

CHURCH AND WORLD IN DON BOSCO'S «STORIA ECCLESIASTICA»

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1. Introduction

The dialectic between Church and World has, in the course of the centuries, known many fluctuations and contradictions. In the age of the martyrs the Gospel had an influence that was subversive and revolutionary. In the so-called Constantinian era, there was a fusion of the two powers and an identification of their respective spheres («*Ecclesiam et Imperium esse unum*»).

After fragmentation in the 16th century, there followed the process of secularization in the 17th and 18th centuries, accentuated by the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the «Risorgimento».

The modern and contemporary world tends, in general, to be hostile to divine revelation: the Enlightenment set in motion a fierce attack against the divinity of Christ and against the Church, which it considered a source of intolerance. During the 19th century disbelief grew into atheism, and this eventually assumed a social dimension. During that phase Catholicism felt itself to be a city under siege and saw itself, like Noah's ark, as the only means of salvation. This confrontation led to competition between the Church and the World, reflected in the structure of the Catholic Church, until Vatican II eventually launched an era of dialogue and service.

Pontifical documents, ranging from papal encyclicals to diocesan pastoral letters, traced with polemical ardour the course of our modern civilization. Luther rebelled against the Pope; the Enlightenment rejected divine revelation; atheism exploded on the scene, at first as a middle-class phenomenon, but soon overwhelming also the working classes.

At the theoretical level, Maritain in his *Three Reformers* links, in an ever downward process, Luther's freedom to examine the truth, Descartes' methodical doubt and Rousseau's free education. It is significant that even the young Montini translated the *Three Reformers* into Italian in 1928,¹ with the

¹ J. MARITAIN, *Tre riformatori*, Brescia, Morcelliana 1938 (2nd edit. 1964). Maritain saw Luther, Descartes and Rousseau as three stages in modern civilization, which began with the

aim of making Italian culture less provincial. His shrewd preface advocates openness and dialogue, but unfortunately repeats the *cliché* proclaimed, amongst others in the last century, by Cornoldi who was asserting about 1870 that the history of modern thought is nothing but the history of the disease of human reason.²

How did Don Bosco see these things in his *Storia Ecclesiastica*? One should note that he published this notable early work when he was 30 years old, not in order to contribute to the scientific study of history, which was still in its infancy in the Catholic field,³ but in order to assist in forming young people in a spirit of whole-hearted fidelity to the Holy See. The leit-motif of his volume, which is modelled on Loriquet, Soave and Bercastel, is brought out clearly in the final vindication of the Church's triumphs in the closing pages of his book.

In spite of this, some scholars have placed Don Bosco alongside Don Curci as an outstanding conciliator who was attacked and silenced by an aggressive intransigent opposition. This view is explained by the fact that many influential politicians were friends of Don Bosco and he often acted as an intermediary between the government and the Holy See.⁴

This thesis, propounded by an Englishman, Seton Watson, has a core of truth when one considers Don Bosco's activity as a mediator⁵ in the nomination of bishops for the many vacant dioceses and for the *exequatur* (see the well documented studies of Francesco Motto). But the mere fact that he acted as a link between the government of Victor Emmanuel II and the Holy See does not mean that he should be located somewhere between Rattazzi and Pius IX; still less that he should be seen as working for recon-

renaissance and humanism, was developed by the protestant Reformation and reached its culmination in the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Maritain is rather too fond of that brand of apologetics that smacks of Manicheism in its strict dichotomy between good and evil; he reached a verdict of total condemnation of modern thought, which has actually had the great merit of defending the dignity of the human person that had been so disregarded by the *Ancien Régime*.

² C.M. CORNOLDI, *Lezioni di filosofia ordinate allo studio delle altre scienze*, Firenze 1872, p. XXIII. Such global dismissal of modern thought was not peculiar to Cornoldi, but was a common feature of Catholic culture and influenced articles that appeared in «Civiltà Cattolica», such as C.M. CURCI's *Il giornalismo moderno e il nostro programma*, in «Civiltà Cattolica» 1 (1850) 5-24 (This, of course, represented Curci during his early period of intransigence when he supported the temporal power of the Papacy).

³ F. TRANIELLO, *Cultura ecclesiastica e Cultura cattolica*, in: *Chiesa e religiosità in Italia dopo l'Unità (1861-1878)*, Relazioni II, Milano, Vita e Pensiero 1973, pp. 3-28. In his later phase Curci condemned the poverty and unscientific nature of ecclesiastical studies: C.M. CURCI, *La nuova Italia e i vecchi zelanti*, Firenze, 1881; G.D. MUCCI, *Carlo Maria Curci il fondatore della «Civiltà Cattolica»*, Roma, Ed. Studium 1988; ID., *Il primo direttore della «Civiltà Cattolica»*, Carlo Maria Curci, Ed. Civiltà Cattolica.

⁴ SE 1845, pp. 387-388. Regarding more conciliatory Catholics and the various currents of thought, cf. F. TRANIELLO, *Cattolicesimo conciliatorista*, Milano, Marzorati 1970.

⁵ C. SETON WATSON, *Storia d'Italia dal 1870 al 1925*, Bari, Laterza 1967, pp. 73 and 813.

conciliation between the Church and the modern world. He was himself most faithful to the Roman Pontiff⁶ and a convinced defender of his temporal power, of the *Syllabus* and of papal intransigence. At the same time he enjoyed the trust of the liberals because of his disinterested philanthropical work on behalf of homeless boys, who were a danger to society, as also on account of his boundless energy and the spirit of self-sacrifice that was manifest in everything he did. It was, likewise, his devotion to the cause of the Pope that enabled him to get round formidable obstacles like the hostility of Archbishop Gastaldi; by appealing to the highest authority he gained Vatican approval for his revolutionary new Salesian congregation.⁷ It was revolutionary in various ways: in the spirit which it radiated, in its efforts to reach out to so many categories of people, in the image it created of the priest as someone immersed in the noisy, chaotic masses of youngsters that shouted and played on the recreation ground. How different was the image from that of the Tridentine priest, the sacred figure, a man set apart from the people, even during the Mass, by the barriers of the Latin language, the altar-rail, the priest's house, the remoteness and absence of all familiarity with the laity so strongly inculcated by St. Charles Borromeo in the *Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis*. Because this bold concept was so new, Don Bosco was forced, time and time again, to modify his rule before it became acceptable to the authorities, who were anxious to contain such new initiatives within the approved structures of the past.⁸

Let us now see whether this balance, which won for the Turinese priest the confidence of two opposing camps, is to be found in his *Storia Ecclesiastica*.

The book was published in 1845, a work of his younger days, with all the merits and shortcomings that that implied.⁹ One positive feature of the work was its immediate clarity and intelligibility, which resulted from its simple form of question and answer. Like St. Augustine, Don Bosco could have

⁶ F. MOTTO, *L'azione mediatrice di Don Bosco nella questione delle sedi vescovili vacanti in Italia dal 1858 alla morte di Pio IX*, in: P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 251-328. Motto, who is at present preparing the critical edition of Don Bosco's letters, believes that some unpublished material can still be traced.

⁷ M. BELARDINELLI, *Don Bosco e il Concilio Vaticano I*, in: P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 239-250. One learns, amongst other things, that Don Bosco helped to convince Gastaldi to vote unconditionally for infallibility at Vatican I and that the saint had known the future bishop Scalabrini when he was rector of the seminary at Como.

⁸ R. AUBERT, *La Chiesa Cattolica dalla crisi del 1848 alla prima guerra mondiale*, in: *Nuova Storia della Chiesa*, 5/1, Torino, Marietti 1977, p. 156. Concerning the in some ways revolutionary image of the Salesian priest see the cyclostyled work of P. STELLA, *Il prete piemontese dell'800 tra la rivoluzione francese e la rivoluzione industriale*, Torino 1972 (Centro di studi sulla storia e sociologia religiosa del Piemonte).

⁹ For fuller information see F. MOLINARI, *La «Storia Ecclesiastica» di Don Bosco*, in: P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 203-238. Very interesting, and helpful, the book: M. MIELE, *Tommaso Michele Salzano, 1807-1890*, an extract from «Campania Sacra» (1986).

said: «I would prefer to be reproved by the learned than not understood by the unlearned». The book was highly successful and was frequently reprinted, not just because of its popular but limpid style, its appropriately simple use of language, free of all archaisms and Piedmontese dialect, but also because it was used in schools, especially by the Brothers of Christian Schools.¹⁰ The author was not happy about the reprints, because they were full of printing errors. He did, however, approve of the fourth improved edition of 1871. The revision was helpful in so far as it softened the virulent polemics of the first edition and improved the general lay-out. One may judge less favourably the decision to drop the catechetical form of question and answer and to turn it into a continuous narrative. This was the work of Don Giovanni Bonetti. It would be interesting to know the reasons for these changes. It is certainly strange that precisely at that time, when the Church was involved in even fiercer controversy round about 1870, this new edition of Don Bosco's book adopted a much more temperate tone, even if this was through the mediation of Don Bonetti: for example, the theme of the «Divine Vendetta» against the heretics. But no more of that.

2. Church and World

One fact needs to be insisted upon. Don Bosco sketched the outline for his *Storia Ecclesiastica* between 1844 and 1845 during the pontificate of Gregory XVI, a man who was as open in his approach to missionary work as he was closed and conservative when confronted by modern civilization. (He would not have railways or street-lights in the Papal States because he feared these things would help the liberals to travel and meet by night). One can understand, therefore, how constantly in the background of Don Bosco's history is the *De Triumphis Ecclesiae*, published by Cappellari in 1799, and echoed in the following extracts: «It was opposed in every age with sword and writings and still it triumphed. It has seen kingdoms, empires and republics crumble and fall into ruins all around, while it alone remained firm and immovable. Nineteen centuries have passed since it was founded and still it flourishes».¹¹

Amongst the great men of history, Napoleon, with his fluctuating fortunes, best illustrates the indestructible power of the persecuted Church, and

¹⁰ The book is dedicated to Fratel Hervé de la Croix, provincial of the Brothers of Christian Schools, friend of Don Bosco.

¹¹ SE 1845, pp. 387-388. The formula used in 1871 is a good deal less polemical: «Finally, although we see the Church persecuted, we must remain firm in the faith, knowing that the war will certainly finish with the triumph of the Church and of its supreme Pastor» (SE 1871, p. 371). He has clearly omitted the bit about the downfall of kingdoms, republics and empires, perhaps because the Papal States had collapsed the previous year.

the futility of compromising with the world (recall the ingratitude of Napoleon towards the Pope who had crowned him as emperor in Paris), and the way God uses the crimes of the wicked to punish them.

When Pius VI died the French revolutionaries declared: «The last of the Popes is dead».¹² «But God is the founder and ruler of his Church, and so all the efforts of her enemies come to nought».¹³

Napoleon raised hopes of a more benign, less bloody style of government.¹⁴ Accordingly Pius VII, who had been elected at Venice despite all efforts to prevent it, entered into a «concordat» with him, which Napoleon at once violated. The Pope agreed to go to Paris to crown him as emperor but the latter «repayed the Pope's condescension with the most monstrous ingratitude, allowing himself to perpetrate against the Pope excesses such as had never been seen before».¹⁵

Napoleon mocked and sneered at papal sanctions, exclaiming: «Does the Pope fancy that his excommunications will make the weapons fall from my soldiers' hands?».¹⁶ But he was to discover that working with the Church leads to greatness, while persecuting it leads to ruin.¹⁷

The arrogant emperor «was taken prisoner and confined in Fontainebleau, the very palace in which he had kept the Holy Father prisoner. There he shed tears of desperation, where he had forced the vicar of Jesus Christ to weep».¹⁸

The world for Don Bosco was unclean, as it was for St. Augustine and St. Alphonsus. The good and the wicked are separated by a towering divide, just as were Lazarus, in Abraham's bosom, and Dives, in the fires of hell. However, while the author of the *De Civitate Dei* discerns «precious signs of civic virtue in the powerful and illustrious empire of Rome, even though it lacks the seal of true religion»,¹⁹ Don Bosco could find no soul of truth or seed of wisdom outside the confines of the Catholic Church. He did not share the openness of the saintly philosopher, Justin, who, though persecuted and martyred by pagans, had a deep awareness of Christian values that were present within paganism, like seeds scattered by Truth itself.

In this psychology of rejection follows Don Bosco from the counter-revolutionary and romantic currents of the time (De Maistre, Chateaubriand,

¹² SE 1845, p. 371. In the 1871 edition (p. 330) the phrase is omitted and replaced by a bare narration of the facts.

¹³ SE 1845, p. 359.

¹⁴ SE 1845, p. 360.

¹⁵ SE 1845, p. 361.

¹⁶ SE 1845, p. 366.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ SE 1845, p. 367. The 1871 edition is identical, p. 335.

¹⁹ *Patrologia Latina* 33, col. 533. St. Augustine continues: «in order that it may be understood that with the advent of true religion men become citizens of another city, in which the king is truth, the law is charity, the length of life eternity».

Donoso Cortés, etc.) as well as from St. Alphonsus de Liguori and the popes of the Restoration, though his views revealed also certain nuances personal to himself.

Thinkers like the Catholic freemason, Joseph de Maistre, considered that everything done by the revolutionaries and Jacobins represented «disorder, madness, impiety, the destruction of all the principles and moral and political supports which make it possible for people to live together in society». Catholic apologetics denounced the massacres, the anarchy, the attack on property, the persecution of the Church in its clerics and in the Pope. Even those immortal principles of «liberty, fraternity and equality», which were rooted in gospel values, were rejected *en bloc*, because they violated the rights of divinely ordained authority, encouraged religious indifferentism and turned freedom into licence.²⁰ Don Bosco, whose historical perspective and cultural awareness were more narrow, could not share Rosmini's view that to make the Church poorer was to make it purer.

The Church came out of the revolution poorer and deprived of its political power. Did that really do it great harm? Rosmini likened the wealth of the Church to the armour of Saul which made David helpless and exclaimed: «Where can we find immensely rich clergy with the courage to become poor? Or a clergy whose intellectual vision remains clear enough to see that the hour has come when to impoverish the Church is to save it?».²¹

Although he aligned himself with the forces of anti-revolutionary intransigence and moral traditionalism, Don Bosco, possibly because of his practical sense and his contact with reality, moderated some of the positions taken up by St. Alphonsus. The latter had written: «You were not born for food, or for pleasure, or to become rich, or to eat like beasts». The founder of the Salesians softened the rigorism of this by adding: «You are not in the world *solely* for pleasure, or to become rich, or to eat».²² He included in his *Giovane Provveduto* the hymn of St. Alphonsus: «World, you are no longer mine», understanding by the word «world» not the wonderful creation that

²⁰ G. MARTINA, *La Chiesa nell'età del liberalismo*, Brescia, Morcelliana 1979, p. 8. For the counter-revolutionary mentality of the Restoration which influenced Don Bosco see C. BONA, *Le Amicizie Società segrete e rinascita religiosa (1771-1830)*, Torino, Società Subalpina 1962. Lively and well-informed is C. MEZZADRI, *La Chiesa e la rivoluzione francese*, Cinisello (Milano), Ed. Paoline 1989.

²¹ A. ROSMINI, *Le cinque piaghe della Chiesa*, edited by C. RIVA, Brescia, Morcelliana 1966, p. 163. The opposite mentality, which viewed every confiscation of Church possessions as an attack on the faith, is well illustrated in the ecclesiastical periodicals of the Restoration: «Enciclopedia Ecclesiastica» (Napoli, 1821-1823), «Memorie di religione, morale e letteratura» (Modena, 1822-1832), «Amico d'Italia» (Torino, 1822-1830).

²² P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 41. The varying nuances are explained not so much by the differing theological approaches (Don Bosco follows the benigner line of St. Alphonsus) as by the differing contexts of the periods in which the two worked: Alphonsus is addressing himself to the people of the 18th century, while Don Bosco worked amongst the youth of the 19th century.

came from God's hands nor man's cooperative labour to improve that world, but rather the world that is troubled by original sin and possessed by Satan. But he sweetens St. Alphonsus with the spirit of St. Philip Neri, who recommended to his pupils: «Be happy; I don't want scruples or sadness; don't sin, and that's enough for me». ²³ Here we have the source of the Salesian saying: *Servite Domino in laetitia*.

The influence of the popes of the Restoration on Don Bosco is attested by the harshly negative judgement that he passes on the French Revolution, on Freemasonry and secret societies, which he sees as constantly seeking the simultaneous destruction of throne and altar. ²⁴ Equally harsh is his condemnation of liberalism and socialism, which opposed Catholic schools and every other social expression of religion, while, at the same time, opening the floodgates to blasphemous and obscene publications, to harmful entertainments and to pagan fashions.

The process of dechristianization, as reflected in papal documents and in the *Storia Ecclesiastica*, unfolds in clear stages: Luther, Freemasonry, the Encyclopaedists (Voltaire, Rousseau), the Jacobins (Robespierre). These people are merely Satan in disguise. The identification of the devil with the revolution was to become a constant theme of Pius IX after 1849, and was already to be found in our author, who affirmed that the devil, «under the cloak of secret societies and of modern philosophy, was stirring up rebellion and bloody persecutions». By advocating freedom of conscience the protestants were declaring: «Do what you like: rob, disobey, kill the King». ²⁵

²³ *Ibid.*, 56-57. Don Bosco also made use of activities like gymnastics, music, acting, concerts, walks – things that had been familiar to him since his childhood.

²⁴ F. MOLINARI, *La Massoneria nei documenti pontifici dell'Ottocento*, which is still in course of publication. See also J. FERRER BENIMELI - G. CAPRILE, *Massoneria e Chiesa Cattolica ieri oggi domani*, Roma, Ed. Paoline 1979, p. 17. There is a repetitive quality in the anti-masonic documents: Benedict XIV's constitution *Providas* largely reproduces the constitution *In eminenti* of Benedict XII, defining the objective of Freemasonry in a formula constantly used by the popes of the 19th century: «to plot against religion, the State and the rule of law». The conviction that the French Revolution was a masonic plot became part of the mental patrimony of the Catholic Church in the 19th century. Certain clear facts, however, force us to alter that conviction: Freemasonry was progressive and preached constitutional monarchy, but did not advocate the Terror of the Jacobins; it supported the principles of liberty, fraternity and equality, but was more inclined towards reform than towards revolution; there were masons amongst those who went to the guillotine in the Revolution, one of them being even a priest, Jean Marie Galot (1747-1794), who was beatified by Pius XII (his life is outlined in: *Liberi Muratori di ieri e di oggi*, Roma, Camelo editore 1986, p. 219). On the contrary, Napoleon was very close to the masons and was probably one himself: see F. COLLAVERI, *Napoleone, imperatore e massone*, Firenze, Ed. Nardini 1986. The best informed work on Freemasonry in Italy is A.A. MOLA, *Storia della Massoneria Italiana dall'Unità alla Repubblica*, Milano, Ed. Bompiani 1976. The theory of a masonic plot is attributed to A. Barruel, who actually distinguishes those Masons who plotted from those who did not, so even he did not believe in a general masonic plot, which was insisted on by those who came after him.

²⁵ SE 1845, pp. 278 et ss. The identical phrase is repeated in SE 1871, p. 267. Pius IX's

After Luther and Calvin, whose monstrous lives were punished by a horrible death through the «Divina Vendetta»,²⁶ the other sinister beast was Freemasonry, which, in Don Bosco's opinion, was also responsible for unleashing the French Revolution. The urge to blame Freemasonry for the apostasy of the modern world became so violent and over-simplified that even Pope Benedict XIV (1740-1758), whose open attitudes towards culture and towards Voltaire are well known, was represented by Don Bosco almost as someone struggling against the Masons: «He spent the 18 years of his pontificate fighting against heretics, to suppress the plots that the Freemasons and philosophers were weaving against religion».²⁷

Don Bosco blamed the Masons for the doctrines of Manete and for the ills that flowed from the French Revolution: they «conspired (with implacable hatred) against the king, the Pope, the priests and the God of the Christians; they vowed to destroy God and Religion, binding themselves by an oath to the very God that they were seeking to destroy. These Freemasons were also called Jacobins, after the church of St. James where they used to meet».²⁸

The Freemasons, the philosophers of the Enlightenment and the Jacobins were all brothers, united by one set of ideas, which the Masons pursued in secret, the philosophers proclaimed in public and the Jacobins translated into merciless killings. Don Bosco wrote: «The secret societies and certain fanatics called *Illuminists* united with other philosophers under the pretence of wanting to reform the world and to establish equality and liberty; they pro-

mentality is clearly demonstrated in P.G. CAMAIANI, *Il diavolo, Roma e la Rivoluzione*, in «Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa» 8 (1972) 485-516. The same ideas are repeated in an article by the same author in: *Chiesa e religiosità in Italia dopo l'Unità (1861-1878)*, Relazioni II, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 1973, pp. 65-128. Very well informed is C. BREZZI, *Orientamenti della Massoneria intorno al 1870*, *ibid.*, Comunicazioni II, pp. 307-340, where Brezzi examines very closely the anti-clericalism of the Masons. Note that in the edition of his *Storia Ecclesiastica* of 1871, Don Bosco stressed the role of the Masons in Italy; he was probably influenced by the climate of opinion following the breaching of Porta Pia.

²⁶ SE 1845, pp. 301 and 306; in SE 1871, p. 285, the death of Luther is described in identical terms, though with the omission of the phrase used in the earlier edition which said: «he ended his life and departed to hell, like the devils whose aid he had often invoked». Also corrected is the date of Luther's death, 1546, whereas the first edition had given it as 1545. The 1871 edition also removed mention of the «Divina Vendetta», which in the first edition had Calvin dying amid appalling torments.

²⁷ SE 1845, p. 334; SE 1871, pp. 314-318. The constant opposition to Freemasonry is retained and even accentuated in the later edition, leading to the repetition of certain inaccuracies; for example, that the masonic doctrine came from Manete, and that Freemasonry is a school of atheism.

²⁸ SE 1845, pp. 335-336; SE 1871, pp. 321-322. The later edition repeats the thesis that the French Revolution was a masonic plot and that freemasons are atheists and materialists. One only needs to read the Anderson Constitution (1723) to verify that an atheist was debarred from the Freemasons, whose declared aim was to create a universal Family of loving fraternity and not to indulge in Manichaeism or class divisions.

voked the revolution which, beginning in 1789, lasted for 10 years and resulted in the shedding of much blood».²⁹

The Church's resistance and survival constituted the rock against which all the forces of evil were shattered, while the impious perpetrators of that evil met shameful deaths. Such was the pattern repeated throughout history, a pattern within which the gates of hell would never prevail. Voltaire, despite confessing his errors, died in despair; Rousseau took poison and then ended himself with a pistol; the «cannibal» Robespierre, «seeking like a modern Nero to escape the shame of a public execution, fired a pistol into his mouth, shattering the upper jaw; but he did not die. He was left to languish in prison in agonising pain, then in the public square, amidst the shrill insults of the crowd. When he was almost at his last breath, he was led to the scaffold and beheaded in 1794».³⁰

The awful death of the heretic, of the persecutor, of the Illuminist, of the socialist Saint-Simon,³¹ following the classic pattern of Lactantius' *De mortibus persecutorum*, certainly did not speak of a God of love, *cuius proprium est misereri semper et parcere*, but rather of the God of retribution, waging his «Divina Vendetta», condemning men not only to hell in the next life but to despair in this. *Non est pax impiis* is the obverse of *Servite Domino in laetitia*.

This Dantesque «seventh circle», wholly evil and void of good, that represented our sinful world, was faced on the opposite shore by the Catholic community, the seat of all good and untouched by evil. One could call this a version of the monophysite heresy as applied to history, in so far as Don Bosco passes over in silence the human side of the Church, with its inevitable defects, in order to concentrate solely on its works of charity and its multitudes of saints.

This polemical and apologetic approach, when joined to his anxiety to keep his boys away from the Piedmontese Waldensians and from the corruption of the modern world, led him, when considering the great divisions within the Church in the 11th and 16th centuries, and even when mentioning

²⁹ SE 1845, p. 343.

³⁰ SE 1845, pp. 338-339, 345-346; SE 1871, pp. 317-318, 323, The description of the deaths of Voltaire, of Rousseau and Robespierre remains the same. That of Robespierre is again stated to be an expression of the «Divina Vendetta», with considerable distortion of the real facts.

³¹ SE 1845, pp. 375 et ss. The 1871 edition omits the life and terrible death of Saint-Simon. The pedagogy of fear which underlies the *Storia Ecclesiastica* and surfaces very obviously in the deaths of opponents of the Church (echoes of Lactantius), was typical of Catholic education in the 19th century: all spiritual exercises included vivid descriptions of death, judgement, hell and heaven (though the feeblest emphasis was usually on heaven). Delumeau, a devout Catholic historian, recounts that basic to his research into the use of fear in western religion was the traumatic effect of the «ditany for a happy death» recited in the Salesian college at Nice, where he was sent at the age of 13, on the death of his father: J. DELUMEAU, *La peur, en Occident (XIV-XVIII). Une cité assiégée*, Paris, Fayard 1978, pp. 25-27.

the injustices of colonialism, to place all the blame on the Church's "dead branches" and never on the Church itself.

When dealing with the Eastern Church, he makes a barbed and bitter comment on the fall of Constantinople (1453). The soldiers of Mahomet II had sacked the churches, profaned the convents and massacred the people. The intransigent historian comments as follows: «That Greek Church which had produced great saints and famous doctors lay in disgrace, a prey to vice and ignorance. It had not been willing to recognise the authority of the successor of Peter, who treated it like a father, and so it fell under the yoke of the infidels, who treated it like a slave».³²

The less savoury aspects of the Spanish and Portuguese *conquistadores* are skated over, and almost obliterated by the missionary achievements: «Although some of the explorers, who were only there in search of wealth, showed considerable cruelty, nevertheless the preachers of the gospel, moved only by the desire to win souls for God, made many conversions».³³

In his interpretation of past events there is no shadow of self-doubt. A Pope like Adrian VI had the courage to admit humbly, in the *guidelines* he sent to the Nuncio Chierigati, that the crisis within the Church was caused by the sins of her members, especially priests and prelates; Don Bosco, in contrast, takes a one-sided view, denigrating the «others» who are all wicked, and exalting the holiness of the saints, as if the Catholic Church were an association of angels rather than a community of sinners who have been saved by the purely gratuitous mercy of God. The «others» could include people like Luther, Calvin and Henry VIII, who, by their dissolute lives and perverse doctrine, led multitudes to hell, or people like the illuminist and socialist philosophers, who died in despair or even by their own hand, as if to affirm the self-destruction at the heart of modern civilization.

According to Don Bosco, the sole reason for the divisions of the Reformation was the pride, ambition, petulance, shamelessness and depravity of Luther, who, «as he progressed in impiety, formulated a doctrine which defiled everything that was sacred, dismissed the sacraments and destroyed human liberty; he proclaimed that good works were useless, gave people freedom to sin, made God the cause of all ills; in fine, he rejected every law and reduced man to the level of the brutes».³⁴

Calvin, in his turn, wanted to get his own back on the Church because he had not been granted a benefice, and he fled to avoid paying the penalty for

³² SE 1845, p. 275; SE 1871, pp. 258-259. The total lack of any spirit of ecumenism is a sign of the times rather than a characteristic of Don Bosco. The intolerance that inspired the savage polemics between Catholics and the Waldenses emerges in a book which, though unscientific in approach, provides an interesting reflection of the mentality that prevailed: M.L. STRANIERO, *Don Bosco e i Valdesi*, Torino, Ed. Claudiana 1988.

³³ SE 1845, p. 282; SE 1871, p. 262 (the two versions are virtually identical).

³⁴ SE 1845, p. 290; SE 1871, p. 269.

a crime which was described by Don Bosco as «infamous». He taught that the majority of the human race was arbitrarily predestined to hell; he behaved like a tyrant and had Michele Serveto burnt at the stake.³⁵

Henry VIII, the king of England, rebelled against the Pope because of his sinful desire to repudiate his lawful wife, Catherine, and marry other women, whom he later deserted or even executed.³⁶ Even more horrendous, as has been seen, was the fate of the leaders of modern movements.

In contrast to these multitudes who were punished by an avenging deity, and against the dark background of the Revolution, which was an incarnation of Satan, there shone out the glorious deeds of the popes and martyrs. Don Bosco, while emphasising this holiness, assigned it four functions: 1) it is the acid test of the true Church's monolithic solidity; 2) it proves the presence of the Holy Spirit; 3) it is an expression of the brotherly love enjoined upon us by Christ; 4) it is a response to the demands of our times and to the attacks of the enemy.³⁷

May I briefly comment on the last two aspects of this holiness. When viewed as an expression of love for one's neighbour it acquires an autobiographical dimension, given that Don Bosco was the saint of charity in action, just as Cafasso could be described as the saint of silent charity. Indeed all the Piedmontese saints, Cottolengo, Cafasso and Murialdo manifested the same evangelical dedication to the needs of others.

All Christian heroes have a genius for charity: Pier Damiani used to feed crowds of poor people daily; Dominic was animated purely by the spirit of charity; Francis of Assisi made it a rule that alms should never be denied to anyone; Brigid of Sweden founded a hospital next to the palace; Francis of Paola did extraordinary things on behalf of the poor; Amadeus of Savoy personally carried out the most menial duties in the service of the sick; John of God set up free hospitals; Aloysius Gonzaga was heroic in his charity towards victims of the plague; Philip Neri used his lively cheerfulness in the service of the poor and the sick; Vincent de Paul was the saint of the poor *par excellence*.

By placing his main emphasis upon the principle of love Don Bosco killed several birds with one stone: he presented to his boys the ideal of self-obl-

³⁵ SE 1845, pp. 291-293; SE 1871, p. 271.

³⁶ SE 1845, pp. 294-295. On page 296 there is a small slip, when Thomas More's date of death was given as 1534 instead of 1535. The same slip is repeated in the 1871 edition, p. 273.

³⁷ On this topic see F. MOLINARI, *I santi nella «Storia Ecclesiastica» di Don Bosco*, in: «Credere-oggi» 8 (1988) n. 5, pp. 45-46. On the psychology of the saint see G. DACQUINO, *Psicologia di Don Bosco*, Torino, SEI 1988 (the volume, while valid from the point of view of psychological expertise, is unfortunately based on documents that are questionable, like the *Memorie Biografiche*, which are currently under careful critical scrutiny. See F. DESRAMAUT, *Les Mémoires I de Giovanni Battista Lemoyne. Étude d'un livre fondamental sur la jeunesse de Jean Bosco*, Lyon, Maison d'études Saint-Jean-Bosco, 1962).

tion, he showed that the gospel has beneficial social implications, and made Catholicism appear in a more sympathetic light, thus compensating for the repellent presentation of God as the spiteful and disdainful being that waged the «Divina Vendetta»

Sanctity, for Don Bosco, was the divine answer to the crisis of a world *totus positus in maligno*. Let me cite two examples.

The 10th century saw the «pornocracy» of Marozia and Theodore: «yet no century has given more saints to the universal Church». Unfortunately, he quotes only two names: St. Bruno and St. Romuald.³⁸

Faced with the devastation of the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic reform movement produced a century of saints: «God's providence ordained in a wonderful way that just when heretics were trying to destroy the Church there should arise a host of religious, saintly doctors, who did wonderful things for the Church and caused to blossom throughout the world... a huge host of saints... (who) gloriously repaired the damage inflicted on religion».³⁹ There follows a list that begins with Cajetan of Thiene and ends with Charles Borromeo.

Don Bosco spoke and wrote of the Catholic Church as the home of saints; these he praised with a degree of energy equal to that with which he stigmatised the world. His attitude was very different from that of other eminent Catholics whom Traniello describes as «conciliators», men like Manzoni, Rosmini, Curci and Newman.

Manzoni, in a famous observation, expressed the need for dialogue: «When the world has recognised the truth and greatness of an idea, one should not seek to contest that idea but rather vindicate it in the light of the gospel. [...] Such ideas should not be condemned by religion unless they are somehow lacking in reason, or universality, or disinterestedness». He commented that the source of true freedom is found only in Christianity, because it demands that a man should respect others and practise self-control, thus ensuring interior freedom and removing the danger of despotism.⁴⁰

Manzoni was a close friend of Rosmini, who had a precise objective in his sights, namely, to reconcile the Gospel with the ideals of the modern world by a renewal of the Church and of society. Such was the aim expressed in his two short books, *Delle cinque piaghe della Santa Chiesa* and *La Costituzione secondo la giustizia sociale* (1848). The laity were to play a vital and active part in the life of the society by their vote, even if only consultative, and in

³⁸ SE 1845, p. 197; SE 1871, pp. 205-206. The exposition of the 10th to 11th century is inclined to be more positive in the 2nd edition than in the 1st.

³⁹ SE 1845, p. 297; SE 1871, pp. 274-284. A pleasing feature of the 2nd edition is the division into chapters, where the titles and contents underline the positive aspects of Catholicism through the saints and religious Orders.

⁴⁰ U. COLOMBO, *Alessandro Manzoni*, Roma, Ed. Paoline 1985, pp. 263-280; A. MANZONI, *Osservazioni sulla Morale Cattolica*, edit. by U. Colombo, Ed. Paoline, Roma, 1965, pp. 319-354. (The chapter is entitled «Degli odi religiosi»).