

# **DON BOSCO: SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR OF YOUNG PEOPLE**

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## PREFACE

If, on reading the title of this book, you are expecting to find an exposition on how to give spiritual direction to young people, you are going to be disappointed. We will search in vain, among the writings of Saint John Bosco, for such a book.

Yet this Saint stands out as one of the most remarkable spiritual directors of the young in the history of the Church. Facts bear out this statement -- it is not just an exaggerated manifestation of hero worship. Can we find, among his writings, how he approached this task of spiritual direction? Yes. This anthology has been put together for this very purpose and some indications of the riches contained have been given. A close and prayerful reading will help the reader to discover many more.

Pope Paul VI could have been describing Don Bosco's approach when he wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation *EVANGELII NUNTIANDI* in 1975: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." (41). "The present century thirsts for authenticity. Especially in regard to young people it is said that they have a horror of the artificial or false and that they are searching above all for truth and honesty . . . The witness of life has become more than ever an essential condition for real effectiveness." (76).

You will find that Don Bosco was well aware of this. Much of the material contained in this book is biographical or autobiographical. It begins with extracts from his own Memoirs, of which Fr. Colli writes: "It is interesting to note that the most important posthumous document which Don Bosco has left us to understand his spirit, his mission - vocation, is not a book of theory, an outline of spirituality, but a story." (*Pedagogia Spirituale di Don Bosco e spirito salesiano* page 18)

Fr. W. L. Cornell S. D. B.



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## I. MEMOIRS OF THE ORATORY OF SAINT FRANCIS OF SALES (1815-1855)

### Some Introductory Remarks

When Don Bosco first visited Pope Pius IX in 1858 to obtain his support for the recognition of the Salesian Society, he began to talk about the Oratory at Valdocco-Turin. Among other things, he spoke of the many saintly boys under his care and made special mention of Dominic Savio who had asked him to mention a vision he had had concerning England. The Pope was intrigued by this message and asked Don Bosco if he had ever experienced supernatural inspiration himself. Don Bosco hesitated but the Pope insisted and so he began to speak of his extraordinary dreams, beginning with that fundamental dream when he was only nine years old.

The Pope drew him out further and then advised him to write down his life story, saying: "Save all this as a legacy for your Congregation, so that it may serve as an encouragement and norm for your sons."

Don Bosco returned to Rome in 1867 and the first question which Pius IX put to him was: "Well, did you follow my advice? Did you write down those things which had a bearing in inspiring you to found your Society? "

"Your Holiness," Don Bosco replied, "I truthfully lacked the time. I was so taken up with . . . " "Well, then, I do not only advise you, but COMMAND you to do it . . . ."

Yet another nine years were to go by until Don Bosco got down to the task. He died before he had time to revise the draft and then only covered the first forty years of his life. He also added that these Memoirs were not to be published even after his death. In 1946 it was decided to disobey this injunction and Fr. Ceria saw to its publication.

### Influences on Don Bosco's Spiritual Life and His Role as Spiritual Director

Don Bosco's loss of his father on the 12th May 1817 is "the very first thing that I can remember."

This fact forced Mamma Margaret to take over the dual roles of mother and father and this certainly influenced John. In his dealing with young people he learnt from his mother how to combine the loving, caring role of a mother with the firmness of a father.

a) **Education in the faith:**

"My mother's first concern was the instruction of her children in religion, teaching them obedience, and keeping them busy with activities that were right for their age. When I was a child, she taught me my prayers; and as soon as I was able to play with my brothers, she made me kneel with them morning and evening, to join all the others in reciting the prayers and the third part of the rosary. I still remember how she prepared me for my First Confession. She went to church with me, where she confessed before recommending me to the confessor, after my confession she helped me with my thanksgiving and continued to help me until I was able to make a good confession by myself."

(MO 21-22)

*Herein lies the germs of the importance Don Bosco gave to penitential catechesis and his willingness to spend hours and hours in the confessional right up to the last months of his life. "The tribunal of penance was for him a place of repose and joy, and not of fatigue."*

(BM III, 54)

*In the Apostolic Process for Don Bosco's beatification, Fr. Michael Rua testified: "If Don Bosco was to give the 'Good Night' to the pupils of the salesian school on two consecutive nights one of them would be on confession, and if he could address them only once, unfailingly he would say something about it too . . . ."*

(BM X, 7)

After relating that his mother made sure he went to the daily classes in preparation for his FIRST HOLY COMMUNION and how she supplemented this instruction by wise words of advice and encouragement, Don Bosco relates in his Memoirs her words after the big event. "My dear son, this has been a great day for you. I am sure that God has truly taken possession of your heart. Now you must promise Him to do your best to remain good until the day you die. In the future, go frequently to Holy Communion and beware not to commit sacrilege."

(MO 33)



*Again we can see the germs of Don Bosco's emphasis on the centrality of the Eucharist in spiritual growth.*

**b) The fundamental dream**

"At that age I had a dream that had a profound impression on my mind for all my life. I dreamed that I was near my home, in a very large playing field where a crowd of children were having fun. Some were laughing, others were playing and not a few were cursing. I was so shocked at their language that I jumped into their midst, swinging wildly and shouting at them to stop. At that moment a venerable man appeared on the scene, in full flower of his manhood, magnificently dressed. A white robe covered all of his body but his face shone so brightly that I could not really keep my gaze on it. He called me by name and told me to take charge of all those boys and gave the following advice: 'You will win the hearts and souls of these friends of yours not by the use of force but by kindness and gentleness. Begin straightaway to teach them that sin is nasty and harmful and that the practice of virtue is such a beautiful thing.'

Confused and afraid I replied that I was only a poor and ignorant boy, incapable of speaking about religion to all these boys. At that moment the fighting, shouting and cursing stopped and the crowd of boys gathered about that venerable man who was now talking. Almost unconsciously I asked: 'Who do you think you are, commanding the impossible?'

'Just because these things seem impossible, you must make them possible by your obedience and educating yourself.'

'And how am I going to find the means to educate myself?'

I will give you a teacher under whose guidance you will become wise and without her guidance all learning is useless.'

'But who are you, who speak to me like this?'

'I am the Son of her whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day.'

'My mother told me to have nothing to do with strangers without her permission. So, please tell me your name.'

'My name? Ask my mother.'

At that moment I saw beside me a Lady of majestic appearance, dressed in a mantle that shone all over as if it were a brilliant star. Seeing me becoming more and more confused by all these questions and answers, she motioned to me to come closer to her and took me gently by the hand. 'Look', she said to me. I did as she requested and saw that all the youngsters had disappeared and in their place I saw a managerie of goats, dogs, cats, bears and all sorts of other animals.

'Here is your mission; here is where you are to work. See that you become humble, strong and stout-hearted; and what you will soon see happening to these animals will happen to the children I will send to you.'

I looked again and I saw that the wild animals had become gentle little lambs, jumping up and down bleating as if they were showing how pleased they were to see that Man and Woman. At that moment, still in my dream, I began to cry and begged them to explain to me what all this meant as I had no idea of what it was all about. Then she placed her hand on my head and said: 'In due time you will understand everything.'

As soon as she said those words, a noise woke me up and everything disappeared. (MO 22-25)

\* *A challenge! to convince young people that true happiness can only come about if their lives are consonant with a life of virtue and that sin can only bring unhappiness and discontent.*

\* *"I will give you a teacher (Mary)." "Let us go to Mary . . . She will generously grant us temporal and spiritual favours. She will be our guide, our teacher, our mother." Don Bosco in 1864 (BM VII, 406)*

c) The acceptance of spiritual direction

Fr. Calosso (1829 - when John was 14 years old)

"I came to know what it meant to have a constant spiritual guide and faithful friend, the kind of relationship I had sadly lacked until then. He soon made me discontinue a penance which he considered incompatible with my age and condition. He advocated frequent Confession and Communion and taught me how to briefly meditate daily, or, more precisely, how to do a short spiritual reading. On Holy Days I would pass all the time I could

spare with him. On weekdays I would go and serve his Mass as often as possible. Thus, I began to get a taste of what spiritual life was really like. Up to then I had acted rather perfunctorily and superficially, performing rites without really knowing why."

(MB I, 136)

Louis Comollo (1834 - when John was 19 years old)

"I admired the loving kindness of my friend and, by placing myself entirely in his hands, I allowed him to guide me as he saw fit. Together with a friend we went to confession, to Holy Communion, we meditated, held spiritual readings, visited the Blessed Sacrament, and served Holy Mass. He would invite us with so much kindness, gentleness and courtesy that it was impossible to turn down his invitation." (MO 60-61)

Father Cafaso (1835-1860)

"If I accomplished anything, I owe it to this worthy priest whom I consulted on every decision, every subject for study, everything in my life." (MO 123)

\* *"Don Bosco would never accept the fact that one goes to confession for nothing else but absolution. He would accept that only in urgent cases or when one finds difficulty in being sincere with one's confessor. That is, he condemned confession divorced from spiritual direction and moral profit." (Fr. Braido: The Preventive System. page 285)*

\* *"Some people think that to start a new life it is enough to open one's heart to a spiritual director and make a general confession. That is fine, but it is not enough . . . Besides fixing up the past we must also provide for the future . . . To make steady progress you must reveal your habitual failings, the occasions which usually lead into sin, and your dominant evil inclinations. You must attentively and faithfully carry out the advice you are given. You must keep your heart open and fully trusting. You must manifest your needs, temptations and dangers as they rise, so that your director may guide you with a steady hand." Don Bosco (BM VII, 430 - 431)*

d) Vocational Guidance

"Having taken the decision to embrace the ecclesiastical state and sat for the prescribed examination, I went on preparing

myself for that very important day, persuaded as I am that one's eternal salvation or damnation depends, in the ordinary way, on this decision." (MO 85)

*"In the salesian perspective all educational and pastoral activity contains as an essential objective a vocational dimension. As a matter of fact, the discovery of one's calling, the well-thought-out free choice of a program of life, constitutes the crowning goal of any process of human and christian growth.*

*The gospel message which unites God's people is a calling to community; and for every believer to welcome the Good News is to accept a personal calling to take on the very mission of the Church according to one's particular vocation.*

*The vocation apostolate will therefore be a ministry of evangelization with a special stress on the help and assistance to be given all the faithful to enable them to enter into God's plan with their entire being and personal free choice."*

*(Acts of the 21st General Chapter of the Salesian Society, No. 106)*

**e) The Faith explained in simple terms**

After his ordination, Don Bosco tried not to turn down any invitation to preach. To his disappointment, he found that he was not getting the message across. After one such sermon he asked the parish priest to give him some advice:

"Instead of deep reasoning, give plenty of examples, stories and simple, practical teaching. Always remember that the congregation often does not understand what is being said so the truths of faith can never be explained too often."

Don Bosco adds: "This paternal advice was followed for the rest of my life."

*In Volume three of the Biographical Memoirs, Fr. Leymoyne devotes a whole chapter to Don Bosco's method of preaching and catechizing --*

*"Enormous crowds would come to hear him, even youngsters, who naturally tire of serious talk, were eager to listen to him. Whenever asked, he would always teach them catechism gladly. They would become fast friends with him and gather around him whenever possible, hardly able to part from him; more than one boy was in tears when Don Bosco finally had to leave." (BM III, 49; cf Acts of the Apostles 20:28-38)*

*"He spoke with such obvious sincerity and conviction that his deep faith found its way into the hearts of his hearers." (BM III, p. 49)*

*"No matter who was in his audience, bishops, scholarly priests or aristocrats, and regardless of the topic, a dominant thought always ran through his sermon: the need to save one's soul . . . his sermons always aimed at winning souls to God." (BM III, 52-53)*

#### **f) Definitive choice of mission**

Worn out by his efforts to find a permanent home for his Oratory and because he was running this huge venture almost single-handed and in the face of opposition, Don Bosco was struck down by pneumonia and was at death's door for some time. When the news of his critical state reached the boys of the Oratory, they were terrified: they were going to lose the only friend they had. They stormed heaven by prayer and penance. After 10 or more hours of hard work as builders' labourers, many were spending hours in prayer at the church of the Consolata - others had vowed to live on bread and water; some took a vow to say the Rosary every day for the rest of their lives ....

*"God heard them. It was a Saturday evening and I was convinced it was to be the last night of my life. The doctors who came to examine me agreed. I had no doubts especially as I was growing weaker and weaker through loss of blood. Late that night I felt sleepy. I went into a deep sleep and woke up recovered. Dr. Botta and Dr. Cafasso who visited me in the morning said I should go and thank Our Lady of Consolation for the grace received.*

My boys would not believe the news and wanted to see me. They were soon to see me coming down slowly with the aid of a walking stick to the Oratory. Their reaction can be imagined but not described. They sang the Te Deum. Their enthusiasm and shouts of joy was an incredible experience." (MO 190-191)

Fr. Lemoyne adds these words of Don Bosco: "I want to thank you for the love you have shown me during my illness. I want to thank you for the prayers you said for my recovery. I am convinced that God granted me an extension of life in answer to your prayers. Therefore gratitude demands that I spend it all for your temporal and spiritual welfare. This I promise to do as long as the Lord will permit me to remain in this world; on your part, help me to keep my promise." (BM II, 386)

*"Don Bosco lived a pastoral experience in his first Oratory which serves as a model; it was for the youngsters a home that welcomed, a parish that evangelized, a school that prepared them for life, and a playground where friends could meet and enjoy themselves. As we carry out our mission today, the Valdocco experience is still the lasting criterion for discernment and renewal in all our activities and works."* (Article 40 of the Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis of Sales)

#### g) The Regulations for the Oratory

*These Regulations, with suitable comments, are to be found in Chapters 8 & 9 of Volume III of the Biographical Memoirs.*

*To quote some of the more pertinent Regulations for the purpose of this work:*

#### Purpose of the Oratory

3) Religious instruction is the oratory's primary objective; the rest is only an accessory, an inducement for the boys to attend.

#### Admission Requirements

2. *Poor, abandoned and uneducated boys are particularly welcome because they need more help to achieve their eternal salvation.*

6. *Boys entering this oratory must realize that it is a religious organization whose purpose is to train boys to become good Christians and upright citizens. Therefore, blasphemy, obscene conversation or language offensive to our Faith are strictly forbidden. Any boy guilty of such offenses will be admonished in a fatherly way the first time; if he does not mend his ways, he will be reported to the director for expulsion from the oratory.*

7. Troublesome boys may also be admitted provided they do not cause scandal and are earnest in improving their conduct.

#### The Catechists

16. The catechist should always show a pleasant disposition and should realize the importance of what he is teaching. When correcting or admonishing, he should always encourage, never use irritating words or expressions. He should praise those who deserve it, but be slow in rebuking ...

#### General Rules for all staff members

1. Every task in this Oratory should be motivated by charity, and discharged with zeal as a homage to God. All should encourage one another to persevere in their office and carry out their respective tasks.

#### The importance of the sacraments

1. Remember, my dear boys, that confession and Holy Communion are your two most solid supports along the road to heaven. Therefore, if anybody tries to make you give them up, consider him an enemy of your soul.

#### **h) The Sodality of St. Aloysius**

"Having established the basic organs for the maintenance of discipline and administration in the Oratory, it was necessary to encourage the members to piety by means of some stable and uniform body. So the Sodality of St. Aloysius was set up."  
(MO 196)

*Don Bosco's concept of the Sodalities within the framework of his educative work: AN INTEGRAL AND INDISPENSABLE ELEMENT.*

\* Already in his schooldays he found it necessary to set up a Sodality which is called the 'Society of Joy'. Don Lemoyne comments on page 195 of Volume 1 of the Biographical Memoirs: "Society of Joy, a most appropriate name because each one was expected to bring in only those books, topics or games that would add to the general cheerfulness. Everything contrary to it was banned, especially anything not in accordance with God's law. Whoever cursed, took the Lord's name in vain, or carried on improper conversation could not remain a member and was forthwith expelled. By common consent membership in this

club was dependent upon two basic conditions: (1) the avoidance of every word and deed unbecoming a christian and (2) the exact fulfillment of one's duties whether scholastic or religious."

*Don Bosco was to set up a similar organization among his companions during the holidays and at the Seminary.*

\* In Volume III, page 147, Fr. Lemoyne writes: "Now Don Bosco realized he had to spur his boys on to virtue by some lasting, uniform means that would unite the more virtuous of them, arouse their enthusiasm and give them by their very number greater confidence against fear of their companion's criticism. To meet this need Don Bosco decided to establish the St. Aloysius Sodality, and thus to have the boys commit themselves to practice constantly the more characteristic virtues of this saint."

*The Regulations merely flesh out the simple rules for the Society of Joy:*

1. . . . "all who want to become members must behave in such a way as not only to avoid giving any scandal but also strive constantly to set good example . . ."
2. . . . "Endeavour to go to Confession and Communion every two weeks or even more frequently, especially on solemn feast days."
4. "Practice the greatest charity towards your companions . . ."
6. "Be diligent in your work and the fulfillment of your other duties: promptly obey your parents and superiors." (BM III, 148-149)

## II. THE COMPANION OF YOUTH (IL GIOVANE PROVVEDUTO PER LA PRACTICA DEI SUOI DOVERI RELIGIOSI)

This book was first printed and distributed by Don Bosco in 1847. By 1888 it had gone through 122 editions, in all, 6 million copies. Further editions were printed after Don Bosco's death.

It appeared in English for the first time in 1938, the 50th anniversary of Don Bosco's death, under the name of THE COMPANION OF YOUTH, with some minor omissions.



“This book is divided into three parts. In the first part you will find the principal things which you must do, or which you must avoid, that you may live as good Christians. In the second part there is a collection of practical devotions for use in church and school. Finally, you will find an instruction in dialogue form on the fundamental truths of our holy Catholic religion, suited to your needs.

My young friends, you are very dear to me. It is enough for me to know that you are young, to become interested in your welfare. There are writers better and more learned than I, but it would be difficult to find one who has a greater love for you in Christ, or a greater desire for your true happiness. I am devoted to you, because you hold in your hearts the treasure of virtue. With its possession, you own everything; without it, you become the most unhappy and the most unfortunate creatures in the world.

May God be always with you, and grant that by the practice of these few suggestions you may save your souls, and thereby increase His glory. That is the sole purpose of the writer of these pages.

May heaven grant you a long and joyful life. May your greatest treasure ever be a holy fear of God, Who will be your greatest recompense in time and eternity.

Yours sincerely,

John Bosco, Priest.

(From the Introduction, page 4. All quotations will be from the 1938 English edition.)

*Cf Fr. Lemoyne's comments as an introduction to Chapter 47 of Volume IV of the Biographical Memoirs (page 379) in which we find Don Bosco's Treatise on the Preventive System: "Experience has shown us that an educator gets nowhere if his efforts are not prompted by true love. A child's first happiness is to know that he is loved. Responding to this love, he will believe what the teacher says and will share his teacher's likes and dislikes . . . Above all, the child will love him as the father of his soul."*  
(MB IV, 379)

*Canon Ballesio, a past pupil of Don Bosco's wrote: "When a boy appeared before Don Bosco for the first time, Don Bosco's natural goodness inspired him with respect and confidence, but, at the same time, his searching eye penetrated into all and divined the talents and the heart of the boy . . . When he recognized a pupil's capacity he kindly, and as it were magnetically, drew him to himself, and kindled the boy's heart with the noble flame burning in his own breast, and with the intimacy of a friend made him share in his noble work."*

*"The boys should not only be loved, but realize that they are loved," Don Bosco in his Letter from Rome, May 1884.*

#### **A. Means needed to lead a good catholic life**

##### Article 1: An understanding of God

"Bear in mind, my dear children, that we were created for heaven. God, Who is our loving Father, will condemn to hell only those who deserve it on account of their sins. Oh, how much God loves us and desires that we perform good works, so that we may share in that great joy, which He has prepared for all of us in the eternity of heaven."

*Fr. Albert Caviglia, in his study of the biography of Dominic Savio as written by Don Bosco, claims that the thought of heaven was a key concept and was the basis of his spiritual pedagogy and "not a religion of terror seen in the threat of hell. The Holy Founder only used this thought to move those who needed this stimulus . . . Heaven is the word which is used under every circumstance as the supreme animator of all his good works and his support under adversity."*

##### Article 2: God loves the young exceedingly

"What ought to excite us to love and serve God is the great love which He has for us . . . Since Our Lord loves you so much, you should form the sincere resolution to correspond with His love by doing whatever pleases Him, and by avoiding whatever might offend Him."

##### Article 3: The salvation of the soul depends greatly upon the time of our youth.

"But some of you may argue: if we commence to serve God now, we shall become sad and depressed. I answer, that this is not true. He who serves the devil is miserable, even if he pretends to be

happy . . . Courage then, my dear friends, employ your time virtuously, and I assure you that your heart will always be happy and contented. You will experience as a consequence how sweet and pleasing it is to serve the Lord."

*Cf the words of the 'fundamental dream': "... teach them that sin is nasty and harmful and that the practice of virtue is such a beautiful thing."*

Article 4: The first virtue of youth is obedience to parents and superiors.

"As a tender plant, although placed in good soil, will take root weakly, and finally wither away unless cultivated carefully up to certain growth; so you, my dear children, you will surely yield to evil, if you do not allow yourselves to be guided by those who have charge of your education and the welfare of your soul."

*"... I cannot tolerate indiscipline in the house. I put up with a lot of things, but when discipline is at stake I am inflexible."*

*BM VIII, 48 - 49)*

Article 5: Respect which we owe the Church and her sacred ministers.

"Since we are christians, we should have great esteem for everything touching our Catholic Faith, and especially for the church, which is the House of God, a place of sanctity, the temple of prayer . . .

Moreover, I recommend that you cultivate the highest regard for priests and religious . . . Lastly, I must advise you not to be ashamed of acknowledging your religion outside the church."

*"Those who are acquainted with the life of St. John Bosco know how much his zeal was motivated by this idea (there is only one Church which is the mother of all men) . . . It is necessary not to overlook this influence even in the idea which he had of holiness. Whoever wants to become holy must be closely united with the Church and with the successor of Peter. The duty of the faithful who agree with this definition of Christianity is to accede to the directives, the manifest intentions and even the simple wishes of the universal shepherd.*

*(Fr. Francis Desramaut: Don Bosco and the Spiritual Life. English translation 1979, page 95.)*

## Article 6: Spiritual Reading and the Word of God

"Besides your ordinary morning and evening prayers, I exhort you to spend a short time in reading some spiritual book . . . Whilst I recommend good reading to you, I must urge you to avoid bad books as you would avoid the plague . . .

The food and sustenance of the soul is the Word of God . . .

*"With praiseworthy consistency, Don Bosco gave to the Word of God (which for him included sermons, instructions, bible history etc.) the first place among the means of acquiring holiness."*  
(Fr. Francis Desramaut: *Don Bosco and the Spiritual Life*. English translation 1979, page 111.)

## **B. Means of Perseverance**

### **1. What Should Be The Chief Concern Of The Young**

#### Article 1: How to act during temptation

"Even at your tender age, my dear children, the devil sets snares to tempt you to sin, and thereby to enslave your soul and render you an enemy to God . . . One way of keeping out of temptation is to avoid occasions of sin . . . When you are tempted, do not trifle with temptation . . . Keep yourself occupied with work, study, art and music."

#### Article 2: Remedies for certain deceits which the devil employs to ensnare youth

"The first snare . . . is to represent to your mind how impossible it will be to walk the difficult path of virtue, without any pleasure, for all the long years of your life . . . On the contrary, those who yield to pleasure live unhappily. They are restless, and the more they search for peace in their amusements, the more miserable they become . . .

But someone might suggest: 'We are young, and if we begin to think of eternity and hell, we shall become low-spirited and morbid' . . . It is better to think about your eternal loss now than to endure it hereafter. To weigh the thought now will most certainly preserve you from such a fate in the future . . .

Courage then, my dear friends. Strive to follow Our Saviour, and you will experience how sweet and delightful it is to serve Him. And a great measure of contentment will flood your soul now and evermore."

### Article 3: How to keep the beautiful virtue of purity

"Every virtue in the young is a precious ornament which makes them dear to God and to man. But holy purity, the queenly virtue, the angelic virtue, is a jewel so precious that those who possess it become like the angels of God in heaven, even though clothed in mortal flesh . . . But this virtue . . . is the objective of all the attacks of the enemy of your soul. He will strive by violent temptations to undermine it, and even destroy it altogether. For this reason, I here suggest certain rules for you to follow:

The principal safeguard is retirement . . .

To retirement should be added sincere and frequent confession, devout reception of Holy Communion, and avoidance of those, who by word and deed, show that they do not value this virtue... By fasting we overcome temptations of the devil; by mortification of the senses, by custody of the eyes, by abstinence, and by shunning idleness and sloth. Jesus Christ, moreover, recommends recourse to prayer, fervent and sincere prayer, which should not cease until temptation has subsided . . .

You have, likewise, a very efficient weapon in ejaculatory prayer, in the invocation of the Holy Names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph...

It is a help to kiss reverently a crucifix, a medal, or the scapular of the Blessed Virgin. But if all this should prove insufficient to drive away temptation, try the most efficacious means of all, namely, the remembrance of God's presence . . . It has always been my firm conviction that in temptation and danger you will not fall into sin if you have recourse to the thought of the presence of God."

### Article 4: Devotion to Mary most holy

"A great help to you, my dear children, is devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary . . . Be persuaded that you will receive every grace from this good Mother, provided that what you ask is for your soul's welfare. You should ask her for three particular graces . . . The first is, that you never commit a mortal sin in your life . . .

The second grace which you should ask . . . is that of preserving the precious virtue of purity . . .

The third grace . . . is always to avoid the company of those who indulge in evil conversation . . . I can assure you that their company will do you far more harm than that of the devil . . .

These are the three graces most necessary in life at your age, and you will surely obtain them from our blessed Mother if you show your sincere devotion to her by reciting the Rosary, or at least by saying three Hail Marys and three Glory be to the Father, with the ejaculation: 'Dear Mother, Virgin Mary, help me to save my soul.'

With these three graces you will travel to the end of your life by the road which will make you worthy members of society, and you will have the secure guarantee of eternal happiness, which Mary most holy infallibly procures for all her clients."

#### Article 5: Advice to members of a Sodality or Festive Oratory

"If you are fortunate enough to be enrolled in some Sodality or Festive Oratory, strive to be loyal and to observe the rules carefully . . .

Guard against quarrels, avoid calling your companions nicknames, and create no dissatisfaction on account of your place, choice, or failure in the games. Whenever you see or hear anything wrong, if you cannot stop it in any other way, hasten to acquaint your superior immediately, that he may prevent any offence against God . . .

Be careful in your speech, and shun lies, because, if you acquire the habit of lying, you both offend God and are dishonoured before your companions and superiors."

#### Article 6: Choice of a State of life

"In His eternal decrees, God has destined each one of us to a state of life with its corresponding graces . . . It is then most important, dear children, that you choose your vocation wisely, so that you may enter upon the career for which the Lord has destined you . . . When the time has arrived for a decision, have recourse to God in frequent and very fervent prayer . . . Consult experienced and God-fearing persons, and especially your confessor, to whom you should confide your vocation and your dispositions."

## 2. What the Young Ought to Avoid

### Article 1: Idleness

"The principal snare which the devil sets for the young is idleness, the fatal source of all evil. Be convinced, my dear friends, that man was born to labour, and when he ceases to do so he is out of his element and in great danger of offending God . . .

I do not mean that you should be occupied from morning until night without some recreation. I want you to be happy, and I gladly wish that you may have any enjoyments which are not sinful."

### Article 2: Bad companions

"There are three classes of companions: good, bad and those who are not wholly bad, nor altogether good. With the first class you can associate freely and with advantage; with the last, only when you have need to do so, and never with familiarity. But who are your bad companions? Pay attention, and you will know who they are. They are those who, in your presence, are not ashamed to make use of bad language, scandalous words, and expressions of double meaning; those who grumble, lie, swear, blaspheme; those who endeavour to keep you away from church, who counsel you to steal, to disobey your parents, or neglect your duty. All these are bad companions, servants of the devil, persons whom you must shun more than the plague or Satan himself. Ah, my dear children, with tears in my eyes, I beseech you to avoid and abhor such companions!"

### Article 3: Bad conversation

"What a number of souls must be lost in hell because they listened to bad conversation! . . . Someone, perhaps, may say: I realize the dreadful consequences, but what can I do? I find myself, of necessity, in a house, a school, a factory, or a shop, where bad talk goes on. Alas, my dear friends, I know only too well that such is the case, so I shall show you how to behave in the circumstances without embarrassment, and without offence against God.

If the persons carrying on the evil conversation are your inferiors, reprove them severely; if they are people whom it would be useless to reprimand, withdraw from their presence if you can; if you cannot, take no part in the evil talk, either by words or even a smile . . . It may happen that some will laugh and mock at you, but this does not matter."

#### Article 4: Scandal

"The word 'scandal' signifies 'stumbling-block'; and he gives scandal who by words or deeds gives occasion to others to offend Almighty God. Scandal is a terrible sin because it robs God of the souls which He created for heaven and redeemed through the precious blood of Jesus Christ, and delivers them into the hands of the devil, who will cast them into hell . . . Guard yourself well from this danger, and avoid it as you would avoid the devil himself . . . Therefore, let your conversation be modest and edifying; behave properly in church, and be obedient and respectful to your superiors. How many souls, imitating your example, will tread the way that leads to Paradise! And you yourselves may hope with all certainty to arrive there in their company, for St. Augustine assures us that whoever saves one soul guarantees his own salvation. These, then, my dear young friends, are the principal things that you must avoid, if you wish to live a virtuous and Christian life."

### III. TIPS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

In the November issue of the Catholic Readings in 1862, Don Bosco added, as an appendix, the following tips for young people exposed to moral dangers:

1. Don't imagine that your age can guarantee that you can look forward to living a long life. We just do not know how long we will live, dear young people. What is certain, on the other hand, is that you will die some day or other and that a bad death brings eternal misery. Therefore, instead of worrying when and where you will die, make sure you maintain your friendship with God so that you will be ready for death at any time.
2. If your conscience tells you that you are doing fairly well, the devil and your own smugness may tell you that you're doing more than enough already. It may even happen that people will call you a religious fanatic and scrupulous. At death, however, the good you have done will seem so slight that you will realize you have been deceived. Remind yourself frequently of this.
3. A good thing for young people is to give serious consideration to the choice of a vocation. Unfortunately, most young people hardly give this a thought and end by taking the wrong decision and so become unsettled and unhappy at the present time and in the future. Therefore, give it serious thought and ask God to enlighten you. Then you will make the right choice.



4. There are two enemies we can never fully overcome: our desires for pleasures of the flesh and our fear of what others may think of us. You will be very lucky if you get down to work fighting these two forces and winning the battle whilst you are still young.

5. It is important to choose your amusements carefully and use them moderately. If in doubt, consult your confessor. If you can sometimes do without them, exercise self-control and you will have achieved a victory and a reward.

6. Don't consider yourself truly spiritually-minded until you go to confession and Communion regularly and you enjoy reading spiritual books and mixing with good friends.

7. The young person who cannot put up with a slight or insult and thinks of nothing but revenge or who cannot accept a correction, even if it is undeserved, from teachers or parents, has still a long way to go on the road to virtue.

8. No poison is more fatal to young people than pornographic literature. More than ever today, books are to be feared because of their abundance and disguise. If you value your faith and your soul, do not read them unless you have your confessor's approval or the advice of people whom you can trust, people who are both spiritually-minded and learned.

9. As long as you do not fear and avoid bad companions, consider yourself to be in serious danger. In fact, consider you are bad yourself.

10. Choose your friends and companions among people who are known to be good; in fact, choose the best among them. As you mix with them, imitate their good points and avoid those that are not so good. We all have our shortcomings.

11. Be neither too stubborn or too changeable. I have always noticed that people who are always changing their minds usually fail in all they do.

12. The worst folly of a christian is to keep putting off his conversion, as though he were sure of the future and felt that it mattered little to play safe. Be truly smart. Put your conscience in order as if it were your last chance. Go to confession regularly; make some sort of spiritual reading each day; examine your conscience every evening; pay a visit to the Blessed

Sacrament and to the altar of Our Lady; attend your Sunday Mass; make the Exercise for a Happy Death. Above all, be deeply, sincerely, and constantly devoted to the Blessed Virgin. If you could only understand how important this is, you would not trade it for all the gold in the world! Therefore, cherish this devotion. I hope and pray that you may one day say: All good things came to me together with it."

(BM VII, pages 172-173)

#### IV. LETTERS TO THE YOUNG

Introduction: Although he was a very busy man, Don Bosco wrote many letters either to individual young people or to groups of boys. This is further evidence of his great love for the young and his great gift of rapport.

These letters are extracted from the four volumes of his letters, put together and commented upon by Fr. Ceria. He writes in the introduction:

"Here we are witnessing again the fatherly ways of the saintly teacher, but most inspiring is the saintliness in which he lived his faith. The marvel of these letters consists in how they portray an ever-active Don Bosco working on behalf of others, overflowing with a charity that springs from those virtues which are considered most typically Salesian, such as goodness and trust, together with an always uplifting cheerfulness which would spur on to greater efforts, and constant attention to God and His holy service, all of which is rendered in a lively, concise and vigorous style."

Quoted from Fr. Eugene Ceria's Introduction on Don Bosco's "Letters to the Young," *The Spiritual Writings of Saint John Bosco*. Edited by Joseph Aubry and translated by Joseph Caselli (New York: Don Bosco Publications, 1984), pp. 136-137.

1. "Do you remember our agreement?" (To the son of a lawyer. Epist. 1, 138)

Dear Joseph (de Sanfront),

It was good of you to write to me and your letter has given me much pleasure. As soon as the small altar is finished, I will come

as promised to preach a short sermon, and then we will talk again of our friendship and of your personal concerns.

Do you remember our agreement to be friends and to love God together with heart and soul? You said in your letter that you find joy in the things that are sacred. This is good because it means that God loves you and that you want very much to return His love. It also has another meaning, which we will discuss personally when you come to Turin.

You'll do me a great favor by passing on my best wishes to your father and mother, and, as a friend, greet the Blessed Virgin for one who with all his heart remains,

Your loving friend,

Fr. John Bosco

Turin, 8th October 1856

2. **"Get rich with real wealth"** (Letter to Ottavio Pavia, a tailor's apprentice from Chieri. Epist 1, 183-184)

My dear Pavia,

I received your letter and I thank you for remembering me so kindly. Take heart, get rich, but always bear in mind that the most important possession, the only real wealth, is the holy fear of God.

Do your duties as well as you possibly can and trust, love and respect your employer. Let us work for Heaven and may the Lord always keep both of us on the path to virtue. Pray for me.

Entirely yours,

Fr. John Bosco

Turin, 29th January 1860

3. Thoughts for the holidays. (An answer to a letter written by a student of the Oratory, Stephen Rossetti. Epist. I, 194)

My dearest son,

Your letter made me very happy. It shows that you have understood my love for you. Yes, my dear son, I love you with all my heart, and my love inspires me to do all I can to help you succeed with your studies, to grow in piety, and to lead you to Heaven.

Remember all the pieces of advice I gave you from time to time. Be cheerful but see to it that your joy is genuine, like the joy which flows from a conscience free from sin. Make every effort to become rich but rich in virtue because the greatest wealth is the holy fear of God. If you shy clear of bad companions, associate with those who are good, and accept the guidance of your parish priest, all will go well with you.

Give your parents my best wishes. Pray to the Lord for me, and while He keeps us separated, I continue to ask Him to keep you as His own until you return from your holidays. Meanwhile I remain with fatherly love,

Your most affectionate,

Fr. John Bosco

St. Ignatius at Lanzo, 25th July 1860

4. Preparation for First Holy Communion (This is one of the many letters Don Bosco wrote to Emmanuel De Maistre, the son of a family whose members gave Don Bosco much financial help. It was both a rich and noble family - the boy was a young Marquis. Epist. I, 209)

Dear Emmanuel,

While you are enjoying Stanislas's (his cousin's) company, I come with Maman ( a common title among the Piedmontese nobility for 'mother') to pay you a visit with this letter, which I owe you. Read it carefully because I intend to make you an attractive proposition: Your age and your knowledge now seem right for

your admission to Holy Communion. I would like that great event of your First Communion to take place at Easter. What do you think of that, my dear Emmanuel? Talk it over with your parents and see what they think about the idea. I would like you to get down to your preparation straightaway and so I advise you to observe the following points carefully:

- 1) Obey your parents and all others in authority, do what they ask you to do and carry out their orders as exactly as you can.
- 2) Always perform your duties as punctually as possible. Take special care to do your duties both at school and at home before you have to be pressured or reprimanded.
- 3) Have a high regard for all that pertains to worship, such as making the sign of the cross properly, observing a proper posture when kneeling for your prayers, and assisting at church services with exemplary devotion.

I would very much like to receive an answer to these propositions. Please give Azelia and Stanislas my best wishes. Always rejoice in the Lord.

May God bless you all. Pray for me. May you, Emmanuel, be my pride and joy in a special way because of your good behavior, and believe me always to be,

Most affectionately yours,

Fr. John Bosco

5. Words of encouragement. (The young Marquis Emmanuel was sent to a Jesuit boarding school in France because the teaching orders had been expelled from Piedmont. Don Bosco continued to write him words of encouragement and advice. Epist. I, 398)

Dear Emmanuel,

In your much-appreciated letter which you so kindly addressed to me, you ask for prayers that the Holy Virgin may grant you the inclination and desire to study. I have done this with all my

heart throughout the whole month of May but I don't know if my prayers have been answered. I am very keen to know even if they are good reasons to think that the answer will be in the affirmative.

Your father, mother and Azelia are all well. I see them quite often, usually at 5:30 p.m. and you are the subject of most of our conversations.

Others are worried. They have fears that you will not do well in your studies and give your parents additional worries. As you well know they have had many this year. On my part, I keep my trust in Emmanuel's ability and the solemn promise I have from him that he will really make an effort and so I keep on ensuring them there is no need to worry. Am I wrong in doing so? I don't think so! Two more months and then what rejoicing if you succeed in your examinations! Therefore, my dear Emmanuel, I'll keep on recommending you to the Lord, but you must play your part. Work, diligence, cooperation, and obedience: let all these play their part in the final success in your examinations.

May God bless you, dear Emmanuel! May your good conduct be the pride and joy of your parents. Pray also for me who is, with all his heart,

Your loving friend,

Fr. John Bosco.

Turin, 1st June 1866.

6. "Strive for perfection in everything you do" (There follows two short letters which Don Bosco wrote from Rome to a boy learning to be a shoemaker at Valdocco. He was later on to become a Salesian lay-brother and be in charge of the shoemaking shop in Buenos Aires. Epist. II, 78,79)

My dear Musso,

I received your letter and I understand everything you are telling me. Don't worry. I'll help you. Make a special effort to put an end to bad talk among your companions. Leave the rest to God.

Give your teacher and companions my best wishes. I'll soon be seeing you again. Pray for me, who remains with all his heart,

Most affectionately yours in Jesus Christ,

Fr. John Bosco.

(no date, but most likely February 1870)

My dear Bernard Musso,

I need the support of your prayers and those of your friends in a special way at this present time. Find those who are thus willing to help me and take them every day to the altar of the Blessed Virgin to pray for assistance in my affairs. When I return to Turin, I would like you to bring them along to me and I will give you a beautiful memento.

Affectionately your friend,

Fr. John Bosco

7. "Don't worry! When we meet, we shall settle everything"  
(Two more short letters to an Oratory student who was uncertain about his future. Epist. II, 293, 1104)

Dear Anzini,

Don't worry! When we meet, we shall settle everything, both for now and for eternity. Keep smiling! Prayer and Holy Communion are our greatest support. May God bless you! Pray for me who is in Jesus Christ, always,

Affectionately yours,

Fr. John Bosco

July 7th 1873

My dear Anzini,

Don't worry, we'll settle everything during the spiritual retreat. Strive only to imitate St. Aloysius. I'll take care of the rest.

May God bless you. Believe me to be,

Most affectionately yours in Jesus Christ,

Fr. John Bosco

22nd August 1873

8. "My sons, you are my joy and comfort" (This is a letter sent to the Oratory boys from the Retreat House of St. Ignatius at Lanzo. Epist. I, 207)

My young men and beloved sons,

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you always. I've been away from you for only a few days, my beloved sons, but it seems like months. Indeed you are my joy and delight and I really miss you when I am away from you.

Fr. Alasonatti has told me that you have been praying for me and I want to thank you for that. I have been praying for you every morning at Holy Mass. However, I have to let you know that most of my time has been spent with you, observing in general and in particular everything you have been doing and thinking. Unfortunately, I will have to take up with some of you personally certain matters which are quite serious. I am well pleased with the general state of affairs and you have reason to be happy with the state of affairs as I am. However there is one important matter for which a remedy must be found: the haste with which you say community prayers. If you want to do me a great favor and please God at the same time, as well as do something for the good of your soul, try to be more careful in enunciating and pronouncing each word, with all the syllables contained in it.

This, my beloved sons, is what I put to you and what I would very much like to see by the time I return home.



I hope, with the Lord's help, this shall be within three days and I am looking forward to telling you about the many things I have seen, read and heard.

May the good Lord grant you health and grace and help us become one in heart and soul in loving and serving Him all the days of our lives. Amen.

Most affectionately yours in Jesus Christ,

Fr. John Bosco.

St. Ignatius, 23rd July 1861

P.S. I had hoped to write to Fathers Turchi, Rigamonti, Peruccatti, Placido, Bagnasacco, Stassano, and Cuniolo, but time is running out, and I will speak to them personally instead.

9. The new school at Mirabello recommended to the care of Our Lady. (Epist. I, 277)

My dear sons and students,

If you, my dear sons, were on this mountain you would certainly be greatly moved. In the centre of a large establishment is a devotional church called the 'Shrine of Oropa', where people are coming and going all the time. Some come here to thank the Virgin for graces obtained, others to pray to be delivered from spiritual or physical sicknesses, still others to ask for the holy Virgin's help in persevering with good works, while others come to pray for a happy death. A constant stream of young and old, rich and poor, farmers and gentlemen, princes and workers, tradesmen, graziers and shepherds, students and women can be seen receiving the sacraments of Confession and Communion, after which they proceed to the foot of a large statue of Mary Most Holy to plead for her heavenly aid.

Here, even in the midst of such a great crowd, I have an empty feeling in my heart. Why? Because I cannot see my own beloved students. How I would like to have all my sons here to take them to Mary's feet, to entrust them to her, to place them under her protection so that she may make them saints like Dominic Savio or Saint Aloysius.

To find some comfort for my heart, I went before her miraculous altar and promised her that I would do my best to instil into your hearts a deep devotion to her. I placed you under her protection and asked for some special graces for you: "Mary," I told her, "bless our house, remove any shadows of sin from the hearts of our boys. Guide their studies as true wisdom resides in you. May they be always yours, cherish them as your sons and keep them faithful to you." I believe that the blessed Virgin has granted me this request and I am relying on your cooperation so that we may hear Mary's voice and experience the grace of the Lord.

May the blessed Virgin bless all the priests and clerics and all who work for our house, and may she bless all of you and me as well. May she, from Heaven, help us. Let us make every effort to deserve her holy protection in life and in death. Amen.

Your most affectionate friend in Jesus  
Christ,

Fr. John Bosco  
From the Shrine of Oropa,  
6th August 1863.

10. A letter to the technical students at the Oratory (Epist. II, 339-340)

My dear Father Lazzaro and beloved technical students,

Although I have written a letter to all my sons at the Oratory, the technical students have a very special spot in my heart and I have asked the Holy Father for a blessing just for them. I think you would be pleased if I follow the dictates of my heart and write you a letter.

There is no need to assure you how much I love you because that is quite evident. I have no doubts that you love me because you have given me proof of this so often. But what is the reason for this mutual love? Money? Not mine for sure because my pockets are always empty; not yours - and I hope you will not feel offended by this remark - because you have none. No, my love

is based on my desire to help you save your souls which have been redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ. For your part, you love me because I am doing my best to show you the way to eternal life. So it is the salvation of our souls that is the source of our mutual affection.

But does each one of you, my beloved sons, act in such a way that is conducive to saving your soul or losing it? If our divine Saviour were to call you to judgement at this very moment, would He find you prepared? Would He find resolutions made but not kept, scandals caused and not atoned for, words said that propagated evil? These are the offenses which should make you think. Although Jesus Christ may have good reasons for reproaching us for our sins, I am sure that there are many among you with clear consciences; who are spiritually sound - this is what gives me consolation.

In any case, my dear friends, do not lose courage because I will continue to pray for you, to think of you, to work for you but you must help me by your full cooperation. Bear in mind the words of St. Paul who urges young men to 'practice restraint, to remember that they are mortal, and that they will be called before Jesus' tribunal after death. He who does not suffer on earth for Jesus Christ cannot be crowned in glory with Him in heaven. Avoid sin as your worst enemy, avoid talking about that which is sinful, and set a good example for each other in word and deed . . .' Father Lazzaro will tell you the rest.

Meanwhile, my dear sons, I commend myself to your charity. Pray for me and let the most fervent members of the Sodality of St. Joseph receive Communion for me once.

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you always, helping us to persevere in performing good deeds until the day we die. Amen.

Your most affectionate friend,

Fr. John Bosco

Rome, 20th November 1874

11. To all the students of Mirabello (This letter was written shortly after this school, the first outside of Turin, was opened. Fr. Michael Rua, then 26 years old, was the first Rector. Epist. I, 331-332)

My dear sons of Mirabello,

The kindness and filial affection which you manifested when I paid you a visit, your letters and greetings which I shall always hold dear, make me want to visit you again as soon as possible and to prolong the visit this time. I have not been able to do this yet but it won't be long. Meanwhile, to satisfy the inclinations of my heart, I have decided to write to you as a prelude to that visit.

But how can one letter contain everything I would like to share with you? I'll need to divide it into different parts.

Again, I want to thank you for your many expressions of friendship and the trust you showed in me on that beautiful day I spent with you at Mirabello. The shouting, the cheers, the kissing and shaking of hands, the happy faces, the rapport between us, the mutual encouragement to do good have all gladdened my heart and I cannot recall them without tears coming to my eyes. So I am often with you in thought and I am glad to know that so many go to Communion frequently. If my love did not prevent me I would like to give a solemn scolding to Professors Maggiore, Persigotti, Cigerza . . . the names escape me and I don't want to go any further.

I will simply say that you are my pride and my joy. I remember you every day in my Mass when I ask God to bestow His grace on you, keep you in good health, and help you with your studies, so that you may grow up to be a consolation to your parents and a joy to Don Bosco who loves you so much.

And what gifts has Don Bosco to offer you? Three very precious ones: a warning, a piece of advice and a direction.

A warning: My dear boys, beware of the sin of immodesty. As St. Paul says, avoid actions, thoughts, looks, desires, words and conversations that violate the sixth commandment.

A piece of advice: Preserve, with the greatest care, the beautiful, the sublime, the queen of all virtues - the holy virtue of purity.

A direction: The best way to remain in control, to overcome temptation, and to make this virtue your own, is to receive Communion frequently, and to receive it in the right frame of mind.

I would like to tell you much more than can be fitted into a letter but I will ask Fr. Rua to give you at least three short instructions on each of the above.

Finally, my dear sons, I say very frankly that I love you all deeply and that I really want to see you as soon as possible. I also want you to give me your heart so that I may offer it to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament when I celebrate Mass.

When I return to visit you, I will speak to each one of you about three things: the past, the present, and the future.

May the holy Virgin keep us always as her sons, and may the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us always. Amen.

Long live my dear sons of Mirabello!

Your most affectionate friend in Jesus Christ,

Fr. John Bosco.

Turin. 30th December 1864

12. Another letter to Mirabello (Epist. I, 482-483)

To my dear sons of Mirabello,

I put off, my beloved sons, the visit I promised I would pay you, and I regret even more that I could not have been with you for the feast of St. Aloysius. I am now planning to pay you a long visit to make up for this disappointment.

God willing, I will be with you on Tuesday evening on the last coach. But why should I pre-announce my visit? Isn't the usual procedure good enough? No, my dear sons, it is not. I intend to speak to you all in public about several matters which, I am sure, you will be pleased to hear. However, I will also have to speak to

some of you privately about a matter which, although unpleasant, you need to hear. To break the devil's horns, I shall have to whisper in your ears, because he is usurping the role of teacher and master with some of you. I am enclosing a list of names in this letter which I jotted down during my last visit. These students should be warned and I am asking the Rector to let them know that I must have a serious talk with each of them about their souls, their hearts, and their consciences, because I am deeply concerned for the salvation of their souls.

All the same I must assure you that my frequent visits to you have given me a great deal of comfort and reassurance. I was particularly glad to see so many boys going to Holy Communion and performing their duties so well. Though I did observe some minor shortcomings in some of you they did not cause me any great concern.

Do not get all upset because I come to you as a father, a friend and a brother. Just allow me to hold your hearts in my hands for a few moments and you will be happy and contented, because the Lord's grace will enrich your soul and give you peace. On my part I will be pleased to see you become friends of God the Creator.

Now that I have spoken about the soul, what about the body? After we have satisfied the needs of the soul we will not leave the body without food surely. So I have asked the prefect to make preparations for a beautiful day and, weather permitting, a pleasant outing for all of us.

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you always, and may the blessed Virgin bestow upon you true riches by giving you the holy fear of God! Amen.

Pray for one who remains with all his heart,

Affectionately yours in Jesus Christ,

Fr. John Bosco

July 1867

P.S. Special greetings to all the priests, teachers and assistants, and the Provera family, particularly to our beloved papa.

13. To the school of Lanzo. (This was also a school for which Don Bosco had a special love. The letter which follows was written after the Rector and one of the boys had attended Don Bosco's feast day at Valdocco on January 24th 1866. At that time the church of Mary Help of Christians was under construction. Epist. I, 405)

To my dear sons of Lanzo,

You can't imagine, my dearest sons, how much I appreciated the visit from your Rector and your representative, my good friend Chiariglione.

My joy deepened when I read the beautiful and loving letters from the various forms, individuals, assistants, teachers and the prefect. I read them all in one go, only pausing to wipe away tears of emotion! You also enclosed a cash offering for the new church which really put the icing on the cake.

My dear sons, I am deeply grateful to you. Although much of what you said about me is grossly exaggerated, I accept it all as a token of the generosity of your heart. May the Lord bless you! Fr. Lemoyne will have a great deal to tell you from me. He is your Rector: love him, obey him and trust me. He gives himself wholeheartedly to your welfare and really wants to succeed in helping you. He told me so many things about you! Rejoice when you hear me say: 'Long live your Rector, Fr. Lemoyne; long live the other superiors of the school! Three cheers for all my dear sons of Lanzo!

I hope to see you soon when we can talk about some very important topics. In the meantime pray for me. I shall not fail to give you a memento in my Mass.

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you always and may the blessed Virgin guide us all on the way to Heaven. Amen.

Your most affectionate friend in Jesus Christ,

Fr. John Bosco

Turin, 25th June 1866

14. Another letter to the House of Lanzo: A programme for the year (Epist. II, 436-438)

To my dearest sons, Rector, assistants, Prefect, Catechist, students and others at the school in Lanzo,

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be always with you. Amen.

Until now, my beloved sons, I have not been able to carry out my ardent desire to come and visit you. Certain difficult situations and some minor illnesses have kept me house-bound. All the same I am going to tell you something you will find it hard to believe! I think of you often during the day and I give you a very special memento every morning at Mass.

You certainly seem to keep on remembering me. I was delighted to receive the good wishes you sent me. I read with great pleasure the name of each student, of each Form, of the entire school from the first to the last. It was as if I were with you and in my heart I kept repeating: 'Long live my sons in Lanzo!'

Let me begin by thanking every one of you very much for your christian wishes and I pray God to reciprocate them, multiplied a hundredfold, to you and to your parents and friends. Yes, may God keep you in His love for many years of happy life. I would like to stress a few things and pray Heaven for your good health, good moral conduct, and serious studies.

Health is a precious, heavenly gift so take good care of it. Be careful of immoderation which is a frequent cause of illness; avoid excessive exercise and the resulting fatigue; beware of sudden changes from hot to cold.

Studies. You are in school to equip yourself to earn a living. Regardless of your circumstances, profession and future status, you have to be able to support yourselves honestly in case you should lose what you have inherited. Never let it be said that you live by the sweat of another's brow.

Good moral conduct is the link which connects health and learning. It is also the foundation on which they rest. Believe me, my dear sons, I'm telling you the truth! Good morals will make you wise and strong. You will be respected by superiors,



companions, parents, friends and fellow citizens, and, to go one step further, you will be liked and respected even by those who do not live good moral lives themselves. All will seek your company and all will praise and help you. But in the case of immorality and dishonesty the picture will be quite different and a much darker one. Such people will be lazy and they will be looked upon as stupid individuals. They will use foul language and they will be known as wicked scoundrels to be absolutely shunned.

Cheer up, then, my dear sons. Try your best to do as well as you can, study, cherish and look after the great treasures of good health, learning and morality.

One more thing: I keep on hearing distant voices calling out to you: 'Sons of Lanzo, come and save us'. These are the voices of a legion of souls who are awaiting helping hands that will rescue them from damnation and put them back on the road to salvation. I mention this since many of you are called to the holy task of saving souls. Courage! Many are awaiting you. Keep ever before your minds the words of St. Augustine: 'By saving another's soul you will save your own'.

Finally I am commending your Rector to you. I know that his health is not the best. Pray for him, console him by your good behaviour, love him, and confide in him absolutely. This will console him greatly and will also do you a lot of good.

Assuring you of a daily remembrance in my Mass. I entrust myself to your prayers so that I may not have the grave misfortune of losing my own poor soul whilst I am preaching to others how to save theirs.

May God bless you all, and believe me to be in Jesus Christ,

Your most affectionate friend,

Fr. John Bosco

Turin. The Eve of Epiphany 1875.

15. "You have stolen my poor heart" (Another letter to the Lanzo community. Epist. III, 5)

My dear sons, Fr. Rector, teachers, professors, students,

Allow me to say something and I hope it will offend none of you: You are all thieves! I declare it and I repeat it: you have taken from me all that I have.

When I was at Lanzo you won me over by your goodness and kindness and captured my heart with your piety. All that remained was this poor heart of mine and now you have stolen that completely. Your letter, signed by two hundred kind and beloved hands, has found its way into my heart, filling it with a burning desire to love you in the Lord, to be good to you, and to save the souls of every one of you.

Your generous token of affection makes me want to visit you as soon as possible. I would like to find you all sound in body and soul and to thus show to the world how much physical and spiritual pleasure you can enjoy without offending the Lord.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for all you have done for me. I shall not fail to remember you every day at Mass, praying to the Lord to grant you in His divine goodness health so that you can study hard and to gain the strength to resist temptations. May He also grant you the most precious grace of all, the grace to live and die in His holy peace.

Here is a proposition I put to you: on the 15th day of this month, the feast of St. Maurice, I shall offer Mass for your intentions. Will you do me the favour of receiving Holy Communion on that day so that I too may go to heaven with you?

May God bless you all. Believe me to be always in Jesus Christ,

Your most affectionate friend,

Fr. John Bosco

Turin. January 2nd 1876.

16. A letter to his missionaries and students in South America  
(Epist. III, 200-201)

My dearest sons,

You cannot imagine, my dearest sons, the great pleasure your letter gave me on the occasion of my feastday. On that day, my sons in Uruguay and Argentina joined in heart and soul with my sons in France, Rome, Piedmont, Switzerland and Trento in expressing their feelings to a father who blesses and prays to God to keep them straight on their way to Heaven.

Thank you for the proof of your great kindness. To show off my fatherly pride, I had an audience with the Holy Father Pius IX during which I spoke to him of Villa Colon which he remembers very well.

I asked for a special apostolic blessing with a plenary indulgence at the moment of death for you and for three generations of all your relatives.

The loving Pontiff responded most favorably: "May God bless the pupils of Villa Colon and their parents and may He make fervent Catholics of them all. May both fathers and sons become very rich in the true wealth, the wealth of virtue and the holy fear of God". Turning to me he said: "Write to them and tell them to inform their parents accordingly."

As for me, my dear sons, I am longing so ardently to visit you. Pray that I may be able to satisfy this desire or else that you may be able to come to Turin to visit me. This house will always be ready to give you a warm welcome.

Meanwhile, please write to me as soon as you can and tell me, first, are you well behaved? Second, will you write me many more long, long letters? Third, will you become missionaries? Fourth, will you all become saints? You will be doing me a great favour by letting me know the answers to all these questions.

On the feast of St. Rose of Lima, I will say Mass for you all. Will you kindly receive Holy Communion for my intentions in return? Those who have not yet made their First Communion could say an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory be . . . to the Blessed Sacrament.

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be always with you.

Your most affectionate friend in Jesus Christ,

Fr. John Bosco

Marseilles, 16th July 1877.

## V. THREE BIOGRAPHIES OF STUDENTS OF THE ORATORY

Dominic Savio (1842-1857)

Michael Magone (1845-1859)

Francis Besucco (1850-1864)

These biographies of three students of the Oratory are gold mines of the principles and goals which guided Don Bosco in spiritual direction, especially of the young.

Fr. Albert Caviglia, that astute student of these biographies, wrote of the subjects of one of them:

"It is not an idle parenthesis to think back how, in the formation of Dominic Savio, we come across once and for all the basics of spirituality that Don Bosco left, as an inheritance, both to us and to the world,"

and again:

"The point of departure in all Don Bosco's works of spiritual building-up . . . was always the same, the heart".

Don Bosco appealed to the heart, rather than to the head, by these simple, but rich, lives of three young lads.

Much is to be learnt from a prayerful and close reading of these lives and we shall see what principles Don Bosco considered basic, how a christian can live out his vocation, how even a young lad can become an apostle.

What follows are the full biographies, as written by Don Bosco. At the end of each chapter are some considerations, some conclusions which can be drawn from the words of the Saint. The reader will mine a lot more for his or her own spiritual life and for the spiritual direction of others, especially of the young.

## A. BIOGRAPHY OF DOMINIC SAVIO

### Principal dates in life and path to sainthood

1842	(2nd April)	Born at Riva San Giovanni, Near Chieri. He was baptized on the same day.
1849	(8th April)	First Communion at Castelnuovo d'Asti.
1853	(13th April)	Confirmed at Castelnuovo.
1854	(2nd October)	First meeting with Don Bosco at Becchi.
	(29th October)	Takes up residence at the Oratory.
1855	(March - April)	Decisive sermon by Don Bosco: all can become saints.
1856	(May, June)	Establishes the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception.
1857	(1st March)	Leaves the Oratory and returns home.
	(9th March)	Death.
1859	(January)	Don Bosco publishes the Life of Dominic Savio.
1950	(5th March)	Beatification by Pope Pius XII.
1954	(12 June)	Canonization by Pope Pius XII.

# LIFE OF DOMINIC SAVIO

by

Fr. John Bosco

## PREFACE

My Dear Boys,

You yourselves have often asked me to write you something about Dominic Savio, and having done what I could to satisfy your earnest wishes, here then is his life briefly and simply written.

There have been two difficulties in particular in writing this life for you. The first one is the talk generally aroused by writing about things which many people still living saw and heard. I think I have got over this by only writing about those things which we ourselves saw. The second one was that, since Dominic lived here for three years, I have had to speak about myself in different ways. I have tried to overcome this by treating things in as historical a way as possible. If, however, in spite of this I seem to refer to myself unduly, regard it as resulting from the great affection I have for Dominic and for you all; this makes me talk freely to you and have no secrets from you.

You might ask me why it is I have written Dominic's life and not that of some of the other boys who were so marvellous and whom you were so fond of - Louis Rua, Gabriel Fascio, John Massaglia come quickly to mind, apart from many others. It is quite true that the goodness of these boys would make their lives very well worth writing, but Dominic stood out even above these. In any case, I have it in mind with God's help to write something about them for you, so that you can do the same as they did.

In the meantime, reading about Dominic's life, say to yourselves what the great St. Augustine said in similar circumstances, "Si ille cur non ego?" That is, if a boy of my age, just like me in every way, who had to meet the same temptations as I have to, could follow Christ with such courage and wholeheartedness, why should I not do the same? Remember that true religion does not

mean simply saying things, but doing them. If you read something that you admire, don't content yourself with saying: "This is smashing"; say rather, "I am going to do the same."

May God give you and all those who read this little book the grace to benefit from it. May the Blessed Virgin whom Dominic loved so much, grant that we may, all of us, love God with all our heart and soul. For He alone deserves all our love and service.

*\*Dominic must not be looked upon as an exception; he is what every Christian should be: a saint. If St. Francis was revolutionary in his own day by writing that holiness was not the prerogative of priests, religious and people with plenty of time to pray for long hours, but was within the reach of every person, Don Bosco was to take that doctrine a step further and show that age is no bar to heroic holiness.*

Don Bosco

## CHAPTER I

Dominic's parents, Charles and Brigid Savio, were poor and hard working people and belonged to Castelnovo d'Asti, a little town about ten miles from Turin. In 1841 they went to live in Riva near Chieri because of the shortage of work in their home town. At Riva, Charles Savio worked as a blacksmith and it was here that their first child was born on April 2nd, 1842. At baptism he was called Dominic: they little realized then how completely their son was to live up to his name.

When Dominic was two years old his parents decided to return to their native place and they found a home at Murialdo on the outskirts of Castelnovo d'Asti.

His parents dearly loved their son and had only one idea - to bring him up as a good Christian. Dominic was naturally good, with a heart which was a fertile field for the things of God. He learned his morning and night prayers readily and could already say them by himself when he was only four years old. He was constantly beside his mother, eager to help her in every way. If he did go away sometimes, it was only to go into some corner and try to say some prayers.

His parents say that at the age when children find it very difficult to keep still, and are always wanting to touch and pull things about, Dominic never gave them any bother in this way, but was always trying to bring joy into their hearts and a smile to their faces.

When his father came home at night from work, Dominic would run to meet him, take his hand, or jump up into his arms. When they were in the house he would get his father's slippers and make a great fuss of him, giving him such a welcome that his father used to look forward to returning home just for the pleasure he got from his little son.

His love did not stop at his parents; his love of God was older than his years. He wanted to say his prayers and never had to be reminded, much less driven, to say them at night and before and after meals. Rather, it was he who reminded others, should they happen to forget. One day, distracted by some unusual event, his parents sat down to the meal without saying any grace. Dominic immediately said, "Daddy, we have not said our grace yet", and began himself to make the sign of the Cross and say the prayer.

On another occasion there was a visitor in the house, who was asked to stay for dinner. When the meal was put on the table, the man sat down and began eating without making the sign of the Cross or saying any prayer. Dominic did not presume to correct the visitor, but left the table and stayed away until the visitor had gone. When asked by his parents why he had acted in this very unusual way, he said, "I did not like to be at table with one who eats just like animals do."

*\*Don Bosco stresses the role of the family in the christian education of their children. This has been stressed, in our own days, by the documents of Vatican II and Papal pronouncements since then. Just to quote two:*

*"As it is the parents who have given life to their children, on them lies the gravest obligation of educating their children. They must therefore be recognized as being primarily and principally responsible for their education. The role of parents is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute." (Vatican II, Christian Education, No. 3)*



*"The ministry of evangelization carried out by Christian parents is original and irreplaceable." (Pope John Paul II: Familiaris Consortio. 22/11/1981, No. 53.)*

## CHAPTER 2

In this chapter there are facts which some might find difficult to believe. In giving them I quote from a statement given me by Dominic's parish priest.

"Soon after I came to Murialdo," he writes, "I often saw a little boy about five years old coming into the church with his mother. I was very struck with the serenity of his face and his unaffected piety, and I was not surprised that others noticed the same. If when he came to church in the morning it was locked, he would quietly kneel down and say his prayers, instead of beginning to play about in some way or other as boys of his age would do. It did not matter if the ground was muddy or the snow was thick on it, he knelt down just the same. Curious to know who he was, I made enquiries and found out that he was the son of the blacksmith, Charles Savio.

If ever I met him on the road he would wave while still some distance away and his face would light up with a smile. At school he made rapid progress not simply because he was clever, but also because he tried very hard. Some of the boys he had to mix with were rather rowdy and far from good, but I never saw him quarrelling. If they did try to involve him in some disturbance, he would patiently hold on and at the first opportunity quietly slip away. If they wanted him to join with them in robbing orchards, damaging property, making fun of old people or similar things, he not only refused, but stated very convincingly why he thought it was wrong to do so.

This spirit of piety did not drop off him as he grew older. He was only five years old when he learned to serve Mass and he always did so with great attention. He tried to be at Mass every day, and if there was someone else to serve, he would hear Mass from the benches. As he was rather small, he could not reach the missal when it was on the altar. It brought a smile to one's lips to see him anxiously coming up to the altar, standing on tip-toe and reaching as far as he could in the endeavour to get hold of the missal stand. If the priest saying Mass wanted to please him, he

must on no account change the missal over himself, but pull the stand right to the edge, where Dominic could get hold of it and carry it in triumph to the other side.

After his first confession he used to go regularly and frequently. Seeing how grace was working in his soul so marvellously, I often thought to myself, "What promise there is here for the future; may God open up the way for him to reach the heights he is capable of attaining."

*\*Note carefully the following points made by Dominic's Parish Priest - they were what made Dominic stand out yet they are all virtues we can and must develop if we are serious about the formation of others and about becoming coherent Christians ourselves.*

- (a) Serenity: a logical consequence of being at peace with himself and with his God, of finding his happiness in God. How many lack this serenity because they are forever restless in a vain search for happiness outside of God.
- (b) Unaffected piety: we must be natural and authentic. The 'holier than thou' type of piety puts up barriers between ourselves and others.
- (c) Radiating joy: blessed are those who can forget their pains and aches and share their joy!
- (d) Persevering effort: "He made rapid progress at school not simply because he was clever but also because he tried very hard". "His spirit of piety did not drop off as he grew older."
- (e) Never quarrelsome.
- (f) Courage of his convictions: not all the boys at the Oratory, in the time of Dominic, were 'angels' - he had to have the courage to stand up and be counted and even to suffer physical abuse.
- (g) Regularity in going to confession.
- (h) In general, a fast-developing maturity.
- (i) Appreciation of the Mass, of the centrality of the Eucharist.

### CHAPTER 3

Nothing stood in the way of Dominic's being allowed to make his First Communion. He knew the First Communion catechism by heart, and understood very well what the Holy Eucharist was. He had also a great desire to receive Jesus into his heart. There was only one difficulty, his age. At that time boys and girls did not normally make their First Communion until they were eleven or twelve years old. Dominic was only seven. To look at him, he seemed even younger, and so the parish priest hesitated to put him forward. He sought advice from some of the other priests and they, knowing Dominic's state, said that he need not hesitate. The way was now clear and Dominic was told that he could make his First Holy Communion.

It is not easy to describe the joy which filled him at this news. He ran home trembling with excitement and joy to tell his mother. Much of his time was given to praying and reading; he made visits to the Blessed Sacrament and it seemed as though he was trying to outrival the angels in his devotion.

The evening before he went to his mother and said: "Mother, tomorrow I am receiving Jesus in Holy Communion for the first time; forgive me for anything I have done to displease you in the past: I promise you I am going to be a much better boy in every way." Having said this, he burst into tears. So did his mother, as she put her arms round him, unable to say anything except. "Pray for me and for your Daddy; pray that God may keep you always his own."

Dominic was up early next morning, dressed himself in his best clothes and hastened off to church. It was not yet opened so he knelt down on the steps, as was his custom, and tried to pray. With Confession, preparation, thanksgiving and sermon, the service lasted five hours. Dominic was the first in church and the last to leave. Time seemed to mean nothing to him and he scarcely seemed to know whether he was on earth or in heaven.

It was a wonderful and never-to-be-forgotten day for him; it was a renewal of his life for God, a life that can be taken as an example by anyone. If one got him to talk about his First Communion several years later, his face lit up with joy and happiness as he said:

"That was the happiest and most wonderful day of my life". He made some promises on that day which he preserved carefully in a little book, and often re-read them. He let me have this little book to look at and I give them here just as he wrote them.

"Promises made by me, Dominic Savio, when I made my First Communion at the age of seven years:-

1. I will go often to Confession and I will go to Holy Communion as often as I am allowed.
2. I will try to give the Sundays and holy days completely to God.
3. My best friends will be Jesus and Mary.
4. Death, but not sin."

These promises were the guiding light of his life until he died.

If among those who read this book there are any who have yet to make their First Communion, I would urge them strongly to try to do as Dominic did; to let him inspire them in their preparation and all that they do. With all my heart too I recommend to parents, teachers and all those who are responsible for the young, to give the greatest importance to this great act. Be assured that the First Communion very well made is a solid moral foundation for the rest of the child's life. It will certainly be an extraordinary thing to find anyone who has made this great act with real devotion and care and has afterwards gone astray. On the other hand there are thousands of young people who have gone astray and who are the despair of their parents and those responsible for them; I would not hesitate to say that the trouble began with the little or no real preparation for the First Communion. It is better to delay making it, or not to make it at all, than to make it badly.

*\*In writing this chapter, Don Bosco must have recalled the beautiful day of his First Holy Communion and the words of his mother on that occasion: "My dear son, this has been a great day for you. I am sure that God has truly taken possession of your heart. Now you must promise Him to do your best to remain good until the day you die. In the future, go frequently to Holy Communion and beware not to commit sacrilege."*

*\*In a Good-Night of the 20th June 1864 Don Bosco addressed these remarkable words to the boys: "Oh, if only I could implant in your souls this great love from Mary and Jesus in the Mass, how happy I would be! Look, I'll say something very stupid but that does not matter. To gain this I would be prepared to crawl to Superga, dragging my tongue on the ground all the way. It is a stupid proposition but I would do it all the same. My tongue would be torn to shreds but that would not matter. I would have a house of saints."*

*\*"Be assured that the First Communion very well made is a solid moral foundation for the rest of the child's life."*

## CHAPTER 4

It was clearly high time for Dominic to go to another school as he had gone as far as he could in the little village school. Both his parents and himself desired this very much but they had not the money which would make this possible. They could only turn to God and ask him to make it possible. "If I were only a bird," Dominic would say sometimes, "I would fly morning and evening to Castelnuevo, and so I would be able to carry on with my lessons."

His keen desire finally overcame all difficulties, and it was decided that he should go to the county school, although this was about three miles away. Dominic cheerfully walked the six miles there and back every day. The varieties of weather, the dust and the very hot sun in summer, mud, rain, storms and fierce winds at other times of the year, never got him down or stopped him from going to school, although he was barely ten years old when he started. A local farmer used sometimes to see Dominic on the road, and one afternoon when the sun was beating down mercilessly he approached the boy and started talking.

"Aren't you afraid to be on your own on this lonely road, especially in the dark winter evening?"

"But I am not alone: my guardian angel is with me."

"But don't you get fed up having to go backwards and forwards in heat like this?"

"No, I am doing it for a Master who pays well."

"Oh, who is that?"

"Jesus, who rewards even a cup of water given for his sake."

The farmer used often to recount this incident and prophesy a great future for Dominic.

Some of his school companions were not very good, and on one occasion he was in grave danger of doing wrong. In the hot weather some of the boys used to go swimming in the river and other places where water was available. Bathing has its physical dangers and, not infrequently, the death by drowning of young people and adults has to be lamented. It can also have its dangers for the soul in certain circumstances, when boys are stripped together and have little care and respect for each other.

Dominic was persuaded by some of his companions to go swimming with them on one occasion. But when he saw what was done and said, he was profoundly grieved and made up his mind never to go again.

A short time afterwards two of the same boys came to him again.

"Dominic, are you going to play?"

"What are you going to play at?"

"We're going swimming."

"I'm not going. I am afraid of being drowned."

"Come on, be a sport: we'll have a great time and feel much fresher in this heat."

"But I am afraid."

"Don't be afraid. We'll teach you, and soon you will be swimming like a fish, and leaping about like the rest of us."

"But is it not wrong to go to such a dangerous place to swim?"

"Not at all. If so many go, how can it be wrong?"

"Still, I feel uneasy about it and don't know what to say."

"Come on, take our word for it, we'll look after you."

"I think I'll go to ask my mother if it is all right for me to go."

"Don't be stupid - don't say anything to your Mom. She won't let you go, and she will also tell our parents and we will be in for a good hiding."

"Well if my Mom would not let me go, I'm not going. In any case if you want the truth I'll tell you. I went once before, but never again; not simply because it is easy to get drowned there, but more still because from what I saw last time it is also easy to offend God; so don't talk to me any more about swimming. In any case if your parents don't want you to go, you know you should not go. God punishes children who disobey their parents."

Thus did Dominic answer the harmful suggestions of his companions and in doing so avoided a grave danger through which, if he had allowed himself to go, he might well have lost his innocence, the loss of which leads on to so many sad consequences.

*\*Don Bosco had a great devotion to the angels, especially to one's Guardian Angel and wrote a booklet entitled: 'The Devotee of the Guardian Angel'. In his talks he developed the same theme e.g. "Remember that you have an Angel as a companion, guardian and friend. If you wish to please Jesus and Mary, obey your Guardian Angel's inspirations. When tempted, invoke your Angel. He is more eager to help you than you are to be helped. Take courage and pray; your Guardian Angel also will pray for you, and your prayers will be answered. Ignore the devil and do not be afraid of him; he trembles and flees at your Guardian Angel's sight. Ask your Angel to console and assist you in your last moments." (BM II, 205)*

## CHAPTER 5

From his experiences at this school Dominic learned how to determine his relationship with the other boys. If he saw one who did his best, was obedient, tried hard at his lessons, he made him his friend. Those who were always giving trouble, making no effort to learn, ready with bad talk and such like, he avoided completely. Those who were in between he tried to help, if he could, in whatever way was possible; but he never became intimate with them.

Dominic's life at the school at Castelnuovo can be a model and an inspiration for any boy who wants to get on, to follow God and also prepare himself for life. I give here what Don Allora, the priest who was the head of this excellent school, wrote about him:-

"I am very glad to write what I know about Dominic Savio, who in a very short time won my admiration and esteem. I have an unfailing memory of his exemplary life and happy disposition.

"I cannot say very much about his piety and devotion as he was excused from taking part in the school religious services, on account of his living so far away.

"He passed the entrance examination with distinction and was admitted on June 21st, the feast of St. Aloysius, Patron of Youth. He was not very strong physically, but he had a very pleasant appearance and was very well mannered. He was always cheerful and good tempered and never imposed himself on anyone. He made a very good impression on his teachers by his diligence and made up for some of the others who never bothered or showed interest, no matter what was done for them. He lived up to his name not only in his lessons, but in everything he did and said. (The English equivalent of Dominic's name would be Wisdom or Wiseman). Right from the first moment he made progress in his studies. He quickly got to the top of his class and remained there getting high marks in all subjects. This was not simply because he was clever but because he worked very hard and came to have a great love for his lessons. It was also because his studies were not simply for himself but for God.

"Although he was not very strong physically he never missed a day off school. It should be remembered that he had over two miles to walk four times a day in the mud, snow and cold of the winter and the oftentimes intense heat of the summer.

"I had great hopes for Dominic and it was with great regret that I saw him go away. His parents had to move to another district and so it was necessary for him to leave; I was afraid that for one reason or another he might not be able to continue with his studies; this would have been a tragedy for so wonderful a boy.

"It was a great joy for me when I heard later that he had been accepted at the St. Francis de Sales school; I knew that there he would have great opportunities both for his mind and soul."



Thus the testimony of Don Allora.

*\*"Dominic learned how to determine his relationships with other boys" It is a yearning of the human heart to have a friend. Don Bosco tells us in his Memoirs of the Oratory how he felt the same need and how he chose his friends:*

*"As I went through four Forms in two years I had to learn all by myself how to get along with my fellow students. As I saw it, they belonged to three categories: good, indifferent and bad. I would have nothing to do with the last as soon as I discovered their true character. I would mix with the indifferent only when good manners and necessity required it. With the good ones I would make friends, but only with the very best would I strike up a close friendship."*

## CHAPTER 6

It seems that Divine Providence wanted to help Dominic to realize that this world is a place of exile where we have no resting place. It may be, on the other hand, that it was God's design that he should be known in as many places as possible, so that his goodness and strong virtue might be a source of inspiration to all who saw him.

Towards the end of 1852 his parents left Murialdo and set up house in Mondonio, a village near Castelnuevo. Here Dominic continued the same way of life. His teacher, Don Cugliero, among other things had this to say about him:

"I can truthfully say that in twenty years of teaching boys I have never had one to equal Dominic. He was only a boy in age but he had the sense and judgement of a fully mature man. He was very diligent and applied himself to his lessons, and his good naturedness and readiness to help won him the affection both of his companions and teachers. I could not help marvelling at the way he could fix his attention in church, and I often said to myself 'This is certainly an innocent boy, whose heart and affections are already in heaven'."

The following is an incident recounted by Don Cugliero. "One day, an incident of so serious a nature took place at the school such that expulsion was the obvious punishment for those

responsible. The culprits realized this and sought to save themselves by coming to me and laying all the blame on Dominic. I could not imagine that the boy had done anything so stupid, but his accusers were so insistent and emphatic about it that I believed them. I was very annoyed and went to the classroom. I left the boys in no doubt as to what I thought about the whole affair, and then I turned to Dominic and minced no words in telling him off, saying that he deserved to be expelled and that he would have been, had it not been the first time he had done such a thing, and that he should make sure it would be the last time. Dominic did not say a word, but stood there with his head bowed, accepting humbly all that was said to him.

"God, however, protects the innocent, and next day it came out who the real culprits were. Somewhat ashamed of all the abuse I had heaped on his head, I took him aside and asked him: "Why did you not tell me you were not responsible?" He replied: 'I knew that these boys had already been up to so much mischief that this would certainly earn them expulsion, and I thought I would try to save them, as I probably would not be expelled, seeing that it was my very first time . . . also, I remembered that Jesus had been blamed unjustly and had not said anything, and I thought I should do the same.'

"No more was said, but all admired Dominic's patience, which was able to return good for evil and was even ready to accept serious punishment to save those who had told such lies about him."

*\*Dominic was concerned with what he was in the sight of God. He was even prepared to lose his good name if that would help a companion from receiving a serious punishment. Cardinal Salotti, who was in charge of the Cause of Beatification and Canonization of Dominic, says this concerning the incident: "It was a humiliation freely accepted before teacher and schoolmates, an act of charity towards the real culprits, and an act of love for God which makes him imitate Christ silent before his accusers."*

## CHAPTER 7

What follows in the succeeding pages can be given with more detail, because I shall be dealing with things which happened before my own eyes and also in the presence of many boys who can

bear testimony to their truth. This period begins in 1854 when Don Cugliero, already mentioned, came to see me about one of his pupils. "You may have in your house," he said, "boys equally good and clever, but there are none who are better than him. Give him a chance and you will find you have another St. Aloysius."

It was arranged that Dominic should come to see me when next I visited the Becchi. It was my custom to spend a few days there each year with some of my boys round about the time of the Feast of the Most Holy Rosary.

It was on the morning of the first Monday of October that I saw a boy coming towards me with his father. His serene expression, and charming but respectful manner captured my gaze.

"Who are you and where do you come from?"

"I am Dominic Savio about whom Don Cugliero has spoken to you and I have come with my father from Mondonio."

I took him aside and asked him about himself and his studies. We found common ground immediately and a relationship of trust and mutual confidence sprang up spontaneously.

I recognized in him a soul where the Holy Spirit reigned supreme, and I marvelled at the way grace had already worked in his young heart and mind.

We talked together for quite a time and, as I was going to call his father over, Dominic said to me:

"Well, Father, what do you think? Will you take me to Turin to study?"

"Well, I think there is good stuff in you."

"Good stuff for what?"

"To make a beautiful garment for Our Blessed Lord."

"Wonderful! I am the cloth and you are the tailor. You will work on me to make something beautiful for Jesus."

I then said that I wondered if he were strong enough for a long course of studies.

"Don't worry, Father, Our Blessed Lord has helped me so far and I am sure he will continue to do so."

"And what are you going to do when you finish school?"

"I should love to be a priest, if that were God's will,"

"Very good. And now let's try a little intelligence test. Take this little book, go over this page, learn it by heart and tomorrow come back and both explain it to me and recite it by heart."

I then left him free to go and play with the other boys while I had a talk with his father. No more than ten minutes had gone by when suddenly Dominic appeared, smiling, by my side.

"If you wish I will repeat my lesson now."

I took the book and, to my surprise, he not only recited the page by heart but explained simply and clearly the meaning, showing that he understood it very well.

"Splendid", I said, "you have been quick and so shall I. I will take you to Turin, and from this moment I consider you one of my chosen sons. From now onwards, often ask Jesus to help us both to do God's holy will in all things."

Not knowing how better to express his happiness and his gratitude he took my hand and kissed it several times and then said:

"I hope always to act in such a way that you will never have reason to complain of me."

*"I am the cloth and you are the tailor." Dominic submitted himself to a spiritual director with a "relationship of trust and mutual confidence", the essential elements for spiritual progress.*

*On the 16th May, 1857, a boy publicly asked Don Bosco how Dominic Savio managed to become so good and holy and a true child of Mary. Don Bosco replied: "The means Dominic Savio used to put himself on the road to heaven and beyond*

*reach of the devil were obedience to and great confidence in his spiritual director.” (BM V,429.)*

*\*Gratitude is the mark of a noble soul.*

## CHAPTER 8

It is characteristic of youth to change suddenly. Not infrequently does it happen that what today is wonderful is far from being so tomorrow. At one time a boy can show great promise and soon after he can act in a way that would show the exact opposite. And if one is not careful, a career that began with the highest hopes can end with disappointment and sorrow to all concerned. It was not so with Dominic. All the virtues which had begun to grow at different stages of his life now continued their growth in a wonderful way, without any of them impeding the others.

As soon as he arrived at the Oratory (Don Bosco's school), he came immediately to my room in order to put himself completely in my hands. Almost immediately his gaze fell on the wall where a piece of cardboard displayed in large letters a saying which I often used: 'DA MIHI ANIMAS CAETERA TOLLE'. He looked at them attentively and I helped him to translate them as follows: 'Give me souls, and take away everything else'. He thought for a moment and then said: "I understand; here you do business not with money, but with souls; I hope that my soul will have its share in this business."

For a time his life was quite ordinary. He studied very hard and was very faithful in carrying out the school rules. He always listened to talks and sermons with great joy, as he was already convinced that the word of God was a sure guide along the road to heaven. He was not worried if sometimes they were a bit long. If there was anything he did not understand, he never hesitated to ask for further explanations. This was the root and source of his exemplary life and steady progress in virtue which could hardly have been surpassed.

In order to make sure that he understood well the rules and discipline of the school, he went to one of the masters and asked him to help and advise him how best to be faithful to them and to correct him if he neglected any of his duties.

His relations with his companions showed the same wisdom. He refused to have anything to do with those who were rowdy,

disobedient and who showed little respect for the things of God. He made friends with those who tried hard, made good use of their time and were a source of good example and good spirit in the school.

December 8th, feast of the Immaculate Conception, was drawing near. It was the Rector's custom to say a little word of encouragement and exhortation to the boys so as to prepare them to keep the feast in a way worthy of Mary most holy. He insisted especially that they should ask Mary for the grace they had greatest need of.

That year, 1854, the whole Catholic world was in a state of excitement because of the approaching definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception at Rome. At the Oratory we did our very best to keep the feast with fitting solemnity and devotion.

Dominic was among those who had a great desire to keep the feast very well. He wrote out nine deeds to be done in honour of Our Lady and drew out one by lot each day. He prepared himself well, and made a general confession so that his soul might be as pleasing as possible to Mary Most Holy.

On the eve of the feast he went to Our Lady's altar and, on the advice of his Rector, renewed the promises he had made at his First Communion, and then he repeated many times:

"O Mary, I give you my heart; please keep it always as your own. O Jesus and Mary, be always my friends. Please, please, rather let me die, than that I should ever offend you seriously."

So he took Mary as the guide of his spiritual life, and with such effective results that I began from that time to note down the different incidents or facts of his life, so that I should not forget them.

I have thought it better in what follows to group together the various facts according to their relationship with each other, and not just to give them in chronological order as they happened. This will make for greater clearness and understanding.

Accordingly I will divide the remainder into as many chapters as there are matters to be treated of, beginning with his classical studies which were the chief reason for his coming to the Oratory.

*\*The virtue of CONSTANCY. "It is characteristic of youth to change suddenly" but "It was not so for Dominic". The reason why most people never come really close to Christ is that they lack the will to keep on battling.*

*\*Dominic's Marian devotion was authentic. No romantic, exaggerated devotion but one based on copying her virtues. "The ultimate purpose of devotion to the Blessed Virgin is to glorify God and to lead Christians to commit themselves to a life which is in absolute conformity with his will." (Marialis Cultus, 39)*

## CHAPTER 9

Dominic had begun his Latin at Mondonio and, with the progress he made by his hard work and more than ordinary intelligence, he was very soon moved from the first into the second form. Here he came under the care of Don Joseph Bonzanino, because as I had little help in those days, I had to send some of the boys out each day to his school. I will tell you about some of the things which arouse out of this.

Don Bonzanino said on a number of occasions that he could not remember having had a better pupil than Dominic, one who was more attentive, more docile, more respectful. His clothes were poor, but he was always neat and clean and his manners and bearing were easily equal to those of boys who came from richer and nobler families. These boys eagerly made friends with Dominic and accepted him as an equal, being drawn by his manners and good qualities. Whenever there was a boy who was a bit scatter-brained and talkative the teacher would put him beside Dominic, and his influence and example would lead the boy to better behaviour and application.

It was during the course of this year that an incident took place which shows clearly the heroic stuff of which Dominic was made. Two of the boys fell out very badly and they became so angry with each other that they determined not only to have a fight but to have a duel with stones, that is, to stand at a distance from each other with a pile of stones and throw them at each other until one of them was badly injured. Dominic got to hear of it, but he wondered how he could manage to stop the duel, as the boys were both older and much stronger than he was.

He tried to reason with them and persuade them to give up and

become friends again. They refused. He threatened to report them, and thereby get it stopped, but this only increased their anger and determination to have it out at all costs. Dominic was very worried both on account of the serious injury which was likely to happen and also for the serious offence against God.

When they were about to go off to a quiet spot for the duel, he went to them and asked them to agree to one condition.

"What is it?"

"I will only tell you when you are ready to begin."

"You are trying to fool us or you are going to bring someone to try to stop us."

"I should, but I promise I will not."

They agreed and the three of them went off together. Dominic had quite a job to stop them from attacking each other on the way. When they reached the appointed place Dominic, without saying a word, let them go ahead with their preparations, and then, when they stood ready at a little distance from each other, each with his pile of stones beside him and a stone in his hand to being with, he said:

"Now I want you to keep your promise," and so saying he took out a little crucifix which he carried under his shirt, and holding it high in his hands he said:

"I want each of you to look at this crucifix and throw the first stone at me, saying clearly these words: 'Jesus Christ who was innocent died forgiving his enemies; I, a sinner, am going to offend him by this deliberate act of revenge.'"

Then he ran to the first boy and, kneeling before him said:

"Throw the first stone at me."

The boy began to tremble and said:

"No, no, I have nothing against you, and would be only too willing to defend you against anyone else."

Then he went to the other boy.



"You throw the first stone at me."

"No, never: you are my friend; I would never do a thing like that."

Then Dominic rose to his feet and standing between them with his crucifix and a stern look on his face said:

"There you are, because I am your friend, you would not throw a stone at me who am only a poor creature. But yet you are ready with this terrible act of revenge to offend Jesus who is not only your best friend but God also, and who shed the last drop of his blood for you."

He stood there motionless between them with his crucifix held high, and the boys, shaken to the depths of their being, dropped their stones and hung their heads in shame.

One of the boys said later:

"At that moment I was shaken to the depths and began to shiver all over. I felt thoroughly ashamed that a boy like Dominic had had to go so far to make me see sense. I had no difficulty in forgiving my companion and I asked Dominic to take me to some understanding priest to whom I could make a good confession and do better in the future."

Dominic never mentioned anything about this incident and nothing would have been known of the part he played in it, if the boys concerned had not related all that happened to their companions.

For boys from the country not very used to the excitement and varied activity of the town, going backwards and forwards to school from the Oratory had its dangers and difficulties. Dominic used it as an opportunity to do something for Our Blessed Lord. He carried out implicitly whatever was laid down by his superiors, and made the journey without letting his eyes roam everywhere or his ears listen to things that were far from good. He did not let himself be drawn into mischievous pranks, or waste time in the silly escapades that easily suggest themselves to schoolboys.

"I enjoy myself most in doing what is expected of me and, if you are really my friends, you will help me to do this and not the opposite," he would say, if some silly prank were suggested.

Nevertheless he was nearly caught out one day when the group

he was with decided to play truant and spend the day at the fair which had come to the town. Dominic had agreed and had started off with them, when he suddenly realized what it was he was doing, and refused to go any further.

"I am going to school. If we stay away we are displeasing God and also our superiors. I am sorry I agreed to do wrong, and I hope this is the last time you will try to persuade me to follow you in doing wrong. If it is not, we will not be friends any more." Dominic won the other boys over and they all went to school, and there was no more trouble in the future.

At the end of the year his hard work won him promotion to a higher class, but, when the new school year began, it was decided to let him study privately at the Oratory, as he seemed to be failing in health. In this way it was felt he could be better looked after.

This plan succeeded and when he came to pass into the next class his health was very much improved. He was sent to attend the classes of Don Matteo. These were considered to be among the best in Turin, and Dominic was admitted free, because of the high opinion this good priest already had of him.

*\*Though many of Dominic's companions were older, he could exert influence on them due, no doubt, to his authenticity.*

*\*When Dominic was aware of evil, he attacked it positively, even risking being hurt physically.*

## CHAPTER 10

We come now to a decisive point in Dominic's life. When he had been about six months at Don Bosco's School, he heard a talk about an easy way to become a saint. The preacher made three points. 1. That it is God's will that each one should become a saint. 2. That it is easy to become a saint. 3. That there is a great reward waiting in heaven for those who try to become saints.

This talk penetrated deeply into Dominic's soul. It was like a spark that set off into a consuming blaze the love of God in his heart. For some days he said nothing, going about very quietly without his usual joyful spirit. His companions noticed this, and

I did also. My first thought was that he was not feeling well, and I asked him was there something wrong.

"No," he said, "it is something good."

"What do you mean?"

"I feel that I must become a saint. I never saw before that it was both possible and easy. Now that I see it, I can have no peace inside until I really begin to do so. Please will you help me?"

I praised Dominic's good desires but urged him not to let himself get too worked up, because in that state it is not easy to know what God wants. I said to him that for the moment he should regain his customary cheerfulness, persevere in his regular life of study and piety, and especially not neglect to be with his companions in games and recreation.

I said to him one day I would like to make him a present of something that would please him, and that I left the choice completely to him.

His prompt and immediate reply was:

"I want you to help me to become a saint. I want to give up everything to Jesus and for always. If I am not trying to be a saint, I am doing nothing at all. I will not have any peace if I don't keep on trying."

On another occasion I wanted to show my affection for the boys and make them a little present, so I said that they could ask me for whatever they wished and, if it were possible, I would give it to them. The requests were to be written down, and it can be imagined that there were some strange and bizarre requests made by some of the boys. On a piece of paper I received from Dominic were these words:

"I ask one thing only, that you help me to save my soul and make me a saint."

Another day explanations were being given about the meaning of words.

"What does Dominic mean?" he asked.

The reply was: "Belonging to God."

"There you are," he said, "you see how right I am in asking you to make me a saint. Even my name says that I belong to God, so I must at all costs become one. I can't be happy if I do not."

This "bee in his bonnet" that Dominic had about becoming a saint, did not spring from the fact that he was not living a saintly life but from the fact that he wanted to go the whole way, including severe penances and long hours in prayer, and his Rector would not allow these on any account.

*\*We come now to a decisive point in Dominic's life: absolute commitment to becoming a saint as he realized he would have no peace otherwise. "The secret of Dominic Savio's sanctity was not so much his 'death rather sin' but rather his 'I want to belong entirely to God' ". Fr. Albert Caviglia.*

*\*"Holiness is not a luxury for a chosen one. Holiness is a simple duty for you and me: the acceptance of God's will with a smile at all times - anywhere and any time - to accept whatever He gives and give up whatever He takes." Mother Teresa of Calcutta.*

*\*I CAN . . . I MUST . . . I AM ABSOLUTELY DETERMINED TO BECOME A SAINT.*

## CHAPTER 11

The first advice Dominic was given to help him become a saint was to set out to win souls for God, because there is no holier work in this life than to work for the good of souls for whom Jesus Christ shed the last drop of his blood. Dominic grasped this completely and often was heard to say:

"How happy I would be if only I could win all my companions for God."

He never let slip any occasion of giving a friendly word of advice or of quietly recalling to duty anyone who said or did anything contrary to God's law.

What really shook him, affecting him even physically, was hearing any form of blasphemy or God's name being taken in vain. If,

going through the streets, he happened to hear anything of the kind, he bowed his head in sorrow and reparation, saying fervently to himself: "Praised be Jesus Christ."

One day when they were walking through the town a companion noticed him taking off his cap and murmuring something to himself.

"What are you doing? What did you say?"

"Did you not hear that carter, cursing and swearing? If I thought it would have done any good I would have spoken to the man, but as he is in a temper I am afraid it would only make things worse. So I was trying to make a little act of reparation by taking my cap off and saying: 'Praised be Jesus Christ.'"

His companion was very moved at hearing this, and to this day never tires of inspiring others by telling them about it.

One day on his way back from school he heard an elderly man utter a horrible blasphemy. He trembled when he heard it and said his short prayer. Then, on a sudden, he went to the man and with great respect and politeness asked him if he could tell him the way to the St. Francis de Sales School. The man was completely taken by the boy's charm and politeness, and said very affably:

"I am very sorry, I am afraid I have no idea."

"Oh," said Dominic, "I wonder, since you can't do that, could you do me another favour?"

"Certainly, certainly. What is it?"

Dominic then went very close to the man, and speaking softly into his ear he said:

"Do you think that, when you are in a temper, you could say something else instead of blasphemies about God?"

The man was both astonished and full of admiration for the boy, and said:

"Well said, you are quite right. I see that I have a very bad habit and I promise you I will try to overcome it."

Another day, near the gates of the school, he came across two boys of about nine years old, quarrelling. While doing so, one of them used the Holy Name of Jesus in a curse against the other. Dominic felt justly indignant, but, restraining himself, he separated the two boys and got them to make peace. Then he said to the one who had sworn:

"Come with me. I've something special for you."

The boy agreed and Dominic took him by the hand and led him into church. He led him to the high altar and then, kneeling down beside him, he said:

"Tell Jesus you are sorry for having taken his Holy Name in vain." As the boy did not know the act of contrition, he said it with him. Then he said: "In reparation say after me: 'Praised be Jesus Christ. May his holy and adorable name be always praised.'"

Among the lives of the saints his preference was for those who stood out for their work for souls. He spoke readily of those on the missions who endure so much to save souls. He had no money to send them, but he prayed for them every day and never failed to offer his Holy Communion once a week. Several times I heard him say:

"How many souls there are in England waiting for our help. If only I were strong enough and good enough, I would go there immediately and by preaching and example try to win them all for our Blessed Lord."

He also often remarked with grief how little help children received to know and love God.

"As soon as I am a seminarian, I will go to Mondonio and get the children together so that I can teach them their catechism, tell them stories and encourage them to become saints. How many young people may perhaps lose their souls, for want of instruction and encouragement."

These were not only words. He used to teach catechism at the Sunday school and on other occasions. And he would coach individual boys privately at any time they wanted, gladly giving up his recreation for this purpose. He was always happy if he could speak to them of God and lead them to an understanding of the wonder and value of their immortal soul. One day a

light-headed companion made fun of him for telling a good story to a group of boys.

"Why do you bother telling stories like those?" he asked.

"Why do I bother?" replied Dominic. "I bother because we are all brothers and we should all help each other in the most important thing of all, the saving of our souls, which cost the blood of Jesus. I bother because God himself has urged us to do this and because I know also that, if I can succeed in saving one soul, I will make sure of saving my own."

This concern for others was not simply a term-time one. During the holidays when he was at home he kept up his good work. Any little gifts he got, or prizes that he won during the term time, were set aside carefully so that he could use them during the holiday to gain the good will of the boys and to encourage them to do better. He would also make the rounds of his superiors before he went home, to ask them if they had any little things to spare, which he might take home with him, "to make my companions happy".

Very soon after he got home he would be in touch with many boys, big and small. He would give out his presents and discreetly find out how things were going on.

With the ascendancy he gained over them he could get boys to go with him to Mass, to Sunday school and so on; and these were boys who otherwise would not have gone.

He would show great patience in getting a boy to make the sign of the cross well and with real devotion, and encourage him with the promise of a little present. He had a great desire to see the sign of the cross well made, and was never shy to make it well in front of others, so as to encourage them to do likewise.

He took under his special care two little boys living nearby, teaching them to read and write and to learn their catechism. He would say morning and night prayers with them and take them to church, show them how to bless themselves properly with holy water, and how to behave well while there. Time that he might have legitimately spent in walks and various pastimes was spent in helping others, by word or by any other means possible. He made a point of making a visit to the Blessed Sacrament every day, and it was a great joy for him when he

managed to get someone to come with him. It may be safely said that he never let slip any occasion of helping anyone or of speaking a word which could do good to a soul.

This apostolate was not, of course, made an excuse for neglecting any of his obligations or duties. He fulfilled them all with great care.

*\*Dominic grasped this lesson quickly: "How happy I would be if only I could win all my companions to God."*

## CHAPTER 12

The thought of winning souls to God never left him. He was the life of the games in the time of recreation but in everything he somehow or other made them serve not only the body but also the soul. He did not monopolize the conversation or keep butting in, but if silence came he was always ready with something interesting, a difficulty which had cropped up in class or an interesting story. The others were always glad to be with him. If someone started grumbling or criticizing, he would raise a laugh over something else and so distract them and dispel the word of criticism.

His cheerful smile and spirit of zest made him popular also with those who were not too fond of religious things. They were always glad to be in his company and whenever he gently chided them it was taken in good part.

On one occasion a companion wanted Dominic to go with him and 'dress up'. Dominic would not go, and said to the boy:

"Would you really like to be what you are going to dress up as - two horns, a big nose and a clown's costume?"

"Of course not," replied the other.

"Well, why make yourself look like something you would not want to be and in addition deface the nice face that God has given you?"

Another time a stranger came into the playground. He soon had a group around him which quickly became a crowd as the laughter of the boys at his stories attracted more and more. As soon as he



had a crowd he changed his tune and was soon trying to poison the minds of the boys with all sorts of horrors, including making fun of holy things and persons. Some of the boys moved off when they heard this but more still stayed on, hanging on his words as though hypnotized. At this moment Dominic came along and as soon as he grasped what was on, cried out:

"Come on, let's get away from this unfortunate man who wants to ruin us."

The spell was broken and all the boys, obedient to a friend whom they loved and respected, scattered, leaving the man walking to the air. He was never seen again.

On another occasion some wanted to go off swimming. This, without due care, can be dangerous anywhere, in more senses than one, and it is especially so round Turin where there is deep and fast-moving water, claiming many young victims each year. Dominic heard about it and tried to make them forget it by occupying their time with him in an interesting way. But when he saw that their minds were made up he spoke out boldly.

"Don't go, it's better not to."

"But we are not doing any harm."

"You are being disobedient, you are putting yourselves in danger and running the risk of getting drowned and you say you are not doing any harm!"

"Yes, but this heat is terrible."

"Maybe, but it is not as hot as another place I know, and what will you do if you end up there?"

Moved by Dominic's attitude they changed their minds and also did not dodge the evening service in church as they had intended to.

Some of the boys had formed a little group pledged to try to lead the not so good to better things. Dominic was one of its most earnest members and used to use various things given him - an apple, orange, crucifix, little book - to help him in this work. He would appear in the playground holding up whatever he had, and crying out: "Who wants it, who wants it?"

There were many cries of "I do" and there would be a concerted rush. "Just a moment," he would say, "I will give it to the one who answers best this catechism question." He would confine himself to the least good boys, and as long as they made a shot at it the prize was theirs.

He had also other methods, such as talking and walking with them, playing a game with them that they liked, and so he might be seen one day carrying a large stick on his shoulders like Hercules with his club, on his way to play the game which was most in vogue at the time. During the game he might suddenly stop and say to a boy.

"What about coming with me to Confession on Saturday?"

The other, because Saturday seemed a long way off, and because he was anxious to get on with the game, or just to please Dominic, would say: "Oh, all right." Dominic did not say any more, but in the succeeding days he kept his quarry in view, and when Saturday came would go with him to church, make his own Confession first of all, and if necessary ask the priest to go out of his way to help the boy coming in after him. He would then stay in church with the boy and they would make their thanksgiving together.

These incidents were by no means uncommon and were a great source of joy and consolation to Dominic. They were of great benefit to his companions and boys who were insensible to sermons and exhortations in church would often yield to his gentle but persistent persuasion.

It also happened sometimes that a boy did not keep his promise and at Confession time on Saturday, Dominic would look for him in vain. When next he ran into him, he said, good humouredly:

"Hey, you rascal, you led me up the garden, properly!"

"Well, I wasn't ready, I didn't feel like it."

"My poor friend," Dominic would reply "it was the devil who was tempting you and you fell for it completely. I can see that you are not in the humour for it now, but I promise you, if you take the plunge and go to Confession, you will be much happier

than you have been for a long time.”

In most cases, after the boy had taken Dominic’s advice, he would come to him smiling and full of happiness:

“What you said was quite true. I am very happy and I have made up my mind to go to Confession regularly in the future.”

In any school of any size there are always some boys who are left on their own by their companions. This can be because they are rough in their ways, labouring under some disability, difficult to get on with. What they need is to experience real friendship, and as this is what they normally do not find, they suffer accordingly.

Dominic made it his business to be their friend. He would play with them during recreation, willingly talk to them, so that when they were ready to do something wrong and he suggested otherwise, they would listen, because they realized it was a friend who spoke to them, who wanted only what was best for them.

So it was when boys were sick, Dominic was always asked for: those who were discouraged and in trouble would go to him and pour their troubles into his ear. Thus the way was opened to him to do good to those around him at all times and to increase in merit before God.

*\*The thought of winning souls to God never left him. Dominic had a very clear perception of the purpose of man’s creation; he had understood the liberating message of the Good News. He felt, like St. Paul, that he would be held responsible for not sharing it with as many as possible. Yet he did not do this by ‘sermonizing’ - he made himself ‘all things to all men to lead all to Christ’. He was accepted by all sections of the Oratory, popular even with those “who were not fond of religious things”. Note Dominic’s strength of character: “he was able to mix with the more troublesome element without lowering his own standards”. Cf. the examples Don Bosco gives of what a person, even a young one, can do if he is ‘loved and respected’.*

## CHAPTER 13

Among the gifts with which God had enriched Dominic was fervour in prayer. As a result of his efforts he got so accustomed to

talk with God, that no matter where he was, or what noise was going on round about him, he could briefly recollect himself, sending his heart soaring to God.

When he was praying with others, he appeared out of this world. There was no fidgeting and continually changing position; he knelt there motionless, his face radiant, head slightly bowed, eyes lowered. Just to see him this way was an inspiration.

In 1854 Count Cays became President of Honour of the Company of St. Aloysius which was established in the school. On the occasion of his first visit to take part in the church services, he noticed a boy obviously praying with great devotion and attention and he was so struck that he afterwards asked who he was; he was told that it was Dominic Savio.

He used to try to spend a part of his free time in reading a good book, or in making a visit to the church. He would normally have some other boys with him and they would pray together and also visit Our Lady's altar.

There was no limit to his devotion to the Mother of God. Every day he made some little act of mortification in her honour. He never let himself gaze or stare at a girl, and when walking through the streets, did not let his eyes roam about.

Things happening on the way that his companions were all eager to see, he never bothered about and often even never saw. When on one occasion he was asked what he thought about something which he had not even noticed, one of his companions burst out impatiently:

"What is the use of having eyes, if you don't use them to look at what is going on around you?"

Dominic replied: "Instead of using my eyes on useless things, I should like to keep them to gaze on the beauty of Mary Most Holy, when, by God's mercy, I shall be in heaven."

He had a very special devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Every time he went to church he would pay a visit to her altar, and kneeling there before her, beg her to keep his heart free from all impurity with the following little prayer of his own:

"O Mary, I want to be your son always. Please let me die rather

than that I should ever sin against holy Purity."

Every Friday he would get some of his friends together and take them to church with him where they would say together the Rosary of the Seven Sorrows of Mary or the Litany.

He was never happier than when he could succeed in bringing someone else to Mary's feet to honour her and ask her help. He did not always succeed easily. One winter Saturday he asked one of his companions to make a visit to Our Lady and they would say the Vespers of Our Lady's Office together. The boy objected that his hands were cold; so Dominic took off his own gloves and gave them to him. Another time in similar circumstances he gave the other boy his coat and made him put it on.

But it was in the month of May that his devotion to Mary reached its peak. He arranged with a group of his friends to do some special deed in her honour every day. He got together a collection of interesting stories and facts about Our Lady and willingly told them to others in order to inspire them with devotion to her. He urged his companions to frequent Confession and Communion every day, showing great recollection and devotion.

The boys in his dormitory had decided to put up in their dormitory a little altar for Our Lady. They had a meeting to decide what each one should give, and Dominic, who was enthusiastic about the project, found that he had no money to pay his share. He was at a loss wondering what to do and then an idea struck him. He hurried off and got a very nice book that had been given him as a prize, and brought it back to his companions telling them to raffle it and so get money that way.

Others were inspired by his generosity and produced little treasures of their own; a very successful raffle was held and with the proceeds all the required materials were brought. The boys worked hard to get the altar ready but in order to finish it in time it was necessary that some of them stay up late the night before the feast.

Dominic wanted to be one of these, but because he had recently been ill, he was not allowed. He was very disappointed, but accepted the decision as an act of obedience.

"At any rate," he said to one of his companions, "come and wake me up as soon as you have finished; I want to be one of

the first to see our altar in honour of Mary Most Holy.”

*\*“Among the gifts with which God had enriched Dominic was fervour in prayer”. Note that Don Bosco speaks of both formal prayer and devotion as well as living in the presence of God by which our every action becomes a prayer.*

*\*Dominic was not content with loving the Mother of God himself. He wanted to share his love with his companions.*

## CHAPTER 14

Experience has amply shown that the greatest helps and aids to development in time of youth are the sacraments of Confession and Communion. Any boy or girl who receives these sacraments regularly and well, will develop in time of youth, reach great maturity and go on to old age, if God spares them, showing forth a way of life which is an inspiration to all who know them.

Would that all our young people could grasp this and try to carry it out; and that all those concerned with their upbringing and education could grasp it likewise, in order to help in its fulfillment in the young.

Before coming to our school Dominic used to go to Confession and Communion once a month as was usual. After he came here he started going more frequently. One day he heard a talk in church which recommended three things. Go often to Confession: go often to Communion: choose a priest as confessor that you can easily talk to and open your heart to and don't change to another priest unless there is real need for it. Dominic grasped these counsels immediately and completely.

He chose a priest as confessor and went regularly to him all the time he was here. So that the priest might know him completely and thereby be better able to help him, he made a General Confession to him. He began by going to Confession and Communion every fortnight and then every week. His confessor seeing what great progress he had made spiritually, suggested receiving the Holy Eucharist three times a week and at the end of the year suggested to him to go every day.

For a time he was troubled with scruples and wanted to go to

Confession every three or four days and even more often, but his spiritual director would not allow this, and kept him at weekly Confession.

Dominic had the most complete confidence in his spiritual guide and would speak to him with the greatest simplicity about his soul and matters of conscience also outside the confessional. Someone advised him to go to another priest sometimes, but he would not hear of it. He replied: "The confessor is the doctor of the soul. People do not go about chasing from one doctor to another unless they have lost confidence in their own doctor or their case is pretty desperate. I have full confidence in my confessor who is so kind and helpful to me and I don't think I have any trouble that he cannot cure."

Nevertheless his confessor did suggest that occasionally, e.g. at the time of retreat, he should go to another priest and Dominic did so without any hesitation.

Dominic was very pleased with this state of affairs. He said: "If I have any problem I take it to my confessor and he solves it for me according to what God wants. Jesus has said that the voice of the priest is the voice of God. If I have some particular need I go to Holy Communion in which I receive the body, blood, soul and divinity which Jesus offered for us on the cross. What more do I need to make me happy? Nothing in the wide world. Only one thing remains - one day to see revealed in heaven, him whom we can only see with the eye of faith here below."

Filled with this spirit, Dominic's days were full of happiness. This was the source of that wonderful cheerful spirit which was the soul of all his actions. It should not be imagined that he went about in a dream half the time or that he did not realize what sort of life it was necessary to live, if one went to daily Communion. He was fully alive to everything and his conduct was irreproachable. I have asked his companions to tell me of anything wrong they found in him or any good quality which he did not show evidence of, during the three years he lived amongst us and all have agreed that there never was anything that they needed to correct in him, or anything they could suggest for him to do that he was not already doing.

His preparation for Holy Communion was most thorough. Before going to bed the previous evening, he said a special prayer to

prepare himself, which always ended as follows: "Blessed and praised every moment be the most holy and divine sacrament." In the morning he carried on his preparation, but his thanksgiving was liable to have no end to it. If he were not reminded he would forget about breakfast, recreation and even morning school, so caught up was he with God. It was really a joy for him to be able to pass some time before the Blessed Sacrament, and as often as he could he would get others to come with him. There was a little group of prayers in reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the many sins of mankind which he was very fond of saying when making such visits.

In order to make his Holy Communion as fruitful as possible and to encourage himself to renewed fervour every day, he made a plan for his Communions as follows:

- |            |   |
|------------|---|
| Sunday:    | In honour of the Most Blessed Trinity.  |
| Monday:    | For all those who have been kind to me and done me good.                        |
| Tuesday:   | In honour of my guardian angel and St. Dominic.                                 |
| Wednesday: | To Our Lady for the conversion of sinners.                                      |
| Thursday:  | For the Holy Souls  |
| Friday:    | In honour of the Passion of Jesus.  |
| Saturday:  | In honour of Mary Most Holy, and to obtain her protection in life and in death. |

He took part with great joy in any ceremonies connected with the Blessed Sacrament. If when out in the town he met the viaticum being taken to the sick, he knelt down no matter where he was and if he were free he would reverently accompany the little procession to its destination.

One day when such a little procession with the viaticum was passing by, it was raining and the ground was very muddy. Dominic knelt down without any hesitation. His companion said that in such circumstances it was not necessary, God did not expect you to dirty your clothes like that. Dominic replied quite simply: "Everything belongs to God including our clothes and so everything must do him honour. I would not only kneel down in the mud when He passes by, but I would throw myself into a furnace if by so doing I would gain a spark of that love



which moved him to give us this wonderful sacrament."

On a similar occasion a soldier was standing near him but made no effort to kneel down. Not daring to ask him to do so, he took out his handkerchief and spread it on the muddy ground in front of him. The soldier looked a bit startled but took the hint and went down on his knees.

On the feast of Corpus Christi he was sent with some of his companions to take part in the procession of the Blessed Sacrament being held in the parish. Dressed in cassock and cotta, Dominic was overjoyed. No other present could have given him more joy.

*\*Don Bosco points out that, for Dominic, the reception of the sacraments was no mere routine one. He prepared well; he made them personal; he realized that the best thanksgiving was a life more and more dedicated to its Author.*

*We live in an age when the number who go to Communion regularly is very great whilst the number going to Confession has drastically decreased. There is a grave danger that both these trends have a common root: lack of appreciation of the sacraments and a brushing aside of the seriousness of sin.*

## CHAPTER 15

Dominic's youth, his far from robust health and his innocent life would certainly have dispensed him from any sort of penance; but he knew and understood that only with the greatest difficulty can a boy keep himself intact without some penance, and so the path of mortification seemed to him to be strewn with roses. By penance and mortification I do not mean patience in meeting the unpleasant things of daily life, nor do I mean the self-control and sacrifice necessary to be able to pray at all times and in all places; such things were in the ordinary way of life for him. I am referring only to penances which affected him physically.

He decided in honour of Our Blessed Lady to fast every Saturday on bread and water; this was forbidden him. He started off fasting for Lent, but after a week his Rector heard about it and stopped it. He wanted at least to go without breakfast, but this was not allowed him either. The reason of course was that his superiors did not want his health to be ruined. What was he to do then?

Dominic was not daunted; he took to afflicting his body in other ways. He put pebbles or bits of wood under his sheet so that he would be uncomfortable in bed. He got hold of a very rough shirt, very irritating to the skin and wore it. These penances were also forbidden him. He tried again. When summer passed into autumn and winter he did not add any blankets to the very thin covering which was sufficient in the hot summer. In the bitter cold of January this was all he had. His Rector came to see him once when he was in bed with some disturbance. When he got to the bed he saw Dominic lying there shivering violently and he realized that there was only thin summer covering over him.

"What on earth are you up to?" he asked him. "Do you want to die of cold?"

"No," he replied, "but Jesus in the stable of Bethlehem was much worse off than this."

He was then forbidden absolutely to undertake any kind of penance whatsoever without the express permission of his Rector. Dominic accepted this obedience, but one day I came across him looking somewhat sad, and I asked him what was the matter. He replied:

"I am properly in the soup. Our Blessed Lord says that if I don't do penance I will not get to heaven. I am forbidden to do any penance; what chance then have I of heaven?"

I explained to him that the penance Jesus wanted from him was complete obedience, patience with others and the unpleasant things of life; to accept equally the heat and the cold and the rain; to be cheerful when tired and not feeling so well and so on.

"But," said Dominic, "these things come to you whether you like it or not."

"Precisely," I replied, "offer them willingly to God; there is nothing that will please him more, and you will be doing real penance."

Thus reassured, Dominic was very happy and completely at peace.

*\*Dominic "knew and understood that only with the greatest difficulty can a boy keep himself intact without some penance."*

Note again the value of acceptance of the guidance of a wise spiritual director. Dominic wanted to do extraordinary penances but was willing to accept Don Bosco's veto, even though he felt such penances were absolutely necessary! He was to learn that real penance can be found in accepting the daily crosses which always come our way.

## CHAPTER 16

Dominic was so natural in his self control and right way of acting, that it could be easily imagined that he was made that way. But those who knew him well or were helping in his education knew differently. It only resulted from great and persevering effort helped by the grace of God.

His eyes were very alive, naturally darting here and there, and he had to do no small violence to himself to bring them under control. He once told one of his friends: "When I realized I must control my eyes, it cost me great effort resulting sometimes in violent headache." He achieved such mastery in this respect, that his companions never saw him even glance at anything that was not as it should be. He used to say: "The eyes are two windows. Through these windows there passes what you let pass. You can let an angel in or you can let a devil in, and whichever you let in can get possession of your heart."

A young relative of one of the boys came to see him and thoughtlessly brought with him a magazine with bad pictures in it. A group of boys gathered round fascinated to see the indecent pictures. Dominic saw the group and came along to see what all the excitement was about.

When he saw what they were looking at, with a sudden gesture he snatched the paper from the boy's hand and quietly tore it to pieces. This action and the look on his face silenced the boys and they stood looking at each other. Then he spoke:

"What fools we are! God has given us our eyes to admire the wonders of creation, and we use them to look at the filth that the evil genius of men produces to ruin souls. You know well enough that one look is enough to stain your souls, and yet you go feasting your eyes on this."

"It was only a joke," said one shamefacedly.

"Fine joke, that can open the way to hell for you! Do you think you would think it very funny, if you had the misfortune to go there?"

Another said: "Nonsense, there is nothing wrong in looking at pictures like that."

"If that is really so, it means that your eyes are already used to looking at such horrors. That you are used to it does not make it any less sinful for you. Job was an old man and covered with sores, but he made a bargain with his eyes that they would never look at anything shameful."

All were silenced and no one dared to make any further observations.

To this care of his eyes, Dominic joined great control over his tongue. He would never butt in when others were speaking, and he never monopolized the conversation. It was asserted equally by his superiors and companions that he never said a wrong word in class or recreation, or spoke when he was supposed to be silent. If anyone tried to pick a quarrel with him, he would not let himself get drawn into it, but would quietly try to calm the other and make him at peace.

One day he tried to correct a companion of a bad habit which he had. The boy did not take it at all well, turned on Dominic and punched and kicked him. Dominic was well able to give more than he received, but although he got very red in the face he kept his temper and when the boy stopped he said to him:

"You have done me wrong, but I forgive you. However, you had better think twice before trying that on anyone else."

Much could be said about his mortification of the other senses of the body, but I limit myself to a few instances.

In spite of the fact that he suffered badly from chilblains in winter-time, he never complained or sought relief. It seemed rather that they were a source of pleasure to him. He used to say: "The bigger the chilblains, the better for the health." Meaning of course the health of his soul.

Many of his companions testified that in very cold weather he would walk slowly, so as to feel the cold more and suffer

accordingly.

In schools, especially boarding schools, boys can always be found whom nothing satisfies. At one moment they complain of the food, at another of having to go to church, at another of not being allowed to do what they like, and so on. These boys are real pests, because their grumbling can quickly spread and a very bad spirit grow among the others.

Dominic had no complaints. It was never too hot, or too cold, and he was equally cheerful in bad or good weather. Whatever was served at table was equally acceptable to him. If others found the food overdone or underdone, too salty or not salty enough, it found no echo in him. "It's quite all right for me," he would say.

He would stay behind in the refectory after the others and pick up any pieces of bread lying around, put them in his drawer and eat them at the next meal. To his companions who wanted to make a fuss about it, he said with a smile: "It is good manners to break your bread before eating it; it saves trouble if it is already broken."

The same applied to other food; he would do anything rather than that it should be wasted. He would easily give away his share of a dish that was especially nice.

When some of his friends asked him why he was so careful he explained:

"Everything that we have is God's precious gift. Of his material gifts the most precious is that of food because our lives depend on it. We should always therefore be very thankful for it and try very hard never to waste it."

With great joy would he do for others what they were least ready to do for themselves, such as cleaning their shoes, getting the mud off their clothes, doing unpleasant jobs in the sick room, sweeping, scrubbing and so on. "If we all do what we can, everything will be all right," he used to say. "I can't do great things; these things I can manage, and I am very pleased to be able to do them for Jesus. I hope that they will please him and that in his infinite goodness he will accept them."

To eat things he did not like; easily leave alone those he did like; not let his eyes roam uselessly around; accept unpleasant smells;

surrender his own way; accept willingly anything which went against him in body or soul: these are things which were a normal part of his daily life.

There are many other facts and incidents which I am omitting. They all testify to how great was Dominic's spirit of penance and charity and how industriously he was making use of all the little occasions which came his way, to live more and more completely for God and gain merit in his sight.

*\*There are no ready-made saints. Dominic was no exception. He had to take all those steps that are necessary to keep up a close relationship with Christ: Correction of faults; control of the senses; mortification; avoidance of occasions of sin; humble service of one's neighbour; willing acceptance of things that annoy or hurt. "He was making use of all the little occasions which came his way, to live more and more completely for God."*

## CHAPTER 17

The whole of Dominic's life can be said to be an act of love for Mary most holy. He never let slip any occasion of pleasing and honouring her. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was solemnly defined in 1854. Dominic had a very great desire to leave behind him at the school some lasting reminder of this great event. He said:

"I would like very much to do something in honour of my Mother Mary; but I will have to do it quickly, as I do not think I have much time left."

Spurred on by his present desire to help his companions, he asked some of those whom he knew well and relied upon to join him in forming the Company of Mary Immaculate. The aim was to obtain the special protection of the Mother of God in life, and especially at the hour of death. Dominic proposed two means to this end: to honour, and to bring others to honour, Mary by different means, and to encourage frequent Communion. In agreement with his friends and after much careful thought, he drew up a set of rules. On June 8th, nine months before he died, he went with his friends before the altar of Our Lady and they read it over together. I give these

rules here so that they may be an inspiration and guide to others.

We, Dominic Savio, etc. (there follows the names of the others), after receiving the sacraments of Confession and Communion, do this day, June 8th, give ourselves completely to Mary Immaculate and promise to work unceasingly for her and with her: to help ourselves to do this and to maintain our love for her we here before her altar solemnly promise, in agreement with our spiritual director, to follow in the footsteps of Louis Comollo to the best of our ability. Here we bind ourselves as follows:

- A. To carry out with the greatest exactness the rules of the school.
- B. To help and encourage our companions: helping them by pointing out in a friendly way whatever needs correcting; encouraging them by being first in doing the right thing and supporting their own efforts.
- C. To be always busy with something useful.

To make it possible to be faithful to these obligations and to help us to persevere in them, we submit the following rules to our Rector.

- 1. We will be very exact in carrying out what we are expected to do and have great confidence in those over us.
- 2. The carrying out of our own duties will be our first and special care.
- 3. A true spirit of charity will unite the members of the group in genuine friendship among themselves and also with their companions. We will not hesitate to correct anyone when so doing in a friendly way would help.
- 4. We will meet each week for half an hour and after a prayer to the Holy Spirit and a short spiritual reading we will consider how the Company is getting on in its work for Jesus and Mary.
- 5. We will help each other to get rid of any faults or wrong habits which we have. This we will do privately.

6. We will try hard to be even-tempered and good-humoured, being patient with each other, and with those who are awkward and troublesome.
7. There are no special prayers to be said; whatever time is left over after having carried out our own duties should be devoted to whatever will be most useful for our souls.
8. However, we do take upon ourselves these few practices:
  - a) We will go as often as possible to the sacraments.
  - b) We will receive Holy Communion every Sunday, holyday of obligation, the novenas and feast-days of Our Lady and our patrons.
  - c) We will also receive Holy Communion on Thursday, unless we are prevented by some necessary obligation.
9. Every day, especially in the Holy Rosary, we will ask Our Lady to bless our Company, and help us to come safely home to heaven.
10. Saturdays will be kept in honour of Our Lady and on that day we will offer her some special act done in honour of the Immaculate Conception.
11. When praying and at the services in church, during lessons and at study time, we will try to make our exterior behaviour and manner such as to encourage our companions to do their best.
12. We will treasure the word of God and we will go over again together the talks we have heard.
13. We will carefully avoid any wasting time, to safeguard ourselves from the temptations which come so easily and so strongly at times of idleness.
14. Therefore whatever time remains after the discharge of our own duties will be spent in useful and good reading or in prayer.
15. Our recreation times will be after meals and after lesson time and study time.



16. We will make known to our Rector whatever will help on our spiritual progress.
17. We will not abuse the goodness of those over us by constantly asking for those permissions which in their goodness they are willing to give. The exact observance of the school rules to which we have pledged ourselves should help us to avoid this abuse of too many exceptions.
18. We will not grumble about food and we will try to prevent others from doing so.
19. Those who want to join our society must first of all make a good Confession and receive Holy Communion, spend a week on trial, read these rules carefully, and promise Jesus and Mary Immaculate to be faithful to them.
20. On the occasion of anyone being received into the Company, the others will assist at Mass and receive Holy Communion, praying that God will give their new companion and the grace of perseverance, obedience and real love of God.
21. Our Company is placed under the care of Mary Immaculate whose name we bear and whose medal we always carry with us. A sincere, filial and limitless confidence in Mary, a constant devotion and loving affection for her, will make us overcome all obstacles, clinging tenaciously to our resolutions, be firm with ourselves, gentle and kindly towards others, exact in everything. The members are urged to write the holy names of Jesus and Mary first of all in their hearts and minds and then on their books and similar objects, so that they can be easily reminded of them. Our Rector is asked to go over these rules and if necessary change them according as he thinks best. We accept completely whatever he decides in the matter.

And you, O Mary, bless our efforts, since the idea of the Company is all yours. Smile on our hopes, accept our promises, and thus under your mantle and made strong by your loving care, we will come safely through the storm-tossed sea of this world and be victorious over the temptations of the devil. So too will we be able to help our companions by what we do, give joy to those over us, and in all things be your loving sons. And if God gives us the grace of becoming priests, we promise you to give all our energies and powers to this

work, distrusting ourselves, trusting completely in God; and so after our exile on this earth we trust that, consoled by Mary at our side, we shall receive safely the eternal reward that God reserves for those who serve him in spirit and truth.

The Rector read the rules very carefully and gave it his approval under the following conditions:

1. That the promises have not the force of vows.
2. None of them bind in any way under pain of sin.
3. Some external act of service or help should be undertaken by each one at the weekly meeting.
4. The week will be arranged so as to have some at Communion every day.
5. No special religious practice may be added without the express permission of the Rector.
6. The principal aim of the Company will be to further devotion to Mary Immaculate and Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.
7. Everyone before being accepted must read the life of Louis Comollo.

*\*Don Bosco convinced Dominic that his own coming close to Christ was intimately connected with his bringing others close to Christ.*

*\*Cf "SODALITIES: AN INTEGRAL ELEMENT OF THE PREVENTIVE SYSTEM", p. 232*

## CHAPTER 18

Everybody was friendly with Dominic. Those who could not understand him completely, at least respected him for his good qualities. He could get on well with everyone. He was so confirmed in the things of God that he was asked on occasion to associate with boys who were far from good, so that he might try to win them over to God. To do this he made use of free time, different kinds of games, conversation, using them all in different ways for the spiritual advantage of those concerned.

His best friends, however, were the other boys in the Company of Mary Immaculate. With these he had regular meetings, and they would gather together also for acts of devotion. These meetings had the permission of the Rector, but they were presided over and carried through by the boys themselves. In the meetings they decided how best to help an active participation in the novenas and solemn feasts, how to maintain and increase love for the Blessed Sacrament and frequent Communion; how to help boys who easily got into trouble and were going astray. Each of them would 'adopt one such boy and make it his business to help him and encourage him in every way possible.

Dominic was the soul of the meeting, its guide and mentor. There is much I could say about many of the boys who took part in those meetings, but as most of them are still alive, it is better I should not. I will mention two only who are already dead: Camillo Gavio of Tortona, and John Massaglia of Marmorito. Camillo Gavio was only two months with us, but it was long enough to leave a wonderful memory of him.

His outstanding character and the great promise he showed in painting and modelling moved his town council to send him to Turin, so that he might have a real chance of developing his talents. He had been very ill not long before and was not yet fully recovered; also it was his first time away from home, and among so many boys whom he did not know, it was little wonder that he was somewhat downcast and stood sadly watching the others playing their game with great zest. Dominic saw him and immediately went over to talk to him and make friends. Something like the following dialogue took place. Dominic began:

"Hullo, don't you know anyone yet?"

"No, but I am enjoying watching the others playing."

"What is your name?"

"Camillo Gavio, and I come from Tortona."

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"You are looking sad; have you not been well?"

"Yes, I have been very ill with some sort of heart trouble and I am not yet fully better."

"You would like to be completely better soon, wouldn't you?"

"No, not absolutely. I only want to do God's will."

These last words made Dominic realize that Gavio was a boy of more than ordinary piety, and his heart warmed to him. With renewed interest he went on:

"Anyone who only wants God's will has a real desire to become a saint, do you want to become a saint?"

"Oh yes; I want that more than anything else."

"That's great; you can be one of our special group, if you like, and share completely what we do together to help us to live for Jesus and Mary."

"Yes, I would like to do that; but what have I got to do?"

"I will tell you in a few words. For us here it means doing all that is necessary to be always in good spirits. We hate and detest sin as something that robs us of God's grace and makes us very unhappy inside; we try to be very faithful to all our duties and to be foremost in taking an active part in all exercises of piety. Try taking for your own special motto: 'Service Domino in laetitia' - Be very happy while following God."

These few words were like a ray of sunshine in the gloom, and greatly comforted the boy. From that day he became a close friend of Dominic and followed him faithfully in the path which he trod. However, his illness flared up again after two months and despite every care he grew steadily worse and in a few days he died. He received the last sacraments with great reverence and joy and gave up his soul to God on December 29th, 1855.

Dominic visited him regularly while he was ill and as the end drew near wanted to spend the night at his bedside. This he was not allowed to do. As soon as he heard that death had come, he went to his bedside and with tears in his eyes said:

"Goodbye Camillo; I am sure you have gone straight to heaven

- get a place ready for me there also. I will always be your friend as long as I live. I will pray for the repose of your soul."

Afterwards he got the boys of the Company of Mary Immaculate together and they all went to pray beside the body. They also said many other prayers for him and received Holy Communion in reparation for his soul. Dominic himself did this a number of times.

He said to his friends several times: "Do not let us forget the soul of our friend. Please God he is already in heaven, but we must carry on praying for him. All that we do for him God will get done for us in due course, when our own time comes."

*\*Note how Dominic went out of his way to share his friendship. However, his close friends were those who shared his ideals.*

*\*Friendship is a good thing, an essential thing and must be encouraged. You will find in the life of Don Bosco how he made some very close friendships and he goes out of his way to point out the friendships which were so much a part of Dominic's life and spirituality. The essence of Christian friendship is two persons together with Christ as their bond. Friendship is only dangerous when it becomes exclusive or secretive.*

## CHAPTER 19

More intimate and maintained over a longer period of time were Dominic's relations with John Massaglia. They both came to the Oratory at the same time, they were from neighbouring villages, both wanted to become priests, and they had a common desire to live for God.

Dominic said to his friend one day, "Don't let us stop at saying we want to be priests, but let us get busy trying to grow in the virtues that are needed by a priest." "Quite true," the other replied, "but if we do all that we can, God in his goodness will give us the great grace of becoming priests."

At Easter time there was the annual retreat; this they made with great fervour. When it was over, Dominic said to John: "Let us be friends in the best way possible, anxious for the

welfare of each other's soul. We could be that if we were to correct each other in whatever way might be needed. So will you tell me whenever you notice me doing anything I should not, or if you see there is some good I can do and I am not doing, please point it out."

"Very gladly, although you don't really need anything like that. It's me that needs it, as I am older and exposed to greater temptations. So will you do that for me?"

Dominic replied with a smile: "Let's cut out the compliments and be really serious about helping each other."

From that moment Dominic and John became true friends. Their friendship was lasting because it was founded on their life for God, striving earnestly together to help each other to resist evil and do good.

After the examinations at the end of the school year, the boys used to go home for the holidays. Some boys for a variety of reasons used to ask to remain at the school during the holiday period. Dominic and John were among these. I knew that their parents were very anxious to have them at home and I also thought it would do them a lot of good to go home for a while since neither of them was very strong, so I suggested this to them.

Instead of replying they both began to laugh.

"What are you laughing at?"

Dominic replied: "We know that our parents would be very glad to have us at home, but we know also that while the bird in the cage loses its liberty, still it is safe from the claws of the vulture; outside the cage he may fly where he likes but also at any moment he can fall a victim to the evil bird of prey."

In spite of this, I judged it advisable for them both to go home for some time and they went without hesitation in a spirit of obedience, remaining just the time that I suggested.

If I were to write about the good example and virtues of John Massaglia I should be largely repeating what I have already written about Dominic, whose faithful follower he was, as long as he lived. He enjoyed good health and showed great

promise in his studies. When he had finished his humanities, he passed with distinction the exam prior to receiving the clerical habit. But he was not able to wear for long the cassock that he had looked forward so eagerly to having.

After a few months he became unwell, but not thinking much of it, he did not want to interrupt his studies. His parents were worried, however, and took him home, so that he might have a good rest away from his books. But, he did not improve and after some weeks Dominic received the following letter:

Dear Dominic,

I thought I should only be a few days at home, so I did not bring any books or notes home with me. However, my sickness is going on and on, and I am wondering how it will all end up. The doctor says I am getting better; my own private opinion is that I am getting worse. We shall see who is right!

I am lonely, dear Dominic, so far away from you and the others; there are not the same opportunities here for all the spiritual things we had at school. I comfort myself with the memory of the days we helped each other to prepare well for Holy Communion. I am sure we are still united in spirit.

Would you go to my desk in the study and get the "Imitation of Christ" by Thomas a Kempis which you will find there and some notes which are lying beside it? Please parcel them up and send them to me. I am tired of doing nothing, but the doctor won't let me study. I sometimes walk up and down my room thinking, "Shall I ever get better? Shall I ever rejoin my companions at school? Is this my last illness?" God alone knows the answers. I think I am quite ready to do his holy will, whatever it may be.

Send me any advice you think will help me. Let me know how you are getting on and remember me in your prayers, especially when you receive Holy Communion. Let our friendship be sealed in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and if we are not destined to be united long in this life, please God we shall be together for ever in heaven.

Tell all the boys I was asking for them and remember me especially to those of the Company of Mary Immaculate. God be with you.

Your affectionate friend,

John Massaglia.

Dominic sent John what he had asked him to get from his desk and together with it he sent the following letter:

Dear John,

You don't know how pleased I was to get your letter - at least it let me know that you were still alive. As no news had come since you left, we did not know quite, whether to say the "Glory be to the Father" or the "Out of the depths" for you. I am sending what you asked me to. I should like to say that Thomas a' Kempis is a good friend, but he is dead. He needs to be made to come alive by your own efforts to understand what he says. Think it over, and see how it can be carried out in your own life.

You sigh for the wonderful chances we have here of spiritual things; so did I when I was at Mondonio. I tried to make up for them by a daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament and when going I tried to get as many others to come with me as possible.

Besides the "Imitation" I read "The Treasure Hidden in the Holy Mass" by St. Leonard of Port Maurice. If you feel like it, read that also.

You say you don't know if you will ever come back to the Oratory. To tell you the truth I have a feeling that I am coming quickly to the end of my own life. At any rate we can pray for each other so that both of us may die happily in God's grace. The one who goes to heaven first can prepare a place for the other and when he arrives stretch out a helping hand to pull him in!

May God keep us always in his holy grace and help us to become saints, but quickly because there is little time left. All your friends look forward to your coming back and send their



very best wishes. With theirs I send you my own best wishes and prayers.

Always,

Your loving friend,

Dominic Savio.

John Massaglia's illness at first seemed of little consequence. Several times he seemed completely recovered only to relapse again, and then suddenly he was at death's door, and passed peacefully away. His parish priest, who was also his spiritual father during holiday time, wrote: "There was time to give him the Last Sacraments and he received them with the greatest devotion. He died the death of the just man who leaves this world to go straight to heaven."

Dominic was deeply grieved for the loss of his friend and although he accepted it completely as God's will, he was in tears for several days. It was the first time that I had seen that wonderful face of his, sad and tearstained. His only comfort was to pray for his friend and get others to do likewise. He could be heard to say sometimes. "Dear John, you are dead, and I hope you are already with Camillo in heaven; when shall I be with you in that happy place?"

He never forgot John Massaglia in his prayers right up to the time of his own death. He never assisted at Holy Mass or at any exercise in church without remembering him before God. Dominic's sensitive heart suffered greatly from this loss and even his health was affected.

*\*This is the second chapter in which Don Bosco underlines the importance of friendship, based upon a sharing of ideals. Don Bosco remarks: "Their friendship was lasting because it was founded on their life for God, striving earnestly together to help each other to resist evil and do good."*

*\*"A criterion of true friendship is the concern for the up-building of brotherhood; instead of monopolizing the heart of another it seeks to extend itself to others, especially to those in greater need of kindness and affection." (Fr. Bernard Häring, C.S.S.R.)*

*\*Some have the quaint notion that tears are a sign of weakness or even of failure to accept God's will. They forget the tears of Christ himself. "Dominic was deeply grieved for the loss of his friend and although he accepted it completely as God's will, he was in tears for several days."*

## CHAPTER 20

There is nothing extraordinary in what I have written about so far, although we might call extraordinary Dominic's exemplary and innocent life, his spirit of penance. Extraordinary also might be called the liveliness of his faith, his constant hope, his tireless zeal in doing good and helping others which went on until his last breath.

I should like to give now some incidents and special graces which were out of the ordinary. I am conscious that these may give rise to some doubt in those who read about them. I should like to state categorically that anything recounted here which seems paralleled by incidents in the Scriptures or the lives of the saints, was seen with my own eyes and that the accounts written of them are written with a scrupulous care for the truth. I leave each one free to form his own opinions.

On a number of occasions when I have been in church when Dominic was making his thanksgiving after Holy Communion, or visiting the Blessed Sacrament exposed, I have seen him obviously quite oblivious to what was going on around him; he would continue in this state without noticing the time unless he was reminded it was time for something else.

One day he was missing from breakfast, morning lessons, the midday meal and no one knew where he was, he was not in the study room, not even in bed! The matter was referred to the Rector, who suspected what might be the case. He went to the Church and there in the little chapel behind the high altar he saw Dominic standing motionless like a statue. One foot was on top of the other, one hand resting on the reading lectern; his other hand was on his breast and his gaze was fixed immovably on the tabernacle. I called him but there was no response. I shook him, and he looked around at me saying:

"Oh, is Mass already over?"

"Look," said his Rector, showing him his watch, "it is two o'clock."

He asked pardon very contritely for having been absent without permission, and I sent him to get some dinner, saying to him: "If anyone asks you where you have been, say you were doing something for me." I said this so that he might be spared the curious questions of his companions.

Another time, as I was going out of the sacristy after finishing my thanksgiving, I heard a voice which seemed to be engaged in argument. It came from the little chapel behind the high altar and when I went there I saw Dominic. He was speaking and then stopping as though waiting for someone else's reply. Among other things I heard quite clearly these words: "Yes, my God, I have already said it and I say it again: I love you and I wish to go on loving you till my last breath. If you see that I am going to offend you, let me die: I much prefer to die than to offend you by sin."

I asked him sometimes what went on at these times and he replied with great simplicity: "It is silly of me; I get a distraction and lose the thread of my prayers and then I see such wonderful things that the hours pass by like minutes."

One day he came into my room saying: "Come quickly! There is some good work to be done."

"Where do you want to take me?"

"Come quickly! Come quickly!"

I hesitated, but on his renewed insistence, went with him: similar instances had happened before. We left the house and silently he led me through one street after another for quite a distance. Finally we arrived at a block of flats and he led me up to the third floor: "Here you are. This is where you are wanted," he said as he rang the bell and immediately went away.

The door was opened: "Oh come in, come in quickly before it is too late. My husband lapsed from the church and became a Protestant: now he is dying and begging for a priest."

I entered and there saw the dying man, overcome with anxiety to set his conscience in order. Speedily I set matters right with

a good Confession, and as I was just finishing, the local priest arrived with the holy oils. As he was in the act of administering the last anointing the man died.

One day I asked Dominic how he could have known that there was a dying man there. He looked at me somewhat sadly and burst into tears. I did not question him any further.

The innocence of his life, his love of God and great desire for the things of God so developed Dominic's mind that he came to be habitually united with God.

Sometimes he would stop playing a game and withdrawing from his companions walk by himself. When asked why he did this he replied. "These 'distractions' come to me suddenly, and sometimes I seem to see heaven open above me and I have to go away from my companions so that I do not say things which could only seem ridiculous to them."

One day during playtime the conversation turned to the great reward God has prepared in heaven for those who preserve their innocence. Among other things it was said that those who have kept their innocence are the nearest in heaven to the person of our Divine Saviour and that they sing a special hymn reserved to them for all eternity. This was enough to send Dominic's spirit soaring towards God; he stood still completely motionless and then fell as though dead into the arms of his companions.

This being carried out of himself would happen sometimes during study time and even in the street on his way to and from school.

He often spoke of the Holy Father and how much he would like to see him before he died. Several times he said that he had something very important to tell him. I asked him what this very important thing was.

"If I could speak to the Holy Father, I would say that in spite of his many worries and cares he should not cease to give his special attention to England; God is preparing a great triumph for the faith in that country."

"What makes you say that?"

"I will tell you, but please don't tell anyone else, as I don't want them to laugh at me. If you go to Rome perhaps you will tell the Holy Father about it . . . . One morning as I was making my thanksgiving after Communion, a very strong distraction took hold of me. I thought I saw a great plain full of people enveloped in thick fog. They were walking about like people who had lost their way and did not know which way to turn. Someone near me said: "This is England." I was just going to ask some questions, when I saw Pope Pius IX just like I have seen him in pictures. He was robed magnificently and carried in his hand a torch alive with flames. As he walked slowly towards that immense gathering of people, the leaping flames from the torch dispelled the fog, and the people stood in the splendour of the noonday sun. "That torch," said the one beside me, "is the Catholic Faith, which is going to light up England."

When I went to Rome in 1858, I told Pius IX about this, and he listened to it with great joy and pleasure and said to me: "What you say strengthens me in my determination to do everything possible for England, already the object of my care and solicitude. The message you give me, if no more, is at least the advice of a privileged soul."

There are many other similar incidents, but I do not give them here. I have, however, written them down and leave it to others to publish them when it will be for God's greater glory.

*\*Dominic's was a life lived in the presence of God. He also learnt from Don Bosco a universal thirst for souls.*

## CHAPTER 21

Those who have read what I have written so far about Dominic will easily realize that his life was a continual preparation for death. For Dominic the Company of Mary Immaculate was a sure means of securing the protection of Our Lady at the hour of his death, which many now felt could not be far off. I cannot say whether he had some revelation from God of the day and circumstances of his death or whether it was just a presentiment. He certainly spoke about his death long before it happened, and so clearly that he could not have described it more accurately after it did happen.

In view of his state of health everything was done to put a brake on his life of study and piety. However, by reason of his constitution, various physical weaknesses and the ardour of his spirit, each day saw his strength decreasing. He was aware of this himself and sometimes he would say: "I must hurry up or I will be overtaken by night, while I am on the way." By this he meant that he had not much longer to live and that he must do as much good as he could before death caught up with him.

It is the custom in this school for the boys to make the exercise for a Happy Death each month. Part of this exercise consists in making a Confession and Communion as though they were to be the last. Pope Pius IX in his goodness has enriched this exercise with many indulgences. Dominic used to make it with great earnestness. It is the custom at the end of the exercise to say one Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory be to the Father for 'the one amongst us who will be the first to die'. One day he said smiling:

"It should not be for the one amongst us who will be the first to die, but for Dominic Savio who will be the first to die amongst us."

At the end of April he went to his Rector to ask him how he might keep in the best way possible Our Lady's month. He was told to fulfill all his duties as well as he could for Our Lady, to tell some story or fact about her every day and act in such a way that he could go worthily to Holy Communion every day.

"I will do that faithfully: what grace shall I ask for?"

"Ask Our Lady to obtain for you from God, health and the grace of living completely for God and the saving of souls."

"Yes, may she do this and also be with me when I am dying and lead me to heaven."

Dominic lived so fervently during this month that he seemed already to be living in the next world and all his thoughts, words and actions were for Mary. He always had his story about her ready each day and would tell it sometimes to one group of boys, sometimes to another.

One of his companions said one day: "But if you do everything this year what will be left for next year?"

"Let me do what I can this year; if I am here next year I'll let you know what my plans are."

In order to do everything possible for his health, I called in several doctors to consult together. All were taken by his brightness, his cheerfulness and his quick and ready replies. One of them, a very eminent physician, Doctor Vallauri by name, said to me with admiration: "What a wonderful boy!"

I asked this doctor to tell me plainly what was the underlying trouble which was steadily sapping his strength.

"There is no basic disease: but given his delicate constitution, the keenness of his mind and the intensity of the spirit continually at work in him are gradually wearing him away."

"What is the remedy?"

"To my mind the best remedy would be to let him go to heaven: he seems to me to be very ready for it. The only thing which is likely to preserve his life is to take him away from all study and keep him busy with manual work proportionate to his strength."

*\*Don Bosco called the monthly Exercise for a Happy Death the key to morality.*

*\*"Never forget this: one of the evil features of modern pedagogy is its aversion to mentioning eternal truths and, above all, death and hell." Don Bosco (BM II, 168)*

## CHAPTER 22

Dominic's ill health was not such as to confine him to bed. He passed his time between some classes, some study and little jobs about the house. It gave him great joy to help in the school infirmary when there were any of his companions sick there. He said sometimes: "I don't get any merit for working in the sick room or visiting the sick, because it is something I like doing very much."

While attending to their physical needs he would also with due prudence suggest things for their spiritual benefit.

One of his companions was finding it a bit hard to remain in bed. Dominic said to him: "Our bodies are not made to last for ever; it is understandable that they gradually wear out until finally death comes. Think how wonderful it will be when our souls, freed from hindrances of the body, fly straight to God to begin an eternity of happiness and joy!"

Another boy refused to take his medicine because of its bitter taste. Dominic said to him: "Medicines also come from God who has made them so that we can get better and stronger. When we take them we are doing what God wants us to do and if they do not taste very nice we get all the more merit. However unpleasant they are, it is nothing to what Jesus suffered on the cross for us."

These observations of Dominic were said so unaffectedly and with such sincerity that they always won the boys over.

Dominic's health was steadily deteriorating but he did not want to go home: he wanted at all costs to try to keep up his studies and his life for God at the school. A few months previously I had sent him home, but a few days afterwards he turned up at the Oratory again. I have to confess that the unwillingness was on both sides. I wanted to keep Dominic with me at all costs. My affection and esteem for him were those of a father for his special favourite son. But I felt that the doctor's recommendation should be carried out and this especially so as he had recently developed a bad cough. I wrote to Signor Savio and Dominic's departure was fixed for March 1st.

He accepted this decision and offered it as a sacrifice to God. "Why are you so unwilling to go home?" I asked him. "You should be glad to be going to your parents."

"I want to end my days here at the Oratory."

"All right; when you get better at home then you can come back."

"That is all very well . . . but I know that if I go home, I shall never come back."



The evening before his departure, he could hardly be persuaded to leave my side - there was always a new question to be answered or another assurance to be given. The following is some of the dialogue which took place between us:

"What is the best thing a sick person can do to gain merit before God?"

"Frequently to renew the offering of his sufferings to God."

"What else can he do?"

"Offer his life to Jesus."

"Can I be certain that I will save my soul?"

"By the mercy of God which will never be wanting to you, you are certain of saving your soul."

"If the devil comes to tempt me what shall I say to him?"

"Tell him that you have sold your soul to Jesus and he has paid for it with his Precious Blood. If the devil continues to worry you, ask him what he has ever done for your soul, and remind him that Jesus shed his blood so that you might be free from his power."

"When I am in heaven, shall I be able to see my companions here and my family at home?"

"Yes, you will see everything from heaven - what is happening here, at home and lots of other things besides."

"Shall I be able to visit you here?"

"Yes, if it is according to God's will and for his greater glory."

From these and many other questions which he put to me it was easy to see that Dominic was already standing on the threshold of eternity, wondering greatly about the joys it had in store for him.

*\*The best evangelizers of youth are young people themselves. There is much to be learnt from Dominic, in this regard, especially about not being afraid to talk about spiritual matters and*

*setting up such a relationship that companions will not be 'turned off'. This point can be taken further. The influence of lay people upon their fellow lay people is not fully appreciated. Too many leave evangelizing to the priests and religious.*

## CHAPTER 23

The morning of his departure Dominic made the Exercise of a Happy Death with his companions. He showed such devotion in his Confession and Holy Communion as it is quite impossible to try to describe.

I must make this exercise very well, he said, because it will be indeed my preparation for death. If I were to die on the journey, I should already have received the Holy Viaticum.

He spent the rest of the morning putting his things in order: he packed his trunk with the care of one who is doing something for the last time. Then he went round saying goodbye to his companions, saying a little word of encouragement to one or trying to spur another on to greater efforts.

He owed a few pence to one of his companions and he took care to settle this little debt so that, as he said, his accounts would be all right with our Blessed Lord. He had a farewell meeting with the members of the Company of Mary and with great earnestness he exhorted them to persevere in keeping the promises they had made to Mary Immaculate, and to put no limit to their confidence in her.

About to depart, he came to me and spoke exactly as follows:- "You will have nothing of this body of mine so I have to take it with me to Mondonio. You would only have been troubled with me for a little time longer . . . but God's holy will be done. If you go to Rome, don't forget the message for the Holy Father about England. Please pray for me that I may die a holy death: and goodbye till we meet again in heaven."

He kept a firm hold of my hand and when we got to the door he said to his friends who were waiting to wave goodbye to him: "Goodbye, everyone, goodbye! You are all my friends, pray for me and we will all meet again once more where we will not be separated ever again."

He had moved off a few paces when he turned and came back to me: "Would you give me a keepsake to remember you by?"

"Certainly, with all my heart, what would you like, a nice book?"

"No, something better still."

"What, money for your journey?"

"Yes, that's it, money for my journey to heaven. You told us that you had got from the Holy Father some plenary indulgences at the hour of death that you could give to people. Will you give one to me?"

"Yes, my son, I will put your name on the list as soon as you have gone."

Then he went off; he had been three years with us. It had been a time of great joy for him, and a great edification for his companions and superiors. Now he had gone never to return.

There was general surprise at his solemn farewell. It was known that his health was far from good, but as he generally managed to keep out of bed, his illness was never considered to be very serious. In addition as he was always bright and cheerful, no one guessed that he was suffering so much anguish of body and spirit. And so it was that although everyone was a bit shaken by the finality of his farewell, there was a general expectancy that he would soon be back again.

But it was not to be so: he was ripe for heaven. What he had done for God and the saving of souls in his few short years of life was though he had lived to an advanced age. God wanted to take him to himself in the flower of his youth, also to free him from the perils and dangers in which even the best of souls can make shipwreck.

*\*We come to the last day at the Oratory. Dominic, unselfish as ever, goes about thinking of others . . . no looking for sympathy. It takes a courageous and unselfish soul to hide his cross and radiate nothing but joy and enthusiasm.*

## CHAPTER 24

It was two o'clock on the afternoon of March 1st when Dominic left Turin. He had a pleasant journey, and the change of air and being with his parents seemed to be doing him good. The first four days at home, he went about as usual, but his lack of appetite and his increasing cough, made his parents send him to the doctor. He was quite alarmed when he examined Dominic and immediately sent him to bed.

The doctor diagnosed inflammation and had recourse to bleeding. Knowing how young people are afraid at the sight of blood, he told Dominic not to be afraid and to turn his head the other way, and he would not see anything. The boy smiled and said: "What is this compared with the piercing of Jesus' hands and feet with the nails?"

He then quite calmly watched the doctor at work, and showed no alarm at the sight of his blood streaming out. This was done several times and there seemed to be an improvement. The doctor felt quite certain there was, and Dominic's parents were quite reassured. Dominic, however, thought differently and being quite convinced that it was better to receive the sacraments too early rather than too late, he said to his father when the doctor had gone: "Daddy, let us give the heavenly doctor a chance: I would like to go to Confession and receive Holy Communion."

To please him his parents sent for the parish priest, although they felt it was unnecessary, as he was apparently getting better. The parish priest came and heard his Confession, and then to satisfy him brought the Holy Viaticum. It can easily be imagined with what devotion and love Dominic received Jesus in what he felt was his last Holy Communion. His heart overflowed with love and there came spontaneously to his lips the promises he had made at his first Holy Communion: "Yes, yes; Jesus and Mary, you are my greatest friends, now and for always. A thousand times, death rather than sin."

When he had finished his thanksgiving he said: "Now I am happy; I have a long journey to eternity but with Jesus by my side I fear nothing. How I wish I could say it to the whole world, when Jesus is with us there is no fear of anything - not even of death itself."

He was patience itself in all his sufferings. He made great efforts to do everything by himself so that as little extra work and trouble as possible should be given to his mother. Unpleasant medicines he took without any sign that they were unpleasant, and he submitted to being bled ten times without showing any sign of resentment.

At his next visit the doctor congratulated Dominic on the big improvement and told his parents that the disease had been overcome and it was now only a question of a good convalescence. His parents were overjoyed to hear this, but Dominic smiled and said: "The world has been overcome, it only remains to make a good appearance before God."

He then begged his father to get the parish priest so that this time he might receive the last anointing. The parish priest could not see in Dominic's serene and joyful face any sign of death, but perhaps inspired from on high he brought the Holy Oils. Before being anointed Dominic said aloud these words with great fervour:

"Dear Jesus, I love you and I wish to love you for all eternity — forgive me my sins. Let this sacrament wipe out all the sins I have ever committed by my eyes, my ears, my lips and my feet: may my soul and body be made holy by the merits of your Sacred Passion."

He then made all the responses in a strong clear voice, like the voice of one who is in perfect health.

It was March 9th, his sixth day in bed, his last on earth. He was very weak now on account of his sufferings and loss of blood, so he was given the papal blessing. He said the "Confiteor" himself and made the necessary responses. He was filled with consolation when he was told that with this blessing of the Holy Father he received a plenary indulgence.

"Deo gratias," he whispered, "semper Deo gratias."

Then fixing his eyes on the crucifix he murmured this little verse which he knew by heart:

"O Jesus, my liberty I give completely to you:  
My body with all its powers  
I give completely to you.

Everything I have is yours, O God,  
And I abandon myself completely  
To your holy will."

*\*Again Don Bosco stressed how Dominic was forever thoughtful of others, right to the end.*

## CHAPTER 25

It is a truth of faith that we gather at the hour of death the result of what we have done during life. As a man has sown so shall he reap. If during his life he has worked for God he will at his last moments be wonderfully consoled. It does sometimes happen nevertheless that good people are very afraid at the approach of death, in spite of the fact that they have led holy lives. This is part of God's providence which wishes to purify these souls of the results of their weaknesses in life, and so prepare them for a more glorious crown in heaven.

It was not like that with Dominic. I believe that God willed to give him that hundredfold which he reserves for his chosen souls before they enter the glory of heaven. Without any doubt, his so strong faith, his spirit of prayer and penance, his never having offended God grievously, his work for the saving of souls, had all merited for him peace and joy at the hour of death.

And so as death came to him he looked at it serenely and unafraid. Normally the body suffers considerable desolation and distress at the great stress of the soul separating itself from the body; but with Dominic it was not so; the phrase sometimes seen on tombs was very true of him - He fell asleep in the Lord.

It was the evening of March 9th; he had received all the helps that the Church has for us at the approach of death. Anyone who just heard him talking quietly and saw the peace and serenity on his face could only have thought that he was having a quiet rest in bed. If you add to this his complete mastery over himself and his happy spirit, it is little wonder that nobody imagined that his end was near.

About an hour and a half before he died the parish priest came to visit him and was quite amazed to hear the little ejaculations with which he so calmly and constantly recommended his soul to God. All the ejaculations expressed his great desire to go quickly to heaven.

In the circumstances the priest was somewhat perplexed as to what way he might help; he said some prayers with the boy and then as he was about to go Dominic said to him:

"Father, before going, leave me a parting thought to keep with me."

"Really I don't know what to suggest."

"Something that will strengthen and comfort me."

"All right; try to keep in mind the Passion of Our Saviour."

"Deo gratias," replied Dominic, "May the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ be always in my mind and heart and on my lips. Jesus, Mary and Joseph help me now when I am dying; Jesus, Mary and Joseph, may I die at peace with you."

After that he fell asleep for half an hour. When he woke up he looked round him and said:

"Daddy, are you there?"

"Here I am son, what do you want?"

"Daddy, it is time; get my Companion of Youth and read me the prayers for the Exercise of a Happy Death."

At these words his mother burst into tears and hurried from the room. His father's eyes filled with tears, but choking back his sobs, he got the book and read the prayers. As he went through them Dominic answered clearly.

"Merciful Jesus, have mercy on me . . ."

When his father reached the final part which runs:

"When for the first time my soul will see the wonderful majesty of God, do not drive it away, but take it to heaven to sing

your praises for all eternity . . .” he said:

“Yes, Daddy - that is what I want so much, to sing the praises of Jesus for all eternity.”

He dropped off to sleep again, but awoke after a short while. Then in a clear voice he said:

“Goodbye, Daddy, goodbye . . . what was it the parish priest suggested to me . . . I don’t seem to remember . . . Oh, what wonderful things I see . . .”

And so saying, with a beautiful smile on his face, and his hands joined on his breast he gave up his soul to God without any struggle.

Return, pure soul, to your Creator; heaven is open to you, the angels and saints are waiting for you. Jesus, whom you loved so much, calls you with sweet words: “Come, good and faithful servant, you have fought the good fight and gained the victory; enter into the joy of your God.”

*\*“Our whole life ought to be a preparation for a happy death.”  
Don Bosco.*

## CHAPTER 26

When Dominic’s father heard him say these last words and saw his head bending forward as though in sleep, he really thought he had fallen asleep again. He waited a few moments and then suddenly filled with apprehension he called to the boy and as he looked again he saw that he was dead.

It can easily be realized how great was the sorrow of Dominic’s parents at the death of their wonderful son, whose innocent life and appealing ways had spread such happiness in their home.

At the Oratory we were anxiously waiting for news of how he was getting on, when a letter came from his father which began as follows:

With my heart full of grief I send you this sad news. Dominic,



my dear son and your child in God, gave his soul to God on March 9th after having received with the greatest devotion the Last Sacraments and the Papal Blessing.

His companions were stunned by the news and some wept at the loss of a great friend who never failed them when in need; others were sad at realizing that they would no longer be helped by his constant inspiration. Others got together to pray for the repose of his soul; but the majority said: "He was a saint, he is already in heaven."

Some began immediately to pray to him and there was great competition to try to get hold of something which had belonged to him.

When Don Picco, head of the school where Dominic went for special classes, heard the news, he was profoundly moved and gave the sad news to his boys in the following terms:

"Only a short time ago I was speaking to you of the uncertainty of life and how death does not spare even your years. When I said that to you I was very far from imagining that one of those listening to me would very soon testify to the truth of my words. It is with great sorrow that I tell you that your companion Dominic Savio, so exemplary in his life, died a few days ago. You will remember how he was racked with a painful cough during his last days at the school, and it was no surprise to any of us that he had to stay away from school.

"I am not ashamed to say to you that my tears flowed freely when I read the letter describing his death, which his father wrote to Don Bosco. I am very sorry that he was not long at our school so that I might have come to know him better, and all of you have been helped more and more by his inspiring example.

"I shall never forget with what unaffected recollection he used to come into the class-room, take his place and start work immediately, showing none of the light-headedness and silliness which so easily manifests itself among boys. With what eagerness and attention he used to listen to what was being said, anxious to learn everything that he could. I never marvelled that he made such rapid progress so that in spite of his delicate health and periodic absences he was always among the first two or three places in the class positions. What joy

it was seeing him join in the prayers we used to say before and after lessons. How earnest was his attempt to really pray, to have his mind and heart at one with God.

"God gives us life to love him and to gain merit for a blessed eternity, thinking of Dominic's life we can see how foolish the boy is who goes on day after day with never a thought for God and intent only on indulging himself in selfish pleasures. Set your life beside Dominic's and whatever difference you find between his and yours, make up your minds to conquer yourselves as he did, and thereby enjoy the same joy and peace that he had and which made him such a wonderful companion to you all. How happy he is in heaven now! I recommend you all to him, and whatever improvement I notice in you I shall attribute to his intercession."

*\*"Let us feed upon the honey of the many good instructions which other devout persons have left us, and pray to God to give us wings like a dove, that we may not only be enabled to fly up during this present life, but also rest on the mountains of eternity in the life to come." St. Francis de Sales: Introduction to a Devout Life.*

## CHAPTER 27

It will not come as a surprise to those who have read what I have written about Dominic that God soon showed in extraordinary ways how pleasing his life had been in His sight. While he was still alive many graces were obtained by people who got him to pray for them and their intentions. After his death confidence in his intercession grew rapidly and the majority of his companions quite spontaneously prayed to him instead of praying for him. As they said among themselves:

"If Dominic has not gone straight to heaven or is not there by this time who on earth is going to manage it?"

No day passed without favours being received for soul and body, not only in the school but also by people outside. I have received many accounts and testimonies from a great variety of people, and of these I give one here. It concerns a seminarian who had known Dominic personally. He became very ill and what with being in the hospital for a long period of

treatment and having to rest after it, he was not able to take the examination at the end of the school year. He thought he would at least manage it in the autumn and so avoid the loss of a school year, but when he started to study again his illness returned with renewed force and there was no hope that he would succeed as he wished. Inspired by what he heard, he turned to his erstwhile companion and begged him to help him, reminding him of how they had been companions at school and of how no one understood better than Dominic how necessary it was for him to get better and resume his studies.

He made a novena in Dominic's honour and on the fifth day his health improved remarkably and he was able to resume studying. With extraordinary ease, he was able to make up for lost time and pass very successfully the necessary examination. The great improvement in his health continued and he had no further trouble.

I would also like to give here what Dominic's father wrote to me about the experience he had a month after his son's death.

"The death of my son caused me profound grief and as the days went past I wondered to myself what was his lot in the life after death. God in his goodness consoled me immediately. It was about one month after Dominic's death; I lay awake one night in bed unable to get to sleep, when suddenly the roof over my head seemed to open, the room was filled with light, and then I saw Dominic standing before me, his face radiant with joy, his whole appearance majestic and splendid. Beside myself with surprise and emotion, I stammered out: "Dominic, Dominic, how are you? Where are you? Are you already in heaven?"

"Yes, Daddy," he replied, "I am already in heaven."

"Oh, then," I said, "if God in his goodness has already taken you to heaven, pray for your mother and me, for your brothers and sisters, so that one day we may all be together again in heaven."

"Yes, Daddy, I will pray," he replied, and disappeared; with that the room was plunged into darkness again.

Dominic's father is ready to testify to this on oath and says

that never before or after did he have the wonderful consolation of seeing his son again.

With these facts I bring to an end this life of Dominic Savio. I would like to make the conclusion a very practical one, and that is that we should be moved to follow in his footsteps. There are none of us who cannot imitate him in his receiving the Sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion often and well. In so doing let us look sometimes at our past Confessions to see if they were well made and if it is necessary let us not hesitate to do whatever is needed to set them right.

It seems to me that through these sacraments received well and often we can live happily in the midst of the sorrows and trials of this life, and like Dominic, when our time comes, see death approach with peace and joy in our hearts. How happy we will be then to meet Jesus Our Saviour who will judge us according to his mercy, and in his goodness lead us to an eternity of happiness.

Here ends Dominic's life as told by St. John Bosco.

*\*"Don Bosco, not wishing to intrude upon this true and intensely spiritual story, plays down his role of spiritual guide to this angelic pupil whom he is leading toward holiness. We cannot let this pass. The marvelous development of St. Dominic was a joint achievement. With the grace of God, the presence of which is always understood, both teacher and pupil worked together in perfect harmony - the disciple with total surrender, the master with consummate art. Moreover, there was a spiritual affinity between the pupil (who seemed made for that school) and his teacher, by which the master's spirit cast a perfect reflection on the pupil's mind. In short, Dominic Savio and Don Bosco were meant for each other. The teacher of saints says here that most of their exchanges took place in the confessional. We have to take his word for it, since he alone was the one who, in the sacred intimacy of spiritual direction and confessional confidences, molded his disciple. We cannot help but realize that Savio's sanctity, guided and sustained by Don Bosco, was the fruit of Don Bosco's work." (Fr. Albert Caviglia)*

## B. BIOGRAPHY OF MICHAEL MAGONE

1845	(19th September)	Michael born at Carmagnola
1857	(9th March)	Death of Dominic Savio.
	(October)	Michael meets Don Bosco at the railway station of Carmagnola.
		Michael comes to board at the Oratory.
1858	(Sept. - Oct.)	Holidays at Becchi.
1859	(January)	Publication of Dominic Savio's Life.
	(21st January)	Death of Michael at the Oratory
1861	(September)	First edition of the biography of Michael Magone as written by Don Bosco.

## LIFE OF MICHAEL MAGONE

by

Fr. John Bosco

Dear young people,

One of you who was anxiously awaiting the printing of the life of Dominic Savio was Michael Magone. He was all the time noting down all that was being said about that model of a Christian life; he was trying his very hardest to imitate him; he was anxious that all that was being said be written down as he wanted to model his life on him. He only had time to read a few pages of this life before he was called to bring an end his mortal life to enjoy, as we most ardently believe, the peace of the just in the company of that friend he had made up his mind to imitate.

The singular, or better, the exciting life of your companion Michael aroused in you a desire to see it in print. You persuaded me to do this. Therefore, motivated by these requests and by the affection that I had for our mutual friend as well as by the hope that this small work would be both pleasing and helpful to your souls, I made up my mind to write down what I knew about him and have it printed in a booklet.

In the life of Dominic Savio you saw innate virtue cultivated to a point of heroism right throughout his life.

In the life of Magone we have a lad who, abandoned to himself, was in danger of treading the sad road of evil but fortunately called by the Lord to follow Him. He listened to this loving call and constantly corresponding with divine Grace, came to be admired by all who knew him, thus demonstrating how marvellous are the effects of this Grace of God on those who make use of it.

You will find here many things you can admire and imitate. You will also come upon certain acts of virtue, certain expressions that seem superior to a fourteen-year-old boy. But just because they are uncommon I felt that they merited being written down. Every reader, anyway, is aware of the truth of these incidents, I do nothing more than write down what happened under the eyes of a whole crowd of living persons who can be questioned as to the authenticity of what I have written.

May Divine Providence, which instructs man by both the lives of old sinners as well as young saints, grant us all the grace to find ourselves prepared at that last moment, that moment upon which depends a happy or unhappy eternity. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be our help in life and at our death and keep us safely on the road that leads to heaven. Amen.

*\*"Don Bosco proposed to his boys a high ideal of christian life even to the heights of sanctity, leading them step by step according to their gifts of nature and of grace. A good example of this is found in his dealings with Michael Magone. Before his conversion Michael was an average boy, then, step by step, he became a good boy, then a very good boy, after three months an outstanding boy and this standard he maintained until his death." (Fr. Joseph Colomer: The Preventive System — a path and plan for holiness for young people.)*

*\*Don Bosco writes that he hoped "this small work would be both pleasing and helpful". The christian ideal needs to be presented in an appealing way. We have a lot to learn from the way the mass media presents its "idols"!*

*\*"Innate virtue cultivated to a point of heroism." Napoleon was supposed to have said that every soldier carries a General's baton in his kitbag. Don Bosco, by using the word 'innate' implies that every young person bears within him the seed of a saint. It is up to christian educators to see that those seeds germinate and the fragile plant is nurtured.*

*\*Dominic Savio was naturally good - perhaps Michael was more typical of the average boy of the Oratory. It may be said that anyone could have worked successfully with Dominic. The fact that Don Bosco could do the same with Michael Magone would be a greater proof of the efficacy of the Preventive System in forming saints.*

## CHAPTER 1 — AN UNUSUAL MEETING

One evening in Autumn I was returning from Sommariva del Bosco and had reached Carmagnola where I had an hour's wait from my train to Turin. It was already seven o'clock, the weather was cold and the whole place was shrouded in a heavy fog, turning into a misty rain. This made the whole place so dark that a person could not be recognized a few feet away.

The dull glow of the light on the station lit up with a pale glow a very limited area. All the rest was in darkness. Only a gang of boys drew the attention of everyone as they "horsed around" and made such a racket as to deafen the spectators. The words "Wait! Catch him! Run! Grab this one or that one!" could be heard. But in the midst of all this shouting one voice stood out and dominated all the rest; it was the voice of a leader whose commands demanded respect and obedience. I felt that I wanted to get to know this lad who obviously was able to gain an ascendancy over this unruly crowd. I waited until all were crowded around him and then went over. All fled as if terrified - only one remained and he stood in front of me, his hands on his hips and, with an imperious air, began to speak:

"Who are you, breaking up our game like this?"

"I'm a friend."

"And what do you want of us?"

"If you are agreeable, I'd like to play with you and your mates."

"But who are you? I don't know you."

"I repeat! I'm a friend. I want to join you and your mates in the game you are playing. But who are you?"

"Me? I'm," he said in a serious voice, "I'm Michael Magone, the general in charge of his game!"

Whilst he was saying this, the other boys, who had fled in panic, surrounded him once more. After saying a few words with some of them, I once more addressed myself to Magone:

"My dear Magone, how old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"Have you made your first confession?"

"Oh, yes," he replied with a smile.

"And your First Communion?"

"Yes."

"And have you learnt some sort of a trade?"

"Yes, I have learnt the trade of how to do nothing!"

"Up until this, what have you done?"

"I've gone to school."

"How far?"

"I've done sixth year primary."

"And have you still got a father?"

"No, my father's dead."



"And your mother?"

"Yes, my mother is still alive and works to earn bread for me and my brothers who do nothing but drive her to desperation."

"And what do you intend to do with yourself in the future?"

"I'll have to do something but I do not know what."

That frankness of speech, combined with a certain air of wisdom and logic, made me realize in what great danger this lad would be if he continued in this abandoned state. On the other hand, I realized that if his lively nature and evident leadership qualities were to be cultivated he would do great things. I took up the conversation once more:

"My dear Magone, would you like to leave this kind of life and learn a trade or even take up some studies?"

"I would certainly like that," he replied, "because this sort of life does not appeal to me - some of my mates are already in prison and I fear that I will follow, but what can I do? My father is dead, my mother is poor, so who can help me?"

"This evening say a fervent prayer to our Father in heaven; pray with all your heart, trust in Him and He will look after me, after you, after everyone."

At that moment the station bell rang and I had to leave. "Take this," I said, "take this medal and go to the assistant priest, Don Ariccio, tomorrow. Tell him that the priest who gave it to you wants to know something about you."

He accepted the medal respectfully. "But what is your name? What town do you come from? Does Don Ariccio know you?" These and other questions Magone put to me, but I could not give him an answer because the train was already in the station and I had to depart for Turin.

*\*Michael realized that his future was not very bright and he could well end as some of his companions had . . . in jail! He wanted to be helped. This was the minimal attitude demanded by Don Bosco - he was prepared to tolerate lively behaviour and even behaviour which disturbed a class but he would not tolerate an absolute refusal to cooperate or, even worse, scandal.*

## CHAPTER 2 - HIS COMING TO THE ORATORY OF ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

His not being able to learn the name of the priest made Magone very curious and he could not wait until the next day but went straight away to Don Ariccio and told him what had happened. The assistant priest understood everything and the following day he wrote me a letter in which he gave me details of our little "General's" life.

"Young Michael Magone," he wrote, "is a poor lad who has no father. His mother is so busy providing bread for the family that she cannot look after him and so he spends his time on the street with all the local larrikins. He is of above-average intelligence, but his liveliness and unruly behaviour have caused him to be suspended more than once from his school. All the same he did fairly well in sixth grade.

As far as morality is concerned I feel he has a good and simple heart but he is hard to manage. At school and in the catechism classes he is forever being a disturbing element. When he's away all is peaceful and when he leaves all breathe a sigh of relief!

This age, poverty, nature and intelligence make him very worthy of charity. He was born on the 19th September 1845."

Basing myself on this information I decided to accept him either as a student or in the trade section. As soon as he had received his letter of acceptance, our friend was impatient to come to Turin. He dreamed of all the delights of this earthly paradise and how great it would be to live in the Capital city.

A few days later I saw him. "Here I am," he said, running to meet me. "Here I am - I'm that Michael Magone you met at the Carmagnola railway station."

"I know. I know. And have you come along willingly?"

"Yes, for sure."

"If you have good will, make sure you don't turn this place upside down then!"

"Don't worry, I have not come to cause you any trouble."

"Would you like to study or would you prefer to learn a trade?"

"I'm prepared to do whatever you wish but, if the choice is left to me, I would prefer to study."

"And if I put you to study, what do you intend to do when you are finished?"

"If a larrikin . . .," he said, bowing his head and laughing.

"Carry on - if a larrikin . . ."

"If a larrikin like me could become good enough to be a priest, I would most willingly become one."

"We'll see then what a larrikin can do. I will put you to study; whether or not you will become a priest will depend on your progress in your studies, your conduct and the signs that will point out whether you have a vocation or not."

"If good will is all that is needed I can assure you that I will succeed and will never do anything to displease you."

First of all he was assigned a companion who acted as his Guardian Angel to help him, advise him and to correct him if necessary. Without Magone realizing it, this lad in the most practical and charitable way, never let him out of his sight. He was in the same class and study as well as in recreation. He played and joked with him. But whenever the need arose he said: Don't speak that way because it's not right; don't say that word or call upon the name of the Lord in vain. And, for his part, even though he showed his impatience from time to time, Michael responded: Good, you did the right thing to warn me; you are a good companion to have. If in the past I had had such a companion I would not have formed these bad habits which I now find so hard to break.

In the first few days the only things he really enjoyed were the recreations. To sing, to yell out, to run, jump, play around were the things which most appealed to his lively nature. When, however, a companion said to him: Magone, the bell has rung to go to class or to Church, to prayers or the like, he gave a longing glance at the games and then went off to wherever duty was calling him without any further objection.

But it was great to see him when the bell rang to signal the end of some duty and recreation lay ahead! He appeared as if he were shot out of a cannon! He simply flew to all parts of the yard. Whenever a game required bodily dexterity he was its leading light. The game that we call "Barrarotta" was his favourite. Michael found life very much to his liking.

*\*Don Bosco had read Michael well - despite some of the negative aspects he knew he had before him a potential apostle!*

*The Sodality of the Immaculate Conception was soon in operation, providing a 'Guardian Angel'.*

*\*"Many boys came to know a father's love only after meeting Don Bosco." (Fr. Giaconelli, quoted by Fr. Lemoyne BM III, 255.)*

### CHAPTER 3 - DIFFICULTIES AND MORAL REFORM

Michael had been at the Oratory for a month now and his many occupations helped the time to pass quickly. He was happy provided he was only jumping around and enjoying himself without reflecting that true happiness must have its origin in peace of heart and tranquility of conscience.

All of a sudden he began to lose that mad desire to play! He became very pensive and began to take no part in the games unless he was expressly invited. This "Guardian angel" noticed this and took the occasion one day of saying to him:

"My dear Magone, for some days now I have noticed your face has lost its happy smile; are you sick or something?"

"No, no my health is very good."

"Then why are you looking so sad and downcast?"

"I am sad because I see my companions taking part in all the practices of piety. To see them so happy whilst praying, going to confession and Communion makes me feel very sad."

"I don't understand how the devotion of others should be the reason for your sadness."

"The reason is easy to understand: my companions, who are already good, practise their religion and become better still whilst I, who am a 'no-hoper' cannot take part and this is the cause of great remorse and uneasiness."

"What a silly kid you are! If your mates' happiness makes you envious, why don't you follow their example? If you have something on your conscience, why don't you get rid of it?"

"Get rid of it! That's very easy to say! But if you were in my shoes, you would realize what a terrible mess I'm in!"

"I can suggest a means whereby you can get out of that mess. Go to your confessor, open up your heart to him and he will give you all the advice you need. When we have something on our conscience that's what we do. That's why we are always happy."

"That's O.K. but . . ." Michael broke down and started sobbing. Several days went by and he grew more despondent. He no longer enjoyed his games. He no longer laughed and smiled. Many times when his companions were enjoying the recreation he retreated to some corner to think, reflect and to cry. I was keeping a close watch on him so one day I called him and the following conversation took place.

"My dear Magone, I want you to do me a favour and I will not take 'no' for an answer."

"What is it? I am ready to do anything you ask."

"I want you to give me your heart for a while and tell me what is causing you to be so sad these days."

"It's true - I have been sad . . . but I am desperate and I don't know what to do."

Having said this he broke down crying. I let him cry for a little while then, jokingly, I said: "Come on now! Are you the same 'General Micky', the leader of the Carmagnola gang? What a fine general you are! You are not even able to tell me, in a few words, what is weighing on your soul."

"I'd like to but I don't know how to begin - I don't know how to express myself."

"Just say one word and I'll say the rest."

"I have a mixed-up conscience."

"That's enough - I understand everything. You had only to say that for me to say the rest. I don't want to enter into matters of conscience. I'll just tell you what to do to put everything right. So listen: if your conscience does not worry you concerning the past, just make a good confession, relating what you have done wrong since your last confession. If out of fear or for any other reason you did not confess something or if you feel your confessions lacked some necessary conditions, then go back to your last good confession and confess what is lying heavy on your conscience."

"Here's the difficulty. How can I remember all that has happened over the past years?"

"That's easy to put right. Just tell your confessor that there is something in the past that is troubling you and he will take up things from there and put certain questions to you which you will only have to answer 'yes' or 'no' and how many times you committed that sin."

*\*The secret of happiness:*

*"Happiness must have its origin in peace of heart and tranquillity of conscience." That which impressed Michael the most about the Oratory was the spirit of joy and real happiness which pervaded it. It made him feel a complete outsider.*

*His 'Guardian Angel' let him into the secret: "I can suggest a means whereby you can get out of this mess. Go to your confessor, open up your heart to him and he will give you all the advice you need. When we have something on our conscience, that's what we do. That's why we are always happy."*

*Note the very good advice given by Don Bosco on the Proper use of the sacrament of Confession.*

## CHAPTER 4 - MICHAEL GOES TO CONFESSION AND BEGINS TO FREQUENT THE SACRAMENTS

Michael spent that day examining his conscience. So great was his desire to put things right that he did not want to go to bed before he made his confession. "The Lord," he said, "has waited for me so long and may not be prepared to wait until tomorrow. So if I can go to confession this evening, I should not put it off: it is time to make a definite break with the devil." He made his confession with great feeling and many times broke down crying. Before leaving he said to his confessor: "Do you think all my sins have been forgiven? If I were to die tonight would I be saved?"

"Go in peace," was the answer. "The Lord in His great mercy waited until now for you to make a good confession so I am sure He has pardoned all your sins and if, in His adorable plan, called you to Himself tonight you are absolutely certain of your eternal salvation."

He was very moved by these words and blurted out: "Oh, how happy I am." Then, sobbing once more, he went to bed. It was to be a night of excitement and emotion. Later on he was to speak to his friends about all the thoughts that went through his mind that night.

"It is difficult," he used to say, "to put into words all that I felt that unforgettable night. I hardly slept at all. In some little time I dozed off but soon my imagination made me see hell open before me, populated with hosts of devils. I drove that thought away as I reflected that all my sins had been forgiven. Then I saw a whole host of angels who showed me paradise, saying to me: See what happiness lies in store for you so long as you keep your resolutions!"

About halfway through the night I was so overcome by emotion that I had to get up, kneel by my bed and say over and over again: Oh, how wretched are those who fell into sin! But how much more unhappy are those who live in sin. I believe that if they could only experience for even a single minute the great consolation that being in the state of grace brings they would all go to confession to placate the anger of God, to remove remorse of conscience and to experience peace of heart. Oh, sin, sin! What a terrible curse you are to those who allow your entry into their hearts. If I ever have the misfortune to

commit even the smallest sin again I am determined to go to confession immediately."

In this way Magone expressed his remorse for having offended God as well as his firm resolution to be faithful in His service in the future. He began to frequent the sacraments of Confession and Communion and began to find great joy in those practices of piety he previously found boring. He also found confession so pleasing that I had to ask him to go less frequently lest he become a victim of scruples. This is a real danger to young people when they make up their minds to serve the Lord with all their hearts. This wreaks great havoc since the devil uses this means to disturb the mind and the heart and so make the practice of religion burdensome. It often causes those who have already made great strides in virtue to retrace their steps.

The most powerful means to avoid this disaster is to abandon oneself to complete obedience of one's confessor. When he says something is bad, let us do everything to avoid it. If he assures us that such and such a thing is not evil, then let us follow his advice and go ahead in peace. In summary, obedience to the confessor is the most efficacious means to be free of scruples and to persevere in God's grace.

*\*Don Bosco so often stressed the need for a firm resolution to sin no more and even asserted that failure to do this was the main reason why even frequent confessions do not radically change people.*

## CHAPTER 5 - A WORD TO YOUNG PEOPLE

The uneasiness and the worries of young Magone on the one hand and the frank and resolute way he went about putting his soul in order on the other, gives me opportunity, dearly beloved young people, to suggest some things that I believe would be useful for your souls. Receive them as a sign of affection of a friend who so ardently desires your eternal salvation.

In the first place I recommend that you always confess each and every sin without allowing yourself to be convinced by the devil to be silent. Always remember that the confessor has power from God to remit every kind of sin, any number



of sins. The more serious the sins confessed, the happier his heart will be because he knows quite well that the mercy of God by which your sin will be pardoned will be manifested all the more and that the infinite merits of the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ by which He will wash away the sins from your soul will the more be applied.

My dear young people, remember that the confessor is a father who ardently desires to help you as much as possible and who tries to keep every evil far from you. Do not be afraid that a confessor will think less of you because you reveal to him serious faults you have committed nor should you be afraid that he will speak of these faults to others. A confessor cannot make use of any information he has received in the confessional no matter what it costs him. Even if he had to pay for it with his life he could not divulge even non-important things he has heard as a confessor. I can even assure you that the more open and sincere you are with him, the greater his confidence in you will become and the more likely will he be in a position to give you the best advice possible for the welfare of your soul.

I have stressed these matters lest the devil tempt you to keep back some sin when you go to confession. I assure you, my dear young friends, that as I pen these lines my hand begins to tremble as I think of that great number of Christians who are eternally lost because they either did not confess their sins or were insincere in confession! If anyone of you, going back over your lives, discover that you deliberately kept back a sin or if you have any doubts about the validity of past confessions, I say to you: Friend for the love of Jesus Christ, and for His Blood shed for the salvation of souls, I beg you to put your conscience in order the very next time you go to confession, putting all in order as if you were at death's door. If you do not know how to explain yourself, just tell your confessor that there is something in your past life that is worrying you.

The confessor will understand. Follow the advice he gives you and you will be certain that everything is in order.

Go to your confessor regularly, pray for him, follow his directions. When you have chosen a confessor who is able to understand and help you, do not go to another unless you have solid

reasons for doing so. Until you have a regular confessor in whom you can put all your trust, you will always lack a friend for your soul. Trust in the prayers of your confessor who prays every day in his Mass for his penitents that God may grant you the grace to make good confessions and persevere in doing good; also pray for him.

You can change your confessor without scruple if he goes elsewhere and it would be most inconvenient to go regularly to him or if he is sick or, on the occasion of some great solemnity, there are great numbers wishing to go to him. Likewise if you have something on your conscience which you do not want to divulge to your ordinary confessor change your confessor a thousand times rather than commit a sacrilege.

If what I have written is read by someone who is destined by divine providence to hear the confessions of the young I would like, among countless other things, humbly and respectfully to suggest the following:

- 1) Lovingly receive every class of penitents but especially the young. Help them to open their hearts and insist that they come to confession frequently. This is the most secure means of keeping them away from sin. Make use of every means to see that they put into practice the advice given them to avoid sin in the future. Correct them with kindness; never scold them because if you shout at them today they will not come to confession tomorrow or, if they do, they will not speak of those matters which upset you.

- 2) When you have gained their confidence, prudently find out whether all their confessions in the past were well made. I say this because celebrated, experienced authors in both the field of morals and ascetics, and especially a celebrated author who merits belief, agree in stating that the first confessions are often null or, at least, defective because of the lack of instruction or the wilful omission of matters for confession. Invite the penitent to ponder well the state of his conscience from when he was seven up until he was ten or twelve. At this age he is already aware of certain serious sins but makes little of them or does not know how to confess them. The confessor whilst he must be most prudent and reserved must not avoid asking questions in the area of modesty.

I would like to say much more about this topic but I will not as I do not want to appear an expert in those fields where I am simply a poor and humble learner. Here I have only said those things in the Lord that I felt would be useful for the souls of the young to whom I am determined to consecrate every moment of that life which the Lord leaves me here on earth. Now let us return to young Magone.

*Don Bosco now inserts a parenthesis into the life of Michael Magone.*

*\* Some hints on how to make a good confession.*

- (1) *Make sure all serious sins are confessed.*
- (2) *Have great confidence in one's confessor: "remember he is a father who ardently desires to help you".*
- (3) *"Do not be afraid that a confessor will think less of you because you reveal to him serious faults you have committed."*
- (4) *"Do not be afraid he will speak of these faults to others."*
- (5) *Ask your confessor to help you if you find difficulties in expressing yourself.*
- (6) *"Follow the advice he gives you."*
- (7) *"Go to your confessor regularly."*
- (8) *Have a regular confessor. "Until you have a regular confessor in whom you can put all your trust you will always lack a friend for your soul." But "if you have something on your conscience which you do not want to divulge to your ordinary confessor change your confessor a thousand times rather than commit a sacrilege."*

## CHAPTER 6 - HIS EXEMPLARY CONCERN FOR THE PRACTICES OF PIETY

In addition to the frequent reception of Confession and Communion, Michael added a lively faith, an exemplary concern and an edifying attitude for all the practices of piety. In recreation he was like an unbridled horse, at first he was ill at ease in Church but soon controlled himself so as to become a model for any fervent Christian. He prepared himself well for confession; whilst waiting he allowed others to go in ahead of

him; as he waited on the convenience of the confessor he was recollected and patient. He took delight in speaking of the edifying way in which Dominic Savio went to the sacraments and tried his hardest to imitate him.

When he first came to the Oratory he barely tolerated going into church. After several months he found religious functions very comforting no matter how long they lasted. He used to say that what we do in Church we do for the Lord and what we do for the Lord never goes unrewarded. One day the bell had already gone for a church function when a companion urged him to finish off the game. "Yes," he answered, "provided you pay me the same wages as the Lord will."

Another companion said to him one day: "Don't you get fed up with functions in the Church when they are long?"

"Oh," he replied, "You are just like I was some time back; you don't know what's good for you. Don't you know that the church is the House of God? The more we go to church here, the greater chance we will have to be with Him in the eternal triumph of paradise. As well as that, if, with practice we gain a mastery of temporal things, why cannot this happen with spiritual things? By remaining in the material house of the Lord in this world we acquire the right to stay with Him one day in heaven."

After the customary thanksgiving after confession or communion or after the sacred functions he remained a long time before the Blessed Sacrament or before the Blessed Virgin to recite some special prayers. He was so attentive, recollected and composed that he seemed insensible to all external activity. Often his companions, going out of church or passing him, gave him a bump; often they stood on his toes and even hit him. But he carried on with his prayers or meditation as if nothing had happened.

He had great esteem for all devotions. A medal, a little crucifix, a holy picture, were all objects of great veneration for him.

At any time when he discovered that Communion was being distributed, or some hymn was being sung inside or outside of church, he immediately broke off his recreation and joined in.

He had a great love for singing and had a very fine voice which he cultivated. In a short time he was proficient enough to take an active part in solemn and public functions. He assured me, and I leave it in writing, that he did not want to open his lips to utter a word if that was not for the greater glory of God. Unfortunately, he said to me, this tongue of mine has not always performed in the past as it should have done; at least it is in my power to right that for the future! On a sheet he left written his resolutions, one of which was: O my God, make this tongue of mine shrivel up between my teeth rather than to utter a word displeasing you.

In 1858 he took part in the Christmas Novena which was held at a retreat house in this capital. One evening his companions were singing his praises for the part he had played in the day's function. He became embarrassed and went off on his own. When someone asked him why he acted like that, he started crying and said: "I have laboured in vain because I enjoyed myself so much when I was singing and lost half of the merit; now this praise has made me lose the other half; all that's left now for me is that I am tired."

*\* Here we see the balance which Don Bosco succeeded in striking in so many of his students. Michael would have loved to have spent all his spare time in the chapel but he was convinced that his apostolate in the playground was of paramount importance. "When Michael first came to the Oratory he barely tolerated going into church. After several months he found religious functions very comforting no matter how long they lasted."*

*\* Michael had moved a long way along the road to sanctity when he was to realize so very deeply that we must refer all back to God; if we have talents, they are gifts of God.*

## CHAPTER 7 - PUNCTUALITY IN PERFORMING HIS DUTIES

Michael's fiery nature, his vivid imagination, his heart full of affections naturally made him a lively lad and, at first sight, distracted. By constant effort he learnt self-control. As we have already said, he was completely at home in times of recreation. In a few moments after beginning a game all corners of the courtyard echoed to the sound of his feet.

There was no game in which he did not excel. But once the bell went for study, classes, rest, meals, church functions, he at once broke off what he was doing and ran to fulfill his duty. It was marvellous to see him who, a few minutes before, had been the soul and inspiration of recreation suddenly being the first to arrive wherever duty called him.

As regards his scholastic duties I feel it could be useful to quote the assessment made by his Latin teacher John Francesia. "Very willingly," he writes, "do I publicly testify to the virtues of my dear student Michael Magone. He was in my class all the scholastic year of 1857 and for a part of 1858-59. As far as I remember there is nothing extraordinary to note. He conducted himself well. By his application and diligence he did two years of Latin in one so that, at the end of the year, he was able to go into Third Year High School. This is enough to show that his progress was out of the ordinary. I do not remember to have ever scolded him because of his behaviour. He was very quiet in class despite his natural liveliness to which he gave full vent in the playground. He made friends of the better elements and tried to emulate their example.

In 1858-59 I had a very fine class who were determined not to waste a minute of time and were most anxious to make progress in their studies. Michael Magone stood out. Among other things I was amazed by the change in him both physically and morally. He became more and more serious and thoughtful. I believe that this change was brought about by his determination to grow in piety and he could really be put forward as an example of virtue to others. I can still see him in front of me in that attitude of rapt attention to me, his teacher whilst I was, at the same time, a great admirer of his virtue! He really gave the impression that he had put off completely the old Adam. In seeing him so attentive to his duties, so unusual for a boy of his age, I could not help applying to him those words of Dante: Under these fair locks lay hid an old mind.

I recall how, one day, to test how well he was paying attention and how much he was absorbing, I asked my dear student to scan some lines I had just dictated to him. "I'm not very good at it," Michael modestly replied. I then asked him to do as much as he could.

He did it so well that I could not restrain in joining in the spontaneous applause of the class! From then on that 'I'm not very

good at it' became a catch phrase in the school to indicate a student outstanding for his diligence and attention." Thus far his teacher.

In the fulfillment of his duties he was an example to all. The Superior of the House had often said that every moment of time is a treasure. Therefore, he used to say, if I waste a moment I am throwing away a treasure.

Motivated by this thought he did not let a minute go by without doing all that his strength permitted. I have here before me his marks for conduct and diligence for all the time he was with us. In the first weeks he had only fair, then they changed to good, then very good. After three months they became excellent and so they remained.

In preparation for the Easter of 1858 he made his Retreat to the great edification of his companions and to the consolation of his heart. He wanted to make a general confession and then to write down some resolutions to guide him for the rest of his life. Among them was a proposal to make a vow to never waste a moment of time. He was not given permission to do this. Then he begged to be allowed to promise the Lord to always aim at excellence in his conduct. His Rector agreed to this provided it did not have the force of a vow. He then got a notebook in which he wrote down the days of the week as follows: With the help of the Lord and under the protection of Mary most holy I want to spend Sunday excellently, Monday excellently, etc.

Every morning his first act was to look up this notebook which he read through several times a day and each time he renewed his promise. If he did happen to make some minor slip he punished himself with some sort of penance such as to miss out on some game, to abstain from something he really liked, to say a special prayer and the like.

This notebook was found by his companions after his death and they were very much edified by holy industry used to advance in virtue. He wanted to do all things excellently. Therefore when the signal was given to do something, he broke off his recreation or cut short his conversation and even put down his pen leaving a line unfinished to promptly go wherever duty was calling him. He often said that it was a good thing to finish off what he had in hand but he got little

satisfaction out of doing it and he was often disturbed about it. He said he found the greater satisfaction in performing his duties as indicated by his superiors or by the bell.

Exactitude in performing his duties did not prevent him from showing all those manifestations of courtesy which good manners and charity demanded. Therefore he was quick to write letters for those who asked him. To clean the clothes of others; to help carry water; to make beds; to sweep; to serve at table; to give up a game, to teach catechism or singing; to explain difficulties in various school subjects to weaker students - these were all things which he did most willingly as the occasion arose.

\* *"He found the greatest satisfaction in performing his duties as indicated by his Superior or the bell."*

*Here, again, he had learnt a lesson from his master! Fr. Braidon writes: "Duty — study and work — is in the educative plan of Don Bosco something sacred and solemn, almost an act of worship." (Fr. Braidon: Il Sistema Preventivo di Don Bosco, p. 139)*

*Fr. Cavaglia also writes: "Two fundamental principles: the scrupulous use of one's time and diligence in performing one's duties, are those which Don Bosco established as the foundation of all his spirituality."*

## CHAPTER 8 - HIS DEVOTION TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

It must be said that devotion to the Blessed Virgin is the support of every faithful Christian. This is especially true for young people. This is how the Holy Spirit speaks of her: He who is small, let him come to me. Our Magone was aware of this important truth, which was revealed to him in a providential fashion. One day he received a holy picture of the Blessed Virgin at the bottom of which was written; Come, my child, listen to me and I will teach you the fear of the Lord. He began to consider this invitation seriously and wrote a letter to his Rector in which he stated that the Blessed Virgin had made her voice known to him and called upon him to be good and that she herself had taught him how to fear, love and serve God.



He began to perform certain practices in the honour of her whom he invoked as his heavenly Mother, his divine teacher, as his most loving shepherdess. Among the main ways in which he manifested his filial devotion was to go to Communion every Sunday for that soul in purgatory who was most devoted to Mary whilst on earth.

He pardoned most willingly anyone who offended him as an act of devotion in honour of Mary. Cold, heat, displeasures, tiredness, thirst, and similar inconveniences due to the climate were for him so many ways he could utilize by joyfully offering them up to God through Mary.

Before settling down to study, to writing, he took out from one of his books a holy picture of Mary on which was written: Virgin Mother, always help me in my studies.

To her he recommended himself at the beginning of everything he did. He used to say that whenever he found any difficulties in his studies, he had recourse to his divine Teacher and she explained everything to him. One day a companion congratulated him for the good marks he got for one of his assignments. You should not rejoice with me, he replied, but with Mary who helps me and brings to my mind many things of which I was ignorant before.

To always have present before him some object that would remind him of Mary's patronage in his ordinary occupations, he wrote wherever he could: Seat of Wisdom: pray for me. This was written on all his books, on the covers of his exercise books, on his desk, on his seat and on any other surface that could be written on.

In the month of May 1858 he decided to do everything possible to honour Mary. Throughout that month he practiced mortification of the eyes, of the tongue and of all the other senses. He wanted to deprive himself of part of his recreation, to fast, to spend whole nights in prayer but he was forbidden to do these things because they were not compatible with his age.

Towards the end of that month he presented himself to his Rector and said: "If you think it is a good idea, I would like to do something beautiful in honour of the great Mother of God. I know that St. Aloysius Gonzaga was very pleasing to

Mary because he consecrated to her the virtue of chastity. I would like to make her this gift also and I would also like to take a vow to become a priest and be perpetually chaste."

The Rector told him he was too young to make such important vows. "Yet," he broke in, "I have a strong urging to give myself totally to Mary; and if I consecrate myself to her she will help me to keep that promise." "Do this," suggested his Rector, "instead of taking a vow just make a simple promise to embrace the ecclesiastical state if, at the end of your classical studies, it seems that there are evident signs calling you to do this. Instead of a vow of chastity, simply make a promise to the Lord that you will in the future, take every precaution not to do anything or say anything, even jokingly, that would be contrary to this virtue. Every day call upon Mary with some special prayer to help you keep his promise."

He was happy with this proposal and joyfully promised to do all he could to put it into practice.

*\* Note how practical Michael's devotion to Our Lady was in line with the guidelines set forth by Pope Paul VI in Marialis Cultus. No mere sentiment but a determination to copy her virtues.*

*\*"We are making the novena of Our Lady of Consolation. Let us win Her protection by putting ourselves in God's grace. We need God's help if we want health of mind and body and success in our exams. To obtain these favors, let us go to Mary, but let us remember that to deserve Her intercession, we must show that we are Her true sons who hate sin and keep it at a distance! She will generously grant us temporal and spiritual favors, She will be our guide, our teacher, our mother. All God's gifts come to us through Her."(Don Bosco in a 'Good-Night' on 15th June 1864, BM VII, 406.)*

## CHAPTER 9 - HIS SOLICITUDE FOR AND PRACTICES OBSERVED TO PRESERVE THE VIRTUE OF PURITY.

Besides the practices already mentioned there were others to which he gave the greatest importance and which he used to call the fathers, custodians and even policemen of the virtue of purity. We have evidence of this in a reply given by him in a letter written by one of his companions towards the end

of the above mentioned May. This letter had been written to Michael asking him to suggest some practices which would help in the preservation of that queen of virtues, purity. That companion passed on to me that letter from which I quote as follows:

“To give you an adequate answer I would have liked to speak with you personally rather than to write to you. I will merely pass on the advice given to me by my Rector on how to preserve the most precious of all virtues. One day he gave me a little note on which was written: Read this and put it into practice. I opened it and this is what I read: Five recommendations that St. Philip Neri gave to young people to help them preserve the virtue of purity. Flight from bad companions; Do not pamper the body; Avoid idleness; Frequent prayer; Frequent reception of the Sacraments especially confession. He often enlarged upon these five hints and I will explain them as I heard them from his lips. Here they are:

1. Place yourself with total confidence under the protection of Mary; confide in Her, trust in Her. It has not been heard in the whole world that someone had recourse to Her and was not satisfied. She will be your defense against the assaults aimed at your soul by the devil.
2. When you realize that you are being tempted, make yourself busy immediately. Idleness and modesty cannot co-exist. Therefore, by combating idleness, you will at the same time combat temptations against this virtue.
3. Often kiss a medal or the crucifix, make the Sign of the Cross with lively faith saying: Jesus, Mary and Joseph, help me to save my soul. These are the three names which are most terrible and formidable to the devil.
4. If the temptation continues, turn to Mary with the prayer proposed by Holy Mother the Church: Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners.
5. Besides not pampering the body and the custody of the senses, especially the eyes, be on your guard against bad readings. Even if you feel there is no danger for you in reading these things, put such readings down immediately. On the contrary, read good books and, amongst these, prefer those that speak of the glories of Mary and the Blessed Sacrament.

- 6 Flee from bad companions, instead choose good companions, namely those who are praised by your superiors for their good conduct. Speak willingly with these, play with them but especially try to imitate them in their carrying out of their duties and especially the practices of piety.
7. Go to Confession and Communion as often as your confessor suggests and, if your occupations permits, visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament often."

These were the seven counsels that Magone in his letter calls the seven policemen given to us by Mary to act as guardians of the holy virtue of purity.

To have some particular inspiration to piety each day, he practiced one of these counsels each day, adding something in honour of Mary. Thus his first counsel was joined to a consideration of the first joy enjoyed by Mary in heaven and this was for each Sunday. The second joy of Mary was for Monday and so on. Throughout the following week, Michael meditated upon the Sorrows of Mary.

Perhaps some will say these sort of practices are trivial. But it has been my experience that the splendour of virtue can be obscured and even be lost by the slightest breath of temptation, so if anything, no matter how small, can help to preserve virtue, then it is to be treasured. For this reason I most heartily recommend simple things that do not frighten or tire people, especially young people. Fasts, long prayer and similar harsh practices are either put aside or endured with reluctance and difficulty. Let us keep to easy things but let us persevere in them. This was the path that led Michael to an outstanding degree of holiness.

## CHAPTER 10 - EXQUISITE CHARITY EXTENDED TO OTHERS

In addition to his lively faith, his fervour and his devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Michael was outstanding for the charity he showed to others. He knew that the exercise of this virtue was the most efficacious means to grow in the love of God. He practiced this virtue on every occasion offered him, even if it be a very minor one. He enjoyed recreation to such a degree

that he did not know whether he was in heaven or on earth. But if he happened to notice that a companion wanted to play the game he was involved in, he immediately gave way and got involved in something else. More than once I saw him withdraw from a ballgame or some other game to make place for someone else; or get down off his stilts, give them to someone else and help him get balanced on them to make the game more enjoyable and to see that his companion did not have a fall.

If he saw a companion in trouble, he immediately went up to him to see if he could help in any way or to tell him a story to make him forget his hurt or worries. If he came to know the reason for the trouble, he tried to give some counsel or advice or to mediate for him with a Superior or to find someone who could help.

Whenever he could he explained a problem to a companion, got him a drink, made his bed — anything to help. He found great delight in all this. One winter's day he noticed a companion standing out of recreation because he had chilblains — he also discovered he could not carry out his duties for the same reason. Michael wrote out his assignment for him; he helped him to dress, made his bed and even gave him his own gloves to keep out the cold. What more could a lad of his age do? Because of his fiery nature, he easily lost his temper but it was enough to say to him: Magone, what are you doing? Is this the way a Christian avenges himself? This was enough to cool him down, even to humiliate him so he often went immediately to apologize to his companion, to beg pardon for any scandal he may have given.

But if in his first months at the Oratory he had to be corrected quite often for his outbursts of bad temper, soon, with his goodwill, he conquered himself and even became a peacemaker among his own companions. However, if some argument arose he put himself, small as he was, between the litigants and even used force to calm them down. "We are rational beings," he used to say, "and must act as such and not solve our arguments by means of brute force." At other times he used to comment: If the Lord were to use force every time we offended Him, we could all be exterminated very soon. Therefore, if Almighty God, when offended, uses mercy in pardoning the offender, why do we miserable creatures not use our reason and tolerate displeasures and even insults without seeking revenge? He said

to others: We are all sons of God, therefore we are all brothers; he who takes revenge on his companion ceases to be a son of God, and by his outburst of temper becomes a brother of Satan.

He willingly taught catechism; he willingly made himself available to serve the sick and earnestly asked to spend the night with them if their sickness was serious. A companion, moved by the many kindnesses he had done for him, said to him: "What can I do for you, dear Magone, to repay you for all the trouble I am giving you?" "Nothing else but a single offering of your sickness in penance for my sins," was the reply.

One of his companions was always in trouble. He was handed over to Michael to see what could be done to bring him to his senses. Michael set to work on him. He started by getting to know him and befriending him. He played with him in recreation; he gave him little presents; he passed on to him little notes on which were written pieces of advice and so got to know him very closely but did not speak of religion with him.

Seizing the opportunity of the feast of St. Michael, Magone approached him: "In three days time occurs the feast of St. Michael, I want you to give me a present."

"Of course, but I am sorry you did not speak about it before as you have caught me unprepared."

"I wanted to speak to you about it because I want to choose the gift."

"Yes - go ahead. I am ready to do what I can to please you."

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"If it costs you quite a bit, will you still do it?"

"Yes, I promise you I will do it just the same."

"I want you on the feast of St. Michael to give me the present of the gift of a good confession and to prepare yourself for a fervent Holy Communion."

Considering the situation and because of his promises his companion did not dare to refuse this request, he surrendered and the three days previous to the feast he was occupied in practices of piety. Magone used all his best efforts to prepare his friend for this spiritual feast, and on the day itself both went to Confession and Communion to the satisfaction of the Superiors and to the edification of their companions.

Michael spent a happy day with his friend and, as evening came, he said to him: "We have had a beautiful feast, I'm very happy and you have really given the great pleasure. Now tell me: Aren't you pleased with what we've done?"

"Yes, I am extremely pleased and, more so, because you have prepared me for it. I thank you for the invitation you gave me. Now if you have some good advice for me, I would welcome it."

"For sometime now, my friend, your conduct left much to be required. Your way of living has displeased your Superiors, hurt your parents, cheated yourself, deprived you of peace of heart and then . . . one day you will have to give an account to God for all the time you have wasted. So, from now on, you must flee from idleness, be as happy as you like provided you do not neglect your duties."

The companion he had half converted was now fully converted. He became Michael's close friend, began to imitate him in carrying out his duties fully and presently by his diligence and morality he was the consolation of all who had anything to do with him.

I thought I would give this episode some importance and develop it in a detailed fashion because it does underline Michael's character and also because I would like to report in full that which his companion himself told me.

*\*The highest form of charity is concern for the spiritual welfare of our neighbour. This Michael understood very well.*

*\*Real progress in the spiritual life is measured by growth in self-control: from being a selfish and troublesome element in the playground, Michael becomes a peace-maker! When he first came to the Oratory he needed a 'guardian angel'; within a few months he had so much progress that he was able to take over that role himself on behalf of others.*

*\*This chapter concentrates very much on Michael in the playground, which was for Don Bosco almost as important (if not more so) than the church. For him (and it is wonderful to see how so many of his students and, later, Salesians, take the cue) the playground:*

- Is the place for personal contact, for the 'word in the ear';*
- Is the place when the student can be shown that we are personally interested in him;*
- Is the place where we can manifest so well the family spirit;*
- Is an opportunity to help the trouble-maker; was not Michael's conversion brought about in the atmosphere of the playground? Apart from the confessional, did not Don Bosco carry on much of his spiritual direction in the playground?*
- Is the place for evaluating the students; here they are most natural.*

## CHAPTER 11 - FACTS AND SAYINGS OF MICHAEL MAGONE

What we have recounted so far deals with easy and simple things that anyone could imitate. Now I want to relate certain facts and sayings that are to be admired because they are agreeable and pleasing but not necessarily easy to follow. However they are useful to underline the goodness of heart and religious courage of this young lad. Here are some among many which I have witnessed.

One day he was talking with his companions when some of them introduced topics that a young well-educated Christian should avoid. Magone only listened to a few words - he then put his fingers in his mouth and gave such a loud whistle that it almost split open the brains of the bystanders. "What are you doing?" said one of the lads, "Are you mad?" Magone said nothing and gave a whistle even louder than the first. "Where are your good manners?" yelled another. "Is that the way to act?" Magone then replied: "It's you who are mad, talking like that, so why cannot I be mad myself to stop such talk? If you want to break the rules of good manners by introducing talk that does not become a Christian, why cannot I do the same to stop it?" Those words, one of his companions



assured me, were a wonderful sermon to them all. "We looked at each other; no-one dared to carry on with the talk which consisted of a lot of grumbling. From then on every time we noticed Michael in our company we measured well our words for fear we would have our heads split open by his whistle!"

Accompanying his Superior one day in Turin they came upon a larrikin using the Holy Name of God in vain. Hearing those words Michael seemed to go mad; without thinking about the place or the danger, with two jumps he flew at the blasphemer, gave him two punches whilst saying: "Is this the way to treat the name of the Lord?" But the larrikin was taller than he was and, without thinking and urged on by the shouts of his companions and by the blood which ran copiously from his nose, he angrily jumped at Magone. There followed kicks, blows, punches that did not give either time to draw breath. Fortunately, the Superior ran to the scene and, putting himself between the two belligerents, managed with a great deal of difficulty to re-establish the peace to the satisfaction of both parties. When Michael was master of himself once again, he realized his lack of prudence in so correcting that silly fellow. He repented of his action and gave an assurance that he would be more cautious in the future and limit himself to giving friendly advice.

On another occasion some lads were discussing the eternity of the pains of hell and one of them said facetiously "I'll do my best not to go there, but if I do . . . patience!" Michael pretended he had not heard that remark but he quietly left the group, found a box of matches and then returned. Lighting a match he put it under the hand of the lad who made the remark. "Ouch" was the startled cry. "That hurts, you fool." "I am not mad", Michael answered, "but I was just trying to test your patience; considering that you reckon you could bear with patience the pains of Hell, you should not be unduly upset by a burning match, the pain of which only lasts for a minute." All burst out laughing, but the burnt companion had to admit: Hell must be an awful place to go to.

Other companions wanted him, one morning, to go with them to make their confessions to a confessor who would not know them and brought forward a hundred excuses. He refused, saying that he did not want to go anywhere without the Superior's permission. He also added he was not a bandit, fearful to be recognized by the policeman and so felt it necessary to go to

places and persons unknown for fear of being recognized. "I have my own confessor and I confess all my sins, big and small, to him without fear. The mania for going to confession elsewhere must be due to the fact that you do not love your confessor or you have very serious sins to confess. At any rate, you are doing a wrong thing leaving the House without permission. If you really have a serious reason to change your confessor you should make use of the extraordinary confessor who comes along to hear the confessions of all the Oratory boys on feast days."

In all the time he was with us he only went home for his holidays once. He would not go again although I advised him to and his mother and relatives were affectionately expecting him. He was often asked the reason for this but his only reply was a smile. Finally one day he gave the reason to one whom he trusted. "I went once", he said "to pass some days of the holidays at home but, unless I am compelled to do so, I will not do that again."

"Why" asked his companion.

"Because at home there are still the dangers that were there previously. The places, the amusements, the companions tempt me to live as I did previously and this I do not want to do."

"You should go with good intentions, determined to put into practice all the pieces of advice our Superiors give us."

"Good intentions are like a fog that disappears bit by bit as you live away from the Oratory; the advice helps for the first few days and then companions help you to forget all about it."

"Then, according to you, no-one should go home for the holidays, not even to see one's relatives."

"No, according to me, only those who feel they are strong enough to resist temptations should go. I do not feel strong enough to do that. I strongly believe that if our companions could see the interior many would be discouraged from going home because they do so with the wings of an angel and return with two horns on their heads like so many devils."

From time to time Michael had a visit from an old friend whom he tried to win over to a life of virtue. This friend used to argue that this was not necessary since he knew a person who had not

gone to church for a long time yet was doing very well, was thriving and prosperous looking. Michael took his friend by the arm and brought him over to a carter who was unloading building materials in the courtyard and said: "See that big mule? He is prosperous looking, big and fat, yet he has never been to confession and never goes to church. Would you like to become like this animal who has neither soul nor reason. His only concern is to work for his owner and then fertilize the fields after his death." This companion was silent and never again did he bring forth such frivolous motives for not carrying out his duties of religion.

I will pass over many other anecdotes; these suffice to make his goodness of heart better known as well as his great hatred for sin which often led him to excesses as, in his zeal, he tried to prevent an offence against God.

*\* Don Bosco seems to have had the gift of instilling into the young leaders of the Oratory a deep sense of conviction; if someone was acting in a way contrary to Christian principles, it was everyone's duty to do something about it! One virtue Michael had to learn — and he did — was that of prudence, even in correcting, since "his great hatred for sin . . . often led him to excesses as, in his zeal, he tried to prevent an offence against God."*

## CHAPTER 12 . HOLIDAYS AT CASTELNUOVO D'ASTI. VIRTUES PRACTISED ON THAT OCCASION

Seeing that Michael was most unwilling to spend his holidays at home, it was decided, in order to give him some relaxation after the pressure of his studies, to bring him with me to Murialdo, a suburb of Castelnovo d'Asti, where several of his companions went in turns to enjoy the countryside, especially those who had no relatives where they could spend the autumn season. Taking into consideration his good conduct I asked him and several others, by way of a reward, to accompany me on the trip. Whilst we were walking together I had a chance to talk with this young lad and to discover that he had reached a degree of virtue much greater than I had ever imagined. Leaving aside the beautiful and edifying conversations he had with me on this occasion, I will limit myself to revealing several incidents that serve to let you know how advanced in virtue he was, especially as regards the virtue of gratitude.

Along the road they were caught by a sudden downpour of rain and reached Chieri like a bunch of drowned rats. They went to refuge in the home of Mr. Mark Gonella, a benefactor, who welcomed this little band from the Oratory every time they went to or returned from Castelnuovo d'Asti.

He dried their clothes for them and then prepared a feast which was a generous gesture on his part and which was very much appreciated by the boys.

After a couple of hours rest we set out once more. For some time Michael lagged behind the group and one of his friends, thinking that perhaps he was tired, fell back with him. He found him quietly speaking to himself.

"Are you tired, Micky?" he asked. "Are your feet feeling the effects of this long walk?"

"Oh, no! I am not at all tired; I could walk to Milan."

"What were you saying to yourself just now as I came along?"

"I was saying the Rosary for the intentions of that kind gentleman who was so kind to us; I cannot repay him in any other way and so I am asking the Lord and the Blessed Virgin for many graces for his family that he might be repaid a hundredfold for all he did for us."

It is well here to mention in passing that Michael had the same grateful thought for even the smallest favour, but towards his benefactors he was most sensitive. I would be wearying the readers if I transcribed the many letters and notes he wrote me to express his gratitude for having accepted him into this House. He often mentioned his teachers, those who had gained him admission into the Oratory or who had helped him in any way; he always spoke of them with respect and was never ashamed to mention his poverty on the one hand and his gratitude on the other. "I regret", he was often heard to say, "that I have not got the means of showing my gratitude as I should but I know full well what I owe to so many people and as long as I live I will continue to pray to the Lord that He will reward them for all they have done."

He also expressed his gratitude when the parish priest of Castelnovo invited our boys to his house for a meal. That evening he said to me: "If you think it is a good idea I would like to go to Communion tomorrow for the intentions of the parish priest who entertained us today." I not only approved of that gesture but made it a point to recommend the same thing to all the boys, since we must always be grateful to our benefactors.

Whilst we were at Murialdo I noted another fine act of virtue which bears relating. One day our boys went for a walk in the nearby woods. Some went looking for mushrooms, whilst others searched for chestnuts and other nuts; others heaped up leaves or other things - in fine, they were really enjoying themselves. Whilst they were busy Michael quietly slipped away and went back to the house. One lad saw him, however, and fearing that he might not be well, followed him. Michael, convinced that no-one had seen him, reached the house but, without saying a word to anyone, he went straight to the church. The boy who followed him found him kneeling before the altar of the Blessed Sacrament wrapt in fervent prayer.

Questioned later why he had disappeared so suddenly from the company of the rest to pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, he replied with all simplicity: "I greatly fear to fall anew into sin and so I go to beseech the dear Lord in the Blessed Sacrament that He will give me the help and the strength to persevere in His grace."

Another striking incident occurred at the same time. One evening all the boys had gone to bed when I heard someone sighing and sobbing. He went quietly up to the window and I saw Michael in a corner of the threshing floor, looking up at the moon and crying his heart out. "What's wrong, Michael", I said, "aren't you feeling well?"

He thought he was alone and that no-one could see him and he did not know what to say. I repeated my question, he replied with these exact words:

"As I admire the moon I cannot help crying because it has for so many centuries regularly lit up the night without once disobeying the orders of its Creator. I, instead, who am so young and a rational creature who should have been faithful to the laws of God, have disobeyed Him so many times and have offended Him

in a thousand ways." Having said this, Michael broke down once more. I comforted him with a few words, calmed him down and saw him back to sleep.

It is certainly a matter for admiration that a boy scarcely fourteen years old had already attained such wisdom and has such beautiful thoughts. But this is a fact and I could bring forward many other episodes that would show how young Michael was capable of reflections much superior to his age, especially in recognizing in everything the hand of God and the obligation all creatures have of obeying their Creator.

\* *Gratitude: Don Bosco gives a couple of examples of Michael's great sense of gratitude. It was a virtue which he very often recommended and even went so far as to say: "It is not possible that he who possesses the virtue of gratitude does not possess all the other virtues as well." (BM XIII, 580-1)*

## CHAPTER 13 - HIS PREPARATION FOR DEATH

After the holidays spent at Castelnuovo, Michael lived for only three months more. He was rather small but healthy and well-built. He was quite intelligent and had no trouble in mastering anything he took up. He had a great love for study and was making better than average progress. As regards his piety, he had reached a standard where I could honestly say that I would not know what to add or subtract in order to present him as a model for young people. He was lively by nature but he was pious, good, devoted and highly appreciative of the little acts of virtue.

He performed them joyfully, naturally and without scruples - because of his piety, his love for study and his affability he was loved and esteemed by all whilst, at the same time, because of his liveliness and gentle manners, he was the idol of the playground.

There is no doubt that it was our earnest wish that this model of Christian living would be spared to us until his ripe old age so that, whether as a priest he felt was his calling, or as a layman, he would have done honour to his country and his faith. But God had decreed otherwise and wished to take this beautiful flower from the garden of the Church militant unto Himself

and transplant it in the Church triumphant in Paradise. Michael, too, without realizing it was preparing for his approaching death with an even better and more perfect way of life.

He made the novena for the feast of the Immaculate Conception with particular fervour. I want to put before you those things he proposed to himself for these days and they are as follows:

"I, Michael Magone, wish to make this novena well and so I promise:

- 1) To detach my heart from all earthly things so as to give it completely to Mary.
- 2) To make a general Confession in order to ensure a peaceful conscience at the hour of my death.
- 3) To skip breakfast every morning as a penance for my sins and to recite the Seven Joys of Mary to merit her assistance at the last hours of my life.
- 4) To go to Communion every day provided my confessor advises it.
- 5) To tell my companions an anecdote in honour of Mary each day.
- 6) To place this sheet at the feet of Our Lady's statue and, with this act, to consecrate myself completely to Her and, for the future, I wish to be entirely hers until the very last moments of my life."

All these resolutions were approved except the General Confession which he made only a short time before. Instead of skipping his breakfast he was advised to say a prayer each day for the souls in Purgatory.

With similar fervour and recollection he celebrated the novena and feast of Christmas. "I really want to make every effort to make this novena well," he said as he began it, "so that the Baby Jesus will come and be born in my soul with an abundance of His graces."

On the eve of the last day of the year (1858), the Superior of

the House urged all the lads to thank the Lord for all the favours granted to them over the past year. He encouraged them to promise strongly that they would pass the New Year in God's grace because, he added, this may be the last one for one of you. Whilst saying this his hand was resting on the head of the lad nearest him and that was Magone.

"I understand," Michael said with an air of surprise, "that it is I who should get things packed up to depart for eternity." His words were greeted with laughter, but his companions remembered these words and Michael himself often recalled them. Notwithstanding this thought he did not lose his joviality and air of happiness and continued to perform his duties faithfully and well.

The last day of his life was really close at hand and God wanted to give him an even clearer warning of it. On Sunday, January 16th the members of the Sodality of the Blessed Sacrament to which Michael himself belonged got together for their usual Sunday meeting. After the opening prayers and the usual reading and having discussed those matters that seemed most opportune, one of the members took the little box which contained little slips of paper on which were written maxims to be practised over the following week. This did the rounds and each boy picked one out at random. Michael plucked his out only to read: "At the judgement seat of God you will be on your own." He read it and then, as if caught unaware, he said aloud to his companions, "I am sure that this is a message sent me by the Lord to warn me to hold myself in readiness."

After this he went to his Superior and said with a little anxiety that he considered it as a warning from the Lord Who was soon to summon him into His presence. His Superior urged him to keep himself in readiness not because of what was written on the slip of paper, but because of the advice that Jesus clearly gives in the Gospel where he urges us to be always ready.

"Then tell me," insisted Michael, "how much longer I have to live."

"You will live as long as God wants you to."

"But will I live until the end of this year?" he begged again with a trembling voice.



"Courage, Michael, calm down. Our life is in the hands of God Who is a good Father. He knows how long to preserve us. Besides, it is not necessary to know the hour of our death to go to heaven. It is sufficient to prepare for it with good works."

Then he grew sad: "If you don't want to tell, it is a sign that my end is near."

"That is not necessarily so but, even if it were, I am sure you would not be afraid of going to pay a visit to the Blessed Virgin in heaven."

"That's true! That's true!" He became his old cheerful self and ran out to take part in the recreation.

He was as happy as ever on Monday, Tuesday and the morning of Wednesday. His health was good and he was punctual in all his duties. Only on the afternoon of Wednesday did he stand on the balcony watching the games and taking no part. This was most unusual and surely a sign that he was not feeling well.

*\*"Michael was no 'plaster saint' but remained very popular among his companions. Why? "Because of his liveliness and gentle manners."*

*\*As Michael had a premonition of death he realized more and more his need of Mary. We often pray: "Pray for us now and at the hour of death". If we pray this prayer and not merely say it, we also will be ready when God calls us.*

*\*Note again the common sense of Don Bosco: no harsh penances but practical ones.*

*\*It has been said that the thought of death is morbid and depressing. Such was certainly not the case with so many boys directed by Don Bosco!*

## CHAPTER 14 - HIS ILLNESS AND THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT ATTENDED IT

On the evening of that day (Wednesday, 19 January, 1859) he was asked what was the matter with him and he answered that there was nothing. He had an upset stomach which was nothing unusual for him. He was given some medicine and went to bed. He passed the night peacefully.

He got up the following morning at the usual time with his companions, went to church and received Holy Communion for the dying which was his usual custom every Thursday. Later he went into the playground but he could take no part because he was feeling very tired and experienced difficulty in breathing. He was given some more medicine, the doctor was called but, finding nothing serious, advised him to keep on taking that same remedy.

His mother was in Turin at this time and was told of his sickness. She came to see him and told us that he had suffered similar illnesses ever since he was quite young and the remedies we were giving him were the same as she had given.

He wanted to get up on the Friday to go to Holy Communion in honour of the Passion of Christ which he used to do every Friday to obtain the grace of a happy death. He was not allowed to do this as he seemed to have got worse. He was given some more medicine and something special to relieve his breathing. Up to this time, there were no signs that he was seriously ill.

At about two in the afternoon matters suddenly changed for the worse. He was experiencing great difficulty in breathing and was beginning to cough and spit up blood. Asked how he felt, he replied that he was still feeling a certain heaviness in his stomach. However, I noticed that he was by now a very sick boy so the doctor was called for once more, to dispel doubt and make sure we were doing the right thing. At that moment his mother, in a true Christian spirit, suggested he go to confession whilst waiting for the doctor.

"Yes, mummy, yes! I only went to Confession yesterday and went to Holy Communion but if the sickness is serious I would like to go to Confession once again."

He prepared himself for a few minutes and made his Confession. After that he calmly and smilingly addressed himself to me and his mother: "Who knows but this Confession will be for the Exercise for a Happy Death for the real thing!"

"What do you think? Would you like to get better or go to heaven?"

"The Lord knows what is best for me; I only want to do what pleases him."

"If the Lord gave you the choice of getting better or going to heaven, what would you choose?"

"Who would be mad enough not to choose heaven?"

"So you would like to go there?"

"Too right I would! I would like to go there with all my heart. That's what I have been asking the Lord for now for some time."

"When would you like to go?"

"Right away if that is according to the Lord's pleasure."

"Right, let us say together: In everything, whether in life or in death, may the adorable will of God be done!"

Just at that moment the doctor arrived. He found that the sick boy's condition was serious.

"The case is very serious," he confided. "The lad has a hemorrhage in the stomach, and I am doubtful whether we can stop it."

He did what he could. Blood letting, blistering, potions - anything possible was done to stop the internal bleeding that at times hindered his breathing. All in vain.

At nine o'clock that night (Friday, 21 January) Michael asked to go to Communion once more before his death which he had not been able to do that morning. He was very anxious to receive that Christ which he had been receiving now for some time with so much fervour.

Before he received it he said to me and those around his bed: "I recommend myself to the prayers of my companions; may they pray that the sacramental Christ be my viaticum. To lead me to eternal life." He received Communion and was helped to make his thanksgiving.

After a quarter of an hour he stopped repeating the prayers that were suggested to him and, since he did not say anything we thought he had suddenly passed away. But after a few minutes he opened his eyes and in a seemingly joking way, said: "On that slip of paper last Sunday there was a mistake! It said - At the judgement seat of God you will be on your own. - That's not

true. I shall not be alone. The Blessed Virgin will be there to help me so I have nothing to fear - I am ready to go at any time. Our Lady wants to be by my side at the judgement seat of God."

*\*THE WILL OF GOD: Michael had reached that height of sanctity when he only wanted to do God's will, even if he was homesick for heaven!*

*\*Michael was a faithful and loving son of Mary in life - she did not desert him as the hour of his death drew near.*

## CHAPTER 15 - HIS LAST MOMENTS AND BEAUTIFUL DEATH

It was ten o'clock and Michael's condition worsened. It seemed that he would not last the night. Therefore it was arranged that Fr. Zattini, a cleric and a young infirmarian should sit with him for half the night and the Fr. Alasonatti with another cleric and an infirmarian should watch by his bedside for the rest of the night.

I did not think there was any immediate danger as I said to the patient: "Michael get a bit of rest. I am going to my room for a few moments and then I will return."

"No, please don't abandon me," Michael begged.

"I'm only going to say some of my breviary and then I'll come back."

"Then come back as soon as you can."

I gave instructions that I was to be called at the first sign of a worsening condition because I loved that young lad very tenderly and I wanted to be at his side in his last moments. I was no sooner in my room that I was called back to the sick-bed because it seemed that Michael had entered upon his death agony.

This was so. He was slipping away quickly so the Holy Oils were administered by Fr. Zattini. Michael was still fully conscious.

He answered the various prayers of the ceremony for the administration of this august sacrament. At every anointing he added some special prayers of his own. I remember his words at the anointing of his lips: "O my God, if only you had struck me dumb before I had used my tongue to offend you! So many offences less! My God, pardon the sins of my tongue - I repent of them with all my heart."

At the anointing of the hands he added: "How many times have I not punched my companions with these hands! Pardon me, O God, and help my companions to be better than I am."

The Anointing over, he was asked would he like us to call his mother who had gone to take rest in a nearby room, also considering his condition was not serious.

"No," he replied. "It is better not to call her. Poor Mum! She loves me so much that witnessing my death would deeply disturb her. Poor Mum! When I'm in heaven I'll pray much for her."

He was urged not to excite himself and to prepare himself for the papal blessing, with a plenary indulgence. During his life he had always held religious practices in high esteem to which indulgences were attached and did his best to utilize them. Hence he was delighted to receive the Papal Blessing. He took part in all the prayers but wanted to recite the Confiteor himself. He pronounced every word with the greatest fervour, devotion and lively faith and the bystanders were moved to tears.

He then seemed to drowse off and so we did not disturb him but he soon awoke. His pulse indicated that death was fast approaching but his face was calm. He smiled, and was as fully conscious as a man in perfect health. This was not because he did not feel any pain because his internal bleeding caused suffocation - he was panting and was generally exhausted. But Michael had often asked God to allow him to do all his Purgatory on earth so that he could go straight to heaven. It was this thought that enabled him to suffer with joy and that very pain which normally brings sadness and distress produced in him nothing but joy and pleasure. Therefore through a special grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Michael not only seemed insensible to pain but showed that he felt only consolation in putting up with these very sufferings. It was not necessary to suggest any prayers to him because he himself, from time to time, was making moving ejaculations.

It was 10:45 when he called my name and said to me: "Here we are. Help me."

"Take it easy," I replied. "I shall not abandon you until you are safe with the Lord in heaven. But if you are really convinced you are about to leave this world, don't you want to say a last good-bye to your mother?"

"No, Father. I don't want to hurt her."

"Then, won't you give me a message for her?"

"Yes, ask her to pardon me for all the suffering I caused her. Tell her that I am sorry. Tell her that I love her and that she should courageously continue her good work. Tell her that I die willingly and that I am leaving this world in the company of Jesus and Mary and that I will be waiting for her in heaven."

At these words, all those present began to sob. I controlled myself and, to fill those last moments, with good thoughts, I kept on asking him questions.

"And what do you want to leave as a message for your companions?"

"Tell them to always make good confessions."

"Michael, tell me what thing of your past life gives you the greatest consolation at this moment?"

"What consoles me most at this moment is the little I have done to honour Mary. Yet, this is the greatest consolation. O Mary, O Mary, how happy are those at the hour of death who have been devoted to you! "But," he continued, "there is one thing that puzzles me. When my soul is separated from my body as I enter heaven, what must I do? To whom must I turn?"

"If Our Lady wants to accompany you, leave all that to Her. But before you leave for Paradise I would like to give you a commission."

"Go ahead, I'll do all I can to obey you."

"When you are in heaven and you see the Blessed Virgin, give

her our humble and respectful good wishes, from me and from everyone in this House. Beg Her to give us all Her blessing, to take us all under Her powerful protection. Beg her to make sure that none of us who are in this House at present or anyone that Providence will send us in the future will lose their soul."

"I'll do that willingly. Is there anything else?"

"Not for the present," I replied.

It seemed as if he wanted to have a sleep. He appeared quite calm although his weakening pulse signalled his imminent death. For this reason we began to recite the Profisciscere; towards the middle of the prayer he awoke as if from a deep sleep and, with a smile on his lips, said to me: "Within a short time now I will deliver your message. - I'll do my best to make a good job of it. Tell my companions I await them all in heaven." He took the crucifix in his hands, kissed three times and then uttered his final words. "Jesus, Joseph and Mary, I place my soul in your hands." He parted his lips as if to smile and gently fell back in death.

That blessed soul left this world to fly, as we ardently hope, to the bosom of God at 11 p.m. of January 21, 1859, barely fourteen years old. He suffered no agony. He was not agitated or in pain nor did he manifest any of the symptoms that naturally accompany the terrible separation of the soul from the body. I hardly know how to describe his death except by calling it a sleep of joy that bore away that soul from the sorrows of life to the joys of eternity.

The bystanders were more moved than saddened. Fr. Zattini could no longer control his emotions and exclaimed: "O Death, you are not a punishment for innocent souls! For these you are the great benefactor who opens the doors to joys that will last for ever. Oh, why cannot I be in your place, Michael? At this moment your soul has been judged and the Blessed Virgin has already conducted you to the enjoyment of the great glory of heaven. Dear Magone, may you live happily for all eternity - pray for us - we will fulfill our duties as friends by offering fervent prayers to God for the eternal repose of your soul."

*\*Note Michael's tender thoughts for his mother. Like Don Bosco, he realized how much he owed to his mother and how much she contributed to the building up of his spiritual life.*

## CHAPTER 16 - HIS FUNERAL, LAST THOUGHTS, CONCLUSION

At daybreak Michael's good mother came into the room to see her son. Her sorrow was great when she learnt that he was dead! That Christian woman just stood there for a moment without saying a word, or giving a sigh, then broke forth in these words: "Great God, you are the Master of all things . . . Dear Michael, you are dead . . . I'll always weep for you as a son I have lost but I will thank God who allowed you to die here with every help possible. Such a death is precious in the eyes of the Lord. Rest with God in peace, pray for your mother that loved you so dearly on this earth and will love you even more now that I believe that you are with the just in heaven. As long as I live, I will continue to pray for your soul and hope one day to join you in the homeland of the saints." Having said these words, she broke down sobbing and went to the church to find comfort in prayer.

The loss of such a companion caused great sadness to all the boys in the House and to all who knew him.

He was well known for his physical and moral qualities and was most esteemed for the rare virtues that adorned his life.

It can be said that his companions passed the following day in praying for the repose of his soul. They found comfort only in saying the Rosary, the Office of the Dead, going to Confession and Communion. All mourned him as a friend yet all consoled themselves by saying: At this moment Michael is already with Dominic Savio in heaven.

The feelings of his companions and of his teacher Fr. Francesia are summed up in the following lines penned by that priest:

"On that day after Michael's death I went into class. It was a Saturday. Michael's seat was unoccupied so I told the class that we had lost a student on earth but perhaps heaven had gained another citizen. I nearly broke down as I said this. The boys were appalled and in the general silence only one thing was said and that was: He is dead. All the class broke into sobs. All loved him and who could not but love a lad adorned with so many virtues? The great reputation he had acquired was only realized after his death. Pages written by him were vied for. One of my distinguished colleagues Fr. Turchi, thought himself very fortunate to



have a notebook that belonged to Michael and to have his name on a piece cut off from an examination paper of the previous year.

For my part, because of the virtues practiced by him with so much perfection, I did not hesitate to invoke him in all my needs and I must confess he never once let me down. Please accept my sincerest thanks, dear friend, and I beg of you to keep on interceding for your old teacher before the throne of God. Instil into my heart a spark of your great humility, Michael! Pray for all your companions that they may meet with you one day in heaven."

In order to give an external sign of the great affection we had for our departed one, he was given as solemn a burial as was compatible with our humble condition.

With lighted candles, funeral hymns and the brass band, we accompanied the body to the grave where, praying for the repose of his soul, we said our last fond farewell with the hope that we would one day be companions in a better life than this.

A month later we celebrated the Month's Mind. The celebrated orator, Fr. Zattini, preached Michael's eulogy in moving words. I regret that there is no room in this little booklet for it to be reported in full. However, I want to quote the final part as a conclusion to this biography.

After having reminded us of the principal virtues that enriched his soul, he invited his sorrowing and moved audience not to forget him. He asked them to remember him often, to comfort him with their prayers and to follow the wonderful example he had given them.

Finally, he concluded thus:

"These examples and these words in death our friend Michael Magone of Carmagnola places before us. Today he is no more, death has caused him to vacate his seat here in church where he often came to pray - that prayer that he found so beautiful and which brought him so much peace. He is no more and, with his departure, teaches us that every star sets here below, every treasure consumed, every soul reclaimed. Thirty days ago we committed his mortal remains to the earth. If I had been present I would have followed the usual custom of the people and God

and would have plucked a handful of grass by the graveside and thrown it in to the coffin whilst repeating in sad tones the words of the Son of Judah: They will flower like the grass of the fields; from their bones will arise other dear young people who will remind us of you, will repeat their example and will multiply their virtues!

Therefore, a final farewell, O sweet, O dear, O faithful companion of ours, O good and valiant Michael! Goodbye! You, the hope of your wonderful mother who shed tears over you more of piety than that of nature and blood . . . You, the beautiful hope of an adopted father who received you in the name of God, who called you to this beautiful and blessed sanctuary where you learnt so well and so quickly the love of God and esteem for virtue . . . You, the friend of your companions, respectful to your Superiors, docile to your teachers, kindly to all! You dreamed of the priesthood . . . even there you would have been a master and example of heavenly wisdom . . . You have left a void, a wound in our hearts! But you have gone from us or, better, death has stolen you from our esteem and affection . . . has death anything to teach us? Yes, to the fervent, to the less fervent and the sinners; the negligent, the sleepy, the lazy, the weak, the tepid, the cold. We pray you to let us know whether you are in the land of the living, in the place of joy; let us hear that you at the fountain-head, in the sea of grace and your musical voice, now join the heavenly choirs so pleasing to the ears of God! Give us your zeal, your love, your charity . . . help us to live good, chaste, devout, virtuous lives . . . may we die happy, peaceful, calm deaths, trusting in divine mercies. We beg you that death may not touch us with its torments as it respected you. Pray for us with those angelic youths from this House who proceeded you into God's presence: Camillus Gavio, Gabriel Fascio, Aloysius Rua, Dominic Savio, John Massaglia. Pray with them above all for the most beloved head of this House. We will always remember you in our prayers, we will never forget you until we have been granted the joy of reaching the stars. O, blessed be God who formed you, nourished you, supported you and took you to Himself. Blessed be He who takes away life - blessed be he who surrenders it."

\* *"The life of Magone is a classic of education of the heart. Because of this it will remain for all time the classical document of pedagogy as envisaged by Don Bosco." (Fr. Albert Caviglia).*

## C. BIOGRAPHY OF FRANCIS BESUCCO

1850	(1st March)	Francis born at Argentera.
1858	(September)	First Holy Communion.
1862		Reads the lives of Savio and Magone and expresses the desire to go to the Oratory.
1863	(2nd August)	Takes up residence at the Oratory.
1864	(9th January)	Death at the Oratory.
	(July-August)	First sketch of his life appears in the Catholic Readings.
1877		A second and revised edition of his life. Both were written by Don Bosco.

### Some Introductory Remarks

*This biography differs from the other two. Francis only spent a few months at the Oratory, although he had been indirectly influenced by Don Bosco through reading the lives of Savio and Magone.*

*Of the 34 chapters of this biography, the first 15 were put together by Don Bosco from information gathered from his parish priest, teachers, parents, and friends.*

*As a wise educator and spiritual director, Don Bosco was well aware of the futility of attempting mass production. Everyone had to be treated as an individual and educated and directed as an individual. Even in these three biographies we see three totally different characters, all with different backgrounds. Besucco, coming as he did from a small alpine village, had had very little contact with many children in his own age group and grew up in the company of adults. His coming to the world of the Oratory must have been a traumatic experience.*

*Yet Don Bosco directed these three souls far along the road to sanctity, even to an heroic degree as recognized by the Church in the case of Savio. This great director of souls attested that these three boys were just three among dozens!*

What was his secret? He himself provides the answer. OBEDIENCE . . . the willingness to seek and accept DIRECTION.

*Don Bosco wrote the lives of three who were called to eternity before the promise of becoming outstanding apostolic souls could be fully realized. Yet we must not forget the hundreds whose lives Don Bosco touched who became real heroes of apostolic sanctity ("contemplatives in action"). We have only to recall Blessed Michael Rua, Blessed Aloysius Orione, Blessed Aloysius Guanella, Cardinal Cagliero, Bishop Costamagna, Fr. Albera, Fr. Rinaldi . . . the list could go on and on. We could add to this the priests — over two hundred of them — that Don Bosco gave to the dioceses of northern Italy!*

## LIFE OF FRANCIS BESUCCO

by

Fr. John Bosco

### PREFACE

My dear Boys,

Just as I was going to write the life of one of your companions, Francis Besucco died unexpectedly and I decided that his life was the one to write. I feel that as well as pleasing both yourselves and his fellow countrymen back at home, this effort of mine will be useful to you; hence I have researched Francis' life and written it out.

Some of you might question whether what I have written really happened. Briefly this is how I went about it. I collected information from the parish priest, the school teacher, his parents and his friends about the years that Francis spent at home; you could almost say that I have rewritten and rearranged what they sent me. For the time he spent with us it was simply a matter of collecting the information from many witnesses; these testimonies were written and signed by the witnesses themselves.

It is true that some of the facts recorded will appear far-fetched; and that is one reason why I have been very careful in writing them down. If the facts were unimportant there would be no need to publish them. When you note this boy speaking with a

knowledge normally superior to one of his age, you must remember that he showed great diligence in learning, that he was blest with a good memory and that he was favoured by God in a special way. All of these facts contributed in no small measure to advance him well ahead of his years.

You will also have to take something into account about myself; possibly I have been over indulgent in writing about things which happened between the two of us; for this I ask your forbearance. Please look upon me as a father who is speaking about a son whom he loves tenderly; a father who gives his time to his loved one and who speaks to his dear sons; he opens his heart to them to please them and to instruct them on the practice of virtue of which Besucco was a model. Read his life then, my dear boys, and if as you read you feel yourself impelled to turn away from something wrong or to practice some virtue, render thanks to God the giver of all good things.

May the Lord bless us all and preserve us in His holy grace here on earth so that we can one day bless him forever in Heaven.

*\* Although this is but a brief preface, it is quite rich in content, giving some valuable hints as to why Don Bosco was such an outstanding educator and spiritual director of the young.*

*— A person is a separate individual because of the sum total of all his characteristics, none of which are unimportant.*

*Don Bosco knew his boys because he took the trouble to pin-point the characteristics and so see what needed to be reinforced, corrected or affirmed.*

*— "Please look upon me as a father who is speaking of a son whom he loves tenderly." Don Bosco really gives us a fine self-portrait in these words and gives us the secret of success when working with young people. As he wrote in another place: "He who knows he is loved, will love and he who is loved will get all he wants especially from the young."*

*... Don Bosco was prepared to "give of his time" (the most precious possession we have).*

## CHAPTER 1

If you have ever trudged from Cuneo towards the Alps, you would have found it a long, steep and tiring walk; then you would arrive at a high plain from which you would have some picturesque and pleasant views. At night you can see the highest peak in the Alps, the mount of the Magdalene as it is traditionally called by the locals, who believe that this saint came from Marseilles to live on top of these uninhabitable mountains. There is a large plateau at the top of the mountain, containing a large lake which is the source of the River Stura. At evening as far as the eye can see there is a long, wide deep valley called the Valley of the Lower Alps which once belonged to France. In the morning your eyes are charmed by a succession of hills one lower than the other, resembling a semi-circular staircase descending to Cuneo and Saluzzo. Lying on this plateau and 80 meters from the French border is the Alpine village of Argentera, the home town of Francis Besucco whose life I am writing.

Francis was born in a humble house in this village of poor but honest and religious parents on March 1, 1850. His father was called Matthew, his mother, Rose. In view of their poverty they asked the Parish Priest, who had the title of Archpriest, to baptise the child and look after him as a godson. The zealous archpriest at that time was Don Francis Pepino and he willingly consented to be the child's godfather. His godmother was the priest's mother, Anna, a woman of great piety who could never say no to an act of charity. The parents wanted the child named after the saint of the day of his birth, Saint Albino. Once Francis had made his first communion he never omitted going to the Sacraments on March 1st, and, as far as he could, he passed the whole day in works of Christian piety.

His mother was well aware of the need to give her children a good education and she was solicitous in teaching her son to be pious. The names of Jesus and Mary were the first words that she taught him. Often as she looked into his face and thought of the dangers that young people are exposed to she would say: "My dear little Francis, I love you so very much, but I love your soul much more than your body. I would prefer to see you dead, rather than have you offend God. Oh! If I could only have the consolation of seeing you always in the grace of God." These and similar expressions were daily occurrences for this boy who, contrary to expectations, grew into a robust little fellow; at the

same time those around him noticed his growth in grace. With such an upbringing it is not to be wondered at that Francis was a great consolation to all his family. Both his parents and his brothers tell us how pleased he was, as soon as he learnt to speak, to say the names of Jesus and Mary. From the most tender age he showed great pleasure in learning prayers and religious songs, which he loved to sing in the family circle. It was also a delight to see the joy with which he would join the faithful in singing the praises of Jesus and Mary before Vespers on Feast Days. Love and prayer appeared to be second nature to him. His parents, brothers and sisters tell us that from the age of three he never had to be invited to pray; he pestered them to teach him new prayers. Every morning and evening at the usual time he knelt down and recited the prayers which he had already learnt and he would not get up until he had learnt a new prayer.

*\*Again, the influence of a good christian mother;*

*"It is therefore above all in the Christian family, inspired by the grace and the responsibility of the sacrament of matrimony, that children should be taught to know and worship God and to love their neighbor, in accordance with the faith which they have received in earliest infancy in the sacrament of Baptism." (Vatican II, 'Christian Education', No. 3. p. 728)*

## CHAPTER 2

Young Besucco loved his godmother very much; he regarded her as his second mother and showed his love by little gifts and acts of kindness. He was only three when Anna Pepino fell seriously ill. He wanted to see her as often as he could, he prayed for her and showed her signs of his love for her. She died on May 9, 1853, and it would appear that, although he was not present, he had some extraordinary knowledge of her death.

Despite his tender age he began to say an Our Father every morning and evening for his deceased godmother, a practice he kept up all his life. He often said: I remember my godmother and pray for her every day even though I have every hope that she already enjoys the glory of heaven." It was probably on account of the affection that Francis showed for his dear mother that the parish priest loved Francis in return and kept an eye on him as much as possible.

Whenever Francis saw any member of his family praying he would assume a recollected posture and raise his eyes and his little hands to heaven foreshadowing the great favours that the merciful God was to shower upon him.

In the morning he would not eat anything until he had said his prayers, unlike the custom of boys his age. When he was taken to Church he never disturbed those around him and they, noticing his devout posture, would be drawn to imitate him. It often happened that those who observed his surprising disposition would say: "It is incredible that a boy of that age could be so good." He willingly took part in any kind of church function and it seemed that he set out to please everybody even if it inconvenienced him. Many times in winter a heavy snowfall would prevent anyone going along to serve Mass. Only the intrepid Francis, courageously facing every danger, would carve out a path through the snow with his feet and hands, and arrive alone at the Church. At first sight he seemed to be a little animal swallowed up in the deep snow. Matthew Valorso was summoned to serve Mass one day half way through January 1863 and as he was lighting the candles he saw something strange enter the Church. He was surprised to find out that it was our courageous little boy who was so happy when he finally reached the Church and who called out: "At last I've made it." He served the Mass too and afterwards spoke to the Parish Priest with a big smile on his face: "This is worth two Masses and I have heard it with double attention and it has made me so happy. I'll continue to come here whatever the cost." Who could fail to like such a pleasant little lad?

And that was how Francis grew in grace before God and men. By the time he was five he knew his morning and night prayers perfectly; he used to say them every day with his family; this was the pattern as long as he lived at home. Whilst he was keen to pray he was equally keen on learning prayers and ejaculations. It was enough for Francis to hear someone say a prayer which he did not know, that he would not rest until he had learnt it. Then he would be as happy as if he had discovered a treasure and he would teach it to the household. He would want his prayer to become part of the repertoire of the household or to hear it recited by his companions. The following prayers were so to speak his Morning Prayer and his Night Prayer. As soon as he woke he would make the sign of the Cross and jump out of bed saying or singing: "My soul, get up; look up to heaven, love Jesus; love the one who loves you; turn away from the world



which cheats you; remember that you have to die and your body will rot away; and so that you may be heard say three Hail Mary's to Our Lady."

In his tender years he did not understand what this prayer meant and he would pester now his father, now his mother, or someone else to explain it to him. When he finally understood it he would say: "Now I can recite it with greater devotion." In time this prayer became his rule of life.

In the evening as he was going to bed he would devoutly recite the following prayer: "I am going to sleep; I do not know whether I shall wake up again: there are four things that I desire: Confession, Communion, Holy Viaticum, the Papal Blessing. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." He was particularly pleased to discuss matters concerned with his religion and to talk about examples of virtue practised by others; these he would then try to imitate. If at times he looked pensive and sad, and needed cheering up, it was sufficient to speak to him of spiritual things or of the advantages of going to school.

### CHAPTER 3

His Parish Priest tells us that he was so obedient to his parents that he often forestalled their wishes, that he never refused them anything and that he never showed any unwillingness to carry out their wishes. His sisters tell us that it sometimes happened that they did not do what their parents wanted, either through inadvertence or because they were occupied in some other duty; they were always admonished by their little brother. He would assume an imploring attitude and say to them: "Look here, mother told you to do this more than half an hour ago and you still haven't done it. You shouldn't displease someone who loves us so much."

He was always kind to his brothers and sisters and never took offence even when he was blamed by them. He generally liked to play with them, because he believed that he could learn only good things from them. He confided in them and he asked them to keep an eye on his defects. "I regret," attests the Parish Priest, "that I am not capable of describing the wonderful harmony which existed in this family; there were eight of them at the time; they were exemplary in everything, whether it be their

family life at home or their frequency and devotion at the sacred functions."

His oldest brother John went to the army five years ago and Francis never stopped giving him advice on how to behave so that he would be as good as he was at home. "Try," he concluded, "to be very devoted to Mary most holy. She will certainly help you. For my part I'll keep praying for you. We shall write again shortly." He said all of this when he was about nine years of age. Then he turned to his parents who had lost the son they relied on most for the work in the fields. "You are sad," he told them, "but God will console us in another way by keeping us in good health and helping us in our work. And I shall do all I can to help you." What a wonderful worker he turned out to be. To the amazement of all he set out his allotted tasks, and he also wanted to take on another work, but his parents did not think he was strong enough. In the midst of all the work in the fields he maintained his sense of cheerfulness despite great fatigue. If at times his father would jokingly tell him that he seemed tired of work, he would reply: "Yes, it seems that I am not suited to this type of work; my godfather always tells me that I should study; perhaps he will help me." And he never let a day go by without telling the family that he wanted to go to school. He used to go to school during the winter, but he never excused himself from the domestic work, as so many boys do, so that he could play during free time. The tenor of his life during the time he went to school in Argentera is as follows.

*\* Francis was prepared to show his love for his parents in a practical way.*

## CHAPTER 4

Although his parents really needed him at home, they realized that regular instruction is a very valuable means of learning one's religion, and so they sent Francis to school. He would get up early and recite his morning prayers, stopping often to meditate on their meaning. He said his prayers alone or with his family. Then he studied until it was time to go to school; after school he would come straight back to do whatever was needed of him at home. His progress in class mirrored his great diligence; he was not a brilliant student, but he did his best and made good use of his time to learn his lessons.

His teacher had given the students a general instruction not to wander about of an evening during the winter season, and Besucco gave a shining example. Not only did he obey scrupulously, but he drew many of his companions to imitate him and this helped their learning and their virtue; it also pleased their teacher Antonio Valorso, their parents and the boys themselves.

Seldom would he go out to play after dinner, and he had ceased to do this almost entirely several months before he came to the Oratory.

After some relaxation he got down to his study until the bell for school sounded. His teacher states that he paid the greatest attention to whatever he was taught and was always respectful. He helped the teacher to teach the young pupils to read and he did this quite naturally. For the whole time that he attended the village school he was regarded by his companions as an example of good behaviour and diligence. They had such esteem for our Francis that they took care when, in his presence, not to let unbecoming words slip out. They were sure that he would not have approved and that he would have let them know it; and it did occur on several occasions. If anyone younger than himself needed help outside of school hours, he was only too willing and he insisted on being asked often. At the same time he did not pass over any occasion to give some salutary advice or to urge greater love of God.

His zealous teacher has told me some facts about Francis at school and I shall pass them on as I heard them. Every now and then there was a fight amongst his school mates, and he would immediately step into their midst to quiet them down. "We are friends," he would tell them, "and we should not fight each other, especially over these harmless trifles; let us think well of each other and learn to put up with each other as God wants us to." Words such as these usually succeeded in restoring the peace. If he saw that his words could not pacify them, he immediately walked away.

As soon as he heard the bell for school or for church he invited his companions to finish their games. One day he was playing bocce when he heard the bell for catechism class. Francis immediately said: "Let us go to Catechism class, we can finish our game after Church." With that he left them. After church he returned and gently rebuked them for missing the instruction

and practices of piety; and then to show that they were still his friends he bought them some cherries. At this sign of generosity and courtesy they promised that in future they would not miss religious functions because of their games.

He would become upset if he heard someone say an indecent word and he would either leave the company or give a severe reprimand. He was often heard to say: "My friends, don't say those words. They offend God and they scandalize others." Those same companions state that Francis very often invited them to visit the Blessed Sacrament and Our Lady; and that he never missed any opportunity to help them in their school work.

At other times when he heard the Angelus bell he would say: "Come on, let's say the Angelus; and then we can continue our games." When on holiday he would invite the same companions to assist at Mass.

"As the teacher of the village school of Argentera I must say, to the greater glory of God, that the pious young boy Besucco was second to none in his diligence in coming to school during his five years there. If he ever saw companions who were negligent he could warn them so kindly that, whether they wanted to or not, they became more diligent. In school his conduct could not have been better, whether it was keeping silence or paying attention to what was being taught. Besides that he took great pleasure in helping the smaller ones to read. He did this so politely and with such kindness that he was greatly loved and respected by them."

\* *Francis was following in the footsteps of young John Bosco by helping his companions in their studies as a form of positive apostolate.*

## CHAPTER 5

As soon as he arrived home from school he ran to kiss his parents and made himself ready to do whatever they wanted before tea time. It was a frugal table but he never grumbled about the quantity or quality of the food. He never wanted his own way and if he noticed others in the family who were dissatisfied he would say to them: "When you are out on your own you can do it your way, but right now we must do whatever our parents want. We

are poor and we cannot live like the rich. It is not important that my companions are well dressed, whilst I cannot have fine clothes. The best suit that we can possibly have is the grace of God." He had the greatest respect for his parents; he loved them with the most tender, filial love; he obeyed them blindly; and he never ceased praising whatever they did for him. They in their turn loved him greatly for this, and those times when he was not in their company weighted heavy on them. If sometimes his brothers or sisters jokingly said to him: "You've got every reason to be happy, Francis, for you are the Benjamin of the family," he would reply, "Yes, that's true, but I always try to be good and to earn their love and yours." This was only too true; if ever he was given a present, or he earned some money for services rendered, he would give it to his parents when he got home or he would share it with his brothers and sisters and tell them: "See how much I love you." Of an evening he would remain at home seldom going out to mix with others. He used the time enjoying the company of his family, studied his lessons or completed some other duty. Then at a set hour he invited all to say the third part of the Rosary with the usual prayers, which he prolonged because he liked to say many Our Fathers. He never forgot to solicit special prayers to obtain from God health for his father and brothers who lived away from the homestead in winter seeking work to support the family. "Who knows," he used often to say with tears in his eyes, "how much our father suffers for us. He must often be very tired and cold whilst we are comfortable here and eating the fruit of his labours. Let us at least pray for him."

He spoke about his absent father every day, and, accompanied him in thought everywhere in his journeys.

During the evenings he would often willingly read some devout books which he had obtained from his godfather or his teacher; they in turn only too gladly loaned them for him. Often when the house was full of people he would say: "Listen to the beautiful example which I found in this book." He would then read it aloud, in a resonant voice as though he were preaching. If he ever came across the life of some pious young man, the latter became the subject of his conversation and his imitation. "Wouldn't I be fortunate, mother, if I could become as good as he was?"

"Two years ago," says his parish priest, "he read the life of St. Aloysius, and promptly became his imitator, especially in keeping quiet about his good actions. Some months later he was given

the lives of Dominic Savio and Michael Magone. After reading the life of the latter he said that he had a good example for his waywardness; and asked God for the grace to correct his defects, and to imitate the good conduct and holy end of 'his dear Magone', as he called him. He wanted to learn about Magone and imitate him and he asked me whether it would be possible for him to go to the same institution so that he would become virtuous. This is the main benefit that our Francis obtained from the reading of good books. May God grant that all my young parishioners would read good books. It would certainly be some consolation to their parents."

In the morning Francis would raise his innocent soul to heaven; in the evening he would turn his thoughts to death. When asked what he did when he went to bed, he would answer: "I imagine that I am getting into my grave and then the first thought that comes to my mind is this: What will happen to you if you fall into the grave of hell? I am frightened by this thought and I pray as well as I can to Jesus, Mary, Joseph, my Guardian Angel, and I don't stop praying until I fall asleep. Oh! how many wonderful resolutions I make when I am in bed for fear of losing my soul. If I wake up in the night I resume praying and I am quite sorry if sleep surprises me again."

\* *Francis is just one example of the influence of reading good literature, in particular, the lives of models for the young. "Don Bosco was personally convinced that to preach the Good News by means of the press was a service he was obliged to render as an educator of youth and the common people."* (Fr. Peter Stella)

\* *"The press was one of the principal undertakings divine providence entrusted to me; I do not hesitate to call this means divine since God himself made use of it in the regeneration of man."* Don Bosco (Epist. IV, 318)

## CHAPTER 6

Although our Besucco seems to have been a privileged soul from his infancy, we must remember that the vigilance of his parents, his own good disposition and the loving care of his parish priest all greatly helped in his moral education. When he was yet a very young child his parents took him to church, they held his hands, they helped him to make the Sign of the

Cross well, they pointed out how and where he had to kneel. As soon as he was ready for it they took him to confession. Because of the example, the advice and the encouragement of his parents he took a liking to this Sacrament and instead of having the usual apprehension or repugnance which boys show when they have to appear before persons in authority, he experienced pleasure. We must also note that the success of this young boy is in great part due to his parish priest, Father Francis Pepino. This exemplary priest worked zealously for the good of his parishioners. But he was convinced that you cannot have good parishioners if the young people are not well educated. Hence he spared nothing in giving help to young people. He taught the boys how to serve Mass; he even taught school, and often went looking for them at home, at work, or in the fields. Any boy who showed an aptitude for study and piety became the special object of his solicitude. It was for this reason that, when he noted the blessings that the Lord was showering copiously on our dear Besucco, he took special care of him and wanted to give him his first lesson in catechism and also prepare him for his first confession. His kindly manner and his fatherly care gained Francis' heart so that he was only too happy whenever he would speak with his Parish Priest or hear some comforting and pious words from him.

He chose him for his regular confessor and continued to go to confession to him during the time he spent in Argentera. The Parish Priest advised him to change his confessor from time to time and even presented him with opportunity to do so, but the lad asked him to be his confessor all the time. "I have every confidence in you, Father," he would say, "you know my heart. I always tell you every secret, I love you very much because you love my soul very much."

I believe that the greatest thing that can happen to a young boy is the selection of a regular confessor to whom he can open his heart, a confessor who takes care of his soul, and with kindness and charity encourages him to approach this sacrament regularly.

Our Francis did not depend on his Parish Priest only for Confession, but also for everything that could contribute to his temporal and spiritual good. The advice given by his Parish Priest, or even his very wish was a command for Francis, who carefully and happily carried it out. His manner and frequency in going to Confession were also edifying. A few days before, he would speak of his coming confession, telling his brothers and sisters

that he wanted to get some good from it this time. He went to them, particularly in the early years, and asked them to teach him to make a good confession; and asked them how they recognized offences committed and how they remembered their sins over the long period of one month. He was also greatly surprised that, after going to confession, a person could again offend God to whom he had promised to be faithful. "How good God is," he used to say, "to pardon our sins despite our infidelity in the resolutions we make to him, but how much greater is our ingratitude in the face of such blessings; we should tremble at the very thought of our infidelity. For my part I am prepared to do whatever I can and to suffer anything rather than offend him again." The evening before his confession he asked his father whether he had any pressing work to do next day. When asked the reason for his question he stated that he wanted to go to Confession. His father always willingly consented and Francis passed nearly the whole night praying and examining his conscience so as to be better prepared, although his whole life could be called a continual preparation. In the morning, without speaking to anyone, he went to Church and there prepared himself for the great event with the greatest recollection. He always waited for those people who seemed to be in a hurry. "His thoughtfulness for others," says his parish priest, "especially in the bitter cold of winter, often impelled me to call him into the confessional, as he would be numbed with cold. He would be asked why he waited so long before going to confession. "I can wait," he would reply "because my parents do not blame me for the time spent in church; perhaps others could be annoyed or be rebuked at home, especially the mothers who have children." His brothers and sisters sometimes jokingly said to him: "You go to confession often just to dodge work." He would reply, "If you want to go to confession I'll willingly take your place and do what I can. The more often you go, the happier I shall be." And then that master of the spirit would often tell them: "The laziness you sometimes feel, the uncertainty about confession, the putting it off from day to day are just so many temptations of the devil. He knows what a powerful and efficacious remedy frequent confession is in the correction of our faults, and he makes every effort to keep us away from it. Oh! When it is a matter of doing good we are always frightened of the world; it is not the world but God who will judge us after death; we shall have to give an account of our works to him alone, and not to anyone else, not to the world; from him alone are we to expect eternal reward."



"When I have been to confession," he used sometimes to say to the other members of the family, "I experience such contentment that I would like to die there and then so as to avoid the danger of offending God again." On days when he went to the Sacraments he used to refrain from all recreations. When the Parish Priest asked him why he did this he replied: "Today I have no need to please my body, because the Good God has brought such great and sweet consolation to my soul. My great sorrow is that I am incapable of thanking my Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament for the continued help he gives me." Instead he spent the day in holy recollection and, as far as was possible, in Church.

I have it on good authority that in order to receive the Sacraments more worthily he used to say: "This confession could be the last of my life, and I want to make it as if it really were the last."

*\* Frequently, throughout this biography, Don Bosco dwells on the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He points out that Francis had already learnt a valuable lesson: the importance of a REGULAR CONFESSOR. Note Don Bosco's own comments at this juncture. Also note his comments on putting off going to confession and the dangers therein.*

## CHAPTER 7

It is not out of place to note that Francis' parents gave him full liberty to go to Mass every day; sometimes, when he was in doubt about going for fear of omitting some duty they themselves sent him to Mass. He was very happy about this and would say to his parents: "Oh! Be sure that time taken to hear Holy Mass will be abundantly rewarded during the day, because God pays well and I shall work much more willingly. On those mornings when he could not go to Mass, he would substitute this with a popular prayer which is widespread in that district. He had learnt it when he was four years old. "The Mass begins, St. Mark intones it, the Angels are singing it and the Baby Jesus offers the water and wine. Make me, O Jesus, part of the Mass this morning."

As a joke his father would ask Francis how he was going to spend that day without Mass and he would reply with the greatest simplicity: "God will help me just the same, because I have said my prayers and I shall pray more this evening."

He so readily believed what other people said that his companions sometimes told him some very tall stories. He remained quite calm, however, even when he realized that he was the butt of the leg-pulling. He was never seen to show signs of pride because of the esteem in which he was held by his parents, by his parish priest and by those who knew him. His work at his studies made him better than his companions, but this did not lead him to despise them; on the other hand he was very kind to them when they recited their lessons. If he received a rebuke for some childish prank, he would be quite contrite whether guilty or not and he would answer: "I won't do it again; I'll be better. You are blaming me, but I know that you pardon me. And here he would run to embrace and hug his parents, more often with tears in his eyes. They never had occasion to punish their son. During the summer he went to the fields to work with the family. He loved to help his brothers and sisters and worked as hard as he could. He shunned idleness and during the rest periods he would begin a discussion on religion or he would question his father on some doubt in spiritual matters.

He liked to pray when going to and from work. This Parish Priest says: "We would often meet him and he was so absorbed in prayer that he did not notice us. Sometimes he would be scandalized by swearing or bad talk which he could not avoid hearing. He would immediately make the Sign of the Cross or say: "Blessed be God. Blessed be his holy name." He immediately began to talk about something else. When warned by his parents not to follow the bad example of certain companions he would answer: "I would rather have my tongue cut out than use it to offend God."

When he led the sheep out to pasture he always had a good book with him and he would read it to his companions if they were prepared to listen to him. Otherwise he would read it by himself or say some prayers, following the command of our Saviour to pray always.

To help provide for his family, Francis' father undertook to look after the common flock and he often set Francis this task, particularly on feast days so that his brothers might take part in parish functions at least on those days. Francis accepted the task obediently and willingly. "If I can't go to Church on these days, I shall try to sanctify the feast in some other way." He would tell his brothers to remember him in Church. When it was time for

the devotions, he would take the animals to a safe spot, then he would kneel down before a makeshift crucifix to say his prayers or engage in spiritual reading. Sometimes he would hide in a cave in the hills, kneel before a picture he had in his book and recite the very same prayers being said in Church. Afterwards he would make the Stations of the Cross. In the evening he sang Vespers on his own and said the Rosary. It was really a great feast day for him when he could find companions to help him praise God. Sometimes he was surprised by his companions when he was at prayer or meditation and his attitude was so fervent that his face seemed to be that of an angel. If he chanced to find willing companions he would ask them to keep an eye on the flock, saying that he had something else to do, and he would slip away for a while. They knew what he was about and they were generally very willing to help him.

Later he was to remember with great pleasure the pasture fields of Roburento and Dreco in the mountains where he used to take his sheep.

"When I was in the solitude of Roburento," he used to say, "I was always very happy. I looked into the deep ravines which led to a kind of dark abyss; and I thought of the dark abysses and the eternal darkness of hell. Birds would fly up from the bottom of the valleys right over my head; and this reminded me that we on earth must lift up our minds to God. As I gazed at the sun rising in the morning, I said to my heart: 'This is like our coming into the world.' Sunset in the evening told me of the shortness of life and the end which comes without our noticing it.

When I gazed at the peaks of the Maddalena and the other mountains white with snow, there came to my mind the innocence of the life that raises us up to God and merits for us his graces, his blessing and the great reward of paradise. After these and other thoughts, I would turn my face to one of the mountains and sing hymns to Our Lady. This was one of my dearest moments because, as I sang, my voice echoed back from the mountains and I rejoiced as if the angels of paradise were helping me to sing the glories of the great Mother of God."

Such were the thoughts in the mind of the pious little shepherd when he took his sheep up to the mountains and was unable to take part in the sacred functions of the Church.

As soon as he had come home and had something to eat he would run straight to the Church to make up for (they are his own words) his lack of devotion during the day. How many apologies would he make to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament in those visits!!

He never failed to make the Sign of the Cross and say some prayer when passing in front of a Church and especially if the Blessed Sacrament was reserved there.

If he was only looking after the family flock, in spring and autumn, there, with his parents' permission, he would bring the sheep home or hand them over to some companions and run along to the parish functions morning and evening. Oh! Why can't all boys imitate the example of Francis and not neglect their religious and their home duties? Unfortunately many dispense themselves for trifling reasons from going to the parish functions on feast days. May the example of this good young boy add weight to the recommendations of priests who preach and inculcate the sanctification of feast days.

*\* Don Bosco always insisted that the support of any growth in the spiritual life lay in devotion to the Eucharist and the Mother of God. As can be seen in this chapter, he had little to teach Francis about the centrality of the Eucharist.*

*\* Through his solitary life as a shepherd Francis had come close to God in His creation. This is something we need to learn and teach.*

## CHAPTER 8

In his conversations and recreations with his companions Francis was always very jovial. He generally chose those amusements that exercise the body, and he would say to his parents and companions: "I am training myself for the time when I'll have to go for military service and I'll certainly want to be a good soldier." He shunned quarrels, and to avoid them he put up with insults and even ill treatment. To avoid becoming involved, he often left the company and hurried home. He used the same prudence in dodging any conversation injurious to the character of others and frequently instead praised the virtues of others. If corrected for some childish fault, he never took offence and never answered back, but he would lower his head and show that he was sorry;

he would say: "This correction is a sign of the love you have for me." If at recreations, he heard the bell for school, for Mass or for devotions, or if his parents called out to him to come home, he never delayed, "These calls are the Voice of God and they require prompt obedience on my part."

From his early childhood, as stated above, Francis showed extraordinary respect and veneration for God's holy House. When he reached the threshold of the Church his face became serious as befitted this holy place. He wanted to be the first into the sacristy to serve Mass and sometimes ran through the Church, but a look from the Parish Priest or some other person was enough for him to understand that he should not do this and he would impose a penance on himself. For example he would make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament or remain alone in Church for a considerable period of time and pray in an uncomfortable position, such as holding his arms in the form of a cross or with his hands under his knees. "How many squabbles have I not seen in the sacristy," attests his Parish Priest, "between Francis and other boys all wanting to serve at the Altar. Often I would put his virtue to the test, and also avoid a reputation for partiality to my godson, by preferring other boys when they came to Church together. He would be somewhat upset, and even shed a tear, but he would not take offence and would remain to assist at Mass with his usual devotion. "I'll make up for his mortification" he would tell his companions; "I'll be first here tomorrow," and he nearly always was. These were probably his only squabbles with his companions." From then on they would be led by the example of Francis to copy his zeal for the service of Holy Mass. Generally he had his hands joined and his eyes fixed on the ciborium or the celebrant, or he read from some devout book. It was touching to see him bring the cruets to the altar. He was recollected, moved about solemnly as he went about his duties as though he were already a cleric perfectly versed in the ceremonies of the Church. Francis was not only happy to give Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament all the honour he could but he tried to make Him honoured also by his companions. Hence on every feast day he went into the sacristy to get the prayer books to give out to his companions so that they would hear Mass with devotion, and not be distracted during Vespers.

"My dear boy, why are you crying so much?" the Parish Priest asked him many times. "I've reason to cry," he replied, "because some boys don't want a book. I know they haven't got one

and I see them looking around and not praying.” He would cheer up only when they came and asked for a book. He offered himself willingly for all services in the Church. He lit the charcoal for Benediction, prepared wine and water for Mass, having first checked that nothing required for the ceremony was missing. You could almost say that he was transplanted into the house of the Lord.”

It was his custom not only to go to Church every day for the sacred ceremonies, but also for a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. He would kneel in front of Our Lady’s Altar for a long time. Not only his Parish Priest but many of the townsfolk attest that they saw him during these visits in such a devout attitude that he seemed ecstatic. Every day he recited the Memorare followed by a Hail Mary and the ejaculation Mary Help of Christians, pray for us. He taught his companions this prayer and had them recite it often. On Feast Days and even on week days he liked to go to the Church to say his night prayers and all the favourite prayers that he had omitted during the week through forgetfulness or inability. Those who saw him admired such virtues in a boy so young.

*\*Don Bosco points out another aspect of his spirituality which Francis already possessed: the spirit of joy, the ‘serving God in gladness’. He remarks, with deep satisfaction that Francis “in his conversations and recreations . . . was always very jovial.”*

*\*Another aspect, which Don Bosco stressed in his “Companion of Youth”, was already part of Francis’ life: “Since we are Christians, we should have great esteem for everything touching our Catholic faith, and especially for the church, which is the House of God, a place of sanctity, the temple of prayer.”*

## CHAPTER 9

Here it seems opportune to point out how very devoted Francis was to the miraculous Crucifix that has been venerated from time immemorial by Confraternities in Argentera, Sambucco, Pietra Porzio, Ponte Bernardo and Bersezio. Large numbers of people go to pray in front of the Crucifix in times of drought and flood. The times when they come in procession to ask for favours and are not heard are very rare. The pious boy could hardly pronounce distinctly the two words Blessed Christ (the name given to the miraculous crucifix) when he asked his father to say an

Our Father in front of the Crucifix. The devotion grew up with him. Besides his frequent visits he recited the Rosary every summer evening for three years (1861, 1862, 1863) with the Confraternity. So that he could satisfy his desire to say the Rosary and to hear Mass every day he sometimes forgot his dinner or his tea, but he said that he preferred to think of his soul rather than his body. His mortification in attending to the works of piety had become so habitual that his parents took great care not to be the cause of it. When the Rosary had finished Francis did not go out of Church with the others, but remained inside for some considerable time to appease his burning desire to honour God and His Holy Mother. He believed he had to do this, as he often told his Parish Priest, because he always felt that he was really in the presence of God.

The thought of the presence of God was so much part of him in the last years of his life that he could be said to be in continual union with God.

"Francis is no longer with us," wrote his Parish Priest, "but we seem to see him in his place near the Altar and to hear him lead the prayers; we were so used to see him at the Practices of Piety." In 1860 he was invited to help in the Pious Work of Devotion to Mary most holy and he did so willingly. Every evening of the month he led the public recitation of the Rosary, as well as the usual prayers and some special ones and the faithful accompanied him. There was a good attendance and all admired the extraordinary devotion that stood out in our Francis. If the Parish Priest needed any help in the discharge of his duties either to exhort a sick person to go to Confession or to prepare him to receive Viaticum, he recommended everything to Francis' prayers and he was sure of a favourable result. There was one particular case, a man known to all to have neglected the affairs of his soul. He was dying and he did not want to be reconciled with God. The Parish Priest recommended him to the prayers of Francis, and to the admiration of all he yielded quite quickly.

\* *Francis' devotion to Christ Crucified gave him the inspiration for and supported his spirit of mortification.*

*"The way of the Cross is the way that leads to God." Don Bosco wrote this in a letter to a Salesian Sisters Postulant (Magdalene Martini). The whole letter makes interesting reading as found in BM X1, 338-339.*

\* *"The thought of the presence of God was so much part of him in the last years of his life that he could be said to be in continual union with God."*

*"Don Bosco never left off praying. He did his work, he joined in the recreation, he did his writing, but his heart was lifted up to God all the time. Do not say, boldly and without some qualification, then, that Salesians belong to the active life. Even as we work, we contemplate. We are at one and the same time, both active and contemplative."* (Don Rinaldi, 1927)

\* *"Most of the faults committed by good people arise from their not sufficiently keeping a steadfast recollection of the presence of God." St. Francis de Sales.*

## CHAPTER 10

A Catechist for the young people was needed and Francis filled the position for four years. He taught carefully and enthusiastically, the boys were pleased to have him and showed him great respect. Hence the Parish Priest chose him to teach catechism to a large class in Lent. After his own class he would invite the children to go with him and sit in on lessons given to more adult classes. During this instruction, as indeed during all sermons, he paid great attention. He would often go to the Priest after the sermon and ask him how he could put into practice what he had heard in the sermon.

When he reached home it was his custom to tell his parents and the whole family what he had heard in church. They were amazed that such a young boy could remember so much.

In all his religious practices he followed the example of another boy of Argentera, his cousin Stephen Valorso who died in 1861. Stephen loved his practices of devotion so much that his loss was felt throughout the district. "I gathered all the young people together," related the Parish Priest, "and asked them if there was anyone they knew who could replace our deceased youngster in diligence and in the practice of the religious exercises. They looked at each other for an instant, then they all turned and looked at Francis. He went red in the face, but he came up to me and said: 'I am ready to replace my cousin in the religious practices under your direction. I promise, to the best of my ability, to emulate the diligence of my dead cousin in the tasks in Church, but with God's grace I shall try to be



better than he was. His clothes were handed down to me; I am wearing them and I also hope to clothe myself with all his virtues." Francis began his career by inviting his companions to make a novena of prayer at Our Lady's altar for the soul of Stephen Valorso and to go to Mass every day during the Novena. Who would have thought that a second novena would shortly be made at the same altar for the one who first thought of it?"

*\* Francis Besucco shared many of Don Bosco's convictions, long before he came under his influence. Not the least amongst these was his appreciation of the value of catechesis — of how this is a real participation in the Divine work.*

## CHAPTER 11

In 1857 Francis joined the Confraternity of the Holy Childhood. He was very pleased to be in it, but he had one great problem, viz. no money to pay the monthly subscription. He went to the parish priest, who immediately solved his problem and gave him what was required; he was pleased to reward him for his good conduct. Francis loved to read the records of the Confraternity. He also admired the solicitude and the diligence of so many boys in helping such a work. Francis often wept in sorrow at not being able to help poor unfaithful children as he would have liked. To make up for his lack of money he offered God his fervent prayers and he got others to join. He took pains to tell his companions about the many children who had been saved.

In 1858 overcoming all human respect he added the "Stations of the Cross" to his devotions after the Parish Mass on feast days. He kept this up until he departed for the Oratory. But the admirable devotion with which he performed this religious practice frequently made him the object of scorn on the part of some of the boys. Francis' devotion was a sharp rebuke to their own un-Christian conduct; they branded him an imposter and a bigot; they exposed him to a kind of persecution in the hope of dampening his enthusiasm for his practices of piety. But, supported by his parents and comforted by his confessor, he paid no attention to them. He took no notice of their gossip nor of their ridicule and kept out of their way; he kept up his devotion of the Stations of the Cross to the edification of many of the faithful who were present.

After that he would often tell his sisters that he no longer paid any attention to the gossip of the world, and that they should

not let themselves be intimidated from doing good; they answered that some people were calling him "little monk", "goody-goody", etc. "Do you know why I am ridiculed by the world?" he asked them. "Because I have decided that I no longer belong to the world. We are in the world to please God and serve Him alone, not to serve and please the world. Let us, therefore, work only to gain Paradise for ourselves. This is the very reason why God leaves us in the world." In line with this thinking when anyone disapproved of the good he was doing, he would turn his back on them and go home, thereby putting into practice what he said every morning on rising: "Leave the deceitful world alone." The evil world did not like him because Francis was detached from the world.

The priest often joined the family discussions and Francis asked him when he would be able to make his first Communion, something very dear to his heart. "Soon perhaps," replied the priest, "if you learn your catechism and you give me further proof of your progress in virtue." Only a few months were to pass before this young boy, like that other Joseph, merited as a reward for his virtue to be admitted to First Communion, even though only 8½ years old.

One day in the spring of 1858 he was looking after the sheep with two other boys a little younger than himself in a field near home. They performed some immodest acts in his presence. This offended him and he rebuked them sternly. "If you don't want to be good and give good example, at least don't give scandal. Would you do such things in front of the priest or your parents? If you don't dare do them in the presence of men, why do you do them in front of God?" When he saw that they took no notice of him, he was indignant and left them. And then? One of them ran after him and asked him to join them in what they were doing. Poor Francis stopped and turned on his seducer with kicks and punches. When he saw that he could not win this way, he did something worthy of advice - but not of imitation. He was near a heap of stones and he called out: "Go away or I'll break your head open." By this time he was furious and he began throwing stones at the enemy of his soul. The other fellow was hit on the face, shoulders and head and then fled. Francis, frightened by the danger but happy with his victory raced home to safety and to thank God for his deliverance. This episode was related by someone who watched the whole action from about 50 metres away.

\* *Francis met the same fate as those who want to follow Christ closely — opposition, ridicule . . . Don Bosco met this as a youngster and countered it by the formation of Sodalties: the combination of the good to counter the attack of those who feel threatened. Young people find no greater obstacle than peer-pressure — they need a lot of support and encouragement if they are not to 'buckle'.*

\* *Holiness includes concern for others. Here Don Bosco writes of Francis' concern for the Missions and those less fortunate than himself even though his own life was a very frugal one!*

## CHAPTER 12

The following day, on being questioned about the incident by the Parish Priest, he replied: "The Grace of God freed me, and I'll never go with companions like that again." As a reward for his courage the Priest told him that he would be admitted to First Communion as soon as possible. This made him very happy and he set about preparing himself by avoiding every little known defect and by practicing those virtues compatible with his state. In his simplicity, he often asked the priest and his parents to help him. "When I go to Holy Communion," he would say, "I shall imagine that I am receiving Jesus from the hands of Our Lady, to whom I now feel that I should recommend myself."

He took great care to ask one of his companions, whom he knew to be quite devout, to keep a watchful eye on him so that he would not be guilty of any irreverence. He certainly could not have put more effort into his preparation. His parents, his teacher, his parish priest all affirm that all the time he was at home Francis never did anything which could be judged as a deliberate venial sin. His beautiful robe of innocence was the most important element in his preparation for Holy Communion.

He seemed to be ecstatic just after receiving Communion; his face changed colour and reflected the joy which filled his heart. The acts of love towards Jesus on such an occasion are proportionate to the care taken in preparing for Communion.

From then onwards he went to Confession every month and he went to Communion as often as his Confessor would allow it. In later years he used to help younger boys to prepare for Communion and make their thanksgiving. After Communion he heard

Mass with the greatest recollection; he did not even want to serve it on those days so that he could be more recollected. During the Mass he was completely absorbed, as he himself said, in contemplating the infinite condescension of Jesus; he did not even read his prayer book but spent the precious time, his face hidden in his hands, in continuous acts of the love of God. Before leaving the Church he went to Our Lady's Altar with his companions and thanked her for the help she had given them; he also recited the Memorare and quite a number of other prayers in a clear voice trembling with emotion. It was at this fire that our Francis so inflamed himself with the love of God that he wanted nothing else in this world other than to do the holy will of God. "I am beside myself," he said, "when I consider that on the days on which I go to Communion, I feel myself so drawn to prayer that I seem to be speaking to Jesus Himself and I tell him: 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

His heart was emptied of the things of this world, and God filled it with His grace. The days on which he went to Communion were entirely spent at home or in Church, and he would ask his companions to go with him to evening devotions so as to make a perfect end to a solemn day. In his later years he would go to Communion every Sunday and also on Feast Days, but he wanted first to go to Confession. He was so humble that he never believed his soul was sufficiently purged of sin; but on the advice of the Confessor he put aside every doubt and gave blind obedience to him.

*\*It may be said that, in our days, "there is a lack of Eucharistic 'hunger' and 'thirst' which is also a sign of inadequate sensitivity towards the great Sacrament of love and a lack of understanding of its nature." (Pope John Paul II: On the Mystery & Worship of the Eucharist. 1980, No. 11.)*

*The examples of Francis' serious preparation for his First Communion would be useful method for catechesis for this most important occasion - there was certainly no lack of 'hunger' or 'thirst' here.*

## CHAPTER 13

These rare virtues of his were defended, so to speak, by a continual spirit of mortification. From the time he was a little child he used to fast rigorously for a good part of Lent. When relatives

would remonstrate that it was indiscreet for one so young to engage in fasting, he would reply: "You don't go to Heaven without mortification. Therefore if both old and young want to go to Heaven, they must go there along the road of mortification. This mortification is also necessary for young people, either to make up for all the offence to God by their many faults or to train them for a mortified life, which everyone needs for salvation. You often tell me that I have many defects; that is why I want to fast." His parents, his brothers, his sisters testify that Francis made many wise observations of this kind.

This same spirit of mortification guided him in checking his eyes, so that he would not look at or listen to things offensive to good Christians. He also kept a check on his tongue; if at times he said anything improper, he would impose a penance on himself, e.g. making signs of the cross on the ground with his tongue. Sometimes his parents surprised him when he was performing this exercise of mortification. They asked him one day whether that penance had been given to him in Confession. "No," came the candid reply, "but seeing that my tongue is so quick in making coarse expressions I voluntarily drag it along the ground, so that it won't drag me into hell. I am also performing this penance so that God will grant me the grace to go to the place my Godfather promised to send me to study."

And as if all of this wasn't enough to keep him away from the corruption he observed in bad conversations, in his later years he sought only to mix with those companions he was certain would be of no risk to his soul.

He had a growing desire to go to the Oratory of St. Francis of Sales but there was one problem in the way. Before they could be admitted as students into the Oratory, boys had to have completed their elementary schooling so that they could begin the first year of High School. But at Argentera the elementary school had only Grade One and part of Grade Two. How could he get over this difficulty? Besucco's good conduct and the charity of the parish priest found the way out. The priest added teaching to his parochial duties, and helped Besucco and other promising boys. Francis was delighted and, with his parents' consent, he set about school duties with added vigour and diligence. He finished up being accepted for First Year of High School. He was forever grateful to his Parish Priest. "How can I ever repay his charity on my behalf?" It was his custom to go to

Our Lady's altar every day before school and with the confidence of a son recommend his teacher and himself to the Seat of Wisdom. "Whatever went on there, I do not know," said the priest, "but many a time he came out of Church with tears in his eyes, undoubtedly the effect of the emotions he went through." When he was asked for an explanation, he answered: "I prayed to Our Lady for you, Father, and asked her to obtain for you from God the thanks I am unable to give you."

"The whole time I taught him," asserted the priest, "he never once gave me any cause to correct him for negligence, because he did his utmost to correspond with all the teaching he was given."

*\* Francis was already a mystical soul, aware of the necessity of mortification.*

## CHAPTER 14

The parish priest wrote to me and recommended one of his parishioners whose conduct was excellent, who was rich in virtue, but who was poor in worldly goods. "This young lad," he said, "has been a consolation to me for many years and he is a great help in the parish. He serves Mass, he takes part in Church functions, he teaches catechism to younger children, he prays fervently, he frequents the Sacraments in an exemplary manner. I am quite willing to let him go, because I hope that he will become a minister of the Lord."

I was happy to co-operate in the education of such an exceptional young lad and I willingly admitted him to this house. He had also been recommended to me by Lieutenant Eysautier of the Royal Police as a model in study and good conduct. "When he heard the good news," wrote the Parish Priest, "this innocent young lad broke into tears of joy and gratitude." But there was another problem on the way, namely the poverty of his parents who were torn between the good disposition of their son and their own lack of means. The Parish Priest recommended that Francis make frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and also pray to Our Lady that he might know the will of God in this regard. God listened to his prayers. One morning he went to Mass and Communion and later arrived at school looking happier than usual. "Well," said the parish priest, "what good news have you for me this morning, Francis? Have you received an answer to your prayers?" "Yes," replied the boy, "I have. It was like this.

After Communion I promised God that I wanted to serve him forever and with all my heart, which I offered him many times. I also prayed to Our Lady for help in my needs. Then I thought I heard these words: 'Be of good heart, Francis, your wish will be granted.' They made me very happy."

He was so sure that he had heard this answer that he repeated it many times and without the slightest variation to his family. From then on he would say, "I am certain, Father, that I am going where you want to send me, because this is the will of God." If at times his parents seemed to be wavering in giving their permission he would explain: "Please don't interfere with my destiny, otherwise I shall become a disgrace to you." He would ask his mother, his brother, his sisters, his parish priest and other people to persuade his father to give his consent. His father did not require a great deal of persuasion. It seemed quite clear that God was calling Francis to work in his vineyard.

At the end of May 1863, as all difficulties had disappeared and as it seemed to be the will of God, his parents decided to send Francis to the Oratory. He was very grateful. "What a lucky boy I am," he said. "Oh, how happy I am. Be certain that I want to repay you by my good conduct." "He redoubled his fervour and his piety," wrote his Parish Priest, "he did nearly a year's work in June and July." Francis was aware of this himself. "You tell me, Father, that you are happy with me. I can't explain either how I have been able to learn so much in so short a time. To me it is a sure sign that I am following God's will." "But," interrupted the priest, "what are you going to pay me for all that I am doing for you? I hope you know that I expect to be paid well." "Yes, I do," answered Francis. "I promise that I shall pray often to God and to Mary most holy that you will be granted all the graces you desire. Be sure that I shall never forget you nor those who shortly are to be so many other fathers to me." Gratitude was one of the strong points of this good-natured boy.

The last day of June came, the day before Francis was to leave for the Oratory. That morning he went to the Sacraments for the last time in Argentera. His parish priest stated: "I saw him, with tears in his eyes, gaze at the confessional and the altars, with what thoughts who knows. His face shone with remarkable happiness after Communion. The fervour and long time taken for his thanksgiving were certainly abundant compensation for the many

Communion that he thought he would still make in this Church. That whole day was a feast day for Francis and I am not capable, due to my present emotion, of describing the very tender scene which followed in my room.

There in the presence of his father he fell on his knees and thanked me profusely for what I had done for him, he assured me of his eternal gratitude and of his docility to all the advice I had given him."

At home he seemed to be no longer of this world; he went about stating how happy and how lucky he was. "Oh! How can I ever thank God for having favoured me like this!" He said good-bye to all his relatives who were amazed to see their nephew or cousin as the case may be, so happy. "But," they told him, "you will be homesick and sad being so far away from your relatives, and, who knows, perhaps you will find Turin too hot in the summer."

"No, now don't worry about me. And my parents, my brothers and my sisters will be happy provided they get good news about me, and I shall try to console them with my letters. I am not afraid of suffering, or of being depressed, because I am sure that I am going to find there everything to make me happy. Imagine how happy I am going to be staying at the Oratory, if just the hope of going there fills me with happiness. The only thing I want is that you will pray for me so that I can always do the will of God."

"When he met me in the street later that day," continued the Parish Priest, "he told me that he was sorry to be leaving me but that the good reports I would get would console me. That night he could not sleep, but he passed it in prayer and union with God."

*\*"Gratitude was one of the strong points of this good-natured boy." How often is this mentioned in this short biography. Certainly this must be seen as a deliberate attempt by Don Bosco to highlight this virtue which he considered so essential in a young person.*



## CHAPTER 15

Early next morning he said goodbye to his dear mother, his brothers and his sisters. They were crying, but, although he felt the parting, he remained quite calm. He encouraged them all to have perfect resignation to the will of God. But when he recommended himself to their prayers so that he would always follow the voice of God who was calling him to His service, he burst into tears. His Parish Priest bade him farewell with these final words: "Go, my dear Francis, God who is taking you away from us is calling you to the Oratory where you will be able to sanctify your soul by emulating the virtues which opened Paradise to Dominic Savio and Michael Magone. During your last months with us you obtained your desire to go to the Oratory of St. Francis of Sales from your reading of their lives and holy deaths."

His father accompanied Francis to Turin; he took a small trunk with him: they left on August 1, 1863. As they left Argentera behind, his father asked Francis whether he was sorry to leave his home, his family and above all his mother. Francis' reply was always the same: "I am sure that I am doing God's will, and the further I get from home, the greater is my happiness." After answering, he continued with his prayers and his father attested that the journey from Argentera to Turin was for Francis almost one continuous prayer.

They reached Cuneo at about four in the morning of August 2. As they passed the Bishop's palace Francis asked: "Whose is that beautiful house?" "The Bishop's," came the reply. Francis signalled to his father that he wanted to stop for a moment. His father went on a little; when he turned around he saw Francis kneeling in front of the Bishop's gate. "What are you doing now?" he asked. "I am praying to God for His Lordship that he also might help me to get enrolled in the Oratory at Turin and that in due time he might number me amongst his clerics and hence do something useful for me and for others."

When they arrived in Turin, his father pointed out the wonderful sights of the Capital. His father observed the symmetrical streets, the large squares, the tall majestic porticos and the well decorated arcades; he admired the height and the elegance of the buildings; he thought that he was in another world.

"What do you think of it, Francis?" he asked the boy, full of wonder. "Doesn't it seem to you that we are already in Heaven?"

Francis smiled and answered: "All these things mean little to me. I won't be happy until I have been accepted at the Oratory to which I have been sent."

Finally they reached the longed-for place and full of joy he exclaimed: "Now we are here."

Then he said a short prayer to thank God and Our Lady for the successful journey they had made and for granting his wishes.

His father was moved to tears when leaving him, but Francis comforted him saying: "Don't worry about me, the Lord won't fail us; I shall pray to Him every day for all our family."

Further moved his father asked him if he needed anything; "Yes, daddy dear, thank my Godfather for the care that he has taken of me; assure him that I shall never forget him and by my concentration on study and my good conduct I shall make him quite pleased. Tell all those at home that I am very happy and that I have found my paradise."

## CHAPTER 16

What I have written about Francis Besucco so far forms the first part of his life, I obtained my information from those who knew him and those who lived with him in his home environment. I am now going to write about the second part of his life; but I shall recount things I heard myself, saw with my own eyes or things I was told by the hundreds of boys who were his companions during the time he spent with us. I have been particularly helped by a long and detailed account prepared by Don Ruffino, a teacher in the school here. He had the time and the opportunity to witness and note down the many acts of virtue practiced by our Besucco.

For a long time Francis was very eager to come to this Oratory but when he actually arrived he was quite bewildered. More than 700 boys soon became his friends and companions in recreation, at table, in the dormitory, in church, in school and in the study-hall. It seemed impossible to him that so many boys could live together in the same house without turning everything upside down. He wanted to ask questions of them all, he wanted to know the reason and explanation for everything.

Every bit of advice given by the Superiors and every inscription on the walls became for him the subject of reading, meditation and deep reflection.

It was the beginning of August 1863, and I had never seen him before. All I knew of him was what Archpriest Pepino had told me by letter. One day I was out with the boys at recreation when I saw a boy dressed like the mountain people; he was of medium build, freckle-faced country boy. He stood there, eyes wide-open, watching the others play. When his eyes met mine, he smiled respectfully and came over to me.

"Who are you?" I asked him smiling.

"I am Francis Besucco from Argentera."

"How old are you?"

"I'll soon be fourteen."

"Have you come to us to study, or to learn a trade?"

"I'm keen to study."

"How far have you gone in school?"

"I finished elementary school back home."

"Why do you want to continue going to school rather than learn a trade?"

"My greatest wish is to be a priest."

"Who ever advised you in this?"

"I have always wanted it, and I have always prayed to the Lord for help to realize my aim."

"Have you ever asked anyone for advice?"

"Yes, I spoke about many times with my Godfather; yes, with my Godfather . . ." He became emotional as he said this, and tears welled up in his eyes.

"Who is your Godfather?"

"My Godfather is the Provost, the Archpriest at Argentera; he is so good to me. He taught me my catechism, he taught me school, he clothed me, he kept me. He is such a good man; after teaching me for two years he recommended me to you so that you would accept me at the Oratory."

He began to cry again. His recognition of the benefits he had received and his affection for his benefactors gave me a good idea of his character and good heartedness. Then I remembered the reverences of his parish priest and of Lieutenant Eysautier and I thought to myself: "This boy, with proper education, will become a very good boy. Because experience shows that gratitude in young people is a good pointer to a successful future: on the other hand those who easily forget the favours they have received and the attention given to them stay insensitive to advice and to religious training; they are therefore difficult to educate and their results are uncertain."

Therefore I said to Francis: "I am very pleased that you like your Godfather so much, but I don't want you to be worried. Love him in the Lord, pray for him, and, if you want to really please him, try to conduct yourself in such a manner that I can send him good reports about you; or, if he comes to Turin, he will be able to appreciate your progress and conduct. Meanwhile go and play with your companions." He wiped away his tears, smiled affectionately at me and then went to take part in the games with his companions.

*\* We now begin Don Bosco's own personal recollections of Francis.*

*The first point he makes is that Francis desperately wanted to be helped. Don Bosco often stressed this element: you cannot help someone who does not want to be helped.*

*\* Once more we find praise for gratitude and how much it tells us of the nobility of a soul.*

## CHAPTER 17

In his humility Francis looked upon his companions as more virtuous than himself and he rated himself poorly when comparing his conduct with theirs. A few days later he again approached me with a rather perturbed look on his face.

"What's the matter, my dear Besucco?" I asked him.

"Here I am with so many real good companions; I'd like to be as good as they are but I don't know how to go about it. I need your help."

"I'll help you in every way I can. If you want to be good, practice three things only and all will go well."

"What are these three things?"

"They are: Cheerfulness, Study, Piety. This is the great programme. Following it you will be able to live happily and do a lot of good for your soul."

"Cheerfulness - cheerfulness - I am already too cheerful. If being cheerful is enough for me to be good, I'll go and play from morning to night. Will that be all right?"

"Not from morning to night, but only during the hours of recreation."

He took my advice too literally; convinced that he was doing something pleasing to God by playing, he became very impatient waiting for play time. He was not very good at some of the games, and often knocked into things or fell over. He wanted to walk on stilts, and had a tumble; he wanted to exercise on the parallel bars and fell head over heels. At bocce he either hit others on the legs with his bowl, or he spoilt the game for others. To sum up, his games always ended up by his falling over or some such mishap. One day a worried Francis limped up to me:

"What is it, Besucco?" I asked him.

"I'm bruised all over," he answered.

"How did that happen?"

"I'm not very good at the games they play here; I've fallen on my head, I've hurt my legs and my arms; yesterday I collided with a companion and we both finished up with blood noses."

"You poor boy! Use a bit of sense, take it easy."

"But you told me that these recreations pleased God; and I want to do well in all the games with my companions."

"You don't quite understand; you must learn these games gradually and play them in accordance with your ability. They are meant to be a means of recreation and not of harm to the body."

He then understood that recreation should be taken in moderation and directed to the relief of the spirit; otherwise it can cause bodily harm. He continued to be a willing participant in the games, but he was more careful. Also, if free time was somewhat prolonged, he would break off from a game and talk to a studious companion about the rules and discipline of the house or about some scholastic difficulty. Furthermore he learnt the secret of doing some good to himself and to his companions in the recreations themselves, by giving some good advice or courteously warning others when an occasion presented itself, just as he used to do at home in a far more restricted setting. By spending part of his recreations in this way, in a short time Besucco became a model in study and in piety.

*In the mind of Don Bosco the recipe for holiness could be translated into the following terms:*

-- (Cheerfulness)	<i>The playground</i>
-- (Study)	<i>Doing one's duty as well as one possibly can</i>
-- (Piety)	

*\*Caviglia comments that this chapter stresses the spiritual value, the energizing and redeeming value of joy, particularly for young people.*

*\*"Sanctity may be attained not only through the hard road of outstanding spiritual gestures but by the humble and modest tracks of a spirituality based on easy things that all can perform." (Fr. Caviglia).*

*\*"Let us keep to the easy things but let us be constant in doing them." Don Bosco*

*\*"The insistence on this aspect of DUTY in the biographies of the three youngsters is so powerful as to make of work that '8th sacrament' that puts young people on guard against illusions, so easy at this age, and makes of it the SUPREME REGULATOR that prepares them, through this asceticism, to face the future with confidence." (Fr. A. Martinelli: Youthful Sanctity in the Biographies Written by Don Bosco)*

## CHAPTER 18

One day Besucco read these words on a placard in my room: "Every moment of time is a treasure."

He was puzzled and he said: "I don't understand what these words mean. How can we gain a treasure in every moment of time?"

"But it's true. In every moment of time we can learn some scientific or religious fact, we can practice some virtue, we can make an act of the love of God; before the Lord there are so many treasures which will help us in time and in eternity."

He made no further comment, but he wrote the words down on a piece of paper, and then said: "I understand." He understood how precious time was and, recalling a recommendation of his Archpriest, he added: "My Godfather also had told me that time is very precious and that we must occupy it well, beginning in our youth."

After that he set about his various tasks with even greater application. To the glory of God I can say that, in all the time he spent in this house, there was never any need to encourage him or advise him in the carrying out of his duties.

It is a custom in this house to read out every Saturday marks the boys are given for their conduct and study during the previous week. Besucco's marks were always the same, namely excellent.

When it was time to go to the study-hall, he went immediately without a moment's hesitation. It was wonderful to see him so absorbed in his study and writing away like someone doing something really to his liking. He never left his place for any reason whatever; and no matter how long the study period lasted he never took his eyes off his text books or exercise-books.

One of his greatest fears was that he would involuntarily break the rules; and, particularly in his first few days, he often asked if he could do this or that. For example, he once asked in all simplicity if he were allowed to write in the study hall, since he thought that they weren't supposed to do anything else there except study. Another time he asked whether he was permitted to put his books in order during study time. He asked

the help of the Lord for proper use of his time. Once some companions saw him make the Sign of the Cross during study time; then raise his eyes to Heaven and pray. Afterwards they asked why he did that and he answered: "I often have difficulties in learning and so I ask the Lord to give me his help."

He had read in the life of Michael Magone that before study Michael always said: "Maria, Sedes Sapientiae, ora pro me." He began to do this also. He wrote these words on his books, on his exercise books and on some strips of paper which he used as book-marks. Sometimes he wrote notes to his companions and either at the beginning or on a separate sheet of paper he wrote for them the same invocation to his heavenly mother as he used to call her.

I read one of the letters he wrote to a companion. It stated: "you have asked me how I have been able to keep going in Second Year when had I been following the usual routine I would barely have made First Year. I answer frankly that this is a special blessing of the Lord, who has given me health and strength. Besides that I have discovered three secrets which I have used to great advantage. They are:

1. Never to waste a moment of time when it comes to duties in school or in the study hall.
2. On holidays or other days when recreation is lengthened I go to study after half an hour, or I discuss school matters with some companions who are further advanced in study than I am.
3. Every morning before going out of Church I say an Our Father and a Hail Mary to St. Joseph. This is the means that has helped me advance in knowledge. From the time I began saying this Our Father I have always found it easier either to learn my lessons or to overcome the difficulties that I often meet in scholastic matters.

"Try it yourself," concluded the letter, "and you'll certainly be happy with it."

We should not be surprised to read that, with such great diligence, he was able to make such rapid progress in school.

When he came to us he almost gave up hope of being able to cope with First Year, but after only two months he was already



getting quite satisfactory marks in his class. In school he dwelt on every word spoken by his teacher who never had to reprimand him for inattention.

What has been said about Besucco's diligence in matters of study must also be said about all his other duties, even the smallest: he was exemplary in everything. He had been given the task of sweeping the dormitory. He won admiration for the exactitude with which he discharged this duty without giving the least sign that it was a burden to him.

When he was sick and could not get out of bed, he apologized to the assistant for not being able to do his usual task and he profusely thanked a companion who took his place.

Besucco came to the Oratory with a fixed purpose; in his life here he always had in view the point to which he was aiming, namely to dedicate himself completely to God in the priesthood. To this end he sought to make progress in knowledge and virtue. He was speaking with a companion one day about their studies and the reason why each of them had come to the house. Besucco gave his own reasons and then concluded: "To sum it all up my reason is to become a priest; with the help of the Lord I'll do everything possible to achieve this."

*\* The pedagogy and spirituality of duty — how much Don Bosco insisted upon this with his boys and with his Salesians!*

*In one of his Good-Nights Fr. Francesia said that Don Bosco often expressed the following thought:*

*"He does a lot who does little but does what he should be doing; whilst, instead, he does little who does a lot but does not do what he is supposed to do."*

## CHAPTER 19

You can say what you like about various systems of education, but I have not found any other firm basis for education than frequent Confession and Communion; and I believe that I am not exaggerating if I assert that morality is endangered when these two elements are missing. Besucco, as we have seen, was trained to approach these two sacraments frequently. When he arrived at the Oratory he grew in fervour in going to Confession and Communion.

At the beginning of the Novena for the Nativity of Mary Most Holy, he went to his Director and said: "I would like to make this Novena well, and, amongst other things, I want to make a general Confession." When he had heard the reasons for this request the Director replied that he did not see any reason for a general confession and he added: "You needn't worry, especially as you have made a general confession at other times to your Archpriest." "Yes," he replied, "I did so on the occasion of my First Communion and also at a Retreat in my parish, but, as I want to put my soul in your hands, I want to reveal to you everything that is on my conscience so that you can with greater surety give me the advice best adapted to help me save my soul."

The director agreed; he praised him for his decision to choose a regular confessor; he exhorted him to think well of his confessor, to pray for him, and to always lay open before him anything which troubled his conscience. Then he helped him prepare for the general confession he wanted to make. He performed this act with very great expressions of sorrow for his past and resolutions for the future even though, as anyone could judge from what was known of his life, he had never committed any fault which could be deemed a mortal sin. Once he had made a choice of Confessor he did not change him for the whole time that the Lord spared him to us.

He had full confidence in him, he consulted him even outside of confession, he prayed for him and he was very pleased every time he was able to get from him a piece of good advice for his rule of life.

One day he wrote a letter to a friend who had told him that he too would like to come to the Oratory. He recommended that he pray to the Lord for this grace and then he suggested some practices of piety to him, such as the Stations of the Cross; but above all he advised him to go to Confession every week and to go to Communion several times during this week.

Whilst I greatly praise Besucco in this matter, I recommend with all my heart, to all people, but especially to young people to choose a regular confessor in good time, never to change him, except for reasons of necessity. Let them avoid the mistake of some people, who change the confessor almost every time they go to Confession; or, when they have to confess something of greater

importance, go to another confessor and then return to their regular confessor. When they act this way they are not committing any sin, but they will never have a sure guide who thoroughly knows the state of their conscience. They will meet the same fate that befalls a sick man who goes to a different doctor each time. The doctor will find it difficult to diagnose the illness, and hence will be uncertain as to what remedies to prescribe.

If by any chance this booklet should be read by anyone who is destined by Divine Providence to be engaged in the education of young people, I would strongly recommend three things to him. First, zealously inculcate frequent Confession as a prop to the instability of young people and do everything to assist regularity at this Sacrament. Secondly let them insist on the great usefulness in choosing a regular confessor who is not to be changed without necessity, but let there be a supply of confessors so that everyone can choose him who seems best adapted to the needs of his own soul. But let them always bear in mind that if one changes confessor he does not do anything wrong and that it is better to change him a thousand times than to keep back any sin in confession.

Let them never fail to speak very often about the great secret of Confession. Let them explicitly teach that the Confessor is bound by a secret which is natural, ecclesiastical, divine and civil, and that he cannot for any reason at all, cost what it may, even death, reveal to others what he has heard in confession or make use of it for his own purposes; that, moreover, he cannot even think of things heard in this Sacrament; that the confessor is not greatly surprised nor does he lose his esteem and affection for people because of serious things heard in the confessional; on the contrary the penitent goes up in his eyes. A doctor is quite pleased when he finds out why his patient is seriously ill, because he can then apply the correct remedy; the confessor who is the doctor of the soul does the same thing. By absolution he cures in God's name all the ills of the soul. I am convinced that we shall obtain wonderful moral results among our boys if these things are recommended and explained; and the results will be the wonderful moral effect the Catholic religion has in the sacrament of penance.

*\*This is the classic chapter on the centrality of the sacraments, especially that of Reconciliation and the Eucharist, in the pedagogy of St. John Bosco.*

*'Frequent confession and frequent communion . . . are the pillars which must hold up our educational edifice'."*

*\*"No other writing of the saintly educator (re centrality of the sacraments in the work of education) contains a statement such as this — it is so definitive and totalitarian. To ignore it would be to turn away the key to his thinking on the Prevention System." (Fr. Caviglia).*

## CHAPTER 20

The second prop for young people is Holy Communion. Fortunate are those boys who begin in good time to go to Communion frequently and with the right dispositions. Besucco had been taught to communicate often and with fruit by his parents and by his parish priest. At home he used to go to Communion every week; then on Feast Days and even some times during the week. When he came to the Oratory he continued to go to Communion with the same frequency, then he went several times a week, and during novenas even every day. Although his innocent soul and his very exemplary conduct made him worthy to receive Communion frequently, nevertheless he considered that he was not worthy of it. His apprehensions grew when a person who came to this house told Besucco that it was better to go less frequently so that he could make a longer preparation and receive Communion more fervently.

One day he went to his superior and told him all his worries. "Don't you eat material bread for your body with great frequency?" the superior asked him.

"Yes, I do."

"If we eat material bread so frequently for the body which is only meant to live for a short time on this earth, why should we not often, even every day, take spiritual bread for the soul, i.e. Holy Communion? (St. Augustine)"

"But anyone who eats less frequently has a better appetite."

"Anyone who eats sparingly and goes for days without food either faints through weakness or dies of hunger, or when he does decide to eat he runs the risk of getting indigestion."

"If that is the case, I'll try to go more frequently to Holy Communion in the future, because I really know that it is a powerful means for making me good."

"Go as frequently as your Confessor suggests."

"He tells me to go every time that there is nothing disturbing my conscience."

"Good; follow that advice. Meanwhile I want to tell you that Our Lord Jesus Christ invites us to eat His Body and drink His Blood every time that we are in spiritual need, and we live in continual need in this world. He goes so far as to say: "If you do not eat my body and drink my blood, you shall not have life in you!" For this reason, as the time of the apostles the Christians were persevering in prayer and in feeding themselves with the Eucharistic Bread. In the first centuries all of those who went to hear Mass received Holy Communion. And anyone who heard Mass every day, also went to Communion every day. The Catholic Church at the Council of Trent recommended to Christians that they assist at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as often as possible, and amongst others there are these beautiful words: "It is the wish of the Council that when the faithful go to Mass they go to Communion not only spiritually but also sacramentally so that the fruit which comes from this Most August Sacrifice may be found more copiously in them. (Sess. 22, C.6)

\* *Discipline and piety went hand in hand in Don Bosco's House. in 1875, Bro. Enria overheard some visitors express their astonishment at the sight of so many boys in the study hall absolutely silent and intent upon their work. To their inquisitive questions as to the secret of such discipline, Don Bosco replied, "You see, it is not fear of punishment that makes these boys behave well and study hard, but fear of God and the fact that they frequently go to the Sacraments. That works wonders with young people."* (BM XI, 203)

Francis showed his great love for the Blessed Sacrament not only by going frequently to Communion, but whenever an occasion presented itself. At home he was always very pleased to accompany the priest carrying Holy Viaticum. Whenever he heard the bell he immediately asked his parents for permission to go out, and they willingly granted it; then he ran to the Church to offer his services in a manner befitting his age. He was always delighted

to do whatever was required, such as, ring the handbell, carry a lighted torch, carry the ombrellino, say the Confiteor, the Miserere or the Te Deum. At home he would willingly help companions who were younger or less instructed than he was to prepare to receive Communion worthily and afterwards to make the appropriate thanksgiving.

His fervour continued at the Oratory and, amongst other things, he formed the very commendable habit of making a short visit to the Blessed Sacrament every day. He was often seen with a priest or cleric when they were taking a group of boys to say some special prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament. It was also edifying to witness the way he managed to take a companion with him into Church. One day he invited a companion saying: "Come with me and we shall go and say an Our Father to Jesus, who is there all alone in the tabernacle." The companion who was completely absorbed in his game answered that he did not want to go. Besucco went in alone just the same. The companion felt sorry the next day for having refused the kind invitation of his virtuous companion and went up to him and said: "Yesterday you invited me to go into the Church with you and I refused; today I am inviting you to keep me company in doing what I didn't do yesterday." Besucco smiled and answered "Don't worry about yesterday. I prayed for both of us. I said three Our Fathers for me and then three for you in front of the Blessed Sacrament. However, I shall go most willingly now and whenever you want to have me for company."

More than once I have had to go into the church after the evening meal to perform some duty whilst the boarders were happily engaged in a lively recreation in the yard. I did not have a lamp in my hands and I tripped over what seemed to be a sack of wheat. I was quite surprised to find out that I had bumped into Besucco who was kneeling in the dark behind the altar but quite near it. He was praying to his beloved Jesus asking for heavenly help to make himself better, or even to make him a Saint.

He would serve Mass very willingly. He took delight in preparing the altar, lighting the candles, taking out the cruets and in helping the priest to vest. Whenever someone else wanted to serve the Mass, he willingly gave way and then heard it with great recollection. Those who have observed him assisting at Mass or at Benediction in the evening are unanimous in asserting that it was

impossible to look at him without being struck and edified by the fervour he showed in praying, and by his composure.

He was also very eager to read books and to sing hymns about the Blessed Sacrament. Among the many ejaculations he recited throughout the day, his favourite was: "Blessed and praised every moment be the most holy and divine Sacrament." "With this ejaculation," he would say, "I gain 100 days indulgence every time; and moreover every time I began saying it all the bad thoughts running through my mind disappear. This ejaculation is a hammer with which I am certain to break the horns of the devil whenever he comes to tempt me."

*\*"Adoration of Christ in this Sacrament of love must also find expression in various forms of Eucharistic devotion: personal prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, hours of adoration, periods of exposition - Eucharistic benediction, Eucharistic processions, Eucharistic Congresses . . . The encouragement and the deepening of Eucharistic worship are proofs of that authentic renewal which the Council set itself as an aim and of which they are the central point." (On the Mystery and Worship of the Eucharist, Pope John Paul II, 24/2/1980, No. 3)*

## CHAPTER 22

It is so difficult to get boys to enjoy prayer. Their fickle age makes anything which requires serious mental attention seem nauseating and heavy. A boy is very fortunate if he has been trained in prayer and likes it. The spring of divine blessings is always opened by prayer.

Besucco belonged to the number of these boys. The assistance given him by his parents from his earliest years, the care taken by his teacher and especially the help of his parish priest all produced the desired end in our Francis. He was not accustomed to meditate, but he recited many vocal prayers. He uttered the words clearly and distinctly and he pronounced them in such a way that he seemed to be speaking to Our Lord, or Our Lady or some saint to whom he was directing his prayers.

He got up and dressed himself as soon as he was called in the morning, made his bed and then went straight to church or else he knelt down by his bedside to pray until the bell called

him elsewhere. His punctuality in going to church meant that he could sit next to those companions or go to those places where he knew he would not be distracted. He was always upset whenever he saw anyone talking or acting in a dissipated manner. One day as soon as he left the Church he went looking for a boy who had misbehaved in this way. When he found him he told him what he had done and, having made him see he had done wrong, he urged him to be more recollected in church.

He had a special devotion towards Mary most holy. He was particularly fervent towards her during the novena in preparation for her birthday. Every evening the Rector used to propose some practice in his exercise book. This way, he would say, I shall have a fine present to give to Our Lady at the end of the year. Throughout the day he repeated the practice and reminded his companions of it. He wanted to know the exact spot where Dominic Savio used to kneel to pray in front of Our Lady's Altar; he would go there to pray also. He used to say that he would dearly like to stay there from morning till evening to pray to Our Lady. "Because I seem to have Savio praying with me; he seems to answer my prayers, and his fervour instils itself into my heart." Generally he was the last to leave the church because he used always to stop for a short time in front of Our Lady's statue. This often caused him to miss breakfast. Those who noticed it were amazed that a strong, healthy boy of fourteen years would forget his bodily food in favour of the spiritual food of prayer.

Often, especially during holiday time, he went into the church with some of his companions to pray the seven joys of Mary, the seven sorrows of Mary, the litanies or the prayer to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. He never wanted to let others lead these prayers. On Friday whenever he could, he made or at least read the Stations of the Cross. This was one of his special practices of piety. "The way of the Cross," he used to say, "is a spark of fire for me; it helps me to pray and it drives me to put up with anything for the love of God."

He loved praying so much, and he was so used to it that whenever he was on his own or had nothing to do, he would immediately say some prayers. He often began to pray during recreation, and at times involuntarily used ejaculations during his games. One day he saw his Superior, ran up to him, saluted



him by name and then said to him, "Oh, Holy Mary". Another time he wanted to call out to a companion with whom he was playing and he shouted: "Oh, Peter Noster". Whilst these actions caused his companions to laugh at him, they also showed his love for prayer and his ability to recollect himself, to raise his mind to God. According to masters of the spiritual life this denotes a high degree of perfection which is rarely seen in people even far advanced in virtue.

After night prayers said in common every evening he went to the dormitory and knelt down on top of his trunk - not a very comfortable position - for a quarter of an hour or even half an hour to pray. When he was told that this disturbed his companions who were already in bed, he shortened his prayers and made sure that he was in bed at the same time as his companions. However, as soon as he settled into bed, he joined his hands on his breast and prayed until he fell asleep. If he woke up during the night he immediately began to pray for the souls in purgatory and he experienced great displeasure if sleep overtook him before he finished his prayer. "I'm sorry," he told a companion, "that I can't spend some time in bed without sleeping. I'm quite distressed. How much good I could do for the souls in Purgatory if I could pray as I want to."

In short, if we examine the spirit of prayer of this boy we can say that he literally followed the precept of Our Saviour who commanded us to pray always, because he passed his days and nights in continuous prayer.

## CHAPTER 23

Boys generally get frightened when you speak to them of penance. But when the love of God takes possession of a heart, nothing in this world and no suffering distress it; on the other hand every affliction in this life is a source of consolation. Tender hearts believe that suffering brings great results, and that a glorious reward in heaven is reserved for those who suffer during life.

From the earliest years Besucco had a great desire to suffer. Here at the Oratory he redoubled his fervour for suffering. He went to his Superior one day and said: "I am very worried: Our Lord says in the Gospel that you can only gain entrance

to Paradise by innocence or by penance. I can't go there through innocence because I've already lost it. Therefore I have to go there through penance."

The Superior replied that he should accept as his penances diligence in study, attention in school, obedience to his superiors, putting up with the inconveniences of life such as heat, cold, wind, hunger, thirst. "But," Besucco interjected, "we must suffer these things as a matter of necessity."

"That's right. But if you add suffering for the love of God to what you must suffer as a matter of necessity, it will become real penance, it will please the Lord, and it will bring merit to your soul."

He quietened down for a time, but he always asked to be allowed to fast, to give up this or that at breakfast, to wear something uncomfortable under his clothing or to put things in his bed. These were always forbidden him. On the Vigil of All Saints Day he asked as a special favour to be allowed to fast on bread and water, but this was changed to abstinence at breakfast time. This pleased him greatly because, as he said would be able, at least in something, to imitate the Saints in Paradise who saved their souls by walking the path of suffering.

It is not necessary to speak of the custody of the senses, especially of the eyes. Anyone who for any length of time had observed his very composure, his behaviour towards his companions, his modesty both inside the house and outside of it would not hesitate to affirm that he could be proposed as the perfect model of mortification and external behaviour of young people.

Although he was prohibited from performing corporal penances, he obtained permission for penances of another kind, namely doing the most humble tasks in the house. Some of the things he tackled with pleasure and great satisfaction were: running messages for his companions, carrying water, cleaning shoes, serving at table when he was allowed to, sweeping the refectory, sweeping the dormitory, carrying away the rubbish, carrying parcels and trunks, provided he was strong enough. These are all examples which could be imitated by certain young people who, when away from home, find it hard to lend a helping hand when they could do so. Sometimes there are young people who are ashamed to accompany their parents because they are not well dressed.

It is as though being away from home changes their condition and makes them forget their duty of reverence, respect and obedience to their parents, and of charity towards everyone.

But these small mortifications contented Besucco for a short time only; he wanted bigger mortifications. Sometimes he was heard to complain that he had performed bigger penances at home and his health had never suffered. His Superior always answered that real penances does not consist in what pleases us, but in what pleases the Lord and promotes his glory. "Be obedient," added the Superior, "and diligent in your duties, be kind and charitable towards your companions, put up with their defects, give them good advice and you will be doing something which pleases the Lord more than any other sacrifice."

Taking literally to heart what he had been told about patiently putting up with cold, he did not clothe himself properly when winter came along. One day I saw him looking very pale and asked him if he were sick. "No," he answered, "I'm quite all right." I took his hand and then realized that he was still in summer clothing even though we were within the novena for Christmas.

"Haven't you any winter clothing?" I asked.

"Yes, it's in my room."

"Why aren't you wearing it?"

"Ah . . . for the reason you already know: put up with the cold of winter for the love of God."

"Go and put it on immediately. See that you are well protected against the cold of winter. If you need anything ask for it and you'll be given it straightaway."

Despite all this, however, we could not prevent a disorder, which was possibly the beginning of the illness which carried him to the grave, but more about that later.

\* *LOVE was the inspiration and driving force of his spirituality.*

\* *"In the Preventive System LOVE IS EVERYTHING . . . the soul of the system is sanctification by means of love in the practice of one's daily duties." (Fr. Caviglia).*

## CHAPTER 24

There are some things Besucco said and did which have no direct relation to what we have already described, so they will now be recounted separately. I shall begin with his conversations. When speaking he was somewhat reserved, but jovial and witty. He would willingly talk about his experiences as a shepherd when he took sheep and goats out to pasture. He spoke of the bushes, of the pastures, of the valleys, of the caves and of the storms in the mountains of Roburento and Dreco as so many other wonders of the world.

He also had some proverbs which for him were undisputed truths. Whenever he wanted someone not to think too much of the things of the world, but rather to think of heavenly things he would say: "It is very difficult for Heaven to open to anyone who looks at the earth like a goat."

One day a companion was speaking about religion and he made some far from simple mistakes. Both because he was young and because he wasn't sufficiently well instructed, Besucco kept quiet but he was uneasy and annoyed.

Later he gained courage and with a smile on his face he spoke to all those present: "Listen, some time ago I read in the dictionary the meaning of the word 'trade' and amongst other things I noted this phrase: 'Let everyone stick to his own trade'. My father said the same thing in different words: 'Anyone who does what he doesn't know spoils what he does'." They all understood his meaning; the one who had spoken indiscreetly kept quiet whilst the others admired the shrewdness and prudence of Besucco.

He was always happy with the arrangements of the superiors. He never complained about the time-table, the setting of the table, the scholastic organization, and so on. He always found everything to his liking. When asked how it was that he was always happy with everything he replied: "I am made of flesh and bones like the others, but I want to do everything for the glory of God; therefore everything that does not suit me will certainly be pleasing to God; hence I always have a good reason for being contented."

One day he was with some companions who had recently come

to the house and who could not settle down to the new kind of life. He comforted them saying: "If we joined the army, would we be able to determine our own timetable? Would we be able to go to bed and get up when we liked? Or would we be free to go for a walk?"

"No," they answered, "but a little bit of freedom . . ."

"We are definitely free," interrupted Francis, "if we are doing the will of God and we only become real slaves when we fall into sin, because then we are the slaves of our greatest enemy, the devil."

"But at home I was able to eat better and sleep more comfortably than here," complained one of them.

"I grant that what you say is true, that is, that at home the food was better and the beds more comfortable, but I'm telling you that you were fostering two great enemies - gluttony and laziness. I'll go further and tell you that we weren't born just to sleep and eat as the goats and sheep do, but we have to work for the glory of God and flee idleness which is the father of all vices. Moreover, haven't you heard what our Superior said?"

"I don't remember anything."

"Yesterday our Superior said, amongst other things, that boys remain here voluntarily and not by force. If anyone is unhappy, he concluded, let him tell me and I'll try to satisfy him; anyone who doesn't want to remain here is free to go, but if he does stay I don't want him spreading discontent."

"I would go elsewhere, but that would cost money and my parents can't afford it."

"All the more reason for you to be happy here; if you can't pay you should show yourself more satisfied than others, because you never look a gift horse in the mouth. And so, my friends, we must be aware that we are in a house of Divine Providence; some pay a little, some pay nothing; and where could we get something else at this price?"

"What you say is true, but if we could have something better to eat . . ."

"Since you're dying for want of something better to eat, I'll tell you how to get it; go and board elsewhere."

"But I haven't got the money to pay board."

"Well then, keep quiet, and be content with the food they give you. Especially so since all our other companions are happy with it. If you really want me to speak my mind, my friends, I'll tell you that strong young people such as we are should not give too much attention to the niceties of life. As Christians we must do some penance if we want to go to heaven; we must mortify our tendency to gluttony in good time. Believe me, this is an easy way for us to obtain the blessings from the Lord and to gain some merit for Heaven."

It was these and other similar ways of speaking that he helped his companions and became a model to them of Christian politeness and charity.

Whilst we're on this point, he used to write proverbs and moral sayings on his exercise-books. He was also quite eloquent in his letters and I think it worthwhile to reproduce some of these, which were kindly given to me by those to whom they were written.

*\* Francis realized that he did not have much to contribute with his 'sporting ability' in the playground, and so made up for that by his pleasant conversations. He also realized that he had a duty of trying to prevent harmful conversations and did his best to prevent them.*

## CHAPTER 25

These letters are a manifest sign of the goodness of heart and of the sincere piety of our Besucco. It is a rare thing, even in older people, to find letters written without human respect and full of religious and moral sentiments. Yet this we should expect of every Christian. But it is indeed very rare to find young people doing this. I should like all of you very dear young readers of mine to avoid this type of letter which has nothing religious in it, a letter which could well be written by the pagans themselves.

No, let us use this wonderful means to communicate our thoughts and our plans to those who are far away from us, but

let us always distinguish between the Christian and the pagan in our correspondence; and let us never forget some moral thought. Hence I am including some of young Besucco's letters which I think will please my readers because of their simplicity and tenderness.

The first bears the date of 27 September, 1863, and was addressed to his Godfather, the Archpriest of Argentera. In it he informs him how happy he is at the Oratory and thanks him for sending him there.

"My dear Godfather,

Four days ago my companions went home for twenty days' holiday. I am very pleased to see them have a happy holiday, but I am better off than they are because by staying here I have time to write this letter to you. I hope that you will be pleased with it. First of all I must tell you that I cannot find sufficient words to thank you for all the good you have done for me. Apart from the favours you have done me, especially that of teaching me in your home, you have also taught me so many things, both spiritual and temporal, that are of great help to me. But the greatest of these favours was to send me to this house where nothing is lacking for my soul or my body. I thank the Lord more and more that he has given me this great favour in preference to so many other boys. I ask him with all my heart to give me grace to correspond with so many signs of heavenly kindness. I am more than happy in this place, there is nothing that I want, my every wish is taken care of. I thank you and all the other benefactors for the things you have sent me. I had hoped last week for the consolation of seeing you here in Turin so that you could speak with my superiors about my conduct. Patience, the Lord wants to defer this consolation for me.

From your letter I learnt that my dear ones at home cried when they heard my letter read out. Tell them that they have reason to rejoice and not to cry, because I am very happy. I thank you for the precious admonitions that you gave me, and I assure you that so far I have done all I could to put them into practice. Thank my sister for the Communion that she made especially for me; I'm sure that it has helped me with my studies. Although it seems impossible in such a short time I have been able to get into Second Year.







You recommended that I look for a good companion; I found one right away. He is a better student than I am, and he is also much more virtuous. We became good friends as soon as we got to know each other; when we two are together we speak of nothing other than study and piety. He also likes to play, but after we have run about for a bit we walk up and down talking about scholastic matters. The Lord is helping me considerably; I am doing better and better in the jobs about the place. There are ninety in my class and I still have fifteen ahead of me.

I was very pleased to read that my companions remember me. Tell them that I love them very much and that they should occupy themselves diligently in study and piety. I thank you for the beautiful letter that you wrote to me and I shall try to put into practice the advice contained in it. I very much want to be good because I know that God has prepared a great reward for me and for those who love him and serve him in this life.

Please pardon me for the delay in writing and if I have not put into practice the advice given me by you, my dear benefactor, I ask you to remember me to all at home and as I cannot send greetings to my father I remember him in my heart and pray to God for him. May God's will be done in everything and never my will.

I remain,  
Your devoted godchild in the most loving hearts of Jesus and Mary,

Francis Besucco.

Francis included a letter in this one to his archpriest; it was addressed to his friend, a virtuous cousin named Anthony Beltrandi, also of Argentera.

The construction, the diction, the thoughts of the letter make it worthy of inclusion here as a model of letters that can be exchanged by two good young friends.

My dear Anthony,

My Godfather has given me good news of you. He tells me that you should take up study like I did. I can tell you that this is a very good idea and you will be very happy if you go on with it.

Since our good Archpriest is prepared to teach you, try to repay him by diligence in the fulfillment of your duties. Throw yourself into the study but accompany it with prayer and devotion; this is the only way to succeed in this undertaking and to be truly satisfied. I am pleased to think that next year you will be my companion in this house.

There is just one memento I want to leave you: obedience and submission to your parents and your parish priest. And I recommend that you give good example to your companions.

And I want to ask a favour of you. During this winter make the Stations of the Cross after the sacred functions as I used to do when I was home. Endeavour to promote this pious practice and you will be blessed by the Lord. Time is precious, try to use it well; if you have any free time, gather some boys together and get them to revise the Christian Doctrine lesson taught on the previous Sunday. This is a very good way of earning God's blessing. Tell my godfather to give me some news about you when he writes to me, and in that way I shall be ever surer of your good will. Dear friend, what great suffering I endure when I think of the time that I have wasted and that I could have spent in study or in other good works.

I hope that you will take my letter in good part and if there is anything that displeases you, I ask your forgiveness. Do your very best to ensure that next year we shall be schoolfellows here in Turin, if this is pleasing to the Lord.

Cheerio, dear Anthony, pray for me.  
Your loving friend,

Francis Besucco.

*The letters show once more how deeply entrenched in the heart and soul of Francis was the virtue of gratitude and his willingness and desire to be spiritually directed. He recommends these virtues to his young friends.*

## CHAPTER 26

The great piety of Francis is revealed in his letters in the previous Chapter. Every spoken or written word contributes to a network of delicate love and holy thought. It seems however that, as he gradually approached the end of his life, he became even more on





As his fervour grew for religious things, so too did his keen desire to withdraw himself from the world. If I could, he often said, I would like to separate my soul from my body so that I could better understand what it means when we say we love God. "If it weren't that I am not allowed," he went so far as to say, "I would like to abstain from all food so that I could enjoy at length the great pleasure experienced in suffering for the Lord. What great consolation the martyrs must have experienced in dying for the faith."

In short, he exemplified by word and deed what St. Paul said: "I desire to be annihilated so as to be glorified with my Lord."

God saw the great love that this little heart had for Him and to prevent the evil of the world from ruining him, He decided to call him to Himself; he allowed an inordinate love of penance to a certain extent to be responsible for it.

*\*"Death is a personal problem. Apparently, the works of Don Bosco do not contain anything really original about the last things of man and of the world, questions which in the twentieth century would deeply involve Catholic theologians . . . His reflections on the last things were in accord with the tradition of the 19th century. His themes were: the inevitability of death, the uncertainty of the moment of death, the supreme importance of death and eternal happiness or unhappiness. His teaching was practical and moralizing, as was that of St. Alphonsus in his Preparation for Death, a book which Don Bosco recommended to his boys. In his sermons and, in particular, in his 'good-night' talks, he would remind his boys and his co-workers of the need to be prepared for death. The numerous deaths which occurred in the house of Valdocco offered him the occasion to return often to this 'great truth'. Nothing is more uncertain than the moment of our death. Death does not wait . . . ' It can take place a year from now, a month from now, a week, a day, an hour, or perhaps as soon as you finish reading this thought. My Christian reader, if death struck us at this moment, what would become of your soul? What would become of my soul?' These warnings were enough for him. He did not usually resort to realistic descriptions which would have shocked his listeners. Don Bosco spread peace, even when he spoke about death. At times the images in his 'dreams' were strong, but never tormenting. (Fr. Francis Desramaut: Don Bosco and the Spiritual Life. p. 56)*

## CHAPTER 27

Francis had read in the life of Dominic Savio how once he had imprudently let the cold of winter set in without putting heavy blankets on his bed. Besucco decided to imitate him. He deemed that the order given to him to be warmly clothed applied only to the daytime, and that he was free to modify himself in bed at night. He said nothing to anybody, took the woollen blankets issued to all the boys but, instead of putting them on his bed he folded them up and put them under his pillow. Things seemed to be all right until the early days of January, when one morning he was so benumbed with cold that he couldn't get up with the others. The Superiors were told that Besucco stayed in bed because he was ill, and the infirmarian was sent to see him and find out what he needed. When he arrived, he asked what was the matter.

"Nothing at all," Francis replied.

"If it is nothing, then why did you stay in bed?"

"Well - I'm just a little off colour."

The infirmarian went to pull up his blankets and found that he was covered by only one summer blanket.

"Where are your winter blankets, Besucco?"

"Here under the pillow."

"Why did you do this?"

"No special reason - when Jesus was on the cross he wasn't covered any better than I am."

It didn't take long to realize that Besucco was quite ill and he was transferred immediately to the infirmary. The doctor was called at once, he thought at first that the illness was not serious and diagnosed it as a simple cold.

But on the following day he noticed that instead of going away, the illness was causing inflammatory congestion in the stomach, and that it had taken a turn for the worse. The usual remedies were applied - laxatives, emetics, blood-letting and doses of various medicines, but nothing seemed to work.

One day he was asked why he had been so careless as not to cover himself sufficiently in bed. He replied: "I am sorry that this has displeased my superiors; I hope however that the Lord will accept my little penance in satisfaction for my sins."

"But what of the consequences of your imprudence?"

I shall leave the consequences in the hands of the Lord. I am not interested in what the future holds out for my body provided everything turns out to the greater glory of God and to the advantage of my soul."

## CHAPTER 28

His illness lasted for eight days; for him it was an exercise, for his companions an example, in patience and Christian resignation. The illness hampered his breathing and this led to severe, continual headaches; he had to submit to further painful surgical treatment; they tried several drastic remedies. But nothing they did was able to alleviate the illness and it served only to highlight his admirable patience. He never gave any sign of resentment nor did he complain. If it was suggested that the medicine did not taste nice he would immediately reply: "If it tasted sweet, it would be more pleasant in my mouth, but it is only right that I should do some penance for my greediness in the past."

Another time he was asked if he was suffering greatly. "Yes, it is true that I am suffering a lot, but what is this compared to what I should suffer because of my sins? I should like to assure you, however, that I am quite happy; I had never thought that I would get so much pleasure from suffering for the love of the Lord."

If anyone did something for him, he thanked him profusely, saying immediately: "May the Lord reward you for your kindness towards me." Not sure as to how to express his gratitude to the infirmarian, he said to him more than once: "May the Lord reward you for me, and if I go to Heaven, I'll pray with all my heart for you that the Lord will bless and help you."

One day the infirmarian asked him whether he was afraid of dying. "My dear infirmarian," he replied, "if the Lord wanted to take me to Paradise with him I should be very pleased to



obey his call; however, I fear that I am not sufficiently prepared. But despite this I place hope in his infinite mercy and I recommend myself wholeheartedly to Mary Most Holy, to St. Aloysius Gonzaga and to Dominic Savio. I hope that with their protection, I shall have a happy death."

On the fourth day of his illness, the doctor began to fear for the life of our Francis. Beginning to speak to him of this last moment, he said: "My dear Francis, would you like to go to Heaven?"

"Can you imagine me not wanting to go to Heaven? But I have to earn it first."

"If you had a choice between being cured and going to Heaven, what would you choose?"

"These are two different things: to live for the Lord, or to die to go to the Lord."

The first pleases me, and the second pleases me even more. But who can assure me of Heaven after the many sins I have committed?"

"In making such a proposal to you, I took it for granted that you are sure of going to Heaven. But, if you are assuming that you might go elsewhere, I only wish that you would forget about it."

"How then can I deserve Heaven?"

"You can lay claim to Heaven through the merits of the Passion and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ."

"Will I go to Heaven then?"

"Most surely, but when the Lord wants it."

He then looked at those present, rubbed his hands and joyfully exclaimed: "It's a contract then: Heaven and nothing else; to Heaven and nowhere else. Don't speak to me of anything else, only Heaven."

"I am happy," I then told him, "that you show such a strong desire to go to Heaven, but I want you to be ready to do the holy will of God . . ."

He interrupted what I was saying with: "Yes, yes, let the holy will of God be done in everything, both in Heaven and on earth."

On the fifth day of the illness he asked to receive the Sacraments. He wanted to make a general Confession: this was denied him. There was no need for it as he had made one a few months previously. However, he was deeply moved as he prepared for that last confession with very great fervour. After confession he appeared to be very happy and he said to the person who was assisting him: "In the past I promised Our Lord a thousand times that I would not offend him anymore, but I did not keep my word. I have renewed this promise today and I hope to be faithful right up to my death."

That evening he was asked if he had any messages for any one. "Yes," he told me, "tell everyone to pray that my time in purgatory may be short."

"What would you like me to tell your companions on your behalf?"

"Tell them to avoid scandal, and to always make good confessions."

"And to the clerics?"

"Tell the clerics to give the boys good example and good advice whenever it is needed."

"And your Superiors?"

"Tell my superiors that I thank them for all their kindness towards me; tell them to keep working for the salvation of souls; and when I am in Heaven I shall pray to God for them."

"And what have you to say to me?"

He was quite moved by these words, he looked at me straight in the eye and then replied: "I ask you to help me to save my soul."

## CHAPTER 29

On the sixth day of his illness (January 8), he asked to go to Holy Communion. "How I would like to go to Communion with my companions in Church," he said, "it is eight days since I last received my dear Jesus with them." Whilst he was preparing to receive Communion he asked someone who was helping him the meaning of the word "Viaticum".

"Viaticum," came the reply, "means help and a companion for the journey."

"Oh, what wonderful help shall be mine, having with me the bread of Angels for the journey I am about to undertake."

"Not only will you have this heavenly bread," he was told, "but you will have Jesus himself as your help and companion on the great journey you are preparing to make to eternity."

"If Jesus is my friend and companion I have nothing to fear; on the other hand I have everything to hope for in his great mercy. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul."

Then he made his preparation. He did not need help as he had his usual prayers which he recited one after the other. He received the Holy Host with those signs of piety which are better imagined than described.

After Communion he settled down to make his thanksgiving. When asked if he needed anything, he answered nothing other than: "Let us pray." After a long thanksgiving he turned to those standing by and asked them not to speak of anything to him except Heaven.

Then the Economer of the House visited him, to his great delight. "Oh, Father Savio," he said with a smile, "this time I'm going to Heaven."

"Courage now! Let us place both life and death in the hands of God; let us hope to go to Heaven but when God wants it."

"Father Savio, please pardon me for all the trouble I've given you; pray for me, and when I'm in Heaven I'll also pray to God for you."

Some time later when I saw that he was reasonably at ease, I asked him if he had any messages for his parish priest. This seemed to disturb him, "My parish priest," he answered, "did a lot for me. He did his utmost to help me save my soul. Tell him that I have never forgotten his advice. I shall not have the pleasure of seeing him again in this world, but I hope to go to Heaven and I shall pray to the Blessed Virgin to help him keep all my companions on the right track and then one day I'll be able to see him and all his parishioners in Heaven." He was choking with emotion as he finished speaking.

After he had rested I asked him if he wanted to see his relatives. "It is not possible for me to see them," he answered, "because they are too far away, they are poor and they can't afford to come here. And also, my father is working away from home. Tell them that I die resigned, cheerful and happy. Tell them to pray for me. I hope to go to Heaven. I'll wait for them all there. To my mother . . ." He could not go on.

Some hours later I asked him: "Have you by any chance a message for your mother?"

"Tell my mother that God has heard her prayer. Many times she told me: 'My dear Francis, I want you to live for a long time in this world but I would rather have you die a thousand times than see you become the enemy of God because of sin.' I hope that my sins have been forgiven and I hope I am the friend of God and that I shall soon go to enjoy Him for eternity. Bless my mother, O my God, give her courage to accept my death with resignation; give me the grace to see her and all the family in Heaven, where we shall enjoy your glory."

He wanted to go on talking, but I told him to be quiet and rest a while. He became worse on the evening of January 8 and it was decided to give him Extreme Unction. When asked if he wanted to receive this Sacrament he answered: "Yes, with all my heart."

"Have you perhaps anything bothering your conscience?"

"Yes there is something that has been on my mind all my life, but I never imagined that it would give me so much sorrow at the point of death."

“What is it that is troubling you and causing remorse?”

“I have the deepest sorrow for not having loved God as much as he should have been loved in my life.”

“Don’t worry about that for in this world we can never love God to the extent that he deserves to be loved. We need only do our best; only in Heaven can we love him as he should be loved. There we shall see Him as He really is, we shall know him and enjoy his goodness, his glory and his love. How fortunate you are because shortly you’re going to have this wonderful opportunity. But now prepare to receive Extreme Unction, which is the sacrament that wipes away the stain of sin and also gives us bodily health if this is good for the soul.”

“I don’t want to discuss the health of the body any more,” he replied, “as for my sins, I ask forgiveness and I hope that they will be completely forgiven. I trust also that I shall obtain the remission of the punishment I must suffer for them in Purgatory.”

*\* The closer one gets to Christ the more one realizes how unworthy we are and how we can never love God as He deserves to be loved.*

## CHAPTER 30

When everything had been prepared for the last sacrament that man receives in this mortal life, he wanted to say the Confiteor himself, along with the other prayers; and he said his own prayer at each anointing.”

Father Alasonatti, Prefect of the house, was administering it to him. At the anointing of the eyes, our pious sick boy said: “O my God, pardon me for looking at things I should not have looked at and for reading things I should not have read.” At the ears: “O my God, pardon me for all that I have listened to that was contrary to your holy law. Please grant that while being closed for ever to the world they may be opened to hear your voice calling me to enjoy your glory.”

At the anointing of the nostrils. “Pardon me, O Lord, for all the satisfaction I have taken in smelling things.

At the mouth: O my God, pardon me for my gluttony and for all the words which have offended you in one way or another. Grant that as soon as possible my tongue may sing your praises for all eternity."

At this point, the Prefect was quite overcome with emotion and said: "What beautiful thoughts, how wonderful in a boy so young." Continuing with the administration of the Sacrament he anointed the hands, saying: "By this holy anointing and by his most compassionate mercy, may God pardon you every sin committed by the sense of touch." The sick boy continued: 'O my great God, with the veil of your mercy and through the merits of the wounds in your hands cover and wipe out all the sins I have committed by my actions throughout my life."

At the feet: "Pardon, O Lord, the sins that I have committed with these feet, either by going where I should not have gone or by not going where my duties summoned me. May your mercy pardon all the sins I may have committed by thought, word, deed or omission."

He was told more than once that it was sufficient to say these spontaneous prayers silently in his heart and that God did not ask for the great effort he was making to pray aloud. He was silent for a few moments but then continued in the same tone of voice as before. At the finish he seemed so tired and his pulse was so weak that we thought that he was about to draw his last breath. Shortly afterwards he recovered slightly and, in the presence of many people, he addressed these words to the Superior. "I have prayed a lot to the Blessed Virgin so that I would die on a day dedicated to her and I hope I shall be heard. What else could I ask of the Lord?"

In answer to his question he was told: "Ask the Lord to grant you to do all your Purgatory in this world so that when you die your soul will go straight to Heaven." "Oh, yes," he immediately replied, "I ask for this with all my heart. Please give me your blessing. I hope that the Lord will make me suffer in this world to the point that I have done all my purgatory and so, when my soul is separated from my body, it will fly straight to Heaven."

It would seem that the Lord heard his prayer as he improved somewhat and his life was prolonged for about twenty-four hours.

*\*"By the sacred anointing of the sick and the prayer of the priests the whole Church commends those who are ill to the suffering and glorified Lord that he may raise them up and save them. And indeed she exhorts them to contribute to the good of the People of God by freely uniting themselves to the passion and death of Christ." (Vatican II, The Constitution of the Church, No. 11).*

## CHAPTER 31

Saturday, 9th January, was the last day on earth for our dear Besucco. He had perfect use of his senses and his reason throughout the day. He wanted to pray all the time, but he was told not to as it tired him too much. "Well, at least," he said, "let someone near me do the praying and I shall repeat in my heart the words he says aloud." Just to please him it was necessary to have someone by his bed praying continuously. Amongst those who visited him that day there was a companion who was somewhat dissipated. "How are you Besucco?" he asked.

"My dear friend," he replied, "I am at the end of my life. Pray for me in these my last moments. But remember that one day you too will find yourself in a similar state. Oh, how happy you will be if you have been good! But, if you don't change your way of life, how sorry you are going to be at the moment of death!" His companion began to cry and from that moment onwards thoughts more about his soul; today he is still one of the good boys.

At ten in the evening he was visited by Lieutenant Eysautier and his wife. The Lieutenant had had a hand in Francis' admission to the Oratory and he had helped him considerably. Besucco was very happy to see them and he showed lively signs of gratitude. This courageous man was greatly edified when he saw the happiness in the boy's face, also the signs of devotion which he demonstrated and the assistance he was getting, and he said:

"Dying like this is a real pleasure, and I would like to find myself in a similar state." Then he turned to the dying boy and said: "Dear Francis, when you get to Heaven pray for me and for my wife . . ." But he was overcome with emotion and could not continue; he departed after giving the sick boy a final wave of his hand.

About half past ten it seemed that Francis had only a few more minutes to live. He moved his hands from under the blankets and tried to lift them up. I took them and joined them together on top of the bed.

He separated them and lifted them up again. He was smiling and his eyes were fixed as if gazing at something he liked. Thinking that perhaps he wanted a crucifix, I put one in his hands. He took it, kissed it, and put it on the bed, and straightaway lifted up his arms again in an outburst of joy. His face appeared to be stronger and to have more colour in it than when he had been healthy. Its beauty and radiance was such that it eclipsed the infirmary lights. The ten bystanders were dumb-founded and their astonishment grew when the dying boy lifted his head a little and stretched out his hands as if to shake hands with someone he loved. Then in a joyful resonant voice he sang: "Lodate Maria - O Lingue fedeli - Risuoni nei cieli - La vostra armonia." (Praise Mary, Oh you faithful tongues; let your harmony resound in the heavens.)

Afterwards he made several efforts to lift himself up and devoutly stretching out his hands, he began to sing again: "O Gesu d'amor acceso - Non vi avessi mai offeso - O mio caro e buon Gesu - Non vi voglio offender piu." (Oh Jesus, on fire with love, would that I had never offended you. Oh my dear good Jesus, I do not want to offend you any more.)

Without interruption he intoned the hymn: "Perdon caro Gesu - Pietà mio Dio - Prima di peccar piu - Morir vogl'io. (Pardon, dear Jesus - Mercy, my God - Before sinning again - I want to die.)

We all listened in stunned silence. Our eyes were riveted on Francis who seemed to have become an Angel with the Angels in Paradise. To break the tension the Rector said: "I believe that at this moment our Besucco is receiving some extraordinary grace from the Lord and his heavenly Mother, to whom he has been so devoted during his life. Perhaps she has come to take his soul to Heaven."

We were all further astonished as Besucco continued to sing, but his words were all truncated as if he were answering questions. I was only able to catch these phrases: "King of Heaven . . . so beautiful . . . I am a poor sinner . . . I give you my heart . . . Give me your love . . . My dear good Lord . . ." Then he fell back on



the bed without a sign of life. But when he realized that no one was praying and no one was suggesting ejaculatory prayers to him he immediately turned to me and said: "Help me. Let us pray. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, assist me in this my agony. Jesus, Mary and Joseph may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you."

I suggested to him that he rest, but without paying any attention to me he continued: "Jesus in my mind, Jesus in my mouth, Jesus and Mary I give you my soul." It was eleven o'clock when he wanted to speak again, but he could say only two words: "The Crucifix." He asked to be blessed with the crucifix to gain the plenary indulgence at the moment of death, something he had often asked for and that I had promised him.

When he had given this blessing the Prefect began reading the Proficiscere (Depart, Christian soul) whilst the others prayed on their knees. At eleven fifteen Besucco looked intently at me, and tried to smile; then he raised his eyes heavenward indicating that he was departing. A few moments later his soul left his body and flew gloriously, so we fondly hope to enjoy heavenly glory in the company of those who have served God by the innocence of their life in this world and who are now enjoying him and blessing him in Heaven.

*\*"Remember that at the hour of death we shall reap what we have sown in life. If we have done good works, we will be happy. Death will be a blessing because it will usher us into paradise. Otherwise, woe to us! Remorse of conscience and the open jaws of hell will await us: 'What a man sows, that he will also reap' (Gal. 6:8). And he added: 'A man's entire life should be a continual preparation for death.'" (Don Bosco)*

## CHAPTER 32

You cannot describe the grief and sorrow caused throughout the whole house by the loss of such a dear friend. Many prayers were said there and then around the bedside. Next morning the news spread amongst his companions, who gathered in the Church to find some comfort in their sorrow and also to pay a tribute to their dead friend. They prayed for the repose of his soul, if indeed he still had need of prayers. Many went to Communion for this purpose. The Rosary, the office, prayers in common, and in private, Communions, Mass, in short, all the practices of piety

which took place in our Church on that Sunday were directed to God for the eternal repose of the soul of our good Francis. Something rather unusual happened that day. His features became so handsome and his face took on such a healthy glow that in no way did he seem to be dead. As a matter of fact he had never seemed so extraordinarily good-looking even when he was in good health. His own companions far from displaying the morbid fear boys generally have for the dead were eager to go to see him and they all said that he really looked like an angel from Heaven. That is why in the portrait drawn after his death he looks better than when alive. Then, those who spotted objects connected in some way or other with Besucco vied with one another to get them and to keep them as remembrances of him. It was commonly voiced about that he had gone straight to Heaven. Some said that he did not have any need of our prayers for he is already enjoying the glory of Heaven here and now. "For sure," added another boy, "he is certainly enjoying the sight of God and praying for us." "I believe," stated a third boy, "that Besucco already enjoys a throne of glory in Heaven and that he is invoking divine blessings on his companions and friends."

On the following day, January 11th, Mass was sung by his companions here in the Church at the Oratory. Many went to Communion as always for the greater glory of God, and also to pray for the eternal repose of the soul of Francis, if indeed he still had need of prayers. After the Mass the boys escorted the coffin to the parish church and then to the cemetery.

Francis was buried in grave number 147 in the fourth row on the western side.

The virtues which had shone forth in this young boy for the space of about fourteen years at Argentera appeared even more resplendent when he died and when news arrived of his holy death. Father Francis Pepino sent me a moving account of what occurred there; it possesses something of the supernatural. I shall keep the full story for a more opportune time but I'll give a few excerpts here.

Father Pepino writes: "When news of the serious illness of Francis arrived there were public prayers with a sung Mass, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and prayers for the sick. The news of his death reached us on the evening of January 13 and it quickly spread. In less than an hour Francis was being pre-

sented by most of the parents as an example to their respective children. I cannot say enough about the sorrow of the parents and the benefactors of this dear boy, who always pleased everybody with his exemplary conduct and who never offended anyone. Mary, the younger sister of Francis, clearly told me of his death on January 10th.. She told me that at about midnight of the previous night, when she was in bed with her mother, she heard a loud noise in the upstairs room where Francis used to sleep. She clearly heard a handful of sand fall on the floor, and fearing that the noise would make her mother suspect that Francis was dead, she began speaking to her in a loud voice - something this girl did not usually do. Several other people, convinced of his holiness, prayed to him for favours and obtained what they sought."

I don't want to discuss what I have just quoted; I intend only to be factual and to leave whatever inferences can be drawn from these facts to the judgement of my readers. Here are a few more excerpts from the source previously quoted.

"During February a two year old boy was in danger of death. The parents considered the case hopeless and turned to our Besucco, whose virtues were being proclaimed by everyone. They promised furthermore that if the boy were cured they would promote the practice of the Stations of the Cross in imitation of Francis. The boy recovered quickly and is now in perfect health. A few days ago I myself recommended to the prayers of our dear boy the father of a family who was seriously ill. At the same time I also recommended him to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament to whose honour and glory this man had consecrated himself as a cantor. I am not giving the names of these people simply to save them from any undue criticism. The sick man showed immediate improvement and within a few days appeared perfectly cured.

"Anna, Francis' oldest sister, was married in March. She was later troubled with an affliction which gave her no peace, day or night. In a moment of greater pain she called out: My dear little Francis, help me in my need, obtain some rest for me. No sooner said than done. From that night on she began to sleep peacefully and she has continued to do so.

"Encouraged by the success of her prayer Anna again turned to Francis for help at a time when her life was in great danger, and again her every wish was granted.

"Whilst, for the greater glory of God, I have collected accounts of what happened to others, I must not omit telling you that I used to recommend myself to the prayers of my godson when he was alive and I continued to do so with greater faith after his death. As a result of my faith I have obtained favours at different times."

## CHAPTER 34

I have come to the end of the life of Francis Besucco. I would like to have said much more about this virtuous boy, but, since this could be the cause of certain criticism from those who do not recognize the wonders of the Lord in his servants, I shall await a more opportune time to publish them, if the divine goodness allows me to live long enough.

Meanwhile, my dear readers, before I finish writing, I would like both of us to come to a conclusion which will be to our mutual advantage. It is certain that sooner or later death will come for both of us, and it is possible that it will come sooner than we think. It is equally certain that if we don't perform good works during our life we won't be able to reap their fruit at the point of death, nor we can we expect any reward from God. Now since Divine Providence gives us time to prepare for this last moment, let us occupy this time in good works and so be assured that we shall collect the reward we merit at the appropriate time. We can expect to find people who will laugh at us because we practice our religion. Don't pay any attention to them..Whoever listens to them acts wrongly and betrays himself. If we want to be wise before the face of God, we must not be afraid of appearing stupid before the world, because Jesus Christ assures us that the wisdom of the world is foolishness in the eyes of God. Only the continuous practice of our religion can make us happy in time and in eternity. Anyone who does not work in summer has no right to enjoyment during winter, and anyone who does not practice virtue during his life cannot expect any reward after death.

I encourage you, Christian reader, I encourage you to perform good works whilst we have time; our sufferings are of short duration and what we shall enjoy lasts forever. I call down the divine blessings upon you, and in your turn please pray to the Lord God to have mercy on my soul, so that after having spoken about virtue, about the method of practicing it, and about the great

reward that God has prepared in the next life for those who practice it, I may not suffer the terrible misfortune of neglecting to do it myself with irreparable harm to my own salvation.

O Lord, help me, help me to persevere in the observance of your precepts during the days of my life so that we can one day go to Heaven to enjoy great happiness for ever and ever. Amen.

## VI. COMMON ELEMENTS OF SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY (as found in these primary sources )

1. A clear idea of our Christian vocation: WHY WE HAVE BEEN CREATED. To get to know God and, knowing God, to love Him with all our hearts because he first loved us. A determination and a willingness to grow in that love no matter the cost.
2. Therefore - a determined, even a heroic, effort to AVOID SIN which is the only thing that can separate us from God's love.
3. OBEDIENCE. "The short-cut for young people to salvation and holiness is, according to Don Bosco, obedience." Fr. Peter Stella.
4. A full utilization of all the means that will keep us from sin and bring us closer to the God of love:

\*Positive use of the sacraments. Stress on a regular confessor.

\*Avoidance of bad company.

\*Deep and practical devotion to the Mother of God.

\*Mortification, not manifested in severe penances but in the cheerful acceptance of daily annoyances and the fulfillment of one's duty. The Salesian conception of mortification and penance is that it must become part and parcel of our life, and not an optional extra.

\*Note the beautiful summing up of duty as given by Don Bosco to Francis Besucco: CHEERFULNESS - STUDY - PIETY.

\*Individual spiritual direction with full respect for the liberty of the individual and spiritual personality. Mutual trust.

\*Learning from the good example of others.

\*Everything done in a spirit of joy: "Here we make holiness consist in always being very happy," especially by a positive use of the playground and other recreational venues.

\*Good, healthy friendships.

5. As a consequence of the love of God, LOVE FOR ONE'S NEIGHBOUR, to be manifested in acts of charity, concern for each other, spiritual admonition, concern for the welfare of the Church and the Holy Father. Love of God has its external expression in concern for others.
6. SAVE YOUR OWN SOUL AND MAKE YOURSELF A SAINT BY HELPING TO SAVE THE SOULS OF OTHERS.
7. A realization that "as a man lives so shall he die". Death is not something to be feared but seen as the gateway to the enjoyment of God's presence for all eternity, that God is the only One Who can satisfy the yearnings of the human heart. "We are made for You, O God, and restless will our hearts be until they come to rest in You".

### Sodalities: An Integral Element of the Preventive System

To really understand the INTEGRAL - not merely the important - part Sodalities play in the thinking of St. John Bosco ("an essential and indisputable factor" says Don Braidon) we need to go back to his school days at Chieri (1831 - 1835). It was there that John had to live "the life of a student with all its anxieties, difficulties, dangers and privations that he might learn to inspire courage, assist, sympathize with, help and comfort those who, like himself, would strive for the priesthood and have to follow steadfastly a path beset with many tribulations." (BM 1, 185)

In this first experience of living away from home as a student, John had to face up to two major problems, the same problems he would have to help others face in his work as an educator.

1) He had to choose his company, to find those companions who would have a positive influence on his life and help him to maintain those ideals planted in his heart by his mother.

2) He would also have to find a means by which he could exert a real christian influence in his environment. He realized that need for personal witness.

John found a solution (not a new one) to both these problems: the formation of some sort of association among the better elements and then infiltrating the masses. His was an idea which has been used so successfully in our own times by Communists and others.

He looked around him at school and came to this very astute conclusion: "As I saw it, the students belonged to three categories: the good, the indifferent and the bad. I would have no dealings with the last group once I discovered their true character. The indifferent I would frequent only when courtesy or necessity required it. With the good ones I would make friends, but only with the very best would I strike a close friendship." (BM I, 192)

Thus the first problem was solved but what about the second? "Those companions who tried but failed to entice him into trouble began to vent their anger upon him with their usual bad manners which, at times, were provocative. John ignored their tactics and continued to be courteous to them. These boys were usually doing rather poorly in their school work. His friendliness prompted them to ask him either to loan them or dictate to them the assignment given by the teacher. John consented. But the teacher did not approve of it and forbade it as encouraging their laziness. He was fully justified, but his directive hurt the interest that John had in his companions." (BM I, 193-194)

Forbidden to give outright help, John tried other tactics. He had to obey so he stopped doing his companions' homeworks. Instead he conveniently left his homework book on his desk when he left the room! Naturally good use was made of it! The teacher soon realized this and moved quickly to close that loophole although he "fully realized John's motives: to lead his companions to good by finding ways and means of helping them even at the cost of personal sacrifices." (BM I, 194)

"After this episode John tried a better way of helping them, namely, to review their lessons with them and tutor them, if necessary. This way everybody was happy and he gained their goodwill, affection and esteem. Little by little, they began coming to him, first to play with him, then to hear his stories or to do their homework. Finally, as in Murialdo and Castelnovo, the just came for no special reason. IT WAS LIKE A CLUB OF THEIR OWN AND THEY STARTED CALLING IT 'SOCIETA DELL 'ALLEGRIA' (Society of Joy), a most appropriate name because each one was expected to bring in only those books, topics or games that would add to the general cheerfulness. Everything contrary to it was banned, especially anything not in accordance with God's law. Whoever cursed, took the Lord's name in vain, or carried on improper conversation could not remain a member and was forthwith expelled. By common consent membership in this club was dependent upon two basic conditions: (1) the avoidance of every word and deed unbecoming a Christian and (2) the exact fulfillment of one's duties whether scholastic or religious." (BM I, 194-195)

When John returned home for his holidays he established this same Society among the boys of his neighbourhood. Again "only those who had distinguished themselves for good conduct were admitted." (BM I, 203)

The same idea to gather together the better elements came to light when Don Bosco went to the Seminary (1835 - 1841) where a group of students gathered around him as a leader. "As regards friends, I followed my beloved mother's suggestion. I associated with those who were devout to the Blessed Virgin, studious and pious. Here, for the guidance of young aspirants to the priesthood, I must note that although many seminarians are exemplary, some are not. Not a few young men, with little regard to their vocation, enter the seminary with hardly the proper motivation or goodwill." (BM I, 282)

"John Bosco, though a friend to all, was on intimate terms only with a small group of classmates, other seminarians he knew because they hailed from villages near his home. From the very start, he had formed with them a kind of club, and, because he was older, he acted as their father, master and mentor. Among these was Commollo . . . This little club aimed at the perfect observance of their scholastic and religious duties." (BM I, 303-304)



In 1841 Don Bosco had begun to gather young people around him, many of whom were getting into trouble because there was no-one to take an interest in them. For four years he was to look for a permanent site where he could teach these children their catechism, celebrate Mass with them, and occupy them in vigorous recreation on Sundays and Holy Days. By 1846 he had found a permanent site for this Oratory at Valdocco. He was soon to realize the need of organizing it on a regular basis (drawing up of Regulations). He was also to see the absolute necessity of providing board and bed for many of the lads who had nowhere to live.

"Now Don Bosco realized he had to spur his boys on to virtue by some lasting, uniform means that would unite the more virtuous of them, arouse their enthusiasm and give them by their very number greater confidence against fear of their companions' criticism. To meet this need Don Bosco decided to establish the ST. ALOYSIUS SODALITY, and thus to have the boys commit themselves to practice constantly the more characteristic virtues of this saint." (BM III, 147). This was in APRIL, 1847.

The Regulations for this Sodality were submitted to Archbishop Frasoni for approval and this good man asked to be enrolled as the first member. Note how these Regulations merely flesh out the two very simple rules of the Societa dell'Allegria.

1. . . "all who become members must behave in such a way as not only to avoid giving any scandal but also strive constantly to set good example . . ."
2. . . "Endeavour to go to Confession and Communion every fortnight or even more frequently . . ."
3. "Flee from bad companions as from a plague, and be very careful to avoid improper conversation."
4. "Practice the greatest charity towards your companions . . ."
5. "Have the greatest respect for the House of God . . . To show his love for his fellow beings, St. Aloysius volunteered to nurse the victims of the plague, and thereby sacrificed his own life."
6. "Be diligent in your work and the fulfillment of your other duties: promptly obey your parents and superiors."

7. "When a Sodality member falls sick all the others should pray for him and also give him material assistance according to their means." (BM III, 184-189)

"The Oratory boys heartily greeted the announcement of the establishment of this Sodality . . . and all were very eager to join. Don Bosco, not aiming at numbers alone, in order to offer all a greater incentive to improve their conduct laid down two conditions for admission. The first was that the applicant prove himself for a whole month by observing the Sodality Regulations and setting a good example in church and elsewhere; the second was that he avoid bad talk and frequent the Sacraments. Soon a great improvement was noticed in the boys' conduct and piety." (BM III, 149-150)

The scholastic year 1854-1855 saw the birth of the IMMACULATE CONCEPTION SODALITY. This was the brainchild of Dominic Savio. He wrote its Regulations, he watched over its inception and was among the pioneer members who were enrolled on the 8th June 1855. Dominic was inspired by the proclamation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. It was, as it were, an overflowing of the tremendous enthusiasm engendered at the Oratory as it prepared for this big day. Dominic wanted to do something to honour Our Lady and this seemed to be the most practical thing to do.

Among other things it should be noted:

- + It was a spontaneous effort to assist Don Bosco and to make of all the people at the Oratory a true family united in love. Don Bosco was to later refer to this Sodality as his 'Guard of Honour'.
- + It was a true participation of the laity.
- + It was characterized by the high quality of its members, by its restricted numbers, by its secrecy.
- + It was largely due to this individual and collective apostolate of Dominic Savio and the Immaculate Conception Sodality that there was a wonderful atmosphere of piety, purity, mutual charity, obedience and general good spirit which Don Bosco had and the early Salesians remembered with so much joy (cf. Letter from Rome, for example).

- + It was a direct and personal apostolate e.g. at each meeting a troublesome lad was assigned to each member for the coming week but "The Sodality members were not informers, but protectors of their trouble-prone charges and even of potential trouble-makers, if there were any, by keeping them out of trouble. They played down the faults of their charges when talking about them to their superiors and assumed responsibility, before God, for their future conduct. At times they offered to accept punishments in their stead and even tried to intercede when any of their charges were threatened with expulsion...In brief, their apostolate was a most sublime one, demanding solid and prudent virtue." (BM V, 316-317)
- + "Those years 1855-1866 were ones of extraordinary fervour. I have often asked myself the reason for this. I am convinced that it was the work of the Immaculate Conception Sodality". Don Francesca. (cf. Chapter 17 of Biography of St. Dominic Savio, as written by Don Bosco.)

"Towards the end of 1857 a new Sodality came into being: the Blessed Sacrament Sodality which aimed at promoting the frequent and regular reception of the sacraments and the worship of the Holy Eucharist. Don Bosco suggested the idea to the cleric Joseph Bongiovanni and he put it into effect. Many of the finest boys joined this Sodality . . ." (BM V, 499)

As an appendage of this Sodality, the Piccolo Clero (Altar Boys' Guild) was added in 1858. Don Bosco wanted the older boys "who gave some hope of a vocation" to become members of this. "This Sodality gave the Church many priests, but what it cost the cleric Bongiovanni is known only to his guardian angel. The members, too, shared his joys and sorrows and the petty persecutions of young scoffers present in every school, but this was only a fraction of the difficulties he encountered in encouraging the good and in putting up with occasional taunts from those who did not understand or appreciate his aims and the excellent results he achieved." (BM V, 518)

For the technical students, the St. Joseph Sodality was formed in 1859. "Don Bosco decided to found a Sodality exclusively for the artisans as an outlet for the more zealous among them." (BM VI, 103)

"Whereas membership in the Immaculate Conception, Blessed Sacrament and Knights of the Altar sodalities merely required that the applicant be accepted, admission to the St. Joseph Sodality was made more solemn with the public recitation of a special formula." (BM VI, 105)

Was this because Don Bosco felt that this type of lad needed to commit himself publicly? Did he want to boost their ego by singling them out?

#### **General And Particular Aims Of The Sodalities As Envisaged By Don Bosco.**

- \* To unite the better disposed to help them fight human respect, to feel strong in a union of lads who wanted to do the right thing but were afraid to do so because of the criticism of their peer-group.
- \* To make young people stand up and be counted.
- \* To form apostolic christians - to 'gain souls for Christ' as Don Bosco put it. To do this the members were urged to:
  - serve the community, help those in need, perform little acts of charity . . .
  - urge their companions to approach the Sacraments, keep the Rules, to forestall disorders.
  - they led to the formation of active christian apostles of the stamp of Dominic Savio.
  - provide an alternative association to those being formed by the masonic, liberal elements for political reasons.

"At the Oratory the students actively opposed the small band of troublemakers. Firmly banded into Sodalities, they did their utmost to rehabilitate as many of these scamps as they could, to shield the unwary from their snares, and to isolate and unmask the diehards." (BM VIII, 25)

"The need was felt to extend, in some way, the influence of the educator; the need was felt to help Don Bosco. The Immaculate Conception Sodality was founded for this very reason at a time

when the Society of St. Francis of Sales was still in its embryonic stage. For many years the new Sodality was a secret association so as to be in a better position to influence the ambient. Those enrolled were very carefully selected. The members kept an eye on any of the students who needed special care and attention e.g. new arrivals, troublemakers, those weak in studies . . . The Sodalities therefore assumed an integral role in the educational system, making up for the shortage of personnel, supplying assistants and performing an action of capillary penetration." (Stella: Don Bosco nella Storia della Religiosita Cattolica, 35-351)

- \* To fill the desperate need young people have of friendship.
- \* Apostolate of Witness. "Scattered in a crowd of noisy, cheerful boys, by word and example they promoted obedience, peace and order." (BM V, 317)
- \* To transform the environment. The Sodalities were destined to heal and 'christianize' the ambient. For Don Bosco, these groups were an excellent means to create in his Houses that spiritual atmosphere to which he gave so much importance. Negatively, the members fought against sin by all means available. Positively, they created a climate of charity, piety and purity by good example, advice and various initiatives. They favoured an atmosphere of trust, cordiality, confidence and co-operation between Superiors and students. They destroyed the 'YOU AND US COMPLEX'.
- \* An education to responsibility and initiative. The Sodalities were to be the work of the students themselves. Don Bosco told Don Rua when he appointed him as Rector at the new House of Mirabello: "Promote, BUT DO NOT DIRECT, the Sodalities."
- \* Formation of an elite.
  - the Sodalities were not open to all the boys. Even those of St. Aloysius and St. Joseph had three conditions for entry:
    - a month's trial
    - avoidance of bad talk
    - frequentation of the Sacraments.

- The means of personal sanctification were stressed: exact fulfillment of duties, good example, charity, obedience, frequent and fruitful reception of the Sacraments, spiritual reading, spiritual direction, mutual correction, imitation of a model.

\* Seedbeds of vocations.

*"I believe that these Sodalities may be called the key to piety, the preserver of good morals, the promoter of priestly and religious vocations." (Don Bosco in a Letter to all Salesians on 12th January 1876).*

"One of the main aims of the Sodalities was the promotion of priestly and religious vocations." (BM XIII, 312-313)