

PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ON DON BOSCO

Pietro BRAIDO

It is not my task, in this last contribution to the Congress, to present a balance sheet or draw «conclusions». A more useful purpose will be served if I can help to extend the close collaboration of these days by indicating precise areas that still demand study and research. It is to be hoped that a growing number of people will become involved in this work: scholars and researchers, working as individuals or as a team, those lecturing in education and other sciences in universities, study centres or historical institutes, while others will be concerned with using the fruits of the research in the serious and valuable task of popularising knowledge of Don Bosco.

These reflections on topics for future research will be grouped around four main points.

1. Checking scientifically the use of the literature we have inherited

1.1. *Getting beyond «idols»: critical vigilance and a sense of proportion*

The first priority is to verify and evaluate with care early witnesses, including the authors of the *Memorie Biografiche*,¹ who were struck from the 1860's onwards by Don Bosco's «great and bright gifts» and by his «extraor-

¹ From the very beginning of the «Istituto Storico Salesiano» it was noted that «this factor of the "marvellous" would present a problem when selecting and assembling documentary material, and probably throughout the whole process of producing a history of Don Bosco, and it is a problem for which there is no ready-made or simplistic solution. In fact Don Bosco himself has contributed to this aspect of his life-story [...]. A whole series of hagiographical and historical works has followed this line from quite early on, even when Don Bosco was still alive; it was often very sentimental and, while desiring to be factual, was overcome by the fascination of its hero, by his extraordinary powers of creativity and by the amazingly rapid spread of his influence. Even the three compilers of the MB were not exempt from this tendency [...]. What is now needed is careful bibliographical research, which, from all this mass of writing, can formulate a fundamentally sound criterion of approach, and thus be able to move on to a scientifically acceptable account of events» (RSS 1 [1982] 20-22).

dinary deeds»: these witnesses include the authors of the «chronicles» or «memoirs», which were later used in the processes of beatification and canonization; biographers and panegyrists whose contributions cluster round the great dates in Salesian history (1907, 1915, 1929, 1934, 1950 and 1954, 1975, 1988); more recent biographers, experts on education, spirituality, pastoral and social work, psychology, etc. This present Congress, especially through its papers of such high scientific worth, has been able to suggest sound methodological criteria for the interpretation and elaboration of this material.

1.2. *Relevance of tradition for the historian*

At the same time I am not advocating any kind of neo-illuminism. In addition to the rich documentation which is of inestimable value and which has been collected and handed down by painstaking chroniclers and writers of memoirs, including the compilers of the *Memorie Biografiche*, we need to prize and seriously evaluate specific aspects of their individual testimonies. Such literature is the stuff of history: the history of Don Bosco, of the Salesian tradition, of mental attitudes (of the saint, of his successors and the world in which they are involved). In this field, too, the Congress has suggested criteria as to how one should read and evaluate material: no one has tried to denigrate hagiography; what has been offered is a series of useful suggestions as to how one should form a balanced judgement that combines both scientific rigor and a wise understanding of history.

1.3. *The value of Don Bosco's published and unpublished writings, and problems connected with them*

A lot has been written on how important it is, if one is to understand and interpret Don Bosco correctly, to appreciate the inseparable link that exists between his writings and his personality as a man of action: one must consider the context, his readers and his purpose (Stella, Farina, Braido).² His writings must, accordingly, be judged and used in relation to these wider considerations.

² Cf. P. BRAIDO, *Significato e limiti della presenza del sistema educativo di Don Bosco nei suoi scritti*, in the collection S. G. BOSCO, *Scritti sul sistema preventivo*, pp. XI-LVII; ID., *Los escritos en la experiencia pedagógica de Don Bosco*, in the collection SAN JUAN BOSCO, *Obras fundamentales*, Madrid, BAC 1978, 1-32. R. Farina states: «The true Don Bosco is the one who emerges from an overall, unified and vital consideration of all his writings, all his initiatives and options; in other words, from his entire life»: *Leggere Don Bosco oggi*, in the volume P. BROCARDI (edit.), *La formazione permanente interpella gli istituti religiosi*, Leumann, LDC 1976, 351.

Two other relevant problems may be mentioned which need to be considered by anyone who devotes himself to the study of Don Bosco and his thought:

1) the degree of Don Bosco's involvement in each of his writings: for example, «*La forza della buona educazione*» is largely a simple translation of a popular French booklet: and this reveals the urgent need for a literary examination of the authenticity, the sources and the borrowings of each of his writings;

2) the degree of «objectivity» in Don Bosco's written and oral testimonies about events connected with his own person and his work: this includes his conferences, conversations, historical «asides», his memoirs, descriptions of events and news bulletins: some of these may be shown to be less than fully reliable as «history», even though they may be valuable for other reasons, in so far as they throw light on the saint's intentions and aims, such as the encouragement of his collaborators, edification, the obtaining of civil or ecclesiastical approval, theological emphases, accusations, devices «ad captandam benevolentiam» or to attract help.³

2. Making the documents of scientific value available

Ever since its foundation (by the decree of 23 December, 1981, becoming operative 31 January, 1982) the «Istituto Storico Salesiano» has drawn up a vast programme of work, beginning with a critical edition of the sources that are considered indispensable for any kind of research. This offers scope for wide collaboration amongst scholars and scientific bodies, and this is already being, in part, effected.

2.1. Don Bosco's unpublished writings

Writings which were «minor» in size but fundamental for any understanding of his educational and spiritual teachings have already been edited. Amongst these should also be included the joint editions of the Constitutions of the SDB's and DMHC's prepared by F. Motto and C. Romero (1982, 1983). The sermons, conferences, etc. are in preparation.

³ For example: in various «historical» documents written at different times and with different ends in view, Don Bosco attributes the real (or idealised?) origin of the Salesian Society to quite different dates: Cf. P. BRAIDO, *L'idea della società salesiana nel «Cenno storico» di Don Bosco del 1873/1874*, in RSS 6 (1987) 256-260.

2.2. *The published writings*

New editions of his writings that have already been published are planned, especially of any versions in Don Bosco's own hand, or of editions that seem to have some special importance.

The Regulations (of the Oratory, of the houses and those governing special activities) merit particular attention on account of their educational and normative importance, and because there exists a rich deposit of manuscripts written in Don Bosco's own hand or by his closest collaborators.

2.3. *The «Memoirs of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales»*

These deserve particular attention because of the exceptional importance attached to them by Don Bosco, who, as he more or less affirms in the introduction, did not intend them to be principally an autobiography or history but, above all, a «theological» evocation of the origins and early development of the Oratory, as a project and as a model for the future.

2.4. *The «Epistolario»* (see the paper by Motto)

2.5. *Salesian documents that carry the imprint of Don Bosco*

As founder, superior and educator, Don Bosco played a decisive role in the life of the Salesian Society. A privileged place must, therefore, be reserved for an edition of important documents relating to the government of his Congregation. These documents bear the trace of Don Bosco's own meticulous and very frequent interventions: the *Minutes* and the *Chronicles* of general conferences to the rectors of the houses, the *Minutes* of the meetings of the Superior Chapter (now the General Council) and, from 1877, the *Minutes* and *Acts* of the General Chapters (1877, 1880, 1883, 1886).

2.6. *Contemporary testimonies: chronicles, memoirs, annals*

These were sources widely used by the compilers of the *Memorie Biografiche*. What is lacking is a unified, critical survey of the vast, heterogeneous mass of material and an adequate evaluation of it in view of the personalities of its various authors, of their credibility and of the overall context.

2.7. *The canonical processes for Don Bosco's beatification and canonization*

Just how far a critical edition of this material would aid the historical understanding of Don Bosco is at present under discussion.

2.8. *Chronicles and letters of Salesians with special link with Don Bosco*

Especially during the final phase of Don Bosco's life there emerged significant individuals, who worked both in Europe and in the New World (Rua, Bodrato, Cagliari, Costamagna, Cerruti, Barberis, etc.) and who shared important responsibilities with Don Bosco. Such people often possessed special knowledge or adopted interpretations of problems and projects that were not always identical with those of Don Bosco, who was far away. This fact is particularly useful in helping us to discern Don Bosco's position over problems relating to emigrants and the missions. The publication of documents and letters – already begun with the publication of the *Chronicle* of L. Lasagna, edited by A. Ferreira da Silva, and of the *Letters (Epistolario)* of F. Bodrato, edited by J. Borrego – will throw considerable light upon a little explored area in the history of Don Bosco and his sons.

The programme that has been planned covers a vast field of research and, obviously, there is no wish to make it the monopoly of the I.S.S.; it is open to all scholars and centres of study wishing to participate. A start has been made on drawing up a coordinated plan of action. Meanwhile, of course, the «Centro Studi Don Bosco» and the faculties of the Pontifical Salesian University have been pursuing research of this kind for years.

3. A major problem: a «history» of Don Bosco

The work on the sources and on other documents has probably fuelled expectation of a new, comprehensive biographical study of Don Bosco, a rigorously scientific history which will present his life and works, his ideas and plans and his significance and influence during the 19th century and beyond.

Special monographs covering a variety of approaches would make a precious contribution: these could cover biography, hagiography, education, spirituality, psychology, sociology, culture, apologetics, theology, etc.⁴ If they are

⁴ Round about the centenary there appeared stimulating contributions, though not all of equal importance; for example: S. QUINZIO, *Domande sulla santità. Don Bosco, Cafasso, Cottolengo*, Torino, Gruppo Abele, 1986; F. TRANIELLO (edit.), *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*, Torino, SEI 1987; S. PALUMBIERI, *Don Bosco e l'uomo nell'orizzonte del personalismo*, Torino, Gribaudi, 1987; G. DACQUINO, *Psicologia di Don Bosco*, Torino, SEI 1988; P. BRAIDO

to have validity, however, they will have to be based on serious historical research. It is no use writing «new» books about Don Bosco unless they are based on an improved and updated approach to «history-making».⁵

3.1. *A complete biography*

From this point of view, as has already been noted,⁶ the classical biographers of Don Bosco (Lemoyne, Amadei and Ceria) appear exemplary – taking into account a different age and outlook – in their intentions and overall plan, even if not always so for method and execution; they accompanied or crowned the work on the *Memorie Biografiche* with works of synthesis. All three aimed at «a potentially complete picture»,⁷ from the *Vita* written by Lemoyne (1911-1914) to *Don Bosco e il suo apostolato* by A. Amadei (1929, 2^a1940) and *Don Bosco nella vita e nelle opere* (1938) by E. Ceria. P. Stella has followed on from and surpassed those early biographies with the first volume (*Vita e opere*) of his fundamental work *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, which is outstanding for its detail and grasp of essentials. At present F. Desramaut is engaged in a courageous undertaking, and the first of eight booklets which will constitute his *Études préalables à une biographie de saint Jean Bosco* has already appeared (No. 8, Lyon, 1988). This is part of his preparation for an extended biography of Don Bosco.

It seems essential that at least two basic concepts be kept well in view. In the first place Don Bosco should not be split into compartments (the saint, the manager, the educator, the spiritual teacher, the publisher, the dreamer, the apologist, etc.), but that even in a specialised study there should be constant reference to the unity of his personality, which is that of a 19th century priest-educator, with a particular mentality and culture, with great qualities, but also with limitations.⁸ In the second place one needs to be constantly aware of his real personal individuality and originality, which cannot be captured within any schematic abstractions: one needs to underline, for example, typical features like his realism, his sense of timing, his vitality, his availability at all times.

(edit.), *Don Bosco nella Chiesa*; M. GUASCO, P. SCOPPOLA, F. TRANIELLO, *Don Bosco e le sfide della modernità*, Torino, Centro Studi «C. Trabucco», 1988; R. GIANNATELLI (edit.), *Pensiero e prassi di Don Bosco*, Roma, LAS 1988; C. NANNI (edit.), *Don Bosco e la sua esperienza pedagogica*, Roma, LAS 1989.

⁵ Cf. P. BRAIDO, in RSS 7 (1988) 465, and C. NANNI, *Conclusioni*, in: *Don Bosco e la sua esperienza pedagogica* 236-239.

⁶ Cf. P. BRAIDO, *Presentazione* of the volume *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 6-9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ Cf. P. STELLA, *Le ricerche su Don Bosco nel venticinquennio 1960-1985*, in: P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 387-388, and *Lo studio e gli studi su Don Bosco e sul suo pensiero pedagogico-educativo. Problemi e prospettive*, in: J. VECCHI - J.M. PRELLEZO (edit.), *Prassi educativa pastorale e scienze dell'educazione*, Roma, Editrice SDB 1988, pp. 32-33.

3.2. *Don Bosco's evolution*

One consequence of what we have said is the need to remember Don Bosco's dynamism and the way his life and work evolved, which is not to deny that he remained rooted in and utterly faithful to certain basic principles. Useful reminders of this aspect of Don Bosco have been provided in the contributions of Pazzaglia and Schepens, in addition to the interesting insights into his modernity offered by Traniello, Scoppola and Stella. This type of research may seem startling to anyone who has been accustomed to thinking of Don Bosco as a giant who had been «programmed» from his infancy, the mere executor of a preordained plan. The trouble with this latter view is that it confuses theology and history, transcendental and secondary causes.

3.3. *The context of this evolution*

This evolutionary process is influenced by various stimuli, the collaboration of others, opposition, factors that arise from within his own world, especially the Oratory at Valdocco, from without, such as the physical environment (poverty and hardships), the «culture» that conditions his boys, his fellow-workers, his benefactors, admirers and detractors, as well as the civil and religious authorities. The studies of P. Stella have made a splendid contribution to this line of approach, particularly his *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale (1815-1870)* (Roma 1980). In the course of this Congress we have also had the paper by J.M. Prellezo (who has done valuable research into Don Bosco's letter of 1883 on the use of punishments and on the way the early Salesians interpreted the preventive system). The paper by Bracco also explored this approach. Any biographical research into Don Bosco can hardly avoid studying such figures as Borel, Cafasso, Rua, Cagliari, Durando, Bonetti, Cerruti, Lazzerio and others.

It becomes clear from what I have said that a real «history» will inevitably involve a whole complex of references, sources and methods: it will be necessary to «disentangle in order to unite» and to create a «composition where there seemed to be opposition».

4. **Examples of possible themes**

This overall view of the problems involved in producing a biography of Don Bosco, together with the many contributions to this Congress, make it possible to single out certain «critical» or particularly important points which demand the close attention of scholars and researchers.

4.1. *Don Bosco's beginnings*

If we are to have a complete understanding of the person of Don Bosco, it is of capital importance to study and evaluate those factors which he himself often recalled as the «beginnings» of his life, of his studies, of the oratory. Those «beginnings» have to be reconstructed without making use of any background «projections» that were made after the events and sometimes long after them. These include various types of reflections dear to Don Bosco, who is often our only witness – reflections that may relate to the order of events, to theology, practical or functional matters – all of which need to be evaluated by the researcher with caution and critical balance.

4.2. *Don Bosco and the Church, local and universal*

The paper of Laboa rightly demonstrated the complexity of this problem, with its delicate combination of ecclesiological theory and living experience of the Church. Don Bosco was «a Catholic priest» who worked «wholly» within the Church. It is impossible to create his history unless this essential consideration is one's point of departure; hence the importance of studying his various contacts with Church authorities: with popes, bishops (especially Frasoni, Riccardi di Netro, Gastaldi, Moreno, Ghilardi, Ferrè, Aneiros), the Roman Curia (cardinals, prelates, consultors). Above all one must take into account the perception that he gradually formed of his own «mission» on behalf of youth, of his responsibilities as a «founder», and the consequent interweaving of his own freedom with the need for coordination and subordination in the face of institutional and hierarchical demands when action was called for. The paper by Tuninetti provided a traumatic example of this kind of situation.

A related issue that merits research is the place that Don Bosco assigned to the laity in the Church and within the Salesian movement: helpers, benefactors, «cooperators», without counting the hosts of well-wishers and also dissenters.

4.3. *Relations with civil society and the «other culture»*

The papers of Poulat, Traniello and Scoppola invited considerable reflection on this question, with the consequent opportunity to verify from this point of view the hypothesis of an opposition - combination between relative «cultural» rigidity of principle on the one hand and extremely flexible and innovative practice on the other.

4.4. *Don Bosco and popular culture*

The contributions of Traniello and Malgeri have opened up rewarding avenues of research. Amongst other things there is the question of the «popular» character of the whole religious, educational and social enterprise of Don Bosco, and of the resulting scope for the wide divulgation of the «Salesian system» (Traniello).

One can see a possible field for valuable research on the topic of Don Bosco «writer and publisher for the masses».

4.5. *Don Bosco and the problems of emigrants and the missions*

P. Stella has already provided an outline of this question in the first volume of his work on *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica (Le missioni d'America)*, pp. 167-186). J. Borrego, on the basis of the ample research he had previously done, presented us with a summary outline of the essential features of Don Bosco's «plan for the missions»

Depending on the availability of new sources, it should now be possible to gain a more realistic understanding of a variety of problems. The first and most fundamental question is to establish how far Don Bosco's perception of situations and projects seen from far away coincided or clashed with the direct experience of those who were working on the spot and had a closer awareness of the practical possibilities. Under the editorship of J. Borrego a critical edition has recently appeared of the *Letters (Epistolario)* of F. Bodrato, the first Salesian provincial in America, and the letters of L. Lasagna are now being prepared for publication by A. Ferreira da Silva.

4.6. *Don Bosco founder of the Salesians*

This is not a purely «family matter», given that Don Bosco and his Salesians have to some extent influenced the history of the Church and of society.

Many of the problems concerning the development of the society, its approval and the kind of religious congregation it was to be, have already been dealt with, and with some success, by Stella, Desramaut, Motto and Braidò. A problem that still needs to be analysed, apart from that of the «origins», is that of the inner organization, as the foundation evolved in practice: by this I mean the real contribution of Don Bosco in shaping the Congregation as a religious and educational entity and in determining its characteristic style and spirit, as well as organizing a programme of both initial and ongoing formation for the clerical and lay members, with the threefold demands made upon them as educators, religious and experts in professional trades.

4.7. *Don Bosco's part in the founding of the Institute of the DMHC*

The first notable results of the research carried out by Sister Deleidi and Sister Posada have shown how timely is the investigation, on a practical and historical rather than on a merely juridical level, of the «*relatio confundatorum*» upon which the Promotor Fidei insisted during the process for the beatification of St. Maria Domenica Mazzarello. The two informative contributions to this Congress have shown the scope there is for interdisciplinary cooperation, to which students of Don Bosco should be able to make their specific contributions.

4.8. *The «extraordinary» in Don Bosco the «dreamer» and «wonder-worker»*

Leaving aside previous uncritical and popular writings, sound contributions have been made by P. Stella (*Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, vol. II, pp. 507-569) and by Sister C. Romero, whose *I sogni di Don Bosco* is a critical edition of 10 important dreams for which we have the saint's handwritten accounts. However, this whole complex matter remains to be explored: there is need for a critical edition of the sources, along with other detailed studies.

In conclusion, a huge programme of work still remains to be done, and calls for detailed planning. This will demand collaboration over a wide range of subjects, but all with one purpose: that of increasing the understanding of Don Bosco's work in the Church and in society by all those who labour for that same Church, but from within different cultures.