

DON BOSCO AND EDUCATION TO THE SACRAMENTS OF PENANCE AND OF THE EUCHARIST

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0. Introduction

In dealing with Don Bosco and the sacraments one should not lose sight of the central point without which any picture of him would be distorted, namely his concern with education and, specifically, with education in a spirit of kindness (*amorevolezza*). The word signifies the love that is shown in action, the manifestation of affection, understanding, compassion and the desire to share in another person's life. For Don Bosco love and kindness were more or less synonymous with *charity*, in the sense celebrated by St. Paul in *1Cor* 13,4-7, which Don Bosco quoted in the official text of his *Sistema Preventivo*: «*Charitas benigna est, patiens est; omnia suffert, omnia sperat, omnia sustinet*».¹ This is the charity which drove him to labour ceaselessly for the integral salvation of his boys, in time and in eternity, and which was demonstrated in the kindness which enabled him to get so close to them.

Don Bosco's affection for his boys was deeply rooted in his spiritual life. In his home town of Castelnuovo, little Giovannino Bosco had searched in vain for a priest who was not aloof. That early experience assumed for him the significance of a happening willed by Providence, to encourage him to construct not only an educational approach founded upon empathy, but also a life of grace and kindness which could be demonstrated towards and communicated to others.²

¹ G. BOSCO, *Inaugurazione del Patronato di S. Pietro in Nizza a Mare [...] con appendice sul sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù [= Sistema preventivo]*, San Pier d'Arena - Torino - Nizza Marittima, 1877, p. 52 = OE XXVIII 430. For the critical edition cf. P. BRAIDO (edit.), *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, with introduction and critical notes, in RSS 4 (1985) 171-321. See also: G. BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 125-200.

² Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco e le trasformazioni sociali e religiose del suo tempo*, in: M. MIDALI - P. BROCARDO (edit.), *La famiglia salesiana riflette sulla sua vocazione nella Chiesa di oggi*, Torino-Leumann, LDC 1973, pp. 162-170.

Canon Giacinto Ballesio, a past pupil of the Oratory, was just one of many who underscored this point, when he delivered Don Bosco's funeral oration: «But we have seen Don Bosco; we have listened to him. At that time the efficacy of his work seemed the more intense because it was all concentrated upon this Oratory. He was full of energy and ability; all his affection was for us, and he was always amongst us. From morning till night, he was with his sons. He heard their confessions, said Mass and gave them Communion. He was never on his own, never had a minute to himself; he was either with his boys or talking to the crowds of people who constantly besieged him in the sacristy, under the porticoes, in the playground, in the refectory, on the staircases, in his room. That is how it was, from morning and throughout the day, right until evening. Today, tomorrow and every subsequent day».³ «Who was this Don Bosco that moved amongst us? He was our master-guide who loved the young and taught them to do what was good. He filled with his spirit the festive oratories that are ever increasing in number and that benefit so many people. Don Bosco gave us an example of kindness that was truly Christian, and in exercising authority over us he avoided that artificial formality and rigorism, which can create an abyss between the one who commands and the one who obeys».⁴

Both in his personal activities and in the institutions he founded his «preventive system» acquired a very distinctive style. Education through «kindliness» was translated into various forms of care work and educational work that sprang up over a span of twenty years (1844-1863) on behalf of «poor and destitute youth». Those works will provide a kind of blueprint for all the future works of beneficence of this Turinese educator. Their matrix is the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales in Valdocco, Turin, towards which, in the early period (in 1844) boys were drawn who had migrated to the city and who, while living in such precarious human and social conditions, became fond of Don Bosco through his catechism classes.

His experience of the Oratory, «a place where youngsters could enjoy pleasant forms of recreation after satisfying their (Sunday) religious obligations»,⁵ was reflected in the various initiatives that he later promoted on behalf of the working classes: the hostel for apprentices and students (1847), the «annex house» where artisans boarded and the secondary school was set up (1853-1863); the expansion beyond Turin (1863), and beyond Italy (1875), and into the foreign missions (1875); the foundation of the Society of St. Francis de Sales, of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, and the establishing of the Union of Salesian Cooperators.

³ Cf. G. BALLELIO, *Vita intima di Don Bosco nel suo primo Oratorio di Torino. Elogio funebre*, Torino, Tip. Salesiana, 1888, pp. 9-10. Ballesio (1842-1917) entered the Oratory in 1857.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵ Regarding this definition cf. G. BOSCO, *Il pastorello delle Alpi. Ovvero vita del giovane Besuccho Francesco d'Argentiera*, Torino, Tip. dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, 1864 [= *Besuccho*] = LC 12 (1864), nos. 5 and 6, p. 70 = OE XV 312.

This specific quality is to be kept in mind by anyone who studies the various important forms that Don Bosco's work assumed. It is revealed especially in two aspects of his diverse activities, in his *writings* and in his *educational practice*. Within the topic that has been allotted to me I shall seek to trace two things, the role of the sacraments of penance and of the eucharist in Don Bosco's educational system. I am, of course, aware that no systematic analysis can adequately capture all the practical expressions of his lifetime of experience or the complexity of the problems to be faced.

1. Teaching on the Sacraments

Don Bosco produced a considerable corpus of books, many now available to readers through the anastatic reprints of the *Opere edite*.⁶ There is a complete list of the books he published in the course of his life, including those that appeared anonymously, those of doubtful attribution, together with information about all editions, changes, translations, etc.⁷

The first series of the *Opere edite* (*Libri e Opuscoli*) is composed largely of works of popular devotion, lives of saints, catechetical and didactic works, and also lives of adults (Cafasso) and young people (Comollo, Savio, Magone, Besucco). These lives are often in narrative form and tend to present ideal «models» of behaviour for imitation by his young pupils. In carrying out this vast amount of work as a writer Don Bosco had no intention of offering his readers learned or scientific works; with his simple style, whether edifying or apologetic, his aim was to touch the hearts of the people and of his boys, both those he encountered in the streets and those who were educated within his institutions.

Although these writings are often schematic or written for some special occasion, without any firm theoretical underpinning, they tell us quite a lot about Don Bosco's doctrinal ideas and, at times, about his practical method in educating others about the sacraments. His doctrinal ideas are, essentially, drawn from the widely held theology of the official counter-reformation and from the catechesis that was produced in the climate of the Restoration. It was the theology which had coloured Giovanni Bosco's entire formation, at home, at school, in the seminary and in the Ecclesiastical College.⁸

⁶ Cf. OE.

⁷ Cf. P. STELLA, *Gli scritti a stampa di San Giovanni Bosco*, Roma, LAS 1977.

⁸ I gave an analysis of Don Bosco's writings on the sacraments in: J. SCHEPENS, *L'activité littéraire de Don Bosco au sujet de la pénitence et de l'eucharistie*, in: «Salesianum» 50 (1988) 9-50; the text can be found in: R. GIANNATELLI (edit.), *Pensiero e prassi di Don Bosco. Nel 1° centenario della morte (31 gennaio 1888-1988)*, Roma, LAS 1988; ID., *Beichte und Eucharistie in der erzieherisch-pastoralen Praxis Don Boscos = Folge der Schriftenreihe zur Pflege Salesianischer Spiritualität 19-20, Köln - München - Wien, 1988.*

His doctrinal or theoretical notions of the sacraments are generally formulated in catechetical terms and are usually simplified for the benefit of the masses and of young people. They are found, for the most part, in the saint's apologetic works or in the writers whom he most frequently published in the series of the *Lecture cattoliche*.⁹ They also underlie, however, works of his that were not directly polemical, especially those of catechetical and didactic intent, like the edifying biographies, the hagiographical and devotional pages of the *Giovane provveduto* and other texts that he prepared for his boys.

After the social, political and religious changes between 1847 and 1850 (the complete emancipation of the Jews and of the Protestant religions, the proselytising of the Waldensians and the proliferation of lay or anticlerical papers and periodicals), and during the years of the suppression of religious institutions and the unification of Italy, Don Bosco felt called upon to react against heresy and impiety by producing a form of education that was «preventive» and often defensive. From that point on his writings, while retaining their catechetical and educative character, acquire a more clearly defensive and apologetic tone, in response to proselytising by the protestant sects and the progressive secularization of society. This is particularly true of his writings about the sacraments of confession and the eucharist. The need to defend the sacraments, which had always been considered indispensable and fundamental to life, happiness, morality and education, forced Don Bosco to spell out certain historical and dogmatic truths of the Catholic faith, in response to attacks from other religions.

1.1. *Confession*

Between 1850 and 1860 Don Bosco had to face attacks on confession by the apostate Luigi Desanctis, who with A. Bert and J.P. Meille, was for a time considered one of the greatest figures in the history of the Waldensians in Piedmont.¹⁰ He reacted vigorously, publishing his *Conversazione tra un avvocato ed un curato di campagna sul sacramento della confessione*.¹¹ This booklet was devoted entirely to the defense of «auricular» confession and provided an opportunity for outlining Catholic teaching on confession and for

⁹ The series was founded by Don Bosco with the help of Mons. Moreno, bishop of Ivrea, and of Mons. Ghilardi, bishop of Mondovì, in order to spread good books and so counter the propaganda of the Waldensians, as well as other secular and anticlerical ideas. The first issue appeared in 1853.

¹⁰ For the reasons why Desanctis broke with the Waldensian church, cf. V. VINAY, *Luigi Desanctis e il movimento evangelico fra gli Italiani durante il Risorgimento*, Torino, Ed. Claudiana 1965, pp. 59-62.

¹¹ Torino, Tip. Paravia e comp., 1855 = LC 3 (1855-1856), nos. 7 and 8 = OE VI 145-272 [= *Conversazioni*].

insisting on its irreplaceable importance for education and good behaviour. This was by way of reply to those who declared that it was a falsehood invented by the priests.

The attacks of Desanctis did not merely provide the masses with a formulation of familiar Protestant objections to confession; they also echoed the scepticism of the unbelievers of the 18th century, the philosophers whose views were steadily gaining acceptance amongst the young and the workers. The necessity and value, even the very existence of confession, were being called into question.¹²

The first task faced by Don Bosco and the other authors quoted by him in his series of *Letture Cattoliche* was to explain the genuine teaching on sacramental confession.¹³ Taking his adversaries' objections, one by one, without any derision, though with touches of humour, Don Bosco refuted their arguments and expounded the Church's constant practice of sacramental, private confession.¹⁴ The content and style of his exposition were adapted to a readership of modest education, and his popular approach distinguished his works from those of other authors who opposed Desanctis.¹⁵

Don Bosco aimed, above all, to show that confession went back to Christ himself and that it had been a constant feature throughout the centuries of Christian history. He added that even the Jews, the pagans and the more intelligent Protestants had always respected the sacrament. Even unbelievers like Voltaire and Rousseau had emphasised its value.¹⁶

¹² *Conversazioni* (1855) 13-15 = OE VI 157-159.

¹³ Interesting passages on confession can be found in the following writings of Don Bosco: *Fatti contemporanei esposti in forma di dialogo* [= *Fatti*], Torino, Tip. dir. da P. De Agostini, 1853 = LC 1 (1853-1854), nos. 10 and 11, pp. 24-25 = OE V 74-75; *Il Galantuomo. Almanacco nazionale per 1855, coll'aggiunta di varie utili curiosità* [= *Galantuomo*], Torino, Tip. dir. da P. De Agostini, 1854, pp. 101-103 = OE VI 15-17; *Novella amena di un vecchio soldato di Napoleone I*, esposto dal sacerdote Bosco Giovanni [= *Novella amena*], Torino, Tip. dell'Orat. di S. Francesco di Sales, 1862 = LC 10 (1862-1863), no. 10, p. 18 = OE XIV 242. Works by other writers include: [FAVRE]-CARLO FILIPPO DA POIRINO, *Il cielo aperto mediante la confessione sincera*, Torino, Tip. G.B. Paravia e comp., 1860; Torino, Tip. e Libr. salesiana, 1885 (4th edition); H.E. MANNING, *La confessione ossia l'amore di Gesù nei penitenti*, translated from the French by Concettina Basile, Torino, Tip. e Libr. salesiana, 1886; *La confessione della regina ossia il glorioso martirio di S. Giovanni Nepomuceno. Storia del secolo XIV*, free version from the German, 2 booklets; J. PASSAVANTI, *Lo specchio di vera penitenza [...] annotato ad uso de' giovinetti da Gaetano Debo*, vol. 2, Torino, Tip. e Libr. Salesiana 1874 = Biblioteca della gioventù italiana [= BGI] 6 (1874), June (no. 66).

¹⁴ *Conversazioni* [1855] 23-26, 34, 36, 38-40, 42, 47 = OE VI 167-170, 178, 180, 182-184, 191.

¹⁵ For other reactions to Desanctis cf. A. BELLI, *Sulla dottrina e disciplina della Chiesa romana intorno al sacramento della confessione. Discorso [...] contro il saggio dommatico-storico di L. Desanctis*, Firenze, 1851; B. NEGRI, *Errori di Luigi Desanctis sul dogma della confessione*, Torino 1862; G. CASACCIA, *Il trionfo della confessione sacramentale sul saggio dommatico-storico di L. Desanctis, confutato per se stesso, preceduto da una risposta alla prefazione in replica alle confutazioni del monaco Belli*, Torino, Tip. G.A. Reviglio 1854.

¹⁶ *Fatti* [1853] 25-26; *Conversazioni* [1855] p. IV = OE VI 148.

The less directly apologetic sections present «models» (Comollo, Savio, Magone, Besucco, Cafasso) as concrete examples of how these religious principles can be put into practice, and how one can satisfy all the conditions necessary to approach confession, Mass and communion with devotion and profit. For this purpose Don Bosco explained the nature and effects of confession in terms and formulae that were mostly traditional. Confession is the mercy of God, a remedy, a form of nourishment, a healing, a necessary means to re-establish friendly links between God and man.¹⁷ In reply to the attacks that were the expression of a process of dechristianization which seemed to be spreading amongst the populace, Don Bosco gave a classic description of the fruits of a good confession: the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, peace of soul and the strength to make progress in the practice of virtue.¹⁸

Beginning from the conviction that the sacrament of penance is the best aid for the young, who are by nature vulnerable and weak, he taught them how to make not only a frequent but also a good confession, with all the necessary dispositions. His exhortations were based on the five elements which, according to J.Cl. Dhôtel, had been commonly taught since the time of Bellarmine with the aim of increasing the penitent's participation in the sacrament: examination of conscience, contrition, purpose of amendment, confession and penance.¹⁹ The formularies that he suggested for the examination of conscience were notable for their brevity.²⁰ Sorrow (or contrition) for sin had to be «interior, supernatural, profound and all-embracing»,²¹ and

¹⁷ G. BOSCO, *Il mese di maggio consacrato a Maria SS. Immacolata ad uso del popolo* [= *Maggio*], Torino, Tip. G.B. Paravia e comp., 1858 = LC 6 (1858-1859), p. 124 = OE X 418; *Conversazioni* [1855] 75-77 = OE VI 219-221; G. BOSCO, *La forza della buona educazione. Curioso episodio contemporaneo* [= *Pietro*] = LC 3 (1855), no. 17 and no. 18, p. 43 = OE VI 317; *Besucco* [1864] 38 = OE XV 280.

¹⁸ Cf., for example, G. BOSCO, *Nove giorni consacrati all'augusta madre del Salvatore sotto il titolo di Maria Ausiliatrice* [= *Nove giorni*], Torino, Tip. dell'Orat. di S. Franc. di Sales, 1870 = LC 18 [1870], no. 5, pp. 34-35, 37-38 = OE XXII 286-287, 289-290.

¹⁹ J.Cl. DHÔTEL, *Les origines du catéchisme moderne d'après les premiers manuels imprimés en France* = *Théologie S.J.*, Lyon 71, Paris 1967, p. 340.

²⁰ *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi doveri degli esercizi di cristiana pietà per la recita dell'uffizio della beata Vergine e de' principali vesperi dell'anno coll'aggiunta di una scelta di laudi sacre ecc.* [= *Giovane provveduto*], Torino, Tip. Paravia e comp., 1847, p. 94 = OE II 274; *La chiave del paradiso in mano al cattolico che pratica i doveri di buon cristiano* [= *Chiave*], Torino, Tip. Paravia e comp., 1856, pp. 65-66 = OE VIII 65-66; cf. the longer, more developed formularies of [ERASMO DA VALENZA,] *Il contadino instrutto con dieci dialoghetti sopra il sacramento della penitenza tra un padre missionario ed un contadino*, Saluzzo 1847, pp. 99-130, and CARLO FILIPPO DA POIRINO, *Il cielo aperto mediante la confessione sincera*, Torino, Tip. di G.B. Paravia e comp., 1861 = LC 8 (1860-61), no. 8, pp. 55-67.

²¹ *Chiave* [1856] 61-62 = OE VIII 61-62; *Giovane provveduto* [1863] 117; [1875] 103 = OE XXVI 103; G. BOSCO, *La figlia cristiana provveduta per la pratica de' suoi doveri negli esercizi di cristiana pietà per la recita dell'uffizio della B.V. de' vesperi di tutto l'anno e dell'uffizio dei morti coll'aggiunta di una scelta di laudi sacre* [= *Figlia cristiana*], Torino, Tip. e Libr. salesiana 1878. My quotations are from *Figlia cristiana* [1883] 102 = OE XXXIII 280.

«joined to a firm purpose of amendment», whose genuineness will be demonstrated by the fruits of the confession, namely the avoidance of «occasions which could lead one into mortal sin». ²² Anyone who falls constantly into the same sins should be making a firmer purpose of amendment rather than frequent confessions. Don Bosco also followed the diocesan catechism in recommending that «sins which are certain should be confessed as certain; those that are doubtful as doubtful». ²³

1.2. The Eucharist

Unlike confession, the eucharist was considered by the Waldensians to be a sacrament. However, there remained the age-old problems of the true presence, the consecration, transubstantiation and the sacrificial nature of the Mass. In his *Cattolico istruito* (and later in his *Cattolico nel secolo*) he refers to the attacks made by a certain Trivier, like Desanctis an apostate priest, ²⁴ and he published from his printing house at the Oratory a book by G. Casaccia, parish priest of Verrone Biellese, defending the Catholic position against another book by L. Desanctis on the subject of the Mass. ²⁵ In the spirit of the theology and catechism of the Counter-reformation, he reaffirmed the dogma of the true presence, directing his arguments, above all, against the Waldensians, and basing them on the gospel accounts of the institution of the eucharist, as well as on the history of the Church and the miracles worked throughout history to demonstrate the true presence of Christ in the eucharist. In 1853, at a time when the eucharist was under attack and when the fourth centenary of the miracle of the eucharist in Turin was being celebrated, he published a booklet entitled *Notizie storiche intorno al miracolo del S.S. Sacramento avvenuto in Torino il 6 giugno 1453*. ²⁶ In 1854

²² *Chiave* [1856] 62 = OE VIII 62; *Giovane Provveduto* [1863] 118; [1875] 103 = OE XXVI 103; *Figlia cristiana* [1883] 102 = OE XXXIII 280.

²³ *Chiave* [1856] 70 = OE XIII 70; *Giovane provveduto* [1863] 126; [1875] 109 = OE XXVI 100; *Figlia cristiana* [1883] 108 = OE XXXIII 286. See also *Maggio* [1858] 127 = OE X 421; *Compendio della dottrina cristiana ad uso della diocesi di Torino* (a Catechism for the use of those admitted to communion and for adults), Torino 1822, pp. 139-140.

²⁴ TRIVIER CH., *Esposto dei principali motivi che mi hanno indotto ad uscire dalla Chiesa romana*, Geneva 1852, translated from the French by Salvatore Ferretti; see also V. VINAY, *Evangelici italiani esuli a Londra*, Torino 1961, p. 145; also G. BOSCO, *Il cattolico istruito nella sua religione. Trattenimenti di un padre di famiglia co' suoi figliuoli secondo i bisogni del tempo* [= *Cattolico istruito*], Torino, Tip. dir. da P. De Agostini 1853, part 2, tr. 37, pp. 275, 277, 278 = OE IV 581, 583, 584; this is repeated in G. BOSCO, *Il cattolico nel secolo. Trattenimenti di un padre coi suoi figliuoli intorno alla religione* [= *Cattolico nel secolo*], Torino, Tip. e Libr. salesiana 1883, part 3, tr. 10, 389, 390 = OE XXXIV 389, 390.

²⁵ L. DESANCTIS, *La messa. Saggio dotmatico-storico*, Torino 1862; Roma - Firenze 1872. Against Desanctis cf. G. CASACCIA, *La santa messa, vero sacrificio e sacramento della nuova legge contro il saggio dotmatico-storico di L. Desanctis*, Torino 1865.

²⁶ Torino, Tip. dir. da P. De Agostini 1853 = LC 1 (1853-54), n. 6. This was inspired by

he published a small work of Carlo Filippo da Poirino, in which the author described the nature of the sacrifice and its institution, in response to the «erroneous teachings of the Protestants and the impious».²⁷

Whilst the pages of his devotional, catechetical, didactic and hagiographical works often touch on questions of a polemical nature, they also draw attention to other important aspects of sacramental life that are often linked more directly with educational practice. The saint lived in a period when there was a certain mental separation of Mass and communion. He therefore presents the eucharist in a double light: as communion, the food of the spirit, and as the Mass, the sacrifice of the altar. The link between these two aspects is Christ's real presence in the holy sacrament.²⁸

Don Bosco saw the Mass as «the greatest act that could take place on earth; in itself it is the most sublime and excellent act [...], it is the continuation and renewal of what Jesus Christ did at the last Supper [...], and it also is the continuation and renewal of the sacrifice of the cross...».²⁹ His pages provide sporadic evidence of the evolution of his convictions (and practice) concerning frequent communion by the young. In his writings he reveals the reasons that moved him and considers the objections that his contemporaries might offer. He also sets out the conditions and dispositions that are required for frequent and even daily communion.

The text of his *Nove giorni consacrati all'augusta Madre del Salvatore sotto il titolo di Maria Ausiliatrice* may be taken as illustrative of this evolution.³⁰ In the first edition of the *Giovane provveduto* Don Bosco had limited himself to saying that «the son who has sinned and does not wish to change his ways, in other words, who is willing to offend the Lord again, is not worthy to approach the table of the Lord».³¹ In *La chiave del Paradiso* and in other texts which, to an extent, are closely related to it, he becomes much more precise.³² Having become a promoter of frequent communion he seemed to feel it necessary to specify the need for inner purification before communion, in

Ricerche critiche sul miracolo del SS. Sacramento avvenuto in Torino il 6 giugno 1453, Torino 1852.

²⁷ CARLO-FILIPPO DA POIRINO, *Trattenimenti intorno al sacrificio della S. Messa* = LC 2 (1854-55), nos. 11 and 12.

²⁸ Cf. *Chiave* [1856] 43-57, 73-84 = OE VIII 43-57, 73-84; *Giovane provveduto* [1863] 105-114, 128-135; [1875] 90-99, 111-120 = OE XXVI 90-99, 111-120; *Figlia cristiana* [1883] 87-98, 110-119 = OE XXXIII 265-276, 288-297; also *Maggio* [1858] 134-138, 139-144 = OE X 428-432, 433-438; *Nove giorni* [1870] 44-62, 63-70, 70-82 = OE XXII 296-314, 315-325, 326-334.

²⁹ *Nove giorni* [1870] 63 = OE XXII 315.

³⁰ *Nove giorni* [1870] 44-45 = OE XXII 296-297. Similar texts can be found in *Chiave* [1856] 73-74 = OE VIII 73-74; *Giovane provveduto* [1863] 128-129; [1875] 111-112 = OE XXVI 111-112; *Figlia cristiana* [1883] 110-111 = OE XXXIII 288-289.

³¹ *Giovane provveduto* [1847] 98 = OE II 278.

³² Cf. *Chiave* [1856] 74 = OE VIII 74; *Giovane provveduto* [1863] 129; [1875] 111-112 = OE XXVI 111-112; *Figlia cristiana* [1883] 110-111 = OE XXXIII 288-289.

order to prevent anyone believing too ingenuously that the sacrament produced its effects automatically.

Together with his collaborators he produced the text of the *Pratiche devote* and of the *Cattolico provveduto*. In the *Pratiche* he included a section entitled «Invitation to frequent communion», in which he repeated the arguments in favour of frequent communion already outlined in his *Mese di Maggio*.³³ His presentation, however, was more nuanced, stating: «it is not enough to communicate often; it is also necessary to receive Communion worthily».³⁴ His books also presented youthful models of frequent and daily communion: Comollo, Savio, Aloysius Gonzaga,³⁵ whilst his devotional and catechetical works contained simple acts of preparation and thanksgiving.³⁶

2. Don Bosco's practice

Don Bosco's sacramental practice was apparently directed towards providing his boys with an intensely positive experience in accordance with the view generally held by pastors and writers of the time that «a man's salvation normally depends on the period of his youth»,³⁷ and that a young person should «give himself to God early»: «the path that a person takes in his youth is the one in which he will continue through old age until death. *Adolescens iuxta viam suam etiam cum senuerit non recedet ab ea* [...]. If we begin to live a good life now when we are young, we shall be good in our old age; our death will be happy and the beginning of eternal rejoicing. If, on the other hand, we become enslaved to vice in our youth, that is more or less how things will continue until our death».³⁸

³³ *Pratiche devote per l'adorazione del SS. Sacramento*, Torino, Tip. dell'Orat. di S. Franc. di Sales 1866, pp. 12-21 = OE XVII 264-273. Cf. also *Maggio* [1858] 139-143 = OE X 433-443; *Il cattolico provveduto per le pratiche di pietà con analoghe istruzioni secondo il bisogno dei tempi*, Torino, Tip. dell'Orat. di S. Franc. di Sales 1868, pp. 443-455 = OE XIX 451-463.

³⁴ *Pratiche* [1866] 16-21 = OE XVII 268-273.

³⁵ *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo, morto nel seminario di Chieri, ammirato da tutti per le sue rare virtù*, scritti dal Sacerdote Giovanni Bosco suo collega [= Comollo], Torino, Tip. e Libreria Salesiana 1884, 51-52 = OE XXXV 51-52; *Savio* [1859] 70 = OE XI 220; *Giovane provveduto* [1847] 65-66 = OE II 245-246 [for Aloysius Gonzaga].

³⁶ *Giovane provveduto* [1847] 99-101 = OE II 279-281; *Chiave* [1856] 76-79 = OE VIII 76-79; *Giovane provveduto* [1863] 131-132; [1875] 115-117 = OE XXVI 115-117; *Figlia cristiana* [1883] 112-114 = OE XXXIII 292-295.

³⁷ Cf. *Giovane provveduto* [1847] 12 = OE II 192; Don Bosco drew his inspiration from the pages of *Guida angelica, o siano pratiche istruzioni per la gioventù. Opera utilissima a ciascun giovanetto data alla luce da un sacerdote secolare milanese*, Torino 1767, pp. 5-6, and from C. GOBINET, *Instruction de la jeunesse en la piété chrétienne, tirée de l'Écriture sainte et des saints Pères*, Paris 1733 (the Italian translation is *Istruzione della gioventù nella pietà cristiana*, Torino 1831), part I, chapter 4.

³⁸ *Giovane provveduto* 6-7 = OE II 186-187; Don Bosco was following the *Guida angelica* 5-6.

This central preoccupation of Don Bosco throughout his life was prominent from the very beginning of his educational work. It is intimately connected with another of his major concerns, which he expressed clearly in response to the religious disaffection of the period, namely, that without the basis of the Catholic religion human values such as happiness, morality and education were doomed to failure: «only religion is capable of initiating and completing the great task of total education».³⁹

This helps us to understand the importance he attached to prayer, practices of piety and the sacraments: «His experience affirmed that the most effective supports for young people are the sacraments of confession and communion. Give me a boy who frequents the sacraments and you will see him grow into a youth, reach maturity and, God willing, extreme old age, while always behaving in such a way as to give good example to all who know him».⁴⁰

From the earliest beginnings of the Oratory witnesses testified that Don Bosco's method was to promote this positive use of the sacraments. The sanctity that he presented to his boys was an attractive ideal, «very easy», attainable by everyone. His originality in combining the energetic life of the young with elements of piety and religious observance, and all within a climate dominated by the sense of duty, joy, and spontaneity which the saint's own presence seemed to promote, makes us appreciate the practical insights of this Piedmontese priest. The «lives» of early pupils or Salesians, produced by Don Bosco or written by other Salesians, together with their descriptions of the early life of the Oratory, provide evidence of the «ideal» which was set before the boys. On the other hand, the regulations of the Oratory allow us to perceive other aspects of the «reality» of the sacramental practice.⁴¹

Confession, Mass and communion seem to have been indispensable ele-

³⁹ *Esercizi spirituali alla Gioventù. Avviso sacro*, Torino 1849: the text was printed on the occasion of the boys' retreat, cf. MB III 605. The following writings are of particular interest in this regard: *La forza della buona educazione* [= Pietro], and *Valentino o la vocazione impedita, episodio contemporaneo* [= Valentino], Torino, Tip. dell'Orat. di S. Franc. di Sales 1866 = LC 14 (1866), no. 12 = OE XVII 179-242.

⁴⁰ *Savio* [1859] 67-68 = OE XI 217-218; *Besucce* [1864] 100 = OE XV 342; *Sistema preventivo* [1877], chapter 2, 4, pp. 54-55, 56-57 = OE XXVIII 432-433, 434-435.

⁴¹ As an example, here is an extract from the Regulations of 1877: «Behaviour in church [...] 3. During the sacred functions refrain, as far as possible, from yawning, sleeping, turning around, chattering or leaving church. Faults like these indicate lack of interest in the things of God, and also greatly disturb, and even scandalise, your companions. 4. When going to your place try not to move the benches or chairs, and try not to make them creak all the time. Never spit on the floor; such conduct is not becoming and there is a risk of the persons kneeling beside you dirtying themselves [...]. 6. When saying prayers, do not shout them, but at the same time do not say them so quietly that no one can hear you. Prayers should be said calmly and without haste: no one should try to say them very quickly, reaching the end while the rest are halfway through» (*Regolamento per le Case della Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, Torino, Tip. Salesiana 1877, pp. 65-66 = OE XXIX 161-162).

ments in the life of the Oratory. Don Bosco must often have spoken to the boys about the exemplary life of his friend and companion, Luigi Comollo,⁴² and about the virtues of St. Aloysius Gonzaga.⁴³ The influence of life at the seminary of Chieri, with the teaching he received and the spiritual reading he did there, would have caused Don Bosco, like many others of his day, to consider that frequent use of the sacraments was the most clear sign of a deeply rooted personal piety.⁴⁴ Initially he seemed to be mainly concerned that his pupils should «assist at Mass in a way that would bear fruit».⁴⁵ He deplored the boys' lack of respect: «Seeing so many boys deliberately remaining standing and gazing all around them – Ah! Such boys renew many times over the sufferings of Calvary; they give serious scandal to their companions and dishonour religion!».⁴⁶ He invited them to enter church «with truly Christian dispositions, in the spirit of Jesus Christ».⁴⁷ Speaking of communion he underlined the need for «proper dispositions»⁴⁸ and explained that anyone «who is unwilling to improve [...] is not fit to approach our Saviour's table».⁴⁹ The central element in confession is, similarly, «great sorrow», which should lead to «a resolution [...] never to offend God for the future».⁵⁰

Right from the beginning the saintly priest put his boys on their guard against making sacrilegious confessions by concealing their sins out of shame, or for some other motive.⁵¹ He insisted on the confidence that should exist between penitent and confessor: «[...] do not have any fear of the confessor; he is happy to know that you are entrusting to him the things you have done wrong [...] and he is not allowed to tell anyone the things you have confessed; he could not make use of them even to save his own life».⁵²

This quotation enables us to discern certain antinomies that Don Bosco failed to resolve. There is a tension between the traditional spirit of con-

⁴² *Comollo* [1844] 1-84 = OE I 1-84. The first edition (1844) was dedicated to the seminarists, while the second (1854) was dedicated to all boys. It was published in the series of the «Letture cattoliche» 1 (1853-1854) nos. 20 and 21.

⁴³ Cf. *Le sei domeniche e la novena di san Luigi Gonzaga con un cenno sulla vita del santo* [= *Sei domeniche*], Torino Tip. Botta 1846, later published in the *Giovane provveduto* [1847] 55-75 = OE II 235-255. Don Bosco used the text of [P. DE MATTEI], *Il giovine angelico S. Luigi Gonzaga proposto in esemplare di ben vivere in alcune considerazioni, preghiere, pratiche di virtù ed esempi... a celebrar con frutto le sei domeniche, e la novena in onore dell'istesso santo*. This booklet was widely diffused in Italy.

⁴⁴ Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 196, 223.

⁴⁵ *Giovane provveduto* [1847] 84 = OE II 264.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 85 = OE II 265.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 85 = OE II 265.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 98 = OE II 278.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 98 = OE II 278.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 95-96 = OE II 275-276.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 96 = OE II 276.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 96 = OE II 276.

formity which treated the obligatory nature of certain observances as the fundamental element and which, in the view of some people, insisted on details that terrified the penitent; on the other hand there is his own spirit of spontaneity, freedom and sense of responsibility, coupled with confidence, insight and adaptability. The thought that the eternal salvation of his boys was the only thing that mattered often produced in him a concern that, at times, was tense and anxious and led him to make use of pastoral devices based on fear, even though he himself was always conscious of the «mercy of God».⁵³ Under the influence of the spirit of Guala, Cafasso and the Ecclesiastical College, Don Bosco emphasised from the very start: «How easy it is for us to be certain that our sins have been forgiven through the sacrament of penance. It is almost unbelievable that God has given us such a gift and shown such mercy by providing us with such a useful and such a necessary sacrament!».⁵⁴

The ambivalence that existed between the anxious, vigilant Don Bosco, who was inclined to impose certain tight restrictions, and the gentle, kindly Don Bosco who appealed to the moral sense of the young and to the personal bond between educator and educand, seems never to have been fully resolved, at least at the speculative level. There exists the Don Bosco who advocated daily meditation on the «last things», the monthly «exercise for a happy death» with its special examination of conscience and litany, the annual retreats with their special emphasis on conversion, repentance and the determination not to sin again. He and his boys entered into the mood of the last things, confessing weekly, monthly and annually the sins that they had committed.⁵⁵ Where the eternal salvation of souls was concerned, Don Bosco did not want to take any risks, and he was prepared to apply a certain amount of pressure on the consciences of his boys in a way that is today less acceptable.⁵⁶ This is the Don Bosco who insisted on the need for confession

⁵³ Cf. the meticulous booklet *Esercizio di divozione alla misericordia di Dio*, Torino, Tip. Botta [1847] = OE II 71-181.

⁵⁴ *Esercizio* [1847] pp. 93-94 = OE II 163-164. Don Bosco took ideas from N.S. BERGIER, *Tableau de la miséricorde divine tiré de l'Écriture sainte ou motifs de confiance en Dieu pour la consolation des âmes timides*, Besançon 1821, pp. 310-311.

⁵⁵ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 108.

⁵⁶ The following extract from G.B. Francesca's (1838-1930) description of the autumn outings may serve as an example: «Our father, Don Bosco, before letting us go off to bed, used, as was his pious custom, to say a few words to us [...]. At this point his tone of voice and his manner changed dramatically, in a way that made a deep impression on us. "We are here", he declared, "to enjoy ourselves and have a good holiday, and, thanks to certain good gentlemen, we are having a really good time. Despite this, we have to think about death. Tonight one of our friends will be called to eternity. Happy the person who has long been prepared for that moment, and who has been able to receive the holy sacraments and so be sure of a place in heaven. My dear boys, each person dies. So before leaving here let us recite a prayer for him and let us commend his soul to the love of the heart of Mary!". He did not say any more, nor was there any need, because we could not have borne any more emotion.

because of the natural «weakness» of the young which leads them more easily into sin and can cause them to make bad confessions. In his opinion these boys needed to be convinced by their educators that the sacraments of confession and communion are their best safeguards, or that frequent confession is a «support during the unstable period of youth».⁵⁷ This Don Bosco points out how important it is for youngsters to learn from childhood how to approach confession with the proper dispositions.⁵⁸ He expressed his conviction that children as young as seven years of age were capable of committing grave sins, of failing to mention them in confession and of making sacrilegious confessions, thus putting at risk their eternal salvation.⁵⁹ Like some other educators, moralists and writers (Gobinet, St. Alphonsus, Humbert, Arvisenet, etc.), he seemed at times obsessed with the fear that the boys might lie about, or conceal, their sins of impurity or immodesty, and that they would thus forfeit not only grace but true happiness and eternal salvation. «Authors who are famous for their moral and ascetical theology and for their long experience, particularly one authority whose teaching has all the guarantees of truth, all agree that children's first confessions are, for the most part, if not null then at least defective through lack of instruction, or through deliberate omission of things that ought to be confessed».⁶⁰ On 4 February 1876, he declared to the members of the first General Chapter of the Salesians that long experience had taught him that it was necessary to persuade boys to make a general confession when they first entered a Salesian college.⁶¹ He exhorted the boys never to allow themselves «to be deceived by the devil into remaining silent about some sin in confession from a sense of shame», and he spoke of the «great number of Christians who go to eternal perdition solely because they concealed or did not reveal their sins with sincerity in confession».⁶²

We looked at each other, as if to try and guess who it was who was soon to die [...]. Then, after bidding us "Good-night", he again begged us to pray for the one who was to die that night at the Oratory; he did this with much affection and concern. We then went to bed, and more than one found it hard to sleep, and even then we continued to pray» (G.B. FRANCESIA, *Don Bosco e le sue ultime passeggiate*, Torino, Libreria salesiana di S. G. Evangelista 1897, pp. 131-132).

⁵⁷ *Comollo* [1854] 4. This passage is not in the first edition of 1844. *Besucco* [1864] 103 = OE XV 345.

⁵⁸ *Giovane provveduto* [1847] 93 = OE II 273; *Maggio* [1858] 124 = OE X 418.

⁵⁹ *Chiave* [1856] 57 = OE VIII 57. After 1863 the editions of the *Giovane provveduto* adopt the same text. *Magone* [1861] 28 = OE XIII 182. Cf. also P. STELLA, *Don Bosco II* 312.

⁶⁰ *Magone* [1861] 29 = OE XIII 182. Cf. also *Chiave* [1856] 58 = OE VIII 58; *Giovane provveduto* [1863] 106; *Maggio* [1858] 126-127 = OE X 420-421; *Nove giorni* [1870] 40 = OE XXII 92.

⁶¹ MB XII 91. Further testimonies can be found in S. STRANO, *Don Bosco, confessore dei giovani. Aspetti particolari*, Acireale, Arti Grafiche della Città del fanciullo 1960, pp. 1-44.

⁶² *Magone* [1861] 24, 25-26 = OE XIII 178, 179-180; also *Giovane provveduto* [1847] 96 = OE II 276; *Pietro* [1855] 19, 20-21 = OE VI 293, 294-295.

According to P. Stella the remarkable thing at Valdocco was that Don Bosco tended, when hearing confessions, to create the same relationship of fatherly and filial trust which distinguished him at other times. As a father, a friend and guide who was endowed with extraordinary gifts, he achieved a most unusual bond of spiritual accord, which was one of his main instruments for attaining his objective of Christian education and for guaranteeing that his boys were on the road to salvation and to sanctity.⁶³

«A loving and expansive person, he exercised authority by inspiring respect, confidence and love. We opened our hearts to him with happy, intimate, total abandon. We all wanted to go to confession to him, so that he had to devote between sixteen and eighteen hours a week to this holy but also wearing duty [...]. This kind of system between a Superior and his dependants is not so much unusual as unique. It is the system of the saints which enables them to understand human nature and wisely direct it, releasing its hidden potentialities».⁶⁴ Those are the words of G. Balesio. The educative function of the confessional depended, for Don Bosco, on the confessor-penitent rapport which he established and which provided a channel through which the healing grace of the sacrament could flow.⁶⁵

Don Bosco inspired confidence and allowed space for spontaneity, independence, and a freedom which helped to encourage the interior development of boys who were beginning to take charge of their own lives. He thus encouraged and developed their sense of personal responsibility; and this perhaps explains why Don Bosco was so keen that they should be faithful in using a permanent or «ordinary» confessor. The sacrament of confession seemed to achieve its full purpose through the close rapport that each individual youngster established with his confessor as his one sure guide.

Don Bosco's writings, especially the «lives», illustrate the way he gradually introduced the question of a permanent confessor.⁶⁶ His frequent references, especially between 1860 and 1870, to the seal of confession also aimed at producing the same effect: «[Confessors] always have to keep in mind the great secrecy of the confessional. They must recall that a confessor is bound to secrecy by natural law, as well as by divine, ecclesiastical and civil law [...]».⁶⁷ These words reflect Don Bosco's great reverence for his mission as a priest, as also the simplicity and warmth of his educational approach. They also reflect his anxiety lest his boys should make bad confessions.

⁶³ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 310-311.

⁶⁴ BALLELIO, *Vita intima* 21.

⁶⁵ G. GROppo, *Vita sacramentale, catechesi, formazione spirituale come elementi del sistema preventivo*, in: *Il sistema preventivo di Don Bosco tra pedagogia antica e nuova*, Acts of the European congress on Don Bosco's educational system, Torino - Leumann, LDC 1974, 62.

⁶⁶ Cf., for example, the evolution of the text in *Comollo* [1844] 26 = OE I 26; [1854] 32-34; [1884] 41 = OE XXXV 41.

⁶⁷ *Besucco* [1864] 104 = OE XV 346.

There could, of course, be good reasons for a change of confessor, by way of exception to the rule, especially if a priest had failed to win the confidence of his penitent. In such a situation he opted for the safest course: «Once you have chosen a confessor who is suited to your spiritual needs, do not change him without necessity. If you do not have a permanent confessor who enjoys your total confidence, you will always lack a spiritual friend. [...] Nevertheless, you can, without any scruple, change your confessor when either of you moves elsewhere, so that it would be very difficult to continue going to him. The same applies if he were sick or if he had a great number of penitents on some solemn feast. Equally, if your conscience were troubled by something that you didn't dare to tell your usual confessor, then, rather than commit a sacrilege, change your confessor a thousand times, if need be».⁶⁸

Don Bosco probably realised that not all the boys who went to confession in college would do likewise as members of pious associations («unioni dei buoni»); hence his insistence on a "stable" or "ordinary" confessor.

For similar reasons he encouraged attendance at Sunday Mass and frequent communion. Don Bosco began by following what was the general practice, in accordance with Church law and local custom: certain practices were covered by law, while others were adopted in line with the diocesan catechism or manual of devotions.⁶⁹ The development of such practices at Valdocco and elsewhere was certainly conditioned by what happened in Turin and Piedmont. There were, however, other specific influences, such as the distinction between boarders and day pupils, students and artisans, clerics and boys, educators and pupils, adults and children, newcomers to the house and veterans. We can say, at the most, that the religious life which Don Bosco established in the Oratory and the house annexed to it was made up of a system of common practices, optional group activities (the various sodalities of St. Aloysius, of the Blessed Sacrament, of the Immaculate Conception, of St. Joseph), as well as personal practices

During the first five years of the boarding school morning prayers were said before Mass. Mass was attended in silence, following the practice in congregations of students, as suggested by catechisms and laid down for Piedmontese students. The key points of the Mass were marked by using the meditations given in the *Giovane provveduto* and by the insertion of the occasional hymn. G.B. Francesca recalled that during those years (1850-1858?) boys used to come to the sacristy before Mass in order to go to confession to Don Bosco. The rest waited in church, praying in silence, until Don Bosco started Mass.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Magone [1861] 26-27, 56-57 = OE XIII 180-181, 210-211; Besucco [1864] 103-104 = OE XV 345-346; Savio [1866] 60-61.

⁶⁹ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 284-285.

⁷⁰ G.B. FRANCESIA, *D. Giovanni Bonetti sacerdote salesiano. Cenni biografici*, S. Benigno Canavese, Tip. Salesiana 1894, pp. 29 et ss.

According to P. Stella, certain indications given by Don Bosco as well as by clerics and boys lead us to believe that at that period there was no check on whether the boys, or even the clerics, attended Mass.⁷¹ As the numbers at Valdocco grew with the passing of the years, a firmer discipline became necessary. From being merely recommended daily Mass became obligatory, as it was for students on schooldays throughout the Sardinian States, and morning prayers and the recitation of the rosary were inserted into the community Mass.⁷² The same happened elsewhere in Turin, in the houses of the «Tommasini», in the College for Artisans and in the educational establishments run by nuns. The practice of mental prayer was carried out at times and in forms which suited each boy, but on a regular basis and in conformity with rules and customs.⁷³

The Mass takes us to the heart of Catholic spirituality. Interwoven with prayers (including the rosary) and popular hymns, it aroused in the boys of Valdocco the same sentiments that it evoked in the people from whom they sprang, and amongst whom they would normally return to live as adults.⁷⁴ The apostle of youth tried, at the same time, to encourage ways of assisting at Mass that corresponded to the psychology of the young, taking especially into account their need for variety. Practices of piety, especially the rosary (though not mental prayer) were integrated into the Mass because they could be recited aloud and in common.⁷⁵

Don Bosco was very keen that his boys should enjoy religious practices, and so he permitted and encouraged practices that grew out of the initiatives of individual groups. Out of love for the Church he insisted that Gregorian chant should be taught, but he also made use of popular music. By way of appendix to the *Giovane provveduto*, and then separately, he published a series of *Laudi sacre*;⁷⁶ he promoted the music of G. Cagliari,⁷⁷ of «maestro» Giovanni De-Vecchi, of Don Costamagna (1846-1921), of the coadjutor Giuseppe Dogliani (1869-1934) and others. Above all, after the building of the sanctuary of Mary, Help of Christians, people used to flock there to hear

⁷¹ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 306-307.

⁷² From 1863 onwards Don Bosco underlines the example of St. Isidore: «I recommend that you should try hard to hear holy Mass every day...»: *Giovane provveduto* [1863] 106 (my italics). Cf. also *Magone* [1858] 138 = OE X 432.

⁷³ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 309.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 330.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁷⁶ Cf. P. STELLA, *Valori spirituali nel «Giovane provveduto» di san Giovanni Bosco*, Roma, Tip. Pio XI 1960, pp. 6-14; ID., *Don Bosco* II 322, n. 160.

⁷⁷ Regarding Giovanni Cagliari (1838-1926) it has been said: «The young Cagliari was later directed to study music. Don Bosco did not want [...] to create an artist who would compose sophisticated, difficult music; what he needed was easy, cheerful music that would suite his boys, music that was easy to learn and easy to perform [...]. Cagliari turned out such pieces of vocal music in a profusion that was quite staggering...» (S. RASTELLO, *In memoria di S.Em. il cardinale Giovanni Cagliari, primo missionario salesiano*, Milano 1926, 5-6).

the polyphonic choir. The decoration of the church, particularly that of Mary, Help of Christians, the altar servers, the pomp of special ceremonies, all these things contributed to the beauty of the services.

For Don Bosco the eucharist was a kind of touchstone to measure a person's depth of faith and love of God, his taste for holy things and the degree of Christian perfection he had attained. Comollo, Savio, Magone and Besucco manifested in this way a great love for Jesus Christ. When one considers the way he promoted eucharistic piety and frequent communion and the booklets he wrote on the eucharist, one must remember that the mental climate, especially in the latter half of the century, did not favour practices of piety.⁷⁸ As an educator Don Bosco developed a policy regarding the eucharist that was based on a conviction that, without religion and the sacraments, the whole of human life was doomed to failure. He tended increasingly to react against a mentality that was commonly considered to be the source of a falling off in piety.

Within this context Don Bosco promoted frequent communion, organizing groups that would encourage this practice. He did so because of convictions that were already present during his period of formation but which matured as his later experience widened. Like other pastors of his day he pointed out the need for «worthy, fervent and frequent» communion, received with the proper dispositions;⁷⁹ but he progressively came to view

⁷⁸ The following are the most important titles: [CARLO] FILIPPO DA POIRINO, *Trattenimenti intorno al sacrificio della S. Messa* = LC 2 (1854-55), nos. 11 and 12; ID., *Trattenimenti intorno al ss. sacramento dell'eucaristia* = LC 3 (1855-56), nos. 19-20; ID., *Trattenimenti morali intorno ai riti ed alle cerimonie della s. messa coll'aggiunta di un metodo per udirla con frutto* = LC 4 (1856-57) nos. 8 and 9; ID., *Il cielo aperto mediante la comunione frequente* = LC 7 (1859-60), no. 8; 1865; 1878; LEONARDO DA PORTO MAURIZIO, *Il tesoro nascosto ovvero pregi ed eccellenze della s. messa con un metodo pratico e devoto per ascoltarla con frutto* = LC 8 (1860-61), no. 12; 1881; HUGUET (and others), *L'esistenza reale di G. Cristo nel ss. Sacramento* = LC 11 (1863-64), no. 7; G. FRASSINETTI, *Due gioie nascoste* = LC 12 (1864), no. 10; G. DE SEGUR, *La santissima comunione* = LC 20 (1872), no. 7; 1875; ID., *Ogni otto giorni* = LC 26 (1878), no. 7; ID., *Venite tutti a me* = LC 27 (1879), no. 6; ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI, *Visita al SS. Sacramento ed a Maria SS. per ciascun giorno del mese [...] preceduta dall'atto eroico e da preghiere in onore dei sette dolori e delle sette allegrezze del patriarca S. Giuseppe* = LC 15 (1867) nos. 10 and 11.

⁷⁹ Other authors of his time emphasise especially the proper dispositions: cf. F. CECCA, *Le veglie de' contadini cristiani. Dialoghi familiari-istruttivi-morali sovra le quattro parti della dottrina cristiana, ad uso, e vantaggio de' contadini, e di altre persone che vogliono approfittarne*, Torino 1806, pp. 278-280; CH.F. LHOMOND, *Doctrine chrétienne en forme de lectures de piété, où l'on expose les preuves de la religion, les dogmes de la foi, les règles de la morale, ce qui concerne les sacrements [sic] et la prière*, Lyon 1808, lecture 89 (pp. 417-421); there is an Italian translation: *Dottrina cristiana in forma di lezioni di pietà, in cui si espongono le prove della religione, i dogmi della fede, le regole della morale, quel che riguarda i sacramenti e la preghiera ad uso delle case di educazione e delle famiglie cristiane*, in 3 volumes, Milano 1831; A. GUILLOIS, *Explication historique, dogmatique, morale, liturgique et canonique du catéchisme avec la réponse aux objections tirées des sciences contre la religion*, III, Paris 1870, pp. 135-138; there is an Italian translation: *Spiegazione storica, dogmatica, morale, liturgica e canonica del catechismo colle risposte alle obiezioni attinte dalla scienza per oppugnare la religione*, 4 volumes, Prato 1863, 1865, 1882; P. COLLET,

communion as an indispensable spiritual food for youngsters who had to live in times that were far from easy. In the latter half of the century his thinking was increasingly in tune with those theologians and pastors who favoured a less restrictive attitude to the practice of frequent communion. His own formation at Chieri had followed the stricter pastoral and theological approach that was prevalent in Piedmont during the 19th century and the Restoration,⁸⁰ but over the years he increasingly favoured a less rigoristic pastoral policy regarding communion.

Throughout history there had always been those who favoured a milder pastoral approach (cf. C.E. Pallavicini, B. Lanteri, T. Gousset, etc.). A number of priests and theologians, like G. Frassinetti, G. de Ségur, S. Franco, J.J. Gaume, J.M.J. Huguet and others, drawing inspiration from that milder tradition, and faced with the sad state of religion, began to declare that Jansenism and the rigour of the «probabiliorists» were to blame for the growing crisis of faith, the religious indifference and the unpopularity of religious practice. The faithful had been deprived of the eucharist, the «food of the strong», the nourishment without which they could not face such «difficult times» and the struggle that was needed to ensure personal and social well-being. John Bosco had already become familiar with this gentler pastoral approach in the school of Guala and Cafasso, and he joined in the campaign which was the equivalent of a proclamation of faith, given the socio-political climate of the time.

Don Bosco became one of those who encouraged children to communicate frequently, because he had become increasingly convinced that the inconstancy of the young, which was the main cause of their failings, needed the spiritual strength that came from communion. That strength was called for in a special way if they were to resist the temptations that faced them in a world of changing ideas and new challenges. For the same reason Don Bosco considered that little children should take their first communion as soon as they were able: this was a measure of timely «prevention», aimed at strengthening the young against the assaults of the devil.

3. Taking a deeper view

«People may say what they like about various systems of education, but I can find no secure foundation other than confession and communion. I don't

Lo scolaro cristiano ossia trattato dei doveri di un giovine che brama santificare i suoi studi, Milano 1844, pp. 186-195; *Compendio della dottrina cristiana ad uso della diocesi di Torino*, Torino 1822, p. 120.

⁸⁰ Cf. G. PENCO, *Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, II: *Dal concilio di Trento ai nostri giorni*, Milano 1978, p. 290; P. STELLA, *Giurisdizionalismo e Giansenismo all'università di Torino nel secolo XVIII* = *Biblioteca del «Salesianum»* 52, Torino 1958, pp. 45, 70-71, 90; ID., *Crisi religiose nel primo Ottocento piemontese*, in «Salesianum» 21 (1959) 66-67.

think it is too much to say that if these two elements are missing then morality disappears».⁸¹

We may ask whether this concept of education, together with Don Bosco's way of speaking, may not turn the sacraments, and religion in general, into «instruments» or «subordinate means» for ensuring morality, happiness and educational results.

When a minister of the queen of England visited Valdocco and was amazed at the «perfect silence» and discipline of the boys, he was told that «frequent confession and communion and devout attendance at daily Mass» were «the powerful instruments of education» that had been revealed to Catholics. «If these elements of religion were not used, one would have to have recourse to threats and the stick [...]. It is either religion or the stick [...]».⁸²

Such a statement may amaze modern readers, who are accustomed to making the necessary distinctions between the order of creation and that of redemption, between the relative autonomy of human realities, including education, and the attitude of faith in God. Various theories have been adduced in an effort to give some sort of adequate explanation of these statements of the saint. Some of his statements could convey the impression that essential ingredients of faith, which are ends in themselves, are being manipulated in order to achieve merely human, educational objectives.

Attempts have been made to understand Don Bosco's statements in terms of the beneficial effects that the sacraments have upon the psychology of the young. A. Caviglia disagreed with this interpretation, judging it too reductionist.⁸³ He emphasised the importance of the fundamental motive behind Don Bosco's pedagogy, the vision that he had of God's grace *at work* in the soul and of what it achieved there. This view is genuinely in line with Christian and Catholic theology, but is translated into educational terms. It is based ultimately on the fundamental doctrine of sanctifying grace, and Don Bosco's entire work as an educator was, as he saw it, devoted to the preservation, or restoring, of God's grace in the soul. For Don Bosco the presence of God's grace was everything.⁸⁴

⁸¹ *Besucco* [1864] 100 = OE XV 342. Similar statements are found in: *Pietro* [1855] 41, 46, 48 = OE VI 317, 320, 322; *Savio* [1859] 67-68 = OE XI 217-218; *Valentino* [1866] 12-13, 17 = OE XVII 190-191; *Sistema preventivo* [1877] 54-55 = OE XXVIII 432-433.

⁸² *Sistema preventivo* [1877] 56 = OE XXVIII 434.

⁸³ «It would not be right to consider the benefit of the sacrament merely from the point of view of the practical function it fulfils at the psychological level, whether by motivating and directing the will or by bringing comfort and encouragement through the reception of communion, with the consequent confirming of one's good resolutions» (A. CAVIGLIA, *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di «Don Bosco» nuovamente pubblicati e riveduti secondo le edizioni originali e manoscritti superstiti*, IV: *La vita di Savio Domenico*, Torino, SEI 1943, p. 344).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 345.

P. Braido also speaks about religion (at least in equivalent terms, such as the fear of God, the communication and development of the divine life, the life of charity and of grace, prayer, attendance at Mass, use of the sacraments of confession and communion) as «the supreme means of education to which all other "human" and "humanistic" technical discoveries are firmly subordinated».⁸⁵ Supernatural means or procedures appear necessary not only for the building of the Christian personality; they contribute efficaciously to the process of human education (happiness, morality, joyfulness) either *ex opere operato*, or by God's action upon us through the actual graces that we merit by our prayers.⁸⁶ Braido also insists that «we are dealing here not with any purely psychological aid, but with a supernatural, efficacious [...] increase of grace and of the divine life, a genuine development and growth towards personal maturity at both a natural and supernatural level».⁸⁷

Don Bosco's thesis seems to me to be, above all, an expression of his typical way of looking at the human person, especially of the young people he was educating. His point of view as an educator, though never developed in theoretical detail, was part of an anthropology in which man, merely because he exists, is seen as radically «existing for God». Only in a complete encounter with God can man find the fulness of his being, the goal of his human and Christian destiny. In the eyes of Don Bosco a man without God, without religion, without divine grace, is not only a creature eternally lost but someone whose earthly endeavours to construct human, cultural and educative values run the risk of losing all meaning. The identification of man with the specifically religious dimension and with his eternal destiny is fundamental in Don Bosco, but it does not take his attention away from the values of the world, of education, of «the honest citizen and good Christian».

These «human» values had for him a strictly subordinate importance. The effort to promote the human development of youth through education achieves nothing, if the educator neglects what is most fundamental: relationship with God, the life of grace, eternal salvation. The realization of human potential could not, Don Bosco believed, be an isolated aim, with its own autonomous value. He did not despise human realities but saw them always in relation to man's ultimate destiny. Education had, therefore, to be considered always in the light of man's indissoluble link with divine reality, as explained in terms of faith and religion, of grace and divine life, of prayer and the sacraments. Education meant, for Don Bosco, helping boys to sanctify themselves and save their souls.

This was the conviction that grew out of his perception of the way that the nature of the young had been weakened as a result of original sin: «Just

⁸⁵ P. BRAIDO, *Il sistema preventivo di Don Bosco* = *Enciclopedia delle scienze dell'educazione* 29, Zürich, PAS-Verlag 1964, p. 250.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 254.

as a tender plant that has been placed in healthy soil in a garden will not grow well if it is not cultivated and cared for until it has reached a certain maturity, so you, my dear boys, will most certainly turn towards what is wrong, if you do not accept direction from the person who has the task of guiding you». ⁸⁸ Don Bosco's point of view, however, remained quite tolerant: «The primary reason for this system is the thoughtlessness of the young, who in one moment forget the rules of discipline and the penalties for their infringement. Consequently, a child often becomes culpable and deserving of punishment, which he had not even thought about, and which he had quite forgotten when heedlessly committing the fault he would certainly have avoided, had a friendly voice warned him». ⁸⁹

These considerations help us to see that the sanctifying action of the sacraments is the necessary foundation for a truly human life and for the education of the young. They also help us to understand the importance Don Bosco attached to confession and the eucharist, especially when writing the «lives» and booklets of religious instruction: these two sacraments are «the two best aids of the young». ⁹⁰

Living before the liturgical movement had begun, ⁹¹ Don Bosco treated the sacraments as part of a Christian piety that was nourished on devotional practices, in accordance with the custom of the age he lived in: such practices as morning and night prayers, meditation, the monthly exercise for a happy death, the yearly retreat. Anxious for the temporal and eternal well-being of his boys and in line with contemporary theology, despite his perception of the part played by grace, he saw the sacraments as channels or signs of grace, as fountains or instruments of salvation: «These sacraments are so many visible signs instituted by God for our salvation; in other words, the seven sacraments are like seven channels along which God communicates his heavenly favours to humanity. There, Christian soul, you have a brief summary of the wonderful means that Jesus Christ has instituted for our salvation». ⁹²

This definition is like those commonly used in the catechisms and books of religious instruction of the period and is fairly typical in its scholastic,

⁸⁸ *Giovane provveduto* [1847] 13-14 = OE II 193-194.

⁸⁹ *Sistema preventivo* [1877] 48 = OE XXVIII 426.

⁹⁰ «I exhorted him to make his first communion and after that to receive communion as often as possible, assuring him that confession and communion are the two greatest helps that young people can have» (*Sei domeniche* [1854] 12); cf. also *Comollo* [1844] 64 = OE I 63.

⁹¹ Cf. O. ROUSSEAU, *Histoire du mouvement liturgique. Esquisse historique depuis le début du XIXe siècle jusqu'au pontificat de Pie X* = Lex orandi 3, Paris, Éd. du Cerf 1945, p. 149; cf. also S. MARSILI, *Storia del movimento liturgico italiano dalle origini all'Enciclica «Mediator Dei»*, which is the appendix to the translation of the book by O. ROUSSEAU, *Storia del movimento liturgico*, Roma, Edizioni Paoline 1961, 362-369.

⁹² *Maggio* [1858] 55-56, 58 = OE X 349-350, 352.

post-Tridentine theology.⁹³ For Don Bosco the sacraments were the surest and most efficacious supports of the faith. Through them the Catholic Church offered to anyone who wished to receive them the certainty that they would one day possess eternal life.⁹⁴ But as a priest who was an educator, concerned particularly with the fate of the young, he explains to the latter what the sacraments mean to them: «Remember, my dear boys, that the two greatest aids you can have to support you on your journey to heaven are the sacraments of confession and communion».⁹⁵ Like Savio, Magone, Besucco, they, too, will find through the sacraments deep peace of soul, which is the foundation for a virtuous life and for the attainment of human happiness.⁹⁶

Don Bosco avoided theological technicalities but he gradually seemed to attribute more and more importance to the efficacy of communion *ex opere operato*. The effect of the sacraments does not depend just on the faith with which they are received but on God's desire to communicate grace through them, though proper dispositions are, of course, required if they are to achieve their full effect.

Does Don Bosco's teaching reduce the sacraments to mere instruments in the service of education? I think some of his expressions, as also the importance he attributed to the miraculous aspect of the eucharist, could lead to a form of sacramental instrumentalism. However, the reduction of the sacraments to something external, functional or instrumental does not seem to be consistent with his spiritual depth. He certainly saw the sacraments as means or instruments of grace; but even more he saw them as providing the essential foundation for the whole process of education, directing his boys towards the ideal of holiness and towards their eternal destiny. Rather than simple instruments the sacraments are a *conditio sine qua non*, if any educational action is to acquire its final purpose.

They, therefore, form part of a process which also includes education, pastoral activity and spiritual formation, in a constant interplay between nature and grace, between the human element and faith, and which finds its ultimate meaning in the mystery of Christian redemption.⁹⁷

⁹³ Cf. L.M. CHAUVET, *Du symbolique au symbole. Essai sur les sacrements = Rites et Symboles* 9, Paris 1979, pp. 188-190.

⁹⁴ This subject is developed in a particular way in the apologetic writings.

⁹⁵ *Regolamento esterni* [1877] 36 = OE XXIX 66.

⁹⁶ *Savio* [1859] 69-70 = OE XI 219-220; *Magone* [1861] 17, 23 = OE XIII 171, 177.

⁹⁷ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 470.