

DON BOSCO AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Giuseppe BRACCO

The centenary year has drawn the attention of students to the history of Don Bosco. According to each one's specialised interest – my own is economics – the study of the person of Don Bosco has also meant trying to understand the context within which his work unfolded. Living in Turin has happily allowed me the opportunity to study the original documentary sources of that period that are still in existence.¹

I should like to share with those present here today a few ideas rather than a complete disquisition, which would require a lot more time if I were to touch on all the points of interest and the new insights that have been thrown up by my research. I shall also endeavour to provide a new key, if that is the right word, to the reading of the already well known studies that have helped to create the accepted view of the events of the decades between 1840 and 1880, which tell us so much about Turin.

New documents have been examined, but, above all, it has become clear that new approaches to the economic history of Italy in the 19th century are highly relevant to the proper understanding of Don Bosco.

The study of economic history became fashionable in Italy about 30 years ago; unfortunately, the approach was prevailingly ideological, presenting the application of historical materialism as an unquestionable truth and many came to agree with this view even if only by accepting the results adduced by those studies. I say this because the vision that is sometimes given of the Turin of the 19th century as a city going through the preliminary stages of industrial development is today widely judged to be exaggerated. It is certainly no longer possible to affirm, as some have done, that Turin in the 19th century recalls London in its pre-industrial phase or, worse still, London during the first years of the industrial revolution. That is certainly not possible, but consider that the industrial revolution in Italy and Turin clearly occurs in the decade that straddles the 19th and 20th centuries. Hence one certainly cannot apply such an interpretation to Turin between 1840 and 1850.

¹ For more ample information on what has been touched upon in this paper cf. G. BRACCO (edit.), *Torino e don Bosco*, I, Torino, Archivio Storico della Città di Torino, 1989.

Italian, French and English scholars, as they try to present as objective a picture as possible, are agreed that the economic and social situation of Italy, including Turin, during that period reveals certain characteristics that are wholly distinctive and not found anywhere else. To put it in economic terms, it is now clearly discernible that the slow development of Italy was such as to guarantee that the supply of goods and services was able to correspond to the demand for goods and services within the context of Italian society. With this premise it becomes easier to understand the social and civil situation of Turin within which Don Bosco operated.

We are dealing with a city whose activity was scattered and very thinly spread; it was certainly not what we would call industrialised in the size of its business enterprises, which were still at the craft stage, even if use was made of the innovations that were familiar throughout the rest of Europe.

Turin, as a capital city, also had its own special characteristics; in spite of everything, Turin was a city of service rather than production enterprises. It was only at the end of the century that it became a centre of production.

This centre of services, therefore, attracted a host of peasants, men and women, who flocked there in a way that is perhaps reminiscent of what happened at the start of the modern age, when poor peasants migrated to the great cities whenever times were hard; it was easier to find there the means of survival, thanks to the application of the old Catholic principle that charity is a real means of redistributing wealth. And so numbers of poor people, today we would call them the under-privileged, came to Turin, not so much because a change was taking place in the economics of production, but because Turin was a centre that made survival easier.

It should be further remembered that Turin was the capital of an extensive kingdom, probably the largest in territorial terms in the Italian context: there was the whole of Savoy, Piedmont, Liguria, the zone of the present Côte d'Azur, and on the maritime side there was Sardinia. It was therefore capable of evoking a poor population of a vast territory.

In coming to Turin Don Bosco became the dispenser of the advantages of this Piedmontese city. These advantages that are connected with city life are all clearly demonstrated in the course of his activities. Living in this city, with its long established customs, meant that he had to deal with a Municipal Council which had inherited the ancient customs of the free Communes and so had authority over the whole city. It also meant that he had to deal with the State Government and with the monarchy, with its king and ministers; and finally, with the local Church. It is certainly not my task here to recount the history of that Church; sufficient to say that it was a Church that conducted itself in its dealings with the State in a style that was traditional in Piedmont, both in the preceding centuries and during the 19th century. Remember, too, that the State of Piedmont had its own special character.

Having said this, and I do not want to contradict myself, it seems that

Don Bosco's first initiatives in Turin were typical of the Church in Turin. One thing that was obvious from the moment I began to consult the documents concerning Don Bosco in the city archives was that Don Bosco was never alone. He worked with a group of priests who all seemed to share the same objective, namely to do something about the under-privileged and about social unrest, using methods that were already well tried.

Those priests were personalities who are now famous for the way they graced the Church of the 19th century, Don Borel, Cafasso, Murialdo and many others. If, in keeping this in mind, one reads the *Memorie Biografiche* noting the names of the priests who helped Don Bosco at Valdocco, the truth becomes evident: Don Bosco was never alone but operated with what I dare call a multitude of priests who worked in the city, according to an overall plan. Whether the plan was prearranged or merely the result of working together, day by day, is now difficult to decide.

One letter that I found (previously unknown, but now widely referred to) written by Don Bosco to Michele di Cavour in the March of 1846, requested permission to set up his work in Valdocco. The letter reveals four fundamental principles, to which Don Bosco appended his signature, and which would henceforth govern his behaviour in relation to civil authority.

The first point, he declares, is love of work; the second, the frequentation of the Holy Sacraments; the third, most important from our modern point of view, respect for all authority; the fourth, the avoidance of evil companions, which could also be interpreted purely in terms of social behaviour.

In a city where there is a lot of unrest, where the authorities are very active and where the Church too is at work, good relations with institutions, especially with civil institutions, become an inescapable condition if one is to achieve anything.

One can almost track Don Bosco in his dealings within the city. There is virtually no fundamental action, no decision that Don Bosco did not submit to the approval of the city authorities. Every building, from a simple wall to a great edifice, from the little Pinardi Chapel to the grandiose Basilica of Mary, Help of Christians, was completed only after obtaining the assent of the authorities. Any action concerning the foundations, from large schools to individual contracts, was always referred to the civil authorities. Even his way of dealing with individual boys and of facing up to what seems a contemporary problem strikes one as quite exceptionally modern.

When the Commune, the Prefecture, the Department of Public Security or the Government were faced with the problem of some boy who was at risk or abandoned, they asked Don Bosco's help, because the State of Savoy had no structure equipped to handle such a problem; there existed only what we would now call IPAB (Private Institutions for benevolent assistance).

In the course of preparatory research for a study sponsored by the Administration of the Commune of Turin, I have been able to trace some de-

lightful letters in the State Archives of Rome. In these letters Don Bosco was replying to requests for help with various boys. Each letter deals in miniature with a case of child care: the essential details about each boy are studied and communicated to the civil authority, because it seems that Don Bosco wanted his course of action to be not only permitted but officially authorised by the authorities. So we find Don Bosco saying of a boy who was too young: «Look, we have to send him somewhere else first; when he reaches the right age, I will take him». After studying the case of another boy, he writes: «He has so far had no education. We are sending him to school, then we shall prepare him for a job, but always trying to understand and allow for his own personal preferences». Another boy has problems because his father had been in trouble with the law and been executed. Don Bosco writes: «We must be careful, because if we put a boy like this with other boys, he may suffer more, because boys can be crueller than they realise and could make his life miserable by making fun of him. Instead of improving his unhappy situation, we could make it worse».

These constant negotiations become an important feature of his work. If, from the episodes that relate to individual persons and which are, therefore, to some extent private, we turn to the examination of events of more general significance for the community at large, we find that Don Bosco was equally precise in his dealings with the civil authority.

I have always been amazed when reading the traditional lives of Don Bosco that he everywhere encountered such difficulties. Why should that be? It is almost as if he could only succeed in any undertaking through some unexpected happening of an almost superterrestrial nature. Something always happens to resolve the problem for him. When he wants to build the Basilica of Mary, Help of Christians, the wicked city councillors don't want it dedicated to Mary, Help of Christians; when he wants to settle in Valdocco, Michele Cavour objects, and so on. In other words, no matter what Don Bosco does, he is always traditionally represented as encountering the most serious obstacles. Then, at a magic touch, the *deus ex machina* resolves the problem.

Of one thing I am convinced: as a practical means of furthering his work within the civil community Don Bosco used a tool which was also an educative, pedagogical method: it may seem crude but the results were pleasing. Let us suppose that he has some project within the city community where he is living. He wants to involve everybody (he spent his whole life involving people in his work). He therefore goes along to people and says: «We must do this, but it's going to be difficult, so we'll have to work hard in order to succeed». Everyone in the community has to play a part, anyone who can do anything must do so; if somebody cannot do anything but can only pray (pardon the word "only"), then that person must pray. Everyone is thus involved in the common effort. Once everyone is involved, another mechanism begins to work, the spirit of solidarity: all work together, «one for all», be-

cause there is work to be done which will ensure the end they all have in view. That mechanism builds a community that lives as one, and benefits by the process. It is given fresh impetus when the final objective is seen to have been achieved.

If we interpret the evidence in this way, we perceive that, quite frankly, there were times when Don Bosco had already obtained the necessary permission from the appropriate body, but did not at once declare the fact. There has to be effort to achieve the desired goal.

I have adopted this point of view, perhaps somewhat obsessively, in studying the individual stages of the lotteries that Don Bosco organized. We all recall how his lotteries were a means of raising the money needed for buildings and other enterprises. As I read, I became aware of other aspects. The lotteries are one of the best ways of involving civil society in Don Bosco's work. When Don Bosco launched a lottery, he puts forward his idea. Then he begins involving people on a huge scale in collecting prizes. Selling tickets, obviously, involves people, but not as much as does the setting up of the lottery steering Committee, the rallying of supporters and those sponsoring prizes: there are thousands of people involved. Afterwards there came, of course, the sale of tickets, the actual «draw» for the winners, sometimes accompanied by amazing circumstances, as in the case of a lottery with just one prize: the ticket was drawn. Who had the right number? Nobody. Don Bosco had it and the prize stayed with him.

Without taking up more time than is necessary, I should like to sum up Don Bosco's relationship with the civil community in this way: the phrase which he wrote when he went to Valdocco as a young priest, «love for work and respect for every authority», became the pattern that he followed throughout his life. His rapport with civil institutions is that of a person who forms part of the community governed by those institutions, even though he deals with them on an equal footing.

He knew how to carry out a role which the authorities were incapable of discharging, but which he could guarantee. In that way his standing with the authorities was greatly increased. But from the authorities he passed on to the whole civic body, using involvement as an instrument which produced solidarity, and thus helped to build a real sense of community. That is something which I still see in the great Salesian family, something I was talking about with my friends this very morning.

The speed with which the Salesian projects come to the notice of the whole Salesian family seems a fruit of this method of Don Bosco. I was talking this morning about the Salesian «bush telegraph», which helps to get people involved in a way that often contrasts with the way things happen in civil society. This involvement is a means of mutual service, part of a global plan for achieving a common objective.

By way of conclusion let me say that I now read the *Memorie Biografiche*

almost exclusively as a monument to a pedagogical method rather than as a scientific historical document. It will probably be necessary to pursue the research of documents outside Salesian institutions. Those documents are numerous and provide interesting insights into Don Bosco's way of acting. In the *Memorie Biografiche* we have an instrument that served to get many people involved; in the outside world, however, we have the documents that allow us to understand the true greatness of what was achieved.