

I. EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES IN THE SCHOOL AND FAMILY SETTING (1855)

*The “document that properly begins the representation of Don Bosco’s real experience as an educator is The Sway of a Good Upbringing. Here we find the Director of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales as catechist, counsellor and confidant of young Peter”, even if he “is in the shade and not fully defined.”*⁴

Well-known and authoritative Salesian scholar, Pietro Stella, in the passage just transcribed, refers to the account published in the “Catholic Readings” in 1855⁵. It is precisely with this document, The Sway of a Good Upbringing, with its historical and biographical background, that we have decided to open this second part regarding Don Bosco’s educational experience.

An “exemplary child” called Peter, and “a model mother” are the main characters in the story. The work consists of a popular pedagogical story—“A curious contemporary episode” as the subtitle of the document puts it—which particularly reflects the narrator’s concerns given the social and political circumstances of his time where religion is increasingly less recognised as the essential basis for education and where traditional religious practices are being questioned more and more⁶.

⁴ Pietro STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Volume secondo. *Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*. Seconda edizione riveduta dall’autore. Roma, LAS 1981, p. 446; cf. P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani ...*, I, pp. 553-555.

⁵ Other editions of: *La forza della buona educazione. Narrazione contemporanea*. Roma, nella tipografia Forense 1860; *Pietro ossia La forza della buona educazione. Curioso episodio contemporaneo, pel Sac. Giovanni Bosco*. Torino, tipografia e Libreria Salesiana 1885. There are no significant variations in the content of the 1860 edition; some stand out in the 1885 edition though: Don Bosco’s introduction, “A word to the reader”, is substituted by another six signed by an anonymous “Publisher”. They are addressed to the “Worker reader”, and say: “The author is D. Bosco, sincere friend of every worker whom you should get to know and love as a benefactor and father” (p. vi). The work was translated into French, German and Spanish: (Barcelona, Librería Salesiana 1951).

⁶ Jacques SCHEPENS, “*La forza della buona educazione*”. *Etude d’un écrit de don Bosco*, in José Manuel PRELLEZO (ed.), *L’impegno dell’educare. Studi in onore di Pietro Braido* promoted by the Faculty of Education. Roma, LAS 1991, pp. 417-433.

The importance of education [it is best understood as 'upbringing' in English, since Peter never did any formal schooling] in the family emerges in the circumstance mentioned in this story, "especially at a tender age." The important pedagogical elements here are: duty, study, cheerfulness, piety.

Don Bosco notes in his introduction that he does not intend to offer the reader a completely original presentation: "This book," he states "was modelled on one entitled: Un mari comme il y en a beaucoup, une femme comme il y en a peu, meaning: A husband like many others: a wife like few others."⁷ But Don Bosco goes on telling us "honestly ... that the facts recounted here really happened; I myself saw or heard almost all of them" and he adds: "Here we will see the sway that a good upbringing has on a child's future; we will see a model mother, an exemplary child. A mother who amidst a thousand difficulties succeeds in giving her child the best upbringing, and leads a wayward husband back to the straight and narrow path. A child who responds to the maternal concerns of his affectionate mother ... and at the same time becomes the support of his family, a model for his peers."

The presentation of the facts closes with a keen appeal to parents, insisting on their role in good upbringing including with a view to social transformation: "if children are raised well this growing generation will love order and work "In short," Don Bosco concludes "we will have better times, children who will be an honour to their country, the support of their families as well as being to the glory and honour of their religion."⁸

⁷ P. Stella has documented the coincidences we find between *The Sway of a Good Upbringing* and various texts drawn from: *Un mari comme il y en a beaucoup, une femme comme il y en a peu...*, published in Caen-Paris, in 1853 (cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica...*, II, p. 191).

⁸ We note some lack of precision in numbering the chapters and this has been corrected by the editor of this edition, bearing in mind subsequent editions of the document.

147. The Sway of a Good Upbringing. A Curious Contemporary Episode

Critical ed. in *La forza della buona educazione. Curioso episodio contemporaneo* per cura del
Sac. Bosco Giovanni. Torino, Tipografia Paravia e Comp. 1855.

A Word to the Reader

The reader may ask if this episode contains true or credible facts, to which I can honestly answer that the facts recounted here really happened; I myself saw or heard almost all of them. Simply note that this book was modelled on one entitled: *Un mari comme il y en a beaucoup, une femme comme il y en a peu* that is: a husband like many others: a wife like few others. I cannot fill out the story completely because Peter, to whom the facts refer, is still alive. This has meant I needed to avoid some names and places so that individuals are not identified. I have also thought it better to remain silent about some things that would be of great interest, for the sole motive that they are presented in a way that contains the supernatural and this could give rise to inappropriate criticism.

Here we will see the sway that a good upbringing has on a child's future. We will see a model mother, an exemplary child; a mother who succeeds amidst a thousand difficulties in giving her child the best upbringing, and leads a wayward husband back to the straight and narrow path; a child who responds to the maternal concerns of his affectionate mother; a child whom we can say was the instrument of Divine Providence in leading his father back to religion and who at the same time becomes the support of his family, a model for his peers, a model of courage and resignation for every faithful Christian.

Chapter 1. The Match Factory

John: "Really, wife, I am beginning to get annoyed at seeing Peter slouching on the streets, and me supporting him while he is doing nothing. We have four children, this one is the oldest at eight years of age and we need to put him to work. If he is unable to do anything else, let's put him in the Match factory run by Mrs Boccardi. He won't earn much that's for sure because he is

so young, but even if he brings just a handful of coins home a week that will be nice.”

Wife: “That’s true, John, with four boys ... I understand that it begins to be a burden, since you have to provide for everyone with your own work. But, my husband, I think it would be better to send him off to school for a time with the Brothers⁹ who would teach him to read, write and pray, since he is still very young and unable to do work that might be of any great use. That would certainly be better than putting him in a match factory where there’s a crowd of unruly kids who will give him bad example and bad advice.”

John: “Quiet! You’re always going on about bad example. What on earth can boys get up to or say that is bad at that age? So it’s clear then; I want to put him to work with Mrs Boccardi.”

Wife: “But let’s at least try another factory where there are none, or at least fewer, of these types like the ones that work in the factory you are speaking of. Because we want to preserve this lad of ours from all kinds of bad encounters so he can keep the good principles I have tried to give him until now.”

John: “That’s enough! Leave me in peace about your principles; if he doesn’t go to Mrs Boccardi he will only earn about twelve *soldi* a week, and there he can earn at least eighteen, and with that ...”

Wife: “If I could just say one thing, not to contradict you, but it seems reasonable to get him to learn now. I really want him to learn to read, write and do at least some arithmetic. When he is able to take up an honourable profession he will need to know these things. At the same time he could learn his catechism and prepare for his First Communion and ...”

John: “The problem is solved. He will do what I did; I didn’t go to school and I grew up big and strong like the others. Maybe it’s true that I know

⁹ Certainly a reference to the schools in Turin run by the Brothers of the Christian Schools (de La Salle Brothers), a Congregation founded by St John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719); cf. general introduction to this volume and Carlo VERRI, *I Fratelli delle Scuole Cristiane e la storia della scuola in Piemonte*. Como, Ediz. Sussidi 1948.

nothing and I am mortified when everyone else races off to read a placard and I have to ask them to explain it to me; if someone asks me what was pasted up there I can't even say a thing. Be that as it may, I have to work Sundays to ensure I can have an extra little something on Mondays, and if my boy can earn eighteen *soldi*, you can make your polenta and I can have my little extra. So go to it, Peter, get your clogs on, get on the road and go to work."

Wife: "Since that's what you want, at least let me take him there and I will have a word with his employer."

The poor mother, sighing deeply, washed the lad's face and taking his arm she sat him on her knees. "Poor boy," she told him "you need to be obedient to your father and your mother. At your tender age we have to ask you to earn your share of your nourishment. Poor boy! But be patient: we are in wretched circumstances and that's why, as small as you are, you need to go off and work. I will find some workmates of your own age for you but always keep in mind the good advice I have given you. I am sure you know, Peter dear, that you need to love God and obey him and never offend him. If your friends put bad ideas to you, you don't need to reply. If they give you bad advice like slacking off work, taking someone else's things, disobeying your parents, don't stop and listen to them. Make sure, Peter, to tell me each evening what your friends said to you during the day. That way I can give you good advice about what you should do and what you must avoid. Do everything your employers ask you and be courteous to your friends; if someone hits you, don't hit back, because you know that God does not want that.

Work diligently, offer up your little sufferings to the good Jesus; think of him and the Virgin Mary from time to time; pray often to this good Mother of ours to obtain the graces you need. And pray too for your poor father. I am really sorry that he told you in your presence why he wants to send you to work so young, that he is counting on your work so he can have a better time at the tavern - that is really such a sad thought!"

After this discussion, and with anguished heart, the good mother took the boy by the hand and led him off to the match factory. She climbed up to the third floor on a steep and partly obscured staircase. She opened the second

door on the right, went in and said: "Good morning, Mrs Boccardi, here is an eight year old boy; could you place him with some of your working lads of the same age?"

Mrs Boccardi: "So here you are, my lad. What would you like to do? To be honest your dad told me you were not very big, but you are big enough for the job I want to give you. So relax, mother, he will do the same as the others."

Mother: "I recommend to you, Mrs Boccardi, if he ever does something wrong, do not fail to let me know, please; and please see that he does not get caught up in indecent conversations with the other boys."

Mrs Boccardi: "Away with you—stop being difficult! Don't worry about it. Your boy will be no worse than the others."

That kind of talk would give you a rather bad impression of the factory where the mother had placed her son. But she kept all her sad thoughts to herself and put all her trust in God, her only hope. How lucky she was that she found a balm in religion that could ease the pain she felt in her heart!

Now let's spend a moment inside the match factory.

A boy: "Look, look at that boy over there! Look how clean he is! Luxury, eh? So well washed, and just look at the handkerchief in his suit pocket! His collar covers half his face!"

Another boy. "Hey! Have you got the tools our father Adam used? Give them to me; I'd like to have some fun. Hey, let me see your handkerchief! You're crying! Why?"

Yet another: "They are just having fun, don't take any notice of what they say. Come here. If someone asks you, tell them that I will be showing you what work you have to do."

The latter who spoke to him this way was the oldest in the group. Reassured a little, Peter went and sat near his protector and Mrs Boccardi brought him the things he had to work on. He hurriedly set to work so he could earn the eighteen *soldi* his father was expecting.

Peter was a happy kind of character and he soon established an easy friendship with the other boys so that conversations got very lively each day and they spoke about many things.

Friend: "What does your father do, Peter?"

Peter: "My father is a carpenter, and yours?"

Friend: "Mine is a labourer. Do you have good fun on Sundays?"

Peter: "Yes, I have fun. I go to Mass with my mother, then Vespers, then afterwards I go for a walk with my brothers."

Friend: "You go to Mass and Vespers, you ... well you ought to see how much more fun I have. My mother says: 'Off to Mass' and I say 'Yes mum I'm going.' Then when I get to the church door I go inside then run out the other door, then I go and play tops with my friends. On Sunday you can come with us, Peter, right?"

Peter: "No that won't be possible because my mother comes with me and then even when she doesn't come I know that one should go to Mass every Sunday."

Friend: "Well, come at least while they are singing Vespers. You'll see how much fun we have."

Peter: "Even that's impossible; my mother doesn't always come with me but she tells me to be there and I obey her because she tells me that disobeying our parents is displeasing to God himself."

Friend: "Then you are a hypocrite if you don't want to come; you can go to ..."

And despite the frequent insistence of his young workmates, Peter remained unbending, and for two years kept on the straight and narrow path that his mother had always pointed out to him. That is much to his credit, but he had always had such great confidence in his mother; every day he told her what his workmates had said to him. His mother gave him good advice, they prayed together asking for God's grace and God blessed the boy. He was able to be steadfast in the face of his work mates' threats and inducements.

Chapter 2. Preparations

Things went on like this for two years. Peter by now was earning twenty four *soldi* instead of eighteen. Mrs Boccardi was happy with him, his father benefited from receiving twenty four *soldi* a week and knew how to spend the lot in an hour! But when it came time for his First Communion, his good mother found herself with more problems. His father had promised to leave this year free so his wife could attend to Peter's upbringing. But what did he do? His taste for the tavern had become more overpowering than ever, the other children were getting older, expenses were on the increase and none of the other children was earning a cent. "Wife," John said, "You'll need to be patient, because Peter has to keep working."

Wife: "And what about his First Communion?"

John: "Do what you can for his First Communion."

Wife: "But how can he possibly learn his catechism and go to church to hear explanations?"

John: "Do what you like about it but I have decided that he continues working. So off you go Peter, quickly. Get to work."

The poor mother just gave a deep sigh; the child obeyed.

The poor mother was taking a walk through the city when she stopped, filled with sadness, in front of a church. She entered and knelt tearfully before the tabernacle where God, the consoler of the afflicted, dwelt. There, like a child she abandoned herself into her Father's arms, placed before him all the crosses in her heart, begged him to inspire her with some good idea as to how to guide her boy during such an important year as this one of his First Communion. She felt her heart filled with consolation and leaving the church she went looking for just the right moment to speak with Peter alone and give him appropriate advice. That moment came.

"My dear boy," she began saying to him, "Here we are in the year when you should be making your First Communion and this is the most important thing in your life. You need to prepare yourself with fervent prayer, ready

obedience, and by detailed attention to all that the Church requires. One thing that pains me is the little time you will have available to learn the catechism and listen to the explanations from your parish priest.”

Son: “Do not worry dear mother. Thanks be to God I have a good memory and good will. On Sundays I have time to go and apply myself with all due attention. Then on working days I have an hour and a half for lunch; I can finish lunch in half an hour then go off straight away to the Oratory of St Francis de Sales where they offer catechism at midday during Lent. If I can’t finish eating before I go to catechism I’ll finish later with a loaf of bread on my return.

And then, mother dear, if you let me, I’ll go back there in the evenings, because they gladly instruct boys there for free. So to put it briefly I will make every effort, and I hope I can study and understand the catechism and be able to pass the exam our parish priest will give me. Indeed at the same time I hope to be able to learn how to read and write; oh how much I want to learn!”

Mother: “Dear child, let me embrace you; your words are a real comfort for my afflicted heart.”

To further encourage Heaven’s favour the poor mother redoubled her care and efforts to temper her husband’s unruly character. Although he only gave her twenty of the thirty *soldi* he earned daily, she knew how to have his supper ready for him when he returned from work. The house was kept very clean; not a grain of dust on the table, the floor always swept, the bed or rather straw palette shaken out and the blankets, little more than rags it is true, were always clean and mended. She always welcomed her husband with a smile despite his inflexibility, lack of religion and frequent visits to the tavern. She always treated him pleasantly and made every effort to do so in the hope that one day she could get him to mend his ways.

In fact how many men we meet each day who are brutalised and ruined by wine but would be very different if they could live within the bosom of a family where they could find a warm welcome, a kindly and patient wife, and respectful and submissive children!

Convinced of this the poor woman we are speaking about did everything she could every day to make the family a pleasant place for her husband, but how much she had to do just to see that he had everything he needed! What economy to make ends meet, how many privations, how many long vigils, how much thankless and unrewarding work, and all this to be able to offer her husband some soup tomorrow that could not be done with the mere one franc he offered her each day!

But let's come back to Peter. Faithful to the plan agreed on between his mother and himself he worked as before in the same match factory. By doing some fasting he learned his catechism; he did this by taking up an hour of his lunchtime to go to church. Often his lunch consisted of a piece of bread which he put in his pocket and would eat, partly on the way to, partly on the way back from catechism. Then in the evening he went off punctually to the Oratory to hear an explanation of things that he may not have understood properly at midday. I recall having often seen him in the evening when it was dark and snowing coming to catechism all on his own. One evening I asked him: "Are you not afraid coming here in such bad weather and all on your own?" "I am not alone," he answered. "Are not the good God and my Guardian Angel excellent companions?"

His young work mates mocked him because of his good behaviour; some of them were also supposed to be making their First Communion that year, but for them and their parents it seemed to be something that could be done in a hurry.

One of them used to say: "Last year I was sent off to Confession because I wasn't fasting in Lent, but my father told me not to be silly enough to tell the parish priest these kinds of stories this year of my First Communion."

Another said: "The same thing happened to me, but my mother got my father to agree that this year we would abstain so I can make my Communion, then we'll go back to how we did things before."

And yet another said: "My father has forbidden me from telling my more serious sins to the priest because that might stop me from making my First

Communion; for better or for worse I have to do it this year because that way I can earn more money.”

Peter was amazed at these revelations but restrained himself and said just a word or two of disapproval. “I really have nothing to say,” he said, “But for sure, someone who goes to Confession and doesn’t promise with all his heart to change his life is making a bad Confession; anyone who keeps quiet about a sin and doesn’t tell the confessor will not receive forgiveness for his sins and adds sacrilege to his conscience. And those who do not abstain are disobeying the Church which commands us to abstain from meat on Fridays and Saturdays and other vigils.” Meanwhile Peter made sure to tell his mother about all these blunders they were making. The good mother was terrified at knowing that her son was living amongst such badly brought up and badly advised boys. The maternal advice she gave him was in conformity with the healthy morality of the Gospel.

“How unfortunate,” she told poor Peter, “How unfortunate it is to have families with little religion and especially not to have good mothers who can keep their hearts away from the bad influence and advice of their fathers. Just remember, dear Peter, that First Communion is the most important thing in your life, and you need a long time to prepare for it, changing your bad habits and practising all the virtues compatible with your age like obedience, being docile, love for work, study of the catechism, respect and modesty in church.

As for the sins you should confess, you need to be sorry for them and also make a resolution not to commit them in future. And even if your family or friends should force you to break the fast, remember that you must obey God before you obey man. Also be careful not to stay quiet about any sin in confession; you need to confess all of them, be sorry for all of them and make a resolution to lead a better life with God’s grace. It would be a thousand times better to delay First Communion for a year if your confessor judges it would be better, than to hide a sin so you can do it, because someone who goes to Communion like that is like someone who invites a friend to dinner and then gives him dishes full of poison.”

Peter: “Don’t worry, mother, I’ve been going to Confession for four years and I have never failed to tell my confessor something I should. Sometimes I don’t remember something and he questions me and I immediately tell him.”

Thus the good mother continued preparing her son for the most serious moment in his life. How many mothers there are who spend so much effort looking after the body but do nothing for their children’s souls! And then what do we say of parents who as well as not caring about the spiritual and eternal good of their children, are actually an obstacle to their eternal salvation by giving scandal by their language and actions? Instead of preparing them properly for Communion, unfortunately they set them on the path to perdition. What a terrible account they must give before God’s judgement seat!

Chapter 3. Confession

Peter went to catechism classes regularly; he was also obedient to the least indication of his father’s. His father was very proud of having a son who was so much better than many of his neighbours’ children and he was not unaware that his son’s good qualities were due to the religion his wife had so successfully taught their son to practise.

The day for Communion was approaching and Peter redoubled his fervour. He used to go to Confession often and had gone to the same confessor for four years. He had always opened every secret of his heart to him and never kept silent about anything in Confession so everything went well for him in Confession. But he wanted to be extra certain about past Confessions that he might not have given due care to for lack of knowledge, so he decided to make a general confession.

Firstly he invoked the enlightenment and help of the Holy Spirit so he could remember all his sins, then he made a careful examination of conscience then went to the church and quietly waited his turn to present himself to his confessor. He told all his sins or rather those he judged were culpable without hiding anything or lessening their seriousness. When he had finished

he prepared himself with all humility to receive absolution asking God many times to give him the strength to be truly sorry for his sins.

Usually, at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales they held a Triduum to prepare boys to make their Easter Communion well. During the three days of preaching, he was a model for all the others. Seeing him so recollected, so pious, so kind and so good with them, they were envious of him. One of his friends was so moved by Peter's modesty and devotion that he decided to tell a sin that, just to please his father, he had kept quiet about in an earlier confession.

Another day one of his friends said: "Come here Peter, look in the mirror and comb your hair." "Oh," he replied "I prefer to adjust my soul and prepare my heart as a proper place for Jesus." He made every effort to have a keen sense of repentance and practise all the little virtues of his age.

How many boys and especially older lads there are who are all worried about looking after their good looks rather than embellishing their souls by practising virtue? How many families have no other ambition than to see their children well-dressed so they can look better than their companions when they go to Communion! Peter's mother had no vain ideas like this in her head. She was always busy about things to do with her children and husband, and spent what little time she had left over praying and sewing a nice item of clothing for her first born child.

But the poor woman had no money to buy some nice material and had the parish priest not come to her aid good Peter would have run the risk of only having a simple and somewhat tattered jacket. But underneath those humble clothes what a wonderful soul there was! It was of great consolation to his mother to think about this.

The final day of the Triduum came and Peter had made his general confession and received absolution. It is impossible to describe the fervour with which he prepared himself. No distraction; perfect recollection; he went into the church and went to the confessional where he received forgiveness for his sins. How moved he was when he recited the act of contrition. He was

crying when he came out of the confessional. Covering his face with his hands he went to the altar, knelt down, renewed his act of sorrow and told God he would always belong to him and would serve him for the rest of his life. His heart was full of joy and he did not know how to thank God for lowering himself to be so good to a poor creature like him. All his thoughts then turned to the following day when he would be receiving him into his heart, even though he was so poor and the least of all people.

Where would one have found a mortal being who was happier than he was? And full of ideas like this he returned home. Seeing such a radiant look on his son's face his father was amazed, and he became a little more tender. Something indescribable was going on in his heart; he went up to his son and embraced him; and filled with joy the latter put his arms around his neck: "Ah, father, if you only knew how lucky I am!"

Yes, I was thinking about it, my son," his father said, "You will soon be finished with all that First Communion humbug."

"Oh father!" Peter said "You haven't understood me; It's the luckiest 'humbug' ever! The good God is coming into Peter's heart tomorrow, poor miserable creature he is! The one who made heaven and earth wants me to sit at his table, feed me with his flesh: by receiving him I will be one with him. Do you understand that, father? God has left me fully free to approach him and to give me his immense riches. How many riches I can use for my soul, how many graces I wish to ask for you and my mother! And being so good how can God refuse such favours when he is with me, in me. There is so much I want to say to him! Oh father, you will be so fortunate, because he has said: 'Ask and you shall receive'."

His father was so amazed that he began to say to himself: "There has to be some other happiness than the one found in the bottle; I am envious of my son's contentment, happiness. It seems so pure and undivided; on the contrary my own pleasures are always mixed with bitterness. The time I spend drinking, time I could well spend supporting my wife, is not spent without some sadness. She is so good, so kind to me despite my mistakes."

And right then a generous thought came into Peter's father's mind. "I want to share in this happiness my son will experience tomorrow" he said: "Here," he told his wife, "Take my entire week's wage. I will be here tomorrow, Sunday, and will spend the whole day with you. I will go with Peter to watch his First Communion. See that there is something extra on the table tomorrow, because I want us to be happy, all happy together."

Peter ran and hugged his father, embraced him, kissed him several times. His mother, whose eyes were full of tears, embraced all the children, and they all gathered around their lucky father, giving him a thousand caresses. And for his part he felt such a pure joy that he had never experienced in the past; family life and the happiness of a soul at peace were revealed to him.

Before going to bed that night Peter wanted to make amends and ask forgiveness of his parents for all the things he had done wrong in the past, and he did this in front of everyone else at home. In some places this ceremony happens in church with the children all together, just before they make their Communion; in other places it is done in the family.

"Forgive me," Peter said "Forgive me, dear parents, for all the displeasure I have caused you, though I believe you cannot overlook the offences I have committed. I hope that God has already forgiven me and you will complete my happiness if you tell me I can be sure of your forgiveness; you see a poor repentant boy before you who is promising unlimited obedience and respect in the future."

"Of course you are forgiven!"

Seeing Peter and meeting his gaze, his father was moved to tears, and almost beside himself as he said: "My poor boy here you are asking me for forgiveness and I should be asking it and throwing myself at your feet, begging mercy for a father who has been a tyrant." He was about to break down sobbing. Covering his face with his hands he wept, but they were sweet tears because they came from repentance.

After evening prayer, said with more fervour than usual, Peter went off to bed and fell straight asleep. His father came to him and contemplated

the face of his son lying on his straw mattress. It was a face of innocence and happiness, peaceful, with a half smile that made him look like an angel. Thoroughly moved, he went off to bed himself, but that night he could not sleep; remorse was getting to him; a good resolution came to him; he thought of his past life, and the happiness he once enjoyed; he thought of Peter's happiness and tranquillity; and meanwhile there was a terrible struggle going on in him between good and evil; the only way he could find peace was to renew his resolve to spend all Sunday with his family.

Chapter 4. Communion day

As soon as he awoke, Peter's first thought was an act of adoration and love, turning his heart to God whom he would be receiving that very morning. Having made this offer of his heart to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and consecrated his whole day to him, he got up and dressed himself with all due modesty. Let us not think that the sight of his new, decent clothes would have made the slightest impression on him, although it would have been the first time he had seen himself so decently dressed, since his usual clothing was ill-fitting and patched. But what is clothing for the body compared to a soul that adorns itself with virtue, carefully avoids the least little vanity, the slightest defect that could displease the guest who wants to take up his abode there?

Meanwhile the bells were ringing and the children were all lining up for church, one so proud of his nice clothes, the other all boastful because he was seen there with his family or because everyone was looking at him. Peter was humble and took no notice of anyone; he was dressed in clothes that came from the parish priest's charity, and he went off to church with exemplary composure.

What did it matter to him to have all the good things on this earth if he were not going there to soon possess the riches of Heaven, take part in the Heavenly feast, go to the same table as his lucky companions, and attract heavenly favours on himself and his family? Accompanied by his father he entered the church; his composure and simplicity shone through each of his movements; his gaze was fixed on the altar; not a word, not even a smile for

his companions. His father looked at him, filled with emotion; he stood still, his eyes fixed on the angelic figure.

When Mass began he had new cause for wonder when he saw his son reading from a book. He recognised his wife's goodness and her diligence in bringing up this dear child. Meanwhile they began reading aloud the prayer of preparation for Communion that the children say alternatively. How much attention Peter gave to those prayers! With what a fervent heart he read them! How humble he was before God! How unworthy he saw himself of the great favour he was awaiting! With what emotion he renewed his acts of sorrow for having offended a God who is so good and worthy of being loved! With what firm resolution he promised to avoid anything in the future that could harm his soul!

Finally the great moment that he had so long desired arrived. "Lord, I am not worthy of the honour you do me, I am not worthy for you to come into my heart, I receive you only by trusting in your mercy: Jesus, Jesus come and take possession of my heart." Having said these words he put his tongue out over his innocent lips and received the God of Heaven and earth, the sovereign of the heavenly choirs who adore him reverently.

At that moment Peter was no longer the child of a poor labourer but an angel. He possessed in his heart the one who makes us truly happy, the only happiness in life; he possessed God. He seemed radiant, his heart overflowing with joy, thanksgiving, and he repeated firmly that he would never abandon his duties. He talked with Jesus one to one. After having spoken of his poverty, his needs, the weaknesses of his soul, and after having asked him for some special graces, he began saying in his heart: "My good Jesus, I possess you in my soul, and your goodness to a poor creature encourages me to ask you for one more very big favour. I have a father who has seen my happiness in church, as you have seen: Oh my Jesus! I do not want to accuse him before you, but I can tell you that he is far from the practices of your holy religion. His soul has not been nourished by your adorable blood for a long time; bad friends have led him to certain places he should not be going to. Change his heart, O my good Jesus, have him return to you!

You have said: 'Ask and you shall receive': so I turn to you with so much confidence. I insist, lovable Saviour, that I will never abandon you while there is a ray of hope in my heart.

My poor mother, my good Jesus—reward her for all the good she has done for me; give her patience, the strength to complete my upbringing and that of my brothers and sisters; make her husband worthy of her virtue; and may the peace and happiness of pure souls begin to reign amongst us. Oh Jesus, we are very poor but I am not asking you to let us have more; I only ask for your love, your grace for me and my parents, and that we may always do your holy will."

During this intimate talk his face radiated the emotions of his soul. His father, his eyes constantly fixed on him, would have liked to have gone to his son and bathed him in his tears but he did not want to interrupt the thanksgiving he had begun. Peter then recited the prayers alternatively with the others, the ones that are usually said after Communion, then he went to a corner of the church and spent half an hour reading a devout book. Then, to please his father and mother and filled with contentment at this greatest act in his life, he obeyed his parents and went home with them.

Throughout that memorable day Peter was a constant model for the other boys and anyone who saw him. After a frugal lunch, which his fortunate father and his still more fortunate mother were also present for, he went back to the church that evening to hear a short sermon meant to encourage all those who had made their Communion that morning to persevere in doing good. His father also wanted to go back with him. Peter, who was filled with thoughts of his God, was saddened to see how the boys who had made their Communion that morning were just frittering away their time that evening.

Another praiseworthy custom they have in some places, and it would be good if they did it everywhere, is the renewal of baptismal vows on the same morning that the children are making their Easter Communion. And because this was not usually the case amongst us, Peter wanted it done at home in God's presence and in the presence of his parents and the rest of the family.

So kneeling down, with a small crucifix in his hands, he said in a steady, loud voice; "I renounce forever the devil, all his pomp and works, and I promise to consecrate myself to Jesus for my entire life." His father could no longer handle these tender, sublime words. He felt his heart breaking. "I made this promise too," he said, "but did I keep it? For me First Communion was a mere formality to be accomplished. If only I had had a mother like Peter's, I certainly would not have abandoned the Sacraments the very same year I made my Communion. I would have been happy, my home would have been honestly managed and the family would have been happy. Oh Peter! You have let me know how happy you are; forgive your father. My God, forgive a poor man like me; and since you have been so good as to make my son happy like this, I also hope you will not reject my repentance and my resolve to begin a new life, because I would like to be as lucky as my son, and make my family happy."

And that evening it seems that God's peace came to that family. How sweet it was for all their hearts! How happy were mother and son now that the head of the family was with them. And what unspeakable joy was the father's, a joy that he hoped to preserve for the rest of his life!

That evening they prayed together, the father playing his part for the first time. Who can imagine the poor wife's consolation seeing her husband kneeling there with the rest of the family! No one could possibly measure up to her happiness. Just the same she had one fear; "Will these good intentions last?" she asked herself. I will pray with all my heart, and Peter, who is so intimate with the good God, will also ask God to listen to us and fulfil our wish.

Before going to bed Peter opened the window that looked out towards the church, and with one more thought for the One who had given himself to him that morning he said: "Just one final greeting, my good Jesus. May I remain yours now and forever." Then with his heart filled with these holy thoughts, his mind once more thinking of God, he went to sleep in the embrace of his Guardian Angel.

Chapter 5. The father's conversion

On Monday it was decided that Peter would return to work at the match factory until he was twelve, and that in the evenings he would go to school to learn to read and write better. The father worked as usual all that morning then after midday, according to his earlier sad custom, he left the workshop. His wife, who was very anxious, saw all this and was deeply upset when she knew that he was no longer at work.

One of his mates had enticed him back down to the tavern.

"What's up with you?" his friend asked him, "Why so sad? Has your wife been beating you?" This last mocking jibe reminded him of what he had been thinking of the day before.

John: "I find myself here," he said, "but it's not where I should be; I am not fulfilling my duties here, am not doing what I should be doing. So goodbye. I'm going."

Friend: "Come on, Is it Peter that's affected your mind? Because they told me that yesterday you were an impostor—in church. So away with all this melancholy, be happy: cheers, here's to happiness: church is good for women and children."

John: "Yes, but my wife and boy are luckier than me; their conscience is at peace, while I am suffering terribly."

Friend: "Relax. Have a drink, two drinks and you will see how good times return."

John: "No, that's impossible."

Friend: "Look! I've got the solution. Madam (to the innkeeper) bring us your best bottle. Here is the remedy for all ills, drink up; to your wife's health, and mine!"

Just then Peter went past on the way to work: his father saw him and it was like a bolt of lightning striking him. He stood up suddenly and ran to the door shouting. "Peter, Peter, listen, come here my dear boy."

Peter: “Oh father, whatever are you asking me! You know what I promised God yesterday, so let’s have a hug but then I’m off to work.”

Poor Peter was sad when he went to the match factory. But he decided to say nothing but rather to redouble his prayers for his poor father. Meanwhile John went back in to the tavern, but he seemed to be dumb; his friend noticed and began talking to him: “I’m telling you my friend, it’s your boy that has affected your mind. Mine made his Communion yesterday too. Your boy has been fooled, don’t crucify him, he will be what he wants to be. Let him go to church when he wants; I would never stop him but when he becomes an adult he will be just like his father and mother, so ... Ah! Ah! To your health, and away with any melancholy!”

Far from making him laugh, all this idiotic behaviour just weighed even more on his heart; the thought of his wife and Peter were fixed in his memory.

John: “It is impossible for me to laugh my friend. I am not finishing this glass. Good afternoon, I’m going, I’ll see you another time.” And with that he left.

Friend: “Oh! Listen John, wait, just one more thing.” But John had left and never went back. “So,” his friend said “Just look at that impostor, following the platitudes of women and children.”

Another friend: “True, but he’s not completely wrong because he does have a virtuous wife and has such a good and well-deserving son. He loves his father, and he doesn’t answer back like mine does! When I think that yesterday morning, after he got back home after Communion he treated me like his dog! What’s he going to be like later when he’s eighteen or twenty! He will have no faith, will not be able to read, and he will treat his father and his commands just like I used to do once. So we need to admit it, it is religion that has made John’s wife so virtuous, his son so obedient and respectful; it is religion that brings good fortune to the family. Certainly if I had had a wife like his, and if my son had been brought up like his, I would not be so unlucky and not forced to relieve my sorrows in life through the bottle.”

But where did Peter's father go? He was almost out of his mind, wandering from the square to the streets without knowing where he wanted to go. And without realising it he found himself in front of the church where he had found such consolation the day before. "Go on," he said to himself, "Peter's and my wife's God is here; I'm going in, whatever happens." His steps led him irresistibly to the altar where he had witnessed his son's happiness; mechanically he knelt down. Going back over his thoughts from the day before, he felt such regret and emotion that he dissolved into tears. He was there for a long time caught up in his meditation when he felt the priest tap him on the shoulder. Thinking that the man was distraught with some terrible cross, the good priest took him by the arm and led him to the sacristy. "You seem to be weighed down by some terrible sorrow," he said to him "do tell me your troubles. I am a minister of the God of consolation; What can I do to help you?"

All he got was a deep sigh.

Father: "Speak, my friend, I am just a poor priest who has seen all kinds of misery, and nothing that has happened to a human being will disturb me, so open your heart to me and tell me. You are speaking to a friend." Encouraged by these kind words, words that he had never heard from his false friends, he spoke of his impressions of the day before, his sighs, his promises, his wife's kindness and loveliness, and his first-born's obedience and tenderness.

Father: "Well, my friend, then it is your wish to be worthy of your family and regain the friendship of the God who has been so good to your son!"

John: "Ah yes! This is what I want, and my soul has been in constant torment since yesterday."

Father: "It is not torment, my friend, but grace which is lifting you up, and God who is reminding you of your sins and his infinite goodness. It is your wife's and your son's prayers that have been heard in Heaven. So courage my friend. Make a good confession, a firm resolve to change your life, and this will be the remedy for your torment. So good friend, do you want to confide the sorrows of your soul in me?"

John: “I want this with all my heart, because you seem to me to be a very good man, but what will my friends say?”

Father: “Is it friends like those who will give you the happiness you do not have? Look at what your friends are worth. They are only good to get you drinking, wasting your money, staying away from a wife and a son who love you, and from the others who surely love you. Leave them to say what they want, show them you are a man and that you have a manly will and approach that shows no embarrassment at doing its duty. After they have spoken about you and laughed at you they will fall silent, then will praise you and will finally say to themselves: ‘At least he has willingly chosen to do his duty’.”

John: “You are right; see, my wife thinks I am at the tavern, and I was led there by my old habits; a friend induced me and I could no longer keep away: then I left and began wandering from street to street until I found myself in front of the church and went in ...”

Father: “Well, my friend, the Lord God brought you here; he loves you very much as you know. He wants to restore your peace of mind and give your family back its happiness. So my friend, listen to his voice, I feel compassion for you; you are not happy. Take my advice: kneel down and make a good confession and you will soon feel peace in your heart.”

The sacrifice of self love was made, and human respect overcome. Amidst tears and sighs he made his first Confession and then set aside a time the following day to continue. His long-remorseful soul was given a soothing balm; an ineffable joy shone from him. Like someone who had found a great treasure, John hurried off home filled with joy. His wife was astounded when she saw her husband arrive so happy, and even more so arriving home long before he usually would on a Monday.

“Where are you coming from, John?” she asked.

“I’m coming from the tavern, then from the church.” John said. “I said goodbye to one of them forever, and in the other I met the good priest who saw me all upset, so I told him all my troubles and he encouraged me to apply the only remedy—Confession. I was really moved by his kindness so

I did what he asked me, and here I am all happy; I am giving my wife back her husband, my children a father who had abandoned them for such a long time.”

It would not be possible to express the poor wife’s emotions, and Peter’s happiness when he found out that his father had said goodbye to gambling and the tavern and gone to the church to go to Confession. We would need a book to express the family’s happiness, reunited around the head of the family who had changed his behaviour and found God’s grace through absolution for his sins. He received into his own heart a God whom he had offended for so long.

Despite their poverty, joy took root in that family because they were all practising their religion, the only source of true happiness. Great kindness reigned amongst them, because on Sundays and Mondays the husband was no longer squandering the savings of an entire week in a single day. His good and attentive wife found a way to save something so she could offer her husband a gift of a half litre after Sunday lunch, so he would not be totally deprived of the things that filled him with delight at the tavern. They all went to the functions in church, and after the sermon and Benediction the father and his children went for a walk, and during winter spent their time at home in the family. Sometimes the father and Peter would come here to us to spend the evening in pleasant, honest recreation, and took part in the plays, comedies or other things that used to happen at the Oratory on winter weekend evenings.

Work continued on Mondays like every other day of the week.

John’s friends joked about him for a while because of his new life style; but they soon tired of that and it was replaced by esteem and he inspired them by his good behaviour.

Morning and evening they prayed together; they all went to Confession and Communion; you would often see father, mother and children go to Confession one after the other then all devoutly make their Communion.

Thus a family that had been in desolation for a number of years because the father had abandoned his family, carelessly forgotten his duties as a

husband and Christian and ignored his religion returned, after twelve years of tribulation, to days of peace and tranquillity, since only religion or God's grace can make a man content and happy.

Chapter 6. The vicissitudes of youth

The reader would certainly want to know how this story continued and I am happy to satisfy that wish. But to keep things fairly brief I judge it better to leave out some details concerning Peter's parents and just keep to facts regarding himself.

I will begin by referring to the resolutions from his First Communion and showing how he observed these as he grew up.

One day I happened to find a devotional book and opening it I saw a scrawled and badly spelled note. I read it and saw that it was something Peter had written to recall his First Communion. Despite the language, as you can imagine would be the case for an eleven year old just beginning to learn to read and write, just the same it testifies to the simplicity and importance of its contents which I intend to give you without any corrections, convinced that it can be a model for anyone making his First Communion. Here it is then.

"Rule of life set out by me, Peter, on the lucky day that I made my First Communion on 12 April 1845 when I turned eleven.

I will kneel down and in God's presence promise that tomorrow, as soon as I have received the host I will make the following resolutions so I can save my soul.

1. I promise that God will always be my father, and Mary my mother, and I will love and obey both of them.

2. I will go to Confession every fortnight or once a month and to Communion with permission from my confessor.

3. I will make Sundays holy by always going to Mass, the sermon and Benediction.

4. I will read something from a devotional book every day, and say a Hail Mary each day for my father and mother so they can be saved.

5. I will humbly ask Jesus when he is with me for two special graces, (1). that I will be able to avoid all bad companions; (2). that I will be able to preserve the virtue of modesty to the end of my life like St Aloysius did.

6. I will re-read and renew these resolutions once a month kneeling before a crucifix. Amen.

Holy Mary, save my soul and the souls of my father, mother, brothers and sisters. Amen.”

These are the resolutions Peter made at his First Communion. As we can all easily recognise, Peter had taken some of the ideas he had heard in sermons at the Triduum he made in preparation for Easter, and adjusted them so they could more easily apply to himself. However that may be, he gave himself the sacred duty of observing them.

Before giving him back the book with its memento, I asked him if he had kept these promises he had written down as a reminder, until now. “Until now, yes,” he said “and I hope to keep them until I die. I think it would be a terrible lie if you tell God something and don’t keep it.”

When he turned thirteen, Peter’s parents, seeing him able to tackle a better profession, placed him at a cotton factory. This new job, although it earned him a little more money in temporal terms, was somewhat of an obstacle to his religious practices because his employer, sometimes pretending work was urgent, and sometimes giving him particular work to do, made him work almost all of Sunday. Poor me, Peter thought, God told us to keep Sundays holy, and I am forced to profane them; how will God bless efforts like these! He spoke to his parents about it, and both were sorry that they had let their son stay with employment. His mother used to often say: “You can imagine, Peter, how sorry I am seeing you spend most of the Lord’s day doing profane work. But I don’t know what to do. I have spoken with the parish priest, and he advised me to be patient because there is nothing else that can be done; but meanwhile we should try to find other work and put up with the employer until such time as we find something better.”

Providence came to Peter's aid, proving that earnings from Sundays and other Holy days bring ruin to all the work during the week. Here is how it happened. First there was a fire at the factory; then the employer went broke; two of his children died; his wife fell sick for more than a year; he was forced to sell his factory to others and became a simple worker rather than the owner.

While he was with the employer, how was Peter to practise his religion? Whoever wants to do things well finds time to do so. Every Sunday, getting up very early, before he went off to work he went to Mass, after which there was the sermon. After lunch if he could, he still went to instruction; otherwise he went to Benediction late in the evening in some church. He found some time to go to Confession. If there was no other possibility, he went to his usual confessor on Saturday evenings, then went to Communion on Sunday morning; sometimes he went to Confession on Sunday evening and Communion on Monday early, before going off to work. He also persevered in reading a little bit each day from some devotional book and since he often had little time, he carried *The Companion of Youth* in his pocket with him, and would read some of it while coming from or going to work. He tried to memorise and "ruminate on them" as he used to say, and sometimes would repeat them to his work mates.

Peter's next employer was more humane and more Christian than the first. Having learned from his predecessor's disasters, and fully aware that God had commanded that Sundays be kept holy, bringing blessings on whatever was accomplished during the week, he looked after his workers and saw that they all had time; on Saturday evening he ordered the business to be closed and it would not open until Monday. This decision brought him good luck. Everyone liked working for him; they all found time to fulfil their duties, nobody took Mondays off and his business prospered.

Peter also gained much from his employer who, noticing his fidelity, punctuality, hard work, soon increased his daily earnings from ten to fifteen *soldi*. Meanwhile because he regularly attended evening classes, Peter was coming on with his arithmetic and metric system, with Italian grammar, and his employer gave him the job of keeping the register for a number of his

work mates, keeping an eye on things to see that there were no arguments, and that no breakdowns occurred with the cotton and thread machines. His work mates were happy; they could not have had a more patient and kind assistant; the employer was happy because it would have been hard to find a more faithful and diligent person than him to entrust things to. And Peter, too, was happy with these responsibilities because while checking that people were working he could also stop some of the blaspheming or taking the Lord's name in vain, or bad conversations. What else? When someone loves God, things go well. Seeing Peter's good behaviour, and the benefits that came from it, the employer increased his pay several times. Peter was only seventeen by this time but he was earning ten francs a week. This was a real stroke of Providence because his father had been sick for a few months and could no longer work all day, so keeping the family was almost entirely up to Peter.

How often his good mother blessed the time she had spent in his upbringing! How often his father thanked Divine Providence for having given him a wife who had known how to instil religious principles in Peter's heart. He was now the consolation and support of the entire family.

Chapter 7. Some particular facts

Let's not think that Peter did not have some bad moments, because youth is a risky time, and such risks can be found anywhere and amongst all kinds of people. Peter had many difficulties but with his courage and the help of God's grace he freed himself from them without being drawn into wrongdoing. Let me tell you about some of these.

One Feast day (it was the Feast of St Peter) some of his friends invited him to go with them to a party. "Come Peter," they said "We will pay."

Peter: "Thanks friends, I will willingly go but only after the functions at church."

His friends: "Ok so we can go after church; there will still be time."

Peter: "We go and do what God asks first, then what people want afterwards."

His friends: “If we go to church, you will come later, won’t you?”

Peter: “Yes certainly, on one condition you already know about.”

His friends: “What’s that?”

Peter: “No bad talk.”

Because they wanted Peter to come with them, he was such pleasant company, but also because their parents wanted them to go, they went to Vespers, the sermon and Benediction. But then afterwards when they went off for something to eat, an unexpected and troubling event arose for Peter. St Peter’s Feast that year occurred on Friday, and the young men, who knows whether out of good or bad faith, had prepared a meat dish. Peter immediately saw the problem he was faced with. “I can see you have done well” he told his friends.

A friend: “Meaning what, Peter?”

Peter: “Did you not realise it is Friday? We Catholics are not allowed to eat meat on Friday.”

His friends: “That’s true, we didn’t think about it, but what can we do at this hour? What’s done is done.”

Peter: “It is still Friday despite the hour, and the Church’s obligation doesn’t stop because of it.”

His friends: “But we forgot about it and we didn’t do it intentionally.”

Peter: “But if we eat meat we will be thinking about it and we will be doing it intentionally.”

Friend: “Peter, I’m sure that just for once we can overlook it.”

Peter: “I know that it is forbidden to eat meat on Fridays, Saturdays, and other vigils; nor can I see that you can do so unless there is a serious reason, like maybe a serious illness.”

Another friend: “Peter, leave it all to my conscience; once, yes, it was forbidden but now everyone eats it.”

Peter: “You are very kind to put all this on your conscience but if I go to Hell then you won’t be coming down to pull me out! I have never heard it said that you can disobey the precepts of the Church without sinning.”

Friend: “But these days everyone’s doing it.”

Peter: “Excuse me but that’s not true, that everyone’s doing it: I know many who abstain on days they should abstain; so when someone says that everyone’s doing it, are they saying maybe there’s no room left in Hell for everyone? Maybe these days the Lord is not around any more. Is it God who commands? Times change, people change, but divine law never changes.”

Friend: “It is not God who tells us to fast but the Church.”

Peter: “But God governs the Church, so what the Church commands, God commands.”

Friend: “But Peter, be patient: what’s the problem for the Lord if I have a slice of salami this evening, or a piece of cheese?”

Peter: “What was the problem for the Lord if Adam ate the fruit or didn’t eat it? And you know what terrible punishment he suffered. Friend, in the things that God commands we should not ask how they matter to God, but what the consequences are for us. I can’t stop you from eating this; I could forbid you maybe, if I could; but I will not be eating it.”

Friend: “But don’t you know, Peter, that you can eat this when there is a serious enough reason: when my parents are ill they do not take any notice of Fridays.”

Peter: “What you say is ok but I see no serious reason here; we are in the best of health.”

Friend: “So what do you want to do with all this stuff?”

Peter: “I am your friend and companion, I am not your treasurer. This stuff can be kept or used in some other way, but not eaten.”

Another friend: “Listen up, Peter. You know well enough that this is a time of political freedom, constitutions; a time when everyone can write, think, speak, do what he likes.”

Peter: “The freedom you are speaking of has no place in things commanded or forbidden by legitimate authority, much less by God. There is no constitution in Heaven that can abrogate the divine law, and for God’s precepts there is no freedom to do and think as you like; the holy law is eternal, to be obeyed as much today as it was in the past; no human being can introduce the least change to it. So if you want to insist on freedom, then let’s do it like this: I will leave you in complete freedom to eat whatever you want, because I cannot stop you and you will certainly have the courtesy to allow me the freedom to eat what I want.”

At these words no one made any further comment to Peter and leaving aside any further discussion they sat down at table to eat and Peter with them. All eyes were on Peter. He happily took a slice of bread with cherries and began eating heartily. Seeing this one of them said: “If Peter is eating like this I want to follow him,” and leaving the chicken and salami aside that was already on his plate, he took a slice of cheese. A second, then a third, then a fourth did the same.

Only three were left eating meat. And although they seemed to regret being interrupted, nevertheless, confused by the others’ example, and feeling the remorse of their conscience, they too began eating fruit and cheese. They all ate happily. Peter could not contain the joy he felt at seeing that he had succeeded in preventing his friends from offending the Lord. When the meal was over Peter amused his friends with some innocent games and stories because, although somewhat reserved, Peter was always cheerful and good at conversation, and when he was with others he could be the life of the party.

After the fun they were about to say good night. As each one was about to go home, Peter greeted them thus: “You gave me great pleasure today my friends by giving me a chance to honour the Saint whose name I bear. But my consolation was even greater when I saw everyone abstaining. You will all be dear friends of mine in the future, and since you were paying today, let me invite you the day after tomorrow, Sunday evening, to eat some meat and everything at my expense. My parents love me very much and they will join in our good cheer.” His friends accepted the invitation and the following Sunday

after fulfilling their religious duties they went to Peter's place. His parents wanted to celebrate Peter's name day, and they were very happy with the party especially his mother who saw that nothing was missing that could contribute to a true feast for friends.

Thus Peter had the consolation of seeing his friends going to church and preventing them from violating the Church's precepts. Furthermore they became Peter's best friends and continued going to church with him on Sundays, never omitting what a good Catholic should do to keep these days holy. How much good a courageous and truly Christian friend can do when he does not let human respect win out!

Chapter 8. His outstanding devotion

The Lord tells us that the road a young man takes when he is young he will continue along as he gets older, into his manhood, his old age and until he goes to his grave. Happy are those who give themselves to God as a young man! They already have an almost certain reward in eternal salvation. This was Peter's happy lot. He gave himself to God in good time, and as he grew in years he also grew wonderfully in virtue. What is most wonderful is that the more he strove to be known before God, the more hidden he became before man.

Here I shall point to some things regarding Peter's outstanding devotion.

On Sundays at our place after church we usually had some games at the Oratory, so that the boys who came could spend some time in pleasant and honest recreation. Peter used to come, talk with, and encourage the others in their games, but he rarely took part himself. What was he doing? When the rest were running around, singing, playing and the like, I would see him quietly pull aside from the games and slip into church. And keeping an eye on him, without him noticing me, I saw that he was slipping away to make a quiet visit to the Blessed Sacrament, say the Rosary, and make the *Stations of the Cross*.

I asked him to tell me one day in confidence why he chose that time to pray, and what particular purpose he had in mind for his prayers and he told

me: "I choose this time because with all the others busy with their games I know I won't be disturbed. And I direct all these prayers in suffrage for the souls in Purgatory. Poor souls," he said emotionally "Poor souls! We can pray for them so they can be with God in Heaven soon; would it not be an act of cruelty not to do whatever we can to help them?"

But despite his diligence in choosing a time he would not be disturbed, some of his friends noticed his devotion and followed his example. That is where the custom came from, and it is one we still keep today, of saying the Rosary after Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament for anyone who wants to, without any obligation, while most of the boys are having fun in the playground.

His heart was so good and affectionate that it enjoyed spending time with spiritual matters. You only needed to mention Heaven to him, God's love or his goodness, and he became all emotional. One day while I was there with some of his friends around I said to him: "Peter, if you continue as good as this what a great feast we will have one day in Heaven with the Lord! We will be with him always, enjoy him, love him for all eternity!" I said this almost casually but it produced such an effect that I saw him go white and he fainted and would almost certainly have fallen had not his friends caught.

I also remember something that happened at Giaveno when a number of boys had gone there to make a retreat. At the beginning of each of the talks he would sit in some corner to see what topic the preacher was going to speak about. And I saw that sometimes he would gradually move up closer to the speaker, and at other times he would hurry out of the church. When I saw this happen a few times I wanted to know why so I asked him one day: "Peter, what's all this, and why don't you go straight to the assigned place with the others? Why stop at the back of the church?" I do that," he said "so I don't disturb the others." "How is it," I asked "that you might disturb them?" And he replied: "You see, if the preacher is speaking about mortal sin, I can't handle it; I feel my heart breaking and I either need to leave the church or shout out."

And so I now knew why he would suddenly leave the Oratory church, sometimes really in a hurry, or why sometimes he would cry out or get very

agitated. This is why, if I noted he was at the talk, I tried to temper my words; but all that was needed was the words *mortal sin* said with a bit of emotion and he would jump up and go. So that is why he usually stayed near the church door.

These things, according to the spiritual masters, demonstrate two important truths. Firstly they demonstrate how pure and innocent Peter's soul was, if he had such sentiments whenever he heard or spoke of spiritual matters. Secondly it shows how deeply rooted was his aversion to evil; this was a sure sign he would continue in virtue in the future.

Despite the many things he had to do at his employment and at home, he found time for prayer and other religious practices. In the morning he would get up early, go to Mass, say his ordinary prayers and the Rosary, and would often go to Communion. At noon he had two hours free time, but instead of playing games or lying down somewhere like most others usually did, he would help his parents at home, or go over lessons with some of his younger brothers and sisters, and then a quarter of an hour before he needed to go back to the workshop he would already be there, handing out work to his work mates as they came back.

He occupied every minute of his time, and where he could he joined prayer with his work. Coming or going to work, or when he had things to do in some other place, if he was alone he would be praying. At this point I would not like to overlook one thing that I was witness to.

One evening as night was falling I was walking home along the road that comes from the Po to Porta Palazzo. When I got to a certain point along the road a young lad arrived carrying a long and heavy wooden pole, nailed together with heavy iron nails. He seemed to be groaning under the heavy load, and seemed to be saying something. Poor boy, I said to myself, he must be very tired. As I got closer to him I saw him bowing his head every now and again, like you do at the *Glory be to the Father*, or rather other moments of veneration: so I was aware that in fact he was praying. It was Peter.

"Peter," I said to him "You look very tired!"

Peter: “Not so much; I went to do a job for my employer, to bring back this cylinder for a broken machine that can now be fixed.”

I: “You seemed to be speaking. Who was with you?”

Peter: “Ah you see, this morning I could not go to Mass, so I didn’t say the Rosary, and since I found myself alone on the road I was saying it while I was walking. I really wanted to say it today because it is Tuesday, the day one of my aunties died, and she was good to me and did many things for me. So having no other way to show my gratitude, every Tuesday I say the Rosary for her soul.”

What a fine example that could be imitated by those who have received some favour. Prayer is such an easy thing to do, and it is so effective as a way of saying thanks for those who have benefited in some way.

Chapter 9. He leaves home

There was something that worried the whole family. It was the military service that Peter had to undergo. The ballot chose him and Peter had to enlist in the army. You just can’t describe his parent’s desolation.

“Woe is me!” his by now sickly old father was saying, “Here am I approaching old age; my strength and health are gone; I cannot earn a living; Peter was my only support. And now he has gone to the army; oh woe is me and my poor family! Desolation and poverty will see me to my grave.”

Peter: “Do not worry, father, as citizens we have to serve our country. We have to recognise God’s will even in things like this. It can happen to anyone, so we need to be patient and resigned. I certainly do not want to make you sad for fear of poverty. But let’s put our trust in God; if we observe his law he will not fail to come to our aid.”

His father: “But who will help me?”

Peter: “God will be our help; my mother will continue to help you, and two of my brothers have now begun to earn something and I will not cease doing what I can to help you.”

His mother, who was always good and solicitous for her son's spiritual welfare even more than for the temporal welfare of the family, on the evening before Peter left, took him into a room that was somewhat apart and taking her son by the hand said: "Peter, tomorrow you leave home, and your parents; who knows if we will see each other again in this life. How many strange thoughts are weighing down my mind at the moment!"

Peter: "Don't cry, mother, you worry me so much speaking like this."

Mother: "I am not crying because you are leaving. I am a Christian and I know my duties to God and the country! But my dear Peter, just thinking about the fact that you have spent twenty years under my eyes and have been so good, always loved your religion, always gone to the Sacraments, always kept far away from bad friends, and now I see you leave to become a soldier where there are so many perils, whether in the people you have to mix with or the places you will be sent to. This is what afflicts me, makes me sad and worried about what might happen to your soul."

Peter: "I understand mother, your fears are well founded. But I have already seen to this at least in part. This morning I went to Confession and Communion and with God's help I will be able to keep my good resolutions and observe the rule I have already established. I am sure I can avoid offending God."

Mother: "Will you be brave enough to avoid anything that might offend God?"

Peter: "I hope so; and that is what I have already promised and continue to promise before this picture of Our Lady whom I have always honoured as my loving mother since my First Communion; I promise, I say, to continue in the Lord's service, take no heed of those who speak evil, and keep up my prayer and the Sacraments as I have done so far."

Mother: "These words of yours, Peter, give me great consolation, and since we are here in front of the image of Our Lady, let us make this agreement: you will not let a day go without praying to Our Lady so that she may keep you free from sin; and every evening before going to bed I will come and kneel

before this picture wherever you are and beg the graces and blessings of this merciful mother.”

At this point both of them were moved to tears. The father had noticed and he joined them in the room and then the other children came and it was the most moving scene you could imagine in the world. They were all weeping, sobbing, sighing. They looked at each other tearfully without saying a word, until Peter, gathering his courage said, “It is time that we raised our eyes to Heaven and resigned ourselves to God our Creator. Let us offer him this sorrowful separation in expiation for our sins. Good night, let us get some sleep.”

His sorrowing parents were comforted by their son’s tender words and offered up their sorrow to God as a sacrifice and went off to bed, but they couldn’t sleep a wink.

The following morning before leaving, Peter gathered all his brothers and sisters together around his father’s bed, since he was forced to remain there through illness, and in his usual kind way he recommended that they all keep Sundays holy; he asked his brothers to avoid bad companions and blasphemy. Amongst other things he told them: “If you love God, serve him and are obedient to your mother and father, you will have great spiritual and temporal blessings.

And mother, please continue to take care of my father. He is not well and therefore even more worthy of our compassion and solicitude. He is my father.

And father, I recommend patience and resignation: we are not wealthy and therefore you will have to put up with things but the Lord will take account of everything. Although I have to go far away from you, I will not cease to think of you, and I will send whatever help I am able to. Meanwhile father, take ...”

“What are you giving me, Peter?” his father asked, astonished.

“Take this.” Peter said lovingly. “These are the savings I have made over the past years. You and my mother used give me whatever I needed for my small pleasures, so I can do no less; I am keeping some for myself to pay for when I

first go to my regiment but the rest I leave for you and I am leaving you two hundred and fifty francs. Goodbye everyone, and take courage.”

Peter wanted to go, his father wanted to speak and could not do so out of emotion, but he held his hand; meanwhile making every effort he could he said: “Come closer Peter, and listen to these words which may be the last you will ever hear from your father: leave consoled, may Heaven bless you, and may this thought be your consolation that through your efforts you brought great consolation and support to your father and saved his soul through your good behaviour.”

Peter was happy to see his parents so resigned to God’s will, and left to join the regiment he had been assigned to.

Chapter 10. Life in the army

It is a fact that army life is full of dangers for good souls, although officers and simple soldiers of good conduct and truly Christian courage are not lacking; nevertheless because of idleness, especially in time of peace, or because of the godless books and papers that are everywhere, the conversations they have, certain places and certain kinds of people they come across out of sheer duty, it is rare to find people return from military service with the holiness of life and upright behaviour they had when they left home. Peter was amongst the few blessed by God and favoured by his grace.

He had decided not to omit any of the religious practices that were compatible with his military status, so on the first day he reached the corps, when it was supper time, before eating he made the usual sign of the cross and a brief prayer that he was unable to finish because interrupted by a long “Ohhh!”

“He is a friar!” said one, “He’s just putting it on” said another: “Well, well, well!” Without being discouraged, all relaxed, Peter said, “What’s the problem? Maybe I didn’t make the sign of the cross properly? Let me do it again and I will try to do it better.” So he made the sign of the cross and said his prayer again and the murmuring continued. He did the same when he had finished eating, but with a little less reaction this time.

During the day he was with one or another person. Some thought he was a young man with lots of good humour, others that he had been well brought up by his parents. And many, who had also recently just joined military service, and were still basically very good sought him out as a friend. Meanwhile there were some that wanted to write to their parents but because they were illiterate, Peter offered to read and write letters for them whenever they wanted to, but always as a good friend without expecting anything for it. And this meant he soon had other friends.

One evening, when it was time for bed, Peter knelt next to his bed to say his prayers. It caused such a rumpus that the captain himself had to come to the dormitory. When he asked why there was such a rumpus, he then began speaking severely: "Is that how you treat religion? You should all be practising it; but since everyone is left free to practise it, at least if someone doesn't want to, he should respect others. I will note this disorder, and if it happens again the miscreants will be severely punished."

The following day Peter was just as kind to anyone who asked him for something.

"What kind of young man is this Peter?" said one. "He read my letter for me, wrote another one and did it all for no cost; he even gave me the paper; he really is a good friend." "For me," another one said, "he read out a note, and helped me out with a debt of three francs, and did it all for nothing." The quartermaster corporal was told that Peter wrote neatly and knew arithmetic and the metric decimal system, so he got him to do some urgent work which even the corporal himself could not do.

Whenever it was time to eat or go to bed he regularly made the sign of the cross and said his customary prayers, and the scoffers diminished in number to the point where after a few days even they became his admirers. But the real marvel was this: some of his fellow soldiers who out of human respect did not say their prayers, little by little began to follow his example and three months had not passed with Peter amongst them before the entire barracks where he slept regularly said their prayers. He thanked God for the courage he had given him and was happy to see his fellows fulfilling their religious duties.

Despite this there were other men who invited him to certain parties or to go to certain places that a good and well brought up Christian young man should stay away from. Peter consistently refused. One day some wanted to drag him away almost by force and since he was absolutely not going to go they said: "What a wretched kind of soldier you are!"

"Why do you say that?" Peter asked.

And they replied: "Because you won't do what all honourable soldiers do."

"A soldier's honour," he replied "lies in preserving his body for his earthly King and his soul for his heavenly King; what you want is to dishonour the true soldier because it is forbidden by the King of Heaven and by the earthly King." Peter put all his efforts into fulfilling his duties, doing favours for whoever asked him without ever getting involved in things that were against God's law.

One of his fellows who had been the recipient of many of Peter's services, said to him one day: "I would like to give you a gift, Peter, something you would like. Tell me: what would you like best?"

Peter: "If you would like to do something pleasing to me and at the same time of advantage to you, I would ask you not to take the Lord's name in vain any more. This would be a very precious gift for me."

Friend: "I give you my word of honour that I will give you this gift and I promise you I will not take the Lord's name in vain again; but I would like you to ask me for something else."

Peter: "Since you are so kind, could I ask you this Easter to make your Confession and Communion and at the same time pray for me and my poor family."

Friend: "What a wonderful soul you are! You are a saint amongst us; you know that some of your friends are aware that your father is sick and in need. They have collected twelve francs and this is the gift they have asked me to give you. You have only asked me for things that are good for my soul, which I assure you I will do, but in the name of your friends I ask you to also accept this gift for your father."

Peter accepted the money with gratitude and saw that his father, who was very sick, soon received it.

Chapter 11. His father's death

Peter's father really was in need. He had had many setbacks and had been confined to bed for some months for most of the time. The two hundred and fifty francs had kept the family going for about eight months. But with the costs of running the home on the increase, foodstuffs going up in price and with the two boys who had been earning something almost without work, poverty had reached a climax. We find out about the situation of the family from a letter Peter's mother had written to him. It went like this.

My dear Peter,

God's hand continues to lie heavily upon us; after you left your father's health got steadily worse and he was no longer able to do a day's work. Your brothers' employer had no more work for them so they are at home and unemployed. Almost anything of any value is at Monte di Pietà. But amidst all our woes there is one great consolation, that we are resigned to God's will. Your father shows the patience of a Christian. He sees God's hand in his sickness and often says: "I had fun in my youth, so it is right that I should suffer in old age: if the Lord sends me with illness it is a sign that he wants me to save my soul." I am writing this to let you know how things are at home. You certainly cannot send us any help, but you can ask God to bless us and help us. May the holy Virgin keep you good. Greetings from the whole family.

Your loving mother.

When he received this letter Peter could not but be saddened and almost by way of comfort he had confided his worries in some of his closer friends who like him wanted to live honest and upright lives. These are the ones who, having been helped so much by Peter, wanted to give him the gift of the twelve francs mentioned above, so he could help his father in some way. So he was keen to answer his mother, and the letter, a copy of which I have here, contained these precise words:

Cagliari, 5 September 1854

My dearest mother,

May Divine Providence be praised mother, and let us always trust in God, since he has advised us always to seek his glory first, promising that he himself would then give whatever we need in life.

Some of my friends who are aware of our need have given me twelve francs to send you; I am adding another twelve that I have saved over the months. So you have a postal order for 24 francs. This sum is certainly only a small help in your serious need, but let us revive our hope that infinite Providence which helps us today will also help us tomorrow. It pains me to hear that father's illness is getting worse. Nevertheless tell him from me that also with this we ought to be consoled; the road strewn with flowers and pleasures does not lead to Heaven; thorns, tribulations, sickness and poverty are special signs of the Lord's kindness. He says "*blessed are those who suffer and are sad*"; and he calls them blessed because of the great reward prepared for them in Heaven, for sure. So my consolation at the news you have given me grows, I mean that my father is resigned to the divine will in his pain, a clear sign that God's grace is with him. Tell my brothers to try to keep busy with something or find some trade or other; and if they find no work tell them to go to school and learn to read and write well; that will always be of some use to them. So I am enclosing a note for my old teacher, and I am asking him to give some schooling to my brothers if they have nothing else to do. He loved me and I hope that to the other good things he did for me he will add this one—to get my brothers into school.

I believe that my youngest brother wants to make his First Communion this year. I am happy about that because he is good. Make every effort to see that he does it well. Because the saying goes that when First Communion is well made the road to Heaven is almost prepaid. Instruct him at home as much as you can and get his teacher to get him to study his catechism well. Send him to Confession often and tell him to make his Confession well and not keep anything back from the confessor.

For some months I have been helping one of my superiors to write; he has promised me a small reward; as soon as I receive it I will write to you and send it to you.

My dear mother, I have so much love for my family that I cannot stop writing because I feel like I am there talking with you. But I have reached the end of the page so I will finish this letter asking you to tell my father that there is a beautiful church in this city dedicated to the Blessed Virgin where I go each evening and pray for him that he may have either health or patience; but that whatever happens he can do God's will. Tell those at home to always keep Sundays holy and especially to go to the sermon.

May God help you mother dear, greet all our relatives, and I am always,
your affectionate son Peter.

The letter and the money did not arrive in time to help his father, who had already been dead three days when it came. As soon as his mother received Peter's letter she wrote to him immediately to tell him of the sad loss of his father; the letter went like this:

Turin 10 September 1854

Beloved Peter,

Your letter, Peter, did not arrive in time to console your father. He died on the 6th of this month. You may weep and be consoled. You have lost a father but he has gone to Heaven. He had been ill for four years; for three months he has been confined to bed; he suffered a lot but was always resigned. During these final months he often went to Confession, received Viaticum twice; he received the Holy Oils and anointing in time; he was also given the papal blessing; his soul went to his Creator at eleven thirty on the evening of the sixth, with our parish priest beside him, praying until he breathed his last. Some hours before he died he called the whole family around his bed and told us to love one another. We are poor, he said, but very rich if we have the fear of God. Love God and begin to love him while you are young. Pray for me now and after my death. And after saying that he looked around those at his

bedside: “Peter,” he said “my Peter! Peter is not here! Tell him to pray for me, he ... he saved my soul; Peter, how much I love you Peter ...” He wanted to say other things but just couldn’t.

We are still experiencing deep sadness.

I received the twenty four francs you sent me, so please thank your generous friends for me for giving the twelve francs. This will help pay some of the debts incurred in recent days because of your father’s illness. Your brothers have found work again with a good employer. Here we pray three times a day for your father’s soul, so pray with us too, and pray also for me. I am,

your sorrowing mother.

News of his father’s death was like an arrow piercing Peter’s heart. He could not even finish reading the letter. He drew aside so he could give full vent to his sorrow and emotions. He cried for hours and could take no food for a whole day. Some of his friends wanted to console him and he told them: “If you want to console me let me weep for my poor deceased father.” His only comfort was to go to church and place his sorrow at the foot of the crucifix: “My Jesus,” he said “accept this sorrow that I am experiencing as penance for my sins and in suffrage for my father’s soul. Yes, father, I loved you so much in life, and I still love you now that you are dead: may the Lord give you eternal repose; yes my beloved father, I pray to God that he will take you soon to Paradise.”

That evening he went to his superior and asked for twenty four hours leave so he could deal with some affairs concerning his father’s death. His superior spoke to him words of comfort and granted the favour he had asked. He spent the time in works of piety in suffrage for his father’s soul. He went to Confession and Communion, went to several Masses and after midday went to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, and then made the *Stations of the Cross*; he said the Rosary and many other prayers. At the end of the day, like someone who had fulfilled an important duty Peter was resigned and said to himself: “I have done everything I can for my father’s soul; he would certainly not be pleased if I continued to feel sad, and nor will he gain any more benefit

from it. So I will be cheerful and resigned.” He then took a sheet of paper and wrote the following letter to his mother.

18 September, 1854

My dearest mother,

Your letter, mother, brought me all the grief that a child can feel for the loss of his tender, beloved father. I have cried, sighed, but since sorrow is no suffrage for the dead, I had recourse to religion. I asked for a day’s leave, which I easily obtained, and I spent it in works of piety in suffrage for my father’s soul. Alleviate your own sorrows and continue to pray for him, for in the future we can say with even more affection: “Our father in Heaven” because I really believe that right now my father is in Paradise. Let us thank God for giving him the time to receive all the Sacraments. That has to be a great consolation for us. Tomorrow all of you go to church for one more Mass, and let those who can, go to Communion for his soul.

If the Lord sees fit for me to return home I would like to bring you all the consolations a good son can for his mother: love, obedience, respect, diligence in my duties, and something I know you have very much at heart—regular practice of my religion. These are the things I promise.

I will write to you again soon when I feel a little calmer. Tell my brothers and my sisters that work makes them good citizens, and religion makes them good Christians and that work and religion leads to Heaven. May God grant you true happiness. Meanwhile mother, know that I am,

Always your most loving son, Peter.

*Chapter 12. Departure for Crimea*¹⁰

After his father’s death it would seem that the situation for Peter’s family had improved. An uncle took his eight year old sister in and that took a burden

¹⁰ Crimea: peninsula that until recently belonged to the Ukraine and in 2014 was annexed by Russia. It lies between the Black Sea and the Azov Sea. The Crimean War (1853-1856), was a conflict between Russia and an alliance made up of the Ottoman Empire, France, Great Britain and the Kingdom of Sardinia.

from the mother. The two older brothers found employment and between them both earned eight francs a week. A thirteen year old sister became a seamstress and earned two francs a week.

Peter had been made a Corporal so was also able to send something to help the family and set that at ten francs a month. His mother put all of this together and through hard work and economy was able to manage affairs properly.

This is how things were for Peter when an alliance was made between our Government, France and England to send fifteen thousand soldiers from Piedmont to the Crimea to fight the Russians. Amongst the regiments destined for this expedition was Peter's. He knew that his mother would be very sorry to hear this news so even though he had to tell her he adopted a facetious tone as if it was like someone going for a trip to pass the time. Therefore this is how he wrote to his mother.

Cagliari, 12 March 1855

Dearest mother,

Good news, mother; I am going for a trip that will cost me nothing. Transport, food, clothing, my stay there, return ticket (when we return) all gratis. We have been warned to get ready to leave for the Crimea. Some get frightened when they hear the name of this country; not me. That's my duty, so I go gladly. The world is like being in exile. Whether I remain here in Sardinia, or return to Piedmont or go to Turkey I am always in exile in a valley of tears; our homeland is Heaven.

Don't think I am heading off carelessly: my first preparations were for my soul and my conscience is fully at ease. We are in God's hands, and if I am to die in battle I will die with honour and even hope to die as a good Christian. But if I come back I will be able to tell you all about those places. As soon as I arrive at my destination I will write to you. Continue to take care of the

family, and if we do not meet again in this world we will meet in Heaven where our father is waiting for us. Goodbye, mother dear. goodbye. Keep cheerful: I am always,

your loving Peter.

Peter, as we have said, wrote this letter in a somewhat facetious tone so he would not cause too much sorrow for his mother. But far from being cheerful she was very sad. I tried to console her by telling her that her son was good at writing and therefore when he was amongst enemies it would be less likely that he would fall into their hands, and that she could be consoled because she had such a courageous and virtuous son. The mother became a little more resigned, and asked me to write him a letter in which I would encourage him warmly to avoid any offence against God and that she would be less sorrowful if she knew he had died in battle than if she were to think he had stained his soul with sin. I willingly carried out my commission, and also added some reflections of my own that I thought would be appropriate. He wrote back immediately and since this reply is full of good and frank thoughts I shall reproduce it here just as it is, asking you to take no account of what he says that concerns me.

Cagliari, 4 April 1855

Dearest friend,

You can imagine with what great pleasure I received your letter! Every word of it was a precious balm for me. You ask me if I am still a good man, if my heart is still good. Yes, dear Don Bosco¹¹, I will tell you frankly that my heart is the same as it was when you knew me at twelve years of age. Only distance has stopped me from going to the Oratory, but tell all my friends that the rules of the St Aloysius sodality have always been my rule of conduct in life. The book you gave me as I was leaving I have looked after jealously, and I read a little from it each day. I have brought with me the resolutions I wrote down at my First Communion, and I read them once a month and even more

¹¹ Don Bosco D.B.

often, taking care to put them into practice. You tell me that you want my soul to be looked after, with all your heart. I believe that and you have always shown that. For my part I assure you I will do everything I can to be saved. I have already encountered serious perils but the Blessed Virgin has always helped me and I have come out of them without offending the Lord.

Please try to console my mother who I believe is very sad that I am leaving for the Crimea. I also ask you to try to teach the fear of the Lord to my brothers. Take care of their soul as you showed you did and still do for mine. So see that my relatives, friends, brothers and sisters will all be saved.

We still do not know the day of our departure but it will certainly be soon. Who knows if I will return one day and can come back to the Oratory and enjoy the pleasant company of friends, and attend religious ceremonies like you have there! Never forget the agreement we made. Every day I say the *Our Father* to St Aloysius. Do not forget to remember me at Mass.

I greet you with all my heart, and with all my heart I remain now and forever in Jesus Christ,

Your affectionate son, Peter.

Chapter 13. His experiences in Crimea

Peter left a few days after he wrote this letter. Of the trip, arrival and where he is in Crimea for now we only know what he wrote in two letters to his mother and that is all we know about this valiant soldier.

The first is as follows.

From East Camp, 26 May 1855

Dearest mother,

Today I can finally write something to you. I begin by telling you that my health is excellent; I can give you some idea of what I have seen. I left the shores of Sardinia on the first of May on a ship something like the boats

you see on the Po, but fifty times larger. The voyage took twelve days. On the high seas you could only see water everywhere. Many of my friends were suffering during the voyage, and three died from sea-sickness. I was able to go to Confession to a Friar who was with us but not to Communion since there was no Blessed Sacrament. The way the burials took place was very sad. A rock was attached to their feet and another to their legs and they were thrown into the sea; they soon sank who knows how deep. After seven days we came to a narrow straight called the *Dardanelles*, then there was the great city of Constantinople. We stayed there a day and I was able to see the Turks. How ugly they look! Their trousers look like sacks; they have hats on their head that could hold about three bushels of maize each. I wasn't able to hear them speak because we were forbidden to leave the ship.

Finally on the 13th we reached the Crimea. Oh! You might ask me, what is the Crimea?

Crimea is a country like others. It is a very large country surrounded mostly by water except for one part called Perecop, where it joins the Russian Empire. We spent six days tied up at the wharf after which we were allowed to disembark. The first to meet us were the English who showed signs of friendship, but I understood nothing, although I picked up some words; *"the italien: the ilalien pruk"*: words that I think mean: "Good for you, Italians, well done!"

We were sent to different places according to orders from our superiors. Some of our regiments had already disembarked, others followed us. You might ask where they could put all these people. Don't be surprised: the world is big; there is a place for everyone. Wide open spaces with sand, river banks, stones and some trees—that's the floor of our home. And the blue sky is our roof. Could there be better floors and roofs than the ones the Lord made? By day we are busy putting up tents where we had to put the munitions, and also some of the men who had fallen ill. Then when evening comes I wrap two scarves around my head, a woollen blanket around my body, a sack under my head, and lying on the ground I sleep there till morning. Sometimes we are disturbed by the noise of shooting or cannon fired by the Russians to frighten

us, but they are just distant noises for us. We have not engaged with the Russians up till now but must constantly fight other enemies. By day it is so hot that it seems to be the antechamber of Hell, with very annoying flies and horseflies that have no respect for people and have a bite like a wasp. At night it is cold, with mosquitoes and some kind of bug that runs and flutters around all over the place, and if we are not covered up and protected from them it is impossible to sleep. There is another enemy and it's the lice which everyone tries to keep away. Up till now this enemy has not made great advances on us but we fear for the future when we have less clothing. What gives me the greatest regret is that after leaving Sardinia I have not been able to attend Mass, a sermon, Benediction. They say however that shortly things will be adjusted so that we can at least have Mass on Sundays.

This letter is already too long; I have many things to tell you and therefore I will write again and soon. Until now the Blessed Virgin has assisted me and nothing unfortunate has happened to me so far. May God help us. Greetings, etc.

Your affectionate son, Peter.

Another letter on 2 July 1855.

Dearest mother,

It was not possible for me to write until today. I have always had to be going here or there without a moment's relaxation. I have no more pen or ink so am writing with a pencil, that is with a lapis.

Many serious things happened after I wrote to you. There was a terrible attack of cholera and some of our companions died! It is said that the death toll reached two thousand five hundred; it is now going down, but there is terrible fever, a kind of cholera. On the seventh of last month there was a great battle at Sevastopol: the French and the English were victorious. On the eighteenth of the same month there was another, and although the allies were very courageous they were pushed back by the Russians and many of our men died. In these battles, between dead and wounded there have been 18 thousand of ours and 12 thousand Russians. They were fewer because they

were in a fort and protected. We are now at the vigil of another great event. What causes the greatest sorrow is to think that in a battle almost all who die are angry and instead of calling on God's mercy, as they should, most are blaspheming and cursing. How many souls will go to Hell!

My health is very good; I lack shirts, and since I was used to not eating so well at home it helps me now to adjust to any kind of diet; but those who used to eat and drink well are suffering from one illness or another and not a few end up in the other world.

My job is no longer to write for my superior but I have been promoted to Sergeant; this means I earn more but it also means I am on service more and have to live in the field with the other soldiers. Do not worry about me. For my body I need nothing, and as for my soul my conscience is at peace. If I live I hope to live in God's grace; if I die I hope to enjoy him in Paradise. If some time passes before I write again do not worry, it could be just that I don't have time. Continue to pray for me and know that I am always,

Your affectionate son, Peter.

This is the last lot of news we have had from Peter. We do not know if he is alive or dead. However we hope that Heaven will preserve him so he can be the consolation of his widowed mother, support the family, and be an example of virtue for his friends.

Chapter 14. Conclusion

So, dear reader, here are the powerful effects of a good upbringing and we could also say the effects of a well made First Communion. Peter always remembered the promise he made to God to be faithful, despite bad example and advice from his friends for many of whom there was no improvement in their lives after the first or second Communion. Their behaviour just went from bad to worse.

Peter knew that the God whom he had received for the first time wanted and indeed commanded that he be received at least once a year, at Easter. He did not limit himself to once a year because, as he used to say: "How can you

do something well if you only do it once a year?" So he went to Confession and Communion with the frequency we have seen.

Many mothers would like to have children similar to Peter in their behaviour, who are the support and consolation of their family; instead they are a cross during their childhood, and their sorrow and desolation when they are older.

Fathers and mothers! If you want to have well brought-up children who are your consolation when they become adults, imitate Peter's mother, instruct them in religion especially at a tender age; look after them and see they go to church rather than go off with bad companions.

But you have to give the example; it would be silly if there were parents who had no scruples about speaking freely of things against customs or religion, especially in the presence of their children, who hold parties on Sundays when they should be attending the sacred functions and then hope their children will be good, recollected, devout.

Fathers and mothers, don't fool yourselves! You will certainly have to render strict account before the judgement seat of God for the upbringing you gave your children. It is certain that many children are damned because they have not been brought up properly and it is equally certain that many fathers and mothers go to eternal perdition for the bad upbringing they have given their children.

These are three great truths which should be given careful consideration. It is an undeniable fact that if children are raised well this growing generation will love order and work, will make sure to comfort their parents and help the family. In short, we will have better times, children who will be an honour to their country, the support of their families as well as being to the glory and honour of their religion¹².

¹² In the original this is followed by: "Litanies for the dead (Translated from English)" (pp. [104]-111).