

BIOGRAPHIES OF STUDENTS

**MICHAEL MAGONE
&
FRANCIS BESUCCO**



By St. John Bosco

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An American edition of the English translation by
Fr. Wallace Cornell, SDB

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These short lives of Michael Magone and Francis Besucco were originally published by Salesiana Publishers, Makati, Metro Manila, Philippines, in 1986 as part of the book *Don Bosco: Spiritual Director of Young People*, compiled by Fr. Wallace L. Cornell, SDB.

This American edition is produced with the permission of Salesiana Publishers of the Philippines. It incorporates elements of another translation done by Fr. Vincent Zuliani, SDB, as well as some editing.

Fr. Wallace L. Cornell was twice provincial of the Salesian province of Australia. He died very unexpectedly on July 10, 1986, at the Salesian provincial house in New Rochelle, N.Y., at the age of 65.

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BIOGRAPHIES OF THREE STUDENTS OF THE ORATORY WRITTEN BY ST. JOHN BOSCO

Dominic Savio (1842-1857)
Michael Magone (1845-1859)
Francis Besucco (1850-1864)

These biographies of three students of the Oratory are gold mines of the principles and goals which guided Don Bosco in spiritual direction, especially the young. This book has the lives of Michael Magone and Francis Besucco, which are complementary to Don Bosco's first work, the biography of St. Dominic Savio, translated by Fr. Paul Aronica, SDB, and printed by Salesiana Publishers in a separate volume.

Fr. Albert Caviglia wrote of Dominic Savio: "It's not an idle parenthesis to think back how, in the formation of Dominic Savio, we come across once and for all the basics of spirituality that Don Bosco left, as an inheritance, both to us and to the world.... The point of departure in all Don Bosco's works of spiritual building-up...was always the same, the heart."

Don Bosco appealed to the heart, rather than to the head, by these simple but rich lives of three young boys.

Much is to be learned from a prayerful and close reading of these lives, and we will see what principles Don Bosco considered basic, how a Christian can live out his vocation, how even a young boy can become an apostle.

At the end of each chapter are considerations which can be drawn from the words of the Saint. The reader will mine a lot more for his or her own spiritual life and for the spiritual direction of others, especially of the young.

LIFE OF MICHAEL MAGONE

By St. John Bosco

Dear young people,

Michael Magone was one of you, who anxiously awaited the printing of the life of Dominic Savio. Faithfully he made notes of all that was said about this model Christian; he did his best to imitate him; he wanted everything said about him written down, so he could imitate his life. He read only a few pages of the life of Savio before he too was called from this life to enjoy, as we most ardently believe, the peace of the just with that friend he was determined to imitate.

The unique and exciting life of your companion Michael moved you to see it in print. You pestered me for this. Therefore, motivated by these requests and by the affection that I had for our mutual friend, as well as by the hope that this small work will be both pleasing and helpful to your souls, I decided to publish his life.

In Dominic Savio you saw innate virtue cultivated to a point of heroism throughout his life. In the life of Magone, instead, we have a boy who, left to himself, was in danger of following an uncertain path but, fortunately, was called by the Lord to follow Him.

He listened to this loving call and, responding to divine grace, came to be admired by all who knew him, thus showing us how marvelous are the effects of this grace of God on those who make use of it.

There are many things to admire and imitate here, and virtues and expressions that seem beyond that of a fourteen-year-old boy. Because they are uncommon, I felt that they merited mentioning. Every reader, anyway, is aware of the truth of these incidents; I have only written of what truly happened and was witnessed by many people, who can testify as to its authenticity.

May Divine Providence, which instructs us by the lives of old sinners as well as young saints, give us the grace to find ourselves prepared at that final moment upon which depends a happy or unhappy eternity. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be our help in life and at our death, and keep us safely on the road that leads to heaven. Amen.

* *"Don Bosco proposed to his boys a high ideal of Christian life even to the heights of sanctity, leading them step by step according to their gifts of nature and of grace. A good example of this is found in his dealings with Michael Magone. Before his conversion Michael was an average boy; then, step by step, he became a good boy; then a very good boy; after three months an outstanding boy, and this standard he maintained until his death." (Fr. Joseph Colomer: The Preventive System)*

* *Don Bosco writes that he hoped "this small work would be both pleasing and helpful." The Christian ideal needs to be presented in an appealing way. We have a lot to learn from the way the mass media present their "idols"!*

* *"Innate virtue cultivated to a point of heroism." Napoleon was supposed to have said that every soldier carries a general's baton in his kitbag. Don Bosco, by using the word "innate," implies that every young person bears within him the seed of a saint. It is up to Christian educators to see that those seeds germinate and the fragile plant is nurtured.*

* *Dominic Savio was naturally good; perhaps Michael was more typical of the average boy of the Oratory. Perhaps anyone could have worked successfully with Dominic. The fact that Don Bosco could do the same with Michael Magone would be a greater proof of the efficacy of the Preventive System in forming saints.*

CHAPTER ONE

An Unusual Meeting

One autumn evening I was returning from Sommariva del Bosco and had reached Carmagnola, where I had an hour's wait for my train to Turin. It was already seven o'clock, the weather was cold and the place was shrouded in a heavy fog, now turning into a misty rain. The area was so dark that one could hardly be recognized just a few feet away.

The dull light of the station lit up a small area with a pale glow; the rest was in darkness. A gang of boys drew everyone's attention as they "horsed around" and made such a racket that no one else could be heard. The words "Wait! Catch him! Run! Grab him!" rang out. But in the midst of all this shouting, one voice stood out and dominated the rest; it was the voice of a leader whose commands demanded respect and obedience. I wanted to meet this youngster who obviously was able to control this unruly crowd. I waited until they all crowded around him and then I approached him. All fled as if terrified; only one remained, and he stood in front of me, hands on his hips and, with an air of haughtiness, barked his words: "Who're you, breaking up our game like this?"

"I'm a friend."

"What do you want of us?"

"With your permission I'd like to play along with you and your friends."

"But who're you? I don't know you."

"Again, I'm a friend. I want to join you and your friends in your game. But who are you?"

"Me? I'm," he said in a serious voice, "I'm Michael Magone, the general of this game!"

The other boys surrounded him once more. After speaking with some of them, I turned to Magone:

"Listen, Magone, how old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"Have you made your first confession?"

"Oh, yes", he replied with a smile.

"And your First Communion?"

"Yes."

"And have you learned any kind of work?"

"Yes, I've learned how to do nothing!"

"So far, what have you done?"

"I've gone to school."

"How far?"

"I've completed the sixth year of elementary."

"Where's your father?"

"My father is dead."

"And your mother?"

"My mother is alive and working to feed me and my brothers, who do nothing but drive her crazy."

"What are your plans for the future?"

"I'll think of something; but I don't know what."

His openness impressed me, as did the way he expressed himself—clearly and to the point. I also realized the great danger this boy could be in, if he were to continue in this neglected way. On the other hand, if his liveliness and qualities of leadership were cultivated, he could do great things. I continued our little talk.

"Look here Magone, would you like to leave this life on the streets behind and study or learn a trade?"

"I wouldn't mind at all," he replied, "because I don't like living this way. Some of my friends are already in jail and I'm afraid that I'll follow them. But what can I do? My father is dead; my mother is poor; so who can help me?"

"This evening say a fervent prayer to our Father in heaven; pray with all your heart, trust in Him and He will look after me, you, and everyone."

The bell rang for the train and I had to leave.

"Take this medal," I said, "and go to Fr. Ariccio tomorrow. Tell him that the priest who gave it to you wants to learn more about you."

He took the medal respectfully.

"But what's your name? Where do you live? Does Fr. Ariccio know you?"

Magone asked these and other questions, but I couldn't answer because the train was already leaving for Turin.

** Michael realized that his future was not very bright and he could well end as some of his companions had – in jail! He wanted to be helped. This was the minimal attitude Don Bosco needed; he was prepared to tolerate lively behavior and even behavior which disturbed a class, but he would not tolerate a refusal to cooperate or, even worse, scandal.*

CHAPTER TWO

Arrival at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales

Magone was very curious about this unnamed priest. He couldn't wait until the next day, but went straight to Fr. Ariccio and told him what had happened. The priest understood, and the next day he wrote me, detailing our little "General's" life.

"Young Michael Magone," he wrote, "is a poor boy who has no father. His mother is so busy providing for the family that she can't look after him, and so he spends his time on the street with rough kids. He has above-average intelligence, but his liveliness and unruly behavior have caused him to be suspended from school. All the same, he did fairly well in sixth grade.

"Morally speaking, I feel he has a good and simple heart; but he's hard to manage. At school and catechism class he is a constant disturbance. When he is absent, all is peaceful; and when he does leave, everyone breathes a sigh of relief!

"His age, poverty, and talents make him worthy of charity. He was born on September 19, 1845."

With this information I decided to accept him, either as a student or in the trade school. As soon as he got the letter of acceptance, he was impatient to come to Turin. He dreamed of an earthly paradise and how great it would be to live in the capital city. A few days later, I saw him.

"Here I am," he said, running to meet me. "I'm that Michael Magone you met at the station."

"I know. I know. Have you come willingly?"

"Certainly!"

"If you have good will, then make sure you don't turn this place upside down!"

"Don't worry; I won't cause you any trouble."

"Would you like to study or would you prefer to learn a trade?"

"I'm ready to do whatever you want; but if the choice is mine, I'd prefer to study."

"And if I place you with the students, what do you intend to do when you're finished?"

"If a street-kid...", he said, lowering his head.

"Continue – if a street-kid..."

"If a street-kid like me can be good enough to be a priest, I would like to become one."

"We'll see what a street-kid can do. I'll place you with the students; whether or not you become a priest depends on how well you do in studies and conduct, and whether you have the signs of a vocation."

"If all I need is good will, I can assure you that I'll succeed and I'll never do anything to displease you."

He was assigned a companion as his guardian angel, who would help, advise, and correct him if necessary. Without Magone realizing it, this boy, in the most practical and charitable way, never let him out of his sight. They were together in class and study as well as in recreation. He played and joked with him. But whenever the need arose, he told him: "Don't speak that way because it's not right; don't say that word or use the name of the Lord in vain." And, for his part, even though he displayed impatience from time to time, Michael responded: "You did the right thing to warn me; you're a good companion. If I had someone like you as a friend, I wouldn't have formed these bad habits which now I find so hard to break.

At first, the only thing he really enjoyed was recreation. To sing, yell, run, jump, and play appealed to his lively nature. But when the bell rang for class, or church, or prayers, he gave a longing glance at the games and then went off to wherever duty was calling him without any further objection.

It was great to see him when the bell rang for recreation. It's as if he were shot from a cannon! He simply flew to all parts of the yard. When a game required agility he shone. "Barrarotta" was his favorite game. Michael found life here very much to his liking.

* *Don Bosco had read Michael well. Despite some negative aspects, he knew he had a potential apostle before him.*

* *The Sodality of the Immaculate Conception was soon in operation and provided a "Guardian Angel."*

* *"Many boys came to know a father's love after meeting Don Bosco." (Fr. Giacomelli, BM III, 255.)*

CHAPTER THREE

Difficulties and Moral Reform

Michael had been at the Oratory for a month, and his many occupations helped the time pass quickly. If he was jumping around enjoying himself, he was happy, without reflecting that true happiness comes from peace of heart and tranquility of conscience.

Suddenly he began to lose that hunger for play. He was absorbed in thought and neglected the games, unless he was expressly invited. His "Guardian Angel" noticed this and said to him one day: "Hey Michael, for some days now I've noticed that you're not smiling; are you sick or something?"

"No, no, I'm okay."

"Then why do you look so sad and glum?"

"I'm sad because I notice my friends taking part in the practices of piety. To see them so happily praying, going to confession and Communion, makes me feel very sad."

"Why does another's happiness make you sad?"

"It's simple. My companions, who are so good, live their religion and become even better, while a loser like me can't take part, which makes me sad."

"What a silly kid you are! If your friends' happiness makes you envious, why not follow their example? If you have something on your conscience, get rid of it."

"Get rid of it. That's easy to say. But if you were in my shoes, you'd realize what a terrible mess I'm in."

"Let me offer you a way out of this mess. Open your heart to your confessor and he'll give you all the advice you need. When we have something bothering us, that's what we do. That's why we are happy."

"That's okay but..." Michael broke down, sobbing.

Several days passed and he grew even more despondent. He no longer enjoyed games or laughed

or smiled. Many times his companions were enjoying the recreation and he found some corner to think, reflect, and cry. I was watching him closely, so one day I called him over to speak with him.

"My friend Magone, I want you to do me a favor and I won't take 'no' for an answer."

"What is it? I'm ready to do anything you ask."

"Open your heart and tell me what makes you so sad these days."

"It's true; I am sad...but I'm desperate and I don't know what to do."

At that point he broke down sobbing. I let him cry for a while then, jokingly, said: "Come on now! Aren't you 'General Mickey,' the leader of the Carmagnola gang? What a fine general you are. You can't even tell me what bothers you."

"I'd like to but I don't know where to start; I don't know how to express myself."

"Just say one word and I'll say the rest."

"I have a messed-up conscience."

"That's enough; I understand. Don't say any more. I don't want to pry into matters of conscience. I'll just tell you what to do to make everything right. Listen! If your conscience bothers you, make a good confession of your failings since your last confession. If out of fear or some other reason you didn't confess something, or if you feel your confessions were lacking something, then go back to your last good confession and say what bothers you."

"That's the problem. How can I remember all that has happened over the past years?"

"That's easy. Tell your confessor that there's something in the past that's troubling you. He'll take it from there and ask you questions to which you'll only have to answer 'yes' or 'no,' and how many times you committed that sin."

* The secret of happiness: "Happiness must have its origin in peace of heart and tranquility of conscience." What impressed Michael the most about the Oratory was the spirit of joy and happiness which pervaded it. It made him feel a like a total outsider.

* His "Guardian Angel" let him in on the secret: "I can suggest a means whereby you can get out of this mess. Go to your confessor, open up your heart to him and he will give you all the advice you need. When we have something on our conscience, that's what we do. That's why we are happy."

* Note the very good advice given by Don Bosco on the proper use of the sacrament of confession.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Sacraments of Confession and Communion

Michael spent that day examining his conscience. He had such a great desire to put things right that he didn't want to go to bed without making his confession.

"The Lord," he said, "has waited long enough for me, and He may not wait until tomorrow. If I can go to confession this evening, I shouldn't put it off; it is time to make a definite break with the devil." He made his confession with great feeling, and many times broke down in tears. Before leaving, he said to his confessor: "Do you think all my sins have been forgiven? If I were to die tonight would I be saved?"

"Go in peace," he answered. "The Lord in His mercy has waited for you to make a good confession, so I'm sure He has pardoned all your sins; and if, in His adorable plan, He calls you to Himself tonight, you are absolutely certain of your eternal salvation."

He was so moved by these words that he blurted out: "Oh, how happy I am!" Still sobbing, he went to bed, filled with excitement and emotion. Later on he confided to his friends about these things that were in his heart that night.

"It's difficult," he would say, "to put into words all that I felt that unforgettable night. I hardly slept at all. In time I dozed off and saw hell open before me, filled with devils. I drove that thought out as I reflected that all my sins had been forgiven. Then I saw a whole host of angels, who showed me paradise, saying: 'See what happiness lies in store for you as long as you keep your resolutions!'

"About halfway through the night I was so overcome with emotion that I got up, knelt by my bed and said over and over again: 'Oh, how wretched are those who fall into sin! But how much more unhappy are those who remain in sin.' I believe that those who for a single minute have experienced the consolation of being in the state of grace would go to confession to please God, to have a clean conscience, and to have peace of heart. Oh, sin, sin! What a terrible curse you are to those who allow you into their hearts. If I ever commit even the smallest sin, I'm determined to go to confession immediately."

Magone expressed his remorse for having offended God, as well as his firm resolution to stay faithful. He began to receive the sacraments of confession and Communion regularly, and found great joy in those practices of piety that previously he found boring. He found confession so comforting that I had to ask him to go less often, lest he become a victim of scruples. This can be a real danger to young people when they are determined to serve the Lord with all their hearts. It brings havoc to their souls, since the devil uses this to disturb their mind and heart and so

make the practice of religion burdensome. It may cause those who have made great strides in virtue to fail.

The way to avoid this disaster is to have total confidence in one's confessor. When he tells us that something is bad, let's do everything to avoid it. If he assures us that something is not evil, then let's follow his advice and go ahead in peace. Obedience to our confessor is the surest way to be free of scruples and to persevere in God's grace.

** Don Bosco stressed the need for a firm resolution to sin no more, and even asserted that failure to do this was the main reason why even frequent confessions do not radically change people.*

CHAPTER FIVE

A Word to Young People

The uneasiness and worries of young Magone and the resolute way he put his soul in order, give me the opportunity, my dear young people, to suggest some things that I believe would be useful for your souls. Accept them as a sign of affection from a friend who so ardently desires your eternal salvation.

In the first place, I recommend that you confess each and every sin and not allow the devil to convince you to keep quiet. Remember that the confessor has power from God to remit every kind and any number of sins. The more serious the sin the happier he is, because he knows full well that God's mercy, by which your sin is pardoned, will all the more be manifested, and that the infinite merits of Jesus' Precious Blood, by which He washes away your sins, will all the more be applied.

Dear young people, remember that the confessor is a father who ardently desires to help you as much as possible and tries to keep you from every evil. Never fear that a confessor will think less of you for revealing to him some serious faults; nor should you be afraid that he'll speak of these faults to others. He can't use anything he has heard in the confessional, no matter what it costs him. Even if he had to pay with his life, he couldn't divulge even non-important things he has heard as a confessor. I can even assure you that the more open and sincere you are with him, the greater will be his confidence in you, and the more likely he will give you the best advice possible for the good of your soul.

I have stressed these matters lest the devil tempt you to keep back some sin in confession. I assure you, my dear young friends, that as I write these lines my hand trembles as I think of the number of Christians who are eternally lost because they did not confess their sins or were insincere in confession! If any of you, in going back over your lives, discover that you deliberately kept back a sin, or if you have any doubts about the validity of past confessions, I say to you: "Friend, for the love of Jesus Christ, and for His Blood shed for the salvation of souls, I beg you to put your conscience in order the very next time you go to confession, as if you were at death's door." If you don't know how to explain yourself, tell your confessor that there is something in your past that bothers you. He will understand. Follow his advice and you'll be certain that everything is in order.

Go to your confessor regularly, pray for him and follow his directions. When you've chosen a confessor who understands and helps you, don't go to another unless you have solid reasons for doing so. Until you have a regular confessor in whom you can put all your

trust, you'll always lack a friend for your soul. Trust your confessor, who prays every day in his Mass for his penitents that God may grant them the grace to make good confessions and persevere in doing good; also pray for him.

You can change your confessor if he moves and it would be very difficult to go to him regularly, or if he's sick or, on the occasion of some great solemnity there is a crowd waiting to go to him. If you have something on your conscience, which you do not want to divulge to your ordinary confessor, change your confessor a thousand times rather than commit a sacrilege.

If a priest who is called to hear the confessions of the young reads this, I would like, among other things, humbly and respectfully to suggest the following:

1) Lovingly receive all penitents, but especially the young. Help them to open their hearts and insist that they come to confession frequently. This is the most secure means of keeping them from sin. Use every means to see that they put into practice the advice you give them to avoid sin in the future. Correct them with kindness; never scold them because, if you do so today, they will not come to confession tomorrow or, if they do, they will not speak of those matters which upset you.

2) When you have gained their confidence, prudently find out whether all their confessions in the past were made well. I say this because experienced authors of morals and ascetics, and a known author who merits belief, agree that first confessions are often null or defective because of the lack of instruction or the willful omission of matter for confession. Invite the penitent to examine well the state of his conscience from when he was seven up to ten or twelve. At this age he's already aware of certain serious sins but makes little of them or does not know how to confess

them. The confessor, while he must be most prudent and reserved, must not avoid asking questions in the area of modesty.

I'd like to speak more about this, but I won't as I don't want to appear an expert in those fields where I'm merely a poor and humble learner. I only mention those things in the Lord that I feel would be useful for the souls of the young to whom I am determined to consecrate every moment of that life which the Lord leaves me here on earth.

Now let us return to young Magone.

** Some hints on how to make a good confession.*

(1) Make sure all serious sins are confessed.

(2) Have confidence in your confessor: "remember he is a father who ardently desires to help you."

(3) "Don't be afraid that a confessor will think less of you for revealing serious faults you have committed."

(4) "Don't be afraid he'll reveal these faults to others."

(5) Ask your confessor for help if you find difficulties in expressing yourself

(6) "Follow the advice he gives you."

(7) "Go to your confessor regularly."

(8) Have a regular confessor. "Until you have a regular confessor in whom you can put all your trust you will always lack a friend for your soul." But "if you have something which you don't want to divulge to your ordinary confessor, change your confessor a thousand times rather than commit a sacrilege."

CHAPTER SIX

Exemplary Concern for Piety

Besides frequent reception of confession and Communion, Michael had a lively faith, an exemplary concern, and an edifying attitude for all the practices of piety. In recreation he was like an unbridled horse; in church he was, at first, ill at ease, but soon controlled himself and became a model for all Christians. He prepared himself well for Confession; while waiting he allowed others to go ahead and was recollected and patient. He delighted in speaking of the edifying way in which Dominic Savio went to the sacraments and was determined to imitate him.

When he first came to the Oratory he barely tolerated chapel. Within months he found religious services very comforting, no matter how long they lasted. He would say that what we do in church we do for the Lord, and that never goes unrewarded. One day the bell rang for chapel and a companion urged him to finish the game. "Yes," he answered, "provided you pay me the same wages as the Lord."

Another companion said to him: "Don't you get fed up with the long services in church?"

"Oh," he replied, "You're just like I was some time ago; you don't know what's good for you. Don't you know that the church is the house of God? The more we go to church here, the greater our chances to be with Him in the eternal triumph of paradise. And if with practice we gain a mastery over earthly things, why can't this happen with spiritual things? By staying in the house of the Lord here, we have the right to stay with Him one day in heaven."

After any religious service, he stayed a long time before the Blessed Sacrament or before the Blessed Virgin to recite some prayers. He was so attentive,

recollected, and composed that he seemed oblivious to all external activity. Often, his companions, leaving church or passing by, gave him a bump, or stepped on his toes and even hit him. But he carried on with his prayers as if nothing happened.

He esteemed all devotions – a medal, a crucifix, or a holy picture were all objects of great veneration.

When Communion was distributed, or a hymn was sung, he immediately stopped his recreation and participated in any way he could.

He had a great love for singing and a fine voice which he cultivated. In a short time he was proficient enough to take an active part in solemn and public services. He assured me (and I leave it in writing) that he didn't want to utter a word if it wasn't for the greater glory of God.

"Unfortunately," he said to me, "this tongue has not always performed as it should have; at least it is in my power to correct it for the future!"

He wrote down his resolutions, one of which was: "O my God, make my tongue shrivel up between my teeth rather than utter a word displeasing to you."

In 1858 he took part in the Christmas novena at a local retreat house. His companions were praising him for the part he had played in the day's services. He became embarrassed and went off on his own. When someone asked him why he acted like that, he began to cry and said: "I've worked in vain because I enjoyed myself so much when I was singing and lost half the merit; now this praise has made me lose the other half; all that's left is that I'm tired."

** Here we see the balance that Don Bosco taught so many of his students. Michael would have loved to spend all his spare time in the chapel, but he was convinced that his apostolate in the playground was of*

paramount importance. "When Michael first came to the Oratory he barely tolerated going to church. After some time he found religious services very comforting no matter how long they lasted."

** Michael had moved a long way along the road to sanctity when he came to realize very deeply that we must refer all back to God; if we have talents, they are gifts of God.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Punctuality in Performing His Duties

Michael's fiery nature, lively imagination, and basic human qualities produced a high-spirited boy, often distracted. By constant effort he learned self-control.

As we have said, he was completely at home at recreation. A few moments into a game, the entire courtyard echoed with the sound of his feet. There was no game in which he did not excel. But once the bell sounded for study, classes, rest, meals, or chapel he stopped and ran to his duty. It was marvelous to see him who, a few minutes before, was the very soul of recreation, arriving first wherever duty called.

As regards his scholastic duties, I quote the assessment of his Latin teacher John Francesia:

"I willingly and publicly testify to the virtues of my dear student Michael Magone. He was in my class the entire scholastic year of 1857 and for a part of 1858-59. As far as I remember, there is nothing exceptional to note. He carried himself well. By application and diligence he completed two years of Latin in one so that, at the end of the year, he went into third year high school. His progress was extraordinary. I don't remember ever scolding him because of his behavior. He was quiet in class despite his natural liveliness, to

which he gave full vent in the playground. He made friends with the better boys and tried to follow their example.

"In 1858-59 I had a class which was determined not to waste a minute of time and was most anxious to make progress in their studies. Michael Magone stood out. Among other things I was amazed by the changes in him both physically and morally. He became more and more serious and thoughtful. I believe that this change came about by his determination to grow in piety. He could easily be used as an example of virtue to others. I can still see him in rapt attention to me, his teacher, while I was the one who admired his virtue! He truly gave the impression that he had put off completely the old Adam. Seeing him so attentive, so unusual for a boy his age, I could not help applying to him the words of Dante: *Under these fair locks lay hid an old mind.*

"I recall how, one day, testing his attentiveness and comprehension, I asked him to scan some lines I had just dictated. 'I'm not very good at it,' Michael modestly replied. I asked him to do what he could.

"He did so well that I couldn't restrain in joining in the spontaneous applause of the class! From then on that 'I'm not very good at it' became a catch-phrase in the school to indicate a student outstanding in diligence and attention."

In performing his duties he was an example to all. The superior of the house had often said that every moment of time is a treasure. He said, "If I waste a moment I'm throwing away a treasure." Motivated by this thought, he didn't let a minute go by without total dedication. I have here his marks for conduct and diligence. In the first weeks he had fair, which went to good, then very good. After three months they became excellent and remained so.

To prepare for Easter of 1858 he made a retreat, edifying his companions while consoling his own heart. He made a general confession and some resolutions. Among them was a proposal for a vow never to waste a moment of time. He wasn't given permission to do this. He asked permission to promise the Lord that he would always aim for excellent conduct. His director agreed, provided it did not have the force of a vow. For each day of the week he wrote: "With the help of the Lord and under the protection of Mary most holy I want to spend Sunday excellently, Monday excellently, etc."

Each morning and several times in the day, he would read this resolution, and each time he renewed his promise. If he happened to make a minor slip, he undertook some sort of penance, such as to miss out on some game time, to abstain from something he really liked, to say a special prayer, and the like.

This notebook was found by his companions upon his death, and they were greatly edified by his holy and total dedication to advance in virtue. He wanted to do all things excellently. And so, when the signal was given to do something else, he immediately quit his recreation or cut short his conversation and even put down his pen leaving a line unfinished to go promptly wherever duty was calling him. He often said that it was a good thing to finish what he was doing, but it gave him little satisfaction. Instead he found greater satisfaction in obeying his superiors or the bell.

Exactitude in his duties did not stop him from showing all the signs of courtesy which good manners and charity demand. So, he eagerly wrote letters for others and cleaned their clothes. Carrying water, making beds, sweeping, serving at table, giving up a game, teaching catechism or singing, tutoring weaker students – these were all things which he did most willingly as the occasion arose.

* *"He found the greatest satisfaction in performing his duties as indicated by his superior or the bell."*

* *Here again, he had learned a lesson from his master! Fr. Braido writes: "Duty – study and work – is in the educational plan of Don Bosco something sacred and solemn, almost an act of worship." (Fr. Braido: Il Sistema Preventivo di Don Bosco, p. 139)*

* *Fr. Caviglia also writes: "Two fundamental principles, the scrupulous use of one's time and diligence in performing one's duties, are those which Don Bosco established as the foundation of all his spirituality."*

CHAPTER EIGHT

Devotion to Mary

Devotion to Mary is a support for every faithful Christian, especially for young people. The Holy Spirit speaks of her: "He who is small, let him come to me." Our Magone was aware of this important truth, which was revealed to him in a providential way. One day he was given a holy picture of the Blessed Virgin. At the bottom of the card was written: "Come, my child, listen to me and I will teach you the fear of the Lord." He considered this invitation seriously and wrote to his director, stating that the Blessed Virgin had spoken to him, asking him to be good, and that she herself had taught him how to fear, love, and serve God.

He began to perform certain practices in honor of her, whom he invoked as his heavenly Mother, his divine teacher, his most loving shepherdess. One way he showed his devotion was to receive Communion on Sunday for that soul in purgatory who was most devoted to Mary while on earth. As an act of devotion to Mary, he willingly pardoned anyone who offended

him. Cold, heat, thirst, tiredness, displeasures, and similar inconveniences due to the climate were so many ways he used by joyfully offering them up to God through Mary. Before settling down to study or write he pulled from one of his books a holy picture of Mary on which was written: *Virgin Mother, always help me in my studies.*

He recommended himself to her at the beginning of every activity. He would say that when he found difficulties in studies, he called on his heavenly Teacher, who explained everything to him. One day a companion congratulated him for the good mark he got on his assignment. "You shouldn't rejoice with me," he replied, "but with Mary who helps me to remember the many things that I had forgotten."

So that he might have something to remind him of Mary's patronage in his ordinary occupations, he wrote everywhere: *Seat of Wisdom, pray for me.* This was written on all his text books, his exercise books, his desk, and wherever it could be written.

In the month of May 1858, he wanted to do all he could to honor Mary. He practiced mortification of the eyes, tongue, and other senses. He wanted to deprive himself of part of his recreation, to fast, to spend whole nights in prayer; but he was forbidden because these were not compatible with his age. At the end of that month he saw his director and said: "If you think it's a good idea, I'd like to do something beautiful to honor the great Mother of God. I know that St. Aloysius Gonzaga was very pleasing to Mary because he consecrated to her the virtue of chastity. I'd like to make her this gift also, and I'd like to take a vow to become a priest and be perpetually chaste."

The director told him that he was too young to make such important vows.

"Yet," he broke in, "I want to give myself totally to Mary; and if I consecrate myself to her, she'll help me to keep that promise."

"Do this," suggested his director. "Instead of taking a vow, just make a simple promise to embrace the ecclesiastical state if, at the end of your classical studies, it seems that there are evident signs calling you to do this. Instead of a vow of chastity, simply make a promise to the Lord that you will take every precaution not to do anything or say anything, even jokingly, that would be contrary to this virtue. Every day call upon Mary with a special prayer to help you keep this promise."

He was happy with this proposal and joyfully promised to do all he could to put it into practice.

* *Note how practical Michael's devotion to Our Lady was in line with the guidelines of Pope Paul VI in Marialis Cultus – not sentiment but a determination to copy her virtues.*

* *"We are making the novena of Our Lady of Consolation. Let us win Her protection by putting ourselves in God's grace. We need God's help if we want health of mind and body and success in our exams. To obtain these favors, let us go to Mary, but let us remember that to deserve Her intercession, we must show that we are Her true sons who hate sin and keep it at a distance! She will generously grant us temporal and spiritual favors; she will be our guide, our teacher, our mother. All God's gifts come to us through Her." (Don Bosco's "Good Night" on June 15, 1864, BM VII, 406)*

CHAPTER NINE

Preserving the Virtue of Purity

Besides those mentioned above, there were other practices to which Michael gave great importance and which he called the fathers, custodians, and even the police of the virtue of purity. We have evidence of this when he replied to a letter written by one of his companions near the end of the above-mentioned May. The writer was asking Michael to suggest some practices which would help to preserve that queen of virtues, purity. He passed Michael's response on to me from which I quote:

"To give you an adequate answer I would prefer to speak with you personally rather than write to you. I will merely pass on the advice given to me by my director on preserving the most precious of all virtues. One day he gave me a note which said: Read this and practice it: Five recommendations that St. Philip Neri gave to young people to help them preserve the virtue of purity – flee bad companions; don't pamper the body; avoid idleness; pray often; and frequent use of the sacraments, especially confession. Here are the explanations as I heard from my director:

"1) Place yourself with total confidence under the protection of Mary; confide in her, trust her. It has never been heard that anyone who had recourse to her was not satisfied. She will be your defense against the assaults of the devil.

"2) When you feel tempted, get busy. Idleness and modesty can't co-exist. By combating idleness, you will combat temptations against this virtue.

"3) Kiss a medal or the crucifix often; make the sign of the cross with lively faith, saying: *Jesus, Mary and Joseph, help me to save my soul*. These are the names which are most terrible to the devil.

"4) If the temptation continues, turn to Mary with the prayer of the Church: *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners.*

"5) Besides not pampering the body and custody of the senses, especially the eyes, be on your guard against bad readings. Even if you feel there is no danger in reading these things, stop immediately. Read good books and prefer those that speak of the glories of Mary and the Blessed Sacrament.

"6) Flee bad companions; instead choose good ones, namely, those who are praised by your superiors for their good conduct. Speak and play with them, but especially imitate them in carrying out their duties, especially the practices of piety.

"7) Go to confession and receive Communion as your confessor suggests and, if your duties permit, visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament often."

These were the seven counsels that Magone in his letter calls the seven police officers given to us by Mary as guardians of the holy virtue of purity. For a particular inspiration to piety, he practiced one of these counsels each day, adding something in honor of Mary. Each day of one week, he considered a joy of Mary. In the following week, Michael meditated upon the Sorrows of Mary, one for each day.

Some say that these practices are trivial. But it has been my experience that the splendor of virtue can be obscured and lost by the slightest hint of temptation. So if anything, no matter how small, can help preserve virtue, then it's to be treasured. I heartily recommend simple things that do not frighten or tire people, especially young people. Fasts, long prayer and harsh practices are put aside or endured with reluctance and difficulty. Let's keep to easy ways but let's persevere in them. This path led Michael to an outstanding degree of holiness.

CHAPTER TEN

Outstanding Deeds of Charity

In addition to his lively faith, fervor, and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Michael was outstanding for the charity he showed others. He knew that the practice of charity was the most effective way to grow in the love of God. He practiced it whenever an occasion arose, even very minor ones. He so enjoyed recreation that he didn't know whether he was in heaven or on earth. But if he noticed a companion who wanted to play, he invited him in and did something else. I often saw him quit soccer or some other game to make room for another; or to offer his stilts to another, even balancing him so that he did not fall.

If he saw a sad companion, he immediately went to his aid, or told him a story to make him forget his hurt or worries. If he knew the reason for the sadness, he would give some counsel or advice, or mediate for him with a superior, or find someone who could help. He would try to solve a friend's difficulty any way he could; get him a drink; make his bed – anything to help. He enjoyed doing these things.

Once in winter he noticed a companion avoiding recreation because of chilblains, nor could he perform his duties for the same reason. Michael wrote out his assignments for him, helped him to dress, made his bed, and even gave him his own gloves to keep him warm. What more could a boy of his age do?

Because of his fiery nature, he easily lost his temper, but it was enough to tell him: "Magone, what are you doing? Is this any way for a Christian to act?" This was enough to cool him down, even humiliate him, so that he often went immediately to apologize and beg pardon for any scandal he may have given.

But if in his first months at the Oratory he had to be corrected frequently for his fits of anger, over time and with good will, he calmed down and even became a peacemaker among his friends.

Whenever an argument arose, even though he was small, he stood between the offenders and persuaded them to calm down, saying: "We're rational beings and must act as such and not solve our arguments with violence. If the Lord acted this way when we offend Him, He would have exterminated us all. So, if Almighty God is merciful and pardons us who offend Him, why don't we unfortunate creatures put up with the unpleasantness of others without seeking revenge? We're all sons of God, and so we're all brothers. If you take revenge on a companion, you cease to be a son of God and by your bad actions become a brother to the devil."

Michael gladly taught catechism. He was available to serve the sick and often passed the night with them if their illness was serious. A friend who appreciated the many acts of kindnesses he had done for him told him: "Michael, what can I do to repay you for all the trouble I'm giving you?"

"Just offer your suffering in penance for my sins," he said.

Michael was given charge of a troublemaker to see if he could bring him to his senses. He began by getting to know him and befriending him. He was with him in recreation; he gave him little presents; he wrote him little notes of advice and got to know him closely; but he did not speak about religion with him. Seizing an opportunity before the feast of St. Michael, Magone approached him: "In three days we celebrate the feast of my patron, St. Michael, and I want a gift from you"

"Of course, but I'm sorry you didn't tell me sooner because I don't have anything now."

"I want to choose the gift."

"Sure, whatever you want."

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"If it costs a lot, will you still do it?"

"Yes, I promise! I'll do it no matter what."

"For the feast make a good confession, and prepare yourself for a fervent Holy Communion."

Because of his promise, his companion did not dare refuse this request; he yielded and for three days before the feast he was occupied in practices of piety. Magone went all out to prepare his friend for this day. On that day, both of them went to confession and Communion, which pleased the superiors and was a good example to their companions. Michael spent a happy day with his friend. At evening, he said to him: "We've had a beautiful feast. I'm happy and you've really pleased me. Now tell me: Aren't you pleased with what we've done?"

"Yes, I'm very pleased and, more so, because you've prepared me for it. Thanks for inviting me. If you have anything else to tell me, I would gladly welcome it."

"I do have something to tell you. For some time your conduct has left a lot to be desired. It has displeased your superiors and hurt your parents. You've cheated yourself and are deprived of peace of heart. One day you'll also have to give an account to God for all the time you've wasted. So, avoid idleness and be as happy as you like, provided you don't neglect your duties."

At first this companion was not fully won over. But he became Michael's close friend and began to imitate him by carrying out his duties fully. Now, through diligence and good living, he is a consolation to all who know him.

I've given this episode much importance and have developed it in detail because it really underlines Michael's character; and I also want to report faithfully what this companion himself told me.

** The greatest charity is concern for the spiritual good of our neighbor. This Michael understood very well.*

** Real progress in the spiritual life is measured by growth in self-control: from being a selfish and troublesome element in the playground, Michael becomes a peacemaker. When he first came to the Oratory he needed a "guardian angel"; within a few months he had made so much progress that he was able to take over that role himself on behalf of others.*

** This chapter concentrates very much on Michael in the playground, which was for Don Bosco almost as important (if not more so) than the church.*

** For him (and it is wonderful to see how so many of his students and later Salesians take the cue) the playground is the place:*

-for personal contact, for the "word in the ear";

-where the student is shown that we are personally interested in him;

-where we can manifest so well the family spirit;

-to help the trouble-maker; Michael's conversion was brought about in the atmosphere of the playground.

Apart from the confessional, did not Don Bosco carry on much of his spiritual direction in the playground?

-for evaluating the students, because here they are most natural.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Good Deeds and Sayings

So far we have recounted easy and simple things that anyone can do. Now I want to relate some deeds and sayings that can be admired, but not necessarily imitated. However, they do help to underscore the good heart and religious courage of this young boy. Here are a few of the many accounts that I have witnessed.

One day, Michael was with his companions when some of them brought up topics that a young, well-educated Christian should avoid. Magone only listened to a few words. Then he put his fingers to his lips and let out a piercing whistle.

"What're you doing?" said one of the boys, "Are you crazy?" Magone said nothing and whistled even louder than before.

"Where are your manners?" yelled another. "Is that any way to act?"

Magone then replied: "It's you guys who are crazy, talking like that; so why can't I be as crazy to stop such talk? If you're so rude in conversation that is not even Christian, why can't I be just as rude to stop it?"

"Those words," one of his companions assured me, "were a real sermon to them all. We looked at each other; no one dared to carry on with such ill-mannered talk or grumbling. From then on, when we noticed Michael in our company, we measured our words carefully for fear of a head-splitting whistle!"

One day, while accompanying a superior on a walk, he heard a tough boy using the Holy Name of God in a curse. Michael lost his temper. Without thinking about the place or danger, he lunged at the blasphemer, gave him two punches and said: "Is that any way to treat the name of the Lord?" But the other

boy was taller and, urged on by his companions and a bloody nose, he jumped on Magone. They exchanged such kicks, blows, and punches that neither one could catch a breath. The superior had to intervene and, putting himself between the two, managed with great difficulty to re-establish peace to the satisfaction of both parties. When Michael got control of himself, he realized how careless he was in correcting that silly boy in such a way. He was sorry for the outburst and assured the superior that he would be more cautious in the future and limit himself to giving good example and friendly advice.

Once, some friends of Michael were discussing the everlasting pains of hell, and one of them said jokingly, "I'll do my best not to go there, but if I do ...patience!"

Michael pretended not to hear the remark and quietly left the group, found a box of matches and returned. Lighting a match, he put it under the hand of the boy who had made the remark.

"Ouch!" was the startled cry. "That hurts, you fool!"

"I'm not a fool," Michael answered, "I was just testing your patience. If you can bear the pains of hell so easily, you shouldn't be so upset by a burning match whose pain lasts only for a moment."

All burst out laughing, but his companion had to admit: "Hell must be an awful place."

Again, one morning, some companions tried to convince Michael to go with them to make their confessions to a priest who did not know them. No matter how much they persisted, Michael refused, saying that he would not go anywhere without the superior's permission. He also added that he wasn't a bandit – afraid of being recognized by someone.

"I have my own confessor and I confess all my sins, big and small, without fear. This craze of going to

confession somewhere else must be because you don't respect your confessor or you have very serious sins to confess. Anyway, you're wrong to leave the house without permission. If you have a serious reason to change your confessor, see the guest confessor who comes to the Oratory on feast days."

While he was with us, Michael went home only once for vacation. He refused to go any more, although I encouraged him because his mother and relatives were affectionately expecting him. He was often asked the reason, but his only reply was a smile. One day, he finally gave the reason to a trusted friend.

"I went once to spend some vacation time at home but, unless I'm compelled to do so, I won't do it again."

"Why?" asked his companion.

"Because there are still dangers for me at home. Places, amusements, and companions tempt me to live as I did before, and I don't want to live like that."

"Have good intentions, and be determined to practice the advice our superiors give us."

"Good intentions are like fogs that disappear once away from the Oratory; the advice lasts a few days, and then companions help you to forget about it."

"Then, according to you, no one should go home for vacation, not even to see our relatives."

"Only those who feel they're strong enough to resist temptations should go. I don't feel strong enough. I believe that if our companions could see their true state, many would be discouraged from going home, because they leave with the wings of an angel but return with the horns of a devil."

Michael had a visit from an old friend, whom he tried to win over to a life of virtue. This friend argued that it didn't matter, because he knew someone who hadn't gone to church for a long time yet was doing very well and was prosperous. Michael brought his

friend over to a worker who was unloading building materials from a mule-driven cart and said: "See that mule? He is prosperous looking, big and fat, yet he has never been to confession and never goes to church. Would you like to become like this animal that has neither soul nor reason? All he does is work for his owner while alive, and then becomes fertilizer for the fields after his death."

His companion was silent and never again brought up such frivolous motives for not performing his religious obligations.

I'll omit many other such incidents. These are enough to show his good heart as well as his great hatred for sin, which often led him to excesses as he zealously tried to prevent any offense against God.

** Don Bosco had the gift of instilling into the young leaders of the Oratory a deep sense of conviction; if someone was acting in a way contrary to Christian principles, it was everyone's duty to do something about it. One virtue Michael had to learn – and he did – was prudence, even while giving corrections, since hatred for sin often led him to excesses as, in his zeal, he tried to prevent an offense against God.*

CHAPTER TWELVE

Vacations at Castlenuovo d'Asti

Since Michael didn't want to spend his vacations at home, I offered him some time from the pressure of studies by bringing him with me to Morialdo, near Castlenuovo d'Asti. A few of his companions who had no relatives also went along to enjoy the countryside. As a reward for good conduct, I asked him and several others to accompany me on the trip.

On the way, I spoke with Michael and found that he had reached a greater degree of virtue than I had ever imagined. Leaving aside the beautiful and edifying conversations we had along the way, I will limit myself to several incidents that reveal how advanced in virtue he was, especially the virtue of gratitude.

Along the way, they were soaked by a sudden downpour and arrived at Chieri looking like a bunch of drowned rats. They found refuge in the home of Mr. Mark Gonella, a benefactor who welcomed this little band from the Oratory whenever they went to and from Castelnovo. After drying their clothes, they sat down to a hearty meal, which was a generous gesture on his part and very much appreciated by the hungry boys.

Then we set out once more, but Michael was lagging behind the group. One of his friends, thinking that perhaps he was tired, fell back with him. As he came closer, he heard him whispering to himself.

"Are you tired, Mickey?" he asked. "Are your legs feeling the effects of the long hike?"

"Oh, no, I'm not a bit tired; I could walk to Milan."

"What were you saying to yourself as I came along?"

"I was saying the Rosary for the intentions of that gentleman who was so kind to us; I can't repay him in any other way and so I'm asking the Lord and our Lady to shower his family with many graces that he might be rewarded for all he did for us."

It is well to mention here that Michael had the same grateful thought for even the smallest favor, but towards his benefactors he was most sensitive. I would weary our readers if I included the many letters and notes he wrote to me to express his gratitude for having accepted him into the Oratory.

He spoke of his teachers, those who got him into the Oratory or had helped him in any way. He spoke of them with respect and was never ashamed to talk about his poverty and his gratitude.

"I regret," he often said, "that I don't have the means of showing my gratitude as I should, but I know full well what I owe to so many people, and as long as I live I will continue to pray to the Lord that he will reward them for all they have done."

He also expressed his gratitude when the pastor of Castelnuovo invited our boys to his house for a meal. That evening he said to me: "If you think it's a good idea, I would like to go to Communion tomorrow for the intentions of the pastor who treated us today."

I not only approved of that gesture but made it a point to recommend the same to all the boys, since we must always be grateful to our benefactors.

While we were at Morialdo, I noted another act of virtue which bears relating. One day our boys went for a walk in the woods for some fun. Some searched for mushrooms, chestnuts and other nuts; others heaped up leaves and jumped around in them. While they were busy, Michael quietly slipped away and returned to the house. One boy saw him and, fearing that he might not be well, followed him. Thinking that no one had seen him, Michael reached the house and, without saying a word to anyone, went straight to the church. The other boy followed and found him kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament rapt in fervent prayer.

Asked later why he had left the others to pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, he replied with all simplicity: "I fear falling again into sin and so I beseech the dear Lord in the Blessed Sacrament to give me the help and the strength to persevere in His grace."

Another striking incident occurred during the trip. One evening when all the boys were asleep, I heard

someone sighing and sobbing. I went quietly to the window and saw Michael in a corner of the threshing floor, looking up at the moon and crying his heart out.

"What's wrong, Michael?" I said "Aren't you feeling well?"

Thinking he was alone and no one could see him, he was startled and didn't know what to say. When I repeated my question he replied: "Admiring the moon, I can't help crying because for centuries it has lit up the night without once disobeying the orders of its Creator. But I, who am young and a rational creature and should be faithful to God's Laws, have disobeyed Him many times and have offended Him in a thousand ways."

Having said this, Michael broke down once more. I comforted him with a few words. He calmed down and went back to sleep.

It is certainly admirable that a boy hardly fourteen years old had already attained such wisdom and had such beautiful thoughts. Yet this is a fact and I could relate many other episodes that show how young Michael was capable of reflections far superior to his age, especially in seeing the hand of God in everything and the duty we have of obeying our Creator.

** Don Bosco gives a couple of examples of Michael's great sense of gratitude. It was a virtue which he very often recommended and even went so far as to say: A grateful person is certainly endowed with other virtues too." (BM XIII, 581)*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Preparation for Death

After the vacation spent at Castelnuovo, Michael had only three months to live. He was rather small, but healthy and well-built. He was quite intelligent and had no trouble in mastering anything he set his mind to. He had a great love for study, and was making better than average progress. As regards piety, he had reached a standard where I could honestly say that I would not know what to change in order to present him as a model for young people. Lively by nature, he was also pious, good, devout and highly appreciated little acts of virtue. He performed them joyfully, naturally, and without scruples.

Because of his piety, his love for study and his affability, he was loved and esteemed by all. At the same time, because of his liveliness and gentleness, he was the idol of the playground.

Without a doubt, it was our earnest wish that this model of Christian living would be with us until a ripe old age so that, whether as a priest, which he felt was his calling, or as a layman, he would have honored both his country and his faith. But God had decreed otherwise and wished to take this beautiful flower from the garden of the Church on earth to Himself and transplant it in the Church in paradise. Michael, too, without realizing his approaching death, prepared for it daily with an even better and more perfect way of life.

He made the Immaculate Conception novena with particular fervor. Here are the resolutions he proposed for these days of preparation.

"I, Michael Magone, want to make this novena well and so I promise:

"1) To detach my heart from all earthly things and give it completely to Mary.

"2) To make a general confession to ensure a peaceful conscience at the hour of my death.

"3) To skip breakfast every morning as a penance for my sins and to recite the Seven Joys of Mary for her assistance at those last hours of my life.

"4) To go to Communion every day, provided my confessor consents to it.

"5) To tell my companions an anecdote in honor of Mary each day.

"6) To place this sheet at the feet of our Lady's statue and consecrate myself completely to her. I want to be entirely hers until the last moment of my life."

All these resolutions were approved, except the general confession, which he had made only a short time before. Instead of skipping breakfast he was advised to say a daily prayer for the souls in purgatory.

With similar fervor and recollection he celebrated the novena and feast of Christmas.

"I really want to make this novena well," he said as he began it, "so that the Baby Jesus will come and be born in my soul with an abundance of His graces."

On the eve of the last day of the year (1858), the superior of the house urged the boys to thank the Lord for all the favors they received over the past year. He encouraged them to spend the New Year in God's grace because this could be the last one for any one of them. While speaking, his hand rested on the head of the boy nearest him – Michael Magone.

"I see," Michael said with surprise, "that it's I who should pack up for eternity."

His companions laughed, but they remembered these words and Michael often recalled them. In spite of this he did not lose his joviality and peace of mind. He continued to perform his duties faithfully and well. As Michael's life was drawing to a close, God wanted to give him an even clearer sign of it.

On Sunday, January 16, 1859, the members of the Blessed Sacrament Sodality, of which Michael was a member, had their usual Sunday meeting. After the opening prayers and time for discussion, one of the members took the box that contained slips of paper, each with a saying to be practiced during the week. As it made the rounds, each boy picked one at random. Michael's read: "At the judgment seat of God you will be on your own."

He passed it around the room and said aloud: "I'm sure this is a message from the Lord to warn me to be prepared and ready."

After the meeting, he went to his superior and said with a little anxiety that he considered it as a warning from the Lord, who would soon call him into His presence. His superior urged him to be prepared always, not because of what was written on the slip of paper, but because of what Jesus clearly says in the Gospel urging us to be always ready.

"Then tell me," insisted Michael, "how much longer do I have to live?"

"You'll live as long as God wants."

"But will I live until the end of this year?" he begged again with a trembling voice.

"Courage, Michael, calm down. Our life is in the hands of God, who is a good Father. He knows how long to keep us here. Besides, it's not necessary to know the hour of our death. Just prepare for it with good works."

Then he grew sad: "If you don't want to tell me, then it's a sign that my end is near."

"That's not necessarily so, but even if it were, I'm sure you wouldn't be afraid of going to pay a visit to the Blessed Virgin in heaven."

"True, true!" he said. He became his usual cheerful self and ran out to take part in the recreation.

He was as happy as ever on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday morning. He showed no signs of sickness and he was punctual in all his duties. It was only on Wednesday afternoon that I saw him on the balcony watching the games and not participating. This was most unusual and a sure sign that he was not well.

** "Michael was no 'plaster saint' but remained very popular among his companions. Why? – because of his liveliness and gentle manners."*

** As Michael had a premonition of death, he realized more and more his need of Mary. We often pray: "Pray for us now and at the hour of death." If we pray this prayer and not merely say it, we also will be ready when God calls us.*

** Note again the common sense of Don Bosco: no harsh penances but practical ones.*

** It has been said that the thought of death is morbid and depressing. Such was certainly not the case with so many boys directed by Don Bosco.*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Circumstances of His Illness

On Wednesday evening (January 19, 1859), I asked Michael what was bothering him. He said that it was nothing, an upset stomach – not unusual for him. He took some medicine and passed the night quietly.

The following morning, he got up at the usual time, went to church and received Holy Communion for the dying, which was his usual custom every Thursday. Later, he went to play but he couldn't participate because he was feeling very tired and experienced difficulty in breathing. He was given some more

medicine. The doctor was called but, finding nothing serious, advised him to keep taking the same remedy.

His mother was in Turin at this time and was told of his sickness. She came to visit and told us that he had suffered a similar illness ever since he was young, and the remedies we were giving him were the same as she had given.

Friday morning he wanted to receive Holy Communion in honor of the Passion of Christ, which he did every Friday for the grace of a happy death. He wasn't permitted, as he seemed to have gotten worse. He was given more medicine, along with another to help his breathing. Up to that point, there were no signs that this illness was serious.

About two in the afternoon his condition suddenly changed for the worse. He began experiencing great difficulty in breathing and was coughing up blood. I asked how he felt, and he replied that he was feeling a great heaviness in his stomach. I sensed that he was by now a very sick boy, so the doctor was summoned once more to make sure we were doing the right thing. His mother, in a true Christian spirit, suggested he go to confession while waiting for the doctor.

"Mom, I just went to confession and received Holy Communion yesterday, but it seems that the situation is serious and I would like to go to confession once again."

He prepared himself for a few minutes and made his confession. After that, with a smile on his face, he calmly spoke to me and his mother. "Who knows that this confession may be a real Exercise for a Happy Death, the real thing?"

"What do you think?" I asked. "Would you like to get well or go to heaven?"

"The Lord knows what is best for me; I only want to do what pleases him."

"If the Lord gave you the choice of recovering or going to heaven, which would you choose?"

"Who would not choose heaven?"

"So you'd like to go there?"

"Of course! I would like to go there with all my heart. That's what I've asked from the Lord for some time now."

"When would you like to go?"

"Right now, if that's what the Lord wants."

"Okay then, let's say together: 'Whether in life or in death, may the adorable will of God be done!'"

Just at that moment the doctor arrived. He could tell that the sick boy's condition was serious.

"The boy has a hemorrhage in the stomach, and I'm doubtful that we can stop it."

The doctor did what he could – potions, blood-letting, blistering – anything to stop the bleeding that at times was choking Michael. All efforts were of no use.

At nine o'clock that night (Friday, January 21), Michael asked to receive Communion once more before his death, since he had not done so that morning. He was anxious to receive that Christ whom he had been receiving now for some time with so much fervor.

Before he received he told me and those around his bed: "I recommend myself to the prayers of all my companions; pray that this sacramental Christ be my viaticum – to lead me to eternal life." He received Communion and was helped to make his thanksgiving.

After a quarter of an hour he stopped repeating the prayers that were suggested to him. We thought he had passed away. But after a few minutes he opened his eyes and in a seemingly joking way, said: "There was a mistake on that slip of paper that I got last Sunday. It said 'At the judgment seat of God you will be on your own.' It's not true. I won't be alone. The

Blessed Virgin will be there to help me, so I've nothing to fear. I'm ready to go at any time. Our Lady wants to be by my side at the judgment seat of God."

** Michael had reached a height of sanctity when he wanted only to do God's will, even if he was homesick for heaven.*

** Michael was a faithful, loving son of Mary in life – she did not desert him as the hour of his death drew near.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Final Moments and Beautiful Death

At ten o'clock Michael's condition worsened and it seemed likely that he would not last the night. It was arranged that Fr. Augustine Zattini, an infirmarian, and a cleric would sit with him for half the night; then Fr. Alasonatti, with another cleric and infirmarian would watch by his bedside for the rest of the night.

I didn't think there was any immediate danger as I told Michael: "Get some rest. I'm going to my room for a few moments and then I'll return."

"No, please don't leave me," Michael begged.

"I'm only going to say some of my breviary and then I'll be right back."

"Then come back as soon as you can."

I gave instructions that I was to be called at the slightest sign of a worsening condition. I loved that young boy very much and I wanted to be at his side in his last moments. I was no sooner in my room when I was called back to Michael's bed. It seemed that he had begun his death agony. He was slipping away quickly, so the Holy Oils were administered by Fr. Zattini while Michael was still fully conscious.

He answered the prayers at the rite of anointing and added some of his own. I remember his words at the anointing of his lips: "O my God, if only you had struck me dumb before I used my tongue to offend you! So many offenses less! My God, pardon the sins of my tongue. I repent of them with all my heart."

At the anointing of the hands he added: "How often I fought with my companions with these hands! Pardon me, O God, and help my companions to be better than I am."

At the end of the anointing, I asked if he would like to see his mother, who had gone for some rest in a nearby room. She too thought that his condition was not serious.

"No," he replied. "It's better not to call her. Poor Mom! She loves me so much that watching me die would upset her deeply. Poor Mom! When I'm in heaven I'll pray for her."

He was urged to remain calm and to prepare himself to receive the Papal Blessing and plenary indulgence. Michael had great respect for religious practices which had indulgences attached to them, and benefited from them greatly. And so he was happy to receive the Papal Blessing. He participated in all the prayers, but chose to recite the *Confiteor* himself. He spoke every word with great fervor, devotion, and lively faith. All who were there were moved to tears.

Then he seemed to doze off, and we left him in peace. After a short rest he woke up. His pulse indicated that death was fast approaching, but his face was calm. He smiled, and was as fully conscious as any youngster in perfect health. Michael certainly must have been in some pain, because his internal bleeding caused him to choke. He was panting and generally exhausted. Michael had often asked God to allow him to do his purgatory on earth, so that he could go

straight to heaven. I believe that it was this thought that allowed him to suffer with joy. That very pain which normally brings sadness and distress gave him nothing but joy and pleasure.

I'm sure that, through a special grace of our Lord, Michael not only seemed insensitive to pain, but exhibited consolation in bearing these sufferings. We didn't need to suggest any prayers to him, because he was reciting some aspirations on his own.

At 10:45 he called my name and said: "Here we are. It's time. Help me."

"Take it easy," I replied. "I won't leave you until you're safe with the Lord in heaven. But if you really feel you are about to leave this world, don't you want to say a last good-bye to your mother?"

"No, Father. I don't want to see her suffer."

"Then, won't you give me a message for her?"

"Yes! Ask her to pardon me for all the suffering I caused her. Tell her that I'm sorry. Tell her that I love her and that she should continue her good work. Tell her that I die willingly and that I'm leaving this world in the company of Jesus and Mary and that I'll be waiting for her in heaven."

These words stirred everyone to tears. I kept my composure and, to leave those final moments with good thoughts, I kept asking him questions.

"Do you have a message for your companions?"

"Tell them to always make good confessions."

"Michael, what gives you the greatest comfort?"

"What comforts me most at this moment is all that I've done to honor Mary no matter how small it was. Yes, this is the greatest consolation. O Mary, how happy are those who, at the hour of death, have been devoted to you! But there is one thing that bothers me. When my soul leaves my body as I enter heaven, what must I do? To whom must I turn?"

"If our Lady wants to accompany you, leave all that to her. But before you leave for paradise, I want you to do something for me."

"Go on, I'll do all I can for you."

"When you're in heaven and you see the Virgin Mary, give her our humble and respectful good wishes from me and everyone in this house. Beg her to bless us and take us under her powerful protection. Beg her to see that none of us who live in the Oratory now, or anyone that Providence will send us in the future, will lose their soul."

"I'll do that willingly. Is there anything else?"

"Not for the present. Now rest."

It seemed that he wanted to get some sleep. He appeared quite calm, although his weakening pulse signaled that death would come soon. And so we began to recite the *Profisciscere*, a prayer for the dying. In the middle of the prayer, he awoke as if from a deep sleep and, with a smile on his lips, said to me: "Within a short time now I'll deliver your message, just as you've asked of me. Tell my companions I await them all in heaven." He took the crucifix in his hands, kissed it three times and then uttered his final words. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I place my soul into your hands."

He parted his lips as if to smile, gently fell back, and took his final breath.

That blessed soul left this world to fly, as we ardently hope, to the bosom of God at 11:00 p.m. of January 21, 1859, barely fourteen years old. He suffered no agony. He was not agitated or in pain, nor did he show any of the symptoms that naturally accompany the terrible separation of the soul from the body. I hardly know how to describe his death, except to call it a sleep of joy that carried away that soul from the sorrows of life to the joys of eternity.

All present were overcome rather than saddened. Fr. Zattini could no longer control his emotions and exclaimed: "O Death, for innocent souls you are not a punishment! For these you are the great benefactor who opens the doors to joys that will last forever. Oh, why can't I be in your place, Michael? At this moment your soul has been judged, and the Blessed Virgin has already conducted you to the enjoyment of the great glory of heaven. Dear Magone, may you live happily for all eternity! Pray for us. We'll fulfill our duties as friends by offering fervent prayers to God for the eternal repose of your soul."

** Note Michael's tender thoughts for his mother. Like Don Bosco, he realized how much he owed to his mother and how much she contributed to the building up of his spiritual life.*

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Funeral and Final Thoughts

At daybreak Michael's good mother came into the room to see her son. She was deeply moved on hearing that he was dead. That Christian woman just stood there for a moment without saying a word or giving a sigh, and then broke forth in these words: "Dear God, you are the Master of all things. Dear Michael, you are dead. I'll always weep for you as a son I've lost, but I thank God who allowed you to die here with every possible help. Such a death is precious in the eyes of the Lord. Rest with God in peace; pray for your mother, who loved you so dearly and will love you even more now that I believe that you are with the just in heaven. I'll always pray for your soul and hope one day to join you with the saints."

Upon finishing these words, she broke down sobbing and went to church to find comfort in prayer.

The loss of such a companion was deeply felt by all the boys in the Oratory, and by all who knew him. Michael was well known for his physical and moral qualities and was most esteemed for the rare virtues that brightened his soul.

His companions passed the following day by praying for the repose of his soul. They found comfort in saying the Rosary and the Office of the Dead, and going to confession and Communion. All mourned him as a friend. They were consoled by saying: "At this moment Michael is already with Dominic Savio in heaven." Their feelings were summed up by one of Michael's teachers, Fr. Francesia, in these words:

"The day after Michael's death I went to class. It was a Saturday. Michael's seat was empty, so I told the class that we had lost a student but heaven had gained another citizen. I nearly broke down as I said this. The boys were shaken up and in the general silence the only words heard were: 'He is dead.' The entire class broke into sobs. All loved him; for who could not love such a boy possessing so many virtues? The great reputation he had acquired was fully realized after his death. Everyone looked for anything that Michael had written. One of my colleagues, Fr. Turchi, was very fortunate to have a notebook that belonged to Michael. He cut Michael's signature from an examination paper of the previous year and pasted it on that notebook.

"For my part, because of his virtuous life, I did not hesitate to call on him in all my needs, and I must confess he never once let me down. Please accept my sincerest thanks, dear friend, and I beg of you to keep on interceding for your old teacher before the throne of God. Instill into my heart a spark of your great humility.

Pray for all your companions that we may all meet you one day in heaven."

In order to show an external sign of the great affection we had for Michael, he was given as solemn a burial as our poor condition allowed. With lighted candles, funeral hymns, and the brass band we accompanied the body to the grave. After praying for the repose of his soul, we said our last fond farewell with the hope that we would one day join him in a better life than this.

A month later we celebrated the Month's Mind. Fr. Zattini preached Michael's eulogy in moving words. I regret that there is no room in this booklet to report it in full. However, I want to quote the final part as a conclusion to this biography.

After reminding us of the many virtues that enriched his soul, he invited his sorrowing audience not to forget him. He asked them to remember him often, to comfort him with their prayers, and to follow the wonderful example he had given them.

These were Fr. Zattini's final thoughts about Michael Magone:

"These examples of his life and these words in his death remind us of our dear friend Michael Magone of Carmagnola. He is no longer with us; death has vacated his seat here in church, where he often came to pray, which brought him so much peace. He is no more, and his sudden departure teaches us that every star sets here below, every treasure is consumed, every soul is reclaimed by God.

"Thirty days ago we committed his mortal remains to the earth. If I had been present, I would have followed the custom of plucking a handful of grass from the graveside, repeating in sad tones the words of the Son of Judah: *'They will flower like the grass of the fields!'*

"From your grave may other young people rise up who will remind us of you, repeat your example, and multiply your virtues!

"And so, farewell, sweet, dear, faithful companion of ours, good and valiant Michael! Good-bye! You, the hope of your wonderful mother who shed tears for you more from piety than from her blood relationship; you, the cherished hope of an adopted father who received you in the name of God, who called you to this beautiful and blessed sanctuary where you learned so well and so quickly the love of God and esteem for virtue; you, the friend of your companions, respectful to your superiors, docile to your teachers, kindly to all!

"You dreamed of the priesthood. Even there you would have been a master and example of heavenly wisdom. You have left a void, a wound in our hearts! But you have gone from us or, better, death has stolen you from our esteem and affection. Does death teach us anything? Yes, it's a warning to the fervent, the less fervent, and the sinner – the negligent, the sleepy, the lazy, the weak, the tepid, and the cold.

"We pray you, let us know whether you are in the land of the living, in the place of joy; let us hear that you are at the fountain of grace, or rather, the sea of grace, and that your voice now joins the heavenly choirs so pleasing to the ears of God!

"Give us your zeal, your love, your charity. Help us to live good, chaste, devout, virtuous lives. And may we die happy, peaceful, calm deaths, trusting in the divine mercies. We beg you that death may not touch us with its torments as it respected you. Pray for us with those other angelic boys from this house. They preceded you into God's presence – Camillo Gavio, Gabriel Fascio, Louis Rua, Dominic Savio, and John Massaglia. Pray with them, especially for the most beloved head of this house.

"We will always remember you in our prayers. We will never forget you until we have been granted the joy of reaching paradise. Blessed be God, who formed you, nourished you, supported you, and took you to Himself. Blessed is He who gives life. Blessed is He who takes it."

* *"The life of Michael Magone is a classic of education of the heart. Because of this, it will remain for all time the classical document of pedagogy as envisaged by Don Bosco."* (Fr. Albert Caviglia)

LIFE OF MICHAEL MAGONE

1845 (September 19)	Michael is born at Carmagnola
1857 (March 9)	Death of Dominic Savio.
(October)	Michael meets Don Bosco at the railway station.
	Michael comes to the Oratory.
1858 (Sept.-Oct.)	Vacation at Becchi.
1859 (January)	Publication of Dominic Savio's <i>Life</i> .
(January 21)	Death of Michael at the Oratory
1861 (September)	First edition of the biography of Michael Magone as written by Don Bosco.

Francis Besucco

Francis spent only a few months at the Oratory, although he had been indirectly influenced by Don Bosco through reading the lives of Savio and Magone.

Of the 34 chapters, the first 15 were put together by Don Bosco from information gathered from his pastor, teachers, parents, and friends.

As an educator and spiritual director, Don Bosco was well aware of the futility of attempting mass production. Each boy was treated as an individual and educated and directed as an individual. Even in these biographies we see three totally different personalities, each with a different background. Besucco, coming from a small alpine village, had very little contact with many children his age and grew up in the company of adults. Entering the Oratory must have been a traumatic experience.

Yet Don Bosco directed these three souls along the road to sanctity, even to a heroic degree, as recognized by the Church in Savio's case. This great director of souls attested that these three boys were just three among dozens. What was his secret? He himself provides the answer: **obedience**, willingness to seek and accept direction.

Don Bosco wrote the lives of three boys who were called to eternity before the promise of becoming outstanding apostolic souls could be fully realized. Yet we must not forget the hundreds whose lives Don Bosco touched, who became real heroes of apostolic sanctity. We have only to recall Blessed Michael Rua, Blessed Aloysius Orione, Blessed Aloysius Guanella, Cardinal John Cagliero, Bishop James Costamagna, Fr. Paul Albera, Fr. Philip Rinaldi ...the list could go on. We could add the priests—over 2000—that Don Bosco trained for the dioceses of northern Italy!

LIFE OF FRANCIS BESUCCO

By St. John Bosco

My dear boys,

Just as I was ready to write the life of one of your companions, Francis Besucco died unexpectedly, and I decided to write his life instead. I feel that this will not only please you boys and his family, but will also be of great value to you. And so, I've researched Francis' life and present it to you here.

Some of you may question whether what I've written really happened. I assure you it did, and here are my sources. Concerning his early years at home, I collected information from his pastor, teacher, parents, and friends. I've only rewritten and rearranged what they sent me. While he was here, it was simply a matter of collecting information from many witnesses, who wrote and signed their own testimonies.

It's true that some of these events may appear far fetched; and that's why I've been very careful in writing them down. If the events were not important there would be no need to publish them. When you realize that Francis possesses knowledge far beyond his age, you must remember that he was a diligent learner, blest with a good memory, and favored by God in a special way. These facts contributed greatly to a maturity well beyond his years.

On a personal note, it's possible that I have been too expressive about the relationship between the two of us. For this I ask your forbearance. But look upon me as a father who is speaking about a son whom he loves tenderly; a father who gives his time to his loved one and who speaks to his dear sons; a father who opens his heart to instruct them in the practice of virtue, of which Besucco was a model.

Read his life, my dear boys and, if it prompts you to turn away from some wrong or to practice some virtue, give thanks to God, the giver of all good things.

May the Lord bless us all and keep us in His holy grace here on earth, so that we can one day bless Him forever in Heaven.

** Although this is but a brief preface, it is quite rich in content, giving some valuable hints as to why Don Bosco was such an outstanding educator and spiritual director of the young.*

** A person is a unique individual – the sum total of his characteristics, none of which are unimportant. Don Bosco knew his boys because he took the trouble to pinpoint their characteristics and see what needed to be reinforced, corrected or affirmed.*

** “Please look upon me as a father who is speaking of a son whom he loves tenderly.” Don Bosco really gives us a fine self-portrait in these words and offers us the secret of success when working with young people. As he wrote in another place: “He who knows he is loved will love, and he who is loved will get all he wants, especially from the young.”*

** Don Bosco was prepared to “give of his time” (the most precious possession we have).*

CHAPTER ONE

Francis Besucco's Early Life

It's a long, steep, and tiring hike from Cuneo to the Alps. As we go we discover a high plain with the most picturesque and pleasant views you have ever seen. At night you can see the highest peak of the Alps, which the local people call Magdalene. They believe that this saint came from Marseilles to live in these uninhabitable mountains.

At the top of the mountain is a plateau with a large lake that is the source of the Stura River. As far as the eye can see, there is a long, wide, deep valley called the Valley of the Lower Alps, which once belonged to France. As morning dawns, your eyes are pleasantly surprised by a chain of hills, one lower than the other, like a spiral staircase descending to the villages of Cuneo and Saluzzo. Resting on the plateau, 50 miles from the French border, lay the village of Argentera, the home town of Francis Besucco, about whom I'm writing.

On March 1, 1850, Francis was born here in a humble house of poor, honest, and religious parents. His father was Matthew, his mother, Rose. In view of their poverty they asked the pastor and archpriest, Fr. Francis Pepino, to baptize the child and look after him as a godson, to which he willingly consented.

His godmother was the pastor's mother, Anna, a woman of great piety, who never refused to perform an act of charity. The parents wanted the child named after the pastor, who then added the saint of the day, Albinus. After Francis made his First Communion, he always received the sacraments on March 1, and, as far as possible, passed the day in works of Christian piety.

His mother was well aware of the importance of a good education and was diligent in teaching her son to be pious. The names of Jesus and Mary were the first words that she taught him. As she looked into his face and thought of the dangers to which young people are exposed, she would say: "My dear Francis, I love you so much, but I love your soul much more than your body. I would rather see you dead than have you offend God. I hope to have the consolation of seeing you always in God's grace."

Rose Besucco daily expressed these and similar sayings for the benefit of her children.

Contrary to expectations, Francis grew into a robust little fellow, while many also noticed his growth in grace. In such a family atmosphere, it is no wonder that Francis was a great consolation to all. His parents and siblings tell us how pleased he was to say the names of Jesus and Mary as soon as he could speak.

As a young boy he showed great pleasure in learning prayers and religious songs, which he loved to sing in the family circle. It was a delight to see the joy with which he would join the faithful in singing the praises of Jesus and Mary before Vespers on feast days.

Francis' love for prayer seemed second nature to him. His family members tell us that from the age of three he never had to be invited to pray; rather, he pestered them to teach him more new prayers. Every morning and evening, at the customary time, he knelt down and recited the prayers which he already knew, and would not get up until he had learned another new prayer.

** Again, the influence of a good Christian mother; "It is therefore above all in the Christian family, inspired by the grace and the responsibility of the sacrament of*

matrimony, that children should be taught to know and worship God and to love their neighbor, in accordance with the faith which they have received in earliest infancy in the sacrament of Baptism.” (Vatican II, “Christian Education,” No. 3)

CHAPTER TWO

Death of His Godmother

Young Besucco had great affection for his godmother and regarded her as his second mother.

She returned his love by little gifts and acts of kindness. He was only three when Anna Pepino fell seriously ill. He went to see her as often as he could. He prayed for her and showed her signs of his love. She died on May 9, 1853, and it seems that, although he was not present, he had some premonition of her death.

Despite his tender age, he began to say an Our Father every morning and evening for his deceased godmother, a practice he kept all his life. He often said: “I remember my godmother and pray for her every day, even though I have every hope that she already enjoys the glory of heaven.” Because of the affection that Francis showed his dear mother, Fr. Pepino loved Francis in return and kept an eye on him as much as possible.

Whenever his family was ready to pray, Francis became recollected, his eyes raised and his little hands joined, as though aware of the favors that the merciful God was about to shower upon him.

In the morning, unlike boys his age, he would not eat anything until he had said his prayers. While in church he never disturbed those around him and, noticing his devout posture, they tended to imitate him.

Those who observed his surprising disposition would often say: "It's incredible for a boy of that age to be so good."

He took part in all the church services, and wanted to please everybody, even if it inconvenienced him. At times a heavy snowfall would prevent anyone from serving Mass. But not Francis! Courageously facing every danger, he would burrow a path through the snow with his feet and hands to get to the church. At first sight he looked like a little animal swallowed up in the deep snow.

One day in mid-January of 1863, while Matthew Valoroso was lighting the candles before Mass, he saw something strange enter the church. He was surprised to see our courageous little boy, Francis, who was so happy when he finally reached the church that he called out: "At last I've made it." He served the Mass with Matthew. After Mass, with a big smile, he met the pastor, saying "This is worth two Masses. I've paid double attention and it has made me so happy. I'll continue to come here whatever the cost."

Who could not love such a pleasant boy?

And that was how Francis grew in grace before God and men.

By the age of five he knew his morning and night prayers perfectly. He would say them every day with his family. This was their custom all the while he lived at home.

While he was eager to pray, he was equally eager to learn prayers and aspirations. It was enough for Francis to hear a new prayer that he would not rest until he had learned it. Then, it seemed he had discovered a treasure and would teach it to the rest of the family. He wanted his prayer to become part of the family tradition, or to hear it recited by his companions.

The following prayers were, so to speak, his Morning Prayer and Night Prayer. Upon waking he would make the sign of the cross and jump out of bed saying or singing:

My soul, get up; look up to heaven, love Jesus; love the one who loves you; turn away from the world which cheats you; remember that you have to die and your body will decay; and so that you may be heard, say three Hail Mary's to our Lady.

At first he did not understand what this prayer meant and he would pester his family to explain it to him. When he finally understood it he would say: "Now I can recite it with greater devotion." In time this prayer became his rule of life.

As he was going to bed, he would devoutly recite the following prayer:

*To lie down, I will go. If I rise again, I do not know.
Four things I need to do –
Confession, Communion,
Holy Viaticum, the Papal Blessing, too;
In the name of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."*

He was particularly pleased to talk about religion and the examples of virtue that others practiced, which he would then try to imitate. If he looked pensive and sad, or needed cheering up, it was enough to speak of spiritual things or of the advantages of going to school.

CHAPTER 3

Obedience, Advice and Work

His pastor, Fr. Pepino, tells us that Francis was so obedient to his parents that he often anticipated their wishes, that he never refused them, and that he never showed any unwillingness in carrying out their wishes.

His sisters tell us that when they did not obey their parents, either through inadvertence or because they were busy with other things, they were admonished by their little brother. He would implore them: "Look here, mother told you to do this more than half an hour ago and you still haven't done it. You shouldn't displease someone who loves us so much."

He was always kind to his brothers and sisters and never took offense even when they blamed him. He liked to play with them, because he believed that he could learn only good things from them. He confided in them and asked them to keep an eye on his defects. "I regret," attests the pastor, "that I can't describe the wonderful harmony which existed in this family; there were eight of them at the time; they were exemplary in everything, whether it be family life or their frequency and devotion at the religious services."

Five years ago his oldest brother John was about to leave for military service, and Francis was forever giving him advice on how to behave so that he would be as good there as he was at home. "Try," he said, "to be devoted to Mary most holy. She will certainly help you. For my part I'll keep praying for you. We'll write to you shortly." He was only nine years old.

Then, turning to his parents, who were losing the son they relied on most for work in the fields, he said: "You're sad now. But God will console us by keeping us in good health and by helping us in our work. And I'll do all I can to help you." What a wonderful worker he turned out to be. To everyone's surprise, he did his allotted tasks, and even wanted to take on more work, but his parents thought it would be too much for him.

While working in the fields, he maintained his sense of cheerfulness, even when fatigued. If at times his father jokingly told him that he seemed tired from work, he would reply: "Yes, it seems that I'm not suited

for this work. My godfather tells me that I should study; perhaps he will help me." He never let a day go by without mentioning to the family that he wanted to go to school.

He attended school during the winter, but he never excused himself from his daily chores, as so many boys do, so they could play during free time. This was Francis' life in Argentera.

** Francis was prepared to show his love for his parents in a practical way.*

CHAPTER 4

Francis' Behavior at School

Although his parents needed him at home, they realized that regular instruction was a valuable way to learn about religion, and so they sent Francis to school. He would rise early and recite his morning prayers, stopping often to meditate on their meaning. He prayed alone or with his family and then studied until it was time to go to school; after school he would come straight back for house chores.

Progress in class mirrored his great diligence; he was not a brilliant student, but he did his best and made good use of his time, making great progress.

His teacher warned the students not to wander about wasting time during the winter season, and Besucco gave a shining example. Not only did he obey, but he led many of his friends to imitate him, which helped them to learn and behave. This pleased their teacher, Anthony Valoroso, their parents, and even the boys. He rarely went out to play after dinner. He had not done so for several months before coming to the Oratory.

After some relaxation, he got down to study until the bell rang for school. His teacher states that he paid the greatest attention to what was taught and was always respectful. He helped the teacher with the younger pupils to learn how to read, and did this quite naturally. While he attended the village school, Francis was regarded by his companions as an example of good behavior and diligence. They held him in such esteem that, when in his presence, they refrained from saying anything bad because he would not approve and he would let them know it, as happened several times.

If a younger student needed help outside of school hours, he was only too willing, and he insisted that they ask for help. At the same time he did not pass up any occasion to give them some good advice or to urge them to greater love of God.

Francis' teacher has written to me the following.

"Whenever there was a fight among his school-mates, he would step in to quiet them down. 'We're friends,' he would tell them, 'and we shouldn't fight over harmless trifles; let's think well of each other and learn to put up with each other as God wants us to.' Words such as these usually worked in restoring the peace. However, if he saw that his words had no effect, he simply walked away.

"When he heard the bell ring for school or for church, he invited his companions to finish their games. One day he was playing bocce when he heard the bell for catechism class. Francis said at once: 'Let's go; we can finish our game after the church services.' With that he left them. After church he returned and gently rebuked those who missed the instruction and practices of piety. Then, to show that they were still his friends, he brought them some cherries. Won over by his generosity and courtesy,

they promised that they would never miss religious services because of their games.

"Francis would become upset if he heard people say an indecent word and would leave their company or else give them a severe reprimand. 'Friends, don't say those words. They offend God and scandalize others.' Those same companions state that Francis often invited them to visit the Blessed Sacrament and our Lady, and that he volunteered to help them with their school work.

"When he heard the Angelus bell he would say: 'Come on, let's say the Angelus; and then we can continue our games.' During vacation time he would invite the same companions to assist at Mass.

"As the teacher of the village school of Argentera, I must say, to the greater glory of God, that the pious young Besucco was second to none in attendance at school during his five years there. If he noticed any negligent companions, he could warn them so kindly that, whether they wanted to or not, they became more diligent.

"His conduct in school could not have been better, whether it was keeping silence or paying attention to what was being taught. He took great pleasure in helping the smaller ones learn to read. He did this so politely and with such kindness that he was greatly loved and respected by them in return."

* *Francis followed in the footsteps of John Bosco by helping his companions as a form of positive apostolate.*

CHAPTER 5

Francis' Family Life

When Francis returned home from school, he hugged his parents and was ready to do whatever they wanted before supper, which was a very frugal meal. He never grumbled about the quantity or quality of the food.

If he noticed others in the family who were dissatisfied he would say to them: "When you're out on your own you can do what you want, but now we must do what our parents want. We're poor and we can't live like the rich. It's not important that my companions are well dressed, while I don't have fine clothes. The best suit that we can possibly have is the grace of God."

He had the greatest respect for his parents; he loved them with the most tender, filial love; he obeyed them blindly; and he never stopped praising them for what they did for him. They in turn loved him greatly for this, and they felt it deeply when he was absent from them. At times his brothers or sisters would jokingly say: "You've got every reason to be happy, Francis, since you are the Benjamin of the family." He would reply, "Yes, that's true, but I always try my best to be good and earn their love as well as yours."

This was so true. If he received a gift or some money, he immediately gave it to his parents when he got home, or shared it with his brothers and sisters and would tell them: "See how much I love you."

He spent evenings at home, seldom going out with friends. He used the time to enjoy the company of his family, to study his lessons, or to finish some other duty. At a certain point he would invite all to say the Rosary along with the usual evening prayers, which he prolonged because he recited many Our Fathers.

He never forgot to say special prayers for his father and brothers, who worked away from home in the winter to support the family. "Who knows," he often said with tears, "how much our father suffers for us. He may be tired and cold while we are comfortable and eat the fruit of his labors. Let's at least pray for him." He spoke about his absent father every day, and accompanied him in thought on his journeys.

During the evenings, he devoted time to reading some devout books, which were provided by his godfather or his teacher; they in turn were only too happy to loan them to him. Whenever the house was filled with family and friends he would often say: "Listen to the beautiful example that I found in this book." He would then read it in a resonant voice as though he were preaching. If he happened to come across the life of some pious young man, he would speak to the others about his life and try to imitate his example. "Wouldn't I be fortunate, Mother, if I could become as good as he was?"

"Two years ago," says his pastor Fr. Pepino, "he read the life of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, and promptly began to imitate him, especially by keeping quiet about his good deeds. Some months later he was given the biographies of Dominic Savio and Michael Magone. After reading the life of Magone, he said that he had a good example for his own life. He asked God for the grace to correct his defects, imitate his good conduct, and have a holy death like 'his dear Magone,' as he called him. He wanted to learn more about Magone and imitate him. He asked me if it would be possible for him to go to the same school so that he would become virtuous. This is the great benefit that Francis got from reading good books. I wish all my young parishioners read such books! They would certainly be a consolation to their parents."

In the morning Francis would raise his innocent soul to heaven; in the evening he would turn his thoughts to death. When asked what he did when he went to bed, he would answer: "I imagine that I'm lying in my grave, and the first thought that comes to mind is this: 'What will happen if you fall into hell?' I'm frightened by this thought and I pray to Jesus, Mary, Joseph and my Guardian Angel. I don't stop praying until I fall asleep. Oh! How many resolutions I make when I'm in bed for fear of losing my soul! If I wake up, I keep praying and regret it if sleep overcomes me again."

* *Francis is just one example of the influence of reading good literature, in particular, the lives of models for the young. "Don Bosco was personally convinced that to preach the Good News by means of the press was a service he was obliged to render as an educator of youth and the common people." (Fr. Pietro Stella)*

* *"The press was a principal undertaking that divine providence entrusted to me; I do not hesitate to call this means divine, since God himself made use of it in the regeneration of man." Don Bosco (Epist. IV, 318)*

CHAPTER 6

Fr. Francis Pepino and Confession

Even though Francis seems to have been blessed from his infancy, we must remember that the vigilance of his parents, his naturally good disposition, and the loving care of his pastor greatly influenced his moral education. When he was a young child his parents took him to church, taught him to make the Sign of the Cross well, and how and when he should kneel.

When he was ready they accompanied him for his first confession. Following his parents' example and encouragement, he took a liking to this sacrament. Instead of the usual apprehension or repugnance that children show when in the presence of persons in authority, he enjoyed it immensely.

Francis' success is due in great part to his pastor, Fr. Francis Pepino. This exemplary priest worked zealously for the good of his parishioners. But he was convinced that you cannot have good parishioners if the young are not well educated. Hence, he spared no effort in helping the young. He taught the boys how to serve Mass. He taught school and often sought them out at home, at work, or in the fields. He paid special attention to a child who showed an aptitude for study and piety.

For this reason, when he noticed the blessings Francis exhibited, he took special care of him, gave him his first lesson in catechism, and prepared him for his first confession. His kindness and fatherly care won him over, so that Francis was very happy when he spoke with him or heard his comforting words.

While in Argentera, Francis chose Fr. Pepino as his confessor, who advised him to change confessors once in a while and gave him the opportunity to do so; but the boy would not change. "I trust you, Father," he would say. "You know my heart. I tell you every secret; I love you very much because you love my soul very much."

I believe that a young boy is very fortunate when he has a regular confessor to whom he can open his heart, one who takes care of his soul, and encourages him to approach this sacrament regularly.

Francis did not depend on his pastor only for confession, but for anything that contributed to his temporal and spiritual growth. Any advice Fr. Pepino

suggested was a command for Francis, who carefully and happily carried it out.

His way of approaching confession was also edifying. A few days before, he would tell his brothers and sisters that he wanted to profit from it. In his early years, he asked them how to make a good confession, how they recognized offenses, and how they could remember their sins over a period of a month. He was very surprised that, after going to confession, a person could again offend God, to whom he had promised to be faithful. "How good God is," he used to say, "to pardon us despite our failure to honor our resolutions. But how much greater is our ingratitude in the face of such blessings; we should tremble at the very thought of our infidelity. For my part I am prepared to do and to suffer anything rather than offend Him again."

The evening before confession he would ask his father if he had any pressing work for the next day. When asked why, he said that he wanted to go to confession. His father always willingly consented and Francis passed nearly the whole night praying and examining his conscience so as to be better prepared, although his whole life could be called a continual preparation.

In the morning, without speaking to anyone, he went to church and prepared for this event with the greatest recollection. He waited for those people who seemed to be in a hurry. "His concern for others," says his pastor, "especially in the bitter cold of winter, compelled me to call him into the confessional, as he would be numb from the cold. I asked why he waited so long before going to confession. 'I can wait,' he would reply, 'because my parents don't mind the time I spend in church. Others could be annoyed by waiting, or be rebuked at home, especially the mothers who have small children.'"

At times his brothers and sisters jokingly said: "You go to confession just to dodge work." He would reply, "If you want to go, I'll willingly do your chores. The more often you go, the happier it will make me."

Any spiritual guide would tell them: "The laziness and uncertainty you feel about confession, and putting it off from day to day, are just so many temptations of the devil. He knows what a powerful remedy frequent confession is in correcting our faults, and he makes every effort to keep us away. Oh! When it is a question of doing good, we are afraid of the world. When we die, it is not the world but God who will judge us. We must give an account of our works to Him alone, and not to anyone else, not to the world; from Him alone are we to expect eternal reward."

"After confession," he would tell the family, "I experience such contentment that I would die there and then to avoid offending God again."

On days when he received the sacraments he avoided any kind of amusements. When his pastor asked him why, he replied: "Today I have no need to please my body, because God has brought such great and sweet consolation to my soul. I'm sorry that I'm incapable of thanking Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament for the help he gives me." Instead he passed the day in recollection and, if possible, in church.

I have it on good authority that, to receive the sacraments worthily, he would say: "This confession could be the last of my life, and I want to make it as if it really were the last."

** Throughout this biography, Don Bosco dwells on the sacrament of Reconciliation. He indicates that Francis had already learned a valuable lesson: the importance of a REGULAR CONFESSOR. Note Don Bosco's comments on the dangers of putting off confession.*

CHAPTER 7

Mass Attendance and Grazing Sheep

Francis' parents gave him full liberty to attend daily Mass. When he hesitated for fear of omitting some duty, they themselves sent him to Mass. This pleased him and he would tell his parents: "Be sure that time taken to hear Holy Mass will be abundantly rewarded during the day, because God pays well, and I shall work much more willingly." When he could not attend daily Mass, he would recite a popular prayer that he learned at the age of four and which is well-known in that district.

*The bells ring as Mass begins;
St. Mark intones the ancient hymns;
Angels chant the songs divine;
Baby Jesus offers water and wine.*

O Jesus, include me in the Mass this morning.

His father would jokingly ask Francis how he would manage that day without Mass, and he would reply quite naturally: "God will help me just the same, because I've said my prayers and I'll pray even more this evening."

Francis easily believed what other people said, and his companions would tell him some tall stories. Even when he realized they were poking fun at him, he remained calm. He never put on airs, because it was enough to be esteemed in the eyes of his parents, his pastor, and those who knew him.

He was better than his companions in studies, but this was no reason to despise them. Actually, he was very kind to them when they knew their lessons, and assisted those who needed help.

If he received a rebuke for some childish prank, he would be quite contrite and answer: "I won't do it again; I'll be better. You're blaming me, but I know that

you pardon me.” And here he would run to embrace and hug his parents, usually with tears in his eyes. They never had any reason to punish their son.

During the summer he worked in the fields with the family. He loved to help his brothers and sisters, and worked as hard as he could. He shunned idleness and so, during rest periods, he would begin a discussion on religion or ask his father about some doubt he might have in spiritual matters.

He prayed to and from work. His pastor says, “We would meet him on the way, but he was so absorbed in prayer that he did not notice us.

He was scandalized by swearing or bad talk which he could not avoid hearing. He would immediately make the Sign of the Cross or say: ‘Blessed be God! Blessed be His holy name!’ and begin to talk about something else. When warned by his parents not to follow the bad example of some companions he answered: ‘I would rather have my tongue cut out than use it to offend God.’”

When he led the sheep out to pasture, he brought a good book along and read it to his companions, if they were willing to listen to him. Otherwise, he read alone or said some prayers, following the command of our Savior to pray always.

To provide for the family, Francis' father took care of the common flock and entrusted Francis with this task, particularly on feast days, so that his brothers might take part in parish services at least on those days. Francis accepted the task obediently and willingly. “If I can't go to church on these days, I'll try to sanctify the feast in some other way.”

He would tell his brothers to remember him in church. When it was time for the devotions, he would take the animals to a safe spot and kneel before a crucifix to say his prayers or read a spiritual book.

At times he would find a cave in the hills, kneel before a picture he had in his book, and recite the same prayers being said in church. Afterwards, he would make the Stations of the Cross. In the evening he sang Vespers on his own and said the Rosary.

It was a special day when he found companions to join him. At times they surprised him while praying or meditating, and he was so fervent that his face seemed to be that of an angel. He would ask willing companions to watch the flock, saying that he had something else to do, and he would slip away for a while. They knew what he was about and they were generally glad to help him.

Later, he recalled with great pleasure the fields of Roburento and Dreco, the hills where his sheep grazed:

"When I was alone at Roburento, I was very happy. I would look into the deep ravines which led to a kind of dark abyss; and I thought of the dark abyss and the eternal darkness of hell. Birds would fly up from the bottom of the valley over my head; and this reminded me that we on earth must lift up our minds to God. As I would gaze at the rising sun, I said: 'This is like our birth.' The evening sunset reminded me of the shortness of life and its end, which comes without warning.

"When I gazed at the peaks of the Magdalene and the other mountains white with snow, I thought about the innocence of life that lifts us up to God and opens for us His graces, His blessing and the reward of paradise. After these and other thoughts, I would turn to one of the mountains and sing hymns to our Lady. This was a cherished moment as my voice echoed across the mountains, and I rejoiced as if angels were helping me to sing the glories of the great Mother of God."

Such were the thoughts of the pious shepherd boy when he took his sheep to the mountains and was unable to attend the church services.

When he returned home and had something to eat, he ran to the church to make up for (his own words) his lack of devotion that day. How often he must have apologized to Jesus for not attending Mass that day!

When passing a church, he never failed to make the Sign of the Cross and say a prayer, especially if the Blessed Sacrament was reserved there.

If he was only looking after the family flock – as happened in spring and autumn – then, with his parents' permission, he would bring the sheep home or hand them over to friends and run along to the morning or evening parish services.

Why can't all boys imitate the example of Francis and not neglect their duties to religion and home? Sadly, many for trifling reasons excuse themselves from going to church services on Sundays or feast days. May the example of this good young boy, Francis Besucco, add weight to the recommendations of priests who insist on the sanctification of feast days!

** Don Bosco always insisted that the support of any growth in the spiritual life lay in devotion to the Eucharist and the Mother of God. As can be seen in this chapter, he had little to teach Francis about the centrality of the Eucharist.*

** Through his solitary life as a shepherd Francis had come close to God in His creation. This is something we need to learn and teach.*

CHAPTER 8

Conversations and Behavior in Church

Francis was always cheerful in conversations and recreations with his companions. He generally chose recreations that exercise the body. He would tell his parents and friends: "I'm training for military service and I'll certainly want to be a good soldier." To avoid quarrels, he would put up with insults and even ill treatment. He often left confrontational companions.

He did not take part in gossip or conversations that injured another's character; instead he praised the virtues of others. If corrected for some childish fault, he never took offense or answered back, but would lower his head saying, "This correction is a sign of your love for me."

When the bell rang for school, Mass or devotions, or if his parents called, he never delayed: "These calls are the voice of God, which demands prompt obedience."

From early on Francis showed great respect and veneration for the house of God. When he arrived at church, he became serious as befitted this holy place. He wanted to be the first there to serve Mass.

At times, in his enthusiasm, he ran through the church; but a look from the pastor or another was enough for him to understand that this was not proper, and he would impose a penance on himself, like making a visit to the Blessed Sacrament or remaining in church for a while and praying in an uncomfortable way, such as stretching his arms in the form of a cross or placing his hands under his knees.

"How many contests I have seen in the sacristy," attests his pastor, "between Francis and other boys, all wanting to serve at the altar. At times I would test his virtue to avoid a reputation for partiality to my godson,

by selecting other boys even if they came a bit later. He would be somewhat upset, and even shed a tear, but he was not offended and would remain for Mass with his usual devotion. 'I'll make up for this setback,' he would tell his companions. 'I'll be first tomorrow.' And he usually was. These were probably his only squabbles with companions. Many copied Francis' zeal for serving at Holy Mass."

Francis usually joined his hands and had his eyes fixed on the ciborium or the celebrant, or he read from some devout book. It was touching to see him serve the cruets. He was recollected and moved about solemnly as he performed his duties like a cleric, perfectly versed in the ceremonies of the Church.

Francis was not only happy to honor Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, but he also wanted his friends to honor Jesus in the same way. Hence, on Sundays he passed out the prayer books to his companions so that they would follow the Mass with devotion.

"My dear boy, why are you crying?" the pastor asked him many times. "Because some boys don't want a book," he replied. "I know they don't have one and I see them looking around and not praying." He would cheer up when they asked for a book.

He offered himself willingly for all services in the church. He lit the charcoal for Benediction, prepared wine and water for Mass, and checked that everything was there for the ceremony. One could almost say that he had made the house of the Lord his home.

He tried to go to Mass every day and also for a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. After, he would kneel at our Lady's altar for a long time. Not only his pastor but many of the townsfolk attest that they saw him during these visits in such a devout attitude that he seemed ecstatic. Every day he recited the *Memorare*, followed by a Hail Mary and the aspiration *Mary Help*

of Christians, pray for us. He taught his companions this prayer so they could recite it often. On Sundays and some weekdays he went to church to say his night prayers and all the favorite prayers that he had omitted during the week through forgetfulness or inability. Those who saw him admired such virtues in a boy so young.

** Don Bosco points out an aspect of his spirituality, which Francis already possessed – the spirit of joy, the “serving God in gladness.” He says, with satisfaction, that Francis “in his conversations and recreations was always very jovial.”*

** Another aspect, which Don Bosco stressed, was already part of Francis' life. “Since we are Christians, we should have great esteem for everything touching our Catholic faith, and especially for the church, which is the house of God, a place of sanctity, the temple of prayer.”*

CHAPTER 9

Practices of Piety

It is appropriate to point out how devoted Francis was to the miraculous crucifix that was venerated from time immemorial by confraternities in Argentera, Pietra Porzio, Sambucco, Ponte Bernardo and Bersezio. Crowds pray at the crucifix in times of droughts or floods, and their prayers rarely go unanswered. The boy could hardly pronounce the words “Blessed Christ” (the name given to the miraculous crucifix) when he asked his father if he might say an Our Father at the crucifix. This devotion came naturally to him.

Besides his frequent visits, he recited the Rosary every summer evening for three years (1861-63) with the Confraternity. In order to say the Rosary and hear Mass every day, he would skip lunch or dinner, saying that he preferred to feed his soul rather than his body. This sort of mortification had become so habitual that his parents took great care not to encourage it.

After the recitation of the Rosary, Francis would not leave church with the others, but remained for some considerable time to appease his burning desire to honor God and His holy Mother. He felt obligated to do this, as he often told his pastor, because of God's goodness to him; and he always felt that he was in God's presence. The thought of the presence of God was such a part of him in the last years of his life that one could say he was in continual union with God.

"Francis is no longer here," wrote his pastor, "but we see him at his place and hear him lead the prayers; we were so used to seeing him at the practices of piety."

In 1860 Francis was invited to join the "Pious Work of Devotion to Mary," which he did willingly. Every evening in the month of May he led the recitation of the Rosary, the usual prayers, and some special ones for May; and the faithful accompanied him. The group admired the special devotion displayed by our Francis.

If the pastor needed assistance, to encourage a sick person to go to confession or to prepare him to receive Viaticum, he recommended everything to Francis' prayers and he was sure of a favorable result. There was one particular case about a well known man who neglected his spiritual life. Even near death he did not want to be reconciled with God. The pastor recommended him to the prayers of Francis, and to the admiration of all, he was reconciled with God.

** Francis' devotion to Christ Crucified gave him the inspiration for and supported his spirit of mortification. "The way of the Cross is the way that leads to God." Don Bosco wrote this in a letter to a Salesian Sister postulant (Magdalene Martini). The whole letter makes interesting reading as found in BM XI, 338-339.*

** "The thought of the presence of God was so much part of him in the last years of his life that he could be said to be in continual union with God." "Don Bosco never left off praying. He did his work, he joined in the recreation, he did his writing, but his heart was lifted up to God all the time. Do not say, boldly and without some qualification, then, that Salesians belong to the active life. Even as we work, we contemplate. We are both active and contemplative." (Fr. Rinaldi, 1927)*

** "Most of the faults committed by good people arise from not sufficiently keeping a steadfast recollection of the presence of God." (St. Francis de Sales)*

CHAPTER 10

Catechist and Young Valoroso

Francis was selected to be a catechist and for four years enthusiastically taught the younger children on Sundays. The boys were happy to have him and showed him great respect. Hence, the pastor chose him to teach catechism to a large class during Lent. After he finished teaching class, he invited them to sit in on the lessons given to the older children. During the instruction, as indeed during all sermons, he paid great attention. He often went to the priest after the sermon and asked him how he could practice what he had heard in the sermon.

Once home, he would tell his parents and family what he had heard in church. They were amazed that such a young boy could remember so much.

Francis followed the example of his cousin, Stephen Valoroso, also of Argentera. He died in 1861. Stephen loved his practices of devotion so much that his loss was felt throughout the district.

"I gathered all the young people together," related the pastor, "and asked them if there was anyone they knew who could replace Stephen, who was so diligent in religious devotions. They looked around for just a moment, and then they all turned toward Francis. Out of modesty he blushed, but he came forward and said to me: 'Under your guidance, I'm ready to replace my cousin, who was so devoted to religious practices. To the best of my ability I promise to emulate his diligence in all church services. And, with God's grace, I'll try to be even better than he was. I'm wearing his clothes that were handed down to me; I also hope to clothe myself with all his virtues.'

"Francis began this initiative by inviting his companions to make a novena at our Lady's altar for the repose of the soul of Stephen Valoroso and attend Mass every day during the novena. Who would have thought that another novena would shortly be made at the same altar for the one who first thought of it?"

** Francis Besucco shared many of Don Bosco's convictions, long before he came under his influence. Not the least was his appreciation of the value of catechesis – of how this is a real participation in the divine work.*

CHAPTER 11

Stations of the Cross and Bad Companions

In 1857, Francis joined the Confraternity of the Holy Childhood. While he was pleased to be a member, there was one problem, namely, no money to pay the monthly dues. When the pastor found out, he provided the monthly fee; it was a small reward for his good conduct.

Francis enjoyed reading the records of the Confraternity. He also admired the concern and the diligence of so many boys in helping such a work. Francis wept because he could not help poor non-Christian children financially as he would have liked. But he did pray for them and got others to join by telling them about the many children who had been saved.

In 1858, overcoming any human respect, he added the Stations of the Cross to his devotions after Mass on Sundays. He kept this up until he joined the Oratory.

But the devout manner in which he performed this religious practice often made him the object of scorn on the part of some of the boys. For them Francis' devotion was a reminder of their own unchristian conduct. They called him a phony. They subjected him to a kind of persecution in the hope of dampening his enthusiasm for his practices of piety. But, supported by his parents and his confessor, he took no notice of their gossip or their ridicule and kept out of their way. He kept to his devotion of the Stations of the Cross to the edification of many of the faithful who joined him.

From then on Francis told his sisters that he no longer paid any attention to worldly gossip, and that they should not be intimidated from doing good. They told him that some people were calling him "the little

monk," "goody-goody," etc. "Do you know why I'm ridiculed by the world?" he asked them. "Because I've decided that I no longer belong to the world. We are here to please God and serve Him alone, not to serve and please the world. Let's work to gain paradise for ourselves. This is why God placed us in the world."

In line with this thinking, when anyone disliked or did not approve of the good he was doing, he would turn his back on them and go home, thereby putting into practice what he said every morning on rising: "Leave the deceitful world alone." The world did not like him because Francis was detached from it.

The pastor often joined the family discussions, and Francis asked him when he could make his First Communion, something very dear to his heart. "Soon perhaps," replied the priest, "if you learn your catechism and give me further proof of your progress in virtue." Just a few months later, Francis received his reward for virtue. He received First Communion, even though only 8 years old. The following event prompted the pastor to admit him.

One day in the spring of 1858, in a field near home, he was looking after the sheep with two other boys younger than he. In his presence they performed some immodest acts. This offended him and he rebuked them sternly. "If you don't want to give good example, at least don't give scandal. Would you do such things in front of the priest or your parents? If not, then why do them in the presence of God?"

Realizing that his words had no effect, he became indignant and left. But then one of them ran after him and asked him to join them in what they were doing. Poor Francis stopped and turned on his seducer with kicks and punches. When he saw that he could not win this way, he did something worthy of admiration but not of imitation. He was near a pile of stones and he

called out: "Either you go away or I'll break your head open." By this time he was furious and he began throwing stones at the enemy of his soul. The other fellow was hit on the face, shoulders and head and then fled. Francis, frightened by the danger but happy with his victory, raced home to safety and thanked God for deliverance.

This episode was related by someone who saw the entire action from about 50 yards away.

** Francis met the same fate as those who want to follow Christ closely – opposition, ridicule. Don Bosco met this as a youngster and countered it by the formation of sodalities: the combination of the good to counter the attack of those who feel threatened. Young people find a great obstacle in peer pressure. They need a lot of support and encouragement if they are not to buckle.*

** Holiness includes concern for others. Don Bosco writes of Francis' concern for the missions and those less fortunate even though his life was very frugal.*

CHAPTER 12

Receiving Holy Communion

The following day, on being questioned about the incident by the pastor, Francis replied: "The grace of God freed me, and I'll never go with companions like that again." As a reward for his courage the pastor told him that he would be admitted to First Communion as soon as possible. This made him very happy and he prepared himself by avoiding every little defect and by practicing those virtues suitable to his state.

In his simplicity, he often asked the pastor and his parents to help him. "When I go to Holy Communion,

I'll imagine that I'm receiving Jesus from the hands of our Lady, to whom I should recommend myself."

He asked a companion who was quite devout to keep a watchful eye on him so that he would not be guilty of any irreverence. He could not have put more effort into his preparation. His parents, teacher, and pastor all state that, while he was home, Francis never did anything that even resembled a deliberate venial sin. His beautiful robe of innocence was the most important part in preparation for Holy Communion.

He was ecstatic after receiving Communion. His face radiated and reflected the joy within his heart. The acts of love for Jesus are proportionate to the care taken in preparing for Communion.

From then on, he went to confession every month and received Communion as often as his confessor would allow. Later, he would help younger boys prepare for Communion and their thanksgiving.

On days he was to receive Communion, he heard Mass with the greatest recollection and did not even want to serve so that he could be more recollected. During Mass he was completely absorbed, as he said, "in contemplating the infinite graciousness of Jesus." He did not read his prayer book but spent the time, his face hidden in his hands, in continuous acts of love of God.

Before leaving church he would go to our Lady's altar with his companions and thank her for the help she had given them. They recited the *Memorare* and several other prayers. It was here that Francis was so inflamed with the love of God that he wanted nothing else in this world other than to do the holy will of God. "I'm overcome when I go to Communion, because as I pray I seem to be speaking to Jesus Himself and I tell him: 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

Francis freed himself of worldly things, and God filled him with grace. When he received Communion, he spent the day at home or in church. He would ask his companions to go with him to evening devotions so as to make a perfect end to a solemn day.

As he grew, he went to Communion every Sunday and feast day, but first he went to confession. He was so humble that he never thought that he was sufficiently purged of sin. But on the advice of his confessor, he put aside every doubt and was obedient to him.

** It may be said that, in our days, "there is a lack of Eucharistic 'hunger' and 'thirst' which is also a sign of inadequate sensitivity towards the great Sacrament of love and a lack of understanding of its nature." (Pope John Paul II: On the Mystery and Worship of the Eucharist 1980, no. 11)*

** The examples of Francis' serious preparation for his First Communion would be a useful method for catechesis for this most important occasion – there was certainly no lack of "hunger" or "thirst" here.*

CHAPTER 13

Mortifications and School

These rare virtues of his were guarded, so to speak, by a continual spirit of mortification. From the time he was a small child he would fast rigorously for a good part of Lent. When relatives pointed out that it wasn't good for one so young to engage in fasting, he would reply: "We don't go to heaven without some mortification. And so, old and young, if they wish to go to heaven, must follow the path of mortification. Mortification is necessary for young people, either to

make up to God for their many faults or to train them for a mortified life, which everyone needs for salvation. You often tell me that I have many defects; that's why I choose to fast."

His parents and relatives testify that Francis made many wise observations of this kind.

This same spirit of mortification guided him by keeping his eyes and ears in check, so that he would not look at or listen to anything offensive. He also kept a check on his tongue. If he said anything improper, he would impose a penance on himself, like making signs of the cross on the ground with his tongue. Sometimes his parents surprised him while he was performing this mortification. They asked him if his confessor had advised it. "No, but I realize that my tongue is quick to utter harsh words. I willingly drag it along the ground, so that it won't drag me into hell. I'm also doing this penance so that God may grant me the grace to study where my godfather promised to send me."

As if all of this weren't enough to keep him away from bad conversations, he only mixed with friends that were of no risk to his soul.

He had a growing desire to attend the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales in Turin. So allow me to explain to the reader what "Oratory" is all about.

The word "oratory" has several meanings. If we think of it as a gathering on Sundays, then it connotes a place for recreation for boys, after they have fulfilled their religious duties. In Turin these are the "festive oratories" of St. Francis de Sales at Valdocco, St. Joseph at St. Saliario, St. Aloysius near Viale dei Platani, Guardian Angels in Vanchiglia, and St. Martin next to the city mills.

A "daily oratory" has day or evening classes at the above-mentioned places during the week. It caters to boys who lack financial means and cannot attend the

city schools. Specifically, the "Oratory" is the Valdocco house in Turin, named St. Francis de Sales. Boys are enrolled here either as artisans or as students.

Artisans, who learn a trade, must be at least 12 years old and no more than 18. They must be orphaned and very poor and abandoned.

Students may not be admitted unless they have successfully completed elementary school, come highly recommended for studies, and possess a good moral background.

Artisans are admitted to all instruction and programs gratis. Students must show that they cannot pay the tuition of 24 lire per month fully or in part.

In the case of Francis Besucco, who wanted to join the Oratory, there was one difficulty. To be admitted as a student in the Oratory, it was necessary to have completed elementary schooling, in order to begin the first year of high school. But Argentera did not have a complete elementary education. How could he get around this difficulty? Besucco's good conduct and the charity of his pastor found a way.

Fr. Pepino added teaching to his parochial duties, and taught Besucco and other promising boys. Francis was delighted and, with his parents' consent, studied with vigor and diligence. Fr. Pepino was successful, as Francis was accepted for high school at the Oratory.

Francis was grateful to his pastor. "How can I repay his charity to me?" He went to our Lady's altar daily and, with the confidence of a son, recommended his teacher and himself to the Seat of Wisdom.

"What went on in there, I don't know," said his pastor, "but many times he left church with tears in his eyes, undoubtedly the result of some emotions he experienced. When asked for an explanation, he answered: 'I prayed to our Lady for you, Father, and asked God to reward you, since I'm unable to do so.'

"All the time I taught him, he never gave me any cause to correct him for negligence, because he did his utmost to respond to the concern of his teacher."

** Francis was already a mystical soul, aware of the necessity of mortification.*

CHAPTER 14

Francis Is Accepted at the Oratory

Fr. Pepino wrote to me in order to recommend one of his parishioners whose conduct was excellent and who was rich in virtue but financially poor.

"This young boy has been a consolation to me for many years and is a great help in the parish. He serves Mass, takes part in church services, teaches catechism to younger children, prays fervently, and frequents the sacraments in an exemplary manner. I am quite willing to let him go, because I hope that he will become a good minister of the Lord."

I was happy to assist in the education of such an exceptional young boy and willingly admitted him to the Oratory. He was also recommended to me by Lieutenant Eysautier of the Royal Police, as a model in study and good conduct. When I broke the good news to Francis, he broke into tears of joy and gratitude.

But there was still the problem of his parents, who were torn between the good disposition of their son and their own poverty. The pastor recommended that Francis make frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament and pray to our Lady that he might know God's will.

God listened to Francis' prayers. After receiving Communion at Mass one morning, he came to school looking happier than usual.

"Well," said the pastor, "what good news do you have for me? Have you received an answer to your prayers?"

"Yes, I have," replied the boy. "After Communion I promised God that I wanted to serve Him with all my heart, which I told Him many times. I also prayed to our Lady for assistance. Then I thought I heard these words: 'Be of good heart, Francis, your wish will be granted.' This made me very happy."

He was so sure that he had heard this answer that he repeated it many times to his family, without the slightest variation. From then on he would say, "I'm certain, Father, that I'm going to the Oratory because this is the will of God."

If his parents had second thoughts about giving their permission, he would explain: "Please don't interfere with my future, or else I'll become a disgrace to you." He would ask his mother, brothers, sisters, pastor and others to persuade his father to give his consent. His father didn't need much persuasion. It seemed clear that God was calling Francis to work in His vineyard. At the end of May 1863, as it seemed to be the will of God, his parents consented to send Francis to the Oratory. He was very grateful. "What a lucky boy I am," he said. "Oh, how happy I am. Be certain that I'll repay you by my good conduct."

"He redoubled his fervor and piety," wrote his pastor. "He did nearly a year's work in June and July." Francis was aware of this himself.

"You tell me, Father, that you are pleased with me. But I can't explain how I've been able to learn so much in so short a time. To me it is a sure sign that I'm doing God's will."

"But," interrupted the pastor, "how will you repay me for all I have done for you? I hope you know that I expect to be paid well."

"Yes, I do," answered Francis. "I'll pray often to God and to Mary that you may receive every grace you desire. Be assured that I'll never forget you or those who will soon be so many other fathers to me."

Gratitude was one of the strong points of this good-natured boy.

On the last day of July, the day before Francis was to leave for the Oratory, he received the sacraments for the last time in Argentera. His pastor stated:

"I saw him gaze with tears in his eyes at the altars and confessional. Who knows what he was thinking. After Communion he radiated happiness. He spent longer than usual for his thanksgiving. Perhaps it was compensation for the many Communions that he thought he would still make in this church.

"That was a happy day for Francis, and I'm not able, due to my present emotion, to describe the very tender scene which followed in my room. There, also in the presence of his father, he fell to his knees and thanked me profusely for all that I had done for him. He assured me of his eternal gratitude and of his willingness to heed all the advice I had given him."

He seemed detached from this world. He would say: "How happy and how lucky I am. How can I ever thank God for the many favors He has given me?"

He said goodbye to all his relatives, who were amazed to see their nephew and cousin so happy. "But," they told him, "you'll be homesick and sad being so far from your relatives, and, who knows, perhaps you will find Turin too hot in the summer."

"Don't worry about me. Besides, my family will be happy when they get good news about me; and I'll try to comfort them with my letters. I'm not afraid of suffering or of being homesick. I'm sure that I'll find there everything to make me happy. Imagine how happy I'll be at the Oratory, if just the thought of going

there fills me with happiness. I only ask that you pray for me, that I may always do the will of God."

"When he met me in the street that day," continued the pastor, "he said that he was sorry to be leaving me, but his good reports would comfort me. That night he could not sleep, but he passed it in prayer and union with God."

** Gratitude was one of the strong points of this good-natured boy. How often this is mentioned in this short biography. Certainly this must be seen as a deliberate attempt by Don Bosco to highlight this virtue which he considered so essential in a young person.*

CHAPTER 15

Francis' Trip to Turin

Early next morning, he said goodbye to his dear mother, brothers, and sisters. They were crying and, although he felt the parting, he remained quite calm. He encouraged them to be resigned to the will of God. But when he recommended himself to their prayers, so that he would always follow the voice of God, who was calling him to His service, he burst into tears.

These were the final words of his pastor and godfather. "Go, my dear Francis. God, who is taking you away from us, is calling you to the Oratory, where you can sanctify your soul by following the virtues which opened paradise to Dominic Savio and Michael Magone. During these last months with us, it was by reading their lives and holy deaths that you desired to go to the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales."

On August 1, 1863, accompanied by his father, Francis left for Turin with only a small trunk. With Argentera behind them, his father asked him whether

he was sorry to leave home, family, and above all his mother. Francis' reply was always the same: "I'm sure that I'm doing God's will, and the farther I get from home, the greater is my happiness."

His father attested that the journey from Argentera to Turin was for Francis one continuous prayer. They reached Cuneo at about four in the morning of August 2. As they passed the Bishop's palace, Francis asked: "Whose beautiful house is that?" "The bishop's," said his father. Francis signaled his father that he wanted to stop. He saw Francis kneeling at the bishop's gate. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm praying for the bishop that he might help me to be accepted in the Oratory, and that in due time he might list me among his clerics so I can be useful to him and others."

When they arrived in Turin, his father pointed out the wonderful sights of the capital – the large squares, the symmetrical streets, the tall majestic porticos, and the well-decorated arcades. As he admired the elegant buildings, he felt that he was in another world. "What do you think of it, Francis?" he asked the boy, full of wonder. "Doesn't it seem that we are in heaven?"

Francis smiled and answered: "I don't really care about all these things, because I won't be happy until I have been accepted into the Oratory."

Finally, they reached the longed-for place and, full of joy, Francis exclaimed: "Now we are here." Then he said a short prayer to thank God and our Lady for the successful journey and for granting his wishes.

His father was in tears when leaving, but Francis comforted him saying: "Don't worry about me; the Lord won't fail us; I'll pray to Him every day for our family."

Further moved, his father asked him if he needed anything; "Yes, Dad, thank my godfather for the care he has shown me; assure him that I'll never forget him."

He will be proud of me for my success in studies and good conduct. Tell everyone at home that I'm very happy and have found my paradise."

CHAPTER 16

Life at the Oratory

What I've written about Francis Besucco so far forms the first part of his life. I relied primarily on information from those who knew him and those who lived with him in his home environment. Now I'm going to write about the second part of his life; but I'll recount things I heard myself, saw with my own eyes, or things I was told by the hundreds of boys who were his companions during the time he spent with us. I have relied on a long and detailed account prepared by Fr. Ruffino, his teacher and director of this house. He had the time and opportunity to witness and note down the many acts of virtue practiced by our Besucco.

For some time now, Francis was eager to come to the Oratory, and when he actually arrived he was simply amazed. More than 700 boys became his friends and companions in recreation, at table, in the dormitory, in church, in school, and in the study hall. It seemed impossible to him that so many boys could live together in the same house without turning it upside down. He continually asked questions of them all and he wanted to know the reason and explanation for everything. Every suggestion of the superiors and every inscription on the walls became a matter for reading, meditation and reflection.

It was the beginning of August 1863, and I had yet to meet Francis. All I knew of him was what Fr. Pepino had written. One day I was with the boys at recreation and I saw a kid dressed like the mountain people; he

was medium build, a freckle-faced country boy. He stood there, eyes wide-open, watching the others play. As we made eye contact, he smiled respectfully and approached me.

"Who are you?" I asked him smiling.

"I'm Francis Besucco from Argentera."

"How old are you?"

"I'm almost fourteen."

"Are you here to study, or to learn a trade?"

"I would like to study."

"What grades have you completed?"

"I finished elementary school back home."

"Why would you want to continue going to school rather than learn a trade?"

"My greatest wish is to be a priest."

"Who ever gave you that advice?"

"I've always wanted it, and I've prayed to the Lord to help me realize my ambition."

"Have you ever asked anyone for advice?"

"Yes, I spoke of it many times with my godfather."

He became emotional as he said this, and tears welled up in his eyes.

"And who is your godfather?"

"My godfather is the pastor at Argentera, Fr. Francis Pepino. He is so good to me. He taught me catechism, educated me, clothed me, and supported me. After teaching me for two years he recommended me to you so you would accept me at the Oratory."

Once again he burst into tears. This sensitivity and affection he had for his benefactor, and gratitude for the benefits he had received, gave me a good idea of his character and good-heartedness.

Then I recalled the beautiful letters from his pastor and Lieutenant Eysautier, and I thought to myself: "This boy, with proper education, will become a very good boy. Experience shows that gratitude in young

people is a good indicator of a successful future. On the other hand, those who easily forget the favors they have received and the attention given to them, remain insensitive to advice and to religious training. They are difficult to educate and their futures are uncertain."

And so I said to Francis: "I'm very pleased that you like your godfather so much, but I don't want you to worry. Love him in the Lord, pray for him, and if you want to really please him, behave yourself so that I can send him good reports about you; or, if he comes to Turin, he'll be able to appreciate your progress and conduct. Now, go and play with your companions."

He wiped away his tears, smiled affectionately at me, and joined his companions in their games.

** We now begin Don Bosco's personal recollections of Francis. The first point he makes is that Francis desperately wanted to be helped. Don Bosco often stressed this element: you cannot help someone who does not want to be helped.*

** Once more we find praise for gratitude and how much it tells us of the nobility of a soul.*

CHAPTER 17

Francis' Cheerfulness

Francis was so humble that he thought his own companions were more virtuous than himself, and he rated himself poorly when comparing his conduct with theirs. A few days later he again approached me with a rather perturbed look.

"What's wrong, my dear Besucco?" I asked him.

"I'm surrounded by really good companions. I'd like to be as good as they are but I don't know how to go about it. I need your help."

"I'll help you in every way I can. If you want to be good, practice three things and all will go well."

"What are these three things?"

"They are cheerfulness, study, and piety. This is our great program. Following it you will be able to live happily and do a lot of good for your soul."

"Cheerfulness, cheerfulness; I'm too cheerful as it is. If being cheerful is enough to be good, I'll play from morning till night. Is that all right?"

"Not from morning till night, but only during the time of recreation."

He took my advice too literally. Convinced that he was doing something pleasing to God by playing, he became very impatient waiting for play time. He was not accustomed to many of the games and so did not excel in them; often he would knock into things or fall down. He wanted to walk on stilts, and took a tumble; he wanted to exercise on the parallel bars and fell head over heels. At bocce he either hit others on the legs with his bowl, or he spoiled the game for others. To sum up, his games always ended up by his falling or some such mishap. One day a worried Francis limped up to me.

"What is it, Besucco?" I asked him.

"I'm bruised all over," he answered.

"How did that happen?"

"I'm not very good at the games they play here; I've fallen on my head, I've hurt my legs and my arms; yesterday I ran into a companion and we both ended up with a bloody nose."

"You poor boy! Use a bit of sense, take it easy."

"But you told me that these games pleased God; and I want to do well in all the games."

"You don't understand; learn the games gradually and play them according to your ability. They are meant for recreation, not to harm you physically."

He then understood that recreation should be taken in moderation and as a way to uplift the spirit; otherwise it can be physically harmful.

He continued to participate in the games, but was more careful. If free time was somewhat long, he would break off from a game and talk to a companion about the rules and discipline of the house, or about some difficulty he was having in studies.

Furthermore, he learned the secret of doing some good to himself and to his companions during the recreations by giving them some good advice or by gently correcting some when an occasion presented itself, just as he used to do at home, but in a more restricted way. By spending his recreations in this way, in a short time Besucco became a model in study and in piety.

* *In the mind of Don Bosco the recipe for holiness consisted in cheerfulness (playground); study (school: doing one's duty); piety (church and family).*

* *Caviglia comments that this chapter stresses the spiritual value, the energizing and redeeming value of joy, particularly for young people.*

* *"Sanctity may be attained not only through the hard road of outstanding spiritual gestures but by humble and modest tracks of a spirituality based on easy things that all can perform." (Fr. Caviglia)*

* *"Stick to easy things, but be constant." (Don Bosco)*

* *"The insistence on this aspect of **duty** makes work the '8th sacrament' that puts young people on guard against illusions. It is the **supreme regulator** that prepares them to face the future with confidence." (Fr. A. Martinelli: Youthful Sanctity)*

CHAPTER 18

Francis' Study Habits

One day Besucco read these words on a card in my room: *Every moment of time is a treasure.*

He was puzzled and said: "I don't understand what these words mean. How can we gain a treasure in every moment of time?"

"But it's true. In each moment of time we can learn about science or religion; we can practice some virtue; we can do an act of love for God. Before the Lord there are many treasures which help us now and in eternity."

He made no further comment, but he wrote the words on a piece of paper, and said: "I understand." He did understand how precious time is and, recalling a recommendation of his pastor, added: "My godfather also told me that time is very precious and that we must occupy it well, beginning when we're young."

After that he applied himself even more to his various duties. To the glory of God, I can say that there was never any need to encourage or warn him to carry out his duties.

Each Saturday it is a custom to read the marks the boys receive for conduct and study during the past week. Besucco's marks were always the same – excellent.

When it was time to study, he went immediately without a moment's hesitation. It was wonderful to see him so absorbed in his studies and writing, like he truly enjoyed it. He never left his place for any reason; and no matter how long the study period lasted, he never raised his eyes from his books.

He always feared that he might unintentionally break the rules. Especially in his first few days, he often asked if it was okay to do this or that. Once he

asked in all simplicity if he was allowed to write during study time, since he thought that they weren't supposed to do anything except study. Again, he asked whether he was permitted to put his books in order during study time.

He asked the help of the Lord that he might use his time well. Once, some companions saw him make the Sign of the Cross during study time, then raise his eyes to heaven and pray. Later, they asked why he did that and he answered: "I often have difficulties learning and so I ask the Lord for His help."

He read in the life of Michael Magone that before studying Michael prayed: *Maria, Sedes Sapientiae, ora pro me*. He began to do the same. He wrote these words on his books, and on some strips of paper which he used as bookmarks. If he wrote notes to his companions, he included this same invocation to his heavenly mother, as he would call her.

I read one of these letters, which said:

You asked how I have been so successful in second year when, had I followed the usual routine, I would hardly have made first year. I tell you frankly that this is a special blessing of the Lord, who has given me health and strength. I have three secrets which have helped me:

1. Never waste a moment of time in school or in the study hall.

2. When recreation is longer, I go to study after half an hour, or I discuss school matters with some companions who are more advanced than I am.

3. Every morning before leaving chapel, I say an Our Father and a Hail Mary to St. Joseph. This has helped me to succeed in my studies. Since I began saying this Our Father, I have always found it easier to learn my lessons and overcome difficulties in studies.

Try it yourself, and you'll certainly be happy with it.

We should not be surprised that, with such great diligence, he was able to make such rapid progress in school.

When he first arrived, he almost gave up hope of coping with first year, but after only two months he was already getting satisfactory marks in class. He listened to every word of his teacher, who never had to reprimand him for lack of attention.

What we have said about Besucco's diligence in studies must also be said about all his other duties, even the smallest. He was exemplary in everything. He had the chore of sweeping the dormitory and was admired for the exactitude in which he carried out this task, without showing in the least that it was a burden to him.

When he was sick and bedridden, he apologized to the assistant for not being able to do his usual task, and he profusely thanked a companion who took his place.

Besucco came to the Oratory with a fixed goal, namely, to dedicate himself completely to God as a priest. To this end he made progress in virtue and knowledge. Once he was speaking with a companion about their studies and the reason why each of them had come to the Oratory. Besucco gave his own reasons, concluding: "To sum it all up, my reason is to become a priest; with the help of the Lord I'll do everything possible to achieve this."

* *The pedagogy and spirituality of duty – how much Don Bosco insisted on this for his boys and Salesians!*

* *In one of his goodnights Fr. Francesia said that Don Bosco often expressed the following thought: "He does a lot who does little, but does what he should be doing; while, instead, he does little who does a lot, but does not do what he is supposed to do."*

CHAPTER 19

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

You can say what you like about various systems of education, but I have never found any other firm basis for education than frequent confession and Communion. I don't think I exaggerate if I maintain that morality is endangered when these two elements are missing. Besucco, as we have seen, was encouraged to approach these two sacraments frequently. When he arrived at the Oratory his fervor for confession and Communion grew even stronger.

At the beginning of the novena for the Nativity of Mary, he told his director: "I would like to make this novena well, and, among other things, I want to make a general confession."

His director said that he didn't see any reason for a general confession: "You needn't worry, since you've already made a general confession to your pastor."

"Yes, I did at my First Communion, and also at a retreat in my parish, but I want to put my soul in your hands. I want you to know everything that's on my conscience so that you can give me the best advice to help me save my soul."

The director agreed and praised him for choosing a regular confessor. He urged him to think well of his confessor, to pray for him, and to be open with him about anything that might trouble his conscience. Then he helped him to make a general confession.

Francis confessed, expressing great sorrow for his past, and made firm resolutions even though, from what we know of his life, he had never committed any fault that could be considered a mortal sin. Once he chose a confessor he did not change, as long as the Lord allowed him to remain with us at the Oratory. He had full confidence in him, consulted him even outside

confession, prayed for him, and was pleased when he received a piece of good advice from him for a better spiritual life.

He wrote a letter to a friend who had expressed a desire to come to the Oratory. Francis suggested that he pray for this grace and then recommended some practices of piety to him, such as the Stations of the Cross. He advised him to go to confession weekly and receive Communion several times in the week.

I praise Francis in this matter and with all my heart I recommend that everyone, but especially the young, should choose a regular confessor and never change him, unless out of necessity. Please, avoid the mistake of some boys who change their confessor every time they go to confession; or, when they need to confess a serious matter, they go to another and then return to their regular confessor. They're not committing any sin when they do this, but they'll never have a guide who thoroughly knows the state of their conscience. They are like one who goes to a different doctor each time he gets sick. It will be difficult for him to diagnose the illness, because he doesn't have a complete picture of his physical state and will be uncertain about what to prescribe.

If this biography should be read by anyone who is selected by Divine Providence for the education of young people, I strongly recommend three things.

First, insist on frequent confession as an aid to the instability of young people, and provide regular opportunities for the reception of this sacrament.

Second, insist on the advantages of choosing a regular confessor, who should not be changed without necessity. There should be a number of confessors available, so that each can choose one that is best adapted to his own needs. They should know that, if one changes a confessor, he does nothing wrong and

that it is better to change him a thousand times than to hold back a sin in confession.

Third, speak often about the seal of confession. Tell your students that the confessor is bound by a seal which is natural, divine, ecclesiastical, and civil. He cannot for any reason, whatever the cost, even death, reveal what he has heard in confession, or make use of it for his own purposes.

Moreover, he cannot even think about what he has heard in this sacrament. He is not surprised nor does he lose esteem and affection for those who confess serious matter. On the contrary, the confessor holds the penitent in greater esteem.

A doctor is very pleased when he finds out why his patient is seriously ill, because he can then apply the correct remedy. The confessor, who is the doctor of the soul, does the same thing. By absolution he cures all the ills of the soul in God's name. I'm convinced that we will obtain wonderful moral results among our boys if these things are recommended and explained. The results will be the wonderful moral effect that Catholic religion has on all people, if the Sacrament of Penance is administered properly.

* *This is the classic chapter on the centrality of the sacraments, especially those of Reconciliation and the Eucharist, in the pedagogy of St. John Bosco.*

* *"Frequent confession and frequent Communion are the pillars which must hold up our educational edifice." "No other writing of the saintly educator (regarding centrality of the sacraments in the work of education) contains a statement such as this – it is so definitive and totalitarian. To ignore it would be to turn away the key to his thinking on the Prevention System." (Fr. Caviglia)*

CHAPTER 20

The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist

The second aid to young people is the sacrament of Holy Communion. Those boys are fortunate who receive Communion frequently early in life with the right dispositions. With great results, Besucco had been taught by his parents and pastor to communicate often. At home he went to Communion every Sunday, on holy days, and even sometimes during the week. When he first came to the Oratory, he followed the same schedule. Then he began to receive several times a week, and every day during novenas.

Although his innocent soul and exemplary conduct proved him worthy to receive Communion frequently, he never felt worthy enough. His apprehensions grew when someone in the house told him that it was better to go less often in order to make a longer preparation and receive Communion more fervently.

He expressed these concerns to his superior, who asked him:

“Don't you eat bread frequently for your body?”

“Yes, I do.”

“If we eat bread so often for the good of the body, which is only meant to live for a short time on earth, why shouldn't we take spiritual bread often, even daily, for the good of our soul, namely, Holy Communion?” (St. Augustine)

“One who eats less, has a better appetite.”

“He who eats sparingly and goes for days without food either faints through weakness or dies of hunger, or when he does eat, may get indigestion.”

“If that's the case, I'll try to go to Communion more often because I know that it's a powerful aid for good behavior.”

“Go as often as your confessor suggests.”

“He suggests that I go whenever there is nothing bothering my conscience.”

“Good, follow that advice.”

Jesus invites us to eat His Body and drink His Blood whenever we are in spiritual need, and we're always in need in this world. He goes so far as to say: *If you do not eat my body and drink my blood, you shall not have life in you!* Thus the early Christians were *persevering in prayer and in the breaking of bread*. They were feeding on the Eucharistic Bread. In the early centuries, all who attended Mass received Holy Communion, even daily.

At the Council of Trent the Church recommended to Christians that they assist at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as often as possible. Among the statements of the council are these beautiful words: “It is the wish of the council that when the faithful attend Mass they go to Holy Communion, not only spiritually but also in the reception of the Eucharist, so that they may share more abundantly of the fruit of this most august Sacrament.” (Sess. 22, C. 6)

* *Discipline and piety went hand in hand in Don Bosco's house. In 1875, Bro. Enria overheard some visitors express their astonishment at the sight of so many boys in the study hall absolutely silent and intent upon their work. To their inquisitive questions as to the secret of such discipline, Don Bosco replied, “You see, it is not fear of punishment that makes these boys behave well and study hard, but fear of God and the fact that they frequently go to the Sacraments. That works wonders with young people.” (BM XI, 203)*

CHAPTER 21

Veneration of the Blessed Sacrament

Francis showed love for the Blessed Sacrament not only by receiving frequently, but whenever there was occasion to do so. While at home he was happy to accompany the priest carrying Holy Viaticum. When he heard the bell, he immediately asked his parents for permission to leave, and they willingly granted it. Then he ran to church to offer his services in any way he could – ringing the hand bell, carrying a lighted torch or the *ombrellino*, and reciting the *Confiteor*, the *Miserere* or the *Te Deum*.

He helped companions who were younger or less instructed, to prepare them to receive Communion worthily and to make a good thanksgiving.

His fervor continued at the Oratory. He formed the commendable habit of making a short visit every day to the Blessed Sacrament. He was often seen with a priest or cleric as they took a group of boys to pray before the Blessed Sacrament. It was edifying to see him as he cleverly managed to take a companion with him into church.

Once he invited a companion, saying: "Come with me to say an Our Father to Jesus, who is all alone in the tabernacle."

The companion, who was absorbed in his game, said that he didn't want to go. Besucco went in alone just the same. The next day this companion felt sorry for having refused the kind invitation of his virtuous friend: "Yesterday you invited me to church and I refused; today I'm inviting you to keep me company in doing what I failed to do yesterday."

Besucco smiled: "Don't worry about yesterday. I prayed for both of us at the Blessed Sacrament altar. I'll join you now and anytime you want company."

More than once I went to church after the evening meal to perform some duty while the boarders were happily engaged in a lively recreation in the courtyard. I didn't have a lamp and I tripped over what seemed to be a sack of wheat. It was Besucco, who was kneeling in the dark behind the altar but quite near it. He was praying to his beloved Jesus, asking for heavenly help to make himself better, or even to make him a saint.

He was always ready to serve Mass. He liked preparing the altar, lighting the candles, taking out the cruets, and helping the priest to vest. If someone else wanted to serve the Mass, he gladly gave up his place and assisted at the Mass with great recollection.

Those who have observed him assisting at Mass, or at Benediction in the evening, agree that it wasn't possible to look at Francis without being moved and edified by his fervor and composure.

He was eager to read books and sing hymns about the Blessed Sacrament. Among the many aspirations he recited throughout the day, his favorite was: *Blessed and praised every moment be the most holy and divine Sacrament*. "When I say this prayer, I gain 100 days indulgence, and all the bad thoughts running through my mind simply disappear. This prayer is a hammer with which I am certain to break the horns of the devil when he comes to tempt me."

* *"Adoration of Christ in this Sacrament of love finds expression in various forms of Eucharistic devotion: personal prayer, benediction, processions, hours of adoration, and congresses. The encouragement and the deepening of Eucharistic worship are proofs of that authentic renewal which the Council set itself as an aim and of which they are the central point."* (Pope John Paul II: *On the Mystery and Worship of the Eucharist*, 1980, no. 3)

CHAPTER 22

Francis' Prayerful Spirit

It is difficult to get boys to enjoy prayer. That fickle age makes anything requiring serious mental attention seem nauseating and burdensome. A boy is fortunate if he has been trained to pray and likes it. The source of divine blessings is opened by prayer.

Besucco was among these fortunate boys. The care of his parents during his early years, the care of his teacher, and especially the help of his pastor, all produced the desired end in Francis. Although not used to meditation, he recited vocal prayers clearly and distinctly; and he pronounced them in such a way that he appeared to be conversing directly with our Lord or our Lady or a saint.

As soon as the bell awakened him in the morning, he got up, dressed himself, made his bed, and either went straight to church or knelt down at his bed to pray until the bell called him to another duty.

His punctuality in going to church meant that he could sit next to companions or places that would not be a distraction. It upset him to see anyone talking or acting in a thoughtless manner. As he left church one day, he went looking for a boy who had misbehaved. When he found him he told him what he had done and urged him to be more recollected in church. The boy realized his poor conduct.

He had a special devotion to Mary, especially during the novena of Mary's birthday. Each evening, the director proposed some practice, which Francis wrote in his notebook and observed. "This way," he would say, "I'll have a fine gift for our Lady at the end of the year." Throughout the day he repeated the practice and reminded his companions of it as well.

He found the spot where Dominic Savio knelt to pray in front of our Lady's Altar, and he prayed there also. He said that he would like to pray to our Lady all day, "because I seem to have Savio praying with me; he seems to answer my prayers, and his fervor is instilled into my heart."

Generally, he was the last to leave church, as he would stop for a short time in front of our Lady's statue, which often caused him to miss breakfast. Some who noticed were amazed that a strong, healthy boy of fourteen years would give up his breakfast in favor of the spiritual food of prayer.

Often, especially during vacation, he would go to church with some companions to pray the Seven Joys of Mary, the Seven Sorrows of Mary, the litanies, or the prayer to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. He would not allow others to lead these prayers. On Friday, whenever he could, he made the Stations of the Cross. This was one of his special practices of piety. "The Way of the Cross," he used to say, "is a spark of fire for me; it helps me to pray and allows me to endure anything for the love of God."

He loved praying so much, and was so used to it, that he prayed during any free time. He often prayed during recreation, reciting some pious aspirations. One day he saw his director, called him by name, and then said, "Oh, Holy Mary." Another time he called out to a companion with whom he was playing and shouted: "Oh, Peter Noster." While these actions brought laughter from his companions, they also showed his love for prayer and his ability to recollect himself and to raise his mind to God. Masters of the spiritual life say that this is a high degree of perfection, which is rarely seen in anyone, even those far advanced in virtue.

After night prayers, which were said in common every evening, he went to the dormitory and knelt down on his trunk – not a very comfortable position – for a quarter of an hour or more to pray. When he was told that this disturbed his companions who were already in bed, he shortened his prayers to make sure he was in bed at the same time as his companions. However, as soon as he settled into bed, he joined his hands on his chest and prayed until he fell asleep. If he awoke during the night, he immediately began to pray for the souls in purgatory; and he was displeased if sleep overtook him before he finished his prayer. He confided in a classmate and said: “I’m so disappointed that I can’t spend more time in bed awake and praying. How much good I could do for the souls in purgatory.”

In short, if we examine the spirit of prayer of this boy, we can say that he literally followed the precept of our Savior, who commanded us to pray always, as he passed his time in continuous prayer.

CHAPTER 23

Penances

Boys generally get upset when you speak to them of penance. But when a heart is filled with the love of God, no suffering can shake it; rather, every affliction is a source of consolation. Tender hearts believe that suffering brings great results, and a glorious reward is reserved in heaven for those who suffer in this life.

From early on Francis had a great desire to suffer. Here at the Oratory he doubled that fervor. One day he told his director: “Our Lord says that we can only gain paradise by innocence or by penance. I can’t go there through innocence because I’ve already lost it. Therefore, I have to go through penance.”

His director said that he should accept as penance diligence in study, attention in school, obedience to his superiors, and the inconveniences of life such as heat, cold, wind, hunger, and thirst.

"But," Besuccio interjected, "we have no choice but to suffer these things anyway."

"But if you include suffering for the love of God to what you must suffer through necessity, it becomes real penance, pleases the Lord, and gains you merit."

He quieted down for a time. But he wanted to fast more, to give up something at breakfast, to wear something uncomfortable under his clothing, or to put things in his bed. These were always forbidden to him.

On the eve of All Saints Day he asked permission to fast on bread and water, but this was changed to skipping breakfast only. He was pleased because, as he said, he would be able to imitate the saints in paradise who were saved through suffering.

It's not necessary to mention how Francis guarded his senses, especially the eyes. One who observed his composure and behavior towards his companions, and his modesty at all times, would gladly propose Francis as a perfect model of mortification and behavior for young people to imitate.

Although he was forbidden corporal penances, he was permitted penances of another kind, namely, doing the most humble tasks in the house. Some of the things he tackled with great enthusiasm were: running messages for his companions, carrying water, cleaning shoes, serving at table when he was allowed, sweeping the refectory or the dormitory, taking out the rubbish, carrying parcels and trunks, provided he was strong enough. These are things that any young person can do when away from home. But most are embarrassed to help out when they can.

Some young people are ashamed to have their parents visit them because of the poor way they are dressed. It's as though absence from home changes them and makes them forget their duty of reverence, respect and obedience to their parents, and of charity towards everyone.

But these small mortifications contented Besucco for a short time only; he wanted to do more. He was heard to say that he had performed greater penances while at home and his health had never suffered. His superior always answered that real penances do not consist in what pleases us, but in what pleases the Lord and promotes his glory. "Be obedient and diligent in your duties; be kind and charitable towards your companions; put up with their defects; give them good advice and you will please the Lord more than any other sacrifice."

Taking to heart literally what he was told about patiently putting up with the cold, Francis did not wear proper clothing during that winter. One day I saw him looking very pale and asked him if he were sick.

"No," he answered, "I'm quite all right."

I took his hand and realized that he was wearing only summer clothes although we were in the novena for Christmas.

"Haven't you any winter clothing?" I asked.

"Yes, it's in the dormitory."

"Why aren't you wearing it?"

"Well, you already know the reason: we should put up with the cold of winter for the love of God."

"Go and put on your winter clothes immediately. See that you are well protected against the cold. If you need anything, ask and you'll be given it straightaway."

Despite all this, however, we could not prevent this disorder, which was possibly the beginning of the illness that carried him to the grave, as we will see.

* *LOVE was the inspiration and driving force of his spirituality.*

* *"In the Preventive System LOVE IS EVERYTHING. ...the soul of the system is sanctification by means of love in the practice of one's daily duties." (Fr. Caviglia)*

CHAPTER 24

His Sayings and Deeds

There are things Besucco said and did that have no direct bearing on what we have already described, so I will recount them separately.

Let's begin with his conversations. When he spoke he was somewhat reserved, but jovial and witty. He would talk about his experiences as a shepherd boy when he took sheep and goats out to pasture. He spoke of the bushes, the pastures, the valleys, the caves, and the ravines in the mountains of Roburento and Drego as so many wonders of the world.

He used sayings which were undisputed truths. When he wanted someone not to think too much of the things of the world, but rather of heavenly things, he would say: "It is difficult to gain heaven if one guards the earth like a goat."

A companion was speaking about religion and made some blunders. Because Francis was young and not sufficiently well instructed, he kept quiet; but he showed that he was uneasy and annoyed. Later, with courage and a smile, he spoke to those present: "Listen, some time ago I read in the dictionary the meaning of the word 'trade' and among other things I noted this phrase: 'Let everyone stick to his own trade and not meddle in another's.' My father said the same thing in different words: 'He who does not know what

he is doing, spoils what he knows.” They understood his meaning; the one who had spoken indiscreetly kept quiet, while the others admired the shrewdness and prudence of Besucco.

He always accepted the wishes of the superiors. He never complained about studies, schedules, or meals. Everything at the Oratory pleased him. When asked how it was that he was always so happy with everything he replied: “I’m just as human as anyone, but I want to do everything for the glory of God; what doesn’t suit me will certainly be pleasing to God; and so I always have a good reason for being content.”

One day he was with some companions who had recently come to the Oratory and could not settle down to the new routine. He comforted them saying: “If we were in the army, could we make our own timetable? Could we go to bed and get up when we liked? Or could we go for a walk whenever we pleased?”

“No,” they answered, “but a little bit of freedom...”

“We are definitely free,” interrupted Francis, “if we are doing the will of God. We only become slaves when we fall into sin, because then we belong to our greatest enemy, the devil.”

“But at home I had better food and I had a more comfortable bed than here,” complained one of them.

“Granted what you say is true – at home the food is better and the beds are more comfortable – but I’m saying that you were encouraging two great enemies – gluttony and laziness. I’ll go further and say that we weren’t born just to sleep and eat as the goats and sheep do, but we have to work for the glory of God and flee idleness, which is the father of all vices. Moreover, haven’t you heard what our director said?”

“I don’t remember anything.”

“He said that we remain here voluntarily and not by force. If anyone is unhappy, let him tell me and I’ll

try to satisfy him; anyone who doesn't want to remain here is free to go, but if he does stay I don't want him spreading discontent."

"I would go elsewhere, but my parents can't afford it."

"All the more reason for you to be content here; if you can't pay, you should show that you are more satisfied than the others, because you never look a gift horse in the mouth. And so, my friends, we must be aware that we are in a house of Divine Providence; some pay a little, some pay nothing; and where could we find anywhere else at this price?"

"What you say is true, but if we could have something better to eat..."

"Since you're dying for better food, I'll tell you how to get it; tell the director that you want to pay the full amount for room and board."

"But I don't have money for board."

"Well then, keep quiet, and be content with the food they give you, since all our other companions are happy with it. If you really want me to be frank, my friends, strong young men such as we should not pay too much attention to the niceties of life. As Christians we must do some penance if we want to go to heaven; we must mortify our tendency to gluttony now. Believe me, this is an easy way to obtain blessings from the Lord and gain some merit for heaven."

It was these and other similar ways of speaking that he helped his companions and became a model to them of Christian politeness and charity.

While we're on this point, Francis would write proverbs and moral sayings in his notebooks. He was also quite eloquent in the letters he wrote. I think it worthwhile to reproduce some of these, which were kindly given to me by those to whom they were written.

** Francis realized that he did not have much to contribute with his "sporting ability" in the playground, and so made up for it by his pleasant conversations. He also realized that he had a duty of trying to prevent harmful conversations and did his best to do so.*

CHAPTER 25

Letters of Francis

His letters are a sign of a good heart and sincere piety. It is rare for older people to write letters about religious and moral thoughts—without human respect—as we should expect. It is even rarer to see these traits in young people.

Dear young people, I want you to avoid letters that have nothing religious in them—letters which could well be written by pagans. No, use this wonderful means to communicate our thoughts and plans to those who are absent. But let's distinguish between the Christian and the pagan in our correspondence and never forget some moral thought. Hence, I'm including some of young Besucco's letters which, I think, will please my readers because of their simplicity and tenderness.

The first is dated September 27, 1863, and is addressed to his godfather, Fr. Francis Pepino, pastor of Argentera. He informs him how happy he is at the Oratory and thanks him for sending him there.

My dear Godfather,

Four days ago my companions went home for twenty days' vacation. I'm pleased they are having a good time, but I'm better off because, by staying here, I have time to write you, which I hope pleases you.

First of all, I cannot find sufficient words to thank you for all the good you have done for me. Apart from these favors, especially teaching me in your home, you have taught me so many things, both spiritual and temporal, that are of great help to me. But the greatest of these favors was to send me to this house where nothing is lacking for my soul or my body. I thank the Lord that he has given me this favor in preference to so many other boys. Pray that the Lord give me grace to correspond to so many signs of heavenly kindness.

I'm more than happy here; there's nothing that I want; my every wish is taken care of. I thank you and all my benefactors for the things you have sent me. I had hoped to see you in Turin last week so that you could ask my superiors about my conduct. Patience! The Lord wants me to wait for this consolation.

From your letter I gathered that my family at home wept when they heard my letter read aloud. Tell them that they should rejoice and not cry, because I am very happy. Thank you for your precious advice. I assure you that so far I have done all I could to put it into practice. Thank my sister for the Communion that she received for me; I'm sure that it has helped me with my studies. It seems impossible that, in such a short time, I have been promoted to second year.

Please, give my regards to my parents and ask them to pray for me. Tell them not to worry as I'm enjoying good health. I have all I need and I'm happy.

Forgive me for the delay in writing. These last few days I had to prepare for the exams, which went better than I had expected. I ardently desire to show you my gratitude and, as I can't do it in any other way, I'll pray to the Good Lord to give you health and happiness.

Please give me your blessing and consider me always your very loving godson,

Francis Besucco

Francis' father, a tool sharpener by trade, spent the summers working in the fields and looking after the animals at Argentera. In the fall he traveled around looking for work so that he could support himself and his family. Francis wrote to him on October 26, 1863. He told him how happy he is to be at the Oratory in Turin and expressed his tender filial affection.

My dear Father,

The time is near for you to leave home to provide for the family. As much as I would like to accompany you, I can't; but I'll be with you in my thoughts and in my prayers. I assure you that I pray daily that the good Lord give you health and keep you in his holy grace.

My godfather came to the Oratory and we had a very pleasant visit. He told me, among other things, that you are worried that I may be going hungry. Not at all; I have plenty to eat. If I were to set aside the bread that I can't eat, there would be enough at the end of the week to make a large loaf. I want you to know that we eat four times a day, and as much as we want. At dinner we have soup and a main course; at supper we have soup. We used to have wine every day, but, since it has become so expensive, we have it only on feast days. Don't worry about me then; there is nothing I want over and above what they give me.

There are two things I'm pleased to tell you; my superiors are happy with me, and I am very happy with them. And the other day the archbishop of Sassari stopped by to see Don Bosco. He also spent a lot of time with the boys, and I had the opportunity to receive his blessing.

Please give my regards to our entire family, dear father, especially my dear mother. Share this news with my godfather and thank him for what he has done

for me. I hope you do well on your rounds, and, if you stay put at any place, let me know where and I'll write to you there. Pray also for one, who from the bottom of his heart will always be your most affectionate son,

Francis

After the visit from his godfather, Francis longed for a letter from him. Soon the zealous priest wrote, giving him some suggestions for his spiritual and temporal welfare.

On November 23, 1863, Francis responded and expressed his happiness for the letter. He thanked his godfather and promised to practice his suggestions.

My dear Godfather,

I received your letter on November 14. You have no idea how happy it made me. For me that day was a holiday. I read it over many times, and the more I read it the more determined I am to study and be better.

I know, now, how much I benefited when you sent me to this Oratory. I can't express my gratitude, other than to pray for my benefactors, especially for you. Not to miss out on study time, I pray during recreation. I can't stay too long because, although I find greater happiness in studying and praying than I do in playing, I must recreate with the others. This is prescribed by the superiors as useful and necessary for study and good health.

Classes have resumed and we go from morning to night with class, study, singing, religious practices, music, and games. I hardly have a moment to think about myself.

Lieutenant Eysautier is a frequent visitor. A few days ago he brought me a coat; it's a real beauty and if you saw me in it you would think I was a little lord.

You recommended that I look for a good friend; I found one right away. He is a better student than I am, and much more virtuous. We became good friends as soon as we met; we speak only about studies and piety. He also likes to play, but after running around for a bit we walk up and down discussing our studies.

The Lord is helping me a lot. I am doing much better in my chores and studies. Of the ninety students in my class, I place fifteenth.

I was pleased to read that my companions in Argentera remember me. Tell them that I love them very much and that they should apply themselves diligently to study and piety.

Thank you for your beautiful letter, and I will try to put into practice the suggestions you recommend. I want very much to be good because I know that God has prepared a great reward for me, and for those who love him and serve him in this life.

Forgive me for not writing sooner and for not following all your suggestions, my dear benefactor. Remember me to all at home and, since I cannot greet my father, I remember him in my heart and pray to God for him. May God's will, not my will, be done.

In the most loving hearts of Jesus and Mary, I remain your devoted godchild,

Francis Besucco

Francis included a letter for his friend and cousin, Anthony Beltrandi of Argentera. The expressions and thoughts make it worth mentioning here as a model letter exchanged by two good young friends.

My dear friend Anthony,

My godfather has given me the good news that you are beginning classes as I did. This is a very good idea and you will be very happy if you go ahead with it.

Since our good pastor is prepared to teach you, try to repay him by diligence in performing your duties. Throw yourself into your studies and accompany them with prayer and devotion. This is the only way to succeed in such an undertaking and be truly satisfied.

I'm pleased to think that next year you may be my companion in this house.

There is just one thought I want to leave you: obey your parents and your pastor. And give good example to your companions.

I ask of you a favor. This winter, after the sacred services, make the Stations of the Cross as I used to do when I was home. Promote this pious practice and you will be blessed by the Lord. Time is precious; use it well. If you have any free time, gather some boys to review the catechism lesson from the previous Sunday. This is a good way of earning God's blessing.

Tell my godfather to include some news about you when he writes to me, so I will be reassured of your good will. Dear friend, how sad I am when I think of the time that I have wasted that could have been spent in study or in other good works.

I hope you will take my letter to heart, and if I have displeased you, I ask your forgiveness. Do your best to ensure that next year we will be classmates here in Turin, God willing.

Good-bye, Anthony; pray for me.

Your loving friend,

Francis Besucco

** The letters show once more how deeply entrenched was the virtue of gratitude in the heart and soul of Francis, and his willingness and desire for spiritual direction. He recommends these virtues to his young friends.*

CHAPTER 26

Francis' Final Letter

In the previous chapter, Francis' piety is revealed in his letters. Every spoken or written word contributes to a network of delicate love and holy thought. It seems that as he approached the end of his life he became even more on fire with the love of God. Some expressions of his may indicate a certain premonition of his impending death. Upon receiving Francis' last letter, his godfather exclaimed: "My godson wants to leave me; God wants him for Himself." Here is the entire letter of November 28, 1863. It's a model for anyone wishing to convey greetings for the New Year in a Christian manner.

My dear Godfather,

Any educated boy would certainly be ungrateful if during these days he did not write to his parents and benefactors to wish them happiness and blessing for the New Year.

But what sentiments am I to express to you, dear godfather and benefactor? From the very day of my birth you have helped me and cared for my soul. To you I owe my first taste for knowledge, for piety, and for the fear of God. If I have studied, or if I have avoided so many dangers to my soul, it is because of your advice, your loving care, and your concern.

How can I ever repay you for all of this? As I cannot do it in any other way, I will show you signs of my constant gratitude by remembering all the benefits I have received from you. During these few days, I will pray often that you receive blessings from heaven for a successful end of the present year and for a good beginning of the New Year.

There is a proverb which says: "A good beginning is half the battle." Therefore, I would like to begin this year in God's grace and continue it according to his holy will.

Currently I am doing well in studies. My conduct marks for the study hall, for the dormitory and for piety have always been EXCELLENT.

I received news today of my father and brother, both of whom are in good health. Please inform my family; it will certainly please them. Tell them not to worry about anything. I am well and want for nothing.

Give my best wishes to my teacher, Anthony Valorso. Tell him that I ask his forgiveness for any disobedience or annoyance that I may have caused him during class.

Finally, I renew the promise that I will not let a day go by without asking God to keep you in good health, and to grant you a long life.

My dear godfather, please forgive me for all the trouble I have caused you, and continue to help me with your advice. I ask for nothing else than to be good, and correct my many faults. May the will of God, not mine, be done always.

With great respect and devotion, I am your loving godson,

Francis Besucco

In this letter to his godfather, Francis included a letter for his mother. It was his last letter and it can be considered as his last testament to his parents.

My dear Mother,

We have reached the end of the year; God has helped me to spend it well. I can say that this year has been for me a continuous series of heavenly favors.

While I wish you a happy conclusion in the few days that remain, I ask the Lord to grant you a good beginning to the New Year, rich in all spiritual and temporal blessings. May Blessed Mary obtain for you from her divine son a long life and happy days.

Today I received a letter from Dad, and he assures me that both he and my brother are in good health; I was very pleased to read this. I'm sending you a list of a few things that I still need.

Dear Mom, I was such a bother at home and I still am. I'll do my best to make up for it by behaving well and by praying for you. See that my sister Mary puts her mind to her studies so she can better understand her religion.

Good-bye, dear Mother, good-bye; let us offer our actions and our hearts to the Lord; let us recommend to him the salvation of our souls. May the Lord's will be done!

Give my best wishes to all at home, and pray for me, who remain always with all my heart, your loving son,

Francis

It seems from these last two letters that Besucco's heart was no longer of this world; he seemed to have his feet on the ground, but his soul was already with God, of whom he wanted to talk and write continually.

As his fervor for religious things grew, so too did his deep desire to withdraw from the world. If I could, he often said, I would separate my soul from my body to understand better what it means when we say we love God. "If I weren't forbidden," he went so far as to say, "I would abstain from all food in order to enjoy the great pleasure experienced in suffering for the Lord. What great consolation the martyrs must have experienced in dying for the faith."

In short, he exemplified what St. Paul says: "I desire to be annihilated so as to be glorified with my Lord." God saw the great love that this little heart had for Him. To prevent the evil of the world from ruining him, He decided to call him to Himself. To a certain extent, He allowed Francis' excessive use of penance as a means to this end.

* *"Death is a personal problem. Apparently the works of Don Bosco do not contain anything really original about the last things of man and of the world. ...His reflections on the last things were in accord with the tradition of the 19th century: ...the inevitability of death, the uncertainty of the moment of death, the supreme importance of death, and eternal happiness or unhappiness. His teaching was practical and moralizing, as was that of St. Alphonsus in his Preparation for Death, a book which Don Bosco recommended to his boys. In his sermons and, in particular, in his 'good-night' talks, he would remind his boys and his co-workers of the need to be prepared for death. The numerous deaths which occurred in the house of Valdocco offered him the occasion to return often to this 'great truth'. Nothing is more uncertain than the moment of our death. Death does not wait ... 'It can take place a year from now, a month from now, a week, a day, an hour, or perhaps as soon as you finish reading this thought. My Christian reader, if death struck us at this moment, what would become of your soul? What would become of my soul?' These warnings were enough for him. He did not usually resort to realistic descriptions which would have shocked his listeners. Don Bosco spread peace, even when he spoke about death. At times the images in his 'dreams' were strong, but never tormenting." (Fr. Francis Desramaut: Don Bosco and the Spiritual Life, p. 56)*

CHAPTER 27

Penance and Illness

In the life of Dominic Savio, Francis had read how he had imprudently neglected to use heavy blankets at night during the cold of winter. He decided to imitate him. He felt that the order to keep warm applied only to the clothes he wore, and that during the night he was free to make modifications. He told no one about this. He had the woolen blankets issued to all the boys but, instead of using them, he put them under his pillow.

This went on until the early days of January, when one morning he was so numb from the cold that he couldn't get out of bed. It was reported to the superiors that Besucco stayed in bed because he was ill. When the infirmarian arrived, he asked him what was wrong.

"Nothing at all," Francis replied.

"If it's nothing, then why are you still in bed?"

"Well, I just feel uncomfortable."

The infirmarian went to check his blankets and realized that he had only a summer blanket.

"Where are your winter blankets, Besucco?"

"Here under the pillow."

"Why did you do such a thing?"

"No special reason; when Jesus was on the cross he wasn't covered any better than I am."

It didn't take long to realize that Besucco was quite ill. He was transferred immediately to the infirmary. The doctor was called at once. He thought that it was not serious and diagnosed it as a simple cold. But the next day he realized that the illness was causing some inflammatory congestion in the stomach and had taken a turn for the worse. The usual remedies were applied—laxatives, emetics, bloodletting and doses of various medicines—but nothing seemed to work.

He was asked why he had been so careless as not to cover himself with warmer blankets. He replied: "I'm sorry this has upset my superiors; I hope the Lord will accept my little penance as satisfaction for my sins."

"But what of the consequences of imprudence?"

"I leave that in God's hands. I'm not concerned about my body, provided everything turns out for the greater glory of God and to the advantage of my soul."

CHAPTER 28

Resignation to Illness

The illness lasted eight days; for him it was a retreat; for his companions it was an example in patience and Christian resignation.

The illness hampered his breathing, which led to severe and constant headaches. He had to submit to further painful medical treatments, and several drastic remedies were tried. But nothing alleviated the illness and it served only to highlight his admirable patience. He never gave any sign of resentment or complaint.

When it was suggested that the medicine tasted awful, he would immediately reply: "If it were sweet, it would be pleasant to the taste, but it is only right that I should do some penance for my greediness in the past."

Another time he was asked if he was suffering a lot. "It's true that I am suffering a lot, but what is this compared to what I should suffer for my sins? I assure you that I am quite happy; I never thought that I would feel so happy to suffer for love of the Lord."

He thanked those that assisted him profusely, saying: "The Lord reward you for your kindness."

Not certain how to show his gratitude to the infirmarian, he told him several times: "The Lord reward you, and if I go to heaven, I'll pray with all my heart that the Lord will bless and help you."

The infirmarian asked him if he was afraid of dying and he replied: "If the Lord wants to take me to heaven, I'm very happy to obey his call; however, I fear that I'm not yet ready. But I place my hope in his infinite mercy and I recommend myself to Mary Most Holy, to St. Aloysius Gonzaga and to Dominic Savio. I hope that with their protection I'll have a happy death."

On the fourth day of his illness, the doctor began to fear for Francis' life. To prepare him for his final moments, I spoke with him. "My dear Francis, would you like to go to heaven?"

"Can you imagine not wanting to go to heaven? But I have to earn it first."

"If you had a choice of being cured or going to heaven, which would you choose?"

"To live for the Lord, or to die to go to the Lord are different."

"The first pleases me, and the second pleases me even more. For who can assure me of heaven after the many sins I've committed?"

"By proposing this to you, I took it for granted that you are sure of going to heaven. But, if you assume that you might go elsewhere, I want you here for now."

"How, then, can I deserve heaven?"

"You lay claim to heaven through the merits of the passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ."

"Will I go to heaven then?"

"Most surely, but only when the Lord decides."

He looked at those present, rubbed his hands and joyfully exclaimed: "It's a deal; heaven and nothing else; to heaven and nowhere else. Don't speak to me of anything else, only heaven."

"I'm happy," I told him, "that you have such a strong desire for heaven, but be prepared for the will of God."

He interrupted me: "Yes, let the holy will of God be done in everything, both in heaven and on earth."

On day five he asked to receive the sacraments. He wanted to make a general confession, which was denied him. There was no need as he had made one just a few months previously. However, he was deeply moved and prepared for confession with great fervor.

After confession he looked so cheerful and said to the one assisting him: "In the past I promised our Lord a thousand times that I would not offend him anymore, but I didn't keep my word. I have renewed my promise today and I hope to be faithful until death."

That evening I asked if he had any messages for anyone. "Yes," he told me, "tell everyone to pray that my time in purgatory might be short."

"What do you want me to tell your companions?"

"Tell them to avoid scandal and always make good confessions."

"And the clerics?"

"Tell the clerics to give the boys good example and good advice whenever it is needed."

"And your superiors?"

"Tell them that I thank them for all their kindness to me; tell them to keep working for the salvation of souls; and when I'm in heaven I'll pray to God for them."

"And what would you say to me?"

He was quite moved by these words; he looked me straight in the eye and then replied: "Help me save my soul. For some time I have asked the Lord to allow me to die in your hands. Please, do this act of charity and assist me through my final moments of life."

I assured Francis that I would never leave him, whether he got well or not, and especially if he were at the point of death. This cheered Francis, who thought of nothing else but his preparation for Holy Viaticum.

CHAPTER 29

Francis Receives Viaticum

On day six of his illness, January 8, he asked to receive Holy Communion. "How I would like to receive Communion with my companions in church. It is eight days since I last received my dear Jesus with them."

While preparing to receive Communion, he asked for the meaning of the word Viaticum. He was told that it means assistance and a companion for the journey.

"What wonderful help for me when I receive the Bread of Angels for the journey I am about to make."

"Not only will you have this heavenly bread," he was told, "but you will have Jesus himself as your help and companion on your journey to eternity."

"With Jesus as my friend and companion, I have nothing to fear; rather, I have everything to hope for because of his great mercy. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul."

He made his preparation, as he recited his usual prayers. He received the host with those signs of piety that are better imagined than described.

After Communion he settled down to make his thanksgiving. Asked if he needed anything, his only answer was: "Let us pray." After a long thanksgiving he turned to those standing by and asked that they speak to him only of heaven.

Then, to Francis' delight, the treasurer of the house visited him. "Oh, Father Savio," he said with a smile, "this time I'm going to heaven."

"Courage now! Let's leave life and death in the hands of God; our hope is in heaven, but when God wants it."

"Father Savio, please pardon me for all the trouble I've caused you; pray for me, and when I'm in heaven I'll pray to God for you."

Some time later, when he was reasonably calm, I asked him if he had any messages for his pastor. This seemed to upset him, "My pastor," he answered, "did a lot for me, especially to help me save my soul. Tell him that I've never forgotten his advice. I no longer have the pleasure of seeing him again in this world, but I hope in heaven to pray to Mary to help him keep all my companions on the right track. Then one day I'll see him and his parishioners in heaven."

He was choking with emotion as he finished speaking, so I let him alone.

After he had rested I asked him if he wanted to see his relatives. "That's not possible," he answered. "They're too far away; they're poor and can't afford to come here. Besides, my father is away from home. Tell them that I die resigned, cheerful and happy. Tell them to pray for me. I'll wait for them in heaven. To my mom..." He could not go on.

Some hours later I asked him: "By any chance do you have a message for your mother?"

"Tell my mother that God has heard her prayer. Many times she told me: 'My dear Francis, I want you to live for a long time in this world but I would rather have you die a thousand times than see you become an enemy of God because of sin.' I hope that my sins have been forgiven, that I am God's friend, and that I'll soon go to see Him for eternity. Bless my mother, O my God; give her the courage to accept my death with resignation; give me the grace to see her and all the family in heaven, where we shall enjoy your glory."

He wanted to talk more, but I told him to be quiet and rest a while. He became worse on the evening of January 8, and I decided to give him Extreme Unction. When asked if he wanted to receive it, he said, "Yes, with all my heart."

"Is there anything bothering your conscience?"

"Yes, there is something that has been on my mind for a long time, but I never imagined that it would give me so much sorrow at the point of death."

"Why are you troubled and remorseful?"

"I have the deepest regret for not loving God as much as he should have been loved."

"Don't worry about it. Here in this world we can never love God the way He deserves to be loved. We need only do our best; only in heaven can we love Him as He should be loved. There, we shall see Him as He really is; we shall know Him and enjoy His goodness, His glory and His love. How fortunate you are because shortly you're going to have this wonderful opportunity."

"But now prepare to receive Extreme Unction, which is the sacrament that wipes away the stain of sin and restores our health, if this is good for the soul."

"I don't want to talk about my physical health any more," he replied. "As for my sins, I ask forgiveness and I hope that they will be completely forgiven. I trust that the punishment I should suffer in purgatory will also be wiped away."

** The closer one gets to Christ, the more one realizes how unworthy we are and how we can never love God as He deserves to be loved.*

CHAPTER 30

The Anointing of the Sick

When he was ready to receive the last rites, he wanted to say the *Confiteor* himself, along with the other prayers of the sacrament. He also said his own prayer at each anointing.

Fr. Alasonatti, prefect of the house, administered the sacrament. At the anointing of the eyes, Francis said: "Lord, pardon me for looking at things I should not have, and for reading things I should not have."

At the anointing of the ears: "O my God, pardon me for listening to what was against your holy law. As they are closed to the world, may they be opened to your voice calling me to enjoy your glory."

At the anointing of the nostrils: "Pardon me, Lord, for the satisfaction I have taken in smelling things."

At the mouth: "O my God, pardon me for my gluttony and for those words which have offended you in one way or another. Grant that as soon as possible my tongue may sing your praises for all eternity."

At this point, Fr. Alasonatti was overcome with emotion and said: "What beautiful thoughts! How wonderful it is to hear them from a boy so young!" Continuing, he anointed his hands, saying: "By this holy anointing and by His mercy, may God pardon you every sin committed by the sense of touch."

The sick boy continued: "O my great God, with the veil of your mercy and through the merits of the wounds in your hands, wipe away all the sins I have committed throughout my life."

At the feet: "Pardon, O Lord, the sins that I have committed with these feet, either by going where I should not have gone or by not going where my duties called me. In your mercy pardon all the sins I may have committed by thought, word, deed or omission."

It was suggested several times that it was enough to say these spontaneous prayers silently in his heart and that God did not ask for this great effort to pray aloud. He was silent for a few moments but then continued in the same voice as before. At the finish he seemed so tired and his pulse was so weak that we thought he was about to breathe his last.

But he recovered slightly and told his superiors. "I've prayed to the Blessed Virgin that I might die on a day dedicated to her, and I have confidence that it will be so. What else should I ask of the Lord?"

Someone responded: "Ask the Lord to allow you to do all your purgatory in this world so that when you die your soul will go straight to heaven."

"Oh, yes," he immediately replied, "I ask this with all my heart. Please give me your blessing. I hope the Lord will allow me to suffer in this world to the point that I have no need of purgatory and so, when my soul separates from my body, it will go straight to heaven."

It seems that the Lord heard his prayer, as his condition improved somewhat, which prolonged his life for about twenty-four hours.

* *"By the sacred anointing of the sick and the prayer of the priests the whole Church commends those who are ill to the suffering and glorified Lord that he may raise them up and save them. And indeed she exhorts them to contribute to the good of the People of God by freely uniting themselves to the passion and death of Christ." (Vatican II, The Constitution on the Church, no. 11)*

CHAPTER 31

Francis' Beautiful Death

Saturday, January 9, was Besucco's last day on earth. Throughout the day, he had full control of his senses and his reason. He wanted to pray, but he was told not to, as it tired him too much. "Well, at least let someone here pray aloud and I'll repeat it in my heart" We had someone by his bed praying constantly.

Among those who visited him that day was a companion who was somewhat dissipated. "How are you, Besucco?" he asked.

"My dear friend," he replied, "I'm at the end of my life. Pray for me in these last moments. But remember that one day you too will find yourself in a similar state. Oh, how happy you will be if you have been good! But, if you don't change your ways, how sorry you'll be at the moment of death." His companion began to cry and from that moment on thought more seriously about his spiritual life. Today he is still one of the better boys.

At 10:00 p.m. Lieutenant Eysautier and his wife came to visit. The lieutenant had helped Francis to be admitted to the Oratory and continued to help him considerably. Besucco was very happy to see them and showed him heartfelt signs of gratitude. This courageous man was greatly edified when he saw the happiness in the boy's face, the devotion that he demonstrated, and the assistance he was receiving. He said: "Dying in this way is a real joy, and I would hope to find myself in a similar state." Then he turned to the dying boy and said: "Dear Francis, when you get to heaven pray for me and my wife...." But he was overcome with emotion and could not continue; he departed after giving Francis a final wave of his hand.

About 10:30 it seemed that Francis had only a few more minutes to live. He took his hands from under the blankets and tried to raise them. I took them and joined them together on top of the bed. He separated them and raised them again. He was smiling and his eyes were fixed as if gazing on something pleasing.

Thinking that he might want a crucifix, I put one in his hands. He took it, kissed it, and put it on the bed, and again lifted up his arms in an outburst of joy. His face appeared stronger and with more color than when he was healthy. Its beauty and radiance was such that it eclipsed the infirmary lights.

The bystanders were dumbfounded and riveted their eyes on Besuccio's face. They were even more astonished when the dying boy lifted his head a little and stretched out his hands as if to shake hands with someone he loved. Then in a joyful voice he sang:

*Lodate Maria, O Lingue fedeli;
Risuoni nei cieli, La vostra armonia.
(Praise Mary, O you faithful tongues;
Let your harmony resound in the heavens.)*

He then made several attempts to lift himself and, devoutly stretching out his hands, began to sing again:

*O Gesù d'amor acceso,
Non vi avessi mai offeso;
O mio caro e buon Gesù,
Non vi voglio offender più.
(O Jesus, on fire with love,
Would that I had never offended you;
O my dear good Jesus,
I never want to offend you any more.)*

Without interruption he intoned the hymn:

*Perdon caro Gesù, Pietà mio Dio;
Prima di peccar più, Morir vogl'io.
(Pardon, dear Jesus, Mercy, my God;
Before sinning again, I would rather die.)*

We listened in stunned silence. Our eyes fixed on Francis, who seemed like an angel. To break the tension I said: "I believe our Francis is receiving some special grace from the Lord and His heavenly Mother. Maybe she has come to take his soul to heaven."

We were further astonished as Besucco continued to sing, but his sentences were broken up as if he were answering questions. I was able to catch these phrases: "King of Heaven... so beautiful... I am a poor sinner... I give you my heart... Give me your love... My dear Lord!" Then he fell back on the bed as if lifeless.

The radiance in his face was gone and the infirmary lights brightened.

But when he realized that no one was praying nor prompting him with invocations, he turned to me and said: "Help me. Let us pray. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, assist me in this my agony. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you."

I suggested that he rest but, paying me no heed, he continued: "Jesus in my mind, Jesus in my mouth, Jesus and Mary I give you my soul."

At 11:00 p.m. he tried to speak again, but he could say only two words: "The crucifix." He wanted to be blessed with the crucifix for the plenary indulgence at the moment of death, something he had often asked for and that I had promised him.

Fr. Alasonatti, the prefect, gave this blessing and began reciting the *Proficiscere* (Depart, Christian soul) while the others prayed on their knees. At 11:15 Besucco looked intently at me, and tried to smile; then he raised his eyes heavenward indicating that he was departing. A few moments later his soul left his body and flew gloriously, so we hope, to enjoy heavenly glory in the company of those who have served God by the innocence of their life in this world and are now enjoying him and blessing him in heaven.

* *“Remember that at the hour of death we shall reap what we have sown in life. If we have done good works, we will be happy. Death will be a blessing because it will usher us into paradise. Otherwise, woe to us! Remorse of conscience and hell will await us; ‘What a man sows, that he will also reap’ (Gal. 6: 8). A man’s entire life should be a continual preparation for death.” (Don Bosco)*

CHAPTER 32

The Funeral and Burial

Words cannot describe the sorrow felt throughout the house at the loss of such a dear friend. Many prayers were said at Francis’ bedside. As morning broke, the news spread among his companions, who gathered in church to find some comfort in their sorrow and also to pay tribute to their dead friend. They prayed for the repose of his soul, if indeed he still had need of prayers. Many went to Communion for this purpose. The Rosary, the Office, prayers in common and private, Communions, Mass—in short, all the practices of piety that took place in our church on that Sunday—were directed to God for the eternal repose of the soul of our good Francis.

Something unusual happened that day. His face became so handsome and healthy that he did not appear to be dead. He had never looked so well even when he was healthy. His companions did not show the morbid fear youngsters generally have for the dead and were eager to see him. They said that he looked like an angel. He looks better in his death portrait than when he was alive. As a memento, they tried to get anything connected with Francis

It was commonly held that Francis had gone straight to heaven. Some said that he did not need our prayers as he was already enjoying heaven's glory. "For sure," added another boy, "he's certainly enjoying the sight of God and praying for us." "I believe," stated a third boy, "that Besucco already enjoys a throne of glory in heaven and that he's invoking divine blessings on his friends and companions."

On the following day, Monday, January 11, Mass was sung by his companions in the church at the Oratory. Many went to Communion, as always for the greater glory of God, and also to pray for the eternal repose of the soul of Francis, if indeed he still had need of them. After Mass the boys escorted the coffin to the parish church and then to the cemetery.

Francis was buried in grave number 147 in the fourth row on the western side.

CHAPTER 33

The People of Argentera's Reaction

The virtuous life displayed by Francis while in Argentera for almost 14 years became well-known in his home town when news arrived of his holy death. Fr. Francis Pepino sent me a moving account of the events there that border on the supernatural. I'll keep the full story for a more suitable time but here are a few excerpts. Father Pepino writes:

"When news of the serious illness of Francis arrived, there were public prayers with a sung Mass, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and prayers for the sick. Then the news of his death reached us on the evening of January 13 and quickly spread. In less than an hour Francis was being hailed by most of the parents as an example to their own children.

"I cannot describe the sorrow of the family and benefactors of this dear boy, Francis, who pleased everybody with his exemplary conduct and never offended anyone.

"On January 10, Mary, Francis' younger sister, told me of his death. She said that at about midnight of the previous night, when she was in bed with her mother, she heard a loud noise in the upstairs room where Francis had slept. She clearly heard a handful of sand fall on the floor and, fearing that the noise would cause her mother to suspect that Francis had died, she began speaking in a loud voice to distract her.

"Several others, convinced of his holiness, prayed to him for favors and obtained what they sought."

I don't want to discuss what I've just quoted; I intend only to be factual and to leave whatever inferences can be drawn from these facts to the judgment of my readers. Here are a few more excerpts from the source previously quoted.

"In February, a two-year-old boy was in danger of death. The parents considered the case hopeless and turned to our Besucco, whose virtues were being proclaimed by everyone. They promised that if the boy were cured they would promote the practice of the Stations of the Cross in imitation of Francis. The boy recovered quickly and is now in perfect health.

"A few days ago I myself recommended to the prayers of our dear boy a family's father who was seriously ill. At the same time I also recommended him to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, to whose honor and glory this man had consecrated himself as a cantor. I'm not giving the names of these people simply to save them from any undue criticism. The sick man improved immediately and within a few days appeared perfectly cured.

"Anna, Francis' oldest sister, was married in March. She was later troubled with an affliction which gave her no peace, day or night. In a moment of extreme pain she called out: 'My dear little Francis, help me in my need, obtain some rest for me.' No sooner said than done. From that night on she began to sleep peacefully and has continued to do so.

"Encouraged by the success of her prayer, Anna again turned to Francis for help when her life was in great danger, and again her every wish was granted.

"For the greater glory of God, I have collected accounts of what happened to others. But I must tell you that I used to recommend myself to the prayers of my godson even when he was alive, and I continue to do so with greater faith after his death. As a result of my faith I have obtained favors at different times."

CHAPTER 34

Conclusion

And so ends the biography of Francis Besucco. I have much more to say about this virtuous boy but, since this might cause certain criticism among those who do not recognize the wonders of the Lord in his servants, I'll await a more opportune time to publish them, if divine goodness allows me to live that long.

Meanwhile, my dear readers, before I finish writing, I would like both of us to come to a conclusion which will be to our mutual advantage. It is certain that, sooner or later, death will come for both of us, and it is possible that it will come sooner than we think. It is equally certain that, if we don't perform good works during our life, we won't be able to reap their fruit at the point of death, nor can we expect any reward from God.

Since Divine Providence gives us time to prepare for this last moment, let's occupy our time in good works and so be assured that we'll collect the reward we merit at the appropriate time.

We can expect some people to make fun of us because we practice our religion. Pay them no heed. They deceive themselves and those who listen to them. If we want to be wise before God, we must not be afraid of appearing foolish in the eyes of the world. Jesus assures us that the wisdom of the world is foolishness in the eyes of God. Only the constant practice of our religion can make us happy in time and in eternity. He who does not work in summer has no right to enjoy its fruit in the winter; and he who does not practice virtue during this life cannot expect a reward in death.

I encourage you, Christian reader, I encourage you to perform good works while we have time; our sufferings are of short duration, and what we shall enjoy lasts forever. I call down God's blessings upon you, and in your turn please pray to the Lord God to have mercy on my soul, so that after having spoken about virtue, about the method of practicing it, and about the great reward that God has prepared in the next life for those who practice it, I may not suffer the terrible misfortune of neglecting to do so myself with irreparable harm to my own salvation.

May the Lord help both me and you to obey His precepts now so that one day we can go to heaven to enjoy great happiness forever and ever! Amen.

LIFE OF FRANCIS BESUCCO

1850	(March 1)	Francis is born at Argentera.
1858	(September)	First Holy Communion.
1862		Reads the lives of Savio and Magone and expresses the desire to go to the Oratory.
1863	(August 2)	Enters the Oratory.
1864	(January 9)	Death at the Oratory.
	(July-August)	First sketch of his life appears in the <i>Catholic Readings</i> .
1877		A second and revised edition of his life written by Don Bosco.

