

DON BOSCO AND THE CULTIVATION OF ECCLESIASTICAL AND RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS

Fausto JIMÉNEZ

One of the things for which Don Bosco is well known is his concern for the cultivation of vocations within the Church. His image is that of a man of the Church, distinguished by his zeal for the expansion of the kingdom of God and by his wisdom as a spiritual director. These features would themselves be enough to place him amongst the outstanding priests in the history of the Church.

1. Introduction: Don Bosco's personal experience

Don Bosco's personal experience, during his years of formation and «apprenticeship», fostered within him a whole set of values which should characterise every priestly or religious vocation.

He entered the *seminary at Chieri* in November, 1835. Most of the seminarians came from the country regions.¹ They believed they were called by God to the service of the Church and that their eternal salvation depended upon their embracing that vocation. Prayer, purity of life, reception of the sacraments and meditation on the lives of Christ, of Our Lady and of the saints made it possible for them to achieve their goal.² The aim at Chieri was to isolate the clerics from the world of Turin, which was not considered conducive to their formation. There was also a fear of careerism: young men might become priests to guarantee a safe future. Don Bosco, accordingly, preferred to be enclosed in the seminary rather than follow the courses as an external student, as some of his companions did.³

¹ Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale*, Roma, LAS 1980, p. 40.

² Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 46.

³ Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 54 et s., 75 et s.; F. DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco et la vie spirituelle*, Paris, Beauchesne 1967, 23-27.

One can discern certain *features* of his experience. In the first place he was sure that he had been called by God when he was only a small boy;⁴ this made him later insist that one should be sure about God's will concerning one's vocation. Secondly, he discovered the benefits derived from spiritual direction. He was thus able to recognise the manifestation of God's will through Don Cafasso,⁵ and he would remind people of the importance of following the advice of their confessor or superiors. Thirdly, he learned how to overcome obstacles, and in this he was helped by his dreams and by his friends.⁶ He would later insist that it was possible and, indeed, a matter of obligation, to put aside doubts and overcome difficulties regarding one's vocation. The fourth feature was his intellectual formation,⁷ which made him emphasise the need for study.

2. The context: the situation of the clergy in the 19th century

The century can be divided into different periods. During *the first half of the century* many religious lived in their convents without any concern for the active apostolate. The Jesuits were detested because of their links with the faction that was favourable to Austria and for their rigid anti-liberal views. The only congregations engaged in a more fruitful apostolate were those of French provenance.

The *secular clergy* numbered more than 60,000 priests, serving 25 million inhabitants: one priest for every 400 souls. There were 225 dioceses in Italy, but only a few of the bishops were outstanding for their zeal, men like Mons. Moreno, bishop of Ivrea, whose pastoral letters were widely read by the clergy. Many of the clergy, however, showed little zeal in their ministry: some busied themselves with the administration of their family's possessions or worked as chaplains or private tutors to rich or noble families.⁸ Others were completely independent of their bishop, so that even seminarists were not always obliged to reside in the seminary. Their learning was fairly modest (one may recall Rosmini's famous book on the *wounds of the Church*), and they were hardly competent to counsel the middle classes about the crises of conscience that they were experiencing. Others were nationalists⁹ or fanatical conservatists or riddled with worldly values (dishonesty, insubordination, freemasonry). This is the picture of things at their worst, because not all dioceses were the same: those in the north, at least in Piedmont, pre-

⁴ Cf. MO 29 et s., 35, 44, 89.

⁵ Cf. MO 133.

⁶ Cf. MB I 123-126, 243 et s., 305 et s., 424 et s.; II 243 et s., 298-300; MO 51-53, 58.

⁷ Cf. MO 110 et s., 121, 123.

⁸ Cf. E I 281.

⁹ Cf. MO 219 et s.; for example Don Cocchi, cf. MO 214 et s.

sented a more positive picture.¹⁰ There were also some exemplary priests: Borel, Cafasso, Pallotti, etc. as well as Don Bosco.¹¹

About *the middle of the century* laws prejudicial to the Church were promulgated: the abolition of the ecclesiastical forum, of clerical immunity and of exemption from taxes (1850-51); the law concerning religious houses (1855), which led to the closure of 721 houses and the dispersal of 12,000 religious.

The numbers of the clergy dwindled: in almost every diocese the number of priests who died outnumbered the newly ordained.¹² This also seems to have been the case in the diocese of Turin, as is demonstrated in a pastoral letter of Mons. Gastaldi during January 1873. Between 1871 and 1901 the number of priests dropped by 25 per cent. Many of them had been arrested and a good number of bishops exiled;¹³ others were not recognised by the government, so that in 1864 there were 108 vacant episcopal sees.¹⁴ Mentalities were gradually changing. The number of priests not engaged in parish work diminished and there emerged, instead, a new type of pastor of more exemplary life, nearer to the people, but still with limited intellectual formation.¹⁵

The causes of this phenomenon can be reduced to the following: the general corruption of manners that had already penetrated into the home; in the state schools teaching was imparted by teachers who did not merit respect; there was a lack of money on account of mortgages and the gap was ever widening between rich and poor, so that the latter could not pay the seminary fees for their sons.

Remedies were sought. Since there was a general decline in faith in the home, a programme of rechristianization was called for through religious instruction for boys and girls. There was a need for schools, hostels, colleges, places of recreation. Since there were fewer priestly vocations from the aristocracy and the middle class, vocations had to be found amongst the agricultural class, at the risk of lowering the cultural standards of the clergy and of reducing their efficacy in the work of evangelization. As the junior seminaries were not reserved exclusively for aspirants to the priesthood, special houses devoted only to the formation of the latter were necessary. This problem was experienced at Valdocco and at Mirabello: when boys studied in these houses, free of charge, and then left to home or join the diocese, Don Bosco described their action as theft.¹⁶ On the other hand he made no difficulty

¹⁰ Cf. E I 258.

¹¹ Cf. R. AUBERT, *Il pontificato di Pio IX (1846-1878)*, Torino, Ed. SAIE 1976.

¹² This is asserted by contemporary writers like Frassinetti in 1867 and Liborio Rossi in 1876.

¹³ Cf. MB VIII 62, 72.

¹⁴ Cf. MB VII 62; X 427-429.

¹⁵ Cf. R. AUBERT, *L'Eglise dans le monde moderne*, Paris, Ed. du Seuil 1976, 91-96.

¹⁶ Cf. MB XII 448.

about accepting vocations from amongst the peasants: he was himself one of them.

By *the end of the century* things looked a lot better even though the secular clergy barely reached sufficient numbers to replace those who died. The religious congregations, however, were flourishing, especially the Jesuits, the Daughters of Charity, the Salesians and the Salesian Sisters.¹⁷

3. Don Bosco's initiatives

Aware of this situation Don Bosco did not waste time lamenting over it, but at once set about doing something.

3.1. Clerical and lay helpers

He turned, first of all, to his fellow priests, whether young or not so young; all he wanted was that they should be zealous. In the end they gradually abandoned him, as he had foreseen in his dream of the pergola in 1847.¹⁸ From 1850 onwards he had less and less recourse to the diocesan clergy and drew increasingly on his own clerics and priests who had grown up with him in the Oratory at Valdocco.¹⁹

He also looked for help amongst the laity, including his own boys. He began with eight to ten youthful teachers, and these quickly grew in number.²⁰ Eventually he included lay members in his Salesian Society,²¹ and when this project was turned down, he grouped his cooperators into an association of their own, so that they could share in the apostolic work of his congregation.²²

3.2. Religious vocations for men

Don Bosco remained concerned about vocations throughout his life. When preparing his address for a papal audience in the April of 1860, he

¹⁷ For more complete treatment of this topic cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 359-367. See also Don Bosco's dream entitled «work, work, work», which he had on the night of 29-30 September 1885 (MB XVII 383 et s.).

¹⁸ Cf. MO 161, 163 et s., 218-221.

¹⁹ Cf. E I 29 et s.; P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 172.

²⁰ MO 183 et s., 206 et s.

²¹ Cf. MB VII 885; the constitutions of 1864, chapter 16 «De externis»; MB X 889; the constitutions of 1873, the appendix.

²² Cf. MB XI 542. He continued to make use of the laity (E I 144) and to encourage lay associations (cf. E II 372).

drew up arguments for the reopening of religious houses and novitiates, and concluded by suggesting that contemplative religious should teach catechism to children, help in giving religious instruction to the young and prepare people for the sacraments.²³

Quite apart from the Salesians, Don Bosco was in touch with various religious families: the Rosminians, the Barnabites, the Oratorians, the members of the Cottolengo. In 1887 he was giving advice to a German priest on how to found a congregation of lay men.²⁴

3.3. *Religious vocations for women*

His letters provide evidence of his desire to promote vocations amongst young women.²⁵ Leaving aside the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christian, we can say that he had close contact with various congregations of women: the Faithful Companions of Jesus, the Noble Oblates, the Dominicans, the Daughters of the Visitation, the Sisters of Mercy, the Madames of the Sacred Heart, the Carmelites. With the exception of the Dominicans and Carmelites, he maintained his contacts with all these female congregations.²⁶

From the many letters that he wrote to young religious women one can gather his views regarding the signs of a religious vocation. One may sum them up as follows: health, good moral behaviour, a good temperament, supernatural motives. On the other hand, in accordance with the dream he had on 31 December 1881, the following were not suitable for life as Salesian nuns: girls who were superficial, morally corrupted or lacking in sincerity. Finally, the requisites in order to discern and guide these vocations were: prayer and meditation, confidence in one's superior and confessor, observance of the rules, obedience and humility, and the thought of the reward that awaits us in heaven.²⁷

²³ Cf. E III 562.

²⁴ See his correspondence with the Rosminians in E I 12, 15, 23, 24, 26, 31, 32, 47, 105. The German priest D. Ringeisen (1835-1904) had opened a hostel for the handicapped at Ursberg, Swabia. He founded a congregation of sisters to look after it, but had doubts about founding a congregation of brothers. Don Bosco replied to him on 25 June 1887, reminding him that he himself had founded the Salesian coadjutors (cf. E IV 379).

²⁵ Cf. E I 339, 355; II 209.

²⁶ Regarding the Faithful Companions of Jesus, cf. E I 372, 518; II 20, 165. Regarding the Noble Oblates, cf. E I 430, 439, 491; II 281, 291. For the Dominicans, cf. E I 436. For the Daughters of the Visitation, cf. E II 55; IV 281. For the Sisters of Mercy, cf. E III 584. For the Madames of the Sacred Heart, cf. E IV 166, 185. For the Carmelites of Paris, cf. E IV 413. His contacts with the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, were more frequent: concerning their foundation cf. *Cronistoria* I. On Mornese cf. E I 323, 336; on the oratory for girls run by the DMHC in Turin, cf. E II 446, 487; III 30.

²⁷ His teaching concerning religious life for women can be found scattered throughout his letters: cf. E I 311, 419; II 491 et s.; III 633 et s.; IV 290. Cf. also MB XV 364-366 and the «spiritual testament» in G. BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 347.

3.4. *Vocations to the priesthood at Valdocco*

The dioceses of Acqui, Asti, Casale, Chieri, Saluzzo, Turin, Vercelli and Vigevano all had seminarists studying at Valdocco, as is proved by the many letters exchanged with the respective bishops and their vicars concerning the various problems relating to diocesan students at Valdocco.²⁸

Don Bosco also engaged in the preparation of Catholic lay people for work on the *missions*. He wrote to an Irish priest, Denis Halinan, asking him to find English-speaking boys who showed signs of having a vocation; he wanted them sent to Turin so that they could be sent immediately to missions in territories under British dominion. He was also in touch with Mons. Quinn, an Australian bishop, in the hope of finding boys who could be educated to work as diocesan priests.²⁹

Don Bosco often alluded to *the number* of clerics who lodged with him.³⁰ On 26 June 1866, he said that there were 50, divided between Turin and Lanzo. On 21 October 1876, he spoke of 50 clerics who continued to wear lay dress because they could not afford to buy clerical dress. On 31 July 1878, he talked to Canon Clement Guiol of Marseilles about housing 300 clerics. This same statistic was mentioned by him in 1879, 1880 and 1881. The number sounds somewhat exaggerated, even if it included all the houses he had opened.

P. Stella gives precise details for the years between 1847 and 1870: clerics never constituted a majority nor was their number particularly noteworthy at the Oratory. If one goes by the «House inventory» in Don Bosco's own handwriting, there were certainly a few priests who helped him, as guests, between 1847 and 1853, but few clerics from the seminary; the greatest number of these lodged with the Oratorians of St. Philip Neri. There also exists the population roll or «Census between 1847 and 1869», but this does not provide conclusive information about the precise number of clerics. If this statistical record is reliable, then of the 804 residents at the Oratory in 1868, 35 were students of theology and 24 students of philosophy: the clerics, therefore, formed 7.34% of the total population of Valdocco. On the other hand, they were certainly the most influential group there.³¹

If one turns to *the age* of the clerics residing at Valdocco, one finds striking divergencies concerning the average age of the priests, who were al-

²⁸ On Acqui cf. E II 205, 477 et s. On Asti cf. E I 211, 265 et s., 268, and the MB VI 740; VII 410 et s. On Casale cf. E I 287; II 79, 81. On Chieri cf. E I 21, 23 et s. On Saluzzo cf. E I 242, 281. For examples of his relations with the diocese of Turin over ordinary administration cf. E I 112, 171, 278 et s., 283, 357. On Vigevano cf. E I 389. On Vercelli cf. E I 219.

²⁹ Concerning the missions, cf. E II 340, 387 et s., 404, 456.

³⁰ Cf. E I 406; III 69, 106, 371, 463, 625, 638 et s.; IV 77, 90.

³¹ Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 182 et ss., 196.

ways limited in numbers. Amongst the clerics there were «late vocations», men whose average age was about 30; but most of them were students of philosophy or theology, with ages varying between 16 and 24. The average age was, therefore, somewhere between 17 and 19.

Economically speaking, the provision of lodging, food and clothing for this crowd of young clerics presented Don Bosco with constant problems. From 1854 onwards the monthly charge for bed and board for the clerics was stable for several years at around 40 to 45 lire. At Valdocco and Mirabello this charge was kept deliberately low, though this was not the case in other colleges where families were considered capable of paying more. The fee was still insufficient to cover expenses, and so Don Bosco was constantly approaching the Turin curia, the parish priests, benefactors and official bodies – even the king himself – in order to ask for help.³² Other sources of financial worry were the *ecclesiastical fund* and exemption from *military service* for both of which he approached all kinds of people in search of financial help.³³

But money was not Don Bosco's only worry. He encountered *legal problems* with the civil authorities, who claimed that the studies done by his clerics did not conform to government directives and demanded that he should submit to them the decree approving the Salesian congregation, if he was to obtain the *Exequatur* of the king.³⁴ Worst of all, however, were the difficulties that he experienced with his ecclesiastical superior in Turin when he was in the process of seeking autonomy for his new foundation. With the civil authorities Don Bosco could appeal to material arguments; with the Church authorities the only way open to him in order to obtain approval for his congregation was to have direct recourse to the Holy See.³⁵

³² Cf. *ibid.*, 373-377. Letters sent to canon Vogliotti between 1855 and 1866 concerning the boarding fees for seminarists can be consulted: cf. E I 117, 172 et s., 188, 212, 325, 337, 402; or letters to the parish priest of Beinasco: cf. E I 210; to Paolo Boselli: cf. E II 310; to countess Carlotta Callori: cf. E I 356; to King Victor Emanuel II: cf. E I 212 et s., 223.

³³ Regarding the ecclesiastical fund cf. E I 243, 407 et s., 411, 501 et s.; II 6. Regarding exemption from military service cf. E I, 392; II 113, 117 et s., 125, 168, 172, 210, 229, 309, 414, 417, 485.

³⁴ Cf. E I 270, 273.

³⁵ Difficulties with the diocesan curia of Turin occurred over the founding of the Salesians: cf. E I 69 et s., 291, 292, 321, 510, 572 et s., 590-593, 596 et s., 599. They continued after the congregation had been approved on 1 March 1869: cf. E II 32 et s., 34, 64, 240, 244, 277 et s., 281 et s., 299 et s. They even continued after the approval of the Constitutions on 3 April 1874. See P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 150-156, and the paper by G. Tuninetti in the present volume.

3.5. *Junior seminaries*

The law of Casati of 1859 provided Don Bosco with an opening. The law demanded that the local authorities should provide primary and secondary schooling. Don Bosco was able to take advantage of the fact that the authorities wanted to find a way of providing state schools without having to spend too much money. He accordingly made the most of this new situation: he first offered to help the bishops in the running of their diocesan seminaries; then he decided that he preferred to open boarding schools under the aegis of the municipality. The result was that after 1860 he widened the scope of his congregation, adding an article about the fostering of ecclesiastical vocations, but requiring that the permission of the Apostolic See should be obtained in each individual case, whenever the care of a seminary was taken on.

The first undertaking of this type was at *Giaveno* (1860-1862). There had been a flourishing junior seminary there until 1840, then it had failed. The authorities of the commune wanted to buy the premises for a municipal college, but when the request was presented to Mons. Frasoni, he intimated that he wished to entrust the reopening of the seminary to Don Bosco. Negotiations began in May 1859, between Don Bosco and the mayor. Canon Vogliotti and Don Bosco visited *Giaveno* on 27 June 1860, but no agreement was reached, because the commune refused to increase the level of its subsidy. It was therefore decided to convert the place into a junior seminary, pure and simple.

The Turin curia appointed Don Giovanni Grassino as rector. Don Bosco sent Don Giovanni Rocchietti as spiritual director, together with a number of clerics who took charge of the finance, discipline and supervision. With them he sent a group of hand-picked boys from Valdocco. In 1860 there were 110 pupils, rising to 240 in 1861. However, differences surfaced between the rector and Don Bosco regarding the educational approach, while the curia did not agree with Don Bosco that *Giaveno* and *Valdocco* should be considered as one entity. Mons. Frasoni died in the May of 1862. The new Vicar Capitular, Mons. Zappata, adopted a middle course: he changed the rector, but he also terminated the agreement with the Oratory. A number of Salesians joined the diocesan clergy, while Bongiovanni and Boggero returned to *Valdocco*, walking all the way from *Giaveno* to Turin, because they had been given no money for the journey.³⁶

Another experiment at *Mirabello* had a happier outcome (1863-1869). The diocese of Casale Monferrato had no junior seminary because the

³⁶ For the correspondence about *Giaveno* cf. E I 188, 192, 193, 208 et s., and also MB VI 720, 731, 1043; VII 137-145, 147-149. A good summary is given in P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 128-130.

premises had been requisitioned. The bishop, Mons. Calabiana, came to an agreement with Don Bosco. Some land had been made available through the generosity of Vincenzo Provera, the father of the Salesian cleric, Francesco Provera, and under the supervision of Buzzetti the construction work was completed by the autumn of 1862. The work cost 100,000 francs.³⁷

The first Salesians arrived there on 13 October 1863: Don Rua was rector, there were four clerics and four youths to help with the teaching. All were extremely young.³⁸ Internal problems arose because many of the students had no intention of becoming priests. Don Bosco's letters to Don Rua show him to have been inflexible on this issue.³⁹ As a result of his firm policy the major seminary at Casale within a few years registered an increase from 20 to 120 in the number of its students of philosophy and theology, thanks largely to those entering from Mirabello.

A further difficulty was created by the state. Mirabello was dependent on Occimiano, which considered that it was a private college and therefore liable to tax. Don Bosco appealed directly to the minister of finance, Urbano Rattazzi, who granted him exemption from taxation. A further difficulty related to scholastic matters: the inspector for the authorities of Alessandria deemed the college illegal because it did not have scholastic approval. Mons. Calabiana at once approved the college as a diocesan junior seminary.⁴⁰

In the event, the college turned out to be too small and too remote, and so it was transferred to Borgo San Martino. The title of junior seminary was dropped and it was called the College of St. Charles.⁴¹

Another enterprise was that at *Magliano Sabino*, a suburban diocese of Rome. At the insistence of the bishop, Cardinal Bilio, Don Bosco took over in 1878 responsibility for the studies and administration of the seminary. He would not allow aspirants to the priesthood and other students to live together and was pleased when he succeeded in having a portion of the huge building set aside for the boarding section. The first rector of the establishment was Don Giuseppe Daghero.⁴²

In 1874 another college was founded at *Ceccano* (Lazio), but failed. Something similar also seems to have occurred in *Florence*.⁴³

As a matter of interest and to illustrate the way Don Bosco helped the seminaries, one may note that, following the custom of the time, Don Bosco sent Salesian nuns to work in the kitchen and laundry of male institutions

³⁷ Cf. MB VII 409 et s.

³⁸ Cf. MB VII 521.

³⁹ Cf. E I 284, 347.

⁴⁰ Cf. E I 472 et s., 491 et s. A good summary is given by P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 130-133.

⁴¹ Cf. E II 98, 103.

⁴² Cf. E III 177 et s., 183, 297.

⁴³ Cf. E II 370; IV 86 et s.

that were not run by his Salesians, including the diocesan seminary of Biella (September, 1876). Only later did he send them to do the same work in the Salesian college at Alassio.

3.6. *Adult vocations*

Don Bosco's specific work for «late» vocations seems *to spring* from the maturing of an idea he had cherished for some years. He had already had adults amongst his aspirants and novices and it does not seem that the «Work of Mary, Help of Christians» on behalf of late vocations made much appreciable difference in the proportion of adults who joined him. His conflict with Mons. Gastaldi may have influenced the development of his plan, but the dream he had in 1875 encouraged him, because it revealed «the divine will» and assured him that there would be a higher rate of perseverance among adults.⁴⁴

On 9 December 1875, a number of adult aspirants were gathered together at *Sampierdarena*. This number gradually rose to 130 and one of the things that aroused great fervour amongst them was the prospect of being sent on the missions.⁴⁵ At the same time special lessons for adult vocations were continued at Turin under the direction of Don Luigi Guanella.⁴⁶ In 1876 Don Bosco began negotiations to open a similar work in *Rome*, but without success.⁴⁷ These aspirants were later, in 1883, transferred from *Sampierdarena* to *Mathi Torinese*, and in 1884 they returned to Turin, but this time they were housed at San Giovanni Evangelista.⁴⁸

Don Bosco frequently described the *nature* and *aim* of this undertaking: to gather together young adults who were academically suitable and who wished to become priests. They followed special «accelerated» courses that answered their peculiar needs. Once these studies were finished and there was sufficient evidence that they had a vocation, they could either join their own diocese as secular priests, or become religious, or even devote themselves to the foreign missions.

Speaking to his Salesians in 1884, Don Bosco asserted: «The "sons of Mary" [the name he gave to his older aspirants] are men of action, whilst the young boys who come up through our houses will be men of learning».⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Cf. E II 96, 237 et s.; MB XI 32 et s.

⁴⁵ Cf. E II 524, 526, 530; III 18, 36, 95.

⁴⁶ Cf. E III 39 et s., 42, 104.

⁴⁷ Cf. E III 130 et s., 137.

⁴⁸ Cf. E IV 499. Concerning the history of the «Work of Mary, Help of Christians, for late vocations» after the death of Don Bosco, cf. E. VALENTINI, *Don Bosco e le vocazioni tardive*, in «Salesianum» 20 (1960) 462-466. This work was always very dear to Don Bosco and he warmly recommended it. Cf. G. BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 330 et s.

⁴⁹ MB XVII 546.

He later drew up a rule in which he set out a detailed programme of study, the fees and the age of these aspirants (between 26 and 30).⁵⁰

This work, too, was not without its *problems*, some from outside and others from within his own houses. Once he had obtained the necessary permissions from the Holy See,⁵¹ Don Bosco drew up a definitive scheme and sent it to the archbishop of Turin for his «*nihil obstat*» with a view to its publication. This marked the beginning of the clash between Don Bosco and Mons. Gastaldi, who was supported by Mons Moreno, the bishop of Ivrea.⁵² The clash was over many things, including the matter we are presently considering. Don Bosco solved the problem by publishing the scheme at Fossano, in agreement with Mons. Manacorda.⁵³

Speaking of the polemics in which he became involved, Don Bosco lamented that his idea had not been properly understood, and he stated: «This work is for the benefit of the Church at large and it does not seem feasible to have it tied to any one ordinary»,⁵⁴ which was precisely what Mons. Gastaldi was demanding.

Even at Valdocco not everyone understood the reason for these adult vocations and two opposing points of view developed: the vice-rector of the Oratory gave in to the pressure of one faction and suppressed the so-called «*express-course*», Don Guanella having been appointed rector of Trinità in Don Bosco's absence. The adult students were scattered around the other classes or sent to Sampierdarena. When Don Bosco learned of this he regretted the decision and had the special course reintroduced in 1877-1878.⁵⁵

The main *result* of this enterprise was the far higher rate of perseverance amongst the adult aspirants: 90% of these who began persevered, while the rate of perseverance amongst those who began as young boys was between 6% and 8%.⁵⁶

During 1874-1875 Don Bosco had assembled about 100 young adults: of the 35 who finished their literary studies 8 left for the missions, 6 entered

⁵⁰ Cf. E II 529; III 23, 130 et s., 561 et s. The regulations can be found in the MB XI 532 et ss. Don Bosco wrote a booklet to publicise this work: *Opera di Maria Ausiliatrice per le vocazioni allo stato ecclesiastico*. It went through several editions. Cf. OE XVIII 1-7, and P. STELLA, *Gli scritti a stampa di san Giovanni Bosco*, Roma, LAS 1977, 56, 60, 111, 113, 116, 133, 143. Don Bosco referred to this booklet in the letters which can be found in E III 187, 431, 443.

⁵¹ Cf. E II 473.

⁵² Cf. E II 491.

⁵³ Cf. E II 493 et s., 495, 500, 502 et s., 511. Don Bosco was forbidden to publish any reference to this work in the periodical «*L'Unità Cattolica*»: cf. E II 529; III 95 et s., 97, 98, 100 et s.

⁵⁴ E II 292.

⁵⁵ Cf. E III 110; IV 115. For his response to these difficulties see MB XI 52, 54, 77. For a summary see MB XI 31-70.

⁵⁶ Cf. E III 130.

the religious life and 21 returned to their various dioceses.⁵⁷ In the years that followed the numbers grew. Amongst the first Salesians recruited from the ranks of these adult vocations there are some well known names: Lago, Rinaldi, Ghivarello, Fagnano...

It is worth recalling that Don Bosco was prepared to welcome to the Oratory priests who were already retired or were in somewhat irregular situations. With some of them he drew up contracts, including teaching contracts.⁵⁸

One may ask what was the aim and the final meaning of these initiatives. He saw himself as a small part of a great movement devoted to the promotion of vocations, as his relations with Giuseppe Frassinetti⁵⁹ and Almerico Guerra demonstrate.⁶⁰ He always had a deep feeling for the Church, as he made clear in his spiritual testament: «Let us remember that we make a precious gift to the Church when we foster a good vocation: it does not matter whether this priestly vocation is for the diocese or for the missions or for a religious house. It is still a precious gift that is given to the Church of Jesus Christ».⁶¹

4. Don Bosco's method of fostering vocations

Don Bosco believed that vocations *are born* in the home and in the school. The problem was that families were being corrupted and schools were in the hands of teachers who merited no respect. After the French Revolution, as a consequence of the high mortality, vocations amongst the upper classes became more scarce. The result of this was a growing tendency to seek vocations from among the workers. As he went about preaching in the parishes Don Bosco came across boys who gave indications of a possible vocation;⁶² he tried to find vocations from amongst those who worked with

⁵⁷ Cf. E III 131 et s.

⁵⁸ Cf. E III 155 (Boдрato); II 231, 126; III 295 et s. (Lago); II 262, 357, 368 et s. (Pavesio); II 345, 351 (Chiala); III 455 (Mons. Negrotto); II 146 (Benvenuto); III 283 (Confortola); III 372 (Garelli); IV 295 et s., 297 et s., 431-435 (Czartorysky). Concerning retired priests cf. E III 294; IV 232 et s. On priests in irregular situations cf. E I 232 et s., 283, 287, 370, 597; III 512.

⁵⁹ Cf. E I 440.

⁶⁰ Cf. E II 31.

⁶¹ Cf. Don Bosco's spiritual testament in: G. BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 330, 352. See also E III 157, 384; IV 328, 333, 336. This sense of the Church appears in the Salesian constitutions of 1874 in chapter I «Purpose of the society», and in the third part of the regulations for the Cooperators, various outlines of which can be found in: F. DESRAMAUT - M. MIDALI (edit.), *Il Cooperatore nella società contemporanea* = coll. «Colloqui sulla vita salesiana» 6, Torino - Leumann, LDC 1975, p. 370. His subconscious concern for the Church surfaces in his dream of 15 March 1875 (cf. MB XI 34).

⁶² Cf. MB V 392 et s.

shovel and hammer and succeeded in getting them together in a suitable place which was created for this specific purpose. He maintained that the Salesian congregation came into being «to promote vocations in the Church from amongst poor boys of humble condition».⁶³ In fact the vast majority of clerics and Salesians at Valdocco were drawn from peasant stock.⁶⁴

His prime concern was to create an environment in which those with a sense of vocation could be made at home and helped to mature: for cooperators that environment would be the parish,⁶⁵ while for Salesians and Salesian Sisters it would be the Oratory and the houses of their respective congregations. He wanted his helpers to create a family atmosphere, to live a deeply interior spiritual life, and to view the world through the eyes of faith, while working together for the salvation of boys and girls. In such an atmosphere the young will respond spontaneously, in the confident knowledge that they are loved.

When it was a question of young people who were called to the priesthood and the religious life, even more concentrated efforts were made to give them personal assistance. He helped them to see that their vocation was on behalf of others rather than for their own personal satisfaction; in this way they became motivated by zeal for the glory of God and for the salvation of souls.⁶⁶ Purity of motive in following a vocation could be judged by the dedication with which an individual responded to the practical demands of his daily life.⁶⁷ Accordingly a definite programme of life was proposed for those youngsters who had the necessary qualities, and since God alone could confirm the truth of a vocation, prayer, the sacraments, Marian piety and spiritual direction had to play an important part in their lives.

Within this environment he promoted *youth associations* and sodalities (called «compagnie» by Don Bosco). These were, amongst other things, «a real support to those with priestly and religious vocations».⁶⁸ Don Bosco also included the artisans in this drive for vocations: «Every confrère should seek, by kindness and by good example, to inspire the pupils with the desire to become members of our pious Society».⁶⁹ It was a bad environment which caused «many to fail in corresponding with their vocation».⁷⁰

A vocation is a *call from God* which demands a personal response. In the *Giovane provveduto* Don Bosco writes: «In his eternal plan God destines

⁶³ See the spiritual testament in: G. BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 329 et s.

⁶⁴ Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 186 et ss., 306; F. DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco et la vie spirituelle* 31 et ss.

⁶⁵ Cf. the regulations, chapter 5, in F. DESRAMAUT - M. MIDALI, *Il Cooperatore* 371.

⁶⁶ This is confirmed by the advices he gave in his letters. See E I 131, 162, 198, 372; IV 10, 13.

⁶⁷ Cf. E II 52.

⁶⁸ Cf. E III 7 et s., 164.

⁶⁹ MB XVIII 701.

⁷⁰ See the letter written from Rome (1884) in: G. BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 293.

each individual for a particular way of life and gives him the graces needed for that state». ⁷¹ The essential prerequisite is, therefore, that one should be guided by spiritual considerations ⁷² and ascertain God's will in choosing one's state of life. This was something he repeated constantly to the boys and clerics. ⁷³

On many occasions Don Bosco listed the *signs of a vocation*. One may recall those enumerated in *Valentino o la vocazione impedita* (1866): good moral behaviour, knowledge, ecclesiastical spirit, a love for the priesthood in preference to any other way of life. ⁷⁴ The three-fold requirements of health - study - piety are indispensable. ⁷⁵

If one possesses these qualities and is certain of God's will, then one must adopt the *measures* needed in order to preserve a vocation. These are: the fear of God, ⁷⁶ the practice of virtues like cheerfulness, humility, charity and chastity. Bad companions and idleness should be avoided, one should frequent the sacraments and cultivate devotion to Our Lady. These, in general terms, were also the conditions to be fulfilled if anyone wished to become a Salesian. ⁷⁷

During the period of *early formation* doubts may arise concerning one's vocation: these should be dismissed as temptations of the devil. ⁷⁸

In order to nourish a vocation one needs to use *natural means*, like health and study, ⁷⁹ and *supernatural means*, such as prayer, meditation, the sacraments, observance of rules, the practice of virtues like obedience and chastity. One also needs to behave in a manner that befits an ecclesiastic, whether in dress, speech or deportment... Certain *dangers* must also be avoided: holidays, periodicals and bad books, any companions and conversations that could be dangerous to purity, and sloth. ⁸⁰

⁷¹ The first edition of the *Giovane provveduto* came out in 1847. I am here following the 121st edition of 1891, which was the last one to be revised by Don Bosco; see part one, letter D. He repeats the same thought in the introduction to the Salesian constitutions of 1874. Reference to the first rules presented to Pius IX by Don Bosco can be found in: MB V 931-940. The Latin text of the constitutions of 1874 can be found in: MB X 956-993.

⁷² Cf. E I 371.

⁷³ For confirmation see E I 150, 411, 589; II 200; III 476; IV 89, 142.

⁷⁴ The text can be found in: G. BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 205 et s.

⁷⁵ Cf. E I 543, 580; III 347.

⁷⁶ Cf. E I 194, 198.

⁷⁷ Cf. E I 195, 198, 298, 299, 332; II 293. See also MB XI 573 et s.; XVI 264.

⁷⁸ This is what is said in the introduction to the Salesian constitutions. See E I 275; II 198, 442; III 28; IV 179.

⁷⁹ Cf. the spiritual testament in: G. BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 334; E I 170, 195-197; II 318, 422.

⁸⁰ Concerning sanctity in general cf. E I 379; II 341. Regarding prayer, meditation and the sacraments cf. E I 516; II 84; III 381, 390, 393, 394; IV 10. On the observance of the rules cf. E I 372; II 106, 120, 365, 446; IV 299. On obedience cf. E II 115, 238; III 343. On chastity cf. E I 118, 127, 131, 132, 146. See also the spiritual testament in: G. BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 330. On ecclesiastical deportment cf. *ibid.*, 194. Summaries of the means for pre-

Regarding *ongoing formation* Don Bosco listed only such supernatural means as devout preparation for and thanksgiving after Mass, meditation, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, daily spiritual reading, frequent confession, the monthly exercise for a happy death, the annual retreat.⁸¹

One may sum up⁸² by saying that the whole educational process reached its culmination in the choice of one's state of life. The pursuit of a vocation revolved around two poles. The first was a mixture of psychological factors, especially those of an affective nature, which bound the young person to Don Bosco and his work. There exist many testimonies to this personal attraction.⁸³ The second was a collection of transcendent and religious elements. Boys were attracted to Don Bosco to give themselves to God, and this crystallised into an attraction towards the priesthood or the religious life, as they chose a state of life in conformity with the divine call, upon which depended their life on earth and hereafter.

One may ask: how far did these boys feel free of pressure from Don Bosco? The letter of the cleric Giuseppe Cagliari to the archbishop of Turin provides sufficient answer. It reveals the many ties that bound him to Don Bosco, but he asserts explicitly: «Don Bosco has always left me free» (the copy of the letter that survives is, however, written in Don Bosco's hand).⁸⁴ It seems that attraction and freedom were perfectly compatible. One example must suffice. Don Bosco wrote thus to the father of young Teodoro Harmel: «I would like him to remain here, but he insists and I cannot force him to stay».⁸⁵

5. Perseverance

Don Bosco was aware of the problem concerning perseverance in a vocation. The attitude he adopted was prudent, as is illustrated by this recommendation to Don Rua: «Don't be surprised if some of the confrères leave us. In most cases it is quite natural».⁸⁶

Is it possible to establish any sort of percentage regarding the rate of per-

servicing a vocation can be found in the *Giovane provveduto*, in the introduction to the Salesian constitutions and in Don Bosco's souvenir to the first missionaries (Texts can be found in: G. BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 123). On dangers to a vocation cf. *ibid.*, 330.

⁸¹ Cf. E II 90; III 57.

⁸² In his spiritual testament Don Bosco provides an excellent and quite ample summary of the environment, the means, the dangers and the stages involved in fostering vocations: G. BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 317, 331-334.

⁸³ Cf. E I 119 et s., 122 et s., and MB V 375 et s.; E I 130 et s., 151, 158, 159 et s., 196, 276; II 57, 62 et s., 311; III 247, 279 et s.; IV 10, 164.

⁸⁴ E II 58.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, IV 163.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, I 424 et s.; MB XII 387 et ss.; XIII 811 et ss.

severance amongst the vocations that Don Bosco fostered? Early in 1875 in a conference to the General Council, Don Bosco said that 15% got as far as being «clothed» as religious, but that the number rose to 80% with those who entered as adults.⁸⁷ Other data quoted by Don Bosco exist, but they appear to be exaggerated in the interests of propaganda.⁸⁸ As regards the Salesians, between 1870 and 1875 out of a total of 471 novices 170 reached profession (36%) and 124 definitely left the congregation (26.6%).⁸⁹ There are plenty of examples of Salesians who left, such as Cuffia, Don Pirro, Berra, Don Giuseppe Boetti, Don Augusto Biancardi, etc.⁹⁰

We may ask, as a point of interest, how many priests Don Bosco produced from amongst those whom he educated. On 29 January 1878 he wrote to Don Rua: «Tell Barale that more than two thousand five hundred priests have gone out from Valdocco, from the Oratory and the houses linked to it».⁹¹ And on 14 February of the same year he commented to Don Giovanni Bonetti: «You have recorded that 600 priests have been produced in our houses, whereas the number should be four times that amount».⁹²

6. Concluding comments

Don Bosco's advice and the programme he adopted corresponded to traditional ascetical teaching, as applied to clerics and religious.

There is a certain impression that Don Bosco was concerned more with quantity than with quality in his anxiety to find enough priests to meet the pastoral need for catechesis and the provision of the sacraments.

A detailed study needs to be made of the education that was imparted in the diocesan seminaries, if we are to be in a position to judge how original Don Bosco was in pastoral strategy relating to vocations (assuming that he had such a strategy).

It seems that the formation of priests and religious was one of Don Bosco's obsessions. This has been passed on as an explicit inheritance to his entire spiritual family, Salesians, Salesian sisters, Cooperators, missionaries. It is, in any case, admirable that a man from a family of such modest means,

⁸⁷ MB XI 33.

⁸⁸ See those contained in his letter to Mons. Gastaldi on 23 November 1872 (E I 239 et s. or MB X 686 et s.); also those referred to in the MB V 408-412, as well as those he sent to canon Clement Guiol in Marseilles (E III, 371 or MB XIII 735).

⁸⁹ For fuller treatment see P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 319, 321.

⁹⁰ Cf. E I 422; II 394, 407 et s.; III 61; IV 24, 32, 197, 252. The case of Don Guanella is an interesting one: cf. E I 423; III 351, 362 et s., 369.

⁹¹ E III 284.

⁹² E III 296. He here refers explicitly to a lively article by Don Bonetti, which appeared in the BS of February 1878 on page 4, entitled: *La Congregazione salesiana e le vocazioni ecclesiastiche*.

with a peasant background and no influential contacts, should have been able to mobilise such quantities of money and such enterprises, so many people, young and old, in order to promote vocations to the priesthood and religious life. It is what we usually call, in evangelical terms, «apostolic zeal».

The rate of perseverance in Don Bosco's day is not significantly different from that of today. The difference is in the great numbers that set off on the road towards the priesthood or the religious life then as compared with now.

The problem of the relationship between attraction and freedom was certainly real enough, because such a charismatic leader could not lay aside the power of attraction which he exerted, and *«bonum est diffusivum sui»*. In other words, the best propaganda on behalf of vocations was the person of Don Bosco himself.