

DOMINIC SAVIO AND ENGLAND: ANOTHER HYPOTHESIS

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The forthcoming visit to Britain by the Holy Father Benedict XVI in September 2010 during which he will beatify Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890) may remind us of the dream Dominic Savio had at the Oratory and his interest in England as reported by Don Bosco in his biography¹. In the dream Dominic says he saw a vast plain covered with darkness filled with a multitude of people. Then he saw the Pope holding a bright torch in his hand. "That torch," said a voice, "is the Catholic faith, which will enlighten England". Is it merely coincidence that one of the best known and well-loved of Newman's many poems and hymns written in 1833 is : "*Lead, kindly Light, amid th'encircling gloom, lead Thou me on! The night is dark, and I am far from home...*"?

One hundred and fifty years after the publication of the first edition of Don Bosco's life of Dominic Savio, one is still inevitably led to ask the question: "How was it that in the Oratory at Valdocco in those years of the 1850s Dominic Savio came to be thinking and day dreaming about England?"

Don Bosco's life of Dominic Savio, which was to be first published in January 1859 less than two years after the boy's death, is the main source of our information about him. Other sources, some of them reported in the "Biographical Memoirs", include comments by his contemporaries at the Oratory. A large number of these boys in fact were to be among the founding group of the Salesian Society in December 1859. Most of them (Rua, Cagliero, Bonetti, Durando, Marcellino, Bongiovanni, Francesia, Lazzero, Savio) were companions of Dominic Savio and members of the Immaculate Conception Sodality founded by him in spring 1855.

Dominic, who was born in 1842, had met Don Bosco in October 1854, and having impressed him very favourably arrived at the Oratory in Turin towards the end of the month, after the cholera epidemic of that summer seemed to have run its course².

* Salesiano, già direttore di varie case, segretario, consigliere e vicario ispettoriale, attualmente è traduttore ufficiale degli Atti del Consiglio Generale presso la Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco.

¹ Sac. Giovanni Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico, allievo dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales*. Torino, G. B. Paravia, 1859

² *The Biographical Memoirs of St John Bosco*. Salesiana Publishers New Rochelle, New York, 1969, V, 79ss.

The “Biographical Memoirs” [BM V 207; “Dream” cf BM V 134] also contain quotations from Don Bosco, including those in which he mentions Dominic speaking about England and his desire to go there as a missionary. Dominic’s desire to encourage the Holy Father in his efforts for the conversion of England is also mentioned. Don Bosco reports that he spoke to Pius IX about it during his visit to Rome in 1858.

In his study on Dominic Savio and Don Bosco, writing in the context of charisms, Alberto Caviglia (1868-1943) seems to suggest that there could only be a spiritual/mystical/supernatural source for Dominic’s words. He states: “*Non è probabile che il Savio potesse da altri aver notizia delle cose d’Inghilterra*”³. [“It is not probable that Savio could have had information about English events from others.”] – which at first sight seems a strange judgment to make, to say the least.

Other later writers, however, e.g. P. Braido, A Lenti and W.J. Dickson provide another possible answer to the question raised above and all refer to Fr Lorenzo Gastaldi⁴.

After quoting Don Bosco’s life of Dominic Savio and the reference to England, Braido writes: “*Potrebbe averne avuto la suggestione da p. Lorenzo Gastaldi il futuro arcivescovo di Torino, allora missionario dell’Istituto della Carità in Inghilterra, nel caso che nei due soggiorni in Italia nel 1856 e 1857 [cf G. TUNINETTI, Lorenzo Gastaldi 1815-1883. vol. 1 pp. 110-111] egli sia stato a Valdocco e vi abbia parlato della situazione religiosa inglese o se ne sia fatto eco don Bosco nelle sue parlate seriali alla comunità di giovani e educatori.*” [He could have had the idea from Fr Lorenzo Gastaldi the future archbishop of Turin, then a missionary of the Institute of Charity in England, in the event that during his two stays in Italy in 1856 and 1857 <cf. G. Tuninetti, *Lorenzo Gastaldi...*, pp. 110-111> he had been to Valdocco and spoken there about the religious situation in England or that Don Bosco in his evening talks to the community of boys and staff had done so]⁵.

³ A. CAVIGLIA *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di “Don Bosco”. Vol IV. La vita di Savio Domenico e Savio Domenico e Don Bosco*, Studio. Torino, SEI 1943, pp. 86-87.

⁴ Fr Lorenzo Gastaldi (1815-1883) born in Turin. Ordained for the archdiocese 1837. He became a great friend and benefactor of Don Bosco, who was also close to his mother and the rest of his family. Between 1851 and 1862 he was a member of the Institute of Charity founded by Antonio Rosmini Serbati and from 1853 a missionary in Great Britain. A prolific writer at both academic and popular level he contributed over a number of years, during and after his time in England, to Don Bosco’s “Catholic Readings”. On Don Bosco’s recommendation he was appointed Bishop of Saluzzo in 1867 and was then archbishop of Turin 1871-83.

⁵ P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*. Vol.1. Roma, LAS 2003, p 326.

A. Lenti writes: “During Father Gastaldi’s furloughs of 1856 and 1857 (Dominic Savio had visions of the conversion of England at this time!)⁶. And W. Dickson writes: “Whether through the influence of Gastaldi’s reports in *L’Armonia* or of his correspondence with Don Bosco, or of Signora Gastaldi, Dominic Savio seems to have developed an early enthusiasm for the English mission. In 1855 he was heard to remark: “So many souls need our help in England...”[BM V 207] “Dream” cf BM V 134⁷. Dickson also notes that while preaching a retreat at the Oratory in January 1863 Fr Gastaldi used ideas and images with “certain very interesting resemblances to Dominic’s day dream.” Two alternatives come to mind: either he had used this image on an earlier occasion when Dominic Savio was listening in 1856 or 1857; or he had come across it in Don Bosco’s life of Dominic Savio (1859) and decided to use it himself. The first alternative offers an explanation for some of the content of Dominic’s dream. The second leaves the intriguing unanswered question of how it appeared in Dominic’s day dream in the first place. Perhaps Caviglia has a point after all?

But in this brief note I would like to suggest that there is more to be said about the matter.

With regard to Dominic’s interest in England in general rather than the day dream and its contents, I think there are a number of possibilities. In those years the Crimean War⁸ (1853-56) was in progress, of which Don Bosco certainly wrote (and one presumes spoke to the boys) (cf MB V 195 [“*alleanza del Piemonte colla Francia e coll’Inghilterra contra la Russia*”] plus chap XXVI, pp 284ss) “*Il Galantuomo 1855*”

Don Bosco would also have been familiar with other events involving England, and which Piedmontese politicians such as Camillo di Cavour, as well as churchmen, had been watching with interest. He was also a good friend of

⁶ A. J. LENTI, *Don Bosco History and Spirit*. Vol.4. *Beginnings of the Salesian Society and its Constitutions*. Roma, LAS 2008, p. 138.

⁷ W. J. DICKSON, *The dynamics of growth. The foundation and development of the Salesians in England*. Roma, LAS 1991, pp 32-35.

⁸ The *Crimean War*; (March 1853–February 1856) was fought between Russia on one side and an alliance of France, Great Britain (and in January 1855 the Kingdom of Piedmont and Sardinia) and the Ottoman Empire on the other. The allied powers of Britain and France asked Piedmont to enter the war partially in order to encourage Austria to enter, which they would not do unless they were certain that Piedmontese troops were not available to fight in Italy. Camillo di Cavour, who hoped that support for the western allies would lead to their support for Sardinia’s ambitions in Italy, agreed as soon as his colleagues’ support would allow, and entered the war on France and Britain’s side with an 18 thousand man contingent, which managed to earn Piedmont a position at the Peace Congress in Paris.

(Blessed) Antonio Rosmini-Serbati (1797-1855), the founder of the Institute of Charity, who had sent some of his best young men on the English mission, to which he was very committed⁹.

In 1833 the Oxford Movement had begun and this had carried great weight in the English Catholic revival. Proponents of this movement who became part of it included William Lockhart (1820-1892), a young Scottish graduate and one of John Henry Newman's chief and closest followers. In August 1843 Fr Antonio Gentili (who in fact had studied for the priesthood at the Irish College in Rome, where he was ordained in 1830, and had been one of the first three Rosminian missionaries sent to England in 1835) received William Lockhart into the church. He then became a member of the Institute of Charity (Rosminian) himself.

Then the future Cardinal John Henry Newman was received into the church on 9 October 1845 by the Passionist (Blessed) Dominic Barberi and later joined the Oratory. The future Cardinal Manning, the Anglican archdeacon Henry Edward Manning, was received into the Church by Father Brownbill, S. J. on Passion Sunday 6 April, 1851.

In the meantime the restoration of the English Catholic Hierarchy had taken place in 1850,¹⁰ and Don Bosco may well have spoken to his boys about these events. At the end of May 1853, Fr Lorenzo Gastaldi had left Italy as a Rosminian missionary for England. The Rosminians — about ten of them — were then working at Ratcliffe, Rugby, Loughborough, Newport and Cardiff. Their work was teaching, pastoral care and itinerant missions. Fr Gastaldi was destined for the house at Rugby, which since 1850 had been the novitiate house. He had to learn English well (and he totally dedicated himself to doing so). Among other commitments, with other confreres¹¹ he also preached missions

⁹ “In fact, though Rosmini gave his consent as early as 1831, the period of preparation for the English Mission was a long one; for the little band did not sail from Civita Vecchia till 22 May, 1835. It is of interest to note that we are told that they set forth with a more personal blessing and mission from the Holy See than even St. Augustine and his companions received from St. Gregory the Great, for Pope Gregory XVI actually came on board the vessel and blessed the three as “Italian missionaries” just before they sailed, probably a unique event in missionary history”. In fact two of the three were Frenchmen: Frs Anthony Rey and Emilius Belisy; the other was a young Italian Dr. Luigi Gentili, and they eventually landed at Tilbury on 16th June.

¹⁰ With the Bull *Universalis Ecclesiae* (29 September 1850), Pius IX recreated a Roman Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales, under the newly appointed Archbishop and Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman with twelve additional episcopal sees.

¹¹ Among these was Francisco Cardozo Ayres (1821-1870) the first South American to enter the Institute of Charity and the first bishop. He was ordained in Rugby on 5 June 1852. On 16 August 1856 he was at Stresa as prefect of the clerics, their spiritual director and the Rector's consultor. On 22 June 1859 he returned to England with the General Fr Pagani. This time he travelled by way of Turin and Paris. In Turin he was very impressed by his meeting

around the country. This preaching was interrupted twice for brief periods, during which he returned to Italy, in May-September 1856 and in summer 1857, [while still stationed in Rugby;] and, as we have seen, probably visited the Valdocco Oratory. In 1858 he was appointed Rector of St David's mission in Cardiff.

However, almost certainly, the death of Rosmini (1 July 1855) could also have occasioned some more comments by Don Bosco to his boys especially those of the newly founded Immaculate Conception Sodality, about the missionary work undertaken by Rosmini's sons in England.

Don Bosco was also in correspondence with Fr Gastaldi while he was in England, certainly writing to him (February 23 1855) in Liverpool¹² and (May/June 1855) in Rugby¹³. In this second letter Don Bosco mentions that he had also written a letter at the end of April addressed to him in Manchester¹⁴ which he feared may not have reached him. The Rosminians did not have houses in Liverpool or Manchester, but they had preached occasional missions there for a number of years.

In this context to quote a local source: "Mention must be made of the wonderful mission given by the Rev. Dr. Gentili and the Fathers of Charity in 1846 at St Wilfred's, Hulme, Manchester. "A man of Roman birth and of striking personality, Fr Gentili was persuaded to come from St. Wilfrid's, Hulme, to give a mission at St. Patrick's, Manchester. So began the famous mission which lasted seven weeks"¹⁵.

It should also be mentioned, while perhaps bearing in mind the cholera epidemic which was to come to Turin in the early 1850s, that in 1847 between March and September in Liverpool 10 young Catholic priests died from typhus. St Patrick's (the church house to which Don Bosco was later to address his letter to Fr Gastaldi) lost three priests; St Joseph's two; St Mary's two; St Anthony's one; St Peter's one and St Nicholas' one. The following year, in 1848,

with Don Bosco who spoke highly of the deceased Rosmini...He was appointed Bishop of Olinda, Brazil, and the solemn episcopal ordination took place on 16 March 1868 in Rome in the Chiesa Nuova. However, he only lived for 48 years and 7 months. He died on 14 May 1870 while attending the Vatican Council and his funeral was held in the Chiesa Nuova on 16 May.

¹² E(m) I 247-249. St Patrick's Roman Catholic Chapel, 22 Park Place, Toxteth, Liverpool. This large Neoclassical chapel was built between 1821 and 1827 to designs by John Slater.

¹³ E(m) I, 255-256. St Marie's Dunchurch Road, Rugby, in the care of the Rosminians from 1849. A new church with the College and Novitiate were then built by Captain Hibbert with Pugin as the architect.

¹⁴ St Patrick's Catholic Church, Livesey Street, Collyhurst, Manchester. On the February 29, 1832, the first Catholic Church in Manchester after Catholic Emancipation was dedicated to St. Patrick, and stood in the green fields of Livesey Street.

¹⁵ Cf website: <http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/LAN/Hulme/StWilfrid.shtml> [06.05.2010]

while giving a great mission in Dublin, Fr Gentili was suddenly seized with a fatal fever, and died after only a few days illness.

We may finally recall from his biography of the boy, Dominic Savio's strange insistence with Don Bosco on one occasion that he visit an unknown house and their finding a dying man whose grateful and relieved wife said that he wanted to be reconciled to the church. Perhaps Dominic had had another day dream. Don Bosco concludes that chapter with the words: "I pass over in silence other incidents of a similar nature. I have placed them on record, but I leave it to others to publish them when they shall judge fit for the glory of God"¹⁶.

It is not likely that Don Bosco was ever familiar with Newman's poem (set to music by John Dykes in 1867), although Fr Lorenzo Gastaldi may have been, but as the above reflections on his knowledge of and contacts with England and his familiarity with other events and people of the time show, there is ample room for further historical research without excluding divine intervention or mere coincidence. It would also be interesting to know what Newman (created Cardinal in 1879) knew and thought about Don Bosco, and vice versa!

¹⁶ "A Boy with a will" *Original life of St Dominic Savio by St John Bosco, Madras 3rd edition 1962, p 77.*