

Hero and Villain: Don Bosco as Seen in the Press of His Times

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Piedmont and Early Press Censorship

One spring day in 1860 Don Bosco was startled by a newsvendor's cry. "Read all about it! Don Bosco in jail!" He was both amused and bemused. Several of the passersby who also heard the newsboy's shouts and who recognized Don Bosco in the street, stopped short. The papers were selling briskly. Never one to be ruffled, he sent his walking companion, John Guarino, to buy two copies of *La Perseveranza* to learn who had so summarily incarcerated him.

The paper had somehow learned of a house search that had just been conducted at the Valdocco Oratory and had assumed that its director had been found guilty as charged for caching guns for an imminent revolutionary uprising against the government. *La Perseveranza* was the first to break the news that the priest in Valdocco was in cahoots with the revolutionaries and had conspired to arm them. Without verifying the facts in the case, the paper had rushed out its sensational edition, announcing that Don Bosco had been found out, and had been jailed in the underground lockup in the Palazzo Madama.¹

The following day, Father Giacomo Margotti, editor of the city's Catholic daily, *L'Armonia* [Harmony], hastened to assure the public that Don Bosco was not languishing in the poky. He ran a front-page declaration that it was all a trumped-up fabrication:

Reports that Don Bosco has been arrested are false. We hasten to assure our readers that, as of now, this claim is not true. We say "as of now", because by the time you read this, he may very well be behind bars. Not that there is any basis for such

¹For an account of this episode see *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, vol. 6, 330-331 (hereafter cited as 'English version'), John Baptist Lemoyne, ed.

action. Everybody knows what kind of priest Don Bosco is. But today a priest is an outlaw for the simple reason that he is a priest; and everything and anything done to incriminate a priest is considered lawful and meets with little opposition.²

When young Father John Bosco had arrived in the capital two decades earlier to begin his studies as a student priest at Turin's Ecclesiastical Institute (*Il Convitto*), the thought of headlining the name of a priest as a "revolutionary" on the front page of a newspaper would have been unthinkable. The reason was simple enough. There was no public free press in Piedmont. And no public newspapers existed until the Constitution of Piedmont-Sardinia was promulgated in 1848.³ The severity of the royal censorship allowed only the scientific and literary periodicals to survive, though there was much to read between the lines of those journals.

Before the *Statuto* (Constitution) of 1848 opened the doors to a free press, a rigid censorship in the Capital was almost Orwellian. As Predari testified:

In the press in those days [1843] it was strictly forbidden not only to speak of politics, but even to use the word. And so whenever I wanted to speak of political interests, I was obliged to change the words to "civil interests". In place of such words as "Italy", "native land", or "nation", I was forced to use the word "country." The word "constitution" was forbidden even when speaking of the governments of France and England, and the word was replaced by "laws" or "institutions". The terms "liberty", "liberal", or "liberalism" were not to be used in any sense, and the word "revolution" was always changed into "upheaval", "anarchy", or "government by violence."⁴

² Lemoyne, *Memorie Biografiche di S. Giovanni Bosco*, vol. 6, 590.

³ The Constitution of Piedmont-Sardinia (often called *statuto*) was promulgated on March 4, 1848. This constitution was not granted by King Charles Albert to his people out of the goodness of his heart. It was conceded with reluctance and in an acute emergency. It would be retained as Italy's basic law until 1946. For an English translation of most of the articles of the *statuto*, the reader is referred to *The Making of Italy, 1796-1870*, edited by Denis Mack Smith, New York, 1968, 136-139.

⁴ G.F. Berkeley, *Italy in the Making, 1815-1846*, (1932). Vol. 1, 170.

But as mid-century neared, the printed word was not to remain imprisoned for long. During those years of comparative inaction in the physical progress of the Risorgimento, Italian thought was profoundly influenced by the publication of several important works. Notable was Vincenzo Gioberti's *Del primato morale e civile degli Italiani*. So, a whole generation of political writers, to circumvent the royal censorship (and the royal displeasure) opted to publish for preference in Belgium, Switzerland, and other countries, although even this was technically illegal.

Italy's first free political press began in Piedmont. The year before the freedom of the press became part of the Constitution of 1848, a modification of censorship permitted the freer expansion of newspapers. One of the first to appear in public was Count Camillo Cavour's own newspaper, significantly entitled, *Il Risorgimento*, which served as a springboard for his political ideas.⁵ In the famous year known as the *Quarantotto* (Eighteen Forty-Eight) the enactment of Piedmont's Constitution granted the freedom of the press, which was more or less maintained even after it had been swept away in the other states in Italy by the triumph of the counter-revolution of 1849.

But Piedmont's freedom of the press was not absolute.⁶ It was hedged in by restrictions. Article 28 read: "The press shall be free, but the law may suppress abuses of this freedom. Nevertheless, Bibles, catechisms, liturgical and prayer books shall not be printed without the previous consent of the bishop."

⁵ The principal aim of *Il Risorgimento* was to advocate political change. Cavour argued that even the best laws could not work under an absolute government. For eighteen months he edited *Il Risorgimento* becoming its principal writer. Denis Mack Smith observed that this experience in journalism was invaluable to him. "His knowledge of the Italian language, though he had been practicing it, was still only moderate, and he had to use the dictionary a great deal, as well as relying on collaborators to revise what he wrote. But the effort of having to translate mentally from the French helped to give him a terse and clear style that avoided circumlocution and abstractions." *Cavour, A Biography*, New York, 1985, 33. Cavour's newspaper was more than just a journalistic Piedmontese endeavor. Its policy was definitely Italian, as it showed when it called on the king of Naples to grant a constitution to his people. It also boldly called for independence of the entire peninsula, and it attacked both Metternich's Italy and the France of Louis-Philippe.

⁶ Denis Mack Smith, the leading historian of modern Italy writing in English, notes that Cavour denounced any form of censorship on grounds that repression merely drove opposition underground where it was more difficult to deal with. However, when circumstances suited him, he did not hesitate to exercise a certain degree of interference with the press. But he drew the line when it was necessary to censor immoral or politically suspect books. That he did not believe in complete removal of censorship is evident in his practice of intercepting private letters, despite his claims to the contrary. D. M. Smith, *op.cit.*, 121.

Massimo D'Azeglio, Piedmont's first prime minister for some three and a half years before making way for Camillo Cavour, quickly put the censorship law to the test. He had earlier warned over-zealous journalists that "The press must either learn its responsibilities or risk severe censorship." His warning was soon put on trial in the case of Bianchi Giovini, a Lombard political refugee writing in Piedmont. An extreme republican, Giovini had taken to journalism, and in quick order succeeded in insulting a succession of important military and political figures with his venomous personal attacks. His first target was the Austrian minister in Turin, Baron Metzburg. His poison pen next attacked several Austrian generals and the Archduke Maximilian. For what was considered an unrestrained use of freedom of the press he was severely rebuked. But nothing further was done. Despite warnings from the Sardinian Ministry of the Interior, Giovini wrote a third scurrilous article. This time it was not the Austrians but the Pope himself who was the victim. And it was not Pius IX's politics that were attacked but his morals, for the Pope was accused of being the lover of a Countess Spaur. For Azeglio such an abusive attack was intolerable and Giovini was expelled from Piedmont. "If I am not afraid to send an archbishop to jail [Archbishop Louis Fransoni of Turin], then I am no more afraid to send a journalist to the devil."⁷

The Giovini incident was symptomatic of an emerging profession in Piedmont that was experiencing growing pains. With all constraints now swept away, many journalists like irresponsible fools frequently rushed in where angels formerly feared to tread. The genie was now out of the bottle:

It must not be forgotten that journalism, during the early stages of the Risorgimento, was not an established profession, but an activity that many people clumsily dabbled in. Everyone and anyone felt called to write for a newspaper or to found one. Lawyers, doctors, aspiring writers, all seemed to try their hand at it. It often became the last refuge of failed authors and struggling entrepreneurs. Trained journalists were unknown; consequently, as a profession journalism frequently took an erratic turn and often became a mere forum for political posturing. One of the first victims was language. Before 1848, anyone writing for publication in Piedmont kept a wary eye on the royal censor. Now there was no need to look over one's shoulder any longer. This change of government policy allowed abusive language, insulting innuendoes, and

⁷ Ronald Marshall, *Massimo D'Azeglio: An Artist in Politics, 1798-1866*. (London, 1966), 197.

libelous rhetoric to become the rule rather than the exception in Piedmont's first newspapers. As a respected and reputable medium of communication journalism still had a long road to travel.⁸

Many of the prominent democratic intellectuals and political activists (Angelo Brofferio, Agostino Depretis, Felice Govean) who had anonymously contributed to the underground press of the 1840s, or to the various revolutionary newspapers, before the lifting of press censorship, now began to write under their own byline. Before the Revolution of 1848, partly for ideological and partly for financial and social reasons, such a course of action would have proven hazardous. Most of the first democrats (a term significantly different than the meaning it conveys today) were committed to reaching the widest possible reading public and the press was the most important tool available to them for the task of mass political education. It was this use of the press that in time would be the key in the transformation of Italian culture and society.

Although not a lucrative calling, journalism offered at least a chance to eke out a living to men of modest social origins who had forfeited more promising career opportunities during the first years of political militancy in Italy's struggle for independence. Despite its low status as a profession in the beginning, journalism assured them a visible and potentially influential place in Italian society. The power of the press was on its way.

⁸ D. Jovine, *Il primo giornalismo torinese*. (Torino, 1938). Church historian, Roger Aubert has noted that now with censorship restrictions relaxed, members of the clergy leaped aboard the newly-popular bandwagon known as the freedom of the press. "Laymen have turned theologians and theologians journalists. There are members of the clergy for whom the press is now an extension of the pulpit, for they realize that newspaper columns carry more weight than their sermons." Roger Aubert, *The Church in a Secularized Society* (London, 1978). Vol. 5, 134.

Anno I.

Torino, Sabbato 21. Ottobre 1848.

L'AMICO DELLA GIOVENTÙ

GIORNALE RELIGIOSO, MORALE E POLITICO

Torino per un anno	Fr. 1. 50.
» per un mese	» 2.
Nelle Province Italiane per la Posta, per mesi tre	» 4. 50.
Per l'Estero franco anno in rimborsi	» 4. 50.

Le Annunzierie si ricevono in Torino dall'Editore Giannone & Provenza degli Ulmi parisi, e dai procuratori Liboni.
Le persone che avranno convenienti diciture avanti rispetto a questo Giornale, dovranno indirizzarsi franci di posta, a dell'Amico della Gioventù presso G. Marzetti in via di Po.

PROGRAMMA

L'ardente brama d'istruirsi e ricrearsi leggendo diffusa per tutte le classi sociali è saggio che contrassegna ove più ove meno la presente generazione. L'appetito del cibo intellettuale scende dai sommi agli infimi, risale dagli infimi ai sommi. Ora non valendo i libri a pubblicare le vicende che giorno giorno accadono, corre la gran necessità de' giornali. Questa necessità crebbe vieppiù dopo le libere istituzioni del magnanimo nostro Re Carlo Alberto, a cui tenne dietro la libertà di stampa. Molti sono i giornali popolari che si stampano fra noi, e che si propongono di fare e promuovere il bene del popolo, ma niuno ve n'ha ancora, che si sappia, il cui scopo principale sia di mantenere intatto ed accrescere per quanto si può il primo de' beni del popolo; il sincero ed inviolabile attaccamento alla nostra Cattolica Religione congiunto alla vera e soda cristiana educazione. Diciamo vera e soda cristiana educazione perchè (dobbiamo confessarlo) nelle presenti emergenze il popolo, e soprattutto la gioventù, va soggetto a molti pregiudizj, e può esser trascinata a non lievi errori.

A questo vuoto, a questa mancanza intende di provvedere la Direzione del nuovo giornale, del quale primo e principal fine si è di confermare nella fede cattolica il popolo; mostrandogliene la irrefragabile verità, la bellezza tutta celeste, ed i beni grandissimi che da essa come da inesauribile fonte procedono a favore degli individui e dell'intera Società; ed insieme d'istruirlo, educarlo nelle virtù, la quale secondochè dice l'Apostolo «è utile a tutti perchè ha da Dio le promesse della vita presente e della futura». Siccome però per la morale educazione giovano assai i ritrovati d'arte e di scienza, così in questo giornale niente si risparmierà di tutto quello che può servire ad illuminare l'amano intelletto e migliorare il cuore. Inoltre una certa cognizione de' quotidiani avvenimenti essendo divenuta oggimai un bisogno sentito da ogni classe di per-

sone, perciò in fine di ogni foglio si saranno quelle civili ed ecclesiastiche not possono tornare di qualche vantaggio.

L'indole del giornale e di chi lo scrisse, da ogni spirito di parte, di liti contese e da ogni livore, onde non avvenga luogo le acris dispute, né gli'ironi dibate sole si cercherà d'illuminare e premunir ventà contro a tutto ciò che potesse peccare ocurare la verità della fede, corro buon costume o traviare il popolo per t e fallaci sentieri.

La Direzione fa appello a tutti i Pastori, ai Parroci delle città e delle campagne, ai Padri di famiglia, infine a tutti che amano di cuore il miglioramento dei popoli, affinché vogliano coadiuvarla i mezzi che sono in loro potere, per un' si spera di vantaggio ad ogni classe di e specialmente alla gioventù che è la più favorita del genere umano, sopra cui danno le speranze della patria, il sostegno famiglie, l'onore della Religione e delle

La Direzione

ALLA GIOVENTÙ

L'aringo della vita è diviso comunemente in riedi, il primo in cui l'uomo cresce, il secondo conserva in un eguale tenore di vita, ed il terzo conduce quindi sino all'ultimo respiro. La gioventù più bello, il più dilettevole periodo del viver non questa deificata dai Greci col nome di Ebe, figliuola di Giove e di Giunone, la raffigurazione veggono combinate, non una coppa d'oro in mano coronata dai biondi capelli, e frotteggiate con: dell'Olimpo ella ministrava il nettare agli dei non ciò significare che la gioventù è la maggior onza.

E come no? Se il fior gentile dell'arvorenza tua della salute addecano mirabilmente il volto non della gioventù? se la vivacità rallegra quattano nera? Se il giovin mangia che lo scorge s

Facsimile of the first issue of Don Bosco's newspaper, *L'Amico della Gioventù* (October 21, 1848). A four-page, tabloid-size tri-weekly with a "religious-political thrust" it covered a wide range of topics. The first issue included such events as the plight of Pope Pius IX besieged in the Eternal City; a frank discussion of the implications of "religious freedom" is directed to young readers.

The Disillusioned Journalist

Into this new climate of the free exchange of ideas at midcentury, Don Bosco began his apostolate among Turin's disadvantaged children. With the royal censorship now lifted throughout the kingdom, a plethora of newspapers quickly sprouted. In less than four months after the promulgation of the Constitution of 1848 which countenanced a free press, Bishop Luigi Moreno of Ivrea helped found Turin's first Catholic newspaper, *L'Armonia* [Harmony].⁹ When Don Bosco realized that it was designed to cater to the educated class with its elitist readership, he decided to publish his own newspaper, one that would be aimed at a juvenile audience.

He recruited Fathers Hyacinth Carpano and Giovanni Chiaves, friends from his *Convitto* days, as assistant editors and advertised his forthcoming publication as "a family newspaper with a political-religious thrust." For one way or any form of political involvement such an editorial policy was hard to explain. But biographer John Lemoyne was quick to clarify Don Bosco's strategy: "He had added the word 'political' because if he had defined his newspaper's editorial policy as purely religious, it would have drawn too few readers."¹⁰

Don Bosco planned to publish his *L'Amico della gioventù* [Companion of Youth] as a biweekly. Introductory fliers announcing its appearance were sent to all priests in the dioceses of Turin, Ivrea, Asti, and Vercelli. Accompanying subscription forms solicited their support. The *Gazzetta Piemontese* hailed its arrival in its October 26, 1848, issue:

⁹ Its full title was *L'Armonia della religione colla civiltà* (Harmony Between Church and Society). Started on July 4, 1848, its founders included some of Piedmont's most prestigious leaders: Luigi Moreno, bishop of Ivrea; the Marchese Gustavo Benso di Cavour, brother of Camillo; Guglielmo Audisio, president of the renowned Academy of Superga; the Marchese Birago di Vische. It first appeared as a biweekly, and by 1855 it had become Turin's daily Catholic newspaper. Though it got off to a hesitant start, it became a strong and popular voice for the Catholic Church when Giacomo Margotti took over the reins. Margotti remained at the helm of the *L'Armonia* until 1863 when he founded his own newspaper, *L'Unità Cattolica*. His forceful and aggressive manner made him one of Italy's best known and controversial journalists. In its first year of publication *L'Armonia* ran a fascinating report of Don Bosco's early Oratory of Saint Francis of Sales (no.40). Written by the Marchese Gustavo Cavour it gave a vivid description of how the Oratory boys raised a purse of thirty-three lire for Pope Pius IX then in exile. See Lemoyne English version, vol. 3, 360-361.

¹⁰ Lemoyne, *Biographical Memoirs*, English version, Vol.3, 339.

L'Amico della gioventù, a religious, moral, and political newspaper, will appear every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. For any business transaction contact Giacinto Marietti, printer, in Turin. Subscription rates are three lire for three months; outside the city in the neighboring provinces the cost of a three-month subscription will be 4.5 lire which includes postage.

But Don Bosco's enthusiasm was greeted with a lethargic response. Subscriptions trickled in at a discouraging rate. Finally, after some aggressive fund-raising, the 800 lire necessary to begin publication were raised.

L'Amico della gioventù managed to attract 137 subscribers for its first issue, but its readership far exceeded that number.¹¹ Don Bosco simply gave away free copies of his newspaper to every boy at the Oratory, as well as to any youngster he met. To appeal to his juvenile readers (and to keep bureaucratic interference at arm's length), the paper avoided reporting on political issues. Among its youthful audience, the paper proved an instant success and was avidly read by them. Ascanio Savio and other seminarians then living at the Oratory confirmed that the paper was very popular and that "its contents were both informative and interesting."¹²

Don Bosco's paper may have maintained a hands-off policy regarding political events, but it did not refrain from running articles directed at a popular daily which was attacking the Catholic Church with increasing vehemence. That paper was Turin's *Gazzetta del Popolo* [The People's Gazette]. It would soon become Don Bosco's (and his newspaper's) principal adversary.

¹¹ A subscription roll of 137 subscribers at first glance seems like a paltry number for a newspaper. But it compared favorably with some of the leading papers of the day. *L'Armonia*, for example, listed a total of 139 paying subscribers, while the *Gazzetta Piemontese*, a leading daily, could count on 122 subscribers only. The famous *Fischietto* (The Whistle), Turin's satirical weekly, had only 37. And yet all of these papers sold thousands of copies daily. The bulk of the capital's first newspapers were sold in public and not through home delivery. Since newspaper stands and kiosks were still unknown at the time, a small army of newsboys and vendors hawked their papers in the streets, in the city piazzas, and in public buildings. In fact, the tactics were so aggressive that even *Il Conciliatore torinese* (September 7, 1849) complained that they were a public nuisance and upsetting the tranquillity of Turin's strait-laced gentry: "It is a disturbing and sometimes a very annoying sight to see this small horde of newsboys, filthy in appearance and often dressed in nothing but rags, screaming at the top of their lungs, demanding that everyone who passes near buy their paper." Quoted in *La Stampa italiana del Risorgimento*, V. Castronovo and N. Tranfaglia, eds. (Bari, 1979), 317.

¹² Lemoyne, *op.cit.*, Vol. 3, 340

The *Gazzetta del Popolo* featured a gossip column, “Il Sacco Nero” (The Black Sack), which took every opportunity to ridicule priests and prelates and comment disparagingly on popular religious practices which the populace cherished. Pope-bashing was also a frequent exercise. Don Bosco countered against this blatant anticlericalism by running a regular commentary in his own newspaper. Calling his column “Blundering Along with the *People’s Gazette*”, he regularly exposed the paper’s religious distortions and its unsubstantiated accusations against the clergy.¹³ The *Gazzetta* would never forget Don Bosco’s stinging commentaries. It would have a long memory. When it became Turin’s most read newspaper—and after Don Bosco’s own paper had folded—he would become a frequent target of its sarcasm and character assassination.

With only a juvenile readership to support it (most of whom received free copies of the paper), the fate of *Amico della gioventù* became precarious. Funds for its ongoing publication soon dried up. Desperate to rescue his paper, Don Bosco sent a letter to influential friends and acquaintances designed to appeal to their support and loosen their purse strings.

[No date]

Dear Friend,

Our recently acquired freedom of the press has led to irresponsible reporting on religious issues and doctrinal matters. It has become evident that a large segment of the secular press has set out to vilify religion and to trample upon the religious beliefs we hold dear.

This disturbing course of events has convinced me of the need to fight fire with fire. To accomplish this we must counterattack with a strong Catholic press that will stand up to these purveyors of lies and deceit directed at our holy religion.

I am happy to inform you that our newspaper, *L’Amico della gioventù* is now three months old. We originally shaped an editorial policy to have our paper appeal to young people only. But the aggressive anticlerical press now compels us to redirect the purpose of our paper. Our plan now calls for us to make *L’Amico della gioventù* a family newspaper.

This change of editorial policy will be an expensive one, and we shall need your help. Since the number of our paying subscribers is pitifully small, we must raise additional

¹³ Lemoine, *op.cit.*, Vol. 3, 340.

funds to keep on publishing. We have, therefore, decided to offer shares in our paper to any party who wishes to purchase them. These shares can be purchased in lots of 20, 50, and 100 lire. They can be bought on an installment plan if so desired. Those wishing to buy shares on the installment plan are asked to pay one fourth down, with the balance to be made in quarterly payments

Once our circulation reaches a figure that will cover the cost of production, not only will your initial investment with dividends be returned to you, but you will be guaranteed a free subscription to our paper.

This offer is being made to you personally because you have demonstrated your support for worthy causes in the past. By investing in our paper, I assure you that you are using your money to foster our religion and to defend our Faith.

Finally, buying shares to support our paper is gratefully appreciated. However, may I ask you to go one step further. May we also solicit your support by promoting our publication. Enclosed with this letter please find several copies of *L'Amico della gioventù*. Will you see that they fall into the hands of readers who will rally to our cause? They come at no cost to you. We will feel amply repaid in knowing that our paper has reached persons who will defend and guard the Faith.¹⁴

May God reward you with his grace.

We remain,

Father John Bosco and editorial staff

It was a last ditch effort, but Don Bosco's appeal fell on deaf ears. Realizing that their paper was gasping for life, Don Bosco's coworkers began quitting in discouragement. Although *L'Amico della gioventù* had now reached a weekly run of one thousand copies, its sixty-first issue was to be its last. Eight months after it had begun publication the newspaper shut down. It did not, however, disappear entirely from the scene. Don Bosco's paper merged with

¹⁴ Lemoyne, Giovanni Batt., *Memorie Biografiche di Don Giovanni Bosco*, vol. 3, 481-482.

L'Istruttore del popolo [The Peoples' Advisor] which had been founded in February, 1849. Don Bosco stayed on to facilitate the merger, but left after *L'Istruttore* gave indications of becoming a liberal publication.

A strange fallout of Don Bosco's failed experience in newspaper publishing was his abrupt leaving of it. For one who always demonstrated hardheaded doggedness, a Piedmontese trait, in all his undertakings, his unexpected future disassociation with the press was somewhat puzzling. Biographer John Lemoyne attempted to explain this course of action by suggesting that "the difficulties Don Bosco experienced in managing a newspaper in time convinced him that divine Providence did not want him to become a journalist." Too facile a conclusion. A more realistic interpretation was the fact that in a still unwieldy profession like newspaper publishing, editors faced a constant barrage of lawsuits, were harassed often with heavy fines, and sometimes imprisoned for their recalcitrance. A free press in Piedmont had its limitations.

Besides, in those politically-charged times, editing a newspaper meant its editor had to take sides with political parties and political issues. This was a course of action that Don Bosco did his utmost to avoid. Since much of his support came from benefactors aligned to different political interests, taking sides would have jeopardized and even alienated some of these benefactors.

Consequently to insure that his Salesians would adhere to a hands-off policy regarding newspaper publishing, Don Bosco ruled out journalism as a viable apostolic option for his congregation. In drafting the original constitutions for his Salesian Society, article seven, which spelled out "The Purpose of the Society," read:

It shall be the unalterable practice, incumbent upon all members of the Society, to avoid any and all kinds of political activity. To this end, members shall refrain from speaking out on political issues; nor are they to write on such matters. *Neither are they to engage in newspaper publishing* [italics mine] even if their contributions are seen as only indirectly supporting political issues, since such activity can prove prejudicial to the interests of the Society.¹⁵

¹⁵ "Ma è principio adottato e che sarà inalterabilmente praticato che tutti i membri di questa società si terranno rigorosamente estranei ad ogni cosa che riguardi la politica. Onde ne' colla voce, ne cogli scritti, o con libri, o colla stampa non prenderanno mai parte a questioni che anche *solo* indirettamente possano comprometterli in fatto di politica." See Francesco Motto's scholarly and definitive landmark study of the Salesian Constitutions, *Costituzione Della Società di San Francesco di Sales [1858] - 1875*. (Roma, LAS) 80.

But the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, to whom Don Bosco had submitted his constitutions for their scrutiny and approval, did not see things his way. They had article seven deleted. They explained that it was too sweeping in scope and would have required extensive clarifications to implement.

Bloodied but unbowed, Don Bosco did not retreat quietly from his misadventure as a failed journalist. Though his own newspaper had folded, he was more than ever convinced that the power of an emerging Catholic press, if supported, could become an effective factor in combating the surge of anticlericalism.

After press censorship was lifted by Charles Albert's Constitution of 1848, it became fashionable for coffee bars (*caffes*) in Turin to offer a wide variety of newspapers and journals for their clients' reading pleasure. The Madera Cafe, for example, boasted that it made 110 different publications available to its patrons.

Don Bosco, who enjoyed his afternoon coffee as much as the next man, began to frequent these intimate havens of strong coffee and hand-waving conversations. Upon entering a cafe, his eye would scan what newspapers were on display for its customers. Whenever he observed that Turin's Catholic newspapers, *L'Armonia* and *La Campana* [The Chimes] were nowhere in sight, he would complain to the proprietor. "We don't have them at the moment," would come the lame excuse. Don Bosco would continue to patronize this cafe and continue to express his disappointment to the owner that such a reputable establishment as his did not see fit to carry such papers for its customers. After repeated but kindly badgering, the proprietor would provide the Catholic dailies for his clients to rid himself of this bothersome priest. With one cafe conquered, Don Bosco would move on to the next, repeating his same tactics to introduce Catholic newspapers for the public.

Don Bosco's *History of Italy* and Press Reaction

By the mid 1850s Don Bosco's name and work had begun to take on a high profile in the capital. His various activities, including his publications, did not escape the attention of both the secular and the Catholic press. It was the

publication of his *Storia d'Italia* (History of Italy) that first made him the subject of debate in the city's newspapers.¹⁶ Though his work was highly acclaimed by several of the more reputable papers, the author of *Storia d'Italia* was sharply attacked by Turin's *Gazzetta del Popolo*. It claimed that his version of Italian history sided with the common enemy (Austria); distorted historical events (the war in the Crimea); and was nothing more than the mouthpiece for Guelphian politics.

But Don Bosco also had his staunch supporters. Turin's *L'Armonia*, the city's principal Catholic newspaper, predicted that his work would "soon become the favorite textbook that will be used in our schools."¹⁷

¹⁶ All his life Don Bosco was a student and reader of historical works. He was fascinated with the study of the past while still a theology student at Chieri. Reading history became a favorite pastime. It was almost inevitable that reading history would compel him to write history. As a young priest he compiled his trilogy: *Church History* (1845), *Bible History* (1847), *History of Italy* (1856). It was his fascination with Church history that planted the seed:

He was deeply interested in Church history to which he was particularly drawn...In this connection it is pertinent to note that as soon as Rohrbacher's *Church History* was published, he carefully read all seventeen volumes. He also read Salzano's work, regarding which he once stated that if that work had been in print when he was still a seminarian, he would have kissed every page of it, so pleased was he with the respect shown toward the papacy by this great Italian historian. Thus guided by wise criteria and enriched by his study of [the historians] Bercastel, Henrion, Fleury, Solzano, and the Bollandists, he set about writing his own popular history of the Church for young people. (*The Biographical Memoirs* (English version, vol. 13, 206-207.)

Pietro Stella has noted that although Don Bosco's historical trilogy does not, on the surface, reveal the hallmarks of the research historian, his historical writings all have that rare quality of capturing and holding the reader's interest—a quality that often eludes the more pedantic and erudite historian. Because of his facile style and story-telling gift, it is easy to overlook the extensive research and collateral reading that went into Don Bosco's history texts. See Pietro Stella. *Don Bosco: Life and Work*, LAS, Roma (1979), 259.

¹⁷ Thanks to the Catholic press the public was regularly apprised of Don Bosco's developing work for the city's poor children. *L'Armonia*, for example, Turin's most popular Catholic daily, ran over 40 articles on Don Bosco's activities during the first six years of its publication. These ranged from announcements of his lotteries, descriptions of religious activities conducted at the Oratory, Don Bosco's

The *Civiltà Cattolica* praised the text for not entangling its young readers in the muddle of questionable political issues: "In the hands of that excellent author, Don Bosco, history is not something to be twisted for the sake of airing dubious political opinions. ... something that has too often been the case in many textbooks that have flooded Italian classrooms in recent years." But it was Don Bosco's narrative skill and his adroitness in drawing moral lessons from historical events that drew the reviewer's admiration: "The author's concern for the truth, his interesting treatment of the subject, the clarity of his style and balanced presentation, are matched by his ability to draw moral lessons from the past."

Equally gracious in their appreciation for Don Bosco's *History of Italy* were the secular authorities who gave Don Bosco high marks for his work. The Minister of Public Instruction, Giovanni Lanza, awarded the author a cash prize for the excellence of his presentation and placed the book on the approved list of texts which school officials used when awarding prizes to outstanding students at the end of the school year.

This well-earned applause did not go unchallenged. The *Gazzetta del Popolo*, which had already begun to mount a public vendetta against Don Bosco, hastened to rain on his parade. The paper had not forgotten the author's earlier skirmishes in his *Amico della gioventù* when he refuted the *Gazzetta's* anticlerical articles. The appearance of Don Bosco's book was welcome grist for its anticlerical mill. In part the paper's review read:

Don Bosco's *History of Italy* is nothing more than a long paean of praise for everything that has been hateful in our memory of Austria's past domination of Italy. A perfect example of this is the mishmash he makes [*stile macaronico*] of the recent conflict in the Crimea.

Further, we want to inform our readers that we have learned just in time that this book was under consideration for use as a textbook for the schoolchildren of Turin. In view of this possible outrage we immediately warned the Minister of Public Instruction that this grotesque publication did not merit

publications, etc. In its April 2, 1849 edition the *L'Armonia* gave the public a fascinating scenario of early life at the Valdocco Oratory. The article was written by Count Gustavo Cavour (brother of Camillo) and represents the first published report by a layman of what was happening in Don Bosco's institution. It can be read in the *Memorie* (English version), Vol. 3, 360-361. All 87 items and articles published by *L'Armonia* dealing with Don Bosco and his work, see *Opere Edite*, Vol. 38, LAS Roma (1987), a *Centro Studi Don Bosco* publication.

a place in the curriculum. We are pleased to report that it will be kept out of the classroom.

Should it happen that this so-called history of our country should ever meet the approval of the school authorities in the future, we shall denounce it as an affront to our nation, expose it as a blatant distortion of the truth, and report it as a work filled with inaccuracies of every kind.

In a word, Bosco's work does nothing more than echo throughout the perverted views of the Jesuit scoundrel, J. N. Loriquet. [A sympathetic papal historian and author of easy-to-read historical manuals for children].¹⁸

For the next 35 years the *Gazzetta del Popolo* would give Don Bosco little peace. More than any journal or newspaper in the capital it would hound his footsteps, snipe at his efforts to improve the educational opportunities in his school, and attempt to thwart the religious advance of the people.

The *Gazzetta del Popolo*, the Anticlericals' Battering Ram

On December 4, 1855 Giorgio Pallavicino wrote to the patriot Daniele Manin:

The *Gazzetta del Popolo* has become the battering ram which continues to pulverize the clergy every chance it gets. Sometimes they overdo it, and I don't like it. A greater wrong still is the paper's attempt to destroy the religious beliefs of our people...¹⁹

¹⁸ *Civiltà Cattolica*. Vol. 5, 482 (1857).

¹⁹ Giorgio Pallavicino, a rich nobleman, is considered the founder of the National Society whose paramount aim was the unification of all Italy. Pallavicino had earlier been on the radical wing of the revolution, but by 1849 had realized that monarchist Piedmont was to be the most likely instrument of unification: "So long as Piedmont preserves the tricolored flag, in Piedmont I see Italy." By this time too Daniele Manin had abandoned his republicanism. The former president of the revolutionary Republic of St. Mark brought a greater weight of intellect to the leadership of the National Society. There was little love lost between the papacy and the National Society, but the two men realized that any radical attempt to destroy the Catholic Church would have critically jeopardized the drive for Italian unification.

The “battering ram” alluded to in Pallavicino’s letter was perhaps the most famous (and for the Piedmontese clergy, the most “infamous”) newspaper spawned by Carlo Alberto’s Constitution of 1848. Founded by Giovanni Bottero and Felice Govean, it appeared on the streets of Turin shortly after the promulgation of the *Statuto* of that year. Taking full advantage of the newly granted freedom of the press, it would advocate for the next 40 years a jingoistic nationalism while openly professing a raw hatred of the institutional church in Piedmont. During this same period it would carry on a relentless harassment of Don Bosco and his work and vilify his character at every turn. The *Gazzetta* vaulted quickly to the top of the best selling newspapers in Turin. Its attractive tabloid format quickly captured the attention of the public, and its aggressive anticlericalism catered to the political left with which it soon identified itself.²⁰

In its first issue the *Gazzetta* spelled out its editorial policy (soon jettisoned), announcing that it would not back any political party and proclaimed that its principal goal was to become the “common peoples’ newspaper”.

We do not espouse any political position, and we intend to conduct ourselves in a gentlemanly fashion. Moreover, we are not seeking an elite audience. Our purpose is to publish a newspaper which the common man can read with ease and whose contents will both please and entertain him.

Pure puffery! The paper grandly announced what it was *for*, but left little doubt what it was *against*. It was never so avidly read as in the 1870s when it regularly baited the newly arrived (1872) Archbishop Lorenzo Gastaldi (dubbed ‘the new Fransoni’), and with its intrusive coverage exacerbated the festering controversy between him and Don Bosco. It was this kind of reportage that gave credence to Vittorio Bersezio’s comment that “The *Gazzetta del Popolo* made it a

When Don Bosco visited Parma in 1873 he paid the Marquis Pallavicino a courtesy visit after the nobleman anxiously requested “several times” to see him.

²⁰The *Gazzetta del Popolo* sold for a paltry 5 centesimi which assured it of instant success. Since the government levied an unreasonable tax (4 lire) on all subscribers, the paper preferred to sell its product through newsvendors on the street. By 1852 the paper had a circulation of 10,000 copies—a remarkable number considering that almost half the population was illiterate. Besides its low price the *Gazzetta* targeted the *mercato popolare* (the man in the streets). The paper’s popularity received a boost when it took advantage of political wars then in full vigor in the capital. Then, of course, its regular basting of Archbishop Gastaldi and Don Bosco certainly did not lose it any readers. See V. Castronovo and N. Tranfaglia, *La Stampa Italiana del Risorgimento*. Bari (1879), 311-316 and *passim*.

practice of eating a priest at breakfast, snacking on a canon at lunch, and devouring a bishop for dinner.”²¹

During its first months of publication, the *Gazzetta del Popolo* kept a wary eye on the almost unknown priest working in the Valdocco neighborhood. Perhaps the first recognition for his work for the poor children of the district was a grudging acknowledgment of Don Bosco’s Sunday school where children in the area were learning to read and write.

Yesterday the children attending the Sunday school at the Oratory of Saint Francis of Sales gave a public demonstration of what they have so far learned in the classroom. Their presentation exceeded all expectations. The problems which this educational program first encountered seem to have been all overcome.²²

One looks in vain for the identity of the soul of the school and its organizer, Don Bosco. As Don Bosco’s popularity increased allusions to him and his work were noted, but in a veiled form. At first the paper began to refer to him as “Don Bosio” (to avoid possible lawsuits) and “The miracle worker in Valdocco”.

We have two saints in this city who both claim to be poor as church mice. But they feel free to flaunt their poverty for the greater glory of God. One wants to rule with an iron hand [Archbishop Gastaldi] while the other [“Don Bosio”] tries to come off like some dewy-eyed innocent.

“Don Bosio”, or “the dewy-eyed innocent” was no mystery to the *Gazzetta’s* readers.

²¹ Luigi Chiesa. *Il Movimento Dei Cattolici in Piemonte*, Torino (1974). Although Bersezio was himself a diehard anticlerical, he strongly objected to the *Gazzetta’s* extremist iconoclastic attitude towards the clergy:

“The *Gazzetta del Popolo* often overstepped the bounds of decency. As a newspaper it left much to be desired. No doubt, as one looks back, it could and should have been more conciliatory during those parlous times. The fact that it made little effort to respect the religious convictions of its readers was one of its biggest flaws. In its relentless war against the clericals, it not only harmed the Faith of the populace, but damaged its own credibility as well. The paper’s readers would have been better served if it had been less strident and less vulgar in its unrelenting attacks against the Church and its ministers.” V. Bersezio. *Il Regno di Vittorio Emanuele II*, Torino (1889), Vol. V, 37. Don Bosco, no doubt, would have said “amen !” to that.

²² *Gazzetta del Popolo*. August 17, 1848, No. 54.

The *Gazzetta* rarely acknowledged the good that Don Bosco was doing for the city's poor children. In fact, when it came to the efforts he poured into their education, the paper sought to thwart his every move. When the school officials ordered him to close down his cherished school at the Oratory because it was violating some statutes of the Casati Law in using uncertificated teachers, the *Gazzetta* condemned the director of the Oratory (Don Bosco) for his 'pigheadedness' in resisting the educational authorities. And when its cross-town rival, Don Margotti's *Unità Cattolica* rushed to the beleaguered priest's defense, a nasty exchange of letters followed.²³

It was during the decade-long ordeal (1872-1882) of the Gastaldi-Don Bosco controversy that the *Gazzetta* was at its scandal-mongering worst. The paper saw in this clash of two strong personalities a burgeoning cause celebre which it exploited on every possible occasion. Its editors left no stone unturned in adding fuel to this scandal-tainted fire. For example, as soon as the *Gazzetta* learned of Don Bosco's suspension by the Archbishop, it wrote with malice aforethought:

They say that the *official* reason that the Archbishop has suspended Don Bosco is because the priest has been accused of manipulating all those idiots who continue to stream to his confessional. People in high places claim that these imbeciles are so terrified by the priest's sway over them that they turn over to him all their worldly possession in their will which they make on their deathbed. But don't be duped. Even if Don Bosco is really flimflamming the faithful in their dying moments, his own archbishop is guilty of the same kind of fraud—probably even more so. The issue in this suspension is not money. The *real* reason that Don Bosco finds himself suspended has been caused by the overweening power he has acquired in this city. And the Archbishop fears it will soon match his own. It all boils down to a matter of pure jealousy between a bishop and his priest.

Despite such vilification in the press, Don Bosco never lost his poise. When someone suggested that he retaliate against the paper with some of his own counteroffensive, Don Bosco forbade any such recourse:

²³ For this prolonged incident that saw the closing of the Oratory school for 18 months see Michael Ribotta: "The Day They Shut Down the Oratory School" in the *Journal of Salesian Studies*, Vol. II, No. 1, 19-44.

Come now, we have to be patient with such people who are unwittingly opposing God's work. Don Bosco is only trying to do good, even if these newspaper reports do not see it that way. So let's hold our peace. God in his wisdom will bring all these evil designs to a sorry end, you'll see. Besides, we can't just stand still and let souls be lost because these papers are angry against Don Bosco and misjudge his intentions.²⁴

During Don Bosco's final years the strident voice of the *Gazzetta del Popolo* became subdued. By now the priest in Valdocco had become a well-known celebrity in Piedmont, and his name was increasingly recognized and admired throughout Italy. So by the mid 1880s Don Bosco's name gradually disappeared from the pages of the *Gazzetta*; its publishers felt they were in no position to incur the wrath of Don Bosco's influential friends. In his final days, as his health worsened, a matter of great concern to the inhabitants of Turin, Don Bosco's declining condition was never alluded to. And when Don Bosco died on January 31, 1888, the city's most read newspaper simply listed the name, age, and date of the deceased. Nothing more.

This embarrassed silence did not escape the attention of the Catholic press. The *Corriere Nazionale* [The National Courier] made little effort to conceal its glee at the *Gazzetta's* discomfiture. Its front page comment read:

The silence of the *Gazzetta del Popolo* regarding the death of Don Bosco is deafening. All these years this newspaper has harried Don Bosco at every turn, and has made it a policy of never saying anything uplifting about the Church and its ministers. Now that Don Bosco has passed on it dares not print anything derogatory about him for fear of outraging the people. It has, therefore, chosen to maintain a discreet silence. High praise and great admiration has come in from everywhere on the death of this saintly priest. But perhaps he can claim no higher achievement than that of finally making this cantankerous paper keep its mouth shut.²⁵

²⁴ For a more detailed treatment of Don Bosco's relationship with an antagonistic press see *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco* (English version) Volume 11, chapter 23, "A Hostile Press"; volume 12, chapter 19, "Newspaper Harassment".

²⁵ *Corriere Nazionale*, February 5, 1888, No. 34.

Turin's "Humorous" Papers to the Attack

The popular press may have distorted Don Bosco's good intentions and maligned his moral activism, but it was in the capital's "satirical and humorous" publications that he took his lumps. These journals and papers had sprung up like wild flowers after a spring rain following the Constitution of 1848—and died just as quickly.²⁶ It was in their pages that Don Bosco was subjected to every kind of denigration. Besides *Il Fischietto* [The Whistle], the leader of the pack, the more popular purveyors of vicious satire and heavy-handed humor were the following:

Il Diavolo [The Devil], first published in 1863, lasted a dozen years. Its name derived from a then emerging cult of Satanism. It delighted in ridiculing the preachment on hell and the devil, frequent subjects in sermons of those days. One article in *Il Diavolo*, entitled "The Saintly Swindler", treated Don Bosco very harshly, accusing him of running a lottery without a state permit.²⁷

Il Pasquino [The Lampoon] was noted for its longevity (it published for 60 years) and for its priest-baiting. Below its masthead readers were informed that it was a "non-political and humorous newspaper". Its articles and cartoons, however, belied its avowed policy. It carried anticlerical pieces with regularity, wrote about Garibaldi with unabashed devotion, and exploited the Roman Question endlessly. The *Pasquino* was one of the first newspapers in Italy to feature political cartoons for its readers. On May 18, 1873, Don Bosco was caricatured in a panel of three cartoons, one more insulting than the next. The last, for example, pictured him perched in clerical garb atop the cupola of a

²⁶ At the time the Constitution was granted in 1848, newspapers all government controlled were rare. Forty years later, in the year of Don Bosco's death, there were 1,600 registered weeklies in Italy, all serious political, economic or educational organs, catering to a very restricted educated readership. But most were local and provincial, not national. They were often subsidized by the government (via advertising and subscriptions from public bodies, 'loans' from friendly banks, etc.). As a rule they were read only by the elite. See Martin Clark, *Modern Italy 1871-1982*, New York, 1984, 40-41. The modern-day Italian has become an omniverous consumer of newspapers. Colorful kiosks exhibiting every variety of reading matter seem to blossom on every street corner

²⁷ "The Saintly Swindler" in *Il Diavolo*, September 7, 1871, No. 83.

church. Clutching a cross and with a smoking pipe between his teeth, he also wore the ostentatious trappings of a military general. The caption read: "Don Bosco is not only the general of Turin, but its commander in chief."²⁸

Il Ficcanaso [The Busybody] distinguished itself for its execrable bad taste. During its brief and fitful existence it was shut down by the authorities on a number of occasions for its inflammatory characterization of ecclesiastics and political figures. In its June 12, 1872 issue, for example, it warned its readers about Don Bosco whom it portrayed as "...a priest who is very vile in every sense of the word. This man is no country bumpkin, so be forewarned. He knows his way around and can ingratiate himself in your confidence very smoothly. Watch the way he operates and you will see that he is no fool. While the public observes him piously running his charitable institutions, he is actually at the same time fleecing the poor and rich alike who are helpless enough to fall into his clutches."

Another trashy tabloid that took morbid pleasure in pillorying the clergy went by the irreverent name of *Gesù Cristo Popolare Anticlericale* [Jesus Christ, the Peoples' Outcry Against the Clergy]. In its opening number it announced with twisted logic that "Our sole purpose is to wage war to the death against the clergy in the political and religious arena. We hold no grief with the Church as such. It is its ministers that we are out to destroy. They grow daily more arrogant in the pulpit, more tyrannical in the confessional, and more hostile to Italian unity and independence. Their only purpose in life is destroy our civil rights."²⁹

It was this statement of policy that endeared the editor, Federico Sticca, to the *Gazzetta del Popolo* which helped launch the publication with an extensive publicity campaign.

Oddly enough, this vilest of all the satirical rags carried on a love-hate relationship with Don Bosco until his death. One moment the *Gesù Cristo* extolled the popular priest as another Saint Vincent de Paul, then condemned him for being an agitator and henchman of the pope who had abandoned his

²⁸ *Don Bosco Nella Storia della Cultura Popolare*, a cura di Francesco Traniello. Torino, 1987, 229.

²⁹ This grossly titled paper began publication in 1882 and disappeared shortly thereafter. It has become a collector's item. The first four issues can be found in the Salesian Archives in Rome.

humanitarian mission by lining his pockets with the hard-earned money of the working poor.

The Don Bosco we know today is but a faint image of the Don Bosco of old. At one time he was another Vincent de Paul, now he is nothing more than a devious agitator, whose career is greed. The Good News has been replaced by the Gold News. It is no secret to anyone that this man is totally on the side of the pope and the bishops and has degenerated into a propaganda machine out to destroy Italian unity. What a falling out we have seen in this man. In his early days he was the personification of Christ's charity; today he is merely the pope's political tool.³⁰

For some reason all its own the *Gesù Cristo* was obsessed with what it believed was the huge wealth amassed by Don Bosco. Though its diatribes bring a smile to us today, in their day they must have shocked the addled readers of this paper:

Some of our more naive readers are asking how Don Bosco put together his prodigious financial empire. The answer is quite simple. Over the years he has gulled the faithful into making continual contributions to his "works". For example, he has established his own miracle factory. First, he has had himself declared a great saint; next, bits and pieces of his clothing are being constantly sold to eager buyers who have been assured of their magical effects. ...It's time we brought this fraud to his knees. Don't let his pleas beguile you any further. He always claims to be a benefactor of his fellow man; in reality it is he who gets all the benefits. Be forewarned. This man is no fool; and he is Italy's enemy, for he wants to strip us of our hard-earned independence. But it is the spell he casts on the children that we must break. The youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow and we must not allow them to fall into his clutches. We have fought too hard and sacrificed too much to allow this man to destroy our nation and corrupt our youth.

³⁰ Francesco Traniello, *op.cit.*, 230-231.

The above mentioned “humorous” publications attacked Don Bosco only on occasion, or perhaps, when the need arose, to help quick-start their sagging circulation.³¹ But it was the scrofulous *Fischietto*, Turin’s most popular “humorous” weekly that was untiring in buffeting Don Bosco. For forty years it made him the butt of its twisted humor and the victim of its spiteful satire. Like a vulture hovering over its carrion prey it feasted regularly on Don Bosco’s defenseless position to counterattack. It never tired of portraying the clergy as devious money-grubbers who made it a practice of relieving the rich and famous of their wealth under the pretext of administering the comforts of religion in their dying moments. Since it was public knowledge that huge sums of money passed through Don Bosco’s hands, it was inevitable that the *Fischietto* would picture him as a cunning fund-raiser. To add insult to injury the paper accused him of accumulating his immense loot by exploiting the religious credulity of simple folk. In its April 29, 1873 issue, an editorial branded him as nothing more than a fortune hunter as he pursued his bogus charity operations:

We can now report that we have seen it all. Our modern priests, under the guise of caring for the poor in the name of holy religion, are using the most brazen tactics to feather their own nests. In this matter Don Bosco’s name leads all the rest. He preys mainly upon simpletons and sanctimonious humbugs who revere him as a great saint.

After witnessing the vast fortune that his partner in crime, the Reverend Half-baked cleric, has raised in soliciting funds for Peter’s Pence, the man in Valdocco has attempted to pull off the same stunt himself. As I write this, I am looking at one of his begging circulars which he distributes far and wide. The circular pleads for donations—a mere ten francs will do—for his church. What a splendid idea, Don Bosco. Perhaps I will try it myself and get rich. If you and your partner, Don Margotti are doing it, why can’t we?

The Oratory school in particular was on the *Fischietto’s* hit list. It maintained a watchdog vigilance of its activities, alerting the school authorities whenever it perceived that the education code (Casati Law) was being circumvented in any way. An example of the paper’s paranoid surveillance can be

³¹ For tactics of yellow journalism used by early Risorgimento newspapers see Paolo Ettore Santangelo, *Il Giornalismo e La Satira Nel Risorgimento*, Milano (1848) 60-67; 184-195.

seen when it raised an alarm in its December 19, 1874 issue, protesting Don Bosco's effort to secure financial aid from the government for his school.

We have just learned that the government is considering subsidizing Don Bosco's educational work in Valdocco. We must speak our mind frankly on this request. Does the state really want to further the education of its young people? Then the best way to educate the children of Turin is to get rid of that miserable school in Valdocco. By now it's common knowledge what kind of product it generates. The person responsible for operating it has only one thing in mind—to turn out a small army of little priests. That's a sorry prospect to contemplate for a people who are struggling to earn their livelihood by hard work, and in these difficult times, to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. We won't find the kind of education this country needs in any of Don Bosco's schools. So stop any funding of such institutions. With a few more Don Boscos around, dispensing the kind of education he boasts of, half the population in this city will turn out to be imbeciles and fools.

Strong stuff! It certainly must have pained the man to bear the brunt of such frontal attacks against his cherished Oratory school.

Taking its cue from its partner-in-sleaze, the *Gazzetta del Popolo*, the *Fischietto* frequently savaged the director or the Oratory of Saint Francis of Sales and the archbishop of Turin. The least hint of imaginary scandal or any bit of unsubstantiated gossip was quickly grasped and exploited for its readers. In its September 11, 1872 issue [No.III] it wrote that Lorenzo Gastaldi's appointment as archbishop of Turin was nothing more than a subtle attempt by Don Bosco to curry the archbishop's future favor:

Don Bosco, that saint who is bigger than life, knew from the start that Gastaldi was a man who understood the value of a deal, and therefore would, when the time was ripe, truckle to his will. It was this same Bosco who proposed to the then not-yet-infallible Pio Nono to appoint Gastaldi bishop of Saluzzo. No sooner said than done. Not long after, in a reshuffling of episcopal appointments, it was the same Bosco who convinced the Pope to promote Gastaldi from Saluzzo (where there was little love lost between him and his flock) to the archdiocesan see of Turin. Now you can understand why the archbishop is indebted to his priest.

But this amicable relationship did not materialize. The secular press of Turin soon realized to its chagrin that Gastaldi was his own man and his forceful personality made him a match for the papers' most caustic comments. As a result both men soon felt the heavy hand of the *Fischietto's* insulting characterization: "That master manipulator is nothing more than Torquemada brought back to life and has quickly shown himself to be no more than a snarling dog. ...As for Sir Wood [Don Bosco], now known to everyone in Turin as "the miracle worker", the only miracle he performs is his bamboozling and plucking the geese that flock to him. If any man can be called a religious opportunist, it is he." ³²

But the unkindest cut of all was the spiteful ridicule leveled at Don Bosco for the enthusiastic fervor he showed in advocating Marian devotions for the populace. These religious manifestations the *Fischietto* branded as arrant nonsense. Nor were the thousands of devout pilgrims streaming to Lourdes spared the paper's mocking commentaries. It issued a warning to all husbands that Don Bosco's devotion to Mary was nothing more than the exploitation of their wives. In an outburst of foggy rhetoric that made little sense and less reason it explained:

It is easy to understand how Don Bosco keeps filling his coffers with money. He does this by deifying women in promoting devotion to the Madonna. Only an ass can fall for such a ruse. It's time we expose this nonsense and show that these Marian devotions are nothing more than a Jesuit scheme to enslave women and alienate them from their husbands.
[May 23, 1874, No.62]

Shortly after, it returned to the attack by running a cartoon showing a woman on her knees before Don Bosco, while a snake, crawling out from under his cassock, was beginning to coil itself around the unsuspecting suppliant.

³² Referring to Archbishop Gastaldi as a modern "Torquemada" was the paper's way of describing his severity and the stern method he used in running his diocese. Tomas de Torquemada (1420-1498) was a Spanish inquisitor in the court of Ferdinand and Isabella. He owes his reputation for cruelty to the harsh rules of procedure which he devised for the Inquisition and to the vigor with which he had them enforced. The newspapers of Turin soon realized that Gastaldi could give as well as he could take. For a brief period he started his own newspaper and attacked the anticlericals with equal ferocity. For an excellent and definitive biography of the combative and controversial prelate the reader is referred to G.Tuninetti's *Lorenzo Gastaldi* (1815-1883), E. Piemme, Casale Monferrato, 2 vols. (1988).

Newspapers in Italy may have still been in their infancy, but the *Fischietto* was already displaying the journalistic instincts of jackals.

Death Comes for Don Bosco: Hero to Some, Villain to Others

During his young adult life, Don Bosco lived in the eye of the hurricane of liberal Piedmontese politics and virulent anticlericalism. Both his work and his personality created a magnetic field for contestation. Even his death did not bring the campaign of personal vilification to an end. His passing in his humble room in Valdocco made front page news not only in Piedmont but throughout the Peninsula. His demise which stirred up strong feelings continued to fuel both the secular and religious press. In the latter he was exalted as a man of God dedicated to the service of the poor; the secular press damned him as a clerical villain whose sole purpose was to accumulate money and to champion papal intransigency.

Don Bosco's final illness was closely followed in the press. Newspapers printed frequent bulletins updating the state of his declining health. When he died on January 31, 1888, the anticlerical press reported his passing with mixed emotions. The *Gazzetta del Popolo* as seen above seemed to have cut off its nose to spite its face by maintaining a reluctant silence. The *Fischietto*, mean-spirited to the end, dipped its pen in bile and noted his passing with a mixture of suppressed glee and malicious innuendo:

Well, old Sir Wood ["Bosco"] is gone. Now perhaps that priest factory of his in Valdocco that has cranked out an endless stream of priests will begin to slow down ... However, you can be sure of one thing—there will be no slowing down of his flimflam operations. His followers will continue hovering over the deathbeds of the rich and famous, easing their passage into the beyond by relieving them of the burden of their earthly wealth and possessions.

A few days later, in much the same vein, the paper parodied him in a cartoon which showed an elderly hooked-nosed priest, clutching the loot of his latest victim, being wafted to some ethereal destination astride a cloud. No caption was necessary to identify the subject of this grotesque sketch.

Not all the secular and even liberal papers, however, treated Don Bosco so harshly. In fact, most press releases that reported his death paid a respectful tribute to one of northern Italy's most venerated priests.³³ The *Corriere della Sera* [Evening Courier], the voice of Milan's liberal party, paid him a deserving albeit grudging tribute: "Although our political views were poles apart, we cannot help but express our admiration for what this humble priest has wrought." In Rome *La Capitale*, the organ of the radical left, gave some interesting details:

In northern Italy these days, the big news is the death of Turin's famed miracle worker. Everything in that city has come to a standstill. All political activity is suspended; business has virtually ceased for the moment; and even the banks are closed. Everyone, from the humbug aristocrat to the simplest of the little people, is filing past his body as it lies in wake in the magnificent church which he built.

Some papers which had studiously ignored Don Bosco in his lifetime broke their silence on the occasion of his death. *La Voce dell' Operaio* [The Worker Speaks] was both typical and notable. It ran a laudatory article describing him as a friend of the working class. It began:

Without doubt Don Bosco was the most popular priest in Turin. The working class has held him in high esteem throughout his life. And for good reason. For more than 50 years his was the world of the workingman, and his heart went out to those who labored in the factories and shops of our city. He was both a father of the working child and an advocate of the workingman's cause. Though he is gone, his spirit will long hover in our midst.

As it had done for many years, the *Unità Cattolica* was Don Bosco's champion to the end, printing a front page obituary which echoed the sentiments

³³ To cite all the newspapers that carried reports of Don Bosco's passing is too long to enumerate here. Some of the representative publications were: *Osservatore Romano* (Rome), "...Those two words, 'Don Bosco', described the greatest apostolate of charity of the 19th century."; *Il Cittadino* (Genova), "...we join the entire world in paying tribute to this giant of charity."; *Il Berico* (Venice), "...one of the greatest men of the Catholic Church this century has seen."; *Il Cittadino* (Brescia), "...Let us not shed tears at his passing, rather let us invoke this great saint and pray to him."

of Don Bosco's friends and supporters. In succeeding editions it ran a series of articles which described the accomplishments of Turin's beloved priest, and detailed many events of his saintly and active life. The story began:

The dawn of January 31 ushered in a heartbreaking day, not only for the city of Turin, but also for the numerous Salesian foundations and for the Catholic Church as well. The last day of January marked the end of the life of a man whom we have all long venerated and loved. ...We thank Providence for his presence among us all these years. His was the life of the just man who reflected every day the virtues of his beloved patron, Francis of Sales.... God fashioned him to be an apostle for our times. ...People everywhere say that he had the gift of miracles, and there are many who attest that they have witnessed them. This, however, is something we will neither assert nor deny. In time, God willing, the Church will decide that issue. But no one can deny perhaps his greatest miracle—that he accomplished so much with so little, and in doing so was able to induce many who were wrapped up in their own self-interests to practice true Christian charity by assisting him in his work.

The Priest, First Victim of Risorgimento Anticlericalism

One is hard-pressed to understand why Don Bosco was so relentlessly harassed in the press until he recognizes the causes which created the period of religious aggression in which he lived. It was during this very period that Don Bosco was most active in the Piedmontese capital, a time between two Wars of Independence (1848-1859) when Italy strove to become an independent nation. This was a frenetic decade for Turin. By mid-century the movement for Italian unification, which was now coming to be called the Risorgimento, had become essentially anti-papal, and anticlericalism had become rampant, perhaps nowhere more intensely than in Turin. It had become a matter of Turin versus Rome.

Shortly after the failed Revolution of 1848, in its attempt to secularize all government institutions, Turin declared an ideological and religious war against Rome. The Pope together with Austria, who constituted the major obstacle for Italian unity, were seen as the enemy. By the end of 1849 the popular press in Piedmont was freely indulging in diatribes against the Church.

There were disorders and demonstrations; strange sects emerged, like that which followed Grignaschi the "Enthusiast" at Viarigi.³⁴ For the first time sectarian churches were being built in Turin. Moreover, with the lifting of the censorship, anti-Catholic literature and socialist propaganda from France were being disseminated in Piedmont.

The opening salvo in Turin's war against the Papacy was the passing of the Siccardi Laws which abolished the Church courts, the right of sanctuary, and the reduction of feast days. This deliberate gesture of defiance of Rome sent the message that the "sovereign people" of Piedmont would settle Church matters in their own way. After the Siccardi Laws had established the principle that the State could do what it liked with the Church, a bill known as the Law of the Convents was introduced and passed. This piece of legislation was an onslaught upon the Religious Orders in Piedmont, which it sought to dissolve.³⁵

Such anticlerical acts created a climate in which the clergy who showed any against sign of opposition against such laws aimed at the Church were put at constant risk whether from personal harassment or physical attack. Any priest, therefore, who was known for his pro-papal position became an inevitable target. "If you are a priest," the anticlericals charged, "you obey the pope. And if you obey the pope you are against Italian unity. This makes you the enemy of your country." The focal point of reference in this struggle was not the Church's religious beliefs or practices, but its political power.

³⁴ The story of Don Antonio Grignaschi has all the ingredients of a Gothic novel. This somewhat addled apostate priest acquired a considerable following. He claimed he was a reincarnation of Jesus Christ and gave Communion with the words "*Corpus meum custodiat te ...*" He preached that as the new incarnation of Jesus Christ returned to earth he had come to found a new Church that was to supplant Catholicism. He even installed his housekeeper, a woman named 'Lana', swathed in a red garment in the sanctuary. People were encouraged to pray to the "Red Madonna" kneeling before her with lighted candles. After being dismissed from his parish by a very shaken bishop, Grignaschi visited Don Bosco at the Oratory and attempted to expound his doctrines to him. For a more detailed account of this weird religious aberration see Lemoyne, *Memorie* (English version), Vol. 4, 69f., and Vol. 5, 269f.

³⁵ Certainly the most devastating event in Turin's war against Rome was the enactment of the Law of the Convents which intended to dissolve most of the Religious Orders in Piedmont. This divisive act sent a clear signal to the pope that it intended to sever all ties with Rome and create a secular society in the Kingdom. The first clause of the Law of the Convents stated its purpose succinctly: "All Religious Orders are declared abolished, with the exception of the Sisters of Charity and those of St. Joseph, and those Orders and Communities dedicated to public instruction, preaching, or the care of the sick." As a result of this legislation 334 communities, comprising some 5,500 persons, were suppressed. Those expelled represented about two-thirds of those living in Religious Communities in the Kingdom of Piedmont.

Don Bosco never left any doubt on whose side he was on. And the fact that he sided so prominently with the pope and the hierarchy made him an inviting target for the anticlerical press. As the Roman Question intensified, and its solution was not reached in his lifetime, he was always fair game for the anticlericals' lies, outrageous charges, and character assassination. One has only to glance, therefore, at the secular press of his day to see how he paid the price for being faithful to the Pope and to his conscience.