

DON BOSCO'S WORK AS A PUBLISHER

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1. The recent attention to the theme

The theme of this paper is familiar to all students of Don Bosco. His work as a publisher and the considerable talent he showed in preparing and disseminating a whole range of texts, booklets and periodicals has attracted the attention of quite a number of scholars. This is to be attributed to the fact that in recent years the study of things Salesian has got beyond the stage of pious encomium and has begun to assume a more clearly scientific nature, thanks largely to the research done by Pietro Stella¹ and Pietro Braido,² together with many other scholars present at this congress.

One of the first careful studies devoted to this topic dates back to 1957, to the work of Eugenio Valentini on *Don Bosco e l'apostolato della stampa*,³ which was followed in 1961 by the same author's study *La prima scuola grafica salesiana*.⁴ Twenty years, however, were to pass before the publication in 1980 of Pietro Stella's volume on *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale (1815-1870)*, in the fifteenth chapter of which the author dealt with the subject of Don Bosco's «publishing enterprises». This work makes detailed use of documents from the archives and deals with both the entrepreneurial aspects of these initiatives, as well as their educational and apostolic significance.⁵

One of the most noteworthy of those initiatives was the «Letture Cattoliche» (to which I shall return later), and in 1984 the most exhaustive study so

¹ Cf. in particular P. STELLA, *Don Bosco*; ID., *Gli scritti a stampa di Don Bosco*, Roma, LAS 1977; ID., *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale (1815-1870)*, Roma, LAS 1980.

² Cf. P. BRAIDO, *Il sistema preventivo di Don Bosco*, Zürich, Pas-Verlag 1964; G. BOSCO, *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, with introduction and critical notes edited by P. BRAIDO, Roma, LAS 1985; P. BRAIDO, *L'esperienza pedagogica di Don Bosco*, Roma, LAS 1988.

³ E. VALENTINI, *Don Bosco e l'apostolato della stampa*, Torino, SEI 1957.

⁴ ID., *La prima scuola grafica salesiana 1861-1961*, Torino, SEI 1961.

⁵ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 327-400.

far produced on this subject was published by Luigi Giovannini. His volume, entitled *Le «Letture Cattoliche» di Don Bosco*, attempts a survey of the numerous yearly issues that came out in that series, assessing the merits and limitations from a literary, cultural, social and educational point of view. He also furnishes a complete list of the texts published between the birth of the series in 1853 and the death of Don Bosco in 1888.⁶

More recently, almost in the last few months, and even during this congress, the question of Don Bosco's publishing activities has been critically appraised, with more attention paid to the national historical background; such matters as the social situation in Piedmont and Turin during the relevant years of the last century, and the connection between Don Bosco's initiatives and the Catholic movement and the complex divisions within Italian society. This study has been rightly set against the background of «popular culture», as was pointed out by Pietro Scoppola in his commemoration of Don Bosco at Turin in January, 1988.⁷ The same theme is dealt with in a volume published by the SEI and edited by Francesco Traniello entitled *Don Bosco nella cultura popolare*.⁸ The work contains a number of contributions (especially that by Stefano Pivato),⁹ which analyse in careful detail the place and significance of Salesian publishing activities within the national context. The themes of these essays, as Traniello emphasises in his introduction, need to be viewed in relationship to the «vast and largely unexplored issues connected with the spread of culture throughout large sections of the masses during our contemporary period, phenomena that have a close bearing upon the growing complexity of society at both national and international level».¹⁰

2. The motives

After this introductory premise I must now settle down to a more specific consideration of Don Bosco's publishing activities. I shall first of all seek to establish the motives which moved Don Bosco to add to his not insignificant social, pedagogical, assistential and recreative initiatives the likewise not insignificant burden – on the economic plain and that of personal commitment – linked with the printing of numerous and varied periodic publications.

Two main motives can at once be indicated. In the first place, Don Bosco

⁶ L. GIOVANNINI, *Le «Letture Cattoliche» di Don Bosco, esempio di «stampa cattolica» nel secolo XIX*, Napoli, Liguori 1984. This work unfortunately contains some inaccuracies which reduce its value.

⁷ P. SCOPPOLA, *Don Bosco nella storia civile*, in: *Don Bosco e le sfide della modernità*, Torino, Centro Studi C. Trabucco 1988, pp. 7-20.

⁸ F. TRANIELLO (edit.), *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*, Torino, SEI 1987.

⁹ S. PIVATO, *Don Bosco e la «cultura popolare»*, *ibid.*, pp. 253-288.

¹⁰ F. TRANIELLO, *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*, the introduction, p. 10.

had always had a sort of secret passion for the press, for books, writing and publishing, which led him to a kind of feverish multiplication of undertakings in this direction: projects for new editions of texts, for publishing series of booklets and periodicals. All this was done at a time when he lacked means and resources, and occasioned the setting up of his own printing houses which, almost miraculously, were destined to grow and multiply. It is clear, however, that this feverish passion was Don Bosco's response to a problem which was produced by the social, political and cultural situation during those years: the problem was the need, which the Catholic party became ever more clearly aware of as the 19th century advanced, to create, develop and disseminate «healthy reading» or «buona stampa», as it was then called.

It was a familiar theme, one which we find pursued in Piedmont at the beginning of the century by the association of «Catholic Friendship», whose principal aim, under the guidance of Cesare d'Azeglio, was the diffusion of good books.¹¹ This association, as is well known, was characterised by its royalist political policy and by its aristocratic form of organization. The succession of events – from the disturbances of 1821 onwards, the growing influence of liberalism, the policy of the Sardinian government to limit the sphere of Church power, the growth of a violently anti-clerical press which questioned the traditional values of the Church and of religion, the spread of Protestant, especially Waldensian, propaganda – all contributed to a sense of concern amongst Catholics, who felt themselves besieged by books, magazines and periodicals that were insinuating ideas hostile to the Catholic faith.

The Piedmontese hierarchy shared this anxiety. The bishops of Piedmont met at Villanovetta, in the diocese of Saluzzo, in the July of 1849 to encourage «the spread of good books» as a means of counteracting «the weapons of irreligion and immorality with the antidote of sound reading matter».¹² The bishops, amongst whom Mons. Moreno, bishop of Ivrea, was outstanding, found in Don Bosco a powerful executor of their directives. In fact he had already anticipated many of the suggestions of the Piedmontese episcopate.

Between 1844 and 1848 there appeared a series of booklets which in many respects (their popular character, small format, hagiographical topics, easy style, stories, useful information, even morsels of Church history and apologetics) provided the first nucleus for a production aimed at the young, the ordinary people, the less educated, and even at the clergy in an effort to assist them in their pastoral work. Don Bosco's first booklets date from those years: his *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Comollo*¹³ appeared in

¹¹ Cf. G. DE ROSA, *Storia del movimento cattolico in Italia*, vol. I: *Dalla restaurazione all'età giolittiana*, Bari, Laterza 1966, pp. 13-38.

¹² Cf. L. GIOVANNINI, *Le «Letture Cattoliche»* 71-72.

¹³ G. BOSCO, *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo morto nel seminario di Chieri...*, Torino, Tip. Speirani e Ferrero 1844.

1844; *Il divoto dell'Angelo custode*¹⁴ and the *Corona dei sette dolori di Maria*¹⁵ followed in 1845, and the same year saw the first edition of the *Storia ecclesiastica ad uso delle scuole*.¹⁶ In 1846 there appeared, amongst other works, *Le sei domeniche e la novena di San Luigi Gonzaga*;¹⁷ in 1847 the *Esercizio di divozione della misericordia di Dio*¹⁸ and, much better known, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi doveri negli esercizi di cristiana pietà*.¹⁹ Finally, in 1848 he published *Il Cristiano guidato alla virtù e alla civiltà secondo lo spirito di san Vincenzo de' Paoli*.²⁰

The next year, 1849, Don Bosco attempted, though with scant success, to launch a periodical for young people, «L'Amico della gioventù», with the sub-title, «A political and religious paper». This publication appeared three times a week, but it had a brief and uncertain existence: 61 issues appeared between the January and May of 1849. Pietro Stella has painstakingly reconstructed the course of this paper's existence, taking into account the historical events which formed the background to the life of «L'Amico della gioventù»: the political and military crisis in Piedmont between 1848 and 1849; the gradual disappearance of the Catholic moderates and the growth of more intransigent stances,²¹ which favoured the promotion of what was the earliest example of an intransigent Catholic newspaper, «L'Armonia della religione colla civiltà». This latter paper, founded in 1848 and managed first by Guglielmo Audisio and then by Giacomo Margotti,²² was uncompromisingly opposed to the forces of liberalism.

3. The «Letture Cattoliche»

Don Bosco's somewhat unhappy experience with «L'Amico della gioventù», and its associated problems of money and assessment of demand, probably convinced him that a traditional periodical did not meet the need for cultural and religious formation which he had already tried to provide for in the booklets published during the preceding years. In other words, the

¹⁴ ID., *Il divoto dell'Angelo custode...*, Torino, Tip. Paravia 1845.

¹⁵ ID., *Corona dei sette dolori di Maria...*, Torino 1845.

¹⁶ ID., *Storia ecclesiastica ad uso delle scuole...*, Torino, Tip. Speirani e Ferrero 1845.

¹⁷ ID., *Le sei domeniche e la novena di San Luigi Gonzaga...*, Torino, Tip. Speirani e Ferrero 1846.

¹⁸ ID., *Esercizio di divozione alla misericordia di Dio*, Torino, Tip. Botta 1847.

¹⁹ ID., *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi doveri...*, Torino, Tip. Paravia 1847.

²⁰ ID., *Il Cristiano guidato alla virtù ed alla civiltà...*, Torino, Tip. Paravia 1848.

²¹ Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 340-347.

²² Concerning «L'Armonia» cf. B. MONTALE, *Lineamenti generali per la storia dell'«Armonia» dal 1848 al 1857*, in «Rassegna storica del Risorgimento» (July - September 1956); E. LUCATELLO, *Don Giacomo Margotti, direttore dell'«Armonia»*, in: *Giornalismo del Risorgimento*, Torino 1961; G. FARREL VINAY, *Nuovi documenti sulla storia dell'«Armonia»*, in: *Cattolici in Piemonte. Lineamenti storici*, Torino, Centro Studi C. Trabucco, no. 2, Torino 1982, pp. 71-89.

solution he adopted corresponded more surely with the objectives he set himself, namely, to provide a product which satisfied the need for acculturation, spiritual guidance and relaxation. These objectives were best achieved not by a paper but by a periodical that would be pocket-sized and less concerned with the things of short-lived interest that had traditionally formed the staple of periodicals. The booklets that Don Bosco was to publish monthly, under the successful title of «Lecture Cattolice», did not, in fact, lose their freshness with the passing of time; they provided the basic material for a small library of books that provided information on sacred and profane history, on the lives of the saints, together with light reading, amusing or edifying stories, practical information, and so on. The 19th century provided examples of similar publications of this type.²³

This successful formula which Don Bosco brought to fruition in 1853 seconded the wishes of the Piedmontese bishops and was strongly supported by Mons. Moreno. It also filled the gap left by the poor success of the «Collection of good books in support of the Catholic faith» published by Botta. This latter work had not impressed the Piedmontese episcopate very favourably, because it showed a leaning towards the Austrian cause and because it failed to explain religious problems in a language that was readily intelligible: it also failed to introduce the kind of lighter, more pleasant material that would hold the interest of ordinary readers.²⁴

This would certainly not be the occasion to analyse in the detail they deserve the hundreds of booklets which made up the series of the «Lecture Cattolice». One can certainly say that they constantly followed the policy indicated by Don Bosco when he launched the initiative in his Plan for the Association of «Lecture Cattolice». On that occasion he spoke of his plan for books written «in a simple style and using popular language», and devoted «exclusively to subjects connected with the Catholic religion».²⁵ If one wishes to give a general indication of the material covered by the series, one can say that in the period between the birth of the publication and the death of Don Bosco, approximately half the booklets were concerned with instruction in matters relating to doctrine and morals; the other half was largely devoted to lives of saints and religious history, while the remainder of the contents was devoted to light reading and amusing stories. Whatever the decision concerning individual issues, there was always an overriding concern with religious education and an effort to present reading matter that was transparently clear and intelligible; this was often achieved by using the device of dialogue between several individuals, thus making the language more lively, as well as bringing out the different aspects of the question under discussion. In the preface to the *Vita di San Pietro*, published in the January is-

²³ L. GIOVANNINI, *Le «Lecture Cattolice»* 70-88.

²⁴ Cf P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 348-350.

²⁵ Cf. E. VALENTINI, *Don Bosco e l'apostolato della stampa* 13.

sue of 1857, Don Bosco wrote: «I am writing for ordinary people and I therefore avoid any affectation of style, any obscure or useless discussion. My aim will be to reduce both the material and the style to that simplicity which is demanded if I am to be precise in presenting an account that is theologically sound and also in keeping with traditional Italian idiom». ²⁶ One should also recall his frequent reminders of the problems associated with various jobs, the connection that existed between the rich and the poor, both humanly and religiously speaking, and the practical obligations of one's faith.

Of the 432 booklets published between 1853 and 1888 Don Bosco personally wrote 70; for the remainder he made use of collaborators like Giuseppe Frassinetti, the prior of St. Sabina in Genoa, the Lazarist priest Francesco Martinengo, Fr. Carlo Filippo da Poirino, Canon Lorenzo Gastaldi, later Archbishop of Turin, and so on. Don Bosco's school produced other contributors to the «Letture Cattoliche», men like Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, Giovanni Bonetti, Giulio Barberis, Giovanni Battista Francesia and Stefano Trione.

Besides the problem of finding authors and deciding on content, there was the problem of circulation, which Francesco Traniello has already dwelt upon in his paper. Many scholars have pointed out, though their figures do not always agree, that from the start Don Bosco managed to sell thousands of copies of «Letture Cattoliche». The figures for the later years become even more substantial, with subscriptions reaching about 12,000 to 14,000 annually, while some of the more successful issues went through numerous reprints. ²⁷ On a rough estimate nearly one-and-a-quarter million copies were sold in the first 50 years. Circulation was boosted by the very modest price which was set at 1 lira 80 cents per annum in 1853, and changed very little over the years. In 1888, when Don Bosco died, it was still only 2 lire and 25 cents per annum.

The problem of circulation and price was, of course, linked to that of distribution, a problem familiar to all editors. Don Bosco's managerial skills helped him to overcome this hurdle: on the one hand he made use of the clergy and the parishes and other church structures, using their powers of moral persuasion and their involvement with the masses; ²⁸ on the other hand

²⁶ G. BOSCO, *Vita di San Pietro...*, in: LC, fasc. 11 (1856, though in reality it was January 1857).

²⁷ The figures for the real circulation of the «Letture Cattoliche» are disputed amongst students of the life of Don Bosco. Those quoted by Stella seem to me realistic and documented. Cf. *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 357-366.

²⁸ In 1876 Don Bosco declared his intention of reprinting the Bollandists. In reply to those who judged that this enterprise would be too expensive he replied: «I maintain that with an initial outlay of twelve thousand Lire I could start printing, knowing that in the end I should make plenty of money [...]. I would go to Rome to obtain a papal blessing and a Brief authorising and encouraging the undertaking; advertisements would be sent to every bishop in the Christian world. We would get in touch with every bookseller in Italy and the principal

he maintained contact with villages and distant regions through a system of promoters who organised local groups of subscribers.

We may say that the «Letture Cattoliche» constituted the most centrally important enterprise undertaken by Don Bosco in the field of periodical publications. One should not, however, overlook his labours in 1875 in launching the «Bibliofilo cattolico» and, then in 1877, the «Bollettino salesiano», which had a very different function from that of the «Letture Cattoliche». As Eugenio Valentini has pointed out, the «Salesian Bulletin» became a «bond» which united the Salesian Cooperators «closely together and linked them with the centre», wherever they were in the world.²⁹

4. The place of Don Bosco's publishing activity

Before concluding it is interesting to ask what place Don Bosco's publishing activity occupies within the broader spectrum of Catholic publications during the second half of the 19th century. It is well known that the Catholic press, especially that supported by the «intransigents», developed greatly in

ones in the rest of Europe; we would also send out representatives to make personal contact with promoters. An association of subscribers would be started and anyone supporting the enterprise from the beginning would obtain the volumes at half of the final price when the series is complete. With the money that many would pay for the first volume we should be able to pay for the second. Subscribers would not pay for the whole series but volume by volume, at a rate determined by the number of pages, and a fresh volume would be published every year. I believe that in this way it would be possible to print, to the immense benefit of Italy and of Europe, the greatest work of its kind in existence. The cost at present would be about two thousand lire, or at least one thousand five hundred lire, and I should be prepared to sell it for six hundred lire, reducing my net profit by about half» (MB XI 438 et s.).

²⁹ Cf. E. VALENTINI, *Don Bosco e l'apostolato della stampa* 24. In his well known circular of 19 March 1885, Don Bosco made the following reckoning concerning the many publishing activities he had promoted, largely on behalf of the young: «While the aim of the "Letture Cattoliche" was to instruct the whole population, it was also meant as a means of gaining entry to homes and of making known the spirit that informs our schools, as well as of attracting boys to the practice of virtue, especially through the lives of Savio, Besucco and the like. The purpose of the *Giovane provveduto* was to draw boys to the Church, instil into them a spirit of piety and persuade them to approach the sacraments frequently. The collection of emended classical Latin and Italian texts, together with the *Storia d'Italia* and other historical and literary texts, was meant to enable me to be at their elbow in school in order to save them from so many errors and unruly emotions which could prove fatal to them in both time and eternity. I have also longed to be close to them in recreation, as once I used to be, and so I have planned to start a series of entertaining books which will, hopefully, see the light of day before too long. Finally, one of the many aims of the *Bollettino salesiano* was this: to keep alive in the boys who had returned to their own homes their love of St. Francis de Sales and of his sayings, so that they would, in their turn, help to save other boys» (This circular is reproduced in: *Don Bosco a carattere di stampa*, Roma, Ed. SDB 1985, pp. 9-12; cf. also pp. 13-30 for the two essays by E. FIZZOTTI, *Perché quella lettera circolare* and *La produzione editoriale di Don Bosco*).

all parts of Italy during that period. It was noted for its implacable opposition to the liberalism of the State and its strenuous defense of the «inalienable» rights of the Holy See. These characteristics do not appear in Don Bosco's publications, even though the yearly Almanac of the «Letture Cattoliche», entitled *Il Galantuomo*, along side general facts, dates and information, touched on problems relating to the social scene in Italy and echoed certain sentiments dear to Catholic intransigents. In the first issue of the *Galantuomo* we read: «Oh dear! Every day I hear talk of liberty and equality; and yet I constantly see gentlemen riding in fine carriages, living in sumptuous apartments, sitting down to lavish meals, while I – if only I were the only one, but there are many more like me – I always have to walk, with my feet coming through the bottom of my shoes; I have to keep changing my lodgings each month, because I can't pay the rent, and can scarcely afford a bowl of polenta to give to my four children. Their shirt is used as pullover, as waistcoat and very nearly as trousers».³⁰

But, beyond these realistic images of a country scarred by deep social inequalities, one does not find in Don Bosco's publications samples of the kind of writing dear to Catholic intransigence. Don Bosco does not hurl thunderbolts against the liberal State or the royal house of Savoy; he does not defend the rights that had been taken away from the Pope, who had become «the prisoner of the Vatican». Most scholars agree that Don Bosco's stance is wholly apolitical. At the same time it is certainly true that Don Bosco has something in common with the cultural world of intransigent Catholicism, even though he was not opposed to secular institutions and was often ready to collaborate with the civil authorities. He did, however, seek to encourage loyalty to the Church and to the parish amongst Catholics, especially those in rural areas, who seemed to be excluded from the discussions of the problems relating to national unification. Ultimately, Don Bosco's publications and his popular form of piety all belonged within the same socio-religious context in which Catholic intransigence was at work. One should keep in mind that the Catholic movement in the 19th century was only partially a political phenomenon: militant Catholicism was in many ways involved in a range of interests and activities that were not far removed from those pursued by Don Bosco. It was not purely by chance that one of the many activities of the «Opera dei congressi» was concern for the spread of good books.

At all events, we have here a hypothesis that calls for further study and verification: the fortunes of the Catholic movement need to be reexamined, while taking into account the exceptional part played by Don Bosco and his Salesians in the history of Catholic Italy during the 19th century. Research into the Catholic movement, the social and religious history of Italy, the

³⁰ [G. BOSCO], *Ai miei lettori*, in: «Il Galantuomo», the national Almanac for 1854, pp. 3-7.

place of Catholic publications during the century, has so far neglected the rich and significant contribution made by Don Bosco. His varied initiatives have had a profound influence not only upon the religious but also the social and civil history of our country.³¹ It has been the purpose of this paper to make some amends for that neglect.

³¹ On this question cf. the lucid comments of P. STELLA, *Le ricerche su Don Bosco nel venticinquennio 1960-1985. Bilancio, problemi e prospettive*, in: P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 373-377.