

DON BOSCO AND THE POPULAR THEATRE

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1. Theatre and popular culture

In October, 1882, one of the more belligerent publications of the Turinese anti-clericals made the following comment on the person and work of Don Bosco:

«The saint of Valdocco no longer finds his inspiration in the gospel but in the Roman Syllabus [...] and this is behind his books and journals that spread clerical propaganda; the same thinking is also behind the circles and committees that are formed. [...] This is likewise why stories are invented about boys becoming saints, like Dominic Savio, or of girls being beatified like the Rigolotti sisters».¹

Nor was it only the anti-clericals who voiced savage criticism of Bosco's work during those years. In even more explicit terms, which were indirectly aimed against Don Bosco as one of the leading purveyors of popular Catholic reading, Francesco De Sanctis wrote:

«If you now present models like St. Aloysius Gonzaga, St. Charles Borromeo, St. Alexis, and represent their virtues as a universal remedy; if you teach people to ignore offences, needs, even hunger, then you are forming such an ideal that when these young people enter the real world, apart from the very few predestined for sanctity and heroism, they will grow used to the worst evil that can afflict any people, that is, they will distinguish between school and life, what they learnt in theory from what really happens, they will become hypocrites».²

On some occasions scarcely less harsh criticism even came from sections of the Catholic community. One such vaguely theological accusation was voiced in the process for Don Bosco's canonization:

¹ *Don Giovanni Bosco*, in: «Gesù Cristo», Grido popolare anticlericale, 22-29 October, 1882.

² F. DE SANCTIS, *Cesare Cantù e la letteratura popolare*, in: *La letteratura italiana nel secolo XIX*, vol. II: *La scuola liberale e la scuola democratica*, Bari 1954, pp. 251-257.

«The Blessed Don Bosco wrote the life of Dominic Savio, making use of personal recollections, of notes that he had taken while the boy was still alive, and written details that he had requested from the teachers and fellow-pupils of the Servant of God. One would, therefore, think that the life would be of unquestionable historical validity. The impression it leaves, the same moreover as the Lives of Luigi Comollo, Francis Besucco and Michael Magone likewise written by him, is that of a story where a predominant place is given to the preoccupation with edifying the young readers and giving them moral teaching. But, what is worse, a comparison of Don Bosco's text with the documents upon which he himself declares that it is based, frequently reveals obvious exaggerations, always introduced for the sake of edification».³

The above judgements, made from differing points of view, all contribute to a generally negative assessment of one of the most significant features of Don Bosco's apostolate, namely the field of popular education.

The reasons for these strictures need to be examined in more detail on some future occasion. For the present it is relevant merely to note that some judgements issue from a kind of superior view of culture which tends to 'dismiss manifestations of a mere «popular culture»,⁴ ranging from efforts to provide wider education, down to lightweight publications such as hand-outs, almanacs, series of popular readings and amateur dramatics as a means of instruction. All these could be classed amongst the «populist or philanthropic»⁵ efforts made by intellectuals, politicians and idealists towards the end of the 19th century in order to bring «intellectual illumination to the people».

What we are dealing with is a judgement which treats these works, in the critical terminology of Croce, as «epiphenomena» or «subcultural» products.⁶ Such an assessment is not only reductionist but ignores the significance that they had within the broader context of Italian culture and, more specifically, in the history of education from the end of the 19th century to our own day. The history of popular culture demands attention, not so that we may justify greater attention to the problems of the masses on the part of the Catholic movement, and certainly not so that we may waste time in contemplating «curious» or «bizarre» happenings, but in order that we may understand

³ This verdict is reported in its entirety by L. GIOVANNINI, *Le «Letture cattoliche» di Don Bosco esempio di «stampa cattolica» nel secolo XIX*, Napoli, Liguori 1984, p. 54.

⁴ For a definition of this term and for the extent of research cf. A. PORTELLI, *Culture popolari e culture di massa*, in: *Gli strumenti della ricerca*, 2: *Questioni di metodo*, edited by G. DE LUNA, P. ORTOLEVA, M. REVELLI, N. TRANFAGLIA, Firenze, La Nuova Italia 1983, pp. 1470-1490.

⁵ F. DELLA PERUTA, *Il «popolo» in Lombardia nell'800*, in: *1815-1898... Quando il popolo cominciò a leggere. Mostra dell'alfabetismo e della cultura in Lombardia*, Milano 1979, p. 6.

⁶ For a correct methodological description of these matters and the relating objections, cf. L. BEDESCHI, *Letteratura popolare e murrismo*, in «Humanitas» 27 (1972) 846-862.

more fully the efforts that were made to influence the minds of the people, their way of behaving and their shared consciousness.

It is within this content that we should locate the birth and development of the popular Catholic theatre, which has been variously defined in its long history as «little theatre» (a word Don Bosco was fond of using) or «educative theatre» or «amateur theatre» or, to use a term that underlines its Catholic allegiance, «our theatre».

The origins of this phenomenon, at least in the recent past, can certainly be attributed to Don Bosco and its later effects were cultivated by a host of writers who, to paraphrase a well known phrase of Gramsci, I would not hesitate to describe as «nipotini di Don Bosco» («Don Bosco's grandchildren»). This is all the more true because the «rules for the stage» which Don Bosco compiled in 1858 were to provide an ideal and inescapable scenario for the amateur Catholic theatre throughout its long and productive history.⁷

2. The idea which inspired this initiative

It is, therefore, worth pausing to consider the idea which inspired this initiative which is unanimously attributed to Don Bosco.

One must, however, at once point out that his educational use of the theatre had nothing in common with traditional artistic pretensions but relied rather on creative spontaneity, combined with concern for what was morally wholesome. It was no mere chance that made Don Bosco insist that the theatre should once again assume a didactic function. Little amateur productions were seen as a kind of school, a means for inculcating Catholic principles through the dialogue and discussion that went on on the stage.

Don Bosco himself tried his hand at dramatic dialogue in such things as the *Disputa col pastore protestante* or the *Dialoghi popolari su alcuni errori di religione*, and he became the forerunner of a highly successful theatrical genre which affirmed the superiority of Catholicism over the «enemies of the Church».⁸

The educative purpose of these amateur productions was stated even more explicitly in the «Manifesto» which Don Bosco drew up in 1858 in order to ensure more discipline in an activity which he not only encouraged but also directed, organizing productions in the refectory of the Valdocco oratory. The 20 paragraphs into which these «Rules» are subdivided under-

⁷ For a fuller examination of the amateur theatre and of the themes touched on in this lecture, cf. S. PRIVATO, *Il teatro di parrocchia. Mondo cattolico e organizzazione del consenso durante il fascismo*, Roma, FIAP 1979.

⁸ On Don Bosco's stage productions, cf. M. BONGIOANNI, *Giochiamo al teatro. Dalla invenzione drammatica al teatro espressivo*, Torino, Elle Di Ci 1977.

line, above all, the educative, instructive and recreational functions of the stage.

To ensure this fundamental purpose he recommended that:

«The compositions should be pleasant and calculated to amuse, but they should always be moral, instructive and brief. Excessive length, apart from making rehearsal more complicated, usually bores the audience and destroys the value of the production by making even worthwhile things appear wearisome [...]. Plays that represent horrific deeds should be avoided. A few serious scenes can be acceptable, but any unchristian expressions should be removed, as well as any words which would, if used in other surroundings, be judged coarse or vulgar».

Don Bosco was not concerned only with ethical content; he also set out a series of norms to govern the behaviour of the performers. The stage was not just a means of instructing the spectators but also a «school of life» for the actors. Don Bosco recommended that «in choosing boys for acting the preference should be given to those who are better behaved». He also warned that «prizes or rewards should not be given to those who have been blessed by God with special talent for acting singing or playing a musical instrument. It is sufficient reward for them that they are let off lessons in order to take part in these activities».

These «Rules» also dealt in detail with such technical matters as the preparation of scenery, the writing of sketches, musical accompaniment, the building up of a library of theatrical texts, and so on.⁹

The theatre was thus well on its way to becoming one of the favourite aids in the Salesian system of education. In fact, it became an integral part of a preventive method in which recreational activity (recall that in the «Rules» Don Bosco insisted that the stage should, above all, serve to «cheer up, recreate and amuse» the boys) was, in the view of some scholars, «given such prominence and was so highly valued that the smooth running of the school and even the religious life of the pupils were judged to depend upon it».¹⁰

3. The developments of the phenomenon

The first stage production mentioned in the *Memorie* went back to 29 June, 1847.¹¹ The «Rules for the theatre» came eleven years later, which leads us to suppose that Don Bosco was moved to compose them in order to regulate a recreational activity which was becoming more and more popular in Salesian schools and oratories; equally it seems to suggest that

⁹ *Regole pel teatrino*, in MB VI 106-108.

¹⁰ G. BOSCO, *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, Torino 1877, p. 42.

¹¹ MB III 592.

Don Bosco foresaw the developments which would take place in the use of theatre in years to come. The catalogues of popular Catholic publishers, meanwhile, give us some idea of the growth in popularity of this form of entertainment. Even the series of «Letture cattoliche» (inaugurated in 1853)¹² began to include periodically small volumes of comedies,¹³ and from 1885 began the systematic publication of comedies for educational use in the theatre.

In 1885 the Salesian printing house at San Benigno Canavese published a play called *Le Pistrine* about paganism in ancient Rome. This was the first in a new series of publications, entitled «Letture drammatiche», and marked the beginning of quite a large-scale publishing enterprise on behalf of the theatre. By the end of the century the «Letture drammatiche» was listing more than a hundred titles in its catalogue. Other publishing houses were also producing texts for the Catholic amateur theatre; among them the house of Serafino Majocchi in Milan, the «Libreria Salesiana Editrice» in Rome and the printing house of the «Immacolata Concezione» in Modena.

What sort of comedies were provided for the stage in these books, and which became most generally popular? A rapid survey of the titles of the «Letture drammatiche» published between 1885 and 1889 provides us with a rough answer: of the fifty comedies, twenty are sacred in character, twelve historical and the rest belong to the anecdotal and moral category, often with a social and pastoral orientation.

Analysis of other catalogues confirms the prevalence of these three kinds. Therefore there were sacred plays, edifying scenes and comic sketches whose aim was to impart moral instruction. The same moral purpose can be discerned in the subdivision of the titles of the comedies into those «for men only» and those «for women only»: this was because, with rare exceptions, the custom of the day did not allow male and female actors to appear in the same play.¹⁴

As Gabriele De Rosa has rightly commented:

«These comedies have little to do with the history of the theatre. They had a practical educational purpose: to edify those working in catholic action, to rebut the propaganda of the enemies of the Church, and, by exalting the traditions, the faith and the virtues of Catholic family life, to counteract the influence of the materialistic, bourgeois theatre».¹⁵

The forms and content of this educational theatre did not derive in any

¹² On the «Letture cattoliche» cf. L. GIOVANNINI, *Le «Letture cattoliche»*.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 157-175.

¹⁴ F. TOLLI, *Moralità avanti tutto!*, in: «Il carro di Tespi» I (1908) 1, pp. 3-4.

¹⁵ G. DE ROSA, *Risposte agli interventi*, in: *Il movimento cattolico e la società italiana in cento anni di storia* 88.

way from the contemporary or earlier world of the secular theatre; its background was the autonomous world of Catholic education, which resisted infiltration by other cultural movements or ideologies. As one of the supporters of the educational theatre wrote, these comedies were «works by Catholic writers for presentation in a Catholic environment by Catholic actors in front of a Catholic audience; moreover they were published and recommended by Catholic editors and by Catholic reviews».¹⁶

I do not, however, think that the full importance of these amateur productions can be appreciated unless one takes into account the way they developed as a result of their elaboration in the hands of Don Bosco and the Salesians of Turin. Their growth went side by side with the expansion of the Catholic party in Italian society. In fact the theatre became one of the tools that bishops, Catholic action and educators constantly recommended. A few statistics will suffice to show how, over a few decades, the amateur theatre grew from its simple beginnings with Don Bosco into a vast movement, with quite a complex organizational structure.

At the beginning of the 20th century the first magazines for amateur dramatics were born: «Su la scena» (1903), «Il Carro di Tespi» (1908), «Teatro, Musica e Sport» (1912). At the same time the authors formed various associations like the «Society of Writers for the Catholic Theatre» (1905) and the «Società Italiana tra gli autori del teatro cattolico» (S.I.A.T.E.) which was formed in Rome in 1911.¹⁷

Most important of all, from an organizational point of view, was the birth of the «Federazione Associazioni Teatrali Educative» (F.A.T.E.) in 1912. This launched the publication of «Il Teatro nostro» in 1913 and by 1914 three hundred circles were affiliated to it.

An examination of the catalogues of Catholic publishers gives a clear idea of the sheer size of this phenomenon of the amateur theatre. In 1916 the publishing house of Giovanni Galla at Vicenza was publishing samples of about 5,000 pieces for the theatre, «for seminaries, colleges, institutes, societies and Catholic recreational groups».¹⁸

During the 1930's no less than five publishers produced nothing but plays for use in education.¹⁹ By the middle of the 30's about 80 new works were

¹⁶ E. ANSEMETTI, *Determinismo e libero arbitrio*, in: «Scene e controcene» (1933), nos. 8 and 9, p. 7.

¹⁷ Cf. S. PIVATO, *Il teatro di parrocchia*.

¹⁸ *Catalogo di 5.000 lavori teatrali. Commedie. Drammi. Tragedie, Farse. Scherzi. Monologhi. Per seminari, collegi, istituti, società, circoli e ricreatori cattolici*, Vicenza, Libreria Giovanni Galla 1916. See also *Il teatro cattolico, Vademecum indispensabile per i direttori di scena dei teatrini cattolici maschili e femminili*, San Benigno Canavese, Libreria Salesiana 1916, which contains a list of more than 600 theatrical texts.

¹⁹ These were: the Serafino Majocchi of Milan, the Paolo Viano of Turin, the Libreria del Ricreatorio of Bagnacavallo, the Libreria Editrice Salesiana of Florence, the Libreria Editrice Salesiana of Rome. Cf. *Case editrici cattoliche*, in: «Il Ragguaglio dell'attività culturale letteraria ed artistica dei cattolici in Italia», Milano, Istituto di Propaganda Libreria (1941), 469-471.

being published annually, and about 200,000 copies of comedies for the amateur theatre were being sold.²⁰ Equally noteworthy was the number of amateur theatres: some statistics suggest that by the early thirties there were as many as 10,000. This figure could well be true, even if it can not be scientifically verified, given the ease with which State control could be evaded, provided one was not operating a professional theatre. This was the case in colleges where, presumably, the practice mentioned in the *Memoirs* of Don Bosco continued, the stage being erected in the refectory for each production.²¹

The authors of the plays were numerous. Not a few were persons of note, connected with the Catholic movement in Italy, whether at the religious or political level: people like Luigi Sturzo,²² Saverio Fino²³ and Luigi Corazzin,²⁴ who all wrote comedies and promoted numerous initiatives in the theatrical field. There were even bishops, like Fortunato De Santa,²⁵ who wrote religious plays, as well as many less well-known individuals who made a notable contribution to local Catholic theatre. One of these was Carlo Trabucco, who was unquestionably the main support of the educative theatre between the two wars; he was a prolific writer as well as president of the Turin branch of «Gioventù Cattolica» from 1927 on.

One confirmation of the extent of Don Bosco's influence on the amateur

²⁰ C. REPOSSI, *Teatro cattolico. Il teatro delle nostre associazioni*, in «Il ragguaglio» 8 (1937) 97-103.

²¹ MB III 105-106.

²² See the collection of some theatrical works of Sturzo in L. STURZO, *Scritti inediti I, 1890-1924*, edited by F. Piva, Roma, Cinque Lune 1974, pp. 53-103 and 108-186. References to these activities can be found in F. PIVA - F. MALGERI, *Vita di Luigi Sturzo* 121-123. De Rosa notes the way «his comedies were written to support the struggle he was waging in the country parts against the tax-gatherers and the mafia cells or to castigate the behaviour and mentality of the hated secularised middle classes. One might say that these were comedies reflecting life in the south of Italy from the point of view of an intransigent Catholic, which is what Sturzo was in his early days»: G. DE ROSA, *Luigi Sturzo*, Torino, UTET 1977, p. 121.

²³ SAVERIO FINO (1874-1937). He was a deputy of the Popular Party in two governments between 1919 and 1924 and was a great supporter of the theatre as a means of education. In 1931 he founded the magazine «I quaderni del teatro cristiano», in order to promote the production of sacred plays on the amateur stage. The following were some of his more famous plays for the use of Catholic dramatic societies: *Qui si bestemmia*, *La Madonna del sorriso*, *La camera rossa*, *Il prete della forza*. Cf. the complete bibliography of his writings in «Boccascena» 11 (1937), no. 3, pp. 28-29. He produced some of his works under the pseudonym of Mario Valli. For further information about the man himself see also the biographical sketch by E.W. CRIVELLIN, *Saverio Fino tra popolarismo e fascismo. Spunti per una biografia*, Torino, Centro Studi C. Trabucco 1987, pp. 23-43.

²⁴ LUIGI CORAZZIN (1888-1946). Member of Parliament for the Popular Party and author of sacred plays for the amateur stage. These included: *Frate lupo*, *Trecento*, *La grande vigilia*, *Il fabbricatore d'oro*, *Vita*. This last was about religious persecution in Russia.

²⁵ For information about FORTUNATO DE SANTA (1862-1939), a priest from Udine and later bishop of Sessa Aurunca (1914), as well as the author of a *Passione di Cristo* (1901), cf. *Un vescovo autore drammatico*, in: «Il teatro nostro» 4 (1914), no. 7, p. 100.

theatre is the fact that not a few of the writers were associated with the Salesians: first of all there was Angelo Pietro Berton, the author of one of the classics of the Catholic theatre, *Il piccolo parigino*; then there were Augusto Michelotti (*La madre, Uno che s'incammina*) and Amilcare Marescalchi (*La vittoria di don Bosco*).

The «Società Editrice Internazionale» and the «Libreria Editrice Salesiana» at Rome continued over the years to publish some of the most popular playwrights, men like Virginio Prinzivalli, Giuseppe Fanciulli and Onorato Castellino.²⁶

4. The most immediate educative medium

The recent centenary celebrations have provided evidence of the ability of Don Bosco and of his Salesians to make varied use of the media in their pastoral work, through the written and spoken word and, more recently, through the cinema.

It is also well known that in Salesian pastoral work the press can boast it exists longer than the theatre. But it is also true that about the middle of the 19th century the printed word, however plain and simple, had a limited circulation because of the widespread illiteracy of the masses.

One should also remember that in Piedmont, the region which saw the largest circulation of the «Letture Cattoliche», 58% of the population were still illiterate in 1871.²⁷ Even after allowing for this high rate of illiteracy, one should not presume that all the remainder of the population were potential readers. In reality, as has been shrewdly commented, between the literate and the illiterate there lie the uncertain but quite numerous ranks of the semi-literate. There were those who could read but could not write: there were also those who could read and write but who could not easily understand what they read and for whom any writing beyond signing their names was painfully difficult.²⁸

According to the calculations of De Mauro, in 1861 «Italophones» or those who could both understand and speak Italian, amounted to barely 2.5% of the total population of Italy.²⁹ This enables one to appreciate that by the end of the century there was an extremely limited market for books.³⁰

²⁶ For further details see S. PIVATO, *Il teatro di parrocchia*.

²⁷ On illiteracy in Piedmont at the end of the 19th century cf. G. VIGO, *Istruzione e sviluppo economico in Italia alla fine del secolo XIX*, Torino, ILTE 1971.

²⁸ Cf. C.M. CIPOLLA, *Istruzione e sviluppo*. Il declino dell'analfabetismo nel mondo occidentale, Torino, ILTE 1971, p. 44.

²⁹ T. DE MAURO, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita*, vol. I, Bari, Laterza 1979, p. 43.

³⁰ A very informative contribution is provided by the writer of the monograph on the Jacini enquiry concerning Piedmont and the nature of the instruction which was imparted in

This fact shows how appropriate was Don Bosco's use of popular forms of expressions which was dictated not so much by his own literary bent as by the demands of intelligibility.

Don Bosco stated that in drafting a work for popular consumption it was better to be «lacking in correctness or elegance of style rather than risk not being understood».³¹

One may sum up by saying that if one wishes to grade the various forms of popular culture used by the Salesians, then the stage represents the lowest level: it is certainly the most immediate educative medium, allowing the Catholic message to reach even an illiterate public for whom the written word was inaccessible.

5. Don Bosco's «modernity»

This brings us to the consideration of one of the most controversial judgements concerning Don Bosco: namely, how far is he to be considered «modern». There is no doubt that if we were to read the text of his plays, we would agree with the view of the person who wrote: «His modernity did not depend on abstract analyses or ideological preferences».³² He remained, in practice, firmly anchored to a «devotional, moralistic and strictly ultra-montane brand of Catholicism», which demonstrated «the traditionalistic framework within which he had to operate».³³

Whatever «modernity» there is in Don Bosco, is to be found not at the doctrinal or ideological level but, if at all, at a practical and pragmatic level; to be precise, in that sector of «popular culture» which we now designate by the term «mass media». His modernity consists in the fact that he used the means of communication in a way which is really contemporary: in other words, he was able to take the traditional themes of Catholic teaching and propagate them by a new means, the theatre, fitting his style of presentation to the receptive capacity of his audience.

There is, however, another sense in which Don Bosco was «modern», if one considers the theatre not just as a means of communication but as an instrument of socialization. If one examines the theatre in the light of re-

its elementary schools: «There is instruction on how to read a little and how to write, though very imperfectly. The results are extremely meagre, so that after a few years these pupils cannot understand what they read, nor can they write with any degree of intelligibility, sometimes not even their own names!» (*Atti della Giunta per l'Inchiesta Agraria* for the provinces of Piedmont. It is quoted in C.M. CIPOLLA, *Istruzione e sviluppo*).

³¹ E IV 321.

³² M. GUASCO, *Don Bosco e le sfide della modernità*, in: *Don Bosco nella storia religiosa del suo tempo*, Torino, Centro Studi C. Trabucco, 1988, p. 29.

³³ F. TRANIELLO, *Don Bosco e il problema della modernità*, *ibid.*, p. 43.

search into the history of socialization,³⁴ one cannot but notice the important function it performs in society, which from the end of the 19th century onwards saw the dislocation of social models and rhythms of life which had been shaped and articulated by the rural community. Moreover, the whole field of popular culture, especially the use of the theatre, deserves to be studied because it is something which contributes substantially to the history of Catholic associations, and, «in the great majority of cases, the history of contemporary Catholicism has failed to consider the internal dynamics of religious associations».³⁵

Studies of the Catholic movement have, in fact, so far failed to give due consideration to the new forms of popular socialization which the Catholic world created following the disintegration of rural society. There is no doubt that in any history of group activities within the Catholic Church during Italy's industrial period Don Bosco would have to feature as a creative innovator.

By way of example we may consider one of the most significant forms of group activity in the industrial age, sport.³⁶ This is an activity which demonstrates, perhaps even better than the press and the theatre, Don Bosco's clear-sighted anticipation of the educative and social potentialities of group activity in a world influenced by liberalism and the emergent working classes. It may be relevant here to refer to a significant comment by Piero Bairati, who has written that Don Bosco, from his vantage point in the industrial city of Turin, perceived that the industrial revolution would change not only the processes of production but also the shape of society itself.³⁷

Sport, which was in 1902 prophetically defined by the Barnabite Giovanni Semeria as «the popular affirmation of tomorrow's industrial society»,³⁸ provides clear evidence of Don Bosco's modern spirit of pragmatism or, rather, of the way he perceived the educational utility of certain forms of group activity which would become characteristic of urban and industrial life.

«Let the boys have full liberty to jump, run and make as much noise as they please. Gymnastics, music, theatricals and outings are most efficacious means of obtaining discipline and of benefitting spiritual and bodily health», Don Bosco wrote.³⁹

A further aspect of Don Bosco's modernity is revealed through this con-

³⁴ On the notion of associative groups, cf. G. GEMELLI - M. MALATESTA, *Forme di socialità nella storiografia francese contemporanea*, Milano, Feltrinelli 1982.

³⁵ R. MORO, *Movimento cattolico e associazionismo: un problema storiografico*, in «Quaderni di azione sociale» (September-October, 1988) 19-39.

³⁶ On this theme cf. S. PRIVATO, *Sia lodato Bartali. Ideologia cultura e miti dello sport cattolico 1936-1948*, Roma, Edizioni Lavoro 1985.

³⁷ P. BAIRATI, *Cultura salesiana e società industriale*, in: F. TRANIELLO, *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare* 331-357.

³⁸ G. SEMERIA, *Giovane Romagna (sport cristiano)*, Castrocaro, Tip. Moderna 1902, p. 8.

³⁹ G. BOSCO, *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù* 39.

cern for sporting activity. At the beginning of the 20th century Salesian provision for such activity developed to a remarkable extent: gymnastic and other sporting competitions were organized and the pupils of the oratories were encouraged to take part in a whole range of physical activities. And this was happening at a period early in this century when the socialist movement was positively opposed to sport, which was considered to be too «bourgeois», suitable only for middle-class «good-for-nothings» and quite incompatible with the aims of socialism. It was only in 1924 that Filippo Turati undertook a self-critical reappraisal of the socialist attitude to sport and began to appreciate its potentialities as a collective and even educative form of recreation.⁴⁰

There is no doubt that the Catholic movement's more positive attitude towards sport early in the century owed something to the influence of Don Bosco. The *Memorie Biografiche* record of Don Bosco that:

«... on many occasions, especially between 1859 and 1860, he used to get hundreds of boys to form a long line in the middle of the playground; then he would place himself at the head of the line, saying: Follow after me, and everyone must follow close on the steps of the one in front. He would then clap his hands in time to their steps and all those behind him imitated what he was doing, as he would sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right, or moved in a straight or an oblique line. As he did so the line formed acute angles and right angles and circles. Suddenly he cried, Halt! and all the boys who had executed these odd manoeuvres behind him came to rest, forming strange patterns that meant nothing to those who were watching. But some of the boys, who had guessed what Don Bosco was doing, ran up on to the balcony of the house and could see that each group formed the shape of a letter; together they spelt out the words: "Long live Pio Nono". During those years when the Pope was constantly threatened and attacked, it was not wise to be heard shouting these words, so Don Bosco used his boys to "write" them in the playground».⁴¹

A «modern» sporting device was this used by Don Bosco to reaffirm traditional values and ideas. This is a good example of the way he combined ideological conservatism with modern pragmatism.

⁴⁰ On these questions cf. F. FABRIZIO, *Storia dello sport in Italia. Dalle società ginnastiche all'associazionismo di massa*, Firenze, Guarraldi 1977.

⁴¹ MB VI 343.