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## An assessment of our knowledge of don Bosco and of the works about him

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## AN ASSESSMENT OF OUR KNOWLEDGE OF DON BOSCO AND OF THE WORKS ABOUT HIM

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Francesco Traniello recently wrote these words: «The "phenomenon of Don Bosco", which has often been presented in the past in a stereo-typed or paradoxical fashion, is now becoming an important field for the application and verification of new lines of research».<sup>1</sup>

Traniello, the author of important works on Antonio Rosmini and a specialist in the history of the Catholic movement, could thus express himself because he was aware of the topics and of the quality of various studies published under his editorship in the volume entitled: *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare* (1987). The authors of the individual essays, practically all of them non-Salesians, had been able to draw upon a wealth of source material and studies published by Salesians themselves in recent years.

But alongside this positive and encouraging attitude of Traniello, other impressions have been noted in the course of this past year. These are cautious and, one might say, even discordant, in so far as they make critical comments on the events celebrating the centenary of the death of Don Bosco.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps it would be premature to risk more definitive evaluations whilst we are still in this centenary year and before the euphoria has cleared, the kind of euphoria which, like it or not, surrounds such an academic congress as this. Several words of caution are in fact suggested first of all by the examination of the links it is possible to see between the perceptions that are still widespread and deeprooted and the scientific production Salesians in particular have been able to come up with from inside their own institutions.

<sup>1</sup> F. TRANIELLO, *Don Bosco e il problema della modernità*, in: *Don Bosco e le sfide della modernità*, Centro Studi «C. Trabucco», 11, Torino 1988, p. 41. The title of the booklet echoes that of J. REMY, *Le défi de la modernité: la stratégie de la hiérarchie catholique en Belgique au XIXe et XXe siècles et l'idée de chrétienté*, in «Social Compass» 34 (1987) 151-173. The entire issue of «Social Compass» contains various contributions under the title: «Les églises et la modernité en Europe occidentale».

<sup>2</sup> Cf. F. TRANIELLO (edit.), *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*, Torino, SEI 1987, and the review of it by Luciano Tamburini in «Studi Piemontesi» 17 (1988) I, 247-249.

## 1. Salesian study of Don Bosco's system of education up to the end of the second world war

One of the fields of study that has always been pursued within Salesian institutions is the system of education practised and taught by the holy founder. After the balanced and brief introductory comments of Don Francesco Cerruti on Don Bosco's pedagogical "ideas" (1883)<sup>3</sup> and after other more or less theoretical developments, there was a change of emphasis. During the period leading up to the beatification (1890-1929) studies of Don Bosco concentrated on the central pedagogical principles that he had enunciated in a conference given at Nizza (1877) («this system is based entirely upon reason, religion and kindness»)<sup>4</sup>. At the same time the Salesians stressed the specifically religious nature of this system and thus tended to distinguish themselves from other educational institutions. For example they underlined the priestly and charismatic example of Don Bosco and the use of the sacraments as the most typical and irreducible element within Salesian educational establishments.<sup>5</sup>

Between the two wars, with the Fascists in power, the Salesians and certain Catholic "elites" managed to get Don Bosco included in the pedagogy classics listed in the Italian school curricula. In the eyes of those who promoted his reputation and in the proclamations of Pius XI himself, Don Bosco was deemed to be a giant towering amongst the Catholic educators of the 19th century. He was recognised as the promoter of a complete educational system that contrasted with and counterbalanced the prevailing fascist ideal of physical prowess and the myth of force and conquest, elements which seemed to signal the start of a violent conflict and the outbreak of a new and worldwide conflagration.<sup>6</sup>

Despite opposition and critical comment the listing of Don Bosco in the ranks of pedagogists was made possible by the ambiguous climate of political compromise and the religious emphasis put on "civic virtue" in the rhetoric

<sup>3</sup> F. CERRUTI, *Le idee di Don Bosco sull'educazione e sull'insegnamento e la missione attuale della scuola. Lettere due*, S. Benigno Canavese, tip. e libr. salesiana 1886.

<sup>4</sup> *Inaugurazione del patronato S. Pietro in Nizza a Mare. Scopi del medesimo esposti dal sacerdote Giovanni Bosco con appendice sul sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, Torino, tip. e libr. salesiana 1877; cf. the critical edition edited by Pietro Braidò, in: BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 125-230.

<sup>5</sup> Concerning the emphasis placed on spiritual and religious matters cf. J.M. PRELLEZO, *Lo studio della pedagogia nella Congregazione Salesiana: alcuni momenti rilevanti (1874-1941)*, in: J.E. VECCHI and J.M. PRELLEZO (edit.), *Prassi educativa pastorale e scienze dell'educazione*, Roma, Ed. SDB 1988, pp. 61-71; Id., *Studio e riflessione pedagogica nella Congregazione Salesiana (1874-1941). Note per la storia*, in RSS 7 (1988) 35-88.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. P. STELLA, *La canonizzazione di Don Bosco tra fascismo e universalismo*, in: TRANIELLO, *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare* 359-382; Id., *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, Vol. III: *La canonizzazione (1888-1934)*, Roma, LAS 1988.

of the Fascists. However, the controversy surrounding the figure and educational thinking of Don Bosco, a debate, incidentally, fuelled by the criticism and even poisonous hostility of certain leading lay educationalists (Ernesto Codignola and others), forced Catholic experts in pedagogy and especially the Salesians to justify the claim that not only was Don Bosco an educator worthy of respect but that he was a great expert in the field of education.

The most significant work of this type is probably Don Braidò's book: *Il Sistema Preventivo di Don Bosco* (1955).<sup>7</sup> The work presents the ideas and fundamental tenets of this saintly Piedmontese priest in organic detail. From Don Braidò's analysis emerges the firm conclusion that Don Bosco's work can appropriately be defined as a "system" and that the unique originality of the system is remarkably clear in comparison with the works and ideas of those other educationalists with whom he was in contact.

This book of Don Braidò, now a classic, can be considered the climax of a whole series of studies which attempted to analyse not so much the simple evolution of Don Bosco's thought and system, but rather the internal logic and educational validity of his ideas. It is worth noting that Don Braidò's work was an act of courage and was completed not without suffering. Its publication can also be seen as an act of faith on the part of the then Rector Major, Don Renato Ziggiotti.

The work on the "preventive system" came out a few years after the death of Don Pietro Ricaldone (1870-1951), the superior whose remarkable talent for government had ruled the Salesian congregation and guided its rapid spread in the difficult period between the two wars. At that time Don Braidò was already lecturing on Don Bosco's system in the Faculty of Philosophy in the Salesian Pontifical Athenaeum. Don Ricaldone is to be admired for founding the Athenaeum, but at the same time it has to be noted that he jealously guarded his role as supreme teacher within the congregation. During those years the problem of reconciling the sense of Salesian tradition with freedom of scientific research was acute.

The Athenaeum assumed a preeminent position within the network of Salesian houses of formation. These houses were rapidly expanding all over the world in response to directives from the Sacred Congregation for Ecclesiastical Studies.

## 2. From philological and literary research to an overall reinterpretation

It was in the houses of study, especially those in Piedmont, that questions began to be asked, increasingly, about the reliability of the hagiographical writings about Don Bosco, and about the attitudes which these writings gen-

<sup>7</sup> P. BRAIDÒ, *Il sistema preventivo di Don Bosco*, preface by Eugenio Ceria, Torino, PAS 1955; 2nd edit., Zürich, PAS-Verlag 1964.

erated. The concern felt by this youthful element within the congregation tended towards scepticism when faced with the *Memorie Biografiche* of Don Bosco (the monumental work undertaken by Don Giambattista Lemoyne while Don Bosco was still alive, and gradually published in nineteen volumes between 1898 and 1939).

Don Eugenio Ceria, the author of the final nine volumes, was subjected to frank questioning concerning the precise value of the *Memorie*. For example he was asked: «Is it true that Don Lemoyne was not so much a historian as a writer who romanced about history; that in the *Memorie Biografiche* there are many facts that will not bear critical scrutiny, and that even the volumes edited by Don Ceria are not truly historical, but rather encomiastic and laudatory?».<sup>8</sup>

An urgent problem was clearly being raised, that of the credibility to be accorded to documents and testimonies which for the Salesians formed the literary foundation of their teaching and which had even been used by Popes in various allocutions. For non-Salesians, especially the laity, these concerns may have seemed marginal; but for the Salesians themselves the issues at stake were, if not absolutely essential, at least of major importance in the life of the congregation.

The first attempt at a scientific response came from France. A Salesian, Don Francis Desramaut, professor of Church history in the house of Theological studies in Lyon, made the first volume of the *Memorie Biografiche* the subject of his doctoral thesis in Theology.<sup>9</sup> His work involved a finely documented study of the moral and intellectual stature of Don Lemoyne seen as the prototype of a specific approach to oral and written sources. Don Desramaut completely exploded the rumours that Don Lemoyne had carelessly and naively destroyed the original documents used in producing the first draft of the *Memorie Biografiche*. The entire mass of material was, and still is in existence, in the Central Salesian Archives.

Moreover, Don Lemoyne had been scrupulously honest in using the testimony of other people which he had always transcribed with great care when integrating it into one coherent literary account. This was an important finding yet, even so, Don Desramaut's carefully documented work remained only a first step. Detailed research in Italy into other documentary sources, outside the Salesian circle, against which the sources used by Don Lemoyne could be compared, was way beyond the concrete possibilities of the French scholar. Although what had been written about his honesty and integrity was wholly satisfactory, research was still required into the mental approach he

<sup>8</sup> Lithographed letter of 14 pages, dated «Turin 9, III, 1953». Cf. P. STELLA, *Le ricerche su Don Bosco nel venticinquennio 1960-1985: bilancio, problemi, prospettive*, in: P. BRAIDO (edit.), *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 373-396.

<sup>9</sup> *Les Memorie I de Giovanni Battista Lemoyne. Étude d'un livre fondamental sur la jeunesse de saint Jean Bosco*, Lyon, Imprimerie de Louis-Jean de Gap, 1962.

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brought to bear on his material as he wove the narratives together. The narratives in volume I, for instance, projected a medieval view of the supernatural and this was evident even more so, in successive volumes of the *Memorie Biografiche*.

Within the limited circle of Salesian historians note was taken of the merits and limits of Don Desramaut's work. It was, however, now necessary to move on from philological and literary research to a more interpretative approach and to other modes of historical investigation. These, it was believed, would provide the basis for an overall reinterpretation of the documentary sources and of the historical figure of Don Bosco. It was essential to move on from the analysis of the individual fragments that made up the pages of the *Memorie Biografiche* to a deeper study of the intellectual climate affecting the way Don Lemoyne treated his material – sources starting from the *Memorie dell'Oratorio*. These had been written by Don Bosco himself, long after the events had taken place, and certainly without any intention of producing a carefully documented historical work. In actual fact these *Memorie* became a basic source for every subsequent hagiographer. Similar scrutiny needed to be applied to the pages of the *Bollettino Salesiano* as well as to other accounts of Don Bosco written by Salesians and other authors such as Joergensen, Huysmans, Crispolti, Vercesi, Salotti, Hugo Wast, Rodolfo Fierro and others.

As early as 1965, when publishing extracts from the *Memorie dell'Oratorio* in an anthology of Don Bosco's writings on the preventive system, Don Braido warned of the need for caution when dealing with such source material. With its selectivity and emphases and homely playful treatment of events, it aimed at confirming in Salesians the conviction that their congregation, having been willed and protected by God, was the repository of a method of education capable not only of attracting sympathy and support but of drawing hundreds and thousands of young people as well.<sup>10</sup> Implicit in Don Braido's statement was a warning that anyone reading too much into the *Memorie dell'Oratorio* would be faced with considerable difficulty.

In the climate surrounding the opening of the Second Vatican Council there was discussion in Italy regarding the continuing usefulness of the *Giovane Provveduto*, the booklet by Don Bosco which had served as the framework for practices of piety in Salesian houses for more than a century. Translated into French and Spanish at Don Bosco's instigation, and subsequently into various Asiatic languages, it had become the norm for devotional and liturgical life in Salesian oratories and schools. It had even been used for the open-air worship organised for the Onas Indians of Southern Argentina and for the Bororos tribe in the heart of the Mato Grosso.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> BOSCO, *Scritti sul sistema preventivo* 3 et ss.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. F. DESRAMAUT (edit.), *La vita di preghiera del religioso salesiano*, Lyon, 10-11 September 1968 (Colloqui sulla vita salesiana, 1), Torino-Leumann, Elle Di Ci 1969.

The issue at stake was the interpretation to be placed upon the motto launched by Don Ricaldone in his classic circular letter published in the year of Don Bosco's canonisation: *Fidelity to St. John Bosco* ("Strenna" of the Rector Major for 1935).<sup>12</sup> It was necessary to face, in a responsible fashion, the danger of harking back to the past, with its inevitable risk of rigidity and the threat of losing touch with the modern pluralistic society in which the world of the young was by now immersed. The slogan of 1934-35 had to be balanced and set against the real need for up-dating. The motto might read: «Fidelity to St. John Bosco and its risks». But it was not difficult to argue in favour of renewal.

In the *Giovane Provveduto* the Saint had collected (as is clear from detailed philological and historical research) the religious practices used in the parishes from which his boys came and to which, ideally, they would return. Obviously, it followed that fidelity to the holy founder should lead his spiritual sons to relegate the *Giovane Provveduto* to the library shelves (and not to the pulping machine!) and adopt in its place, forms of piety in line with the liturgical and ecumenical movements and, more generally speaking, in tune with the sense of the human race that, despite the cold war and sharp social conflicts, was alive and present in the world of youth.

In contrast to the inflexible, fossilised repetition of actions and words which seemed almost to produce miraculous educational results «ex opere operato», historical and philological analysis indicated two important facts. In the first place it was easy to point out how the intellectual world of the 19th century and its theological framework was subject to development and change. Don Bosco, himself, in the years when his work matured and expanded most (and when he had to engage in widespread publicity and appeals for help) had calmly dismissed the rigid and simplistic controversy with the Waldensians during the 1850's. In like fashion, the Salesians, themselves, experienced no difficulty in abandoning the rather traditional theology that can be traced to the *Cattolico istruito* (1853) and in other writings of Don Bosco which appeared before the First Vatican Council.

Equally part of a bygone world was the organisation of boys into vertical family groups under heavy supervision and with total segregation of the sexes. The opening of Salesian youth clubs to both boys and girls was a partly intuitive, partly practical solution to the needs of young people made by the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians; a response very much in line with the founder's own intuition and practical common-sense.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The official version is in the ACS (24 March 1936) 1-195, with the title: *Strenna del 1935. Fedeltà a don Bosco santo*. It was at once reprinted as a booklet, *Strenna del Rettor maggiore per il 1935. Fedeltà a don Bosco santo*, Torino, SEI 1936.

<sup>13</sup> Examples of renewal are given in the collection of studies: P. BRAIDO - L. CALONGHI, *Don Bosco educatore, oggi*, Roma, PAS 1960; 2nd revised and enlarged edition, Zürich, PAS-Verlag 1963.



In the second place it can clearly and amply be demonstrated that Don Bosco's own ability to adapt to changing circumstances was far more flexible than any rigid adherence to custom, as is evidenced by his progression from the founding of the early oratory for poor and abandoned boys to the subsequent establishing of colleges and the departure of Salesian missionaries to Latin America.

One of the fruits of these studies was a radical reinterpretation of certain significant and characteristic elements in the writing about Don Bosco: the series of prophetic dreams, his predictions of death, the extraordinary miracles (such as the temporary restoration to life of the boy «Carlo» in 1849), in short, those facts and stories that form a notable and spectacular part of the *Memorie Biografiche* as presented by Don Lemoyne and then Don Ceria.

These and other interpretative hypotheses determined the approach manifest in the two volumes published in 1968 and 1969 entitled, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*.<sup>14</sup> The appearance of the first volume reawakened, briefly, but in rather acute form, the problem of the relationship between the demands of scientific research and the need to preserve sound tradition concerning Don Bosco. In a meeting of the Provincials of Europe, the Middle East, Central Africa, the United States and Australia, held at Como in April 1968, the representatives of the German provinces expressed their concern over this new «modernistic and reckless» research into Don Bosco currently being carried out at the Salesian Athenaeum.<sup>15</sup> However, the Rector Major at that time, Don Luigi Ricceri, and his council, permitted the historical investigation to continue and to make its contribution to the reflection and renewal required by Vatican II.

A positive outcome was reached with the creation in 1973 of a «Centro Studi Don Bosco» at the Athenaeum which was by now recognised by the Holy See as the Salesian Pontifical University, and finally, with the establishment in December 1981 of the «Istituto Storico Salesiano» attached to the Generalate in Rome. Since then studies of Don Bosco and his work have multiplied and maintained a high scientific level both at the U.P.S. and elsewhere in the Salesian world.

As a result of this openness to new methods of research and of new lines of historiography devoted to the part played by religion within society and also as a result of debate within the Salesian congregation concerning their response to poverty in various parts of the world, there appeared in 1980 a volume entitled: *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale: 1815-1870* (1980).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, Vol. I: *Vita e opere*, Zürich, PAS-Verlag 1968; Vol. II: *Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*, ibid. 1969; 2nd edition Roma, LAS 1979-1981.

<sup>15</sup> Meeting of the Salesian provincials of Europe, the Middle East, Central Africa, United States, Australia. *Atti* (Como, 16-23 April 1968), Torino (lithographed), E. Gili 1968, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Roma, LAS 1980.

Don Bosco is placed – in the book's treatment of the transition from Restoration to liberal society's scheme of privilege and assistance – amongst those who look for financial and popular support for their own undertakings from sources that do not rely essentially for funds on the interest provided by investing inherited capital. When all is said and done, Don Bosco is presented as though he were an independent entrepreneur in the educational and philanthropic fields within the liberal concepts of the economy and society. The book clearly reveals a less than total familiarity with statistical techniques and a somewhat shaky competence in the field of the specific history of economics and economic doctrines. Nevertheless, the work as a whole is the fruit of original study and opens up interesting avenues for research into the world of peasant existence and its techniques.

The circle of Salesian scholars trained mainly in the humanities, philosophy and theology appeared to be still somewhat unprepared and ill-equipped for research of this kind. Consequently, the most satisfactory contributions in recent years have been within the field of philological research or the history of ethics, politics, and education.

A detailed study of the works on Don Bosco published by Salesians in recent years would lead us far from our theme. One contribution worth mentioning is that of Don Francesco Motto on the part played by Don Bosco in the nomination of Italian bishops after 1865; and on the steps he took, after the «Law of Guarantees» of 1871, to have the royal *exequatur* granted to the bishops relative to the temporal goods of their individual dioceses.<sup>17</sup>

These essays of Don Motto, the fruit of dedicated research in the Vatican Secret Archives as well as in public and private Italian archives, highlight the figure of Don Bosco in a story which is, to tell the truth, a little exaggerated, since, as far as can be seen, Don Bosco played no part, or a very limited part, in the negotiations concerning episcopal nominations for the diocesan sees stretching from Lombardy and Veneto to the provinces of Naples and Puglia.

Don Bosco's involvement in matters concerning the bishops of Piedmont and Liguria can be regarded as of major importance in relation to the development of his educational work. Until that time, Don Bosco's name had cropped up sporadically in non-Piedmontese Catholic papers as one of several beneficent and zealous priests at work throughout Italy. But whilst negotiations over the *exequatur* were going on, his name suddenly became surprisingly prominent as that of a person who had unusual access to government circles and to the Holy See. It appears that during those years Don Bosco experienced a growing awareness that his vocation was not limited

<sup>17</sup> F. MOTTO, *La mediazione di Don Bosco fra Santa Sede e Governo per la concessione degli Exequatur ai Vescovi d'Italia (1872-1874)* (Piccola Biblioteca dell'Istituto Storico Salesiano, 7), Roma, LAS 1987.

merely to Piedmont but also embraced wider issues within society and within the Church. Shortly after his interventions into the *exequatur* issue the first Salesian missionary expeditions were made to South America followed closely by foundations in France and Spain.

If we take note of the suggestions recently made by Don Braidò it seems that the articles and pamphlets on Don Bosco and his remarkable educational method which appeared in France and Italy during the 1870s induced Don Bosco to try to formulate the thinking behind what, for better or worse, he called: «The Preventive System in the Education of Youth». Actually, he himself, together with the more astute of his spiritual sons (as has been pointed out by Don José Prellezo) varied the loose formulas of his theory and at times went beyond them.<sup>18</sup>

Alongside the investigations of Don Motto and the contributions of Don Braidò and Don Prellezo one may single out the doctoral dissertation of Don Jacques Schepens on the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist in Don Bosco's writings.<sup>19</sup> Here again is a detailed examination of published and unpublished material revealing a progression from a rigorous to a more benign approach.

One might, perhaps, have wished for a fuller examination of the points of reference for Don Bosco's activities and religious thinking; in other words, greater attention to the mentality and behaviour not only of young people, but also of the wider social groups into which the work and the message of Don Bosco penetrated. Therefore, it might have been valuable to examine other sources in addition to those actually used.<sup>20</sup> The rite of confession, for example, could have been explored in the religiosity that gradually centred around the sanctuary of Mary, Help of Christians, i.e. around a centre of cult that linked city and surrounding district, Don Bosco's educational institutions and circuits of popular cult.

Research like that of Don Motto and Don Schepens deepened and extended awareness of various aspects and stages of Don Bosco's life, within

<sup>18</sup> J.M. PRELLEZO, *Il sistema preventivo riletto dai primi salesiani*, in: C. NANNI (edit.), *Don Bosco e la sua esperienza pedagogica: eredità, contesti, sviluppi, risonanze*. Atti del 5° Seminario di «Orientamenti Pedagogici» (Venezia-Cini 3-5 ottobre 1988), Roma, LAS 1989, pp. 40-61.

<sup>19</sup> J. SCHEPENS, *L'activité littéraire de Don Bosco au sujet de la pénitence et de l'eucharistie*, in «Salesianum» 50 (1988) 9-50.

<sup>20</sup> On the use of confession and the behavior of the boys, cf., for example, the testimony of Giovanni Roda, who was called as an «ex officio» witness in the process of beatification of Dominic Savio in October, 1916: «Sacra Rituum Congregatio e.mo ac rev.mo domino cardinali Vincentio Vannutelli Relatore. Asten. et Taurinen. Beatificationis et canonizationis servi Dei Dominici Savio adolescentis laici alumni oratorii salesiani. Positio super virtutibus, Romae, typ. Guerra et Mirri (1930): *Summarium super dubio: An constet de virtutibus theologalibus fide, spe et charitate...*, p. 5. The episode is reported more concisely by M. MOLINERIS, *Nuova vita di Domenico Savio*, Colle Don Bosco, Istituto Salesiano 1974, p. 134. Mention is also made of it in the study by A. CAVIGLIA, *Savio Domenico e don Bosco*, in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di Don Bosco*, IV, Torino, SEI 1943, p. 146.

the context of his times. Other recent investigations have included an examination of the spread of Salesian work after the founder's death in the light of the popularly cultivated image of the saint. Particularly interesting in this respect are some of the footnotes made by Don Braido in his edition of Don Lemoyne's letters, and also the ideas forwarded by Don José M. PELLEZO in his study of the reaction of early Salesians to Don Bosco's first formulation of his preventive system.<sup>21</sup>

Don Braido notes that Don Lemoyne (who was already a priest when he joined the Salesians) tended, when collecting material about Don Bosco, to have a preference for whatever seemed prodigious, miraculous or marked by some sign of divine intervention. Don Lemoyne, on the one hand, was a precise chronicler of the deeds and utterances of the man whom he loved as a spiritual father; but on the other hand, he was an avid searcher for the unusual. He was particularly diligent in seeking out any written record of phenomena which Don Bosco described as dreams, when he was giving his evening talks to the boys gathered at Valdocco. Things which Don Bosco narrated as parables, dreams or day-dreams, depending on the interpretation put upon them by his audience, were, for Don Lemoyne, a faithful account of divine revelation.

Don Cerruti was another who considered that Don Bosco's dreams were supernatural events but he chose to direct his attention to the practical organisation of the system of education in the Oratory and other Salesian houses. He is amongst those within the group of Don Bosco's most faithful collaborators who insist most that the fundamentals of the educative system are best translated in a reasonableness and rationality in the rapport between educators and young people, in a religiousness that is balanced and centred on essentials, in a charity understood in fact as daily and intelligent dedication to one's own proper role as educator. When Don Cerruti provided depositions for the process of the beatification of Don Bosco and later, for that of his former fellow-pupil, Dominic Savio, put more emphasis on the virtues shown in the lives of the two servants of God as signs of supernatural gifts than on the spectacular nature of prodigious happenings.

Don Bosco made Don Cerruti one of the directors of Salesian work. First, he was appointed rector of the municipal college at Alassio, and provincial of the Ligurian province, and then finally, General Councillor in charge of studies. Don Lemoyne, after several jobs as rector, finally was given the more congenial duty of secretary to the Superior Chapter with plenty of time to write short plays and «Letture Cattoliche», to provide poems for special occasions and to act as historian of the congregation.

<sup>21</sup> P. BRAIDO and R. ARENAL LLATA, *Don Giovanni Battista Lemoyne attraverso 20 lettere a don Michele Rua*, in RSS 7 (1988) 89-170; also don PELLEZO in the articles quoted above in note 5.

The prominence acquired by dreams and miracles in the *Memorie Biografiche* is due to Don Lemoyne's spiritual tendencies. He presented the dreams as if each was a heavenly revelation of hidden things, whether present or to come. To him (but already before him to Don Bosco) is ascribed the oral and literary tradition which eventually created in the Salesians from the end of the 19th century onwards the idea, somewhat millennialist and apocalyptic, that their expansion throughout the world, their settling in definite places, was the fulfilment of a future seen by Don Bosco himself in his dreams; seen – wrote Capuchin cardinal Vivés y Tuto, enthusiastic cardinal promoter of the cause of Don Bosco's beatification at the beginning of this century – «as if in a cinematograph».<sup>22</sup> Don Cerruti on the contrary is the exponent of an attitude that is more discreet, but not less effective, that leads to the Salesian educative work being given a civil, and what might be called a more universally acceptable, sense.

Recent historical studies by Salesians are moving towards a reinterpretation of our understanding of Don Bosco. Emphasis is being placed on sources outside the framework of the *Memorie Biografiche*. At the same time there is an acceptance of the value of the nineteen volumes of this work as a fundamental reference source. Their importance is irrefutable containing, as they do, the impressions of those who saw and heard Don Bosco first-hand.

Besides this plethora of studies which we have so sketchily presented here, there are many others of great interest written by Salesians from all over the world: works by Don Francis Desramaut, Don Cajetano Bruno, Don Ramón Alberdi, Don Jesús Guerra, Don Jesús Borrego, Don Natale Cerrato, Don Reinhold Weinschenk, Don Antonio Ferreira da Silva. There are also studies by Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: Sister Giselda Capetti, Sister Cecilia Romero, Sister Maria Esther Posada, Sister Piera Caviglià, Sister Anita Deleidi, together with many other works by members of both congregations.

Alongside all these historical studies, and sometimes connected with them, one must list others which aim at a deeper, less time-conditioned understanding of Don Bosco's personality. Amongst these works which have, as their point of departure, varied philosophical, psychological and psychoanalytical positions, a few merit special attention. These include a long essay by Don Sabino Palumbieri and articles by Don Bruno Bellerate, Don Pio Scilligo and Don Xavier Thévenot.<sup>23</sup>

In reviewing this series of Salesian studies and the modes of perception implied in them and whilst attempting to analyse them more clearly, the investigator is led to the conclusion that all this work is in response to ques-

<sup>22</sup> Cf. BS 41 (1917) 182, and STELLA, *Don Bosco* III 146.

<sup>23</sup> For further information see recent years of the «Salesianum», «Orientamenti Pedagogici», «Rivista di scienze dell'educazione», RSS.

tions raised within the domestic situation of the Salesian congregation itself, and that of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: in short the studies originate within the nucleus of people who remember and especially venerate Don Bosco.

The observations of Francesco Traniello, the starting point of this study, are certainly the fruit of scholarly sensitivity, but even so, perhaps, generous and indulgent when it is remembered that very few Salesians have, so far, shared in the questioning undertaken by the scientific world at large: a world which endeavours to verify and analyze all that relates to the «case of Don Bosco».

A few Salesian scholars have adopted cognitive models and scientific research techniques which have been validated (though some methods are still under review). Some examples are: the examination of the mentality and the religious approach underlying the «*Annales*», and other works; the use of cultural anthropology; the recourse to models and methods proper to economic and social history; the acceptance of psychoanalytical, philosophical and educational hypotheses (such as an analysis of the preventive system using Lacan's models; an examination of Don Bosco's personality based on the personalistic approaches or using the interpretative theories of Freud or Lévi-Strauss).

It may be useful to question the nature of these efforts which are possibly merely random and sporadic rather than an integral part of a concentrated project. One is even more cautious the more one reflects on the difficulties still faced by the Salesian Historical Institute in attracting a steady flow of young recruits. The Don Bosco Studies Centre within the UPS, in its turn, manages somehow to carry out its teaching tasks; but – and this is a sign of how fragile it is – it is unable to complete the anastatic reprint of Don Bosco's writings begun in 1976-77 with the series of books and pamphlets. There are, of course, technical problems, but more importantly there is no one able to ensure that the production line is maintained between the initiators of scientific projects (left like generals without an army) and the technical and editorial staff.

And as this year advances, the continued affection for the *Memorie* makes for an enthusiastic acceptance of the *golden legends*; a continued recalling of hagiographic legends (as seen in the film done recently or in books and conferences). Like a huge wave of foam, it submerges the few rocky clusters historic research has managed to place here and there in the last thirty years. It shows the gap, not yet totally overcome, between popular Salesian culture – that you spend yourself as in the past working hard for young people – and scientific research.

### 3. Recent studies and perceptions amongst non-Salesians

Given the above situation, one cannot expect from non-Salesian writers anything more than limited essays, general sketches, and research restricted to particular areas. So, for example, Francesco Traniello has examined the saint's *Storia d'Italia*; Giacomo Dacquino has written on the psychology of Don Bosco; Stefano Pivato has a study on the popular writings and playlets, while Maria Luisa Trebiliani has examined the place of women in Don Bosco's thought and educational experience. There have also been stimulating comments from Piero Bairati on «Salesian culture» and industrial society between the 19th century and the fascist era.<sup>24</sup>

Sergio Quinzio, in an essay published in 1986, re-opened discussion of Don Bosco's place in the history of Catholic spirituality and of socially involved Catholicism.<sup>25</sup>

Speaking at a conference in 1987 on «Christians and Culture in Turin», Franco Bolgiani dealt with «Salesian» culture within the broader framework of the dominant cultures that were more rooted and more characteristic (of the city). A major dominant culture would have been that connected with the emergence of the house of Savoy from the mid 1500's to the unification of Italy, what Bolgiani describes as a «military culture». This was followed, especially after the launching of the automobile industry, by the shaping influence of an «industrial culture», with the «Fiat» works acting as a kind of temple and centre-point of reference dominating the thought and way of life of the people of Turin.

At the same time a more or less sophisticated lay culture emerged exerting its own peculiar influence; this was solidly rooted in the university world and its ideas were spread by the more active and prosperous «avant-garde» publishing houses. According to Bolgiani, Catholic culture, on the whole, was listless, repetitive and conformist throughout the whole of the period from Trent to the *Risorgimento*, after which it was enfeebled and closed in on itself, eventually becoming a kind of sub-culture. Bolgiani argued that it was easy to understand how Salesian culture was able to flourish in this particular ecclesiastical and Catholic environment. Salesian culture grew because it met the needs of youth for education and recreation; it provided leisure activities and forms of worship for boys of simple rustic background who had no aspirations towards a scientific formation. A culture such as this is worth rediscovering today, but at that time appeared wholly irrelevant in a lay culture that was positivistic or idealist, liberal or extreme left-wing socialist. Salesian

<sup>24</sup> G. DACQUINO, *Psicologia di don Bosco*, Torino, SEI 1988; the other essays are in the volume edited by TRANIELLO, *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare* (cf. above, note 2).

<sup>25</sup> S. QUINZIO, *Domande sulla santità. Don Bosco, Cafasso, Cottolengo*, Torino, Ed. Gruppo Abele 1986.



culture was fatally open to the risk of exploitation by the dominant industrial culture for its own ends.<sup>26</sup>

This conference on *Cristiani e cultura a Torino* was held at the Salesian Institute at Via Caboto 27, the Turin branch of the Theology Faculty of the UPS. Amongst Bolgiani's audience there were, besides the professors and students of the university, secular priests and laymen who had been pupils of Salesian oratories and colleges. Their reactions were lively.

One of those who spoke up was the Hon. Armando Sabatini (b. 1908) a former member of the Committee for National Liberation (formed at the «Fiat» works after 8th September 1943) and also a former member of Parliament. Both before and after the fall of Fascism he was a most loyal member of the Salesian oratory at Via Caboto, as was the Hon. Carlo Donat Cattin (b. 1919). According to Sabatini the picture drawn by Bolgiani was quite inadequate. The «culture» which the latter had described was not one which either Sabatini or other past pupils could recognise. The oratory had nourished his religious faith and that of many others; the debates on philosophical and social topics led by professors from the Salesian Athenaeum (such as Don Gemmellaro and Don Mattai) had been, in his view, sound and enriching and valued on account of their speculative and ideological structure by philosophers with idealist and spiritual leanings such as Augusto Guzzo.

But were the Oratory experiences related by Sabatini only particular limited examples, or should they be seen as indicative of a cultural reality that was more complex, more articulated and less closed than what was suggested by professor Bolgiani's necessarily schematic and deliberately provocative exposition? For example, he made no mention of Salesians like Don Paolo Ubaldi, who, between 1924 and 1934 had been the first professor of Christian Greek and Latin literature in an Italian university (the Catholic University of Milan); he was also the founder of the *Corona Patrum Salesiana*, published by the S.E.I. (the Salesian publishing house in Turin), he was an outstanding teacher who was venerated as such by no less a person than Michele Pellegrino, the Cardinal Archbishop of Turin during the Vatican Council and immediately afterwards.<sup>27</sup> Bolgiani also failed to mention that the S.E.I. was one of the first publishing houses in Italy to publish the works of Jacques Maritain.<sup>28</sup>

The picture painted by Bolgiani is harsh and perhaps irreverent, and the product of an «elitist» approach. Nevertheless, it forced people to reflect on

<sup>26</sup> E. BOLGIANI, *Proposte di lettura del retroterra storico*, in: *Cristiani e cultura a Torino. Atti del convegno Torino, 3-5 Aprile 1987*, Milano, Angeli 1988, pp. 34-53.

<sup>27</sup> M. PELLEGRINO, *Un cinquantennio di studi patristici in Italia*, in «La Scuola cattolica» 80 (1952) 424-452 (especially pp. 430 et ss. and 450).

<sup>28</sup> J. MARITAIN, *Introduzione generale alla filosofia*, trans. by Antonio COJAZZI, Torino, SEI 1922; further editions in 1926, 1934, 1938, 1946.



the features of the ecclesiastical and Catholic world within which the Salesians had worked, while at the same time seeking to remain faithful to their charismatic and saintly founder.

Pietro Scoppola is an expert on contemporary history and a specialist on the political consequences of modernism in Italy. Within the limits extended to him he used this expertise to produce an important lecture delivered in Turin to mark the opening of this centenary year. He tackled the two connected themes of Don Bosco the «social saint» and Don Bosco the «modern saint». As his exposition unfolds one can trace the varied assessments of the theological and intellectual thought of Don Bosco and of his apologetic and spiritual writings. These can all be seen to be conditioned by a conservative Catholic tradition fighting for survival. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate or overlook Don Bosco's clear awareness of the essentials of Christianity and their development.

This awareness was expressed in forms that Don Bosco sought to refine and relate to the world about him, especially as he matured and as his experience widened. Somewhat paradoxically it could be said (and this may be a subject for future debate) that Don Bosco's modernity lies in the fact that while he clung to Christian essentials expressed in simple, old-fashioned, catechism formulas, he was able to make shrewd organisational decisions in matters relating to the needs of youth and their technical education.<sup>29</sup>

Norberto Bobbio has commented, somewhat tartly, that expressions like «the spirit of reform» and «modern» ought to be banned because they have become vague and ambiguous, especially in the jargon used by politicians.<sup>30</sup> Bobbio was reacting to an historical study by Giovanni Aliberti on the modernisation of the Italian south during the Napoleonic reforms. Aliberti's reply was that terms like «reform» and «reformism» are unavoidable in writing history and have a clearly defined meaning when applied to the 18th century. As such they are well understood by all students of history. Still less can one dispense with the word «modern» when examining periods of history and the structural changes that occur within them.<sup>31</sup> In actual fact that is precisely the kind of legitimate use that Bobbio was advocating, a consistent and un-

<sup>29</sup> P. SCOPPOLA, *Don Bosco nella storia civile*, in: *Don Bosco e le sfide della modernità* 7-20. The question of Don Bosco's modernity is also touched on by Piero BAIRATI in his essay: *Cultura salesiana e società industriale*, in: TRANIELLO, *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare* 351-355. Admittedly we are dealing with readings that are open to discussion. Other than the articles in «Social Compass» 1987, already mentioned, there are contributions by W. REINHARD, *Gegenreformation als Modernisierung. Prolegomena zu einer Theorie des konfessionellen Zeitalter*, in: «Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte» 68 (1977) 226-252; J. HERF, *Il modernismo reazionario. Tecnologia, cultura e politica nella Germania di Weimar e del Terzo Reich*, Bologna, Il Mulino 1988; J.A. SCHMECHEN, *The Victorians, the Historians and the Idea of Modernism*, in «American Historical Review» 93 (1988) 287-316.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. The Turin newspaper «La Stampa», Sunday, 8th February 1987.

<sup>31</sup> G. ALIBERTI, *Sistema sociopolitico ed organizzazione dello stato nel Mezzogiorno napoleonico*, in «Ricerche di storia sociale e religiosa» 17 (1988), n. 33, 25-43.

ambiguous use of mental tools and a correct use of models in the interpretation of history. This is exactly the case with John Bosco, as is exemplified by a lecture given at Florence by another contemporary Catholic historian during the centenary year.<sup>32</sup>

Amongst non-Salesian scholars who have spoken on Don Bosco during this year educationalists and historians of education seem to merit special attention. They have pointed out, not so much the rudimentary and unsystematic nature of the formulations of the «preventive system» in 1877, as the insights that shaped their development and, linked with them, the part played by the use of free-time and games in Don Bosco's educational experience, both in the spontaneous public gathering of youth in oratories and in the fairly uninhibited gatherings of the Salesian college (even if the latter were not entirely free of constricting or even repressive elements), where playground games were an important feature in its life and a healthy safety-valve as well.<sup>33</sup> Hypotheses of this kind grasp things correctly, in the sense that they effectively lead to his work in the world of youth being seen as to where Don Bosco's modernity really lies; and this makes it opportune and necessary to explore, precisely, this world in a more integral way, to research the psychological and social movements of that period.

As I have had occasion to point out and repeat, and as is well known anyway amongst demographic and social history scholars, youth, as a separate social class, is per se an element of modernity of the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>34</sup>

Don Bosco could be called a modern saint in that he is one of the handful of people who, still working within the existing religious and political structures, had the daring and ability to come up with his own proposal of works and activities better suited to the psychology of the times, to the aspirations of life, and in tune with the ideals cherished by young people in places which previously had been very religious, and then had become more «modern», in the sense that they were more and more characterised by geographic and social mobility in political structures that were no longer along confession lines.

If one were to attempt a sweeping review of the part played by Christianity in history from the age of Constantine down to what has been called the neo-Constantinian age, Don Bosco would be grouped with those Catholics dedicated to social improvement («to create good Christians and honest

<sup>32</sup> M. GUASCO, *Don Bosco nella storia religiosa del suo tempo*, in: *Don Bosco e le sfide della modernità* 21-38.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. in particular the acts of the study seminar held at Venice from 3rd to 5th October, 1988. See above, note 18.

<sup>34</sup> STELLA, *La canonizzazione di don Bosco tra fascismo e universalismo* 368 et ss.; ID., *Don Bosco III* 278; ID., *Lo studio e gli studi su don Bosco e sul suo pensiero pedagogico-educativo: problemi e prospettive*, in VECCHI - PRELLEZO, *Prassi educativa pastorale e scienze dell'educazione* 26.

citizens») during the period stretching from the «Amicizia Cattolica» down to the years that produced *Rerum Novarum*. Within that group he would stand out for his labours on behalf of the sons of the emerging working class. His great dream was that boys, educated according to the system that he himself practised, would increasingly fill the world with Salesian co-operators, in other words with ever-growing numbers of good Christians and honest citizens.

It is hoped that these fragmentary reflections of mine will be put into better perspective as our conference progresses and these themes developed by other contributors into a more carefully orchestrated whole.