

THE «EPISTOLARIO» OF DON BOSCO: FIFTY-EIGHT LETTERS TO CLARA LOUVET

John ITZAINA

Eugenio Valentini, SDB, in his *Presentation* of the Fourth Volume of the *Epistolario di S. Giovanni Bosco* states that the letters of Don Bosco are not letters regarding ideas but regarding matters both spiritual and temporal. He writes that what is striking about this man of action is his relationship with all sorts of different people in Italy and elsewhere.¹ One such relationship is strikingly revealed in his series of letters to Mademoiselle Clara Louvet, one of the first French Salesian Cooperators. The contents of these fifty-eight letters reveal Don Bosco as a spiritual guide, sensible and sensitive, practical and paternal.

Little, it seems, is known of the life of Mademoiselle Clara Louvet, except what has been recorded in Salesian sources.² Called «an angel of charity»,³ she was born in 1832, the only daughter of an elderly high-ranking officer in the French army from the Pas-de-Calais department in Northern France, in Aire-sur-la Lys.⁴

¹ E IV 4.

² «Bulletin Salésien» 35 (Janvier 1913) no. 402, p. 27; *Annali* I 520-521; MB XV 584-610; E IV 447-479; and *Clara Louvet: Coopératrice Salésienne Française et Fille Spirituelle de Saint Jean Bosco 1832-1912*, Anonymous, no date of publication. Many of the biographical notes on Clara Louvet found in the E IV are taken almost verbatim from Chapter XIX of MB XV. Some of the material from Chapter XIX of MB XV is found in Clara Louvet's obituary letter in the «Bulletin Salésien» written by Fr. Paul Moitel who used testimonial letters from Abbé Sénéchal and Abbé Engrand. Both letters can be found in the Archivio Salesiano Centrale (ASC), *Fondo Don Bosco* (FDBMicro: 695 E3... and 696 E11...). Eugenio Ceria relies heavily on the contents of the letters themselves in writing Chapter XIX of MB XV. For some statements he mentions «altre fonti» as well. Cf. E IV 457 and MB XV 605.

³ *Annali* I 520.

⁴ E IV 447. Abbé R. Sénéchal in his 1933 letter to P. Moitel writes that «she was the only daughter of Commandant Louvet who married a noble person, Mademoiselle de Lottinberges [sic]» (FDBMicro 695 C12). The anonymous biographer of Clara Louvet identifies her as «Mlle Julie Lochtemburg» (*Clara Louvet* 16).

In 1881 Clara Louvet first met Don Bosco while she was vacationing with her cousin Mademoiselle de Villeneuve on the French Riviera at Nice. From that time on she remained a true Cooperator of Don Bosco, and, after his death in 1888, of the successors of Don Bosco: Don Michael Rua and Don Paul Albera. Besides helping Don Bosco through her prayers and alms, she sent poor children to the Salesian orphanage at Lille and then to Ruitz. These children she especially counseled and encouraged; some became Salesians later on, and she thus merited the title of «*la mère spirituelle de Religieux Salésiens*».⁵

Mademoiselle Louvet, as Don Bosco used to address her, lived a well-ordered, saintly life,⁶ rather reclusive and retiring.⁷ From Don Bosco's letters we learn that he invited her a number of times to attend dedications and celebrations both in Rome and Turin. Soon after first meeting Don Bosco, she journeyed to Turin,⁸ then returned again for the feast of Mary Help of Christians in 1882.⁹ In October of 1882 she returned yet again bringing with her some donations she had collected (rather unsuccessfully) for the construction of the church of the Sacred Heart in Rome.¹⁰ She came to see Don Bosco two more times: once in 1885,¹¹ and for a final visit in 1887 on the feast of Mary Help of Christians.¹²

Eugenio Ceria, SDB, editor of the *Epistolario di Don Bosco*, tells us that Clara Louvet's admiration for Don Bosco was such that from the very first meeting she kept both her purse and her spiritual life open to him. And Don Bosco, like a «*buon papà*», responded paternally and candidly, explaining his many financial needs to her.¹³

It would seem that no two persons could be so different in family background, upbringing, character or temperament. While Don Bosco was of humble origin, living a very active and energetic life among the poor and the abandoned, Clara Louvet was born of a noble family, rather delicate in health, with a sweet and quiet disposition, timid, almost timorous.¹⁴ Despite these differences, theirs was a deep, friendly relationship.¹⁵ Besides the fifty-

⁵ «Bulletin Salésien» (1913) 27.

⁶ *Annali* I 520.

⁷ «Bulletin Salésien » (1913) 27.

⁸ E IV 447.

⁹ E IV 448; MB XV 552.

¹⁰ E IV 452-453; MB XV 587.

¹¹ E IV 468.

¹² E IV 477.

¹³ MB XV 585.

¹⁴ Eugenio Ceria says that Clara Louvet was tried by interior sufferings, «*pene interiori*». The nature of these interior sufferings is not specified. Possibly she was troubled by scruples. The mysterious reference to «*altre fonti*», privileged and unspecified sources mentioned in the E IV 457, remains unsolved.

¹⁵ «Bulletin Salésien» (1913) 27. Cf. Abbé Sénéchal's letter to P. Moitel, Lille, 20 November 1912, FDBMicro: 695 E3...

eight extant letters that he wrote to her, Don Bosco sent her from time to time grapes from the vine that shaded his windows at the Oratory.¹⁶

The praises of Clara Louvet both preceded and followed her death in 1912. Don Bosco said that Clara Louvet «aids us with her purse, but she helps us even more with her prayers».¹⁷ Don Bosco's successors were also high in praise of her. Don Michael Rua told a young compatriot of hers that her prayers were very powerful. Don Paul Albera wrote in the same strain: «Would that we could present ourselves to God with as much merit!».¹⁸ Ceria in the *Memorie Biografiche* called her «una grande Cooperatrice francese»,¹⁹ and in the *Bulletin Salésien* she is called «une amie de la première heure des oeuvres Salésiennes», and «coopératrice parfaite».²⁰ Clara Louvet died at the age of eighty years and eight months, on the 11 November 1912.²¹

The extant letters Don Bosco wrote to Clara Louvet between January 1882 and September 1887 now number fifty-eight.²² In the *Epistolario di S. Giovanni Bosco IV* we find fifty-seven of these letters.²³ Forty-six of the original letters are found in Rome at the Archivio Salesiano Centrale, Via della Pisana. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians have five original letters in their Archivio Generale in Rome. The remaining seven letters are found elsewhere. Of the five letters that Ceria believes should be found in the Archivio Generale of the Salesian Sisters, only two are available: L. 2741 and L. 2651 c4...; the other three letters, L. 2729, 2730, and 2765 are apparently not there.²⁴ Fifty-six of the letters can be found in Volume XVI of the *Memorie Biografiche*, in the original French.²⁵ Twelve letters have been

¹⁶ MB XV 602; «Bulletin Salésien» (1913) 27.

¹⁷ MB XV, 609; «Bulletin Salésien » (1913) 27; Cf. R. Sénéchal to P. Moitel, 19 October 1933: «Don Bosco l'estimait beaucoup plus pour ses vertus que pour les aumônes qu'elle faisait» (DFBMicro: 695 D3).

¹⁸ FDBMicro: 695 E2: Don Albera to Abbé Engrand, 13 November 1912.

¹⁹ MB XV 584.

²⁰ «Bulletin Salésien» (1913) 27.

²¹ MB XV 610; «Bulletin Salésien» (1913) 27; E IV 520; FDB Micro: 696 A3 (Printed funeral notice).

²² Clara Louvet told Fr. Paul Moitel, a French Salesian who owed his Salesian vocation to her, that she had destroyed a certain number of letters because she judged them «useless» since they only emphasized the receipt of her almsgiving. For her, it was important to keep those that contained Don Bosco's advice, to re-read them, meditate on them, and once again find comfort for her soul. Cf. *Clara Louvet* 29.

²³ Ceria, in Chapter XIX of the MB XV, mentions only fifty-three letters, all but three in the original French, p. 584. But by the publication of the E IV in 1959, three more letters had surfaced. One letter, written in 1886, is found as part of L. 2631, «Lettere da spedirsi ai Cooperatori dopo la sua morte», E IV 391.

²⁴ Statement of Sr. Anna Costa, FMA, Archivist AG/FMA, Rome, 13 November 1982.

²⁵ Ceria reasons in the «Prefazione» of Volume XVI, p. 9, of the MB that although some letters have already been presented [Cf. MB XV, Chapter XIX, pp. 584-610], no doubt one would want to read all of them, «direttamente e interamente».

translated into Italian and appear in Chapter XIX of MB XV, «Una grande Cooperatrice francese».²⁶

The contents of Don Bosco's letters to Clara Louvet reveal much about Don Bosco's own character: his interests and curious nature, his attitudes, his humor, his sensitivity and delicacy in dealing with women, and his beliefs and opinions. Revealed is the portrait of a man who can laugh at himself while at the same time paternally instructing, correcting, exhorting, and guiding another to a closer union with God.²⁷

We see in Don Bosco's letters a broad range of topics: people, events, politics, missionary activities, his boys, even disasters. He asks about the health of Mademoiselle Deslions, who traveled with her to Turin in 1882.²⁸ How is Abbé Engrand's health?²⁹ Are her servants serving her well and is she patient in dealing with them?³⁰ How is her health, he wants to know, and can she travel now?³¹ Is everything going on well? Is she going to visit him soon?³² Is she bringing someone along? And when will she be arriving?³³

The letters to Clara Louvet also reveal Don Bosco's sense of humor. It is revealed principally in his attitude concerning almsgiving and his own shaky health. In the earliest extant letter dated January 1882, a few months after Clara Louvet had visited Turin and left Don Bosco a generous donation, Don Bosco writes about visiting her: «As regards my voyage to Aire in April, that should give you time to prepare some more money. Isn't it true, o charitable Mademoiselle!».³⁴ When Don Bosco received 10,000 Fr. from her in less than two months,³⁵ he writes again: «O Mademoiselle, if everybody came to me these days bringing such bouquets, I'd be another Rothschild. But for me there's only one Mademoiselle Clara Louvet and I'm very happy about it». In a joking manner which belies his seriousness and disguises his intent to express his attitude towards the use of earthly goods, he continues: «My aim has always been to do everything possible to detach the hearts of

²⁶ L. 2753, p. 592; 2762, pp. 594ff.; 2764, p. 595; 2765, pp. 595ff.; 2757, p. 598; 2750, pp. 599ff.; 2743, p. 600; 2756, p. 602; 2736, p. 606; 2754, p. 607; 2766, p. 608; 2767, pp. 608ff; two other letters are also quoted in MB XV 389 and MB XVI 57.

²⁷ E. Valentini in the «Presentazione», E IV, pp. VI-VII: «The epistolary of Don Bosco makes very clear that he was a man endowed with clarity and profundity of thought, richness and simplicity of grace, sense of achievement and practicality that was truly modern; his letters are like a photograph of his deep desires and preoccupations – his life-long activity».

²⁸ IV, L. 2714, 31 May 1882, p. 448.

²⁹ E IV, L. 2765, 12 June 1887, p. 478.

³⁰ E IV, L. 2755, 27 July 1886, p. 473.

³¹ E IV, L. 2765, 12 June 1887, p. 478.

³² E VI, L. 2717, 10 August 1882, pp. 459-461; L. 2732, 21 December 1883, p. 459.

³³ E IV, L. 2719, 2748, 2753, 2762.

³⁴ E IV, L. 2713, January 1882, p. 447.

³⁵ E IV, L. 2714, 31 May 1882, p. 448 (2000F); L. 2715, 12 June 1882, pp. 448-449 (5,000F). It doesn't add up to 10,000F as Ceria states in the E IV 448, but perhaps a letter is missing.

my friends from these miserable worldly things and lead them to God, to eternal happiness. Mademoiselle, I want to make you rich, or better, to transform the fruits of this earth, so rarely preserved, into eternal treasures».³⁶

In another letter he reveals an engaging, if not humorous way, of dramatizing a situation. When in need of 2,000 Fr., he receives the requested sum from Clara Louvet: «But what's this? It's the good Lord who has suggested [that she] send her offering».³⁷ Again when Clara writes that she wants to send an offering of another 2,000 Fr., Don Bosco replies: «You write that you want to send me an offering of 2,000 Fr. on some occasion. But since we find ourselves always and especially at this moment in need of money, I believe that it would be better to send the offering, so you can therefore anticipate a hundredfold, and we can save ourselves that much sooner».³⁸ Another time he uses this dramatizing technique: «If you're going to be elsewhere when I come to Aire, I may as well defer my trip for another time, but if you were to tell me, "But I'll have some money to give you when you come" ... then I say prepare the money».³⁹ When Clara Louvet was asked to attend the laying of the cornerstone of Sacred Heart Church in Rome, she evidently wrote back worried about what to do with her precious possessions during her absence. Don Bosco replies: «Entrust them to someone who performs that type of service or, better yet, if you want to be doubly sure, give them all to Don Bosco who'll watch them, or better still, who'll use them promptly so that thieves can't touch them».

Don Bosco could be also flippant about his own health. In ending a letter written in 1884, he almost casually mentions that «ma poitrine est un peu fatiguée...».⁴⁰ A little? Ceria recounts in the *Memorie Biografiche* that Don Bosco was certainly understating his real condition which was quite serious. An extraordinary prostration had caused a tear in his stomach that was complicated by bronchitis and spitting of blood («sangue da pezzuola»). Phlebitis set in, coupled with a weak pulse and general disorientation. His fever increased and, after spending the night without sleep, an egg-shaped swelling formed at the base of his stomach, and the swelling of his legs increased. Ceria uses this letter to Clara Louvet to demonstrate Don Bosco's «tranquillity of spirit».⁴¹ Perhaps the understatement «un peu» reveals more his lighthearted attitude towards his worn-out body, for this attitude is again revealed in yet another letter. In it he tells Clara that he was at Pinerolo to cure his laziness!⁴²

It would seem that Don Bosco used humor to cover up his real physical

³⁶ E IV, L. 2715, 17 June 1882, p. 449.

³⁷ E IV, L. 2716, 15 July 1882, p. 450.

³⁸ E IV, L. 2717, 10 August 1882, p. 451.

³⁹ E IV, L. 2723, 18 January 1883, pp. 454-455.

⁴⁰ E IV, L. 2735, 14 February 1884, pp. 461-462.

⁴¹ MB XVII 29-30.

⁴² E IV, L. 2737, 10 August 1884, p. 462.

condition, for most of the time he assures her that his health is improving.⁴³ Still, he does mention that his physical condition is deteriorating. After reminding her to take care of her own health, he remarks: «Ma santé est toujours bien faible». And then he immediately adds: «mais je suis hors du lit et à débarasser mes occupations».⁴⁴

Perhaps Don Bosco worried more about Clara Louvet's health than his own. In explaining the fire of 24 January 1886, which destroyed one complete building at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales in Valdocco,⁴⁵ Don Bosco adds that God would provide. But, instead of asking for funds, he immediately changes the subject: «I recommend one thing only: take care of your health».⁴⁶ As to fasting and abstaining during Lent, he rigorously forbids Clara to do it, telling her that fasting and abstaining are for sinners like himself.⁴⁷ Another letter gives this recommendation: «In your last letter you spoke of your health and your plan to make a journey to Italy to cure it. Nothing could be better».⁴⁸

The biographer of Clara Louvet says: «Let's thank heaven that this precious correspondence has been preserved for us; for without it a special aspect of Don Bosco would have escaped us...».⁴⁹ And a particular aspect of Don Bosco revealed in these letters to Clara Louvet is his obvious sensitivity and delicacy shown to her. One finds in Don Bosco a reserve in writing to women, but he cannot hide his concern and affection for her.⁵⁰ Don Bosco thought of her often. When cholera was raging both in Italy and France in the summer of 1884, he sent her, as he did to others, an «antidote» for the cholera: 1) wear a medal of Mary Help of Christians; 2) say the prayer: Mary Help of Christians, pray for us; and 3) go to holy communion frequently.⁵¹

Don Bosco also shows a certain sensitivity in reading her letters. He

⁴³ E IV, L. 2737, 2738, 2740, 2747, 2754, 2765, 2767.

⁴⁴ E IV, L. 2746, 1 February 1885, p. 467.

⁴⁵ MB XVII 297.

⁴⁶ E IV, L. 2746, 1 February 1885, p. 467.

⁴⁷ E IV, L. 2747, 21 February 1885, p. 468. «Dans le courant de ces jours ne devez penser ni au maigre ni au jeune: vous en êtes rigoureusement défendue. Laissez que les pécheurs comme D. Bosco, fassent de la pénitence autant qu'il faut». Ash Wednesday in 1885 was on 19 February.

⁴⁸ E IV, L. 2748, 27 February 1885, pp. 468-469.

⁴⁹ *Clara Louvet* 72.

⁵⁰ There is a remarkable contrast in the salutations addressed to Count Colle, a French Cooperator who lived in Toulon, who was one of Don Bosco's greatest benefactors and friends. Don Bosco even wrote the biography of his son Louis, who died at an early age, an only child. With Count Colle Don Bosco addresses him as «stimabilissimo», as «mon très cher», or «mon très cher et ami» or similar endearing terms. But to Madame Colle and Clara Louvet it was always «Charitable Madame», or «Charitable Mademoiselle», or the like.

⁵¹ E IV, L. 2736, 9 July 1884, p. 462.

states that her last letter was very short – was anything wrong?⁵² The very next letter he writes that he will say the Holy Mass for her «... so that God may bless you and that the Holy Virgin may always protect you and be your aid in danger, support you at the moment of death, and give you joy in paradise». Then Don Bosco asked her if everything was all right: «Vous bien va-t-il?». Then with great sensitivity he adds (almost as an after-thought – probably not to alarm her implying she was soon to die) but everything in its own time: «Mais chaque chose à son temps».⁵³

When in Pinerolo at the Bishop's residence for a needed rest, Don Bosco writes to Clara: «My health has obliged me to suspend every sort of occupation. Just now I'm beginning to do something, and I find the need to write *the first words* to you, o charitable Mademoiselle».⁵⁴ In one of his last letters that Don Bosco wrote to her in 1887, he reveals both his great sensitivity and his deep affection for her. He capped it all off with a marvelous compliment. Clara Louvet had traveled to Turin in 1887 for the feast of Mary Help of Christians which was to be Don Bosco's last. On their parting, Don Bosco sensed both her great sadness at seeing him so drained of his strength and her intuition that she would never see him again.⁵⁵ After recovering some of his strength, he wrote her a very intimate and touching letter: «After you stayed with us, I detected that you were close to tears at your departure. That has given me pain. Perhaps you didn't quite understand my words, for I always gave you my assurance that our relationship here on earth would not last; but in the after-life we shall forever pass our days in true joy and never lack those things we desire: *in perpetuas aeternitates*. Right now the heat of Turin is unbearable, and so I have come to enjoy the refreshing climate of Valsalice which has invigorated me. Here we lack nothing except your presence to renew our strength...».⁵⁶

In another letter Don Bosco writes that he hasn't heard from her since the earthquake, and so he writes that «[just] a brief note will be welcome». He goes on to tell her of the destruction of one of the Salesian schools, but is quick to assure her that no one was injured.⁵⁷

His thoughtful consideration is also seen in the little gifts that he would send her from time to time. In a New Year letter he promises to send a holy card of St. Louis IX of France (which he does). He also promises to

⁵² E IV, L. 2720, 2 November 1882, p. 452.

⁵³ E IV, L. 2721, 5 December 1882, p. 453.

⁵⁴ Perhaps we can't take Don Bosco's words (underlined words are my emphasis) literally, for since coming to Pinerolo he had already written four letters: one to Cav. Vincenzo Levrot (L. 2583, 19 July 1886); one to the president of the Catholic Work Club of Bergamo (L. 2584, 22 July 1886); one to Count Colle (L. 2828, 25 July 1886); and one to the Cooperators of San Nicolas de los Arroyos (L. 2585, 25 July 1886). Still the thought is there!

⁵⁵ E IV, p. 477, Ceria's annotation to L. 2765, 12 June 1887.

⁵⁶ E IV, L. 2765, 12 June 1887, pp. 477-478.

⁵⁷ E IV, L. 2762, 15 March 1887, p. 476.

visit her in Aire (which he doesn't). He concludes by assuring her that nothing bad will happen to her during the coming year.⁵⁸ He also enclosed a small 10 cm. cross with an ivory corpus surrounded by a crown of thorns. When she asked about the significance of the thorns, Don Bosco explained, rather obscurely, that the thorns prepare one for the flowers, but that only time would tell.⁵⁹ Although we see no mention of Don Bosco sending grapes picked from outside his windows at the Oratory at Valdocco, Ceria makes mention of it;⁶⁰ and the biographer of Clara Louvet adds that Don Bosco also had the Salesian Sisters send his beloved Cooperator some lovely fruit from the Piedmontese district.⁶¹

In some letters Don Bosco informed Clara that he would be away from Turin for some time. Just before he left at the end of January to begin his triumphal trip of 1883 to France, he sent her his itinerary. He writes that with God's help he would be in Paris in April. He adds these interesting words: «Whether I make my way to Aire is up to you to say. The only person I know there is yourself, Mademoiselle. But if you're not going to be there in April, I'll postpone my visit for another time. But, if you would say to me: "But I have some money to give you if you come to Aire..."». ⁶² He also let her know where he was during this trip: «I'm here at Marseille. The Count and Viscount [Villeneuve] are here with me, and we see each other often and just as often we talk of you. On the first of April I shall depart for Lyon and I hope to be in Paris by the 15th. On the last of the month I shall leave for Lille. All that: God willing. We can see each other and talk at our ease either in Paris or Lille. Time is short, but if you absolutely want me to go all the way to Aire, I'll keep my word...». There follows a postscript in which Don Bosco gives his address in Paris.⁶³ For his trip to Barcelona in 1886 he said: «My health is good enough. I depart, God willing, on Saturday for Nice etc. until Barcelona... Your letters should be always addressed to Turin. From there they will be promptly sent on to wherever I am. From here [Alassio] I will depart for Nice, Cannes, Toulon, Marseille, Barcelona...». ⁶⁴

While Don Bosco's letters to Clara Louvet show a man both sensitive and affectionate, they also reveal Don Bosco, the spiritual father, guiding souls along the path to perfection. The letters to Clara Louvet give us an example of a practical simple type of spiritual direction, not directed towards

⁵⁸ E IV, L. 2752, 16 January 1886, p. 471.

⁵⁹ E IV, L. 2717, 10 August 1882; cf. *Clara Louvet...* 55.

⁶⁰ MB XV 602.

⁶¹ *Clara Louvet* 69.

⁶² E IV, L. 2723, 18 January 1883, pp. 454-455.

⁶³ E IV, L. 2725, 2[2] March 1883, pp. 455-456. Cf. MB XVI, 57, fn. 1 for Ceria's inventive explanation of Don Bosco's dating mistake.

⁶⁴ E IV, L. 2754, 19 March 1886, p. 472.

his boys in his schools, but rather directed toward a lay person immersed in the everyday life of the world. Don Bosco dedicated himself to saving souls whenever and wherever he could; he lived his motto: *Da mihi animas, caetera tolle*. His spirituality emphasized ultimate and final union with God in heaven; it was eminently eschatological. Life for him is but a road to another more lasting life, where by doing good works, receiving the sacraments, being joyful and calm, we gain our eternal reward and save our souls.⁶⁵ It is in the context of this theological perspective that Don Bosco wrote to Clara Louvet. And it is in these letters of spiritual direction that we discover a man of God, deeply spiritual, single-minded, practical, humble and saintly.

A much used phrase that we find in Don Bosco's letters to Clara Louvet is «*le chemin au Paradis*». In one of his last letters to her, Don Bosco writes: «That she [the Holy Virgin] grant us the grace to see each other yet another time on this earth, but to find us surely one day together in Paradise to praise and bless eternally the good Lord».⁶⁶ There is a consistency about Don Bosco's use of the word «Paradise». Even in his very first letter to Clara he says: «That God bless you and make the heavenly benediction descend upon you... with perseverance on the way to Paradise».⁶⁷ He continues in his second letter: «That the grace of Jesus Christ be always with you, keep you in good health and holiness for a long time on earth and one day give you the grand prize of Paradise».⁶⁸ In one letter we can almost feel Don Bosco speaking of his own closeness to eternity when he tells her that «your place in Paradise is prepared and I do believe secured, but still you'll have to wait for some time».⁶⁹

It is in this perspective of heaven, eternity, and Paradise that we must read Don Bosco's letters of spiritual direction to Clara Louvet. Don Bosco urged Clara from the very first letter to go to holy communion as often as possible adding, rather wisely, that if for any reason she can't go to communion, "don't be troubled".⁷⁰ Evidently Clara Louvet had doubts about receiving communion so often. She must have told Don Bosco that she felt her communions would become routine or mere habit. But Don Bosco insisted: continue to receive holy communion every morning. Don't worry whether it will become a habit. «When a habit is good», Don Bosco contin-

⁶⁵ Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 13-17; also Chapter I, II, VI, X, XII of this same book which especially elaborate this thought.

⁶⁶ E IV, L. 2768, 4 September 1887, p. 479; L. 2749, 12 August 1885, p. 469 is quite similar: «Adieu, au revoir bien des fois sur la terre, mais sûrement un jour au Paradis».

⁶⁷ E IV, L. 2713, January 1882, p. 447.

⁶⁸ E IV, L. 2714, 31 May 1882, p. 448.

⁶⁹ E IV, L. 2766, 7 April 1887, p. 478. References to «*le chemin au Paradis*» or similar eschatological expressions abound in these letters: L. 2713, 2714, 2721, 2729, 2733, 2734, 2739, 2744, 2747, 2749, 2750, 2753, 2754, 2756, 2757, 2758, 2761, 2765, 2766, 2767, 2768, 2769. Note especially the last five letters of Don Bosco.

⁷⁰ E V, L. 2713, January 1882, p. 447.

ues, «and guides us toward our goal, we should follow it and practice it».⁷¹ A month later he wrote again: «You say in your letter that it bothers you very much to receive holy communion every morning because you're weak. Remember that very delicate food is for the weak and moreover when one's stomach is weak, one should be given the proper food. Do you understand me?» It is in this same letter that Don Bosco emphasized the need of a good confessor. He tells her he doesn't have to remind her of the necessity of a good confessor: pick one, or keep the one you have, or be patient until one comes along.⁷² In this very same letter Don Bosco says he has a secret to tell her. He wants her to support his spiritual works and also those works useful to the Church and society, works that last and gain souls for the Lord. This thought follows closely with Don Bosco's idea of the Salesian Cooperators, i.e., to work for the Church, for good morals and for society.⁷³

⁷¹ E IV, L. 2716, 15 July 1882, pp. 449-450.

⁷² AG/FMA and AGS L. 2651c4..., 19 August 1882. The original of this letter is found in the Archives of the Salesian Sisters in Rome. Found after the publication of the E IV, this letter is included here. There are some difficulties with the text, for some words are indecipherable because of the creases in the folded letter:

«Mademoiselle Clara...

Dieu soit béni votre lettre m'a portée dernièrement et vous a assurée le centuple (200,000) qui forment l'enterêt promis dans l'évangile. Mais ce n'est pas tout, car le vrai priz vous est retourné à son temps en paradis, mille fois mercis...

Vous êtes contente des prières, des messes, des communions que selon votre intention on fait tous les jours dans l'église de notre dame auxiliatrice, et nous continuerons [la] peine a faire la même chose à jamais.

Vous dites en votre lettre que vous avez de [la] peine à faire la sainte communion tous les matins; car vous êtes faible. Rappelez vous que la nourriture beaucoup délicate est pour les faibles et plus la poitrine est faible plus on doit lui donné la nourriture avec délicatesse. Comprenez-vous?

Je ne enseignerai pas de penser [à] un bon choix du confesseur vous le trouverez sans doute ou dans celui que vous avez maintenant; ou dans un autre que Dieu vous enverra.

Sur la considération du nombre considérable de messes que vous avez fait dire, je crois que pas assez en raison des nécessités dans les quelles se trouvent ses millions [ils] serviraient pour des prêtres et pour des pauvres garçons qui demandent du pain spirituel et temporel et [pour] sauver tant d'âmes et tant [de] corps.

Je crois que vous pensez que j'ai quelque secret à vous dire à vous Mademoiselle. Je désire vous entretenir dans nos affaires spirituelles et sur la maniere entretenir des oeuvres utiles à l'église, à la société civile; des oeuvres durables que gagnent bien des âmes à Dieu.

Que Dieu vous bénisse, charitable Mademoiselle, que Dieu vous remplisse? de tout santé, la prière du coeur et perseverance dans le chemin du paradis. Ainsi soit-il.

Veillez aussi prier pour moi, pour toute ma famille (150.000) et croyez-moi avec protection en N.S.J.Ch.

Turin 19 Août 82

Humble serviteur

Abbé Jean Bosco».

⁷³ Cf. *Cooperatori Salesiani ossia un modo pratico per giovare al buon costume ed alla civile società*, Torino, Tipografia Salesiana, 1876: «We Christians should be united during these difficult times, and together we should develop the spirit of prayer, of charity; use every means at our disposal through religion, to lessen the evils that threaten good behaviour without

In his blessing he continues this theme of good works: «Do the good works that are possible for you».⁷⁴ In 1886 Don Bosco answers some questions of Clara. His gentle guidance, practical and moderate, continues: «Always do those good works that you have at hand without making commitments to the future».⁷⁵ This balance and reasonableness is brought out again in another letter which answers Clara's questions. Writes Don Bosco: «I received your very touching letter here in our Salesian school in Alassio. The things you write to me about are nothing in comparison with eternity...». He goes on to tell her to go to the French Riviera for the winter for it will do her good and will relieve her worries. Don Bosco then exhorts her to persevere in her good works.⁷⁶

There came a time in Don Bosco's correspondence with Clara Louvet when he had to give very definite direction on vocation. Perhaps it was inevitable for Clara to become very close to the Salesian Sisters. In Don Bosco's letters we see evidenced a gradual progression of friendship. When she came to Turin, she stayed with the Salesian Sisters.⁷⁷ In his letters he sends the prayers and the regards of the Sisters.⁷⁸ He mentions a retreat with the Sisters at Nizza Monferrato.⁷⁹ Finally, Clara asked Don Bosco about becoming a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. In a letter begun by Don Bosco and later finished by Don Rua, Don Bosco is very firm yet at the same time leaves the future possibility open when he replies: «At this moment you don't have a religious vocation, but you do have the vocation to be a saint. Continue as you are, you are on the road to Paradise».⁸⁰ Ceria quotes Don Bosco further on this situation: «She was thinking about entering the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians; and so she asked the Saint [Don Bosco]. With a smile on his face, he told her, "Age, health, your position all create an insurmountable hurdle to fulfilling your pious desire". And she acquiesced».⁸¹ The fact was that Clara Louvet was already forty-nine years old

which, civil society itself would come to ruin»: in OE XXVIII [258].

⁷⁴ AGS, 2651c4..., 19 August 1882.

⁷⁵ E IV, L. 2760, 26 December 1886, p. 475.

⁷⁶ E IV, L. 2756, [12 August] 1886, p. 473.

⁷⁷ E IV, L. 2713, 2719, 2748.

⁷⁸ E IV, L. 2713, 2723, 2732, 2745.

⁷⁹ E IV, L. 2721, 2754.

⁸⁰ E IV, L. 2741, 22 November 1884, pp. 464-465.

⁸¹ MB XV 605. There is a question whether these are the very words of Don Bosco to Clara Louvet. Certainly the words echo those that appear in the 1876 edition of the *Cooperatori salesiani...* in Chapter III, «Scopo de' Cooperatori Salesiani»: «While it is true that would willingly embrace religious life, many are also prevented from doing so because of age, health, or social condition; these can become Cooperators and live as if they were in the Congregation, while going about their specific duties within their own families». Cf. OE XXVIII [260]. Actually the source of Ceria's quote is found in Abbé Sénéchal's letter to Fr. Paul Moitel: Lille, 19 October 1933. In this letter Abbé Sénéchal is answering Moitel's request for information not on Clara Louvet, but on someone who was closely connected with her, Abbé En-

when she first met Don Bosco. At the time of Don Bosco's letter of 22 November 1884, in which Don Bosco tells her she has no vocation to become a religious, but only to become a saint, she was fifty-two years old. Certainly her age was a factor in Don Bosco's guidance. Her health had never been good, her eyes, it seems, were a problem. Don Bosco's worry about her health gives some evidence of this. Her condition as a landowner with tenants also seems to have been a factor in Don Bosco's discernment that religious life was not for her.

From the letters of Don Bosco it would seem that indeed Clara Louvet did have a vocation, that of a Salesian Cooperator. His insistence on doing good, charitable works for Church and society;⁸² his spiritual plan of life;⁸³ her call to become a saint;⁸⁴ his effort to detach her from attachment to earthly goods;⁸⁵ all point to Don Bosco's desire to make her a model Salesian Cooperator and a saint.

In conclusion, how should we characterize the relationship between Don Bosco and Clara Louvet as revealed in these fifty-eight letters? Certainly the letters reveal Don Bosco as a sensitive and affectionate human being who paternally and practically guided a soul toward a life of perfection. But revealed also is a «true friendship» that St. Francis de Sales talks about in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*. In the third part of the *Introduction*, de Sales says that «... perfection consists not in having no friendships, but in having only those which are good, holy, sacred».⁸⁶ Certainly this friendship shows a great affinity to the spiritual relationship of St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal. It is interesting that the obituary letter for Clara Louvet as submitted by Paul Moitel to the *Bulletin Salésien* includes a note from Dom Guéranger that speaks of friendship «au dessus de régions de la chair et du sang»;⁸⁷ but rightfully so, this section was edited out of the published obituary,⁸⁸ for the quote from Dom Guéranger makes no sense without a following comment of Dom Sénéchal which Paul Moitel left out of his draft, which compares the friendship of St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal to that of Don Bosco and Clara Louvet.⁸⁹ However, the biographer of *Clara*

grand. Abbé Sénéchal makes the following reference to Clara Louvet, even though from the letter, it seems out of place: «Elle [Clara Louvet] lui demanda de la recevoir dans la congrégation de filles de Marie Auxiliatrice. Il [Don Bosco] rit de la proposition. "Votre âge votre santé et votre condition sont un obstacle insurmontable à la réalisation de ce pieux désir"» (FDBMicro, 695D4...).

⁸² AGS, 2651c4... 19 September 1882.

⁸³ E IV, L. 2730, 17 September 1883, p. 458.

⁸⁴ E IV, L. 2741, 11 June-July 1884, pp. 464-465.

⁸⁵ E IV, L. 2734, 2744.

⁸⁶ Francis de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, New York, Image Books, 1972, 177.

⁸⁷ Dom Guéranger quoted by Paul Moitel in FDBMicro 695D10.

⁸⁸ «Bulletin Salésien» (Janvier 1913) no. 402, p. 27.

⁸⁹ «Ces amitiés surnaturelles ne sont pas rares dans la religion; car l'amitié est une vertu.

Louvet... does not fail to make reference to this comparison referring to Clara Louvet as the Philotea, the addressee of Francis de Sales' *Introduction to a Devout Life*.⁹⁰ It is in this same third part of the *Introduction* that we find an appropriate description of the friendship of Don Bosco and Clara Louvet which perhaps summarized quite well the content of Don Bosco's correspondence to Clara Louvet: «If your mutual and reciprocal exchanges concern charity, devotion, and Christian perfection, O God, how precious this friendship will be! It will be excellent because it leads to God, excellent because its bond will endure eternally in God. How good it is to love here on earth as they love in heaven and to learn to cherish one another in this world as we shall do eternally in the next!». ⁹¹ These words of St. Francis de Sales, in my opinion, seem to be echoed in one of Don Bosco's letters to Clara Louvet: «I always gave you my assurance that our relationship here on earth would not last; but in the after-life we shall forever pass our days in true joy and never lack those things we desire: *in perpetuas aeternitates*». ⁹²

S François de Sales en parle délicieusement dans son traité sur la vie dévote. Lis-le, si tu as le temps. Il rappelle l'amitié de notre Seigneur pour Martha et Marie - de S. Paul pour Ste. Thécle - de St. Ambroise pour Ste. Monique - et on pourrait citer par dessus tant la sienne pour Mad. de Chantal fondatrice de la Visitation. L'amitié suppose l'affection réciproque et le dévouement mutuel. Pour bien connaître les liens affectueux qui unissaient D. Bosco et Madlle. Louvet, il faudrait pouvoir lire les nombreuses lettres que le Vénérable lui a écrites» (FDBMicro, 695E6). Don Sénéchal is quoting freely from de Sales' *Introduction...*, Part Three, Chapter Nineteen on «True Friendship», p. 176, in the Image Edition.

⁹⁰ «Dieu avait décidé de donner à Mademoiselle Louvet un guide spirituel que, à la manière de S. François de Sales, la détacherait petit à petit des choses du monde, tout en la laissant dans le monde. Nouvelle Philothée du XIXe siècle, elle recevrait du saint prêtre, soit à l'occasion de leurs rencontres, soit par lettre, les conseils du guide le plus sage; un guide à la fois aimable et ferme. En retour, elle serait la coopératrice et la bienfaitrice de ses oeuvres» (*Clara Louvet* 25).

⁹¹ FRANCIS DE SALES, *Introduction...*, pp. 174-175.

⁹² E IV, L. 2765, 12 June 1887, pp. 477-478.