

The Roman Letter of 1884 And Its Aftermath

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When Don Bosco reached Rome in mid-April of 1884 (his next-to-last visit in the Eternal City), he was a sick and tired man. Two pressing reasons had brought him to Rome: he found himself compelled to raise funds to meet the mounting debts then piling up for the construction of the church of the Sacred Heart in the outskirts of the capital; he wanted to secure a firm reassurance that the Salesian Congregation was now established on secure juridical and canonical grounds. He would spend the next month in Rome pursuing these objectives.¹

Broken in health he was no longer able to traverse the city streets and piazzas to meet with his many friends and acquaintances who always rallied to his support in his quest for funds. During his previous visits he had acquired an increasing circle of supporters for his work: cardinals and bishops, superiors of religious orders and members of the nobility, affluent benefactors and even government officials. Don Bosco's affable and persuasive ways always left them willing to open their hearts and purse strings to him in his moments of need.

Now 68, his physical buoyancy was gone. During that early spring of 1884 he was enduring physical distress. Writing to the Countess Bonmartini in Turin he frankly admitted: "You want to know about my health. What can I say? I

¹ All told, Don Bosco spent more than two years (740 days) in Rome. His first visit occurred in 1858, and his last took place in 1887 one year before his death. Like most visitors viewing the city of the Caesars and of the Popes for the first time he too acted like a wide-eyed tourist, determined not to leave one stone unturned. Angelo Amadei, in his *Vita di San Giovanni Bosco*, described Don Bosco as eager and chafing at the bit, anxious in his anticipation: "As soon as he got to Rome, Don Bosco immediately began planning how he would explore the city. He got in touch with persons whom he knew and with their help began to take in the more interesting sites and sights, especially the basilicas, sanctuaries, and churches which seemed to turn up at every corner." (Vol. I: p. 544).

For a detailed description of Don Bosco's twenty visits and sojourns in the Eternal City see the handsomely illustrated volume: *Don Bosco in Vaticano* by Marco Bongiovanni (*Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticano*, Rome, 1989). This work is a veritable feast for the eyes.

have my good days and my bad days, and I feel constantly exhausted.”² Two weeks later he sent off a hurried note to Cardinal Alimonda: “My health continues to worsen. But I hope my condition will improve enough to enable me to greet you personally, just as old friends should.”³ In a note to Senator Paolo Bosetti he alluded to what had become a frustrating and crippling infirmity — his failing eyesight: “I realize that my scribbling to you like this will tax your patience; but you must realize that a half-blind man is writing this.”⁴

Now confined to his room most of the time, Don Bosco felt like a caged bird. No longer able to crisscross the city with his earlier vitality, his visits to friends and benefactors diminished. But his incapacity to get around did not insure him hours of leisure time for relaxation. His secretary, John Lemoyne, noted that visitors beat a constant path to his door. Cardinal Consolini, who greatly admired the humble priest’s apostolic zeal, arrived for a friendly chat. Cardinal Lodovico Jacobini, the secretary of State, came to assure him that he would do everything possible to assist him. Cardinal Parocchi, vicar of the Holy Father, put in his appearance to pay his respects; so did Cardinals Nina and Buonaparte. Archbishop Kirby, director of the Irish College in Rome became a frequent visitor. Groups of youths often invaded his room just to see him and receive his blessing. The traffic to his residence became relentless. From eight in the morning to seven in the evening Don Bosco rarely enjoyed a moment of peace and quiet. Finally, an attendant was posted outside his door to bar intruders for an hour in mid-afternoon to assure the exhausted man at least a brief period of rest.⁵

² *Epistolario di San Giovanni Bosco*, a cura de Eugenio Ceria, Vol. 4, No. 255.

³ *Epistolario*: Vol. 4: No. 259.

⁴ *Epistolario*: Vol. 4: No. 260.

⁵ *Memorie Biografiche di San Giovanni Bosco* (SEI, Torino, 1935). Vol. 17: pp. 80-81.

Two weeks after his arrival in Rome, Don Bosco appeared before the then reigning pontiff, Leo XIII, for a papal audience. The Pope could not help but observe his declining condition and showed extreme sensitivity for his frail health. In an unprecedented act he called for a chair to be brought into the papal chamber so that Don Bosco could rest more comfortably. This was a most unusual gesture since proper protocol demanded that visitors were to kneel or remain standing when addressing the Holy Father.

The Pope then turned his attention to Father Lemoyne, and in a matter-of-fact voice said: “You are his secretary, are you not? Well, from now on I entrust Don Bosco to you. I am making you personally responsible for his health. Do not let him get too tired. And you can see that his eyesight is failing, so stand close by him at all times. Do I make myself clear? This is your Pope, the Holy Father who is speaking: I want you to see to it that he gets the best medical attention that is available. So be sensitive to all his needs. You should feel honored in receiving this assignment. All you Salesians should be proud of the mission God has given you and of the destiny that is your lot, so live up to it.

During his long hours of forced isolation, Don Bosco's thoughts often wandered nostalgically to the happy and carefree years of his early Oratory experiences. Father Lemoyne who was constantly by his side noted that during his Roman sojourn of 1884 Don Bosco seemed to be increasingly living in the past: "It's difficult for our beloved Don Bosco to talk to anyone without letting his mind turn to those first heroic days of long ago."⁶

Given, then, Don Bosco's prolonged periods of rest and confinement, exacerbated by his declining health, it was only natural that he would fall into bouts of frequent reveries about his early oratory days. One can readily understand too how his still vivid imagination could conjure up the dream scenario that became the setting of his famed Roman letter of 1884. That young men have visions, but old men have dreams never rang truer than it did on this occasion.

Five years before his death, Don Bosco had selected John Baptist Lemoyne to serve as his confidential secretary and constant companion. "I am entrusting myself to you," he told him, "totally and without reservations. So deal kindly with me, and above all be a willing listener. There will be no secrets between us. My heart will be an open book to you. I will confide to you all my concerns for our young congregation. Moreover, it is my hope and prayer that you will be that someone who will be by my side when I breathe my last."⁷

It is Father Lemoyne, therefore, who became Don Bosco's Boswell. It is he who played the key role not only in recording and transmitting the contents of the Roman letter, but in preserving the original document.

It was during his last days in Rome that Don Bosco had a dream, the interpretation of which was to have significant implications. Often referred to as "the Roman letter of 1884", this dream was to serve succeeding generations of Salesian educators as a seminal document in explaining the principles of Don Bosco' educational philosophy, which he termed his *sistema preventivo*. But there was to be a more immediate fallout. The message in the dream heralded the

Furthermore, I want you to inform all your confreres about what I have enjoined on you today. Your hearts should overflow with compassion for this poor old man who is sitting before me." (*IMB*, Ceria, Vol. 17: p. 105).

⁶ Letter of J. B. Lemoyne, dated April 8, 1884. In Central Salesian Archives in Rome, No. 272.

⁷ Don Bosco's first major biographer was 44 years of age when his mentor singled him out as his trusted secretary and confidant. Lemoyne was elated at the appointment. He wrote to his mother: "I could not be happier over this appointment than if I had just been made king of Italy." For the next five years Lemoyne would be privy to his beloved Don Bosco's dreams, his aspirations, and his disappointments. He dutifully transcribed in "good copy" the Roman dream of 1884 which fifty years later Eugenio Ceria would include in the 17th volume of the *Memorie Biografiche* (pp. 107-114).

beginning of reforms at the Oratory which aimed at restoring the original family spirit that for many years had animated oratory life in the Valdocco.⁸

Like Charles Dickens' ghost of Christmas past, two of Don Bosco's early Oratory boys appeared to him in a dream one evening as he was getting ready to retire for the night. The lengthy dialog that ensued contrasted in vivid detail the carefree and innocent years of the early Oratory with its then present formalized and perfunctory lifestyle. What had once been a home had now become an institution. Don Bosco was quite shaken up by the experience and he hastened to put his encounter with Ferdinando Valfre and Giuseppe Buzzetti on paper while it was still fresh in his memory.

On the following day Don Bosco dictated the account of his dream experience to Father Lemoyne who carefully transcribed it word for word. After carefully perusing the text and making occasional emendations, Don Bosco instructed his secretary to send the finished draft in letter form posthaste to Turin so that Don Rua could read it in public to the Oratory community.

Earlier Father Lemoyne had written to Don Rua alerting him about Don Bosco's dream, a description of which he would receive shortly. He then expressed Don Bosco's desire to have the dream-letter read to the assembly of the Oratory community after evening prayers.

Don Bosco is in the process of drafting a lengthy letter in which he describes a recent dream he has had. He wants it to be read to the Oratory boys, preferably after evening prayers. You will see that it contains many wonderful things. The writer is also taking the opportunity to tell his boys that he misses them and loves them very much and is anxious to see them again soon.⁹

True to his promise, Don Bosco's letter arrived several days later. After Don Rua examined it, he had some misgivings about reading it in public to his young audience in its entirety. He felt that some of the allusions to the Oratory staff would have created considerable embarrassment to the priests and brothers. It was almost a case of airing the Oratory's dirty laundry in public. As promised, the letter did contain some "wonderful things". But it also contained some not-so-wonderful revelations that would have caused the Oratory personnel some uncomfortable moments had they been publicly disclosed.

⁸ The educational value of the "Roman dream of 1884" would in later years become a wellspring of inspiration for Salesian educators in their attempt to trace Don Bosco's *Sistema Preventivo* to its very roots. Eugenio Ceria stated that "This letter is a veritable treasure. Alongside Don Bosco's short treatise on *the Sistema Preventivo* and the "Regulations for the Houses", it forms part of the trilogy of his educational legacy." (*IMB*, Vol. 17, p. 115).

⁹ Ceria, E. *op. cit.*, Vol. 17: p. 107.

Don Rua hastened to dispatch a message to Father Lemoyne, asking him to edit and abridge the letter so that only material pertinent to the Oratory boys could be revealed in his public reading. The latter promptly obliged and drafted a condensed version. This truncated edition became the "shorter version" of the Roman letter. But even this digest of the original lengthy dream-letter had an immediate and desired impact. The evening when it was read, a noticeable number of boys listened to it with somber and even grim faces. For Don Bosco revealed that he had become privy to the state of conscience of a good number of youths who at that moment were listening to his words. Further, Don Bosco promised that upon his return a general housecleaning would be in order.¹⁰ Moreover, if the shortcomings of the Oratory students were singled out, some members of the Oratory staff would not be spared. In their case, Don Bosco was not all sweetness and light as prompt reform measures soon went into effect after his return to the Oratory.

Actually, Don Bosco had anticipated some adverse reaction to his original letter and had authorized Don Rua, after his close scrutiny, to edit its contents. "Don Bosco wants you to look at his letter carefully before you read it to the boys," wrote Lemoyne, "and to lessen the severity of any word or phrase that you think will not have the desired result." Then the exhausted secretary who had spent most of the night transcribing Don Bosco's text, apologized for the presence of any errata. "Please excuse any error you may find in the text. I was up all night preparing it to mail it to you."¹¹

Don Bosco probably was not prepared for the wholesale condensation of the letter that was read to the Oratory community that evening in mid May. About half of the original "Roman letter" was excised to adapt its contents to a youthful audience.

Although it was the abridged version of the Roman letter that first received public attention, it quickly disappeared from sight. For years it lay virtually unnoticed in the Salesian archives in Turin.¹²

¹⁰ Don Bosco's statement that the "state of conscience of many boys had been revealed to him" created quite a stir among the Oratory boys. Biographer Ceria observed that among Lemoyne's abundant notes was the observation that upon his return to the Oratory, a group of apprehensive youths had lined up outside Don Bosco's room anxious to learn if any of them had in some way figured in his dreams: "per sapere com'egli li avesse veduti." In for a surprise especially were some "who outwardly were looked upon as model students of exemplary character, but in reality were very far from it." Ceria, E. *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹¹ From Lemoyne's letter to Don Rua, dated May 12, 1884. Always solicitous to preserve any documentation he considered important, Lemoyne in a footnote in this letter added: "Please make sure that you preserve Don Bosco's letter so it may be filed in our archives."

¹² Excerpts of the shorter version of the Roman letter have since been discovered in the notebooks of the early Salesian novices. Portions of it were also

The original document hand-copied in Rome by Lemoyne hardly fared better. In tracing its origin and eventual destination Pietro Braido has written: "The Roman letter of 1884 has had a rather precarious existence, going from occasional recognition to frequent periods of oblivion."¹³

For more than three decades it endured a benign neglect. Finally in 1920 the then superior general, Father Paul Albera brought it to the attention of the Salesian world by publishing it as an official document in the *Atti del Capitolo Superiore della Pia Società Salesiana* (June 24, 1920).¹⁴ He also announced that he would shortly make available to each Salesian a separate reprint of the letter. This brief prefatory introduction that followed explained his motive:

Enclosed you will find a copy of our venerable founder's Roman letter of 1884 which I had promised to forward to each of you earlier. It would be presumptuous on my part to attempt to comment or explain its contents. The letter speaks for itself. Its clarity and directness serve as models in adapting Don Bosco's *Sistema Preventivo* to our modern times. It is still as valid today as it was when it was first written. By implementing its timely message we can animate the family spirit in each of our institutions. By ignoring it or just paying lip service to it, we will be betraying our founder's trust. Let the message this letter contains strengthen our commitment to Don Bosco; let it encourage us to follow the path he has laid out for us in the education of the young. May the Lord be by your side as you, Don Bosco's spiritual sons, study its wonderful sentiments. For this letter, grounded so deeply in its message of love, will strengthen our loyalty to Don Bosco....¹⁵

found among the papers of the first Salesian directors of novices, Fathers Giulio Barberis and Eugenio Bianchi. See *Scritti Pedagogici e Spirituali* (LAS, Rome, 1987) p. 269.

¹³ See *Scritti Pedagogici e Spirituali*, p. 269.

¹⁴ On April 6, 1920, Father Paul Albera extended an invitation to the Salesian world to attend the blessing of the bigger-than-life bronze statue which had been erected in the small square which faces the facade of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin. The dedication ceremony had actually been scheduled for the eve of the feast of Mary Help of Christians, May 23, 1915. But World War I was devastating Europe at that time and the blessing of the statue was postponed until May, 1920. In his circular letter entitled: *Invito all' inaugurazione del Monumento a D. Bosco*, Father Albera also sent out a clarion call to Salesians everywhere to erect in their hearts "another monument, more enduring than bronze, of their living commitment to Don Bosco's Salesian way of educating the young." Two months later Father Albera gave substance to his invitation by printing Don Bosco's Roman letter in the June issue of the "Acts of the Superior Chapter".

¹⁵ *Circolare del 6 aprile, 1920, Per l'inaugurazione del Monumento del Venerabile Don Bosco*, in *Lettere Circolari*, p. 311.

The impetus given by Father Albera to the inherent significance of the Roman letter helped popularize its educational value. In 1927 the complete original version appeared in Father Bartholomew Fascie's modest but meaty anthology of key selections illustrating Don Bosco's way of educating the young.¹⁶ Nine years later in 1935 the Roman letter received its permanent place in the corpus of Salesian literature with its inclusion in Eugenio CERIA's 17th volume of the *Memorie Biografiche*.

In recent years various Salesian authors and scholars have focused their attention upon this basic document in tracing the sources of Don Bosco's *Sistema Preventivo*. Father Eugenio Valentini, writing in the fall issue of the "Salesianum" treats the Roman letter extensively, calling it "the Magna Carta of the Salesian way of educating youth."¹⁷ Pietro Braidò, the foremost authority on Don Bosco's *Sistema Preventivo*, has recently published a critical and definitive study of the Roman letter.¹⁸

One hundred years after its original composition, when the revised edition of the "Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales" were formally approved by the Holy See, the full-length version of "The Letter from Rome" was accorded a place of honor among the "Writings of Don Bosco which the 20th, 21st, and 22nd General Chapters considered to be of special significance for the faithful living out of our vocation." It can be found in the appendix, in an English language translation, such as it is, on pp. 254-264.¹⁹

The Roman Letter — A Précis

My Beloved Children in Christ,

May 10, 1884

No matter where I am, you are always on my mind. I'm sure that by now you are all aware that what I want for you more than anything else, is for us to be happy together in this life and then be happy together again in heaven. This is the real reason that compels me to write in you.

¹⁶ For any student of Don Bosco's *Sistema Preventivo*, B. Fascie's *Del Metodo Educativo di Don Bosco* (Torino, 1927) can be a valuable compendium. The anthology contains 30 selections, judiciously chosen, from the life of Don Bosco which illustrate his educational philosophy.

¹⁷ Eugenio Valentini, "Il Sogno dell '84," *Salesianum* (Vol. 15, 1953)

¹⁸ P. Braidò, "Due Lettere da Roma," in *Scritti Pedagogici e Spirituali* (LAS Roma, 1987), pp. 269-303.

¹⁹ "The Letter from Rome" can also be found in the revised Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (*Costituzioni e Regolamenti dell'Istituto delle Figlie de Maria Ausiliatrice*. (Rome, 1982) pp. 265-277.

You have no idea how hard it is for me to let a single day go by without hearing your cheery voices or watching you at play. I wanted to write to you the moment I reached Rome. In fact, I began this letter several times, but never got around to finishing it because I have been so busy. However, since I shall be leaving this city in a few days, I want to get this off to you before I return to the Oratory.

Know that I am addressing you as your father in Christ, one who loves you and is very concerned about each one of you. So listen carefully to what I have to say; but above all, I want you to put into practice what I am going to propose to you.

Something strange happened to me the other night as I was getting ready for bed. I had just said my prayers — the same prayers, by the way, that my mother taught me when I was just a little boy — when I had a most unusual experience. I still don't know if it was a dream or some out-of-body experience. I suddenly found myself face-to-face with two old friends who had been with me as boys at the Oratory many years ago.

One of them came up to me and greeted me warmly. He then asked: "Do you know who I am, Don Bosco?"

"I certainly do," I said.

"And do you remember the wonderful times we had together at the Oratory in the good old days?"

"How could I forget," I told him. "I remember those times only too well. And I remember all my boys of those bygone years too. You are Ferdinando Valfre, and you were at the Oratory with me back in 1870."

"You're right!" he exclaimed.

Then Valfre went on: "Would you like to see some of those old familiar faces?"

"Nothing would please me more," I answered with keen anticipation.

As if by magic, Valfre brought me back to those carefree days, and I started to relive what life was like at the Oratory during those golden years. Everything seemed to be frozen in time: all the boys looked exactly as I remembered them fifteen years before. The scene I was viewing was the recreation hour. What a happy sight it was. Everyone appeared to be enjoying himself immensely. No one was standing still. The youngsters were playing those same wonderful games we used to play hours on end, racing after each other with wild abandon. Everywhere I looked there was laughter and cheers and high spirits. The few who were not playing had formed a circle around one of the priests and were listening to his stories in rapt attention. I watched all this as though spellbound.

One thing especially stood out as I relived those merry and carefree moments — the wonderful bonding that friendliness and openness had created between the children at play and the priests and brothers who were playing along with them. I turned to Valfre and said: "You can see for yourself, my friend, what this

openhearted friendship between the boys and their teachers has done. Friendship creates trust which in turn creates confidence. So it's easy to understand how these boys very easily open their hearts to their educators. And this conduct carries over into their religious practices. A willingness to approach the priest in confession and to open up to him in troubled moments comes naturally.

I had no sooner said this when the second person who had remained in the background all this time approached me. Despite his thick bushy white beard, I recognized him immediately. It was none other than my longtime friend, Joseph Buzzetti.

"Don Bosco," he said, "You've seen the Oratory of times past, would you like to see your Oratory boys of today?"

I jumped at the opportunity he offered me: "I certainly would," I said eagerly. "I miss them very much. It's been almost a month since I've seen any of them."

In a trice, there they were. Big as life, before my very eyes. Again I was viewing what in the past had always been a hurly-burly scene — the recreation hour. But this time there was something very strange. The joyful shouting and wild running about of children at play had vanished. Nobody seemed to be having any fun at all. I couldn't believe my eyes. Gone was the excitement of the games I used to enjoy watching and even playing myself. Gone were the clouds of dust that running feet used to stir up on the playground.

I strained my eyes for a closer look and could actually see the look of boredom on many faces. It quickly became obvious to me that many boys were just going through the motions of playing — they just didn't have their hearts in the games. All this saddened me. Then I observed something that I don't recall I had ever witnessed before in the old days: knots of boys were lounging around on staircases, or moping about in groups under the porticoes that bordered the playground. I could even make out an occasionally solitary figure alone and depressed and lost in thought.

But what I found especially disturbing was the scattered small cliques of youths who had wandered off the playground and had isolated themselves from their companions. I could observe them huddled together and talking in hushed tones, all the while snickering and casting furtive glances about, making sure they were not being seen nor heard. I'm sure that if St. Aloysius had entered their company he would have blushed at the way the conversation was going.

"Well," Buzzetti asked, "what do you think of your boys now. Do you want to see more?"

"I've seen enough," I answered.

"Things sure have changed from the old days, haven't they?" countered my friend.

Don Bosco nodded slowly, "They certainly have. Watching that dull and listless recreation was really a pathetic sight."

Buzzetti continued: "The unfortunate part of all this is that the general apathy you witnessed on the playground poisons everything else the boys do. That real fervor we used to feel in approaching the sacraments has virtually disappeared. For most of the Oratory boys, church services have become a boring routine. In general, most of the youths whom you harbor in your Oratory no longer appreciate what a loving Providence is doing for them — I mean giving them an education and a Christian upbringing, feeding and clothing them. Many just whine and complain. That wonderful openness we had as boys with our educators has just about disappeared. You realize what all this will lead to, don't you?"

Don Bosco nodded. "You've made it only too clear. But I can't let things go on like this. I want to change things. To bring back that family spirit that was so special in those early years when my boys were always lively, outgoing, and so loving." Buzzetti's answer was quick and straightforward: "It will take love to bring all that back."

But I protested when I heard that. "Love? Are you telling me that I don't love my boys enough? You, more than anyone else, know that I have done everything humanly possible for them. I have sacrificed a lot, have put up with a lot of privations for them these past 40 years. I've fought against impossible odds for my boys and have endured all kinds of opposition so they could have a loving home here with me. I have given every waking moment of my life to feed and house and educate them, and above all to bring them up as good Christians. What more could I possibly have done. These boys are my life."

"Don Bosco, I'm not speaking about you."

"Then who," I demanded. "Certainly you can't be talking about the people who have been working shoulder to shoulder with me these many years. My priests and seminarians, my lay brothers and shop teachers are all as dedicated to these boys as I am. Many of my Salesians have given the best years of their lives to the young people whom Providence has entrusted to our care."

My friend quickly concurred. He then paused a moment and said: "You are certainly right, Don Bosco. But there is still one very important thing missing."

"What do you mean?"

"It is not enough to be dedicated to your work and to love the children that Providence has entrusted to you. These children must be shown that they are loved."

I voiced my protest when I heard that. "They may be children, but they are certainly old enough to know that. They are also well aware that what we are doing for them is not being done for our own gain, but because we truly love them in Christ. What more can they want?"

Buzzetti then attempted to clear up my quandary. "The heart of the matter is this: You and your Salesians must convince your boys that you have their best interests at heart. You can begin by showing them that their concerns are your concerns too. That you want to share their little pleasures, their fun and games, their hopes and joys. When the children you are educating realize that, then you will see their attitude change; you will see that they will more readily accept these things which you and your Salesians cherish and prize and deem important — even if in the beginning they will appear reluctant to do so. I mean such things as school discipline, church services, taking their studies more seriously, controlling their crude and unmannerly ways, and so on. Such things naturally go against the grain of most boys. But in time they will fall in line, not because they like it, but out of respect and appreciation for the affectionate understanding you have shown in sharing with them what their boyish hearts love and enjoy."

"You'll have to explain that further. It's still not clear to me."

Buzzetti pursued the subject afresh: "Let me show you what I mean. I want you to take a good look at what is going on in the play yard."

I did as he suggested, but there was nothing that caught my attention. So I turned to Buzzetti and said, "There's nothing unusual happening that I can tell. What am I supposed to see?"

"You've been these boys' father and educator all these years and you still don't see? Look closer. Where are your Salesians?"

I looked again, and this time I understood. There were precious few priests and brothers among the boys. The few that I saw were like strangers in their midst. They were no longer the heart and soul of the fun and games that used to enliven the playground.

Next, my eye caught sight of a group of Salesians strolling leisurely about and chatting among themselves alongside the edge of the play area. They were completely oblivious to what was going on. I did observe a stern-faced few who had placed themselves in strategic corners to supervise the recreation hour. My first impression was that their somber presence was mainly to maintain law and order. I also noticed an occasional Salesian, in seeing a group of boys drift off by themselves, hasten to join them. But as he drew near, the group quickly dissolved. The message was clear. Those youths wanted to have no truck with any of the priests and brothers at their gathering.

After Buzzetti had seen that I had taken all that in, he turned to me and said: "Things have surely changed haven't they from those early days when our beloved Don Bosco was always among us, especially when you joined in our games. Do you remember those wonderful times? For me those years were heaven on earth. The only rule we had was the rule of love. Everything was always out in the open as far as you and your boys were concerned. We never had any secrets from Don Bosco. Remember?"

"How could I ever forget? Those were times of great joy for me too. My boys were never out of sight or out of mind. Always willing and eager

to do anything I asked them. But I can't do that anymore. My travel, meetings, appointments take up all my time. And my declining health certainly doesn't help any."

"That's understandable, Don Bosco. But why can't your Salesians take up where you left off? You've got to get more demanding with them. Insist that they get more involved with young people, the way you used to."

"Don't you think I haven't tried? But I always keep getting the same answers: The demands and sacrifices are too great. They don't seem to realize that as far as our boys are concerned, we have to live in their world: we have to cherish what they like; interest ourselves in their little games and activities. When that happens, boys are only too willing to take kindly to the things we prize and consider important. If we are having problems at the Oratory now, it's because this mutual trust and bonding between the boys and the Salesians have broken down. In my days it was this trust that made my boys open their hearts to me like an open book. I regret to say that most of our Salesians at the Oratory are too often seen as authority figures. Respect for authority may create a semblance of order, but one no longer senses that bond of love between student and educator that used to pervade the Oratory."

After a long pause, Don Bosco continued: "To create in the child a heart and soul that reflects the love of Jesus Christ, the barrier of indifference and distrust that separates him from the educator must come down."

Buzzetti interrupted, "But just how does one go about bringing down that barrier of distrust and indifference?"

"Building a warm and friendly relationship with a boy is the key," Don Bosco responded. "And the best way to do this is when children have time on their hands, like the recreation hour. That is why it is so important to be with them at that time. When Jesus was among the children, he made himself like one of them. This is the approach one must take. Being aloof from them, whether we intend it or not, creates a barrier. A teacher who is accessible to his students only in the classroom will always be only a teacher to them. But the moment he leaves his books behind him, joins in his pupils' fun and games, exchanges jokes and banter with them, he becomes their big brother. The same can be said of a priest. If he is seen only at the altar or heard only in the pulpit, he is looked on as just another priest, doing what a priest is expected to do. But when he takes the trouble to mix in among the boys outside the church and shows that he is really interested in what they are doing, then those boys see him as someone who not only cares about their souls, but also about their lives. I can vouch that the lives of many young people have been turned around because a priest took the time and trouble to talk to them."

"A youth who is shown that he is loved will return that love. But this bond of love must be built over time. It does not come easy. It generally begins with friendship, which in turn generates confidence, which in time creates that bond of love between student and educator. Once a child's heart

has been won over, then he willingly shares all his little foibles and problems, all his likes and interests with the teacher or brother or priest who has created this climate of love and caring between them."

This brought our lengthy conversation to a close. However, I could not take my eyes off that dismal scene on the playground. With every passing minute I became more and more depressed. It was probably this mounting displeasure that jolted me awake, and I found myself standing by my bed. My legs had become quite swollen, and it pained me to stand on my two feet. So I got back into bed again, determined to send off this letter to you as soon as possible."

(Don Bosco confessed that the dream he had described to his boys had had on unsettling effect on him. As he admitted later: "I wish I did not have such dreams, they tire me out so much." On the following day he could hardly wait for evening to fall so that he could get some bed rest. But no sooner had sleep overtaken him that the dream resumed.

Once again Joseph Buzzetti appeared to him. This time his old friend had some disquieting news for him. Don Bosco was informed that a number of the Oratory students were not in the state of grace, some had not been for long periods of time. It was these troubled souls he told Don Bosco that were mainly responsible for the bad spirit reigning at the Oratory. When Don Bosco insisted that most of his Oratory boys went to confession regularly, Buzzetti was forced to apprise him that "They confess their sins all right, but they only repeat them over and over again. They make little or no effort to amend their lives....Fortunately they are only a few," he tried to assure Don Bosco.

Of all the revelations he received, the fact that even only a few of his boys were not in the state of grace distressed him most. The thought that some of his boys lived in jeopardy of losing their souls was enough to cause him such heartache that he awoke.

Don Bosco attempted to end his Roman letter on a positive note. He tried to bolster the spirits of his listeners by telling them that they were fortunate in receiving their education at the Oratory because they were being molded in the spirit of Francis de Sales. They should take comfort too that Mary Help of Christians was truly their loving spiritual mother. On that note he promised his boys that he looked forward to celebrating the feast of Mary Help of Christians with them in two weeks time. Typically he ended with the words: "That wonderful feast will only be a foretaste of the eternal feast we will all celebrate together one day in heaven.")

The Aftermath

The Roman letter served as a wake-up call for the Oratory community. A week after it had been made public, Don Bosco returned to Valdocco. On May 19 he convened the members of the house council to discuss the internal problems at the Oratory and to seek ways and means of improving the morale and the morality of the institution. At this meeting Father John Bonetti proposed that a follow-up discussion should be held to probe more at length the troublesome problems that Don Bosco had singled out. The group met on June 6 for that purpose.

The June meeting was chaired by Don Bosco himself, with Father Lemoyne diligently recording the proceedings. His introduction revealed an agitated state of mind and a firm intent to implement drastic reforms as he deemed necessary. His intervention as recorded by the secretary was almost startling in its proposals:

I am inviting each one of you to examine and discuss the manner we can adopt to improve the moral climate of our Oratory. As we carry on these deliberations we must also seek effective ways to encourage the growth of more vocations for the Society. It is true that we have already gone over this ground before, and have even prepared printed guidelines to assist us in cultivating vocations among our boys. But it pains me to see how many of our students show early and promising signs of joining our Society and then change their minds by the time they have reached the fifth year of their *ginnasio*.²⁰ In fact, in their last year with us many of the students are already making plans to continue their education elsewhere with the intention of eventually enrolling in the university. Others have set their sights on landing a job as soon as they leave us.²¹

²⁰ The Italian *ginnasio* in Don Bosco's later years followed the format of the Casati Law, which was the country's education code. The *ginnasio* marked the first stage of secondary education which followed primary schooling. It lasted five years. The Casati law required that such schools be established in every provincial capital and, if necessary, in the major town of each district. A youngster who finished his *ginnasio*, and had aspirations to enter the university moved on to a *liceo* which lasted three years. The Casati law dictated that there was to be at least one *liceo* in each province. For a clear explanation of the structure of the Italian school system during this period see Elmiro Argento, "Italian Education From 1859 to 1923: A Study in Educational Expectations and Performance" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1975)

²¹ Quoted by Jose Manuel Prellezo in "Valdocco 1884: Problemi Disciplinari e Proposte di Riforma" in *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane* (LAS, Roma Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 36).

The June 6th meeting marked the beginning of several ensuing lively debates among members of the house council who were determined to bolster the sagging morale then pervading the Oratory. At this early June meeting Don Bosco established a committee, committing it to probing the troubled areas he outlined to them. Their goal was to come up with ways and means of returning the school to the once halcyon "old days" they all well remembered. Appointed to the committee were: Fathers Michael Rua, Joseph Lazzerio, Michael Cagliero, Celestine Durando, and John Bonetti. The latter was designated chairman. He was charged by Don Bosco to initiate an inquiry among the Salesians and school instructors to get to the root causes of the problems that were causing a breakdown of that family spirit and smooth harmony that had characterized the Oratory for so many years. But getting to the root causes of the problems was not enough. He was also enjoined to solicit positive input that would restore Oratory life to its original spirit. There was little time to lose. The results of his inquiry were to be submitted to the house council for further discussion within four days. (*...Don Bonetti fu incaricato di chiedere privatamente i pareri dei membri del Capitolo della Casa e dei singoli maestri e farne relazione alla Commissione lunedì.*)²²

With just several days to meet his deadline, Bonetti conducted his survey with prompt dispatch. The members of the council handed in their written opinions without delay, and other staff members and school instructors who had been canvassed on various sensitive topics submitted some revealing and frank contributions.

The minutes of the following June 9th meeting reveal few specific details of what was discussed, probably to allow the committee members time to analyze and study the frank reports that had been submitted to the chairman, along with the wide-ranging recommendations that had accompanied them. If the first meeting produced just broad generalities, the next two committee meetings (June 30th and July 4th) brought specific problems and divergent opinions out into the open.

A review of the disclosures submitted to Father Bonetti underscored the salient problems that had disturbed Don Bosco in his dream in Rome: the dispirited conduct of the Oratory students was attributed to the lack of Salesian presence among them; the absence of firm but fatherly leadership in the director had created the loss of a sense of direction and family spirit. On the latter Don Bosco had some incisive comments to make:

²² Among those who submitted their evaluation regarding the state of things at the Oratory and proposals for improving the running of the institution were: Tommaso Pentore (1860-1908); Stefano Febraro who left the Congregation in 1901; Domenico Canepa (1858-1930); Secondo Marchisio (1857-1914); Serafino Fumagalli (1855-1907); Giacomo Ruffino (1850-1913); Giovanni Bonetti (1838-1891); Giovanni Battista Lemoyne (1839-1916).

I have carefully gone over the regulations that we used to practice in times past, and I am convinced these regulations contain the remedy for the ills that are bothering us today. In brief the problem can be reduced to this. It must be emphasized that the director of the house is the man in charge. It is his responsibility to know exactly the role each priest and brother on his staff is supposed to play. Therefore, he must make sure that he knows just what their duties and responsibilities are. This kind of uncertainty and indecisiveness is what creates the problems that confront us. As a consequence, nobody appears to be in charge. Everybody gives orders, and everybody questions the orders he receives. Little wonder then that there is a constant state of confusion.²³

The absence of consistent student supervision was next in the line of fire. “*Vi è vera mancanza d’assistenza*” lamented Tommaso Pentore. (“The boys are never properly supervised.”) Father Serafino Fumagalli’s complaint echoed almost verbatim the criticism that Buzzetti had leveled at conditions then existing at the Oratory:

In ricreazione i confratelli invece di mettersi coi giovani amano meglio passeggiare e discorrere tra di loro, e se qualche volta si fa lor osservare che questo modo di agire non è secondo il nostro regolamento, essi adducono per iscusà, o che non osano a mettersi tra i giovani, o che temono che mettendosi tra essi li abbiano a dare degli intrusi, e gli abbandonino oppure che non sanno di che cosa parlare..” (“One scarcely sees our priests and brothers active in the play yard anymore. They seem to be more interested in strolling around chatting among themselves than involving themselves in what is happening on the playground. They always seem to have a ready excuse for this kind of behavior: either they don’t dare to mix in with the boys, or they feel uncomfortable in playing with them, or they don’t want to be looked upon as intruding in their games.”²⁴

²³ See minutes of the July 4, 1884 meeting in ASC 0592 *Verballi* (1866-1888).

²⁴ Perhaps of all the reports submitted to Bonetti, Father Fumagalli’s was the most spirited. More than anyone else he decried the absence of a forceful and authoritative person in charge. He did not hesitate to suggest that it was time that the responsible voice at the Oratory should be shifted from Don Bosco to someone else: “In the past we used to go to Don Bosco to solve problems, but those days are over. We now need someone to be his spokesman, someone to whom our students can have immediate recourse when they have problems, someone who can counsel them in those difficult moments.” Fumagalli also expressed his disappointment regarding the age-old problem of teachers who were always late for their classes. “Very often a teacher doesn’t show up on time to teach his class or supervise the students in the study hall. As a result chaos reigns. I’ve had students coming to me to complain that they cannot study because of the turmoil. Some even pack up their books and look for a quiet corner to work on their assignments.” Perhaps such disorders compelled Fumagalli to end his suggestions for restoring some kind of sanity to the institution

Poor and neglectful supervision was the most consistent complaint found in the reports turned in to the chairman of the committee. What Don Bosco had seen for himself in the Roman dream had been verified. Many Salesians had become strangers to the very children they were supposed to educate.

One problem did arise in the following meeting that created a temporary standoff between Don Bosco and a member of the committee. Father Celestine Durando took exception to Don Bosco's proposal to scrape the last year of the *ginnasio* in order to eliminate the older troublemakers from their younger schoolmates. On this point Don Bosco was adamant. He further proposed that Oratory students who did not show evident signs of a desire to embrace the religious life as they neared the end of their schooling should be excluded from taking their examinations and should not receive their graduation diploma. This came as a shock to several members of the committee. Durando protested such draconian measures, arguing that many gifted students then enrolled in the Oratory would be forced to curtail their education. "...Moreover, if knowledge of this policy gets around, many talented youngsters who want to get a good education at the Oratory will not apply. After all, many of our boys who are academically gifted are here not because they want to become Salesians, but because they aspire to get a good education. And in the process one can see how, in the course of time, their conduct and their application improve." ²⁵

Sensible as Father Durando's objections seemed, Don Bosco would brook no opposition and insisted that he receive everyone's support on his proposal.

...Don Bosco risponde che non vuole essere contrariato in questo suo disegno, e che vuole essere coadiuvato in questo progetto... ("...Don Bosco responded that he wanted no challenge on the matter and expected everyone to go along with his proposal.") ²⁶

be noting: "What we need is a good weekly course in 'good manners.'" See *Verbali* above in ASC 0592 (July 7, 1884).

²⁵ It is quite difficult to comprehend why Don Bosco had suddenly become so selective in weeding out undesirables from the student population of the Oratory, especially when one remembers the cross section of youths which he harbored in Valdocco in the early years: runaways, petty thieves, homeless and illegitimate boys, strays of every stripe, etc. However, in a September meeting in the following year, Father Michael Rua attempted to clarify Don Bosco's decision to lop off the fifth year of the *ginnasio* from the Oratory. He insisted that such a practice would obtain only at the Oratory itself and did not apply to other Salesian institutions. In effect, this was an experiment of the introduction of the Salesian junior seminary concept which saw its first realization at the Oratory. See ASC 0592 *Verbali* (September 16, 1885).

²⁶ ASC 0592 *Verbali* (July 4, 1884).

The minutes of the meeting note that Father Durando quietly withdrew his opposition.

Three days later Don Bosco consolidated his new student admission and retention policy for the Oratory. He addressed the members of the fact-finding committee assuring them that the original spirit of the Oratory could be restored if the following guidelines were adhered to:

1. From now on only those boys who showed promise of a religious vocation, especially for the Salesian Society, would be permitted to enroll in the student section of the Oratory.
2. Any student who gave evidence of immoral conduct, directly or indirectly, was to be summarily dismissed. In this matter no mollicoddling was to be tolerated. Firm and decisive action was to be taken at all times.
3. Students who did not receive Holy Communion on a regular basis, or who displayed indifference in their religious practices were to be transferred from their academic courses and enrolled in the vocational program in the Oratory.²⁷

Once the ticklish matter of setting future admission standards (as defined by Don Bosco) was out of the way, the committee members went back to the business at hand: Arriving at the necessary guidelines to ensure successful Oratory reform. There was a plethora of proposals but, like Abou Ben Adam, two led all the rest: determining the proper role of the director; improving the overall supervision of the students.²⁸

On examining the contributions submitted by the Oratory confreres that summer of 1884, (and now ensconced securely in the Salesian archives in Rome), one cannot help but be impressed by the candor and the sincerity of the contributors. Brother Pentore, for example, expressed his feelings very frankly.

²⁷ ASC 0592 *Verbali* (July 7, 1884).

²⁸ Every report turned in to Father Bonetti contained a reference to the way (or lack of it) the director of the Oratory was doing his job: "...il Direttore non mostra di muoversi" ("The director never seems to move a muscle"), Tommaso Pentore; "...bisogna che il Direttore cogli altri superiori si trovino a tavola insieme" "...the director can show his solidarity with the community by at least showing up at meals with his staff members"), Febraro Stefano; "...E questo Direttore abbia la carità e l'energia del padre; ma e l'una e l'altra sarebbe inutile quando non si trovasse in mezzo ai giovani" ("...the director has to be actively present and always show himself affable towards the boys — something he can't do if he's never around"), D. Canepa; "...Dico questo perchè se ebbe già ad udire da giovane di scuola superiore questa risposta: Chi è il direttore?" ("...I'm bringing this out in the open because I even hear the students of the upper grades ask: Who's the director around here?"), Serafino Fumagalli. And the beat goes on.

On second thought, perhaps too frankly. In a postscript he pleaded with Father Bonetti that his revelations were for his eyes only: "Please keep this information confidential. In the past I have also revealed my feelings on similar matters, but had to pay the price for blurting them out too freely."²⁹

Father Secondo Marchisio's report probably illustrates best the mood of the committee and their determination to set things right. His intervention given below was a classic case of hitting the proverbial nail squarely on the head. His 'seven-step solution' for restoring the Oratory to its pristine spirit minced no words:

1. What we need is a director who is both a strong leader and a good listener.
2. A monthly or bimonthly meeting should be established to discuss how best to handle disciplinary problems.
3. The director, and only the director, should speak to the children after evening prayers. That's the way it was in the past, and that's the way it should be in the future.
4. If our seminarians are allowed to continue doing their own thing, they will not remain seminarians for long.
5. Sometimes our boys learn about official matters before we do. Something must be done to stop these leaks.
6. The spiritual director ("catechist") of the Oratory should be an older and more mature man. That type of person will inspire more confidence among the boys.
7. There is a noticeable lack of unity and harmony among the confreres at present. Perhaps that is the principal reason that things are not going well.³⁰

²⁹ Brother Tommaso Pentore, at the time of Father Bonetti's investigative inquiry, was a seminarian on military leave. Apparently his candid revelations had no lasting ill effects. He was ordained to the priesthood in the following year. His was a unique ministry. For several years he ministered to the workers of the Simplon Tunnel in Switzerland which, when it opened in 1906, was the longest tunnel in the world (twelve miles). Father Pentore later became a much sought-after preacher and a prolific writer. He was one of the first members of the Congregation to write on the Salesian missions in South America.

³⁰ Don Bosco especially supported Father Marchisio's comments on the responsibility and duties of the spiritual director: "Let him supervise the religious instruction in the school, see that religious services are properly conducted, and monitor the way the school rules are observed. The spiritual director ("catechista") is

In retrospect, one can appreciate why Don Bosco had become so distraught by the message that was played out in his dream (reverie?) during his Roman sojourn of 1884. His old friends, Joseph Buzzetti and Ferdinando Valfre, had demonstrated all too realistically what he could expect when the educational principles of his *Sistema Preventivo* and the "love environment" he strove so hard to cultivate for 40 years at the Oratory had been allowed to dissipate. As he dictated the account of his dream to his secretary, Father Lemoyne, he realized to his dismay that his beloved Oratory had become just like any other 19th century educational institution.

As Don Bosco studied the conduct of the Oratory students against the backdrop of Buzzetti's commentary, one thing more than any other struck home. The Oratory as a home for homeless children was no more. The father image of the director had been replaced by some vague and ineffective school administrator.

Father G. Ballesio, in one of the earliest intimate portrayals we have of Don Bosco as a loving father, vividly contrasts the Oratory of the early 1840s and that of 40 years later. It was his reminiscing on the way things once were that brought him, as Lemoyne noted in the margin of his manuscript, to the verge of tears. Ballesio wrote:

In those early days when living with Don Bosco at the Oratory, one really experienced Christian love in action. There were no rigid rules of any kind to keep us in line; nor did Don Bosco ever attempt to control us with an iron hand. This is probably what separated our oratory from similar institutions of those days, where harsh discipline prevailed and a huge gap existed between the children and the authority figures who were responsible for them.

A big contrast existed in our case. Don Bosco was always so affable with us, so outgoing that we respected and trusted and loved him. We never hesitated to open our hearts to him and to share our little secrets with him. He knew all our little hurts and joys because we told him everything; and like a loving father he never tired of listening to us. So you can understand why everybody was always ready — no, everybody was always eager to go to confession to him.

This is not to say that life as we lived it with Don Bosco was not experienced anywhere else. It's that when living with him as we did at the

the key for the smooth running of the Oratory." See ASC 0592 *Verbali* (July 7, 1884).

Oratory in those days we were all like one big happy family. And that's what made it all so very special, so very unique.³¹

Little wonder then that Don Bosco, in concluding his Roman letter, pleaded with the Oratory community to relive those "happy days of old when Christian love and trust created a bond between students and their educators, when we put up with all manner of hard times for the love of Jesus Christ. I beg of you, let us return to those times when your hearts were always so open and sincere. Why do I want all this? I have only one reason: I want the salvation of your souls more than anything else."

True to form, Don Bosco was not about to end his plea in such melodramatic fashion. He ended his Roman letter on a very humane note, illustrating how well, even in his sunset years, he understood the nature of his young audience. On an upbeat fashion he concluded: "I have every desire to spend the feast of Mary Help of Christians with you. I want this feast to be celebrated with full solemnity. So I have instructed Fathers Lazzerio and Marchisio to see to it that this solemnity carries over from the church into your dining room where you can expect lots of good things to eat!"

³¹ G. Ballesio, *Vita intima di D. Giovanni Bosco nel suo primo Oratorio di Torino* (Torino, 1888) p. 21.