

DON BOSCO AND THE ORATORY (1841-1855)

Giorgio CHIOSSO

The Oratory was the first educative enterprise that Don Bosco undertook in Turin during the «forties», at first in collaboration with other priests and later on his own initiative. It was a practical response to immediate, practical needs in the religious and catechetical sphere. The prime object of the Oratory was to care for boys, especially those «abandoned and at risk», in order to save their souls and make them honest citizens. With its characteristic combination of varied activities the Oratory was the fruit of the progressive development of Don Bosco's own experiences and efforts, as well as of his assimilation of past and contemporary initiatives in the field of popular education in the Turin of those years. This paper will present a few ideas concerning the initial phase of the Oratory, understood as a «Sunday and feast-day gathering» for boys, a place that was more or less complete by the beginning of the decade from 1850-1860.

1. Oratories and popular education in Turin

The beginnings of the Oratory, prior to its official establishment in December 1844, at the Refuge of the Marchioness of Barolo (where Don Bosco was acting as assistant to Don Borel) were extremely meagre and simple: they consisted in little more than some basic religious instruction, together with the religious practices expected of a good Christian and complemented by some form of recreation, the whole being animated by Don Bosco's capacity for forming a friendly educative relationship with the boys who attended.¹ The teaching of catechism to those boys who did not, for various

¹ «By way of experiment they began to give catechism lessons in the prisons of this capital city, and soon afterwards in the sacristy of the church of St. Francis of Assisi. Later they began to hold meetings on Sundays feasts. To these they invited those who had just left prison, as well as others that they picked up during the week as they went about the streets, piazzas and factories. Moral and religious stories, hymns, little gifts and games were the incentives that they used to get them to attend these Sunday sessions»: P. BRAIDO (edit.), *Don*

reasons, attend religion classes within their parishes had for some time been one of the pastoral activities entrusted to the young priests of the Ecclesiastical College by Don Guala and Don Cafasso. This practice, together with the impression made upon him by the great city, played an important part in the experience of the young priest, who was engaged in working out the nature of his religious vocation. When, after completing his studies, he was transferred to the Refuge, he took with him the group of youngsters that had begun to collect around him; an indication that his youth contacts had already begun to develop beyond the limits that were normal in the Ecclesiastical College.

The hospitality of the Marchioness of Barolo offered him his first chance to impart a minimum of organization to the nascent oratory. It also made possible further development. It seems probable, for example, that Don Bosco and Don Borel improved the games and increased the number of activities in order to attract more boys; but the painful events that occurred between the summer of 1845 and the spring of 1846 did not favour continuity and order.

Without the help of Salesian recollections (largely dependent on Don Bosco's own memories and, understandably, inclined to romanticise those distant events) it is difficult to verify from the sparse documentary evidence the precise composition and organization of the first oratory, especially between 1844 and 1846.

Even the important letter sent in March 1846 by Don Bosco to the Marquis Michele Benso di Cavour, "vicario di città" (city Mayor) of Turin, informing him of the transfer to the Pinardi house of the work he was running with Don Borel, provides little information. Don Bosco referred to his previous experience,² then made great play on the opportunity provided by these reunions for catechising the young,³ not omitting, perhaps even exaggerating, the good results achieved to date.⁴

Bosco per i giovani: l'«Oratorio». Una «Congregazione degli Oratori». Documenti, Roma, LAS 1988, p. 58. Cf. also G. BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, in: *Scritti sul sistema preventivo* 84-86.

² Namely, the protests which, after the initial permission he was given, led to his being denied the use of the premises of the church of S. Martino dei Molazzi for his itinerant oratory in the autumn of 1845. On this episode and the events between the spring and autumn of that year cf. the reconstruction offered by F. MOTTO, *L'«oratorio» di Don Bosco presso il cimitero di S. Pietro*, in *RSS* 7 (1986) 199-220.

³ «The aim of this catechism class is to gather together on Sundays those youngsters who, if left to themselves, never attend any church for instruction, and this is achieved by means of persuasion, with words, promises, gifts and the like. What they are taught comes down to this: 1. Love for work; 2. Reception of the sacraments; 3. Respect for every kind of authority; 4. The avoidance of bad companions» (G. BOSCO, *Una lettera «storica» del 1846 sulle origini dell'oratorio* [Don Bosco al Marchese Michele Benso di Cavour, Vicario di Città a Torino], in: P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco per i giovani* 169-170).

⁴ «In the space of three years more than twenty embraced the religious life, six are studying Latin in order to become priests, and many others have so changed their attitude

A further brief piece of information is found in a short article that appeared a few weeks later (June, 1846) in *Letture di famiglia*, a popular educative periodical directed by Lorenzo Valerio. The notice referred to «Sunday schools and entertainments for the poor» and cited as praiseworthy examples (though not explicitly naming them) the oratories of Don Cocchi and of Don Bosco. «In our own Turin», the article stated, «many poor, ragged boys are gathered together and instructed [...] thanks to a small society of young priests. They have rented two small houses with a garden attached: one of them is near the Refuge of the Marchioness of Barolo just outside the Porta Palazzo; the other is situated near the river Po, in the new suburb, if I am not mistaken, of Vanchiglia. Every Sunday and feastday the real ragamuffins and urchins of Turin flock in great numbers to these two houses and the affection and happiness with which they attend is quite amazing».

The anonymous writer went on to specify who these «real urchins of Turin» were: sellers of matches and lottery tickets, apprentices, waiters, servants, «in fine representatives of every trade and occupation».⁵ He also explained the varied activities that went on in the Oratories: «First of all they receive a short religious instruction from one of these zealous priests; they sing psalms or hymns, then they are given lessons in good manners and moral behaviour and, finally, they are treated to various kinds of recreation (in the Oratory near the River Po they even do gymnastics) and they are sometimes even provided with a snack».⁶

that they now attend their own parish churches. This is quite remarkable if one considers the kind of boys they were, aged between ten and sixteen, devoid of any religion or education and, for the most part, a prey to vices that could only lead to public complaints or to their being confined in places of correction» (G. BOSCO, *Lettera del 1846* 170).

⁵ «The region near Porta Palazzo seethed with itinerant vendors, match-sellers, shoeshines, chimneysweeps, stable-boys, people distributing phoney leaflets, errand-boys for the market traders, and all of them poor children who lived from hand to mouth on their meagre earnings» (MB III 44). Don Bosco recalls that the oratory from its very beginnings «was composed of stone-cutters, bricklayers, plasterers, pavement-layers, scaffolders and others, who came in from distant villages» (*Memorie dell'Oratorio*, p. 86). Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 104.

⁶ *Scuole e sollazzi domenicali pei poveri*, in «Letture di famiglia» 25 (20 June 1846) 196. In order to put this brief outline of the oratories in proper perspective one should note that the «Letture» had in a previous issue carried an article on the «Ragged-schools» in London [*Scuole di cenciosi in Londra*, 21 (23 May 1846) 161-162], which lamented that nothing similar had been done in Turin. The article, by the editor of the periodical, Lorenzo Valerio, asked whether «the type of children for which the "ragged-schools" were created are found in greater or lesser numbers in the cities of Italy than in London. We do not know; but those children certainly exist. Anyone who visited the recovery centres set up through the charity of the Turinese during the harsh winter of 1845 will have seen the misery, savagery and even ferocity on the faces of ragged children becoming gradually more gentle [...]. Unfortunately once these winter reception centres were closed, those children returned to their old misguided way of life [...]. If only the centres set up in the winter were made permanent, if only schools like those described above existed in Turin, then perhaps these children would not be condemned to a life of infamy».

This admittedly brief account in the *Letture di famiglia* is an interesting document for the history of the Turin oratories, especially if one considers the context within which it was published. It enables us to establish that by the middle of 1846 both the oratory of Don Cocchi (who had been running the oratory of the Angel Guardian since 1840) and that of Don Bosco and Don Borel (which from April onwards was located at Valdocco) were viewed by that section of the public most concerned with the problems of the poorer classes as places not just for simple religious instruction but also for more diverse forms of popular education.

It was symptomatic that the periodical which showed interest in the oratories was the one run by the dynamic director of the silk factory of Aglié. As early as the period which saw the production of the *Letture popolari* he had become the spokesman of various initiatives in mass education, but he had more recently printed a long essay by Caio Ignazio Giulio who, under the pseudonym of Luca Ligorio, maintained that if «children left abandoned on the streets» were to be effectively saved from «physical squalor» and from «still more revolting spiritual squalor», then schools were not enough; it was also necessary to provide forms of «popular entertainment». Giulio listed many examples and proposed them as «useful means for helping to put right an ugly situation». Games, gymnastics, the teaching of singing and drawing, puppet theatres, natural-history museums and industrial exhibitions were all listed as useful ways of creating healthy interest amongst the lower classes and, above all, amongst children who were so often left entirely to their own devices.⁷

The interest of Don Cocchi, Don Bosco and other priests who shared a determination to dedicate themselves to youth work, as well as their novel approach, especially in Turin, appeared to the philanthropic liberals of the *Letture* to be worthy of notice, even if the prime inspiration of these young priests was to be seen as charity and beneficence. Both groups, with varying degrees of awareness, formed part of the general enthusiasm for popular education that was stirring in the Piedmont of Carlo Alberto at the beginning of the decade from 1840 to 1850. One cause of this enthusiasm was the overall economic progress, which resulted, on the one hand, in the growing development of urban life and, on the other, in a general improvement in living conditions, even though this was often dearly paid for, in human terms, by the more vulnerable sections of society.

The sharp interest shown by Piedmontese society in the problem of popular education was related to certain preoccupations and demands that were all closely linked. The underlying mental attitude, however, was one which sought «to instruct the masses» and «to instil into the minds of the

⁷ L. LIGORIO [C.I. GIULIO], *Dei trattenimenti popolari*, in «Letture di famiglia» 2 (14 January 1843) 9-11.

people correct ideas about things»; it certainly did not aim «to absorb the ideas of the people, poor, limited, vague, prejudiced and imperfect» though they might be, to use the words written by Rosmini in the *Educatore primario* during those very weeks.⁸ In the circles of the middle class and the liberal aristocracy «work for the people» was linked with ensuring order in society. This was a first important sign that the upper classes were becoming aware of the changing relationships between the different strata of society; the promotion of schooling was thus linked with the desire for a new culture and new practises that would promote in the emergent groups the characteristics most calculated to equip them as potential foremen and managers.

The charitable works of Cottolengo, Barolo and numerous others were born of Christian zeal and demonstrated in tangible form the value of charity and love of one's neighbour. At the educational level there was the related aim of averting the process of dechristianisation, which was seen as the first stage in the creation of moral chaos and political revolution.

For the young priests working in the oratories, most of whom had been born between 1810 and 1820 and largely formed at the Ecclesiastical College, the idea of the «people» was closely linked with that of «conversion», as that word had come to be understood during the Restoration, namely as signifying a clear religious response to the efforts of the Enlightenment and the Revolution to create a world without God. The most urgent objective was to bring the masses back to sacramental and devotional practice. Their priestly ideal was gradually changing from that of the priest as judge, whose main preoccupation was satisfying the requirements for valid absolution, to that of the priest as father and pastor, capable of fostering the life of grace in the faithful. This new ideal was closer to the mentality and needs of the masses, who could understand such a person and speak the same language, without seeking any special favours.

The oratories of Don Cocchi and Don Bosco developed along the twin lines dictated by pastoral needs and by the demand for popular education. The religious and social education of the young meant laying the foundations for the gradual, orderly development of society in Piedmont.

As we know, the first concern was to teach the catechism and restore religious practice. Don Cocchi ventured into the infamous quarter of Moschino, where he first set up his oratory of the Guardian Angel in order to give religious instruction to the kind of boys who had so far been averse to it.⁹

⁸ A. ROSMINI, *Della vera popolarità*, in «L'Educatore primario» » 10 (1846) 148-150.

⁹ «In the parish of the Annunciation there used to be a district, now completely obliterated, called the Moschino, perched on the sloping left-hand bank of the Po, where the most wretched and dangerous elements in the population of Turin used to crowd together in their squalid dwellings. It was right in the middle of these people that Don Cocchi set up residence and in April of 1840 opened the Oratory of the Guardian Angel for the children [...]. The following year, in 1841, he moved the oratory to Vanchiglia, nearer the centre, using a

Don Bosco's first steps were very much in the same direction. But these efforts on behalf of religion quickly revealed far more complex human and educational needs, the most urgent being that the boys should no longer be left to themselves on Sundays and feastdays, since this was the occasion «of many vices». Many boys «who were previously good quickly became a danger to themselves and to other people».¹⁰

The consequent problems that faced these priests were many. Don Cocchi had recourse to gymnastics to arouse and retain the boys' enthusiasm, exploiting in the interests of education their love of physical and daring activities. Don Bosco and Don Borel, for their part, devised all kinds of games, arranged outings, taught reading and other things. The encouragement of Cafasso, the benevolence of the archbishop and Don Bosco's own wisdom helped him to overcome many difficulties and even the hostility that was shown in certain quarters. His growing experience and close contact with the boys enabled him to reach certain important conclusions, as, for example, the value of games and of festivities in education, things which corresponded with popular tradition and with the tastes of young people. Games and celebrations provided special opportunities for community, familiarity, friendship, as well as for conveying other human and religious values. Equally important was the help given by some of the boys themselves (this had been the case in Don Cocchi's oratory at Vanchiglia); the collaboration of the best of the boys not only supplied important assistance in catechism classes and in organising games but provided valuable example for other boys, who were accustomed to very different surroundings and modes of behaviour.¹¹

There were two other insights that Don Bosco had already gained by the time he was organising the oratory at Valdocco. The first related to the flexible structure that he envisaged for the oratory: neither parochial (as Don

shed in the garden of the lawyer Bronzino. In this rustic courtyard he erected a chapel, established a little theatre and place for gymnastics. At that time this was something totally new in Turin. He used to assemble there all the boys who used to come for catechism on Sundays, and when he had given them the opportunity to fulfil their religious obligations, he provided them with healthy forms of recreation» (E. REFFO, *Don Cocchi e i suoi artigianelli*, Torino, Tip. S. Giuseppe degli Artigianelli 1896, reprinted 1957. The present quotation is from the latter, pp. 9-10).

¹⁰ «When visiting the prisons of Turin I have noticed that the unfortunates who have ended up in these places are, for the most part, impoverished youngsters whose homes are far away and who have come to the city either because they need work or because they have fallen in with the wrong sort. These boys, especially on Sundays, left to themselves, spend the little money they have earned on gaming or self-indulgence. This is the cause of most disorders, and boys who were once good soon become a danger to themselves and a threat to others. Prison does nothing to improve them; it merely teaches them more refined forms of evil-doing, so that they come out worse than ever» (G. BOSCO, *Cenno storico*, in P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco per i giovani* 35-36).

¹¹ MO 85.

Cocchi's basically was) nor interparochial, but a work that involved the Church, the city authorities and groups of working-class boys. The second related to the dynamic combination of religious instruction and human development, of catechism and education. The essential features of Don Bosco's plan were thus already outlined, even if numerous modifications occurred in the subsequent translation of the plan into reality. Those features were: religion as the *fundamentum* of education; the key significance assigned to the personal relationship between educator and educand; the importance attached to the development of all the human faculties in order to produce a self-sufficient adult (instruction, work, respect for authority, etc.), and the recognition of the significance of the environment in education, in particular of those elements in the environment of the ordinary people that were potentially formative.

2. The Oratory at Valdocco (1846-1850)

Following the transfer to the Pinardi house, Don Bosco's oratory left behind what we may call its experimental phase and became gradually more complex in its organisation, as it assumed ever increasing responsibilities. In the November of 1846, with the support of Mons. Fransoni, Don Bosco and his mother settled at Valdocco, as if to set a seal on the closeness of the tie between himself and his work. The preceding months had been a settling-in period, beset with numerous difficulties and further complicated by the serious illness of the founder. The difficulties were overcome, thanks to Don Cafasso, Don Borel and a number of other priests, like Don Vola, Don Carpano and Don Trivero, who generously made themselves available. This collaboration amongst young priests, some of whom were also helping Don Cocchi, was a sign of a new pastoral sensitivity and practical awareness of the problems of society on the part of those clergy who were ready to face up to the changes taking place in Piedmont.

The stability of the Valdocco oratory allowed boys to participate in its life in a fuller and more systematic fashion, and soon they numbered between two and three hundred.¹² This also brought about a certain change in the

¹² The following are the numbers of youngsters who first attended the Sunday gatherings at the church of St. Francis of Assisi and, later, the oratory of St. Francis de Sales: about 20 in 1842 (a figure upon which both the *Cenno storico* and the *Memorie dell'Oratorio* agree); about 80 by the time they moved from St. Francis of Assisi (*Cenno storico*, *Memorie dell'Oratorio* and a letter to the «MendicITÀ istruita» of 1850). After this, figures do not always agree: during the time from autumn 1845 (at S. Martino ai Molazzi) to spring 1846 (in the Filippi field) a minimum of 250 is indicated in a letter of 1846 to Michele Benso di Cavour, while 300 are spoken of in the *Cenno storico* and 300-400 in the *Memorie dell'Oratorio*. The figures for the early years at Valdocco fluctuate between the «three hundred or more boys» of the *Memorie Biografiche* (III 133) and the 600 to 700 mentioned in the letter to the «Men-

character of those who frequented it. Such data as is so far available suggests that until 1850 (the composition of Valdocco was to change yet further with the increase in boarders from about 1855-60) the population at the oratory was split into three main categories of boys, beginning at between 10-12 years old, and going up to 18-20 years old: migrant youths, boys from the poorer classes, and students whom Don Bosco and the other priests made contact with through religious and scholastic activities. Over and above these there was a group of lay people, boys and adults, who continued to help as they had done from the start.¹³

The growing number of boys and the more diverse nature of the population, compared with those who had frequented the Ecclesiastical College or the Refuge, had important consequences. Practical needs rather than any theoretical considerations necessitated the introduction of some method of organization and education that would hold the balance between freedom of association and discipline, spontaneity and order, and, more important still, make possible the energetic pursuit of initiatives likely to appeal to the interests of the young and meet the real needs of the working class to which most of the young «oratorians» belonged. As efforts were made to find working solutions to this collection of problems, the Valdocco oratory developed firmer structures between 1846 and 1850,¹⁴ and acquired an increasingly favourable reputation amongst the public,¹⁵ gradually taking on its own

dicità istruita». Even after taking into account how numbers fluctuated in the Oratory and the absence of any clear indication of precisely how the numbers of those attending were calculated, it remains difficult to estimate the precise population of the Oratory during the early years.

¹³ «Don Bosco worked out the main offices and the functions of each of them, then he entrusted them to those of his boys who were best behaved and had most common-sense, thus making them, as it were, his officers and adjutants. Because he used to let them get on with the task entrusted to them, limiting himself to checking that they actually did their job, each of them took pains to study and discharge as well as he could the work given to him [...]. The rector would then gather his officers together every week to give them the benefit of his experience, to encourage them to be faithful to the job they had been given and to suggest what they should do or avoid in order to have even better success. Occasionally he would give them a little reward, such as a holy picture, a booklet or the like, always finishing by reminding them of the wonderful reward that awaited them in heaven» (G. BONETTI, *Cinque lustri di storia dell'Oratorio salesiano fondato dal sac. Giovanni Bosco*, Torino, Tip. Salesiana 1892, p. 129).

¹⁴ Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale (1815-1870)*, Roma, LAS 1980, pp. 75-77.

¹⁵ For references to the oratory in the Turin press between 1848 and 1849 see the comments of G. TUNINETTI, *L'immagine di Don Bosco nella stampa torinese (e italiana) del suo tempo*, in: F. TRANIELLO (edit.), *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*, Torino, SEI 1987, pp. 210-212. Don Bosco links the next increase in the population of the oratory with the opening of his schools: «The more one did to promote schooling, the more the number of the pupils grew» (MO 135). He uses almost the same words in: *Cinque lustri...* 152. There is no complete agreement as to the precise date of the introduction of Sunday and evening classes at the Oratory. Don Braido has recently expressed his belief that it would be «probably

quite distinctive character. In other words, the years of neo-Guelph aspirations and of the «Statuto», of the first war of independence and of the searing disappointments of 1849, of enthusiasm for Pius IX and the subsequent anticlerical reaction, were precisely the years when this first undertaking of Don Bosco was growing steadily stronger.

The problem of introducing Regulations had caused him concern for a long time, on account of the urgent need to regulate the turbulent life of the oratory; this led finally to a first draft,¹⁶ based on past experience and on tried models.¹⁷ Above all he brought to fruition a number of earlier ideas, such as the more regular and orderly functioning of evening classes and Sunday school; the introduction of music (singing and instrumental), of theatre and plays, used as instruments in the human and religious formation of his boys: the exploitation of the educational potentialities of recreation. As a result of all this the oratory, while still understood as being primarily a place for «pleasant and suitable recreation after assisting at the sacred functions in Church», showed its rich potentialities, once it was able to enjoy the stability that Valdocco provided.

Don Bosco, meanwhile, began to think of the oratory more and more as a place or form of education that was useful for youth in general, especially those of the working class. The criterion of «poor and destitute boys» which had guided him during the earlier phase of his work thus underwent some revision. Although this formula continued to be used in describing the oratory, Don Bosco began to devote himself not only to individuals or groups that could be defined as «at risk» but to sons of the people in a much wider sense, all those who were soon to be exposed to the hardships of labour and to the brutal amusements that were common, with the resulting physical and moral dangers that beset even those who were not alone or homeless.

realistic» to date the event during the first winter spent at Valdocco, between 1846 and 1847 (cf. P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco per i giovani* 68). Don Bosco's insistent references to evening classes in the Moretta house (winter of 1845-46) could mean that, before the introduction of schools properly so-called, lessons were probably given to individuals and groups who were anxious to master reading, writing and arithmetic.

¹⁶ «The purpose of the oratory is to entertain young people on days of obligation by means of pleasant and suitable recreation, after they have assisted at the church services» (MB III 91).

¹⁷ «He had had sent to him the regulations of various festive oratories, old and new, founded by zealous people for the glory of God. These were operating successfully in various Italian cities. He wanted to study them to benefit from the experience of others. Amongst his papers we found *Le regole dell'Oratorio di S. Luigi eretto in Milano nel 1842 nella contrada di S. Cristina* and also *Le regole per i figliuoli dell'Oratorio sotto il patronato della Sacra Famiglia*» (MB III 87). On Don Bosco's connections with the Milanese and Lombardy oratories cf. P. BRAIDO, *Il sistema preventivo di Don Bosco*, Torino, PAS 1955, pp. 87-92. On the genesis and role of these regulations in the educational establishments founded by Don Bosco see also the comments made by P. Braido in G. BOSCO, *Scritti sul sistema preventivo* 355-359.

The more open circulation of opinions and ideas that resulted from the freedom of the press after the concession of the «Statuto», the anticlerical mentality that spread in Turin, especially after 1848, together with the activity of the protestant sects, were probably some of the considerations that drove Don Bosco to increase his efforts to turn the oratory into a centre for mass education and a Christian meeting-place. He extended his activity to Porta Nuova (the oratory of St. Aloysius opened in 1847) and then to the oratory of the Guardian Angel in 1849. This plan of expansion reflected his conviction that the oratory was the most effective form of pastoral work for youth at a time when the new educational models that were becoming widely known clearly showed up the deficiencies of the work done in the parishes.

As the oratory responded to day-to-day problems and to the demands made upon it, it became a kind of school that was open to everyone and for an indefinite period. Its main purpose was to ensure that Sundays and feast-days were not wasted through idleness but that the time would be used in a way that was both useful and morally sound. It was a place for practical religious instruction and recreation, for study and relaxation. Its educational approach was simple and was based on creating a family atmosphere, making boys feel welcome and involving them in a way that made the most of each one's talents. It used religious feasts as a means of education and promoted a spirit of joy through the exercise of the fundamental Christian principle of charity. It was thus a dynamic environment that transcended the notion of mere assistance.

Contemporaries who spoke of Don Bosco round about 1850 saw him not only as a priest concerned about boys but as an educator of the masses. Casimiro Danna in the *Giornale della Società d'istruzione e d'educazione* defined him as a «father and brother, teacher and preacher», and, after reviewing the religious nature of his activity, pointed out enthusiastically the multi-form educational work of the oratory, which taught not only church history and catechism but «the principles of mathematics, the decimal system and, for the illiterate, reading and writing. This is all done to provide moral and civic formation».¹⁸

Casalis, who was less enthusiastic about Don Bosco, emphasised «the advantages the boys enjoy through frequenting the oratories», as demonstrated in «the refining of their rough behaviour», the «enrichment of mind and heart», so that «they quickly become more friendly and courteous, grow fond of their work and end up good Christians and excellent citizens».¹⁹

Don Bosco's pragmatic response to the needs of his boys led to further initiatives and experiments. It was soon clear that Valdocco had to provide

¹⁸ C. DANNA, *Cronichetta* in «Giornale della Società d'istruzione e d'educazione», vol. I, Torino, 1850, p. 459.

¹⁹ G. CASALIS, *Dizionario geografico-storico-statistico-commerciale degli Stati di S.M. il Re di Sardegna*, vol. XXI, Torino, 1851, p. 718.

for boys who were homeless and quite destitute, and so, as Don Cocchi had already done, Don Bosco began a hostel for a small community of boys. Almost as a natural consequence of his concern for those who were most deprived of affection and of material support, he began to involve himself in finding jobs for his boys, especially those living in the hostel.²⁰ Adopting the practice followed by the «Mendicità Istruita» (an institution devoted to care and education, with which Don Bosco was in touch), he began to entrust some of the youngsters to able and honest tradesmen, signing contracts of apprenticeship as a guardian acting in place of their parents.

Finally, realising the importance of schooling, he opened elementary day-schools at Valdocco and at the Oratory of Porta Nuova, while keeping up the existing evening classes. Above all, he began to take in boarders (usually from poor families), provided they were of good ability and wellbehaved and thus gave some guarantee of success in their studies. As is well known, Don Bosco in this way extended the educational range of the oratory, as traditionally understood, and moved a step nearer the creation of a genuine boarding school at Valdocco.

The number of the students gradually increased, as did the artisans, at first frequenting schools in the city, then, later, following courses set up within Valdocco itself (from about 1855 onwards). In the course of time the young artisans were likewise employed in the workshops set up within the institution. The first was opened in November 1853.²¹

This is not the place to investigate the reason which compelled Don Bosco to transform Valdocco into a boarding school. This decision along with other initiatives (the building of the church of St. Francis de Sales, the refurbishing of Valdocco, the beginning of *Letture Cattoliche*, the first concrete steps to start the Salesian Society) were so many other pieces in a much larger mosaic of which the Oratory as it was originally understood only represented the start.

²⁰ «Many of the youths who frequented the oratories were so poor and destitute that all efforts on their behalf would have been useless unless they could be provided with lodging, food and clothing. Every effort was made to provide for these needs in the adjoining house, which was also called the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. Initially a small house was rented there in 1847, where some of the poorest boys could be sheltered. At that time they used to go out to work in the city, returning to the house at the Oratory for their food and lodging» (G. BOSCO, *Cenno storico* 70-71). «Don Bosco's daily experience proved to him that if he was to give lasting help to some boys it was not enough to gather them together and instruct them on days of obligation; there was need of some kind of free hostel» (G. BONETTI, *Cinque lustri* 143-144).

²¹ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale (1815-1870)* 175-199; also L. PAZZAGLIA, *Apprendistato e istruzione degli artigiani a Valdocco (1846-1886)*, in: F. TRANIELLO (edit.), *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare* 20-39.

3. The Salesian Oratories after 1850

Don Bosco's leadership in founding the oratories was officially recognised by Archbishop Frasoni in a decree of 31 March 1852, which appointed him «chief spiritual director» of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales and Superior of the oratories of St. Aloysius and the Guardian Angel. Mons. Frasoni thus chose Don Bosco in preference to Don Cocchi. The latter had tended to disqualify himself because of his open sympathy for the liberals and his imprudence in leading a group of young people towards Novara on the occasion of the fatal encounter of 23 March 1849; all this despite Don Cocchi's further generous efforts on behalf of orphaned and destitute children, when, in October of the same year, 1849, he proposed setting up an association of priests and lay people, which resulted in the opening of the *Collegio degli Artigianelli*.

The political vicissitudes of 1848-1849 had accentuated the differences between Don Cocchi and Don Bosco, and a group of influential members of the Turin clergy (Cafasso himself, Don Durando, Canon Gastaldi and Abbé Peyron) worked out a plan to unify resources and provide unity of direction in the various projects for the oratories. They envisaged the creation of a federation which would have taken control of the existing institutions and any created in the future. Don Bosco resisted this plan energetically, adducing in justification of his position the differences in educational approach between Valdocco and the oratory of the Guardian Angel: in his opinion the latter, at Vanchiglia, was too political, offered too little religious instruction and saw amusements too much as ends in themselves.²²

Unfortunately we have no direct testimony by Don Cocchi and his supporters relative to this divergence between the two sets of oratories, so it is very hard to say how far the assessment found in the Salesian sources is fair to the educational approach of the Vanchiglia oratory. Examination of the only evidence available, the biography of Don Cocchi by Don Reffo,²³ confirms that, despite features in common (the homely educational approach, the formative value of recreation, the importance of religion, the modest philosophy of «learning to be content») there were two distinct educational styles. For example, Don Cocchi attached great importance to «tempering the fibre of his pupils by robust and virile physical education»; he wished «to make skilful use of any opportunity for gaining entry to the hearts of his boys, discovering their faults and correcting bad habits», but «he was so reserved that he did not wish to be confessor to his pupils»; he was less keen on teaching and, when he had to find a well-tested method of instruction for the agricultural school at Moncucco (opened in 1853), he readily adopted

²² MB III 453-454.

²³ E. REFFO, *Don Cocchi e i suoi artigianelli*.

that of a protestant pastor, Fellenberg, which he had seen in operation during a visit to Switzerland. Finally his tolerance in educational matters, lodged in a good and generous heart, was proverbial; yet it did not seem to be sustained by the pedagogical longsightedness that inspired Don Bosco's educative principle of loving-kindness.

Whilst there were real political differences dividing Don Cocchi and Don Bosco, differences that reflected varying currents of thought amongst the Piedmontese clergy, there were genuine grounds for talking about two distinct styles of education. These were, perhaps, different rather than opposed and were largely due to the different conditions prevailing at Vanchiglia and Valdocco. If one takes into account that after 1850 Don Bosco gave more emphasis to the «protective» aspects of his pedagogy, then one can more easily understand the reasons for a certain distrust that persisted. For example, Don Bosco's oratories were always very different from that of St. Martin, opened by the tireless Don Cocchi in 1851, directed for many years by Don Ponte, a friend of Don Bosco, and supported by a group of priests and lay people attached to the «Opera degli Artigianelli».

After 1850 Don Bosco's horizons were opening out beyond the work of the oratories. The decade of 1850-1860 saw the creation of some of his main enterprises and the growth of his reputation. It was the decade of Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco, and of his first genuinely stable collaborators. It was his most successful period as a writer and apologist, and witnessed the definitive shaping of the oratory.

His interest now became focused more and more on the boarders, even though his oratories in the city featured more prominently in his numerous appeals for help.²⁴ The explanation is simple: the sound work done by the oratories was visible to everyone and demonstrated the good use which would be made of any donations or assistance. Don Bosco, moreover, was happy to be seen as the priest and educator of poor boys, even if in ways that had changed with the passing of time.

The word «oratory» took on various meanings which Don Bosco himself explained a few years later, speaking of Francis Besucco and his arrival at Valdocco: «If you think of it as a Sunday gathering then it is a place where young people can engage in enjoyable games, after fulfilling their religious

²⁴ By way of example one may consult his letter to the «Mendicità Istruita» of 1850 and the circular letters for the lotteries of 1857 and 1862, in which his request for help and the invitation to take part in this lottery for charity is preceded by a description of the festive oratories and of what they have achieved on behalf of «poor and destitute boys». That of 1850 is probably the more sober: «By means of pleasant recreation enlivened by various forms of entertainment, by means of catechism, lessons and singing, many boys become well-behaved, fond of their work and of religion. There are also singing classes every evening and Sunday classes for those who can attend them, and they have given public examples of their work, much to the satisfaction of those who came to see them». Many other examples can be found in the rich store of his letters.

obligations [...]. Then there is the daily oratory, where there are *day and evening classes* throughout the week for boys who, for lack of money or equipment, cannot go to the state schools. If you take the word "oratory" in its widest sense, it means the house at Valdocco in Turin, which is known as the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. Boys can be given a place in the house as either students or artisans».²⁵

In analysing the original meaning of the oratory under the title «festive oratory», one has to mention that Don Bosco, at a stage when this was no longer his main preoccupation, left us what is probably the most interesting document on its role in popular education. I am referring, of course, to his story *La forza della buona educazione*, published in 1855. The hero is a young member of the oratory called Peter, presented as a model for all the boys that crowded during their free time into the playgrounds of Valdocco and of the Guardian Angel or that attended the catechism courses. He is thus different from Magone or Besucco, who belong to the history of the boarding school.²⁶ The action takes place on the outskirts of Turin, in one of the many families that lived in the cheap apartments of Borgo Dora or Vanchiglia. Peter is the eldest son of a carpenter and of a typically good mother. She is the one who brings him up as a good Christian and who sees to things, when at a tender age he has to find work.

The oratory, with its many activities, provides the support that Peter needs in order to be good and to grow in the life of faith. He follows the catechism lessons and is prepared for his first communion; his good behaviour makes his superiors fond of him; he succeeds in getting his father to go less frequently to the tavern and by his good example helps his companions to avoid wrongdoing. When he is called up for military service he does his duty as a good citizen, and, on being sent off in the expedition to the Crimea, he does not forget, though far from home and the oratory, the things he has been taught: to love God, to avoid the occasions of sin, to pray and to carry out the duties of his state of life. The story ends with Peter's promotion to sergeant and his predictable return home.²⁷

In this little work Don Bosco clearly tried to present a model for those attending the oratory as externs. Peter's life is the very normal existence of a boy living at home, where the influence of the mother is underlined, going to work and using his free time. However, he has learnt how to internalise the sound instruction he has received (hence the title «The power of a good education») and so lives a happy Christian life, even when far from home and from his customary pursuits.

²⁵ G. BOSCO, *Il pastorello delle Alpi ovvero Vita del giovane Besucco Francesco*, Torino, Tip. dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales 1864, pp. 70-71, note 1.

²⁶ Michael Magone and Francis Besucco were, with Dominic Savio, amongst Don Bosco's most celebrated pupils (G. BOSCO, *Scritti sul sistema preventivo* 175).

²⁷ G. BOSCO, *La forza della buona educazione. Curioso episodio contemporaneo*, Torino, Tip. Paravia 1855.

This novelette contains several interesting features: the interrelationship of family and oratory as the prerequisite for a sound education; the persuasive power of good example (Peter is instrumental in converting his father and in helping his friends to fulfil their duties); the «simple» nature of a sanctity that is based on doing one's daily duty, on obedience, on prayer, on charity nourished by constantly doing good, on mortification (nothing extraordinary but simply that inseparable from daily life) and chastity.

4. Later developments

This booklet of 1855 sums up, in a way, all Don Bosco's ideas about the oratory as an open Sunday meeting place, even if he was to return to the point as circumstances varied over the next 30 years. The early fifties were decisive in the history of the oratory, as it passed from its infancy and Don Bosco's fundamental experience of the need for religious education to a more developed form within the overall strategy of the evolving Salesian apostolate. The development of the oratories was affected by the choices and changed priorities which were directed, at least in the initial stage, at taking on responsibilities, following a line that was different to the traditional thinking that had matured through experience in this area. Thus, up to the decade of 1870-1880 (as has been authoritatively documented),²⁸ the oratory was largely static: the Salesian work was spreading in the country regions which did not favour the kind of oratory that suited the big city; what they needed was schools, especially after the enactment of the law of Casati in 1859.

The stagnation of the Turin oratories is symptomatic in other ways. In 1860 there were six Turin oratories, only one more than at the beginning of the decade: the three founded by Don Bosco; that of St. Martin; the oratory for girls in Borgo San Donato, founded in 1850 by Don Gaspare Saccarelli, and the oratory of San Giuseppe in Borgo San Salvatio, opened in 1859 by some lay people and then taken over by the Salesians in 1863. This number scarcely changed during the next decade, despite the growing juvenile population of the city after 1850.

Things became more difficult between 1860 and 1870. Events following the unification of Italy help to explain the lack of growth: the varying levels of seasonal immigration; the alternative places where older youths could meet together, like the working-mens' clubs; the amalgamation of the oratory at Vanchiglia (which became part of the new parish of St. Giulia in 1867) with that of Porta Nuova within what was now a residential area in

²⁸ On the development of Salesian initiatives between 1860 and 1870 cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 123-157.

the suburbs. In 1869 Baricco gave some data about the population of the oratories in the preceding year; he placed it at about two thousand.²⁹ It is not easy to compare this figure with various rather fluctuating figures given from time to time by Don Bosco;³⁰ it seems, however, reasonable to believe that between about 1855 and 1870 the number of those frequenting the oratories was fairly stable, though it may have varied a little as a result of the crises that beset Turin, as when it ceased to be the capital in 1864.³¹

During the last years of Don Bosco's life there was something of a revival in the life of the oratories which we can refer to only briefly by way of conclusion. In 1875 Don Bosco lamented the fact that the only oratories were in Turin and in Sampierdarena,³² and it was on that occasion that he made the famous remark: «If one wants to do something radical to benefit the population of a town the best thing is to open an oratory». In fact, during the eighties the Salesians began to show fresh interest in the oratories, rating them more highly on their list of priorities. This coincided with the growing concentration of their work on the outskirts of the towns during the last

²⁹ P. BARICCO, *Torino descritta* II, Torino, 1869 p. 719. According to Baricco's data the population of the Turinese oratories was made up of 800 boys at Valdocco, 450 at St. Aloysius, 400 at St. Joseph (San Salvario), 100 at St. Giulia (the Guardian Angel had been taken over by the parish the previous year) and 300 at St. Martin (boys and girls in separate playgrounds), giving a total of 2050 young people.

³⁰ As we have already seen in connection with the early days of the Oratory, the figures that Don Bosco gives need to be treated with caution. Between 1850 and 1862 the oratories go from a thousand spread over the three oratories to several thousand in each one. This huge increase seems unlikely and does not seem to fit in with the resources that Don Bosco had at his disposal. I have taken the following data partly from P. STELLA (*Don Bosco nella storia economica* 173), and partly from some invitations to take part in Don Bosco's lotteries, as recorded by P. BRAIDO, (*Don Bosco per i giovani* 24-26): in 1850, a thousand boys in the three oratories together; in 1852, more than two thousand at Valdocco alone; in 1855, between one thousand five hundred and two thousand in the three oratories; in 1857, more than three thousand; in 1862, «sometimes there are several thousand in just one of these oratories».

³¹ After examining the figures, Stella concludes: «In conclusion, after admitting the fluctuating numbers of boys during the summer months and during the hardest winter months, as well as the drop in numbers caused by extraordinary happenings such as the cholera of 1854, it seems certain that during the twenty years between 1850 and 1870 there was a certain levelling out in the number of boys attending the oratories directed by Don Bosco» (*Don Bosco nella storia economica* 174). The total population of Turin during those twenty years grew from 136,849 inhabitants in 1848 to 194,480 in 1868, and to 212,644 in 1871. Growth was not uniform and a peak was actually reached in 1864 with 220,000 inhabitants: this coincided with the expansion that followed the unification of Italy, and quickly slowed down with the transfer of the capital to Florence (cf. the work done by C. BERMOND, *Torino da capitale politica a centro manifatturiero*, Torino, 1983, pp. 122-138).

³² The Salesians settled at Sampierdarena in 1872, after a brief spell at Marassi. The house very soon became «the most typical Salesian work in Liguria»; the oratory for the boys of that area and the hostel for poor boys reproduced «the early experiences of Don Bosco» and represented «the essential aims which he preferred» (P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 153).

quarter of the century. The new heavily populated districts that were springing up alongside industrial works reproduced the living conditions and the social and educational requirements that had produced the oratory at Valdocco and the other oratories in Piedmont.

In 1877 there was published the most explicit document so far on the oratories, namely the «Regulations», although this reflected the evolution and existing practice in the oratories. Ten years later it was laid down that every Salesian house ought to provide a festive oratory: «Every Rector should do all he can to open a festive oratory attached to the house or institute, if one is not already in existence and to develop further any that has already been founded». This expressed a clear desire that the oratory should again be accorded its special place in the complex of Salesian works. The result was a new flowering of oratories in Italy, including those for which the Salesians were not directly responsible, during the last decade of the 19th century and the first fifteen years of the 20th century as Italian Catholics strove to renew their dedication to social and educational progress.³³

³³ P. STELLA, *I salesiani e il movimento cattolico in Italia fino alla prima guerra mondiale*, in *RSS* 2 (1983) 223-251.