

MY BELOVED SON... ACCOMPANIMENT BY DON BOSCO IN THE LETTERS TO SOME YOUNG PEOPLE

by Wim Collin

1. Don Bosco's letters

It is not easy to categorise Don Bosco's correspondence. There is, of course, a considerable number of letters written by himself or his secretaries. Don Bosco did not write every letter himself. He had some Salesians, confreres who were secretaries and who wrote letters on his behalf. He would sign these letters, or one of his secretaries would stamp them with Don Bosco's signature. This was partly because of the number of letters that arrived in Valdocco every day and because, towards the end of his life, Don Bosco no longer had the strength to answer all of them.

It is not easy to divide the correspondence into various categories. They can be divided into categories according to the addressee: letters to important people, civil and ecclesiastical officials, letters sent to Salesians, letters sent to lay people, letters sent to Salesian Cooperators and benefactors, and letters sent to young people. Another classification could be according to subject. For example, letters of an organisational nature, relating to the foundation of the Congregation, letters of a spiritual nature, and letters of a financial nature addressed to benefactors.

The problem is that most of the letters, whether categorised by subject or by addressee, deal with different subjects. For example, there are letters to the Salesians in which in one paragraph Don Bosco talks about the organisational nature of, for example, the missions or the organisation of the house or of the work they are involved in. In another paragraph, Don Bosco gives the addressee precise spiritual guidance or some personal pedagogical indications on how a Salesian should behave.

The same can be said of his letters to benefactors in which he writes about how one should be an excellent Salesian Cooperator. Don Bosco explains the state of the various houses and the foundation of the Congregation, and ends by asking for financial support to make it all happen.

Don Bosco wrote many letters to young people, and it would take a doctoral thesis to study them all appropriately. Unfortunately for the scope of this study only a limited selection of letters will be considered. One might think that the letters Don Bosco writes to young people – because Don Bosco wrote quite a few letters to young people – would be an exception here. However, even if the majority of the letters to young people are of a spiritual and pedagogical nature, it is possible to note that some of them have characteristics that have already been discussed in relation to the organisational aspects of the foundation of the Congregation, fundraising and so on. Following are two examples of letters written to young people about young people from Belgium.¹ The first one is from Henri Vonck² from Ypres, who writes on behalf of his father. The second is a letter from Jeanne van Cutsem asking for prayers.

Example 1:

Ypres, Belgium, November 29, 1887.

Very Reverend Father Bosco

On behalf of my father, A. Vonck-Clément, I am instructed to inform you that he has just paid six hundred francs on your behalf at the Ypres post office, including 500 francs for 250 masses

¹ W. PROVOOST (cur.), *Correspondance Belge de Don Bosco (1879-1888)*, Roma, LAS, 2019.

² Henricus-Edouardus-Augustus Vonck, abbreviated: Henri (Ypres, 24 mars 1874 - ?).

pro defunctis and 100 francs for your good works. Please send us a receipt.

My father thanks you, very Reverend Father, for the letter you kindly addressed to him dated 25 October, 1887, and he asks you to recommend in your good prayers, the soul of his dear and beloved wife Philomène Clément, our late mother who died last May and was buried on the feast day of Mary Help of Christians.

We all began a novena, and mother hoped that she would recover by the feast day on 24 May. But God had decided otherwise: Mum went to Heaven to celebrate the feast of Mary Help of Christians. Now, most Reverend Father, I urge you also to recommend all your children, our father and all his affairs [,] my two brothers, my little sister and I who have the honour of writing to you and who still asks for your blessing for all of us.

Receive, Most Reverend Father Bosco, the assurance of my deep respect.

Henri Vonck³

Example 2:

[Enghien, s.d. (January 1888)]

Most Reverend Father,

Knowing your great goodness, I have come to ask you for a small prayer for the sick. One has been suffering from severe headaches for several years; another, who is in very fragile health, has been suffering from severe angina and the beginning of bronchitis since yesterday.

I have unlimited confidence in St. Anthony of Padua, so we have begun a novena in his honour.

I would be very grateful if you would be so kind as to join us in our prayers!

³ W. PROVOOST (cur.), *Correspondence*, 185-186.

Receive, my Most Reverend Father [,] the expression of my most respectful feelings.

Jeanne van Cutsem

Here is my address: Mademoiselle Jeanne van Cutsem [,] Châlet near the train station [,] Enghien Brussels (Hainaut) (Belgium)[.]⁴

Without wishing to detract from the content of these letters, it must be said that there are several letters with similar content. Letters from which very little can be understood. They are some letters to adults, about practical matters, letters in which Don Bosco thanks them for their prayers and financial contributions. The saint writes that he will pray for the boy.

Other letters from young people ask Don Bosco for spiritual advice on various matters. One example is the letter from Edmond Evens⁵, who works in the coal mines in Bellecourt and wants to fulfil his religious vocation.

In the sad situation in which I find myself, allow me to come and commend myself amid your holy and fervent prayers. I am a young man in my twenties. [...] My only desire has always been to dedicate myself to Our Lord in a religious order, but the will of the good God is not sufficiently known to me. Moreover, I have several faults that would prevent me from carrying out my plans.

Here are the main ones: 1. my vocation, 2. my poor health, 3. the destiny that still binds me for two more years, 4. my parents' consent, etc. In the meantime, while waiting for this great happiness, I am constrained to work in the terrible environment of a coal mine'.⁶

Only occasionally do the letters addressed to Don Bosco deal with questions about religious vocations. As stated in the lecture presenting the letters from Belgians to Don Bosco, one can find some prayer requests to

⁴ W. PROVOOST (cur.), *Correspondence*, 273-274.

⁵ Edmond Evens was born probably around 1867. At the time he was writing the letter to Don Bosco he was around 20 years old.

⁶ W. PROVOOST (cur.), *Correspondance*, 188-189.

find the right spouse in the letters of Madame Dons to Don Bosco.⁷ It may be a coincidence, but the twenty-one-year-old Antoinette Segers⁸ from Antwerp in Belgium also writes:

I still have a third request to make of you, Reverend Father. For four years, my vocation has been decided; I have given my affection to a pious young man from a good family who has all the qualities to be a Christian husband and who my parents would be happy to call their son; unfortunately, this young man does not return my affection, he knows of my love, but some ungracious friends have ridiculed this love, and he has too much self-love to immediately see beyond their comments.

I have used up all the saints. I no longer trust, my faith is diminishing day by day, I no longer know how to pray [,] the aunt of the young man who wishes this marriage has obliged me to turn to you. You are now the only hope I have left. Pray for me, I beg you, so I can still turn to God to give me Alphonse's affection. I am sure that your prayers will bring me the grace for which I have been waiting in vain for four years. Ask the Blessed Virgin, in whom I have always had great confidence, that she will give me one or two meetings this winter where I can meet this young man and that he can judge my character, and pray to her again so that she can arrange this marriage for 1888.⁹

In the end, Antoinette did not marry her Alphonse, but would be the wife of Joseph Giesen for 22 years, with whom she had five children.

2. The stylistic aspects of letters to young people

For the letters used for this study, we have drawn on the work of the "Istituto Storico Salesiano" and, in particular, the first volume of the "Fonti

⁷ W. COLLIN, *La correspondance belge de Don Bosco (1879-1888). Analysis and contextualization of the letters of Madame Marie Dons, Canoness of the Berlaymont de Bruxelles monastery* [conference November 25, 2019], Roma, Università Pontificia Salesiana.

⁸ Antoinette Maria Emilia Segers (Antwerp, 24 July 1866 – 11 March 1922).

⁹ W. PROVOOST (cur.), *Correspondance*, 192-194.

Salesiane”. These letters are fascinating and reflect in a beautiful and succinct way the theme under investigation.¹⁰

2.1. Common formal aspects

Looking at the form of these letters from a formal point of view, before going into the details of their content, it is possible to identify some standard components of these letters. These characteristics are therefore independent of the letters’ contents or addressees.

The first characteristic of these letters is that they all begin with a word of gratitude. Don Bosco thanks the writer for what he has written; this gratitude, often expressed in simple terms, meant a great deal to the person who received the letter. For example, to Severino Rostagno: “Your letter brought me much pleasure.”¹¹

A second characteristic of the letters is the explicit reference to an earlier one, right at the beginning. Often it is not Don Bosco who takes the initiative for writing, but the young people who first wrote to the director of the Oratory. Don Bosco always refers to this previous letter. In his letters, he would often refer to the young person’s previous letter and to other letters he had already written, opening their hearts. “Looking at your letter from just one point of view, I thank the Lord that during the most difficult years of your life, he helped you to maintain the healthy principles of religion.”¹²

It is worth mentioning that Don Bosco’s secretariat his personal secretaries, kept a huge register of writers who wrote to Don Bosco, indicating when they wrote and what was answered. The letters were also kept in the archives. This whole administration was necessary to maintain good relations, not only when it came to organisational letters or letters relating to the founding of the Congregation but also when it came to pedagogical or spiritual advice that Don Bosco gave.

An exception to these first two characteristics is, of course, the letters that Don Bosco wrote to groups. Among the letters studied, there are

¹⁰ SALESIAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE, *Salesian Sources 1: Don Bosco and his work. Collected Works*, Rome – Bangalore, LAS – Kristu Jyoti, 2017, 766-791. (= FS) To facilitate the reading in other languages of the letters the reference to the letter will be to the number it has in *Salesian Sources* since it is the same in the various translations.

¹¹ FS., 186.

¹² FS., 199.

several letters addressed to the students of the “Mirabello” college, for example, or the students of other houses.¹³ These letters are special, and above all they give spiritual and educational advice to the students. One could say here that these letters are a written good-night-talk, more than an actual letter. But these letters to the groups also have other characteristics, such as some practical, organisational instructions given to the Salesians in the field.

A third characteristic, a feature that appears in almost all the letters, a very striking and specific component, is the way in which these letters’ core message is presented. Suggestions or concrete guidance on a spiritual or educational level are offered on several points. Don Bosco often wrote a list, 1, 2, 3 or with words underlined or written in italics. In this way, the reader immediately realises what is essential, what the different pieces of advice are and what the order of the steps to be taken is. Usually, these steps are described very briefly: “Meanwhile prayer, work, mortification, frequent confession and communion, will help you conquer the old enemy of your soul.”¹⁴

The fourth characteristic of these letters is that they are often short letters. Don Bosco only wrote short letters to young people. He also only wrote to adults when there were specific situations. It was often less than one A4 page. Accordingly, the language was simple. Don Bosco did not use complicated words or symbolic meanings. He wrote clearly what he wanted to say. The letter to young Annetta Pelazza, doubting about entering a convent, was six lines or 110 words.¹⁵

And finally, the fifth and last characteristic is that almost all letters in made reference to God in their closing lines: a prayer to God the Father and often also a prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary or a plea to obtain her intercession. For example: “May God bless you and keep you in his holy grace. Pray for me. I am yours affectionately in the Lord.”¹⁶

2.2. Understanding the formal aspects

The first tentative conclusion is that counselling through letters is complex, and generally does not happen in one letter but over several of them. There must be several letters, a degree of correspondence, an

¹³ FS., 189; 191; 192; 193; 195; 197; 198; 201; 202; 204; 205.

¹⁴ FS., 203.

¹⁵ FS., 194.

¹⁶ FS., 196.

exchange of letters. However, it should immediately be noted that often Don Bosco often points out in his letters, that it is better to turn to one's own spiritual director rather than to someone at a distance. This, of course, has everything to do with the religious and educational idea that Don Bosco himself had: a spiritual counsellor who was close by and who could be called upon.

A second tentative conclusion is that counselling young people should be about more than an hour-long conference; it is not about endless reflection and introspection or heavy or meaningless dialogues. It is about specific initiatives and concrete steps to be taken. Here too, it is easy to see that all this has to do with Don Bosco's pedagogical system.

A third tentative conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the education of young people does not depend solely on human work. Both in the letters in which Don Bosco gives pedagogical advice and in the letters in which he provides spiritual guidance, it becomes clear that entrusting oneself to God is not only the work of people but also the work of God.

A fourth tentative conclusion, which only applies to part of the correspondence studied, is that it concerns very personal advice. Although Don Bosco sometimes acts like Saint Francis de Sales, who says, "Read the *Philothea*"¹⁷, Don Bosco said: "Read *The Companion of Youth*"¹⁸ Don Bosco never seems to have had a standard answer that he writes to everyone even though almost the same advice can be found in several letters. Every letter has a personal touch, if only because it is handwritten and addressed to an individual.

3. Exemplary letter from Don Bosco to Stefano Rossetti

Looking at the content of the letters, and more specifically what he wrote to the different people, we can also see some similar character traits that are common to all or most of the letters. These traits have everything to do with Don Bosco's the pedagogical system. It is not possible, therefore, to make a distinction between what Don Bosco wrote in his theoretical expositions on the Preventive System or other treatises on the educational system, his pedagogical actions, and his letters to young people. In many of these letters, one can find a concise summary of what Don Bosco meant by his educational system.

¹⁷ Cf *Lettre MCLXXVI*, Œuvres Tome XVII, Lettres: Vol 7, 167; *Lettre MDCLXXXII*, Œuvres Tome XIX, Lettres: Vol 9, 287.

¹⁸ FS., 205.

A striking example is his letter to Stefano Rossetti on 25 July 1860.¹⁹ At that time, Don Bosco was staying in Lanzo Torinese, in the sanctuary of Saint Ignatius. A lot can be learned from this letter. Stefano Rossetti, born in 1843, lived at the Oratory from 22 October 1859 until October 1862. He became a priest and the (vice) rector of the seminary at Asti.²⁰

Sant'Ignazio presso Lanzo, 25 July 1860

My beloved son,

The letter you wrote me truly gave me pleasure. You have really shown by this that you have understood how I feel about you. Yes, my good friend, I love you with all my heart, and this love urges me to do whatever I can to help you progress in your studies and in piety and guide you on the way to Heaven. Call to mind the advice I have given you at various times; be cheerful, but let this cheerfulness be truly that of a conscience free from sin. Try to become wealthy - but in terms of virtue, and the greatest wealth is a holy fear of God. Keep away from bad boys and be friends with good ones; place yourself in the hands of your parish priest (arch-priest) and follow his advice, and all will go well.

Greet your parents on my behalf; pray for me, and while God is keeping you some distance from me, I pray that he will always keep you as one of his own until you return to us. Meanwhile, I am yours in fatherly affection.

Fr John Bosco.

As mentioned above, Don Bosco expressed his gratitude for Stefano's earlier letter. He confirmed that the young man had perfectly understood what Don Bosco meant in this letter. And then, very succinctly, Don Bosco describes what he thinks is the purpose of education and what the educator should be like. This is, therefore, not an operational objective but an essential characteristic. "It is because I love you that I will do everything..." Salesian education begins with love for the other. It is love that is the deepest motivation for the educator to be an educator. And it is this love that compels the educator to help the young person grow. Don

¹⁹ FS., 185.

²⁰ G. BOSCO, *Epistolario, Volume primo (1835-1863)*, F. MOTTO (cur.), Roma, LAS, 500.

Bosco divides this growth into two parts: the development of studies, that is, human formation in general, and the evolution of faith. This is nothing other than a “translation” of “the upright citizen and good Christian” of which Don Bosco speaks in the *Preventive System* and the *Memoirs of the Oratory*. It is interesting to note that this is immediately linked to something for which Don Bosco is well known, and which is emphasised in this short letter. Being an “upright citizen and good Christian” is directly related to the “*da mihi animas*”: I will “guide you on the way to heaven”. The ultimate goal is to save the young person’s soul.

In the following sentence, Don Bosco gives advice to help the boy achieve this goal. It is a short list of tips or advice Don Bosco gives the young person. He has already told him this, but he repeats it just to be sure. 1) be cheerful; 2) live according to virtues; 3) avoid bad friends; 4) place yourself into the hands of a spiritual director. Here, too, it is clear that some of these pieces of advice sound familiar to us. They can be found in the biographies of Dominic Savio and Michael Magone.

When we look at the life of Michael Magone, we see that is explained in detail what “being cheerful” means. When Michael Magone spends some time at the Oratory in Valdocco, he is overcome by sadness. This sadness arises because he realises that his cheerfulness is somehow superficial and fleeting, in contrast to the cheerfulness of his new friends. His friends’ cheerfulness is the result of inner and deeply-rooted happiness, real humanity and self-acceptance. Initially Magone’s cheerfulness is the result of “fun”. Don Bosco writes to Stefano that his cheerfulness must be the result of “freedom from sin” or pure humanity. Don Bosco is describing almost the same thing here as he described in detail with Magone.

“Being free from sin” inevitably brings to mind the words attributed by Don Bosco to Dominic Savio on his First Communion day. Words that are not only emblazoned on the wall of the house where Dominic lived in Morialdo but also words inscribed in the Salesian tradition: “death, but not sin”.

“Live according to the virtues” was the following guideline that Don Bosco gave to Stefano. You can be sure that the young people of that time knew the virtues perfectly: faith, hope and love, the divine virtues, and the seven main virtues: chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, kindness, patience, and humility. They learned this in catechism class in every parish, and they knew exactly what they meant. These virtues were the milestones of everyday life. These virtues were to characterise the lives of the young. Examples of this can be found in the biographies that Don Bosco wrote. Just think of the virtue of purity (i.e. chastity), described in detail in the life

of Michael Magone in the chapter on “The seven policemen”. Or in the belief in God (i.e. faith) emphasised in the Life of Dominic Savio.

Having good friends and avoiding bad ones is essential to Don Bosco’s educational experience. Bad friends should be avoided like the plague; bad friends can throw you into the abyss, lead you down the wrong path, and ruin your life forever. Striking examples of this can be found in the lives of Severino and Valentino. Valentino was “forced” to have a bad friend assigned by his father to prevent his son from becoming a priest. Mari, the friend, is the prototype of the wrong friend. For various reasons, including economic ones, Severino befriends the Protestants and thus risks his salvation.²¹

But let us be clear. Don Bosco is not only about avoiding bad friends but also about having good friends. A good friend means salvation. For Don Bosco, there are three categories of friends, but he only talks about two: bad friends and good friends. He never talks about “ordinary” friends. Don Bosco’s concept of friendship is almost identical to the ideal described by Francis de Sales. One makes friends, not for the sake of something, to gain concrete advantage, but for the sake of the other person, because of who he or she is. Friendship improves the other person and me; he or she becomes a better person, and so do I, because of the friendship. Friendship means loving each other, not because of what you do but because of who you are. And the source of this love for the other can only be God himself. In friendship, man recognises and finds a divine presence: it is in the other that man loves the Other. It is the Spirit of God himself who is the author of holy friendship. True friendship leads to God. And that was also the case for Don Bosco. Friends must lift each other up to reach higher goals. A friendship in which one does not grow is not a good friendship.

Don Bosco gives Stefano the fourth guideline: to have a spiritual director. For Don Bosco, having a “regular confessor” was a *conditio sine qua non* for achieving the educational ideal. Placing yourself in the hands of this confessor, pouring out your heart to him so that he can form you by showing you the way, showing you how to advance in life, was more than necessary for Don Bosco. This element is also found in the biographies that Don Bosco wrote: Dominic Savio stands in Don Bosco’s room and asks

²¹ W. COLLIN, *La pedagogia della scelta nelle narrazioni biografiche di don Giovanni Bosco*, in *Atti del Congresso Internazionale*, Roma 20-23 settembre 2018, Roma, LAS, 2019, 271-298; W. COLLIN, *The Role of the “Educational Presence” in the Memoirs of the Oratory and some Biographies written by Don Bosco. The Salesian educator as a guide in the vocational realization*, in «Journal of Salesian Studies» 19 (January-June 2021) 1, 55-81.

him to help him become a saint; Michael Magone goes to Don Bosco and asks him how to be happy. It is clear from this letter that Don Bosco prefers the guidance of the young person to be done “in persona” rather than in writing. It would be the priest who accompanied Stefano, who walked the path with him, not Don Bosco. Don Bosco is convinced that little can go wrong if one acts this way. If you follow the instructions of your spiritual director, you will certainly take the right road and succeed.²²

It is remarkable and always surprising how simple Don Bosco’s educational ideal is. It is not about great plans or a proposal for life that detaches or separates the young person from his natural environment. On the contrary, it is a proposal for life that leaves the young person in his environment, even if the ideals seem a little alien to us at the moment, from a secularised point of view, which was certainly not the case at that moment.

I would like to come back here at the end of the presentation of these four pieces of advice given by Don Bosco, to emphasise that the advice given by Don Bosco to the young people was very concrete: a list of things that could be followed. The way this boy dealt with this letter, but the way all the young people dealt with the letter they received from Don Bosco, is very striking. The fact that these letters have been preserved to this day means that many young people kept them and probably read and reread them. And even though these letters were collected at the beginning of the process for Don Bosco’s canonisation, that is, well after his death, in the case of this letter, the receiver kept and cherished the letter for more than forty years. And that is not because it was assumed that Don Bosco was a saint or someone famous, with the letter to Stefano in the 1860s, only fifteen years after the beginning of the Oratory. But above all because these letters were very concrete advice for young people, with goals that were very easy to achieve and verify. At the end of the day, when, as was customary, the boy said his evening prayers and reviewed his day, all he had to do was take the summary or the list of goals that Don Bosco had given him and check whether he had achieved them or not. Or, to put it very simply, referring to the letter to Stefano: 1) Have I been cheerful today? Did I commit sin today? 2) Have I lived according to the virtues today? 3) How did I hang out with my friends? 4) What should I discuss with my spiritual director?

²² W. COLLIN, *Amicizia. Camminare con maggior sicurezza nella vita. Il concetto dell’amicizia secondo San Francesco di Sales*, in «Note di Pastorale Giovanile» LV (settembre-ottobre 2021) 6, 47-51.

The letter's last paragraph also fits perfectly into this pattern. A greeting to the parents, an entrustment to God, and the hope that God will assist the boy and his family.

4. Pedagogical and spiritual content of accompaniment in the letters to young people

Don Bosco has a project for young people. That is one of the essential qualities from the letters. The young person must take control of his life and live according to his own project. This can be found in almost every letter. The content of each project is different because it is personal and individual, but it is possible to see some significant and common directions.

When reading Don Bosco's letters, it is important to remember that the author's pedagogical action, the process of education and guidance are never a work of human hands alone. God sets the process in motion: so he writes to Severino, "When I saw you, I seemed to have an inkling of Divine Providence's plans for you."²³ And it is God himself who guides the process and leads it in the right direction: "I ask God to keep you healthy, in his grace, make progress in learning, and that you may be able to be the consolation of your parents and Don Bosco's delight. He loves you so much."²⁴

What, then, are the things that Don Bosco recommends to young people?

4.1. Religious recommendations

Of all the recommendations, the most important one is "frequent confession and communion". This recommendation is reflected in many letters, both in the letters he sends to individuals and the letters he writes to the students.²⁵ On 1 June 1866, Don Bosco wrote to Giorgio very simply as his third and final point: "3. Fervent and frequent Confession and Communion."²⁶ He wrote almost the exact same words to Severino Rostagno, "Go to the sacraments of confession and communion."²⁷

²³ FS., 186.

²⁴ FS., 195.

²⁵ FS., 186; 190; 191; 193; 195; 196; 197; 198; 199; 203; 204; 205.

²⁶ FS., 196.

²⁷ FS., 186.

For Don Bosco, “frequent communion is the great pillar which supports the moral and material world to stop it falling into ruin [...] I believe I am not saying too much if I state that frequent communion is the great pillar that one pole of the world balances on.”²⁸ To the students of the fourth and fifth grades at Borgo San Martino, where Mirabello’s house moved to, Don Bosco makes it clear why it is so important: “The basis of a happy life for a young man is frequent communion.”²⁹ Before the holidays’ Don Bosco writes: “While you are at home, at least go to communion on Sundays.”³⁰ There must be a certain regularity in communion and confession, which must not be broken during the holiday period.³¹ Don Bosco is a true pedagogue in these letters, for he commands the young people to always greet their parish priest when they go home.³² “This is a strict duty of gratitude which will please others and benefit you.”³³ In this way, he simplifies the step for them to go to confession to the parish priest. The parish priests had often urged the boys to go to one of Don Bosco’s schools, and there was also a certain amount of follow-up and control over the boys.

One recommendation that is less often made is actually at the basis of all the recommendations, and the ultimate goal of faith formation is growth and steadfastness in the faith. he writes to Severino Rostagno: “So courage my son, remain firm in faith, and grow each day in the holy fear of God.”³⁴ This is the virtue in which one must be rich, as he writes to Stefano Rossetti.³⁵ If these things are done with care, they contribute to the growth of faith. Don Bosco writes to Emanuele Fassati: “Have great regard for your devotions. So make the sign of the cross well, kneel up straight and pray, and be exemplary at church.”³⁶

The role of Mary in Don Bosco’s letters to young people is twofold. On the one hand, she is invoked as an advocate, a help and a support in the process of growing up. “May the Holy Virgin preserve you as her own, always.”³⁷ On the other hand, she is sometimes also part of the proposal: “Be devoted to Mary and you will certainly be holy.”³⁸ “Pray to the holy

²⁸ FS., 191.

²⁹ FS., 205.

³⁰ FS., 198.

³¹ FS., 197.

³² FS., 193; 197; 198.

³³ FS., 197.

³⁴ FS., 186.

³⁵ FS., 185.

³⁶ FS., 188. (Also FS., 191)

³⁷ FS., 191.

³⁸ FS., 186.

Virgin every day that she may allow anything to happen to you except falling into sin.”³⁹ In the letter to the pupils at Mirabello, he literally writes as the fourth recommendation a part of the *Memorare*: “3. Devotion and frequent recourse to Mary Most Holy. It has never been known anywhere in the world that someone who has trusting recourse to this heavenly mother is not promptly heard.”⁴⁰

Less frequently mentioned in the letters is the recommendation to meditate daily. Don Bosco reminds his readers of this because meditation belongs to the standard behaviour of the young person. This is specifically about a time of silence and a time for reading.⁴¹

Some letters deal with the specific subject of priestly or religious vocation.⁴² Don Bosco offers some specific tips and recommendations for perseverance. For Don Bosco there are two kinds of vocations: the “secular state” and the “ecclesiastical state”.⁴³ And in this last category, there are three types of priests: “Secular priest, religious priest, priest in the foreign missions are three fields in which labourers of the Gospel are called to work and promote the glory of God. One must choose what one has most at heart, most adapted to one’s physical and moral strength.”⁴⁴

The words Don Bosco wrote to a young seminarian, Antonio Massara, who was in doubt about his vocation, are remarkable. He did not know whether he wanted to continue in the seminary or enter the Congregation. He also questioned the existence of God. Don Bosco writes:

God is great; God is merciful. We sometimes do not think about him, but he thinks about us and when he sees us running away he places his hands on our shoulders and stops us to bring us back to him. Is that not true? May the Lord be blessed in everything and his decrees adored. [...] I will not be far from advising you to push on ahead as far as priesthood. If you would like a life in

³⁹ FS., 190.

⁴⁰ FS., 191. The “*Memorare*” by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux goes: “Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thine intercession was left unaided. Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto thee, O Virgin of virgins, my mother; to thee do I come, before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful. O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions, but in thy mercy hear and answer me. Amen.”

⁴¹ FS., 197; 198; 200.

⁴² FS., 187; 194; 199; 203; 205.

⁴³ FS., 205

⁴⁴ FS., 205.

common and would like to come with me, I will list you amongst my dear and beloved sons.⁴⁵

4.2. Educational recommendations

One of the most important methods Don Bosco used to make young people understand what education is all about was to propose “models” or examples to follow. This is reflected in the recommendations he gives to the boys. The boys are given an example, literally and figuratively, of what they need to do to become an “upright citizen” and a “good Christian”. Don Bosco had done this from the beginning of his pastoral work, and we do not have to wait for the biography of Dominic Savio and Michael Magone to encounter the first “model”. Earlier, he wrote the biography of Luigi Comollo in his seminary days; later, in *The Companion of Youth* we find the biography of *Luigi Gonzaga*, and it is known that *Stanislaus Kostka* and *Jan Berghmans* were also among the model young people or saints whose lives Don Bosco described. These “proposed models” can be traced in Don Bosco’s letters to young people. For example, he explicitly writes to the boys at Mirabello: “2. Imitating St Aloysius in his good example, especially in avoiding improper talk.”⁴⁶ Adding that if they do this, they will be happy.

This, too, is typical of Don Bosco’s pedagogy; he encourages young people to be models for others. “Be models for your relatives and friends in the virtue of obedience, charitably put up with others, make no demands in food, rest, clothing”, he writes to the students at Mirabello before they leave on holiday.⁴⁷ The boys at the vocational school in Valdocco were also called upon to be examples for each other: “God willing, I could say that every working boy is a model and good example to the others!”⁴⁸ This is how he writes to Giovanni Garino: “I need you to go out and catch souls, but afraid that you might instead be caught by others I suggest that you simply make yourself a model for your companions in doing good.”⁴⁹ Young people can learn from other young people, and Don Bosco uses them for his work of salvation among the young. To the boys at the school in Lanzo, he writes: “If you find a virtuous companion in your village try

⁴⁵ FS., 203.

⁴⁶ FS., 192. (Also FS., 197.)

⁴⁷ FS., 197.

⁴⁸ FS., 204.

⁴⁹ FS., 187.

to get him to come back to college with you; for those who don't seem so good do not talk to them about coming to college."⁵⁰

It can also be confirmed that what was said about friendship in the letter to Stefano is also repeated in other letters. Of bad friends, he says: "Keep away from bad companions as you would from poisonous snakes."⁵¹ Or: "Avoid [...] companions whom you happen to hear speaking improperly."⁵² Another time: "Flee companions who indulge in immoral conversations or give you bad advice."⁵³ Good friends, on the other hand, you have to look for.⁵⁴

Don Bosco often described how education should take place. The young person needs, and this has been demonstrated several times, a guide, a leader, and someone who shows the way. The young person must have confidence in this person or persons.⁵⁵ Don Bosco writes to Annetta Pelazza: "To carry out the idea that for a while is keeping you busy (you have not told me, but I seem to see it in your mind: to become a [religious] sister) put yourself entirely into the hands of your good [holy] superiors."⁵⁶ In another letter, Don Bosco writes: "put your heart in my hands."⁵⁷ To Stefano he writes: "place yourself in the hands of your parish priest (arch priest) and follow his advice" and the reason for this is very simple "all will go well."⁵⁸ He writes to Annetta that obedience is the sure path to Heaven.⁵⁹

4.3. Other recommendations

As for the standard recommendations, those that have nothing to do with faith, religion or human relationships, there is very little to be found in the letters to young people.

Note the contradiction: laziness – duty. "Avoid idleness, and be very diligent in fulfilling your [...] school duties. Idleness is the father of all

⁵⁰ FS., 198.

⁵¹ FS., 186. (Also FS., 187.)

⁵² FS., 190.

⁵³ FS., 196.

⁵⁴ FS., 200.

⁵⁵ FS., 190.

⁵⁶ FS., 194. (In Italian: "Per mettere in esecuzione il pensiero che da qualche tempo vi occupa..." was translated originally in "To carry out the idea you sometimes are thinking about..." The translation for this article was modified.)

⁵⁷ FS., 193.

⁵⁸ FS., 185.

⁵⁹ FS., 194.

vices.”⁶⁰ Another time it would be the first point of attention: “1. Flee from idleness.”⁶¹ Sometimes he says it positively: “Fulfilment of all your duties, especially at school, without complaining about them.”⁶² Doing what you have to do means taking responsibility, now and later. Don Bosco writes to the students at Lanzo Torinese in 1875: “You are in college to learn things with which in due time you can earn a living. Whatever be your situation, your vocation, your future state you ought to act in such a way that should you no longer receive support from home, you can still be able to earn an honest crust. Let it never be said that we live off others’ sweat.”⁶³

In the same letter, he writes about health as a priority, which may come as a surprise. He did this when he had some minor health issues. “Health, this is a precious gift from heaven, so look after it. Beware of excess, perspiring too much, getting overtired, and moving too quickly from hot to cold. These are the common sources of illness.”⁶⁴ In other letters, he wished his addressee and his family good health or that his health would improve.⁶⁵ To Luigi Vacaneo he wrote about “temperance in eating.”⁶⁶

5. Conclusion: Don Bosco as the guide in his letters

In the last part of this article we will examine what Don Bosco, the author of these letters, reveals about himself, about how he wants to be a guide for young people, often in a clear and direct way. Don Bosco considers himself the “friend of their soul” or simply their “friend”⁶⁷, “father, friend and brother”⁶⁸, and “humble servant”⁶⁹. The youngsters are the apple of his eye.⁷⁰

Don Bosco loves the young person he is writing to and asks him to do the same: “Love me as I love you in the Lord.”⁷¹ He constantly calls

⁶⁰ FS., 191.

⁶¹ FS., 196. (Also FS., 190.)

⁶² FS., 188.

⁶³ FS., 202.

⁶⁴ FS., 202.

⁶⁵ FS., 186, 190; 192; 195; 197; 203.

⁶⁶ FS., 200.

⁶⁷ FS., 188; 192; 199; 201; 202; 203; 204; 205.

⁶⁸ FS., 193. (“Friend, father and brother” in FS., 198.)

⁶⁹ FS., 194.

⁷⁰ FS., 195.

⁷¹ FS., 187. (Also FS., 192.)

them his beloved sons.⁷² The reason why he does this is described in the letter to the boys at Valdocco:

There is no need to tell you how much affection I have for you. I have given you clear proof of that. Nor do I need you to tell me of your love for me because you have shown that so often. But what are our mutual affections based on? On money? Not mine, because I spend it on you; not yours because (and don't be offended) you have none. So my affection is based on the desire I have to save your souls. You were all redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, and you love me because I try to lead you along the path to eternal salvation. So the good of our souls is the basis of our affection.⁷³

To Stefano Rossetti, Don Bosco wrote almost identically: "Yes, my good friend, I love you with all my heart, and this love urges me to do whatever I can to help you progress in your studies and in piety and guide you on the way to Heaven."⁷⁴ Don Bosco loves his young people because he wants them to become good Christians and help them live a fulfilling life. To the boys at Mirabello, he wrote: "I am coming amongst you as a father, friend and brother; just put your heart in my hands for a while, and we will all be happy."⁷⁵ Don Bosco promised to do everything in his power to help the young people, provided that they did their part and cooperated.⁷⁶

There is also a degree of caution in what Don Bosco wrote. There were things he did not want to commit to paper but promised to tell them these things when they met in person. To Severino Rostagno, he writes: "I will not tell you this yet, but if you come another time and see me, I will speak more clearly, and you will know the reasons for certain things said then."⁷⁷ Another time to Gregorio Garofoli, he wrote almost the same thing: I would certainly like to speak with you at some length, but the things I would like to tell you cannot be entrusted to a letter."⁷⁸ Another time he wrote: "Here I would like to say more things to you which are not for a letter."⁷⁹

⁷² FS., 185; 186; 187; 191; 192; 195; 201; 202; 203.

⁷³ FS., 201.

⁷⁴ FS., 185.

⁷⁵ FS., 193.

⁷⁶ FS., 187.

⁷⁷ FS., 186.

⁷⁸ FS., 196.

⁷⁹ FS., 195.

It should be clarified that Don Bosco was not a great believer in the use of letters as a means of accompaniment; he preferred to deal with issues in person, in a face-to-face conversation. Don Bosco gives advice to the young people in his letters, especially in letters to individuals, and in some of the letters to groups he gives hints, but it is not real accompaniment. He prefers to talk with the youngsters in private when it comes to actual accompaniment.

There is only one thing left to say: a piece of advice that Don Bosco gave his young people and which is typical of our founding father. When they leave for holidays, he writes to the students: “Make sure you rest, be happy, laugh, sing, go for walks and do whatever you like, so long as you do not commit sin.”⁸⁰

⁸⁰ FS., 197.