

Ceria Eugenio

DON BOSCO WITH GOD



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Dedication

On the occasion of the 2008 General Chapters of the Salesians of Don Bosco and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (the Salesian Sisters), the Institute of Youth Ministry is pleased to present this book about the life of their founder, Don Bosco, and to express their appreciation to the translator of this book, Fr Michael Smyth, sdb.

We would also like to offer this book to the Salesian Family and Friends of Don Bosco as an instrument for the spiritual preparation for the upcoming 150th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Salesian Congregation in 2009.

Elena Rastello, fma
Director
of the Institute of Youth Ministry
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Don* Eugenio Ceria

In his lifetime, Don Ceria was a teacher, a director of houses/schools and also a writer. He was an editor of a series of Latin and Greek classical works as well as works of the Fathers of the Church, a Director of a literary periodical for institutions of higher education and the author of spiritual works.

In 1929 he was appointed to continue the Biographical Memoirs of Don Bosco, which was interrupted in 1916 with the death of the original author, Don Giovanni Battista Lemoyne. The first edition of Don Bosco con Dio was published in 1930. It was meant to underline the prayerful and contemplative interiority of Don Bosco. There were some objections of those who saw Don Bosco as a great worker, an excellent organiser, and more inclined to action than to contemplation. This book was a great editorial success.

Despite the fact that many years have passed since this first edition, the book retains all its freshness and presents the spiritual depth of the Saint of the Young. Besides presenting the spiritual figure of Don Bosco, the reader will be challenged to see the value and merit of the dynamics of a spiritual life, and perhaps will find him/herself falling in love with God.

* "Don" is the Italian word for "Father."

Presentation

A Salesian Classic

After Don Bosco's death the main preoccupation of his sons, and of all those who felt themselves called in some way to continue his spirit, was to guard and develop faithfully his charism without any deviation or loss. This precious task gave rise to an impressive collection of writings. There are more than a thousand biographies of the saint, and more than thirty thousand publications about him. These include works of documentation, serious studies and popular works.

Not all of this material merits preservation, but there are some Salesian classics, books which are impressive for their scientific thoroughness, or for their deep insights. These are books that will never be out of date because they are capable of shedding light and instilling awareness today as they did in their own time. Of these, Don Ceria's *Don Bosco con Dio* is one of the best.

It has passed through two editions. The first of these was quite short. The second, the definitive edition, was published in 1946. It contained five additional chapters and some details were amended. This excellent book began to take shape in the mind of the author following an assertion about the scarce attention paid to the interior life of the saint both before and after his death. That assertion was valid then, and still is today. "Captivated by the sight of the wonderful deeds he had done in his varied field of activities," Don Ceria writes, "his contemporaries were content to admire his triumphs without paying attention to the fact that all his glory was from within - *omnis gloria eius ab intus*. Even the generation that grew up after his death preferred to look at Don Bosco's works, studying their form and development, without pausing to examine thoroughly the underlying principle which gave life to all his works. This guiding principle has always

been the great secret of the saints, their spirit of prayer and union with God."

Then, and now, there was need for a change of approach, passing from the visible fruits of a tree that was greatly admired, but too little studied, to the hidden roots of its immense fruitfulness. It needed someone to "lift the hem of the veil, on a life that seemed on the surface like so many others, but which in reality concealed treasures of grace and supernatural gifts."

The Author's Resources

Don Ceria showed great intelligence and determination, and displayed five specific characteristics in his work.

First of all he made use of the competence he had acquired in writing the volumes of the Biographical Memoirs that bear his name. Secondly, he applied himself diligently to the patient task of revisiting the oral and written sources at his disposal, going back over, as he says himself, "with filial affection, the example and the teachings of the Father," and picking out "every detail that seemed worthy of mention in relation to his life with God."

In doing this - we are now at the third characteristic - he took advantage of the opportunity he had of being in an environment where the memories of those who had collaborated with Don Bosco were still alive. He added a selection filter - his own discernment and judgment based on a good knowledge of spiritual theology, following the line of St Thomas Aquinas and the Jesuit, Poulain, just to mention two names.

Finally, he made good use of the ideas inspired by his own refined understanding in spiritual matters.

A Short Essay in Spiritual Theology

The result is a work which, even though modest in scope, is a model from the point of view of edification in the proper sense of the word, namely the capacity to enlighten the mind and move the will of its readers. It is also an academic work of spiritual theology understood rigorously as the theology of Christian experience.

A glance at the index is enough to prove this. However a premise is needed. Spiritual theology has its own specific character which is a critical study of the subjective appropriation of the objective message of faith (which belongs to the field of moral and dogmatic theology). For this rea-

son spiritual theology combines the historic inductive method focussed on the concrete life situation of the subject, with the systematic deductive method required by the presence of an authentic form of Christian living. Since it is based on a real life story, it presupposes a biography. Interpreting it from a faith point of view requires a theological approach.

There are some authors, von Balthasar for example, who identify spiritual theology with theological hagiography. The twenty chapters of Don Ceria's work are completely along this line, including and combining in a single unit, both biography and theological reflection.

The biographical content can be seen very clearly from a look at the titles of the first seven chapters. They are dedicated to the life of Don Bosco as a child, in the family and at school, as a young man in the seminary, then as a priest, the beginnings of his mission, finding a permanent home and the phase of the great foundations. It is there again in Chapter 19, 'The Quiet Twilight.' The systematic reflection is found especially from Chapter 8 onwards, with a series of portraits intended to illustrate, first of all, the strength of the saint in face of the trials of life, and then his qualities as confessor, preacher, writer, man of faith, apostle of charity, rich in ordinary and extraordinary gifts. Finally there is a reflection on the profoundly priestly character of his sanctity.

Description of a Saint

From the meshing of these two components, not only as indicated in the chapter headings but also within the various chapters, there is a line which runs through the whole work revealing a spiritual identity clearly built on three important axes: relationship with God, relationship with neighbour and relationship with self. The aspect of Don Bosco's spiritual life on which everything else depends is, without doubt, his intense unceasing union with God. This is enough to justify the overall title of the book.

This fundamental basis explains the pre-eminence given to his faith, understood both as living faith and as intellectual assent. Don Bosco was fully convinced of the absolute primacy of God in salvation. He lived as one who trusted in the Lord and entrusted all his initiatives to the Lord. His faith found expression in a strong devotion to Mary - he never let slip an opportunity to nourish this devotion, in himself and in others, from a doctrinal as well as a devotional point of view. He was convinced that God does all by getting us to do all. His was the very opposite of the protestant viewpoint

that to attribute some good work to man is somehow to take away from God. His understanding was expressed in a very profound and honest humility together with a crucifying commitment to unceasing hard work. His humility was based on the knowledge that everything depends on God and comes from God. His constant hard work was a result of his conviction that it is God's plan to involve man fully in the work of salvation.

His relationship with God is mirrored in his relationship with his neighbour. Don Bosco's belief that he had a part to play in God's plan was translated into an unconditional commitment to work for the salvation of souls. Don Ceria emphasises three aspects of this commitment. The first of these was an untiring opposition to sin which is the worst misfortune that can befall a human person because it is an evil directed against the intimate truth of his being. Second was the cultivation of loving kindness, a love of neighbour which is not just real, but perceptible and attractive. Third was his zeal in nourishing the lives of priests. This came from an appreciation of his own priestly vocation, from the esteem he had for other priests, and from his concern for their well-being and for the growth of a sense of Church and of the papacy.

A correct understanding of one's relationship with self is both a condition and a consequence of one's relationship with God and with neighbour. Don Ceria highlights the paschal mystery of death and resurrection - patience and mortification together with inner joy and external cheerfulness - and draws attention to the exceptional level reached by Don Bosco in living both aspects of this mystery.

Don Bosco's Secret: The Spirit of Prayer

We have seen the main lines of the portrait of Don Bosco painted by Don Ceria in this book. It might be useful now, as a help to the reader, to examine in some detail the sequence of ideas behind it.

The starting point is found, as we well know, in Don Bosco's untiring spirit of prayer. Don Ceria outlines the truth of this and its centrality.

To prove the truth of it, he describes the attitude of the saint, always absorbed in God, the "ease with which he spoke about God with real feeling," his exceptional strength in facing up to the difficulties of life, the solid spirit of piety of his followers, the constant aim in his educative work to promote the spiritual life. He writes, quoting the testimony of contemporaries, "Love of God shone forth on his face, in his whole person and from

every word that came from his heart.” He had a maxim that “a priest should never deal with someone without leaving him a good thought.” He showed such fortitude in putting up with obstacles, hindrances and misfortunes that “when he seemed more cheerful and happy than usual, the people who worked with him would whisper among themselves, based on experience, ‘Don Bosco must have some really serious difficulty today, given that he is more joyful than usual.’” He taught his helpers to pray fervently to such an extent that it seemed “that they were unable to say four words in public or in private without bringing in prayer in some way or other.” He maintained that without a religious element, “education was not only ineffective, but really made no sense.”

– As confirmation of the centrality he gave to prayer, Don Ceria refers to what the saint used to say about the relationship between prayer and action and between prayer and study, and he recalls the great importance he attached to the practices of piety.

– He says that Don Bosco never separated prayer and action but neither did he confuse them. By means of prayer at every moment (ejaculatory prayer and interior aspirations) he transformed every activity into prayer. But he did not fall into the mistake of “thinking that working hard on behalf of our neighbour dispenses us from the obligation to pray assiduously and interiorly to God.”

– On the second point, he says that Don Bosco was ruled by the principle that “for ecclesiastics study is a means, not an end in itself. It is a means to do good for souls. Holiness of life must come before everything else.” And he says, “He was a thousand miles away from putting love of knowledge before a spirit of prayer.”

With regard to the practices of piety, he reminds us that Don Bosco wrote and prescribed a rule of clerical life in seven articles, of which the sixth read, “Apart from the ordinary practices of piety, I will never omit daily meditation and spiritual reading.”

Relationship with God

– Don Ceria affirms that it is from his unceasing union with God that Don Bosco derived, first of all his great faith, and his yes to the will of God. This gave rise to an unshakable trust and a firm conviction of God’s fatherliness and omnipotence. No difficulty or distress could destroy his peace of mind, and he explained why: “In all these works I am only the humble

instrument. The master craftsman is God. It is not up to the instrument, but to the Master, to provide the means necessary to bring them to a good end. He will do so as he thinks best. It is up to me only to be docile and pliable in his hands."

Nevertheless, "he also believed that Providence wants to be helped by our efforts. At the commencement of every work, he tried to secure whatever was necessary. We should not remain idle as we wait for the help of Divine Providence, he used to say. The Lord comes to our help when he sees the generous efforts we make for love of him."

Don Bosco had a particularly catholic view of the relationship between God and man: *Deus solus* (God alone) becomes *nunquam solus* (never alone) because the action of God is constantly incarnated through human mediation. Proof of this was the intense devotion Don Bosco nourished towards the Blessed Virgin under the title Help of Christians. Don Bosco's prayer was that of a saint for whom prayer leads immediately to action, and he was always conscious of the power of Mary. "Don Bosco is nothing," he used to say, right to his last breath. "It is Mary who has done everything." In his mind the role of the Blessed Virgin was far from being simply a model. It included also the aspect of active support in the life of Christians. Her role is not to be confused with that of God, or, worse still, considered an alternative. Rather it should be firmly acknowledged as a mirror of the communion between creature and Creator. For him the Help of Christians was the revelation of God's power to arouse in his creatures a true capacity for salvation.

The consequences of this understanding of faith can be clearly seen in the way he combined humility and hard work. It is a fact, explains Don Ceria, that Don Bosco literally died of work. "His strong physical constitution would have allowed him to live to ninety and beyond. Instead he wore himself out by hard work day and night." He wanted the same spirit of hard work to continue in the Salesian Congregation. He saw in it the way God wants us to imitate the obedience of Jesus even unto death. He also saw it as the first and most fundamental fulfilment of Christian asceticism, and as an effective response to the accusations that were made in his day against religious life. However, "he feared, he feared greatly that the efficacy and merit of our work might go up in smoke if it were infiltrated by our own will and self-seeking. Therefore, whilst he used to recommend to Salesians that they should work hard, he would add immediately, so as to avoid any misunderstanding, that they should work untiringly for the salvation of souls."

His Relationship with People

Love of God leads naturally to love of neighbour and it is there it can be verified. The second great outcome of Don Bosco's intense prayer life is precisely his love of neighbour, evidenced by his zeal for the salvation of souls.

According to Don Ceria, John Bosco's piety was like goodness, which by its very nature tends to spread.¹ To see someone and think immediately of how he could make that person good, or make him better, in the true Christian sense of the word, were for him one and the same thing. This was because his ardent union with God led him logically to share the love of God with his neighbour. Don Bosco loved the whole person, body and soul, mind and heart, natural talents and gifts of grace. But, thanks to the clarity of his faith, he had a special love for that which was most important, namely holiness.

This is why he never ceased to regard sin as the greatest misfortune that could befall a person, and this is what led him to oppose sin with all his strength. "Against sin," writes Don Ceria, "Don Bosco fought an implacable war for the whole of his life." When confronted with sin, he reacted very strongly, in a way that the world might consider exaggerated. For him it was justified because "he was burning with the love of God, and he saw every sin as an offence against God." When one really loves, no offence against the beloved is considered small, and no sacrifice to avoid it seems too great.

Don Bosco knew well that he was called by God to love especially the young who, "during the time of their formation need to experience the beneficial effects of priestly charity." This led him never to lose sight of "three rules inspired by his priestly zeal and often recommended to his followers in order to win the affection and confidence of the young: Love what they love and in this way they will come to love what we love for their good. Love them in such a way that they will know they are loved. Make every effort to ensure that none of them ever leaves us unhappy." He chose as his educational method "kindness adapted wisely and gently to their youthful condition" and he raised this kindness to "spiritual fatherhood of the highest level."

He did all this without ever falling into any kind of exclusivity or reductionism. His predilection for the young, adds Don Ceria, did not preclude but rather served to increase other parallel concerns. Among these he

¹ Bonum est diffusivum sui.

highlights his concern for priests. Don Bosco engaged in an extraordinary programme for the promotion of priestly vocations and he showed an intense, though perhaps little known, commitment for the support of priests in need, be it material or spiritual, or in any kind of difficulty.

It is well known how sensitive he was in everything that concerned the Church. Don Bosco never wanted to be anything other than a priest. He had a very strong sense of Church, a deep understanding of the ministry of the Pope and a great esteem for the priestly ministry.

Relationship with Self

Speaking of Don Bosco's three principles for the education of the young, Don Ceria comments: "It is easy to enunciate principles like these, easier still to admire them, but to put them into practice costs constant sacrifice."

The two dimensions referred to so far point to a third: the closeness of Don Bosco to God, and the love of neighbour that flows from it, cannot be explained without a strong element of asceticism, of sacrifice, detachment, selflessness and patience. By way of comment on this aspect, Don Ceria devotes two of the most moving chapters of the entire book: chapter 8 on the physical and moral sufferings Don Bosco had to undergo, and chapter 9 on the disappointments and adversity he encountered in his life.

The picture that emerges is one that is bound to impress any reader, even one contaminated by the principles of a society that seeks pleasure and comfort. In Don Bosco there was no facile triumphalism but the true face of an authentic disciple of the Crucified Lord, bent under the heavy burden of unbelievable crosses.

The life of Don Bosco, according to Don Ceria, "was sown with sharp thorns." These included misunderstandings, disagreements, persecution, even attempts on his life, economic difficulties, and then physical illnesses so grave that the doctor who was caring for him could say that "after about 1860, his organism was almost reduced to a walking pathological cabinet."

And yet "he never lost his serenity. Indeed it seemed that at times of suffering he developed even greater courage, for he appeared more cheerful and witty than usual." Nor did he ask to be relieved of his sufferings. According to his contemporaries, "the one thing Don Bosco did not pray for was to be cured of his illnesses, although he did allow others to pray

for him as an act of charity." The reason for this rather surprising attitude is rather simple, according to Don Ceria. "Physical sufferings accepted with perfect conformity to the will of God are acts of great love for God and of voluntary penance... Souls which feel strongly attracted to God are given to mortification almost as an irresistible act of love."

The fruits of such suffering confirm this. In the Christian paradox suffering is transformed mysteriously into a transcendent source of joy. Don Bosco's sharing in the death of Christ through his sufferings led him continuously to the paschal event of eternal joy. And joy was the goal of his educative work.

Relevance of Don Ceria's Work

Addressing himself to his readers, Don Ceria confides that he wrote this book to correct a major misunderstanding linked to the notion of Don Bosco as a modern saint. "In these times of feverish activity some would like to regard Don Bosco as a saint of action, almost as if the Church, from St Paul to the present day, had not always had saints who were very active, and as if a modern active saint did not also need to be a man of prayer. There is no sanctity without an interior life, nor can there be an interior life without a spirit of prayer."

Certainly Don Bosco was a man of action and his activity reached an incredible level. But it came from the superabundance of his interior life.

The fever of activity is higher than ever in our own day. We Salesians talk constantly about the need to be with the young people, to share their problems, their concerns and their needs. And so it should be. But what good does it do, however, to be among the young in their search for meaning, if we ourselves have little or nothing of the truth? And what should be our response to the needs of the young if not to be in their midst as Don Bosco was, with the interior qualities that Don Ceria has described?

Going through the pages of *Don Bosco with God* we see there a mentality and a way of life that are so different from our own day as to frighten us. It is a good time for us to reconsider and allow ourselves to be challenged by the truths it contains. It is for this reason the book is being republished. It is for this same reason that it deserves to be received and regarded as an authentic gift of the Spirit.

Foreword

The idea for this book came to me at Frascati in 1929, the year of Don Bosco's beatification. I read the annual report given by the third successor of Don Bosco, Fr Philip Rinaldi, to the Salesian Cooperators in January of that year. He concluded the report by recalling how, one hundred years previously, young John Bosco, not yet fourteen years of age, was working as a farmhand with a neighbouring farmer. During this period, despite his young age, he did not neglect the apostolate among his companions but he was especially careful in attending to his prayer life. He spent almost two years at that farm, working and praying.

Then I remembered that the Benedictine Dom Chautard, in his well known book *The Soul of the Apostolate*, mentions Don Bosco as one of those modern priests and religious who engaged in a life of intense activity and did immense good for souls, only because they were at the same time men of profound interior life. I recalled too, that Monsignor Virili (postulator for the cause of Don Cafasso) gave testimony also during Don Bosco's cause. He said that he believed Don Bosco was a saint, not only because of the work he had done, but also for his spirit of prayer and recollection. I said to myself, this is an aspect of Don Bosco which has not been sufficiently highlighted and which deserves to be made known this year when it is very probable that he will be beatified.

His contemporaries were so taken up in admiration of his immense activity and various triumphs that they overlooked the fact that all his glory came from within - *omnis gloria eius ab intus*. Even the generation that came after his death preferred to dwell on the works of Don

Bosco without paying much attention to the animating principle, that which has always been the secret of the saints: the spirit of prayer and union with God.

— Let no one fool himself into thinking he understands Don Bosco if he does not know him as a man of prayer. We will not benefit much from his admirable life if we concentrate only on the biographical details and do not seek to penetrate the intimate inner movements of his soul.

It seemed to me that the best contribution that could be made to honour the newly beatified would be to lift the hem of the veil that covered his inner life. Externally his life was like that of many others but in reality that ordinary exterior concealed treasures of grace and supernatural gifts. We can say of Don Bosco what has already been said of others, that he was like the sacred Host: the outward appearance of bread, inwardly Jesus Christ.²

I could easily have sheltered behind the very convenient and not altogether untrue pretext that I was not up to the task. I decided however to give it a try, especially since it meant complying with the wishes of the Rector Major, Don Philip Rinaldi. I made use of whatever free time I had in the midst of my various occupations, and with filial affection I went back over the deeds and the teachings of our dear Father, focussing on every detail that seemed worthy of mention in relation to his union with God.

In this way I gradually built up enough material for this short work. Humbly and joyfully I placed it at the feet of our dear Founder, now Blessed. At the same time I prayed that others, with sharper minds and greater skill and competence, might revisit the topic and produce a work of genuine quality. The subject certainly merits it.

The book was well received. It has been reprinted and translated. Now, in obedience to another successor of St John Bosco, I have revised it with some additions and modifications but without altering its original form.

The sources I have used have been mainly the Biographical Memoirs which are well known, the two-volume Life written by Don Lem-

² Fallon, *Vie de M. Olivier*: T.I., p.136. In his discourse on the heroic virtues of Don Bosco, Pope Pius XI said that he had personally admired Don Bosco's "immense humility," and observed that he, "the one who started everything," went around the house "like the latest arrival, like the least of the guests."

oyne, the Acts of the Canonical Processes, and documents from the archives. I mention this to reassure readers of the credibility of the contents, without the need for too many quotations. Whenever I have had recourse to other sources, I have always made mention of them in the footnotes.

As far as the title of the book is concerned, it seemed best to keep to the original. This does not detract in any way from the greatness of the man who, under the simple name of Don Bosco, wrought so many wonders. Pope Pius XI was of the same opinion. In an audience on 3rd April 1934, for the pilgrims who had come for the canonisation, he referred to all the different groups that make up the great family of Don Bosco. He corrected himself and said, "Of St John Bosco," but went on immediately to say that the world would continue to call him Don Bosco.

"And rightly so," he added, "for it is like repeating his war title, that benevolent war, one of those wars which divine Providence deigns to grant every now and then to impoverished mankind, as if to make up for all those other wars that are far from benevolent but cause so much pain and suffering."

This edition has five new chapters and various modifications and additions here and there. The previous division into three parts has been abandoned.

One morning in August 1887, I was at the college in Lanzo Torinese. On my way upstairs I suddenly found myself just a few feet away from Don Bosco. He was waiting for someone on the first floor landing. Delighted at the opportunity, I kissed his hand with great affection. Don Bosco asked me my name and when I told him, he said, "Oh! I am happy ..." I was all ears to hear what he had to say, but he did not finish the sentence, because the person he was waiting for came and took him away! Now that I have finished this humble task, what a joy it would be to hear again those few words from the lips of our beloved Father, and to hear the rest of what he was going to say! In any case, he knows the motive behind this work and he knows the love with which it is done. May God bless my effort and render it not altogether unfruitful.

Fr Eugene Ceria

Turin, Feast of St John Bosco 31 January 1946

Introduction

For simple souls a saint is someone who has visions, prophecies and miracles. But these are charismatic gifts, not essential for holiness. They have been given by God to individuals in his Church since the beginning, as evidence of the Church's divine power. They also serve as an extraordinary means to awaken or strengthen in people's minds the thought of heavenly things.

A saint is someone who belongs totally to God, someone who, as St Paul says, *lives for God* (cf. Gal 2:19). A saint is one who seeks in God the beginning and end of all his or her thoughts, feelings and actions.

All the baptised have received the elements of this supernatural life in the grace bestowed on them by God in His infinite goodness. However, not all Christians correspond perfectly to God's light and inspiration to the point where they can say with the same Apostle, "*Yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me*" (cf. Gal 2:20).

A saint is one who lives the supernatural life to the full, insofar as that is possible for a human being. This means that habitually his conversation is in heaven (cf. Phil 3:20). He lives on earth but as a citizen of heaven, with his heart ever fixed on heaven where he knows his true good is to be found. It is in this that the spirit of prayer consists, prayer understood as the raising up and the tending of the soul towards God³ in such a way that nothing in the world can distract it from the supreme object of its love. It is an experience here below of the heavenly life which is the direct, loving, eternal vision of God.

Having said this, we have to admit that the stories of the saints as told nowadays do not always tell of the lives of the saints. Without doubt the

³ In a more general sense, prayer is defined by St John Damascene (*De Fide Orth.* 3,24) as *ascensio mentis in Deum* (the ascent of the mind to God) and by St Augustine (*Sermons* 9, 2) as *mentis ad Deum affectuosa intentio* (a loving inclination of the mind towards God).

saints also help us to understand some actions that take place within the framework of the events of their lifetime. Believers may see in some of their actions or ideas the hand of divine Providence which, from time to time, sends heroic men and women capable of carrying out some important religious or civil mission to humanity.

From this point of view, it cannot be denied that modern hagiography has got rid of some longstanding prejudices which looked upon the saints as beings that had fallen from the stars, and had little to do with ordinary everyday life. They were seen as suffering from a kind of monomania which passed off as mysticism. This was a false notion due to ignorance of the true nature of mysticism and applied often in derision to phenomena of a supernatural nature.

It is to the credit of the followers of the historical approach that the lives of the saints can now be presented without arousing some of the antipathies of the past. But it is also undeniable that their true individuality runs the risk of being diminished if they are presented without the halo of sanctity that was part of their being and which lets us see them as they really are.

We should be able to distinguish the two aspects - historical detail and sanctity - without isolating them. Why should we ignore sanctity when writing about the saints? When we speak about sanctity we are speaking about a reality which history and psychology can examine, at least superficially. But it is a reality which also needs to be studied by someone who is trained to enquire into facts belonging to a superior order, where the human and divine meet and are intimately joined together.

Some writers miss the point when they think that it is not worthwhile speaking about a person's union with God. We finish up with lives of the saints that could be regarded almost as secularised.

Here it is worth adding another observation. We have often heard and read that Don Bosco is a modern saint. This strikes us as a comment that should be regarded with caution and maybe taken with the proverbial pinch of salt. Otherwise we run the risk of giving the impression that sanctity - like so many other things in life - needs to be modernised to keep up with the times.

We do not at all agree with the idea that there are two different kinds of sanctity, one suitable for times past and another for our own time! The action of the Holy Spirit that forms saints does not change with the passing of the centuries. It is not like human activities which adapt continually to changing times and situations. Neither is human cooperation with the

sanctifying action of God's grace any different in our day from yesterday. It does not change style to suit our tastes.

Perfect love of God, which is the essential element of holiness, is like the sun which gives light and heat to the earth from the first day of creation. The saints are men and women of their own time. They carry out their mission at a specific time in history, and they develop attitudes characteristic of their time, which might seem strange to people living at a different time in history.

Nevertheless, given the inspiration and power and supreme end of every holy undertaking, this does not mean that holiness develops characteristics so completely new as to justify the idea that there is a different kind of holiness for different periods in history.

There is one big misunderstanding to be avoided, when we say that Don Bosco is a modern saint. In these times of 'feverish' activity some would like to regard Don Bosco as a saint of action, almost as if the Church, from St Paul to the present day, had not always had saints who were very active, and as if a modern active saint did not also need to be a man of prayer.

There is no sanctity without an interior life, nor can there be an interior life without a spirit of prayer. That is the nature of genuine spirituality, yesterday, today and always - prayer and action combined, fused, intertwined and indivisible, as on the day of Pentecost.

A writer with a profound knowledge of St Paul, drawing on his study of St Paul's apostolate, gives this outline description: "With incomparable ease the Apostle combines the most sublime mysticism and the most practical asceticism. His eyes were always on heaven and his feet firmly on earth. There is nothing above or beneath him. When Paul states that he is crucified to the world and living with the life of Christ, he uses words which attract his followers by their joyfulness and grace. He even goes down to the most minute detail regarding a woman's veil, the correct ordering of the assembly, the duty of manual work, and the care of a weak stomach! In this way his spirituality offers attractive nourishment to the humblest souls, and to chosen ones an inexhaustible source of profound meditation."⁴ In all of this, Don Bosco would seem to have been a faithful imitator of St Paul.

Jumping now from the beginnings of Christianity right into the Middle Ages, we come to St Bonaventure. An authoritative biographer says of him something which could also be applied to Don Bosco. "Times of conflict

⁴ Prat, La F., *Theologie de St Paul*, Vol II, I, VI, 3, 5. Paris Beauchesne, 1961.

require people of great goodness who can rise above divisions and bring peace; people of clear vision who know what they want and work single-mindedly for their goal; people of prayer to ensure peace in their own inner lives and to gain light and strength from above."⁵

Here we have the spirituality of the saints, ever old and ever new. It does not change with the passing of centuries or the mood of the times.⁶

It can easily happen that apostolic people and Christians well versed in the sacred sciences who often have to write about spiritual matters, deceive themselves in what they say. It is one thing to speak and quite another thing to do. It is possible to write very well about the spiritual life without living spiritually.

In the pages which follow, those engaged in priestly ministry will find, please God, and through the merits of Don Bosco, some light and help to enable them to combine *doing* and *teaching* (cf. Acts 1:1). May what they practise precede, accompany and follow what they teach. St Bernard urges us to be reservoirs and not simply channels of what we teach.⁷

In all that is written, lay people should not lose sight of the things of the spirit. They can profitably read what is said of Don Bosco's indefatigable work, and how in a sea of troubles he was able to transform into prayer the work of his hands. He practised naturally and to an incomparable degree the gospel saying *semper orare et non deficere* - Pray always without becoming weary (cf. Lk 18:1) We shall say nothing of religious sisters because they understand spiritual matters and, from the little we put before them, they will be able to draw out much more than our poor eye has been able to see.

The spirit of prayer is the atmosphere in which the Christian lives. The Lord says, "On the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem I will pour out a spirit of kindness and prayer. They will look on the one whom they have pierced." (cf. Zec 12:10). The spread of this spirit began at Pentecost, has lasted, still lasts and will last forever in the womb of the Church, like the air which the faithful breathe. The saints breathed this spirit in all its purity, without interruption and with full lungs.

Filled with this spirit they grew strong in their hidden life (cf. Eph 3:16) and were able to eliminate from their lives the deeds of the flesh listed by St

⁵ Lemmens, Leonard, *Vita di S. Bonaventura*, p.XIV, Soc., "Vita e Pensiero," Milano, 1921.

⁶ Cf. Vismara, D. Eugenio, *Don Bosco, il Santo dei tempi moderni*, in *Virtù e glorie di S. G. Bosco*, discorsi raccolti da D.G. Favini, Torino, S.E.I., 1934, p.328. It is an outline description of the subject, but it is complete and well written.

⁷ *In Cant.*, Ser. XVIII, 3: *Si supis, conchum te exhibebis et non canulem.*

Paul in his letter to the Christians of Galatia, (cf. 5:19-25) and were imbued with the fruits of the Spirit as given by the same Apostle: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness self-control*. This is what he calls living by the Spirit and walking in the Spirit. This is what he means when he says that we should be filled with the fulness of God. What beautiful sentiments! Would that we might comprehend with all the saints, but especially with Don Bosco and at his school!

Regarding the order of treatment: The way of the just is compared by the Holy Spirit to the light that begins to shine, then increases and grows until there is perfect day. The saints are true children of the light (cf. Jn 12:36; Lk 16:8) who shine in the world like bright stars, (cf. Phil 2:15) progressing in virtue to perfection (cf. 2 Cor 3:18) and making the Ascents (cf. Ps 84:6) to arrive there above, where they will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father (cf. Mt 13:43).

We will follow the life of Don Bosco with all simplicity from dawn to midday and to evening, or better to his passing from the firmament of the Church militant to the Church triumphant in the highest heavens. We will highlight some supernatural gifts which shone resplendently in him. These are not a necessary means for reaching union with God but, when they are genuine, they do serve to reveal ever more the extent of that union.

Meanwhile, my heart is overflowing with joy with the thought that our dear Father is enjoying the glory of the Blessed. From there he will not just show us the way from our exile by the light of his teaching and example, but he will also be our powerful intercessor with God, until it is granted also to us to reach the happiness of our heavenly homeland.

1 Childhood

In the spiritual life there are moments of grace in which the soul has unexpected revelations. These are often unforeseen and of great importance for salvation. They are unforeseen, insofar as they take you unawares, for the spirit blows where it wills. (cf. Jn 3:8). Nevertheless, ordinarily speaking, in things of this nature, that immediate clear insight does not happen without some kind of preparation. This may be more or less conscious, and consists especially in faithful correspondence to supernatural gifts.

As an eleven year old child,⁸ young John Bosco had one of these 'moments of grace.' He had become the friend of a worthy old priest and, with childlike trust, had placed himself in his hands. From his short period of time at the school of this priest he learnt an enduring lesson - that it was good for the soul 'to make a short meditation every day.' From this early lesson he drew two benefits: 'he got a taste for the spiritual life' and he learnt no longer to behave as before, 'in a somewhat materialistic way, like a machine, that acts without knowing the reasons why.' This is what he himself wrote in his Memoirs,⁹ recorded at the express wish of Pope Pius IX for the benefit of his sons. But in the passage quoted we should not skip lightly over some keywords that are significant. One is where he says he began, not simply to know or to experience the spiritual life, but to 'get a taste for what the spiritual life means.'

Here we see the beautiful gift of wisdom, which St Bernard calls 'experiential knowledge' of divine things. This gift of the Holy Spirit is really a supernatural taste for the things of God 'through a kind of mysterious

⁸ CERIA says "as an eleven year old child." We know now that this meeting took place after his stay at the Moglia farm, in November 1829, and therefore when John was fourteen (Teresio Bosco).

⁹ *Memorie dell'Oratorio* (S.E.I Turin 1946).

sympathy or similarity of nature.'¹⁰ The other phrase that is very revealing is where he speaks of previously having acted 'in a somewhat materialistic way.' It is worth noting the qualifying word 'somewhat' which softens the meaning a little.

The small boy had, therefore, already an idea of spirituality, vague and indeterminate perhaps, but yet he was able to distinguish between the spiritual and the material. The thing that strikes us most is to see that at such a tender age he already had a clear idea of the form of piety which was suitable for him and his followers: a harmonious accord between work and prayer, or, if you like, prayer as the soul of action.

Before that he had learnt the love of prayer from his mother. In the families of rural Piedmont at that time good Christian customs remained strong, despite the infiltration of foreign influences. Traditions were handed down from generation to generation around the fireside, a place that witnessed the sharing of simple family joys as well as the daily prayer with which these honest, hardworking people ended the day, reciting the rosary before the image of Our Lady of Consolation.

The home really deserved the name of domestic sanctuary. In such a healthy environment a gifted woman, like John's mother, could become an outstanding teacher of living religion, especially since her words were matched by the example of her own life. We know indeed that with the spontaneous language of a mother she was able to instil in him, from an early age, a lively awareness of the presence of God, a sincere admiration for the works of God's creation, gratitude for his gifts, acceptance of his will and the fear of offending him. Rarely, if ever, did a mother's teaching find such a docile son, quick to learn the lessons she taught.

In this way, from his humble family home, the child learnt to ascend to the holy House of the Lord. The desires of this child's heart were already aspiring to heavenly things. The rest of his wonderful life prompts us to apply to him the words of Sirach: *When I was young and innocent, I sought wisdom. She came to me in her beauty, and until the end I will cultivate her. As the blossoms yielded to ripening grapes, the heart's joy* (Sir 51:13-15).

On Sundays and feast days he assisted with joy and devotion at the celebration of the divine office and attained such fervour that the memory of it was present in his soul for the rest of the week. Many who knew him as a child have testified that while working in the fields, as he did from an early age, he often broke into prayer and his fine voice re-echoed in the

¹⁰ Tanquerrey, *Abrégé di Théologie ascétique*, p.1348.

hills as he sang sacred hymns of praise. He used to prepare little altars, as children do, decorating the image of Our Lady with flowers and leaves. Unlike others of his age, however, he used to call as many companions as he could to pray and sing and to repeat with devotion the ceremonies he had witnessed in church.

The word of God held an attraction for him. At sermons and catechism classes he did not miss a syllable. He sought every occasion to gather people together, get up on a plank and, standing there in his peasant's clothes, he would repeat the Sunday sermon with perfect memory and complete mastery of himself, or narrate some edifying story that he had heard and remembered for precisely such an occasion. The talks were interspersed with prayers and, if time permitted, he led his little band of followers in evening prayer. This zeal in doing good was aroused and enkindled in this young boy by his childlike love for God. Even at a tender age his heart was moved not only to love God, keeping him united to God with an ever growing bond of love, but also to desire to make God loved and to do all he could for this purpose.

According to the masters of the spiritual life, a most efficacious means of growing in union with God is the practice of Christian mortification, dying to self so as to live life as it was lived by Jesus Christ in God. Souls that feel strongly drawn to God, are drawn also to mortification by an almost irresistible instinct of love.

On seeing the saints find joy in voluntary privations and suffering, the world in its ignorance asks: *Ut quid perditio haec?* Why this waste of the good things of life? The answer is as old as the question St Paul gave it to us a long time ago: *Now those who belong to Christ (Jesus) have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires* (Gal 5:24). Those who have risen with Christ to the life of the Spirit willingly sacrifice the flesh in order to live according to the Spirit. Experience teaches that it is from there that the spirit of prayer develops and from there also comes fruitfulness of apostolic action.

Young John had already understood spontaneously this great secret of Christian perfection even before he met the priest who taught him to meditate. In fact he wrote in the aforementioned Memoirs:

Among other things he soon forbade me a particular penance that I used to practise which was not appropriate to my age and condition.

Instead the good priest encouraged him to frequent the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist.

He had made his first Communion a year before this happy encounter, when he was ten years old.¹¹ This was highly unusual for there was, at the time, a strict custom of not admitting anyone to the sacrament before the age of twelve or fourteen. John presented himself so well prepared that the parish priest closed an eye to his age. He prepared for his Communion by going to confession three times and for the whole of that blessed day he did no manual work but occupied himself in reading pious books. He was to write in his Memoirs:

It seems to me that from that day there was an improvement in my life.

Sadly, however, the holy and fruitful friendship with that good priest of God, who had directed him gently along the road of piety and knowledge, was to be cut short abruptly by the priest's death. Severe trials awaited Mamma Margaret's son. He had to leave his mother's house and go to work as a servant for a farm owner in the countryside.¹² Highly intelligent and with an extraordinary memory, he found himself compelled to put all his energy into hard, tiring work on the land. God so willed it that he might build a structure of solid virtue on the sound base of humility. He was to confess later that he felt he needed it.

Prayer was nourishment and comfort to him... prayer and something else. Every Saturday he respectfully asked his master's permission to go the following morning to a village, an hour's walk away, to attend the first Mass which was celebrated at a very early hour. Why such haste, given that he was always present at the parish Mass and other functions? He went there early in the morning to go to confession and to receive Holy Communion. He kept this up every Sunday and feast days for two whole years. This was exceptional for a youngster in such circumstances, far from his family and certainly not prompted by the example or suggestions of anyone.

Such a great love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is a clear sign of unusual progress in the spirit of prayer. The internal dispositions induced in the mind by this spirit are seen in traits of conduct, in the attitudes and speech of the young person. The members of the family he worked for were very clear about this in the testimony they gave during the process for his beatification. They had never had, nor could they ever imagine, a servant boy so obedient, hardworking and exemplary. In the house he fulfilled his duties as a good Christian with the regularity of older servants well accustomed to work on the farm and to the demands of country life at

¹¹ Ceria wrongly states 'one year before.' It was in fact three years before (Teresio Bosco).

¹² Ceria places John's employment at the Moglia farm *after* the death of Don Calosso, the good priest who had helped him, but see note 2 of this chapter above (Translator).

the time. This young servant, however, prayed usually on his knees, prayed more often than the others, and prayed for longer periods of time.

Outside the house, while he tended the cows at pasture, he was found recollected in prayer or concentrated on reading the catechism, which was his book of meditation. Once he was seen on his knees, motionless, head uncovered, under the heat of the sun, so absorbed that even though he was called repeatedly, he gave no indication that he had heard anything. When he was shaken and warned not to sleep in the sun, he replied that he had not been asleep. One day, the elderly head of the household, returning tired from the fields, came across the young boy on his knees saying the Angelus. He told him off and complained that he was forgetting his work to think about heaven, as he put it. John finished his prayer devoutly and answered respectfully,

You know well that I don't spare myself when it comes to work. However, it is certain that we gain more from prayer than from work. If we pray we sow two seeds and reap four ears of corn; if we don't pray we sow four and reap two.

With such sentiments, it is not surprising that, as many eye-witnesses testified, he was always calm, even-tempered, wise in his comments, reserved in his behaviour, and that he had an abhorrence of anything that could cast a shadow on the candour of his soul or seem in any way unbecoming of a true Christian. Nor did he neglect any opportunity of doing good to the children, entertaining them, teaching them catechism and leading them in prayer.

The parish priest, to whom he went to confession every Sunday, shed tears of consolation on seeing how piety flourished among those young people, thanks to the efforts of this poor servant boy. Indeed, when the young apostle left, the parish priest had only to continue those gatherings in order to have a real festive oratory.¹³ Later St John Bosco wrote of twelve year old Dominic Savio that he was 'not a little amazed at seeing what divine grace had wrought in one so young.' We can only say the same when we read the sworn testimony of his contemporaries and fellow countrymen regarding the conduct of young John Bosco.

John left there because he was concerned, day and night, about his studies; but his *way of the cross* was still to be long and painful. He experienced many disappointments and much discouragement and came to realise, even more than before, the efficacy of St Bernard's exhortation: *Respice stellam*,

¹³ The festive oratory was a gathering of young people on Sundays and holydays for prayer and catechism as well as for games. It was a regular feature in many Italian parishes and was later to become the most important part of Don Bosco's work for boys.

voca Mariam - Look to the Star and call upon Mary. From his earliest years he had learned devotion to Mary most holy. On important occasions and at critical moments, his mother would tell him, 'have devotion to Mary!' Gradually, as he deepened his knowledge of the things of God, he began to taste ever more the sweetness of this devotion which consisted in total confidence and filial love, as preached and practised so much by the saints, and so beloved of devout souls.

There is a small chapel dedicated to Our Lady high up on the hill that dominates Castelnuevo. It became a place of frequent visits for John. He used to go there either alone or, more often, in the company of some young friends. Those pilgrimages to the Marian sanctuary made during adolescence remained indelibly imprinted on his mind and, in his later years, he became quite emotional when he recalled them.

Before going deeply into our study, it seems opportune to open a brief parenthesis in order to express clearly the basic understanding of prayer. Nobody can reasonably question the fact that prayer is of supreme necessity in the life of a Christian. St Paul, in his letter to Timothy, recommends prayer as the *primum omnium* - the first of all things (cf. 1 Tim 2:1). Prayer is both a state and an act. As a state, it consists in the continuous prayer spoken of by the same apostle when he says: *Sine intermissione orate* - pray without ceasing (cf. 1 Thes 5:17) Certainly it is not possible to remain always with the mind actually fixed on God, but one can stay always in an attitude of prayer through the virtue of charity. The soul of the just person, possessing sanctifying grace, has in itself the necessary condition for the words of Jesus to be fulfilled: *We will come to him and make our dwelling with him* (cf. Jn 14:23). He receives from the three persons of the Most Holy Trinity, through their presence in him, a share in their life so that indeed he prays *without interruption*.¹⁴

Understood in this way, apart from ordinary and common states of prayer, there are very elevated states that are reached only by a few, mystical states that are pure gift and privilege. As an act, prayer takes on four forms as spoken of by St Paul, when he urges Timothy to make *supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgiving* (cf. 1 Tim 2:1) - that is prayers of petition asking something for ourselves, prayers of adoration, prayers of intercession for others, and prayers of thanksgiving for favours received. The theology of prayer can be reduced substantially to this. It is a source of edification and of wonder to see how it has been lived by the Saints.

¹⁴ "When one remains faithfully in the furrow of the divine will, even without being aware of it, one is praying in the depth of his soul" (DON MARMION, in a letter quoted by DON THIBAUT: *L'Unione con Dio*, Italian Translation, p.19. Lib. Ed. Fior.).

2 School

The life of young John Bosco underwent an abrupt change when he left his native place and went to Chieri. From a young country boy he became a student and city-dweller overnight. Chieri was small compared to Turin but everything is relative in this world. Here John had to face the novel attractions of a more sophisticated environment. Besides, he was now independent and at an age that can bring its own problems.

He was a young lad from the country, who had grown up always close to home and always under the eyes of his family and neighbours. He was inexperienced in anything other than rural occupations and pastimes, and accustomed to dealing only with the simple people of the countryside. Now suddenly he found himself in a city, with habits and customs of an entirely different world, a stranger among strangers. Here was a young man entering the critical phase of adolescence, gifted with a lively intelligence, and full of energy. Suddenly he was pitched into the middle of a group of smart secondary school students. He certainly found himself at a crossroads in life. Fortunately for John he came prepared for the risks that awaited him. From a background of humble poverty, he had a clear intention in mind, and a strong sense of religion, which is always for a young person a shield against the snares of evil.

True religion is useful for everything, (cf. 1 Tim 4:8) because it shows everything in the real light, (cf. Jn 1:9) which is the divine light. It was his deep sense of religion that guided his first steps, usually the most dangerous ones, and helped him to make his first acquaintances and to choose his first friends.

He himself tells us how:

The first person I got to know was a priest of beloved and honourable memory. He gave me a lot of good advice on how to stay away from danger. He invited me to serve his Mass and this gave him a regular opportunity to offer me some good counsel. He himself brought me to the prefect of schools...and introduced me to the other teachers. He taught me to divide my companions in my own mind into three categories: good, indifferent and bad. I avoided this last category always and absolutely, as soon as I got to know them. I learned to treat the indifferent with courtesy when necessity arose. I became friendly with the good but real friends only with the best, when I discovered who they were. This was my firm resolution. However, I had to struggle a lot with those I found were not good ... I avoided being drawn into their ways by rigorously avoiding their company as soon as I got to know them.

When he had his relationships fairly well sorted out, the same virtue of religion guided him in the search for what was closest to his heart.

The best thing that happened to me,

he writes,

was the choice of a permanent confessor in the person of a Canon from the Collegiate. He received me with great kindness, every time I went to him. He encouraged me to go to confession and communion more frequently. It was a very rare thing in those times to find someone who encouraged frequent reception of the sacraments... Anyone who went to confession and communion more than once a month was considered very virtuous and many confessors did not allow it. I believe that I owe it to my confessor that I was not drawn by some companions into certain disorders which, unfortunately, sometimes occur among young people in big colleges.

By colleges here he means not boarding schools but public schools.

Not only did his companions not drag him into disorders, but he led a good many of them unto the right road and kept them there. A young man who excels in school, and is modest and easy to get on with, soon gains the hearts of his fellow students. In a short while John had won such esteem and goodwill among the young people of Chieri, that he succeeded in founding a group called the *Società dell'Allegria*, which loosely translates as "The Joy Club." This club had just two rules: avoid every word or action unbecoming of a good Christian, and the exact fulfilment of religious and scholastic duties.

Every member was obliged to look for books and games that would keep the other members happy. Anything that caused discontent was for-

bidden, especially if it was contrary to God's law. On Sundays and holy-days the members of the society went to catechism classes at the Jesuit Church. During the week they gathered at the home of one or other of the members. Anyone who wanted to participate was welcome. They passed the time in games, religious discussions, spiritual reading, prayer, giving good advice, helping each other to discover personal defects which they had noticed or heard others speak of.

Apart from these friendly encounters, "we used to go," writes Don Bosco, "to listen to sermons, often to go to confession and receive Holy Communion." He tried always to look for joy as a sure means of serving the Lord (cf. Ps 100:1).

It is not my intention to exaggerate since my purpose is to edify, but admiration comes from facts. One frequently meets good young people, thank God. But it is very rare that one meets a young man of such a strong religious disposition that he is not content to walk with God all by himself, (cf. Gn 5:24) but also feels the desire, even the need, to lead other souls to God.

Bonum est diffusivum sui. Goodness by its very nature tends to spread. The same could be said of young John Bosco's sense of prayer and devotion. To see someone and think immediately of how he could make that person good, or make him better, in the true Christian sense of the word, would one day be his life's work as a priest. It was something he was doing already in his early years. We have already seen how he operated among his peers and fellow students. To explain everything we would have to repeat ourselves a lot, and this is not meant to be a biography. All we want to do at this stage is to point to what would become one of the characteristics of his spirituality.

Maybe others might interpret the life of young John Bosco very differently. They might regard him as unduly interested in seeking publicity, attracting attention with his juggling and acrobatic feats, and perhaps have some reservations about the inner motivation for all this activity. Could it not be that he was merely seeking popularity, driven by ambition or showmanship? These are attitudes not easily reconcilable with the demands of an interior life and the traditional rules of asceticism, *rumores fuge* (avoid noise and publicity) and *ama nesciri* (prefer to remain unknown). To dispel these doubts it is enough to reflect on his motives, and the manner, circumstances and effects of his actions. We won't go into all of this but just limit ourselves to one known fact.

The same spirit always motivated him in his face-to-face contacts with people of every kind, the zeal of the devout person always solicitous for the good of the other. His landlady's son, a rascal if ever there was one, was the despair of everyone. John became friendly with him, brought him back gradually to the practice of his religion, and eventually he turned out a good young man.

On his regular visits to the Cathedral, he got to know the head sacristan, a grown man, who dreamt of becoming a priest even though he was not very bright. He had had no opportunity to study, and lacked the necessary means. John set about helping him and for two years gave him lessons every day until he was able to sit the examination for the clerical habit - all this with infinite charity and without any payment. He became friendly with an eighteen year old Jew, aroused in him the desire for Baptism, instructed him secretly and overcame the opposition of his relatives and fellow Jews, and finally brought him to be baptised.

The apostolate that we have seen so far was extraordinarily fruitful for one so young, and is proof of a level of union with God equally extraordinary for one of his age. It is of little use knowing what to say or do if it is not accompanied by recollection in prayer, which, together with example, is an indispensable requirement for works of zeal.

There is a well known proverb, "Show me your friends and I'll tell you who you are." It can surely be applied to John and his friend Luigi Comollo. Comollo's reputation for holiness preceded his arrival at Chieri. John heard about him and was keen to meet him, and they quickly became friends. He soon discovered that Comollo was even better than he had expected.

In the Memoirs we read,

He was my best friend... I had full trust in him and he in me... I let myself be guided by him as he wished... we went to confession and communion together, we meditated and did spiritual reading together, we made visits to the Blessed Sacrament and served Mass together.

The mention of meditation proves that he did not neglect to renew his interior life every day with this powerful means.

Words flow out of what fills the heart (cf. Mt 12:34). Their conversation was often about religious matters.

Speaking about such things with him,

writes Don Bosco,

was always a source of consolation to me. He spoke with joy of the immense love of Jesus for us in giving himself to us in Holy Communion. When he spoke about Our Lady you could see him wrapped in fervour and devotion. If mention was made of some physical cure obtained through her intercession, his face would light up and sometimes he would burst into tears. 'If Mary works such wonders for this miserable body of ours, how much more will she not do for those who invoke her help for their souls? If all people were truly devoted to Mary, what happiness there would be in the world!'

Don Bosco casts himself in the role of listener but we can be sure he was not always a silent listener. Conversations of this kind would not have taken place if there had not been, on both sides, a taste for such matters.

— The four years of secondary school finished with great success. John obtained excellent results in his exams and won the esteem and affection of his teachers. He was enthusiastically admired by his companions and generally liked by the townspeople. All the signs were there of a promising future. But how many difficulties, dangers and deprivations he had to face! He was able to keep going only through prayer and reliance on God's help. This was God's design so that he might come to the support of others in every hardship of theirs (cf. 2 Cor 1:3-4).

This serene peace, undisturbed by hardship and poverty, was somewhat overshadowed by a cloud during his third and fourth years. Coming, as it did, at a time when it is normal for young people to face crisis, this can be called a crisis of vocation.

There is no doubt that he aspired to priesthood from his earliest childhood; he felt himself so strongly attracted to it that it seemed he was born to it. But in his second last year of high school two fears assailed him and the nearer he drew to decision time, the more anxious and perplexed he became. On the one hand, the more he came to appreciate the loftiness of the priestly state, the more he felt unworthy because of his lack of the necessary virtues. On the other hand, knowing the dangers of the world, he was afraid of what might befall him if he became a secular priest.

The spiritual travail that he underwent in this struggle can be seen from the painful tone with which he described it many years later in his Memoirs: "Oh, if I had had then a guide to take care of my vocation, it would have been a great treasure for me, but I had to do without this treasure." In fact, his excellent confessor who sought to make him a good Christian, did not want to get involved in matters of vocation.

Forced to seek counsel for himself, he had recourse to books that dealt with the choice of one's state in life. A ray of hope dawned for him. "If I remain as a secular cleric, he said to himself, my vocation will be in grave danger. I will embrace the ecclesiastical state, go into a cloister, devote myself to study and meditation, and there in solitude I will be able to fight against my passions, especially pride, which has taken deep root in my heart." Accordingly he applied for admission to the Franciscans, who, seeing his intelligence and his prayerfulness, accepted him readily. But his heart was still not at peace.

There was an added difficulty. Some serious people of goodwill to whom he had opened his heart, did everything in their power to dissuade him from becoming a friar, urging him strongly to enter the seminary. And so his anxiety grew.

Providence ordained that he should meet with Joseph Cafasso, then a young priest with a great reputation as a man of sound advice. Don Cafasso listened carefully and told him to go ahead with his studies and then to enter the seminary.

During these times of inner distress, his exterior life went on as normal, between study, prayer, works of charity and manual work to earn his living, to the extent that nobody was aware of his interior suffering.

The thought of God, when it dominates a person's soul, makes him master of self, habitually calm in exterior manifestations even when interiorly disturbed.

Don Cafasso's authority gradually silenced the doubts but later, when he read more on the question of vocation, he was besieged again by similar doubts. He would have gone back to the Franciscans were it not for something that happened - we don't know what - that put that idea quickly to rest. He tells us only that because these obstacles remained for some time, he decided to tell Comollo everything. Indeed it is rather surprising that it took him so long to decide to share his inner drama with his friend. However, close friendship does not in itself guarantee competence in such delicate matters and besides, John, for all his bright ideas and facility in communicating them, was anything but a talkative young man.

They prayed together, went to the sacraments together, and agreed to write a letter to an outstanding priest, an uncle of Comollo. Precisely on the last day of their novena to Our Lady, he replied to his nephew as follows:

I have considered carefully the matters you wrote about and I would advise your friend to give up the idea of entering the friary. Let him receive the cleri-

cal habit and as he continues his studies he will know better the way God wants him to go. He should not be afraid of losing his vocation, with discipline and the practices of piety he will overcome all obstacles.

Study, discipline and piety - had these not always marked his life in Chieri? Like Don Cafasso and Comollo's uncle, his parish priest, too, was of the opinion that he should enter the seminary, leaving until he was older and more mature the decision about religious life. All this helped to restore peace of mind. "From then on," he wrote, "I applied myself seriously to whatever might be of help in my preparation for receiving the clerical habit."

Putting on the clerical habit was no mere ceremony for John Bosco. Through prayer and recollection, to which he was well accustomed, he was spiritually prepared and convinced of the importance of the sacred rite. This was in spite of the fact that all the time he had a group of about fifty young people who, as he says himself, loved and obeyed him as if he were their father. His devout sentiments during the ceremony are recorded in the pages of his Memoirs which, fortunately, preserve the record of the occasion for us.

"The priest instructed me to remove my lay clothing, praying: 'May the Lord strip you of your old nature and its deeds.' As he did so, I thought, 'Oh, how much old clothing there is to cast off. My God, destroy in me all my bad habits.'

When he put the clerical collar round my neck, he said,

'May the Lord clothe you with the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.'

Deeply moved, I thought to myself,

Yes, O my God, grant that at this moment I may put on a new nature. May I henceforth lead a new life in complete conformity with your holy will. May justice and holiness be the constant objects of my thoughts, words, and actions. Amen. O Mary, be my salvation.

He drew up a rule for the clerical life in seven articles. The sixth one reads as follows:

In addition to the ordinary practices of piety, I will give some time every day to meditation and spiritual reading.

He was determined that his good resolutions should not remain a dead letter. Kneeling before an image of the Blessed Virgin, he read the seven

articles and, after a fervent prayer, he made "a formal promise to his Heavenly Benefactress to observe them at the cost of any sacrifice."

It will be noted above that the terms 'piety' and 'spirit of prayer' are used indifferently, as if they were one and the same thing. To clarify things it might be worth observing that a spirit of prayer finds expression normally in a series of acts with which we honour God and these we normally call piety, whereas by a spirit of prayer we mean a habitual, profound heartfelt piety.

On the question of prayer, it is worth adding an observation. Prayer can have different emphases and can be described accordingly. This is often done in describing the spirituality of the various religious orders. For example, the prayer of the Benedictines is called liturgical prayer, that of the Franciscans affective prayer, that of the Dominicans dogmatic and the prayer of the Redemptorists is prayer based on the eternal truths.

Following that line, how would we describe the prayer of John Bosco? Can we not see, even at this early stage, an emphasis on sacramental prayer, given the importance he attached to confession and communion? Indeed, it was through these two sacraments, received with a frequency that was unusual at the time, that John Bosco set the style of prayer that would mark the spirituality of the future congregation of the Salesians.

3

The Seminary

At that time the seminary for the Archdiocese of Turin was at Chieri. John Bosco entered there on 30 October 1835 at the age of twenty.

Quick to observe, the young cleric soon formed an accurate idea of the place, the people and the ways things were done there. He was careful to inform himself regarding the practices of piety. He was happy with the daily Mass, meditation and Rosary, and with the weekly confession. He was less happy about Communion which could be received only on Sundays and special occasions.

To go elsewhere for Communion during the week meant committing an act of disobedience. It meant skipping breakfast and stealing out through the door that led to a nearby church. Then, when he had made his thanksgiving, there was no time to spare before joining his companions in class or study, which meant that he did not break his fast until lunchtime. Strictly speaking, this was forbidden but the superiors gave tacit consent since they knew very well that it was happening, and indeed often saw it and turned a blind eye to it. In this way he was able to receive Communion whenever he wanted and this, he says, was the most efficacious nourishment of his vocation.

Nourished with the Bread of Angels, and under the gentle protection of Mary Most Holy, the young seminarian grew in the ecclesiastical spirit. The words of his mother when he left for the seminary remained deeply impressed in his memory and heart.

This illiterate woman possessed to an extraordinary degree that *sensus Christi* (cf. 1 Cor 2:16) which is divine wisdom infused from above that enables one to judge rightly in matters relating to God. It is found in many

simple souls to the amazement of those who do not understand, but not of those who recognise the gifts of the Holy Spirit. John recounts in his *Memoirs* how he received from his mother this advice,

When you came into the world, I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin. When you began your studies, I recommended to you devotion to this Mother of ours. Now I say to you, be completely hers; love those of your companions who have devotion to Mary; and if you become a priest, always preach and promote devotion to Mary.

Mindful of his mother's wise counsel, he took care to befriend those companions who were "devout to the Blessed Virgin, committed to study and prayer."

Many of his companions who outlived him testified to the way he would invite them into church to recite the Vespers of Our Lady or other prayers in honour of the Mother of God. Others spoke of the zeal with which he used to translate liturgical hymns in her honour, or the pleasure he found in recounting her glories in edifying stories during recreation. While still a student of philosophy, he felt honoured to be able to go into the pulpit for the first time to give a talk on Our Lady of the Rosary, the first of many such sermons on Mary which he loved to give even in his old age.

Many times young John Bosco, still a cleric, mounted the pulpit. On account of his readiness, he was often called upon at the last minute during the summer holidays. He was never nervous, and did not need much asking. This is worth noting. There is an old saying that everyone can speak well on a topic he knows well, and another which says that real fluency comes from the heart. Both of these were true of the cleric Bosco, and even then he was a fine preacher.

Amongst his resolutions on receiving the clerical habit there was also the following:

Since in the past I have served the world with profane reading, so in the future I will serve God by devoting myself to reading about religious things.

Notice he says 'religious things,' not ascetical or spiritual. During high school, with his keen intelligence that recognised quality and beauty, he had been an avid reader of the Italian and Latin classics to enrich his secular or literary culture. In the seminary, on the other hand, he devoted all his time to devouring even huge volumes on church history, catechetics and apologetics.

He had a retentive memory. Everything he read he retained. He said so himself. All this reading served not only to make him erudite but especially to prepare him to serve God. The things he read, together with his ardent love for God, increased his faith and zeal. In him, knowledge of religion and knowledge of the saints grew hand in hand, each helping the other. This explains why, when asked to preach even without prior notice, he lacked neither material nor enthusiasm. A few moments of recollection and prayer were enough for him to feel ready.

And is it not true that John Bosco preached always? If we leave aside the formal word 'preaching' and forget about the notion of a congregation gathered in church, and go to the essential meaning which is to proclaim the word of God, then is not every diligent sower of the word a preacher? In that sense, what a capable and untiring preacher the cleric Bosco was!

Many young people from the city used to come every Thursday to visit him.¹⁵ He used to go down among them, engage cheerfully with them as he had always done, talk to them about school and study, but also about the sacraments. He never sent them away without first leading them into a church for a brief prayer. He used to say to his fellow students,

We should always introduce into our conversations some thought of supernatural things. It is a seed that will bear fruit in time.

Among these seeds he used to mix also some thoughts on vocation to the priestly life, whenever he sensed an opportunity. Teaching Christian doctrine to the young was for him almost a passion. He never missed an opportunity for a catechism lesson and he was ingenious in creating such opportunities.

He sowed the word also within the seminary. The best among the clerics used to hold scholastic circles during the longer recreations. This was something he liked very much because it helped not only in study but also in piety. In this way he gathered around him a group of close friends. This was a kind of holy alliance for the observance of the rules and commitment to study, and also a way of helping each other to grow in the spiritual life. However, even outside these meetings, his conversation usually came round to his favourite topic, 'like salt with which he flavoured every discourse.' (cf. Col 4:6)

He spoke gladly of spiritual things, as one of his companions was to testify. He had an inexhaustible fund of stories with which he held and enchanted his audience. In later life one of his friends said of him,

¹⁵ There was no school on Thursdays.

Never once in the five years that I was his fellow student, did he miss out on his resolution to relate every day some episode from Church history, from the lives of the saints or the glories of Mary.

This resolution was part of the programme for clerical life already referred to. It is only when the heart is full of God that someone can speak of God like that, every time he opened his mouth as it were.

During his first year in the seminary, his most regular visitor, and the one he looked forward to most was naturally Louis Comollo, who was then attending the final year in high school. They were worthy companions and held no secrets from each other. Both were in love with God and they shared their plans to dedicate their whole lives to the salvation of souls. It is easy to imagine then what good friends they became when they were together in the seminary. Fortunately there is no scarcity of information about their relationship and so we can look closely at these two friends, and at the same time explore more deeply the life of John Bosco in the seminary.

The regular daily routine in the seminary means that one day is very much like the next. Generally speaking, expressions of individual tendencies are not encouraged. Moreover, the cleric Bosco, according to one of his old professors, made notable progress in both study and piety, but "without giving any particular sign to that effect, because of his good humour which was one of the characteristics of the whole of his life." As a result he passed through seminary unnoticed by most and it was only later that they understood him. Another of his professors had this to say of him:

I remember when he was my student. He was pious, diligent and most exemplary. Certainly no one could have foreseen then what he has become now. But I must say that his dignified behaviour, and the exactness with which he fulfilled his scholastic and religious duties were exemplary.

It is a pity that time has dulled the memory of many such precious testimonies. We can only make use of the material we have relating to his friendship with the cleric Comollo.

In matters relating to study and piety, school and religion, the two of them were completely in agreement. In intelligent young people the love for study can threaten piety in three ways. First of all, mental activity tends to dominate the spirit, filling it with ideas which can be a considerable distraction during practices of piety. Success in studies can lead to youthful vanity which gradually, in those who yield to it, weakens the action of grace. Finally, deeply committed students can easily fall into the temptation to shorten the time of prayer or find excuses to omit it altogether on occasion, since they are inclined to regard time not spent in study as time wasted.

In religious congregations, clerics begin studies after a period of suitable spiritual preparation which teaches them to put prayer first. Seminarists, however, start their studies the day after receiving the clerical habit. It can happen, if they become really attached to their books and their professors, that they have little or no time for church and practices of piety, or at least, find it hard to develop a taste for them.

The cleric Bosco was more gifted intellectually than Comollo, but in zeal for study and prayer the two had a marvellous understanding. They saw study as a duty but they also knew that there is a hierarchy among duties and they assigned first place to their duties towards God. They were also convinced that for clerics, study is a means, not an end in itself. It is a means of doing good to others, but it is secondary to holiness of life. Thus they were very far from putting love of study before the spirit of prayer and they helped each other to grow in the interior life.

As long as God spared me this incomparable friend,

Don Bosco wrote,

I was always very close to him. I saw in him a saintly young man. I loved him on account of his outstanding virtue. Whenever I was with him, I tried to imitate him in everything, and he loved me because I helped him in his studies.

In one small matter, trivial but revealing nonetheless, John Bosco kept to his own way of thinking. Comollo had exceptional devotion to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. After Communion, which he received with the utmost recollection, he used to tremble with emotion. When he returned to his place, he seemed in ecstasy, sobbing as he prayed with groans and tears, and he remained like that until the end of Mass. John would have preferred him to restrain himself so as not to attract attention, but he replied that if he had not expressed his emotions, it seemed to him that he would suffocate. John respected his fervent devotion, but he himself was against anything that savoured of singularity or attracted attention.

His devotion was no less ardent but it showed itself differently. As he went to Communion or returned, there was nothing exceptional. Afterwards, as he made his thanksgiving, he remained still, upright with head slightly bowed, eyes closed and his hands joined on his breast. There was no sighing, no sign of emotion, apart from an occasional quiver of the lips as he offered some silent aspiration. His faith shone through, however, in his whole appearance.

Outside the seminary, during holiday months, the two friends wrote frequent letters to each other and exchanged visits, in which spiritual mat-

ters were the favourite topic of conversation. One of the most significant documents regarding their relationship is the biography of Comollo who died at a youthful age during his second year of theology. In writing it Don Bosco conceals his own identity, referring to himself only as 'an intimate friend.'

We need to note however that the author naturally wishes to remain in the background and keep the focus on Comollo. There is evidence from other sources to confirm this. One conclusion stands out: they were kindred souls, joined in friendship by their intimate unity of spirit, 'like drawn to like.'

We mentioned the holidays. "Holidays could be a great danger for clerics," writes Don Bosco, "especially at that time when they lasted four and a half months." He was determined to sanctify them, maintaining totally the fervour of the seminary. He spent the first year with the Jesuits at Montaldo, giving revision classes in Greek to the boarders and assisting in a dormitory. In subsequent years, as we know from various reliable witnesses and documents, his rule of life for the holidays could be summed up in a few words: avoid idleness and be faithful to the practices of piety.

So that he would not be idle he divided his time between study, manual work (recommended to him also for reasons of health) and revision classes for school pupils. They came to him from nearby villages, either singly or in groups, to improve their knowledge of material already studied or to prepare for new courses. He helped them willingly. One of them, who later became a professor, gives this testimony:

The first lesson was that of the love of God and obedience to his commandments. He never ceased to exhort us to prayer and the fear of the Lord, and to avoid sin and the occasions of sin.

With regard to his prayer life, as usual for him, there was nothing extraordinary, simply the faithful observance of the practices proper to the clerical state: meditation, spiritual reading, rosary, visit to the Blessed Sacrament, daily attendance at Mass, frequent confession and communion. He volunteered readily to serve at any religious function. On Sundays he was zealous in teaching catechism to the youngsters of the parish. Every time he heard the bell announcing that Viaticum was being brought to some sick person, he went quickly to the church, some three kilometres away, put on a surplice and accompanied the Blessed Sacrament, carrying the umbrella that served as a canopy. He never missed parish sermons. Moreover, he was aware of the importance of giving good example. His behaviour eve-

rywhere and with everyone was reverent and beyond reproach. His fellow country people held him in the highest esteem.

His growth in the priestly spirit, which is interior and exterior holiness of life,¹⁶ can be seen from various episodes in his biography, but this is not the time or place to go into them or even to list them. It is more to our purpose to take note of the spiritual disposition with which he received the sacred Orders.

Near the end of his life, referring to the decisive step which is Subdiaconate, he reveals his soul with expressions which make us wonder which to admire most - his extreme delicateness of conscious or the profound esteem he had for the priestly state. Both of these were fruit of his constant awareness of the things of God.

When I think of the virtues required for that most important step, I am convinced that I was not sufficiently prepared for it. But since I had no one to care directly for my vocation, I turned to Fr Cafasso. He advised me to go forward and trust in his advice. I made a ten-day retreat at the House of the Missions in Turin. During it I made a general confession so that my confessor would have a clear picture of my conscience and would be able to give me suitable advice. Though I wanted to complete my studies, I quaked at the thought of binding myself for life. Before I took the final step, I wanted to receive the full approbation of my confessor. Henceforward I took the greatest care to practice Fr Borel's advice: a vocation is preserved and perfected by recollection and frequent communion.

The good priest from Turin had given this recommendation in response to a question put to him during a retreat he preached in the seminary.

These words of Don Bosco are confirmed by the evidence of one of his fellow students, a good friend who later became his confessor until the time of his death. Giving testimony regarding the retreat done by the Deacon Bosco in preparation for priesthood, he speaks in these terms,

He made his retreat in a most edifying manner. He was moved in an extraordinary way by the words of the Lord, which he heard in the sermons, but especially by those expressions which concerned the great dignity which would soon be conferred upon him.

As a permanent memento of that retreat he wrote down nine proposals, the eighth of which was as follows:

¹⁶ Can. 124: *Clerics should lead a life of greater holiness, interior and exterior, than lay people, and should excel in example of virtue and good behaviour.*

I shall set aside some time every day for meditation and spiritual reading. During the day I shall pay a brief visit to the Blessed Sacrament, or at least raise my heart in prayer. I shall spend at least a quarter of an hour in preparation for Mass and another quarter of an hour in thanksgiving.¹⁷

This second programme of life contains nothing substantially new from the one already mentioned, apart from some slight amendments required by circumstances. This is because Don Bosco did not grope his way forward like someone walking in the dark or even in the first rays of light. If we may be permitted a little levity, of the type beloved of Don Bosco, we might say that he did not hesitate, as many others do, to get his teeth into a matter. Indeed, from the time he first reached the use of reason, he knew what was the right way for him and he set out on that way, forging ahead as best he could, until gradually his own natural sense of judgment, with the help of God's grace, showed him a better way. Both programmes of life are based on the four pillars, so to speak, on which Don Bosco constructed his holiness: work and prayer, interior and exterior mortification, and then, as he himself used to say modestly, the holy virtue.

In the second programme he laid more emphasis on action. Keeping to these resolutions, Don Bosco as a priest never used to go for a walk except out of necessity, to visit the sick or something similar. He would make rigorous use of time: "he would suffer, work, undergo humiliation in everything and always, as long as it was a question of saving souls." He would not allow his body more than five hours of sleep every night. He would take no rest during the day, and especially after lunch, except in the case of illness. His activity would never be divorced from prayer. Now, as in the past, meditation will have its place among the activities of every day. In meditation, that daily encounter with oneself, the priest besieged by work is able to attain the spirit of recollection and prayer which is absolutely necessary for him if he is to keep his faith alive, to remain always united to Jesus the Supreme Priest whose minister he is, and to receive abundant graces in the exercise of his ministry.

We never find Martha without Mary in the priestly life of Don Bosco. Rather we find Martha at prayer and Mary working: Martha at prayer as long as his period of intense work lasted, and Mary in action towards the end of his days when his activity was reduced to a minimum. At no time did he forget to pray without ceasing.

¹⁷ Cf. Can. 124: *Clerics ... shall spend some time daily in mental prayer.*

Beginnings of His Mission

To find out what a star or planet is made of, physicists use an amazing process. They cause a ray of light from the star to pass through a prism. The light is broken up and produces a long multi-coloured trace called a spectrum, which falls on a white screen. Analysis of the colours which make up the spectrum allows the scientist to collect information. To the present day there is no other way of studying objects at such an immense distance.

In Don Bosco, a soul filled with God, the spirit of prayer did not have any manifestation which might allow us to perceive immediately its nature and intensity. To know the quality of his prayer and measure its degree, we have to do a diligent examination of other aspects of his ordinary life. Few men were so extraordinary and yet managed to appear so ordinary as Don Bosco did. In great things and in little things he always showed the same naturalness, which at first sight revealed nothing more than a good priest.

For a start, not everyone recognised the merit of Don Bosco. It required someone who had, first of all, the privilege of observing him on some occasion when he was alone, or at a meeting or during some mishap or enterprise. Then secondly, it needed a sharp eye to recognise the effectiveness of his way of operating. Or else it required someone who had a particular intuition which can readily recognise an exceptional person, like Pius XI, for example. We need not wonder, then, if some did not understand him immediately, or even if they underestimated or completely misunderstood him. These last were very few, and became fewer as time went on, but there were indeed some. It is true to say, then, that in his years of greatest activity, not everyone recognised Don Bosco for the man of prayer that he was. Indeed we might also say that not even those who wrote about him were

always aware of his deep spirit of prayer, so keen were they to write about his great achievements. On the other hand, the biographical material that has been handed down lends itself very well to a thorough scrutiny of his interior life. These pages are a modest attempt to do precisely that.

The festive oratory was a spontaneous fruit of the soul of Don Bosco as soon as he became a priest. He did not create it from nothing, nor was he the first to coin the name. There were the Sunday catechism classes for young people in the various parishes, and there had been the Oratories of St Philip Neri and St Charles Borromeo. Don Bosco realised that many young people no longer knew what parish they belonged to, so he organised inter-parochial oratories where he could gather the stray sheep. Alongside the catechism classes, he introduced a whole range of activities to fill the entire Sunday. From his great love for God, Don Bosco drew his lively awareness of the Gospel injunction let the little children come to me (cf. Mt 19:14). He was aware of the multiplicity of threats to young people. Writing of his early experience as a priest he says,

My delight was to teach catechism to the young people, to spend time with them and talk to them.

It would even seem that the young people instinctively were attracted by that delight for, as soon as he settled in Turin, he found himself surrounded by a band of youngsters who followed him in the streets and squares. Gathering them together in big numbers proved much easier than trying to find a place for them. His zeal knew only one goal: to lead them to God through obedience to God's law and the laws of the Church. His first concern was to see that they observed the precept of Mass on Sundays and holydays. He then taught them to say their morning and evening prayers, and finally prepared them to make a good confession and receive Holy Communion. Gradually he introduced religious instruction by means of catechism classes and sermons adapted to their ability to understand.

At the same time, he invented a whole variety of entertainments which served as a magnet to increase their number and ensure that they returned. The most powerful magnet was Don Bosco himself, with his inexhaustible kindness. In this way it could really be said that Sunday was sacred to the Lord (cf. Neh 8:9). The name 'oratory' suited these gatherings. Don Bosco chose it out of many others precisely because it corresponded fully to his ideal.

The name had become very popular in Italy, even if the dictionaries did not yet recognise its new meaning, giving only the traditional meaning of "little church." Don Bosco's Oratory was a spiritual house (cf. 1 Pt

2:5) built with living stones,¹⁸ the hundreds of boys and adolescents who flocked there on Sundays to adore the Lord and to learn to adore Him for the whole of their lives.

Don Bosco's piety found its natural expression in the work of the Oratory! He began on 8 December 1841 with just one boy. Before giving him his first lesson in catechism, he went on his knees and said a Hail Mary to Our Lady to help him to save that soul. In a talk he gave to the Cooperators on 8 December 1885 he compared the then state of the Oratory with what it had been forty-four years previously. He said that it was all the work of Mary Help of Christians in response to that Hail Mary "recited with fervour and right intention." He did not have long to wait for the first fruits.

The following Sunday the boy returned with a group of companions, poor street boys like himself. They were welcomed by Don Bosco and received with kindness and charm. From one week to the next their number grew and so did their obedience and happiness.

At Christmas many of them made their first communion. Later on the Feast of the Purification of Our Lady and again on the Feast of the Annunciation a choir of youthful voices, capably trained by Don Bosco himself, sang hymns in honour of Our Lady and many of the better prepared went to the sacraments. For Don Bosco it was as if he were in heaven.

These first meetings were held in what was usually a place of silence, almost a cloister, in the Ecclesiastical College in Turin, where new priests from Piedmont went through the final stage of formation. They did further studies in moral and pastoral theology and in the exercise of priestly ministry under the guidance of a team of experts, the most outstanding of whom was Blessed Joseph Cafasso. Don Bosco could not have had a better preparation for his mission as a zealous apostle of the young. The three years that he spent there contributed powerfully to mould his spirit in a definitive manner. Providence placed him in the hands of that saintly teacher of priestly souls, and the graces he received there bore much fruit.

At the school of Cafasso, he eagerly imbibed that spirit of prayer which he had already acquired intuitively in spite of the prevailing fashion of the times he lived in, prayer based on "unlimited trust in the goodness and loving-kindness of God towards us." From Cafasso's conferences on theology and his spiritual direction, he learnt how to hear confessions "with prayerfulness, knowledge and prudence." In the lessons on sacred eloquence he heard it emphasised that a priest does not go into the pulpit to show off, but

¹⁸ Cf. Vespers for the Dedication of a Church.

“to preach on observance of the divine commandments, prayer, devotion to Our Lady, frequent reception of the sacraments, avoidance of idleness, fleeing from bad companions and occasions of sin, charity towards one’s neighbour, patience in affliction - and he learned never to end a sermon without reference to the eternal truths.”¹⁹

He accompanied Cafasso in offering religious assistance to prisoners and took part with him in retreats, growing in fervour as he prepared for his apostolic work. Even in their daily conversations, he heard and took on board wise recommendations on “how to live in society, to deal with the world without becoming a slave of the world, to become true priests armed with the necessary virtues, ministers capable of giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” But alas, giving to Caesar is not the only reason why we sometimes take from God! Being always on the go, doing good, can unfortunately deceive us in the long run, making us think that generous work for our neighbour excuses us from the obligation of attending to our interior life and our relationship with God.

It was at this time that Don Bosco added a footnote, if we may call it that, to his programme of life as a priest. It was probably one that he learnt from experience, a great teacher of wisdom to those who are capable of learning from it. We repeat it, exactly as he wrote it in a notebook: *Breviary and confession*:

I will make sure to recite the breviary devoutly, in church if possible, so that it will serve as a Visit to the Blessed Sacrament. I will approach the sacrament of penance every week and I will make sure to put into practice the resolutions I make in confession. When I am asked to hear the confessions of others, if there is any urgency I will interrupt the Divine Office and I will shorten my preparation and thanksgiving for Mass, in order to be available for this holy ministry.

When the spirit of prayer becomes a habit, it gives a person an air of serene dignity and an alert sense of good judgement which are readily seen by observers if they are not too superficial. This was the case with Don Bosco. Business people and big shots from among the politicians and nobility of Turin used to go to the Ecclesiastical College to receive spiritual direction from Don Cafasso. These experienced people noticed Don Bosco and regarded him even then as “a man who belonged wholly to the Lord.” They held him “in great veneration,” and his biographer was able to get testimony to this effect from the lips of those same men.²⁰

¹⁹ Can. Giacomo Colombero, *Don Giuseppe Cafasso*, Torino, 1895.

²⁰ Lemoyne, G. B. *Memorie Biografiche di D. Giov. Bosco*, vol. II, 1908, p. 191.

5

Second Stage of His Mission

In the seminary Don Bosco had made the acquaintance of a priest named Don Borel who had come there to preach a retreat. This was an acquaintance that was to prove very precious to him. "He appeared in the sacristy," writes Don Bosco, "with a cheerful air, and with humorous words that were, nonetheless, always rich in moral thought." They say that first impressions are true. Perhaps this is not always the case for impressions can be very subjective. In this instance, however, it proved to be well founded and very true. A priest shows himself to be a priest in those things which are of God (cf. Heb 5:1). It is there that one can see whether he is a man of prayer or a poor man acting only out of habit.

The cleric Bosco observed "his preparation and thanksgiving for Mass, and his dignity and fervour in its celebration," and saw immediately that he was "a worthy minister of God." That word 'immediately' is significant. A few signs are enough for an intelligent man. In matters of prayer the cleric Bosco was quick to see and to understand. When he heard him preaching he needed nothing further to convince him that he was "a saint" and he wanted "to confer with him on the affairs of his soul." When we say that he wanted, we mean a spontaneous wish on his part. And what did he want? Not just to go to confession as was the custom, but to confer with him, in other words, to have serious and weighty discussion with him. And this discussion was to be about the affairs of the soul, by which he means the things he needed in his spiritual life.

The memory of that retreat remained firmly imprinted in the mind of Don Bosco. During his three years at the Ecclesiastical College he was always happy when he could exchange a few words with this exemplary priest. Don Borel, on his part, knew Don Bosco well and was glad to invite him to serve at sacred functions, to hear confessions and to preach. These invitations were quite frequent, given Don Bosco's well known zeal. They led to his being noticed by his companions who nicknamed him *il bersagliere di santa Chiesa* (the Church's crack marksman). These two priests were kindred souls who understood each other very well.

Don Bosco was already familiar with Don Borel and with his residence when, at the end of his three years in the Ecclesiastical College, he was invited to take a room with him. The idea, or rather the inspiration, came to that other holy priest Don Cafasso, who was determined that Don Bosco should not leave Turin.

Don Borel lived at *The Refuge*,²¹ the name by which the people of Turin referred to a whole complex of charitable institutions founded by the extraordinary generosity of a kind and wealthy woman, the Marchioness of Barolo. He was Rector and Spiritual Director there. With the docility of a son towards his spiritual father, Don Bosco saw in Don Cafasso's recommendation a pure and simple manifestation of God's will. Leaving aside any other ideas he may have had, he transferred to the Refuge the headquarters of the Oratory which was now becoming an institution in its own right.

Headquarters may seem too grandiose a word for the small room assigned to Don Bosco for his accommodation, but not when you consider that for three years it was the place of command of a veritable army of young people. Staying with the military image, we could say that the head of staff was Charity with all the accompanying virtues described in the famous Chapter 13 of St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.

He had many occasions to call to mind that love is patient. His three or four hundred urchins got on the nerves of the Matron of the Refuge until one fine day, she could bear it no longer and felt compelled to send them away. She saw that Don Bosco was not willing to abandon his work for boys, and sadly she resigned herself to having to do without his services. They disturbed the quiet life of the people who lived in the area where he held his Sunday gatherings. They offended the sensibilities of the civil and political authorities who came to the assistance of some private citizens. The authorities drove Don Bosco and his boys from one place to another,

²¹ Nowadays, by government decision, it is called "Institute" since the name Refuge is considered humiliating.

and kept a careful eye on them, as if they were a danger to the social order. The local parishes were alarmed and worried about the possible consequences of this new development. Don Bosco and his boys ran foul of people who had an interest, not always honourable, in throwing a spanner in the works. Rejected on every side, they were forced eventually to hold their meetings in a field well away from any inhabited area.

Worried but not beaten, saddened but not put off, he met the growing hostility with that heroic fortitude which is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Fortitude from such an exalted source makes a man ready for anything, without fear or pride, and this is precisely what we see in the case of Don Bosco. It was no joy for him, humanly speaking, spending the entire Sunday among so many rough, noisy quarrelsome boys. There was no joy in teaching slow-witted young men, often headstrong or listless. Nowadays even boys from a poor background appear clean and neat on Sundays, like little gentlemen. Not so the gangs of noisy, illiterate, poorly dressed ruffians that wandered the streets and squares of Turin in those days! Don Bosco should have been admired and helped, or at the very least left in peace, among the gang of rogues of whom he loved to proclaim himself the leader. But God's work was attacked by friend and foe alike. He suffered quietly, raising his eyes to heaven, because it was there he sought help and comfort. Whenever he encountered something difficult or repugnant to his nature, he seemed to take it in his stride easily and calmly.

The fortitude of the Saints does not have the hard, inflexible edge of the stoic. The Saints trust in the supernatural power of grace; they pray, and suffer patiently and emerge victorious. Philosophical fortitude does not go beyond a selfish satisfaction which is part of the self-love from which it draws its motivation. The Christian, on the other hand, uses his intelligence to seek out ever new ways, sometimes humble and even humiliating ways, of reaching the desired goal, without any ambition other than the glory of God and the welfare of his neighbour.

Members of the Oratory from those early days, who stayed with Don Bosco or close to him, preserved in their hearts a lively memory of those heroic early days. They recalled especially his fatherliness. They remembered him as loving and good, with the kind of goodness that the young man in the Gospel saw in the face of Jesus when he asked him: *Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?* (cf. Mk 10:17; Mt 19:16). In a man as good and as complex and complete as Don Bosco, goodness has none of the softness that easily falls into weakness. The goodness of Don Bosco, enlightened by intelligence and inflamed by habitual union with

God, was expressed in a supernatural love shown in equal measure to all and for the benefit of all.

Those boys from the early years of the Oratory scarcely recognised the difficult times Don Bosco was going through. It was only later that they understood how much he suffered. They saw him always calm and peaceful, making himself all things to all people with kindness and affection. This was how he stole the hearts of the young people. Wherever he went to hear confessions, they did not want to go to anyone else, but thronged around him, cheerful and confident. When he was driven out of his little bit of land within the city walls and forced to transfer the Oratory to open countryside, the young people followed him faithfully, despite the severity of the Turin winter. They brought with them their bite to eat and stayed with him the whole day until evening. Later, as adults, those first boys remembered their experience with him and said, "He was an angel in our midst."

This judgment in his regard reminds us of the first martyr, St Stephen. We read in the Acts (cf. Acts 6:15) that when he was falsely accused his face appeared to them like the face of an angel, such was the calm and dignity he showed, being filled with grace and power (cf. Acts 6:8).

The extraordinary composure of Don Bosco in the midst of such difficulty had the same supernatural origin. This was recognised in the Churches on the outskirts of Turin where he used to lead his gang of youngsters in pilgrimage to seek heavenly blessings through prayer and sacraments. It was known at the Sanctuary of the *Consolata* where he often came with his sons to pray at the miraculous image of Our Lady, and where he received much supernatural encouragement. It was known also to Don Borel and other good priests who saw the religious fervour he was able to arouse in the souls of those young people. It was well known also to some of the better boys whom he used to take aside so that he could accompany them in prayer and direct them towards greater perfection.

These things need to be remembered if we are to understand fully these words from his Memoirs:

It was amazing the way that crowd allowed themselves to be controlled by me, even though they were unknown to me a short while previously, and it could be said of them, in the main, that they were 'like a horse or mule, without understanding.' I must say, however, that despite their great ignorance, I always admired the great respect they had for everything in church and for the sacred ministers, and their eagerness to learn more about religion.

Not bad indeed, for unintelligent horses and mules! But their tamer and trainer possessed in abundance that gift of intellect which they lacked at first but which later came to light in them. Now we can understand a bit better how Blessed Cafasso, after trying to rebuff the various complaints against Don Bosco, invariably finished up with the refrain, "Let him go on! Let him go on!"

Sunday was only one day of the week: what about the other six? Don't believe for a moment that a real Oratory only involves Sunday work. The Oratory, as conceived by Don Bosco, is a centre of fatherly concern which wins over the minds and hearts of the young people, and then follows them everywhere. Don Bosco intervened on their behalf with parents, employers, teachers, whenever and wherever it was possible to exert a salutary influence on their behaviour. Then, in addition to the Refuge, Don Bosco had a field of work that knew no bounds: religious institutes, colleges, public and private schools, prisons, hospitals, evening classes, sermons, study and publications.

Such an amount of activity put him in contact with people of every class. Many of them, in need of his help or a word from him, chased after him wherever he went to say Mass. Proof of this is a resolution he made in 1845. We include it here, not because we want to do the work of his biographers, but because it serves our purpose. In it he says:

Since, more often than not, it happens that when I arrive in the sacristy I am met by someone who wants a word of advice or wants me to hear his confession, I will be sure to make some brief preparation for Mass before leaving my room."

This resolution is very significant. The word 'brief' removes any thought of scrupulosity on the part of Don Bosco, but the resolution shows how he prefers to anticipate his preparation rather than omit it on the convenient excuse that he was leaving the Lord for the Lord.

From this period also there are some cards, handwritten by Don Bosco, carrying a selection of thoughts that he wanted to keep close to his mind. He used these as bookmarks in his breviary for some forty years. They included eleven passages from the bible which reminded him of Divine Providence, trust in God, fleeing occasions of sin, detachment from earthly goods, the joy of a good conscience, the Lord's goodness towards the generous, the importance of thinking before speaking, the divine judgement, love for the poor, the honour due to those in authority, and forgiveness of offences.

Five quotations from the Fathers reminded him of the need for frequent examination of conscience, humble and complete adherence to the teachings of the Church, careful custody of secrets, the power of good example, and zeal for the souls of others as well as his own. Three more from the poet Dante (from the end of the canticles) served to raise his mind to the stars, to contemplate paradise. Last of all were four lines from Silvio Pellico. They are worth quoting not because they are anything out of the ordinary, but because they seem to us to have served as a statement of the kind of politics suited to a man of God, at a time when political passions were raging in Italy - the politics of an Italy united in faith, hope and charity:

Let Italy believe in every noble virtue.

May the State hope for every grace from God.

*Believing and hoping may she love and
proceed to the conquest of the eternal truths.*

Pellico and Don Bosco knew each other well. The poet nourished a sincere esteem for Don Bosco and had written for him the well known eulogy which begins *Angioletto del mio Dio* (little angel of God). As secretary of the Marchioness of Barolo it would have fallen to him to pen the letter in which the noble lady communicated to the Rector of the Refuge her decision regarding Don Bosco. He worded in diplomatic terms her brusque either/or: either leave the Oratory or leave the Refuge.

The long letter bearing the signature of the aristocratic lady, but scripted in the charming style of her secretary, is precious to us for two short sentences which are most enlightening:

I liked Don Bosco from the moment I first met him. I found in him an air of recollection and simplicity that is found only in saintly souls.

The writer expressed in elegant terms her ladyship's opinion, which surely corresponded to his own.

6

A Permanent Home for His Mission

Nowadays the name Oratory is so well known in Italy that it might seem it was always so, and no one feels a need to ask how it started. Still, the name of Don Bosco will always be linked with one Oratory, the Oratory par excellence, the Oratory of Valdocco.

It was part of the mysterious design of providence that the driving force of the works of Don Bosco should bear a name made holy by being used to indicate a place of prayer. A place is named after the principle activity carried on there. If then a place of so much action is called a place of prayer, it can only mean that in Don Bosco's works, prayer comes before action. The words of Don Bosco himself confirm it.

Even at the beginning there were some well-intentioned people who said it was inappropriate to have so many sacred functions and practices of piety, but Don Bosco always responded by saying,

I gave this house the name Oratory in order to show clearly that prayer is the only power on which we should rely.

In the Oratory, prayer could be breathed in the air. You could see it in the faces of the young people; prayer was part of everybody and everything. This is not, however, our purpose. We mention it only to show that the Oratory mirrored the priestly soul of Don Bosco. A priest endowed with a good spirit of initiative might well organise the Church from the soil of the earth, but if he has not got in equal measure the spirit of prayer, he will not be able to infuse into his activities the breath of life, (cf. Gn 2:7) without which such organisations will not be life-giving.

For Don Bosco, God was the beginning and end of everything. He was so engrossed in work that he could not devote long hours to prayer. However, his mother who slept in a room next to his, maintained on good evidence that he spent part of the night in prayer. At the entrance to his room there was a poster with the prayer *Praised be Jesus Christ*. On the wall inside, another poster said: *Only one thing is necessary, to save one's soul*. A third called to mind the motto dear to St Francis of Sales which Don Bosco had made his own at the beginning of his priesthood: *Da mihi animas, caetera tolle* (give me souls, take away the rest).

He habitually made use of aspirations which expressed his desire for eternal salvation, for himself and for others. His spirit of intimate prayer manifested itself in respect, love and esteem for every act of worship and every devout practice approved, promoted or recommended by the Church. These included, for example, the use of the sacramentals, attendance at church functions, the recital in common of the rosary, pious associations, the Angelus, grace before and after meals, and the Way of the Cross. What great devotion he had for the mysteries of the passion and death of Jesus! He meditated on the sufferings of Christ with such profound sentiments that, when he spoke about them, he became emotional, words failed him, and his listeners were moved to tears.

With regard to pious associations, it is important to mention that shortly after he settled at Valdocco he enrolled in the Third Order of Franciscans. He wore their habit, did the novitiate and made profession. Anyone who observed him could see that he was an outstandingly prayerful priest. He prayed in a loud voice, pronouncing the words with a slight tremble which revealed the fervour of his love. The humble poet who wrote and set to music some verses in his honour in 1846 when he returned after a long period of convalescence, was voicing the opinion of all when he spoke of the return to the Oratory of "the wise man, the devout man, the man adorned with virtue."

Other testimonies from much later, given by trustworthy eye-witnesses, say the same thing. Those were years that brought Don Bosco many headaches: running an Oratory of seven hundred boys; opening and directing two new oratories in Turin; starting the section for boarders; opening his doors to poor clerics left abandoned by the forced closure of the seminaries; his own small house packed beyond belief; trying to provide the daily bread; and laying the basis of the future congregation. Then there were the public conflicts which gave a huge amount of rope to the ecclesiastical authorities. In the spirit of the gospel he shared the anxieties of his Pastor who

had become a sign of serious contradiction. All of this would be enough to make us think that from morning to night Don Bosco would be in turmoil and his head like a pressure cooker.

Nothing could be further from the truth. A revered priest who knew him at close quarters tells us that the thought of the presence of God was so evident in his appearance as to bring to mind those words of the Apostle, 'our homeland is in heaven' (cf. Phil 3:20). Everywhere, even at table or in his room, he was seen to be composed in his actions, recollected in his looks, with head bowed, like one who was in the presence of some exalted personage or before the Blessed Sacrament. When walking in the street he was totally concentrated in a manner which showed clearly that he was absorbed in thinking about God. It sometimes happened that people asked him for spiritual advice when it seemed that he was distracted by things of a completely different nature, but he was able to respond like a man who lived immersed in meditation on the things of eternity.

Another witness who lived under Don Bosco's direction in the early days of the Oratory used to watch him when they were saying prayers in common. He noticed with what joy he spoke the words *Our Father who art in heaven*, and his voice stood out among the others for an indefinable quality that greatly moved those who heard him. Although there was nothing extraordinary about his appearance, this witness observed that in the church or sacristy he was in the habit of not leaning on his elbows but simply resting his forearms on the edge of the bench or kneeler, with hands joined or holding a book. Even the great moralist, Monsignor Bertagna, could not forget his demeanour in prayer. When asked to sum him up in a few words, he replied that Don Bosco prayed "like an angel."

We will not make an issue out of Don Bosco's external attitude except to add, in support of what has already been said, another observation that will help us to a more complete understanding of his spirit of prayer. Writers and artists lay too much emphasis on the childlikeness of the external appearance of the Servants of God. There are some who like to present an image of Don Bosco as all sweetness. Those of us who knew him could never agree to such an image, nor could we recognise Don Bosco in such a guise.

A great person who is, at the same time, a great saint, is able to smile. His is not a permanent, meaningless or merely instinctive smile, but one that is deliberate and radiates the inner thought. It is a smile that has a purpose and is withdrawn when the purpose is achieved. In a saint, kindness and charm are never dissociated from a calm and serene dignity. These

two, kindness and dignity, form a visible indication and, almost, the seal of the presence of God. The sight of a saint in some act of goodness, raises the mind and makes one think.²²

It is true that people speak of agreeableness in relation to Don Bosco, but never of weakness. Since these two often go together, perhaps we need to conclude that in the case of Don Bosco, agreeableness needs to be understood, not so much according to its dictionary meaning but in a gospel sense: the simplicity of yes, yes or no, no, born out of kindness but with an element of firmness. The man who is in interior communion with God will always bear the marks of sober gravity in his appearance, and that is how Don Bosco is seen by anyone who has studied the genuine expression of his personality.

As well as his comportment, there was also his manner of speech. He spoke slowly and calmly, giving importance to every word and avoiding profane expressions, too lively a manner, words of resentment or incitement. One who lived for many years in Don Bosco's family, and indeed in close familiarity with him, had this to say,

We often used to say among ourselves, 'How we love to be near Don Bosco! If you talk to him for an instant, you feel full of fervour.'²³

We have yet another testimony which is of the highest value that of the Servant of God Don Michael Rua, who had this to say in his testimony for the process of beatification,

I lived by Don Bosco's side for thirty-seven years ... Observing Don Bosco's actions, even the least important of them, made more impression on me than reading or meditating on some pious book.

Please be patient and allow me to digress a little, for good reason. I want to report a relevant quotation which shows how legitimate it is to judge Don Bosco's interior life from his external demeanour. If there were a more direct way, would we not all follow it gladly? The quotation is from St Vincent, in one of those wonderful sermons that he gave to his Missionaries:

²² It is beyond doubt, we believe, that mystics do not laugh. The impression they receive in their contact with God is not dissipated in them but keeps them enthralled by the thought of God's presence. When they smile at someone, that smile does not quiver and does not alter the marks of their habitual interior recollection. While I was revising the draft of these pages for the first edition I heard the following words from the lips of Don Francesia: "Don Bosco evoked joy in others but he himself had the restrained appearance that is seen in people who are sad." The Salesian Don Vismara expressed it well when he said that Don Bosco's smile was seen but not heard.

²³ G.B.Francesia, *Il Ven. D. Giov. Bosco amico delle anime*, p.6. Sc. Tip. Sal., S. Benigno Canavese, 1908.

If you speak not even one word, but are totally immersed in God, you will touch people's hearts by your very presence. The Servants of God have an outward appearance that distinguishes them from unspiritual people. There is a certain humble external attitude of recollection and devotion that has an effect on the souls of those who admire them. Here we have people so full of God that I can never even look at them without being struck. Artists depict the saints surrounded by rays of light; it is a fact that good people, who live holy lives on earth, radiate a light that belongs only to them.

St Bonaventure's biographer says of him:

We don't have information to enable us to know his progress in prayer and his sublime gift of contemplation.²⁴

He goes on to say,

the fruits of his interior life and his permanent union with God ... imprinted upon his appearance an unspeakable peace, a heavenly grace that impressed everyone who saw him.

He quotes the testimony of a contemporary who, speaking about the Council of Lyons where Bonaventure's angelic light shone forth for the last time, wrote as follows:

The Lord gave him this grace that all those who saw him had a great affection in their hearts for him.

Just change the name, and you could apply it to Don Bosco.

Don Bosco was a great admirer of the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius. He loved the exercises, for himself and for others. Ahead of his time also in this, he began retreats for young workers in 1847. He introduced in Salesian boarding schools the custom of a retreat at Easter, well prepared, well preached and always finishing on a joyful note. For the members of the Congregation, he was no less insistent than other founders. He was a strong promoter of retreats for others, and he himself was faithful to the practice.

Until circumstances made it impossible for him, he used to go every year to the Alpine hermitage of St Ignatius above Lanzo Torinese. There in the solitude and peace of the mountains he fortified his spirit by prayer and meditation on the eternal truths. On a page which he kept carefully we can read, with a certain emotion, the resolutions he made during the retreat of 1847:

²⁴ Lemmens., *L. c.*, c. VIII, p. 263.

Every day: Visit to the Blessed Sacrament.
Every week: Confession and some act of penance.
Every month: read the Prayers for a Happy Death.
Domine, da quod iubes et iube, quod vis.²⁵
The priest is God's thurible (Theodotus).
He is the soldier of Christ (St John Chrysostom).
For a priest prayer is like water for a fish,
air for a bird and a fountain for a deer.
One who prays is like one who goes to the King.

This is the third time we have seen Don Bosco's resolutions regarding his prayer life. There is a world of difference between saying and doing, but we must bear in mind the character of Don Bosco. Don Bosco was not just an intellectual, nor an emotional type. He was a man of strong will, with clear ideas and pure sentiments. People of this kind, strong and tenacious, mean what they say. They are not like those of a speculative nature whose resolutions remain in the air, nor like emotional people who keep on making resolutions because they are like feathers tossed in the wind. Don Bosco was iron-willed.

Here another question occurs. If Don Bosco had such mastery of himself, how do we explain the fact that he was often seen weeping? He used to weep when celebrating Mass, or distributing communion, or when simply blessing the people at the end of Mass. He used to weep when speaking to the boys after Night Prayers, or when giving talks to his helpers or giving the memento during a retreat. He wept when he spoke about sin or scandal, about immodesty or about human ingratitude towards the love of Jesus Christ for us, or when expressing fears for someone's eternal salvation.

One witness says, in relation to the merrymaking at carnival time,

He used to urge us to receive Holy Communion in reparation for these disorders, and to spend time in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. While he was speaking, at the thought of the insults offered to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, especially during those days, he used to weep and he even made us weep.

Another very important witness, Cardinal Cagliero, had this to say,

I saw Don Bosco weeping more than once, and my companions saw him too, when he preached on the love of God, or on the loss of souls, or on Good Friday, when he spoke about the passion of Jesus Christ, when he spoke on a happy death or on the hope of heaven. There were tears of love, of sorrow and

²⁵ "Lord, grant what you command and command what you will."

of joy. He was transported with joy when he spoke of the Blessed Virgin, her goodness and her immaculate purity.

The same thing happened to him also in public churches. A witness saw him burst into tears in the Sanctuary of the Consolata when he was preaching on the final judgment, describing the separation of the damned from the elect. Another observed him weeping many times especially when he was speaking about eternal life. His tears moved obstinate sinners to repentance, and after the sermon they would come to him for confession.

Finally, his conscientious biographer writes:

We who write these pages were witnesses with a thousand others, of this divine gift, which was given to Don Bosco from the time he founded the Oratory and even before, and which lasted till his death.²⁶

Now the question arises whether we are really dealing with a mystical gift, and if so, does it allow us to say that Don Bosco enjoyed the grace of passive prayer. We will return to the topic at greater length. We limit ourselves, for the time being, to noting that in the circumstances referred to, the tears of Don Bosco were proof of his great union with God. And since union with God is prayer, we can see what a deep spirit of prayer animated Don Bosco in the midst of the ever-increasing intensity of his work.

The Eucharist held a dominant role in Don Bosco's spirituality. It was the love of his life and the permanent object of his priestly zeal. It was a day of immense joy for him when the Blessed Sacrament was reserved in his Oratory. He received this outstanding grace in 1852 when the chapel of St Francis de Sales was built. That sacred building became the centre of his affection. You could not describe the joy with which he gave the good news to his pupils. Later, whenever he had a moment's breathing space, he used to go there to adore the Lord, in an attitude of prayer that seemed more like that of an angel than of a man.

He attached supreme importance to everything that concerned divine worship. He insisted upon the cleanliness and tidiness of the sacred vessels and vestments. He made sure that the tabernacle lamp was burning, day and night. He urged all to reflect that it was the Lord who deigned to dwell in the tabernacle. He loved to remove the cobwebs with his own hands, to dust the altar, sweep the floor and wash the sanctuary. He paid careful attention to everything that was needed for the worthy celebration of the sacred functions. On major feasts he did not want secular musicians because

²⁶ Lemoyne, L. c., vol. IV, pp 307-8.

they were unaccustomed to being in the house of God and did not show respect for the real presence of Jesus. His biographer, who is an excellent witness, writes that in church his faith and his love for the real presence of our Divine Saviour were reflected on his face.

If he was like that at prayer, what was he like when celebrating Mass? He was reverent, attentive, devout and exact. He spoke the words with clarity and fervour. It was obvious that he enjoyed distributing Holy Communion and his fervour was noticeable. However, there was no affectation, nothing done simply to serve the eye. He was neither slow nor fast, and he proceeded from beginning to end with a calmness and naturalness in all his movements. The faithful who saw him were immediately edified. Some, when they knew where he was celebrating Mass, made sure to be there. Families that had the privilege of a private oratory vied with one another to have him come and celebrate there.

Very often he returned to kneel at the altar of his first Mass in the Church of St Francis of Assisi, at the Ecclesiastical College, and renewed there the resolutions he made that precious day. The copy of the Rubrics of the Mass which he always carried, is still conserved, worn out from use. He would sometimes ask those he trusted to observe him celebrating Mass and watch carefully to see if he made any mistakes.

In the morning when he was on his way from his room to the church, if he met anyone who greeted him or kissed his hand, he replied with a smile but without saying a word, completely absorbed in thinking about the Mass he was about to celebrate. Whenever he had to travel, in order not to miss the divine sacrifice, he either cut short his sleep and celebrated at an early hour, or he underwent serious inconveniences to celebrate later, often even very late. That is how the early Salesians saw him at the altar and it is how we latecomers saw him, too.

Don Bosco's heart was formed in the spiritual life by his love for the Holy Eucharist, which was constant from childhood onwards. He was naturally led, or rather he was providentially prepared, to become as a priest an apostle of frequent communion. How his angelic zeal shone in this holy mission!

Shadows of Jansenism still weighed upon the people of Piedmont. Sound moral doctrine was imparted in the Ecclesiastical College with a view to banishing traces of Jansenism from the minds of the clergy. Who knows how long the suffering would have continued were it not for the powerful wind of change that came through the example of Don Bosco? He acted; he did not engage in polemics. Personally he had resolved long

ago the question of frequent communion, and he embarked on his priestly ministry with clear ideas on the matter.

There is a passage from his Memoirs that makes quite an impression on us reading it now. He says,

At the beginning of my second year of philosophy, I paid a visit to the Blessed Sacrament one day. I had no prayer book with me, so I began to read *The Imitation of Christ*. I went through some chapters dealing with the Blessed Sacrament. I was so touched by the profound thoughts expressed, and the clear and orderly way these great truths were clothed in fine language that ... I went back again and again to that golden little work.

He fell in love with that book and it became one of his favourites.

Reading and re-reading the part that deals with the *Sacrament of the Altar*, he must have paid particular attention to the second part of Chapter Ten where the author observes that the enemy, knowing well the many and wonderful fruits of Holy Communion, does his utmost by every means to stop not only the simple faithful but also devout consecrated souls from approaching the sacrament.

This cursed diabolical infiltration is an old scourge and an old plague in the Church, our thoughtful reader must have said to himself. All the more avidly, then, he sought to make his own the sweet nectar of that sublime book, turning to it daily. He resolved that he would become an apostle of frequent Holy Communion to the youth of the world. To the youth, because he knew it was useless building on sand, and therefore it was necessary to lead young people to the Eucharistic banquet at an early age, to lead them there in large numbers and with great frequency and to get people used to seeing them at the altar. And this is precisely what he did.

Critics abounded on all sides but Don Bosco lost no time in discussion. He prepared large numbers of young people well for their first communion. He multiplied opportunities for general communion. He started groups and sodalities with the intention of encouraging the members to frequent and even daily receive communion. He spent hours hearing the confessions of those who wished to receive communion. God alone knows the sacrifices Don Bosco made in promoting frequent communion among the young. On-lookers noticed the sincere joy he felt at seeing long lines of young people approaching the altar and returning from it. Indeed, what more could one desire whose whole life was focussed on Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament?

We should not finish this chapter without repeating yet again the use Don Bosco made of the sacrament of confession during these years. The

choice of a good director is an ordinary requirement for progress in the spiritual life.

St Bernard alludes to this in his famous saying: *Qui se sibi magistrum constituit, stulto se discipulum facit* (one who is his own master has a fool as a disciple).²⁷ The holy Doctor is writing this, not to a beginner, but to a poor cleric. Indeed, in the same letter he repeats his teaching and adds an example by way of proof:

I do not know what others think on this subject. I speak from experience and as far as I am concerned I can say it is much easier to direct many others than to guide myself.

The great master of spiritual direction, Scaramelli, appeals to the authority of St Bernard and affirms:

After the first desire for perfection and the first resolutions to strive towards it, the most necessary means of progress in the spiritual journey is without doubt the choice of a good guide.²⁸

Don Bosco had already shown that he had understood this necessity in good time. As soon as he went to Turin he placed himself under the direction of Blessed Cafasso and he went every week to open his conscience to him. He used to go to him in the Church of St Francis of Assisi, to the confessional where there was a long queue of penitents waiting their turn. Don Bosco would kneel on the ground near a pillar making his preparation as he waited for the confessor to notice him. In order not to make him lose too much time, Don Cafasso would raise the curtain and beckon to him. He would then approach with head bowed reverently, kneel at the confessional and make his confession, to the edification of those who were present. A holy master and a holy disciple!

²⁷ *Epist.* LXXXVII, 7.

²⁸ *Directorio ascetico*, tratt. I, n.92.

7 Period of Great Foundations

During this period of his life Don Bosco's name gradually came to be known throughout the whole world. Newspapers of various points of view, illustrated booklets, photographs that were spread widely because they were much sought after, lectures, all the means of communication vied with each other in spreading news of his work. No other apostle had ever had so much publicity.

The success which crowned his arduous enterprises continued to confirm in people's minds the opinion that he was, according to some, a great saint, and to others, a great man. Moreover, he himself, in appealing for funds, spread news of his mission to the four winds, by means of circular letters in various languages to people of every kind and every nation. Silent modesty was not part of his approach! Some were scandalised but it was the scandal of the small-minded; his critics often felt compelled to imitate him.

We have a statement made by Don Cafasso in 1853 to clarify things for some learned clerics who had some doubts in regard to Don Bosco. Its value goes far beyond the petty scope for which it was first given. In it Don Cafasso said:

How well do you know Don Bosco? For me, the more I study him, the less I understand him. I see him as both simple and extraordinary, humble and great, poor and yet undertaking huge projects that seem impossible. I have seen obstacles in his way and his situation impossible, and yet he succeeds splendidly in whatever he undertakes. For me, Don Bosco is a mystery! I am certain, however, that he is working for the glory of God, that God alone is his guide, and that God alone is the motive for all his actions.

Don Cafasso's prudent reserve was easily understandable at that time. When word that Don Bosco was a saint entered the public domain, the reasons for such reserve were no longer valid. However, fame and renown may sound great in the ears of those far away but they don't always produce the same effect in those closer to home. That is why the proverb says, 'familiarity breeds contempt' or, as the French say with a bit more imagination, 'no man is great to his own valet.'

But Don Bosco was different. Those who knew him well have attested unanimously that the better they got to know him, the more they were confirmed in their conviction that he was indeed a saint. Those who were close to him for a long time, and had opportunity to examine at their leisure the tenor of his intimate daily life, found themselves filled with a veneration for him that was almost like worship.

This familiarity, far from lessening the attraction of the unknown, and reducing to more modest proportions the rumours of sanctity that were on the lips of the people, served only to give further substance to them. Anyone who knows anything about the spiritual life will know two things: no opinion of holiness could be formed nor could such an opinion endure, if the supposed saint were not a man of prayer; secondly, it would not take much to discredit it; to be seen making the sign of the cross carelessly even once would be enough.

Don Bosco lived his life under the attentive scrutiny of very many people and his actions could be observed by many, some discreet and others indiscreet. Within the walls of the Oratory, true prayerfulness was well known. The true spirit of prayer was to Don Bosco what the martial spirit is to a good captain, or the spirit of observing things to the artist or scientist - a habitual disposition of the soul lived with ease, constancy and visible delight. Among those who grew up at the Oratory, special mention is due to those who were formed by Don Bosco and became his collaborators and later the first members of the Salesian Society. We knew them - men who were very different in terms of genius and culture, and different, too, in their skills and aptitudes - but there were some common traits that stood out in all of them. These might almost be called the founding characteristics of the Society.

Among these traits one could mention a serene peacefulness in word and deed; fatherliness in manner and in expression; but particularly, in line with our theme, a prayerfulness that could be seen to be the essential fulcrum of their Salesian life.

They prayed a lot. They prayed very fervently, and they attached great importance to praying well. It seemed they could not put together four words in private or in public without bringing prayer into it in some way. And yet, none of them, not even Don Michael Rua for all his ascetical and almost mystical figure, attracted the attention of those who saw them. None of them appeared to have received extraordinary gifts of prayer. In fact we saw them fulfilling with simplicity the normal practices of our rule and our traditions.

Yet what diligence they showed in their dealings with God! They were able to bring thoughts of faith into ordinary conversation on any subject and they did so with great naturalness. They had lived with Don Bosco, and that had left an indelible mark on their lives. We could very well say of them something similar to what Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth: if you want to know Don Bosco's spirit of prayer, just look at his disciples. They are like an authentic letter in which he himself is described (cf. 2 Cor 3:2-3).

The absence of those great external signs which are frequently to be seen in the prayer of the saints, does not mean that Don Bosco's spirit of prayer went unnoticed, even during the busiest period of his life when unceasing activity and troubles of every kind competed for his attention. The sense of God's presence was so rooted in his mind that business and worry could not disturb his intimate union with God. His continuous awareness of God's presence served to keep him alert and ever intent on his one purpose, which was to serve God. It was also for him a permanent source of joy in a sea of worries. In all his activity he sought only the fulfilment of God's will.

Once when writing to a good priest to ask his help in the administration and supervision of the hostel which was packed with boarders he used a joking remark which was typical of his style: "Come and help me to say the Breviary."

Going from one activity to another without a pause was, for Don Bosco, like a continuous recital of the psalms, because in everything he did he gave praise to God and sought lovingly to do his will. In fact the book which the priest uses in his daily ritual of prayer tells him that he must also carry out his daily activity in a spirit of prayer before God. A similar analogy is found in St Augustine.²⁹ Urging the Christian to make of his whole life a hymn in praise of God's glory, the great Doctor, refers to David's musical instrument and says: *sing to God not only with your tongue but also with the psalter of your good works*. This was Don Bosco's Breviary.

²⁹ In Ps. CXLVI, 2.

I had already drafted this chapter to this point when I read Pope Pius XI's discourse of 19 March 1929 for the decree on the miracles of Don Bosco. It included a personal memory and it came at just the right time. The Holy Father recalled how he had once passed a few days with Don Bosco, staying under the same roof and sharing the same table. On more than one occasion he had had the joy of spending a considerable amount of time with the Servant of God. He noticed that Don Bosco was always very busy, and yet one of the characteristics that impressed him most was "a peacefulness, a self-control in the use of time so that he was able to listen to all who came to him in perfect calm as if he had nothing else to attend to."

If we wanted to relate all the facts and include all the testimonies that support the accuracy of this observation, there would be enough material to fill a large volume. The observation refers not only to his mastery of time but also to his control when things went wrong. He faced opposition, disappointment and misfortune with calm and peacefulness. Nothing caused him to be upset.

We still remember well something that was said to us by Don Bosco's first successor: when Don Bosco appeared more cheerful and happier than usual, his collaborators, in the light of experience, would whisper among themselves, "Don Bosco must have some serious problem today because he looks more cheerful than usual."

In his evidence during the process of Beatification, Don Rua had this to say, "In these situations his strength came from prayer." Even if we did not have such a reliable testimony, no other explanation would be possible.

The author of the *Imitation*³⁰ states that, perfect peace and serenity can come from one source only, which is complete abandonment to God by one who lives closely united to Him. In the words of the soul to his Beloved, *You render the heart tranquil and give great peace and joy.*³¹

One good proof of union with God is an ease in speaking about Him. Don Bosco's sons were well aware of this gift. His conversations with them often began with expressions like,

"How good is the Lord, and what good care He takes of us!" "God is a good master and does not allow to go unrewarded even a cup of water given for love of Him." "Let us love God, let us love Him!" "Can you see how good He has

³⁰ Lib. III, 34,1.

³¹ In *Cattolico Provveduto*, written under Don Bosco's guidance, we read among the resolutions to be made on the day of Communion: "Be careful not to lose your peace of spirit, without which nothing good can be achieved. To preserve it, stay closely united to God." p. 507 (1888 edition). A well known modern author observes very well: "It is unlikely that souls will be open with one who appears to be constantly worried or too absorbed in business" (R. PLUS: *Irradiare il Cristo*, Marietti, Torino, p.29).

been to us? He created everything for us. He instituted the Eucharist to remain with us. At every moment he bestows blessings on us." "When it is a matter of serving God, who is such a good father, we should be ready for any sacrifice." "Remember that faith without good works is dead." "Let us do all we can for the glory of God." "All for the Lord, all for His glory!"

Even the most material concerns did not diminish this readiness to speak about God.

The reverend Don Rua says,

Sometimes, when I accompanied him as he went to rest late at night, he would stop to contemplate the starry sky and remain there, forgetful of his tiredness, talking about the immensity, omnipotence and wisdom of God. On other occasions in the countryside he would point out to us the beauty of the fields, or the abundance and richness of the fruit, and this led to a conversation about God's goodness and providence. We often exclaimed, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus: *Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road?* He displayed the same ease with strangers, inside or outside the house, people of humble or noble state, clerics or lay people. At Marseilles in the house of an outstanding benefactress, he took a forget-me-not and said to the lady: "Here, I am giving you something to remember, the thought of eternity." With or without flowers, he never forgot to leave some pious thought, no matter who it was that came to him. One of his sayings was, "The priest should never deal with anyone without leaving him a good thought."

A more striking example of habitual union with God is an ease in speaking about heaven. According to Cardinal Cagliero, Don Bosco "used to speak about heaven with such conviction, such pleasure and joy, that everyone who heard him was impressed. He talked about it as a son talks about his father's house; the desire to be with God inspired him more than the rewards promised by God."

Whenever he heard people complaining about their difficulties, or fatigue or the duties of office, he would encourage them by saying,

Remember that you are suffering and working for God who is a good master. Work and suffer for the love of Jesus Christ who has toiled and suffered so much for you. A little bit of heaven will make everything all right.

Whenever someone told him of difficulties or opposition he would reply,

There will be none of this in heaven. The sufferings of this life are momentary, the joys of heaven are forever.

A certain rich man, an unbeliever, intrigued by the things he had heard about Don Bosco, came to visit him out of pure curiosity. Don Bosco bade

him farewell with these words, "Let's hope that you with your money and I in my poverty may meet one day in heaven." Whenever holidays were mentioned he would say, "Our holidays will be in heaven." Returning tired from the city after a hard day's work, if he was asked to rest a while before going to his desk or to the confessional, he would answer, "I will rest in heaven." At the end of long discussions he would conclude, "There won't be any more controversies in heaven; we'll all be of the same point of view."

Often he used to exclaim, "What joy there will be when we are all in heaven!" "Just be good, and don't be afraid!" "You don't think, do you, that the Lord created heaven to leave it empty? But remember that heaven costs sacrifice." On one occasion he met with a theologian, a wealthy man who had the reputation of being over-fond of money. Don Bosco spoke with such feeling that the good man went to his safe, took out as many pieces of gold as he could hold in his two hands, and consigned the lot to Don Bosco with all the goodwill in the world.

Another day he was sitting outside the house with several priests. The conversation was about the excellent quality of the fruit they were eating. Don Bosco began to speak about heaven and he spoke with such warmth of feeling that his companions stopped eating and remained spellbound by his words. One witness who knew him well says that if someone asked straight out, "Where are we going?" Don Bosco would answer, "To heaven!" As St Augustine says, the constant desire for heaven is constant prayer.³²

Another very good proof of habitual union with God is the ability to say a good word always. According to Don Albera, his second successor, even when he was taken unawares or when engaged in something completely different, Don Bosco "seemed to interrupt his colloquy with God to attend to someone else, and it seemed as if his thoughts and his words of encouragement were inspired." We have many examples of his ability to speak about the Lord in seemingly unpropitious moments, but there is one more such example to be found in his biography, one that was repeated on many occasions.

It often happened that the priests of the Oratory, and especially the superiors, went to him for confession during the time that he allocated to dealing with his voluminous correspondence or to business matters. Even so, Don Bosco was able to speak to the penitent with such fervour and devotion that it was as if he had just come from celebrating Mass.

³² *Ep.CXXX*, 19.

His deeds matched his words. When he spoke, he spoke like a man united to God. His actions were marked with the characteristic of priestly zeal. Zeal indicates fervour of soul. In the Christian tradition, zeal is defined by St Ambrose as *fidei vapor* (the vapour of faith) and *devotionis fervor* (fervour of devotion). Zeal is therefore the external outpouring of inner faith. It is an ardour of devotion to God which cannot contain itself and boils over, releasing power and heat. Zeal is not just enthusiasm, an extraordinary urge that soon wears out. Zeal is sustained by higher values. It is something continuous and progressive, no matter what resistance it may face.

Don Bosco's zeal was modelled on that of Jesus: ardour for the glory of God and the salvation of souls together with war on sin, but always marked by kindness in dealing with people, small and great. The young people at the Oratory were won over by Don Bosco's zeal and they stated their view in a phrase which says a lot about the faith and devotion of the place: "Don Bosco seems like Our Lord." In these words we see Don Bosco coming and going, working hard with his feet on the ground and his hands on his work, but with his eyes resplendent with that light that comes from above, which illumines the heart and fills the whole body with light (cf. Mt 6:22). It is here that we should look for Don Bosco, rather than in any of his institutions.

St Bonaventure distinguishes three kinds of prayer: prayer in common, private prayer and continuous prayer.³³ He recommends this third kind especially to superiors who are busy about many things.³⁴ It requires three things: that the mind be kept on God during all one's occupations; that the person seeks always God's honour and that every now and then, almost furtively, he be recollected in prayer. Seen in this light, all Don Bosco's actions were penetrated by prayer, from the sign of the cross to the celebration of Mass, from a quick word to a sermon, from domestic details to major business. In major undertakings this spirit of prayer was the strong driving force that made him seek always the glory of God.

Before getting deeply involved in any activity, instead of calculating whether or not he had sufficient material resources, he looked at the problem from an angle foreign to human prudence. He used to say,

I keep to this rule in all my undertakings. I first examine very carefully if this work will be for God's greater glory and the benefit of souls. If it is, I go ahead, certain that the Lord's help will not be lacking. If later it turns out that

³³ *De sex alis Seraphim*, 12-14.

³⁴ Speaking to religious who live in their cell, the Holy Doctor addresses this advice to superiors since only they were occupied in business.

it was not as I imagined or believed, and it all goes up in smoke, I am equally happy.

What were Don Bosco's thoughts when one of his plans became reality? A certain Fr Felix Giordano of the Oblates of the Blessed Virgin Mary was curious enough to ask Don Bosco how his works succeeded so well, even though they were such huge undertakings. And Don Bosco replied,

Look. It has nothing to do with me! It is the Lord who does everything! When he wants to show that something is his work, he makes use of the poorest instrument. And this is what happens in my case. If he had found a poorer priest, one less worthy than me, he would have used him as his chosen instrument for that work, and let poor Don Bosco follow his natural vocation as curate in some country parish.

The whole world was speaking about his work, and he himself used to speak about his work to the whole world. He allowed people to speak and he would say, "It is a question of glorifying God's work, not that of man. How many more wonders the Lord would have worked if Don Bosco had had more faith!" As he wanted others to give praise to God for the work done, it was only natural that he himself should do so through the various means of publicity he used. His practical criterion was as follows:

It is right that those who give to charity should know where their gift goes. We live in an age when the world wants to see things and touch them. It is all the more necessary then that our good works should be known, so that God may be glorified.

In the canonical process many conscientious witnesses, who had heard him speaking about his works, all expressed the opinion that in such matters Don Bosco placed the focus much higher than on his own person. His strong conviction that he was the humble servant of divine Providence sustained him in moments of extreme difficulty. Indeed, God permitted that people did not always immediately give a favourable judgement on Don Bosco's works. Even the highest authority in the diocese was slow to understand Don Bosco, and seemed to believe that he was rendering honour to God by going against Don Bosco. What a bitter chalice this was for poor Don Bosco! But the only complaint that fell from his lips or issued from his pen during this whole painful trial was that these annoyances caused him to waste time when he could have been doing so much good for the glory of God. This was always his ultimate aim.

One day the voluminous collection of his letters will document abundantly the great desire he had to promote God's glory, and to enkindle the

same longing in the priests, both secular and religious, with whom he exchanged correspondence, and especially in his own sons. Among the many fatherly admonitions given to his sons, they themselves assign pride of place to the following:

In treating of spiritual things, they should always be resolved in the way that gives most glory to God. Commitments, spite, revenge, rights, pretensions and even honour must all be sacrificed in this case.

This is the language of someone who is used to passing among people with his mind fixed on God.

St Paul tells all Christians without distinction to seek the glory of God, each one according to his own vocation, (cf. 1 Cor 10:31) and thus the priest should do so as a priest. Now the mission of a priest, the minister of Christ, cannot be different from the mission of Christ himself, which is to save souls from perdition: *for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost* (cf. Lk 19:10).

From the day of his ordination, Don Bosco wanted nothing other than to be a priest. He aspired to no office other than those belonging strictly to his priestly ministry. He had ambitions for no title other than that of a simple priest. He would allow no badge of honour on his person save those of a priest. He never thought of giving glory to God in any way other than through his priesthood, and specifically in that which Pseudodionysius has called the most important of all: *the most divine of all divine things, is to cooperate with God in the salvation of souls.*³⁵

On this matter the Salesians have from Don Bosco a masterly teaching which forms part of the living patrimony of our family traditions. Don Bosco said:

A priest is always a priest, and should be seen as such in his every word. To be a priest means to be obliged to keep always in mind the great interest of God, which is the salvation of souls.

A priest should never allow anyone who approaches him to go away without hearing some word that expresses the desire for the eternal salvation of his soul. Don Bosco put this eminently priestly objective as a precondition for all his foundations, beginning with the one that was destined to be the mother of all the others. "Remember," he used to preach to his sons, "that the Oratory was founded by the Blessed Virgin for the sole purpose of saving souls." This is why the motto *Da mihi animas* was included in the Salesian crest. For him it was the first rule of his entire life.

³⁵ *De cael. hier.*, 3.

It would be impossible for us to follow him step by step through his life's journey. Let someone else glean diligently from this vast field for the instruction and edification of his brothers in the priesthood. Let others tell of the schemes he devised, the fatigue he endured, the heroic sacrifices, the tears and sighs and prayers - especially the prayers, for without prayer he would not have had the strength to sow amid such tears and to reap with such abundance (cf. Ps 126:6).

A modern theologian has written,

Where there is no interior life, external actions are of little value, because the grace of God does not give fruit to a ministry in which there is no place for prayer. It is necessary to begin external works with the spirit of prayer³⁶

Sin is the great enemy of God because sin drives God from our souls. It is the great enemy of our souls because it pushes them to hell. Don Bosco fought for the whole of his life against sin in a war to death. One night he could not sleep because he knew that one of his pupils had committed sin. The following evening during the "good night" he looked like sadness personified. At the thought of a mortal sin committed by one of his boys his whole soul was revolted. His spirit was filled with a deep affliction like the Apostle Paul on seeing the Athenians worshipping idols (cf. Acts 17:16).

When he preached about the gravity of mortal sin he wept and the words seemed to stick in his throat, obliging him to cut short what he was saying. Even in conversation, at the mere mention of an offence against God his face contracted and his tone of voice, or sometimes his silence, expressed his grief. He suffered physically when faced with sinful acts or on hearing an accusation of certain grave faults. For example, when he heard someone blaspheme, he felt like fainting. When his boys confessed impurity he felt like vomiting or he experienced an unbearable stench or a tendency to suffocate.

Don Francesia once saw him developing a sudden eye problem and asked him if he had worked too much that night. Don Bosco replied that he had been hearing confessions in the prison and he had offered to do penance on behalf of his penitents since they were not in a position to do much penance themselves. Where sin was being committed it caused him a real martyrdom, the hardest one could imagine. At the same time, it increased his determination so that, as he used to say, he would never give in, even if he had a whole army against him.

Whenever sin was committed, especially if it was a case of scandal, it caused him to shiver, and to cry out in anguish. "Oh, what a disaster! What

³⁶ Tanquerey, *Comp.di teol. ascetica e mistica*, n.611, Desclée, Rome.

a disaster!" The fear of sin created in him such distress that he used to wish that the Oratory would be wiped out and his houses razed to the ground if they no longer fulfilled their purpose which was to prevent sin. In one of his rare statements about himself he said,

Don Bosco is one of the nicest men in the world. Run, shout, play tricks and he will put up with it, because you are young. But do not give scandal, do not ruin your own souls and the souls of others by sin, because then he will become ruthless.

A man of prayer can quickly find his own way of preventing offence against God when others would not even think of it. It happened once in Don Bosco's presence that a cart overturned when being pushed by a fifteen year old boy. The boy got into a rage and uttered the name of Jesus with total disrespect. Don Bosco called the boy over and gently and kindly asked him why he had misused the name of Jesus. "Because the cart overturned," he answered. "But do you not know that you should not speak the Lord's name without respect and devotion?," said Don Bosco, and he asked again, "Do you know the commandments?" "Yes," said the boy. "Then recite them for me, please." The boy did as he was asked. Don Bosco let him go only as far as the second, *You shall not take the Lord's name in vain*. He stopped him and asked, "Do you know what it means, not to take the Lord's name in vain? It means that you should not speak the name of God who loves us so much, without good reason and without devotion. Otherwise it is a sin, an offence against God, especially when it is said in anger, as you did just now." "My father says it always," replied the boy. "But from now on I will not do it again!" interjected the father who was there present, mortified by the scene.

On another occasion while Don Bosco was waiting for a train, he heard the son of the café-owner muttering every now and then, "Chisto! Chisto!" Don Bosco beckoned to him and said, "Come here, my boy. Do you want me to teach you to pronounce your words well. Listen now. Pay attention. It is *Cristo*, not *Chisto*! Like this, *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Sia Lodato Gesù Cristo*.³⁷ Remember that, *Cristo*, not *Chisto*!

In May of 1860 he had to undergo the unpleasant experience of a personal police investigation. As Don Bosco was opening the door one of the three policemen read in mocking tones the inscription over the door, *Praised be the names of Jesus and Mary*. Don Bosco stopped, turned to

³⁷ *Sia lodato Gesù Cristo (Praised be Jesus Christ)*.

him and said, *Praised for ever!* Then in commanding voice he said to the three men, "Remove your cap!" And when none of them obeyed, he repeated, "You started, now you must finish with due respect," and he ordered them again to remove their caps. The man of God won and the policemen made a virtue out of necessity. Then he concluded, "*Be the name of Jesus, the Incarnate Word.*"

These examples explain many things: the hours he spent in the confessional forgiving sin, the images of Dominic Savio with his motto, *Death rather than sin*, his educational method aimed at preventing sin.

They also explain how there existed in the Oratory a sacred horror of sin, not only mortal but even venial sin. It explains the spirit of reparation which moved so many young people to make reparation for the sins of others, not only by prayer but also through mortification. It also explains how the best of the boys were always and everywhere careful to ensure that sin did not enter or take root among their companions.

It is very moving to note how, in the canonical process, the witnesses, lay and clerical, who had lived in that environment, laid so much emphasis on the zeal of Don Bosco. They spoke, not with the colourless language of someone who is trying to drag up some long forgotten memory, but with the vivid tones of people who sensed within them a deep and loving impression.

There is a beautiful passage of St Thomas Aquinas which helps to clarify the matter. He argues as follows:

The love of friendship has this property that it seeks the good of the beloved. When such love is ardent it moves the lover to react against everything that is harmful to the friend. A person has zeal for his friend when he seeks to prevent everything in word or action that could harm his friend's interests. Similarly one is zealous in relation to God when he uses every means in his power to oppose whatever is contrary to God's honour or God's will. We say that one is devoured with holy zeal when he does his best to make up for any evil he sees being committed, or if that is impossible, he bears it with tears.³⁸

Here we see why sin hurt the heart of Don Bosco so grievously.

Don Bosco was consumed with love of God and he felt that every sin was an offence against God. Frequently he was heard giving vent to his feelings with expressions such as this,

³⁸ Ia IIae, q.XXVII, a IV, corp.

How is it possible that a person with common sense who believes in God can allow himself to offend God grievously? Why should anyone treat the Lord so badly? See how good God is! Every day he bestows his gifts upon us. Why offend him? It really must be said that whoever offends the Lord shows by this that he is not true to himself.

These are some of the things he said, but who can ever tell what he felt in his soul that was so much in love with God?

A little chapel stands beside Don Bosco's family home. It serves as a symbol. He himself prepared it in 1848 for his own convenience and that of his boys whenever he went there, either alone or with a group of boys, to spend some days in his native air. Everything is preserved as it was from the beginning.

On your right as you enter there is a couch on which he used to sit as he heard confessions. Straight in front, in the centre of the altar is the tabernacle, undecorated but solid and secure for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament; and above the altar a picture of the Blessed Virgin. Here we see the three principle means used by Don Bosco for his own sanctification and for that of his followers: frequent confession and communion, and devotion to Mary Most Holy, who calls us to Jesus through the sacraments of reconciliation and of love.

In a letter of 13 February 1863, Don Bosco said to Pius IX:

Your Holiness, please accept and support this lofty thought and may God inspire you to proclaim everywhere devotion to the Most Holy Sacrament and to the Blessed Virgin, the two anchors for the salvation of suffering humanity.

The enormous amount that he did during the years of his major foundations to instil love and devotion to the Blessed Virgin in those around him and to promote it to the ends of the earth, could not be explained if he himself had not had a fervent love for the Mother of God. Indeed this devotion contributed greatly to his spiritual formation and to the growth of his interior life.

St Bernard, whom the Church acknowledges as 'master of masters' of devotion to Mary, exhorts us with the words *Mariam cogita, Mariam invoca* (think of Mary and invoke Mary).³⁹ The thought of Mary and invocation of Mary were never absent from the heart and lips of Don Bosco. His devotion to her was always in line with the genuine uninterrupted Catholic tradition.

³⁹ St Bernard, *Hom. II super Missus est*, 17.

He constantly celebrated the glories of Mary, ancient and modern, and he sought always to infuse in others the filial trust in her that he nourished in his own heart. He never ceased to invoke the help of his heavenly patron. Public declarations of gratitude were ever on his lips for the innumerable graces and benefits he had received through the powerful intercession of the Help of Christians. "How good Mary is!" he used to exclaim frequently. Whenever he was praised for his achievements he felt embarrassed and would quickly correct his admirers saying, "These good people don't know who Don Bosco is; it is Mary Help of Christians who does everything."

He was often moved to the point of tears when preaching about the greatness of Mary. He was heard to repeat insistently that he had never taken any step without recourse to Mary. At least three times he went on pilgrimage to the famous Sanctuary of Oropa near Biella to receive guidance when faced with important decisions.

In his letters we often find phrases like, "May the Blessed Virgin keep us always hers!" At the end of a lovely story about Mary, (of which we do not know the author), we find written in Don Bosco's handwriting this beautiful exhortation which comes from the depths of his heart:

Dear reader, wherever you may be, whatever work you do, you can have recourse to the Blessed Virgin Mary in prayer. Turn to her in faith for she is a dutiful mother who can help and wants to help her children. Pray to her from your heart, pray with perseverance, and be sure that she will be a help to you in your spiritual and temporal needs.⁴⁰

Elsewhere there is a description of the apparition of Mary to St Stanislaus Kostka, when the saintly young man received the command to enter the Society of Jesus, and Don Bosco has added,

Christians, you who love Mary, pray to her with all your heart that she obtain for you this beautiful grace of offering yourself totally to God. Tell her that in this way she will be taking you away from the great dangers of the world. Tell her who can do everything, to command you as she did St Stanislaus, and be very quick to obey. From the time of his childhood, Venerable Father Charles Hyacinth used to ask Mary for this grace of being called to the religious state, and he obtained it.⁴¹

These are two examples of spontaneous and lively devotion to the Madonna.

⁴⁰ *Maria provvidenza e soccorso di chi la prega*. Appendix I in the May 1865 edition of the *Letture Cattoliche*, entitled "The History of the Inquisition."

⁴¹ *L.c.*, Appendix II.

We need have no scruples about prolonging our discussion of a topic as delightful as this. As Don Bosco's heart rejoiced at the thought of Mary, so our hearts are happy to recall his devotion, and we do so all the more eagerly because he did not usually share with others the inner feelings of his heart. There were some circumstances when, despite his natural reserve, his emotions poured forth.

We have a letter of Don Bosco, written from Oropa on 6th August 1863 and addressed to the students, his "very dear sons," in which he waxes lyrical. The good father calls on them all to share in spirit the 'transports' of joy which he experienced in that Marian atmosphere, in that royal dwelling place of the Holy Mother of God.

The devotion in that place took such a hold of his meditative spirit, and he found such joy at seeing so much prayer being offered to his heavenly Queen, that he felt the need to share right away with his sons the same delight:

If you, my dear sons, found yourselves on this holy mountain, you would certainly be moved. There is a large building, and at the centre of it a Church, commonly known as the Sanctuary of Oropa. Here there is a continuous throng of people, coming and going. Some of them have come to thank the Blessed Virgin for graces received, others are asking to be freed from some spiritual or temporal evil, yet others are praying for the help they need to persevere in goodness, and others still for the grace of a happy death. Young and old, rich and poor, ordinary country people and gentlemen, knights, counts, marquises, craftsmen, merchants, men, women, pastors, students of every kind can be seen here continuously in great numbers approaching the sacraments of confession and communion and going then to the foot of the magnificent statue of Mary Most Holy to beg her heavenly assistance.

His joy however soon turns to sadness that he is not with his boys in the Oratory to lead them all to pay homage to the blessed Mother:

In the midst of such people my heart had one big regret. What was it? I didn't see my dear students among them! It saddens me that I do not have my dear students here with me, that I cannot lead them to the feet of Mary, offer them to her, place them under her powerful protection, make them all like Dominic Savio or St Aloysius.

In this sadness at not being able to honour the Blessed Virgin in a solemn way with the participation of his sons, Don Bosco finds comfort in a promise and a prayer:

To find some comfort for my heart, I went before the splendid altar of Our Lady and I promised her that, when I got to Turin, I would do all in my power to instil in your hearts devotion to Mary. Entrusting myself to her, I begged these special graces for you: 'Mary,' I said to her, 'bless our house and drive away from the hearts of our boys even the shadow of sin. Be the guide of our students, be for them the seat of true wisdom. May they all be yours, and always yours. Take them as your sons and keep them always devoted to you.' I believe that the Blessed Virgin Mary has heard my prayer and I hope that you will help me, so that we can respond to Mary's call, and to the Lord's grace.

Finally, Don Bosco's heart rests in firm trust, as if he saw the Madonna up there among the beautiful mountains of Oropa, raising her right hand to bless his beloved Oratory of Valdocco and extending the mantle of her motherly protection over all who dwelt there:

May the Blessed Virgin Mary bless me, may she bless all the priests and clerics and all those who expend their energies on behalf of our house; may she bless all of you. She will help us from heaven and we will make every effort to earn her holy protection in life and in death. Amen.

Leaving that holy place, with his mind fixed on the future, Don Bosco must have said tenderly and fervently, *I raise my eyes towards the mountain. From where will my help come?* (cf. Ps 121:1) This was just the time when he was about to build his own Sanctuary to Mary Help of Christians.

Don Bosco had in mind the design of an extraordinary picture to adorn that Sanctuary. In the centre, on top, there would be Mary Most Holy amid choirs of angels. Close around her would be the apostles, then the martyrs, prophets, virgins, and confessors. Lower down there would be symbols of Mary's victories and of the people who sought her help. He outlined the design with so many words and in such detail that it seemed as if he was describing a real picture that he had already seen. It is true that the artist persuaded him that it would be impossible to fit so many figures into such a limited space, but the grandiose idea of Don Bosco and the manner in which he explained it showed that it was the fruit of long contemplation, and that Don Bosco was very familiar with the design.

8

In the Tribulations of Life

All those who were pleasing to God passed through many tribulations and remained faithful.⁴² Looking from a distance one might think that Don Bosco's life was a path of roses, but indeed his whole life was filled with many thorns. There were thorns in his family: poverty and opposition, which first blocked him completely and later made his journey to priesthood a difficult one, strewn with hard and humiliating trials. There were thorns at the founding of the Oratory: opposition from private citizens, from parish priests, from municipal, political and school authorities, there were thorns and worse at the hands of the Protestants. Every issue of the *Catholic Readings* led to a new trial. There were the thorns that came from a lack of means: he had so many boys to care for and so many works to sustain and no secure means to do it. There were thorns that came from his own personnel: the sacrifices he had to make to form them and the painful desertion of some of them. And finally there were thorns and tribulations that came from the diocesan authorities: misunderstandings, opposition and resistance without end.

The founding of the Salesian Society was a real Calvary, so much so that Don Bosco was to say later,

The work is done. But how many difficulties there were, how many headaches! If I had to begin now, I don't know if I would still have the courage to undertake the task.

The physical sufferings constituted a prolonged martyrdom. No one could withstand so many trials and reach the goal with peace and calm if

⁴² *Jud.* VIII, 23.

he did not have, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, "While keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith. For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising its shame...." (cf. Heb 12:2). Such triumphs are reserved to interior souls.

Let's look at Don Bosco and observe him closely at some of the more critical moments of his life. St Augustine says that the Psalmist, in the midst of trials inflicted upon him by evil people, takes refuge in prayer, *orat multa patiens*, and exhorts us when we are suffering in the same way to pray as he did: *ut, communicata tribulatione, coniungamus orationem* (cf. Ps 54:3-5). This is the great lesson we learn from the saints, the only true masters, after Jesus, in the art of suffering well.

Huysmans⁴³ had to omit many things from his short but beautiful life of Don Bosco but dedicated a whole page to the events of Palm Sunday 1846. This was really a day when Don Bosco experienced his own share of the Passion! Chased from every corner of the city, but followed faithfully by his ever-growing flock, he was reduced to celebrating the Church services in a field.

But even from there he was evicted. There was no respite, not a ray of hope. All his searching had been in vain. He met only mistrust and everywhere doors were closed in his face. He was heartbroken. He heard the confessions of his boys there in the field and then led them in pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Campagna, a couple of kilometres away. They sang and prayed and received Communion with great fervour as he celebrated Mass for them. It served only to increase his sorrow at the thought that these devout youngsters were about to be disbanded, after all the efforts he had made to bring them together and keep them together. In his sermon he compared them to young birds that were about to be thrown from their nest. They prayed with great fervour to the Mother of God that she might find a better and more permanent home for them.

That afternoon the recreation was held in the field but Don Bosco was heartbroken. When evening came, he still had absolutely nothing. One last attempt to stave off the embarrassment had failed. It was too much for him and Don Bosco was reduced to tears. Worn down by sorrow he was seen going off on his own and was heard praying aloud and in tears. The older boys, who knew him well by now, could not bear to see him so sad and they followed him. They heard his prayer of sorrow and of hope,

⁴³ Huysmans, Joris-Karl, *Don Bosco*, Patronage St-Pierre, Nice, 1902 p.13.

My God, my God, your will be done, but do not leave these little ones without a place of refuge.

His prayer was not in vain. The response was almost immediate. The following Sunday they were able to celebrate Easter in joy.

One of the gallant youths who stayed with Don Bosco in his hour of desolation was called Giuseppe Brosio, a name that is remembered with love in the history of the Oratory. He was Don Bosco's right hand man on many occasions. To him we owe the following account.

One Sunday after the services Don Bosco was not to be seen in the playground. This was so unusual that it could not pass unnoticed. The ever faithful Brosio went in search of him and found him in a room, very sad and almost in tears. Don Bosco was very fond of him and when Brosio questioned him he replied that one of the Oratory boys had insulted him in a manner that had caused him grave offence. "It does not matter about me," he added, "What worries me is that the misfortunate boy runs the risk of perdition." Brosio was hurt to the quick. He could not restrain himself and made as if to rush off to teach the boy a lesson he would not forget. Don Bosco's face changed and he stopped him just in time. "You want to punish the boy who offended Don Bosco? You are right! Let's take our revenge together. Do you agree?" "Yes," said Brosio with determination, raging with anger. Don Bosco took him ever so gently by the hand, led him into the Church, got him to pray alongside him, and remained for a long time in prayer. He must have prayed also for the young man beside him because his anger changed to love in an instant. When they went outside Don Bosco said to him, "You see, my friend, a Christian gets revenge by forgiving his enemy and praying for him."

How many opportunities Don Bosco had to put into practice that same holy maxim. From 1848 to 1854 there were several serious attempts on his life. One day while he was teaching catechism, a shot from a gun passed through the sleeve and the breast of his cassock. On another occasion two assassins were lurking in a corner of Piazza Castello, waiting to beat him up, when some people arrived just in time.

Twice he was called to the bedside of people who were said to be dying, and only his presence of mind enabled him to escape poisoning on one occasion and an attempt to kill him on the other. Three times he narrowly escaped being knifed by a hired assassin. Once in his room he was threatened by a gunman and was saved only by the sudden entry of one of his helpers who was keeping watch, suspecting that something might be

amiss. One day, as he was walking along the street in Moncalieri, he might have had his neck broken by a heavy blow of a cudgel had he not managed a timely push which caused his attacker to fall into the deep ditch that ran alongside the road.

And what about the four attempts on his life that were foiled by the appearance of the mysterious dog? High ranking criminals, who themselves remained in the background, provided the weapons for murderers who attacked him many times, because he refused to desist from his campaign *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* (for the Church and the Pope). This campaign was conducted mainly through the *Letture Cattoliche*,⁴⁴ which were much feared by the enemies of the Church. So many and so serious were the dangers he faced that men without courage would have been overwhelmed by them, but they did not even disturb Don Bosco's calm as he went about his ordinary duties. Very few in the house knew the risks he was facing, and even these few came to know them only gradually. He himself tells us of the spirit that sustained him throughout this dangerous period.

In 1853 two gentlemen, whom he had welcomed courteously, resorted to ugly threats to force him to stop publication of the periodical. He told them, loud and clear,

When I became a priest I committed myself to work for the good of the Catholic Church and for the salvation of souls, especially those of the young. You obviously do not know catholic priests or you would not have recourse to such threats. You should know that the priests of the Catholic Church work willingly for God for as long as they live. If they were to die in the course of their duty, they would consider death a privilege and an honour."

He insisted also that violence must never be opposed by violence, because "the priest's power lies in patience and forgiveness." Indeed, anyone meeting Don Bosco after the incidents such as these would have found him thanking God and the Blessed Virgin, praying for his unfortunate persecutors, thinking before God about how to repay evil with goodness and trying to regain his peace of soul through communion with the Lord.

As well as the armed attacks there were others, more prosaic and much more frequent from his providers and creditors! In carrying on his works of religion and charity, Don Bosco often found himself reduced to dire straits. This did not stop him, however, from drawing strength from his deep faith, nor did it affect his joy and peace. "God is a loving Father," he used to say. "He provides for the birds of the air and he certainly will not fail to provide

⁴⁴ *Catholic Readings*, published regularly by Don Bosco.

for us." As for himself and his mission, he reasoned, "I am only a humble instrument in all this work, God is the craftsman. It is up to the master craftsman and not to the instrument to provide the means, and lead the work to a fruitful conclusion. He will do that, in the way He judges best. It is up to me only to show myself obedient and docile in his hands."

In the little talks he gave each evening he spoke often of this habit of seeing things in a supernatural light:

Pray, and those of you who can, receive Holy Communion, for my intentions. I assure you that I also pray! I find myself in difficulties. I need special graces. I will tell you later what it is about.

A few evenings later he would keep his word, telling, for example, how a rich person had come and brought enough money. He would add,

The Blessed Virgin today, this very day, obtained a great grace for us. Let us thank her from the heart. Meanwhile, continue to pray. The Lord will not abandon us. But woe to us if sin should enter the house! The Lord will no longer come to our help. Be careful therefore to reject the wiles of the devil and to frequent the sacraments."

There are some short sayings that the boarders used to write down, evening after evening, and which our archives guard jealously. They are a faithful echo of the voice of our father, and a precious document of the truth of what he declared publicly in 1876:

We have no human means but we keep our eyes raised to heaven.

The proof that someone has his heart continually in God and God in his heart is in that ability to regain strength (cf. Is 40:31), to start again with renewed force when it would seem that everything points to giving up, a stability that is an intimate sharing in God's immutability. Cagliero says,

In thirty-five years I have never seen him annoyed, discouraged or disturbed for even one instant, when the care of his boys was at stake."

In addition to the violent incidents and the daily difficulties there were other painful episodes which hurt him where he felt it most. It is enough to mention the sorry example of what befell him on the occasion of the centenary of St Peter.

One of Don Bosco's great loves was always his love for the Pope. In times that were very hostile to the Papacy he displayed an active zeal for the Roman Pontiff that was well known to all and was often cruelly tested. To attack Don Bosco's love for the Pope was to injure him at the very heart of his being, and yet God allowed even this trial to befall him.

There were worldwide celebrations to mark the centenary. Don Bosco had published in his *Letture Cattoliche* a booklet on the Prince of the Apostles, a small work that received much praise. However, somebody or other, for whatever reason, referred the little booklet to the Sacred Congregation of the Index. It was like a bolt from heaven! He received from the office the report of one of the Consulters. It contained a grave charge and a serious, even rude, attack against the person of the author, almost as if he had attempted to undermine the Pope's authority by erroneous teachings. Don Bosco prayed long and hard, sought advice and then wrote a respectful reply.

The night before sending it to Rome he called one of his helpers with good handwriting to transcribe it, which allows us to know something of an incident that might otherwise have remained buried in the darkness of those difficult times. In the silence of the night the secretary heard the groans and sighs of Don Bosco from the adjoining room, utterances of heartfelt prayer. At midnight he opened the door and said gently, "Do you see how they have treated Don Bosco?" Then looking at the crucifix, he exclaimed, "Oh, my Jesus, you know that I wrote this book with good intentions. Ah! *My soul is sorrowful even unto death! Thy will be done!* I do not know how I will get through this night. Oh, my Jesus, help me!" God alone knows how Don Bosco got through the rest of that night. What we know is that at five in the morning, when the secretary returned to his desk to put the finishing touches to the letter, he saw Don Bosco coming down, serene and peaceful as always, to hear confessions and to celebrate Mass. He seemed a completely different man with joy and happiness shining from his face.

His defence was sent. Pius IX himself stopped the procedure. At the end of the day, when everything had been examined, it was a matter of two slight amendments to be made in the new edition. It was no more than a storm in a teacup but for Don Bosco it was a very grievous blow. The humble prayer that had supported him during his days of suffering was transformed into acts of thanksgiving to Our Lady as soon as all was at peace again.

This nightmare, which lasted four months, was nothing compared to another persecution that dragged on for fully ten years. This is not the place for bitter words and the nature of this work precludes any polemics. History will tell the tale and indeed has already begun to do so. The heroism of Don Bosco's holiness shines out during those ten years. For us it would be a grave omission, in speaking of Don Bosco's union with God in time of tribulation, were we to pass over in silence the greatest tribulation of all and the

one that caused him the most pain. We have on one hand Don Bosco who sought by every means to smooth over the differences, and on the other hand people who seemed to try to multiply the incidents and make matters worse.

Ten years is a long time to suffer such painful disagreement, enough to try the patience of Job. And yet our good father, whenever he felt compelled to speak about these distressing events, was always meek. Only once, in a letter to Cardinal Nino, did he express his own wishes or make any lament:

I have never sought, and will never seek, anything other than peace and tranquillity, in order to be able to work in the sacred ministry on behalf of souls exposed to so many dangers.

For Don Bosco, only souls mattered. The rest, his good name, his reputation, related interests, all counted for nothing. In such bitter suffering, what did he do? He did what the saints do: The Psalm says, "*Before God I pour out my complaint, lay bare my distress*" (cf. Ps 142:3), and the apostle says, *endure in affliction, persevere in prayer* (cf. Rom 12:12).

In the acts of the process of his beatification we come across a few lines in which that unfortunate period is defined as "the crucible which purified the gold of his virtue from all worldly dross, rendering it resplendent especially for his spirit of faith and union with God." Concerning the authors of his tribulations, Don Rua gave this testimony:

I know that he was not content with forgiving them. He prayed for them and got others to pray for them.

One thing Don Bosco never prayed for was relief from the physical illnesses that he suffered, although he did allow others to pray for him as an act of charity. Physical sufferings accepted with such perfect conformity to God's will constitute a great act of love for God and of voluntary penance. And we really should see to what an extent Don Bosco suffered! The ailments that afflicted him all through his life were many and serious. It is no exaggeration to say that his body never got relief. He began spitting blood just after his ordination and this recurred periodically during his life. From 1843 on, he suffered a burning sensation in his eyes and eventually he lost the sight of his right eye. In 1846 he developed swelling in his legs and feet, which got worse as the years went by. He had to wear elastic stockings. Those who helped him in his latter years to put on or take off his shoes and socks testified that his skin had become loose and flabby to the point where it covered the top of his shoes. He used to refer to this swelling as his

daily cross. He suffered from headaches so severe that it seemed his skull was enlarged, terrible neuralgia which caused serious pain in his gums for weeks on end, indigestion, and heart palpitations so severe that it seemed a rib would give way under the pressure.

During the last fifteen years of his life he often had fever accompanied by a rash on his skin. He developed a fleshy growth the size of a nut on the sacrum, and we can only imagine the pain this caused him when he sat on a chair or lay on his bed. He never mentioned this to anyone, for reasons we can easily guess, not even to the doctor. It could easily have been removed with a small incision, as in fact was done during his final illness. When people noticed his difficulty in remaining seated, he would simply say, "I am better standing or walking. I get tired sitting."

There was another cross of which some were vaguely aware, but no one knew the extent of it until after his death. In 1845 there was an epidemic of *petechiae*⁴⁵ in the Cottolengo hospital. Don Bosco, a frequent visitor, caught the disease and traces of it remained in his system till the end of his life. The undertaker who prepared his corpse was faced with a pitiful sight: a kind of herpes all over his body, especially on the shoulders. A more painful hair shirt it would be hard to imagine!

In the last five years of his life, his backbone was so weak that he went around painfully bent over under the weight of so many crosses, supported by the strong arms of his sons who loved him greatly.

A renowned French doctor, who visited Don Bosco during an illness he suffered in Marseilles in 1880, said that his body was like an old worn-out garment that had been used day and night, beyond repair and fit only to be conserved as it was. Another doctor, the one who took regular care of him, wrote that after about 1880, Don Bosco's entire organism was reduced to a "walking pathology cupboard."⁴⁶

Despite all these illnesses, there was never a complaint, never the least sign of impatience. Indeed, whether he was working at his desk, hearing confessions for long hours, preaching or travelling, he seemed like one in perfect health, always in good humour, cheerful in appearance, and encouraging in his words. When it was suggested to him that he should pray and ask the Lord to relieve his pain, he answered, "If I knew that one short prayer was enough to have me cured, I would not say it." Don Bosco looked on his sufferings as sent by God and loved them all the more, the greater their number and severity.

⁴⁵ Petechiae are small red spots on the skin due to a ruptured blood vessel, sometimes caused by typhoid.

⁴⁶ Albertotti, Dott. Giovanni, *Chi era Don Bosco*. Genova, Fratelli Pala 1934, p. 83.

This fact alone reveals a depth of interior life that is almost beyond belief, if we did not know how admirable God is in his saints (*cf. Ps 67:3-6*) It prompts us to recall the well founded teaching of Taulero⁴⁷ who says, "Of all the prayers offered by Jesus during his life on earth, the highest and most excellent is that raised to the Father when he said: *Father, not my will but yours be done*" (*cf. Lk 22:42*). This is the prayer which gives most glory to the Father and is most acceptable to Him, the prayer which is of most benefit to people and most terrible to demons. It is thanks to this resignation of the human will of Jesus that we all, with God's help, are saved. This is why the greatest and most perfect delight of truly humble souls lies in doing God's will with the utmost exactness." And this is the prayer that Don Bosco prayed to perfection during the whole troubled course of his life.

⁴⁷ *Institutiones*, 13.

9

Disappointments of Various Kinds

People of action face two serious dangers: they are those indicated by Jesus to Martha, who was *burdened with much serving and anxious and worried about many things*, (cf. Lk 10:41-42) two difficulties that can easily be found in those who are forced to divide their activity among many things. To avoid falling into this mistake, we need the *one thing necessary* that Mary chose, and that is not to lose sight of the Lord. A ship laden with cargo rides the waves safely as long as its centre of gravity is in the right place. It has not only balance and stability, but also, one might say, the power to regain stability every time it is thrown off balance by the stormy sea. The centre of gravity of an active life is precisely this union with God, which prevents loss of balance or quickly restores it if lost.

How many waves strike our poor ship without warning! To remain calm without the least sign of upset during all these disappointments is a rare privilege. It is granted only to those who are so united to the Lord that they are literally *one spirit with him*, as Paul says (cf. 1 Cor 6:17). That Don Bosco was one of these privileged souls can be seen from his words and actions in the face of the many unforeseen and troublesome misfortunes which seriously inconvenienced him, yet without ever upsetting his customary peace and calm. This is possible only for one who is ever and always in touch with the God at the centre of his being.

Don Bosco suffered many grave disappointments as a result of various disasters that occurred in his building enterprises. One night in 1852 a good part of a building under construction collapsed, a building that had been erected with God alone knows how many sacrifices. The boys, wakened abruptly, ran from the dormitories and met Don Bosco who gathered them around himself, and led them into the church to thank God and Our Lady

who had saved them from greater harm. A few hours later, during recreation time, what was left of the building collapsed, pillars and all, into a heap of masonry. At this new disaster, which destroyed in a brief moment so much hard work and so many hopes, Don Bosco was shocked but stayed serene, and he joked: "We were playing with bricks!" Then, with complete peace and like a true father he added,

God's will be done. Blessed be the name of the Lord. We accept everything from the Lord's hand. He will take account of our resignation. Indeed, let us thank God and the Blessed Virgin that in all the painful happenings that afflict mankind, we have always found a gracious hand to lessen our misfortune.

A letter he wrote three days later reveals how much he suffered and at the same time the holy peace that reigned in his soul:

I have had a disaster: the building under construction is almost completely ruined, just as it was at the roof. Only three were seriously hurt and nobody killed, but there was such consternation that it was almost enough to send poor Don Bosco to the next life. *Sic placuit Deo* - it was God's will.

About midnight one night in 1861 a tremendous noise shook the Oratory to its foundations. A bolt of lightning struck Don Bosco's room, scattered everything in it and left Don Bosco himself half unconscious. His first thought was for the boys who were sleeping on the floor above him and he entrusted them fervently to Our Lady's protection. And they certainly needed it! The electrical storm had also hit there and filled the boys with such terror that the panic threatened to do more harm than the lightning had done.

There was bedlam, screaming everywhere, noise and darkness. Then Don Bosco appeared among the rubble, lantern in hand, calm and smiling as always. "Don't be afraid," he said in a reassuring voice, "We have a loving Father in heaven and a good Mother who takes care of us." In God's good time the confusion ceased. Don Bosco, once he had made sure that everyone was safe, said a loud *Deo gratias* that came straight from the heart, and then continued, "Let us thank the Lord and his most holy Mother! They have saved us from grave danger. What if the house had caught fire! Who would have been saved?" He had nothing else to say there and then but he got them all to kneel down on the spot before an image of Mary and they recited the Litany of Our Lady of Loreto. Later some of the clerics went to visit him to see whether he had suffered injury. This was the third time lightning had threatened him, and this time he had a narrower escape than on the other two occasions. However, he limited himself to saying, "This is one of the greatest graces we have received through Our Lady. Let

us thank her from our hearts." Later investigations showed that they were within a hair's breadth of a complete disaster.

Someone suggested a lightning conductor. "Yes," said Don Bosco, "we will put a statue of Our Lady up there. Mary shielded us so well from the lightning that it would be utter ingratitude to put our trust in any other protection." A small statue of the Blessed Virgin, true protectress of the Oratory, is there to this day, testament to the filial devotion Don Bosco had to the powerful Queen of Heaven.

Before that year was out, the collapse of a large underground vault in a nearby factory caused consternation for many people. Don Bosco restored calm among his boys and commented, without any trace of agitation, "The devil has put his tail into things again, but don't be afraid, let's carry on."

We see the same abandonment into God's hands in the face of a similar disappointment when he was already an old man. Twenty-four years later, during the farewell dinner for a band of missionaries, a fire broke out in the bookbinding shop. The luggage of the departing missionaries was close by. You can imagine the consternation! The whole house was in turmoil but Don Bosco did not move from the refectory - not that he didn't care - but remained there silent and recollected. Every now and then he enquired if anybody had been injured and on being assured to the contrary, he resumed his recollection. When they told him that the damage would come to a hundred thousand lire, he exclaimed, "That is serious! But the Lord has given, the Lord has taken away. He is the Master."

Don Bosco used to quote St Teresa's "*Let nothing disturb you*" when he was giving out appointments, to prepare people for any unpleasant surprises. He also applied it to himself when things went wrong. Little things may not cause serious problems but they can upset those who are not in the habit of remembering always that not one leaf falls without God willing it. This imperturbability is all the more rare at times when things go wrong and it would seem more natural to get excited and upset. The ability to remain invariably serene and loving is the prerogative of those who are completely immersed in God. Who, for example, has never had the misfortune to miss a train when travelling? It is only a small thing but very often it can reveal the kind of person one is.

One day Don Bosco got out of the train at Asti for a brief moment's business at the station and did not get back in time to catch the coach that was to bring him to Montemagno, with the result that he had to wait some hours. He did not get upset. Instead he got into conversation with a group of boys, and encouraged them to go to confession there and then in

a nearby hotel. On another occasion he missed the train from Trofarello to Villastellone and, without thinking twice about it, he took a sheaf of papers from his pocket and set out on foot, correcting the papers as he went along. When he got to his destination, he said to his companion,

It really is true that misfortunes can sometimes prove useful! Even if I had been at home I would not have been able to get through as much work as I have done, thanks to this mishap.

One morning he had to go by train to a place not far from Turin. He had decided to celebrate Mass there. On coming out of his room he met a cleric who wanted to say a few words in his ear. Don Bosco stopped and listened attentively. As he was going downstairs he met another cleric wanting to speak to him. Again he stopped and listened. At the bottom of the stairs a third one was waiting for him. Calm as ever Don Bosco stopped to speak to him. As he went out the door a group of priests and clerics surrounded him. Don Bosco attended to each one of them. Eventually he crossed the yard and was just about to go out the gate when he heard the voice of a young boy who was running after him shouting. Don Bosco stopped, turned round and answered his questions. Trains don't wait however, and he got to the station just in time to hear the whistle as the train departed. Don Bosco simply turned round, went to celebrate Mass in a nearby church, and came back to catch a later train.

For a superior to be as kind and loving as we have just seen, needs constant communication with God, according to St Bonaventure.⁴⁸ Only He who is infinitely kind can infuse in the soul that goodness which enables one to be all things to all. The greatest difficulties came to Don Bosco from men: from those of humble rank, from important people and from the authorities. One such humble person was the Salesian Brother who asked to go to America and was sent to Santa Cruz in Argentina. When he got there he found life too difficult, left the house and went to work on a farm belonging to one of the settlers. News of this reached Don Bosco who was very upset and gave orders for him to return to Italy. When someone mentioned the heavy expense involved he replied calmly and resolutely, "Don't worry about expense when it is a question of saving a soul."

Another was the good cook at the Oratory. One evening Don Bosco was hearing confessions and came late for supper. The cook sent up a plate of overcooked rice that had gone cold. The one who was serving knew from experience that Don Bosco would have said nothing but he did not

⁴⁸ L.c., VII, 2: *Devotio pium et affectuosum facit* (Prayer makes him kind and loving) speaking of the sixth wing of the superior, which is prayer.

have the heart to present him with a dish of leftovers, so he went to the cook and rebuked him, "You give this stuff to Don Bosco?" But the poor cook was beside himself with rage and said, "Who is Don Bosco? He's just like anybody else!" The server, either through annoyance or perhaps to make sure he would not be blamed, repeated those foolish words to Don Bosco exactly as they had been spoken. Don Bosco took a spoonful of rice and raised it to his mouth saying laughingly, "The cook is perfectly right!"

Another was the refectorian who was admonished by Don Bosco himself because he had not changed a dirty tablecloth in time. He did not accept the reproof but wrote a letter in which he went so far as to say that this was the first time he had seen Don Bosco with such a serious face. Far from taking offence, Don Bosco called him and, referring to the unfortunate phrase which by this time had done the rounds of the oratory, said with kindness: "Don't you know that Don Bosco is human like everyone else?" From St Paul to our own times, every man who is truly of God has seen himself as the servant of all, of the foolish no less than the wise (cf. Rom 1:14). And to return to St Bonaventure, it is conversation with God that makes the soul of the superior humble: *devotio cor humiliat* (prayer makes the heart humble).⁴⁹

Abbot Amadeus Peyron, eminent philologist and orientalist, professor at the Regia University in Turin, was considered a very important person. On one occasion he was presiding at a meeting of priests on matters concerning priestly ministry. The discussion came round to the need for educational publications suitable for the ordinary people. Don Bosco took the ball on the hop and mentioned his *Letture Cattoliche*. A pity he spoke! It was as if the abbot was waiting for his opportunity. He launched a scathing attack on the *Letture*, criticising the language in them as poor in both grammar and style. The man's position, the fury of his onslaught, and the sarcasm of his words left the entire audience aghast.

Among that audience was the Servant of God, Leonard Murialdo.⁵⁰ He was mortified at the embarrassment caused to his friend and he was also aware that many of those present had little sympathy for Don Bosco. He waited anxiously to see how Don Bosco would react. He knew very well how sensitive writers can be to criticism of their work, and especially when they are attacked in public. When the storm ended, Don Bosco had this to say,

I am here precisely to receive help and advice. Please tell me what you think needs to be corrected and I will gladly correct it. Indeed, I would be very happy

⁴⁹ *L.c.*, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Now St Leonard Murialdo

if others, who are better writers than I am, would revise each pamphlet.

Murialdo was able to relax. Later in 1896, recalling that dramatic episode, he said that he realised from that time that Don Bosco was a saint. He had his problems also with other notable priests, not so much due to any malice on their part as to their preconceived ideas. Don Bosco had to endure some very difficult meetings, but he did so with total detachment from self and complete peace of mind. These are the fruit of uninterrupted contact with God. Wherever the Lord is, there is no commotion (cf. 1 Kgs 19:12). In a well known city outside Italy, where he had recently opened a college, Don Bosco went to visit an important religious institute. After a long delay in the waiting room, he was accorded a welcome that can only be described as icy. As soon as they crossed the threshold his companion was about to complain, but Don Bosco said, "Don't worry, don't worry. They will feel worse than we do at the way they have treated us." Then, without the slightest sign of upset, he went on to discuss more important matters.

In the same city, during one of Don Bosco's visits to the college, the local Parish Priest, although he was a good man, attacked Don Bosco with some very violent language and went on at great length. It was one of those impulsive outbursts which are not all that rare even in well intentioned people. Don Bosco waited until the storm had abated, bowed his head slightly as if asking permission to speak, and said, "Father, you are right to complain. I am sorry I was not able to meet your wishes fully. You are our benefactor and I remember with gratitude the kindness you have shown us. We will always do all in our power to help you. I have not long to live but I have left it in my will for my successor to pray for you." Every word of Don Bosco fell like a gentle soothing balm on the angry mind of his proud assailant who finally begged forgiveness and they became friends as before.

Something has to be said about the newspapers! You could build a fine monument with all the bricks that were hurled at the Oratory and at Don Bosco from various publications of every persuasion. I myself have a very painful memory, one I shall never forget. As a child, the first time I heard the name of Don Bosco was from a small piece in a hostile newspaper. It contained an ugly caricature with a vile caption mocking, in an incredible way, the work he was doing for poor and abandoned youth. But, let the dead bury the dead. Even when they were alive, Don Bosco let them talk. He did not permit any revenge, retaliation or rancour towards his denigrators, happy to allow his works to speak on his behalf. When snide remarks appeared in the newspapers, he would raise his eyes and his hands to heaven and say something like,

Ah! Patience! This also will pass. They have a go at Don Bosco who is only trying to do good. Are we to let them lose their souls? They are attacking the work of God without knowing it. He knows best how to foil their plot.

The unfavourable attitude of some of the authorities hurt Don Bosco more than the foolish talk of the newspapers. By his own admission he had a fiery temperament and he found it difficult to put up with opposition. He sought only the glory of God but he underwent some bitter moments when he found the way blocked by the representatives of various authorities. And yet in such circumstances, he was the most conciliatory and peaceful man in the world, thanks to the power of grace.

During periods of public unrest the State authorities, at the instigation of the sects, often came down suddenly and heavily on Don Bosco. He often succeeded in winning over even those who were most opposed to him. Before getting into dispute with them, he used to turn to God in prayer and he experienced for himself the power of prayer in moving the hearts of the most powerful. "By this means," he used to say, "you can obtain what you want, if it is for the best, and we should ask for this especially for those who have neither love nor respect for us. God will touch their hearts so that they will react favourably to our proposal." Here we see the source of his generous zeal in difficult and disconcerting circumstances.

In 1862 they tried to force him to close the school at the Oratory. The regional inspector of schools granted him an audience after keeping him waiting for two hours. He received him, sitting in his comfortable armchair, while Don Bosco was left standing in front of him. Before Don Bosco could open his mouth, the official let out a torrent of evil words against priests and friars, against the Pope and against Don Bosco, against his schools and his books. Don Bosco stood there calm and motionless, without making any attempt to defend himself, to the point where the official thought he was dealing with someone incapable of understanding.

Then Don Bosco spoke. In a gentle serious tone he first asked him to realise that what had been said so far had absolutely nothing to do with the reason for his visit, and he went on to explain why he had come. The inspector had never before dealt with anyone like Don Bosco. He could not believe his eyes or ears. He felt within him a growing esteem and affection for the man he had vilified a few minutes previously. He was totally changed and now treated Don Bosco with kindness, like a friend or protector. Not for the first time Don Bosco could make his own, with due modifications, the words of Nehemiah. *I prayed to the God of heaven and*

then answered the king... The king granted my requests, for the favouring hand of my God was upon me (cf. Neh 2:4-8).

The spirit of prayer which the Servant of God Contardo Ferrini calls "a feast of holy thoughts" has indeed this quality that it arouses in the mind holy and joyful thoughts, even in circumstances which are in themselves troublesome and disconcerting. What a burden it must have been for Don Bosco, "faithful and prudent servant of the Church" as Pius XI later called him, when he found himself in difficulty with the ecclesiastical authorities. And what mental skill he exercised in seeking to reconcile his duties as a subject and his rights in justice. He sought from God the solution to insoluble problems.

There is a document in the archives which contains this brief note in different handwriting: "Poor Don Bosco! If God had not been with him, he would not have survived." It concerns an official report drawn up and sent by an excellent Monsignor in the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Religious, the official appointed by the Holy See to deal with the Piedmontese Government. It describes the life of Don Bosco's clerics in such negative terms that it was bound to delay the much desired approval of the Salesian Society. The good prelate judged the situation as someone who knew nothing of Don Bosco and his spirit, using outdated criteria and methods which in their over-simplification went completely contrary to all traditional pedagogical ideas. When Don Bosco got to know of the report, he sensed the disastrous consequences it could have, but in informing the Chapter of the Society of the matter he spoke in polite terms of the author. He even welcomed him repeatedly to the Oratory with a sincere display of respect and when the opportunity came to do the man a good turn, he did it generously and magnanimously.

The negotiations for the approval of the society forced Don Bosco to swallow far more bitter pills. He had recommendations from individual bishops but it would have helped if he had had a collective recommendation from the Ordinaries of the Turin Ecclesiastical Province. The opportune moment came when Archbishop Riccardi called together the Suffragan Bishops before the Vatican Council. Don Bosco presented his request very humbly, to be read at the assembly, in which he had many supporters. He had no reason to doubt that the outcome would be favourable. Alas, however, some prior interventions served to muddy the waters. He had to suffer the let-down of a reply that was worded very courteously but was equally evasive in content. Bitterly disenchanted, he merely said, "Patience! May it all be for the love of God and the Blessed Virgin."

On one of his visits to Rome for this business of the approval, a very unpleasant surprise awaited him, right on the eve of his departure. He received support from people of Rome of every class. As he paid his farewell visit to the Vitelleschi family, lo and behold the arrival of Cardinal Altieri was announced. Don Bosco had not had time to visit him and the eminent Cardinal was quite put out by this. When Don Bosco approached him to greet him, he answered with a cold *buon giorno*, and in the conversation that followed - in a house where Don Bosco was held in the highest esteem - not one compliment, not a word or look, was granted him. His illustrious hosts were on edge and remained ill at ease, knowing the inflexible character of the Cardinal. The one most at peace was Don Bosco. "It's nothing," he said. "By tomorrow everything will be all right." In fact, the following day, after recommending himself to the Lord, he requested an audience during which every cloud was lifted and he was able to give tangible proof that he was at peace again with the Cardinal.

Since we are dealing with misunderstandings with the hierarchy, why don't we go the whole way right to the top? Don Bosco had a misunderstanding even with His Holiness Pope Pius IX. On one occasion, taking advantage of the favour he enjoyed in the Vatican, he agreed to recommend a Piedmontese lawyer, later Senator, Tancredi Canonico for a private audience with the Pope. This man was one of the followers of the fanatical Polish visionary Towianski, forerunner of the modernists, something Don Bosco was completely unaware of. When he arrived in the presence of the Holy Father, he proceeded to air his views, totally forgetful of where he was and with whom he had the honour of speaking. The Pope interrupted him indignantly and signalled to him to leave. Before he left however, he placed on the table a book he had written in which were contained all the things he knew he would not be able to say directly. Don Bosco was sent for immediately after the audience and the Pope said to him, "Either this man is a great rogue or Don Bosco is very naïve." Don Bosco smiled. Pius IX noticed this and asked him, "Why did you bring this man here? And now you are laughing at my indignation!" Don Bosco answered, humbly and calmly, "I am laughing because it is the indignation of a loving father." He explained how it had happened and was happy to see that even the Vicar of Christ smiled at his honest words.

One day Don Bosco wrote to one of his Salesians to comfort him in some misfortune. "Cheer up! Courage, and let us pray for each other!" For Don Bosco, prayer was the secret of his calmness and peace of mind in the midst of affliction, as the inspired word of the Apostle James teaches (cf. Jas 5:13).

10

Confessor

Intimate union with God, when it really exists, ensures that a priest not only knows but also feels that he is a sacred person. He never loses sight of his sacred character, no matter what he may do or say, in public or in private, directly or indirectly, when dealing with people of any level, class or condition. The priestly spirit fills the whole of his life. He irradiates a supernatural influence that heals and purifies souls, strengthens them in doing good and raises them to heavenly things. The human nature of Jesus, hypostatically united to his divinity, was an instrument of marvellous works. Similarly, in the priest who has a strong interior life, there is no word or action that does not carry the priestly imprint and does not do good to souls, to the point where it can be said also of him "power came forth from him and healed them all" (cf. Lk 6:19). We will see this now as we examine the work of Don Bosco in the confessional, in the pulpit, in the printed word and as an educator.

Regarding Confession, his way of administering the sacrament cannot be fully understood unless we take into consideration his personal practice of the sacrament as well as his ordinary teaching.

Don Bosco came to love confession even at a tender age and nothing in his later life weakened that love or altered the frequency with which he went to confession. As a child he went very willingly of his own accord, even when his mother was not there to bring him. He went very often, much more than was customary at the time, especially among young people, not to mention children and people in rural areas.

As a student in Chieri, when he was completely free to be himself, he thought immediately of looking for a permanent confessor. Even though he was a young student of poor background and simple ways, his confes-

sor was impressed by his diligence and foretold great things of him. As a cleric in the seminary he was distinguished immediately for his regularity and punctuality in going weekly to the sacrament of Penance. As a priest in Turin he went every week to Blessed (now Saint) Joseph Cafasso. When Cafasso died, Don Bosco chose a holy priest who had been his fellow student. This priest came every Monday to hear Don Bosco's confession in the sacristy of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians and then he in turn made his confession to Don Bosco.

When he was travelling or when his usual confessor was absent, he remained faithful to his practice, going to a Salesian or to some other priest, depending on the occasion. For example when he spent a few months in Rome in 1867, he went to confession every week to Fr Vasco, a Jesuit whom he had known in Turin. His own sons hesitated at first to hear his confession, but he would say, "Come on! Do an act of charity for Don Bosco and let him make his confession."

His manner of going to confession was also noteworthy. We have already made some mention of it and will speak further of it here. He did not choose a secluded place or an unusual hour but went rather in full view of all. Young people and others had a chance to see, during his preparation and thanksgiving, the importance and holiness he attached to what he was doing. To practise frequent confession with such strong and persevering love is in itself a vigilant and uninterrupted custody of the heart. It removes continually every little obstacle to the working of the Holy Spirit and allows the soul to be filled with his heavenly gifts.

Don Bosco's own personal practice in relation to confession was reflected in his teaching, both oral and written, on the subject. An aspect particularly characteristic of Don Bosco was his outstanding ability not just to encourage confession but to instil a love for it, especially among the young, who were the special object of his God-given mission.

Don Bosco's writings on confession are original, not in what he says, but in his apostolic fervour in leading others to love the sacrament he himself loved so much. In his *Life of Michael Magone* there is a digression in which he addresses himself with priestly zeal to young people to urge them to have confidence in the father of their souls. He also addresses priests who hear the confessions of young people, to exhort them to show fatherly kindness in the exercise of their ministry.

In a memoir addressed to the Salesians he says that a priest, when requested to hear confessions, should do so cheerfully. No priest should ever

display rudeness or impatience. The young should be received with great kindness and affability. They should never be scolded nor should the priest ever express surprise at their ignorance or at the things they confess. In the same note he gives this important rule: "It is very important and helpful for the young that they should never go away from us unhappy."

In the *Companion of Youth* he gives guidelines for going to confession that are so beautiful that anyone who follows them will find great spiritual satisfaction in going to the sacrament. Even someone who is no longer young will find in those simple kind words a sense of abandonment and trust, and be led to approach confession with the fervour and simplicity of his earlier years. Confession has a place of honour in the regulations for the Oratory and other Institutes, and in the rules of the Sodalities. It is presented always in a gentle and appealing manner.

As in his writings, so also in the spoken word. His main biographer states that "every phrase of Don Bosco was an encouragement to confession." We can overlook the exaggeration that suggests that every phrase had this intention, and yet it would be greatly desired if every overstatement had as much basis in reality as this one. There is no doubt about the efficacy of his encouragement to go to confession: the facts speak for themselves. We have so many of these facts, in such varied circumstances, that anyone reading them is bound to be amazed and to marvel at the wonders of divine grace in the work of salvation.

When Don Bosco invited people to go to confession, the thought of returning to God took hold of their minds so irresistibly that they responded immediately by opening their consciences to him. This was true of his young people and of strangers, of workers and professional people, ordinary people and high ranking personalities, good people and evildoers alike. Don Bosco's conquests in this field are beyond counting. This ability he had to find a way to people's hearts and to lead them to do something which is hard in itself, and very hard for some people, would not have been possible if he had not had great faith in the sacrament of Penance and great apostolic zeal. It demanded also something else, the basis of all the rest - a secret which Don Bosco himself let slip on one occasion.

In 1862 a good priest from Osimo asked Don Bosco what was his secret for winning souls and he answered, "I don't know. If that good priest loves God, he will succeed far better than I do."

We find in Chautard's book⁵¹ a fine comment which is worth quoting:

⁵¹ Op.cit. p. 161.

Between natural goodness, which is the fruit of one's temperament, and the supernatural goodness of the heart of an apostle, there is the difference between the human and the divine. The former may give rise to respect and even a liking for the apostolic worker, diverting towards the creature a love that is due to God alone. It can never lead souls to make the sacrifice required to return to their Creator. Only the goodness which comes from union with Jesus can obtain such an effect.

If Don Bosco did this in isolated encounters, we can imagine how he made use of the opportunities to give religious instruction or preach the Word of God. In catechism classes he kept on going back to the beginning and insisting on the dispositions necessary to receive the benefits of the sacrament of Penance. He showed by his own manner the goodness of the Lord in instituting the sacrament and the benefits it brings to the soul. For Don Bosco, love of the sacraments of confession and communion was the key to preserving one's innocence and recovering from earlier falls.

Rarely did Don Bosco speak to his boys or to staff or preach to any kind of audience without touching on the topic of confession, in season and out of season. Did he run the risk of upsetting his listeners or striking a wrong note? No! When someone speaks with faith and love, he speaks as one inspired and brings his audience with him. Indeed, Cardinal Cagliero, who heard him hundreds of times, gave testimony that on this, his favourite topic, Don Bosco "spoke always in a fresh and attractive manner." And as for striking a jarring note - never! It did not matter who he was speaking to or what kind of audience he had before him, Don Bosco saw only souls. This awakened two sentiments in him, one a desire and the other fear. His desire was to lead all to heaven and his fear was that some might be on the way to hell. These two sentiments, harmonised in the love of God which was the sole motive of his words and actions, set the tone for all his talks. His sermons covered a great variety of themes, among which the most common and the one most often repeated was precisely a reminder of the sacrament of mercy.

The love of God which inflamed the heart of Don Bosco can be seen in what he wrote and said about confession, but it shines forth clearest of all in the way he administered the sacrament.

Huysmans, the great convert, says that for the likes of him who "need to pour out their whole lives in one go at the feet of a priest, it would be a great advantage to be comforted and helped in the way Don Bosco

comforted and helped his penitents."⁵² And he adds, "His way of hearing confession recalls the infinite mercy of Jesus." Just to watch him as he exercised his holy ministry aroused reverence and love for the sacrament in those who saw him.

With that great reverence for the things of God that he possessed, he used to approach the place where he was to hear confessions holding his biretta on his breast rather than wearing it on his head. He did not sit down without first praying and making a reverent sign of the cross. Usually he heard confessions seated on an armchair between two kneelers. His posture was what you would expect of one who represented God, dignified and loving. Knees together, his feet resting on the footstool, body straight, head slightly bowed, the appearance of a man absorbed in God's work and totally penetrated by God's Spirit. In welcoming penitents he did not look them in the face nor did he show that he wanted to recognise them. With his elbow on the kneeler, his ear close to the penitent's mouth and his hand cupped to shelter it, he listened carefully and with kindness. His appearance remained unaltered throughout.

What passed between him and the penitents we will never know, except what we are told by those who had the good fortune to have him as their confessor. One of these, and a very authoritative one, is none other than Cardinal Cagliero, who went to confession to Don Bosco for more than thirty years. He said, during the process of beatification and elsewhere,

His kindness was exceptional, towards young people and adults alike. Almost all of us went to confession to him, attracted by his kindness and his charity, his gentleness and patience. He was brief but without hurry. He was extremely kind and never severe. He gave a brief penance, always appropriate to our age and always beneficial. He knew how to be little with the little ones, and his advice was always appropriate. His recommendations were seasoned with such sweetness that he inculcated in us a love for virtue and a horror for sin. There was an angelic atmosphere that seemed to hang over him and his words.

It was common knowledge that people were often seen coming to him very dispirited and going away radiant with consolation, as if filled with trust in God's infinite mercy. His manner of hearing confession inspired such confidence in those who experienced it that they never forgot it. Sometimes his penitents, meeting him after several years, spontaneously manifested the state of their souls to him and told him how long it was since they had been to confession. At other times, he asked them with af-

⁵² Loc.cit. pp. 136-7.

fection and sincerity and they responded to his concern. It often happened that people heard that he was going to be in a certain place and they travelled from afar to be able to go to confession to him once again.

We cannot leave the topic of his manner of hearing confession without two further observations, which will help us to probe better the depth of his interior life.

First of all, when hearing confessions he was totally removed from the things of this world. It is true that he had important matters to deal with, often serious ones, which would have taken up all the attention of someone engaged in so much work. Yet when asked to hear confession, even in the midst of such difficult matters, he was always willing and never asked the penitent to return later or to go to another priest. He just put aside every worldly concern and placed himself humbly at the service of that soul. When the time for confessions came he detached himself immediately from everybody and from everything. Nothing else was more important at that time. This happened every Saturday evening, on the eve of feasts and every morning before and during the community Mass. He remained in the confessional for several hours on end, completely concentrated on his ministry, without any impression of being bored, never leaving his ministry for human reasons. He did not leave even when exceptional circumstances seemed to suggest that he should. There is no discussion: for the saints, human affairs never take precedence over heavenly interests.

It happened one Sunday morning that Marquis Patrizi, a most distinguished Roman visitor, called to the Oratory. Some of the superiors welcomed him as best they could while Don Bosco was hearing the confessions of the day boys. When told of the visitor he said, "All right. Tell him that I am happy he has come and to wait a moment until I have finished hearing the confessions of these poor boys who want to go to Communion." That moment lasted an hour and a half!

The second observation refers to the patience with which he endured every discomfort, every annoyance or suffering, when hearing confessions. He also endured tiredness. After days of hard work he remained there for as long as the penitents came, almost as if he felt no need of rest. He was immune to changes of temperature. At a time when there was no heating of any kind, he put up with the rigours of a Turin winter even until ten or eleven at night.

In Liguria he put up with the attacks of the mosquitoes. He suffered their bites to the point where his face and hands were all marked. And

there was more than that! The poor boys of the Oratory at that time often came bearing more than their sins, so that after a period of confessions Don Bosco would find himself infested with various tiny creatures of different species. He was warned in advance of their existence and knew what would happen, but he ignored the threat, always intent on caring for those poor souls.

Then there were the confessions of the prisoners. The prisons of those days were a lot worse than those of today as far as tidiness and decency were concerned. Don Bosco was a man of exceptional delicacy but in that unwholesome environment he seemed to have neither sight nor smell. He went to heal the spiritual ills of those poor unfortunate ones and had no time to worry about what was repugnant to his senses. After what we have just said, we must recall the words of Pius X, in his encyclical of 11 June 1905 to the Bishops of Italy, when he stated categorically that without the help of an interior life, it is impossible to endure with perseverance the difficulties that are inseparable from any apostolate.

11 Preacher

The intimacy with God which inspired Don Bosco the confessor was equally evident in his preaching. Don Bosco's words from the pulpit were never intended to boost his own ego but were always filled with the breath of God.

Sadly, the tendency to show off is a great temptation for those who speak the word of God. It creeps in slowly and subtly by way of the cleverness of the ideas, the originality of the images, the erudite expressions, the elegance of style, even the tone of voice and the manner of one's gestures. The adulation that follows then, under pretext of courtesy, does the rest, for anyone who is foolish enough to believe it. Unfortunately, when pride takes hold of a preacher it is very hard to let go of it. Despite precautions, it comes out at every opportunity, distracting the more superficial from the serious thoughts that the word of God should inspire, and upsetting more serious listeners. It is precisely that adulterating the word of God (cf. 2 Cor 2:17) that St Paul speaks of which renders it sterile to a greater or lesser extent.

Even Don Bosco was not beyond such temptations in his early preaching, and he does not hide the fact. His sharp intelligence, serious study, retentive memory and the spirit of the time all pushed him in that direction. However, his love for God soon got the better of the devil of his own ego.

Don Bosco prepared humbly for the task of preaching and, indeed, he advised beginners that the sermon which produces good fruit is one that has been well studied and prepared. He began with humble prayer. When he was in Turin he went to confession regularly every week, but during his hard apostolic work he used to go more often. He never suffered from scruples but he had recourse to the sacrament of Penance solely in order

that he might be a less unworthy instrument of divine grace for the souls of others. And so, wherever he went to preach the word of God, and he preached a lot in many different places both in Italy and beyond. He went as an authentic minister of the Lord, sent to give the people knowledge of salvation (cf. Lk 1:77).

At his first Mass, Don Bosco had asked fervently for the grace of efficacy of the word, that is to say the power of persuasion in order to do good for souls. His prayer was answered to such an extent that he could hardly have wished for more. At the end of his life he was able to write, humbly and truthfully, "I think the Lord heard my humble prayer."

His sermons went from introduction to pleading with no break, no flights of imagination, hardly any gestures, at a rather slow pace, in monotonous style, using the language of the ordinary people, often indeed in plain Piedmontese dialect. There were times when his sermons went beyond the usual length, sometimes reaching unbelievable length. Still, people liked them and listened with pleasure, such was the fervour and genuineness which marked them.

At Saliceto di Mondovì, for example, the people forced him once to preach for six hours on end, with only brief intervals. Remember also that his sermons were on well worn topics: the importance of saving one's soul, man's final destiny, the brevity of life, the uncertainties that surround death, the enormity of sin, lack of final repentance, forgiving injuries, restitution of ill-gotten goods, false shame in confession, intemperance, blasphemy, putting poverty and afflictions to good use, keeping feast days holy, how to pray and the necessity of prayer, frequenting the sacraments, holy Mass, the imitation of Jesus Christ, devotion to Mary, and the ease of perseverance. Nevertheless, people stayed to hear him without batting an eyelid, the noble and learned as well as the ordinary people, even priests and bishops. I won't say they were fascinated because that would sound bad, as if it were the effect of some human suggestion. They were captivated by divine ardour, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:32).

How truly can it be said of Don Bosco what the Trappist monks say in their beautiful responsorial for the Feast of St John the Evangelist: "Resting on the Lord's breast, he drank directly from that divine source the saving waters of the gospel, and he spread the grace of the word of God throughout the world."⁵³ All the Evangelists are inspired but how can we deny the particular eloquence of St John, which comes from the heart and

⁵³ *Supra pectus recubens Evangelii fluentia de ipso sacro Dominici pectoris fonte potavit et verbi Dei gratiam in toto terrarum orbe diffundit.*

touches our hearts? And where did he drink if not from that heart on which he laid his head at the Last Supper, and which is always the true source of priestly eloquence? This is the heart which inspires and sanctifies the catholic priest. It is not for nothing that Don Bosco bore the name of the disciple whom Jesus loved.

This detail, which in itself means nothing, reminds us of the reason for Jesus' predilection for John, as given by St Jerome.⁵⁴ This leads us to refer to a testimony on Don Bosco's preaching left us by a young chronicler at the Oratory, who wrote on 29 May 1861:

When we came out of the Church many of us were amazed and we shouted out, 'Oh, what beautiful things Don Bosco said this morning! I could pass the day and the night listening to him! Oh, how I desire that God would grant me the grace, when I become a priest, to be able to make the hearts of the young and of all fall in love with this beautiful virtue in the way Don Bosco does.

Don Bosco had spoken that morning about purity.

One principle idea predominated in Don Bosco's preaching - the necessity of saving one's soul. In this matter we priests are ambassadors of Christ; it is as though God were speaking through us (cf. 2 Cor 20). We are spokesmen for God in the things that concern the salvation of souls. Don Bosco was convinced always that this was his serious duty. He never forgot it, not even in a panegyric which is the kind of preaching in which orators easily lose the run of themselves, and where something original and flowery is expected. That explains why Cafasso had little love for panegyrics. But in those of Don Bosco, the master would have found no reason to reproach his disciple.

Let's take one as an example, a sermon on St Philip that he gave in Alba in 1868. Passing over everything else, he took as his theme what he called the key point on which the saint based the practice of all the other virtues, namely "zeal for the salvation of souls." He described St Philip's apostolate vividly and then, knowing that there was a good number of priests present, he went on to speak clearly and directly to them. He proceeded saying that he had heard the comment that St Philip worked so many wonders for the salvation of young people because he was a saint. And to this hypothesis he replied, "I disagree. Philip worked these wonders because he was a priest who corresponded to the spirit of his vocation." And he went on to insist

⁵⁴ Contra Iovin., 1: Quem fides Christi virginem repererat, virgo permansit, et ideo plus amatur a Domino et recumbit super pectus Iesu (*The one whom Christ found a virgin, remained a virgin, and for this reason was loved more by the Lord and lay upon his breast*).

on the necessity of priests imitating St Philip in gathering children to teach them catechism, to encourage them to go to confession and to hear their confessions. Then, after warning parents, employers and teachers, he went on with apostolic zeal,

What a dreadful situation it is for a priest who arrives before the divine Judge and hears him say - 'Look down at the world: how many souls are walking in the way of iniquity and are on the road to perdition! It is on your account that they find themselves on that evil way. You were not concerned to make your voice heard calling them to duty, you did not seek them out, you did not save them. There are others who through ignorance are falling into one sin after another and now they are heading for hell. Oh how many of them there are! Those souls are crying out for vengeance against you. Now, useless servant, *serve nequam*, give an account of yourself. Give me an account of the precious treasure I entrusted to you, a treasure which cost me my passion, my blood, my death. Your soul will take the place of the soul that is lost through your fault. *Erit anima tua pro anima illius.*

Finally he concludes his sermon exhorting all to trust in God's mercy and grace.

As can be seen, Don Bosco, the preacher, cashed in on the popularity that went with his name and person. Even in the ill-famed panegyrics he did not bother about the opinion of others, but went always to the point. Some religious sisters in a well known monastery in Rome discovered this when they asked him to sing the praises of their patron, a holy martyr. They were longing greatly to hear him, expecting something extraordinary from him. Don Bosco had got word that some noble ladies and gentlemen would be present and launched into his sermon. He began by reminding them that the saint's praises had been sung in that place for more than a hundred years and that little would be gained by repeating things they already knew. He thought it better therefore, if for no other reason than out of love for the truth, to change topic and speak about the necessity of striving for perfection and the salvation of their souls through the sacrament of confession well made.

In this way, without any human respect and with complete disregard for himself, he killed two birds with one stone. He spoke to the sisters of perfection and he reminded the lay people of the importance of saving their souls. He got all of them to examine their consciences with regard to previous confessions. Were the fruits of his sermon lost because of their disappointment? Apparently not, if we can judge by the devout attention with which they listened to him. Anyone who does not realise that the first

rule for the preacher is to forget himself, might find this hard to understand. Blowing one's own trumpet in the pulpit is to be simply a gong booming or a cymbal clashing (cf. 1 Cor 13:1). But from the mouth of one who preaches Jesus Christ, comes that word of God which is something alive and active; it cuts like any double-edged sword penetrating into the very heart of a human person (cf. Heb 4:12).

There was one occasion, the only one in his life, when a little literary exhibition in religious matters might have seemed not only permissible but even advisable, especially since he was well capable of it. After all, had he not spent ten years, day and night, even outside of school, reading and enjoying the classics? This was not by any means insignificant. The incident deserves to be known.

In 1874 some Roman friends of his had him enrolled in the *Arcadia Academy*.⁵⁵ Two years later, the Academy invited him to give the customary lecture on the Passion of Our Lord held each year on Good Friday. There were circumstances which Don Bosco could not ignore, nor did he pretend to ignore them: the literary style of the *Arcadia*; the more secular tradition of assigning the lecture to people outstanding in the world of literature (Monti and Leopardi were among previous speakers); the fact that the rest of the programme was of a literary nature; the quality of the interventions, and the presence of these literary giants. He himself said that he had been invited to give a literary composition, and he confessed that the eloquence of speech and the elegance of style that characterised that learned academy had filled him with not a little apprehension. He comforted himself with the thought that the skilled pen of others would soon make up for his inadequacies.

However, as in every other time and place, he wanted to be there simply as a priest. In fact, after introducing himself as a humble priest, he went on to speak purely as a priest. He indulged neither in ascetics nor oratory, because he was not there to preach. He displayed neither erudition nor exegetical learning, because he was not there as a teacher. He took everyone by surprise by choosing as his topic the seven last words of Our Lord. To Don Bosco's priestly spirit, it seemed absurd that a priest, speaking on that day and at that hour, should engage in a literary exercise instead of recalling the bloody sacrifice offered two thousand years ago by the eternal Priest. He was well aware that in doing so he was rowing against the current and so, when he announced his subject, he protested that he was leav-

⁵⁵ A group of literary people dedicated to preserving the purity of the Italian language.

ing the lofty thoughts and poetic flights to the skill of others. He would be happy if his poor endeavour did not merit applause but rather offered his listeners an opportunity to show compassion and kindness.

That was only the introduction! He felt he had done enough to satisfy the conventions and he went on to speak with calm simplicity as follows,

After a thousand torments and tremendous fatigue, after cruel scourging and crowning with thorns, condemned to an ignominious death on the cross, our most loving Saviour carried the instrument of his torture to Golgotha.

And he went on, in precise and objective terms. He drew upon Scripture, the Fathers, St Thomas and various spiritual writers, always with good judgement and good sense. He did not reveal his own sentiments. Don Bosco is a saint characterised almost by a spiritual shyness which does not allow him to reveal the secret movements of grace: *secretum meum mihi!*⁵⁶ But his intentions were very clear, priestly intentions as always, to enlighten souls in order to detach them from sin and unite them to God.

⁵⁶ My secret is for me. Cf. Is 24:16.

12

The Writer

The priestly heart of Don Bosco shines forth even to this day in his writings no less than in the spoken word. He began writing for the public in 1844 and he never stopped until the end of his life. Many of his writing were published and many more remain unpublished. Three things made it possible for him to engage in the work of writing amidst all the other things he had to do: his long time habit of making use of every little bit of time; his intellectual capacity and powerful memory sustained by a strong desire to do good; and the rare gift he had of being able to attend to different things at the same time, even to the extent that he could dictate simultaneously on several different topics.

These three talents would not explain on their own his huge number of publications unless we also take into consideration his strong motivation that made use of them constantly for a period of about forty years. I am referring to his ardent zeal for the glory of God and the good of souls. It would be a mistake, therefore, to pass judgement on Don Bosco's writings using only literary criteria. Our dear Father would very quickly point out our mistake, with a kind smile, in words similar to those of St Francis de Sales, "As for embellishment of style, I have not even thought about it for I had more important things to do."⁵⁷ And as St Francis de Sales also says of himself,⁵⁸ so Don Bosco writes, "spontaneously, without pretence or art, because his topics do not require it and their best embellishment is the simplicity so dear to God who is its source."

What serves as inspiration for the poet and driving force for the man of profound thought and, indeed, as frivolity and vanity for the scribbler, was, in the case of Don Bosco, a holy apostolic spirit under the permanent

⁵⁷ *Philothea (Introduction to the Devout Life)*, Introduction.

⁵⁸ *Oeuvres*, vol 16, p. 55, 'Letter to the Duke of Belgarde.'

vigorous impulse of the love of God. This is what led him to listen attentively to the voices of his day, and to lock himself away in libraries. This is what kept him bent over his desk. This is not to say that Don Bosco had an excessive tendency to rush to print, at a time when the printing machines were still underused. Indeed going into print was, by his own admission, a cause of anxiety for him. Still, he understood the strict obligation of his sacred ministry to use the talents given him by God. He felt the need to counter bad press with good, responding to error by means of leaflets, pamphlets, books and periodicals. He wrote manuals of popular piety and appropriate religious instruction for the young and for ordinary people, and other publications with a salutary message. The Don Bosco who wrote and went into print was the same Don Bosco who heard confessions and preached. No matter what he was doing, he was always himself, the man of God, for whom, as St Bonaventure says, "what is spiritual must always and everywhere be referred."⁵⁹ For us then to resort to literary criteria would be out of place.

In such abundant religious publications it might seem obvious that we will find places where the author gives some information about himself and his inner world - the very places that we would want to examine. There is nothing - not a trace!

A Bishop, writing about Don Bosco, mentions how in a conversation he, Don Bosco, began to speak "in his slow manner of acting and talking."⁶⁰ This is the description of a man who is always in control of himself in conversation. We see the same vigilance in his writings. The person of the writer never intrudes on the scene. If we want to discover the man, we have to search behind the scenes. And yet, this silence has an eloquence of its own. The more the author is silent in his own regard, the more it is to his credit. It is true that his intimate spiritual life penetrates his writings, more in some than in others. This explains the effect his writings had on the souls of readers who were not prejudiced.

In 1908, Cardinal Vives expressed a wish to have some small sample of Don Bosco's spiritual writing, which would reveal his spirit of piety.⁶¹ I do not know which of his writings were chosen, for his spirit is evident more or less explicitly in all of them.

A modern Christian poet⁶² declines modestly any claim to art, preferring to call himself "a worker in words." Don Bosco, though without ever

⁵⁹ *De regula novitiorum*, I.

⁶⁰ Letter of Mons. Eugenio Galletti, Bishop of Alba, 3 September 1874.

⁶¹ Letter of Don Marengo to Don Gusmano, Rome, 21 May 1908.

⁶² Giulio Salvadori, when he published the verses "*Ad una poetessa*" (*Ricordi dell'umile Italia*, p. 111).

saying so, showed himself to be a priest of the word. A worker in words is one who makes of words a work of his own, to his own wish and pleasure. A priest of the word is one who exercises a ministry of the word, *ministerium verbi*, (cf. Acts 6:4; 20:24) a new expression by which we mean a sacred use of the word, done in God's name for the spiritual good of one's neighbour, in response to one's vocation. This means that the man does not present himself but represents God. This ministry is exercised ordinarily in the Church through preaching, but it can be prolonged and extended to reach a greater number of people by use of the written word. In this case the writer who dispenses the word of salvation, whilst remaining hidden himself, as Don Bosco does consistently, shows that he has a heart empty of petty vanity and that he writes from the pure love of God.

Don Bosco's intimate dispositions can be understood even better if we consider his humility in association with his charity. At a time when the religion of the young and of ordinary people was being attacked daily, he was moved by the love of Christ to oppose the poison of error with the antidote of truth. He developed a wide readership among the young and the ordinary people. They did not understand the language of books and Don Bosco exercised this renunciation of self to which the Pope referred when he spoke of "his exceptional prowess of mind and intellect, far above the ordinary, and equal to the genius of those who are properly called geniuses." Don Bosco could have been a successful scholar, thinker or writer. Instead of using his exceptional talents to create something original, he applied them to the popularising of ideas, and this was his first renunciation of self. But there was also another.

Even in the field of popularising ideas, Don Bosco, with his gifts, could have produced some works of art. Instead, he let go of all literary pretences and made use of the language of the common people. He went to incredible lengths. He used to read his works to illiterate people, and brought his writing down to the level of their understanding. Sometimes he gave a first draft of his writings to the porter or someone else of limited intelligence and got him to read it and repeat the content and argument. This was how he got to the level that could be understood by the category of people he chose to write for. When we recall the unknown marvels wrought through this humble charity and the priestly soul of the one who worked them, we cannot help experiencing some emotion when we read today what was written in 1853 in the leading Catholic Magazine in Italy.⁶³ It recommended to its readers "a humble ecclesiastic ... called Don Bosco [who had written] some short

⁶³ *La Civiltà Cattolica*, A.IV, s. II, V.III, p. 112.

booklets, full of solid instruction, adapted to the understanding of the common people and altogether suited" to those difficult and troubled times.

The "humble ecclesiastic" of the Roman magazine became, several decades later, the "angelic priest" in a book by a Florentine writer.⁶⁴ He was angelic for many reasons, but especially for one which I wish to speak about here. In all the writings of Don Bosco we can see his jealous love for the angelic virtue, a love which prompted him to write in article 35 of the Regulations: "Anyone who has not a well-founded hope that he will, with divine assistance, be able to preserve the virtue of chastity in word and deed and thought, should not make profession in this Society."

The sixth beatitude speaks of the intimate communication between God and those who are pure of heart (cf. Mt 5:8). This is sufficient justification for our entering into the topic here as we seek to discover the mind of the writer from a study of his writings.

A brief episode can sometimes reveal the moral views of a man as much as a long discourse. As a young priest, Don Bosco was preparing for publication a booklet on the mysteries of the rosary. In reviewing the draft written on the third joyful mystery he was talking to himself in the presence of a friend who was a theologian, and he said,

We contemplate how the Blessed Virgin gave to light ... No, that won't do! We contemplate how our Redeemer was born of the Virgin Mary... That won't do either! Better: we contemplate how our Redeemer was born in the city of Bethlehem.

The purity of his soul shines through from beginning to end of his *Sacred History*, compiled by him with unprecedented restraint. Not the slightest blemish can be found in this work of such luminous purity. The young person reading it will never come across any detail, even from the bible, nor any word, however common it might be, that might produce in him an impression less than chaste. The reader is spared the embarrassment caused by some writers who express themselves in crude terms without worrying about the danger of impropriety. It is a masterpiece of Christian reserve in the education of the young, and an eloquent monument of the angelic inner beauty of its author.

Don Bosco's principle biographer has written a sentence which could have been written on purpose to put the seal of approval on what we have just said, and to add something better than anything we could say. He writes:

⁶⁴ Alfani, A., *Battaglie e Vittorie*, VIII.

We are intimately convinced that here especially is to be found the secret of his greatness: God has given him extraordinary gifts, and he has made use of them in marvellous ways, in order to remain pure and chaste.⁶⁵

In going through the pages of his *Sacred History* another thing surprises us: among the facts of Old and New Testament, Don Bosco manages to conceal, with the dexterity of the magician that he was, a detailed apologetics for Catholicism which is all the more effective for the fact that it appears unintentional. Who other than Don Bosco would have thought of drawing on Biblical stories to undermine Protestantism? It needed Don Bosco's refined sensitivity towards everything that concerned the Church. This lively sensitivity, which is nothing other than the perfect *sentire cum ecclesia* of St Ignatius, is to be found in all Don Bosco's writings, from his edifying biographies of young people to his series of *Almanacs for Gentlemen*.

The doctrinal and hierarchical authority of the Catholic Church was always to the forefront in the thoughts of a writer who was affected by everything that concerned the Church. It brought him joy and suffering, caused him to act and to react, as can be seen from his many works that were published at brief intervals over a period of forty years. The scholar who studies the works of Don Bosco and is looking for a single phrase to sum up the writer, could adopt the concise epitaph that is sculpted on the tomb of the great Bishop and Cardinal Mermillod, *Dilexit Ecclesiam*, he loved the Church. This is all the more appropriate when we consider that, like the great Swiss prelate, Don Bosco suffered uncommon persecution for the cause which was so dear to his heart.

At that time in Piedmont the enemies of the Church were attacking it to such an extent that Don Bosco could not even find the censors required by Canon Law for his books. Don Bosco's *Catholic Readings* were enemy number one for the sects. At first the censors approved their publication but without appending their signature, and later no one would take on the risky task of approving them. Despite threats by letter, by word of mouth and by armed men, he trusted in God, challenged the 'Philistines,' and refused to give up the battle. He never lapsed into animosity, something that can easily happen even in religious polemics.

The spirit of the Lord inflamed his zeal and directed his pen. You can search his many writings and you will not find one tract, one slogan, one word or comma which points to a deliberate intention to humiliate his opponents, nor even a careless phrase that might offend. He used phrases like "our holy mother, our good mother" and similar, in referring to the Catho-

⁶⁵ Lemoyne, G. B., *Memorie Biografiche di D. G. Bosco*, Vol V, p. 157.

lic Church, to believers and non-believers alike. They indicate his predominant concern, his passion, one might say, to make the Church loved by all. They also speak of his own love for the Church, a love which is so much part of piety, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

His letters also form part of his written works. Don Bosco wrote an amazing number of letters, to every part of the world, on thousands of topics, to prelates, princes and noblemen, to religious and religious communities, to workers, to elderly ladies and to children. What interests us most is that these letters reflect the spirit of their author. Let us not, however, pretend to find in them more than he put there.

The flood of correspondence compelled him to put pen to paper without giving it much thought and this sometimes led to mistakes. However, this did not mean that his pen was not guided by his thoughts or by his habitual devout way of thinking, and that revelations concerning matters of his interior life escaped. Certain introspections which are frequent in the letters of devout persons are completely absent from the letters of Don Bosco. You can sense very well the kind of person he was, but never does he say a word indicating his intimate state of mind. All we have are the inevitable result of the sentiments of his heart always in perfect union with God; his complete submission to God's will, the glory of God and the salvation of souls, the sacraments, prayer, offence against God, trust in Providence, reminders of feast days, scriptural quotations and short prayers.

He often enclosed a holy picture with quotations in his own handwriting, to raise people's minds to heavenly things. Then there was the tone of his letters. Having read some of them, we find in them a sense of peaceful calm which is a quality close to goodness in thought, word and action. Who has not had the experience of receiving an angry or offensive letter? He used to say that to reply immediately to such a letter with kindness and respect gives one the victory, for it changes an enemy into a friend. And how many times he had occasion to prove it! It is also worth mentioning the naturalness with which he introduces into his letters the names of God, and of Jesus and Mary. His biographer says that "even when writing these names he pronounced them with a prayer from the heart, but in such a way that others did not hear him, for he shunned any singularity, and it was as if he wrote them on the page with his breath."⁶⁶

This consciousness of his own character reaches such profundity in a priest only when the priest is indeed an *alter Christus*, the living personification of Jesus Christ.

⁶⁶ Lemoyne, loc.cit V, p. 609.

13

Educator

Some may question whether Don Bosco was indeed a great educationalist but nobody can ever seriously doubt that he was a great educator. This is what interests us. Why did Don Bosco dedicate himself to the education of the young? How did he understand education? In what way did he educate and want others to educate? We will try to answer these three questions while still remaining within our topic, which is Don Bosco with God.

Don Bosco gave himself to the education of the young with the enthusiasm of one who believed that he had received this as a special mission from on high. He had his own good reasons for believing so.

While still a child, barely past the age of reason, he used to seek out other children, not just to play with them, but to repeat to them the beautiful things he had learned from his mother, and to draw them away from evil and lead them to do good. Who, if not God, could have placed in his heart that desire, which is the seed and forerunner of his vocation? Looking back on it he himself wrote in his old age, "Gathering the children together to teach them catechism was something that came into my mind when I was only five years old. It was my strongest desire. It seemed to me the only thing I should do in life." Then, while he was still a child, the idea of becoming a priest started to dawn on him and he resolved to embrace the clerical state. "If I were a priest," he was heard to say, "I would be close to children, I would gather them around me, I would love them and make myself loved by them. I would speak kind words to them, give them good advice, and dedicate myself totally to their eternal salvation."

At the age of nine he received a call from heaven which was very clear and direct, even if somewhat mysterious. The veil covering his future was

removed in a dream. We shall say something later on the nature of Don Bosco's dreams. For now we limit ourselves to this first one which can be called the dream of his vocation. We will read it again exactly as he related it in his oft mentioned Memoirs.

"In my sleep I seemed to be near my home, in a very spacious yard, where a crowd of children were gathered playing. Some were laughing, others playing, whilst many of them were swearing. On hearing their bad language, I threw myself quickly into their midst, using words and fists to make them stop. At that moment a venerable Man appeared, of adult age, nobly dressed. A white cloak covered his whole person, but his face shone so brightly that I could not look directly at him. He called me by name and ordered me to place myself at the head of those children, adding these words: 'You will win over these friends of yours, not with blows but with gentleness and love. Begin immediately therefore to instruct them on the ugliness of sin and the preciousness of virtue.'

Confused and frightened I added that I was a poor, ignorant child, incapable of speaking about religion to these young people. At that moment the boys stopped their quarrelling, shouting and swearing and they all gathered around the Man who was speaking. Almost without realising it I said, 'Who are you to command me to do the impossible?'

'Precisely because these things seem impossible, you must make them possible by obedience and by acquiring knowledge.'

'Where and how can I acquire knowledge?'

'I will give you a Teacher under whose tuition you can become wise and without whom all knowledge is foolishness.'

'But who are you who speak in this manner?'

'I am the Son of Her whom your mother taught you to salute three times a day.'

'My mother tells me not to associate with people I do not know, without her permission, so tell me your name.'

'Ask my mother and she will tell you my name,' At that moment I saw beside him a lady of majestic appearance dressed in a mantle which sparkled all over as if every stitch were a shining star. She realised that I was becoming more confused than ever in my questions and answers, and indicated to me to come close to Her. She took me kindly by the hand. 'Look!' she said. Looking around I noticed that the children had all disappeared, and in their place I saw a crowd of young goats, dogs, cats, bears and many other animals. 'This is the field where you must work. Make yourself humble, strong and robust. What you see happening now to these animals

is what you must do for my children.' I looked again and instead of wild animals I saw gentle lambs running around, gambolling and bleating, as if to welcome the Man and the Lady. At that point, still in my sleep, I began to cry and I implored the lady to please speak in a manner I could understand, because I did not know what she meant. She then put her hand on my head and said to me, 'You will understand everything in due course.' As soon as she said this, a noise woke me and everything disappeared. I remained bewildered. It seemed as if my hands were painng me from the blows I had given, that my face was sore from those I had received. From then on my mind was so preoccupied with that Personage and the Lady, and with the things I had said and heard, that I could not sleep any more that night."

He told this dream to his family the next day and then he did not speak of it again for thirty-four years. He said, however, that he could not get it out of his mind. Indeed as events unfolded it seemed as if the things he had seen and heard were coming true. Now we can see in it the prediction of his vocation. The object, method and final outcome of his mission were to be found there.

Even Pius IX took it seriously when he heard it. Don Bosco closes his account with the words, "I have always remained silent about it and my relatives paid no heed to it. When I went to Rome in 1858 to speak to the Pope about the Salesian Congregation, he made me tell him in minute detail everything that had even the appearance of the supernatural. Then for the first time I recounted my dream at the age of nine. The Pope ordered me to write it down, literally and in detail, and to leave it as an encouragement to my sons in the Congregation. It was for the sake of the Congregation that I had made that visit to Rome."

It is important to add that the impression the dream made on him was deepened by the fact that the same dream was repeated more than six times and always with new details that served to develop and clarify it. When he was 16 he received a promise that he would have the necessary material means. At 19 he was given strict orders to work for young people. At 21 he was shown the category of young people who were to be the object of his special attention. At 22 it was made clear to him that the city of Turin was to be his first field of action, In these last two instances he saw clearly the development of a great work at Valdocco and he learnt what he should do in order to gather suitable helpers around him. It was a prediction of the Salesian Society.

The repetition of these phenomena served to overcome any doubts he had about their nature, and convinced him that there was something super-

natural about them. Indeed, on 8 May 1884, speaking to the members of the Society he recounted these events and concluded by saying,

Some people might say that these happenings are to the glory of Don Bosco. Nothing of the kind! All that I have to do is to give an account of the way I have carried out God's will. I have always followed the plan revealed to us by the Lord and this is the only purpose of all I have done so far. This is why in adversity and amid persecutions, and in the face of huge obstacles, I have never been afraid, for the Lord has always been with us.

The chronicle of the Oratory which provides this report finishes as follows:

It is impossible to describe the profound impression he made and the enthusiasm generated by this revelation.

The memory of this prophetic dream came back to him forcefully in Rome in May 1887 as he was celebrating Mass in the Church of the Sacred Heart. Such was his emotion that tears ran down his face. Sixty-two years had passed since he had been told, "You will understand everything in due course." Now he felt that time had arrived. The building of the Church dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the Eternal City, and its consecration the previous day, seemed to him to be, as it were, the crown on his mission in favour of young people. His sons understood even better. They had witnessed the enormous development of the work of which he, the little visionary, had had only a vague idea, and which now as a holy old man he could contemplate as a reality.

On the centenary of that prophetic dream, his third successor, Don Rinaldi, drew the attention of the Salesians to the event, and encouraged them to meditate upon it and to draw helpful lessons from it. Even now, reflecting on it, we can see there in embryo the programme of action assigned by Providence to Don Bosco and his sons.

If the mission came from above, it is evident that the ultimate end of Don Bosco's educative work could not have been only that of preparing good citizens for this earthly life, but also that of making them good Christians for heaven. That is why, in 1868, speaking after the academy on his feast day, he affirmed categorically, "The only purpose of the Oratory is to save souls." It is very clear that for Don Bosco the terms good citizen and good Christian were not mutually exclusive. The two go together. Don Bosco made use of the insights of good pedagogy and of his own psychological intuition in order to help his boys to do well in life as professionals or as workers. In the eyes of the State he emphasised the civil aspect of his education but he could not understand a system of education of a baptised

person that did not concentrate all its efforts on the development of the supernatural life. This is the point that we need to study if we are to know Don Bosco's mind in relation to this great problem.

Monsignor Caviglioli says,

The ethical life of a Christian man must be conducted on a supernatural plane. Any education that concerns itself only with the purely natural, leads to a lowering of standards. Whoever leaves the level of grace falls immediately into error, for he does not remain at the level of nature but falls to a lower level.

Somebody was needed to raise the flag of an all round Christian education, especially among the poor, the most numerous class in society. When our Saint entered the field, naturalism was the prevailing philosophy. It was getting more and more hold on the minds of young people in the public schools. The pedagogical theories most in vogue excluded absolutely any attempt to raise education to a higher level. Indeed there was sometimes outright hostility. It often happened that even good people, drawn along by the tide, went along with the prevailing views, some to a greater extent and some less. Don Bosco valued all that modern theories had to offer, but he set his sights much higher.

As soon as young people arrived, Don Bosco made his understanding of education very clear to them. He welcomed them as if from the hand of God. He used to say, "God has sent us, still sends us, and will send us many young people." He knew very well that their parents and benefactors entrusted the young people to us to be educated in literature and science, in arts and trades, and he did his best to meet that expectation. But he constantly told his helpers, "The Lord sends them to us for us to take care of their souls and help them on the way to eternal salvation. Therefore we must consider everything else as merely a means. Our supreme end is to make them good and to save them for all eternity." In his first meeting with a young person, he spoke immediately of his soul. Indeed, on this matter he held an opinion which may cause some surprise.

He maintained that it is a mistake if a young person comes to us and the Superior does not show concern for his eternal salvation. If the Superior is afraid to speak to him prudently about matters of conscience, or if he speaks to him in vague terms about becoming good, about obedience and study and work, this produces no lasting effect. It does not change the young person and does not win his affection. This is a wrong step, and if the first step is wrong, it is difficult to correct it. He had learnt this from long experience. He used to say,

The young love being spoken to about the things of salvation, far more than we think, and they know very well from this who really cares about them and who does not.

It is not only the Superior of the house who should do this. He recommended that teachers and assistants and all involved, should make it clear to the young people, especially at the beginning of the year, that their only motive was the good of their souls.

He wanted the teachers to consider the school as a means for doing good. He used to tell them,

You are like priests in the parish or missionaries in the field of apostolate. Every now and then you should draw attention to Christian truths, speak of our obligations towards God, of the sacraments and of devotion to Our Lady.

Putting it plainly, he wanted the lessons to be Christian, and he wanted the teachers to be frank and loving in exhorting their pupils to be good Christians.

This is the secret to make yourself loved by the young and to gain their confidence. Anyone who is ashamed to speak about religion is not worthy to be a teacher. The young will look down on him and he will not succeed in doing anything except ruining the hearts that Divine Providence has entrusted to him.⁶⁷

Every superior and every teacher should turn constantly to God for help and should attribute to God whatever good he has been able to do. Whenever one of them complained about the pupils he would begin by asking him, "Do you pray for your pupils?" In the "confidential advice" given to Rectors, he said, "In things of greater importance, raise your mind briefly to God before coming to a decision." In the Regulations for the Houses, after the preliminary articles of a general nature, he declared that prayer, with patience and much diligence, is indispensable, and that without it he considered any set of regulations useless. Whenever he was pleased with the results obtained, his sentiment was always,

We should thank God humbly for everything. We should pray, especially at Mass, at the elevation of the Host, entrusting ourselves, our pupils and all our work to the Lord.

On his part, when regular lessons were underway, he would speak frequently and wisely about the three basic elements of his system: fleeing from sin, frequent confession and frequent communion. His chief concern was to ensure the presence of God in the souls of the young.

⁶⁷ *Mem Biog.* vol X, p. 1018.

We could spend a long time on this topic. From what we have said so far it is sufficiently clear that for Don Bosco the religious element is essential in education. Without it, in his view, education was not only ineffective, but had no meaning. In 1849 he got printed and distributed a poster which contains this sentence:

Only religion is capable of beginning and completing the great work of true education.

And he was not referring to a vague pious sentiment, totally abstract, without specific practices.

In his *Life of Young Francis Besucco*, published in 1864, he speaks very clearly without worrying about what the experts might think:

Let them say what they like about various systems of education - I find no sure basis other than frequent confession and communion. I do not believe that I am going too far when I say that, without these two elements, morality is doomed.

This conviction stayed with him for the whole of his life. In 1878 he stated openly to a high ranking government official, "They say that Don Bosco is too religious. I maintain that without religion no good can be achieved among the young." In 1885, with a sense of sorrow, he lamented, "I am an old man about to die and I feel grieved that I have not been understood properly."⁶⁸ He does not say by whom, but it is not hard to guess.

Pope Pius XI understood Don Bosco very well. He declared him "a great proponent of Christian education" and in his homily on the occasion of Don Bosco's canonisation he pointed out the secret by which the educative system of St John Bosco had achieved such copious and marvellous fruits. "He practised those principles based on the Gospel which the Catholic Church has always recommended,"⁶⁹ the Holy Father said. Caviglioli, whom we have already quoted, sums up Don Bosco's idea of education in these words:

God, revealed in Christ the Redeemer, lives in his Church and operates with his gifts in the whole work of education.⁷⁰

Forming the consciences of young people in a Christian way has always been the aim of Christian educators. Don Bosco engaged in this work at a particular moment in history when this was more urgent and necessary than ever before. To say how he went about it would require, not just a few

⁶⁸ Cerruti, D.F., *Le idee di Don Bosco sull'educazione e sull'insegnamento e la missione attuale della scuola*. S. Benigno Canavese, 1886.

⁶⁹ Cf. *Mem Biog.* XIX, pp. 71 and 724.

⁷⁰ Loc. Cit. p. 207.

pages, but a large volume. I will highlight just two points: in the field of education he worked wonders through priestly kindness and through Christian devotion. He possessed both of these to an unparalleled degree.

Regarding priestly kindness, I start with something he said in Paris in 1883 at a meeting of famous people.⁷¹ "The souls of the young during the time of their formation need to experience the beneficial effects of priestly kindness." Priestly kindness and love are the fruit of priestly goodness. It is a goodness which is born and nourished by the love of God. It is fatherly and concerned for the welfare of souls, and leaves a lasting and salutary mark on the souls of those who experience it from a tender age. It was this kindness, wisely and gently adapted to the age of young people, that Don Bosco chose as the basis of his educational method. Rightly Don Rua described him as a man in whom God raised spiritual fatherliness to the highest degree.

In the Oratory, Don Bosco's kindness could be seen everywhere. It was like the sun that gives light and heat even where it cannot be seen. It created a peaceful environment and the young people always wanted to make him happy. When he appeared in the playground they ran towards him to kiss his hand and to be near him. He spoke to them and smiled and joked with them. He would look around him, bending his ear to anyone who wanted to say something to him, and his lips to the ears of those he wanted to admonish, exhort or encourage. He never lost sight of three maxims inspired by his priestly heart and which he constantly repeated to his Salesians. These were the three things that enabled him to win the affection and trust of the young. Firstly, love what the young people love, and in that way they will come to love the things we love for the good of their souls. Secondly, love them in a way that they will know they are loved. Thirdly, make every effort to ensure that none of them ever leaves us unhappy. Rules like this are easily stated and it is easier still to applaud them. To put them into practice requires constant sacrifice.

Don Bosco also taught that the educator is one who is dedicated to the good of his pupils, and therefore must be ready to put up with any inconvenience or suffering in order to reach his objective. This strength and constancy are possible only in one who, in the great work of education, seeks only the glory of God and the good of souls. This was something Don Bosco preached by word and example. The time came when other occupations led him to reduce his presence among the young, but by then he had gathered around him a group of helpers that reached, like a long arm, where

⁷¹ *Mem Biog.* XVI, p. 169.

he could no longer go, and acted in his name and with the identical spirit. Having said this in general, let us come down to some particular examples, while skipping over many others that would take too long to relate.

Don Bosco's boys sensed his priestly kindness from the moment they set foot in the Oratory. His fatherly manner, the serene look on his face, and the love that shone through in his smile, led them immediately to respect him and have confidence in him. We would really need to repeat here the many questions he used to ask of the new arrivals, just to get a sense of their nature. Inevitably and at just the right moment came the question, "Do you want to be Don Bosco's friend?" This opened the way for him to speak to them about the state of their souls and suggest confession to them.

For one who does not know Don Bosco, what I am about to say may seem strange: he showed such sincerity that the newcomers came out from seeing him, leaving the key to their hearts in his hands. Every evening after prayers, Don Bosco spoke to the boys of the Oratory in the so-called "Goodnight." This consisted of a few minutes of intimate familiarity and fatherly kindness during which he imprinted on their minds the final thought of the day. Those who heard him have handed down to us many of these talks. To support the point I am making, I will relate just one of them, by way of example.

Every 31 December he used to give the *strenna*, a souvenir and spiritual motto for the New Year. In 1859 he had this to say,

My dear sons, you know how much I love you in the Lord, and how I have dedicated my entire self to do whatever good I can for you. Whatever little bit of knowledge or experience I may have acquired, all that I am and all that I possess, my prayers, my hard work, my health and my whole life - I want to use them all for you. You can count on me at any time and for anything, but especially in matters of the soul. For my part, as a *strenna* I give you myself. It may not be much, but when I give everything it means I keep nothing for myself.

Then he gave each one a souvenir and continued,

I want you to finish the year with perfect love and holy joy. And so I forgive any wrong you may have done to me, and I want you to forgive each other whatever wrongs you may have received. I want us to begin the year 1860 with no discontent and no regrets.

On this note of kindness he finished his talk.

The young people knew that they could go to him at any time, and how well he always received them! He would make them sit down on the couch

and he would sit at his desk. He would listen to them attentively, as one listens to someone who has something important to say, and he did his best to please them. After their conversation he accompanied them to the door, opened the door for them and bade them farewell with his customary, "We are always friends, eh!" There is no need to say that the boys always came away from him at peace and as happy as could be.

They were always delighted to see him going round the house. His fatherly care brought an affectionate word to his lips which was as welcome as a beautiful gift. He was always able to remember something that interested the person he was meeting. His visits to the sick were not just brief visits from a distance. He would go right up to their beds and spend some time with them, completely at his ease. He enquired about their health, cheered them up and, if they needed something, he gave orders for it to be provided or he got it himself.

Every educator, no matter who he is, has to correct, reprove or punish, at some time or other. As early as 1846 Don Bosco, with his priestly kindness, had formulated a rule to be followed on such occasions.

During one of his absences from Valdocco he had come to hear that a priest friend, one of his helpers at the Oratory, was treating the boys 'with considerable force' and had upset many of them. On 31 August he wrote to Don Borel, who was filling in for him as Director of the Oratory, to make him aware of the situation. "See to it that everything on the menu in the Oratory is seasoned with oil," he said. He used the same sort of metaphorical language later in dealing with similar cases. For example, in 1866 he said one day to Don Rua who was in charge of discipline, "I seem to have heard some of the doors creaking. A little oil on the hinges would help." He even told him to become an oil merchant! Needless to say, he himself used this oil unsparingly.

It is impossible to relate all the ways in which he displayed this kindness and brought joy to the Oratory, or the many ways in which he won the confidence of the pupils. It is enough to read his admirable and much admired pages on the preventive system, pages dictated from his priestly heart. This was the rule that was lived by Don Bosco in the Oratory for forty years before he committed it to writing. In it we can find his true thinking on education, and also the nuances of the spirit that animated him in his long and arduous work of education. Through it he achieved success to a degree never even imagined by educational experts.

One of these successes was, believe it or not, none other than Cardinal Cagliero. As a boy he was intelligent and full of life and energy. Even though the Oratory was run more like a family than a college, this lively youngster from Castelnuovo often tried to shake off the yoke. He broke the hearts of the superiors who had to look after him. Some of them wanted to send him away and if it were not for Don Bosco, Cagliero would not have become the man we know today. Don Bosco knew well how to handle him, and gradually he became an exemplary young man. The rest of the story is well known.

In a talk given on the occasion of Don Bosco's beatification, a Bishop from Argentina had the happy idea of demonstrating how, in Don Bosco, there was only what was necessary of the educator, nothing of the policeman and everything of a father.

An Anglican who was in charge of a hostel for young people in London read Don Bosco's text on the preventive system. He also observed it in practice in the Oratory in Turin and in some colleges in Italy and was so impressed that he tried to adopt it himself as far as he could. He placed a picture of Don Bosco in the entrance hall of the hostel, and even included the motto *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*.

He wrote two articles which were published in 1900 and 1903. In them he prayed that the Lord would raise up in England men with the spirit of Don Bosco, for there was great need of them. He used to speak also of frequent confession and communion, and daily Mass, though he used the word Eucharist which was more acceptable to his co-religionists.⁷²

This man, a protestant, has understood that the basis of Don Bosco's educational method is piety. This is the second characteristic referred to above. Much has already been said in this regard in the previous chapters, especially those immediately preceding. I limit myself therefore to a few comments and testimonies.

Piety at the Oratory was cultivated, not imposed, and so it flourished with an attractive spontaneity. It was nourished by prayer in common, daily Mass, frequent confession and communion and the short talk after evening prayer. It was reinforced by periodic practices such as sermons on feast days, the monthly Exercise for a Happy Death and the retreat in the middle of the school year. Religious feasts were well prepared and celebrated with solemnity. There were four sodalities, each with its own rule, which helped to promote piety. Their members were drawn from the best boys in

⁷² From a letter by the Salesian Don Bonavia to Don Lemoyne, London 12 June 1903.

each section. They encouraged each other in fervour and served as a leaven among the rest of the boys.

More than anything else, Don Bosco was influenced by his example, his words and the ministry of confession, as we have already noted above. His own devotion and his zeal for piety were passed on to his helpers, and they brought the same spirit into the various colleges. Bishop De Gaudenzi of Vigevano wrote:

Anyone visiting the Oratory or the other establishments built and run by Don Bosco and his priests, notices immediately an indefinable sense of piety which is not easily found in other institutes. It appears that in Don Bosco's institutes you can breathe the good odour of Jesus Christ.⁷³

Another bishop, the Bishop of Casale Ferré, was also struck by the piety observed in Don Bosco's houses. The learned prelate once said, in the hearing of some distinguished people, that the great secret of Don Bosco's educative work was to imbue in his boys the spirit of piety.

The very atmosphere that surrounds them, the air they breathe, is impregnated with devotion. Boys who have been influenced in this way would hardly dare to do evil, even if they so wished. They have not the means to do evil. They would have to go against the current to become bad. If they neglected the practices of piety, they would feel like fish out of water. This is what makes them obedient and makes them act from conviction and conscience, so that rebellion among them is unimaginable. They are carried along by an irresistible force.

When somebody mentioned this observation to Don Bosco he said that it was true, and he added this comment,

We try not to burden the boys with the practices of piety, nor to tire them out. They should be like the air around us that is never a burden, never tires us, even though we carry a heavy column of air on our shoulders. The reason is that we are entirely surrounded by it, and completely filled with it inside and outside.⁷⁴

The piety inculcated by Don Bosco was inspired by the first verse of Psalm 112:1 *Happy are those who fear the Lord, who greatly delight in God's commands*. Generally his talks after evening prayer finished always, like the *Gloria* at the end of each Psalm, with some thought concerning piety together with a thought referring to the obligations of their state or some other truth of faith. He believed that faith is the eye of piety; it is not

⁷³ Letter to Pius IX, 4 April 1875.

⁷⁴ Barberis, D. G., *Chronicle* (unedited), 27 November 1878.

for nothing that religious instruction played such a big part in the Oratory. In this way he gave the boys a piety that was enlightened, and they became accustomed to act according to conscience and from supernatural motives. Here lies the difference between the secular educator and the priest-educator. The former is engaged in a psychological exercise, the latter is more concerned with the development of conscience.

Joy was another characteristic of the Oratory. A well known writer on the spiritual life has this to say,⁷⁵ "Sadness is a sentiment that comes from hell, joy is the mirror of God's life in us." Don Bosco's mind was filled with God and the joy in his heart shone through in his appearance, his smile, and his constant optimism. He shared this joy with all those around him. *Serve the Lord with gladness* was an absolutely essential rule of his educational method. While still at school he founded the *Società di Allegria* (The Joy Club) among his schoolmates in order to help them to be good. Dominic Savio, totally imbued with the spirit of Don Bosco, interpreted it very well when he said to a newcomer, "Here we make holiness consist in being always cheerful."⁷⁶ These were not just words! In 1857 a young man, who had just recently arrived at the Oratory, wrote to one of his friends, "Here I feel like as if I am in an earthly paradise. Everyone is happy but it is a truly heavenly happiness, especially when Don Bosco is among us."⁷⁷

Life at the Oratory was made up of piety, study and work, all of them seasoned with holy joy. "Anyone who has not seen it would find it very hard to imagine how it was," writes a historian who was an eye-witness.⁷⁸ Survivors of that period are rejuvenated when they recall the happiness they enjoyed in Don Bosco's house, even though they had none of the comforts that came later. When the heart is at peace, there is always joy. As scripture says, "... but a light-hearted man has a continual feast" (cf. Prv 15:15).

In his short treatise on the Preventive System, Don Bosco promised another longer work on the subject, a promise he was unable to fulfil. However, he left his followers something far more valuable than a book containing his ideas on the topic. He left his sons a spirit which, in the field of education, is of far more benefit than all the books in the world. For him, this spirit had just one source, his habitual intimate union with God, nourished by a lively faith.

⁷⁵ Marmion, loc.cit. p. 166.

⁷⁶ *Life* chapter 18

⁷⁷ *Mem Biog.* vol.5, p 713

⁷⁸ *Mem Biog* vol 6, p 401

Man of Faith

It is faith received in Baptism that makes us Christian. Faith is the basis of the supernatural life and the bond which unites the soul to God. Faith is completed by hope and charity. It is one thing to be a believer, but it is quite another thing to be a man of faith. The believer practises his faith, more or less, while the man of faith lives by faith and does so to the point where he reaches a profound union with God. Such was the case of Don Bosco.

Really, most of what we have seen so far, and much of what we will see later, is the lived faith of Don Bosco. His thoughts, emotions, undertakings, courage, suffering, sacrifices, pious practices, and his spirit of prayer all came from the faith which burned in his heart. It seems then, that we either have to repeat what has already been said, or else omit altogether the chapter on faith. Still it is such a vast field that there is still something more to be gleaned. Surely a life so constantly and intensely animated by faith will offer some material on the first of the theological virtues to hold our attention. There are bound to be characteristics worthy of particular mention.

Among the witnesses called to testify at the process for his beatification and canonisation were many who had lived close to him for a long time. It could be said that they vied with one another in extolling his faith. Their testimony can be summed up in these words: our saintly father was eager to know the truths of faith, firm in believing them, fervent in professing them, zealous in inculcating them and strong in defending them. Worthy of special attention is the testimony of Don Rua which begins as follows:

He was a man of faith. He was taught the principal truths of faith as a child by his outstanding mother and he became hungry for the faith.

This last expression is beautiful and very true. It was not only when he was a child that his mother nourished the faith of her son, but also later, in the most solemn moments of his life she poured out into his heart the faith that was overflowing in her own heart. This explains why Don Bosco maintained such reverence for his saintly mother. To the end of his days he spoke of her with a tenderness that was really moving. His words were marked with a sentiment of gratitude to God for having given him such a holy mother. For him it was a very special favour from God.

Nevertheless it must be added that, if his mother intervened at the most important moments of his life, these interventions were preceded by a powerful working of divine grace which led him to generous acts and proposals rooted in his faith. Mamma Margaret prepared her son John for his first communion. She brought him herself to the priest for confession. Not satisfied, he wanted to go to confession twice more; such was the high esteem for the sacrament already inspired in him by faith.⁷⁹ In the question of his vocation his mother stated clearly,

In these things I do not enter, because God comes before everything else. Do not think about me. I am poor. If you, as a priest, become rich, I will not pay you a single visit.

But the son was already convinced that in the matter of vocation he should pay no heed to the voice of flesh or blood. One preoccupation had been uppermost in his thoughts for some time: to know the Lord's call and to follow it faithfully. Indeed he tried as far as possible to come to a decision before he spoke to his mother about it.

Once he entered the seminary he had such a lofty idea of priesthood that in order to prepare worthily, he dedicated himself to a life of perfection, not just practising the evangelical counsels but even committing himself by a perpetual vow.⁸⁰ When he was ordained priest his mother gave him a beautiful message,

You are a priest, you say Mass; from now on you will be close to Jesus Christ. Remember however that beginning to say Mass means beginning to suffer. From now on think only of the good of souls and do not have any thought of me.

The son had already made his good resolutions in this regard. Among others was one, "to suffer, work or undergo humiliation always and in everything, when it is a matter of saving souls." His spirit was moving in a supernatural atmosphere of faith.

⁷⁹ *Diocesan Process.. Summary*, p. 62, testimony of Don Barberis.

⁸⁰ *Mem Biog.* vol 2, p. 26.

The day came when he had to choose which way he should go in order to save souls. This was not a worry for him. Faith had taught him that the will of God is made known through one's superiors. What was important for him was that his own will should not enter. His Superior was Fr Joseph Cafasso. He told him one day that he should become director of a hospital for children opened by the Marchesa di Barolo, and as spiritual director of an institute for girls run by the same good woman. Could anything have been more alien to his aspirations? Had it not always been his most ardent desire to work with boys? Speaking of his first four months as a priest, spent in his own parish of Castelnuovo, he had this to say,

My delight was teaching catechism to the children, spending time with them and talking to them.

He was always surrounded by them. Was he to abandon all this? He did not seek advice based on human prudence but was led solely by faith, which increased the value and merit of his obedience. He obeyed without a word. It was highly unlikely that he foresaw at that moment that Providence was leading him towards his desired goal, even though he seemed to be going in the opposite direction along a road he had not even thought of.

"It is faith that does everything," he once wrote.⁸¹ With this conviction in mind he always thought that he did not have enough faith. He even asked the boys once to pray for him, that the Lord would grant him, "a living faith, a faith that changes mountains into valleys and valleys into mountains."⁸² Many times during the course of his various undertakings, and even towards the end of his days, he accused himself of being lacking in faith. He would exclaim, with tears in his eyes, "How much more the Lord would have done, if Don Bosco had had more faith!"⁸³

It is true that without great faith he could not have done the amount of good he did. We could write volumes on this theme! It will be enough to draw attention to a few specific points that cover a lot. We will add a few things on the topic already touched upon in Chapter 7. 'The glory of God' and 'the salvation of souls' are two expressions that occur frequently in Salesian literature. This is because they were repeated so often by Don Bosco and his successor, Don Rua. Don Bosco used them continually in speaking to the Salesians and to the Cooperators, and in his writings. Raised on the wings of faith, he sought nothing else in life.

⁸¹ Loc.cit., vol 10, p. 90.

⁸² Loc.cit., vol 10 p. 42.

⁸³ Loc. cit., vol 8, p. 977, vol 17, p. 587.

He had one salutary lesson which taught him to become detached from self and from earthly goals. He was going to preach a sermon on St Benignus in a village in Asti. He had prepared a sermon with some elegant touches to honour the saint, but maybe also to show off a bit. He was travelling on horseback. Something frightened the horse and it took off at a mad pace across fields and ditches until finally it dumped him on a pile of stones. He was carried unconscious to a nearby house where he came to, but he had learnt his lesson. After this warning, he wrote in his Memoirs,

I made a firm resolution that in the future I would prepare my sermons for the greater glory of God and not to appear learned and clever.

He desired always the glory of God, and, what comes to the same thing, the good of souls. From that day, however, he gave himself entirely to their pursuit, knowing that nothing could be more noble or appropriate for a minister of the Lord.

Before starting any enterprise he always examined it to see if it was for God's glory and the good of souls. When he was convinced of this he knew that the idea was from above, and nothing in the world would stop him. Others around him might be dismayed because the means were lacking. "Men of little faith," he would say. "Is it not a far greater thing to create an idea than to produce the means to bring it about?" Many were amazed when they saw him beginning the construction of the Church of Mary Help of Christians, knowing that he had no money and that he could not hope to get much for a work of that kind at that time. "Is this not challenging Providence?" they asked him. His answer was always the same.

His constant, enlightened, living faith produced three effects in him. It gave him strength to endure hardship, fatigue, misfortune and persecution, which, as Cagliero declared during the process of his beatification, would have crushed anyone who was guided only by human motives. Not only that, but he was always calm and serene. "If God allows these trials," he used to say, "it is a sign that he wants to draw great good from them. Let's go ahead with courage and patience, trusting in him." At times some of his sons would have wished, like the sons of Zebedee, to draw down fire from heaven, but he would smile and calm their anger, saying, "Ah! You are still young. We must leave everything in the hands of the Lord. He will know how to overcome these evil designs. We should pray and we should not be afraid." At other times he used to say, "The more we lack human resources, the more God helps us. I know this from experience." Or he might say, "In the midst of more serious trials, we need greater faith in God." He would also come out with the invocation, "Lord, it is your work! You will take care

of it. If it is my work, I don't mind if it fails." Such was his disposition that it seemed that he welcomed material concerns and financial worries, and it was clear that they did not affect in the slightest his union with God.

This abandonment to God did not mean that he himself did not work hard. He believed that Providence wished to be helped by our efforts, so when he was starting some work he knew beforehand that he would have to get busy. "We cannot stand idle and expect the help of divine Providence," he used to say. "The Lord comes to our help when he sees our generous efforts made out of love for Him."

How did his faith influence him when speaking about his achievements? We have a good example of this in a lesson he gave during his grave illness in 1872 to the Brother who was caring for him. The lesson was not intended for the Brother, certainly not solely for him. It is worth repeating. When Don Bosco was beginning to pick up again, his return to health made him a bit more talkative than usual, as often happens during convalescence. He joked a bit about the change that was visible on his skin and said,

We'll see if this new skin will be stronger than the old one, and better able to resist the storms and tempests. I am confident that God will make it strong enough for me to do his work, for his greater glory. Be certain, my friend, that all our faculties and talents, and all our work, all our sufferings and humiliations, should all be solely for the glory of God. If we labour for our own glory, then our thoughts and ideas, our work and our inventions, are all worth nothing. Woe to him who works expecting the world's praise! The world pays badly. It pays with ingratitude ... Who is Don Bosco? He is the son of poor country people, whom the mercy of God raised to the glory of the priesthood through no merit of his own. But how great is the goodness of the Lord! He makes use of a simple priest to do wonderful things in this world. Everything he has done and will do in the future is for the greater glory of God and of his Church.

His faith is revealed most of all in his work for the salvation of souls. No matter who came before him, his mind turned immediately to think about that person's soul and how he might help him for eternity. Two supernatural considerations inspired this zeal: the danger of someone facing eternal damnation, and all that our divine Redeemer had done and suffered for the salvation of souls. He trembled with fear for the fate that might befall someone who did not concern himself with his eternal destiny, and he burned with desire to win all for Christ. In this he displayed limitless courage and strength: courage in overcoming human respect, strength in putting up with discomfort, sacrifices and humiliations for such a charita-

ble and noble cause. Fully convinced of the priestly power he had received to forgive sin, he invited all to avail of the sacrament of confession.

For as long as he was able to, he used to go around Turin in search of souls, entering public places, bars, coffee shops, barber's shops and the like, with the excuse of wanting to buy something or receive some service. He was able to engage easily in conversation with owners and clients, and always found the right way to reach the purpose he had in mind. Later he would miss no opportunity to do the same, in meetings, on journeys or in audiences, and he made no distinction of persons. It is true that the Lord had given him efficacy of the word to a degree not just rare, but unique. Nevertheless, in some situations his language sounded unpalatable at first, and it demanded real effort on his part to engage in certain conversations with high ranking people or with educated people or unbelievers. His faith gave him a self-assurance and an ease of manner which were difficult to resist. It was with good reason that he was called a great fisher of souls.⁸⁴ He had one sentence which he liked to repeat when speaking to priests:

Whoever approaches a priest should always take away some truth that will be to the benefit of his soul.⁸⁵

To this I will add a piece of information that came out during the Apostolic Process.⁸⁶ Pius IX had dispensed Don Bosco from the recitation of the Breviary, but he still regularly recited part of it. In return, Don Bosco promised that he would never do anything or say any word that was not intended for the glory of God. Clearly his frequent reminders to people to put their conscience right were for this very purpose.

We have said enough already about his strength in putting up with discomfort and suffering of every kind in the exercise of his ministry. People who loved him greatly saw that he needed care on account of his age and health. They would have liked him to reduce his workload in the confessional and to take some rest. His reply is well known:

Tell the devil to stop trying to deceive so many poor young people and to drag them to hell. Then I will stop sacrificing myself for their sake.

Having dealt with these two fundamental points, I will now speak briefly on three others, which will help us to gauge the strength of faith of Don Bosco. The first of these is all that he did and suffered to defend the faith against heresy.

⁸⁴ On this topic Don Terrone has published a large volume of anecdotes, arranged systematically. (L.I.C.E., Turin).

⁸⁵ Cf. *Mem Biog.* vol 6, p. 381.

⁸⁶ *Summary*, p. 3363, testimony of Mons. Anfossi.

When the laws on freedom of worship and of the press were passed in 1851, the Protestants launched a merciless propaganda in Piedmont, even to the extent of erecting a temple in Turin. Catholics, accustomed to the old regime, were not prepared for the battle. Don Bosco emerged as a vigilant watchman in defence of the faith. To protect the innocent from these attacks he launched a series of leaflets, started a magazine entitled *Friend of Youth*, wrote and got others to write short pamphlets that were distributed with the *Letture Cattoliche* (Catholic Readings), and inserted in the *Companion of Youth* a short tract on the *Fundamentals of the Faith*. Nowadays an insertion like this would seem out of place, but it served a purpose at that time.

He welcomed to the Oratory as many children as he could rescue from the Protestants. He held conversations and debates with the ringleaders and ministers of the sects, often charming them with his admirable calm and impressing them with the clarity of his arguments. His words were always charitable and they persuaded many to abjure their errors. He often gave financial assistance to ensure that people who were in real need would not allow themselves to be bought over by the enemies of the faith. He also alerted parish priests and bishops to the deceitful intrigues of the heretics.

His zeal was not limited to Turin. He preached missions in villages already infected by the contagion of heresy. One of his sermons attracted great publicity. It was in 1856 at Viarigi where a fanatical apostate had settled, with a great crowd of followers who had been deceived by him. God had favoured Don Bosco with some miraculous signs. Still, not all the right thinking people there understood his providential action and they caused him humiliation, while his ruthless enemies went out of there way to harm him, even making several attempts on his life as we have mentioned elsewhere. But nothing intimidated this stalwart of the faith. Indeed from 1868 onwards he extended his efforts to the Ticino Canton, where the prevailing radicalism had left many places without a parish priest. He procured good priests for at least thirty parishes, at the cost of money and sacrifice, and in the face of tough opposition. He carried on unperturbed, earning the gratitude of Catholics who were confirmed in their faith through his charitable work.

Building the Church of St John the Evangelist in Turin cost him an enormous amount. It was erected just a short distance from the Waldensian Temple with the intention of neutralising its unhelpful influence. It is well known that the Salesian houses in La Spezia, Vallecrosia and Florence were opened by Don Bosco with the main purpose of opposing the activities of the Protestants. In La Spezia, the Protestants had 150 pupils in their

school in 1880, but by 1884 they had only 17. More could be said but the limits of this work do not permit.

One day Don Bosco was in conversation with some Salesians in his room. All of a sudden he became serious, trembling from head to foot, and he stood with his eyes fixed. Those around him were frightened when he came around and said,

I have seen a flame extinguished. A boy from the Oratory has become a Protestant.

This is an indication of Don Bosco's sensitivity regarding dangers to the faith. Don Bosco's faith caused him to be anxious in relation to the steady reduction in the numbers of young men who were aspiring to become priests. They were difficult times for ecclesiastical vocations but this is not the place to enumerate the causes. If faith is by hearing - *fides ex auditu* (cf. Rom 10:17), then what will happen to the Christian people, when the word of God is not preached and religious instruction is not given? Don Bosco, faithful servant of the Church, did not waste his time lamenting the situation. Some members of the government had reason to rebuke him for producing too many priests! No sacrifice was too great when it came to working for an increase in the number of students for priesthood.

He preached, and he wrote, that fostering a good vocation was the gift of a great treasure to the Church. He advised his Salesians never to refuse a boy for lack of means if he gave good hopes of becoming a priest. Instead they should spend all they have to his end, and if necessary, go out and beg. If they found themselves in need as a result, they should not worry for Our Lady will come to their help, sometimes even miraculously. It did not matter to him if the priest then went to the diocese or on the missions or to some other religious community: he was still a precious gift of Jesus Christ to his Church.

On his part he opened the doors of the Oratory to young men who showed an inclination for the priestly life. He believed that there was no better way of using the means given him by charity than by equipping places to accept as many candidates as possible, and by spending all that was necessary for their study, food, clothing, their ecclesiastical incardination and their exemption from military duty. Hundreds of pupils, the hope of the Church, went from the Oratory to seminaries, despite the accusations of those who complained that Don Bosco was interested only in getting vocations for himself. There are data in the *Biographical Memoirs* that show the very opposite to be the case.

He made enormous sacrifices over a period of ten years to provide accommodation and the opportunity for study and formation at the Oratory for the clerics of Turin and the other dioceses of Piedmont and Liguria, when the government ordered the closure of several seminaries. And that was not all. In 1875 he got the idea of starting the Work of Mary Help of Christians for late vocations, which provided a considerable number of good priests. The work for vocations remained a major concern for him right to the end of his life.

In 1883, in the presence of several trustworthy Salesians, he declared with obvious emotion, "I am happy! I have had reliable statistics drawn up which show that more than two thousand priests have come from our houses and are working in various dioceses." He gave thanks to Mary Help of Christians who had provided him with the means to do so much good.

Another notable characteristic of his spirit of faith was his love for all that had to do with divine worship. It is true that worship belongs to the virtue of religion, but it presupposes the virtue of faith which reveals to us our duties towards God. Here we will deal only with external worship, leaving aside his internal devotion which we have already dealt with at length. We have also had occasion to speak more than once of his acts of worship. It remains now to say something about his zeal for the places of worship and the sacred ceremonies.

Although he was poor, he spent a fortune on building the Churches of Mary Help of Christians and St John the Evangelist in Turin and that of the Sacred Heart in Rome. He wanted them to be rich in splendour and art.

What a man! – said the architect of the Church of St John the Evangelist⁸⁷ – he gave me an idea of how much he could afford to spend but then added with enviable calm and confidence, 'It is better to do things well, however, and if the price comes to twice what we have estimated, it does not matter. We will find some way to meet it.

He attached great importance to music and installed a first class organ in each of the Churches. He believed that musical performances were events that served to draw people to the celebrations. The beauty and style of the music not only aroused enthusiasm among the people but also served to impress on their minds a lofty idea of the honour due to God.

Regarding Church functions I will mention just one interesting peculiarity. There was always a prominent part for the so-called *piccolo clero*

⁸⁷ Letter of Conte Arborio Mella to his daughter. The original is in the possession of the Marchesa Terzi at Sciolze (Turin).

(Altar Boys' Society), which was a creation of Don Bosco in the form in which he introduced it. The Salesians spread the society everywhere. Huysmans⁸⁸ mentions the profound impression it made on him on one of his visits to Paris. Those numerous altar servers that Don Bosco had, assisted at the sacred ceremonies with edifying correctness, seriousness and fervour, and their behaviour won the devout admiration of the people.

Don Bosco knew how to get young people to love everything connected with serving at the altar, on major solemnities and feasts but also on ordinary weekdays. This helped to create at the Oratory an atmosphere of faith, which mirrored his own faith, always anxious to see God served worthily. According to reliable testimony, those who came from outside were full of admiration at the sight of so many devout and happy boys. The same source records that noble families used to bring their children at first to the Church of St Francis de Sales, and later to that of Mary Help of Christians, in the hope that they might become like those good and joyful boys.

We could go on forever on the topic of Don Bosco's faith, but it is not possible to develop it any further here. By way of conclusion I quote the words that the fourth successor of Don Bosco wrote from Rome to all the Salesians on the triumphant day of his canonisation.⁸⁹

Faith, which is the basis of all holiness, was without doubt the lamp for his steps, as the psalmist says. In the light of faith his mind was filled with contemplation of the revealed truths, and his will moved in directions always in conformity with the divine will. Whether speaking or writing or acting, his spirit never wavered between God and his own ego, between heaven and earth, between the eternal and the temporal, between duty and pleasure, but he chose always the will of God, Father and Supreme Lord. From Him he drew the sure law which governed everything he did. What I mean to say is that he never sought his own self, his comfort or satisfaction, his own advantage. He spent his time, energy and efforts in serving the Lord in the best way possible, working in the field entrusted to him by divine Providence.

⁸⁸ Huysmans., *Loc.cit.*, p. 1.

⁸⁹ *Mem Biog.* vol 19, p. 282.

15

Apostle of Charity

We will try to give some other indications to describe further the figure of Don Bosco presented in the preceding pages. Following him step by step through the course of his life, we have emphasised the spirit which motivated him at the different stages and the varying situations of his life. We have seen him as a child and as an adolescent, as a cleric and a young priest, as a founder of works and as a minister of the Lord, always consumed by zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. We have seen how he was tested by tribulations of every kind, without ever losing that imperturbable calm, that peace and tranquillity, which came from his perfect, intimate, uninterrupted union with God. Now, since Don Bosco's life was undoubtedly one great apostolate of charity, in this chapter we want to study it from that point of view, and to see what there is that is proper to him. This is a vast topic on its own, but we have to stay within the limits allowed by the nature of this book.

Don Bosco was essentially an apostle. An apostle is one who is sent. He was sent, as we have seen, on a specific mission of charity towards the young, a mission which was providential but not exclusive. When he was called to this apostolate he was also shown the means by which he should prepare himself. He was to begin by becoming humble, strong and tough, and then proceed to acquire knowledge. In other words, the preparation was to be physical, moral and ascetical, rather than scientific. What was not clear then, would become clear in the future.

Carrying out this mission would mean toiling hard, through difficulties and contradictions, in a huge work of instruction and education. He would need good health, a balanced temperament, and learning. When God destines one of his creatures for a particular mission, He always gives him

the natural aptitudes required for the fulfilment of that mission, and so it was in the case of Don Bosco. However, it would not have been enough for him to rely on his human efforts nor his natural gifts. To have done so would have produced merely natural results, which were not in line with God's designs. He needed also, and above all, the powerful help of divine grace, which is given only to the humble of heart. According to St Thomas, "humility is a disposition which prepares the soul to receive spiritual and divine benefits."⁹⁰

Jesus triumphed over the world through the humility of his whole life. There was no other way Don Bosco could have triumphed over the endless obstacles put in his way by the enemies of good, and so bring to a happy conclusion the mighty task entrusted to him by God. We have to agree that Providence gave him ample opportunities to be well rooted in humility. He was of humble birth; for two years he endured the humble condition of a farm worker with another family, and he did humble work from the age of sixteen to twenty-one.

He felt destined for great things, and he was inclined to a high esteem of self, but his spirit was slowly mortified and he became accustomed never to refuse anything, no matter how humiliating, whenever the glory of God and the good of his neighbour might demand it. He learned to consider himself nothing more than a poor instrument in the hands of God. Humility became the secret of his intimate union with God, the source from which all his activity flowed. So it is with every true apostle.

We must not overlook the fact that he learned this lesson from the Mother of God. Don Bosco's apostolate had a specifically Marian imprint, which is one of its distinguishing characteristics. *Mary Help of Christians and Don Bosco* could well be the title of a wonderful poem! "Don Bosco is nothing," he used to say at the end of his life, "Our Lady did everything."

Every apostolate has its precise and proper object. As with all the saints, Don Bosco practised universal charity, according to the circumstances. "Do good to all and evil to none" was a maxim he used to repeat even towards the end of his life.

In the field of charity, which is as vast as the needs of people, he was given a particular area which was the Christian education of the children of the ordinary people. To do this work he founded two religious families, and he handed on his spirit to them. What spirit? Leaving aside elements common to others, I will speak about the three characteristics indicated above

⁹⁰ *Ilia Ilac.*, chapter 46, 2.

which can be considered particular to Don Bosco: a spirit of hardworking charity, joyful charity and unbiased charity.

The first element is that of hard work. It would be difficult to find another saint who worked as hard as Don Bosco. For Pius XI, his life was "one of colossal work."⁹¹

This aspect of Don Bosco's life is described, better than anyone else could describe it, by Fr Leonard Murialdo in the following passage:⁹²

I am not aware of long prayers or extraordinary penances in the life of Don Bosco. What I do know is his constant indefatigable work, carried on over a long period of years for the glory of God, with endless fatigue, amid crosses and contradictions of every kind, with a calmness and tranquillity that were unique, and with extraordinary results for the glory of God and the good of souls."

Regarding work, whether for himself or for others, Don Bosco had a particular understanding that was all his own. For himself, he regarded work as a weapon against the enemies of his soul, as can be seen from the resolution he wrote at the time of his priestly ordination. He did not mean just any work. In his opinion, a priest has an obligation to work, and to work to an extent that, even if it cost him his life, he would have done nothing more than his duty. It is the aim, and the glory of priests, never to get tired of working for the good of souls.

Feeling that he was called to a work on a grand scale, he maintained that nothing great is ever achieved without great effort. He was convinced that the modern world wants so see priests who work, and he realised how much even the enemies of the Church appreciate priests who work. He believed that nowadays it is no longer enough to pray. We must also work, and work hard, while never forgetting prayer.

With these principles it is no wonder that he employed all his forces to work for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. When advised to take some rest he would reply pleasantly, "I will rest when I am a few kilometres above the moon!" With his sound constitution he might have lived to be ninety or more. Instead he died, worn out, literally worn out from toilsome work, day and night. We can well believe the testimony of those who recall that, when he was seventy, he suffered at the thought of the work he used to be able to do, and now he had neither the strength nor the sight to do even one hundredth of it.

⁹¹ Speech on 3 December 1933.

⁹² *Mem Biog.* vol 4, p. 748.

He wanted to see the same spirit of hard work flourishing in the Salesian Congregation. He used to say so clearly to those who wished to enter,

The spirit of the congregation is this, that no one should think of entering it to stand with his hands by his sides.

An experience he had in the early days of the Congregation encouraged him to get the members to work without let-up.

At that time he could not speak openly about religious life, because hostile notions were prevalent almost everywhere among the people. Seeing the need to prepare those among the young clerics at the Oratory whom he considered suitable, he did not demand much from them by way of practices of piety, but he made them work as hard as they possibly could. And what happened? There were some less disciplined clerics who would have left if they had been subjected to rules that were restrictive. Instead, under his watchful guidance, they worked willingly and hard, and later, when the circumstances changed, they became excellent Salesian priests.

Later on, when things were more organised, he had another experience. He discovered that a reluctance to work was one of the causes that led people to leave religious life. Hard work, as well as helping to uncover talents and skills that might otherwise have remained hidden, also helped to preserve vocations. Pius IX confirmed him in this way of thinking, and twice shared this view with him.

In 1869 the Pontiff told him that he had more esteem for a congregation where they prayed less and worked more than one where they prayed a lot and worked very little. For this reason in 1874, he authorised him to entrust to the novices work that the Rule prescribed for the professed. "Keep them occupied with work!" the Pope told him.

Having said this, it was his own sense that he should not spare the members in matters of work. Certainly he encouraged them to take care of their health, but in order to be able to work more. His words and example were a powerful and effective stimulus. With evident satisfaction he pointed out how all those who had grown up in the Society, had acquired a love, and even a zeal, for work, which, he felt, could not be surpassed. "As long as this hard work lasts," he used to say, "things will go well."⁹³

With this kind of spirit he was able to make statements like the following,

⁹³ *Mem Biog.* vol 11, p. 409..

When it happens that a Salesian dies working for souls, then we can say that our Congregation has won a great triumph, and copious blessings will descend upon it from heaven.

Such things actually happened, especially on the Missions. In his first three-year report to the Holy See on the state of the Society, he did not hesitate to write:

The work is beyond our resources and the number of men we have, but no one complains. It is as if tiredness is another source of nourishment after their material food.

It is one thing to do a lot of work. It is another thing to work well. Everyone knows that the apostolate, while it is and should be a means of sanctification, can also become a cause of spiritual exhaustion for someone who allows himself to be overburdened with external activity. Don Bosco did not need anyone to point out to him this danger which is so evident. To begin with, we can refer to the judgment of Pope Pius XI, someone who had a good knowledge of human nature and who knew Don Bosco well.

In his speech on 19 November 1933 for the approval of the miracles, he said,

It is necessary to ask what was the secret of all this miracle of work. And Don Bosco himself has given us the explanation, the true key to this magnificent mystery. He gave it to us in his continuous aspirations and constant prayer to God. His intimate conversation with God was unceasing and rarely has the saying *qui laborat, orat*⁹⁴ been so true as in his case, for he identified work with prayer.

As for others, he was not satisfied that they worked a lot, but he taught them to work spiritually, that is, with faith, hope and charity. With faith meant seeking in faith to do always the will of God, without ever looking for the praise of people. With hope meant looking for heavenly recompense for our labours here and not poor earthly rewards. With charity meant doing all for love of God, offering everything to him, for he alone is worthy of being loved and served, and with charity towards one's neighbour, seeking only the good of souls, with the gentleness of St Francis de Sales and the patience of Job.

He feared greatly that the efficacy and merit of work might be lost if one's own will were allowed to infiltrate. Self-will was to be conquered and renounced, because for a Christian and for a religious, work is to be seen as

⁹⁴ The one who works, prays.

the fulfilment of one's duty, whether it is to one's own liking or not. After a message he received from heaven in 1876 he used to repeat frequently,

Work and temperance will make the Salesian Congregation flourish. These are the two weapons with which we will succeed in conquering everything.

He believed that temperance was another indispensable virtue that should always be accompanied by work.

To raise their spirits, he liked to speak on occasion of the extraordinary good the Congregation was called to do in the world, and he did so in such vivid terms that it was as if it had already been accomplished. At the end he would warn against any presumption, saying that work must be joined with temperance and humility. It has to be said that the General Chapter was inspired when it inserted in the Regulations for the Houses of Novitiate an article obliging the Novice Master to instil in the novices "that untiring zeal for work sanctified by prayer and union with God, which should be characteristic of the sons of Don Bosco."⁹⁵

I will not spend time trying to measure the field of the charitable work of Don Bosco towards his neighbour, and in particular for the sons of the ordinary people. For this I refer the reader to the four chapters dealing with Don Bosco as confessor, preacher, writer and educator. There you can see how his unparalleled work rate was accompanied always by a perfect interior life, making him an altogether exceptional saint.

He was hardworking in his apostolate of charity, but it was always a cheerful charity. The reading for the Mass of St John Bosco, taken from St Paul, begins with the words: *Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again rejoice* (cf. Phil 4:4). It is well chosen. Joy dwelt in him and radiated from him always. How many reasons he had to feel sad, from childhood to old age! And yet those who were in a position to know him best are in complete agreement in testifying that cheerfulness was one of his characteristics for the whole of his life. Who would ever have thought that he was troubled by a thousand worries as he gave those 'goodnights' laced with good humour, or when he went into the playground, calm and smiling, with a word of greeting that brought laughter and did so much good to those to whom they were addressed?

We have his letters, written under pressure of extreme labour and serious difficulties, yet adorned with witticisms which were intended to touch the heart of the other person and sow there the seed of some good sen-

⁹⁵ *Regulations of the Salesian Society*, art. 291, par 4.

timent. His example exerted such influence on those who had the good fortune to live with him that they also, without realising it, were inclined to accept things contrary to their own tastes with admirable serenity and a spontaneous smile. Don Bosco's constant spiritual joy came from a heart filled with the love of God. This, together with his perfect control over self, made him serene in all life's dealings and a bearer of serenity to his sons and to the young.

I cannot pass over in silence two things that were affected by his spirit of joyful charity. The first of these concerns the piety of the boys and in particular frequent communion.

Nothing went against his way of thinking of the goodness of the Lord as much as the burdensome remains of the Jansenist severity that still survived here and there in Piedmont, weighing on people's souls especially in relation to the practice of the sacraments. Don Bosco set out courageously to dispel these notions, and to encourage young people to participate joyfully in the Eucharist. He accepted firmly the genuine teaching of the Church, and went further even than St Francis de Sales, favouring not just weekly but daily communion. This was something that had not been done previously.

The comments opposed to this innovation and the occasional strong protests are therefore understandable. Some were genuinely upset on seeing the procession of young boys who approached the altar rails every day at the Community Mass in the Oratory. He let them talk and gradually the practice became acceptable. Pope Pius X ended the discussion once and for all with his well known decree which confirmed Don Bosco's practice in relation to the sacrament, even using the very words of Don Bosco.

The other beneficial affect of his joyful charity is the spirit he gave in his preventive system for the education of young people. The prudent, wise and fruitful norms that he dictated are the result of his joyful spirit in one of the most delicate works one can undertake on behalf of young people. As a child he felt the urge to be an apostle among his peers and even among his older neighbours. He used his skill as an acrobat, a skill he had learned for this very purpose. As a teenager he started a group called The Joy Club. As a young priest, at the beginning of his mission, he attracted the youngsters of Turin, becoming one of them, happy to be among them. In the early days of the Oratory he thought up the best ways and means of creating joy in the house. When he put pen to paper and wrote down in precise terms the rules that were to guide the education of the young, as he saw it, he made joyful charity a *sine qua non* of his whole educational method. Indeed, in the final

analysis his method can be summed up in the beautiful expression *servite Domino in laetitia* (serve the Lord with gladness).

I called him an apostle of unbiased charity - by that I mean a charity that rises above all judgments and prejudices. He did not judge those for whom he was working, nor those who either opposed him and criticised his work, or lavished praise upon him. He showed no prejudice towards those who misunderstood and put obstacles in the way of what he was doing, nor towards those who, through bad will, fought against his institutions and would have wished to destroy them.

First of all, the charity that burned in his heart made him a minister of God towards people of every kind. It did not matter who he was dealing with. As soon as he got a sense of the person's attitude towards religion, he found a way to invite him to think about his soul. The charity which burned within him gave him a remarkable apostolic frankness which, combined with sincere simplicity, never failed to make an impression. Human respect can sometimes hold priests back from approaching certain topics; Don Bosco did not know the meaning of it!

Knowing that in this way he could offer the best service one could expect from a priest, he did not worry about the first impressions his words might have on the person before him. They were often scientists, professional men, politicians, important people, known for their ideas against the Church, who might well turn up their noses at what he had to say. He did not worry but his words were accompanied with such gentleness of manner, and such expressions of esteem, reverence and affection, and often with unexpected urbane wit, that there is not even one case recorded where someone felt offended. Many delightful episodes of this kind have been related

Both criticism and praise were heaped on him from every side and on many occasions. Hundreds of times the newspapers wrote about him, both favourably and unfavourably. He was not dismayed by criticism and he looked upon praise as good publicity for his charitable works. His views are clearly expressed in an article of the old *Regulations for Salesian Houses* which was kept in the 1877 edition and successive editions.

In that article Don Bosco tells the boys that they should become accustomed to receive blame and praise with indifference.⁹⁶ This is asking a lot of young people! On his own part, whenever people spoke to him about praise or blame that had been accorded him, he used to say that those

⁹⁶ Chapter 10, art. 6.

who praised him were saying what he should be, and those who criticised him were saying what he was. His critics had two main complaints: that he attracted too much publicity to his own person, and that he became too familiar with people who were opposed to the Church.

He saw publicity as a way of making his institutions known and getting support for them. In this he had the merit of understanding the times he lived in. Gradually it became so fashionable to make use of publicity that even his enemies had recourse to it when they wanted some enterprise to succeed.

It is easy to exonerate him from the second accusation. He saw no harm in approaching anyone with a view to doing good. In dealing with civil authorities, he respected them and he rendered to Caesar the things that were Caesar's in order to ensure that no one neglected to render to God the things that were God's. He did not seek to flatter anyone. With deputies, senators and ministers he behaved courteously and openly. He was a priest with everyone and he did not omit to speak truths that they might not have heard from anybody else.

His charity was free from the prejudices of others. He prudently avoided any harmful action that might have had adverse consequences for his cause. The prejudices against him came from three sources: ecclesiastical, religious and political.

Don Bosco's work contained elements that were new to the world and seemed irreconcilable with traditions that had been long venerated. The novelties that he introduced have now entered the life of the Church but those with new ideas are not always welcomed at the time, hence the reservations, the mistrust and the opposition. Sometimes the difficulties were so great and lasted so long that anyone who did not have a sense of a higher mission would have been discouraged. He did not give up nor change course. He suffered patiently, he was humiliated, he spoke and wrote, and only towards the end of his days did he have the consolation of knowing that he was universally understood, appreciated and praised.

By the prejudices of the second type I mean the false ideas of the times regarding religious life. The government suppressed the convents and dispersed their members. The press, newspapers, books and theatre - continually denigrated religious and heaped derision upon them. Even Christian families were influenced and did not always look sympathetically on religious. The secular clergy did not also appreciate religious. Religious meant friar, and friar, at that time, was regarded as a synonym for a man of little

worth, an idle good-for-nothing. Children laughed at the cowls of the friars, on the rare occasions when they saw them. And Don Bosco was planning to found a new religious congregation! It would have carried little weight for him to say that his would be different from all the others. Even the boys at the Oratory would not have listened to him and they would have told him, "Priests, yes! But we don't want to be friars!" It is easy to imagine then how, with this in mind, he felt the need to proceed cautiously so as not to offend the common perceptions and not to ruin the project before it got off the ground. His goodness, patience and prudence saw him through in the end. Only a charity that saw far into the future could have sustained him in such an arduous undertaking.

Then there were the political prejudices. The birth of the Society coincided with the period of the wars for the independence and unification of Italy. Unorthodox ideas of reform, progress and liberty that had been fermenting during the pontificate of Gregory XVI exploded on the arrival of Pius IX. Frenzied popular manifestations aroused a desire for change even among members of the clergy, secular and religious. Many of them went with the current, either because they no longer accepted discipline, or because they were influenced by reading the books of Gioberti, or led astray by their own naivety. If it had been pure patriotism it would have been all right, but there were some who were taking advantage of the situation for their own ends. They were the members of the sects, enemies of God and of the Church. Too many good people were short-sighted and allowed themselves to be misled.

They did everything possible to drag Don Bosco into the field of politics. His thoroughly priestly way of thinking showed him the right line of conduct. He chose, not the way of politics that divides, but always and in everything, the way of charity that unites. He had to suffer a lot as a consequence, at the time and later. But he did not bend. Prudent, calm, respectful, he thought only of gathering young people who were abandoned to make them good citizens and good Christians. He thought increasingly about how to protect young people from the errors that were all around, because in his own mind he saw these young people as the foundation stones of the edifice he was to construct.

The experience of that troubled period was to be his teacher in years ahead when he was consolidating the Salesian Society. Before the new state he proposed to make it known - and he was praised for this by Pius IX - that it was possible to render to Caesar the things that belonged to Caesar, without any compromise, and without ever being diverted from giving to

God what belongs to God. He considered this the biggest problem facing Catholics at that time.

He met many difficulties, which he sought to resolve by the practice of evangelical charity. The enemies of the Church had their art refined and their means were immense. Nevertheless, Don Bosco managed to stay within the law and by his charity he secured for himself the personal favour of the men at the seat of power. This cost him sacrifices of every kind but he succeeded in establishing his building on a solid foundation, so solid that others who wanted to restore their institutions, were quite happy to follow his example.

Pope Pius XI, the Pope who canonised him, referred to the many difficulties that crossed the path of our saint and which he overcame with God's help. In his homily on the great day, he said,

[Don Bosco was] entirely dedicated to the glory of God and the salvation of souls. He was never put off by the doubts of others, but with bold ideas and the use of modern means he set about realising those innovative plans which he knew to be in accordance with God's will, even though to others they appeared rash.

Further on the Pope said,

In the face of difficulties of every kind, in spite of derision and contempt on the part of many, he would raise his eyes to heaven and exclaim, 'My brothers, this is God's work, it is the Lord's will. The Lord is obliged to provide the necessary means.' Events proved the truth of his words, so much so that contempt gave way to universal admiration.

What St John wrote about love, fear is driven out by perfect love (cf. 1 Jn 4:18), was seen to be true in the life of Don Bosco. His extraordinary love for God and neighbour rendered him steadfast in everything and so he reached the goal of his mission.

Here the mind turns spontaneously to the Mass approved by the Church for St John Bosco. It opens with words which Scripture speaks of Solomon, and which Pius XI used many times in speaking about Don Bosco: God gave him (Solomon) wisdom and exceptional understanding and knowledge, as vast as the sand on the seashore (cf. 1 Kgs 5:9) This was said of the one who, as is suggested also in the Mass, was to become the father of many nations (cf. Rom 4:18)

16

The Gift of Counsel

Don Bosco's spiritual light shone brightest towards the end of his life. His works were now established and the disciples, formed at his school, were reaching maturity. His physical condition no longer allowed him to join in the rhythm of daily life. The extraordinary charisms which, in truth, had been evident from the age of nine, shone now more vividly and more frequently than ever, until at the end it was almost as if his whole existence was wrapped in the supernatural.

God knows the trepidation with which I began to write about the mind and heart of Don Bosco in the earlier parts of this work. Now, since I do not want to omit mention of his charismatic gifts, the trepidation turns to sacred terror, like the fear of those who approached the Ark of the Covenant. Is mystical theology not called the higher level of sacred science? What then can one say about mystical experiences, not written about in treatises, but lived in real life?

The famous French apologist, Augustus Nicolas, a man respected for his experience, learning and holiness, went to visit Don Bosco a few years before Don Bosco died. He knelt before him and remained there with his hands joined throughout the conversation, religiously gathering the holy words that fell from Don Bosco's lips, as if they were the human sound of the divine Word. This is the right attitude to adopt before such greatness.

God surely gave Don Bosco grace beyond measure to make him the instrument of his providential designs. Indeed, in the order of Providence, when God chooses a creature for a particular office, he equips him beforehand and prepares him to accomplish well the mission entrusted to him.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Cf. *S. Theol.* III, q. XXVII, a. 4.

Among the special gifts that God willed to bestow on Don Bosco we have to mention the gift of discernment and counsel⁹⁸ which enlightened his whole life. It was accompanied by other outstanding privileges which we must not neglect nor treat lightly.

Through the gift of counsel the Holy Spirit perfects in the faithful soul the virtue of prudence. It is a supernatural intuition which enables one to make a decision promptly and confidently on what is to be done, especially in difficult cases. This gift has as its object the right direction of particular actions, one's own or those of others, depending on time, place and individual circumstances. We can apply in practice to Don Bosco the teaching of a great Bishop⁹⁹ who says that Don Bosco always had right discernment as to the means, seeing clearly the way he should go and following it without fear, despite the difficulties that often stood in his way, and he knew how to wait for the right moment.

Anyone who has followed us this far will not need further proof of this assertion. There is hardly a page in what we have written which does not show how he saw clearly everything that concerned his own life. It would be mere repetition if we were to go over it again, so we shall look instead at the direction he offered to others.

Don Bosco was a man of discernment, not just by virtue of his intelligence and human prudence, but by a gift from above. This view was so widely accepted that people came to see him and wrote to him from all over, to seek a word of enlightenment from him.

Very many people, including some important people, had recourse to Don Bosco by letter on matters of conscience and things concerning their spiritual life or on other questions. There were very many of these letters but few remain, because Don Bosco himself destroyed most of them on account of the confidential matters they contained. Still, in the archives there are many requesting advice on family matters, on the advisability of changing job or career, on taking out a loan, on legal disputes, on the education of children or the choice of a state in life, on all kinds of doubts and various necessities. They are proof of the trust that people placed in the supernatural wisdom of his recommendations.

Pius IX himself turned to Don Bosco and his higher gifts in a time of difficulty, after the capture of Rome when he was undecided whether to stay there or to leave. Advice to go elsewhere came to him from all sides.

⁹⁸ Translator's note: Don Ceria frequently uses the word *consiglio* and rarely the word *discernimento*. I have sometimes translated *consiglio* as counsel and sometimes as discernment, depending on the context.

⁹⁹ Landrieux, Mons, Bishop of Dijon, *Le Divin Méconnu*, p. 163.

The Pope was hesitant but made prudent arrangements for the journey. But when they told him to delay no longer, he replied that he had asked Don Bosco's advice and had decided to follow it, whatever it might be. After much prayer Don Bosco sent his answer, delivered by hand, in these terms:

The sentry, the Angel of Israel, should remain at his post and guard God's rock and the Holy Ark.

The Pope recognised the message of God in Don Bosco's words, and was confirmed in his decision not to leave Rome.

People came to Don Bosco in person whenever they could. The effort that these audiences cost him is beyond imagining. The Jesuit, Fr Joseph Oreglia, stated that, without any other form of penance, this would be enough to prove the heroic character of his virtue. People came to him at home and in the streets, in the city and beyond, without any consideration for the amount of work he had to do. People of every social class and rank came, one after the other, to consult him. Clergy and laity, princes and workers, rich and poor, friends and strangers, educated and uneducated, good and bad, crowded his waiting room. The superiors of religious orders or communities often asked to speak to him, as did the superiors of monasteries and sisters of many congregations.

He did not look people in the face but sat there like someone carrying out a duty, not showing preferences to anyone. Everyone who came to him was treated with kindness and courtesy, as if sent by God. He listened without interrupting, and was interested in what was said, even when it was a case of the interminable ramblings of some poor person afflicted with scruples. If the other person interrupted while he was speaking, he stopped immediately. He was never the first to end a conversation, it was as if he had nothing else to do, nor did he give any sign of wanting to cut it short, even though he often had to keep repeating himself as different people came to see him about the same thing.

At Marseilles once, when he was reasoning with a mother who looked as if she might go on forever, someone came in to tell him, for the third time, that there were a lot of people waiting for him. He whispered in the ear of the one who had come in:

Things should be done well or not at all. This is not wasting time. We will let the others in as soon as we can.

A witness¹⁰⁰ writes that a heavenly peace was to be found in Don Bosco's room at the Oratory. That peace did not emanate from the walls but

¹⁰⁰ Avv. C. Banchetti, Speech given at a commemoration of Don Bosco, 24 June 1903.

from the person of Don Bosco, and so, even outside he was always being sought. Wherever he went, an atmosphere of peace and calm expectancy surrounded him. His words were like those of an oracle, sounding sometimes like a panacea, and at other times, like a spark of mysticism.

The spirit of the Lord, which spoke through the mouth of Don Bosco, was seen also in the wonderful freedom with which he shared his advice, whether asked for or not, with people of every kind, poor or rich, uneducated or learned, of low or high rank. He drew his inspiration from the *Seminator casti consilii*, planting wise and holy thoughts in the minds of people, without any human respect.

A further proof that the Spirit of the Lord was on the lips of Don Bosco was the ease with which he gave advice, and could adapt his advice, with an efficacy that proved irresistible, even when the advice was hard to accept. Priests, clerics and pupils experienced this every day in the Oratory, whether they met him in the playground, in his room or in the confessional.

The advice he used to give in the playground became known as 'the word in the ear (*la parola all'orecchio*)'. For as long as he was able to, Don Bosco took part in the boys' recreation. When he could no longer spend much time with them, he used to make an appearance. This gave him the opportunity to get to know them, and speak an appropriate word to each of them, at the right moment. It was for this reason that he inserted the following article in the regulations for the houses:

Remember the example of the hen and her chicks. Those who come closest to mother hen are more likely to receive a special morsel. Similarly those who are close to the superiors always receive some good recommendation or advice.¹⁰¹

In his last years, all he was able to do was to go along the veranda but, when he reached the entrance to his room, he would not go in immediately. Instead, he would turn towards the boys in the playground. They had watched him lovingly as he made his way along with slow difficult steps. Then he would utter some kind words which were received with avid attention and welcomed with joyful applause. In earlier times, how many such words he had whispered in the ears of individuals, according to each one's needs! The educator who is there only to admonish easily becomes suspect in the eyes of the pupils. They take a dislike to him and seek to avoid him whenever he appears. The boys of the Oratory loved Don Bosco's word in

¹⁰¹ Regulations for the Houses of the Salesian Society, art. 763.

the ear and used to ask him for some words of advice. Scripture says, *Like a golden earring, or a necklace of fine gold, is a wise reprover to an obedient ear* (cf. Prv 25:12.)

Don Bosco would put his hand on a boy's head, lean over and whisper a word secretly in his ear, putting the other hand round his mouth so that nobody else would hear. It took only a few seconds but the results were magic! You could see the change of expression on the boy's face and the reaction: a sudden smile, a serious look, blushing or tears, an answer yes or no, repeating Don Bosco's gesture by whispering in his ear, hearing the word again, a shout of *thanks* and running off to play or to the chapel. It sometimes happened that a boy heard Don Bosco's word and remained by his side as if absorbed in some marvellous idea. Other effects were seen later: going to the sacraments, becoming more recollected in prayer, greater diligence in his scholastic duties, better behaviour or greater charity towards his companions.

It is recorded¹⁰² that many, whose names could be given, were so affected by these simple means that they began to do extraordinary penances, to the point where Don Bosco had to stop them. Others used to wait at night by his door, knocking gently every now and then until he opened it, because they did not want to go to bed with sin on their souls.

His biographer¹⁰³ has preserved a collection of these words in the ear, like a bouquet of beautiful flowers. The written word lacks the vividness of expression which comes from the accent, the look, the smile, or from the seriousness with which the words were spoken. It cannot capture the freshness of the present moment or the psychological condition of the hearer. The image of Don Bosco among the young leaps forth from these well written lines of one witness:

It is as if I can see him again, smiling at me, and hear his charming words, and admire again that loving face on which the beauty of his soul was clearly stamped.¹⁰⁴

If we could gather the pieces of advice given by Don Bosco *in camera caritatis*, they would make a fine anthology of Christian wisdom. We can see this from the genuine simplicity of the few examples that survive, and from the general testimony of witnesses. Those who received such advice appreciated its worth but, for the most part, kept it jealously to themselves.

¹⁰² *Mem Biog.* vol 6, p. 417.

¹⁰³ *Loc.cit.*, p.416; cf. p. 433.

¹⁰⁴ Letter of a parish priest, Don E. Sacco, to Don Rua (1888).

This writer will never forget his first meeting with Don Bosco within those hallowed walls. The high point of the encounter was a golden piece of spiritual advice given by Don Bosco, expressed in very simple but precise words, spoken spontaneously in a tone that was both authoritative and fatherly. The sound of it still re-echoes within me.

The Oratory was like a great Noah's Ark. Nobody, not even the humblest little boy, was refused access to Don Bosco's room. Nobody was ever afraid going up to see him. All were welcomed with the same kindness, as previously described. Don Bosco would be sitting at an ordinary desk, with letters and papers piled high. It would often happen that more correspondence would arrive during the conversation. He would put everything aside, and give all his attention to whoever was sitting in front of him, as if there was nobody else to be seen and nothing else to do. Naturally people came out from him enlightened, encouraged and happy.

Don Murilado's successor as director of the artisans was very happy to give his description of the situation of those who lived in that veritable sanctuary, where so much good advice was to be had. He said,

You have a great good fortune in your house, which nobody else in Turin has, not even in religious communities. You have a room which anyone can enter, weighed down with affliction, and come out from it radiant with joy.

His biographer adds,

Thousands of us have experienced the proof of that.¹⁰⁵

The advice he gave as confessor brings us to a more sensitive topic. One of his very first pupils,¹⁰⁶ writing of him as confessor, uses three adjectives: "charitable, opportune and wise."

We give just a few examples which illustrate perfectly the triple judgement of our witness, based on his own experience.

Charity: One day towards the end of his life Don Bosco said to a small group of Salesians who were gathered in a circle around him,

Last night I dreamt that I wanted to go to confession. In the sacristy there was only one priest (whom he named). I looked at him from a distance and I felt almost a repugnance. "'He is too strict,' I kept saying to myself." The people around him laughed heartily, watching to see what affect the words would have on the priest concerned. He laughed as heartily as the others and said pleasantly, "Who would have thought that Don Bosco could ever be afraid of me?"

¹⁰⁵ Lemoyne, *Mem Biog.*, vol 6, p. 441.

¹⁰⁶ Francesia, *loc.cit.*, p. 6.

This exchange was a lesson for them all, one that was understood immediately.

Opportune: All are agreed that in confession Don Bosco did not say much. What he did say was well chosen to fit the particular situation, and designed to inculcate a firm purpose of amendment and an appreciation of the sacrament.

A young man who used to attend the Oratory had agreed to sing a religious part in the *Teatro Regio* in Turin. It seemed to be an honour for the house, given the times, but Don Bosco did not see it that way! Fearful for the souls of his boys, he did not think it right that a boy from the Oratory should go to the theatre. But what would happen if he were to forbid him to go? The superiors were on tenterhooks. On Sunday morning the young man went to confession. Don Bosco spoke and gave some advice. The penitent nodded without a word. To cut short the gossip of others he said to whoever he met, "When it is a matter of conscience, it is always the confessor who decides."

Wisdom: One of Don Bosco's most cherished dreams was, as we have already said, to increase the number of students for the priesthood. The conviction that his words were inspired by God led very many to him to seek advice with regard to their vocation. A yes or no from Don Bosco, in a matter of such importance, removed all doubt. During the apostolic process many witnesses, speaking about this aspect of Don Bosco's priestly zeal, agreed unanimously that they had never heard of anyone who regretted following Don Bosco's advice, whether it was favourable or unfavourable to his joining the clerical state. Neither had they heard of anyone who had chosen to go against his advice who had not regretted it.

An unedited chronicle records a trivial episode which illustrates the extraordinary effect of such charity and wisdom on the minds of the adolescents who went to confession to Don Bosco. One young man, when he had finished his confession, asked Don Bosco if he could kiss his foot. Don Bosco was not in the least put out but answered, "There is no need. Kiss my hand, as you usually do the hand of a priest." The young man kissed his hand with great affection and exclaimed, "What a blessing it would have been for me if I had opened my eyes long ago as you opened them for me this evening."

The Spirit of the Lord, which guided Don Bosco so powerfully in the advice he gave to others, also gave him extraordinary insight that enabled him to know the hidden sins and secret thoughts of others, both near at hand and far away.

One thing that strikes us about this supernatural favour is the fact that Don Bosco spoke about it without any reticence. We read in a document of 1861,¹⁰⁷

In the ten years that I have been at the Oratory, I have heard Don Bosco say, 'Give me a young man whom I have never known in any way, and I can look him in the face and tell him his sins, beginning with those of his earliest years.

A handwritten chronicle for 23 April 1863 reports verbatim a talk given the previous evening in which Don Bosco said, among other things,

During these days of retreat I was able to read the hearts of the boys the way you read a book. I could see their sins and their difficulties clearly and distinctly.

On the 25th of the same month the chronicler wrote,

I asked Don Bosco if his reading the hearts of the young people was something that happened only in confession or also at other times. His answer was, 'At any time of the day, even outside confession.'

This should not be taken to mean that his reading of consciences was continuous, but that he was given the ability to do so whenever it was necessary for the good of souls. Who knows why Don Bosco, who usually kept very quiet about what went on between him and God, spoke so openly and freely about this matter? There must have been some good reason, maybe even two reasons. First of all the fact that this was so unusual and so well known meant that it was bound to be talked about in the small world of the Oratory. Prudence suggested that he should clarify the matter with genuine simplicity so as to remove any doubt about the origin and nature of the phenomenon.

There is a second reason which, in our opinion, carries more weight. Don Bosco was a zealous hunter of souls through the sacrament of confession. He knew that there was a formidable enemy ranged against him. It was the demon of dumbness that traps so many in the sacrament of confession through their lack of sincerity. For him this was a constant nightmare. An excellent parish priest from France, who preached many missions and retreats, was terrified at the sight of so many souls living in a state of sacrilege because of bad confessions. Fearing that this might be an illusion,

¹⁰⁷ Report of Dr Giov. Turchi whom Lemoyne describes as "a man slow to believe, a severe critic." *Mem Bing*, vol 6, p. 453.

he wrote to Don Bosco to seek his opinion on the matter that was disturbing him so much. Don Bosco replied, ¹⁰⁸ "You are telling me this. I have preached throughout the whole of Italy and I have almost always found it so."

In the early years of his priesthood he was convinced that his sons had unlimited confidence in him, but he soon realised that the devil was smarter than he was.¹⁰⁹

Let's draw upon the usual chronicle, under 21 April 1861:

There was a cleric who expressed surprise that some concealed their sins in confession, despite the fact that there was an adequate number of confessors. Don Bosco told him that not all the confessors had "the ability, experience and means to scrutinise consciences and discover the foxes that gnaw at the heart."

And the chronicler concludes painfully,

Shame, and fear of losing the esteem of the confessor, are two beasts. This is where we must look for the chief reason why he spoke out on this matter, despite his usual reserve. It is good that Don Bosco should clear up the mystery. But when he spoke the sins of a penitent, had the devil not been there before him, tempting them to a malicious silence?

It helped therefore to let them know in advance that at his confessional the devil's tricks would be uncovered. They should not allow themselves to be deceived, but should take advantage of the gift of God to secure the good of their souls. And that is how it was understood at the Oratory. Very often the pupils knelt down, began their confession and then asked the confessor to tell them their sins, and Don Bosco did so with an accuracy that left them amazed. We have evidence of this from a recommendation he gave to the boys during a 'goodnight' which Lemoyne recorded in a notebook and later read during the process for beatification.

Up to now, when you came to confession you used to say to me, "You tell me," and I told you. But it is up to the penitent, not the confessor. I can no longer keep talking for hour after hour. My poor stomach is suffering. From now on, you tell me, and if you are confused, I will help you.

Even outside confession, Don Bosco could read sins and thoughts distinctly. Within a community there are ways of speaking which become part

¹⁰⁸ Zelle, S. I., *La confessione secondo i grandi maestri*, p. IX. Tip. Sal. S. Pier d'Arena, 1896.

¹⁰⁹ Francesia, *loc.cit.* p. 84.

of the local jargon. People know what they mean and they are not to be interpreted literally. Part of this jargon at the Oratory was the phrase *leggere in fronte* (to read on someone's forehead). When said of Don Bosco it referred to his ability to know someone's sins.

It was widely believed that he could look someone in the forehead and see there the signs of hidden secrets. Boys would not dare to go near him if their conscience was not clear, in case he would read their sins on their forehead. If they were called to him, or had to go to him for some other reason, they would pull down their caps to cover the forehead.

Don Bosco was quite happy to let this impression persist because it helped him to conceal the miraculous nature of what was happening. However, there are some accounts of impudent boys who did not appreciate the seriousness of the matter and challenged Don Bosco to tell their sins, even in public. On those occasions his tactic was always the same: he would take the boy aside, whisper something in his ear that would set him wondering or make him blush or weep.

More or less the same thing happened when it came to thoughts, although his reputation for reading thoughts was limited. Don Rua testifies, from his own experience, that sometimes he thought it advisable to conceal from Don Bosco some business matter which he had a right to know. No matter what subterfuge Don Rua resorted to, it was no good, because Don Bosco would show in conversation that he knew everything in detail. There was a cleric who was troubled with scruples. As he was examining his conscience in preparation for confession, he began to think secretly:

If Don Bosco were to say to me that I should go to Holy Communion tomorrow without going to confession, then I would know that my anxiety is all the work of the devil.

Late that evening he felt a hand on his shoulder and he heard the fatherly voice of Don Bosco saying in his ear:

Go to communion tomorrow. It is not necessary to go to confession.¹¹⁰

Still in relation to reading thoughts, I would like to refer to an anecdote that became known in 1929. It is useful because it gives us one more insight into the spirit of Don Bosco. Another cleric, later Don Eugenio Ruffo, co-founder of the Josephites, had accompanied his superior, Don Murialdo, to Don Bosco's room. He was sitting in one corner while the two Servants

¹¹⁰ Francesia, *loc.cit.* P. 80. Lemoyne related the incident anonymously. Don Francesia tells us that he was that cleric, and to the detailed account he adds this comment, "I am old, and at my age you don't tell lies."

of God were in conversation in the opposite corner. The noise of the boys in the playground could be heard, augmented by the sounds of a band practising. The cleric thought to himself, "I would not tolerate such a racket! The Lord is not found in commotion" (cf. 1 Kgs 19:12). Don Bosco interrupted his conversation, looked at him and said, "Yes, Don Bosco is right!" He made gestures with his hands like the banging of cymbals or the battering of a big drum, and he said, "Clang-clang, boom-boom. That's the way the Lord wants it. Noise, fun, pandemonium ... Clang-clang, boom-boom... everything in its own time!"¹¹¹

News of mysterious happenings reached him even from afar. Writing from the Oratory to the Colleges or from elsewhere to the Oratory, he would sometimes inform the Superiors of things that were happening unknown to them, and that he could not possibly have known about except by revelation. He gave names, places, and circumstances with such accuracy that, when it was a question of wrongdoing, the offenders, when challenged, were so dumbfounded that they did not try to make up excuses.

One evening, during the customary 'goodnight,' Don Rua asked him how he came to know things from a distance. Don Rua could do this because he was the one who took Don Bosco's place when he was absent, and also because the 'goodnight' was such a friendly informal affair that he could ask such questions even in public. He replied jokingly, "By means of my telegraph wires, I can establish communication and see whatever is for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, no matter how far away I am." What happened in Barcelona in 1886 went far beyond letters or telegraph wires!

The present writer heard from the Rector himself a detailed account of the episode. Its historicity is beyond doubt. Even though he was in the Oratory in Turin, Don Bosco appeared one night in person to the Rector of the community in Barcelona. He approached his bed, made him get up and lead him on a tour of the house, in the full light of day, pointing out to him certain disorders. He led him back to his room, left instructions for immediate action, and then disappeared, leaving the Rector standing there, totally bewildered, in the dark.

¹¹¹ Cf. Article by Prof. Vaudagnotti, professor of ecclesiastical history in the Archdiocesan seminary of Turin, in *Corriere d'Italia*, 22 May 1929.

Dreams, Visions, Ecstasy

The title of this chapter is suggested by a passage from Isidore, quoted by St Thomas. He writes:¹¹²

Isidore describes the gift of prophecy according to the manner of foretelling. Regarding the way in which the images are received, he makes three distinctions: dream, vision and ecstasy.

These are gifts freely given which do not of themselves imply or require holiness, but usually accompany it. Through them God reveals hidden things to some souls in a supernatural way.

These gifts played such an important part in Don Bosco's life that to omit to talk about them, would be to ignore an aspect that is of great value in coming to an understanding of his intimate communion with God. Anyone who had passed through a Salesian environment would have heard of the so-called *Dreams of Don Bosco*. That way of referring to them came from Don Bosco himself and is in use in all Salesian houses. It requires no explanation.

We are not going to try to prove that his dreams were really supernatural. That would be knocking at an open door. We are well aware of the *young men shall see visions and old men shall dream dreams* (cf. Acts 2:17) listed by the prophet Joel among the gifts which would be poured out by the Holy Spirit in the days to come, which, as St Peter explains, refers to the messianic times. We will go on rather to discuss the dreams of Don Bosco without further delay.

There were an extraordinary number of these dreams, coming at short intervals from the time of his childhood right to the time of his old age. For

¹¹² [Ia II ae, q.174, a. 1 - 3.

a few of them we have the text written or reviewed personally by Don Bosco himself. For others we have reports from trustworthy people who heard him telling them. For many of them there are word-of-mouth accounts circulating here and there. For many more there are only vague memories or even just vague clues to their existence. In the eighteen volumes of the Biographical Memoirs a good hundred of them are recorded, some narrated in detail, others with just the main headings.

Usually the scenes described relate, more or less dramatically, to one of three topics: the Catholic Church, the Salesian Society, or the Oratory at Valdocco. Those relating to the Church can be explained in the light of future events or in the general life of the Church or affairs of the Church in some particular nation. Those regarding the Congregation indicate the work to be done, the path to be followed, or dangers to be avoided. Sometimes the state of conscience of some of the boys is revealed, or their vocation, or deaths that are to occur in the near future. His state of mind when dreaming can be deduced from the way he used to speak.

For example, speaking of a dream he had one night in 1867 or 1868, he said, "It was the kind of sleep in which you know what you are doing, hearing and saying, and you can answer questions."¹¹³ He usually had some person alongside him as guide and interpreter, but not always the same person. There are indications to suggest that it was sometimes a pupil who had died, sometimes St Francis de Sales, or St Joseph or some other saint, or an angel of the Lord, and sometimes Our Lady. On some occasions there were secondary apparitions accompanying the guide.

What did Don Bosco think of his dreams? At first he was slow to believe in them, and put them down to tricks of his imagination. When recounting them, if there were predictions of the future, he was always afraid of making a mistake or of saying things that should not be taken seriously. The fact remains however, that he was well able to distinguish between some dreams and others. Some of them passed without making any impact on him, others made a deep and lasting impression. Talking about them in familiar conversation with close friends, he said that often, after relating dreams of this latter type, he used to go to confession to Don Cafasso saying that he had spoken rashly. The holy confessor listened and reflected seriously on the question, and said to him one day, "Since what you relate does come true, you should carry on without any worry."

¹¹³ Lemoyne, *loc.cit.*, vol IX, p. 11.

Still he did not think it right to abandon all caution immediately. One of the chronicles we have already mentioned, on 13 January 1861, reports what he said about a dream that he had in three parts on three consecutive nights.

On the first day I did not want to pay any heed to it, since the Lord forbids it in Sacred Scripture. But these past few days I have had several experiences. I called different boys aside and told them what I had seen in my dream, and when they assured me that things were exactly as I had seen, then I could no longer doubt that this was an extraordinary grace that the Lord has granted for all his sons at the Oratory. Therefore I feel it is my duty to tell you that the Lord is speaking to you. He lets you hear his voice, and woe to those who resist it.

Nevertheless, with great humility he took several precautions. Under 15 January we read:

I will say what I have already said. I had that dream and for a while I did not want to pay any attention to it. However it seemed important and I examined it very carefully.

The examination consisted in questioning again three boys whose sorry state he had seen in his dream and whom he found to be exactly as he had seen. Seven years later, on 30 April 1868, he spoke again as follows,

My dear boys, last night I told you that I had something unpleasant to tell you. I had a dream, and I had decided not to say a word about it to you, partly because I thought it was just an ordinary dream like those that come to our minds when we are asleep, and also because whenever I relate one of my dreams there is always some comment or complaint. But I have had another dream which obliges me to speak of the first one.

In this second dream, as he later explained, the guide had said to him, "Why do you not speak?" Don Bosco was prudent in this as in other matters.

What we have said so far helps us to understand something he said in confidence, and with a certain sense of worry, to Don Giulio Barberis in 1876,

When I think of my responsibility in the position in which I find myself, I tremble. The things I see happening are such that they leave me with an immense responsibility. What a worrisome account I will have to render to God for all the graces he gives us for the good progress of our Pious Society. It

could be said that Don Bosco sees everything and that Our Lady leads him by the hand. She is present at every step and in every circumstance.

How did Don Bosco relate his dreams? His state of mind in telling them is clear enough from the quotations reported above, but there is something else to be added... He described things "with simplicity, seriousness and feeling" according to one witness.¹¹⁴ He usually began very casually, avoiding anything that might impress or suggest that there was any merit or privilege on his part. He used to throw in witty or jocose comments to distract the attention of his listeners from anything that might suggest that he was special. However, there were also individual insights which they understood and recorded.

Always with a view to playing down any impression of the extraordinary, he would give very ordinary names to the personages who accompanied him. He would call them guides or interpreters or simply say that they were unknown. Only in one-to-one discussion with a few people did he give more precise indications. He made a particular point of emphasising anything that tended to embarrass or humiliate him. For example, relating a dream in 1861, he mentioned his great sorrow at seeing boys from the Oratory who ignored his advice or did not cooperate with his recommendations, and he continued,

Then my guide rebuked me. Pride, what pride! Who are you to think you can convert others, just because you work hard? Do you think that your boys will do what you want, just because you love them? Do you think you love them more, and labour and suffer more for them than our divine Saviour? Do you think your word should be more efficacious than that of Jesus Christ? Do you perhaps preach better than he did? Do you think you have shown more charity and taken greater care of your boys than Our divine Saviour did with the apostles? You know that they lived with him continuously, and benefitted at all times from gifts of every kind. They heard his warnings and his teaching and they saw his works, which should have been a strong stimulus for the sanctification of their lives. How much did he not do and say for Judas? And yet Judas betrayed him and died unrepentant. Are you perhaps better than the apostles? The apostles chose seven deacons, only seven, carefully chosen, and yet one of them failed. And do you wonder then that, among five hundred boys, there should be this small number that does not respond to your care? Do you expect to succeed and have no one bad or perverse? Oh, what pride!

It is all very well to play down as much as possible anything that might point to the supernatural, and to humble oneself by reporting these stern re-

¹¹⁴ Can. Giacinto Ballesio, *Vita intima di Don Bosco* Commemorative lecture.

bukes, but truth also has a right to be heard. He warned against making fun of the things he had heard and invited everyone to take to heart whatever applied to him. And even these comments were marked by humility.

Allow me one more quotation, a rather lengthy one, but it will be the last. The dream of 1861 in which he received the rebuke we have just referred to, was told on three consecutive evenings and this is how he concluded,

Now that I have told you these things you will think, 'Don Bosco is a great and extraordinary man, surely a saint!' My dear boys, to stop foolish judgments about me I leave you all complete freedom to believe or not to believe these things, to give them whatever importance you wish. I ask you only one thing - do not make fun of them either among your companions or with outsiders. I think it well to tell you that God has many ways of revealing his will to us. Sometimes he makes use of the most unsuited and unworthy instruments, as he made use of Balaam's ass, making it able to speak, and of the false prophet Balaam who predicted many things regarding the Messiah. The same can happen with me. I tell you therefore, don't look at my actions to decide how you should act. All you should do is to pay attention to what I tell you, because this will always, I hope, be the will of God and will be for the good of your souls. As for what I do, don't ever say, 'Don Bosco did such and such a thing, therefore it is all right.' No! Observe what I do and if what you see is good, imitate it. And if by chance you see me doing something that is not good, take care not to imitate it.

Not everything he saw or heard in his dreams was told in public. Some things were communicated privately to the people concerned. Others were made known to some who were closer to him, or who asked him face to face. Yet other things he kept to himself, as if intended for him personally. One of the chroniclers tells us that in the case of some of his dreams they heard new bits every now and then, enough to double or treble the original material. There were others, according to the same source, which would have needed several volumes if everything were to be recorded.

For example, going back to the dream of 1861 already mentioned, Don Bosco said that he learned more theology in those three nights than in all his years at the seminary. He intended to write about these theological questions, leaving aside "the specific facts of the last night," and concentrating on "the theology of the first two." From this we can see that he selected carefully the bits to be told in public. His purpose was to edify and to comfort, to help others or to warn them, so that the dream might be of benefit to his listeners. The results could be seen even by a blind man.

In particular he inculcated a horror for sin, more frequent confession with greater sorrow, an increase in the number of general confessions, better participation in Holy Communion. It all added up to what he himself called "bankrupting the devil."

There is more than enough evidence therefore to subscribe wholeheartedly to this opinion of the Canon quoted above:

We were no longer children, but we could find no reasonable or plausible explanation other than the extraordinary gifts given to Don Bosco by the Lord.

This is all the more significant when we bear in mind that Don Bosco did not look for nor did he want dreams of this kind. Indeed he feared them, because they caused him serious physical disturbance. Sometimes it happened moreover that, immediately after narrating the dream, he could not remember what he had said. This is something known to happen when people are speaking under supernatural inspiration. In addition to what we have said above, there are two other notable characteristics of Don Bosco's dreams which show that they cannot be considered the same as ordinary dreams.

The first characteristic is of a psycho-physical nature. In ordinary dreams the imagination rules or runs riot, uncontrolled by reason. The normal condition for the beginning of sleep is tiredness. Tiredness produces substances which slow down the activity of the brain, but without stopping it completely. Nature has arranged that at a certain point these substances act like a switch and slow down the motor apparatus which consumes energy. This cuts off from the nervous system the psychophysical energy necessary for normal activity, more or less, depending on the individual's need for sleep. The small amount of psychophysical energy that remains is enough for the activity of dreaming, but too little to activate the central nervous system.

Now, when you consider that Don Bosco, when he went to bed, was always in extreme need of sleep, you have already a reason why the vividness of his dreams had no human explanation.

And there's more. The mechanism which reduces the psychophysical energy of the central nervous system affects the imagination, causing the double phenomenon of irregularity and sudden change, something we have all experienced during sleep. This is because the lack of psychophysical energy makes it impossible to follow one idea for long, but any little external stimulus is enough to direct the small amount of energy that remains in another direction, with the result that the whole image of the dream breaks

up. For this reason, during dreams the activity of the imagination is not directed by any positive intention and so, in ordinary dreams, there is neither an orderly rational representation nor any logical sequence of thought. Instead the imagination jumps from one thing to another, with sudden bizarre movements and quick darts into the ridiculous or extravagant.¹¹⁵

The exact opposite happened in the dreams of Don Bosco. They are symbolic representations similar to those seen by St Peter in his ecstatic vision of the sheet being let down from heaven, full of clean and unclean animals (cf. Acts 10:10-16). The plot is more or less complicated and the scene drawn out for a considerable time with distinct actions as in real drama. Moreover, and this is what makes them special, there can always be seen in the images a succession that follows a particular line of reason, and the words heard or read have a value and meaning that form a single whole with the images.

Every dream revolves around a central idea and is directed to a specific scope. The action develops progressively and in ordered fashion, as in a well composed drama. The symbolism is in line with the ordinary mentality but there are no odd or vulgar or frivolous elements not in keeping with a holy man. It would be nice to give examples but the size of the book does not permit.

A second characteristic of Don Bosco's dreams is their prophetic nature. Our imagination evokes various notions in sleep but it does not foresee the future, not even when we bring our intelligence to bear on them when we are awake. Yet the dreams of Don Bosco contain, not vague uncertain predictions, but clear and precise revelations of events that are hidden in the future.

It is true to say that Don Bosco had the spirit of prophecy. He made many predictions of events that were to take place in the future, even after his death, at the time and in the manner he foretold. Canon Ballesio, whom we have already mentioned several times, writes as follows:

In Don Bosco this was not a sudden inspiration or a quick flash of the intellect. It seemed to be the ordinary state of his mind. He prophesied when at prayer, in conversation, when joking. He prophesied when neither he nor those who were listening to him were aware that he was prophesying.

He prophesied also when he was dreaming.

¹¹⁵ Lindworsky S.J., Giov., *Manuale di psicologia sperimentale*. Trad., Galli-Gatti, p. 111-2 and 318-9., Soc. "Vita e Pensiero" Milano.

The prophetic content, if it was not the whole of his dream, was always a significant part. For example, how often did he foretell the death of someone, because he had been told of it in a dream! He did not give names but he gave precise dates. Sometimes he revealed in public the first letter of the name and at other times he communicated it privately to someone, on condition of secrecy. Most were happy when the dream came true, pleased to hear what he had to say, and the doubters remained silent. They were few but they guaranteed then and now that the predictions did actually take place. There is no need to give episodes, we leave that to the biographers. Instead we will allow Don Bosco two further comments.

One of the writers of the house chronicle records an observation he made on 17 February 1861 in relation to the prophecies that occurred in his dreams.

If outsiders heard of some of the things that happen and are spoken about in our house, which are unusual and should remain among ourselves, they would regard them as fables. Our belief is that when something is for the good of souls, then it is certain that it comes from God and not from the devil.¹¹⁶

The enemy of God and of souls had another field where he launched his attacks against Don Bosco. Poulain,¹¹⁷ who is an expert in matters of mysticism, has this timely comment to make:

It appears from the lives of the saints that, if they suffer serious attacks, this happens mainly when they reach the point of ecstasy, or even just of divine revelations or visions, whether these graces continue or are temporarily suspended. The extraordinary intervention of God is followed by an extraordinary intervention of the devil.

The world is a battleground also for the saints of the Church militant.

We have accounts of the war waged by the devil against Don Bosco in official bulletins drawn up from the beginning. They are enough to give us an idea of the whole campaign which lasted three years. The devil displayed his hostility towards Don Bosco especially by not allowing him to sleep at night. Sometimes a loud voice in his ear deafened him, at other times it was like a strong wind that blew against him. The room was ransacked, papers were scattered and books thrown around.

Don Bosco was writing a booklet entitled *The Powers of Darkness*. Some nights when he finished correcting the draft copy, he left it on his

¹¹⁶ On the dreams of Don Bosco, cf *Mem.Biog.*, vol XVII, p. 7-13.

¹¹⁷ Poulain S.J., Aug., *Des graces d'oraison*, XXIV, 71., Dix.me ed., Beauchesne, Paris, 1922.

desk. When he got up next morning the papers were scattered on the floor or sometimes they had simply disappeared. Flames flared up from the stove, even though the fire had gone out. As soon as he got into bed a mysterious hand pulled the blankets slowly towards his feet, and when he rearranged them he felt them sliding down again. When he lit the lamp the phenomenon ceased only to start again once it was dark. On one occasion the light was extinguished by a powerful puff of air, seemingly from nowhere. When he was on the point of falling asleep, the pillow under his head would begin to dance. The sign of the cross or a prayer would restore peace but as soon as he fell asleep, the bed would begin to move. The door creaked as if it was being pushed by a powerful wind. Frightening noises were heard in the room, like the sound of chariot wheels in a race, and very loud shouts were heard without warning. One night the door was flung open and a horrible monster entered with its jaws wide open as if to devour him, but it fled when he made the sign of the cross.

A brave priest decided to keep watch in his room but he could not remain there. At midnight he was terrified by an infernal noise and fled in haste. Two clerics volunteered to stay together in the library adjoining his bedroom... They also had to beat a hasty retreat, because they developed terrifying convulsions. Poor Don Bosco went to see the Bishop of Ivrea, in order to attain some peace. He had one quiet night, and then the enemy returned worse than ever. This is enough to give an idea of the terrible struggle he endured against the spirit of darkness. Speaking of it in 1865, Don Bosco indicated that he had found a remedy that was very effective, but would not explain further. It may well be that the remedy was some extraordinary penance.

These supernatural dreams belong to the category of visions which the mystics call imaginative, because they take place through images impressed on the imagination by a higher cause. But visions of this kind can also occur when one is awake. We are well used to referring indiscriminately to all these visions as the *Dreams of Don Bosco*, even though they can be of both kinds and they differ considerably. The vision that appears in the imagination when one is awake is always accompanied by some kind of ecstasy or abstraction from the senses.

This is how Don Bosco saw a complicated series of public events that had happened in 1870 and were still, in a certain sense, ongoing. The introduction to the text which he wrote at the command of Pius IX seems to confirm this. He expressed himself in the following terms:

On the eve of the Epiphany of this year 1870 everything in my room disappeared and I found myself confronted with supernatural happenings. It did not last long, but I saw a lot. It is very difficult to communicate to others what I experienced, but what follows will give some idea. The word of God is in agreement with the word of man.

On numerous occasions he saw before him the holy young man Louis Colle from Toulon, whom he had known shortly before he died at the age of seventeen. This young man appeared to him several times between 1881 and 1885 while he was hearing confessions, saying Mass or distributing Holy Communion, and once at the railway station in Orte when he had a four-hour wait for a train. These apparitions were always bright and joyful, sometimes with conversation and sometimes without.

He had a similar vision at Lanzo Torinese, probably in August of 1887. A Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, keen to have his blessing and tired of waiting in reception for someone to introduce her, gently pushed open the door of his study, and what did she see? She saw Don Bosco standing, listening, as if in ecstasy. His face was transformed with a bright light. He looked gentle and peaceful. His arms were raised and he kept bowing his head as if in agreement. "Praised be Jesus! Excuse me, Father!" the sister said repeatedly, but he did not answer. Finally the scene, which had lasted at least ten minutes, came to an end when he made the sign of the cross and bowed with great reverence. It is worth noting that by that time, 1887, Don Bosco found great difficulty in standing without the support of someone's arm and he was always stooped, but on this occasion he stood perfectly erect.

Apart from visions of the imagination, there are two other types of vision, one of lesser significance and one greater. The less significant type consists of corporeal visions, perceived by the senses and seen by the eye. In these the senses perceive external things that could not be seen or understood without supernatural assistance.

Don Bosco had a vision of this kind when the future of the young man Cagliero, then gravely ill, was revealed to him. Don Bosco went to visit him, to help him to prepare for death. He had just arrived at the door of the room when he had two apparitions, both very brief. In the first a bright dove carrying an olive branch in its beak did a few rounds of the room, then flew down to the dying youth, touched his lips with the olive branch and then let it fall on his head. This was an image of his future missionary apostolate and the fullness of priesthood that he would receive. Then a crowd of wild men of strange appearance bent anxiously over the young

man. Among them were men of two different races. Subsequent events enabled him to recognise them as representing the people of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego.

The other type of vision, the highest class of all, goes under the name of intellectual visions. This is when the mind intuits supernatural truths without any accompanying images of the senses. Did God grant this gift to Don Bosco? We cannot say so with certainty. But who will ever know the abundance of supernatural charisms which enriched his soul?

His natural spontaneity in all things and the habitual simplicity of his lifestyle were designed to conceal the secret operations of grace, whenever knowledge of them was not for the benefit of his neighbour. At any rate, do not the cases of levitation and the shining light that sometimes surrounded his figure, support the hypothesis that even visions of the highest order were accorded him?

On three different occasions in 1879, when he was saying Mass in his private chapel, a bright light was seen radiating from his face and lighting up the whole room. Then he was seen rising from the predella and remaining suspended in mid air for about ten minutes.

On three successive evenings, the historian Don Lemoyne saw his face being lit up gradually and assuming a radiant transparency. His whole face shone with a bright, gentle splendour. The Rector Major, Don Rinaldi, told this present writer that Don Bosco had appeared unexpectedly to him on three separate occasions, when he was aged ten, again at twenty-two and yet again when he was about thirty. These appearances occurred in broad daylight and in very different places. Don Bosco's eyes were shining, and the light extended to his whole person, forming a brilliant halo around him, brighter far than the daylight. Agility and splendour are two beautiful gifts reserved to the glorified body. If we find them anticipated miraculously in the bodies of living people, is it not legitimate to conclude that, when this phenomenon occurs, they are experiencing a divine vision, resembling more or less their future beatific vision?

Knowledge of these heavenly favours was not as widespread as his fame as a wonder worker, which spread far and wide right to the end of his life. We do not intend to delay on the question of miracles but a brief reference, in accordance with our purpose, will not seem out of place, before we conclude this chapter.

In 1884, when he was already an old man, Don Bosco gave us a souvenir, written with a shaky hand but an open heart. It is a kind of fatherly

testament containing reminders and warnings that would be useful to his sons. We will take from it a few sentences that serve our purpose. In it the good Father expresses sentiments which those who lived with him daily were well convinced of, even if he had said nothing about them himself. For us, at a distance, his statements are more than we could dare to wish for when it comes to knowing his intimate thoughts about the supernatural gifts which filled his spirit and were revealed to others, earning him fame as a miracle worker.

With complete simplicity he writes:

I recommend warmly to all my sons to be careful when speaking or writing, never to say that Don Bosco received graces from God or that he worked miracles in any way. That would be a harmful mistake. God has been good to me but I have never pretended to know or do anything supernatural. I have never done anything except to pray and ask God for graces, like any good soul. I have always found the prayers of our boys to be very efficacious, and God and His holy Mother have always come to help us in our need. This is seen especially whenever we needed something to provide for our young people who are poor or abandoned, and even more so when their souls were in danger.

We conclude by making our own an observation made by the advocate of his cause, when he says that the gift of miracles confirms clearly the supernatural nature of his communications.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ *Resp. ad animadversiones*, p. 27.

18

Gift of Prayer

The extraordinary phenomena described before are wonderful external signs that manifest the presence of God in the soul. God dwells in us when we are in union with him by grace. In some souls God makes his presence felt with an indescribable touch which reaches the very essence of the spirit, a phrase used by the mystics. It happens then that the higher powers of intellect and will are totally taken up in the divine operations, while the senses are more or less able to function, as happens in ecstasy.

None of this is verified in the earthly life of Jesus or in the life of Mary. They enjoyed continuously an experience of the supernatural life, yet, because of their state of perfect integrity, which implied the complete subjection of the senses to reason, they suffered no loss of their lower faculties.

Now we ask ourselves: since the external manifestations that accompany the mystical life are seen in the life of Don Bosco, can we say with certainty, that he was truly raised to a state of mystical union?¹¹⁹ And to what degree? In other words, since this comes about through infused contemplation, is it possible for us to discover whether, and in what measure, this gift of infused contemplation was given to the chosen soul of Don Bosco?

A priori, looking at the nature of things, it does not appear rash to answer in the affirmative. In fact, Benedict XIV,¹²⁰ basing himself on history, felt it was possible to assert that “nearly all the saints, and especially the founders of orders, have received divine visions and revelations.” He

¹¹⁹ We define mystical life, on the authority of some outstanding teachers, as “the immediate loving perception of the world of faith, in particular of the eminently active presence of God in the soul.” Cfr. *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 18 May 1929, p. 324.

¹²⁰ *De Can. Sanct.* III, 52, 3.

added, "Without doubt God speaks familiarly with his friends and favours especially those chosen by him to do great works."

Poulain¹²¹ says that ordinarily the canonised saints, who reached the level of heroic virtue, have been favoured with mystical union. He goes on to observe that if some of them appear not to have had it, this does not mean that they did not in fact have this gift, but rather that we should deplore the lack of documents to prove it. Fortunately all Don Bosco's precautions did not succeed in depriving us of manifestations of his mystical life, so we also have arguments *a posteriori*.

We would love to have the same certainty regarding the degree of his mystical union with God. After careful study it seems that, leaving aside special moments of greater intensity, we can prove that he habitually possessed that gift of prayer which St Teresa calls *complete union*. Poulain calls it *full union*. Others, especially Italians like Scaramelli and St Alphonsus de' Liguori, call it *simple union*. St Alphonsus describes it as follows:¹²² "In simple union the faculties are suspended, but not the bodily senses, although these are greatly hindered in their operation."

Prayer of this kind has two characteristics: the soul is totally absorbed by the divine object without any other thought and without distraction. The senses continue to act more or less, and they can still communicate with the external world. The person can see, hear, speak, and walk, and therefore can emerge freely from the state of prayer. Authoritative mystical writers¹²³ draw on St Thomas for the fundamental notions of this delicate matter. They list seven effects of simple union. To avoid getting things wrong, we will look at these seven effects rapidly and see if we can recognise their presence in Don Bosco.

However, the nature of the topic suggests that we should not proceed until we have highlighted a concept that the reader may well have formed, at least vaguely, from what we have already said. Don Bosco's soul enjoyed uninterrupted union with God. It seems that he received the gift of never being distracted from loving attention to the Lord, even though his work and his preoccupations were many and serious.

We will run through the Summary of the *Positio super virtutibus*, particularly the seventh chapter on his heroic love for God, picking out the most relevant statements from a dozen different witnesses. They are all of

¹²¹ Loc. cit. XXVIII, 15.

¹²² *Homo apost.*, App. I, 17.

¹²³ Vallgornera, Th. A., *Mystica Theologia D. Thomae*: Q. IV, disp. 2, a. 2, nn 1-8. Marietti, Torino, 1889 and 1911.

importance because they are given by people who could say about Don Bosco what it says in the introduction to the first letter of St John: *What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands... what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you. (1 Jn 1:1.3)*

We will give the first word to the three successors of Don Bosco. Fr Michael Rua, whose cause for Beatification has been introduced, ¹²⁴says in his testimony,

What I noticed repeatedly was his constant union with God ... these sentiments of love of God appeared with such spontaneity that it was clear that they came from a mind and heart always immersed in contemplation of God and his attributes.

Fr Paul Albera stated:¹²⁵

Such was Don Bosco's union with God that it seemed that he received from God the advice and encouragement he gave to his sons.

Fr Philip Rinaldi testifies:¹²⁶

It is my firm conviction that Don Bosco was truly a man of God, continuously united with God in prayer.

We add the word of Fr John Baptist Francesia to that of the Rector Majors:

I saw that it came easy to Don Bosco to be recollected in the Lord.

Now we shall hear the testimony of seven other Salesians, highly regarded for virtue, learning or office, or for all three. In their evidence they said that "the life of Don Bosco appeared to be one of constant union with God." This was true to the extent that "no matter when someone asked him a question, even if he was engaged in serious and demanding business matters, he replied as if he had been absorbed in meditation." "Love of God shone through in his union with him," "He lived always in the presence of God and his thoughts were always directed to the Lord." "Mental prayer could be said to have come natural to him." "He had a heart so full of love for the Lord, that his thoughts and his words were always directed to him." "Don Bosco always showed a true and deep spirit of prayer and of union

¹²⁴ Michael Rua was beatified on 29 October 1972 (translator's note).

¹²⁵ He was not among the witnesses who testified but his words are reported by Don Amadei in his evidence.

¹²⁶ Letter to the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation of Rites, 27 September 1926, in *Appendix Documentorum* of the *Responsio* for a *Novi Positio Super Virtutibus*.

with God, and we were assured of this everytime we approached him.” And finally, “He had a perfect union of spirit with God.”

There is also the testimony of two Bishops. The first of these is Monsignor Tasso, a Vincentian, Bishop of Aosta, who had been a pupil of Don Bosco from 1861 to 1865. He says, “Don Bosco burned always with a great love for God, and I am convinced that he lived in constant union with God. I remember that among us as boys there was a belief that he spoke directly with the Lord, especially when it had to do with advice concerning our future.”

Cardinal Cagliero testifies,

The love of God shone in his face and from his whole person and from all the words that came from his heart when he spoke about God from the pulpit or in the confessional, in public or private conferences, or in friendly conversation. This love was the only yearning of his heart, and the most ardent desire of his entire life. Thousands and thousands of times I heard him say, ‘All for the Lord and for his glory!’ ... He was always in intimate union with God, whether meeting someone, or working at his desk, with us in recreation or praying with the fervour of an angel before the Blessed Sacrament, or when he was celebrating at the altar ... No matter when we approached him, he always received us with the most delightful charity and love, as if he was coming from the most fervent prayer or straight from the divine presence... I repeat what Cardinal Alimonda said to me, that Don Bosco was always in union with God.

How often the word “always” occurs in these testimonies! Cardinal Alimonda, who when he became Archbishop of Turin was a great support to Don Bosco in the last six years of his life, repeated what he had said to Cardinal Cagliero when he spoke on the occasion of the Month’s Mind Mass for Don Bosco. He simply defined Don Bosco as “constant union with God.”

We crown all these testimonies with an observation of Pope Pius XI which fits Don Bosco perfectly. This great Pope loved to recall, even in public, and with obvious satisfaction, that he had met with Don Bosco and had more than a passing acquaintance with him. He states that he had seen in all Don Bosco’s actions, even in private,

a wonderful spirit of recollection, tranquillity and peace which was not just the fruit of silence, but of the kind that comes from a real spirit of union with God. It enables us to realise what was the object of his constant attention, what it was that engaged his heart - the presence of God and union with God.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Talk after the Decree on the historicity of the virtues of Dominic Savio, *Mem Biog.* vol XIX, p. 220.

A chronicler said about St Bonaventure long ago that in his writings he made a prayer out of every truth. We can say the same of Don Bosco, that everything he did became a prayer.

This long list of testimonies means that the rest of the chapter will be short. We leave it to the reader's intelligence to draw on the appropriate examples as we go through the seven effects of simple union as mentioned above.

The first effect of the prayer of simple union is the only one which is almost impossible to prove. We can refer to it as a melting of the soul, terminology suggested by the biblical phrase: *My soul failed at his flight* (cf. Sng 5:6). It could be called a deep longing of the heart through a burning fire of love. In plain language, without any metaphor, it is a powerful sentiment of divine love which fills the soul with inexpressible joy to the point where it brings about in the body a mystical languor, which sometimes leads to swooning. Did physical phenomena of this kind occur in Don Bosco's life? We will respond with two general observation and three specific facts.

First observation: one of most outstanding fruits of contemplation is humility. The contemplative, who is more aware than others of God's greatness, has also a better sense of his own nothingness. Far from taking pride in his awareness of God, he is almost afraid that it will become known. He does not speak of it to others, except when he needs to seek advice. Indeed, he uses every means to keep it to himself. However, not everything that happens is a decision of the will - temperament also plays its part. Grace works in nature but does not suppress it. We have seen in the case of Luigi Comollo that, if he had not been able to give expression to the strength of his feelings after communion, his heart would have burst. Don Bosco, on the other hand, restrained his fervour, and would have liked his friend to do the same. Comollo did not have the same physical strength that he had.

And a second observation: Don Bosco was master of his emotions. He had a temperament of steel, or, in less profane language, he was a man to whom we can apply the words of the Psalm: *I carry my life in my hands* (cf. Ps 119:109). He had a strong will capable of controlling his lower powers and suppressing his feelings. The absence of the kind of phenomena mentioned above would not in itself prove that he did not receive the gift of infused contemplation.

Moreover, how do you explain that someone, when afflicted with serious problems and suffering, is actually more cheerful than usual? Do afflictions give rise to joy? In hearts favoured with contemplation, suffering

is transformed mystically into love, and love gladdens the heart. This is the first of our three facts.

The second is that, in the last years of his life, Don Bosco used to spend the morning receiving visitors and then in the afternoon he would spend at least an hour alone in his room. Those close to him were often surprised to find him sitting erect at his desk, hands joined in an attitude of fervour, totally absorbed in heavenly things.¹²⁸ This was precisely the time at which the Sister found him in ecstasy, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

And the third fact: towards the end of his life, his strength was exhausted and his emotions began to get the upper hand. When celebrating Mass he became visibly moved, and his whole body appeared to tremble, especially at the moment of the elevation.¹²⁹

It is worth mentioning here, to illustrate and support what we have said, evidence given by Don Cerruti during the process.¹³⁰ Speaking of the last two years of Don Bosco's life, he testified,

When headaches and pain in the chest and his poor eyesight no longer allowed him to do any work, it was a sad but comforting sight to see him sitting for long hours on a poor sofa, in semi-darkness because his eyes could not bear the light, always peaceful and smiling, rosary in hand, lips moving in prayer, hands raised every now and then in a silent prayer of union with God and acceptance of his will, for he no longer had the strength to express it in words. I am totally convinced that his life, especially in his final years, was one continuous prayer to God. Others feel the same. Whenever we entered his room to see him or talk to him, we always found him like one who was in deep meditation, even though there were no external signs of it. His face was always happy, serene and tranquil, and the words that came from his mouth were words of peace, love and faith.

The second effect of passive prayer is a gentle need to weep. St Catherine of Siena gives a lovely image. She says that in the intimate union of the soul with God, the loving knowledge of the divine goodness awakens such sweet and lively emotions in the heart that it can no longer contain them and seeks the help of the eyes.¹³¹ Don Bosco had the gift of tears and often did not have the strength to control them.

During his last visit to Rome, when he was celebrating Mass in the Church of the Sacred Heart, he burst into tears more than fifteen times. The

¹²⁸ Cf. Letter of Don Rinaldi referred to above.

¹²⁹ *Positio super virtutibus*, p. 972, l.

¹³⁰ *Summary*, X, 39.

¹³¹ *Dialogues*, LXXXIX, 6.

priest who was assisting him did his best to distract him, so that he would be able to finish the Mass. The tears came back later and those around him were moved in an extraordinary way. Throughout his priestly life, whenever he was preaching on certain topics, he sometimes deliberately said silly things to prevent him weeping, but it was no use.¹³² His tears did an enormous amount of good to those who witnessed them, and maybe this was part of the design of providence in giving him tears that he could not control. We have given further details elsewhere¹³³ and there is no point in repeating them here.

The third effect is to be aware of the presence of God with a certainty that excludes even the possibility of doubt. St Teresa expresses it this way:

God comes to dwell in the intimacy of the soul in such a manner that it cannot in any way doubt that it is in God and God is in it. This truth remains so firmly impressed that, even if one goes several years without reaching that elevated state, one cannot forget the favour received nor doubt its reality.¹³⁴

Don Bosco was full of the thought of God. To prove it here would be simply repetition of what we have already said. This explains the fascination of which Mons. Tasso speaks when he says,

It was enough to spend even a short time with him to realise immediately that he was indeed a man of God. The supernatural shone from his every word and his whole person. I know this from my own experience.¹³⁵

The fourth effect is strength, courage and patience in suffering everything for the love of God. These souls are so kindled with divine love that they yearn to suffer for God. This desire is always growing together with the desire to belong to him always. Don Bosco was like that. Many of the preceding pages speak of his superhuman courage in the face of pain, and two new testimonies re-echo the same idea.

The first of these is from Don Rua.¹³⁶ Referring to Don Bosco's moral suffering he says,

He always showed admirable patience, resignation and courage. It seemed that difficulties and tribulations gave him added strength. He suffered, especially when the opposition came from the ecclesiastical authorities, but he did

¹³² *Pos. sup. virt.*, p.589, par. 183.

¹³³ See Chapter 6.

¹³⁴ *The Inner Castle*, Fifth mansion, c.1.

¹³⁵ *Pos. sup. virt.*, p. 416-7, par. 384.

¹³⁶ *Loc. Cit.* p.788, par. 29.

not lose his peace of mind. Indeed it seemed that in times of tribulation, he acquired greater courage for he seemed more cheerful and more jovial than usual.

Regarding his physical sufferings, which were many and serious, as we have already described, Don Lemoyne testifies:¹³⁷

He never prayed for a cure for himself and so his sufferings became voluntary. He never complained nor grew impatient and he continued to work.

The fifth effect is an ardent desire to praise God. The person is so inflamed with divine love that he would wish to be nothing other than a voice giving praise to God. His one desire is for God to be known, loved and glorified by all. He knows well that God is beyond all praise and yet his greatest delight is to honour, adore and thank God.

In order to satisfy this burning desire St Francis of Assisi called on all creatures, even irrational animals and inanimate things, to join with him in praising their common Creator. But, as St Francis de Sales observes, there is both unity and variety in the Church. The wonderful diversity of the Saints is founded in the gold of love: "In holy Church all is by love, in love, for love and of love"¹³⁸

Don Bosco, completely in love with God, had three ways of his own of inviting and encouraging others to praise God: he practised the most exact diligence and decorum in divine worship, he spoke with fervour about God and divine things to all, even to those he met only in passing, and he sacrificed himself with unsurpassed zeal in working for God's glory.

These three things, especially the last which includes them all, have given us reason to write so much heretofore that, if we were to remove it, very little would remain of the present work. And yet what we have said so far is only a rough outline compared to the full picture.

The sixth effect is a great desire to help one's neighbour. The soul which lives in God often manages to be of help to its neighbour without even realising it. When welcoming or consoling or offering help, which according to St Thomas are the three ways of helping the needy, the person united to God receives help from above which renders his work fruitful.

To speak about Don Bosco is to speak about charity: inexhaustible charity in dealing with his neighbour, unlimited charity in helping the afflicted and comforting the dying, heroic charity in going in search of means

¹³⁷ Loc. Cit. p. 793-4, par 47.

¹³⁸ *On the Love of God.*, Preface, par. 3.

of doing good. It is for this reason that the world loves Don Bosco: we have put our faith in love (cf. 1 Jn 4:16).

On this theme of supernatural charity, it is only right that we should read what Don Rua has to say. He was Don Bosco's *alter ego* and for many years he bore with him the burdens and the heat of the day.

His entire life, says Don Rua, was consumed in the exercise of charity. His charity could be considered partly a gift from God, but one that went on growing as he advanced in age. He saw in his neighbour the work of God and God Himself. He saw in every person his brother or sister in Jesus Christ. He loved them for God's sake and he did not spare himself in his efforts to draw all people to God. His was not just natural sympathy. It was the love of God, the charity of Jesus Christ, which led him to spend himself entirely for others.¹³⁹

The seventh, and last, effect of the prayer of simple union, and the most wonderful in a poor descendant of Adam, is the habitual practice of the theological virtues, and the cardinal and moral virtues, to a heroic degree. By this we mean to an extent which exceeds, in intensity and constancy, the limits found in ordinary virtuous people. When God bestows his gifts on a soul with such largesse, enriching it with every virtue, it is for the good of the whole Church. Heroism in the practice of virtue brings honour to the Church and is a source of edification to all. So abundant are the heavenly graces that all the soul has to do is to consent and cooperate.

There is no danger that the soul become proud, as if forgetful of its true state. Indeed, the more the soul is exalted in the knowledge and love of God, the more it becomes aware of its own nothingness. As the soul grown in humility, it also grows in grace and in enthusiasm for every virtue without exception.

In this regard it is worth noting a comment of Poulain who writes:

God does not come alone into the soul. His sanctifying action is all the greater according to the level of one's prayer. The soul which is filled with God in mystical union feels itself - at the same time and without knowing how - filled with love, humility and the spirit of sacrifice. God himself gives it occasion to grow in this union, sending trial upon trial: temptation, sickness, failure, injustice, contempt.¹⁴⁰

To start describing the heroic quality of Don Bosco's virtue now, when the Church has already given its judgement, would be pointless. One thing,

¹³⁹ *Pos. sup. Virt.*, p. 592, par. 3.

¹⁴⁰ *Loc. cit.*, XII, p. 1-2..

however, should be said, and it leaps out after reading the sentence just quoted. Don Bosco experienced without interruption the kind of divine intervention described by Poulain. The Letter to the Hebrews says, "*For whom the Lord loves, he disciplines; he scourges every son he acknowledges*" (cf. Heb 12:6). This kind of language, which the world does not understand, shows that tribulations are the means used by God to purify souls and lead them along the way of perfection. They are, in themselves, proof of God's love. Don Bosco had proofs of this kind all through his life, and he gave proof of his love for God by practising heroic virtue in the midst of his crosses from the beginning to the end of his life. His life is before us with transparent clarity. Nothing is hidden from our scrutiny, and we see nothing there that is not holy.

Before we finish, we must repeat the words of Cagliero:¹⁴¹

I have frequently received evidence of the heroic nature of his virtue during his youth and childhood from my fellow townspeople. Confreres who knew him well testify to his heroic virtue as a priest, as Rector of the Oratory, as Superior of the Congregation. When I came back from America, I found him gentler, more ardent in charity, more united to God, more filled with goodness. Unless my love for him is deceiving me, I saw him in his old age surrounded by a kind of heavenly light. He was like an angel - it was if he was already glorified. He had sacrificed his entire self for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

One more question: was Don Bosco a mystic? We are well aware that many find this idea strange, but it is not the fault of mysticism! Worldly people often have two false ideas in relation to mysticism. They think mystical is the opposite of real, whereas, in fact, it is the opposite of physical or natural. Mystical means belonging to the realm of supernatural reality. And they also think that mystics live so absorbed in their contemplation that they see nothing and understand nothing of the things of this world.¹⁴²

One author, well versed in the matter, describes mystics in this way:

True mystics are practical people and people of action, not just ideas and theory... They are organised, able to command, and well skilled in business matters. The works they found are useful and lasting. In conceiving and directing undertakings they show prudence, courage and a realistic grasp of what is possible. They display good common sense. Indeed, common sense would seem to be their outstanding characteristic - common sense that is not led astray

¹⁴¹ *Pos. sup. virt.*, p. 319, par. 52 and 55.

¹⁴² *De Montmorand*, quoted by TANQUEREY in *Précis de Theol. Asc. et myst.*, n. 43, C. Desclée, 1924.

by flights of fancy or imagination, but is accompanied by a rare capacity for discernment.

If I am not mistaken, this describes Don Bosco very well. In him, action was enlightened and directed by contemplation.

Donoso Cortes once said that if he had to deal with a very difficult diplomatic question, he would seek the advice and guidance of a mystic. Who was more of a mystic than St Bernard? And yet he dealt with everybody and everything, so much so that it is impossible to write the story of his life without writing the story of his times. The same is true of St Teresa and many others. What was said of St Bernard can also be said of Don Bosco:

The periphery did not disturb the centre of his life, and the centre did not disturb the periphery.¹⁴³

The periphery was his external activity and the centre was his mystical recollection. The idea that contemplative souls are of little practical use, says the author mentioned above, is an entirely modern discovery.

¹⁴³ Hello, *Physionomies de Saints., St Bernard.*

19

The Quiet Twilight

After a life extraordinarily rich in supernatural graces, like that of Don Bosco, some might expect that the end of his life would be preceded by special signs, the prelude of eternal splendour. But it was not like that. Everything happened as one might expect for someone whose life was marked by long and painful suffering. Having said that, there was nothing extraordinary about the way Don Bosco bore his sufferings to the end. Holiness keeps growing to the end of one's life, it is then, rather than earlier, that one is seen to be truly holy.

"The death of a saint," writes Faber¹⁴⁴ "is a work of divine art, a supernatural masterpiece resplendent with eternal beauty. No two of them are alike and all are wonderful." The same author, listing the deaths that are most precious in the eyes of God, mentions one which he calls "death of detachment." It is the kind of death of one who has nothing to sacrifice, nothing to deprive himself of, either because his soul was never attached to this earth or because it has been detached for a long time, so that, before his physical death, he had already died spiritually to earthly things. "In this case," he says, "death is purely an act of love. It could be called the celebration of a sacred rite, rather than a punishment. The detached person is no longer a child of the earth but an angel in the chains of a mortal body."¹⁴⁵

We see this in the last six weeks of Don Bosco's life when he was preparing to leave this life for heaven. He was no longer of this world, but totally wrapped up in confident expectation of good things to come. The Lord willed that during this lengthy period of illness he should edify others from his bed of suffering, through his heroic patience, his inextinguishable

¹⁴⁴ *Spiritual Conferences*, p. 136 (Edition of D. G. Albera) S.E.I. Torino.

¹⁴⁵ Loc. Cit p. 138.

ardour for the good of souls, and his fervent prayer: the threefold effect of that intimate union with God, which made him suffer for the love of God, love his neighbour with a supernatural charity, and look to the Lord with filial tenderness.

Along with these three fruits of his union with God, there was also his unconditional loyalty to the Vicar of Jesus Christ. But Don Bosco is always Don Bosco! We should not expect to find impressive external manifestations of his intimate sentiments, these are seen, rather, in calm measured signs. Anyone who observes them cannot fail to notice the interior life of those whose life is *hidden with Christ in God* (cf. Col 3:3). We will now examine each of the fruits mentioned above, one by one.

Don Bosco's patience never left him, through all the sufferings that afflicted him, because it was strengthened by the three theological virtues. His faith enabled him to see illness as something sent to him by God for the good of his soul. Hope gave him an imperturbable peace of mind as he waited, trusting in God, for the help to bear the discomfort caused by his illness. Charity inspired perfect conformity to the Divine will as he suffered for pure love of God. He exercised humble patience in thought, word and deed.

During those six weeks nobody heard him complain in the slightest about his sufferings, the attention he received, nor the cures that were offered him.... And yet it is such a common thing for sick people to want to talk about their illnesses! It is one of nature's ways of coping. They love telling everything that has happened to them. They want everyone to know how they got through the night and how they passed the day. They love to describe the progress of the illness and predict future developments. And if they don't deliberately look for sympathy, at least they enjoy it when it comes spontaneously from those who come to visit them, especially if they are praised for how well they are bearing their illness. There was none of that in Don Bosco!

During the process of beatification, the Brother who stayed up with him at night for those six weeks described with simplicity how Don Bosco acted during this period. "He practised the motto that he often repeated to me when he was in good health: '*fare, patire, tacere*' (work, suffer and keep silent). When he could no longer work, he suffered in silence. He kept silent about his sufferings, but he never ceased to speak, for as long as he was able, whenever it was a question of doing good.

Once only, two days before he died, he said, "My friend, how much I am suffering!" Immediately he went on to say humbly, "If it continues, I

don't know if I'll be able to bear it." Then he picked up again, raised his eyes to heaven and said with great faith, "God's will be done in everything."

Often he hid his sufferings, as was usual for him, passing some witty comment to distract the attention of those who were around him, as for example after his operation of which I spoke above.¹⁴⁶ A few minutes after the operation, when someone asked him how he was, he replied, "They did an expert cut!" When someone said, "Poor Don Bosco, you must have felt a lot of pain." He answered, "I don't think that bit of flesh they cut from me felt anything."

One evening the Economist General, Don Sala, said to him, "Don Bosco, you are not feeling well, are you?" "No," he replied modestly, "but everything passes and this will pass too." When he heard this, Don Sala asked if there was anything he could do to alleviate the pain. "Pray!" was the response. Then Don Bosco joined his hands and began to pray. When people said they were sorry for him, he used to answer, "The Lord suffered more than I am suffering."

He was patient in everything. His illness was hard and lasted a long time. Experience shows that in such cases even the strongest temperaments can begin to waver. They become nervous and excited. Don Bosco placed himself in the hands of the doctors who were looking after him and others who assisted them. It is easy to imagine the concerns of these people. The sick man, forgetful of his own condition, used to express regret for the sacrifices they had to make for him. He suffered from myelitis which caused him to have spasms when he moved. The people around him noticed this but he used to pass some witty comment to put them at ease.

Moving him from one bed to another was a major task. Even though his helpers were as gentle as possible, it still inevitably caused him serious pain, especially since they did not have the appropriate equipment, and they did not have the skill or experience of professional nurses. The poor patient remained always calm and allowed himself to be moved as if he were a statue. He even managed to say something pleasant every now and then. He had to be moved almost every day. One night he wanted something to drink but they had to refuse him, because he was vomiting so much. He did not get upset but simply said, "I have to learn both to live and to die." He made no demands for any delicacy or any bit of comfort. Indeed once he got upset when he felt he was getting special treatment.

¹⁴⁶ See chapter 9.

In the last few weeks he suffered from a tremendous thirst, which neither water nor ice seemed to ease, so they gave him sodawater. This appeared to bring some relief, but he refused it because he thought it was too expensive. They had to show him that it cost only seven cents a bottle to get him to agree to it. Another comment of Faber is very apt:

There is no characteristic more common among the saints than their dislike of exemptions, and the more they need and deserve them, the greater their dislike.¹⁴⁷

As we move on with our account, we will see the thoughts that occupied his mind. Here in reference to patience, it is enough to mention his spirit of resignation to God's will. After a life as active as his, it would seem natural that he would think often of the good he would be able to do when he got his health back. Sick people love to dream about what they will do when they are well again, and often think they are doing so only out of a desire to serve God. But genuinely holy souls know that the best way to serve God is in the way he decides. If then God wills that they suffer illness, so be it!

Never for a moment did Don Bosco lose this perfect resignation. Eyewitnesses are unanimous in stating this. Repeatedly one or other of the Superiors would encourage him to pray for a cure. They were convinced that if he prayed for it, this grace would be granted. But he did not agree. All he would say was, "May God's holy will be done!" On one occasion when one of them was saying some short prayers for him to repeat, he tried to slip in, almost surreptitiously, "Mary Help of Christians, let me be healed," but Don Bosco remained silent.

To express his resignation he used to raise his arms towards heaven and then join his hands. When eventually his right side became paralysed and he could no longer raise his right arm, he continued to raise the left as he said, "Your holy will be done!" When finally he could no longer speak, he would raise his hand every now and then in the same manner, seemingly renewing with this gesture the secret offering of himself to God.

All Don Bosco's life he had practised the advice of a great ascetical writer who said, "A priest's conversation should always suggest a *Sursum corda* - lift up your hearts."¹⁴⁸ He could not forget it at the end of his days. Just to see him there, suffering yet resigned, was a source of edification. Still, he always had words that did good to those who were present and

¹⁴⁷ Loc. Cit., p. 91.

¹⁴⁸ Tanquerrey, Loc.cit., n 615.

encouraged them to do good to others. In truth he was able to say but few words, but his heart, united to that of Jesus, made his voice tremble in a way that caused deep emotion in those who heard him.

For those who were most frequently at his bedside, like the Brother mentioned before and his young secretary, Don Viglietti, he always had expressions of affection and gratitude. Whatever services they rendered him, he encouraged them to do for supernatural motives. To the Brother, for example, he would say,

Remember, my friend, that at the end of our lives we gather the fruits of all the good deeds we have done. Try to work for the glory of God and the Lord will pay you well.

And to his secretary he used to say with fatherly kindness,

Tell your mother I was asking for her. Tell her to make her family a good Christian family and to pray for you that you will be a good priest and save many souls.

The saving of souls was one of his most frequent recommendations. He said one day to Mons. Cagliero,

I ask only one thing of the Lord, that I may save my poor soul. Tell all the Salesians to work zealously. Work, work! Always be diligent in saving souls.

To the Superior General of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians he said, after blessing her,

Save many souls!

And again to Cagliero, five days before he died, he whispered with great effort,

Save many souls on the Missions.

Cagliero loved to recall, and comment enthusiastically on, our dear Father's warm recommendation about work. It is not for nothing that Don Bosco used to repeat it at the end of his life in preference to other recommendations. Work is one of the genuine traditions of the Salesians. We can extend to the sons of Don Bosco what Don Marmion says of the sons of St Benedict.¹⁴⁹

Like the Benedictine Rule, the Salesian Rule does not prescribe extraordinary penances such as the hair shirt or the discipline. For both of

¹⁴⁹ Marmion, D. C. *Christ the Ideal of the Monk*, (translation) Padova, Antoniana, p. 84.

these religious families, work is its special form of penance. All who enter religious life do so to seek God. Both of these rules say that God is to be sought not only in prayer, but also in work: *ora et labora* (pray and work). The more we give glory to God, the more we will find him, and we glorify God by generously using all our strength in doing his will according to obedience. This is in a nutshell the thought which prompted Don Bosco's solemn appeal from his deathbed.

Naturally the two congregations founded by him were in his thoughts. His last recommendations were for the sanctification of their members, and for their perseverance and fruitful activity for the good of souls. When the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians asked him for a memento, he said, "Obedience. Practise it and get others to practise it." He said to Don Bonetti, just three days before he died, "Listen. Tell the Sisters that if they obey the Rule, their salvation is assured." The following day he said to Mons. Cagliero, in an encouraging tone of voice, "The Congregation has nothing to fear. It has men well formed. Take it to heart. Help the other superiors in every way you can." That evening Don Sala found him a bit rested and said to him, as if to cheer him up, "Don Bosco, you must be happy now with the thought that, after a life of such hard work and so many difficulties, you have succeeded in founding houses in different parts of the world and the Salesian Congregation is firmly established." "Yes," he replied. "Whatever I have done, I have done for the Lord. I could have done more. My sons will do it. Our Congregation is guided by God and protected by Mary Help of Christians."

It should not cause any surprise if we include here a mention of the loyalty and devotion Don Bosco had towards the Vicar of Christ, and this, too, was seen on his deathbed. Did he not believe and teach that the Supreme Pontiff is the chain that unites people to God? Pius XI paid a magnificent tribute to him, when he said that he knew, from his own personal experience, that Don Bosco put the faithful service of God and of Jesus Christ, and of his Vicar, ahead of any personal glory.

During his illness he was able to reopen his heart to some of the noble sentiments that had motivated him in the course of his life. In this regard he revealed to Mons. Cagliero something that he had kept secret until then. And the jealously guarded secret was this:

The Congregation and the Salesians have as their special scope to uphold the authority of the Holy See wherever they are and wherever they work.

Anyone who is familiar with the times he lived in will well understand why he kept from the eyes of the public this particular part of his programme of action. He spoke of the topic again during a friendly visit that Cardinal Alimonda made to him. He no longer referred to it as a secret but rather as a wish, expressed in these solemn words,

Eminence, I have lived through difficult times. But the authority of the Pope ... the authority of the Pope ... I have told Mons. Cagliero: 'The Salesians are to defend the authority of the Pope, wherever they work, wherever they are. Remember, Eminence, to say this to the Holy Father.

Two months later, during the solemn commemoration of the deceased, the Cardinal told of his visit and repeated Don Bosco's words. He went on,

In these words the venerable man revealed to me his testament. But why do I say revealed? His whole life - public and private - is known to the world as testimony to his loyalty to the Pope.

When his successor, Don Rua, in his first audience with Pope Leo XIII recalled these sentiments of Don Bosco, the Pope exclaimed,

Oh! You can tell that Don Bosco was a saint. He was just like St Francis of Assisi who, when he was about to die, warmly recommended to his religious always to be devout sons and supporters of the Roman Church and its Head. Do what your Founder told you and the Lord will not fail to bless you.

Whoever undertakes a study of Don Bosco's loyalty to the Vicar of Christ will find abundant material to prove that his loyalty and devotion were based upon deep veneration, cordial love and absolute obedience.

We have still to speak about his piety, manifested and nourished as always by prayer, his two principle devotions and the Sacraments. "He prayed continuously," says the Brother who testified during the process. "He was always absorbed in God," said his secretary, and he added,

This could be seen from his humble and devout demeanour, his ardent glances at the Crucifix, the way he kissed the scapular and medal of Our Lady, the numerous and frequent aspirations that fell from his lips. The scapular was that of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, given to him during his illness at his own request by a Salesian who had the faculty of enrolling in it. Apart from the Crucifix that he normally wore around his neck, he had received one during the last days of his life to which a plenary indulgence was attached, and this brought him great joy. Sometimes when he was suffering more than usual, the

bystanders would encourage him to think of the sufferings of Jesus, and he would say, 'That is what I do always.'

Despite the ills that troubled him, he wanted his secretary to pray with him every morning, to read the meditation and other readings. Every morning up to the Feast of St Francis de Sales (which at that time was on 29 January) he assisted devoutly at Holy Mass, propped up by pillows. It was the secretary who celebrated Mass in the chapel attached to his room. During January, when he was often confused, he said, "I seem to be praying all the time, but I am not sure. You help me."

Not only did he pray, but he got others to pray too. From the beginning of his illness he told the Superiors to pray and get all the Salesians to pray for him, that he should die in God's grace, for he desired nothing else. On the afternoon of 24 January he was feeling very ill and called the young sacristan, Palestrino, whom he regarded highly. He made him promise that he would spend all his free time in prayer to Jesus and Mary that his faith would remain strong as he awaited his end. Later when the young man was admitted to see him, he repeated the same thing with great emotion, and then gave him a blessing. Towards evening he usually felt a bit better, which is the opposite of most sick people. Don Lemoyne says it was due to the prayers of that good young man. Later, when he found it very difficult to speak, he asked those around him to keep suggesting to him some short pious aspirations.

He gave many new proofs of his devotion to Mary and to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. He loved to receive the Blessing of Mary Help of Christians according to the formula approved by the Congregation of Rites. He kept the rosary beads always in his hand. Once as he kissed the medal, he exclaimed,

I have always had great faith in the Blessed Virgin.

But even if he had not said it, anyone who saw him kissing her image could have said the same thing.

Towards the end of December he said to several Superiors,

I recommend to the Salesians devotion to Mary Help of Christians and frequent communion.

Don Rua thought this was intended as the *strenna* to be sent to all the houses for the New Year, and suggested this to Don Bosco. He replied,

This is for the whole of their lives!

but then he agreed to Don Rua's suggestion. A little later he turned to Mons. Cagliero and said,

Spread devotion to Mary Help of Christians in Tierra del Fuego. If you only knew how many souls Mary Help of Christians wants to win for heaven through the Salesians!

He said the same thing to him on another occasion,

Those who wish to obtain favours from Mary Help of Christians should help our Missions and they will surely receive them.

In early January when all were fearful of the impending catastrophe, there was a sudden unforeseen improvement in his condition. Everyone saw this as a special grace as a result of all the prayers that had been offered for him everywhere. On the evening of 7 January he dictated a message to his secretary for Don Lemoyne. It said:

How can you explain that someone, after three weeks in bed, almost without eating, with his mind extremely feeble, suddenly gets better, begins to notice things, feels strong again, is able to get up, write, and work? Yes I feel healthy at this moment, as if I had not been ill.

When someone asked him how, he replied,

Quod Deus imperio, tu prece, Virgo, potes (What God does by command, you, oh Virgin, can do by your prayers).

The joy that this unexpected good news brought to the Oratory was indescribable. This short Latin verse in praise of Mary's intercessory power was written on posters and displayed on the walls in various places in the house, where all could read it.

How often during his life he prayed to the Madonna, to help him to save his boys and to direct the Congregation well. The memory of so many invocations, sustained him in moments of drowsiness, as he remembered the many times he had turned to Mary, fervently and spontaneously, to seek her help.

Once when he woke suddenly he clapped his hands and shouted, Quick! Quick! Save those poor boys! Mary, most holy, help them! ... Mother! Mother!" Another day, half awake and half asleep, he was heard to shout out, "Look! They are in trouble! Courage! Keep going! Keep going, always! ... Mother! Mother!

He repeated this tender invocation about twenty times. A short while later, when he was fully conscious, he joined his hand and three times he repeated fervently, "Mary! Mary! Mary!" That calling on the Blessed Virgin in such a filial manner was a very frequent occurrence towards the end, for as long as he was able to speak.

His seraphic devotion to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament was visible in his face when he received the holy Eucharist. He received Communion every morning, apart from the few exceptions when he had been unable to keep the fast. It seemed he could never be well enough prepared and, nearly every day, when his confessor came to visit him, he sought forgiveness. He received communion right up to 29 January, Feast of St Francis de Sales. That morning some thought he should not receive communion because he was not conscious but the majority were of the opposite point of view and they decided on the best moment. When they told him that the Lord would be coming soon, he did not move. But as soon as the celebrant approached and said in a loud voice, *Corpus Domini nostri Jesu Christi* (the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ), the sick man roused himself, opened his eyes, looked at the Host, joined his hands and received the Lord. He remained recollected and repeated the words of thanksgiving suggested to him by the Superior who was with him.

This was his last Communion, but he had asked for Viaticum much earlier. Three days after he had taken to his sick bed, he said to his secretary,

Get everything ready for the holy Viaticum. We are Christians and must be always ready to offer our lives willingly to the Lord.

His tone of voice was so determined that none of the Superiors dared to suggest delaying it, and so it was fixed for the next day, Christmas Eve. He was told when everything was ready. Then, as if worried, he said to those present, "Help me, help me, all of you, to receive Jesus. I am confused. *In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum* (In to your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit)."

The procession was approaching, made up of all the altar servers and as many priests and clerics as could take part. When he heard them singing, Don Bosco became emotional, and when he saw the Blessed Sacrament appear, carried by Mons. Cagliero, he burst into tears. The chronicle notes that he was wearing a stole and he "seemed like an angel." During the process, Mons. Cagliero said that he seemed to him like St Jerome of Domenichino.

He did not delay either in asking for the Holy Oils, but insisted on being anointed by Mons. Cagliero the same evening that he received Viaticum. He had earlier expressed a wish that they ask for the Pope's blessing and this was done as quickly as possible. After receiving the sacraments he spoke only of eternity and spiritual topics.

The serenity which shone forth from his face and eyes and in his voice impressed everybody. He maintained this serenity to the end. Indeed, it remained visible on his face even when he had lost all perception of the world around him. I feel obliged to add that I myself saw him that last evening, and it seems as if that gentle image will never disappear from before my eyes. Even after his death, the look on his face was one of quiet peace, which made one exclaim, "How beautiful in the eyes of God and of people is the death of the saints."

I referred to the visit made to him by the great Cardinal Alimonda. As he said later at the commemoration, "Visiting him had a profound effect." He was amazed to see him so peaceful in spirit and so full of the thought of God. When he came out from visiting him, the Cardinal turned to Mons. Cagliero who was with him and said, "Don Bosco is always with God, in intimate union with God." The signs of this habitual contact with God did not disappear with the approach of death, or even with death itself.

A Gem Among Priests

A Danish author who has written a life of Don Bosco studied the saint and then wrote an impression of him which earlier biographers must surely have had, but none of them expressed it as well as he did.¹⁵⁰ He wrote:

Don Bosco is one of the most complete and perfect men that the world has ever known. In most of the saints, even those canonised by the Church, there is always something human and, sometimes, as in St Ambrose (*sic*), even too human... In the life of Don Bosco there is nothing or almost nothing of this. In him everything is light, without shadow. This constitutes a difficulty from an artist's point of view. The whole picture should be pointed in white, white on white, light on light. 'The just,' says the gospel, 'shall shine like the sun.' But who can paint the sun?

It is against this background of perfect innocence that Don Bosco set about building his priestly holiness.

This is what characterises Don Bosco's holiness. Even before he became a priest he longed to become one, and this aspiration gave the tone to his whole life from the age of five to twenty-six. It is hard to determine when the idea of becoming a priest entered his mind. It is as if he was born with it. He manifested a desire to become a priest as soon as he was able to understand what a priest was and what he did. From that moment the idea of priesthood so dominated his life that it gave a priestly character to his whole conduct.

There is no need to mention childish games, acting the priest in liturgical ceremonies, something that happens often among the children of Chris-

¹⁵⁰ Joergensen, John, *Don Bosco*, Italian edition by D. A Cojazzi, Torino, S.E.I., 1929., p. 8.

tian families. I focus rather on the apostolate which he began to exercise while still a child, in ways that showed priestly zeal. This is well known. When he became a cleric he did everything he could to rid himself of every habit that had even the appearance of worldliness. He gave up playing the violin, his favourite instrument. He gave up hunting and even reading the profane classics, so that he would have more time for sacred studies, teaching catechism, and religious services. When he came to priesthood he had a soul that had been priestly for a long time. After the imposition of hands and the grace of the sacrament, his mind was filled even more than before with everything that is true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we love and honour, everything that is virtuous or worthy of praise (cf. Phil 4:8). These words of St Paul are used in the Mass in honour of St John Bosco. Don Bosco wanted to be a priest, and truly was a priest in example and in word, in action and in prayer.

We don't have to study the practice of the various virtues in Don Bosco's life to be able to say that his was an exemplary priestly life his canonisation confirms that he practised virtue to a heroic degree. Here it is enough to show that he was exemplary in the respect he had for the dignity of priesthood. He showed this in a unique way in an incident that happened in 1866. When the government of the new Italy was still in Florence, the President of the Council asked him to act as official intermediary with Pius IX to resolve some particularly thorny issues. Don Bosco accepted the invitation in the hope of being able to offer a service to the Church. However, when he met the Minister, knowing whom he was dealing with, before he took on the task he was not afraid to state very clearly,

Your Excellency, I want you to know that Don Bosco is a priest at the altar, a priest in the confessional, a priest among his boys; and as he is a priest in Turin so also is he a priest in Florence, a priest in the homes of the poor, a priest in the palaces of the King and of the Ministers.

It is almost as if we can see and hear him. Don Bosco had a habit of speaking slowly, with a pleasant gravity, giving weight to every word, and that is how he must have spoken on that occasion. We can easily imagine the surprise of the Minister who, nevertheless, hastened to give the necessary assurances. If he had taken offence, Don Bosco would have replied, as he did on other occasions, with all simplicity and candour, "My language seems strange to you because you have never had the opportunity of speaking to a Catholic priest."

Don Bosco used to say that the priest is always a priest and should be seen as such at all times. Six years after his ordination, among the notes of his retreat he wrote the words of St John Chrysostom, "The priest is a soldier of Christ." And a soldier is always a soldier, always on active service.

The lofty notion that Don Bosco had of the priesthood can be seen also in other ways. He, who was always so humble, delighted in the signs of respect that he received in many places, and from groups of people, on his journeys. Why? He said himself,

These marks of respect are not given to the individual but to his priestly character and therefore to the Church and the faith.

One day when he was the guest of a noble family in Turin, grand speeches were given in his honour. He let them speak and then he replied,

I am happy that you have such esteem for the priesthood. No matter what good is said about a priest, about the dignity and virtues which the priest should have, enough can never be said.

On another occasion he gave free vent to his enthusiasm in a lively and spontaneous manner. As he was entering a female institute with a priest friend of his, he whispered a prayer,

Fac, Domine, ut servem cor et corpus meum immaculatum tibi, ut non confundar (Grant, O Lord, that I may preserve my heart and body pure for your sake, and that I may not be deceived).

Then he turned to his companion and said,

You see, my friend, a priest faithful to his vocation is an angel, and if he is not that, then what is he? He becomes an object of pity and scorn for all.

It is natural then that he had great respect for the priestly character in others. He showed many signs of esteem and respect for priests. If ever he heard about a priest who did not respect his priesthood, he became upset even to the point of tears and would have wished to hide him from the eyes of others. He showed great love in trying to rehabilitate priests who had fallen into disrepute and who were recommended to him by the Archbishop. We shall speak again of this later.

It is a great pity that we do not have complete copies of the sermons he preached to priests during retreats. We have only brief notes but from them we can judge the efficacy of his words. He spoke *ex abundantia cordis* (from the richness of his heart). "How happy I am to be a priest!" he once exclaimed, in conversation with another priest. He said this because he

humbly believed that being a priest was the only thing that saved him in those difficult times from the foolish ideas of some hotheads.¹⁵¹ But being a priest was at all times his greatest personal satisfaction, as it was his greatest title of honour. He never failed to put his priestly title whenever he wrote his name on books or signed letters, something that was not done at that time.

Who was more priestly than Don Bosco in his way of speaking? We can say with moral certainty that Don Bosco did not have to render an account to God for even one idle word. Of Don Bosco the preacher we have already spoken sufficiently in chapter 11, and in chapters 12 and 16 we have spoken also of his use of the word. His priestly love for souls inspired him in the pulpit as well as in his room and in the playground. It never left him, no matter where he was. Whether he was at home or away from home, whether engaged in business or in pleasant conversation, those who were with him knew that they were always in the presence of a priest, who was well used to speaking about God and eternity. He knew how to be both *salt and light* (cf. Mt 5:13) in every time and place. This was well understood by that Marquis in France who felt obliged to say, in the company of some aristocrats, "Don Bosco preaches always." The young clerics and priests of the Oratory also understood the value of his words. They not only treasured them, they also recorded them faithfully in their notebooks, some of which have come down to us.

I have already said a lot about his priestly work, but there is more to be said. What was said of him, "priest at the altar," can serve as our starting point. We have seen how he celebrated Mass like an angel. He was also "a priest in the confessional." He was convinced that he was a priest especially to restore souls to God's grace, and we have seen in chapter 10 the fruits of that conviction. He was "a priest in the midst of his boys." How he loved those boys! "It is enough that you are young for me to love you," he wrote in the introduction to the *Companion of Youth*. He loved them as a priest. He also said, "It would be difficult to find anyone who loves you in Jesus Christ more than I do." He showed this as a priest, willing to undergo tiredness, pain and sacrifice of every kind and at every moment for the good of their souls. He dealt with them always as a priest.

A saying he constantly practised and preached was always to deal with young people in such a manner that they would never go away unhappy. He spoke to them as a priest. The salvation of their souls was the subject of his conversation with the young, in private and in public. This was the

¹⁵¹ *Mem. Biog.*, vol.3., P. 278.

first thing he spoke about when he met a boy for the first time, the last thing when a boy was leaving, and the first thing whenever he met him again later in life.

"A priest in Florence as in Turin," a priest always, everywhere and in every circumstance. On his travels in Italy, France and Spain the general admiration for him as wonder worker did not prevent his being venerated as a holy priest. This is how he was seen by all who met him. Crowds came to attend his Mass, to hear him speaking, to open their conscience to him. On his way back from Paris in 1883 he said that he had had to resolve a good number of cases there, each one of which would have made his journey worthwhile.

"A priest with the poor." Like Jesus he had a special love for the poor and like Jesus he sought his followers among the sons of the poor. And who does not know that to speak about Don Bosco is to speak about poor young people? Relating how no poor person ever approached Don Bosco without getting some assistance, his biographer concludes with a revealing expression: "Don Bosco was poor but as generous as a king!" Among the distinguishing characteristics of his mission, Jesus pointed to the words of Isaiah, "The Good News is proclaimed to the poor" (cf. Mt 11:5; Lk 4:18). The priest is a true priest to the extent that he draws on the divine example in proclaiming the Good News to the poor.

"A priest with the rich and powerful." That could serve as a summary of what he said in Florence after he declared himself a priest in the homes of the poor, and that is certainly what he meant, even if he did not say so expressly. He could not say everything! Between the poor and the kings, there are not only the government ministers. There are other categories of persons such as the wealthy and the educated. Don Bosco had very frequent contacts with people who were rich in possessions and in knowledge. He knocked unceasingly on the doors of the wealthy, and he received from them in abundance. He was deeply grateful as a priest should be, without any servility. He worked on the principle: "We do a great service to the rich when we help them to observe the divine precept to *give alms from what you have*" (cf. Lk 11:41).

He himself often gave precious spiritual alms to rich people who were enslaved to their wealth. There was even the case of a wealthy Jew who wanted to meet Don Bosco and came to see him. Coming out from the Oratory he was heard to say that if there were somebody like Don Bosco in every city, the whole world would be converted. Another wealthy Jew, who was also a rabbi, said that he had been to visit Don Bosco twice, but that he

would not go a third time for fear he might find himself compelled to stay with him. These and similar expressions show that these men saw not only Don Bosco's priestly habit but also the priestly character of his soul.

Just as he did not flatter the rich, neither did he feel overawed by the learned. He also was possessed of knowledge, which Scripture calls the hallmark of every priest (cf. Mal 2:8). He shared his knowledge with all, whether they wanted to hear it or not. A well known foreign lawyer, much in demand for the defence of the rights of ecclesiastics, quoted from the Psalms in support of his work on behalf of the Church. Don Bosco asked him bluntly,

You, sir, this religion that you defend so admirably, do you practise it?

The poor lawyer tried to change the topic of conversation, but Don Bosco held his hand and insisted,

Don't twist. Answer: this religion that you defend so well in public, do you also practise it?

This was the *coup de grace* for the lawyer who had reached the stage where he no longer even believed in confession. Taking his leave of a noble family after a meal with them, Don Bosco spoke a good word to each one, except a certain general who was also a guest. He was an educated man but indifferent in matters of faith. He asked Don Bosco for some word to keep as a memento of their pleasant meeting. "Pray for me, General," said Don Bosco, "pray that I may save my soul." The General was a bit shaken and replied, "You are asking me to pray for you! It would be better if you were to give me some good advice." Don Bosco paused for a moment to collect his thoughts and answered with calm resolve: "General, you have one great battle still to fight. If you win it, you will be very fortunate. It will be for the salvation of your soul." The onlookers were amazed but the General declared that only Don Bosco could speak so frankly to him.

There was a very moving conversation with seventy year old Count Cibrario, a famous liberal and Minister of State. The dialogue ended on this very priestly note,

Count, you know I wish you well and have great respect for you. If, as you say, you may not live much longer, remember that before you die you have some things to settle with the Church.

In Paris he was visited by Paul Bert, former Minister of Public Education. He brought the conversation round to the question of eternal life and very slowly persuaded him to revise immediately a book on morality that

the minister had written for the schools. Also in Paris there was his dramatic conversation with Victor Hugo! We have the script of it, edited according to Don Bosco's account of it and corrected by his own hand. The famous novelist had come in with other ideas but left thinking about the afterlife.

Don Bosco had very many dealings with people in authority. He respected their authority, but in his dealings with them he did not give up his own priestly authority. Minister Ratazzi experienced this once. He asked Don Bosco if he had incurred excommunication by some of his decisions in government. After three days he got this reply, "I have examined your question. I have studied and sought somehow to be able to say no, but I have not succeeded." The proud liberal declared himself grateful for this reply and said that he had asked Don Bosco because he recognised his honesty.

In Rome in 1874, coming out from the office of the Minister for Internal Affairs, he confided to a close friend that he had spoken some home truths to the minister, and not without results. Two years later, when the railway was being inaugurated at Lanzo Torinese, the Salesian college there was chosen for the reception of the authorities and distinguished guests. There were three famous ministers and a string of senators and deputies, all well known for their very liberal views. Don Bosco was present. During the lengthy but pleasant reception, he gradually became the subject of the conversation. He took advantage of this to turn the topic around, very delicately and politely, and he led those gentlemen to reflect on matters of religion which they had not heard for who knows how long.

Even many years earlier, Don Bosco was not slow in speaking the truth to important people, crowned and uncrowned. He reminded members of the former royal family of Naples, now exiled in Rome, of the wrongs they had committed against the Catholic Church. He advised them to resign, telling them that the plans they had in mind were not those of Divine providence. Even before that, the love and devotion he had for the Kings of Savoy did not stop him from raising his voice to persuade the Sovereign to draw back from some evil steps he was about to take. Unfortunately he was not heeded, but later Victor Emmanuel II showed his appreciation for Don Bosco's priestly candour. He told the Archbishop of Genoa, who had previously been tutor at the court, that Don Bosco was truly a holy priest. Don Bosco obeyed the injunction of St Paul, "Pay to all their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due ... honour to whom honour is due" (cf. Rom 13:7). He never spoke a disrespectful word against the authorities, and he wanted his sons to show due honour to the legitimate authorities. No matter how difficult times were, he always maintained his priestly decorum.

Don Bosco was a priest with everyone and he was a priest also among his superiors and confreres in the priesthood. He was a priest with the Pope. His conduct towards the Vicar of Christ could not have been more correct. His motto was,

All with the Pope, all for the Pope, always loving the Pope.

From this principle the corollaries followed easily. He used to tell the boys,

When you see an author who speaks badly about the Pope, you know that his book is not one you should read.

When questioned about the forceful annexation of the Papal States he used to say,

As a citizen I am ready to defend my country even with my life, but as a Christian and as a priest I can never approve these things."

Someone who knew him very well, Bishop Manacorda of Fossano, said in his funeral eulogy,

No one ever heard a word from him that did not carry the print of his childlike docility towards the Pope.

We have heard what he said on his deathbed.

He was a priest also with bishops. He venerated the fullness of priesthood in them and got others to do the same. Those bishops who suffered political persecution could give ample proof of his courageous loyalty and devotion. Among them were Archbishop Frasoni of Turin who suffered imprisonment and exile; as well as Cardinal De Angelis, Bishop of Fermo, and Bishop Rota of Gaustello who were both sentenced to house arrest in Turin. Don Bosco considered it a great privilege to have a bishop stay at the Oratory. He would announce his arrival, wait for him at the door, present him to the boys and attend to his every need. In the decree on the heroic quality of his virtue, there was a reference to the difficulties between Don Bosco and Archbishop Gastaldi. History shows to what extent and in what unlikely circumstances Don Bosco proved himself a priest with his bishop.

A priest with priests: he respected his own gift of priesthood and revered the priesthood in others. Priests always found great friendliness at the Oratory. Don Bosco never allowed himself to forget that he was a priest also among other priests, and he never lost sight of their souls. Some sayings were always on his lips,

The priest should attend to the salvation of souls, but before all else he must think about his own salvation... A priest never goes to heaven or to hell alone ... *Salve, salvando salvati* (save yourself by saving others).

He showed great deference in his relationships with parish priests. It caused him great pain, however, when he heard of priests who dishonoured their state, but he did not waste time in useless lamentation. Sometimes on his own initiative, and sometimes at the request of a bishop, he would try with great charity to rehabilitate them, exhorting them, holding long meetings with them, giving financial help, even offering them hospitality for a period of time. He went after priests and ex-priests involved in politics or antipapal movements with the sole intent of getting them to review their situation. The well known ex-Jesuit and great theologian Passaglia, even though he was laicised, said that Don Bosco possessed all the charisms of the Holy Spirit and he avoided meeting him for fear he would be won over by him.¹⁵² He hoped also to win back the famous ex-Canon Gioberti. He visited him together with Don Borel, enquired about the state of his soul, and engaged in heated argument with him, but his charitable and priestly attempt failed on account of the man's pride.¹⁵³ But there were a good number of priests who had betrayed their priestly honour, and who were led back by Don Bosco. We have already spoken about his zeal in promoting priestly vocations.

His enormous activity as a writer was also part of his priestly work, as we have seen in chapter 12. I draw attention here to one of his principles which shows how delicate his priestly conscience was when it came to writing. Speaking to his Salesians about his *Ecclesiastical History* he said,

I do not write for the learned but for ordinary people and for the young. If I were to disturb the faith of some simple soul by describing some less honourable or somewhat controversial fact, would that not be to lead them into error? If I were to expose to some simple mind the defect of a member of the Congregation, would it not create in his mind doubts about the entire community? And would this not be a mistake? Only someone who considers the whole two thousand years' history of the Church is able to see that the faults of even very eminent men do not take away from the holiness of the Church, but serve rather to prove its divine origin. Bad impressions received at a tender age through imprudent words often have lamentable consequences for faith and good conduct.

¹⁵² *Mem. Biog.*, vol. 7, p. 175.

¹⁵³ *Mem. Biog.*, vol. 7, p. 423 and 526.

The artist, Fra Angelico, used to say that those who do the things of Christ should always stay close to Christ, an excellent rule for religious art. It is also a fundamental law of priestly ministry. One who wants to form Christ in souls, must live habitually with the life of Christ (cf. Gal 4:19; Phil 1:21; Gal 2:20). Don Bosco would be a complete enigma if we were to think that his prodigious effectiveness in the priestly ministry derived from any source other than an intense life of union with Jesus Christ, whose faithful minister he was and wanted always to be.

There were those who were so impressed by the immense amount of work Don Bosco did that they asked, in the presence of Pius XI, when did he find time to be recollected in prayer to God. The Pope, who knew Don Bosco well, replied that it was more to the point to ask when did Don Bosco not pray. It is true that he did not devote long hours to meditation, as other saints did. It is also true what St Teresa said,

Believe me, it is not the length of time devoted to prayer that brings about progress in the soul. If one spends many hours in works of charity or obedience, love is inflamed more rapidly in a few minutes than after long hours of meditation. Everything must come from the hand of God.¹⁵⁴

Here might be the place to deal with a fourth topic, prayer, but we have already said a lot about it in this volume! Nevertheless I want to insist on one peculiar aspect frequently recorded in relation to the prayer of Don Bosco. It was not something original, but was there in the ancient teaching and practice. For example, St Gregory the Great used to say that contemplation should always be strictly united to active love, and he has a few very profound pages on this principle.¹⁵⁵ One sentence is enough for us, where he says,

Our charity must be inflamed by the love of God and of neighbour, in such a way that we do not abandon charity towards our neighbour for the sake of quiet contemplation and the love of God, and then not want to engage in the service of neighbour, with the result that the flame of eternal love becomes extinguished.

This is exactly how Don Bosco lived. In him, fervent action was never separated from intense contemplation.

St Bernard says that contemplation brings about a collection of ideas, love and energy that are then poured out in action. This can be seen very

¹⁵⁴ *Oeuvres complètes*, translated into Italian by the Carmelites of Paris. T.3, p. 109. (Or, *Fondazioni* 5, towards the end).

¹⁵⁵ *Mor.*, 6.37. (MPL., 75, 761).

well in the life of Don Bosco. A present day authority on asceticism gives this judgement in relation to Don Bosco: in him we find "a perfect unity of prayer and contemplation" to the point that he can be called "a contemplative in action."¹⁵⁶

The thought of the priestly holiness of Don Bosco dominated the mind of Pius XI. On one occasion, speaking to a large group of seminarians, he began by stating,

The Holy Year has ended with the figure of a great priest, who had the true and firm conviction that he was an instrument of Redemption, especially for the young who are so much under attack, so much in danger and so needy.

He went on to develop the idea and to explain how, in his opinion, the new saint ought to be proposed as a model for future priests like those to whom he was speaking.¹⁵⁷ Therefore Don Bosco is, and will remain, a model for priests who spend their energy every day in working for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. He is indeed *a gem among priests* (words that the Church uses in the divine office for St Martin of Tours).

If Don Bosco is a pearl among priests this does not mean that he should be proposed as a model only to priests. In many public audiences after the beatification and canonisation of Don Bosco, Pius XI, the "Pope of Don Bosco"¹⁵⁸ spoke about him and distributed the medal of Don Bosco to a great variety of people. He always found some aspect of Don Bosco that he could propose to them for their imitation. He did this without any forced arguments but with observations that were natural and evident, and above all, rooted in the reality of his life.

After reading the reports of those audiences one is inclined to think that Don Bosco's holiness was, one could almost say, an 'encyclopaedic' holiness, that is, a holiness of universal character. The proof of this is the universal enthusiasm that welcomed his elevation to the honours of the altar, and the widespread devotion to him among all kinds of people.

He is indeed the Saint of all!

¹⁵⁶ Portaluppe, Don, *La spiritualità di Don Bosco* in "Scuola Cattolica," January, 1930.

¹⁵⁷ *Osservatore Romano*, 15 April 1934.

¹⁵⁸ On 3rd April 1934, as Pius XI was being carried through St Peter's on the *sedia gestatoria* towards the throne before the altar of the Confessions, shouts of *Viva il Papa di Don Bosco* (Long Live the Pope of Don Bosco) echoed around the Basilica. In his talk the Pope referred to this greeting with evident satisfaction and said, "It is with deep joy that we have heard around us the shouts *Viva il Papa di Don Bosco*."

The author confides that he wrote this book to correct a major misunderstanding. "In these times of feverish activity some would like to regard Don Bosco as a saint of action, almost as if the Church, from St Paul to the present day, had not always had saints who were very active, and as if a modern active saint did not also need to be a man of prayer. Certainly Don Bosco was a man of action and his activity reached an incredible level. But it came from the superabundance of his interior life.

Going through the pages of *Don Bosco With God* one can see there a mentality and a way of life that are so different from our own day as to frighten us. It is a good time for us to reconsider and allow ourselves to be challenged by the truths it contains. It is for this reason the book is being republished. It is for this same reason that it deserves to be received and regarded as an authentic gift of the Spirit.

In his lifetime, Don Ceria, a Salesian of Don Bosco, was a teacher, a director of houses/schools, and also a writer. In 1929, he was appointed to continue the *Biographical Memoirs of Don Bosco*. He meant to underline the prayerful and contemplative interiority of Don Bosco. Even today, Don Ceria's book retains all its freshness and presents the spiritual depth of the Saint of the Young.



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