

DON BOSCO AND «MODERNITY»

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1. Reasons for saying Don Bosco is modern

The topic «Don Bosco and modernity» may provide an interesting line of approach for an assessment of Don Bosco's role in the life of the Church and in the history of Italy. The subject is not new: a very significant contribution to this was made by the volume edited by Francesco Traniello and published by the SEI a little more than a year ago, *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*. Of particular value was the essay by Pietro Bairati,¹ and that by Traniello himself on *Don Bosco e il problema della modernità*.²

The reasons for discussing the question of *modernity* in relation to Don Bosco (and we shall see how complex and controversial the meaning of that word «modernity» is) are varied and familiar to most of you. Don Bosco was modern in the way he used a method of education that attached value to young people's freedom of expression, fostering their intimate, personal resources rather than imposing predetermined mode of behaviour. Pietro Prini, in his preface to the book by Palumbieri,³ saw this as an anticipation of the 20th century insights of personalistic humanism. Don Bosco was modern because, while using an old instrument like the oratory for the formation of the young, he transformed it into a most effective tool for involving young people in the life of the Church within the new urban context. He was modern in the way he showed almost a preference for work in the city, whereas contemporary Catholic interest was concentrated more on the apostolate of the countryside. He was modern in his ability to maintain a wise balance, as

¹ P. BAIKATI, *Cultura salesiana e società industriale*, in: F. TRANIELLO (edit.), *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*, Torino, SEI 1987, pp. 331-357.

² F. TRANIELLO, *Don Bosco e il problema della modernità*, in: *Don Bosco e le sfide della modernità*, Centro Studi «C. Trabucchi», no. 11: contributions by M. Guasco, P. Scoppola, F. Traniello, Torino, 1988, pp. 39-46.

³ In the introduction to the volume of S. PALUMBIERI, *Don Bosco e l'uomo nell'orizzonte del personalismo*, Torino, Gribaudi 1987.

Luciano Pazzaglia⁴ has indicated, between school, professional training and work, during a period when Italian legislation had nothing to say about this problem.

We may go even further. This priest, born in a tiny, peasant hamlet, showed that he was capable of picking out his own very individual and original path within the new capitalist world that was emerging in Italy, and of creating a spirituality which encouraged the virtues of initiative, responsibility and solidarity. He in fact helped in some way to create a "soul" within the new economic order and, as we know, won the respect of the great captains of industry.

In the course of this Congress these aspects of Don Bosco's work have been discussed in depth. Tramontin was certainly right when, in his paper, he invited us not to yield to the temptation to see Don Bosco «anticipating philosophical or theological developments»; since such speculations in the historical field are always risky, because they can cause us to overlook the context within which an individual or an institution operated. But, with these provisos, the problem, as I shall try to demonstrate, remains open to discussion, because Don Bosco defied the limitations of his own time in a host of ways, both as regards his outlook and the nature of the works he undertook.

It is not, however, my intention to review these questions, on which I had occasion to speak a year ago when commemorating the figure of Don Bosco during the celebrations in Turin to mark the centenary of his death.⁵ On that occasion I attempted to clarify certain aspects of this problem; today I should like to locate our reflections on the modernity of Don Bosco within the broader context of the debate of recent years concerning the relationship between the Church and the modern world, in order to see how far the case of Don Bosco can throw light upon what is an extremely intricate question.

2. «Modernity»: a complex concept

What do we mean by «modern»? The concept, as we know, is most complex and has, for a long time, been tied to models and categories that belong to western civilization. In his philosophical discourse on modernity,⁶ Habermas has to some extent dissociated the notion of modernity from the categories of western thinking with which it has been linked. There is no one form of modernity, and processes of modernization have to be viewed and evaluated within differing existential contexts. This observation, which Tra-

⁴ L. PAZZAGLIA, *Apprendistato e istruzione degli artigiani a Valdocco*, in: F. TRANIELLO, *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare* 43-80.

⁵ This can be seen in the pamphlet *Don Bosco e le sfide della modernità* (note 2).

⁶ In the Italian edition, J. HABERMAS, *Il discorso filosofico della modernità*, Bari, Laterza 1987.

niello emphasises in the essay to which I have made a passing reference, makes any discussion of modernity and its relative values more problematic and, I should say, more open.

Modernity is not necessarily a criterion of value; if it becomes such, then it loses its current meaning of being adapted to the changes taking place in the world, of being ready to welcome what is new. And yet it must imply some deeper and wider significance at the human level, otherwise we should have to say that what comes after is necessarily better than what went before, for example that Nazism was better than the Weimar Republic! An English scholar, Tim Mason, has listed all the ambiguities involved in the ideological use of the terms *modern*, *modernity* and *modernization*, and has come to the conclusion «that any valid, *comprehensive* notion of modernity or modernization must be based on considerations of value and therefore involve moral and educational commitment regarding the future... If we speak of *modernization* we imply that some sort of change is desirable, that something has still to be achieved».⁷ It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between modernity as a positive value, as a form of human progress, and modernity as meaning simply some new situation in the unfolding of events.

Further clarifications have been suggested by Gino Germani,⁸ for whom *modernization* not only is not a form of value judgement but is not even reducible to the generic idea of novelty or modernity: it implies a precise reference to those processes which are characteristic of our European society in this century and which were greatly accelerated by the First World War, thus contributing to the creation of the current notion of a global society.

I am of the opinion that the historian should not load the word *modernity* with value meanings but should note that it is merely one element in the process of historical events, and should define and clarify its meaning in relation to the circumstances of time and place (in this sense the specific notion of *modernization* can be useful). Consequently when one labels an idea or event as either modern or otherwise, one is not necessarily making a value judgement.

This is particularly true when speaking of the Church. One cannot use *modernity* as a criterion when judging the Church's attitude. When a scholar who is as acute and stimulating as Ernesto Galli della Loggia denounces «the total rejection by the Catholic tradition of the social developments of the modern world» and «the characteristic failure of Catholics to support and oversee the modern development of the country from an ideological and

⁷ T. MASON, *Moderno, modernità, modernizzazione: un montaggio*, in «Movimento operaio e socialista» 10 (1987), nos 1-2, devoted to the topic of *Storia contemporanea oggi. Per una discussione*.

⁸ G. GERMANI, *Sociologia della modernizzazione. L'esperienza dell'America Latina*, Bari, Laterza 1971.

cultural point of view»,⁹ he is not only distorting the facts of history but is implicitly invoking a criterion of value which is far from proven.

Gabriele de Rosa has many times rightly warned of the risks involved in applying to the Church, its members and the movements that originate within it categories that are taken from political and social history; and *modernity* is just such a category. «We cannot ignore», he has said, «the Church's structure, which is centuries old, the awareness she has of her mission, her language, which draws its own sustenance from a science – theology – which is extraneous to the lay world».¹⁰

Methodological observations of this kind must clearly be kept in mind when we consider someone like Don Bosco: we have to do more than simply note his ability to anticipate so many insights and initiatives, educational approaches or types of work which would only win general acceptance in Italy and in the Catholic world years after his death. We have to ask ourselves what was the connection between this openness to what was new and his system of values, his way of living his Catholic faith, of being a priest in the Church of his time. For example, all his work on behalf of youth, with the elements of modernity that we have indicated, remains incomprehensible if one does not recognise the religious and spiritual considerations summed up in the old traditional phrase of «the salvation of souls», which constantly inspired him. How did he reconcile within himself this openness to what was modern in education with the more traditional expectations of the way a priest should behave amongst young people?

3. Relationship between Church and modernity

A detailed analysis of the relationship between the Church and the modern world has been carried out by a young and accomplished scholar, Renato Moro. His study, only recently published, refers explicitly to the Fascist era, but its interest as a piece of historical writing goes far beyond its immediate field of reference.¹¹ The author is particularly concerned with the effects within the Catholic world of the process of modernization, as understood by Germani, to whom I have already alluded. Of special interest are the changes which the processes have generated in the mentality of Catholics and in the shape of Catholic institutional structures during the Fascist era.

⁹ E. GALLI DELLA LOGGIA, *Ideologia, classi e costume*, in: V. CASTRONOVO (edit.), *L'Italia contemporanea 1945-1975*, Torino 1976.

¹⁰ I am quoting from the intervention made by G. De Rosa during discussion of the paper by A. MONTICONE, *Religiosità popolare e coscienza civile da Pio XII a Giovanni XXIII*, in «Sociologia» (January - August, 1984) 115.

¹¹ R. MORO, *Il modernismo buono. La «modernizzazione» cattolica fra fascismo e post-fascismo come problema storiografico*, in «Storia contemporanea» (August 1988).

Clearly, that part of his analysis is not germane to our present topic. What is extremely useful, however, is the author's examination of the various interpretations that have been put forward of the relationship between modern and anti-modern in the life of the Church.

Amongst historical experts two fundamental hypotheses have emerged regarding these contrasting positions within the Church. Some see this contrast as an incurable dichotomy; this seems to be the view of Giorgio Campanini when he states that the conflict between «tradition» and «modernity» expresses a «fundamental difference within the overall operation of the Catholic movement».¹² Others would define this contrast in terms of a twofold presence and of a dialectical exchange between these two elements, as is suggested, for example, by Émile Poulat in his study *Église contre bourgeoisie*.¹³

In actual fact certain aspects of these two positions coexist together, but, by and large, they succeed one another in the movement of events: after the defeat of the strongly anti-modern positions taken up by the traditionalism of De Maistre and his followers, a certain dialectical interplay of modern and anti-modern became characteristic of the entire Catholic movement. Even those who were most open to the demands of the modern age – I am thinking of liberal Catholics in the first half and Christian Democrats in the latter part of the 19th century – expressed critical reservations: they never wholly surrendered to what was modern. De Rosa, in the contribution to which I have made reference, gives prominence to the Church's reasons for unwavering opposition to the society that was emerging from the processes of industrialization during the 19th century.

This idea of a dialectical relationship between the modern and the anti-modern is obviously not meant to be adopted as a convenient abstract formula to explain away or justify all disagreements. On the contrary one uses it in order to see how far it fits in with the various phases, different elements and personalities that form part of the Catholic movement and of the history of the Church during the period in question.

It is possible to pick out a moment, both for individual groups or activities and for the Church at large, which marks the transition from simple opposition to the notion of *modernity* to a more complex and qualified position. That moment coincided with the succession of Leo XIII to Pius IX. The pontificate of Pius IX, after its brief opening phase, had been dominated by a «siege mentality» which produced the defensive and wholly negative responses towards *modernity* which historians have unanimously emphasized,

¹² G. CAMPANINI, *Il movimento cattolico fra tradizione e modernità*, in «Istituto per la storia della Resistenza in provincia di Alessandria», Quaderno no. 14 (1984) 44-45.

¹³ E. POULAT, *Église contre bourgeoisie. Introduction au devenir du catholicisme actuel*, Tournai, Casterman 1977; the Italian edition is *La Chiesa contro la borghesia. Introduzione al divenire del cattolicesimo contemporaneo*, Casale Monferrato, Marietti 1984.

even though they may have placed varying interpretations upon it. A consistent and important synthesis, which combined the objectives of the Catholic Restoration with awareness of the new world produced by the liberal revolution, is manifested in the Church's teaching from the pontificate of Leo XIII. It is from that pontificate onwards that the organised Catholic movements start, presenting themselves, at least outwardly, with those modern connotations that characterise their subsequent history. It is with this pontificate that one can begin to speak, as has Antonio Acerbi, of a «historical design» guiding the Church's action.¹⁴

For any movement whose inspiration was unconditional loyalty to the Pope – this would not, of course, apply to the liberal Catholics – this moment of transition from outright opposition to a more nuanced approach, which did not exclude an openness to modernity, even if only as a tool, was situated in the final quarter of the 19th century.

4. Don Bosco's openness to «modernity»

Now what is striking about the work of Don Bosco is that, although he was largely contemporaneous with the pontificate of Pius IX, and although his point of departure was a position of intransigent loyalty to the Pope that made no allowance for the differences in mentality and culture of the Catholic liberals, especially concerning the temporal power, he was, nevertheless, far in advance of the intransigent movements in his awareness, understanding of and openness to certain new features of his time. Don Bosco, in other words, does not fit neatly into any neat dichotomy between modern and anti-modern.

But Don Bosco's openness to what was modern – and this is a point I wish to emphasize – is reducible neither to a liberal Catholic, neo-Guelph position nor to the new policy that entered with Leo XIII of giving a share in the task of Catholic renewal to the whole Christian body, working in a more democratic fashion.

Don Bosco, as we know, shared for a time the hopes of the neo-Guelphs, but when these were extinguished by Pius IX himself in his allocution of April 1848, he distanced himself from the movement's subsequent developments: whilst the majority of the neo-Guelphs pinned their patriotic hopes upon Piedmont and the House of Savoy, Don Bosco defended the temporal power.

His siding with the temporal power of the Papacy doubtless had also a tactical advantage: Don Bosco's fidelity to the Pope was an essential condi-

¹⁴ See the essay by A. ACERBI, *La Chiesa nel tempo. Sguardi sui progetti di relazione tra chiesa e società civile negli ultimi cento anni*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero 1979.

tion if his work was to prove effective; it provided a guarantee and shield for an enterprise which, in fact, constantly led to confrontation, and at times to collaboration, with the leaders and the institutions of the liberal State.

Yet Don Bosco's support for the temporal power did not place him in the ranks of intransigent Catholics who were automatically opposed to the State. Their opposition, though motivated by religious considerations, contained also a strong vein of antiliberal philosophy and politics. Don Bosco, although a temporalist, steered clear of intransigent politics and, in general, would not allow political considerations to play any part in his mission.

The avoidance of politics did not, however, prevent his fostering civic virtues: he proclaimed and practised respect for constituted authority and for the laws of the State, and he worked consistently to ensure that his pupils and disciples were trained in good citizenship. His work, therefore, contributed indirectly to political life.

As Bellerate has suggested and I find his comments interesting, Don Bosco's invitation to his pupils to respect the State and its laws can be traced back to the ancient laws that governed the alliance between throne and altar, rather than be attributed to an awakening perception of the claims of the modern state. The fact remains, however, that Don Bosco's position was an original one and different from that of the intransigents, with whom in other respects he had something in common.

In fine, it is not possible to rank Don Bosco amongst the conciliators any more than one can place him amongst the proponents of the intransigence which flourished from about 1875. His contact with modernity seems to have been wholly extraneous to the Catholic plan of conquest – using the instruments provided by the liberal State and by the infant movement towards democracy that began to take shape after the pontificate of Pius IX. Don Bosco's personality and work do not accord with any dichotomy between the traditional and the modern any more that they lend themselves to a dialectical interpretation of the relationship between those two elements.

Emphasis has been placed, and rightly so, on Don Bosco's pragmatism. Stefano Pivato in his very shrewd treatment of the subject of the popular theatre draws attention to the synthesis that existed in Don Bosco between ideological conservatism and pragmatic acceptance of the new. Giuseppe Tuninetti, reviewing the conflict between Don Bosco and Archbishop Gastaldi, into which he has done important research,¹⁵ underlines the casual behaviour of Don Bosco, who at first favoured Gastaldi's appointment as bishop in the hope of gaining a friend, then appealed to Rome to get round the same bishop's opposition over the *Regulations* of the nascent Salesian Congregation.

¹⁵ G. TUNINETTI, *Lorenzo Gastaldi 1815-1883*, 2 volumes, Roma-Casale Monferrato, Edizioni Piemme 1983.1988.

5. The spiritual source of Don Bosco's modernity

But does not such marked pragmatism, which governs even relations with ecclesiastical authority, become eventually an entire mental approach infecting even the purpose of one's actions? Just as there is, in the moral field, a relationship between means and ends, which can result in the means influencing the end more than they ought, how can one conceive of the combination of intransigent conservatism and ready acceptance of modern means without concluding that there must be some interaction between those two elements?

What, then, is the source of Don Bosco's modernity, of his original and highly personal combination of fidelity to the Church and the Pope with openness to the new stirring in Italian society? He seems to defy at every turn any attempt to tie him down within one or other of the many categories into which the Catholic movement and the work of the Church itself have been traditionally divided by historians. One may see this as a simple proof of the inadequacy of the historical categories which we are driven to use in order to render intelligible the processes of history and in order to express ourselves and discuss the subjects of our research. But perhaps there is more to it than just that.

The formula of the modern, anti-modern dialectic as applied to the Church and the Catholic movement must itself be only relative and a historical construct. The life of an historical theory in the sense proposed by Antonio Acerbi, in this instance tied to the hypothesis of the restoration of Christianity through the use of instruments supplied by modern developments, has a starting point, as we have suggested: but it has also a point of crisis and, perhaps, an end. To be more precise, we shall say that it has been continuously in crisis, right from the moment when it was formulated at the time of Pope Leo, because the use of modern instruments creates tensions and forces one to re-evaluate tradition itself. If we want to express it in philosophical terms, the relation between tradition and modernity represents not so much a dialectic of the kind which leads to synthesis as a simple conflict which gradually throws one of the two elements, tradition or modernity, into a state of crisis.

The season for «historic endeavours» seemed to come to a close with the beginning of the Pontificate of John XXIII, who had a quite different religious and spiritual understanding of the papal role and of the services it should give. Angelo Roncalli, as has been shown by recent research,¹⁶ had been for the most part removed from the culture of the «historic endeav-

¹⁶ Cf. the volume edited by G. ALBERIGO, *Papa Giovanni*, Bari, Laterza 1987. For an example of the interpretation to which I refer in the text see my review of the book: *Intorno a Giovanni XXIII*, in «Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa» 24 (1988), no. 1.

our» right from the years of his priestly formation, and consequently remained to some extent immune to the dialectic extremes of modern versus anti-modern which had characterised and polarised the life of the Church during the first half of this century. The sources of his spirituality as a Christian and a pastor seem to have been rooted, according to recent studies, in the Bible, the Fathers and in the broad tradition of Christian thought. These were areas that provided depth and stability and that were far less influenced by cultural polemics with all their damaging consequences. He traversed the modernist crisis unscathed and without any interior anguish: he was not a modernist, but neither was he an antimodernist; he understood the importance of history and of critical method as an instrument for uncovering the riches of the Christian tradition.

I believe that one needs to follow the same procedure with Don Bosco, adopting a similar method: one must go back to his religious formation, as Marcocchi and Pazzaglia have done in their papers, examining the influence which Cafasso exercised over him, and the example of certain great saints in whose persons the Church bent lovingly over a weak, suffering and sinful humanity. Don Bosco's religious formation, like that of Pope John, stood aside from the great ideological controversies of the age; like Roncalli he was profoundly affected by the spirituality of the *fuga mundi* and had a great love for *The Imitation of Christ*; but like Roncalli – as has been acutely observed by Maurilio Guasco in tracing several similarities between Don Bosco and Pope John¹⁷ – in place of the twin principle «salvation - fear» he substituted that of «salvation - joyfulness», and, like the future Pope of Vatican II, he took as his model Francis de Sales, the saint of kindness.

His modernity is not rooted in any ideology; it cannot be traced back to any cultural or political programme: it is rooted in a spirituality that is fresh and spontaneous and which promotes a spirit of freedom towards every one and everything. As Francesco Traniello has rightly pointed out, «the same religious instinct that gave rise to ultramontane, pietistic and moralistic tendencies [...] was also the creative force that helped to produce Don Bosco's special kind of sensitivity, as he confronted the acute problems of modern society».

Consequently, Don Bosco's modernity is not in dialectical opposition to tradition but shares the interior inspiration that proclaims the need for tradition; he thus maintained a steady balance between what was new and what was traditional. This makes him an uncomfortable subject for the students of history, because he does not fall conveniently into any of their ready-made categories. The instruments of historical analysis tend to break down when they are employed in the attempt to uncover the secrets of the interior life.

¹⁷ M. GUASCO, *Don Bosco nella storia religiosa del suo tempo*, in: *Don Bosco e le sfide della modernità* 21-37.

This fact also helps us to understand the fecundity of his enterprises: precisely because his work was not trapped within any narrow programme or ideological scheme, it has been able to develop as contemporary society has developed – and as the Church has developed with that society – and has remained open to the fresh challenges of our modern age.

I should like to say, if I may be allowed one small digression from my historical disquisition, that the last word on Don Bosco's modernity can only be said by his successors through the options they make and the daily work in which they engage. They have already said something very important simply by holding this Congress and by the liberty of spirit with which they have encouraged this historical and critical study of their founder. In my view they need never fear that the Don Bosco who emerges from the kind of critical history that is dear to Pietro Stella will be different from the Don Bosco who has been the inner inspiration of his disciples in all the work they undertake. If there is any foundation of truth for all that has been said, it seems certain that once he has been freed from the embellishments of an image which is itself interesting material for the history of a popular culture which the saint helped to create, the Don Bosco who will emerge from this critical examination will be a source of even more profound and effective inspiration for the disciples who carry on his work.