessons, point out the beauty, the grandeur and holiness of this religion which provides in the sacraments such a useful and easy means of benefiting society, achieving peace of mind and saving one's soul».⁹⁷ This same conviction emboldened him to write to Pius IX: «Your Holiness should follow the lofty idea that God has inspired in you by proclaiming constantly devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and devotion to the Virgin Mary which are the twin anchors of salvation for our poor humanity».⁹⁸

⁹² «It is a property only of the Catholic Church to have saints and men of outstanding virtue» (MB XIV 229).

⁹³ E II 23.

⁹⁴ MB III 397. On other occasions he linked the Protestants with immorality: «Unfortunately the Protestants have become established, and by a thousand devious means they pose a threat to the morality and faith of adults and of thoughtless youth» (E IV 23).

⁹⁵ «The poor girls... having no place or opportunity for schooling, or for attending religious services, are exposed to grave moral dangers» (E III 30).

⁹⁶ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 139. This historian affirms that «his reflections on the sanctity of the Church and of the faithful were consciously rooted in a Christological and soteriological approach» (*Ibid.*, 140).

⁹⁷ P. BRAIDO, *Il progetto operativo di Don Bosco e l'utopia della società cristiana*, Roma, LAS 1982, p. 16 et s. Don Bosco's devotion to and insistence on the plenary indulgence *in articulo mortis* is illuminating and worthy of consideration.

⁹⁸ E I 259. «One can talk at great length about various systems of education but the only sure basis that I have been able to find is the use of the sacraments of confession and holy communion. I don't think I am exaggerating if I say that if these sacraments are abandoned, then morality is at risk» (G. BOSCO, *Il pastorello delle Alpi ovvero vita del giovane Besuccho*

His whole life was to be the expression of one desire, that all might practise the Catholic religion and remain within the Church, that is, be sanctified by the sacraments and be devout to Mary. If this is to be achieved priests are indispensable, and so he is unsparing in seeking vocations and forming priests. «Let us remember that when we foster a good vocation we present a great treasure to the Church. It makes no difference whether this vocation is for the diocese, the missions or a religious congregation; it is still a precious gift made to the Church of Jesus Christ».⁹⁹ His entire life was a tangible demonstration of his lofty concept of the priesthood and of the total dedication to the good of souls which should characterize the priest.¹⁰⁰

In a way one could say that priests were the most important thing for Don Bosco, since it is through their work that people are evangelized and sanctified. The bishops, in general, were not leaders in the work of evangelization, because the actual nature of their work was more juridical and administrative in character. In this sense, while allowing for the theological inaccuracy of the statement, one could perhaps assert that for Don Bosco priests were, in practice, more important than the hierarchy and the structure in sanctifying, evangelizing and building up the people of God.

7. Don Bosco's experience of the Church

Don Bosco's complex activities, and his varied apostolate and total dedication to the sanctification of souls provide us with a fuller, more open and dynamic view of the Church than that which emerges from how he formulated things theoretically. In the field of active experience he transcended the Church structures and opened up new paths.¹⁰¹

He knew and faced all the ecclesiastical problems of his day. His activity as a catechist and confessor, his daily work as an educator of the young and of the masses, his projects and all the accompanying know-how, his theological, historical and didactic writings – all these things revealed the personality

Francesco d'Argentera, Torino, Tip. dell'Orat. di S. Franc. di Sales 1864, p. 100). One should also recall the influence of St. Alphonsus upon Don Bosco, Don Cafasso and Don Guanella through the «Convitto ecclesiastico» at Turin. St. Alphonsus encouraged missions to the people, eucharistic and Marian devotion, and loyalty to the Roman Pontiff (cf. G. ANGELINI, *La realtà religiosa tra escatologia e storia*, in: *Coscienza civile ed esperienza religiosa nell'Europa moderna*, Brescia, Morcelliana 1983, p. 379).

⁹⁹ MB XVII 262.

¹⁰⁰ Don Bosco said to Bettino Ricasoli: «Your Excellency should know that Don Bosco is a priest at the altar, a priest in the confessional, a priest in the midst of his boys; he is a priest when in Turin and similarly a priest when in Florence; a priest in the poor man's house, a priest in the palace of the king and his ministers» (MB XIII 534).

¹⁰¹ E. ALBERICH, *L'esperienza e il senso della Chiesa nell'educazione salesiana*, in: R. GIANNATELLI (edit.), *Progettare l'educazione oggi con Don Bosco*, Roma, LAS 1981, pp. 258-278.

of a priest totally immersed in the problems of the local and universal Church.¹⁰²

The explanation for this total dedication is in his experience of the Church: «All his thoughts and all his undertakings were directed towards the exaltation of the Church; he shared its joys and its triumphs and suffered with it when it encountered persecution. He accordingly laboured tirelessly to ensure its contentment and success, to soften its griefs and compensate for its losses by leading [...] a great number of new members into its maternal embrace. [...] He therefore never missed an opportunity for giving good advice, hearing confessions, preaching, admonishing and joining in prayers: he considered all these things as of the utmost importance». Those words from the *Memorie Biografiche* corroborate our conclusion that his whole life was dedicated to providing for the needs of the Church.¹⁰³

For all this he was no traditionalist, still less a zealot for the «Restoration». He was aware that not everything in the past was good and he rejected any return to the conditions of earlier times; he was aware that the liberty of the Church, that had been won with much suffering, was a priceless treasure.¹⁰⁴

Despite living in a period of the Church's history that was far from peaceful or glorious, he constantly showed his optimism and faith in the future. Neither the protestants, nor the masons, nor the persistent malice of the devil would prevail: «[The Church] has been attacked by sword and pen in every age, yet she has always triumphed. She has seen kingdoms, republics and empires crumble around her; she alone has survived, firm and immoveable. Nineteen centuries have passed since her foundation and she is as vigorous as ever. Others will come after us and find her still flourishing. Directed by the hand of God she will overcome all human trials; she will defeat her enemies and advance steadily through the centuries and through their upheavals until the end of time, collecting all her sons into the one kingdom of the blessed».¹⁰⁵ This conviction of ultimate success remained unshaken even after 20 September, 1870. As Lemoyne comments, «everybody marvelled at his icy calm».¹⁰⁶ On the very day of the fall of Rome the saint

¹⁰² P. BRAIDO, *Pedagogia ecclesiale in Don Bosco*, in Ch. CINI - A. MARTINELLI (edit.), *Con i giovani raccogliamo la profesia del concilio*. Atti della XIII Settimana di Spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana, Roma, Dicastero per la Famiglia salesiana 1987, p. 24.

¹⁰³ He wrote to Don Fagnano: «Make sure that your efforts are always directed towards the growing needs of your Mother. "Sed Mater tua est Ecclesia Dei", says St. Jerome» (E IV 334).

¹⁰⁴ «Don't you think that it is a triumph for the Church», he said to the Jesuits of Piacenza, «that it has freed itself from troublesome treaties with governments which presumed to elect not only bishops for the dioceses but even the individual parish priests? The Church is now freer than before. The concordats that hampered freedom, especially in the election of bishops, have been removed...» (MB X 464).

¹⁰⁵ SE 1845, p. 388; ed. 1870, p. 371.

¹⁰⁶ MB IX 920.