

# THE STATE OF THE CENTRAL SALESIAN ARCHIVES AND THEIR USE<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. A brief account of the archives from the beginning until 1972<sup>2</sup>

Amongst Don Bosco's earliest writings there is a «Regulation for the Festive Oratories», the manuscript of which, composed between 1847 and 1852, is still preserved. The whole of chapter 9 is devoted to the archivist or records officer.<sup>3</sup> We read that this person was to look after the various registers, keep the music of the Oratory locked up, take care of the small library of books suitable for the boys, recording the name and address of any borrower, and being generally vigilant so that none of the property of the Oratory might be lost. By and large it was a series of rules borrowed from other regulations, though so far as can be judged, it remained a dead letter in Don Bosco's oratories.

The archives of the Salesian houses originated in answer to practical needs and are well stocked. Don Bosco used to preserve anything that seemed important for the management and recording of affairs: his school notebooks, lists of boys, registers of boys for Confirmation, the records of Masses said, printers' receipts. Giovanni Borel, his first collaborator, had charge of the accounts as early as 1846, and later Don Vittorio Alasonatti began to keep records of boys accepted, expenses and income, and progress in school.

As yet one could not talk about an archive of the congregation, but this was to be its forerunner. To the record of official and social activities there were added accounts of the founder's activities. As early as 1860 to 1861 the

<sup>1</sup> I owe the drafting of this contribution to the constant, generous help of Don Vendel Fenyö.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. P. STELLA, *Archivio Centrale Salesiano*, in L. PASZTOR, *Guida alle fonti per la storia dell'America Latina negli Archivi della Santa Sede e negli Archivi ecclesiastici d'Italia*, Città del Vaticano, 1970, p. 521; V. FENYÖ, *L'Archivio Salesiano Centrale*, in RSS 4 (1985) 149-151.

<sup>3</sup> See the edition of 1877 in OE XXIX 49 et ss. See also MB III 104.

young members of the nascent religious congregation (Ruffino, Bonetti, Francesia, Rua and others) felt they ought to form a committee to record what they considered to be the extraordinary deeds and utterances of their superior and father, so that «nothing relating to Don Bosco might be forgotten».<sup>4</sup>

The archives trace the vicissitudes and developments of the infant congregation and of the mother house at Valdocco in Turin. A special room was provided for them which, though rather small, was usually adequate. From the very beginning the General Secretary of the congregation was put in charge of them, though no official description of his duties has been found. The fourth successor of Don Bosco, Don Pietro Ricaldone, devoted an issue of the *Acts of the Superior Chapter* to the archives, dwelling at length on the archives of the Salesian houses, touching also on provincial archives but merely mentioning the «general archives of the Congregation».<sup>5</sup>

After the last war it was decided to reorganize the archives completely and they were re-named *Central Salesian Archives*. Metal shelving was provided and a new decimal classification was introduced. At the heart of this undertaking was Don Tomás Bordas. He prepared the system of classification, which was meant to be used for both libraries and archives.<sup>6</sup> Possibly with a view to its use in libraries, the new system was carefully provided with a range of headings which were less than suitable for the ordering of archives: a great deal of material was removed from the files where one would have expected it to be and was scattered about under various headings (the correspondence of individual superiors, the sundry papers that poured into the office of the General Secretary of the Superior Council from different departments, etc.). Consequently, the sources of documents and even their chronology became confused: this was exacerbated by the mass of material that poured in almost weekly, causing historical documents and current business papers to be slowly absorbed into a single confused archive for a congregation that had already assumed world proportions.

During its existence of more than 100 years the archives have been variously designated. Initially they were referred to as both the «archives of the congregation» and the «Salesian archives», without distinction. From the start of this century they were known as the «Archives of the Superior Chapter», a title found on many of the papers right up to 1972. From 1951 to 1985 it was called the «Archivio Centrale Salesiano»,<sup>7</sup> and then, when the

<sup>4</sup> MB VI 861-863; VII 129.

<sup>5</sup> ACS No 120 (Nov.-Dec. 1943) 279.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. T. BORDAS, *La clasificación decimal aplicada a la Congregación Salesiana para sus Bibliotecas y Archivos*, in «Boletín de la Dirección General de Archivos y Bibliotecas, Madrid», II/14 (1953) 13-16.

<sup>7</sup> Actually the volume by Don Torras mentioned in note 13 already used the term «Archivio Salesiano Centrale». It seems that the change only became official in 1985 in order

*Regolamento* entered into force, the «Archivio Salesiano Centrale».<sup>8</sup>

From Don Bosco's time, down to our own, the central Salesian archives have been under the care of the General Secretary to the Superior Council (today called the «General Council»). The following men have been archivists.<sup>9</sup>

1. *Don Gioachino Berto* (1847-1914). He was Don Bosco's secretary until 1882 and was assisted as archivist by Don Michele Rua, Don Angelo Lago, Don Giuseppe Lazzerio, Don Francesco Dalmazzo, and others. Don Carlo Viglietti (1864-1915), who succeeded him as Don Bosco's secretary in 1882, also assisted him in collecting and filing writings relating to the Salesian congregation.

2. *Don Giovanni Schläpfer* (1884-1946). As a clerical student he used to help Don Berto and as soon as he was ordained on 20 July, 1913, he succeeded Don Berto as archivist but was under the authority of Don Calogero Gusmano, secretary to the Superior Council (1912-1935). Don Schläpfer catalogued the archives, assisted by Signor Giuseppe Balestra (1868-1942) who was Don Rua's personal secretary, and, drawing on his own experience, worked out an orderly arrangement of the archives, though this was changed by his successor, when Don Schläpfer died in 1946.

3. *Don Tomás Bordas* (1889-1968). He had worked in the archives since 1926 and assumed responsibility for them in 1946, on the death of Don Schläpfer. He was assisted by Don Johann Birkenbiehl and Don Luigi Tavano. Besides having inspired the reclassification of the archives using the Dewey decimal system, he is remembered for the part he played in transferring the most important section of the archives to the crypt of the Basilica of Mary, Help of Christians, in Turin, in order to prevent their possible destruction in the air raids that the city suffered during the Second World War.

4. *Don Pietro Stella*, a respected specialist in Don Bosco studies, worked alongside Don Bordas from 1961 and took charge of the archives until 1965. He concerned himself particularly with the organization and classification of the «Don Bosco Collection» (*Fondo Don Bosco*), which provided the detailed knowledge for his well known historical works on Don Bosco.

5. Since 1965 the archives have been in the care of *Don Vendel Ferryö*, although since 1985, his title has been «Vice-Director». He has been assisted for some years by Don Tarcisio Valsecchi and more recently by Don Jaroslav Poláček and Don Ambrogio Park. The brief but fruitful spell as director by *Don Ugo Santucci* (1980-1981) should also be recorded.<sup>10</sup>

to avoid confusion between its abbreviation (ACS) and the same abbreviation used to designate the *Atti del Consiglio Superiore*.

<sup>8</sup> ACG year 66, no. 314 (July-Sept. 1985) 48-56.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. A. MARTÍN, *Jaen en los Archivos de Roma: Instituciones giennenses en el Archivo Central Salesiano*, in «Boletín del Instituto de Estudios Giennenses» 90 (1976) 6-7.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Elenco Salesiani Don Bosco 1980-1981*, vol. 1, pp. 11-12 (Settori e Attività della Casa Generalizia).

## 2. The problems following the transfer to Rome (1972)

In 1972 the «Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco» was transferred from Turin to Rome in the newly built house just off the great ring-road (Via della Pisana, 1111), and the archives were moved at the same time. In a few months the transfer and new housing of the archives were successfully completed. Most of the documents are stored on steel shelving in special resistant containers, in accommodation that is sufficiently spacious for the time being and in an environment where the temperature is maintained at 20° and the humidity at 50°.

Considerations of space at once forced a measure which has turned out to be an improvement. The so-called «Historical Library» of Valdocco-Turin was removed from the archives and given a new home in the «Istituto Storico Salesiano» that was set up in 1982; and with the reorganization of the library of the generalate in 1985 it was given its definitive systematisation. One has to mention here the deplorable fact that lack of due care in making this removal resulted in the dispersal of some copies of works that featured in the so-called «Library of Don Bosco», that is the library that the saint used during his life. Moreover, a good part of that library remains at Valdocco, Turin, where it was kept when the rest was transferred to Rome.

This is just one of the many problems that the person currently in charge of the archives has had to face in the critical period since they arrived in Rome. The complicated situation has been repeatedly recorded by Don Fenyö, always with his characteristic tact, in a series of «memoranda», especially during 1973, as is well known to all who have had dealings with the archives over the past 20 years in their researches concerning our founder and the Salesian congregation.<sup>11</sup>

Here, in brief, are some of the main problems:

1. The decimal classification initiated in 1951 facilitated the search for material about people and ideas but did not sufficiently safeguard a prime requirement in every archive, namely the recording of the provenance of the items. There was no indication of the history, nature or significance of the entities about which documentary material was collected.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cf. for example V. FENYÖ, *L'Archivio Centrale: difficoltà nella consultazione* (15 April, 1973); *I problemi del titolare nell'Archivio Centrale Salesiano* (2 May, 1973). Cf. also J. HOMOLA, *La funzione della Segreteria generale di una Casa Generalizia in rapporto coll'Archivio in modo particolare con quello corrente* (Study presented in the «Scuola di Archivistica dell'Archivio Segreto Vaticano», 1973). This work by a Salesian refers to the situation in the archives of the «Casa Generalizia Salesiana».

<sup>12</sup> When one reads the work referred to above in note 6, one forms a distinct impression that the criteria adopted by Don Bordas in collecting and organizing the material were those appropriate to a Press Office. It is worth recalling that he had moved from just such an office to take up his post as archivist.

2. The classification, based on the decimal system, made no allowance for the practice followed in the archives of Generalates of making the traditional three fold division of material into items pertaining to general, provincial and personal levels. In actual fact it ought not to be too difficult to infer such classification of an item from its content.

3. It was not easy to locate material for consultation because items were inadequately described. The only help was the classification system and we have already indicated its shortcomings.

4. The indexing of the material was not done according to a consistent criterion; many related items could be found under different headings.

5. The card-indexing was, and remains, incomplete; some sections are well done; others less so. For these reasons, and for those mentioned in No. 3. the archivist has to spend a lot of time searching out material for any researcher. The alternative would be to let the researcher seek the material himself, but that is not permissible.

6. There was no regulation governing the archives and this created some of the problems we have mentioned, as well as others, such as deciding which material from the various offices should be lodged in the archives and which discarded.

7. Other problems for the archives are created by the inadequate organization of the offices which produce the documents deposited in the archives.

### **3. The microfiche reproduction of the «Don Bosco Collection» (1979-1980)**

The section of the archives devoted to the founder, which is continually being consulted as it has been from the beginning, demands even more careful preservation. Accordingly, it was decided to transfer it all to microfilm. This was done between June 1979 and June 1980 by the Spanish Salesian, Don Alfonso Torras. This required 2,322 microfiche (150 x 104 mm) each of which contained 60 frames. That amounts to the reproduction of 139,151 pages of manuscript.

To ensure the best possible use of the microfilmed collection, each manuscript was then numbered according to its vertical and horizontal position on the microfiche, dividing each card into 5 rows of 12 frames each. A further index was then required to individuate every single document organised on the microfiche. This final painstaking labour of Don Torras was published in a volume of 629 pages.<sup>13</sup> This microfilmed collection can be consulted not only in the Central Salesian Archives but also in many Salesian

<sup>13</sup> ARCHIVIO SALESIANO CENTRALE, *Fondo Don Bosco, Microschedeatura e descrizione*, edited by A. Torras (Roma, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco 1980).

foundations throughout the world which have acquired their own copy.<sup>14</sup>

The carrying out of such an enterprise, even if it is not without the odd blemish on account of the incomplete organization of the archives, deserves to be warmly applauded. It has not only achieved its main aim of preserving for posterity, against the possible ravages of time (wars, fires, floods, etc.) and the wear of constant use, a treasure of great value; it has also made these manuscripts available to students throughout the world who would not always be able to consult the originals in Rome.

Once the computerization of the «Don Bosco Collection» is complete, it may be worth producing a second edition of the microfilms in order to make it even easier to consult these documents. One could show on each card the number proper to each document, and a *Guide* could then be prepared to make the work of consultation so much more easy.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. The recent organization of the Archives (1984-1988)

The reproduction of the «Don Bosco Collection» on microfilm was a symptom of a new climate of opinion. The impetus came from the General Chapter, beginning with the Special Chapter of 1971, which set about the work of renewal and also stimulated fresh study of our origins and of the founder's spirit. This led to a fresh appreciation of the written material handed down to us. Significant events were the relaunching in 1972 of the «Centro Studi Don Bosco» at the Salesian Pontifical University after the Special General Chapter (see the *Acts*, No. 186),<sup>16</sup> and the foundation in 1982 of the «Istituto Storico Salesiano» at the Generalate, in conformity with a decision of the 21st General Chapter of 1977-1978 (*Acts*, No. 105c).<sup>17</sup>

The new «Istituto Storico», with its need for research and study, provided the motivation for the recent reorganization of the archives, in the preparation and execution of which I have been able to play an active part. This was done in three stages: the drawing up and promulgation of the Regulations, the preparations for computerization and, finally, the actual computerization.

<sup>14</sup> At the request of several Salesian provinces, Don Torras produced, between 1980 and 1982, a second series of microfilms (149,090 frames). Unfortunately he did not publish any guide.

<sup>15</sup> For several references to the structuring of the «Fondo Don Bosco», see P. STELLA, *Gli scritti a stampa di S. Giovanni Bosco*, Roma, LAS 1977, pp. 15-16.

<sup>16</sup> *Atti del Capitolo Speciale XX*, p. 457. Cf. R. FARINA, *Leggere Don Bosco oggi: note e suggestioni metodologiche*, in *La formazione permanente interpella gli Istituti Religiosi*, edited by P. BROCARDO, Torino-Leumann, LDC 1976, p. 356.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the first number of RSS (1982).

#### 4.1. *The Regulations of the Central Salesian Archives (24 May, 1985)*

The Regulations of the archives were promulgated by a letter of the Rector Major to the General Secretary.<sup>18</sup> They indicate the plan of reorganization, which has been in progress for 3 years and which is substantially complete, if one prescind from the fact that the putting of all the material on to computer will take several years.

I should like to point out some important features of the Regulations:

1. The setting up of a group of properly trained archivists, led by a Director and Deputy Director, who will see to the organization, classification, listing, indexing and computerization, as well as the preservation of the documents (articles 4-14). Hitherto all the work and responsibility have been borne almost exclusively by one person.

2. The division of the documentary material, dictated by practical considerations, into four sections: an historical archive, a deposit archive, a current archive and an archive for reserved use (articles 15-16).

3. The creation of detailed rules controlling the use of the archives (articles 17-27). In his letter of promulgation the Rector Major decreed that the archives should be open to all students who ask to consult them and who observe the rules, but only up to 1931, the year of the death of Don Bosco's third successor.

4. The programme of reorganisation of the documents in the archives, which involves in particular: 1) new accessing of documents (listing and stamping); 2) the collecting of all documents in numbered files with a classification code, cross-referenced with the General Index, and a place number that identifies each individual document; 3) the depositing of documents in the archives; 4) the discarding of material.

#### 4.2. *The preparation for computerization*

This important work proceeded, with all the caution demanded in such a new development, on three separate fronts simultaneously. The archives had first of all to be prepared for such an undertaking. It was a question of resolving the old problem of separating the «historical archive» from the «current archive». This was done by:

1) lodging documents in the archives only as laid down in the Regula-

<sup>18</sup> Cf. ACG (1985) 48-49. The *Regolamento* immediately follows the letter on pages 50-56. Referring to these regulations in his manual for provincials entitled *L'Ispezzore Salesiano: un ministero per l'animazione e il governo della comunità ispettoriale* (Roma, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco 1987) Appendix 13 (pp. 547-558) he repeats and updates the rules for provincial and house archives laid down by Don Pietro Ricaldone in 1943 (see note 5 above).