

# THE CONFLICT BETWEEN DON BOSCO AND THE ARCHBISHOP OF TURIN LORENZO GASTALDI (1871-1883)

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## 1. How to understand a serious conflict

The title of this talk does not seek, like a newspaper headline, to sensationalize a particular event; it merely mirrors the real relationship between Don Bosco and the Archbishop of Turin, Lorenzo Gastaldi, during the years 1871-1883.<sup>1</sup>

It is a fact that the history of the Church is scarred with frequent conflicts between what we may call «charismatics» and the ecclesiastical authorities whether papal, archiepiscopal or otherwise.

It would be all too easy to appeal to this constant of history and to quote famous precedents, in order to explain satisfactorily, or worse, to play down, the conflict between Don Bosco and Archbishop Gastaldi.

This is certainly an example of the kind of conflict that occurred between episcopal authority and religious charism, but without any doubt it also has a special quality which provides a key to the understanding of the complex personalities and activities of the two men involved.

Faced with the seriousness of this clash and the length of time it continued, one inevitably feels amazed; and that amazement grows when one reflects that for almost 25 years, right up to the spring of 1872, these two men had enjoyed an excellent relationship of mutual esteem, friendship and collaboration.

The lives of these two people resemble, if I may use a geometric image, two straight lines which, after beginning in the same year, 1815, followed a

<sup>1</sup> The subject of this present talk is amply described in my biography of Gastaldi, to which I would refer you also for the sources, the bibliography and various quotations: G. TUNINETTI, *Lorenzo Gastaldi 1815-1883*, Volume I: *Teologo, pubblicista, rosminiano, vescovo di Saluzzo: 1815-1871*, Roma-Casale Monferrato, Edizioni Piemme 1983, especially pp. 132-134; Volume II: *Arcivescovo di Torino: 1871-1883*, Casale Monferrato, Edizioni Piemme 1988, especially pp. 259-290: «The conflict with Don Bosco».

parallel, quite separate course for thirty years. Then from 1844 to about 1872, they came together in close collaboration, suddenly turn against each other and clash between 1872 and 1883.

Their social backgrounds were different: Giovanni Bosco a poor peasant, Lorenzo Gastaldi of the comfortable middle class. Their cultural and ecclesiastical formation was no less different: Giovanni Bosco after broken primary schooling had followed courses in philosophy and theology in the diocesan seminary at Chieri; Lorenzo Gastaldi, in contrast, had been well schooled up to a good level, judged by contemporary standards, first in the College for Nobles («del Carmine») run by the Jesuits, then at the university of Turin, where, as a clerical external student, he studied philosophy and obtained his degree in theology.

Ordained priest in 1841, Don Bosco had completed his pastoral formation at the «Convitto Ecclesiastico» of St. Francis of Assisi under the tutelage of Don Luigi Guala and Don Giuseppe Cafasso, while at the same time starting to run an oratory for abandoned boys; Don Gastaldi, ordained in 1837, had joined the faculty of theology at the University in 1838, and therefore dedicated himself to academic work, to study and the writing of works on moral theology. He became involved in the contemporary cultural debate, especially in that which arose over Rosmini.

The fact that Don Bosco belonged to the clergy of the «Convitto Ecclesiastico» and Don Gastaldi to the university world meant that they belonged to two quite different, and in some respects opposed schools of priestly thought: the first was Alphonsian and ultramontane, the second tended towards rigorism and a moderate form of Gallicanism, with all the consequent differences in ecclesiology and spiritual and pastoral theology.

This difference in formation will play its part in the conflict in question, but at first it did not prejudice their friendly relationship as they collaborated in the work connected with the oratory at Valdocco from as early as about 1844.

Canon Gastaldi helped Don Bosco by teaching catechism and preaching, whilst his mother and sister, and later his niece, gave a hand to Mamma Margherita. Such was his admiration for the priest of Valdocco that, on 7 April 1849, he wrote an article in the newspaper, of which he was manager, «Conciliatore Torinese», in which he extolled the merits of Valdocco and of its rector, whom he likened to «a new Philip Neri».

When, in 1853, he left to work in England as a Rosminian Missionary, he left in his secret will a considerable sum of money to Don Bosco and to his oratory. From his field of work across the Channel he kept in touch with Don Bosco by letter and began to collaborate with him in the «Letture Cattoliche».

After becoming Bishop of Saluzzo, largely through the influence of Don Bosco, he wrote most enthusiastic and laudatory letters of commendation in

order to obtain Rome's approval of the society of St. Francis de Sales. His transfer to Turin in 1871 was brought about partly by the wish of Pius IX to reward his open support for Papal infallibility at Vatican I and partly through the advice that Don Bosco himself gave to the Pope.

## **2. How did that come about?**

Don Bosco, after all the serious difficulties that he had encountered from Mons. Riccardi di Netro in getting his congregation approved, had leapt at the chance of having a friend of his as bishop in the see of St. Maximus. With the appointment of Lorenzo Gastaldi all the signs seemed set fair.

His calculations turned out to be quite mistaken. Not only did he fail to obtain the support he had hoped for, he soon found himself against a wall of opposition. How did that come about?

Gastaldi's role had of course, changed: he was no longer a friend who was a bishop but Don Bosco's direct ecclesiastical superior, personally involved, therefore, in the problems of the Salesian congregation, Turin being not only its cradle but the place where it had the strongest presence. Not to mention his position as bishop which could bring out the contrasts between their different mentalities, which were the fruit of very different formative processes. Moreover, the archbishop had to take into account the attitude of his diocesan clergy towards the Salesian congregation, which had only recently been approved by Rome. Indeed the clash between Don Bosco and the Archbishop of Turin did not originate with Gastaldi but had already surfaced with his predecessor, Alessandro Riccardi di Netro, who had been translated to Turin from Savona in 1867. Gastaldi merely inherited an existing situation of conflict.

The real trouble with the Turinese curia had begun with the arrival of Riccardi di Netro. The cause was simple. The see of Turin had been vacant from 1850 to 1867: from 1850 to 1862, on account of the enforced exile of Monsignor Fransoni in Lyons, the diocese had been governed by letter and through the vicar general; from 1862 to 1867 it had been guided by the vicar capitular, Giuseppe Zappata, during what was a very stormy period in Church-State relations, especially in Turin.

The state of ecclesiastical discipline that the new archbishop had to face was far from easy, despite the fact that the clergy of Turin were, by and large, very good.

During that long period Don Bosco himself had become accustomed to a certain freedom of action that was favoured by two factors: the unquestioning confidence placed in him by archbishop Fransoni, and the surrogate role played by the oratory at Valdocco after the closure of Turin's theological seminary in 1848, on account of the well-known demonstrations by the clerics.

With the arrival of Riccardi di Netro in 1867 the long state of emergency came to an end. As he set about restoring order in his diocese, he found himself having to deal with the oratory at Valdocco because some of his diocesan clerics were housed there.

On 11 September 1867, the archbishop ordered the diocesan clerics based at Valdocco to return to the seminary and to follow the prescribed course there, if they wished to receive Holy Orders.

This ruling created real difficulties for Don Bosco, because he was thus deprived of precious helpers.

More serious still was the unfavourable judgement passed by the archbishop on the constitutions for which Don Bosco was seeking the approval of Rome. Besides his reservations on the subject, the monsignor was not enthusiastic about the transformation of the Society of St. Francis de Sales into a religious congregation; even if he did not want it strictly diocesan, he certainly wanted it very much inserted into the pastoral work of the diocese for the goals for which it was founded.

On 1 March 1869, the Holy See did not approve the Constitutions; it merely recognised the Society of St. Francis de Sales as a congregation of simple vows. However, Don Bosco obtained from the Pope the ten-year privilege of issuing dismissorial letters to clerics who had entered his colleges and oratories before the age of 14; and he later obtained similar powers for those who had entered above that age.

From then onwards, as Don Bosco saw that he would not obtain from the archbishop the help he needed in furthering his aims, he obviously had constant recourse to the privileges that had been granted. In consequence, when Gastaldi arrived at Turin in 1871, the confrontation between Don Bosco and his archbishop was already in existence: the training of Salesian clerics and their reception of holy orders, the privileges obtained from Rome (especially those relating to *dismissorial letters*) the approval of the Constitutions, which were under examination in Rome – all these things were at the heart of it. What was at stake was not only the bishop's jurisdiction but also the very future shape of the Salesian congregation.

### **3. Two formation models and two ecclesiological visions**

Into this context of already somewhat tense relations, there entered the powerful personality of archbishop Lorenzo Gastaldi, formed in the Turin faculty of theology, matured in the school of Rosmini and already experienced as a bishop.

Open conflict began with a letter of 24 October 1872, in which the archbishop, in conformity with canon law, ruled that Salesian clerics should be presented to him at least forty days before ordination, together with a

declaration from Don Bosco regarding their *curriculum vitae*, their formation and studies. In addition, on each such occasion the clerics were to be examined in the curia on two treatises of theology. For the time being the archbishop did not demand, as was his right and duty, that they should follow classes at the diocesan seminary.

Faced with Don Bosco's understandable protests, the archbishop, far from softening his demand insisted, in addition, that unless a serious novitiate were made there would be no true formation in the religious life and he would not be able to promote the approval of the constitutions. He ended by specifying that he was in agreement with certain exemptions, but within definite limits, one of which was that he should examine the suitability of ordinands.

It was by now the usual argument only further complicated by Rome's approval of the Salesian congregation and by the privileges that Don Bosco had obtained. These latter the archbishop tended to nullify by appealing to canon law and to the fact that the congregation was one of simple vows and hence not exempt. This juridical uncertainty, heavy with misunderstandings, would only be overcome in 1884, after Gastaldi's death, with the concession of exemption.

Another reason for the misunderstanding was the differences of approach to the congregation and therefore to the novitiate. The archbishop followed the traditional lines, taking the novitiate of the Jesuits as his model. Don Bosco, who did not in any case have much juridical training, apparently had no intention of founding a traditional religious congregation but something much more flexible and better suited to the world of youth. As a result, he found himself in a dilemma: the novelty of his institute made it more dependent on the bishops (something which, given the situation, he did not want); independence of the bishops was only possible by obtaining privileges from Rome; but one could only obtain such privileges for a traditional religious congregation.

In order to escape from this impasse, Don Bosco decided to follow the path of privileges, and he obtained them without any difficulty from Pius IX, who greatly esteemed him and preferred him to the archbishop of Turin.

The archbishop for his part, feeling he had been by-passed by Don Bosco and aware of Pius IX's preference for Don Bosco (something that he openly referred to in his letters to the Roman congregations) threatened on several occasions to resign, as if to force the Pope, by the threat of such a theatrical gesture, to show greater respect for the archbishop of Turin. And since he felt irked by the privileges, in his dealings with Don Bosco and his congregation he systematically invoked canon law, in which his training had made him well-qualified. In doing so he found quite often that he was in tune with the Roman congregations, which themselves tended to adhere to the common law.

The *iter* for the approval of the constitutions provides a typical case in point, concluding with the decree of 3 April 1874. The archbishop had sent out his commendatory letter on 10 February 1873, laying down six precise conditions on the points previously discussed; and also requesting that the subdiaconate should be conferred only after final vows. Don Bosco, for his part, on 1 March 1873, asked the Pope to give definite approval to the constitutions, together with the faculty to issue dimissorial letters. Each side put pressure on the Holy See in order to ensure that their own point of view prevailed.

Amongst other things the archbishop wrote to the prefect of the congregation of the Council, stating his conviction that the Salesian congregation would not survive the death of its founder should the suggested provisions not be approved. In the event, the consultor of the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars accepted the substance of Gastaldi's observations relating to the novitiate, the studies of the clerics and the conferring of the subdiaconate after final vows.

In the meanwhile (and in this he revealed what was really his basic concern), Gastaldi, on 26 July, placed before the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars a query as to whether the Salesian congregation was to be exempt or not. The reply, dated 18 August, threw into sharp relief the fact that there existed in Rome two distinct views regarding the approval of the constitutions, that of the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars and that of Pius IX. The reply, in fact, affirmed that, since the Salesian congregation was one of simple vows, it could not be considered exempt from episcopal jurisdiction; «except when the Constitutions have been approved by the Holy See and when particular privileges have been obtained from the same». It then went into more precise detail, saying that, although the constitutions were still under examination, there was «no point in hiding the fact that the priest Bosco had obtained a number of particular privileges from the Holy Father relating to the granting of dimissorial letters to certain of his students; and that in a recent audience on the 8th of this month he obtained another similar privilege for a period of six years».

The politics of playing a double game can also be discerned in the approval of the constitutions. They were approved by a decree of the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars on 3 April 1874, and incorporated the substance of the observations made by Gastaldi regarding the crucial points that caused him concern. At the same time, however, there was granted, by way of privilege, what had been excluded by the normative ruling of the constitutions: a rescript of the same day granted Don Bosco the faculty for a ten-year period to issue dimissorial letters for Salesian ordinands. What is more, on 8 April Don Bosco received from Pius IX, *vivae vocis oraculo*, exemption from the kind of novitiate laid down in the constitutions.

It was clear to Gastaldi that thanks to Pius IX, the weight of Roman sup-

port was for Don Bosco. This was made all the more humiliating for him by the objective ambiguity of the solution, namely the demands of the constitutions being circumvented by means of privileges. If the archbishop could have accepted this without batting an eyelid all might have been resolved without too much trouble. But that kind of resignation was alien to him, especially when he was convinced that he was in the right. Was this mere obstinacy? Or was it a clear awareness of a bishop's rights and duties?

The fact is that what followed as the relations between the archbishop and Don Bosco became more and more painful, was attributable, at least in part, to the ambivalence of Rome, as it oscillated between the dispositions of canon law and personal privileges.

#### **4. The most critical period**

The most critical period for relations between the archbishop and Don Bosco was between the years 1878-1879, when five anonymous and libellous attacks on the archbishop were published, in which considerable space was given to the current controversy. During those years the archbishop was under a lot of fire, since these libellous publications coincided with a very delicate stage in the polemics surrounding Rosmini, in which the archbishop, ever more isolated in his stance towards Rome, was the target for the insults of the intransigent opposition.

The first pamphlet appeared at the end of 1877 and was entitled: *Letter concerning the archbishop of Turin and the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales. A little light*. It made serious accusations against the archbishop over his treatment of Don Bosco.

The fact that its author professed himself a *Salesian Cooperator* attracted suspicion toward the Salesians, and the archbishop was convinced that they were responsible. In his *ad limina* report of 18 March 1878, he actually accused the Salesians of having published the pamphlet and of diffusing it widely. The author, as was later discovered, was really Canon Giovanni Battista Anfossi, once a Salesian but then a diocesan priest, who had close links with the Salesians. The dust was barely settling after the first libel when a second one, likewise anonymous, appeared in the May of 1878. The author of this, on his own admission, was Don Giovanni Turchi, a Salesian past-pupil and friend of Canon Anfossi, likewise in close contact with the Salesians. His leaflet had the title: *A present for the clergy, a review of the liturgical calendar of the archdiocese of Turin for the year 1878, written by a Chaplain*. The attack took the form of a summary trial of the archbishop, who was accused of being a persecutor of the clergy, especially of Don Bosco; a liberal; the cause of the death of Pius IX through the displeasure he had occasioned him; and a madman who was unfit for the episcopal office.