

## **Reflections on Virtue**

### **Saint John Bosco's Heroic Faith as Reported by Eyewitnesses in his Beatification Process**

**Joseph Boenzi**

#### **Introduction**

**B**y January 1896, the Church in Turin was winding down its preliminary investigation into the life and virtue of the late priest and educator John Bosco. Since 1890, a team appointed by Cardinal Gaetano Alimonda (1818-1891), and reconfirmed by Archbishop Davide Riccardi (1833-1897), had gathered the testimony of 29 eyewitnesses who made sworn deposition regarding all they knew about John Bosco's life, work, and virtues. At least another 15 witnesses were due to appear before the arrival of summer. If those conducting this "informative process" felt the evidence warranted it, the archdiocese of Turin would formally propose the late John Bosco to Rome as a candidate for beatification and canonization.

The procedure, which followed the prescribed format, resembled something of an inquest, even a "trial." However, this "trial" did not so much center on what Don John Bosco had done or not done during his lifetime — Don Bosco was easily one of Turin's best known churchmen. Instead it launched a thorough examination of his character and virtues. This is because beatification is not based on personal success but on an heroic and exemplary practice of Christian virtues.

Witnesses were to testify to the "servant of God's" practice of the theological, cardinal and moral virtues: faith, hope, charity with God, charity toward neighbor, prudence, justice, fortitude, obedience, humility, piety and reputation for holiness. If after a thorough scientific and legal examination, it

could be proved that the person in question lived a life of Christian virtue "to an heroic degree," he or she could be declared "venerable," that is, worthy of imitation. The focus would then shift. Many other factors would come into play before the Church would be in a position to beatify the "venerable servant of God."

This study does not go into the long process that led to Don Bosco's beatification, which took place on June 2, 1929. The topic concerns one small aspect: the sworn testimony of eyewitnesses concerning his life of "faith."

We begin with a background study of the documentation that was compiled for Don Bosco's beatification process. Next we try to clarify what the Church understood by "heroic virtue" during the years in question. Step three allows us "to meet" the different witnesses whose testimony we will examine, with a brief biographical sketch of each individual, followed by the list of questions which they were likely asked when they "took the witness stand." This, it is hoped, will allow us to get a better grasp of the actual statements they made as they recalled for the canon lawyers who Don Bosco was for them.<sup>1</sup>

Others have written brilliantly on the topic of Don Bosco's canonization: one thinks immediately of Pietro Stella and his *Don Bosco nella Storia della Religiosità Cattolica*.<sup>2</sup> Our topic is quite confined. We examine only the testimony regarding Don Bosco's life of faith, leaving aside all the other testimony concerning his practice of the theological, moral and cardinal virtues, as well as the testimony dealing with his founding of the Salesian Society, his dealings with Archbishop Gastaldi, his rapport with the Holy See. Given the restricted scope of this paper, I have no illusions about uncovering new discoveries in Salesian history and spirituality. It is simply my hope that this small contribution will further reflection and serious study in English.

## 1. The Documentation

The official documents from the beatification proceedings provide a rudimentary outline for a spiritual biography. Though the descriptions of

---

<sup>1</sup>Two practical points: when quoting individual witnesses, I cite their surname followed by the page number upon which their statement occurs in the beatification documents. This should simplify matters. Then, since the witnesses testified in Italian, a language which is not accessible to most of my readers, I have provided an English translation whenever it seemed advantageous. Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from Italian contained in this paper are my own.

<sup>2</sup>Unfortunately this monumental study has only been partially translated into English. Nevertheless, the third volume of Prof. Stella's trilogy deals specifically with the entire process that led to D. Bosco's beatification and canonization. See: Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco nella Storia della Religiosità Cattolica*, vol. 3 *La Canonizzazione, 1888-1934* (Roma: LAS, 1988).

witnesses are discursive, the postulator of the cause normally collates testimony into volumes called the *Informatio* and the *Positio*. The *Informatio* is an "informational document" which reconstructs the life of the Servant of God in the light of the practice of the virtues. The *Positio* is the formal proposal for the declaration of heroic virtues, based on the writings of the Servant of God and the testimony of the witnesses.

The *Informatio* is divided into two parts. The first part offers a schematic biography of the Servant of God — the *Synopsis Vitae*. The second part is a discussion of his virtues and "supernatural gifts and miracles," including the gifts of counsel, discernment, healing — gifts which we would call "charisms" today. This discussion of virtues follows a concrete outline, common to all beatification processes, for the examination of different virtues seems to be one of the most practical ways in which the Church can discern whether a Christian proposed for sainthood really sought to live the Gospel, or as some would say, practiced a life of virtue "to an heroic degree."<sup>3</sup>

The critical backup for the *Informatio* is provided by the *Positio super virtutibus*. This long document is compiled from testimony given during the beatification proceedings by witnesses who either knew the Servant of God personally, or who had authoritative access to knowledge culled from reputable sources. The postulator (the one who presents the request for beatification and who promotes the "cause") creates this document in such a way as to gather all the pertinent testimony according to a pre-determined outline, presenting the witnesses' statements "virtue by virtue." This document, also called the Summary, or *Summarium*, forms the basis for writing the *Informatio*, and serves as the foundation for all future study by the beatification commission into the life and virtues of the Servant of God.

The *Positio* and subsequent documents are prepared at the conclusion of the diocesan inquest (called the "Ordinary Process") and, if the case is approved and sent ahead to the Holy See, after the Roman hearings (or "Apostolic Process"). In Don Bosco's case, the *Positio super virtutibus* for the Apostolic Process was prepared by Msgr. Giovanni Battista Romagnoli and canon lawyer Pietro Melandri from the testimony recorded during both the diocesan and apostolic processes. With over 1000 pages in quarto, the volume was completed on

---

<sup>3</sup>For an explanation the Church's criteria for beatification, see Romualdo Rodrigo, *Manuale per istruire i processi di canonizzazione*, translated by Maria Sara Figliuoli (Roma: Institutum Historicum Augustinianorum Recollectorum, 1991), 39-41. Current procedures derive from the Apostolic Constitution "Divinus Perfectionis Magister" (25-10-1983); D. Bosco's cause was completed 50 years earlier. For a view of criteria then in force, see Arnald M. Lanz, *Lineamenti di Ascetica e Mistica*, 2d ed. (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1958), 41-42.

January 15, 1923. We have used this *Summarium* to examine testimony regarding Don Bosco's faith in the course of this study.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Ingredients in the Beatification Process

### Virtues under Consideration

What constituted the basis for the beatification inquiry at the turn of the century when Don Bosco's case was being considered? Basically, the Church followed the time-honored practice of scrutinizing the Servant of God's heroic practice of the theological, cardinal and moral virtues. "Heroic virtue" signifies that interior disposition by which a person, moved by divine grace, habitually faces life's difficulties in an extraordinary way, exercising repeated acts of virtue with courage and love.<sup>5</sup> Concretely, the beatification inquiry centers on the theological virtues of faith, hope, love of God, and love of neighbor. It then moves on to consider the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. In the case of a religious, further research is required into the questions of obedience, poverty, chastity, which are extensions of justice and temperance. Humility and personal charisms or questions about the person's prayer life may serve to conclude the inquiry, along with an investigation into how the Servant of God faced death.<sup>6</sup> These last issues relate somewhat to the person's reputation for holiness, another important theme in the investigations.<sup>7</sup>

Miracles, charisms, and a reputation for holiness are not criteria for the canonization of a Christian, but his practice of heroic virtue. This regards human and Christian virtues, practiced to a heroic degree, witnessed in concrete instances, and enduring over the person's life-time.<sup>8</sup> Our topic is the theological virtue of faith. Shortly, we will survey the Church's understanding of the heroic practice of faith during the years when Don Bosco's beatification was in process. Before doing that, however, let us become acquainted with those who were called to the witness stand on Don Bosco's behalf.

---

<sup>4</sup>Sacra Ritum Congregatione, *Taurinem, Beatificationis et Canonizationis Ven. Servi Dei Joannis Bosco, Sacerdotis Fundatoris Piae Societatis Salesianae necnon Istitui Filiarum Marie Auxiliatricis: Positio Super Virtutibus. Pars I. Summarium*. Relator: Antonio Vico (Roma: Agostiniana, 1923), 327-462 (hereafter cited as SUM).

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Rodrigo, *Manuale per istruire i processi di canonizzazione*, 40.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Rodrigo, *ibid.*, 168-176; Lanz, *op. cit.*, 47-48.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Rodrigo, *op. cit.*, 39-40; 176-177.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Rodrigo 39; Lanz, *op. cit.*, 33. See also: Joseph Norval, *Commentarium Codicis Iuris Canonici, Liber IV: De Processibus*, 2d ed. (Torino: Marietti, 1932), 2:289-293.

### The Witnesses

Forty-five individuals were called to give testimony during the Diocesan Informative Proceedings, held in Turin from July 26, 1890 until June 8, 1896. A further thirty-two witnesses testified at the Apostolic Process held for the Holy See between 1910 and 1911, and between 1916 and 1918.

Of these, the *Summarium* presents excerpts from the testimony of 22 witnesses, 8 from the Diocesan Process and 14 from the Apostolic Process.<sup>9</sup> According to the norms of the Church, those called to testify in such a process must be "persons worthy of faith" or trustworthy, and must confirm their own depositions with a sworn oath, which must be noted into the acts.<sup>10</sup> In our case, all those who testified on Don Bosco's behalf described themselves as having personally witnessed the events to which they testified, or if they knew of events second hand, that they had gained their information from reputable primary sources.<sup>11</sup>

### Relationship of Witnesses to the Servant of God

The testimony of 22 witnesses from both the Ordinary Process and Apostolic Process was collated into the *Summarium* to demonstrate how Don Bosco lived the virtue of faith. All twenty-two were men. One, Fr. Giovanni Giacomelli, had been Don Bosco's classmate. All the other witnesses who speak of the Servant of God's faith had been his pupils. Twelve of these had become Salesians and, at the time of their testimony, one was a lay religious, one was a cardinal archbishop, and ten were priests. The only layman whose testimony figures in the summary on "heroic faith" was Giovanni Villa.<sup>12</sup> Another, Giovanni Vincenzo Tasso, had entered the Vincentians and was bishop of Aosta at the time he gave testimony. The remainder were secular priests, all involved in important ministries within the Turin archdiocese.

---

<sup>9</sup>Cf. "De heroica Fide," SUM 327-462.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Fabijan Veraja, *Commento alla nuova legislazione per la beatificazione e canonizzazione dei santi. Sussidio per lo studio delle cause dei santi Series, no. 1* (Rome: Congregazione per le Cause dei Santi, 1983), 34.

<sup>11</sup>The canonical process defines witnesses as *ex visu* or *ex auditu*, that is, "eye witnesses" or "hearing witnesses." All the witnesses we will cite from the apostolic as well as the diocesan proceedings fit this description. For current canonical legislation, see: *Cum in constitutione apostolica*, Norms for the inquests by bishops initiating causes of canonization, Sacred Congregation for the Cause of Saints, (Roma: Tip. Poliglotta, 7 feb 1983), §17, p. 488.

<sup>12</sup>Clergy outnumber all other categories of witnesses. For the Ordinary Process, there were 24 ecclesiastics, 10 laymen, 5 laywomen, 4 women religious and 2 male religious. The ratio varies somewhat during the Apostolic Process: 17 ecclesiastics, 8 women religious, 4 laymen, 3 laywomen.

An important consideration for those who conducted the "informative process," on both the diocesan and apostolic levels, was the relationship between the "Servant of God" and those who gave testimony. We begin, then, by briefly listing the biographical data of each of the witnesses whose testimony we shall consult.<sup>13</sup>

The Salesian witnesses were:

Fr. **Angelo Amadei**, Salesian (met Don Bosco in 1887 when he was accepted into the Salesian Society); Fr. **Giulio Barberis**, Salesian (knew Don Bosco from the age of 13 and had constant dealings with him until the latter's death, a period lasting 25 years); Fr. **Gioacchino Vincenzo Berto**, Salesian (knew the "Servant of God" since 1862, when he entered the Oratory as a student; Don Bosco was his regular confessor; from 1866 to 1886 he served as Don Bosco's private secretary); Cardinal **Giovanni Cagliero**, Salesian, Vicar Apostolic of Patagonia/Cardinal secretary for the Congregation of Religious (another native of Castelnuovo, knew Don Bosco when he was growing up, since the latter was a family friend; in 1851 he came to live at the Oratory when he was 13, and remained 23 years at Don Bosco's side until the latter sent him first as spiritual director of the Salesian Sisters, then as leader of the first Salesian missionary expedition in Latin America); Fr. **Francesco Cerruti**, Salesian (met Don Bosco in 1855 remained with him until 1863; though he carried out different responsibilities in the Salesian Society, he kept in close contact with the Servant of God; in 1885 he was called by Don Bosco to return to Turin as a member of the general council); Fr. **Francesco Dalmazzo**, Salesian, formerly procurator general of the Salesian Society (met Don Bosco in 1860 as a 15-year old student, and remained with Don Bosco until the end of the founder's life, except when sent on special missions by the "Servant of God" related to his job as procurator general); Br. **Pietro Enria**, Salesian (met Don Bosco at age 13 shortly after he had lost his mother in the cholera epidemic of 1854; he and a younger brother were taken in at the Oratory, where he remained; he became a coadjutor Salesian and worked at many different tasks within the community, including financial administrator, nurse, music director; he nursed Don Bosco during a long illness at Varazze in 1871, and during his last illness in 1887 and 1888);<sup>14</sup> Fr. **Giovanni**

---

<sup>13</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, the biographical data is taken from the witnesses own statements as recorded in SUM 2-35, with supplemental data from *Dizionario Biografico dei Salesiani*, edited by Eugenio Valentini and Amedeo Rondinò (Torino: Ufficio Stampa Salesiana, 1969).

<sup>14</sup>For an insight into Pietro Enria's relationship to the founder, and his own circumstances at the time he made his deposition in the Ordinary Process, see: Arthur J. Lenti, "Don Bosco's Last Years, His Last Illness and Saintly Death From Eyewitness Accounts," *Journal of Salesian Studies* V, 2 (Fall 1994): 36-37.

**Battista Francesia**, Salesian, superior of the Piedmontese province of the Salesians (knew Don Bosco since 1850 and, except for brief intervals, always lived close to Don Bosco); **Fr. Giovanni Battista Lemoyne**, Salesian (met Don Bosco in 1864 when he was already a priest; that same year he entered the Salesian Society and maintained close contact with the founder even while on assignment outside Turin; from 1883 until 1888, he was Don Bosco's secretary); **Fr. Secondo Marchisio**, Salesian (native of Castelnuovo, knew Don Bosco from childhood, entered the Oratory at age 15, and remained in Don Bosco's house for the next 13 years); **Fr. Luigi Piscetta**, Salesian, director of Valsalice, professor of moral theology at the Metropolitan Seminary of Turin (met Don Bosco in 1870 when he was accepted as a student at the Oratory at age 12; he lived in close proximity to Don Bosco from 1870 until 1880, and again from 1884 until 1888); Don Bosco's successor **Don Michele Rua**, Salesian (knew Don Bosco since he was 8, and except for 2 years, always lived at Don Bosco's side).

The non-Salesians testifying on Don Bosco's faith were:

Canon **Giuseppe Allamano**, founder of the Consolata Missionaries (nephew of St. Joseph Cafasso, knew Don Bosco while still a child in Castelnuovo; entered the Oratory in Valdocco 1862 and remained until 1866; he maintained a good rapport with Don Bosco after leaving the Oratory, and became a Salesian Cooperator); Canon **Giovanni Battista Anfossi**, honorary canon of SS. Trinità, Turin (met Don Bosco when he had become an orphan at age 13, under his guidance began his studies for the priesthood; after leaving the Oratory to enter the diocesan clergy, he maintained a close relationship with Don Bosco); Canon **Giacinto Ballesio**, pastor of Santa Maria della Scala, and vicar of Moncalieri (met Don Bosco in 1857 and lived at the Oratory for 8 years, until he entered the seminary); **Fr. Domenico Bongiovanni**, pastor of S. Alfonso parish (lived at the Oratory from 1856 until 1866; had been a member of the Salesian Society for a time, but left to join the diocese; the beatification documentation lists him as "Bongioanni," and it seems the informational committee summoned him to testify because he had been involved in a dispute with Don Bosco after leaving the Salesians)<sup>15</sup>; **Fr. Giovanni Giacomelli**, spiritual director of the Sisters of St. Mary Magdalene, and chaplain of S. Filomena Hospital (Don Bosco's companion from seminary days in Chieri and close personal friend; from 1874 he served as confessor to Don Bosco, who considered him

---

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco nella Storia della Religiosità Cattolica*, vol. 3 *La Canonizzazione, 1888-1934* (Roma: LAS, 1988), 88. "It was common knowledge that Father [Dr.] Bongiovanni had taken Don Bosco to court over matters of inheritance. He had clashed with his former benefactor on other grounds as well. It had been Bishop Bertagna himself, through explicit references in his testimony, to point Bongiovannini out to the judges [as a possible witness]."



a model seminarian and an exemplary priest);<sup>16</sup> Canon **Francesco Maffei** (met Don Bosco when he entered the Oratory in 1861, where he remained until he entered the seminary in 1866; he lived in Turin and maintained a casual relationship with Don Bosco); Fr. **Giovanni Battista Piano**, pastor of the Gran Madre church, Turin (entered the Oratory in 1854 as a 13-year-old student, and lived there for more than 4 years; during the ensuing years, as a seminarian and priest for the Turin diocese, he maintained a vibrant friendship with the "Servant of God"); Fr. **Felice Reviglio**, theologian, pastor of S. Agostino church, Turin (began attending the Sunday Oratory in 1847 at age 16, became one of Don Bosco's first boarders and assistants; he turned from an agnostic lifestyle to become active in the Church, and later, with Don Bosco's help prepared for the priesthood; after ordination, he was posted in a parish, but maintained close ties with his mentor and benefactor; he was active among Don Bosco's alumni and a Salesian Cooperator); Bishop **Giovanni Vincenzo Tasso**, Vincentian, Bishop of Aosta (was a pupil at the Oratory from the age of 12 to 15; as a priest he had many occasions to meet Don Bosco, who invited him to preach to the Oratory boys, and to conduct retreats for young Salesians in formation); Mr. **Giovanni Villa**, merchant, candy maker (met Don Bosco in 1854, when he was 16 years old; he frequented the Sunday Oratory as a young adult, and continued to attend Sunday services at the Oratory after he had set up his own business; he was active in Don Bosco's past pupil association).

### Personal Touch Sampler

Time and space do not allow us to offer even a brief biographical sketch of these witnesses. Some are well known to Salesian readers; others are not. What would offer us most insight into their testimony is to hear from each one of them, to let them share some details of their relationship with the "Servant of God" about whose life they were ready to testify under oath.

This is not possible, but let us choose one individual who can act as a spokesperson for the group, as it were. The only layman of the group, Giovanni Villa, came to Turin seeking work in 1854, at the age of 16. He began to frequent the oratory in Vanchiglia with his brother and six cousins. When he realized that the Valdocco was closer to home, he and his brother went to the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales to personally register as members. That is when he met Don Bosco. Giovanni Villa recalled his first impressions of the priest.

The first time I saw Don Bosco, the fatherly warmth with which he welcomed me made a profound and consoling impression on me, and that

---

<sup>16</sup>Cf. "Necrologia: D. G. B. Giacomelli," in *Bollettino Salesiano* 25.10 (October 1901): 295.



will never be canceled from my memory, especially if I compare the way Don Bosco treated young people with the style of the priests in my home town and surrounding area, from whom I never had such a warm and charitable welcome. This not only took place in my case, but in other young people besides. The first time I met him, Don Bosco said these words to me; "From now on we will be good friends, until we are in Paradise" — something very familiar to him.<sup>17</sup>

As young adults after military service, he and his brother set up a shoemaker shop in their home, and though they only rarely took part in the oratory recreation, they continued to attend the Sunday services, and to turn to Don Bosco for counsel. Mr. Villa was "intimately convinced" that the "principal aim" of this "holy priest" was "always zeal for God's greater glory."<sup>18</sup> This was the attraction that Giovanni Villa felt for Don Bosco; this is what kept him coming back to the Oratory week after week, Sunday after Sunday, even in old age.

### Questions Regarding Faith

When called upon to give their account, witnesses in the beatification proceedings were to speak without notes, in a slow and clear fashion so that their testimony could be recorded. This was all done by a stenographer who copied out their words in long hand as they spoke. This made the witness process long and difficult, for the witness could not speak spontaneously out of regard for the stenographer. This practice accounts for some of the awkward phraseology found in many of the recorded testimonies.

Another factor that would influence a witness's testimony about the life and personality of the Servant of God would be the questions themselves. During those years when Don Bosco's cause was in process, no outline was given to the witnesses. They did not know the exact questions they would face beforehand. However, the questions that were asked followed a prescribed list, and were meant to allow the ecclesiastical judges to deduce from the accounts of the witnesses whether the person proposed for sainthood actually practiced virtue to an heroic degree. This meant clarifying two issues: how did the Church define virtue, and what was meant by "heroic degree?"

Christian heroism, a concept advanced by the scholastics and developed by canonists involved in beatifications, received its classic definition from Prospero Lambertini (later Pope Benedict XIV). According to Lambertini, the term signifies a life of intense charity, lived within the framework of intimate union with the Blessed Trinity. It is a wholehearted, unconditional response on the part

---

<sup>17</sup>Villa, in SUM 30.

<sup>18</sup>Villa, in SUM 458.

of the Christian to God's loving invitation to a life of grace. This heroism is expressed, above all else, on the level of faith, hope and love.<sup>19</sup>

Faith was understood, quite simply, as "belief in God, one and three, and in the truths which God had revealed." To verify whether the Servant of God practiced this theological virtue to an heroic degree, the following questions were asked.<sup>20</sup>

1. Did the Servant of God ever thank God for being born in the Catholic Church and pray that all people might know and embrace the Church? Did the Servant of God always give firm consent to the single articles and mysteries of faith? With what fervor did he especially honor the mysteries of the Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation of the Word, and the most august Sacrament of the Altar? In what way did he show faith in these mysteries?
2. Did he demonstrate great love for the cult of the Most Blessed Virgin, and did he seek to propagate her devotion? Did the Servant of God pray over long periods and frequently before the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar? With how much fervor of spirit did he celebrate Holy Mass? With what preparation and in what frame of mind? Were there any external indications of his devotion?
3. Was he devoted to the Passion of Jesus Christ? Did he ponder this mystery often and with what degree of fervor; with what degree of piety? Did he ever seek to excite this piety for the Passion in others?
4. Did he honor in a particular way the saints in heaven? Which saints did he choose as his own patrons, and how did he show devotion toward them?
5. Did he burn with the desire to spread the Catholic faith and to shed his own blood in the defense of the truth of faith? Did he work so that the faithful might know the Christian dogmas and conserve them whole and entire? Did he show veneration for the Sacred Scripture and the Fathers of the Church?
6. Did he obey the laws of the Church and the rulings of the bishops? Was it evident that he honored the Supreme Pontiff and all the ministers of God? Did he rejoice when an infidel converted to the Catholic Church?

---

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Paolo Molinari, Peter Gumpel, and Tullo Goffi, "Eroismo," in *Nuovo Dizionario di Spiritualità*, edited by Stefano De Fiores and Tullo Goffi, 5th ed (Torino: Edizioni Paoline, 1989), 479-480.

<sup>20</sup>The following questions are listed in Lanz, *op. cit.*, 42-43. They reflect the line of questioning in vogue at the time of D. Bosco's Process.

Did he suffer when the Church experienced damage or persecution? Did he have the beauty and decor of the house of God at heart? How did he observe the sacred ceremonies?

7. Finally, did the Servant of God desire to profit from indulgences? Did he hate bad books and all that is contrary to the faith? Did God illustrate his faith with some sort of singular grace or prodigy?

Reviewing these questions, we begin to understand why many of the witnesses repeat the same details. The set of questions asked during both the Ordinary and Apostolic Processes, indeed, the entire procedure, reflect a determined conception of spiritual life. When we understand this and the context in which this questioning took place, we begin to appreciate the language used by some of the witnesses. Static questions tended to force every "Servant of God" into a hagiographic straight-jacket, and this heavily conditioned the responses that even eyewitnesses could offer. Basically, this remained an issue until John Paul II reformed the legislation regarding beatification procedures in 1983. Only then did this type of interview substantially change.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, it was this "conditioning" style of interview that prevailed at the time that Don Bosco's beatification was in process. There was less concern for narrating events than there was for the "legal brief;" less room for reminiscences than for clear proofs.<sup>22</sup> We can only evaluate the testimony which the eyewitnesses offered based on the questions they were asked. Were they able to offer a "first-hand" portrait of Don Bosco in spite of the restrictions they encountered?

The majority of witnesses felt close to Don Bosco. Many respected him as their greatest benefactor, their father and friend. Certainly the Salesians among them had made positive efforts to assimilate his spirit — his understanding of faith, prayer and spiritual life.<sup>23</sup> How did this "spirit of faith" compare with what theologians were teaching about the faith in the early years of this century? We will examine this issue next.

---

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why* (New York: Simon & Schuster Touchstone, 1990), 223-224.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Woodward, *op. cit.* 226.

<sup>23</sup>D. Bosco's first and second successors continually stressed the importance of "maintaining whole and entire the spirit of our dearest Founder and Father" as the greatest responsibility of every individual Salesian. Cf. Michele Rua, *Lettere Circolari di Don Michele Rua ai Salesiani*, compiled, with introduction by Paolo Albera (Torino: Tip. SAID Buona Stampa, 1910), 280, 434; Paolo Albera, *Lettere Circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai Salesiani* (Torino: SEI, 1922), 21, 111, 114, 117, 171, 189, 212, 218, 224, 229, 242, 256, 257, 260, 280, 291, 296, 319, 320, 324, 361, 369, 373, 378, 379, 385, 434, 436, 457, 504.

### 3. Images and Definitions of Faith During the Period in Question

Faith does not exist in a vacuum. It can be described in the abstract but, like any virtue, faith can never exist except through the commitment and the struggle of concrete, faith-filled persons.

People with a concrete world vision perceive faith in clear cut events as it incarnates itself in specific persons. Those who testified at Don Bosco's beatification proceedings, especially his own past pupils, had been formed in the "mysteries of the Faith" by Don Bosco himself. They had learned from him that this theological virtue is the "foundation of Christian virtues, the cornerstone of salvation, and the food that nourishes the just."<sup>24</sup> It is a gift freely given, but a gift that must be used if it is to last. In Don Bosco's word:

The apostle Saint Paul says that without faith it is impossible to please God, *sine fide impossibile est placere Deo*. We must therefore always keep this flame of faith burning in our heart. We need the faith to enlighten us in all the steps of our life. Faith should be the food that sustains us in the spiritual life, for the Sacred Scriptures say: *justus ex fide vivit*, the just man lives by faith. So that this faith that we have received from God in holy baptism might never fade from our heart, we must excite it often. We must for this reason often make acts of faith; we must protest with all our heart that we firmly believe the principal truths of the Catholic religion and all that God through his Church wants to teach us. We do this when we recite the formula of the act of faith.<sup>25</sup>

It is a gift, infused in the soul and enabling the baptized to "firmly believe" all that God has revealed to and through his Church.<sup>26</sup> The Church, Don Bosco taught, is the defender of the faith, protector of the faithful, the mother of all believers; it is their kinship with the Church that enables believers to become children of God.<sup>27</sup> Such knowledge was cause for joy and thanksgiving, as Don Bosco stated in a prayer that he published in 1868:

---

<sup>24</sup>Giovanni Bosco, *Il Cristiano Guidato alla Virtù ed alla Civiltà secondo lo spirito di San Vincenzo de' Paoli, Opera che può servire a consacrare il mese di luglio in onore del medesimo Santo* (Torino: Tipografia Paravia, 1848), 121.

<sup>25</sup>Giovanni Bosco, *Il Cattolico Provveduto per le Pratiche di Pietà con Analoghe Istruzioni secondo il Bisogno dei Tempi* (Torino: Tip. dell'Oratorio di S. Franc. di Sales, 1868), 87-88.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. [Giovanni Bosco], *Specchio della Dottrina Cattolica*. Approvato dal Vesc. di Mondovì per la sua Diocesi e caldamente raccomandato ad ogni classe di persone (Torino: Tip. dell'Orat. di S. Franc. dei Sales, 1862), 8.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Giovanni Bosco, *Il Cattolico Istruito nella sua Religione, Trattenimenti di un Padre di Famiglia co' suoi Figliuoli secondo i Bisogni del Tempo* (Torino: Tipografia dir. da P. De-Agostini, 1853), 2:204; *Il Cattolico Provveduto*, 87.

Praise and glory be yours, Lord, for without my deserving it, through your goodness and mercy alone you have called me to the light of this true and saving faith. How happy I am because of this gift! Oh! how I can walk safe and secure by the light of this faith along the path of virtue! Your gift allows me to sustain the difficulties of the present life with joy, courage and strength, and I can prepare myself with hope and peace in my heart for eternity!<sup>28</sup>

Faith was possible if one lived with "simplicity of heart," ready to "profess it without fear" but also ready, he concludes his prayer,

to put it into practice, so that after having known and glorified you on this earth, the day may come to contemplate you and possess you in Heaven. So be it.<sup>29</sup>

It was Don Bosco's "faith put into practice" that was so striking to those who knew him. Those who were called to testify during his beatification hearings, described their "father and founder" in very concrete terms. The examples they brought before the tribunal portray him as a "man of faith in action." They had experienced faith as something alive within him: it was the key to his personality. In fact, nothing about Don Bosco's life made sense apart from this deep, all pervading faith.

Eugenio Ceria, reviewing their testimony, interprets their thinking in these terms:

Every Christian is such because of Faith. Baptism is the door that opens the way to faith, and faith is the foundation of our supernatural life: the bond which unites the soul to God. And Faith is made complete by Hope and by Charity. But it is one thing to be a "believer," and quite another to be a "man of faith." The believer more or less practices his faith while the man of faith lives on faith, and he lives it as an invitation to attain a deep and continual union with God. This is what the faith meant for Don Bosco.<sup>30</sup>

This distinction between the "believer" and the "man of faith" allows Eugenio Ceria to demonstrate that Don Bosco was strong because he was sustained by the rock of Faith. This is not an abstraction. Any discussion by the beatification witnesses presents this virtue as it was lived and practiced by Don Bosco. Faith is the foundation of Don Bosco's holiness. It was faith that nourished, sustained, and thrust him more and more deeply into the mystery of God.

---

<sup>28</sup>*Il Cattolico Provveduto*, 184.

<sup>29</sup>*Il Cattolico Provveduto*, 185.

<sup>30</sup>Eugenio Ceria, *Don Bosco con Dio*, Introduction by Giorgio Gozzelino, Non-commerical ed. (Roma: SGS, 1988), 213.

It is interesting how many witnesses depict faith as if it were an objective and tangible something which fills Don Bosco from his youth. It is lively and it is intimate. This is a vision which contrasts somewhat from the view advanced by the spiritual writers of their generation. For instance, Adolfe Tanquerey, writing on ascetical and mystical theology during the period when Don Bosco's cause for beatification was in process, defined faith as "an assent of the mind" to truth:

*Faith is a theological virtue that inclines the mind, under the influence of the will and of grace, to yield a firm assent to revealed truths, because of the authority of God. Faith is before all else an act of the intellect, since it is question [sic] of knowing the truth. But since this truth is not self-evident our assent cannot be effected without the action of the will, bidding the mind study the reasons for believing, and, when these are convinced, giving a further command to assent. Because it is question [sic] of a supernatural act, grace must intervene to enlighten the mind, and to aid the will. It is in this way that faith becomes a free, supernatural and meritorious act.*<sup>31</sup>

Tanquerey goes on to state that faith is "the foundation of our supernatural life and unites us to God in a most intimate way." As we have seen, these are the same terms that Don Ceria uses, but the stress is different. Fr. Tanquerey explains that faith unites us with God by "bringing us into communion with divine thought." Don Ceria sees faith as strength that illumines goodness — "that goodness which the youth in the Gospel read in Jesus' face when he asked 'Good Master, what must I do to gain eternal life?' In a man as complex and as complete as Don Bosco, goodness...was expressed as supernatural kindness toward all."<sup>32</sup> Fr. Tanquerey focuses his attention on the intellect and the will, while Don Bosco's sons speak about faith as lived experience.

Having made this comparison, let us now turn to the testimony "regarding heroic faith" collected in the *Summarium* of the "process for the beatification and canonization of the Venerable Servant of God, John Bosco, priest, founder of the Pious Salesian Society and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians."<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup>Adolphe Alfred Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life: a Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, translated by Herman Branderis (Tournai: Desclée, 1930), 551 [author's italics]. Eugenio Ceria would have found this same text in the Italian version: Adolphe Alfred Tanquerey, *Compendio di Teologia Ascetica e Mistica*, translated by Filippo Trucco and Luigi Giunti, 4th ed. (Roma: Desclée, 1928), 722.

<sup>32</sup>These two descriptions of faith are found, first in Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life*, 552, and secondly in Ceria, *Don Bosco con Dio*, 83.

<sup>33</sup>Thus the title page of the *Summarium*, and all the documentation for D. Bosco's process. Each word is important, according to Luigi Fiora, former procurator general for the Salesian Society. Every Servant of God is presented with a "title" that defines his or her characteristic position and specific role in the life of the Church.

#### 4. Descriptions of a "Man of Faith" by Eyewitnesses

What follows is an attempt to trace how those who testified at the Ordinary and Apostolic phases of the beatification process described John Bosco's faith. We will not offer a commentary as much as a synthesis of their own accounts, realizing that they described themselves as offering only what they had seen first hand or heard from authoritative sources. We will also pay close attention to how they describe the "man of faith," sharing their impressions of how he faced the great moments and the every-day events of life, especially as he impacted their own lives.<sup>34</sup>

The witnesses show Don Bosco as a person who "loved the faith." His closest collaborator and successor, Michele Rua, spoke of faith as if it were a motivating friend, a member of the Bosco household, accompanying John Bosco in his growing years.

The Servant of God was a man of faith. Instructed as a child in the principal truths of our holy religion by his most worthy mother, faith became a household commodity for him. This was the source of his diligence in attending catechism lessons and sermons at his parish as a boy in spite of the great number of kilometers between his home and the parish church; this is what made him avidly read good books about religion and edifying stories to the point that he did not know how to put these books down even when he led the milk cow out to pasture, even to the point of reading through part of the night; this is what gave him such an interest in the holy rites of the Church when he was a school boy in Chieri.<sup>35</sup>

He was grateful to God for this gift and for his family which brought him up in the faith, his secretary Gioacchino Berto reported, depicting him as a youngster who relished teaching the Catechism to his friends.<sup>36</sup> Teaching God's law and explaining the Gospel was his passion even as a youngster, Fr. Francesia observed, and this longing to share the faith motivated him to study the Scriptures and to recommend this practice to others.<sup>37</sup> This eagerness to know

---

"Priest" and "Founder," then, defined D. Bosco's place in the Church. Cf. Luigi Fiora, "Storia del titolo di "Confondatrice" conferito dalla Chiesa a S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello" in *Attuale perché Vera: Contributi su Santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, edited by Maria Esther Posada. Il Prisma Series, no. 6 (Roma, LAS: 1987), 37-38.

<sup>34</sup>We again point out that our source for this testimony is the *Positio Super Virtutibus. Pars I. Summarium*, compiled by Giovanni Battista Romagnoli and Pietro Melandri between 1923 and 1925. For a description of this documentation, see § 1 above.

<sup>35</sup>Rua, in SUM 327.

<sup>36</sup>Cf. Berto, in SUM 429.

<sup>37</sup>Cf. Francesia, in SUM 344-345.



and share the faith as a child, was translated into zeal in teaching and defending the faith as an adult, according to Fr. Francesco Cerruti.<sup>38</sup> Don Rua sums up the process:

From the time he was a child his faith induced him to take an interest in the spiritual welfare of his companions, instructing them in a way that was compatible with his own age, keeping them far from the dangers of perversion and attracting them to the sacred services and to the Holy Sacraments. Faith and zeal continued to grow as he matured; they indicate that he acted from supernatural motives. He had no other aim than the Glory of God and the salvation of souls.<sup>39</sup>

God's glory: this was his love, his passion, "his star, his beacon light; he directed all his thoughts, all his actions toward this star, this light, and this was the only goal for which he undertook so many extraordinary projects," Fr. Felice Reviglio explained.<sup>40</sup> Francesco Dalmazzo synthesized Don Bosco's faith when he testified:

The Servant of God always gave signs of a lively faith in all his words and deeds — his was a faith that was truly heroic. Speaking to his young people, he used to demonstrate how great was his fortune and theirs for being born in the lap of the Catholic religion. He had words of special gratitude for his wonderful mother, because at a young age she had shown him how to know God, to serve him and to love him, and because she had lead him to regard sin with great horror. From his earliest years, not only out of habit or because his mother demanded it, but from true joy, he ran to participate in catechism lessons, sermons and parish conferences, repeating with pleasure the things he heard not only at home, but among his companions so that these lessons might impress themselves more firmly in their minds. And I learned of these things from his own lips on several occasions, and heard them confirmed by people from Castelnuovo, and especially by his brother Joseph.<sup>41</sup>

### Presence of God

As a man of faith, "the venerable servant of God," Fr. Francesia asserted, "was a lover of the word of God, both when he heard it as when he repeated it."<sup>42</sup> Canons Anfossi and Balesio, as well as Fr. Lemoyne, agreed with Fr. Francesia

---

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Cerruti, in SUM 453-454; see also: Marchisio, in SUM 350-351; Lemoyne, in SUM 390.

<sup>39</sup>Rua, in SUM 327-328.

<sup>40</sup>Reviglio, in SUM 439.

<sup>41</sup>Dalmazzo, in SUM 445-446.

<sup>42</sup>Francesia, in SUM 344.

that this love for God's Word could be verified in Don Bosco's veneration for the Sacred Scriptures, in his insistence on good preaching, and in his adherence to the decrees of the Holy See.<sup>43</sup>

Faith allowed Don Bosco to experience joy in his relationship with God. He was zealous for making sure the church was a prayerful environment. He insisted that the physical adornment be beautiful and orderly, that the liturgy be celebrated in a joyful and memorable way. According to testimony we have from Cardinal Cagliero Don Bosco wanted his boys to remember the church when they recalled holidays and feasts. "When it came to divine worship, Don Bosco was no longer poor." Fr. Dalmazzo agreed, and maintained that Don Bosco's "zeal for the beauty of the church" was "a sign of his affection for the things of religion."<sup>44</sup>

A number of Don Bosco's past pupils told of how, at Don Bosco's oratory, as well as in his other institutes, they felt the church or chapel was the heart of the house. Bishop Tasso recalls the rich ritual and beautiful choral works offered during the course of the liturgy. Fr. Allamano emphasizes the fact that Don Bosco's churches were houses of prayer. The Servant of God introduced devotions that appealed to the young people; he trained choirs, organized altar servers to facilitate devotion — all this from the earliest days of his oratory ministry.<sup>45</sup>

The scope of all these efforts was to invite his young people to encounter Jesus. His evident joy in celebrating the Eucharist and his devotion was contagious. He prayed with his young people, many of whom were deeply moved by his tender faith. Salesian alumnus Giovanni Villa explained, "His own zeal was so great that it excited the most sincere devotion in us."<sup>46</sup> Two other alumni, Salesians Pietro Enria and Francesco Cerruti, were convinced that the Eucharist was the secret of his educational system.<sup>47</sup>

### Sacramental Prayer Life

Don Bosco's concern for each of his young people was translated into his availability as a friend and confessor. He would make himself available, "even in the rigors of winter," said Fr. Reviglio, "hearing our confessions for hours on

---

<sup>43</sup>Cf. Francesia, in SUM 344-345; Anfossi, in SUM 354, 359-360; Ballesio, in SUM 388-389; Lemoyne, in SUM 394-395. See also Barberis, in SUM 381.

<sup>44</sup> Dalmazzo, in SUM 450-451; Cagliero, in SUM 402.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. Tasso, in SUM 417; Allamano, in SUM 421.

<sup>46</sup>Villa, in SUM 459; see also: Cagliero, in SUM 404-405; Maffei, in SUM 422; Bongiovanni, in SUM 461.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Enria, in SUM 452; Cerruti, in SUM 456-457.

end.”<sup>48</sup> Life at the Oratory, Fr. Lemoyne recalled, revolved around religious instruction and reception of the sacraments:

Don Bosco thought up a thousand ways to inspire the hearts [of his sons] with a lively faith through his talks, both public and private, in the advice he gave each individual, with the Scriptural passages he had inscribed along the porticoes of the house, in the study rooms and workshops. One day I heard him exclaim, “I’d give anything to win over the hearts of the young people and offer them as a gift to the Lord.”<sup>49</sup>

If he met past pupils on the streets, he would greet them warmly, then waste no time in inviting them to pay him a visit at the Oratory, and even come to the Sacraments.<sup>50</sup> This became a further reason to affirm Don Bosco’s heroic faith, for they recognized in him not only an ideal, but proof that God continues to live among his people.

If Don Bosco was able to inculcate faith in others, said Cardinal Cagliero, it was because his own heart was filled “with tenderness and love for Jesus.”<sup>51</sup> He was a man of deep prayer. He prepared seriously for every celebration of the Eucharist,<sup>52</sup> keeping a contemplative silence before Mass, as Canon Anfossi recalled:

The Venerable [Servant of God] demonstrated his faith and devotion to the Most Blessed Sacrament to the maximum when he celebrated Holy Mass. His attitude was grave, with his head slightly bowed and his gaze directed toward the Holy Table. Before Mass, except when he had to hear confessions, which however happened quite frequently, he did not speak to anyone except when there was a need, and then only very softly. Once it happened that I met him on the stairs before mass, I greeted him and asked if he had slept well. The Venerable [Servant of God] shook my hand without answering me and continued his prayers which he pronounced in a low voice. He never neglected to celebrate [Eucharist] even when this was a major inconvenience to him, as I can confirm having traveled with him on numerous occasions.<sup>53</sup>

According to Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, Don Bosco celebrated every Mass with fervor and devotion; even when pressed for time, he did not rush but prayed with

---

<sup>48</sup>Reviglio, in SUM 441-442.

<sup>49</sup>Lemoyne, in SUM 391.

<sup>50</sup>Cf. Reviglio, in SUM 442.

<sup>51</sup>Cagliero, in SUM 404.

<sup>52</sup>Cf. Francesia, in SUM 342-343; Marchisio, in SUM 352; Barberis, in SUM 378.

<sup>53</sup>Anfossi, in SUM 355-356.

composure and "living faith."<sup>54</sup> He took time for a prayerful thanksgiving afterwards.<sup>55</sup> This joyful and constant love for Jesus in the Eucharist extended to the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament: if ever he had a moment to spare, he would spend it in prayer before the tabernacle.<sup>56</sup> This was a practice he handed down to his young people, for as Canon Ballesio recalled, "when going into some little town with us, the first thing he did was visit the Church."<sup>57</sup>

Don Bosco often reviewed the ritual, to the extent that he kept his rubric book with him and would pick it up to read even when traveling.<sup>58</sup> Still, he was anything but mechanical in his celebration. Participating in a Eucharist celebrated by Don Bosco was a boost to one's faith, Canon Allamano maintained.<sup>59</sup> Another of his past pupils, Giovanni Villa, summed up his experiences in this way:

I assisted many, many times at Holy Mass celebrated by him, and I sincerely confess that, in assisting I was impressed and highly edified by the great devotion that I saw in his whole attitude, in the way he pronounced the words and recited the prayers. It was always my burning desire and a great consolation for me to come to hear his Mass, and I came whenever I could do so, even when I was living quite some distance from the Oratory.<sup>60</sup>

Cardinal Cagliero, a contemporary of Mr. Villa, shared the following testimony:

Instead of asking what D. Bosco did to promote love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, I would ask what didn't he do? He transfused in his pupils and in the Christian people his seraphic love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Many hurried from the city to hear his Mass in the principal churches of religious orders, in the chapels and in the oratories of the Roman nobility. D. Francesia, who is still alive, assures me, as did the now deceased D. Rua and D. Berto — all of whom accompanied him — that an hour before the service, the churches and the chapels were packed with noble lords and ladies of the highest aristocracy who had come to hear the Holy Mass offered by the Venerable Servant of God, to listen to his sermons and to receive his blessing and contemplate his angelic face and his saintly demeanor.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup>Cf. Lemoyne, in SUM 393; see also Piscetta, in SUM 368.

<sup>55</sup>Cf. Ballesio, in SUM 387.

<sup>56</sup>Cf. Marchisio, in SUM 350; Piano, in SUM 352; Tasso, in SUM 418; Giacomelli, in SUM 437; Dalmazzo, in SUM 447-448.

<sup>57</sup>Ballesio, in SUM 388; see also Piano, in SUM 353.

<sup>58</sup>Cf. Rua, in SUM 337; Anfossi, in SUM 357; Piscetta, in SUM 369; Amadei, in SUM 415.

<sup>59</sup>Cf. Allamano, in SUM 421.

<sup>60</sup>Villa, in SUM 458.

<sup>61</sup>Cagliero, in SUM 403. See also: Rua, in SUM 332; Barberis, in SUM 378-379; Amadei, in SUM 412.

### Marian Dimension of Don Bosco's Faith

"When I first entered the Oratory," Fr. Giulio Barberis testified, "I was struck at seeing how devotion to the Madonna was cultivated there."<sup>62</sup> Nor was Barberis the only one to be struck by this aspect of life in Don Bosco's house. The feasts of Mary were always a special occasion in that educative community,<sup>63</sup> and Don Bosco personally spoke about the Mother of God "in every sermonette that he used to give after evening prayers in the community."<sup>64</sup>

Faith was the basis for the saint's tender devotion to the Mother of God. As far as he was concerned, Mary was the one who had initiated all his works, and he entrusted himself totally to her care.<sup>65</sup> He nurtured a lively devotion to her all his life,<sup>66</sup> and sought to instill his love for Mary in his young people and rejoiced when they displayed their devotion through prayer and pious practices.<sup>67</sup>

A number of the eyewitnesses testified that Don Bosco promoted novenas and feasts in the Virgin's honor and that his devotion was evident in the fact that he constructed the basilica of Mary Help of Christians. He instituted associations under her protection, including the "Archconfraternity of Mary Help of Christians," the Salesian Sisters, officially known as the "Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians," and he undertook a project for adult vocations, calling those who joined this program the "Sons of Mary Help of Christians." This was in keeping with his own experience, for he felt that without Mary's help, he would never have been able to enter the seminary himself, nor begin his ministry among youth.<sup>68</sup>

Don Bosco's devotion to Mary was not a matter of monuments. What struck his young people most was how he made the Mother of God part of every important moment of their lives. Testifying about what he had seen, heard and personally experienced, Bishop Tasso recalled:

In his sermons and talks, and also in private conversations, he used to speak with great feeling to excite our devotion and confidence in her. I always remember with gratitude that he advised me to always recite three "Hail

---

<sup>62</sup>Barberis, in SUM 383.

<sup>63</sup>Cf. Anfossi, in SUM 362; Piscetta, in SUM, 370.

<sup>64</sup>Piscetta, in SUM, 370.

<sup>65</sup>Cf. Tasso, in SUM 419-420.

<sup>66</sup>Cf. Rua, in SUM 337-338.

<sup>67</sup>Cf. Cagliero, in SUM 408; Tasso, in SUM 419; Maffei, in SUM 423-424; Reviglio, in SUM 444-445.

<sup>68</sup>Cf. Anfossi, in SUM 363-364; Maffei, in SUM 424; Berto, in SUM 435; Giacomelli, in SUM 436, 438; Dalmazzo, in SUM 448; Villa, in SUM 460; Cagliero, in SUM 404, 408. See also Rua, in SUM 339.

Marys" in the morning and in the evening to the Most Holy Virgin and to begin and end every one of my actions with a "Hail Mary."<sup>69</sup>

The bishop of Aosta credits Don Bosco with this formula of the "three Hail Marys," but we know that Don Bosco himself learned this practice from what was a well-established, pious tradition.<sup>70</sup> The point is not whether Don Bosco initiated the practice, but that he lived it and handed it on to his spiritual children. He handed over what he himself received, and this too manifested his own deep sense of gratitude. Don Rua affirms that Don Bosco turned to Mary "in all his spiritual and temporal needs."<sup>71</sup>

John Bosco had learned this "sweet devotion" from his mother, and Mary occupied a special place in his heart, his thoughts, his conversation, all his life, according to Don Rua.<sup>72</sup> If he undertook any new project, it was in her name. Fr. Francesia recalled that the Servant of God even went so far as to time special events or begin new projects so that they would coincide with days dedicated to the Virgin.<sup>73</sup> He believed and he proclaimed that Mary made his mission fruitful; she made miracles happen.<sup>74</sup> He was convinced that it was she who continually protected the Salesian mission for needy young people, and, in the testimony of Angelo Amadei, said: "We owe the development of our work solely to the goodness of the Madonna."<sup>75</sup> Fr. Amadei concludes his testimony by reflecting that Don Bosco understood Mary to be the greatest influence in his own life.<sup>76</sup>

### Trust, Serenity and Union with God

The testimony given during beatification proceedings describes Don Bosco's faith as "vital, enlightened, and constant." Faith, a "light to his path," accounts for Don Bosco's apostolic effectiveness and spiritual greatness. This living faith enabled Don Bosco to endure great demands, extreme fatigue, frequent humiliations and recurring persecutions, all while maintaining his peaceful calm. Nor did difficult situations (from financial problems to malicious accusations to

---

<sup>69</sup>Tasso, in SUM 420.

<sup>70</sup>Cf. S. Alphonsus de' Liguori, "La Vera Sposa di Gesù Cristo, cioè, La Monaca Santa per mezzo delle Virtù Proprie d'una Religiosa," in *Opere Ascetiche di S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori, Dottore di S. Chiesa, Vescovo di Sant'Agata de' Goti e Fondatore della Congregazione del SS. Redentore*, Opere di S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori Series, no. 4 (Torino: Giacinto Marietti, 1880), 4:530.

<sup>71</sup>Rua, in SUM 338.

<sup>72</sup>Cf. Rua, in SUM 337-338.

<sup>73</sup>Cf. Francesia, in SUM 347.

<sup>74</sup>Cf. Cagliari, in SUM 408-409; Dalmazzo, in SUM 448.

<sup>75</sup>Amadei, in SUM 415; see also Piscetta, in SUM 371.

<sup>76</sup>Cf. Amadei, in SUM 415-416.

physical threats) cool his confidence in the Lord. If anything, his union with God became ever more radical.<sup>77</sup> The theologian Felice Reviglio felt that Don Bosco could induce others to raise their hearts to God because he himself was so profoundly rooted in the Lord. His entire life and ministry revolved around a deep awareness of God's presence.

He demonstrated that God's glory was truly his nourishment, his life. That's why he always appeared untroubled and serene — jovial, in fact! — every time he was faced with danger, insults, threats from adversaries. He was even ready to sacrifice his life, if such a sacrifice would bring glory to his God.<sup>78</sup>

Along much the same lines, Cardinal Cagliero describes the calm and serenity with which Don Bosco lived his daily life.

I myself was often amazed when I considered Don Bosco's moral character. He was always serene, always balanced, whether in times of joy, or in times of suffering he remained unshaken. But I was especially amazed at the degree of perfection that he reached in spite of the difficulties! I was not surprised because he aimed at the source from which perfection arises. He was imperturbable in the midst of the world because he threw himself into the arms of God. His faith was so alive that he was always in God's presence, and he spent every instant of his life for the glory of God.<sup>79</sup>

The Cardinal cites an incident from the Servant of God's last days, when the archbishop of Turin, Cardinal Alimonda, went to visit him before traveling south to Rome. John Cagliero, then a missionary bishop, was present at the scene. Don Bosco was confined to bed, but he removed his night cap and held the Cardinal's hand, asking prayers for his salvation. Then "his whole face lit up" as he asked the archbishop "to tell the Pope that all his work had been and would be, as was his very life, in defense of the Authority of the Vicar of Jesus Christ."

Cardinal Alimonda was amazed to see him so tranquil in spirit, so undisturbed by the pains of his illness and so filled with thoughts of God. On leaving the room he turned to me and said, "Don Bosco is always with God. He is union with God." Don Bosco was actually in continual union with God. He had God at the top of all his thoughts, and the aspirations of his soul were identical to the aspirations of Jesus Christ, and that which Jesus taught us to pray for in the Lord's Prayer: the glory of God's Name. This, I repeat, was the ideal of his entire life and therefore in all his private

---

<sup>77</sup>Cf. Giacomelli, in SUM 437; Enria, in SUM 451; Cerruti, in SUM 457-458.

<sup>78</sup>Reviglio, in SUM 440.

<sup>79</sup>Cagliero, in SUM 399.



sessions, in all his speeches, in all his letters, he always included a thought about God, about avoiding sin and about the salvation of souls.<sup>80</sup>

Faith gives "limitless strength." It formed a staunch character that enabled young John to resist peer pressure and set high standards for himself. As he matured, faith afforded him a sense of security and empowered him to work disinterestedly for others. He trusted in Providence, confident that through patient sacrifice, all difficulties and setbacks would eventually be overcome. His faith helped sustain those who were discouraged, as Francesco Dalmazzo recalled during his testimony:

Many times some of his own [collaborators] who were discouraged by these difficulties and persecutions and wanted to call it quits, heard him exclaim: "Let us never yield to doubt. Experience has taught me that the more that human support fails you, the more God comes through with his 'If God is for us, who can be against us?'"<sup>81</sup>

In the meantime, he continued to win over young people, workers, people of every category. Ever the educator, he strove to help his young people encounter God in their daily lives. This is the trademark of heroic faith. In the words of Felice Reviglio:

You can say that, armed only with the sentiments of faith, which he instilled deeply within the hearts of his young people, and therefore with the thought of the presence of God, of his judgments, and the effectiveness of the sacraments — with these and with no other human or coercive means, he succeeded in introducing not only a sense of order in the community, but a peace and joyful enthusiasm among all.<sup>82</sup>

Don Bosco centered his thoughts on God continually, according to one of the younger witnesses, Fr. Secondo Marchisio.<sup>83</sup> Michele Rua concurred. Don Bosco's abiding love for the young can only be explained by his deep love of God, who was ever the center of his thoughts:

The Servant of God... was defined as "Union with God," and this is what he really was, for it seemed that he could not carry on a conversation without introducing some thought about God and allude to some truth of religion.

---

<sup>80</sup>Cagliero, in SUM 399-400.

<sup>81</sup>Dalmazzo quotes D. Bosco citing Rom 8:31, in SUM 450.

<sup>82</sup>Reviglio, in SUM 445. For a description of what the Church today understands as the "ideal" and "call" to a life of heroic Christian virtue, see Paolo Molinari, Peter Gumpel, and Tullo Goffi, "Eroismo," in *Nuovo Dizionario di Spiritualità*, eds. Stefano De Fiore and Tullo Goffi. Torino, Paoline 5 1989, 487-488.

<sup>83</sup>Cf. Marchisio, in SUM 351.

From this fact one could easily reason how his mind was continually occupied with thoughts of God, or the mysteries of our holy religion, and his heart always overflowed with God's love, for "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." Conversing with his pupils he often proposed some phrase from the Holy Scripture for them to translate. He then explained the phrase according to its literal meaning, and also according to its applied meaning, as such texts were often explained. And one could say that this took place every day in which he spent some time with his sons.<sup>84</sup>

### Ecclesial Dimension of Don Bosco's Faith

A delicate balance existed between total trust in God and a keen awareness of the needs of his times. Don Bosco was ready for action whenever and wherever the good of the Church and the "salvation of souls" was concerned.<sup>85</sup> This ecclesial dimension became evident in how highly he regarded the person and ministry of the Pope. He supported the Pope, and saw the "defense of the authority of the Roman Pontiff and of religion," according to Fr. Berto, "as one of the principal scopes of the Salesian Congregation."<sup>86</sup> He spoke often to others about the Pope, Secondo Marchisio recalled, and used to repeat: "Where Peter is, there the Church is present."<sup>87</sup> His great veneration for the Holy Father was evident to the young, as Fr. Reviglio recalled: "He had infused in us [his pupils] such a great love for the Church that we felt ready to defend her even at the price of our own lives."<sup>88</sup> He fostered the reading of the Pope's encyclicals, and, Fr. Dalmazzo testified, "repeated that the Pope's word should be our rule of life in everything and always."<sup>89</sup>

Don Bosco was pro-active in his faith stance. He preached, he wrote and published; he sponsored numerous initiatives "to spread the faith." He promoted religious experience through worship enhanced by good music, devotional celebration, and clear preaching.<sup>90</sup> Even the fact that he was able to embark on so many apostolic enterprises demonstrated his great faith in the Lord "who never abandoned him."<sup>91</sup> Don Bosco is shown as a man of "inextinguishable zeal" in the face of sectarian proselytism, even to the point of being exposed to

---

<sup>84</sup>Rua, in SUM 330. See also Cerruti, in SUM 454.

<sup>85</sup>Cf. Reviglio, in SUM 441; see also Marchisio, in SUM 351.

<sup>86</sup>Berto, in SUM 430.

<sup>87</sup>Marchisio, in SUM 351.

<sup>88</sup>Reviglio, in SUM 443. See also: Dalmazzo, in SUM 453.

<sup>89</sup>Dalmazzo, in SUM 449; see also Lemoyne, in SUM 395-396.

<sup>90</sup>Cf. Tasso, in SUM 417. With regard to D. Bosco's ability as a preacher, D. Cerruti tells us that, from the time he was a young seminarian until his old age, D. Bosco was always ready to preach (cf. SUM 454), and D. Dalmazzo speaks of D. Bosco's sermons moving to tears and conversion and renewed faith (cf. SUM 447).

<sup>91</sup>Bongiovanni, in SUM 462.

grave danger.<sup>92</sup> He was loyal to the Church, upholding the infallibility of the Roman Pontiff and never allowing a word of criticism against the bishops, even when he himself endured great suffering due to misunderstandings with his own archbishop. He was a man with a mission, nourished by the "mysteries of our holy religion." In the words of Fr. Amadei, "the thought of God" and "the practice of the Faith" was "the distinctive mark of his soul."<sup>93</sup>

From all we have seen, Don Bosco's faith was tender but practical. It was born of a trusting relationship with God, and this was something that he longed to share with others, especially with his young people. By way of summary, let us leave the final word to Domenico Bongiovanni.

Don Bosco was above all else a man of faith. As a matter of fact, a supernatural purpose shone through all his works, words and even his brainstorm, and he aimed at bringing all of us to God. At every opportunity he inculcated in us a sense of God's presence...Don Bosco always had great faith in God, whom he was sure would not abandon him in his works; and in fact, I do not know of his having taken up any project that he did not carry to completion.<sup>94</sup>

## **5. From Anecdotes to a Practical Trademark of Heroic Faith**

The eyewitnesses we have considered bring out the practical aspects of Don Bosco's faith. In reviewing the questions they were likely asked, we note that their tone is very straightforward and conversational as they each bring out aspects of John Bosco's life that seemed to demonstrate his faith as they individually perceived it.

Many of the witnesses repeat the same themes, stressing his devotions to certain saints, to the Madonna and to the Blessed Sacrament, and his loyalty to the Pope and the bishops. This repetitive, almost stereotypical classification of religiosity seem to have been conditioned by the questions that they were asked during the inquest. Some seem to answer in a very matter-of-fact way. Others add details, and still others seem to go off on tangents as the question sparks a memory of a detail which, while not a literal response to the question at hand, adds greater realism to the figure of Don Bosco as a "man of Faith, man of God."<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup>Cf. Barberis, in SUM 375, 381-382; Maffei, in SUM 423.

<sup>93</sup>Cagliero, in SUM 401. Cagliero speaks of D. Bosco's rapport with the archbishop on pp. 406-407; see also Amadei, in SUM 414.

<sup>94</sup>Bongiovanni, in SUM 461-462.

<sup>95</sup>Villa, in SUM 461.

Those who enter into most detail are Don Rua, Cardinal Cagliero, Giulio Barberis, Gioacchino Berto, especially with regard to many facets of Don Bosco's faith life. They speak with feeling about his continual union with God, his thirst for God's glory, and his desire to do everything possible for those in need. Bishop Tasso speaks of his devotions, while Prof. Francesia and Canon Anfossi describe his passion for the Word of God.

Pietro Enria, a lay Salesian, adds a different dimension. His testimony is bereft of ecclesiastical terminology, but includes colorful descriptions of Don Bosco's courage when dealing with enemies of the Church, his facial expressions when at prayer and when inciting his young people to faith. He shows us a Don Bosco who is proud of his young people and their faith in the Lord. Another layman, Giovanni Villa, remembers how Don Bosco's concern and simplicity would move his pupils to faith and trust in God. These details introduce us to a fresh and alive Don Bosco who invites imitation.

More than confine themselves to theories about the faith, these men witness to John Bosco as he *lived* the faith. As one reviews their testimony, one begins to suspect that they themselves had been moved to faith by the relationship they shared with the Servant of God. Formed by Don Bosco, they constitute a sort of core group of a "School of Faith." As Pietro Enria recalls in his testimony, "Whoever was close to him couldn't help but pray well too!"<sup>96</sup>

In the beginning of our paper we saw how theologians at the turn of the Twentieth Century concentrated their attention on the philosophical aspects of faith, which they described in terms of the assent of the intellect and the will. Don Bosco's sons who testified at his beatification proceedings, on the other hand, spoke about faith as lived experience. For them, faith was the foundation of spiritual life, and was borne out in a tangible way through an intimate union with God. They asserted this, not because they had studied it in theological manuals, but because they saw it reflected in their experience with John Bosco. And all of them, whether bishops, priests, or laymen, whether a retreat master like Bishop Tasso or a candy maker like Giovanni Villa, concur in their opinion that John Bosco was, above all, a man of faith, a man of God who courageously took up God's work, confident that God would see him through.

This, as we have seen, is the trademark of heroic faith, and once John Bosco had instilled this same sense of faith in the hearts of his young people, their own lives took on new purpose, they were filled with inner strength and peace, and with joy and enthusiasm — with love for life and for God.

---

<sup>96</sup> Enria, in SUM 453.