

VOLUME II - 1841-1846

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THE BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

---

of Saint John Bosco



## Father Giovanni Battista Lemoyne

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**FATHER GIOVANNI BATTISTA LEMOYNE** (1839-1916) was the first and great chronicler of the life of St. John Bosco and of the first decades of the Salesian Congregation.

From their first, providential meeting in 1864, Father Lemoyne esteemed Don Bosco as a person of outstanding character and holiness. He not only strove to understand and acquire his spirit, but also took upon himself the task of committing to writing anything of significance that Don Bosco did or said. Information concerning earlier events he painstakingly gathered from eyewitnesses and other sources.

In 1883 he came to the Mother House as editor of the **Salesian Bulletin** and Secretary of the Superior Chapter. The five years that followed he spent in cordial intimacy with Don Bosco and heard from the Saint himself the story of the arduous road he had to climb in his youth to arrive at the priesthood, and of the wonderful manner in which Providence guided the Salesian work.

After Don Bosco's death in 1888, he was formally charged with the compilation of available materials for the life of the Saint. Forty-five large volumes of galley proofs bear witness to his dedicated research and provide the material for the nineteen volumes of the **Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco**, the first nine of which he authored. Noteworthy among his other works are the **Life of Don Bosco** in two volumes and the **Life of Mamma Margaret**, Don Bosco's mother. He died in Turin on September 14, 1916 at the age of 77.

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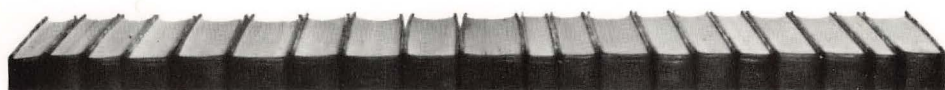
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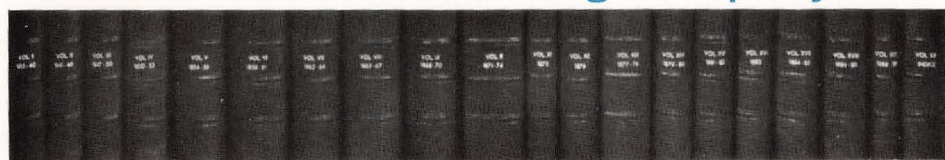




*Don Bosco's Statue In St. Peter's, Rome*



**A Faithful Translation of the Original Expertly Done**







THE  
BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS  
OF  
SAINT JOHN BOSCO





*The*  
*Biographical Memoirs*  
*of*  
*Saint John Bosco*

by  
GIOVANNI BATTISTA LEMOYNE, S.D.B.

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AN AMERICAN EDITION  
TRANSLATED  
FROM THE ORIGINAL ITALIAN

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DIEGO BORGATELLO, S.D.B.  
*Editor-in-chief*

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# **Dedicated**

WITH PROFOUND GRATITUDE  
TO  
THE LATE, LAMENTED, AND HIGHLY ESTEEMED

**VERY REVEREND FELIX J. PENNA, S.D.B.**

(1904-1962)

TO WHOSE  
WISDOM, FORESIGHT, AND NOBLE SALESIAN HEART  
THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION  
OF  
THE BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS  
OF  
SAINT JOHN BOSCO  
IS  
A LASTING MONUMENT



TO  
The Very Reverend  
**LUIGI RICCERI**  
Rector Major  
of the Salesian Society  
and  
Sixth Successor of Saint John Bosco

## *Editor's Preface to the First Nine Volumes*

**S**AINTE JOHN BOSCO, the central figure of this vastly extensive biography, was a towering person in the affairs of both Church and State during the critical 19th century in Italy. He was the founder of two very active religious congregations during a time when other orders were being suppressed; he was a trusted and key liaison between the Papacy and the emerging Italian nation of the *Risorgimento*; above all, in troubled times, he was the saintly Christian educator who successfully wedded modern pedagogy to Christ's law and Christ's love for the poor young, and thereby deserved the proud title of *Apostle of youth*.

He is known familiarly throughout the world simply as Don Bosco.<sup>1</sup> His now famous system of education, which he called the *Preventive System*, was based on reason, religion and kindness, and indicated by its descriptive name that, also in education, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. He always sought to place pupils in the moral impossibility of committing sin, the moral disorder from which all evils flow.

To ensure the continuation of his educational mission in behalf of youth he founded two worldwide religious congregations, the Society of St. Francis de Sales (Salesian Society) and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (Salesian Sisters) which today number more than 40,000 members conducting 2800 educational institutions throughout the world.

To help in the difficult art of educating the young, Don Bosco planned to expound his method of education in a book but, absorbed as he was in the task of firmly establishing his two religious congregations and in unceasing other labors, he had to content

<sup>1</sup> *Don* is an abbreviation of the Latin *dominus*, master. It is used in Italy as a title for priests; it stands for *Father*.

himself with a simple outline of his ideas in a golden little treatise entitled *The Preventive System in the Education of Youth*.

Fortunately, the *Biographical Memoirs* of St. John Bosco are ample compensation for a book which, if written, might have given us only theories. These memoirs, a monumental work in nineteen volumes, until recently reserved exclusively to Salesians and published only in the original Italian, are now available, unabridged, in this American edition not only to his spiritual children, devotees and admirers, but also to all who are interested in education.

In these volumes Don Bosco is shown in action: not *theorizing*, but *educating*. What he said and did in countless circumstances was faithfully recorded by several of his spiritual sons, chief among them Father Giovanni Battista Lemoyne. From the day he first met Don Bosco in 1864 to his own death in 1916, Father Lemoyne spent his life recording words and deeds of Don Bosco, gathering documents,<sup>2</sup> interviewing witnesses, and arranging raw material for the present nineteen volumes of the life of Don Bosco, eight of which he himself authored beside readying another volume for the press before his death.

In the compilation of the *Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco*, Father Lemoyne's primary sources were the *Memorie dell'Oratorio dal 1835 al 1855* (Memoirs of the Oratory from 1835 to 1855) written by Don Bosco himself, the diaries and chronicles of various fellow Salesians who daily recorded what Don Bosco said or did, numerous letters of the Saint, the *Cinque lustri di storia dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales* (The History of the First Twenty-five Years of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales) written by Father John Bonetti, S.D.B., and personally checked by Don Bosco, the proceedings of the diocesan process of beatification and other unimpeachable contemporary documents and testimonies. Above all, Father Lemoyne, intelligent, conscientious and well-informed, not only used reliable sources, but was himself an eye witness. He recorded what he personally saw and heard from Don Bosco. This enabled him to write a true history, even though not according to modern critical methods. He concerned himself

<sup>2</sup> All the documents in the archives at the Salesian Motherhouse in Turin, Italy are now being microfilmed and stored in the Don Bosco College Library in Newton, New Jersey.



principally with presenting chronologically his vast selected material and therefore his narrative is somewhat fragmentary and may lack scientific method. It is nevertheless true history, even Volume I which deals mainly with Don Bosco's youth and the training he received from Mamma Margaret, his mother.<sup>3</sup> When gifted writers and scholars of the future will produce a critical biography of Don Bosco, the *Biographical Memoirs* will still not be surpassed because Father Lemoyne lived at Don Bosco's side, wrote what he saw and heard, and eminently succeeded in giving us a living portrait of Don Bosco.

In editing the translation of the *Biographical Memoirs* accuracy and readability were the goals we set. This was not easy and occasionally, as regards the latter, we may have fallen short of the mark. Nineteenth century Italian does not readily lend itself to an agile version that strives to be an accurate translation and not a paraphrase.

We have departed from the original in only one minor point: the lengthy titles or series of subtitles in each chapter. Father Lemoyne's method of chronological sequence in his narration necessarily made the contents of each chapter fragmentary. As it was not possible, under these circumstances, to give them a meaningful title and the volumes were not indexed, Father Lemoyne prefaced each chapter with many subtitles. In some volumes such subtitles fill a whole page. Since we have indexed each volume and subtitles become unnecessary, we selected in each chapter the most outstanding episode and gave it a title.

May the reading of these *Memoirs* portraying the life of a man whom Pope Pius XI called "a giant of sanctity" inspire his spiritual children, to whom this work is primarily directed, and all men and women of good will to walk their own path of life in a spirit of service to God and man.

FR. DIEGO BORGATELLO, S.D.B.  
*Editor-in-Chief*

New Rochelle, N.Y.

June 5, 1965

124th Anniversary of Don Bosco's Ordination

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Francis Desramaut, S.D.B., *Les Memorie I de Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, Étude d'un ouvrage fondamental sur la jeunesse de saint Jean Bosco*, Lyon, 1962, p. 411ff.

## *Acknowledgments*

For the publication of *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco* we owe a debt of gratitude to the Very Reverend Augustus Bosio, S.D.B., Provincial of the Salesians in the eastern United States, who sponsored this project.

In the preparation of this volume we are indebted to Genevieve M. Camera, Ph.D., John Chapin, Rev. Paul Aronica, S.D.B., and Rev. Joseph Bajorek, S.D.B., for editorial assistance; to Rev. Henry Sarnowski, S.D.B., for indexing; to the Editorial Board for advice and suggestions; and to the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine for permission to use the Confraternity translation of the Scriptures.

THE EDITOR

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## Author's Preface

AS a token of my respectful affection, I offer to my confreres the second volume of the *Biographical Memoirs* of the beloved Founder and Father of our Pious Society of St. Francis de Sales. I trust that they will welcome this new labor of mine and that they will pray that I may be able to complete it.

In my narration, I have followed the method described in my preface to the first volume, and used the same sources. Furthermore, the attentive reading of the published works of our dear Don Bosco greatly helped me towards a deeper understanding of his spirit, trust [in God], love of his fellowmen and his aims. No less informative were some of his unpublished writings such as:

1. *Memorie dell'Oratorio dal 1835 al 1855; esclusivamente per i Soci Salesiani* [Memoirs of the Oratory from 1835 to 1855 for the Exclusive use of Members of the Salesian Congregation], in which he describes the early beginnings of his providential institution. The unforgettable Father John Bonetti found in it a mine of information when compiling his *Cinque lustri di Storia dell'Oratorio Salesiano* [History of the First Twenty-Five Years of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales], a work of unquestionable authority, substantiated by the testimony of a great number of past pupils who were diligently interviewed by the conscientious author.

2. *Memorie ai miei figli i Salesiani* [Reminiscences for my Spiritual Sons, the Salesians] in which Don Bosco gives norms derived from experience. They were intended to be a legacy for his successor in the difficult task of governing the Salesian Society.

3. *Biografia del Sacerdote Giuseppe Cafasso esposta in due ragionamenti funebri* [Biography of Father Joseph Cafasso as Presented in Two Funeral Eulogies]. They portray the heroic virtues of his teacher and spiritual guide, as well as the close and holy



friendship that bound Don Bosco to him. Indirectly, they tell us about Don Bosco during those years.

I have written this volume solely for the Salesians. In accordance with our Superiors' directives and until the Holy See will have pronounced its definitive judgment, I will not permit it to be made public, nor will I authorize any translation, reprint, imitation, abridgment or extracts for any reason whatsoever. Likewise, it should not be put in the hands of any one who is not a member of our Pious Society as source material to be published in praise of Don Bosco. Hence, I duly place this book under the protection of existing copyright laws.

The frontispiece shows our highly esteemed Rector Major, Father Michael Rua. I mean this to be a token of my profound veneration and affection for him because, in addition to many other reasons, these pages portray his first meeting as a little boy with our dear Don Bosco.

May Our Lord and Mary Help of Christians bless the reader of these pages, as well as the writer,

FR. GIOVANNI BATTISTA LEMOYNE  
of the  
Pious Society of St. Francis de Sales

Turin, February 2, 1901  
Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin

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## CHAPTER 1

### *Freemasonry in Piedmont in 1841*

OUR account of the life of Don Bosco has now reached the year 1841: peace and security reigned throughout Piedmont. For eighteen years [1831-1849] Charles Albert enjoyed the distinction of being a father to his people rather than a ruler.<sup>1</sup> He adhered to the laws of God and was devoted to the Church. He secured for Piedmont a position of respect among the European powers: commerce flourished, finances were sound, justice was properly administered and Sardinia was widely known and highly regarded in the most remote areas. Political life, unhampered by foreign influence, enjoyed complete independence.<sup>2</sup> For a small but brave kingdom as Sardinia was, its army and navy were exceptionally strong.

Charles Albert covered himself with glory when, in 1823, he bravely took up the defense of Ferdinand VII against a triumphant revolution and took part in the capture of the *Trocadero*.<sup>3</sup> He was indeed qualified to reign. In 1835, he bravely stood up to the ministers of France and England, De Broglie and Lord Palmerston respectively, when they voiced their displeasure at his moral, political, and material support of Don Miguel in Portugal and Don Carlos in Spain. He told them that he intended to be master in his own house. He directed foreign relations with a steady hand and earned the respect of the great powers.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Albert succeeded to the throne of Sardinia as an absolute monarch, but in 1848 he granted a constitution. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> [Clement] Solaro della Margherita, *Memorandum storico politico*, Turin, 1851, pp. 551, 571.

<sup>3</sup> A fortress near Cadiz. During the civil war following the revolution of 1820, Ferdinand VII was held there almost as a prisoner. Through the intervention of the Grand Alliance, the *Trocadero* was captured in 1823 by the French army of the Duke of Angoulême in which Charles Albert was serving. [Editor]

At the same time he set a good example for his subjects with his sincere piety. He frequented the sacraments, constantly read and commented on Holy Scripture, and, when in Turin, frequently attended novenas and other public devotions.

All the while, the dreams of glory, dimly glimpsed in his youth, were very much alive. He cherished the hope of taking northern Italy from Austria and, in filial devotion to the Holy See, of becoming the shield and sword of the pope. He was determined to conquer or die in this cause. Men in authority joined his flatterers in promoting this desire of his. Within his hearing, nothing but the expression of the deepest veneration for the Church and the greatest zeal for God's cause was uttered, together with anxious sighs for the dangers besetting the Holy See on account of Austria's presence in Italy. These hypocrites, who would have loved to enslave the Church, if possible, pretended to be aghast at the laws of [the Hapsburg Emperor] Joseph II, and solemnly stated that freeing the bishops and the clergy in Lombardy, then fettered by Austrian oppression, was tantamount to freeing the Christians in Syria from Turkish tyranny. This kind of talk, repeated over a period of years by cunning tongues, totally deprived Charles Albert of the necessary means for discerning the truth.<sup>4</sup>

In furtherance of his plan to oust the Austrians from Italy, he courted Count Ilarione Petitti, Count Promis, Count Frederick Sclopis, Count Gallina and Robert d'Azeglio, all adherents of the new liberal ideas and of constitutional government—the last two *carbonari*<sup>5</sup> and conspirators in the 1821 uprising.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> [Clement] Solaro della Margherita, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> The *carbonari* were members of a secret society formed in the early 19th century in Italy in order to establish a republic. They wanted constitutional liberties and an independent Italy. [Editor]

<sup>6</sup> In March, 1821, the *carbonari* organized unsuccessfully a liberal uprising in Turin. King Victor Emmanuel abdicated in favor of his brother Charles Felix. But as Charles Felix was in Modena, Victor Emmanuel named as regent Charles Albert, Prince of Carignano, who was next in line of royal succession. Charles Albert, who at the time was openly supporting liberalism, granted a constitution, but the speedy intervention of Austrian troops enabled Charles Felix to expel the liberal-minded regent and to reestablish an absolute government. To manifest his conversion to orthodox reaction, Charles Albert enlisted in the expedition to subdue the Spanish liberals and restore the absolutist Ferdinand VII to the throne of Spain in 1823. Then, in order to ensure his succession to the throne of Sardinia, Charles Albert signed a declaration by which he pledged himself to preserve the fundamental (absolute) bases of the monarchy. Nevertheless, his accession to the throne in 1831 revived many hopes. [Editor]

Following their suggestion he planned to employ the various secret societies for his own ends, with the intention of destroying them once his purpose had been achieved. In fact, the leaders of secret societies throughout Italy, convinced by this time that they could not achieve their ends by violent means, accepted the invitation of the Piedmontese liberals, and by night made their way into Turin. Admitted by way of the wardrobe chamber and the royal armory, they met clandestinely with Charles Albert. Since these secret societies were dispersed, independent of each other, without discipline, hope of success or a definite aim, it was decided to organize them and more clearly determine their general objective, namely, a free and independent Italy. Mysterious and highly secret messengers were dispatched from Turin to all parts of Italy, as well as to Brussels and Paris. In the meantime, in Turin, Count Camillo Cavour<sup>7</sup> founded the *Whist Club* so that the members of this harmless group might be gradually and prudently apprised of the new political ideas.

Charles Albert wanted to free Italy. He envisioned a country in which religion and justice would prevail. He believed that once victory was achieved he could either convert or destroy liberalism, which he now favored as a means. A naïve hope! Demons are neither converted nor destroyed. Once admitted into one's house as allies, they bring with them betrayal and death.

The common people had no inkling of these anti-religious intrigues, though for years the conspirators had astutely carried on their work of destruction throughout Italy, especially within the Papal States, in order to topple thrones and destroy the Catholic Church. Already in 1819-1820<sup>8</sup> the Grand Masters of the Freemasons had drawn up a *Permanent Instruction*. It revealed the secret aims of the organization; it was the handbook that directed and guided the higher-placed members who had been chosen to lead the whole Masonic movement and that of the other secret societies, especially in Italy.

The *Instruction* reads:

<sup>7</sup> Camillo Benso (1810-1861), count of Cavour, was a great Piedmontese statesman and the soul of the Italian *Risorgimento*. [Editor]

<sup>8</sup> During the reign of Victor Emmanuel I, 1802-1831. At this time Charles Albert was Prince of Carignano. [Editor]



Now that we are constituted as an active body and (after the political upheavals of 1814 and 1815) order again begins to reign in the most remote branches of our organization, as well as in those nearest to the center, we must turn our attention to an ideal that has always been of great concern to men aspiring to the regeneration of all mankind. This ideal is the liberation of Italy, whence is to come the liberation of the entire world and the establishment of a *republic of brotherhood* and world peace.

Our brothers in France have yet to understand this concept. They believe that, apart from plotting in dark corners and stabbing a policeman or traitor now and then, revolutionary Italy can, on the whole, placidly endure the yoke imposed upon the Italian people by men seated in conference beyond the Alps, without Italian representation. Such an error has been fatal to us again and again. Nor can we be satisfied to oppose it with words, for that would only further spread this misconception. It must be destroyed by deeds.

Among the many remedies which have been suggested by the more energetic members of our organization, *there is one which we must never forget.*

The Papacy has always exerted a decisive influence on Italian destinies. Everywhere, with the arms, voice, pen and heart of its countless bishops, monks, nuns and the faithful of all regions, the Papacy has always found people enthusiastically ready for sacrifice and martyrdom. At will, the Papacy can call upon followers who will die for it and others who will strip themselves of everything for it. This is an immense lever, whose power only a few popes have understood. Thus far they have but sparingly availed themselves of it. At the present time we do not intend to rebuild, even for our advantage, this power which has been temporarily weakened. *Our ultimate purpose is identical with that of Voltaire and the French Revolution: that is, the total annihilation of Catholicism and even of Christianity.* For, if the latter is allowed to survive on the ruins of [papal] Rome, it will become its new embodiment and perpetuation.

To achieve this end with greater certainty and to spare ourselves future disillusionments that indefinitely delay and jeopardize the success of our cause, we must not heed the French braggarts, nor the nebulous Germans, nor yet the melancholy British who believe that Catholicism can be destroyed by an obscene ditty, a sophism or some trivial sarcasm smuggled into the country like British cotton. Catholicism has a vitality that can resist far greater onslaughts. It has confronted more implacable and formidable adversaries, and at times it has even had the impudence

of blessing the more rabid among them with holy water. So, let our brothers across the Alps give vent to their immoderate anti-Catholic zeal; let them scoff at our Madonnas and at our *apparent* devotion. With this artifice we will be able to plot at our convenience and gradually achieve our purpose.

For seventeen hundred years the Papacy has been an essential part of Italian history. Italy cannot breathe or stir without the consent of the Supreme Pontiff. Through him she has, like Briareus, a hundred arms; without him she is condemned to a pitiful state of impotence, subject to division, hatred and hostility from the first mountain range of the Alps down to the last peak of the Apennines. We cannot endure such a state of affairs; we must find a remedy for this situation. And here it is! Whoever he may be, the pope will never join the secret societies: *therefore, the secret societies must take the first step toward the Church and the pope, for the purpose of vanquishing them both.*

The task we undertake will not be completed in a day, a month, or a year. It may require many years, perhaps even a century; but on our side, though the soldier dies, the war continues. We do not intend to win the pope over to our cause by converting him to our principles or making him their propagator. This would be a ridiculous dream. Regardless of the course of events, even should some cardinal or prelate on his own initiative and not through our deceit share our views, this would not be a reason for us to desire him to become the pope. This could even spell our ruin. Inasmuch as ambition would have led him to apostasy, so the need to retain power would of necessity induce him to sacrifice us. What we must wait for, like the Jews awaiting the Messiah, is a pope suitable for our purposes. Such a pope alone, will be *a greater help to us in our assault on the Church* than the little pamphlets of our French brothers or even the gold of England. And why? Because with such a pope we could effectively *crush the rock upon which God built His Church*; and we would have no further need of Hannibal's vinegar, nor of gunpowder, nor even of the strength of our arms. The little finger of Peter's successor would be caught in the plot, and this little finger would be more effective in this crusade than all the Urbans II and all the St. Bernards of Christianity.

We have no doubt that we shall achieve this ultimate goal of our efforts. But when and how? As yet we cannot foresee the unknown. Nevertheless, since nothing must deter us from the plan as set forth, but rather, all things should contribute to its realization, as though tomorrow's success were to crown the design we have barely traced, *we wish in this Instruction, which must not be revealed to the initiated of lower*

*rank, to give some suggestions to the leaders of the Supreme Lodge. They will communicate these to our brothers as a directive or a memorandum. Under no circumstances, as dictated by the most elementary prudence, should it leak out that these suggestions are orders from our supreme leaders. The clergy has too much at stake in this, and under the circumstances, it would be foolhardy to play around with them, as we do with petty rulers and princelings who can be blown away with a single puff.*

There is little to be gained with the old cardinals and with those prelates of resolute character. We must of necessity leave alone these diehards of the school of Consalvi,<sup>9</sup> and choose instead, from our arsenal for influencing public opinion, the weapons which will exploit or ridicule the power in their hands. A well-conceived remark, artfully circulated among certain good Christian families, will find its way to the café, and from there to the public square. At times a word can kill a man. When a prelate comes from Rome to a province, we must at once gather information on his character, his past life, his good qualities, his defects, especially his defects. Is he opposed to us? You must immediately entangle him in as many snares as possible. Give him a reputation that will frighten children and women, presenting him as cruel and bloodthirsty. Spread some horrifying story about him, such as may easily impress the minds of the people. When out-of-town papers pick up these stories from us, they will embellish and color them as usual. *To obtain the respect due to the truth*, you will show, or better still, let *some respectable fool* show the issue of the newspaper wherein such stories are written regarding that prelate. Like England and France, *Italy will never lack pens capable of concocting useful lies for the good cause.* When the people see the newspapers with the name of this or that monsignor, be he delegate or judge,<sup>10</sup> they will have no need of further proof. Here, among the people of Italy, liberalism is still in its infancy. So they will believe *in the liberals today just as they will believe in anything else tomorrow.*

Therefore crush the enemy, *whoever he may be.* If he be powerful crush him with slander and calumny, but above all, crush him before he grows in strength. You must captivate youth. *Youth must be seduced and lured unsuspectingly to the banner of the secret societies.*

<sup>9</sup> Cardinal Ercole Consalvi, was papal Secretary of State under Pope Pius VII (1800-1806, 1816-1823). [Editor]

<sup>10</sup> The Papacy was at this time both a spiritual and a temporal power. In the latter category it had more power than it has today, for it ruled over all of central Italy. It followed that most civil administrations and courts were in the hands of ecclesiastics. [Editor]

But in this, proceed with extreme caution. Two things are absolutely necessary if we are to advance slowly but surely on this dangerous path: You must appear as doves, yet be cunning as serpents. Your own parents, children and even your wives must never know of the secrets confided to you. If you so desire, *in order to better deceive the searching eye*, go to confession often. However, in the confessional, maintain absolute silence on these matters. As you know, the slightest disclosure, the faintest indication escaping you in the *tribunal of Penance or elsewhere*, could lead us to major disaster. Furthermore, the offender wittingly or unwittingly signs his own death warrant (by dagger or poison).

Before we can produce a pope according to our desires, we must produce an entire generation worthy of the kingdom that we hope for. We must ignore old men and those of middle age. We must seek the young and, if possible, even the very young. Never indulge in obscene or profane conversation with young people. *Maxima debetur puero reverentia*. [The greatest reverence is due to a child. Juvenal, *Satires*, XIV, 47]. Never forget these words of the poet, for they will assist you in avoiding licentiousness, *from which it is necessary to abstain in the interests of the cause*. If our cause is to take root and bear fruit among families, if you wish to enjoy the privilege of shelter and hospitality at the family hearth, you must appear as men of good morals. Once your good reputation has been established at boarding schools, high schools, universities and seminaries, once you have won the trust of teachers and pupils alike, foster *especially in those who are embracing the ecclesiastical state* a desire to associate with you. Speak to them of the past splendors of papal Rome. Every Italian has a nostalgia for the ancient republic of Rome. Subtly blend these two ideas. Stir and excite these temperaments always so inflammable in matters of national pride. Begin by offering them, but always secretly, innocent books, poetry glowing with patriotic overtones. Little by little you will lead their minds to the required state of ferment. When this daily routine work has succeeded in spreading the brilliance of our ideas at all levels in the ecclesiastical state, you will then realize how wise is this counsel which we now initiate.

Present events, which in our opinion are being precipitated too rapidly, will of necessity require armed intervention by Austria within a few months. There are fools who take pleasure in drawing others into the midst of danger, and who at the right moment can drag even prudent men after themselves. The revolution now being organized in Italy (the insurrections of 1820 and 1821) will only bring disaster and exile.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> As foreseen, these uprisings were quelled with Austrian arms and absolutism was again in the saddle. [Editor]

Nothing is ripe, neither men nor events, and the situation will not ameliorate for some time to come.<sup>12</sup> But through these disasters you will be able to strike a new chord in the hearts of the younger clergy, namely hatred for the foreigner. Even before the Austrians intervene, as we foresee they will, make them appear ridiculous and detestable. Subtly fuse the memory of the conflicts between the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire with the ideal of papal supremacy. Arouse the slumbering passions of the Guelfs and the Ghibellines, so that little by little, without much labor, you will create for yourself the reputation of being a good Catholic and a good Italian. This reputation of yours will make the younger secular clergy and even the religious receptive to our doctrines. Within a few years, this same younger clergy will, of necessity, occupy responsible positions. They will govern, administrate, judge and form the council of the Sovereign Pontiff; some will be called upon to elect the future pope. This pope, like most of his contemporaries, will be to a greater or lesser degree influenced by *those Italian and humanitarian* principles which we are now circulating. It is a small grain of mustard seed which we entrust to the soil, but the sun of justice will make it grow to maturity and one day we will see a rich harvest born of this same little seed.

Along this path which we now outline for our brethren there are major obstacles to surmount and difficulties of all kinds to overcome. With experience and wisdom, we will triumph over them. The objective is so glorious that, to reach it, all sails must be unfurled. Do you want to revolutionize Italy? Seek a pope fitting our description. Do you want to establish the *kingdom of the elect* on the throne of the *Babylonian whore*? Then induce the clergy to march under your banner, in the belief that they are marching under the papal banner. Do you want to make the last trace of tyranny and oppression disappear? Lower your nets like Simon Bar Jona [Cf. John 1, 42]; lower them into the *sacristies*, the *seminaries* and the *monasteries*, instead of into the sea. If you do not precipitate events, we promise you a catch of fish even greater than St. Peter's. [Cf. Luke 5, 6] The fisher of fish became a fisher of men [Cf. Luke 5, 10]; you will fish for friends at the very feet of St. Peter's Chair. By so doing you will net a revolution clothed in tiara and mantle, preceded by the cross and papal ensign; a revolution that will require but little help to set fire to the four corners of the earth.

<sup>12</sup> At that time "the most active and intransigent current among the Catholic clergy and hierarchy declared itself against constitutionalism, rallying round the absolutist courts and especially the court of Vienna." Luigi Sturzo, *Church and State*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1962, Vol. II, p. 401. [Editor]

Our every action should aim at coveting the philosopher's stone. The medieval alchemists lost both time and money to realize this dream. The dream of the secret societies (to have a pope as their ally) will be made real for the very simple reason that it is founded on human passions. Hence let us not be discouraged by disappointment, nor setbacks, nor even by defeat. Let us ready our weapons quietly in our secret gatherings; let us aim our heavy guns and fan the flame of every passion—the most vicious as well as the most noble. Everything leads us to believe that our plan will one day succeed beyond our fondest hopes.

When the 1821 uprising failed, as had been foreseen in the above *Instruction*, the leaders of Freemasonry sent new directives to their membership.

This defeat can provide us with new weapons: our role is to arouse the people and to exploit every situation. . . . The presence of foreigners in the ranks of the police is a powerful weapon which must be skillfully handled. . . . The foreigner must be made so odious to the Italians, that when the revolution breaks out in Rome, foreign assistance will be considered offensive, even to the most sincere patriots. . . . In the meantime, keep your eyes on Rome . . . discredit the clergy by every means. . . . Arouse and play on the passions of the common people with or without reason. . . . Agitate at all times . . . create martyrs and victims. . . . We will always find those who will be able to portray the situation in a manner most advantageous to us.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, one of the leaders of the conspiracy, a high-ranking member of the Freemasons and their secret chief in Italy, had established himself in Rome in order to supervise the implementation of these directives. He held a diplomatic post in one of the Italian legations. A wealthy nobleman, learned and eloquent, he was, above all, an astute and bold dissembler as well as a corrupt cynic. He received large sums of money from the Jews of Prussia, England, Silesia, Portugal, Hungary and elsewhere, in the hope of

<sup>13</sup> Cretineau Joly, *L'Église Romaine en face de la révolution*. Vol. II, p. 119ff.

destroying Christianity and restoring the ancient kingdom of Jerusalem.

In a letter to an accomplice, this gentleman disclosed his diabolic plans and aspirations against the Catholic Church, as follows:

Dear Avenger:

Should we triumph some day and should it prove necessary for the perpetuation of our triumph to shed some blood, we must not grant our designated victims the privilege of dying with dignity and honor. Such deaths only keep the spirit of opposition alive and provide martyrs for the people, who always admire a display of courage. This sets a very bad precedent. The man who is dragged to the gallows is no longer dangerous. But if he himself ascends it with unfaltering step and faces death unflinchingly, he will excite the admiration of the crowd.

I am not cruel by nature, and I hope I shall never develop blood-thirsty instincts. But he who wills a certain goal, wills also the means. I say that in a given situation we cannot and we dare not, even in the interests of humanity, allow ourselves to be saddled with martyrs against our will. Do you not think that the Caesars would have accomplished more in the interest of paganism by weakening and turning to their own interest that itch for martyrdom of those first Christians, instead of allowing them to increase their popularity by an heroic death? Would it not have been better if they had *diminished the resistance of the soul by tampering with the body? A drug well prepared, and even better administered, to enfeeble the victim to the point of prostration would, in my opinion, have been far more effective.* If, in this undertaking, the Caesars had only used the means they had at their disposal, I am certain that our *old Jupiter* and all his little secondary gods would not have succumbed so ignominiously, and Christianity would not have enjoyed so momentous a success.

Their apostles, priests and virgins were made to die in the amphitheatre or in the public squares, torn to pieces by lions before spellbound audiences. Inspired by faith, force of example, hope of making converts or sheer enthusiasm, they died without blanching; they even sang hymns of victory! This was enough to make anyone eager to die, and there were such caprices! Did not the gladiators inspire others to become gladiators? If these misguided Caesars had had the honor of belonging to our Supreme Lodge, I would have plainly told them to force these neophytes to drink one of our best recipes, and there would no longer have been talk of further conversions, because there simply would have

been no martyrs. In fact, an inert body with an inert will, that is dragged weeping to the scaffold, does not arouse emulation; it will not have followers. The Christians immediately became popular, because people sympathize with the persecuted. The people would have booed if they had witnessed weakness or fear. If the Christians had been a trembling and panic-stricken crowd, Christianity would have died in the third act of the tragicomedy.

If I find it necessary to suggest these tactics (drugs), I do so for a humanitarian policy. . . . Never allow death on the scaffold to appear glorious, holy, courageous, and joyful. You will then rarely need to inflict death.

Though the French Revolution generally did well, it erred on this particular point. Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette and the majority of the victims of that era are outstanding for their resignation and nobility of soul. . . . This is just what we do not need. Given the occasion, let us see to it that *a pope, and two or three cardinals die like old women*, in an agony of fear and trembling in the face of death. This will put an end to any fancy of imitating their sacrifice. You will spare the bodies, but you will have slain their spirit.

It is their morale that we must strike at and destroy. *If this secret is well kept*, you will have occasion to observe the usefulness of this new kind of *medicine*. A little planning was enough to destroy Cromwell. What does it take to enfeeble a strong man and hand him over listless, vacillating and fearful into the hands of his executioners? If he does not have the strength to grasp the palm of martyrdom, he will not have its halo, and therefore, he will have neither admirers nor imitators. We will thus make quick work of both the former and the latter. Indeed, only the sublime thought of revolutionary humanitarianism could have inspired such a precautionary measure. I recommend it to you. Never forget it.<sup>14</sup>

What miserable, hypocritical, and blasphemous fools! How could any secret society, founded on human passions, defeat the Church which is based on God's almighty power? It is written: "There is no . . . counsel against the Lord." [Prov. 21, 30] And after solemnly promising that "the gates of hell shall not prevail," [Matt. 16, 19] Our Blessed Lord indicated how far human malice would go. But He assured His Apostles that in matters pertaining

<sup>14</sup> *Civiltà Cattolica*, 1875, Series IX, Vol. VII, p. 329. Cretineau Joly, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 85.



to the glory of God, "if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them." [Mark, 16, 18] God permits war to be waged against His Church: "If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you also." [John 15, 20] But the Church will always emerge victorious.

During all these years, the sectaries followed the directives set down by their leaders in the *Instruction* of 1819, with harm to many souls. "They conspired to conceal their snares, saying: 'Who will see us?' " (Ps. 63, 6) But Divine Providence, keeping watch over its chosen souls, exposed the intrigues of the enemy to the light of day. From the first days of his priesthood, Don Bosco saw through their diabolical schemes and closely watched the various phases of their execution. Indeed, one might say that he then had in mind a complete picture of all the events which were to take place, and that he prepared himself to meet them, planned his strategy, took protective measures against the expected obstacles and then confidently proceeded to carry out his very important mission. Thousands of times he told us: "When certain events took place, they were not news to me. I knew all beforehand; I had foreseen all without fear of being mistaken." In the course of this account we shall note how true were his words.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Priestly Zeal*

DON BOSCO is now a priest. The sacred ministry is the ideal of his whole life; the long-desired goal that has finally been attained; it is the driving force of all his thoughts and actions, which will spur him on with ever-increasing ardor to seek God's glory and the salvation of souls. As he daily gazes upon the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ, held in his hands, and moistens his lips with His Most Precious Blood, his faith grows livelier, ever increasing the intensity of his love and urging him on to distribute among the faithful the treasures of which Our Lord has made him the custodian. He perceives in men's souls the greatest work of God's omnipotence on earth, the object of a love so great that it endured the sacrifice of the cross. Hence he unites himself with their Savior and will not countenance any delay in his mission for their salvation. He is further prompted by the sight of the many snares which threaten the unwary.

Don Bosco spent the first few months of his priesthood in his native town.<sup>1</sup> Two years earlier, his brother Joseph had terminated his sharecropper contract<sup>2</sup> [with Joseph Febraro] on the Susambrino estate, which was now the property of Chevalier [John] Pescarmona, and had returned to live at Becchi. John's old room was also put back into service. However, Don Bosco [as he was now called] stayed most of the time at the rectory with his beloved pastor, Father Cinzano, and helped in the parish work as much as he could. Besides taking part in all the church services, as the old people of the parish later testified to Father Secundus Marchisio,

<sup>1</sup> Becchi, the birthplace of Don Bosco, was situated on the outskirts of Morialdo, one of five hamlets which made up the town of Castelnuovo d'Asti, 15 miles from Turin. Most of the dwellings are built on hillslopes with the church in the center. See Vol. I, p. 20. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> See Vol. I, p. 177. [Editor]

he brought Holy Viaticum, anointed the sick and tenderly assisted them during their last moments. They also added that he enjoyed associating with the younger boys, instructing them, and encouraging them to lead a Christian life. This is confirmed by Don Bosco himself in his own memoirs.<sup>3</sup>

In that year, 1841, since my pastor was without an assistant, I served as one for five months. I found great pleasure in this work. I preached every Sunday, visited the sick, administered the sacraments, but I did not hear confessions as I was not yet authorized to do so. I conducted funeral services, kept the parish records in order and issued certificates as required. But my greatest delight was teaching catechism to the children, passing the time with them and talking to them. They often came from Morialdo to visit me and whenever I walked home they thronged about me. Also in Castelnuevo the youngsters began to make friends with me and seek my company. Whenever I left the rectory I was escorted by a crowd of boys who followed me wherever I went.

He experienced particular joy in baptizing infants, and it was noted how during these months the baptismal records show that almost all the male children were given the name Aloysius as their first or second name. As far as it lay within his power, he wished to place them from their infancy under the protection of the angelic patron of purity, so that he might defend them against all the wiles that endanger that virtue.

As Don Bosco himself wrote, he preached every Sunday in his parish church. Since he could explain the word of God with great facility, he was often invited to preach also in neighboring villages, especially on patronal feast days. It was such an occasion, the feast day of St. Benignus, that brought him to Lavriano at the end of October of that year. We quote from his memoirs:<sup>4</sup>

I readily agreed, since that was the home village of my good friend, Father John Grassino, who later became pastor at Scalenghe. I wanted

<sup>3</sup> See Vol. I, p. 93. [Editor]

<sup>4</sup> Still in manuscript form at that time. [Editor]

my sermon to measure up to the solemnity, so I carefully prepared it and wrote it in simple but attractive language. I went over my talk very carefully, convinced that I would do myself credit. But God willed to teach me a good lesson for my vanity. It was a Sunday, and since I had first to say Mass for our parishioners, I would have to hasten on horseback in order to be on time for my sermon. I had already covered half the distance, alternately trotting and galloping, and I had reached the valley of Casal Borgone, between Cinzano and Bersano, when suddenly a covey of sparrows shot up from a nearby field of maize. Their sudden rush and the noise of their wings startled my horse; he plunged wildly down the road and across the fields and meadows. I managed to stay in my saddle, but realized that the straps were slipping. I attempted a trick of horsemanship but the sudden dislodging of the saddle hurled me into the air and I fell headfirst upon a heap of crushed stones. From a nearby hill a man witnessed my distressing fall. He ran to my aid with one of his men. Finding me unconscious, he brought me to his house and laid me on the best bed. Under his solicitous care, I regained consciousness about an hour later and saw that I was in a strange house.

"Do not worry," my host said, "do not be disturbed because you are in someone else's house. You shall not want for anything here. I have already sent for the doctor and someone has gone in search of your horse. I am only a farmer, but I have everything you need. Do you feel much pain?"

"May God reward you for your kindness, my good friend. No, I don't believe I am hurt too badly. Perhaps I have fractured my shoulder, since I can't move it. But where am I?"

"You are in my house on a hill overlooking Bersano. My name is John Calosso, but people call me *Brina*. I have often been in need just like you. Oh, how many times I have found myself in difficulties at fairs and markets."

"Tell me about them while we're waiting for the doctor."

"Oh! I could tell you many a story. Listen to this one. One autumn, several years ago, I went to Asti on my donkey to purchase provisions for the winter. On my return through the Morialdo valley, the poor beast, which was heavily laden, fell into a morass and remained stuck. Every effort to free it was useless. It was midnight, dark and raining. Not knowing what else to do, I began to shout for help. After a few minutes, a response came from a neighboring farmhouse. A seminarian with his brother, and two other men came with lighted torches. They helped me unload the donkey, pulled it out of the mud and brought me with all my belongings into their house. I was half dead with fatigue, and all

bespattered with mud. They cleaned me up, restored my strength with an excellent supper and gave me a nice soft bed. The next morning, before leaving, I wanted to offer them some compensation as was just, but the seminarian refused it, saying, 'Maybe some day we'll need you to do us a good turn.' "

At these words I felt deeply moved and my friend noticed my tears. "Are you in pain?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "I liked your story very much and it touched me."

"If only I knew of some way to repay that good family! Such good people!"

"What was their name?"

"Bosco, but people also called them *Boschetti*. But why are you so touched? Do you know that family? How is that seminarian doing? Is he well?"

"That seminarian, my good friend, is the priest whom you have repaid a thousand times for what he did for you. He is the same one whom you have taken into your house and laid on this bed. Divine Providence wanted us to realize that as one sows, so shall he reap." [Cf. Gal. 6, 8]

You can imagine the amazement and joy of that good man as well as my own, for in my mishap God had me fall into the hands of a good friend. His wife, his sister, and other relatives and friends were delighted to learn that the person of whom they had often heard him speak, was by chance now in their very house. They spared no effort to make me feel at home. Shortly afterward the doctor arrived and found no fracture. Within a few days I was able to mount my horse, which had been found in the meantime, and ride back home. John Brina accompanied me all the way, and, for as long as he lived, we always maintained the most cordial friendship.

After this salutary lesson, I firmly resolved for the future to prepare my sermons solely for the greater glory of God, and not for a display of learning and culture.

This was the resolution Don Bosco made in that particular circumstance, but quite different are the observations that spontaneously come to our mind. First of all, how faithful is the Lord in fulfilling His promises! He has said, "Happy is he who has regard for the lowly and the poor; in the days of misfortune the Lord will deliver him. The Lord will keep and preserve him; He will make him happy on the earth and not give him over to the will of his

enemies. The Lord will help him on his sickbed; He will take away all his ailment when he is ill." (Ps. 40, 1-4)

Mamma Margaret's family was always generous and hospitable towards anyone in need. A beggar was never turned away from their door empty-handed; no one ever arrived at mealtime without being cordially and insistently invited to sit down to table. Time and again she experienced God's bounty rewarding her for what she had done for the poor. The incident quoted above is but one example.

Nor should we overlook that admirable humility which constantly recurs in Don Bosco's memoirs. He speaks of himself only to find fault, but while he does so, genial episodes come to light as if to give him the lie. As a young seminarian he availed himself of a stratagem to assist the sick through the invocation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He dispensed small pills made of bread crumbs, or a dose of sugar and maize flour in small envelopes, on condition that the recipients would receive the sacraments and recite a given number of times the Hail Mary, the Hail, Holy Queen, and other prayers to Our Lady. Sometimes the pills and the accompanying prayers were prescribed for three successive days, sometimes for nine. Even those who were seriously ill recovered. The news spread from village to village and people flocked to this new doctor, whose reputation increased as more and more of his patients recovered. Even in those early days Don Bosco realized the great power of prayer to Our Lady. Perhaps the Blessed Virgin Mary had granted him the gift of healing, which he concealed behind the artifice of pills and powders to avoid becoming an object of admiration. He continued to avail himself of this means even as a priest while he was at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* in Turin, and decided to cease its practice only as a result of a truly singular occurrence.

In 1844, at Montafia, Mr. [Joseph] Turco was stricken with fever, and no doctor's prescription could cure him. The family appealed to Don Bosco. He first recommended confession and Holy Communion and then gave the sick man a supply of pills, to be taken each day after reciting three Hail, Holy Queens. To everyone's astonishment, the patient was completely cured after taking the first dose. The local pharmacist hastened to Turin. He presented himself to Don Bosco and said, "I have great respect for your talent and the new medicine you have discovered. It has proven to be

a powerful remedy against fever. I beg you to let me buy a quantity of these pills, or else give me the formula so that the good people of Montafia won't have to come to Turin whenever the need for them arises."

Don Bosco was somewhat embarrassed and could find no other way out but to say, "I have used up my supply; I don't have any more."

The pharmacist returned to Montafia and, eager to discover the ingredients of the pills, he obtained a few which some family still had and subjected them to a careful analysis. "There is nothing but bread in them!" he cried. "Yet the cures are incontestable."

He then went to see another pharmacist, a friend of his, and together they analyzed the pills. Again the findings were the same. "It's bread; no doubt about it."

The word spread throughout the village. When Mr. Turco went to Turin personally to thank Don Bosco for his recovery, he told him about the strange rumor of the bread pills and begged him to reveal the secret of the medication. "Did you say the three Hail, Holy Queens with great faith?" Don Bosco inquired.

"Oh, certainly," the man answered.

"Then let that suffice," Don Bosco concluded.

Since his clever stratagem had been discovered, he dropped that method of healing, and relied only on the efficacy of his blessing [of Mary, Help of Christians].

Bishop John [Baptist] Bertagna related how, as a boy during the first years of Don Bosco's priesthood, he had noticed that many people in Castelnuovo were eager to call upon Don Bosco in the hope that his blessing would cure their sick relatives. They had every reason for such hope, because his faith in their power of prayer and the efficacy of his priestly blessing was based on the promise of Our Lord in the Holy Gospel and consequently was unlimited. From that time, therefore, in his firm belief that God would not fail him, he began to bestow his blessing, and this practice he continued until the end of his days. The graces which the faithful were convinced that they had received from Our Lord through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin and the instrumentality of Don Bosco's blessing and prayers ran into the thousands every year. Without interruption, an amazing chain of marvels be-

came linked to Don Bosco's undertakings, animated them, sustained them and multiplied them incessantly. As a result, it became common belief that Don Bosco's life was but a continuous act of blessing, and that anything to which he might put his hand would certainly succeed.

Nor should this surprise us, when we bear in mind that Don Bosco was a man of boundless faith. With his mind and will he unreservedly accepted all the truths revealed by God. This profound, spontaneous and constant assent, untouched by the slightest shadow of doubt, was never disproved by any act or word throughout his whole life. He often expressed his great joy at having been made a Christian and an [adopted] son of God through Baptism. He never ceased to proclaim his good fortune for having had such a pious mother who, early in his childhood, taught him his catechism and directed him in the ways of piety. He thanked the Lord every morning and evening for these signal favors. A thousand times he was heard trying to instil in others gratitude to God for having destined them to be born in the Catholic Church and enjoining them to show appreciation for such a grace by professing their faith before men courageously, without human respect, by avoiding sin and by observing the divine law.

He would make his hearers conscious of the presence of God with words that made it evident that the thought of God was constantly in his mind. No one ever approached Don Bosco without hearing him speak of some eternal truth or express a spiritual thought. This he did with the greatest ease and spontaneity even when discussing material things or business matters, or when entertaining people with some amusing story.

He knew how to speak of God in so amiable a manner that his conversation pleased even those who were averse to religion. Spiritual matters so absorbed him as to permeate his every thought and action. This characteristic of his manifested itself in his holy fear of offending God's holiness and justice, and in the great horror he had of sin. He took great pains to avoid not only that which was evidently evil, but also that which might have even a semblance of it. At times he felt uneasy about words and actions that generally are considered virtuous or at least devoid of any imperfection.

Hence his earnest desire for perfection, and his practice even



then, of the three evangelical counsels, poverty, chastity and obedience. These he so zealously observed that he could not have done more had he been bound by vow. Those who did not know him admired him, but could not understand the reason for such observance. However, a few schoolmates and fellow seminarians at Chieri, who shared his secrets, manifested his motive to Father Francis Dalmazzo, [S.D.B.], who declared himself ready to testify to this even under oath. Don Bosco had consecrated himself to God by a perpetual vow while still a seminarian. He had offered the lily of his heart at Mary's altar. At that time, he had been wisely prevented from entering a religious order, notwithstanding his strong inclination to do so. While he followed the directives of his superior, he pledged his will to God in order to be ready for His service when the call should come.

It is also for this reason that he so greatly loved mortification and poverty. During the months he spent at home on vacation and during the first few years in Turin, he was always mindful of Mamma Margaret's admonition: "Bread is good enough for us; it is for the rich to have something else with it; we are poor and should live like the poor."

The whole tenor of his life was uninterrupted mortification. When boys went first to Susambrino and then to Becchi for tutoring or simply for a visit, Don Bosco would sometimes take them to the vineyard or orchard and treat them to some delicious fruit. But on these occasions he was never seen to take any himself, neither grapes nor peaches nor any other fruit which at that season was so abundant in every vineyard and orchard. He had imposed upon himself a strict rule never to eat or drink between meals.

His deportment was always beyond reproach; an aura of modesty seemed to encompass his whole person, revealing itself in every gesture. Averse to idle curiosity, he ceased attending any kind of entertainment except that in which he himself performed to amuse the boys.

His ardent faith was most apparent when he celebrated Mass. Joseph Moglia, John Filippello and Joseph Turco, his contemporaries and friends, relate how during those summer months they frequently assisted at his Mass, and were always deeply edified by his

demeanor, his fervor and his devotion; in fact, some of those present were even moved to tears.

Father John Turchi affirms: "I never knew a priest endowed with livelier faith than Don Bosco. Without such faith he would not have been able to do what he actually accomplished."

"Have faith in God," Jesus Christ said to His Apostles. "Amen I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, arise and hurl thyself into the sea, and does not waver in his heart but believes that whatever he says will be done, it shall be done for him. Therefore I say to you, all things whatever you shall ask for in prayer, believe that you shall receive and they shall come to you." (Mark 11, 22-24)

Only faith united with profound humility and mortification of one's whole self can explain Don Bosco's many wonderful achievements.

## CHAPTER 3

### *A Grateful Heart*

**D**URING the first weeks after his ordination, Don Bosco made a round of visits in answer to many insistent invitations, and as an expression of his lasting gratitude to all those who had helped him or merely expressed their good will. First he visited the Moglias at Moncucco. From there he went to Pinerolo to see the Strambio family, because of his close friendship with the three sons. His next stop was at Fenestrelle, where he preached at the request of the pastor, a close friend. Nor did he forget his former teacher, Father [Joseph] Lacqua, who had taught him the rudiments of reading and writing and who, as noted in the previous volume, was now past his eighty-sixth year and living in retirement at Ponzano. Don Bosco had written him of his happiness at having attained at long last the goal of priesthood, and promised to visit him. He always kept the reply of the venerable old man among his treasured papers, and we are happy to quote it in its entirety.

Ponzano, July 28, 1841

Dearest friend and beloved pupil:

Here in a few words I acknowledge receipt of your gracious letter. (I am writing as always with the intimacy and freedom a teacher may take in addressing a pupil.) Yesterday evening I read and reread your letter several times. I am delighted, and congratulate you on your ordination to the priesthood, an honor and a reward well-deserved and preordained by heaven in view of your merits. I am very grateful for your efforts to satisfy my desire for a solitary and secluded life, and thank you a thousand times. During the coming school year I am under contract to render my feeble services at the local school, although if

I so wished, I could have resigned my position and retired. Now that way is closed to me.

*Pensatis pensandis* [after due consideration], I think it is better that I continue at this post, which is really an easy one for a poor old man like myself, rather than accept another teaching assignment or a chaplaincy. During the winter, my pupils are never more than twelve or fifteen, while after Easter the class dwindles to only one, or none at all. Perhaps the best thing for me will be to return to my native village, to end my days where I began them. *Dulcis amor patriae, dulce videre suos*. [Sweet is the love of homeland; sweet is the sight of one's kin.] But only one thing is certain, and that shall come to be: the will of God.

I am pleased to accept the Mass stipends which you graciously sent me out of the goodness of your heart . . . and, *favente Deo* [God willing], I shall continue to celebrate my Masses according to your intentions until the middle of the coming September, or until your much awaited arrival. Marianne<sup>1</sup> is well and sends you her respects.

The page is now full, so I will fold it and await you with open heart, together with your mother, *si fieri potest* [if this be possible]. I wish you all that is truly good and remain, as always,

Yours,

Father Lacqua

P. S. Please give my respects to Mr. Scaglia and his whole family whenever the opportunity presents itself.

After the novena and the feast of the Holy Rosary, Don Bosco was able to keep his promise. He chose October 14th for his visit to Ponzano. There he was awaited not only by his former teacher but also by Marianne, his mother's sister, to whom he was indebted for the start of his formal schooling,<sup>2</sup> and by the pastor, an old acquaintance.

I undertake a detailed description of this trip because I have heard of it from Don Bosco's very lips. He delighted in recounting

<sup>1</sup> Marianne Occhiena was the spinster sister of Don Bosco's mother, Mamma Margaret. In 1824 she became Father Lacqua's housekeeper and served him until his dying day. She herself ended her days at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales in Turin. See Vol. I, p. 75. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> See Vol. I, p. 75. [Editor]

these events and in recalling every least circumstance. This he did with such sincerity and keen enjoyment as to reveal how welcome was the recollection of what had been imprinted indelibly not only in his mind but also in his heart. His words revealed the selflessness of his motives and the rectitude of his behavior, even when he told an anecdote simply to enliven a pleasant recreation. Never had he the least cause for regret nor any reason to blush. He would reminisce, smile and savor the recollection of days gone by, taking great pleasure in sustaining the curiosity and merriment of his boys. This was a means of fostering a reverential fear of God even during recreational activities so that, regardless of the nature of their amusements, the boys would avoid sin. Don Bosco often remarked: "A day that fills the heart with remorse and fear of God's judgment cannot be called a day of amusement."

After taking leave of the pastor and receiving necessary directions, Don Bosco left Montaldo early in the morning, accompanied by a fine young man. His first stop was at Cocconato where he lunched with the pastor. He then resumed his walk and, although the hour was late, he tried to reach Ponzano. Unfortunately he missed the road and found himself lost in a dense forest. Night was about to fall, the sky was overhung with dark clouds, and a storm was brewing. Nevertheless Don Bosco and his companion continued for some time along the path, until they lost it in the darkness of the night. The only light they had was an occasional flash of lightning which was followed by shattering claps of thunder. They could see nothing, and, to make matters worse, a heavy rain began to fall, drenching them from head to foot. The darkness and the thickness of the forest made further progress impossible. What should they do? They resigned themselves to their difficult plight and, stumbling towards a spot which seemed more or less protected from the elements, sat down and waited for the fury of the storm to abate. They were frightened by the solitude and darkness; by the lightning, thunder, whistling wind and the creaking of branches under the stress of the storm; also by the lugubrious cry of some bird startled from its sleep. They were both speechless.

Finally the continuing fury of the storm forced them to seek shelter elsewhere. Don Bosco said a prayer to the Blessed Virgin. He then stood up and said to his companion, "Let's take this path,

it must lead somewhere." Off they went and a few minutes later they heard the crowing of a cock. This spurred them on their way. Then, little by little, as they went forward, they heard the barking of a dog and the mewing of a cat. Finally they saw a few glimmering lights of nearby dwellings. "Oh, there is a village!" they happily exclaimed.

As they hurried on, they detected the welcome fragrance of baking bread. They then saw people gathered about an oven, and approached them. But as soon as these people became aware of their presence, they dropped everything, rushed to their houses, and locked themselves in, terror-stricken, leaving the newcomers alone in stunned consternation.

Don Bosco approached a house. "Don't be afraid," he said; "come outside. We are honest folk who have lost our way. Come and attend to your bread or it will burn."

But his words fell on deaf ears. They would not listen to reason. Only after much pleading, did they open the door a crack, just enough to peer out and at the same time allow the strangers a glimpse of men armed with knives, pitchforks and sickles. They asked Don Bosco brusquely who he might be, and what village he was going to.

"I am a poor priest," Don Bosco told them; "and this is a friend of mine. We were on our way to Ponzano but unfortunately got lost. Do not be afraid. We will do you no harm."

By this time the storm had ceased and many people began to gather about the two strangers. Those who had armed themselves felt reassured and came out. Returning to their oven, they began to talk with Don Bosco.

When he asked the reason for such fear, they replied that those parts were infested by brigands who, only the night before had committed a murder in their village. They added that the *carabinieri* had combed the entire region in search of the criminals, who were still at large. Don Bosco asked for someone to lead him to Ponzano; but the peasants told him that he was too far from his destination. He asked them to be so good as to lend him some clothes, because everything he had on was dripping wet, and the dampness had penetrated to the marrow of his bones. The peasants excused themselves, saying they were very poor, but they told him

of a wealthy gentleman living nearby, who could easily provide anything he needed. Don Bosco then asked for a guide, as he did not know the area.

After some hesitation, for they feared the brigands greatly, they armed themselves again with knives, pitchforks and sickles and set out with Don Bosco and his companion. They followed a narrow path which zig-zagged up a hill, and reached a castle that dominated the whole hamlet. The path ran between two tall hedges, and when they approached the castle wall, they were greeted by the furious barking of two mastiffs. The little company halted, as it was too dangerous to get any closer. One of them called aloud for the master of the castle, announcing two strangers who had lost their way.

The owner, a Mr. Moioglio, was an elderly gentleman of the old school, with a heart of gold and old fashioned courtesy. He immediately came out, called off his dogs, who were as big as calves, and with a warm welcome ushered Don Bosco and the young man indoors. Although the hour was late, there were a number of guests in the drawing room with whom Mr. Moioglio used to pass the time in friendly games. Everyone arose as Don Bosco came in, and introductions were exchanged. As soon as Mr. Moioglio heard that Don Bosco was a native of Castelnuovo d'Asti,<sup>3</sup> he began to enumerate the friends he had in that town and its vicinity, among them the Bertagna family, the pastor and Father Lacqua,<sup>4</sup> and was delighted that a priest who knew his friends should have chanced to come to his home. He readily provided dry clothing for his new guests and pressed Don Bosco to wear his own mantle. After having a good dinner served them to restore their strength, he entertained them with delightful conversation. As they left the dining room, Mr. Moioglio said, "This castle has a chapel and, if you would oblige, we could attend your Mass tomorrow morning. My wife is deeply religious and this would really be a very welcome surprise for her." Don Bosco readily agreed and about midnight, weary with fatigue,

<sup>3</sup> It will be recalled that Becchi was on the outskirts of Morialdo, one of five hamlets that made up the little town of Castelnuovo d'Asti. See Vol. I, p. 20. [Editor]

<sup>4</sup> Before his semiretirement at Ponzano, Father Lacqua had taught at Capriglio which lies northwest of Castelnuovo d'Asti. It was almost two and a half miles from Becchi, Don Bosco's birthplace. See Vol. I, p. 75. [Editor]

went to bed. At dawn the castle bell announced that Mass was to be said, and all the people living in the neighboring farmhouses hastened to attend the Holy Sacrifice.

Don Bosco would have preferred to set out for Ponzano immediately. But his host would not hear of his leaving so soon, and led him on a tour of inspection of the castle, an austere and forbidding edifice. As they walked along the outer wall, Don Bosco noticed several entrances to dark tunnels dug into the hill.

"Look," said the master of the castle, "no one has ever dared to explore these tunnels. Apparently they extend very far. I am certain that thieves, murderers and, perhaps counterfeiterers have their hideouts there. They come and go at will. No one is courageous enough to go in and investigate; even the police are afraid. We must keep silent about this because reprisal can easily be taken, and we find our lives in danger. Now and then we meet some sinister-looking strangers, and we know nothing of what brings them here; but it is wiser to act as though we have taken no notice."

Back in the castle, Mr. Moigoglio ushered Don Bosco into an elegant library. Don Bosco asked for a souvenir of such cordial hospitality, and chose a book entitled *Compendio di storia ecclesiastica* [*Compendium of Church History*] by Lorenzo Bertì Fiorentino, with which Mr. Moigoglio readily parted. On the last page of the book Don Bosco wrote: *On October 14, 1841, after walking for several hours through a dark night, along an unknown path, I arrived at the Castello dei Merli, near Moncalvo, where I was received with the most generous hospitality by the apothecary Mr. Moigoglio, from whom I purchased this volume as a grateful remembrance of my host. John Bosco.*

Don Bosco always kept the book with him. The kindly old gentleman topped their stay with a delicious dinner, after which he accompanied Don Bosco and his companion a good part of the way to Ponzano.

Whenever Don Bosco narrated this unusual episode, he never revealed anything that might indicate displeasure or any annoyance for the hardship he suffered. Difficulties of any kind appeared in his narratives only as a source of merriment and pleasant recollections. Patience and serenity of spirit were always his most outstanding characteristics, and his appreciative heart never forgot any kind



deed. In his generosity he never failed to repay in some way the inconvenience, trouble or expense incurred by others on his behalf. In the above-mentioned incident he purchased a book; in another he will contract for a measure of wheat or wine; in others still he will make gifts of devotional books and religious articles, or else he will send chickens, fruits, vegetables, or something else which his mother had raised, or some of the better presents he himself had received. On the night table in the room where he had spent the night, he never forgot to leave a gratuity for the domestics. To those who occasionally questioned him on the matter he remarked confidentially, "It isn't right that anyone who has been obliged to do extra work on our account should go unrewarded."

Another person with whom he visited during the autumn of 1841 was the former head sacristan of the cathedral at Chieri, Father Charles Palazzolo, who had said his first Mass on the same day as Don Bosco. The reader will recall that Don Bosco, then a student himself, had taught Charles Latin.<sup>5</sup> Later he had tutored him in philosophy and theology by summarizing the lessons so clearly and concisely that Charles was able to learn them by heart each time. This enabled him to pass his examinations without difficulty. Don Bosco had also procured for him a grant of 1,000 lire<sup>6</sup> from a charitable person.

As he had done with his other companions, Don Bosco exhorted Charles, on the day of his priestly ordination, to implore Our Lord during his first Mass for the grace he most desired, assuring him that it would certainly be granted. After his ordination, Father Palazzolo continued to take lessons in moral theology from Don Bosco at the Oratory. He was a holy priest, worked with great zeal and was an instrument of great good through the sacrament of Penance. For a time he was the rector of St. Pancratius Shrine near Pianezza.

He was indebted to Don Bosco for his success, and always maintained toward him the most profound gratitude. Now happy in his priestly calling, he in turn strove to foster vocations to the priesthood by teaching young boys, placing them at the Oratory, and supporting them as best he could with his own savings. He almost

<sup>5</sup> See Vol. I, p. 219f. [Editor]

<sup>6</sup> A substantial sum in those days. [Editor]

reached the age of ninety, and died in 1885. From time to time he visited his friend and benefactor. The affection and gratitude he constantly manifested, demonstrated how worthy he was of Don Bosco's friendship.

One must not suppose that Don Bosco spent all his time paying social calls. In these matters he guided himself by duty, gratitude or some special reason. The rest of the time he was always busy either in the parish or at the family farmhouse at Becchi. He never indulged in unnecessary recreation or rest. While he continued his favorite study of church history, he diligently applied himself to the study of moral theology, as Father [John] Giacomelli attests. Thanks to this, he had the great advantage of remembering by heart quite a number of treatises when he took up the study of pastoral theology at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* that winter. At the same time he devoted a number of hours to outlining likely subject matter for sermons.

Because he had studied classic poetry and knew much of it from memory, he had a tendency when preaching, unwittingly to drift into rhyme. This led his close friends as well as some unkind critic to admonish him, "Don Bosco, don't talk so much in rhyme!" To which he would reply smiling:

I must really ponder long and think in time  
If I am not to talk and preach in rhyme.

His friends laughed and teased. These remarks were not lost on Don Bosco. With diligence and painstaking care he soon overcame this habit. [Joseph] Turco, [John] Filippello and [Joseph] Moglia declared that they and their relatives and fellow villagers often heard him preach, and never failed to receive some deep insight into eternal truths. The particular preoccupation of Don Bosco was to preach so as to be understood by all, the common people as well as the young. He, therefore, endeavored to render his sermons in as popular a style as possible, that is to say, correct in language but intelligible to all. How well he succeeded is attested by all who, like ourselves, had the good fortune to hear him.

## CHAPTER 4

### *The Convitto Ecclesiastico*

THE long summer vacation was drawing to a close and Don Bosco, who now was twenty-six years old, had to plan for his future.

He had three offers. The first was that of tutor in a wealthy Genoese family with a salary of 1,000 lire a year. Relatives and friends tried to induce Margaret to persuade her son to accept the post. Since, over and above the annual 1,000 lire, Don Bosco would receive free lodging, board and clothing, his whole salary could be used to improve his own family's living conditions. But Mamma Margaret, realizing that an exemplary way of life is not always found behind lace curtains, exclaimed, "My son in the house of a rich gentleman? What would these 1,000 lire profit him, or me, or his brother Joseph, if John were to lose his soul?"

The second offer was a chaplaincy in his native Morialdo,<sup>1</sup> with an increase in the customary salary. In their anxiety to have him stay and teach their children, the villagers were even willing to double it. The third offer was that of curate at Castelnuovo, where Don Bosco was very popular with the people and much loved by Father Cinzano.

Before choosing a course of action, Don Bosco would always set for his goal the glory of God and the good of souls, and then ask himself whether his decision would serve so noble a purpose. He would pray to God for light, and at the same time he would seek the advice of some wise and pious person. When he was morally certain that the course he was about to undertake was pleasing to God, he would go ahead. This was his constant practice throughout life.

<sup>1</sup> In many parishes there were chapels built by men of means, where Mass was said daily. Very often the chaplain doubled as schoolteacher. [Editor]

Since this was a decision of great importance, he went to Turin to seek the advice of Father Joseph Cafasso, in order to understand God's will and act accordingly. Father Cafasso lectured on pastoral theology at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* of St. Francis of Assisi. For years he had been Don Bosco's guide in both spiritual and temporal matters. He listened attentively to the offers of generous stipends, the insistence of relatives and family friends, and Don Bosco's intention of dedicating himself entirely to God's work. Then, without a moment's hesitation, Father Cafasso replied, "What you should do is perfect yourself in moral theology and homiletics. For the time being, decline all offers and come here to study."

The *Convitto Ecclesiastico* in Turin is well known to all priests in Italy, but for the benefit of the general reader we here give a brief history.

At the start of the [19th] century there lived in Turin a very worthy priest, Canon Louis Guala, rector of St. Francis of Assisi Church. Beyond reproach in his conduct, pious, learned, prudent and courageous, he was loved by the good and respected by the bad. He was deeply loyal to the Sovereign Pontiff and at the time of the French domination,<sup>2</sup> he had maintained, with Father Lanteri and other well-known persons, an active correspondence with Pius VII, then a prisoner at Savona. He kept the Pope informed of everything that was happening, and communicated to the Church the wishes of the Pope on matters of ecclesiastical discipline.

Since Father Guala was the soul of a committee formed to assist the Pope with generous donations, both he and a banker named Gonella, fell under police suspicion, and were saved from jail only through a comic mixup. In the arrest warrant their names were listed as *Father* Gonella and the *banker* Guala. While the police were searching for men so erroneously described, the suspects had

<sup>2</sup> The Napoleonic intrusion into Italy lasted from 1796 to 1814. The last of the Italian petty states to be incorporated by Napoleon were the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and the Papal States, including Rome, in 1809. Pope Pius VII (1800-1823) replied to the annexation of the Papal States to the French Empire by excommunicating Bonaparte. The Emperor sent troops to Rome and, in the small hours of June 6th, the Pope was obliged to enter a carriage and set off for the Carthusian monastery of Val d'Erma. Thence a long and painful journey brought the Pope to Savona. In June, 1812, the Pope was transferred to Fontainebleau. On March 9, 1814, the Emperor was defeated at Laon, and on the following day the Pope was set free. On May 24th, Pius VII made his solemn entry into Rome, where the people received him with transports of joy. [Editor]

ample time to destroy all compromising documents and go into hiding, until, through the intervention of influential persons and lack of proof, they could again move about freely.

Pious and learned as he was, Father Guala thoroughly understood the needs of the times. He realized how important it was for newly ordained priests to take post-ordination courses in pastoral theology before assuming the duties of their sacred ministry. Fully convinced of this need, as early as 1808, he began giving lectures on pastoral theology to a few newly ordained priests in his own home. This went on until 1818, when, after the end of the Napoleonic regime in Piedmont and the evacuation of French troops from the monastery of Friars Minor Conventual adjacent to St. Francis of Assisi Church, Father Guala there founded an ecclesiastical college for young priests. [A few years later], in 1822, King Charles Felix authorized the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* to accept donations and legacies. He also made a gift of the unsold part of the monastery, to serve as living quarters. The ecclesiastical authorities, too, gave their active support. By a decree of June 4, 1823, Archbishop Columbanus Chiaverotti of Turin, appointed Father Guala rector of the *Convitto* and gave his official approval to the regulations he had drawn up. Meditation, spiritual reading, two daily conferences, lectures on homiletics, study periods and research filled the hours of the student-priests.

With this institution Father Guala rendered invaluable service to the archdiocese and especially to the city of Turin. First of all he succeeded in uprooting the last remnants of Jansenism, that execrable doctrine which, by arbitrary and deplorable rigor, discouraged souls from their pursuit of eternal salvation, alienated them from, and deprived them of, the vital benefits of Divine Redemption. Among other errors, Jansenism taught that a penitent, guilty of sins not even particularly grave, could not be given absolution before months and even years of severe penance; Holy Communion demanded an angelic life and no Christian could ever be properly disposed to receive it worthily.

To combat these pernicious errors there arose, in the middle of the 18th century, the Doctor of the Church, St. Alphonsus Liguori, whose works provided a powerful antidote. Father Guala was very

active in spreading the writings of this saint throughout Piedmont. Printed in France, they could be brought into Piedmont only clandestinely, because of government opposition. In this undertaking Father Guala found an able assistant in a penitent of his, a certain Giani, a sculptor from Cerano in Vall'Intelvi above Lake Como. Using Marietti's bookstore [as his distribution center] he sold at low cost and sometimes donated to customers: *The Way To Love Jesus Christ, The Glories Of Mary, The Great Means Of Prayer and Visits To The Blessed Sacrament*. In a short time these precious books were in the hands of many religious and especially of young students. Besides these ascetical works, Father Guala distributed to priests St. Alphonsus' two volumes on moral theology, and an abridged edition of *Homo Apostolicus* [The Apostolic Man]. He personally presented them to the many priests he knew, while his friend Giani offered them to pastors and other priests when they came to Marietti's bookstore. Sometimes Giani would include free copies of St. Alphonsus' works with books that had been ordered.

Thus a start was made in correcting false ideas and many were brought back to the right path. Such holy and heroic labors induced many priests to study the moral principles taught by St. Alphonsus. In those days a great controversy was raging among theologians concerning the moral systems of probabilism<sup>3</sup> and probabiliorism.<sup>4</sup> The supporters of the former followed St. Alphonsus Liguori's teaching which had been commended by the Church and declared free of censure. The supporters of the latter, instead, followed the opinions of some rigid authors, which, if not applied with prudence, could lead to the practice of an unreasonable rigorism, spiritually harmful.

Father Guala's aim in founding the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* was to put an end to this controversy. With the charity and meekness of our Lord as a basis for all discussions, he was able in great part to quiet the dissension, and he succeeded in having St. Alphonsus

<sup>3</sup> Probabilism holds that, when there is question solely of the lawfulness or unlawfulness of an action, it is permissible to follow a solidly probable opinion in favor of liberty even though the opposing view is more probable. [Cf. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, c1913, Vol. XII, p. 441. Editor]

<sup>4</sup> Probabiliorism holds that it is unlawful to act on the less safe opinion unless it is also the more probable opinion. [*loc. cit.*, p. 445. Editor]

accepted as the Master of moral and pastoral theology. This restored tranquillity of conscience to the faithful and was of great spiritual advantage to them.

In the beginning, though, Father Guala had to make use of the official textbook of moral theology by Alasia; but he never failed to bring in St. Alphonsus, whom he habitually called "our saint." In those days it was dangerous to oppose Alasia's teachings and Father Guala had to lecture with the greatest circumspection, for if news of this new trend in teaching had reached the diocesan board of education, it would certainly have created difficulties for this most worthy undertaking.

Father Guala's right-hand man was Father Joseph Cafasso, his substitute in the chair of moral and pastoral theology, and later his successor. Endowed with virtues capable of withstanding all adversities—a prodigious serenity, an admirable discernment and prudence, an exemplary, and at the same time, unassuming and sincere piety—Father Cafasso banished from Piedmont all traces of that acrimony which still lingered among some of the probabiliorists against the followers of St. Alphonsus. He also played an important part in the formation of a learned and exemplary clergy.

A gold mine of virtue also was the young Turinese priest, then a student at the *Convitto*, Father Felix Golzio. His life of retirement created little stir, but his indefatigable labors, profound humility and deep knowledge made him an invaluable assistant to both Father Guala and Father Cafasso, who loved and esteemed him greatly.

The sacerdotal activities of these three priests were not limited to the confines of the *Convitto* and the adjacent church, but extended much farther. They visited prisons, hospitals, charitable institutions, palatial homes, hovels, neighboring villages and towns: all benefited from the charity and zeal of these three luminaries of the Turinese clergy. In fact, their light and ardor continued to exert beneficent influence over the diocese of Piedmont even after their death, through the numerous disciples who continued their work. Among these, to cite but one, was Father John Baptist Bertagna. A fellow villager of Don Bosco, and an outstanding professor of moral and pastoral theology, he later became coadjutor bishop of Turin.

It was to this school, run by model priests and exceptional teachers, that Don Bosco was invited. Father Cafasso's advice was excellent. Outside the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, it would have been extremely difficult for Don Bosco to acquire a sound and profound knowledge of pastoral theology, such as he would need in his future diversified mission. For, in his own parish, his personal study would have been inadequate; and elsewhere, through lack of means, he would have had to finance his studies by undertaking work extraneous to the sacred ministry, and requiring excessive contact with the world.

The lack of such an institution [as the *Convitto*] in Piedmont had hitherto been the cause for the scarcity of confessors trained to meet the spiritual needs of all types of persons. This deficiency had made it more difficult for the faithful to receive the sacraments. How could Don Bosco not avail himself of this heavenly opportunity to make himself better qualified to direct countless people of different age, sex, social condition, as also priests and religious of all ranks and dignity? A priest must have knowledge to be able to "distinguish between what is sacred and what is profane, between what is clean and what is unclean," (Lev. 10, 10) in order to avoid imposing obligations not demanded by the law.

Besides, Don Bosco looked upon Father Cafasso's advice as a command and a heavenly inspiration. Consequently, he accepted it willingly, and generously renounced not only the lucrative positions offered, but even the spiritual satisfaction that prompted him to take care of the boys of his native village without delay. With a presentiment that later God would entrust other boys to him, he decided to enroll at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*.

On November 3, 1841, before setting out for Turin, Don Bosco celebrated Mass in the church at Castelnovo. We have an indication of what may have been his thoughts at this time from a document found in his handwriting and dated a little later that year.

The words of the Holy Gospel, "that he might gather into one the children of God who were scattered abroad," [John 11, 52] seem to apply literally to the situation of youth in this our present day. This most precious segment of human society, upon whom all hopes of a



happy future are founded, is not of itself of a bad disposition. Take away their parents' neglect, their idleness and bad companions, and it becomes very easy to instill into their tender hearts principles of order, good habits, respect and religion. If at times these youngsters are already infected with evil, it is more often through thoughtlessness than through deliberate malice. These youngsters truly need a helping hand to take care of them, and to lead them away from evil to the practice of virtue.

The difficulty is to find a way of gathering them together for moral instruction. This was the mission of the Son of God; and this can be achieved only through the Holy Church He founded, by nature eternal and unchanging. This Church has been and always will be the teacher of men, and its law is so perfect that it can adapt itself to the vicissitudes of the times and to the temperaments of all men. Oratories<sup>5</sup> are, in my opinion, a suitable means for teaching moral principles to uneducated and underprivileged boys. When I chose this particular work in the sacred ministry, it was my intention to consecrate all my efforts to the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls. My purpose was to make of them good citizens here on earth and, one day, worthy inhabitants of heaven. May God help me to continue this task until my dying breath.

From these words it becomes apparent that the idea which was first manifested to him in a dream was that of one flock under one shepherd, the selfsame mission of Our Lord. He yearned to gather about him not only all the boys of Turin and its environs, but the boys of all nations: Christians and pagans, Catholics and non-Catholics, schismatics and heretics, civilized and uncivilized, in order to bring to all the knowledge of the true God and His Son Jesus Christ. Such charity was to be boundless. "A sincere love of one's neighbor," wrote St. Francis de Sales, "is one of the greatest and most excellent gifts which Divine Goodness can give to man." This is why Don Bosco unhesitatingly tells us: "Let us save youth!"

Don Bosco left Castelnuovo, but "his ways were pleasant ways, and all his paths were peace." (Cf. Prov. 3, 17) He lacked financial means but in his heart there dwelt Jesus Christ. Rooted in charity and filled with the fullness of God, Don Bosco abandoned himself

<sup>5</sup> A Salesian work which offers boys and young men organized recreation, educational and religious activities that otherwise would be unavailable to them. [Editor]

"to Him who is able to accomplish all things in a measure far beyond what we ask or conceive," (Eph. 3, 20) and with simplicity and faith he advanced toward that city which, at least indistinctly had already been foreshadowed to him.<sup>6</sup>

Most likely he was referring to this in a sermon about St. Philip Neri we heard him preach in Alba [near Turin]. He plunged into the subject without preliminaries. In poetic fashion, he imagined himself standing on one of the hills of Rome, and contemplating the city spread out beneath him. A youth, weary after a long journey and absorbed in deep thought, had his eyes fixed upon that magnificent panorama.

Then Don Bosco continued, "I addressed him: 'Young man, who are you, and what are you gazing at so intently?'

" 'I am a stranger. As I gaze at this great city, a thought fills my mind, but I fear that it is either madness or audacity.'

" 'What is it?'

" 'I desire to dedicate myself to the welfare of the souls of many poor boys who, through lack of religious instruction, are walking along the road of perdition.'

" 'Have you had an education yourself?'

" 'Not much, and I fear I cannot be considered learned.'

" 'What are your financial means?'

" 'None at all! Even for food I have to depend on what my master out of his kindness gives me each day.'

" 'Have you a gathering place for these boys, a church or a hall?'

" 'All I have is a small room, low and narrow, which I am allowed to use out of charity. As for clothing, my entire outfit can fit on a clothesline strung across the room.'

" 'How then can you undertake so gigantic a task, unknown and uneducated, without either money or locale?'

" 'You are right. Lack of material means and personal qualifications is just what worries me. But God who inspired me with the resolution, God who can raise up children to Abraham out of stones [Cf. Matt. 3, 9], this same God is the one that. . . '

" 'Do you love the Madonna?' "—

<sup>6</sup> See Vol. I, p. 315f. [Editor]

At this point Don Bosco changed from dialogue to narrative form and described the boy's appearance, the gleam that lit up his eyes at this question, his smile, his reply.

At last Don Bosco asked, "What is your name?"

"Philip Neri," the boy answered.

Don Bosco then resumed the subject of his sermon, describing to the congregation Philip's work in Rome.

But as he said "Philip Neri" several of his hearers corrected him in an undertone: "Don Bosco, Don Bosco."

These must have been Don Bosco's splendid dreams, when he gazed upon the city of Turin from the hills of Superga.<sup>7</sup> He had such expectations and confidence in the help of Divine Providence, that he was ready to face every danger and obstacle unflinchingly, no matter how insurmountable. Whatever undertakings were proposed to him, he always examined them carefully, to see if they were necessary or advantageous for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. He would then consider the means to be employed, choose them with rare insight and then execute his plans with true courage and with the conviction that the Lord would not forsake him. Only such trust [in Divine Providence] can adequately explain the vast amount of good he was able to achieve. Without fear of error, it can be said of all his undertakings that not one remained uncompleted despite the difficulties and the great expenses he had to incur. He truly *coepit et perfecit* [began and brought to completion. Cf. Luke, 10,14].

Furthermore, God and His Blessed Mother had not only traced for him the path he was to follow, but had stationed associates and co-workers along the way, who were to be of tremendous help to him. This is confirmed in a letter Don Bosco wrote on October 31, 1887, to the committee of the Catholic Club at Dinan [France]: "As if to take away all merit for my complete abandonment to Its will, Divine Providence always saw to it that throughout my long life, I should meet people filled with a heroic spirit of sacrifice and immeasurable generosity."

<sup>7</sup> Superga is a hill about 3 miles east of Turin. It rises 2,205 feet above sea level and is crowned by a basilica, Juvara's masterpiece. It is the burial chapel of the House of Savoy. From the summit of the hill, in fine weather one can look down on Turin and at the wide semicircle of the snow-crested Alps that rise like a wall at a radius of 30 miles or more. [Editor]

Among these were a large number of priests, men of great holiness, of whom we heard Don Bosco himself repeat: "The oratories and the Pious Society of St. Francis de Sales truly owe their existence to the diocesan clergy."

The very first among these was Father [Joseph] Cafasso, of whom Don Bosco was often heard to say with the deepest gratitude what he also put down in writing: "If I have done some good in my life, I owe it to this worthy priest, into whose hands I entrusted every decision, every deliberation, every plan, every undertaking of mine."

## CHAPTER 5

### *Pastoral Training*

TRADITION has it that the monastery of St. Francis of Assisi, now housing the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, as also the monastery at Chieri, was founded in 1210 by St. Francis of Assisi when he himself visited Piedmont. In 1834 the archbishop of Turin, by episcopal decree, proclaimed St. Charles Borromeo and St. Francis de Sales protectors of the *Convitto* since both had founded and promoted similar institutes. He also named Blessed Sebastian Valfrè, a model of priestly virtue, as its patron.

Upon his arrival at the *Convitto* Don Bosco went directly to Father Cafasso's room. As was his wont, Father Cafasso met him at the door with a friendly smile and fatherly benevolence. He inquired about his vacation and his health, asked news of his relatives, the pastor, of other priests of the village, of his own family; and then briefly and amiably he explained the main rules and spirit of the *Convitto*. He concluded by telling him, as though there had been an implicit understanding, that Father Guala, the rector, had exempted him from paying the fee.

At that time the *Convitto* had many sources of revenue and therefore a large number of the students were admitted either at a reduced rate or gratis. With the utmost delicacy, Father Guala or Father Cafasso would secretly give some of these students the necessary money for paying the bursar their fees, lest anyone should come to know the straightened circumstances of their respectable families.

Overwhelmed with gratitude, after taking leave of Father Cafasso, Don Bosco hastened to pay his respects to Father Rector, a venerable man in his sixty-sixth year, and thank him for his generosity. He found him with his head somewhat bowed, seated at his desk, suffering severely from rheumatism in the legs. From the cordial

reception accorded him, Don Bosco perceived that Father Cafasso had spoken highly of him. He was assigned a simply furnished room which, like the entire *Convitto*, was spotlessly clean, a manifestation of its spiritual and moral order.

That evening the old and new students gathered in small groups, renewed old seminary friendships, contracted new ones, and in lively but not loud conversation, awaited the sound of the bell. Following their entrance into chapel, Father Rector intoned the *Veni Creator* with sentiments of devotion and joy. Thus began the scholastic year.

The first days were spent in explaining the few rules, characterized by moderation, and so drawn up as to make their observance possible even outside the *Convitto*, and thus dispose the priests to continue to follow them when they would be on their own. Community devotions included morning and evening prayers, attendance at Mass with the singing of a hymn before Holy Communion for those not yet ordained, a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, five decades of the rosary, a half hour meditation and fifteen minutes of spiritual reading. Other practices included weekly confession, some act of mortification on Fridays, silence at certain specified times and the monthly Exercise for a Happy Death.<sup>1</sup> Scholastic work included two daily lectures and study periods in common. The schedule included an evening walk in pairs, avoiding the more crowded sections of the city; no one was permitted to attend public shows or stop at a café.

In passing, it may be noted that Don Bosco later introduced in his schools, especially those for academic students, the practices of piety prescribed by the government; subsequently he added those in use at the *Convitto* for his Salesians. His life's work was a continuous growth in practical knowledge, based on the experience of his elders, the gathering of means to attain the goal indicated to him by Divine Providence.

Father Guala insisted that the rules be fully observed. Students were treated as men, not as boys. There were no prescribed penalties, but anyone who did not cooperate and, after a few warnings,

<sup>1</sup> A practice of piety that promotes spiritual recollection and fervor by meditation on one's eventual death. It stresses the reception of the sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist as if for the last time. [Editor]

did not comply, was requested to leave the *Convitto*. Discipline was rather strict and supervision was close. If anyone transgressed, he was immediately called to task by the rector who forgave very readily if the culprit admitted his error. He insisted that in their deportment, the students should diligently put into practice the injunction of the Council of Trent: "Thus it is in every way fitting that clergy who have been called to the service of the Lord should so order their lives and habits that in their dress, gestures, gait, conversation and all other matters they show nothing that is not grave, controlled and full of religious feeling; and let them also avoid minor faults which in them would be very great, so that their actions may receive the respect of all." (Session XXII, Ch. 1, De Reform.)

Father Cafasso constantly urged: "Become saints! The priesthood! What exalted dignity in this word, but also how great the obligations it imposes and the virtues it demands. A priest may be considered as holy by men, and yet not by God. A third of the virtues necessary for a priest can make him appear holy in the sight of men, but not before God, who knows the secrets of men's hearts. One who is truly a priest will easily go to heaven after death; but if he is not fully a priest, it is far more likely that he will go to hell, than to purgatory."

The students constantly had before them two models of priestly virtue. [When Don Bosco entered the *Convitto*] Father Guala had already spent thirty-one years as rector. He was much given to penance, fasting, the wearing of a hair shirt, and strict adherence to the *Convitto's* rules. He remained in his confessional beside the altar of the Immaculate Conception until ten o'clock every morning, either praying or hearing confessions. Then followed his morning lecture to the students. The rest of the day he spent in preaching, visiting the sick and the imprisoned, and distributing generous alms to needy families.

He also used to visit the Citadel to hear the confessions of soldiers condemned to death and offer them comfort. Some of his leisure hours he spent informally with the students as did also Father Cafasso, a most unusual practice in those days for the rector of an institute.

[It is quite proper that at this point we say a few words about]

Father Cafasso. He entered the *Convitto* as a student priest on January 28, 1834, and on June 29, 1836, he received authorization to hear confessions. That same year he was appointed instructor in moral theology and shared the burden of teaching with Father Guala until 1844. We might say that he was an improved copy of virtuous Father Guala. Although small, slight of build and somewhat less than physically perfect, he never let up in his incessant activity of preaching, hearing confessions, teaching, visiting the imprisoned and comforting those condemned to death. Though rather serious in appearance, he was more lenient than Father Guala in granting students their requests. In many cases the latter would say to them: "*Ite ad Joseph*" [Go to Joseph], meaning Father Cafasso. He was quite solicitous about their bodily health, and readily granted permission for a morning walk, or a dispensation from the law of abstinence to those in need, admonishing them to obey him without any qualms of conscience. He wanted them to stay in good physical condition and to be able to work hard. As for himself, he was given to very severe mortifications, and fasted rigorously on the prescribed days.

"What was most remarkable in Father Cafasso's personal life," wrote Don Bosco, "was the exactness with which he observed the *Convitto's* rules. After he became superior, there were things from which he could have legitimately dispensed himself, either on account of his frail health, or by reason of the many serious tasks that weighed upon him. However, he was convinced that a superior's most effective command is his good example and leading his subjects in the fulfillment of their duties. Therefore, in the smallest things, in carrying out his practices of piety, in being punctual at meetings, meditation, and meals, he was like a machine that the sound of the bell set in motion to perform whatever duty was called for at the time.

"I recall how, one day, a glass of water was brought to him, and he already held it in his hand when the bell rang for the rosary. Instead of drinking, he set it down and went to pray. 'Drink it,' I said, 'you'll still be on time.'

" 'Would you give more attention to a glass of water,' he answered, 'than to a beautiful prayer honoring the Blessed Virgin, like the rosary?' "



Father Cafasso lectured in the evening. His long, profound and uninterrupted study of the more celebrated authors of moral theology, the comparisons he had made between the opinions of Alasia and St. Alphonsus, and his attentive perusal of Father Guala's notes, had given him a singular facility in grasping immediately the point at issue and finding then and there a solution to even the most difficult and intricate problems. The numerous marginal notes in his books present the more important points with such order, clarity, brevity and precision, that it becomes very easy to grasp and remember them. From these notes, amplified and reorganized, he later compiled a 400 page summary of moral theology, known at the *Convitto* as the *Trattatelli* [short treatises]. He himself loaned the work to several students and everybody made copies.

This saintly priest, this expert in the art of spiritual direction, Don Bosco chose as his spiritual guide and confessed to him regularly once a week from then on. He manifested a deep veneration for him by his filial affection and respect. This esteem was not so much due to the fact that they came from the same village, but derived rather from Father Cafasso's proficiency as a guide in the path of perfection and sanctity. In every undertaking, Don Bosco sought his advice. Moreover, he took him as his model and emulated him so faithfully that many of Father Cafasso's sayings, deeds, methods and means employed for the greater glory of God and the welfare of souls, were duplicated many times in Don Bosco's own life. Father Cafasso's manner of living was to Don Bosco like a constant echo of St. Paul's exhortation: "I beg you, be imitators of me as I am of Christ." [Cf. Rom. 4, 16]

## CHAPTER 6

### *Poor and Abandoned Youth*

THAT mysterious desire which had been kindled in Don Bosco, urging him to take care of boys, was further intensified when he came to the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* and saw the misery and neglect of so many young people in the Piedmontese capital.

The condition of the young in large centers and populous cities certainly offers a much more pitiful spectacle than in smaller towns. Walking past stores or workshops, one can often hear questionable snickering, obscene singing, shouts and imprecations. At times, from the voices of adults rises the voice of some young boy who, beaten and harshly treated by a cruel master, cries in pain, then himself becomes brutal and callous, harboring thoughts of hatred and revenge. Passing by a building under construction, one can find at work boys ranging from eight to twelve years of age. Still in great need of a mother's love and care, far away from home, as masons' helpers they climb up and down unsteady scaffolding, carrying a load of lime, bricks or other heavy material up a steep ladder, under a baking sun or in wind and rain. Rough reprimands, an occasional shove, a piece of brick hurled by way of rebuke, or a rap on the head, as often as not accompanied by curses, are their sole education.

Other children are seen, dressed in rags and barely covered even by these, sent out into the street, or driven out by the negligence, sloth or vice of their parents. Sometimes it is a case of dire necessity: their work schedule or other needs prompt the parents to send the children out of the house so they can lock it up and so safeguard their few household goods. Not infrequently, though, they do it purposely, to spare themselves the cost of providing for their children. Parents force them to beg alms from the passersby, thus accustoming them to beggary and idleness. These poor things,

covered with mud and dirt, can be seen running, playing and quarreling on bridges, at street corners, and in alleys, with no one to teach them about God and eternal life. All they see about them are unwholesome examples of squalor and evil, which prematurely poison their tender souls. Now and then one can meet a group of dissolute young men, loitering about. Given to mockery and provocation, their countenances reflect their depravity. Before long, dragged into crime by the example of evil companions as well as by their own passions, some of these poor wretches will face the prospect of prison or even the gallows. There is no one to offer them a hand in time to save them from human and divine justice.

In the evening, swarms of workmen climb up to malodorous garrets or descend into gloomy, sordid basements, where, after an exhausting day, they pile almost on top of each other in overcrowded rooms to save on rent. Among them are young boys who either have no close relatives or, abandoned by them, are obliged to live in the corrupting environment of these foul shelters, and waste their youth without even hearing a good word or spiritual thought.

This wretched picture in all its loathsomeness greeted Don Bosco from the very beginning of his stay in Turin. As soon as he was settled at the *Convitto*, he himself told us that he became eager to acquaint himself with the moral condition of the boys in the city, by visiting the different sections during his daily walks. The sight of these boys, abandoned and roaming around with evil companions, clutched at his heart and made him weep out of compassion. Sometimes, meeting some young boys, he would beckon to them, give them a medal or a few pennies, and ask them simple questions about their faith, to which they did not know how to reply.

He prolonged his investigation on Sundays and holy days, and was grieved to see so many boys of varying ages roaming the streets and squares instead of going to Mass, staring in dumb wonderment at the perfumed and pompous men and women who went about with no regard for the misery of others. Beyond the windows of squalid wine shops and under the light of smoky lanterns, he saw adolescents drinking, reveling and gambling. The

crowds, especially in the vicinity of the Citadel, in the meadows outside the city limits and in the slums, amused themselves improperly, quarreled, fought, blasphemed and talked obscenely. They vividly presented the reality of the dream he had had when he was ten. Ever more he became convinced that this was the field of his apostolate pointed out to him by the Blessed Virgin.

More than once, brazen urchins laughed and scoffed at Don Bosco as, all alone, he approached them and stood among them to watch. Their jibes and insults rang in his ears like the cry of the prophet: "Starving children begged the bread of the word of God, and there was no one to take pity on them and give it to them." (Lam. 4, 4)

And he would depart, pondering within himself how to gather them in some place in the greatest number possible, remove them from danger, take them away from idleness and evil companions, instruct them, train them to keep the Lord's day holy, lead them to receive the sacraments. He knew well that they did not attend catechism class, simply because there was no one to send them or to see that they went.

Pastors were busily engaged in their sacred ministry and there was much to be done. On the whole, the Turinese sent their children to church and most of the parents accompanied them. But there were two increasingly numerous groups, which were truly forsaken. In those days Turin was beginning to grow. New factories were being erected and thousands of workers, both young and old, were flocking in from the area around Biella and from towns in Lombardy in search of employment. They had left their native districts instructed in their faith, but once in the big city, they knew not where or how to join a parish, and as they forgot the truths learned, they ceased to be practicing Catholics. There was also a segment of the people that lived in remote parts of the city, not easily accessible to priests. They kept away from church and lived in great ignorance of religious matters.

Don Bosco saw before him an immense field for exercising his zeal. However, he bore in mind St. Francis de Sales' wise maxim: "Follow in the footsteps of Divine Providence; do not lead." So he awaited the hour, albeit with holy impatience.

Don Bosco had not yet seen the complete picture of desolation

and ruin wrought on youth by the lack of religion and by bad example. What was still missing was to be filled in by his visits to hospitals, the wretched garrets of the poor and the prisons, where were gathered all the misfortunes that irreligion and vice inflicted on suffering humanity. By the disposition of Divine Providence, Don Bosco was able to visit such places while a student at the *Convitto*, and thus redouble his ardent zeal for the welfare of the young.

Father Guala, a very generous man, was wont to send weekly packages of tobacco, bread and also money to those in jail, especially the inmates of the *Correctionel*. He performed this work of charity by means of those students of the *Convitto* who taught catechism to prisoners. Father Cafasso, a long-standing member of the *Compagnia della Misericordia* [Sodality of Mercy], with a membership of three hundred, was among the eight appointed to visit the prisons and give spiritual and material aid to the inmates.

Father Cafasso was the most zealous among them. One might say that he was in his element when visiting the prisons, and that the convicts were dear sons of his; in helping prisoners, his heart had found a needed outlet. Desirous that his pupil and fellow villager join him in this apostolate, Father Cafasso brought Don Bosco also into the prisons. From the manner in which Don Bosco expressed himself in describing his revered master's extraordinary accomplishments in prisons, we can infer the nature of Don Bosco's first impressions in following him, and the extent to which he shared Father Cafasso's feelings and objectives.

Father Cafasso walks through the gates. He is not dismayed either by the sentries or the guards, as he passes through the iron doors and big gates. The clang of chains does not disturb him, nor do the dimness, unhealthiness and stench of the place deter him. In one cell some inmates are laughing and guffawing coarsely, in another, men are singing; but they sound more like wild animals howling than human beings. He gives no sign of disgust or annoyance, or even of apprehension, at being in the midst of men of such sort, anyone of whom would have been enough to strike terror into a crowd of people, even the police. Father Cafasso is in their midst. Some curse, some fight and shout obscenities; others blaspheme against God, the Virgin and the Saints. At such a

scene, the courageous priest feels a bitter grief in his heart, but he is not dismayed. He lifts his eyes to heaven, offers himself as a sacrifice to God, and places himself under the protection of the Virgin Mary, the safe refuge of sinners. As soon as he begins to talk to this new kind of audience, he becomes aware that these men have reached this unhappy state of degradation more from the lack of religious instruction than from personal malice. He speaks of religion and they listen; he offers to return and they await him with pleasure. The intrepid minister of Jesus Christ continues his catechetical instructions; he invites other priests to assist him, especially his students at the *Convitto*; and at last he succeeds in winning the hearts of these lost men. He starts to preach sermons and to hear confessions. Thus, thanks to the initiative of one man, these prisons, which had been veritable pits of hell, filled with imprecations, blasphemies and other horrible vices, gradually become the dwelling places of men who, on becoming aware that they are Christians, begin to love and serve God, their Creator, and to sing hymns to the adorable name of Jesus.

While these fruitful results brought solace to Don Bosco's heart, he also experienced intense emotions of fear and pity. In the prisons he saw a great number of boys, ranging between twelve and eighteen years of age, [basically] healthy, sturdy and intelligent. He was horrified to see them inactive, bitten by insects, hungry for both spiritual and material food while they served time, expiating through detention, and even more through remorse, their precocious depravity. They were a blot on their country, the dishonor of their families, an infamy to themselves. They were above all, souls that, redeemed by the blood of Christ, were now reduced to slaves of vice, and in the greatest danger of eternal perdition.

In seeking the cause of such depravity among those unfortunate youths, Don Bosco came to the conclusion that it lay not only in the fact that they had been deplorably abandoned in their early years by their parents, but still more in their alienation from religious practices on holy days of obligation. With great conviction he kept repeating: "Who knows, if these boys had had a friend who had taken loving care of them by helping them and by giving them religious instruction on holy days, perhaps they would have kept away from wrong doing and disaster, and thus would have

avoided coming and returning to these prisons. Certainly, the number of these young prisoners would be diminished. Would it not be highly beneficial both for religion and civil society to undertake such an experiment for the future advantage of countless other youngsters?"

Don Bosco prayed the Lord to grant him the opportunity of dedicating himself to this task of saving young people. He revealed this desire to Father Cafasso, who approved and encouraged him. Guided by his counsel and his judgment, Don Bosco promptly studied the means of implementing this desire, leaving its successful realization to Divine Providence, without whose help men's efforts are in vain.

Generous towards all in need, Father Guala showed particular interest in periodically bringing assistance to impoverished individuals and families. With Father Cafasso, he brought gifts to their homes, and when necessary, he called on the assistance of the *Convitto* students. He entrusted this task also to Don Bosco, after giving him suitable advice and warning to be prudent and to accompany the act of material charity with the supernatural charity of gentle words and Christian encouragement. Don Bosco, therefore, began to climb those low, small and filthy garrets, so squalid and loathsome. Each served as bedroom, kitchen and living room for the entire family; father and mother, sisters and brothers lived and slept in the same room, with absolute lack of privacy. Whenever a member of the family was sick, whoever visited him was obliged at times to step across three or four straw mattresses, worn-out or evil smelling from long use, in order to reach the corner where lay the patient, his teeth chattering, numb from fever or the cold weather. The emaciated, pale faces of these poor men,<sup>1</sup> unhappy wives and little children would light up at the appearance of this consoling angel. How many blessings those poor mothers called down on Father Cafasso and Father Guala.

Not a few of these poor mothers, ignorant of eternal truths or estranged from the Church and the sacraments, out of shame for their poverty or perhaps angered and aggrieved by their misery,

<sup>1</sup> These were the years in which economic liberalism reigned supreme, long before Pope Leo XIII issued his famous *Rerum Novarum* (May 15, 1891), on the rights and duties of capital and labor. [Editor]

could not instill in their children the religious beliefs or sentiments which they themselves lacked. Others, good and faithful to God and resigned to their poverty, wept over the evil conduct of their sons who had been perverted by paternal bad example or by bad companions. Some men were estranged from their families: for the voice of nature is stifled, all affection is destroyed and even the most powerful feelings fade away when immorality fastens itself onto poverty. Even in their children's presence these men did not hesitate to blaspheme, to mock a pious wife's faith, insult her coarsely and even strike her in drunken anger. Humane people offer pity, generous people bring relief, but only people motivated by supernatural charity will sacrifice themselves. It is for this reason that the Christian faith can work miracles. After bringing help one can speak frankly; and a good word, at first listened to with respect, soon moves the heart and in time also succeeds in converting it. Such were the scenes Don Bosco witnessed. They impressed him profoundly and convinced him ever more of the necessity of strengthening young boys in their faith, if they were to withstand the trials of evil under the added burden of privation and misery.

But there was another field of human misery that our Lord wished to reveal to Don Bosco. One day during his first few months at the *Convitto*, Don Bosco met Canon Joseph Cottolengo.<sup>2</sup> The latter looked him straight in the eye and after the customary greetings, said to him: "You look like the right kind of man. There is plenty of work in the *Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza* [The Little House of Divine Providence]. Come!" Don Bosco promised to do so, kissed his hand in respect,<sup>3</sup> and soon kept his promise.

A few days later, with several of his fellow students he went to a section of Turin called *Valdocco*,<sup>4</sup> where Cottolengo's charitable institution had already assumed huge proportions. It had humble beginnings in 1827, and with no fixed source of income it depended entirely on the donations that Divine Providence supplied daily

<sup>2</sup> Now St. Joseph Cottolengo. In 1832 he founded the *Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza*, an institution at present providing for more than 7,000 persons. [Editor]

<sup>3</sup> A custom in many lands. [Editor]

<sup>4</sup> As regards the origin of this name see p. 234. [Editor]



through generous benefactors. It flourished to the extent that by this time [1842], it housed 1800 persons of both sexes:<sup>5</sup> forsaken orphans, disabled men, cripples, paralytics, mental defectives, epileptics, people afflicted with ulcers and incurable diseases in all stages of gravity and loathsomeness—all rejected by other hospitals, whose rules barred their admission. All these poor unfortunates were admitted gratis, treated with every consideration and provided with everything necessary for their maintenance and medical care. Eminent physicians and surgeons contributed their services. Several communities of religious were employed in ministering to the physical and spiritual needs of the patients. Many of the local priests came to hear confessions, in a great spirit of service. All this still continues on a much greater scale. The institution is a veritable open gate to heaven for the many patients who otherwise would die without the comforts of religion. Here the same care is given to both Catholics and non-Catholics, believers and unbelievers.

At the main entrance Don Bosco saw a motto which explains the secret of so many wonders: *Charitas Christi urget nos*. [The love of Christ impels us. 2 Cor. 5, 14]. Kneeling before Mary's image in the vestibule leading to the wards, he was moved to tears by the words written on the arch above it: *Infirmus eram et visitastis me*. [I was sick and you visited me. Matt. 25, 36]. He then asked to see the venerable founder. Canon Cottolengo received him warmly and guided him about the vast building, where every nook and corner inspired charity and zeal. Don Bosco experienced some sadness, tempered however by consolation. In some of the wards were boys over whom the angel of death was hovering. Their sunken faces and obstinate coughing, their total prostration, revealed that vice had blighted their young lives. He spoke a few comforting words, and they listened, resigned to God's will. As he smiled, they smiled back but with sadness. "Oh! How these poor boys need to be forewarned and saved!" he thought.

His tour of that sanctuary of Christian suffering completed, he was about to take his leave when Canon Cottolengo, fingering the sleeves of Don Bosco's cassock, exclaimed, "This material is too thin, and light. Get yourself one of a stronger and more durable

<sup>5</sup> At present it provides for more than 7,000 persons. [Editor]

fabric, so that boys may get hold of it without tearing it. . . . A time will come when a lot of people will pull at it!"

This incident we came to know from Canon Dominic Bosso, one of Canon Cottolengo's successors, who as a boy, was present at the above conversation. He never forgot that prophecy. The time foretold by Canon Cottolengo was not far distant, and the prediction of multitudes of boys surrounding Don Bosco was to be verified in the very neighborhood of the *Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza* [The Little House of Divine Providence].

## CHAPTER 7

*December 8, 1841*

DON BOSCO was sadly moved by the sight of so many youths of Turin treading the path of dishonor and perdition, neglecting the divine law, of which they were ignorant, and offending God, whom they hardly knew. He felt a constant and intense urge to bring them prompt and loving aid. His upright heart was distressed at the thought that the majority of these poor souls risked their eternal happiness because they were ignorant of the teachings of our faith. He lamented with the Prophet Isaia: “. . . my young people go into exile, because they do not understand. . . . Therefore the nether world enlarges its throat and opens its maw without limit; down go their nobility and their masses, their throngs and their revelry.” (Cf. Isa. 5,13-14)

“No sooner did I enter the *Convitto*,” wrote Don Bosco in his memoirs, “than a crowd of boys began to follow me through the streets and squares, even into the sacristy of the *Convitto* church. But I could not give them much attention for I had no suitable place to assemble them.”

Nevertheless, whenever he met any boys in the sacristy of St. Francis of Assisi Church, he talked to them with such amiability and common sense that they became much attached to him. Sometimes he taught them catechism in the little rooms adjacent to the sacristy and exhorted them to be good. He also invited them to come again and encouraged them to receive Holy Communion with the proper disposition. Naturally, the continuous traffic of so many boys caused not a little noise and disturbance, a source of irritation to the sacristan, who would reprimand them and treat them brusquely. This, Father Cafasso and Don Bosco's fellow students at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, narrated to the clerics, John Cagliero, Anfossi, Fusero and others.

Don Bosco himself goes on: "For several years, during the summer months, Father Cafasso had held a Sunday catechism class for apprentice masons in a room adjoining the sacristy of St. Francis of Assisi Church. Although this apostolate was very dear to him, his many other duties obliged him to discontinue these lessons. I resumed them toward the end of 1841."

At that time Don Bosco had not yet undertaken any specific work in favor of the young. He was awaiting the moment chosen by God, fully determined to respond with all his heart and strength, even though he considered himself an inadequate instrument.

He pleaded for enlightenment from God in fervent and persistent prayers, and opened his heart to Father Cafasso. With him he frequently talked about gathering as many boys as possible near St. Francis of Assisi Church, in order to teach them catechism and keep them busy with wholesome amusements. Thus he would shield them from the dangers lurking in the city streets and squares, where they were left entirely to themselves. Then he decided to reach an understanding with the archbishop, the better to ascertain God's will and forestall future difficulties. Both Father Guala and Father Cafasso who guided him in everything and were on intimate terms with the archbishop, had recommended this course of action. Don Bosco was often to narrate how Archbishop Fransonì listened to the plans for the festive oratories and immediately granted his full approval and his episcopal blessing. From that moment a warm and intimate friendship began between the saintly prelate and the zealous priest, who made no move in developing his plans without prior consultation.

For several days, after his return to the *Convitto*, Don Bosco pondered the time and the manner of starting his work. As he awaited the opportunity, an unexpected incident occurred to launch his project. It was December 8, 1841, feast of the Immaculate Conception, and Don Bosco felt even more ardently the desire to gather up, as in a family, the neediest and most abandoned boys. A well ordered family, however, needs a mother's care, in order that it be properly regulated, educated and protected. Who else could become the loving mother and powerful protectress of this new family but the Virgin Mary? It was precisely on the day

dedicated to her greatest glory that the Queen of Heaven willed the [festive] oratory to have its beginning.

At his appointed time Don Bosco was in the sacristy, about to vest for Mass. He was waiting for a server. In the middle of the room stood a fourteen or fifteen-year-old boy, looking about. His clothes were none too clean and his awkward manners made it obvious that he was of poor and uneducated parents. Hat in hand, he stood staring at the sacred vestments with amazement, as though he had never seen anything of the kind. The sacristan, Joseph Comotti, a rude fellow, approached and asked him brusquely: "What are you doing here? Don't you see that you're in the way? Quick, go and serve Mass for that priest."

At these words the boy became dumbfounded and, cowering at the sacristan's harsh manner, could only stammer: "I can't. I don't know how."

"Come along," the sacristan said, "and serve that Mass."

"But I don't know how," the boy insisted, feeling even more humiliated. "I've never served Mass."

"What? What?" cried the sacristan. "You don't know how!" And he gave him a kick. "You blockhead! Why do you come here if you don't know how to serve Mass? Get out of here at once."

The boy was so bewildered he could not move. This incensed the sacristan all the more: grabbing a duster, he rained blows on his back as the boy tried to find an exit.

"What are you doing?" demanded Don Bosco. "Why are you beating the boy? What did he do to you?"

But the infuriated sacristan was paying no attention to him. Not knowing which door led into the church, the boy rushed through the one that led to the little apse, with the sacristan after him. Unable to find a way out, he ran back to the sacristy and raced out into the square.

Don Bosco called the sacristan a second time and in a severe tone inquired: "Why were you beating the boy? What wrong did he do you that you should treat him that way?"

"He had no business coming to the sacristy, if he didn't know how to serve Mass."

"Even so, you did wrong."

"What do you care?"

"I care very much. He's a good friend of mine."

"He is? A character like that?"

"He certainly is. All those who are ill-treated are my dearest friends. You have struck one who is no stranger to the superiors. Go out instantly and call him, for I must speak to him. Don't return without him, or else I shall report your conduct to the rector."

At this admonition the sacristan's uncalled-for anger subsided. He put aside the duster and, calling for the boy, ran after him. He found him in an adjacent street and, assuring him that he would be treated kindly, he took him back to Don Bosco. Fearfully, the poor lad approached, still in tears from the blows he had received.

"Have you been to Mass?" Don Bosco asked him kindly.

"No!"

"Come and hear it. Afterward I want to talk to you about something you will like."

Don Bosco only wished to alleviate the poor lad's misery and dispel the bad impression he had received in the sacristy. However, God's designs reached much further, for on that day He wished to lay the foundations of a great undertaking.

Don Bosco's dialogue was interrupted by the sacristan telling him that he had found an altar boy.

After his Mass and thanksgiving, Don Bosco had the first boy brought to him. He led him into a little apse of the church, and, seating the boy opposite him, he assured him that he need not be afraid of being beaten. Then he began to ask him a few questions.

"What is your name, my good friend?"

"Bartholomew Garelli."

"Where do you come from?"

"Asti."

"What is your job?"

"Bricklayer."

"Is your father living?"

"No, he's dead."

"And your mother?"

"She's dead too."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Can you read or write?"

"No."

"Can you sing?"

Wiping his eyes, the boy stared in surprise at Don Bosco and answered: "No."

"Can you whistle?"

The boy's face broke into a smile, which was what Don Bosco wanted, because it showed that the boy felt at ease. So he went on: "Tell me, have you made your first Holy Communion?"

"Not yet."

"Did you ever go to confession?"

"Yes, when I was little."

"Do you always say your morning and evening prayers?"

"No, hardly ever. I've forgotten them."

"Isn't there anyone to see to it that you say them?"

"No."

"Tell me, do you always go to Mass on Sundays?"

"Nearly always," the boy said after a slight pause, and with a grimace.

"Do you attend catechism class?"

"No, I don't dare."

"Why not?"

"Because the smaller boys already know it, while I'm bigger and don't know a word. So I'm ashamed to go to class with them."

"If I were to teach you catechism privately, would you come and learn?"

"Sure!"

"Even here?"

"Yes, as long as they don't beat me up."

"Don't be afraid of that. No one will treat you unkindly again, as I've already told you. From now on you'll be my friend, and you will be dealing with me and no one else. When would you like to start our catechism lessons?"

"Whenever you like."

"This evening, perhaps?"

"Yes."

"Even now?"

"Yes, I'd like that very much."

Thereupon Don Bosco knelt down and, before beginning the

lesson, he recited a Hail Mary, asking Our Lady to give him the grace to save that boy's soul. That fervent prayer and Don Bosco's selfless zeal bore great fruit. Rising, Don Bosco made the sign of the Cross, but not his new pupil, who knew neither the gesture nor the words. So the first lesson was on how to make the Sign of the Cross. Don Bosco then spoke to him about God, our Creator, and the purpose for which He created and redeemed us. Almost half an hour later he dismissed the boy with much kindness, assuring him that he would teach him also how to serve Mass. As a parting gift he gave him a medal of the Blessed Virgin, making him promise to return the following Sunday. Then he added: "Listen, I would like you to come with some of your companions. I shall have another present for you and for those that you will bring along. Are you happy, now?"

"Oh! very happy," the boy cheerfully replied. Then, kissing Don Bosco's hand repeatedly, he left.

For Don Bosco, Bartholomew Garelli represented not only countless other boys, but the many peoples he would evangelize: "that he might gather into one the children of God." (Cf. John, 11, 52) This was the real start of the festive oratories, of which Don Bosco was the founder and Garelli the cornerstone, upon which the Virgin Mary was to shower countless graces and favors.

The following week Father Cafasso also met a boy who did not know how to serve Mass, and he too promised to teach him. Then a second boy came with the first one. Pressed for time by his many other activities, Father Cafasso entrusted their instruction to Don Bosco, who thus increased the number of his pupils.

The following Sunday, St. Francis of Assisi Church presented a charming sight. Six poorly clad boys, led by Bartholomew Garelli and joined by the other two, were attentively listening to Don Bosco as he taught them the way to heaven. Although not endowed with a retentive memory, by his diligence and attention Bartholomew was able to learn the essentials for a good confession and Holy Communion after a few Sunday instructions. He then learned to serve Mass. Thereafter he was one of Don Bosco's faithful disciples. Canon Anfossi and others saw him visit Don Bosco at the Oratory,<sup>1</sup> even after 1855.

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviated form of *Oratory of St. Francis de Sales*, the motherhouse of the Salesian Congregation. [Editor]



Other boys soon joined, so that in a short time the little apse where the lessons were held was filled to capacity. The evening of one of these first Sundays, as Don Bosco was passing through the church on his way to the sacristy, he noticed a group of boys sitting on the steps of a side altar. They were apprentice masons, but instead of listening to the sermon they were dozing. He asked them in a whisper: "Why are you sleeping?"

"We don't understand a word of the sermon," they answered. "The priest isn't talking to us."

"Come with me!" He led them into the sacristy and invited them to join the others in his catechism class. Among these young apprentices were Charles Buzzetti, Germano and Gariboldo.

Thus, week after week, the number of pupils increased, and Don Bosco always encouraged them to bring as many friends as they could. He ardently desired to lead them to God by teaching them to obey His laws and the laws of the Church. Therefore, he gave immediate attention to their attendance at Mass on Sundays and holy days, to their recitation of morning and night prayers, to which he attached great importance, and to their preparation for a good confession. After catechism class he allowed them, for a time, to amuse themselves in the square fronting on the church. That winter he paid particular attention to some of the older boys who were living far away from their families. Most of them, especially the bricklayers, came from the region of Biella and Milan in Lombardy. By now the sacristan had been won over by Don Bosco's affability and an occasional gift. We knew him as a very old man in 1891; he still remembered Don Bosco with affection. As for the boys, they greatly benefited from their religious instruction, and the results, evident in their excellent behavior, were heartening.

With that courage which is born of sincere love for one's fellow-man, Don Bosco called on various people in order to solicit employment for his protégés and thus keep them away from idleness and vice.

On Christmas Day, several of these boys received Jesus in their hearts in Holy Communion, and the joy which transpired from their faces was also felt by Don Bosco. Our Lord was assuring him of His assistance as a reward for the humility that guided him.

In all these things Don Bosco always acted with the knowledge of his superiors at the *Convitto* and the consent of the ecclesiastical authorities, to whom he was most obedient. In the report he sent to Rome in 1864, in order to obtain approval of his Pious Society, he wrote: "Ever since 1841, when the work of the oratories began with a simple catechism lesson on a holy day of obligation, in St. Francis of Assisi Church, everything was always done with the consent and under the guidance of Archbishop Louis Fransoni."

Don Bosco was a new apostle setting out on his mission. At all times, by the grace of God, the Church has had extraordinary men who performed extraordinary deeds in which the finger of God was manifest. Our century, too, no less worthy of divine favors than others, has known many such men. I do not think I err in saying that Don Bosco was one of them.

## CHAPTER 8

### *Father Joseph Cafasso*

WE have already spoken of the *Convitto's* rectors and teachers, and of their magnificent work in the formation of the clergy in Piedmont. Yet, in order to bring out Father Cafasso's wisdom in inviting Don Bosco to the *Convitto* to prepare him for his future mission, we cannot overlook another very outstanding merit of this institute—training priests to withstand the persecutions and trials then being hatched against the Church. If the insidious enticements, to which even many priests fell victim, and which were the prelude to the organized warfare against religion by the sectaries, did not have all the fatal consequences which threatened the faith of the people, it was principally due to the *Convitto's* graduates. They immediately grasped the strategy of the enemies of the Church, and, as courageous as the first martyrs, they steadfastly opposed false freedoms, forerunners of irreligion and corruption, and kept alive the sacred fire of Christian faith among the people. Quietly and painstakingly they laid the foundations of a spiritual reawakening and a return to the Faith, a return now everywhere so evident.

Let us digress a moment and briefly present the excellent methodology that Father Cafasso in particular used in his lectures on moral theology. We single him out because Don Bosco has left us much information about him. It should not be forgotten, however, that Father Cafasso followed the path opened by Father Guala. In turn, their successors always endeavored to imitate their former teachers. More than one hundred priests from all parts of the city attended Father Cafasso's morning lecture. The hall was so crowded that there was a crush at the door to get in. The late comers would even climb on the shoulders of their fellow priests.

At the appointed time Father Cafasso unfailingly would enter

the study hall, which doubled as lecture hall. He would devoutly recite the *Veni Sancti Spiritus* [Come, Holy Spirit] and then take his place at the teacher's desk. After a glance at the audience, he would start his lecture by having one of the students read a problem from moral theology and its proposed solution from Alasia's *Compendium*. Father Cafasso would then present one or more problems of a very practical nature, prepared in advance and so arranged as to touch on the point at issue in all its aspects. He thus had the opportunity of commenting on answers that frequently were incomplete, contradictory, and even irrelevant. Closing the lecture, he himself would give the complete solution, so clear, precise, logical and practical, that no one could fail to recognize in him a man of logic. In the biography which Don Bosco wrote of him, we read: "Remarkable was his ready, concise and lucid manner of answering. He had a talent for resolving even the most complicated doubts, difficulties and queries. If one posed a question, he grasped it instantly, and after briefly raising his heart to God, he would give such a prompt and accurate reply that longer reflection could not have improved it. All vied with one another to attend his classes and the more he prolonged his lectures or devoted time to explaining difficulties submitted, the greater was the general satisfaction. The feeling was that his lectures were never long enough for them."

Father Cafasso had a rare and wonderful talent for stimulating interest even in subjects that of themselves were thorny and unattractive. The nature of the moral problems and their presentation, his constant cheerfulness, his witty remarks and pertinent anecdotes, all brightened by his perennial smile, enlivened even the most uninteresting and abstruse topics. It was only when speaking of the subject of which St. Paul says: "Let it not be named among you," [Eph. 5, 3] that his approach was totally different. He was sufficiently clear, but handled the subject soberly. He used to advise his students to pray to the Lord that He assist them with His divine grace, and never once, when dealing with such a subject, did he allow himself a smile or a joke. With this reserve of his, he greatly impressed them as a man of great restraint and extreme delicacy in regard to the virtue of purity.

His teachings not only enlightened their minds and increased

their knowledge of moral theology, but spurred them to practice what they learned. He often spoke of prisoners condemned to death, or of people once given to evil whose souls he had won for God. His conclusion always proved to be an encouragement to do good and work for souls. It was an exhortation, an admonition to strive to practice especially the virtues proper to a priest, to avoid spiritual dangers, to work for one's personal sanctification and to offer to God all one's undertakings with the sole intention of working only and forever for the accomplishment of His divine will; not to manifest too much love for one's parents, to live detached from the world and united with God, never to refuse one's services in the great act of charity which is the reconciliation of a soul with its Maker. All these things he presented as attainable, noble and a source of great consolation.

Don Bosco followed intently every word of his beloved teacher, by whom, one might say, he was fascinated. He wrote:

Father Cafasso's teachings were not merely theoretical: he trained us in the proper method of hearing confessions so as to benefit penitents; he demonstrated to us the effects of various ways of speaking, interrogating and giving counsel. He did all this with such skill, or better, with such piety, knowledge and prudence, that one could not say who were the more fortunate, those who listened to his lectures or those who were privileged to have him as their spiritual director. His learning and understanding account for his extraordinary rapidity in the confessional. A few words or even a mere sigh from the penitent were sufficient for Father Cafasso to understand his state of mind. He did not speak much in the confessional but what little he said was clear, exact, sound and so well suited to the need that a long talk could not have achieved better results. During class he taught by using the dialogue method, and thus trained his students in his manner of hearing confessions. The moral problems he presented to the class were most profitable object lessons.

What made his lectures and all his words particularly effective was his boundless confidence in God's goodness and love for us. Someone once remarked in his presence: "Who knows if I shall go to heaven?"

"Oh! you shouldn't even doubt it!" he exclaimed. "There are some who look upon eternal salvation as if it were a lottery game, and wonder if they will show the lucky number. This is the wrong outlook. We have

the laws and promises of Jesus Christ, and whosoever strives to observe His laws, must never doubt His promises.”

He talked of heaven as one who already had a foot inside the gate. He was constantly striving to smooth the path for others. He urged the practice of little acts of virtue and the performance of small daily sacrifices according to the opportunity; he often repeated that it is by means of these small things that vast treasures accumulate.

Besides moral theology, Father Cafasso taught homiletics. He would assign the students a sermon theme to be prepared within fifteen days and delivered in public by one whom he would choose. The other sermons he would read privately and return with marginal corrections. He was firmly convinced that preaching is one of the most potent means for overcoming sin and one of the most important duties incumbent on a priest. He noted that the increase and spread of sin among [the faithful was] due on the one hand to people who did not listen to sermons or did not practice what they heard, and on the other hand to priests derelict in their duty of preparing themselves by the study of theology, the Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, church history and also by prayer and good example.

He stressed that sermons be adapted to the degree of intelligence of the congregation; that they be simple in diction and sentence structure, free of trivial and slang words; that they show regard for the listeners by being short so as not to bore; that they be free of irritating personal allusions; that they be interesting, with illustrations drawn from concrete and familiar things, rich in examples taken from the Holy Scriptures and church history; that they be humble, by making it clear that the preacher considered himself a sinner like anyone else in the congregation, except when speaking of immorality. Father Cafasso had little use for purely flowery panegyrics or polemical sermons. These last, he said, if delivered by a competent preacher chosen from among the many available in large cities, could be quite opportune in combating current errors and acquainting the faithful with the sublimer aspects of religion and its ineffable beauty. In general, however, Father Cafasso believed that a simple well-reasoned exposition of some part of cate-

chism was always better; a well-prepared instruction more fruitful; a sermon which fostered love for virtue and hatred of vice, speaking directly to the heart, ever more desirable; because lack of faith is felt more in the heart than in the mind, and once the heart is healed, prejudice will vanish and faith will bloom again. "Not so much philosophy," he would say, "not so many words ending in '-ism': positivism, materialism, spiritism, socialism and what not. Speak instead of heaven; the commandments of God; devotion to Our Lady; the reception of the sacraments; avoidance of idleness, bad companions, and occasions of sin; love of neighbor; patience in affliction; and so on. Furthermore, never end a sermon without some allusion to the eternal truths."

He believed that certain subjects, more worldly than religious, should be avoided as being more suited to the lecture hall than the pulpit. Nor would he tolerate the treatment of sacred truths solely from a human point of view, proven by dint of pure reason alone, because, presented in such a way, he declared, they ceased to be the word of God. He warned against taking up matters still moot among theologians, and advised the avoidance of themes which could only arouse excessive fears or great discouragement, such as predestination, the small number of the elect, and the obstacles on the road to heaven.

"Give preference to those truths which encourage and attract people to do good, such as confidence in God's mercy and devotion to the Blessed Virgin even in the most difficult circumstances and desperate cases," he used to say. "Do you want to inspire a salutary fear? Then speak of the certainty of death, and the uncertainty of the hour in which it may come; speak of God's judgment, of the horrible punishments of hell; make them understand that one sin alone may be sufficient to cause damnation. Tell them clearly that the road to heaven is difficult for those who lack good will, but easy for those who have it. When one really puts his heart into his resolution, difficulties disappear because God helps him with His grace, consoles him and uplifts him. Although adversities may always be encountered, so ample are the rewards as to make their burden hardly felt. The greatest obstacle against which everyone will always have to struggle is the attempt to serve both God and the world at the same time. Let us present the Christian way of

life as something truly practical. Let us depict its temporal and eternal advantages, its peace of heart, the joys found in prayer, domestic tranquillity, success in business, the comfort of an upright conscience. Let us speak to them of heaven, and often; let us describe it in such terms that the listeners will conceive in their hearts a burning desire to possess it.”<sup>1</sup>

Words cannot describe the benefits Don Bosco derived from these lessons. In his desire to become proficient in guiding souls in the sacrament of Penance, and to draw all to love Jesus, he applied himself so indefatigably to the study of pastoral theology that he excelled among his fellow students.

He followed Father Guala's and Father Cafasso's lectures attentively, treasuring all their precepts with that same intellectual acumen with which he subsequently planned and executed so many wonderful projects. He was fortunate enough to secure a copy of the *Trattatelli* [short treatises] of which we have already spoken,<sup>2</sup> abounding with many cases of conscience solved during the lectures. These treatises he thoroughly absorbed and made his own. Father Cafasso's spirit, learning, and experience passed on to him. He showed the same charity in receiving penitents, the same precision in interrogating, the same brevity in confession, so that he was able to solve very complex moral problems in a few minutes. The few words he said to excite sorrow were soul-piercing and indelible, and he was likewise prudent in suggesting remedies. Those who had the good fortune to confess to Don Bosco remembered ever after the fervor and efficacy of his counsels.

In 1880, almost forty years later, he still possessed the *Trattatelli* [short treatises] and his notebooks, an indication that despite his many activities, he had often reviewed these subjects so necessary for a priest. Whenever called upon to pronounce himself on very important and difficult cases, or on very intricate doubts of conscience, even in his last days he immediately grasped the point at issue and his solution was always along the principles set down by Father Cafasso. Father Michael Rua confirms that during his entire life Don Bosco continued to review moral theology with the serious-

<sup>1</sup> *Don Giuseppe Cafasso* del Can. Giacomo Colombero, Tipografia e Libreria Fratelli Canonica, Torino, 1895.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 44. [Editor]



ness that Father Cafasso would have required of his students. He used to repeat that any confessor who let a whole year go by without reviewing some treatise of moral theology, could not be excused from mortal sin. Thus Don Bosco became extremely well-versed in all the duties of the sacred ministry and was able to reach decisions and advise men and women in every walk of life with remarkable discernment. Furthermore, God had given him the gift of knowing the sins that penitents concealed through shame, as many have admitted.

Meanwhile, as he reviewed his priestly studies, Don Bosco continued to manifest his deep love for the beautiful virtue of chastity and his vigilance in preserving it immaculate. Until obliged by duty, he did not dare take up the two treatises *De Matrimonio* [On Matrimony] and *De Sexto* [On the Sixth Commandment], and when this became necessary, it deeply distressed him. Whenever he was obliged to discuss directly or indirectly those vices which were opposed to purity, he became visibly flushed and took pains to avoid discussions concerning such matters. If unavoidable, he quickly disposed of them with remarkable ease. When the teacher called upon him to enact the role of penitent, he always assumed that of a child, because of his repugnance for mentioning intimate subjects. Whenever a fellow student would question him on this point, his restraint was such as to elicit a similar reserve in his questioner. After giving a suitable answer, if a longer reply was needed, he would refer him to some pertinent books. This we heard several times from Father Giacomelli, his fellow student for a year.

Besides moral theology and homiletics, Don Bosco gave his time to church history, mostly at night. He had the endurance to read all of Orsi<sup>3</sup> and carefully consulted the Bollandists. This was a remote preparation for the many debates forced upon him in later years with Protestants. Of him one might deservedly repeat the eulogy carved upon Father Guala's tombstone: *Voluptatem in*

<sup>3</sup> Giuseppe Agostino Orsi (1692-1761) was a cardinal, theologian and ecclesiastical historian. His literary activities dealt especially with dogma, apologetics and church history. His chief work was his *Storia Ecclesiastica*. He authored the first 20 volumes whose narrative extends to the close of the 6th century. The work was brought to completion by others. A 42-volume edition was published in Venice in 1822, and one in 50 volumes, in Rome in 1838. It has been translated into foreign languages. [Editor]

*labore, vitam in vigilia posuit* [Work was his delight both day and night].

This continuous privation of sleep and rest, especially during the winter months, was also an instance of his persistent mortification. Instead of bracing himself somewhat at breakfast with a cup of coffee, he contented himself with a little plain bread, and very often not even this much. He fasted every Friday and often also on Saturdays. Although Mamma Margaret, his mother, would have been happy to bring him fruit and wine whenever she visited with him, he never asked her to do so; and if she did, he quickly shared it with his fellow students, cheerfully depriving himself of it, as he had previously done at the seminary. Father Maurice Tirone, pastor at Salassa Canavese [near Turin] wrote: "Two priests who were Don Bosco's fellow students at the *Convitto* told me more than once, that whenever an especially good soup was served either at dinner or supper, Don Bosco would add so much water to it that it tasted like dishwater. Still he would eat it with great relish. To the remarks of those close to him at table, he merely answered: 'It was too hot.' Much was hidden beneath those words: his complete control over his sense of taste, his love of penance, his humility that made him shun the admiration of others."

Bishop John Bertagna assures us that Don Bosco was esteemed for his diligence and progress in his studies, his remarkable piety and other virtues, both by his fellow students and his superiors. Father Guala and Father Cafasso held him dear also because of his prompt obedience that overcame all obstacles and brooked no delay.

The superiors of the *Convitto* saw to it that every day after dinner a considerable amount of food be distributed to the needy who would come in large numbers, confident of not being disappointed.

On fixed days, at an appointed time, alms were given to a crowd of beggars gathered in the sacristy. Often Father Guala and Father Cafasso, unable to take care of this personally, because of their other duties, entrusted this act of charity to Don Bosco. Thus in charge of the distribution, he gave these poor people the money he had received. This was not a pleasant task. It required much pa-

tience and firmness, especially in the beginning, to maintain order in that boisterous confusion, amid the insistence, the recriminations, the complaints and rudeness of not a few of them. On one occasion there occurred what could have led to an abuse, if not checked at the very start. Don Bosco was distributing alms to the poor who were standing in line. A beggarly woman who had already received her money took her place again at the end of the queue. Approaching Don Bosco, she held out her hand a second time.

"But I've already given you money, my good woman," Don Bosco told her.

"Oh, you *do* know, Father, that you gave me money! I thought the right hand did not know what the left hand was doing." [Cf. Matt. 6,3]

"You're right," Don Bosco answered, and for that once he gave her money a second time. This true incident has also been told of other charitable people, so that one may say, "Nothing is new under the sun." [Cf. Eccles. 1,10] It also shows Don Bosco's charity and admirable goodness of heart.

## CHAPTER 9

### *Festive Oratory at the Convitto*

IT is characteristic of God's works that from an insignificant beginning they attain a wonderful development, contrary to all expectations. This is so that we may more clearly perceive that they are inspired and sustained by the Creator. Such was also the case with Don Bosco, who prudently bided his time. He called his first undertaking *oratorio* [oratory], i.e. a place of prayer, because of its primary purpose, namely to teach boys to go to church and pray. Its objectives were the practice of religion and virtue, the boys' moral education and, consequently, the salvation of their souls; recreation, entertainment, singing and schooling, which followed in due time, were only the means.

During that first winter Don Bosco directed his efforts towards consolidating his small oratory. His main purpose was to gather only those boys who were in greater moral danger and in greater need of religious instruction, particularly those who had recently been released from prison; however, to foster discipline and morality, he also invited and brought in boys from good families, of good character and with some education. After some training, these boys began to assist him in keeping order among their companions. They read aloud and also led the singing of sacred hymns—activities which made these Sunday gatherings more fruitful and delightful.

From the very beginning, Don Bosco realized that without singing and the reading of wholesome and interesting books, the meetings would have been lifeless. By the feast of the Purification, February 2, 1842, he already had a choir of some twenty fine voices, raised in praise of the Mother of God, singing for the first time *Lodate Maria, o lingue fedeli* [Let praises to Mary . . .]. By the feast of the Annunciation [March 25], their number had passed

thirty, and the boys solemnized this day, dedicated to their heavenly Mother, by going to confession and receiving Communion in a body. Later that evening, they gathered in the chapel at the rear of the sacristy, since the little apse could no longer hold them all. A few weeks later they numbered fifty.

At that time the festive oratory was run as follows. On Sundays and holy days the boys were offered the opportunity to go to confession and Holy Communion. Once a month, on a specified Sunday, they all received the sacraments in a body. This cherished practice was always announced in advance by Don Bosco, who in few but heartfelt words encouraged all to go to confession and receive Holy Communion devoutly. Then, with admirable patience and kindness, he helped the boys to prepare. Father Guala and Father Cafasso were always willing to hear their confessions. Don Bosco mentally noted how often each boy went to confession, in order to stimulate, by more personal attention, those who were in greater need.

At a given time in the evening, the boys met in the above-mentioned chapel, where they sang hymns, listened to a little spiritual reading, had a catechism lesson and heard some edifying story by way of a sermon. Finally, Don Bosco gave each boy some small gift, or sometimes the boys drew lots for a prize. Meanwhile there had been a turnover among the boys attending the oratory because winter had come. All construction work had come to a halt and many of them had gone home. But with the coming of spring, they returned to Turin, and hurried back to Don Bosco. Outstanding among them was Charles Buzzetti, then only an apprentice mason, who later became a master builder. He returned to Turin and, for the first time, brought along his younger brother Joseph to learn the same trade.<sup>1</sup> This boy became so fond of Don Bosco and of the oratory, which he attended unfailingly in an exemplary manner, that the following winter he forwent the opportunity of returning to his home at Caronno Ghiringhello with his other brothers and friends.

<sup>1</sup> These two brothers remained very close to Don Bosco throughout their life. Charles Buzzetti, a contractor, was the one to whom Don Bosco entrusted the construction of Mary Help of Christians Church and many other buildings. Joseph, his brother, became a Salesian coadjutor. [Editor]

Both Father Guala and Father Cafasso were delighted by these gatherings of boys, whose numbers increased each Sunday. Don Bosco had remarked to Father Cafasso that to encourage the boys to attend the Sunday gatherings little gifts were needed, but means were not available. Father Cafasso answered promptly: "Don't worry; I'll take care of that." In fact, from time to time he and Father Guala supplied him with prizes, such as pamphlets, books, medals and crucifixes. Sometimes they gave him cloth material for the most needy boys, whom they also provided with food for weeks until they could earn their own living. Frequently after catechism class, Father Cafasso would distribute groceries to all the boys in the *Convitto's* refectory. He also rewarded the more assiduous with jackets, waistcoats, shoes, sabots, shirts and other articles of clothing, as needed. He even gave Don Bosco money for lottery prizes.

Not accustomed to handling money, especially in larger denominations, Don Bosco was not yet very familiar with its value. Certainly it never dawned on him that in his lifetime he would have to handle enormous sums of domestic and foreign currency in every denomination. One day somebody gave him a gold coin. Believing that it was worth 20 lire, he entered a store and purchased a *marengo's*<sup>2</sup> worth of merchandise. When he paid for it, the storekeeper quietly handed him back nine lire. "Why so much change?" inquired Don Bosco. "Wasn't that a *marengo* I gave you?"

"No," replied the storekeeper, "it was a coin worth 28½ lire."

On those occasions when all the boys received the sacraments in a body, Father Guala and Father Cafasso would visit them and regale them with stories, for which the boys were most eager. Whenever Don Bosco was obliged to absent himself, they would have one of the *Convitto* students substitute for him and they themselves would conduct the catechism lesson.

Helpful and kind as these two priests always were, Don Bosco still was the soul of the oratory, the incomparable friend and most tender father of these boys. He had an innate disposition for handling abandoned boys. His amiable manner in dealing with them was the exact opposite of the severity then in vogue. He gave of

<sup>2</sup> The *marengo* was a gold coin used in Italy up to the 19th century and approximately equivalent to the contemporary American dollar. [Editor]

his time to his boys, not only on Sundays and holy days, but even on weekdays. He would sacrifice for them the time reserved for a daily walk, or some other period with the rector's approval. He went everywhere—into the public squares, through the streets and even into the workshops—to invite the youthful workers to the oratory. On Sundays, these boys, left all to themselves, were wont to fritter away their meager wages on amusements and sweets. Don Bosco knew from experience that this could become the source of much evil and cause even the good to stray and become dangerous to others. He particularly sought youngsters who, coming from afar, did not know what church to go to and had no friends. Whenever he found out that one of his boys was unemployed or was working under a harsh master, he quickly set about finding either a different occupation for him or a better employer. Not content with this, he went about almost daily to visit them in stores, factories or at construction sites. He always had a kind word, a question, a sign of affection or a small gift for them, leaving them all filled with unutterable joy. "At last there's someone who cares for us!" the boys exclaimed.

Their employers also welcomed the good priest's visits. They were happy to give work to apprentices who were attended to in a fatherly manner on Sundays and weekdays, and whose religious training made them ever more punctual and faithful in their work. The boys, on their part, grew to love Don Bosco so much that a mere meeting with him was always an occasion for joy, and they hailed him with enthusiastic salutations.

One day, near City Hall, Don Bosco met one of them. The boy had been shopping, and, besides other provisions, he was holding a jar filled with vinegar and a bottle of olive oil. At the sight of Don Bosco the young boy jumped with joy and called out: "*Viva Don Bosco*" [Long live Don Bosco].

Laughing, Don Bosco asked: "Can you do what I am doing?" and clapped his hands.

Overcome with joy, the boy put the bottle under his arm and clapped his hands, as again he shouted: "*Viva Don Bosco*." Naturally, as he did so, both jar and bottle fell to the ground in pieces. Stunned, he began to whimper that his mother would beat him when he got home.

"Don't worry," Don Bosco said to him. "We'll do something about this right away. Come with me." And he took him, still crying, into a store, told the proprietress the story, and asked her to replace the lost oil and vinegar.

"Gladly," the lady said: "and who are you, Father?"

"I am Don Bosco," he replied.

The lady filled the order and gave it to the boy. When Don Bosco asked her how much he owed, she replied, "Twenty-two *soldi*, but it's taken care of."

No less attached to him were the boys he had trained to teach catechism. Since they were attending school, he would show his appreciation for their help by coaching them in their subjects, explaining the more difficult passages of the Latin authors, and correcting their assignments to help them understand their mistakes. Like the young laborers, they hurried to spend their little leisure time with him also during the week. More than once, they brought along members of their families, and thus Don Bosco's beneficent influence extended far beyond the walls of the *Convitto*.

It so happened that a family, the Vernianos, through their son, Emil, became acquainted with Don Bosco. The father, the son, or the daughters, accompanied by their mother, would call on him on Thursdays<sup>3</sup> at the *Convitto*. There were eight children in the family, and all were very eager to see Don Bosco. He, however, was rather uneasy on account of the girls' somewhat scanty dress. Two of the girls, barely ten and twelve respectively, could be excused, but not so their elder sisters who were past eighteen. Since they were simply following the fashion of the day, and neither they nor their parents saw anything wrong in it, Don Bosco chose to wait for the right moment, rather than give advice that might savor of reproach. One day the whole family came to visit him. As he spoke, one of the smaller girls stood before him, mouth open, listening.

Suddenly Don Bosco turned to her and said, "I'd like to ask you something."

"Oh, please do," she replied joyfully.

"Tell me, don't you care for your arms?"

"Of course I do," answered the little girl.

"I'm afraid you don't."

<sup>3</sup> Thursdays were visiting days. [Editor]



"Quite the contrary," interjected the mother. "If only you knew how often I have to scold her for being so vain. She is forever washing them, and she perfumes them besides."

"And yet," Don Bosco continued, addressing the little girl, "I still say that you don't care for them."

"But why? How could that be?"

"I hope and pray that when you die you'll go to heaven. But I'm sure these arms of yours will be cast into the fire to burn. This is what I mean when I tell you that you don't care for them."

"But I've done nothing wrong. I don't want to go to hell!"

"Well, it might not be that bad, but it will be purgatory, to say the least, and who knows for how long!"

"Oh, then that's for me, too," one of the older girls exclaimed, blushing; "my neck is all uncovered!"

"Well, the flames will leap up and encircle it."

"I get the point," the mother said. "It's my duty to correct all this. Thank you, Father, for your warning."

Prudence and modesty shine forth in this admonition. Don Bosco was still the same, but now, as a priest, he did not shy from conversing with girls and women.<sup>4</sup> St. Paul wrote: "I became all things to all men, that I might save all." (1 Cor. 9,22) Consequently Don Bosco will also consider girls the object of his priestly concern, for they too are God's children, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. However, we shall always admire his extreme reserve, both in manner and speech, in dealing with them.

Don Bosco's contacts were not limited to the families of the boys attending the oratory; they began to include prominent people, as well as priests, both secular and regular. Even with them Don Bosco had the courage to speak his mind in the manner and at the time he deemed opportune.

Among his visitors at the *Convitto* were several priests of an illustrious religious order. One of them frequently had something to say about a learned and saintly priest, a friend of Don Bosco. Counselling to enter that particular order, this friend had been invited to take a kind of entrance examination, but having failed to make the grade, was not admitted to the novitiate. This led the visitor to speak of this other priest as ignorant and lacking in judg-

<sup>4</sup> See Vol. I, pp. 79, 149, 269, 359. [Editor]

ment and to brand him as such whenever he mentioned him to Don Bosco. He also spoke of other priests in the same uncomplimentary vein. On a number of occasions Don Bosco remained silent, but at last he was unable to endure the shallowness of the criticism any longer and somewhat indignantly retorted: "Members of your own order invited him to take the examination; it is to be assumed that in their opinion he had the necessary qualifications. That the results indicated otherwise is no credit to their discernment." Mortified, the critic was struck speechless and never again brought up the subject.

When narrating these and similar incidents, Don Bosco made no secret of the painful impression he received when hearing such censorious remarks. He exhorted his listeners never to speak evil of anyone, least of all members of the clergy, whether secular or regular. He considered this totally incompatible with charity, and responsible for a very bad impression left on persons endowed with at least a minimum of good judgment.

## CHAPTER 10

### *Prison Apostolate*

AT the *Convitto*, as previously in high school and at the seminary in Chieri, Don Bosco retained that delightful sense of humor which made him the life of any conversation in which he took part. He was always ready with something new to keep his fellow students amused, all the while maintaining a calm and smiling countenance in the midst of jokes and pranks, avoiding any impropriety or immoderate outburst of laughter. We shall now relate a little incident which will further demonstrate how closely piety and apostolic zeal can go hand in hand with gaiety. Even the grave, stern Father Guala and Father Cafasso, enjoyed these delightful hours of recreation.

At the *Convitto* there was a certain Father C., of a jovial and somewhat odd disposition, who used to keep everyone in high spirits, occasionally at his own expense. From a Jew he had purchased an overcoat which was a classic in age and style, and which, for its antiquity, had become so proverbial among his fellow students that he no longer dared to wear it. One day Don Bosco smuggled the overcoat into the study hall. At study time, Father C. went to his desk and when he sat down, he felt a bulky parcel beneath him. "What's this doing here?" he exclaimed, and hurled it into the middle of the aisle. Then, taking a closer look at it, he recognized his ancient overcoat. At first he was annoyed. Then, getting into the spirit of the prank, he picked it up and carried it out.

Another time Don Bosco played the same practical joke in the dining room, after which Father C. was rather peeved. He locked the overcoat in his trunk and shipped it home in great secrecy, with instructions that it be kept under lock and key. But his instructions were not followed.

When carnival time came,<sup>1</sup> Don Bosco began to do some juggling as a diversion. One evening, he and Father Fava, a fellow priest, decided to get another laugh out of Father C.'s notorious garment.

"Well, shall we have a little fun?" Father Fava inquired aloud at recreation.

"Yes, we can stand some diversion," answered Father Guala and Father Cafasso, who were party to the scheme.

"Show us some new trick," suggested Father Fava.

"What kind?" inquired Don Bosco.

Many suggestions were offered, while Don Bosco listened with a straight face. He checked the clamor by saying: "Name something, and I'll make it appear before you on the table."

All kinds of ridiculous things were suggested. One wanted a cat, another a live sparrow, a third some eggs, a fourth a roasted chicken. Above the tumult rose the voice of Father Fava: "Make Father C.'s overcoat appear!"

This request was hailed with lively applause, and all the others were forgotten. Don Bosco tried to excuse himself, saying that it was impossible, but Father C. immediately shouted: "Yes, go ahead! I dare you. I left my overcoat at home under lock and key. No one can get at it."

Then, accepting the challenge, Don Bosco called for a magic wand. He then tied a towel around his waist, sang, and muttered some mysterious words. All laughed until their sides hurt. But Don Bosco, as though discouraged, declared he could not do it. Pressed by his audience, he repeated his cabalistic signs, and suddenly exclaimed: "Silence! The overcoat is now in Constantinople, but I'll make it come here." The laughter grew as Don Bosco requested his audience to repeat with him some mumbo jumbo.

He then asked that a small table belonging to one of the students be brought into the room. He opened the drawer and invited all present to see for themselves that it was empty. He closed it and opened it again for all to see again that it held nothing. Then locking it, he handed the key to Father Guala and instructed him to hold it in full view of all, pointing it toward Don Bosco. "Go on, go on," Father C. teased, with a complacent smile on his lips.

<sup>1</sup> The period of merrymaking extended from the feast of the Epiphany to Ash Wednesday, and reached its peak on the last three days before Lent. [Editor]

Don Bosco then assumed an inspired expression and slowly waved his wand through the air, uttering more gibberish, and concluding with: "It's done!" With that he gave the key to Father C., who scarcely resting his eyes upon it, exclaimed, dumbfounded: "This is the key to my trunk!" He opened the drawer and, lo and behold, the ancient overcoat was displayed to the gaze of all. The amazement and amusement of all present was immense. As Father C. stood gaping, Father Cafasso suggested: "For heaven's sake, let's go out, before we all die of laughter."

Gladness of heart is the very life of man, and a rich treasure of sanctity. (Cf. Sir. 30, 22) Still more cherished by Don Bosco were other recreations passed in the company of Father Cafasso. What follows was written by Don Bosco himself.

Every day, meals were followed by a period of recreation. This was the time when Father Cafasso again became a teacher, and his pupils absorbed lessons of proper deportment in society. Here they learned how to live in the world without becoming its slaves; how to become worthy priests, endowed with all the virtues necessary to God's ministers for rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God that which is God's. Here also Father Cafasso would describe the conversions he had witnessed in hospitals, prisons and elsewhere, to the enjoyment and benefit of the students. Whenever he was absent, his pupils delighted in recounting many incidents about their beloved teacher. Among the many episodes at which I was present, I choose one both humorous and unusual.

Father Cafasso had spent a whole week instructing and encouraging forty-five notorious criminals in a large cell, in preparation for a feast of the Virgin Mary. Almost all of them had promised to go to confession on the eve of the feast day. But when the day arrived, no one had the courage to be the first one, whether because of human respect, the guile of the devil or for some other reason.

Father Cafasso renewed his request, briefly recalling the instructions of the preceding days and reminding them of their promise, but in vain. What was he to do?

Supernatural love is ingenious, and Father Cafasso found a solution. Laughingly he approached one of them, the tallest and strongest among them. Without uttering a word, he grabbed the man's long, thick beard in his frail hands. At first the prisoner thought that Father Cafasso was

jesting, so he only said, with as much courtesy as one might expect from one of his kind, "Take all of me, but leave me my beard."

"I'm not letting go of you until you come to confession."

"But I'm not coming."

"Then I won't let go of you."

"I don't want to go to confession."

"Talk all you want, you're not going to get away from me. I won't let go of you, until you've made your confession."

"I'm not prepared."

"I'll help you."

The convict could very easily have shaken off Father Cafasso's hold, but either because of respect for him, or better yet, because of God's grace, it is a fact that the convict yielded and allowed Father Cafasso to lead him to a corner of the large cell. The priest sat down on a straw mattress and prepared him for confession. Surprisingly, in a few moments, the convict was deeply moved, and amid tears and sighs, was just barely able to finish the recitation of his sins.

Then something wonderful took place. This man who previously had refused, amid blasphemies, to go to confession, began to tell his fellow inmates that never in his life had he been as happy as right then. He was so enthused that he talked them all into making their confession.

Whether one wishes to interpret this incident, one from among many, as a miracle of God's grace, or as a miracle of Father Cafasso's charity, he cannot but see in it the hand of God.

I have to add that Father Cafasso did not finish hearing the convicts until late that night, when the gates of the prison had already been barred and bolted, and he faced the prospect of spending the night with the inmates. But then came the guards for their inspection, carrying lanterns at the end of long iron rods, and armed with rifles, pistols and swords. While they were checking the walls and the pavement for possible escape attempts, they noticed a stranger among the convicts. "Who goes there?" they shouted, and without waiting for an answer, they surrounded Father Cafasso. "What are you doing here?" they asked. "Who are you?" Father Cafasso tried to speak, but the guards drowned his voice, shouting, "Stand still; don't move! Tell us who you are."

"I am Father Cafasso."

"Father Cafasso? . . . What? At this hour! Why didn't you leave earlier? We can't get you out of the prison without making a report to the warden."

"I don't mind. Make your report to whom you like. But you had better think it over, because you should have been here sooner, before

nightfall, to check that all visitors had left the prison precincts. That was your duty and you are at fault!"

They were silent for a moment, and then they begged Father Cafasso to keep the matter quiet. They not only opened the gates for him, but to gain his goodwill, they even accompanied him home.

At that time there were four prisons in Turin: one in *The Towers* near Porta Palazzo, a second in *Via San Domenico* in a building which later housed the *Casa Benefica* [House of Charity], a third in the *Correctionel* near Holy Martyrs Church, and a fourth in the basement of the Senate building. Father Cafasso served them all; but he took particular care of the last one mentioned.

The regulations of the prisons had been rewritten, to conform to religious principles, by order of Charles Albert in 1839. On Sundays and holy days there was to be Mass, sermon and one hour of catechism. Furthermore, chaplains were enjoined to visit the prisoners every Wednesday and Thursday, and to give them daily catechetical instruction during Lent.

To help the chaplains prepare the inmates for their Easter duty, Father Cafasso used to send over some of his students three times a week. One of the *Convitto's* domestics carried a basket with packages of tobacco and cigars for them. At the prison gate, these were apportioned to the *Convitto* students to be given as gifts to their none-too-amiable pupils.

At first Don Bosco was reluctant to undertake such an assignment. The damp, unhealthy corridors, the wretched appearance of the convicts and the thought of finding himself in the midst of men guilty of horrible crimes, even with blood on their consciences, upset him. He overcame this aversion by reminding himself what the Divine Judge would say at the last judgment: "I was in prison and you came to me." (Matt. 25, 36) So he began teaching catechism to the group assigned to him. The beginnings were far from encouraging. Some laughed, some asked questions which were out of order, some chatted in an undertone, others yawned noisily. Don Bosco was undaunted by this lack of cooperation and treated all with the utmost patience, charity and meekness. His informal way of speaking, warm cordiality, and lively manner of teaching

won the affection of these unfortunate men, so much so that they soon began to look forward to his visits. By constant word and endeavor, he succeeded in winning the confidence of many, and in leading them back to a Christian life. Having learned from Father Cafasso, Don Bosco was successful even in his first visits, in arousing their trust in God's mercy, as many witnesses later attested.

But it was the plight of poor adolescents that pained Don Bosco's sensitive heart. Society had judged them as dangerous individuals and, without knowing what else to do, had put them behind bars with hardened criminals. They were paying the penalty for offenses that were beyond their age. He noticed that the number of these unfortunate boys was increasing every day. Many, after serving a term, returned in a few days, guilty of new offenses. To his dismay he observed that this often happened even to many who, because of the horror and the suffering endured there, had left fully resolved to lead a better life. Furthermore, in prison many learned more subtle ways to commit crime, and when discharged, were worse than when they had entered.

And yet, among them were not a few who were fundamentally good, and capable of bringing happiness to their families. Unfortunately, depressed and embittered by harsh treatment and bad food (prison conditions were much worse than today), they had become inwardly rebellious. Surly and bitter, they yielded only to force.

Don Bosco would approach them, with words of kindness, faith, and cheerfulness. He roused them out of their gloom with interesting tales; he soothed their fierce disposition; he put in a good word for them with their guards. By his devoted and amiable zeal, he gained sway over them and exercised an irresistible fascination. It was a case of mutual attraction. "Little by little," he wrote, "I instilled in them self respect, and made them understand the reasonableness of earning one's daily bread by honest toil and not by thievery. No sooner had I made some religious and moral principle clear to them than their hearts filled with an inexplicable joy that prompted them to mend their ways. In fact, not a few reformed while still in prison, and others, after their release, so conducted themselves as not to return there again."

After his catechism lessons, Don Bosco would emerge from these grim walls deeply moved and with an ever stronger resolve to dedi-



cate himself entirely, at whatever cost, to alleviating the pains and sufferings of poor and abandoned youths. Whenever one of these young unfortunates was released from prison, Don Bosco found ways and means of helping him. If the lad lived far from the oratory and Don Bosco deemed it imprudent to receive him among his other pupils, he would entrust him to the care of some charitable and responsible layman, who would care for him and see that the youth attended Mass on Sunday and holy days. Moreover, Don Bosco never failed to inquire about their conduct, visit them, encourage and assist them. Already at that time, he fully understood how difficult it would be to rehabilitate some of them after years of lawlessness. He realized that the sole means of protecting them from evil was to shelter them in some institution, where they could be given a religious education away from the dangers they would not be able to overcome by themselves. But how could that be done?

In his visits to the convicts, Don Bosco learned many precious lessons for the successful education of the young. He grew more and more convinced that it was essential to treat these unfortunates, as well as all young people, with great charity if any good result was to be obtained. He was later to insist upon this point with all his co-workers, assuring them that even a rough and rebellious boy easily yields to amendment when he finds himself treated with loving kindness. He understood ever more clearly the causes that led so many unfortunate youths to those unhappy places of detention. With tears in his eyes he would confide to his boys what many of the convicts, especially the younger ones, had told him: namely that they had been led astray by bad companions, or by their parents' neglect, particularly of their religious training. He would illustrate his statements with moving episodes that had taken place during his priestly ministry in the prisons. This explains why he always stressed the importance of avoiding bad companions, and the necessity of instructing the young in their religion. He also insisted that parents give good example to their children to keep them on the path of salvation.

Lent was now drawing to a close and the catechists redoubled their efforts to prepare the convicts for their Easter duty. Father Cafasso and several other priests attended to the confessions. That year, Easter fell on March 29th. After Mass and the general Holy

Communion, Father Cafasso came, as was his custom, to congratulate the prisoners. As soon as the gates were opened there was a veritable ovation. "Long live Father Cafasso!" they shouted on all sides. "Long live our benefactor! Long live our father!" When the uproar subsided, he made them line up and, with a smile on his lips, he distributed to each two rolls of fine white bread, which was cake to them, and some fruit.

These gifts he would give four times a year on the greater religious feast days. At such times he would ask them to say a Hail Mary for him that he too could save his soul. He would close the joyous occasion by amusing them with some humorous tale and several jokes which they greatly enjoyed. Many of the prisoners were wont to beg him for a little tobacco, shirts, underwear, trousers, a little money, etc., and Father Cafasso satisfied these requests immediately or the day following. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, he visited the prison in the dungeons of the Senate building where he distributed alms (never less than two lire each) and, through the warden, provided soup and other comforts for sick inmates. Sometimes he left small sums of money for their families. He continued this work until laws were passed forbidding it. Furthermore, this saintly priest obtained from Charles Albert a pardon for many of these hapless inmates.

In this holy apostolate and heroic work of mercy Father Cafasso chose Don Bosco as his companion. He also entrusted him with special catechism classes several times during the course of the year, as Father [Michael] Rua, Father [John] Bonetti, [Brother Peter] Enria and many other former pupils at the Oratory have told us. Thus was Don Bosco trained to perform the most noble tasks of the priestly ministry, tasks which filled his heart with joy.

## CHAPTER 11

### *Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*

A FEW months after Don Bosco's admission to the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, Father Cinzano, the pastor of Castelnuovo, met Father Cafasso and asked him whether he had noted anything unusual about Don Bosco's preaching. Father Cafasso replied that he knew Don Bosco to be an excellent priest, but, as yet, had had no opportunity to evaluate him as a preacher. Father Cinzano then said to him, "Have him preach a Lenten sermon or a novena on very short notice, and you will find out." It just happened that a priest was needed to preach a novena at the *Ospizio di Carità* [Charity Hospice], and Father Cafasso, on the very eve of the novena, asked Don Bosco to undertake the task. He obliged.

When the two priests met again, Father Cinzano asked Father Cafasso, "Well, did you try Don Bosco? Did I exaggerate his talents for preaching?"

Father Cafasso answered, "Yes, I did try him out without previous notice; I asked him to preach a novena at the *Ospizio di Carità*. I have just come back from listening to his sermon. I asked him if he still had enough subject matter to continue the novena, and he said yes."

And so Don Bosco went on with his novena sermons to the great amazement of Father Cafasso and all the other priests who knew that all those sermons had been improvised, since he had been cornered into accepting that task at short notice. This is what Father Cinzano narrated to us. The special grace that Don Bosco had asked of Our Lord, namely, that wherever he might preach, his word might be efficacious, had been abundantly granted to him.

Against the day when he might need them, Don Bosco had written a number of sermons on the Blessed Virgin and the Saints, but not, as yet, on doctrinal or moral subjects. Therefore, not to be

taken unprepared, and to have his words carry greater spiritual benefit, he began that year, 1842, to prepare a series of such sermons. We have the following manuscripts, jealously preserved, with the date on which they were finished:

*Introduction to the Spiritual Retreat* (April 2, 1842)

*Mortal Sin* (April 17, 1842)

*The Death of a Sinner* (July 1, 1842)

*Death, the End of Time and the Beginning of Eternity* (July 17, 1842)

*The Mercy of God* (July 20, 1842)

*The Two Banners* (July 23, 1842)

*Institution of the Holy Eucharist* (August 12, 1842)

*On Frequent Communion* (August 22, 1842)

Many of his other sermons are extant, but their date is uncertain. We do, however, have one more written in 1842. It is on the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin [to St. Elizabeth]: a marginal note reads *June 9, 1842, Retreat for Orphan Girls*.

Since we mentioned the Blessed Virgin, we should add that preaching on Our Lady was one of Don Bosco's greatest delights. We ourselves heard this introduction of a sermon on the holy rosary: "If it were granted to me this day to contemplate heavenly things and appear before the Blessed Virgin's throne, how I would love to describe to you, my brethren, Her immaculate holiness, Her beauty, Her great merits and mercy, Her dignity as the Mother of God. . . . Unfortunately I am as yet only a pilgrim, far away from my heavenly home and our beloved Mother. . . . Yet our faith comes to our aid, and full of this faith I shall speak of Mary, who is all compassion, all benignity toward us. . . ." Such words on his lips captivated his audience, and made all hearts throb with tender devotion for our heavenly Queen.

He would talk about Her not only in the pulpit but throughout the entire day. With a heart full of love for the Queen of heaven and earth, and a mind overflowing with an inexhaustible store of themes exalting Mary's power, glory and maternal goodness, he never failed in his resolution to recount each day some episode, grace, or miracle performed through Her most powerful intercession. All the more so, because during the 19th century, Her miracles and various apparitions made people aware of Her protection of the

Church and the faithful. He was never without listeners, for either they came to him or he sought them out, so as to be able to carry out his resolution.

He dearly loved the Immaculate Conception in which he firmly believed, although the Church was yet to proclaim it a dogma of faith. He secured and distributed a great number of medals, called miraculous, so that the faithful could wear them. One side of the medal portrays Mary standing on a globe, crushing the serpent beneath Her feet. From Her outstretched hands, rays of light descend upon the earth as symbols of graces and blessings. An inscription around Her image reads: "Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee." On the reverse, there is the letter "M" in the center, with a cross above; the lower half has two hearts, the heart of Jesus, encircled by a crown of thorns, and the heart of Mary, pierced by a sword. Twelve stars crown the whole design. This medal, a symbol of divine protection and a means of making known Our Lady's newest title, had been a gift from heaven.

During the night of July 18, 1830, Catherine Labouré, a Sister of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, was sleeping in one of the novitiate dormitories in Paris. As the clock struck half past eleven, the novice heard her name called three times: "Sister Labouré!" She woke up, and drew back the curtain around her bed on the side from which she heard the voice. To her amazement she saw a Child four or five years old, clothed in linen of purest white; rays of light emanated from His blonde hair and His whole person, and illuminated the surrounding area.

With a sweet and melodious voice He beckoned: "Come, come into the chapel. The Blessed Virgin awaits you."

Ecstatic, but hesitant, the novice thought: "Arise? Leave the dormitory? Surely someone will see me."

The lovely Child answered her unspoken thoughts. "Do not be afraid. It is half past eleven and all are asleep. I shall escort you."

At these words, Sister Labouré dressed hurriedly and followed the Child, who, aglow with light, walked at her left. The lamps along the corridors lit up as He passed. The young novice's wonder and amazement grew when she reached the chapel door, always

firmly locked at this hour. It opened wide at the light touch of her Guide's finger. The chapel was ablaze with lights as it had been for the Christmas midnight Mass. She walked to the altar rail and knelt down; the Child entered the sanctuary and remained standing on her left. Those minutes of waiting seemed endless to Sister Catherine.

Finally, when it was almost midnight, her heavenly Guide exclaimed: "Here is the Blessed Virgin, behold Her."

The novice distinctly heard a very slight rustle, as of the folds of a silken robe, coming from the right side of the chapel. A Lady of incomparable beauty, clothed in a creamy white garment and a sky blue veil, came and sat in the sanctuary on the altar's left. Sister Labouré, perplexed, and swayed by interior doubts, knelt motionless. The Child then firmly and severely reproached her, asking why the Queen of Heaven could not take on whatever appearance She wished, in making Herself visible to a humble creature. The novice's doubts vanished. Following her heart's impulse, she flung herself at Mary's feet and familiarly rested her clasped hands on the Virgin's knees as she would have done with her own mother. Indescribable love filled the young novice's heart. The Blessed Virgin then told her how she was to bear the afflictions then besetting her. Pointing with Her left hand to the foot of the altar, She directed her to go there to unburden her heart, for from there she would receive all the consolation she needed.

Then, with tears in Her eyes, and with evident signs of grief, She predicted detailed events of the new French revolution up to 1871: the many calamities that would befall the world, the insults that would be directed against Our Lord Jesus Christ, and the graces, great and small, that would be bestowed on those who implored them. After assuring the novice that people of faith would acknowledge Her visit and God's protection, Our Lady entrusted her with the mission of having a medal stamped according to a design to be given to her in a second apparition. She requested that it be made known, through ecclesiastical authorities, to the entire world, promising special graces to those who would wear such a medal.

After this conversation with the novice, the Blessed Virgin dis-

appeared. Almost beside herself with sublime sentiments, Catherine rose to her feet. The heavenly Child said to her: "She is gone." Once more walking to her left and emanating rays of light along the way, He escorted her back to the dormitory and then disappeared. Sister Catherine was still standing by her bed when the clock struck two.

The fulfillment of Our Lady's predictions, the rapid distribution of millions of miraculous medals throughout the world, the innumerable miracles and conversions of hardened sinners, and the sanction of the Holy See confirmed the truth of Mary's apparition, which, in a way, was the first proclamation of Her Immaculate Conception.

The report of this event and the wonders that followed it were spreading throughout the Catholic world, when, in 1842, a new extraordinary apparition corroborated the first. Don Bosco recounted it to his boys at the oratory to encourage them in their filial devotion to Mary. In his first *Compendio di Storia Ecclesiastica* [Compendium of Church History] he described this new apparition as follows:

Alphonse Ratisbon, the scion of one of the wealthiest Jewish families in Strasbourg, hated the Catholic Church bitterly, mainly because his brother Theodore had become a Catholic and a priest. On a pleasure trip to Rome, he made the acquaintance of Baron de Bussieres, a Catholic convert from Protestantism. After insisting in vain that Alphonse open his eyes to the truth, the baron succeeded in having him accept at least a medal of the Immaculate Conception. Out of curiosity, Alphonse allowed the baron to hang it around his neck, while [inwardly] laughing at the baron's [conversion] attempts. The following day, they went out for a walk and a visit to a church. Since the baron had some business at the adjacent monastery, he asked Alphonse to wait for him in the church for a few minutes. When the baron returned and looked for him, he found him in the side chapel of the Guardian Angel, on his knees, motionless and in tears. He shook him gently several times. At last, as though awakening from a deep sleep, and still overcome by tears, Alphonse drew out the medal of the Virgin, kissed it tenderly, pressed it against his breast and exclaimed: "I saw her! I saw her."

He then asked to see a priest, expressed his earnest desire to be bap-

tized, and, in the presence of several others, described what had happened.

"I was alone in the church. Suddenly I began to feel an indescribable agitation. I looked up and the whole building had disappeared, while this chapel became brilliantly lighted. Here I saw the Blessed Virgin standing on the altar as She is portrayed on this medal, in the midst of all this radiant light, full of grace and majesty. She made a sign with Her hand that I was to kneel down. I felt an irresistible force draw me to Her and I seemed to hear Her say to me: "Good, good!" She did not speak, but I understood Her. For an instant I saw the immaculate beauty of Her face. Three times I tried to look at Her again, but could raise my eyes no higher than Her blessed hands, from which streaked vivid rays of grace. Then She disappeared."

In these brief moments Alphonse Ratisbon was infused with knowledge of Catholic truths of faith. Two weeks later, on January 13, 1842, he was baptized. He then became a priest and founded the Congregation of the Ladies of Sion. He lived and died in the odor of sanctity. The Holy Father ordered a canonical investigation of this event. The findings proved that this was a true and outstanding miracle. His conversion was instantaneous and perfect, as St. Paul's had been, a greater wonder than restoring life to the dead."

While, through these extraordinary happenings, devotion to Mary Immaculate was spreading ever more in Piedmont, another religious event was kindling anew the love of Jesus and His Sacred Passion. On April 21, 1842, on the occasion of the wedding of the Crown Prince Victor Emmanuel to Marie Adelaide of Lorraine, archduchess of Austria, the Holy Shroud was displayed for the veneration of the faithful from the balcony of *Palazzo Madama*.<sup>1</sup> The immense square and adjacent streets were crowded with people of every class and age, who had eagerly come from all parts of Piedmont to manifest their faith in and veneration of the holy relic, on which are imprinted the Divine Face and the wounds of the hands, feet and side of Our Savior. Among those present were Don Bosco and his boys from the oratory.

<sup>1</sup> This palace was built at the close of the 13th century on the Roman east gate of Turin. The remains of the gate towers were incorporated in the palace. [Editor]



Don Bosco had a tender devotion to the sufferings of Our Savior and of His Mother, and he availed himself of this moving demonstration to arouse in his boys an implacable hatred of sin as well as an ardent love for Jesus their Redeemer. This he always did whenever he had an opportunity to speak of our Lord's passion and of the sorrows of His Blessed Mother.

## CHAPTER 12

### *St. Ignatius Retreat House*

ON April 30 [1842], the city of Turin suffered a great loss in the saintly death of Canon Joseph Benedict Cottolengo,<sup>1</sup> a man raised up by God to bring relief to all sorts of human infirmities and miseries.

A few years earlier this great servant of God had paid a visit to Charles Albert at the royal palace. As they were conversing near a window overlooking the square below, the sovereign expressed some fear regarding the future of the *Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza* [The Little House of Divine Providence]. “Dear Canon,” he said, “may the good Lord spare you a long time. But have you given thought to your successor? If you were to die, what would become of your institute?”

“Oh, Your Majesty,” replied Canon Cottolengo, “do you doubt Divine Providence? Do you see the changing of the guard at the gate below? A soldier whispers a word in the ear of his comrade. He comes to stand at attention with his arquebus on his shoulder, while the other leaves and, without drawing any attention, the guard is maintained, and commendably does its duty. So will it be with my institute. I am a nobody. Whenever Divine Providence wills it, another will be sent to mount guard and relieve me of my post.”

The day Cottolengo had so often foretold and desired—when he would terminate his guard duty and go to heaven—had come. Canon [Louis] Anglesio succeeded him in mounting guard over the *Piccola Casa*, which, even as its holy founder had predicted, he extended as far as the Dora River.

It is superfluous for us to eulogize a man who soon may be canonized<sup>2</sup> and whose saintliness is known to all. Nevertheless, I

<sup>1</sup> See footnote on p. 51. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> Canon Joseph Benedict Cottolengo was canonized in 1939. His feast is kept on April 29. [Editor]

must not keep silent about a few words he uttered shortly before his death. On the third Sunday after Easter, after preaching on the desire for heaven in the *Suffragio* Monastery, he took a few steps to return to the sacristy, turned back and, standing by the altar, begged the congregation to pray for King Charles Albert and the entire royal family. Then, like a man who probes the future and, having grasped its import, prays that it come not to pass, lifting his arms and eyes to heaven and yielding to profound grief he cried out, "As long as we have Charles Albert! . . ." and said no more. What message was the servant of God trying to convey?

At that time Piedmont was one of the most Catholic kingdoms of the world in its legislation. From time to time, however, the liberals advanced new and spurious claims of the State against the Church, which, always a mother, now and then yielded on certain points of discipline to avoid greater evils.

In view of military conscription, the government had imposed certain limitations on the acceptance of novices by religious communities. But is it not proper that the best fruits of God's creatures be offered to Him for His service? Was it not He who chose them and called them? Did not Pope St. Gregory abrogate, as contrary to God's law, the decree of Emperor Maurice, which banned soldiers from the monastic life?

Though these limitations at first glance did not appear to harm vocations to any appreciable degree, they did offer civil authorities a new channel for intrusion into ecclesiastical affairs.

It was therefore decreed by the government, with the consent of the Holy See, that before accepting novices who were subject to military conscription, superiors of religious orders should first obtain the consent of the ordinary. Young men in their twentieth year could not be accepted. Every year, bishops were to send to the Army or Navy Department a list of those who had been admitted to the novitiates. Superiors were also forbidden to send novices still subject to conscription out of the country, and were obliged to report to the bishop the names of those who had left religious life.

Lastly, to win exemption from military service, every novice had to file an application to enter religious life prior to the drawing of his conscription number, and was not permitted to leave the country without first posting the prescribed bond. These directives were

communicated to the faithful by Archbishop Frasoni in a circular letter dated July 9, and November 15, 1842; but, with his profound knowledge of men he detected in this first clash the seeds of other, far more serious controversies.

It was at this time that Count Camillo [Benso] di Cavour [1810-1861] founded the *Associazione Agraria* [Agrarian Association]. Its avowed purpose was the welfare of both town and country folk. Ostensibly, it had three moral objectives: the reconstruction of society with special attention to farmers; the promotion of great undertakings by merging forces; the fostering of fraternal ties between cities and provinces through congresses. The secret political objective was the education of citizens in public discussion, a preliminary experiment for a parliamentary system of government.<sup>3</sup> The association soon numbered 4,000 members, with Charles Albert at the head of the list. The association had its own library, an official publication and its own public and private meetings. The king appointed the Marquis Caesar Alfieri di Sostegno as its president. This nobleman, a veteran conspirator of the 1821 uprising,<sup>4</sup> would [in due time] moderate the intemperate demands of an [immature] democracy.

A start was also being made by outstanding writers in compiling and publishing a popular encyclopedia. While encouraging scientific and literary progress, this publication was to kindle and keep alive in Piedmont that patriotic spirit which gradually was to spread to all the provinces of Italy.<sup>5</sup>

The revolutionary ferment veiled under these activities gave reason for a premonition of evil. We believe that when Canon Cottolengo uttered the aforementioned words, he foresaw all those events that suddenly took place a few years later.

A more intimate grief saddened Don Bosco's heart the following month: the death of his fellow seminarian Joseph Burzio, a saintly youth. In the seminary, when Burzio almost became victim of a

<sup>3</sup> Cavour's life purpose was to free Italy of foreign domination and introduce a parliamentary government based on the liberal English pattern. Italy at this time was in the grip of reactionary governments, while Charles Albert continued to waver between conservatism and liberalism. [Editor]

<sup>4</sup> See above Chapter I. [Editor]

<sup>5</sup> Predari [Francesco], *I Primi Vagiti della Libertà in Piemonte*, Milan, [Vallardi], 1861, p. 27f.

vicious slander, Don Bosco had taken up his defense and with perception and consummate prudence had unmasked the intrigue and vindicated his innocent friend. Burzio, now twenty, a novice with the Oblates of Mary, and still on intimate terms with Don Bosco, had been brought from Pinerolo to Turin, for better treatment of his illness, only to die there in the monastery of *La Consolata* on May 20th, as he had foretold. His body was buried in the crypt of the church, under Our Lady's altar, among the tombs of other members of his order.

In the meantime, Don Bosco's first year at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* was drawing to a close. By regulation, he was to make a spiritual retreat at St. Ignatius [Retreat House] above Lanzo.

An isolated alpine peak, known as *Bastia*, rises some 2,800 feet above sea level to the north of Lanzo. For the most part the mountain is rocky and barren, but here and there it is shaded by firs, chestnuts and larches. In the sixteenth (sic)<sup>6</sup> century, the people of this area built a chapel to St. Ignatius Loyola on this mountain top. This was in fulfillment of a vow made when the saint appeared to them amid wondrous splendor, melodious song and harmony. Soon pilgrimages arrived from all over Piedmont, mainly on the eve of the first Sunday in August, when the saint's feast was celebrated.

In 1677, the chapel was entrusted to the Jesuit Fathers, who built the existing church and an adjacent sixteen-room building. In 1774 the Jesuits had to leave.<sup>7</sup>

About 1804, Father Guala and a few companions began to go to that solitude for a brief spiritual retreat. This became an annual practice and the number of priests [attending] so increased that they had to lodge two in each room. A retreat for laymen, held in September, 1808, drew thirty-two persons. Then, in 1814, Msgr. Della Torre appointed Father Guala rector of this shrine, neglected for so many years, and designated it as a place for spiritual retreats. From then on, three separate retreats were held each year: for priests, for lay people, and for the *Opera Pia di S. Paolo* [St. Paul's Institute] which provided financial assistance.

Father Guala was greatly devoted to this work and remained

<sup>6</sup> St. Ignatius Loyola died in 1556. [Editor]

<sup>7</sup> The Society of Jesus was formally suppressed on July 21, 1773, by the bull *Dominus ac Redemptor*. It was reconstituted by Pope Pius VII in 1814. [Editor]

rector until his death. Up to 1847 he himself, with rare exceptions, conducted the meditations, while assigning the instructions to the best preachers among the secular and regular clergy. Outstanding among them were Father Durando, a Vincentian; Canon Rebaudengo; Father Compaire and Father Cagnoli, both pastors; and the Jesuits, Father Bresciani, Father Menini, Father Mellia, and Father Lolli. God alone knows how many souls left the retreat house replenished with holy fervor, and how many sinners found refuge under the wings of His mercy.

During the last lectures of the school year at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, Father Cafasso would warmly exhort his student priests to participate in that spiritual retreat, and he skillfully suggested to them how to derive the greatest benefit from it.

Don Bosco could not but avail himself of this opportunity. He later wrote [in his memoirs]:

In my first year at the *Convitto*, 1841-42, Father Cafasso invited me to join him in making the spiritual retreat for diocesan priests at St. Ignatius Shrine above Lanzo.

His departure for Lanzo was always an event. Once the day was known, coachmen vied with one another for the privilege of driving him in their carriage. Later, on the road up the mountain, a crowd of poor people would press around him begging for alms, which he distributed to each with appropriate words. "Endure your poverty with patience," he would say to one. "Be devoted to the Blessed Virgin and go to confession," he advised another. "Obey your parents," he enjoined a third.

In those days one could reach the top of the mountain by a wide but very steep path. This was the first time that Don Bosco was able to visit this beautiful shrine. In the center rises the peak on which St. Ignatius and his companion—now represented by statues—had miraculously appeared. The old monastery had been restored and enlarged by Father Guala to accommodate eighty retreatants, for whom he provided every reasonable convenience.

The regulations were so drawn up that the retreat proceeded

with maximum order and exactness, thanks to the foresight and great care taken in necessary preparations and in assigning the various administrative and menial duties. The spiritual retreats at St. Ignatius became famous throughout Piedmont and the norm and model after which similar retreats were organized or restored in all the dioceses.

The retreat began on June 7, 1842. Father Menini, S.J., preached the instructions, and Father Guala the meditations. This we know from a manuscript of Don Bosco, still extant, with outlines of the matter treated by the preachers.

For Don Bosco the most efficacious sermon was the deportment of Father Cafasso, himself a retreatant. His saintly fellow townsman had never missed these retreats, even when he was not the preacher. He was an example to all by his constant recollection, punctuality at all exercises, [and piety in] serving several Masses every morning as an ordinary altar boy. Don Bosco faithfully imitated everything he did, as many eye-witnesses, Father Giacomelli among them, later attested.

The retreat over, Don Bosco returned to his [festive] oratory at Turin. But, after a few months, Father Cafasso, noticing that Don Bosco was run-down, sent him home to benefit from the pure air of his native village. He himself, with Father Guala or some other priest, looked after the oratory boys. Don Bosco's weakened condition and the availability of public conveyance should have prevailed on him not to make the journey on foot. However, his love of evangelical poverty brushed aside all these considerations.

His few days at Castelnovo were spent at the service of his fellow villagers. He taught catechism to the boys at Becchi, Morialdo and Castelnovo, and prepared the material for his *Storia Sacra ed Ecclesiastica* [Bible and Church History] and several booklets adapted to the understanding of the young. These booklets subsequently did much good.

Don Bosco had a deep appreciation of the God-given gift of time, and therefore he employed it well to the benefit of others and himself without losing a single minute.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> A scriptural reference (Sir. 14, 14) closing this chapter has been omitted because it is no longer apropos in the new Confraternity version. [Editor]

## CHAPTER 13

### *Don Bosco's First Choirboys*

**A**T the beginning of the scholastic year 1842-43, two consoling religious events, one particular in character, and the other general, gladdened everyone at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*. On September 25, 1842, Pope Gregory XVI issued a rescript granting a plenary indulgence to the students and faculty on the feast days of the *Convitto's* patron saints and on that of St. Alphonsus Liguori, as an encouragement to invoke and emulate these great saints. It could be gained under the usual conditions: confession, Holy Communion, and a visit to a designated church.

The second event was the proclamation of a Jubilee, by which the Pope requested public prayers of all the faithful for the cessation of the bitter strife in Catholic Spain between Don Carlos' conservatives and Queen Isabella's liberals. The latter had disbanded religious orders, impoverished the clergy, imprisoned and exiled bishops, closed the apostolic nunciature and now proposed to pass a law which openly leaned towards a schism and the subordination of the Church to the State.

Charles Albert had supported the Carlists and was offering them assistance and protection. He refused formal recognition of Queen Isabella, broke off all trade with Spain, and offered refuge in Piedmont to the bishops of Cuba and of Leon. The latter retired to the hermitage of Lanzo where he remained until his death. Later Don Carlos himself sought refuge and was granted asylum at Genoa.

The Jubilee was announced to the faithful of the archdiocese of Turin by Archbishop Fransoni, who, in a pastoral letter dated October 31, 1842, set the period for gaining the indulgences as November 27 to December 11.

While in all the parishes the faithful were beginning to carry out



the required devotional practices, Don Bosco received the following letter from the archbishop.

To the Rev. John Bosco  
*Convitto di S. Francesco*  
[Torino]

Turin, November 30, 1842

Dear Reverend Father:

I am in receipt of a letter from [Father Joseph Comollo], pastor at Cinzano. He is in very poor health at present and requests me to permit Your Reverence to assist him next Sunday. While I am willing to grant this permission, I note that it would be necessary for you to obtain the required faculties for confessions. If you are prepared to take the examination, please acquaint Father Guala with the contents of this letter. I hereby authorize him together with Father Cafasso to give the aforementioned examination.

Please acknowledge receipt of this letter. With profound esteem I am,

Your devoted servant,  
Louis Fransoni, *Archbishop*

In making such a proposal, the archbishop, no doubt, was fully apprised of Don Bosco's charity, zeal and solicitude for the welfare of souls, especially the young, as also of his prudence, and knowledge of moral theology.

Father Guala and Father Cafasso proceeded with the examination and authorized him to hear confessions. It was a temporary permission, which did not remove the obligation of reporting for a final examination, usually held at the end of the second year. Nevertheless, it was an extraordinary exception to the rule as Father [John] Giacomelli and Father [John] Bonetti later attested.

The venerable uncle of [Louis] Comollo<sup>1</sup> joyfully welcomed Don Bosco, who preached daily for a whole week, explaining indulgences and the means of gaining them. He also heard confessions, and people flocked to him also from the neighboring villages.

<sup>1</sup> See Vol. I. p. 250ff, 319. [Editor]

Don Bosco personally had great faith in indulgences and strove to gain as many as possible, fervently exhorting others, at every opportunity, to do likewise. To spur all to a fuller appreciation and have them draw from this spiritual treasury based on the infinite merits of Jesus Christ and the merits of the Blessed Virgin and the Saints, he often explained their great benefits in his sermons. Deploing the prejudice of those who exaggerated the difficulties in gaining indulgences, he used to say: "With His grace, our Divine Savior has placed within easy reach of us whatever contributes to our sanctification and the salvation of souls." Later on, he himself would request and obtain many indulgences from the Holy See for his Society's houses and for all the faithful; works of mercy and acts of devotion were among the required conditions.

Since he was now authorized to hear confessions, Don Bosco, on his return to Turin, was in a position to be of greater spiritual assistance to his oratory boys. In this connection, toward the end of 1842, he penned the following resolutions in a note book of his:

*Breviary and Confession:* I shall strive to recite my breviary with devotion, preferably in church by way of a visit to the Blessed Sacrament.

I shall go to confession every week and shall endeavor to put into practice the resolutions I shall make each time.

Whenever I am requested to hear confessions, if the matter is urgent, I shall even interrupt the breviary and shorten my preparation for or thanksgiving after Mass in order to perform this duty of the sacred ministry.

Meanwhile Don Bosco used every means to make the Sunday oratory gatherings as pleasant as possible. He managed to play the piano and organ fairly well and had thoroughly studied the best methods of instrumental and vocal music. He was gifted with a voice whose melodious range extended to high C of the second octave.

As Christmas approached, he wrote a little carol in honor of the Divine Infant. He jotted it down standing at the window-sill of a little apse in St. Francis Church and then he set it to music. Here it is:

Ah! sing in tones of jubilee,  
Ah! sing in tones of love.  
Ye faithful, our tender Savior  
Is born.

Oh, how splendidly shines every star,  
The moon is fair and bright  
And the veil of the shadows tears.

Oh! seraphic band, whom heaven discloses  
Singing in jubilee: peace on earth!  
Others respond: glory be in heaven!  
Come, come, beloved peace,

To rest within our hearts.  
Oh Infant within our midst  
We want to keep You here.

Though the music did not adhere to the rules of counterpoint, it was so moving that it brought tears to one's eyes. Don Bosco then set about teaching it to his boys who knew nothing at all about music or meter. His perseverance overcame all obstacles. At first, since there was no place at the *Convitto* for practicing, they went outdoors. People stopped and stared in astonishment at seeing a priest surrounded by six or eight boys walking up and down Doragrossa Street and Milano Square repeating a song in a low voice. The melody made such an impression that several of those boys still remembered it in 1866. It was then, after so many years, that the notes were set down for posterity. The precious manuscript of the carol was also found and is still extant.

This carol was first sung in 1842 at the Dominican Church, and subsequently at the *Consolata* [Our Lady of Consolation Church], with Don Bosco conducting the choir and playing the organ. The Turinese, at that time, were unaccustomed to hearing the silver voices of a boys' choir and they loved it. Hitherto only deep and often not so melodious voices had been heard at church functions.

This first success encouraged Don Bosco to set to the same musical theme new verses he composed for singing during Holy Communion.

Ah! let us sing in jubilee  
Ah! let us sing in love.  
Ye faithful, we are awaited  
By our God and Savior.

Oh! what infinite  
Goodness He manifests  
In giving us Bread  
That gives us life,  
And great graces  
Upon us confers.

Seraphic legions  
Whom heaven discloses,  
Descend jubilantly  
From heaven to earth;  
Everywhere they sing  
Praises to the Lord.

With a few variations, he again used the same musical theme for a *Tantum Ergo* which the boys often sang during the next twenty years, especially during their occasional long hikes through the countryside. Thus their limited musical training, used opportunely, brought them both fame and friendliness among the country people.

Later Don Bosco set to music [the invocation] *Lodato sempre sia il Nome di Gesù e di Maria, e sempre sia lodato il Nome di Gesù Verbo incarnato* [Praised ever be the name of Jesus and Mary, and the name of Jesus the Word become flesh] which is still sung in Mary Help of Christians Church at the close of the morning sermon.

Further, he composed a *Gloria in excelsis Deo* which was sung in Castelnuovo when he hiked there the first few times with his oratory boys. This was the first part of an unpretentious Mass he set to music, and it seemed a marvel in those days. He also composed a musical theme for the *Magnificat*, in which the choir and the congregation, taking the role of chorus, sang alternately, the chorus ever repeating the first verse. He did the same for the Litany of the Blessed Virgin.

In this holy undertaking of catechist and musician Don Bosco

soon had an associate in the person of the seminarian Louis Nasi, of a noble Turinese family. Louis received his degree in theology in 1842, was ordained a priest in 1844, and subsequently became spiritual director at the *Rifugio* Institute and a canon of *Corpus Domini* Church. Through Father Cafasso's endeavors, Canon Nasi dedicated himself to the ministry of the confessional and of missions. He was an excellent orator and, like his colleague and intimate friend, the renowned Canon John Baptist Giordano, he preached in the principal pulpits of Italy. Eager to dedicate himself to the care of boys, he was particularly fond of Don Bosco's oratory, then in its beginning, and used to frequent it with holy enthusiasm. His delightful anecdotes and virtuous example won him the boys' affection. A good poet and musician, he wrote verses which he set to music, and, proving to be a godsend to Don Bosco, for several years he played the organ and directed the choir whenever the need arose.

He so loved Don Bosco that in 1893, out of deference to him, he yielded to friendly and delicate pressure and consented to have his sermons printed at the Oratory. To Don Bosco's mission in Patagonia<sup>2</sup> he donated all the proceeds from the sale of this work.

And so it was that Father Nasi provided the organ accompaniment for Don Bosco's young choristers, some of whom were exceptionally gifted. They sang at Mount Carmel in Moncalieri, at the *Consolata*, *Corpus Domini*, and, from time to time, also at St. Francis of Assisi Church in Turin. The sacristy of this church then became a music room which saw the beginning of a *schola cantorum* which later sang the Masses, Vespers, *Tantum Ergo*, and motets of such celebrated composers as Cherubini, Rossini, Haydn, Palestrina, and others. Very fond of music himself, Don Bosco later carved over the door of his choir room: *Ne impediās musicam*. (Cf. Sir. 32, 3)

Among the hymns Don Bosco taught his boys during the early days of his [festive] oratory were several in honor of the Mother of God. *Maria risuona la valle e il monte* [The name of Mary resounds through valleys and mountains] is perhaps no longer remembered. Another in honor of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament begins thus

<sup>2</sup> See Vol. XI, p. 129ff. [Editor]

To the sacred joyous table  
Lambs now gather about,  
In candid pure white vestments  
Of innocence draped.  
Come sing our hymn of jubilee  
To Christ, the Conqueror.

The music and verses of these hymns were not always Don Bosco's compositions; occasionally they were the works of writers and musicians not obscure. Further, several of the songs and hymns which are still sung in Salesian schools and oratories, had a rather unusual origin. For instance, one evening Don Bosco heard a group of workmen walking along to the rhythm of a melodious martial ditty. Knowing how boys delight in such tunes, he memorized it, and asked Silvio Pellico,<sup>3</sup> (whose spiritual director was Father Guala), to write a few verses in honor of the Guardian Angel. Thus came into being the verses and music of the popular *Angioletto del mio Dio* [Little Angel of my God].

Another time, while walking across Milano Square, he saw a troupe of young performers surrounded by a crowd. They were singing a worldly but respectable song to the accompaniment of a guitar and a violin. One youth sang the verses and the others joined in chorus to sing the refrain. Don Bosco was much taken by the melody, for it had a lilt which would certainly make it popular. Taking out pencil and paper, he leaned against the door post of the Prefecture Building in a corner of the square and set down the notes. He then searched for a sacred poem which might fit the catchy tune and found a highly suitable one, *Noi siamo figli di Maria* [We are Mary's sons].

<sup>3</sup> Silvio Pellico (1789-1854), born in Piedmont, spent most of his young manhood in Milan where, in 1820, he joined the *Carbonari*. Arrested by the Austrians, who then ruled Lombardy, he was sentenced to 20 years of hard labor in the Spielberg at Brünn. In 1830 Pellico was pardoned. Nearly all the rest of his life was spent in Turin.

Up to his imprisonment Pellico had been a lukewarm Christian, but in the distress of prison life, he resolved to love God and his fellowmen. In 1832 he wrote the story of his experiences, entitling it *Le mie prigioni*, the most famous book in the literature of the *Risorgimento*. The Christian gentleness of this book at first disappointed some Italian patriots, but it proved, as Cesare Balbo said, to be more damaging to Austria than the loss of a battle. [Editor]

Words cannot describe the joy and enthusiasm these songs gave the boys and the people who heard them. One day, Don Bosco took the boys to the *Madonna del Pilone* [Our Lady of Anchorage], [on the outskirts of Turin]. There they boarded three large boats, and when they were in midstream on the Po River they intoned a sacred hymn. People on the river bank stood still, listening; then, captivated by the melody, they followed the course of the boats, walking along the shore road. As some trumpet players happened to be among them, they took up the easy rhythm and improvised an accompaniment to the boys' singing, with magic effect.

All the people came out of their houses, so that by the time the boys landed, about a thousand persons were there to welcome the young choristers. This was one of the first musical triumphs of Don Bosco's choirboys, a prelude to many, many others in all parts of the world.

## CHAPTER 14

### *First Growth and Difficulties*

**A**LL the activities just described made the little festive oratory prosper ever more during 1843. Don Bosco, however, was rather worried about the limited space available to him and his boys. The boys were now too many and it was no longer feasible for them to play, even for a short while, in the square before St. Francis of Assisi Church. The attendance of the people at Sunday Mass and other church services was crowded and uninterrupted because the church was centrally located and many Masses were said, since most of the students at the *Convitto* were priests. The boys therefore were in the people's way and a source of annoyance. Nor would the city police tolerate any noisy assembly in the nearby upper-class residential district, where the streets were very narrow. For this reason Don Bosco would go out to the square and adjacent street corners, both to lead the boys to his meetings and later to dismiss them on their way home. At times, he also grouped them according to the sections of the city whence they came, and then sent them off with the advice to go straight home. Often he walked along with one or two of the groups.

Yet games were indispensable to attract these lively boys to catechism class; so he often led them beyond the city limits on pleasant excursions where they could play to their hearts' content. His paternal vigilance never slackened either on the way out or on the way home. This, however, did not always work out well for either Don Bosco or the boys, so Father Guala, realizing the need for a permanent playground, granted Don Bosco permission to gather his boys from time to time in the courtyard adjacent to the *Convitto*.

Nor was the room in the rear of the sacristy large enough for catechism class, since the boys were now eighty in number. Father



Guala then permitted them to use the sacristy also. But this created another problem. The boys were now split into two and sometimes three groups, the last one in the adjacent little apse. Consequently, Don Bosco could no longer supervise them alone. Father Guala therefore arranged for other priests at the *Convitto* to help Don Bosco by sharing the teaching chores.

But that was not all. As more and more boys came to the oratory, Don Bosco was obliged to establish two sessions for catechism classes. This system continued for almost two years. Sometimes, he would have the slower boys come in the evening during the week and patiently he would go over the catechism lessons with them until they could grasp the meaning and memorize the answers.

He never failed to inquire where each one lived and where he was employed, so that he might visit him from time to time, encourage him to behave well, and recommend him to the care of his employer.

On Sundays and holy days the boys received the sacraments. They were all so fond of Don Bosco and had such confidence in him, that one and all went to confession to him. It was always an encouraging sight to see his confessional surrounded by twenty, thirty, forty, and even fifty boys who waited for hours for their turn to confide to him the innermost secrets of their hearts. After confession he would celebrate Mass and distribute Holy Communion to a great many of them. Before dismissal, he would give them a short catechetical instruction. Those who witnessed these scenes were always greatly impressed by the sight of such religious renewal.

It redounded to Don Bosco's credit that he trained so many boys to receive Holy Communion frequently, when, unfortunately, it was customary for them to receive almost exclusively during the Easter Season, after they had become adolescents. Don Bosco grasped the true significance of the words of Our Lord: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for of such is the kingdom of God"; (Mark 10,14), and "I came that they may have life, and have it more abundantly." (John 10,10)

The boys could not stay for Benediction in the evening because it was not feasible, but after the catechism class, Don Bosco would

occupy them by teaching them hymns in honor of our Lord and His Blessed Mother. Bishop Bertagna, at that time a boy, temporarily living in Turin, was invited by Don Bosco to take part in these meetings, and occasionally attended the catechism classes and the lessons in singing.

These boys were a source of great joy to Don Bosco. He wrote in his memoirs:

Within a short time I found myself surrounded by boys docile to my admonitions and intent on their work. Generally I could vouch for their good conduct on weekdays as well as Sundays. At a simple look from me, one would return to his parents, from whom he had run away. Another, who had been an idler and a vagabond, would find work and stick to it. A third, an ex-convict would become an inspiration to his companions. A fourth, previously ignorant of religion, would now be all eagerness to learn more and more about his Faith.

Yet Don Bosco was not entirely satisfied. He felt the need to have a church just for his boys, large playgrounds, special rooms for the various classes he planned, porticoes and shelters to protect them from rain and cold weather.

At the same time he was disconcerted by the attitude of some members of the *Convitto* faculty, who looked askance at such novelties. Father [John] Giacomelli stated to us that Don Bosco's boys were, on the whole, grudgingly tolerated by the community. Usually, God's works take root and grow through trials and tribulations. These were now beginning to make themselves felt. Life in common calls for several hours of silence each day; church services in a much frequented church require tranquillity; both the one and the other [at the *Convitto*] seemed to be incompatible with a crowd of boys not always subdued in their activities.

Don Bosco of course, realized the need of another location, and even discussed such a need with the rector. But Father Guala, though accustomed to a quiet life and well-informed about the complaints lodged against such novelties, appreciated the good work

being accomplished and foresaw its development. He therefore encouraged Don Bosco to continue without paying attention to idle tongues, and he gave him yet another proof of his protection.

From time to time, on the occasion of some solemn feast day, Father Guala had provided breakfast or refreshments for the oratory boys. Now he decided upon a very special surprise both for them and for Don Bosco. At that time, some of the boys were stonemasons, plasterers and pavers; but most of them were bricklayers. For this reason Father Guala wished that the feast day of St. Anne, patroness of bricklayers, be kept with great solemnity. On that morning, therefore, after church services, he invited all the boys to breakfast with him.

He led them—almost a hundred of them—into the vast lecture hall. To their pleasant surprise they were served plenty of coffee and milk, hot chocolate, breakfast rolls, pastry and other sweets, such as they had never tasted. They felt as though they had been invited to sit at the king's table.

"Oh, we solved not a few problems in that lecture hall that day," one of the boys recounted years later. "Indeed we did! It was amazing how we boys, in a few minutes, disposed of all the pastry and other goodies in front of us. Our companions [who could not be present] were quite impressed with this celebration when we told them about it. After that day we would have grown to several hundred if only there had been enough room to accommodate us.

"No less impressive was our devout attendance at the church services, and the spiritual benefits we derived from this feast day. We felt that St. Anne, mother of God's holy Mother, was smiling down upon us from heaven and placing us under her protection. We really needed it, for the daily hazards of young apprentices, bricklayers especially, were many and serious. From that day on, no accident befell us.

Thus Father Guala encouraged Don Bosco who, though in poor health, nevertheless continued his indefatigable labors for souls. Father Guala who had helped Don Bosco with funds ever since he had entered the *Convitto*, remarked of him one day: "If he is able to pull through, we are really going to see something."

All that we have recorded here regarding this oratory, we gathered from Father [John] Giacomelli, Joseph Buzzetti, Professor

Gaidano, a *Convitto* student for several years, and Mr. Bargetto, a hatter and one of the domestics at the *Convitto*. He added that everything Don Bosco had or received from others he made use of in order to provide his boys with whatever they needed, or to entertain them with games and similar activities. For himself, he retained only the strictly necessary, which was very little indeed.

## CHAPTER 15

### *Political and Religious Ferment*

**A**T the end of his second year of pastoral theology Don Bosco passed the final examination, and on June 10, 1843, he received faculties for hearing confessions. Shortly afterwards, Father Cafasso invited Don Bosco to accompany him on a holiday to the *Convitto's* summer house at Rivalba. This was not the first or the last such invitation joyfully accepted.

During this brief holiday, though free of his ordinary duties, Father Cafasso did not remain idle. He devoted his whole day to prayer and the preparation of sermons. Only in the evening did he permit himself the diversion of a walk in the woods or a little visit to a rustic shrine of St. John. This solitary haven and the company of such a friend and spiritual guide as Father Cafasso, so imbued with the love of God, brought to Don Bosco inestimable spiritual and physical benefits. Father Cafasso also invited Don Bosco to go with him to St. Ignatius Shrine above Lanzo, which, in due time, would become a choice field of spiritual labors.

To facilitate access to this shrine, Father Guala had initiated the construction of a five-mile road up the eastern slope of the mountain, no mean enterprise. To this he himself had contributed over 100,000 *lire*. Don Bosco admired his rector's enterprising zeal and was fully acquainted with his many sacrifices and his solicitude to make this shrine more accessible. It was here that the Lord spoke more intimately to the soul, and with love prompted it to follow Him. Willingly, therefore, he accepted Father Cafasso's invitation and went there for the priests' retreat.

At that time, the laymen's spiritual retreat needed some enlivening. Mindful of this, Father Cafasso earnestly wished Don Bosco to attend. To comply with this holy desire and to contribute to the success of a work so pleasing to God, Don Bosco obliged,

and henceforward never failed to take part in it, year after year, until 1875. For many years he made the journey on foot leaving Turin at 3:00 a.m. and arriving at St. Ignatius about 10:00 a.m. Father Cafasso, Father [Felix] Golzio and Father Begliati always put him in full charge at the shrine and retreat house, but did not burden him with preaching. However, after Don Bosco had received faculties to hear confessions, nearly all wanted to make their confessions to him, and he made himself available. The good he accomplished is beyond calculation.

As our account unfolds, we shall narrate several anecdotes about him which occurred there. For the present, let it suffice to say that during the hours of recreation he kept everyone amused by his inventiveness. It was at this propitious time that he used to catch the bigger fish by captivating them with his delightful manner.

After his visit to St. Ignatius, Don Bosco passed the summer in Turin, where he divided his time between the confessional and his work for his beloved boys. However, a few weeks before the feast of the Holy Rosary, he went to Castelnuovo, a practice he faithfully followed, especially after he was allowed to build a small chapel at Becchi.

That year, by order of Archbishop Fransoni and with Rome's permission, there had been added to the Litany of Loreto the invocation: "O Queen, conceived without sin, pray for us."

While Don Bosco and his revered superiors were intent on strengthening the moral order, the Court had contrary aspirations. Charles Albert's secret as well as his open dealings with the liberals who were active in Turin, in other parts of Italy, and abroad, were increasing daily. While Massimo d'Azeglio<sup>1</sup> was publishing his novels of patriotism, Cesare Balbo with his book *Le Speranze d'Italia* [Italy's Hopes] exalted the ideal of Italian unity through a federation of all the Italian states. Charles Albert was to be the champion and defender of the [proposed] federation. [In Balbo's opinion], this was the only solution possible. As for the pope being king of the united peninsula, this was out of the question, since it would interfere with his divine mission. Balbo's work gave remark-

<sup>1</sup> Massimo d'Azeglio (1798-1866), born in Turin of a noble family, was an outstanding statesman and patriot of the Risorgimento. He married the daughter of Alessandro Manzoni. [Editor]

able support to Father Vincenzo Gioberti's ideas as expressed in his book *Del primato morale e civile degli Italiani* [On the Moral and Civil Primacy of the Italians].

These books were to popularize the new aspirations of freedom and national unity. Indeed, the doctrines of these three Piedmontese writers influenced the whole of Italy. Of the three, Gioberti's book made the greatest impact. The author had so skillfully woven together flattering praise of the Italians, religious reflections, encomiums of the pope, of the Papacy, and of the Saints, with incitements to liberate Italy from foreign domination and restore her to her former greatness, that he confused countless readers and gained many among the more informed, including several of the clergy. The volume made clear that the cause of Italy as an independent nation rested on a federation of states with the pope at its head, and that this end could not be achieved without it.<sup>2</sup>

Gioberti's tempestuous and patriotic ardor was mere pretense. A friend of Mazzini, he availed himself of the mantle of religion and the standard of the Cross to prepare the way for a revolution and merge all the forces of the enemies of the Church. He planned to make one move at a time and, to avoid alarm, he seasoned his doctrines with subtle hypocrisy to render them palatable even to the faithful and the clergy. [In fact], on August 13, 1843, he wrote to Mamiani<sup>3</sup> that his praise of the pope and the Church was nothing more than a cloak with which to cover *his other thoughts* and enable him to make them acceptable to all. It was necessary, he said, to make a show of such praise in order to clear the way for further progress.<sup>4</sup>

When, as Father [John] Bonetti told us, Don Bosco went to Castelnuovo, he noticed Gioberti's book on Father Cinzano's desk. The good pastor had been quite taken in by its magnificent style and the religious sentiments expressed therein. He had known

<sup>2</sup> Gioberti was defended by the liberal clergy and attacked by the Jesuits who feared that making the pope the head of an Italian federation would mark him with the stamp of nationality and thus cause him to lose his universal character. [Editor]

<sup>3</sup> Count Mamiani Della Rovere (1799-1885), a politician and a philosopher, was Minister of the Interior under Pius IX (1848), and, later, Minister of Education under Cavour (1861). [Editor]

<sup>4</sup> Balan, *Storia d'Italia*, Vol. VII, p. 619.

Gioberti when, as a young university student, the latter used to gather about himself many lay students and seminarians, inflaming them with passionate republican theories and liberal philosophical notions. He had a charming manner, was extremely intelligent and learned, and although he was puffed up by boundless pride, the young ecclesiastics had looked to him as the eagle of the subalpine clergy. Father Cinzano's natural enthusiasm had led him to admire the remarkable talents of this court ecclesiastic, who depended on an annuity from King Charles Albert and, overlooking certain exaggerations of his, he had subscribed to his ideals of independence and freedom. His enthusiasm soared high, upon reading Gioberti's books on these subjects. He was certainly not aware that Gioberti had written an article for *La Giovine Italia* [Young Italy]<sup>5</sup> in which he had labeled Catholicism "the religion of slavery and barbarity."<sup>6</sup>

When Don Bosco saw Gioberti's book, he said nothing but he gave good Father Cinzano one of his characteristic and indefinable looks, sympathetic yet teasing, vanquishing and embarrassing. Don Bosco was convinced that the sectaries were now beginning openly to carry out the secret instructions that their leaders had given them in 1820.<sup>7</sup> Annoyed, Father Cinzano asked: "What have you against it?"

The answer offered no difficulty. Gioberti had been a supporter of *La Giovine Italia*, both in theory and practice, not only among the young, lay or clerical, but even in the army. Apprehended, he had been imprisoned and then exiled (1834). Seeking asylum at Brussels, he taught philosophy in a Protestant college. He dressed as a civilian, did not celebrate Mass or recite the Divine Office, and no longer received the sacraments, living a free, not to say licentious life. All this was more than sufficient to render his writings suspect, but Don Bosco chose to open the *Primato* and, selecting a few paragraphs at random, pointed out that Gioberti, like all other heretics, while pretending to restore religion to its pristine place, actually aimed not at purifying it, but changing it. Father

<sup>5</sup> This was the organ of a secret society by the same name, organized by Giuseppe Mazzini to propagate his political and moral ideals. [Editor]

<sup>6</sup> Gioberti, Vincenzo, "Lettera di Demofilo," in the *Giovine Italia*, 1834.

<sup>7</sup> See above, Chapter I.



Cinzano, however, could not be convinced. Partial as he was to Gioberti, he saw in those errors only an oversight due to pressure and lack of time.

Time and again, Father Cinzano and Don Bosco argued in vain about Gioberti's book. The good pastor would end these arguments by playfully saying to Don Bosco in the Piedmontese dialect: "Don Bosco, Don Bosco, you're a hard nut to crack." And this he repeated often.

This difference of opinion did not in the least disturb the warm friendship which united these two priests of God. In everything else, Father Cinzano, as docile as a child, followed the younger priest's advice. In illustration of this, we recount the following incident. "I recall," Don Bosco himself related, "how Father Cinzano, in the beginning of his pastorate at Castelnuovo, would complain, privately and even from the pulpit, about the so-called *beatelle* [sentimentally pious ladies], who wasted the confessor's time by not explaining themselves properly, or by being long-winded in what they said, and so on. These remarks alienated the people and Father Cinzano suffered considerably because the people ceased to confess to him. Those who did go to confession went to his curate. One day he brought this subject up and I repeated Father Cafasso's advice. I urged him to be more conciliatory in the pulpit, to point out the benefits of the sacrament of Penance, and to tell the people that he would always be happy to hear their confessions. I stressed particularly that in the confessional he should treat kindly these *beatelle*, listening to them with patient charity and asking them to persuade others to go to confession. He thanked me and followed my suggestion. Shortly thereafter, the whole village went to confession to him, and the number of parishioners who received Holy Communion greatly increased."

In the matter of confession, Don Bosco himself observed and recommended wise and well-defined rules, to control the impatience of confessors who found certain penitents tiresome and boring. On the other hand, he took care to caution others, who all too easily were impressed by the apparent sanctity of their penitents. It often happens that a confessor has pious penitents who are at the same time scrupulous and disobedient. At times they want to change their spiritual director, but the confessor objects for fear that they

will come to harm. Don Bosco was wont to say: "If penitents regularly confess to the same priest, he must insist that they obey him. Not only should he always allow them to go to another confessor, but he should make it easy for them, and even, I would say, encourage them to do so. If they later return to him, he should receive them and insist on their obedience. If they should again wish to go to another confessor, he should let them do so." He asserted that though these good pious women may be boring, scrupulous or indiscreet, they nevertheless do much good, and he never permitted anyone to make jest of them or speak disparagingly of them. In most cases they are the religious backbone of a village or parish. To neglect them, or to treat them unfairly would cause a whole village to lose its spiritual fervor. Many times, the best way to foster piety among the people is to use the services of these good women. It is they who zealously promote respect for God's house, who exert themselves to prevent or put an end to a scandal, who donate or collect funds for any charitable or religious undertaking. And truly what usually makes them somewhat burdensome is nothing but a little ignorance and excessive fear. On the whole, however, they are innocent souls and live for years and years without committing sin, not only mortal sin, but even any intentional venial sin. If, however, a confessor antagonizes them, they will not dare approach him again. They will complain with their friends and cronies about it day after day, for it troubles their minds; and without intending to do so, by their lamentations, they will dampen the religious fervor of all those with whom they come in contact.

## CHAPTER 16

### *Confession and the Young*

FATHER GUALA permitted Don Bosco to remain at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* for a third year [1843-44], a privilege usually granted only to student priests outstanding for learning and piety. Therefore, immediately after the novena and feast of the Holy Rosary at Castelnuovo, Don Bosco hastened back to the *Convitto*. From the very start he was appointed special tutor, and some time later he was asked to coach the slower students.

That year Father [John] Giacomelli enrolled at the *Convitto* for courses in pastoral theology. Thus, close to Don Bosco, he was able to observe his unfailing diligence in the classroom, despite many other occupations prompted by his obedience and great charity.

Foremost among them at all times were his festive oratory and the catechetical instruction which he considered the basis for the moral upbringing of his boys. Invoking God's help, he would often repeat: "The revelation of your words sheds light, giving understanding to the simple." (Ps. 118,130) His teaching was not a mere repetition of the questions and answers in the catechism; he illustrated them with accounts of miracles and prophecies drawn from Holy Scripture, showing how God Himself had revealed the truths we must believe and given us laws for what we must do and avoid.

By this method the young are able to understand their religion. This, without doubt, is what really matters, for if conviction is lacking, belief will falter, and, with the passing of time, passion and error will completely remove the holy fear of God. The knowledge of our Faith constantly protects us from moral lapse, for as the Psalmist said: "How shall a young man be faultless in his way? By keeping to your words." (Ps. 118,9) Also, it continually spurs

those towards the path of virtue, who may have had the misfortune of straying from it.

In catechism class Don Bosco especially dwelt at length on explaining the dispositions necessary for a good and fruitful confession and the benefits derived by those who receive this sacrament regularly. He was firmly convinced that frequent confession and Holy Communion were absolutely necessary if a boy was to preserve his innocence during adolescence, when, as he is growing up, the most dangerous passions assert themselves. Again, frequent confession and Holy Communion were the only means of reform and salvation for those boys who had fallen prey to their passions. The continual exhortations he directed to his beloved boys, orally and in writing, bear witness to this conviction of his.

By way of illustration we quote from Don Bosco's biography of Michael Magone. After first addressing himself specifically to boys, he offers some very useful advice to confessors.

First of all, [my dear boys], do everything you can to avoid offending God, but, if unfortunately, you should commit sin, do not let the devil prevail upon you not to confess it. Remember that the confessor has received from God the power to forgive every kind and any number of sins. The more serious the sins you confess, the more will the confessor inwardly rejoice, for he knows that God's mercy is far greater. Through the priest, God grants you His pardon, and by the infinite merits of the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ washes away every stain from your soul.

Remember that the confessor is a father who is eager to do all he can for you and protect you from all possible harm. Never fear that you will lose his respect when confessing serious sins, or that he will reveal them to others. No matter what may happen to him, the confessor may never avail himself of any information received in the confessional. Should he stand to lose his very life, he may not and will not tell anyone at all even the slightest thing heard in the confessional. Moreover, I can assure you that the more sincere and trusting you are with him, the more his confidence in you will grow and the better he will be able to give you that counsel and advice which he deems most necessary and useful for your soul.

I wanted to tell you these things, lest you allow the devil to trick you into concealing some sin in confession through shame. I assure you,

dear boys, that while I write these words, my hand trembles at the thought of the great number of souls that go to their perdition only because they concealed certain sins or failed to confess them sincerely. If ever, in reviewing your past life, you recall some [mortal] sin deliberately concealed, or should have any doubts about the validity of a past confession, then I say to you: "My friend, for the love of Jesus Christ and by the Precious Blood He has shed for your salvation, I beg you to set your conscience aright the next time you go to confession, making a clean breast of what is troubling you, as though you were about to die. If you do not know how to express yourself, just tell the confessor that you have something in your past life that disturbs you. The confessor will understand; then do what he tells you and you may be sure that everything will be all right."

Go to confession often, pray for your confessor, follow his advice. After you have chosen a confessor who fully understands your spiritual needs, do not go to another without necessity. As long as you are without a regular confessor who has your full confidence, you will be without a spiritual friend. Also, put great trust in his prayers, for every day during Mass he prays for his penitents, that God may help them to make good confessions and persevere in holiness. In return, you too should pray for him.

You are, however, perfectly free to *change* your confessor if either of you should move elsewhere, making it gravely inconvenient for you to go to him, or if either of you be taken ill, or if his confessional is crowded on some solemn feast day. Again, if there should be something on your conscience which you do not dare to confess to your regular confessor, sooner than commit a sacrilege, change him not only once, but even a thousand times.

Finally, should it happen that some priest chosen by Divine Providence to hear young people's confessions, read what I am now writing, I humbly ask permission, while passing over many other things, to offer the following respectful advice:

1. Be kind to all penitents, but especially to youngsters. Help them to lay open their conscience and insist that they come frequently to confession, for this is a sure means of keeping them away from sin. Leave no stone unturned to have them carry out your suggestions for avoiding new lapses into sin. Correct them, but kindly. Never scold them. If you do, they will not return to you for confession, or they will conceal the sin for which they have been sharply reprimanded.

2. Once you have won their confidence, interrogate them carefully to ascertain that their past confessions were well made. Many authors of

moral and ascetical theology, renowned for their experience and reliability, whose judgment cannot be challenged, agree that generally, the first confessions of young people, if not invalid, are at least defective through ignorance or voluntary omission of sins which should have been confessed. Invite the boys to examine their consciences thoroughly, particularly about the time when they were between the ages of seven and twelve. At that age one already knows that certain sins are serious, but little is made of them, or one does not know how to confess them. Let the confessor be very tactful and discreet, but never let him omit questions on matters pertaining to the virtue of modesty.

I would like to say more on this subject, but I will refrain, because I do not want to present myself as a master in a field where I am only a poor, humble disciple. I have written these few words because it seemed to me in the Lord that they would be useful to the souls of young people, to whose welfare I intend to consecrate all the time which it shall please Our Lord to grant me in this world.

Elsewhere, in a memorandum of 1845, directed to his spiritual sons, the Salesians, he wrote:

When you are asked to hear confessions, show a pleasant disposition towards all; never be rude or impatient. Children should be treated with much kindness and affability. Never scold them, nor express surprise at their ignorance or the sins they confess. If at any time you should note their need of more instruction, invite them to come to a suitable place at a suitable time. The main failings in children's confessions are a lack of sorrow for sin and a purpose of amendment. When one or the other of these two are lacking through ignorance, advise the child to seek instruction by attending catechism classes or by studying his catechism if he is capable of reading and understanding what he reads. If, however, you have any doubt, and the sin does not seem grievous, you can simply give him your blessing.

To further the good work of the festive oratories, Don Bosco added to this memorandum some general norms which reveal how very prudent he was. He wrote:

In dealing with youths, it is very important and advantageous that no boy go away discontented with us. On the contrary, he should part from us with a little souvenir, a promise or even a kind word which will make him desire to see us again. Furthermore, promises made to children should always be kept, or at least the reason given if they cannot be kept.

If you want your reprimand to bear fruit, never give it in the presence of others. Try to win their love; then they will obey you readily. You can never be strict enough in those matters which help preserve morality.

All this flowed from his great love of God, a love which revealed itself in a most edifying manner when he administered the sacraments. It was this same love that permeated his manner of dealing with boys and the exhortations he frequently gave to draw them away from offending God and to stir them to love Him.

## CHAPTER 17

### *Mainstay of Faith*

**D**ON BOSCO'S suggestions regarding the manner of dealing with youths and other penitents were those which he himself followed. The immense good he accomplished by such procedures, whether through preaching or in hearing confessions, finds its only explanation in his lively trust and steadfast hope in God as his ultimate end. Faith and hope gave direction to his entire life. In his unswerving trust in the merits of Jesus Christ, he was certain, though not presumptuous, of his eternal salvation; he was convinced that God in His infinite goodness, would forgive his sins and give him the means of personal sanctification and of final perseverance.

"During the thirty-five years I lived at his side," Bishop John Cagliero declared, "I never detected any sign of distrust in him, nor any expression of fear or doubt. I never saw him troubled by any misgivings as to God's goodness and mercy towards him. He never gave evidence of suffering distress of conscience. He spoke of heaven with such animation, relish, and profound feeling as to enchant all listeners; it was obvious that the hope of celestial joys banished the fear of death. He discussed heaven as a son talks of his father's house. The thought of possessing God inflamed him more than God's promise of heavenly reward. St. Paul's words consoled him: 'If we are sons, we are heirs also: heirs indeed of God and joint heirs with Christ, provided, however, we suffer with Him that we may also be glorified with Him.' " (Rom. 8,17)

"If anyone," Father Ascanio Savio added, "had asked him off-hand, 'Don Bosco where are you going?' he would have answered, 'We are going to heaven.' "

This lively confidence he nurtured not only in himself but in his boys and his fellowmen as well, in whom he knew how to instil and stimulate this virtue. He often said: "Imagine the joy when we are



in heaven all together. Just be good and have no fear! After all, you don't really believe that Our Lord created heaven to leave it empty, do you? But, remember that heaven requires sacrifices on our part. Yes, we shall be saved through our own efforts and with God's grace and help, which are ever present. *Deus omnes homines vult salvos fieri*, says St. Paul. (Cf. 1 Tim. 2,4) Do you understand this Latin? *Vult*: God wants. God does not lie. God does not speak in jest. *Omnes*: he wants everybody to be saved. He will always do His part. Let us not fail to do ours. Let us pray; a prayer said for this purpose is an unfailing petition! That is an article of faith." Such words greatly encouraged the boys to work at being good and virtuous so as to merit heaven.

If anyone asked him, "Shall I be saved?" he would reply, "Of course; wouldn't it be awful if you went to hell? My great desire is that we be together for ever in heaven! Do your part, and trust in God's infinite mercy. You may be sure of eternal salvation, as long as you cooperate with the graces that God offers you each day."

To those who showed fear and doubt because of their sins, he would say: "Jesus Christ died for sinners. He Himself said that He came into this world to heal the sick and to seek and rescue lost sheep. Our Lady is justly called *Refugium Peccatorum* [Refuge of Sinners]. Let us do our share. Let us appeal to Her, place our trust in Her and our safety is assured for She is all powerful." He also exhorted people to confide in the merits of our heavenly Mother, and to have recourse and trust also to the intercession of the Saints.

His trust and faith made him an apt instrument of God's mercy. For him hope, mercy and confession were synonymous. He placed great reliance on the sacrament of Penance, and with unmatched constancy recommended it on every occasion. Even while conversing with people of importance, he knew how to suggest, in a pleasant manner, some thought that would prompt them to set their consciences in order. If he preached to the same congregation for several days consecutively, very rarely would he refrain from teaching them to make a good confession, stressing the importance of its frequency. In his sermons and conferences, and in his talks to his boys, he always injected some remarks on this subject. He yearned to shepherd everyone to heaven, his one fear being that

someone might stray. So zealous was he in the conversion of sinners, that one might say he wore himself out in the confessional. So widely known was his charity, that whenever a dying person refused to make his peace with God, someone would rush to call Don Bosco as the only priest who could rescue the unfortunate one.

With Don Bosco, preaching and practice went hand in hand. Every week he went to confession to Father Cafasso, not privately, but, as he did throughout his life, publicly in church, in view of all the people. His preparation, accusation and thanksgiving made manifest that he was performing an action worthy of the utmost respect because established by Our Lord Himself. In his every action, he emulated his Divine Master, who first *did* and then *taught*. [Cf. Acts 1,1]

But now let us see him in action. It was during this third year at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* that Don Bosco began to preach in the local churches, giving triduums, novenas and retreats. His sermons were mostly an explanation or development of some Scriptural text, with dogmatic and moral reflections, and an edifying example well presented in great detail. He also began to hear confessions in St. Francis of Assisi Church every morning for several hours. His charity, zeal, rare discretion and expert questions soon became well known. Among his many penitents were a number of his own fellow priests at the *Convitto*, including Father Giacomelli who chose him as his regular confessor. He reports that Don Bosco's confessional was soon besieged by a large number of people. He performed this task with such love that he gave the impression that the confessional was the most cherished and most gratifying duty of his ministry. At any hour he was called, he willingly obliged, never complaining of fatigue or excusing himself because of the inopportune time or some other duty, class time excepted. His easy manner inspired confidence, even in those who were older or of higher rank than he. If someone with troubles on his conscience approached him in the sacristy for confession, Don Bosco sensed it immediately. He would say smilingly: "Sir, I must tell you that I'd like to make my time worthwhile. If it's big stuff, well and good; then I'm happy. If it's just trifles, then don't bother."

Sighing in relief at this pleasantry, the poor fellow would answer: "Have no doubt; I'll please you."

"Fine, we friends will understand each other."

Thus he won their confidence. The more involved or difficult the matter, the happier he was in witnessing the effects of Divine Mercy.

We may apply to him what he himself wrote of Father Cafasso: "A few words, a single sigh sufficed to make him understand the penitent's state of soul. In the confessional he was very brief, but what he said was clear, exact, sound, and so well suited to the need that a long talk would not have been more effective." He was so sparing in his words that in a few hours he could hear the confessions of hundreds of people and send them away with a feeling of peace and joy. At times, however, he would take bitters to stop the nausea and retching caused by the hearing of certain sins. At the mere approach of some people infected by sin, he could detect a horrible stench even before they spoke. With great kindness he would sometimes direct them to another confessional. However, if they insisted that he hear their confession, he would comply, but under such torment that he was barely able to listen to the end. Thereby the penitents understood why, in the first instance, they had been requested to go elsewhere, coming to realize that the state of their conscience lay open to him even before their own disclosure. This occurred especially with certain dandies who came unconcernedly and smirkingly to confess their nefarious sins. Don Bosco's instinctive horror of certain sins was all the more remarkable since his knowledge of these was limited only to what was necessary to judge their gravity, the danger of the occasion, the need of this or that solution, and naught else. Bishop [John] Cagliero<sup>1</sup> attested that at the age of sixty-eight Don Bosco still did not fully comprehend how certain offenses against God were possible. From his earliest years he abhorred anything which might even in the slightest degree tarnish that virtue which makes men like unto angels. This we have often heard from his own lips. All we have so far narrated leads us to believe that, even then, he was guided by a supernatural light.

<sup>1</sup> John Cagliero (1838-1926), one of the first pupils of Don Bosco, was consecrated bishop in 1884, promoted archbishop in 1904, and named a cardinal in 1915. He was the first Salesian bishop, archbishop and cardinal. [Editor]

Don Bosco's priestly ministry was not limited solely to St. Francis of Assisi Church. Father Cafasso sent him to preach and hear confessions in the prisons, at the *Albergo di Virtù* [a hospice for boys], the *Scuole Cristiane dei Fratelli* [the Christian Brothers School], the *Collegio Governativo di San Francesco di Paola* [the St. Francis de Paula State School], the *Istituto delle Fedeli Compagne* [Institute of the Faithful Companions], a girls' school where he also gave conferences and taught catechism and Italian, and finally at the *Ritiro delle Figlie del Rosario* [Retreat of the Daughters of the Rosary], a boarding school for wayward girls, founded by Father [Bernard] Sappelli, O.P., and staffed by a community of Dominican Tertiaries. Don Bosco's priestly charity also included the *Monastero del Buon Pastor* [the Good Shepherd Monastery], opened in 1843, through the initiative of Count [Clement] Solaro della Margherita by the Sisters [of the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity]. They had been founded in France in 1641 by Father John Eudes<sup>2</sup> for the purpose of reforming wayward girls and protecting from delinquency those in danger of falling. Since these sisters also conducted a regular boarding school for girls, they often repaid Don Bosco for his services by accepting those young sisters of his oratory boys who otherwise would have been left to themselves, without moral guidance.

Don Bosco exercised his sacred ministry in these and such other institutions in Turin, often working until late at night—always with Father Cafasso's permission. This apostolate continued for many years until 1860. In all these institutions Don Bosco left an indelible remembrance of his zeal and prudence, as Bishop Cagliero later testified after he succeeded Don Bosco.

Three other institutions to which Father Cafasso sent Don Bosco were the *Ospedale di Carità* [the Charity Hospital], sheltering about a thousand patients, old men and women, boys and girls; the *Ospedale dei Cavalieri dell'Ordine di San Maurizio e Lazzaro* [the Knights of SS. Maurice and Lazarus Hospital], and the *Ospedale di San Luigi* [St. Aloysius Hospital] for incurable consumptives. The Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul, an offshoot of the Daughters of Charity called the "Grey Sisters" from the color of their habit, staffed these three institutions.

<sup>2</sup> Father John Eudes (1601-1680) was declared a saint in 1925. [Editor]

Occasionally he also preached and heard confessions at the *Ospedale Maggiore di S. Giovanni* [the General Hospital], also called St. John's Hospital, where the Daughters of Charity helped him greatly in the spiritual assistance of the sick. A substantial number of them were heroic in their self-sacrifice, both in sheltering abandoned boys and in providing for their needs with their own resources and with alms they solicited from the wealthy. In passing, we should note that the name of St. Vincent de Paul will be associated through his conferences with many of the worldwide hospices founded by Don Bosco.

Time and again Don Bosco was called to a hospital to minister to dying patients. At other times, he came, uncalled, to the bed of a person he knew to be unprepared for death. The risk of contracting contagious diseases in the wards he visited never deterred him, as Father Michael Rua later testified. This intrepid task continued until 1870.

Meanwhile he did not forget the *Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza* [The Little House of Divine Providence] and the invitation extended to him by the Venerable Cottolengo. In spite of his youth, many sick people sought him out to confide to him their sins and anxieties. Often he returned to the *Convitto* late in the evening, after the others had already recited the rosary. Father Guala, who must have known that Father Cafasso had given him permission, would, nevertheless, in tone of reprimand, tell him: "Come home at the appointed time!"

Without seeking to defend himself, nor manifesting any resentment, Don Bosco would humbly reply: "But there was so much to do at Cottolengo's, so much!"

To which Father Guala would retort: "Observe the rules; put off the extra work to another time."

It seems that the rector spoke in this manner to test Don Bosco's virtue. Meanwhile, he permitted him to continue his visits, so beneficial to souls, several times a week. Through them Don Bosco gave proof of true priestly heroism. The visits to the wards, where later his boys received the most loving care, continued until 1874. Until 1860, he often went there three or four times a day, at times summoned, at times on his own initiative.

About 1845, there broke out an epidemic of petechial typhoid.

Don Bosco continued to visit the victims of this disease until he himself contracted it. He bore traces of it for the rest of his life and suffered great torment. This we know from Father Rua, who heard it from Don Bosco himself. Father Sala, who tended Don Bosco's body after his death, found it in a pitiful state. Herpes had spread over his entire body, especially around the shoulders. The most painful hairshirt could not have tormented him as much. Perhaps God had permitted him this hidden torment so no one might know of his extraordinary love of mortification and penance.

## CHAPTER 18

### *Triumphs of Grace*

IN the exercise of his sacred ministry, Don Bosco experienced a number of extraordinary happenings which deserve at least a mention. We shall relate them as our story unfolds. Meanwhile we cannot help but narrate some of them here.

In 1844, a woman in the last stages of tuberculosis was at St. John's Hospital [in Turin]. She had lived a disreputable life and it was feared she might die in despair. Involved in innumerable affairs, guilty of serious sins, and responsible for financial harm to many people, she had not approached the sacraments for many years. She furiously resisted the pleas of the hospital rector, of the chaplains, nuns and anyone who tried to persuade her to make her confession. She spurned Father Cafasso's efforts and hurled a vase at him. Apprised by the doctors of the fact that she was at death's door and grieved by the thought that this wretched woman might die unrepentant, Father Cafasso returned to the *Convitto* and asked Don Bosco to see her. Don Bosco agreed.

He walked slowly through the ward, stopping to speak to the patient next to that poor woman. Then without even glancing in her direction or saying a word to her, he walked to the patient on the other side and began to speak with her. The dying woman followed the priest with her eyes, and when he not only failed to stop by her or exchange a few words with her, but totally ignored her, she said, "Aren't you going to talk to me?"

"Certainly," Don Bosco replied, and, pulling up a chair, he sat beside her bed and asked, "Well?"

"Say a good word to me."

"Yes, I'd like to."

"What will you talk to me about?"

"Confession!"

"Confession! It's been a long time since my last one."

"Well, then, make another now!"

"It's not that easy. This morning some other priest wanted to hear my confession, but I was mean to him and drove him away."

"Let's not talk of that. What you should do now is set your conscience in order." And he began, *Deus sit in corde tuo . . .*

"But I'm not ready for confession."

"That's why I gave you my blessing, that you may prepare yourself."

"Just now, I don't feel like it. Later, when I've recovered, I'll go to confession in some church in town, or maybe even here in the hospital chapel, as soon as I can."

"Do you really believe you will recover?"

"I'm feeling better now."

"Perhaps, but it isn't so."

"Why not?"

"Do you want me to tell you something from the doctors or in God's name?"

"No, not from the doctors. I'd rather hear something in God's name."

"In God's name I tell you that in His mercy, He is granting you a few more hours to think of your soul. It is now four o'clock in the afternoon and you still have time to confess your sins, receive the Holy Eucharist, the Anointing of the Sick and the papal blessing. Don't fool yourself any longer. Tomorrow you'll be in eternity."

"You really mean it? It can't be!"

"I told you that I'm not speaking for the doctors, but in God's name."

"Eternity, eternity! What a thought. . . . It frightens me."

"Come now, let us begin. I will help you."

"But that priest whom I insulted! It hurts me to think that I was so angry with him."

"Don't worry. Be at ease. I know that priest and I'll take care of everything."

The poor woman made her confession and that very night she died.

One day Don Bosco arrived at a town, where he learned that a very elderly friend of his was sick. Spurred on by a troubling pre-



sentiment, he hastened to call upon the old gentleman. Now in his eighties, the sick man had spent his life in promoting God's honor and in charitable works, and was considered a saint by everyone. He had come to know Don Bosco as a student and loved him dearly.

When Don Bosco arrived at the house, he was grieved to learn from the family that his friend was dying and had already received the Last Rites and the papal blessing. When he asked to see the dying man he was told that the doctor had forbidden visitors. He insisted. They replied that the dying man was unconscious and it would be useless to see him. Still disturbed and mindful of their close friendship, Don Bosco spoke so persuasively that at last he was admitted to the old gentleman's room and left alone. Don Bosco approached the bed and called him by name. His voice had a marvelous effect. The dying man moved, opened his eyes, looked at him and recovering his senses said, "Oh, it's you, Bosco!"

"I heard that you were ill, and as I was passing through town I simply had to call on you."

"Thank you, thank you."

"How are you?"

"Bad, very bad."

"They tell me you have already received the Last Sacraments."

"Yes, I've received them." As he spoke his voice trembled, and there was a deeply disturbed expression on his face.

"Let us thank God," said Don Bosco. "You have put the affairs of your soul in order and so you have nothing to worry about. After a life wholly spent for God's glory and the good of others, you have reason to rejoice."

The old man heaved a deep sigh, almost a moan, looked about him and whispered, "Bosco!"

"Yes?"

"Is anyone else in this room?"

"No one. We're alone." So thought Don Bosco, but behind a curtain was a person who had been unable to withdraw in time and now, trapped in the room, remained perfectly still. Forty years later that person told this story without giving any clue as to the identity of the people or the place.

The old man continued, "Tell me, do you already have faculties for confession?"

"Yes, but at this moment any priest could absolve you, even without them."

"Bosco, I must tell you something confidential. Try to understand and forgive my weakness. Don't be hard on me. . . . I must tell you a secret."

"Go ahead. . . . You know how much I care for you."

"When I was a boy I had the misfortune of committing a mortal sin. Since then I have been so ashamed that I never dared confess it. All my Communions, even my first one, were sacrilegious. I was afraid of losing the confessor's esteem."

"And now, in your last confession, did you reveal everything?"

"No, I did not. Help me."

"Yes, willingly. Place all your trust in Our Lord, who is so good and who died for us."

The old man made his confession with sincere and deep sorrow and after Don Bosco absolved him he raised his arms exclaiming, "Blessed forever be God's infinite mercy." So saying, he fell back on the bed and died.

On August 31, 1844, a wealthy lady, the wife of the Portuguese ambassador, had to go by coach from Turin to Chieri on personal business. A pious lady, she first saw to her spiritual welfare before setting out. That morning she went to St. Francis of Assisi Church. She did not know Don Bosco. He had never met her, nor could her simple attire give him any hint of her social position. The lady's regular confessor was not there. She noticed a young priest kneeling near a confessional absorbed in prayer and felt drawn to go to confession to him. Don Bosco heard her confession and then told her as a penance to give some small alms that day for specific purposes.

"Father, I can't do it," replied the lady.

"Why not? How can you say that, wealthy as you are?"

The lady was greatly surprised at Don Bosco's knowledge of her social position, since she was sure that under no circumstances had they ever met before. She replied, "Father I cannot fulfill this penance for I have to take a trip today."

"Well, then, do this instead: say three times the *Angele Dei* asking your Guardian Angel to protect you from all danger, so that you may not be frightened by what will befall you."

Yet more deeply impressed by these words, the lady willingly performed the penance and on her way home recited the prayer together with her servants, invoking her Guardian Angel's protection for a safe journey. Then, in the company of her daughter and maid, she got into her carriage. After some distance, as the horses swiftly galloped, they suddenly took fright and shot ahead, out of control. In vain the coachman tugged at the reins: the horses did not feel the bit. The women screamed. A carriage door swung open, the wheels struck a heap of gravel, and the carriage tipped over. The passengers were all thrown to one side and the open door was smashed. The coachman was hurled from his box and the women were in serious danger of being crushed. The lady felt her head and hands scraping the ground as the horses galloped on. It was all over in a matter of seconds. Placing all her trust in her Guardian Angel, she shouted as loud as she could: *Angele Dei, qui custos es mei!* [O my good Angel, . . .] This was enough to save them. Suddenly the excited horses calmed down and stopped short. The coachman picked himself up, unharmed, to see to his passengers, while people came running to help. The lady and her daughter found themselves outside the carriage, but remained calm and without a sign of fear. After straightening out their clothing as best they could, they stared at each other in astonishment noticing that neither had suffered the least hurt. Together they exclaimed, "God and our Guardian Angels saved us from harm!" The lady and her companions were able to continue on their way in another coach. In the meantime, the coachman stood the carriage upright and proceeded on foot for several hours to his house at Chieri.

We can imagine how highly the good lady then thought of the young priest who so opportunely had advised her to commend herself to her Guardian Angel. She could not return to Turin soon enough to learn who he was. She went back to St. Francis of Assisi Church and walked to the sacristy to inquire about the identity of the priest who had heard confessions at the time and in the confessional she pointed out. Informed that it was Don Bosco, she went to him to express her gratitude for his salutary advice. Thence-

forth she became one of his admirers and thereafter sang his praises to all. In turn, Don Bosco turned to her when it was a question of relieving the poverty of Father Charles Palazzolo, who desired to devote his whole life to [a field of] the sacred ministry suited to his mature age. She became a zealous benefactress of the festive oratory. The small crystal urn which to this day stands on a book-case in Don Bosco's room is her gift. It contains a wax miniature of St. Philip Neri, clothed in priestly vestments, as he is venerated in Rome in the church of *Santa Maria in Vallicella*.

All the details of the incident just narrated were obtained in writing from this very same good lady, from her maid Mrs. Teresa Martano of Chieri, and from Father Michael Rua.

## CHAPTER 19

### *The Prisons Again*

THE task of preaching the Gospel to prison inmates is not easy, for it is fraught with not a few difficulties. The unfortunate convicts in such places of affliction are in dire need of a priest's ministry, but not every priest has the stamina to spend his days in these gloomy precincts, behind bolted iron gates, looking on countenances that arouse disgust and fear by their ugliness. Not everyone has sufficient gifts of prudence, self-denial, piety, presence of mind, and the very special knowledge required to deal with such people. Therefore, many otherwise zealous priests, because of lack of health or time, or lack of heroic will power, or of special aptitude for this ministry, either did not undertake the difficult task, or in the face of many obstacles soon became discouraged and withdrew. Moreover, the police authorities were not inclined to allow visits to the prisons: such permits were regarded as special favors. Consequently, during the years covered by this volume [1841-1846], the apostles of the Turin prisons could be counted on the fingers of one hand. These were Father Mathis, a renowned Piedmontese missionary and rector of Our Lady of Mercy Church, Canon Borsarelli, Father [Joseph] Cafasso, Father [John] Borel and our Don Bosco. They employed every possible ingenuity to overcome their many difficulties.

According to the testimony of Father Borel, and later of Bishop [John Baptist] Bertagna and Bishop [Joseph] Cagliero, Don Bosco also exerted himself generously on the convicts' behalf. Whenever he had the time, he would spend entire days in the prisons and several times he conducted spiritual retreats there. He regularly visited the inmates on Saturdays, his pockets bulging with tobacco or bread. He was especially interested in the juveniles whom misfortune had brought there. By helping and befriending them, he

sought to draw them to the festive oratory after their release from prison. Nevertheless he did not neglect the adults. One after another he visited every block. The convicts were not confined in individual cells but were herded into large ones that held twenty-five to thirty, each one having nothing but a straw bed that served also for a table or a chair. First offenders were herded in with hardened repeaters, who coached the newcomers in theft and other crimes, and by their domineering and ridicule destroyed whatever good result had been effected in their hearts by the words of the priest. The more hardened prisoners shamelessly boasted of their crimes. The more severe their sentences, the greater the superiority they felt over the other convicts. Whenever a dispute arose, they claimed the last word, shouting down their opponents with: "Whom are you trying to teach? I've already served time at hard labor!"

On his first visit to some of those dens, Don Bosco sometimes became the target for atrocious insults, wicked abuse, malicious jokes, and allusions infamous to a priest, from those convicts who did not know him. Debauched by their passions, these poor wretches would not have stood for admonitions, much less reprimands. For this reason, Don Bosco controlled himself, responding with a serene smile even when his courtesy met with insults, abuse and, at times, threats. Following the course dictated by prudence, and aware that discretion would bring results, he at first limited himself to brief visits. Conversing with the convicts in tones of friendly respect, he addressed the older ones as "sir," and showed deep compassion and a genuine desire to ease their lot. With an occasional humorous remark he amused them and, since love can be proven by tangible benefits, he distributed money and other gifts. Thus, his unfaltering patience impressed and humanized them.

Charity would soon triumph. Many of these poor wretches had perhaps never heard a word of sincere affection. Spurned by society, punished by the law, betrayed by their accomplices, disgraced in the eyes of the world and degraded in their own, they vainly sought a helping hand to raise them and, enraged by the loss of their freedom, they lived in hatred. With such persons one cannot reason: their answer is a shrug or curses and blasphemies. Sincere love, a self-sacrificing love expressed in deeds and not in words, is the most convincing of all languages. Only when they realize that the

priest has no other motive in visiting them but their own welfare, and that he is not lying when he says he loves them, do they feel moved. Gratitude begins to blossom in their hearts, they feel that they are loved, and their confidence is won. "What interest," they ask themselves, "can this priest have in visiting us? Then, the religion which brings him here must be truly divine and the doctrines he teaches true!"

"Nevertheless," Father Borel used to tell us, "what efforts had to be made before one could silence their crude and mocking ignorance and begin to teach them the truths of the Gospel! So depraved were they, that at times the priest's own words were misinterpreted into scandalous meaning. The particular phraseology for vice in its various forms and ways is so developed, that unless one has inside knowledge and long experience, he may at any moment, on speaking or preaching before such an audience, give rise to obscene snickering. Hence, one has to make a superhuman effort to maintain self-control and calm and not lose his line of reasoning. And yet, no matter how hard one tries, one cannot avoid all those words to which human depravity has given a double meaning. Even sacred words have, at times, a filthy meaning for these wretches. Hence, when such words must be used, a priest must interrupt his sentence, and with digressions and stern warnings, castigate the wickedness of vice before explaining the true meaning of the word he is about to use.

"Moreover, such rough men cannot suddenly raise their minds to supernatural thoughts. One must often begin by training them to mount the lowest steps, showing them that crime leads also to temporal harm, that virtuous living yields an abundance of advantages on this earth."

This was the course Don Bosco followed in dealing with convicts. Once he had gained their confidence and friendship, he would often ask them by way of a favor, to do things which, if simply demanded of them as a duty they would have refused. And so, to please Don Bosco, they refrained from foul language, blasphemy and fighting. The inmates felt moved at seeing themselves loved and esteemed by a priest reputed to be a saint. Thus Don Bosco attracted them to himself so as to lead them towards God, whom he described as a most loving Father, ever at their side to aid them, while all those

in whose love they trusted had abandoned them. As a result he acquired such an ascendancy over them, that his appearance was greeted with joy and cordiality.

With persuasive words, Don Bosco then would teach and explain the catechism to these dear friends of his. He often enlivened his talks with pleasing and familiar comparisons, with ingenious allegories, or with gospel parables suitable to their intelligence and spiritual needs. He never failed to add some striking event of Holy Scripture or church history to bolster his teaching. The amusing tales which enlivened his conferences made them ever more popular. By means of this method the prisoners easily learned and never forgot the truths and precepts of the catechism, and they made their own the firm faith of their lovable teacher. Thus, even the most obstinate were won over, becoming receptive to the inspirations of divine grace, as they were gradually drawn to make a good confession.

But all this arduous labor did not make for as much progress as it would, if it had been steady. At times, the work was interrupted and had to be resumed: at other times everything failed and it was necessary to begin anew. The weekly arrival of new prisoners inured to evil, the disciplinary measures with which the warden was obliged to punish their insubordinations, the fights and hatreds engendered among themselves for trivial reasons, prison sentences heavier than anticipated—all these things would make the good priest's hopes vanish; but with heroic constancy and fortitude he again resumed his labor and continued imperturbably. Meanwhile, he himself prayed and asked for prayers at the many institutions where he exercised his sacred ministry, repeating a motto that had become familiar to him: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me." (Phil. 4, 13)

Hence, he never ceased to redouble his solicitude and his visits, and to repeat catechism lessons and admonitions even when the convicts either did not want to listen or did so with indifference. But what Don Bosco saw in each of them was a precious soul, beautiful despite its defilement, and destined for heaven; a soul which he had to save. In fact, as Father Borel affirms, he never complained either of his many discomforts or of their ingratitude.

With his penetrating, almost spiritual glance, Don Bosco studied



each individual's inclinations, desires, and internal conflicts. Surprisingly and tactfully he discovered in their hearts seeds of virtue choked by thorns of vice: tender memories of an innocent childhood, love for their native villages, homesickness for their distant families, dejection for their loss of honor. These seeds he so expertly cultivated, that eventually he brought these convicts to their knees before God, resolved to change their way of life. What mournful and dismal stories he must have heard in those instances when a convict, resting his head on Don Bosco's shoulder, would confide in filial abandonment his most secret miseries. Thus the poor wretch obtained mercy and pardon in the very place where men condemned him to be punished. Don Bosco would then speak to him of God's infinite love, mingling his own tears with the convict's, and would lead him to accept the punishment of human justice in a spirit of Christian atonement.

Many were the hours that Don Bosco spent hearing confessions in the damp, filthy, stench-ridden common cells, amid the racket of the ill-disposed, deeply regretting that he had no control over the place or the people, so that he could be unhampered in his zeal.

Some things were physically repelling, but there was nothing he could do about them. For example, Don Bosco had to find a place where there would be less disturbance when a convict made his confession. There were no chairs, and the priest had to sit on a filthy mattress, and sometimes even near a nauseating container, from which he had to further withdraw when an inmate approached to take care of his physical needs. How loathsome! And with heroic patience Don Bosco overcame his repugnance so many times! When necessary, however, he joined determination to goodness and patience.

One day he was called to the infirmary to a seriously ill young thug who wished to make his confession. He was sitting by the bed listening to the convict when he noticed near the pillow a large knife overlooked by some careless guard. Dexterously he took it and pocketed it. Confession over, the prisoner turned towards the pillow. He rummaged under it and even under the mattress. "What are you looking for?" asked Don Bosco. "This perhaps?" and he showed him the knife.

"Yes, give it to me! Give it to me!"

"No, I will not."

"But I want it."

"I will not give it to you. You'd better tell me what you intended to do with it."

"All right, on my word of honor, I'll tell you. It's months that I have been rotting in this jail without trial or release, so I had decided to stab you. Then there would be a reason for my punishment."

The unfortunate man may have been joking, but Don Bosco knew that with such people one had to be wary. Nevertheless, even such types he tried to bring back to God.

So much good could not be achieved without great and constant prudence. There were the guards, whose goodwill Don Bosco needed to gain free access to the inmates, and to minister to their spiritual welfare without delays or obstacles. Prison guards [of those days] tended to be sullen, rude and scornful, due perhaps to the nature of their work, which not only isolated them from society, but also earned for them little respect and even aversion. Any slight transgression of the prison rules by Don Bosco, any action of his taken amiss, or a misinterpreted kind word to the prisoners could provoke a hostile report to the authorities, who would not have hesitated to deny him access to the prisons. So Don Bosco treated the guards with great deference, and respectful cordiality, which, under the circumstances, called for the exercise of much virtue. He calmly ignored their discourtesies, charitably interceded on their behalf when they incurred punishment, generously gave them substantial tips and other gifts, with courteous insistence if they demurred, and thereby acquired a great ascendancy over them. Here is one of many incidents.

Leaving the prisoners' quarters one day, unaccompanied by a guard, Don Bosco took the wrong staircase and entered a room he had not seen before. Here he met a man and his wife and daughter, all embarrassed and surprised at his appearance. The man was the executioner. Realizing his error and realizing where he was, Don Bosco wished them a cordial good day. Unaccustomed to visitors or to respectful treatment, they returned his salutation and asked

what he wanted. Don Bosco had already decided on his approach. "I am very tired and would appreciate a cup of coffee. Would you kindly give me one?"

At such an unexpected request the family replied together with eager joy: "Certainly!" The daughter ran to make it. The executioner was staring at Don Bosco in amazement and with some emotion he asked: "Don Bosco, do you know who I am?"

"Of course I do. You are a good man."

"But how could you be so kind as to visit an executioner?"

"I know that you are a good and devout man." (This was true. Whenever an execution was scheduled, the executioner would send five *lire* to a nearby church for a Mass to be said for the condemned man.) "I would like to be friends with you."

The poor man, never having been treated so affably by his betters, was beside himself. He offered Don Bosco whatever he had in the house. Don Bosco sat down, and the coffee was brought in, but with only one cup.

"Bring another cup," Don Bosco requested. "I would like you to have coffee with me."

"Oh no," the executioner exclaimed; "that would be too great an honor."

But a second cup was brought in. Don Bosco poured the coffee and handed it to the executioner. Flabbergasted, the man could hardly drink it, so moved was he. Afterwards, Don Bosco stayed to chat a little while, before taking leave of the family whom he had charmed by his unexpected visit.

Word of this and similar courtesies soon spread among the guards, who acclaimed Don Bosco as a fine man, even a saintly priest, and were thereafter ready to aid him in all his undertakings for the prisoners' physical or spiritual welfare. They would tell him of the arrival of new inmates and describe their characters and inclinations; they closed an eye if his visits went beyond the scheduled time; and they immediately notified him if some patient in the prison infirmary took a turn for the worse. It was this goodwill that made it possible for Don Bosco to continue his prison ministry until 1870, freely though prudently, even after harassing orders had been issued to restrict his visits.

Don Bosco also used his influence over the prison guards to help

them make their peace with God. He would say to them, "You who are the executors of human justice should take care not to fall into the hands of divine justice." His words were always taken in good part and the guards often visited him at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales and went to confession to him. The executioner frequently attended the church services at Valdocco for a number of years.<sup>1</sup> When, however, towards 1870, the boys came to know the nature of his job and showed repugnance for him, he ceased to go there. Thereafter, though, in his walks he always went to the neighborhood of Valdocco, where he could see from a distance the rooftops and the dome of the church that reminded him of the only man in the world, perhaps, who had shown him sincere esteem and affection. His son, too, frequented the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. He was an excellent boy, deeply attached to Don Bosco, whom he chose as his confessor. He desired to become a priest, but on learning that his father's occupation constituted an ecclesiastical impediment, he became so deeply distressed that he became ill. His health declined rapidly and he died of tuberculosis with Don Bosco at his bedside.

Popular with the guards and beloved by the prisoners, Don Bosco went to preach also in other prisons: that of the *Senate*, the *General* and the *Correctionel*. He usually preached on Thursdays and concluded by saying: "I'll return this Saturday to visit you, but I want you to prepare a nice gift for me."

"What would you like?"

"Something very big; really enormous. Anything small serves no purpose and wouldn't be worth my while."

"Tell us! We're willing!"

"Each one will give me his own personal share, but a big one, a really big one!"

They were quick to understand that he was alluding to confession and would then laugh.

"I'll have something for you for sure. I've got more sins than anybody," one would say.

"That fellow over there," exclaimed another, pointing at a fellow convict, "has committed sins even worse than yours."

<sup>1</sup> The festive oratory was transferred to Valdocco in the fall of 1844. See below Chapter 26. [Editor]

A third would interject: "When it comes to that, no one can beat you!"

"Come, Don Bosco!" everybody would shout. "There'll be some pretty tales for us to tell and for you to hear."

"That's what I mean," Don Bosco would answer. "Otherwise it wouldn't be worth my while."

"Don't worry," the prisoners would assure him as they crowded around him. "You will not be disappointed."

"It's ten years since my last confession. . . ."

"Twenty for me. . . ."

"Thirty over here!"

All laughed, Don Bosco with them, and they parted till the next Saturday.

On Saturday, Don Bosco would go to the prisons. The convicts who wished to go to confession were kneeling in a row. Unusual scenes occurred at such a time, as all wanted to be first.

"It isn't fair," said one inmate to the first in line. "The fellow at the end of the line should be first. It's only six years since you've been to confession, while that fellow has not been to the sacraments for fourteen."

"But I have big sins; as big as the earth, don't you understand? I have a right to be first."

"My sins are even bigger than yours and I don't push myself ahead as you do. Move back."

"You're crazy! Do you want to bet that when it comes to sins I'm far ahead of you?"

The arrival of Don Bosco would put an end to these strange arguments, and confessions would begin. Don Bosco's norm in hearing the confessions of such rough men and boys was to make them talk by asking pertinent questions lest their minds should wander off. By practice he had learned to make each confession short. The convicts were thereby pleased and satisfied, and willingly went to him.

Sometimes, however, after a week's instruction and promises to go to confession on Saturday, whether out of human respect or some devilish deceit, none of the convicts would stir for confession when Don Bosco arrived. Somehow charity would always triumph

in the end. The first to come forward would feel so happy after his confession that the others were induced to follow suit.

These apostolic labors bore consoling fruits of conversion. Even the most recalcitrant ended by becoming sincerely attached to Don Bosco, and manifested their affection by calling on him after their release from prison.

When, afterwards, Don Bosco would learn that someone's term was up, he would endeavor to find him work with an honest employer, especially if the prisoner were young and penniless. He would then continue to take an interest in his moral conduct. He also tried every means to prevent his relapse into evil and to enable him to live honorably and save his soul. Many convicts, after leaving prison, led such honest lives (with his aid) that they even managed to attain honorable positions in society. Not so long ago, there were still in Turin many ex-convicts who, thanks to Don Bosco's zeal, had become exemplary fathers of families and honest citizens. Many of them remembered the good priest and visited him at the Oratory, continuing their friendly relations with him.

It also happened several times that some of them, many years after their release, would recall Don Bosco's warm affability and feel the urge to return to God. They would come to the Oratory from their distant homes, present themselves to Don Bosco, and say, "I am so and so. You heard my confession when I was in prison. Do you still remember me? Since then I've never been to confession. Now I come again to you, for I want to put my conscience in order. I really want to go straight."

Father Michael Rua, Bro. John Tamietti, Mr. Joseph Tomatis, Bro. Joseph Buzzetti and others were witnesses to such incidents.

## CHAPTER 20

### *Useful Contacts*

DON BOSCO'S inexhaustible activity ranged far and wide, extending to prisons, to religious institutions, to his festive oratory, and to preaching and hearing confessions in public churches. He never undertook a new mission without first apprising Archbishop Fransoni, either in writing, or personally, during his frequent visits to him in the episcopal residence where he was always warmly received. Don Bosco unfailingly turned to his ecclesiastical superior for directives whenever he was faced with difficulties in his manifold activities, or when he had to make important decisions, and to these directives he scrupulously adhered. Even years later, from time to time, we heard Don Bosco speak with reverence and love of this intimate relationship with his archbishop, and thus we could infer how dear he was to him. Then, too, whenever Don Bosco's opinion was asked regarding diocesan affairs, his respectful answer was well received by the archbishop.

Foremost in his mind was the catechism, which he regarded as one of his dearest books. While teaching it, he detected in the diocesan textbook entitled *Compendio della Dottrina Cristiana* [Compendium of Christian Doctrine] several sentences which he judged to be inexact. He studied them, made several corrections and presented them to Archbishop Fransoni, explaining his reasons for so doing. He believed that there was a discrepancy between the Italian version and the Greek and Hebrew texts. For example, in the catechism, the ninth commandment of God was: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife." Don Bosco suggested that it be rendered in a more precise, chaste and comprehensive way, more in accordance with the original text: "Do not covet thy neighbor's person." The archbishop concurred with Don Bosco's findings and praised him, but he did not wish to take it upon himself to change

anything in the diocesan catechism. He referred Don Bosco to the vicar general, Canon Philip Ravina, asking him to examine the texts and give his opinion. The canon complied: he also consulted with Canon [Joseph] Zappata and other members of the archdiocesan chapter, and the final answer was negative. Later when Canon Lawrence Gastaldi, who was acquainted with Don Bosco's opinion on the matter, became archbishop of Turin, he accepted Don Bosco's point of view and saw to it that, if not all, at least several of his revisions were made in the diocesan catechism.

Moreover, Don Bosco's frequent visits to the episcopal residence enabled him to share his ecclesiastical superior's joys and sorrows. In that year the archbishop was greatly consoled by the conversion of a young Protestant lady, both because of the conversion itself and also because of its circumstances. Don Bosco often spoke of this and other triumphs of God's grace. At that time the king and the archbishop were still on excellent terms. The following event took place in the month of June.

A daughter of the Dutch ambassador at the court of Savoy, upon being opposed by her parents in her will to abjure Protestantism and become a Catholic, fled from her home and sought sanctuary in the convent of the Lateran Canonesses [in Turin] where she was entitled to the right of asylum. Her father's demand that she be returned home was upheld by the Prussian and British envoys, but Archbishop Fransoni replied that the natural right to embrace the true Faith was superior to that of parental authority; that the girl was free to leave the sanctuary she had chosen; that her father, or someone authorized by him, could visit her and find out for himself that she had not changed her mind; that he, the archbishop, would never violate her rights by evicting her. Count [Clement Solaro della] Margherita, speaking on behalf of the king concerning the archbishop's statement, added that the convent was protected by ecclesiastical immunity and therefore above diplomatic privileges; and that, furthermore, the girl, being a foreigner, could not be coerced into acting against her will. The diplomatic corps' attempt to intervene was unsuccessful and the young lady abjured Calvin's and Luther's errors in the archbishop's presence. Shortly thereafter she was reconciled with her parents and faithfully persevered in the Catholic Faith. That is the way in which freedom of conscience was



understood in those days. The weak were helped and defended against the bullying of the strong.

Anxieties and fears, however, were not lacking, even if entwined with joys. Archbishop Frasoni and Don Bosco had foreseen and pointed out the goals of the sectaries and were aware that not a few members of the clergy, blinded by Gioberti's writings, were unconsciously preparing themselves to support the revolutionary movement. It was a crafty maneuver. The seditious of 1821 and 1831, as well as the friends of the *Giovine Italia* [Young Italy] had made a determined effort to win over the people and to present a good image of themselves by introducing and promoting popular education, literature, commerce and transportation. They were particularly interested in schools of methodology, night and Sunday schools and homes for the poor. Basically, all these things were good and were meant to win the approval of all without arousing suspicion. However, even a superficial examination would have revealed that these works were merely philanthropic and not prompted by [supernatural] charity; their scope was purely humanitarian; useful and praiseworthy, no doubt, but not inspired by the spirit of the Gospel, which teaches that only those who help the poor in Christ's name will gain Christ as an eternal reward. This exclusion of Christian motivation by the revolutionaries should have put prudent men on their guard and made them realize that these undertakings were meant to win adherents to the secret societies and that their sponsors, under the guise of working for the welfare of the people, were actually plotting against Church and State. Thus, with sectarian goals, a number of kindergartens had been opened in Tuscany; at Pisa they were actively promoted by the Protestant Matilde Calandrini who, as a matter of policy, conducted Protestant services in the classroom itself. She was the center of a group of heretics, atheists, and self-styled philosophers with no religious affiliation allegedly willing to help her educate the people. Valerio Lorenzo<sup>1</sup> and others, among them Father Ferrante Aporti,<sup>2</sup> were active in spreading these kindergartens; the latter, in particular, was credited with having introduced them into Italy according to the

<sup>1</sup> Valerio Lorenzo (1810-1865) was a liberal politician. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> Ferrante Aporti (1791-1858) was one of the foremost educators in Italy at this time. [Editor]

plan of the Scottish Protestant [Robert] Owen, a leader of a saint-simonian sect.<sup>3</sup> Aporti had opened his first kindergarten at Cremona in 1830; in the meanwhile, he was introducing a methodology of his own for elementary school teachers.<sup>4</sup>

Although Turin already boasted a flourishing Catholic kindergarten, founded as early as 1825 by Marquis Barolo and later bitterly opposed by the sectaries, nevertheless the liberals wanted to introduce the new type of kindergarten, and were all in favor of establishing a chair to train teachers in pedagogy. Bishop Dionysius Pasio of Alessandria, president of the School Reform Board, was hoodwinked by these gentlemen and unwittingly served their purpose. When Bishop Pasio wrote to the Sardinian consul in Milan<sup>5</sup> asking him to recommend some outstanding educator, the latter consulted the governor-general of Lombardy and he suggested Abbot Aporti, whom he very highly praised. Thereupon, Bishop Pasio advised King Charles Albert to invite Aporti to Turin. The king had kept Archbishop Fransoni informed of these steps, knowing that the archbishop was opposed to Bishop Pasio's plans. This was an act of solidarity with Pope Gregory XVI, who in 1839, in a circular letter to all the bishops of the Papal States, had forbidden the introduction of kindergartens of the type sponsored by Father Aporti.

The hour was drawing near for the first onslaughts against the Church by the promoters of error. Meantime, in furtherance of his mission, it was necessary for Don Bosco to establish relations with prelates and with the more outstanding religious leaders in Turin and throughout Piedmont: some were members of the diocesan clergy; others belonged to religious orders, to the judiciary and even to the king's council. These would become his most distinguished benefactors, his advisors and his alert supporters. Divine Providence was behind these contacts which could not have been made so easily or so rapidly without the circumstances preordained by the same Providence.

<sup>3</sup> Count Henri de Saint Simon (1760-1825), a French philosopher and scientist, was one of the founders of Utopian Socialism in France. [Editor]

<sup>4</sup> [Giuseppe], Montanelli, *Memorie sull'Italia e specialmente sulla Toscana, ecc.*

<sup>5</sup> Piedmont was part of the kingdom of Sardinia under the House of Savoy. Milan, in Lombardy, was then administered as an integral part of the Hapsburg Empire. [Editor]

During his visits to the archbishop's residence, Don Bosco would often meet bishops who had come for business with the archbishop, and also bishops of other ecclesiastical provinces, who frequently came to Turin also for court affairs. We think that on these occasions he made the acquaintance of many venerable personages. In fact, from the very first years of his priesthood, we see him dealing almost as an equal, we would say, except for the respect to the episcopal dignity, with Bishop Philip Artico of Asti, Bishop Modesto Contratto of Acqui, a Capuchin, and Bishop John Peter Losana of Biella. He was friendly with Bishop Clement Manzino of Cuneo, a Discalced Carmelite, Bishop Louis Moreno of Ivrea, Bishop Alexander Vincent Louis d'Angennes of Vercelli, Bishop Jacob Philip Gentile of Novara, and Bishop John Thomas Ghilardi of Mondovì, a Dominican who was held in high esteem at court and who was most zealous in fostering piety and defending the rights of the Church. To these and many others we should add the new vicar apostolic at the court of Savoy, Archbishop Anthony Antonucci, titular of Tarsus. Thus, from these very first years until the end of his life, Don Bosco had the good fortune to be in a position to follow the advice of Sirach: "Frequent the company of the elders: whoever is wise, stay close to him. Be eager to hear every godly discourse; let no wise saying escape you." (Sir. 6, 34-35)

Besides the archbishop's residence, the *Convitto* of St. Francis of Assisi was a meeting place for the cream of Piedmontese society. Bishops and other prelates, of lesser rank, came to confer with Father Guala. Among those who went to confession to Father Guala were John Anthony Oddone, who became bishop of Susa in 1845, Louis of the Counts of Calabiana, consecrated bishop of Casale in 1847, Chevalier Vasco, Chevalier [Mark] Gonella, Count [Joseph] Provana of Collegno, Silvio Pellico, the Marchioness of Ruffia, Marchioness [Julietta Colbert] Falletti of Barolo, who habitually sought his advice before opening charitable institutions, and many other eminent Turinese. Father Guala had also made friends with the Fathers of the Society of Jesus, especially Father [Anthony] Bresciani and Father Felice; the latter, Father Franco, and Father Merlino often preached at St. Francis of Assisi Church. Count Avogadro della Motta and Count Clement Solaro della Margherita often met with him and talked at great length. Even Count

Barbaroux came to consult him while compiling the new code of laws.

Then, too, there was Father Cafasso, whose spiritual direction was sought by some bishops, many pastors, priests, lawyers, men in the armed forces, doctors and merchants, besides a large number of common people. He was the confessor of nearly all the canons of the archdiocese and of not a few of the nobility, among whom were [Count Ernest Bertone] of Sambuy, [Count] Charles Albert Cays, [Count] Clement Solaro della Margherita, as well as a number of the most prominent ladies of Turin. The Duchess of Montmorency had placed all her confidence in him and sought his advice on domestic as well as spiritual matters and, later, also on her generous contributions through him to the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales.

These illustrious people were the avowed friends of the festive oratories from their very beginning. Together with other outstanding people, they witnessed the marvellous happenings of a great part of Don Bosco's life. In a short while they came to hold him in high regard, as a man entirely dedicated to the Lord—an opinion they themselves expressed to us.

## CHAPTER 21

### *First Writings*

PUBLIC opinion, fired by the needs of the times, spurred on by secret agents,<sup>1</sup> and supported by civil law demanded that the greatest possible efforts be made to educate the masses. Don Bosco was among the first to foresee how both education and the press—excellent things in themselves—would inevitably become the most powerful means with which the devil would spread evil and error among the people. France was already giving deplorable proof of this. “We must forestall this peril as much as possible,” Don Bosco repeatedly declared. “We must counter a secularistic education and press with one based on religion.” Thus it happened that he decided (and he remained steadfast in this decision throughout his life) to dedicate himself to the education of the young and the adults through good books. To this end he became a writer. This task robbed him of much needed night rest and of the little free time that remained after the daily demands of his boys, his sacred ministry and his study of moral theology.

The little desk in his room was piled high with notebooks and papers crammed with annotations which he had diligently gathered on such topics as the defense of the Faith, the Catholic Church, the Papacy, edifying episodes, devotions and other subjects, sacred and secular, for the instruction of the young. Thus he gathered material for the many books he planned to write, whose timeliness and ex-

<sup>1</sup> Of all the Italian states, Piedmont was the one in which the movement for a constitutional state was making the greatest headway. This movement, a mixture of liberalism, conservatism and radicalism, was predominantly anti-Catholic. In its view the Church usurped powers properly belonging to lay authorities. After Charles Albert's abdication in 1848, his son, Victor Emmanuel II, threw in his lot with the liberals and approved legislative measures designed to contain the Church's power within narrowly defined religious limits. This meant taking away from the Church's jurisdiction areas of social control. Chief among them was education, which the Church had always considered essential to the fulfillment of her mission. [Editor]

cellence were confirmed by their numerous reprints and favorable comments of outstanding people.

Despite his belief in the excellence and power of this mission, Don Bosco never posed as an author, nor did he ever express vain sentiments. His sole purpose was God's glory and the welfare of souls, and, distrusting himself, he never published anything without first submitting it to ecclesiastical authorities for their revision, in accordance with Church laws.

At the same time, in his humility, rather than aspire to fame as a skillful and polished writer, as he could have been, since he had had a scholarly education, he strove for simplicity of style in all his writings. He aimed, above all, at making the truths of the Catholic Faith clear to all, even the least educated workingman and housewife, thus to lead them to God. To this end, as soon as he had written a booklet, before sending it to the printer, he would read it to persons of scant education and then ask them if they had understood it. If a word or the meaning of some phrase was not clear, if the expression was too classical or beyond them, he would go over it, and rewrite whole paragraphs again and again, until he was sure that they understood what it meant. Thus he developed the proper method to follow, not only when writing, but also when preaching to people with little or no education. Though he avoided pompous verbiage or elegant expressions, he did not neglect to blend the purity and propriety of language with smoothness and clarity, so as to render his writings pleasing and instructive to all classes of people. Consequently, they were avidly read by the young and the adults. "His first editor" [we might say], wrote Father Angelo Savio,<sup>2</sup> "was the *Convitto's* doorman."

And now let us visualize Don Bosco as he first takes up his pen, never to set it down again. Ever present in his mind was his dear friend Louis Comollo.<sup>3</sup> He could still hear Louis' delirious words one night before his death, when he cried out against his soul's enemies: "With your powerful help, O Mary, I triumphed over all my evil enemies! . . . Yes, you are the vanquished . . . I am the victor! . . . Hers is the victory! . . ." These words Don Bosco

<sup>2</sup> A pupil of Don Bosco in the first years of the oratory and later a Salesian. [Editor]

<sup>3</sup> See Vol. I, Chs. 38, 51 and 52. [Editor]

had jotted down in his drafts of sermons, and he repeatedly mentioned them in his sermons.

Aside from the many favors believed to have been obtained from God through this saintly youth's intercession, Don Bosco had been greatly impressed by a singular incident which he kept secret until his last days, when he confided it to one close to him.

About four years after Louis' death,<sup>4</sup> some of his fellow seminarians, anxious to see the condition of the corpse, without their superiors' knowledge, plotted with great secrecy to open his tomb. Removing a stone slab, they descended into the crypt, lit some torches, and found the coffin on the ground to the left of the main altar. They opened it and saw that the youth's corpse was incorrupt, his features unaltered. Deeply moved and filled with wonderment, they tore off part of his cassock to keep as relics. They did something else, and, inexcusably: they cut off a finger. They then closed the coffin, replaced the stone slab, and removed every trace of their misdeed. A few days later one of them called on Don Bosco, and with an air of mystery said to him: "I must tell you something very important. Promise that you'll keep it a secret."

"I will, if it does not offend God or harm anybody."

"It's none of that, but woe to us if anybody finds out." He then revealed what they had done. Then he unwrapped a little package and presenting the finger added: "I took this relic for you!"

Don Bosco could hardly believe his eyes: the flesh was soft and had the same color as that of a living person. He was troubled, and he censured the deed, for it had not been authorized. He refused the gift and, after insisting that the finger be buried again in consecrated ground, he made them understand how severe were the penalties prescribed by civil law for violating a tomb. So disgusted was he, that he did not want to think about it any more; otherwise it would have been possible to have the fact authenticated. Fifty or more years later, when some work was done in the crypt, the coffin was found to contain only the bare skeleton.

High esteem and veneration for Louis Comollo had motivated that imprudence; but Don Bosco, in order to accede to his friends' wishes, decided to perpetuate Louis' memory by presenting him as a model for young men, especially those aspiring to the priesthood.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Comollo died on April 2, 1839. [Editor]

Louis Comollo's biography was his first booklet, and he wrote it while he was still in the seminary. When it was ready, he presented it to his superiors for their examination and opinion.

In describing Louis' frightening dream shortly before his death, Don Bosco had written, strictly for himself and not for publication, the names of various persons whom Louis had confidentially told Don Bosco [then a seminarian] he had seen falling into hell or already there. This amounted to a corroboration of what he had narrated. The names were those of prominent people, respected and reputed for virtue. Those superiors who knew some weakness of theirs were horrified at this revelation. Some of these people were dead but others were still living. Naturally, the superiors deleted those names before giving their approval for the publication of the biography in 1844. This first edition was anonymous and entitled: *Cenni storici sulla vita di Luigi Comollo, morto nel Seminario di Chieri, ammirato da tutti per le sue singolari virtù, scritti da un suo Collega*.<sup>5</sup> [Historic Account of the Life of Louis Comollo who died in the seminary of Chieri, admired by all for his singular virtues. Written by a fellow seminarian]. There was this preface.

To the Chieri Seminarians:

Since virtuous deeds are much more important than elegant discourses, it is quite proper to present to you a short biography of one who lived with you under the same roof and under the same discipline. Because of this, he may serve as a model for you, and help you to be worthy of the sublime goal to which you aspire—to become, one day, worthy levites in the Lord's vineyard.

True, this manuscript lacks two important things: a polished style and elegant phrasing. For these reasons I have bided my time, in the hope that a better writer would undertake this task. But since I waited in vain, I have finally decided to do it myself as best I can. I was urged to write it by the repeated requests of my fellow seminarians and of other people. I am sure that your esteem for your departed friend, and your great piety will know how to condone, and even supplement my deficiencies.

Although I cannot dazzle you with fine phrases, I am happy to tell you that what I have written is the truth, for I myself witnessed or heard

<sup>5</sup> Tipografia Speirani e Ferrero, Torino, 1844.



these things, or learned them from trustworthy persons. You can judge for yourselves, since you too witnessed many of the events.

If, in reading these pages, you feel encouraged to practice some of his virtues, then be grateful to God, to whom alone I dedicate this work, as I pray that it be beneficial to you.

With words no less affectionate did Don Bosco conclude Louis' biography. May his words be read and meditated upon each year not only by boys but also by seminarians.

Louis Comollo's edifying illness and death, replete with virtuous sentiments of piety, aroused in many seminarians the desire to emulate him. Not a few determined to put into practice the counsels and admonitions he had given them while still alive. Others followed his virtuous examples so well, that some who had not shown any clear signs of a vocation, resolved to become models of virtue after Louis' death.

"It was Louis' death," one of his fellow seminarians said, "which made me resolve to lead a truly virtuous life and become a good priest. Although this resolution has been ineffective so far, I am not discouraged; in fact, I want to redouble my daily efforts."

That these resolutions were not merely impulsive and momentary is proven by the fact that the influence of Louis' virtues is still felt nowadays. A few months ago the seminary rector told me that the students' change in deportment as the result of Louis' death was no passing phenomenon. It still lasts.

Here we should remark that this is mainly due to two apparitions by Louis Comollo after his death. One of them was witnessed by an entire dormitory of his fellow seminarians.

In the first edition of 3,000 copies, Don Bosco barely mentioned these miraculous events. It was not until 1884, that, in answer to our pleas, he consented to give a detailed account of one of these apparitions. The above stated reasons<sup>6</sup> explain the fright engendered by the second apparition. It was necessary that not only Samuel,

<sup>6</sup> When Louis Comollo confided to Don Bosco, then a fellow seminarian, his dream on hell, he also revealed to him the names of well-known and highly esteemed people whom he had seen in hell or about to fall into it. See p. 155. [Editor]

but also some of Eli's sons, should hear the Lord's voice. [Cf. 1 Kgs. 3, 3ff]

Meanwhile Don Bosco was offering his literary firstfruits to the Blessed Virgin, as two bouquets of flowers. The first was the aforementioned biography, which was an illustration of Mary's protection in life and death of a devoted seminarian. The second was a booklet entitled: *Corona dei sette dolori di Maria, con sette brevi considerazioni sopra i medesimi, esposte in forma della Via Crucis* [Chaplet of the Seven Sorrows of Mary, brief meditations designed as a Way of the Cross]. He wrote it while still at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, on the occasion of the solemn novena and feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, an annual celebration at St. Francis of Assisi Church, the home of a sodality in honor of Our Lady under this title whose dues were 15 *soldi*.

This 42 page booklet opened with the *Corona* which later on was reprinted in the *Giovane Provveduto*<sup>7</sup> with the Stabat Mater and other ritual prayers, but without the very short prayers that followed the mention of each sorrow. In these short prayers one asks the Blessed Virgin: for grace to be ever mindful of Our Lord's Passion; to be freed from the persecution of the visible and invisible enemies of the soul; that all sinners seeking Jesus in true contrition may find Him again; to be able to accompany Jesus to Calvary with unceasing sorrow for our sins; to beg from God grace to seek, through constant meditation, Jesus, crucified by our sins; to wash away continuously with our tears of true contrition the mortal wounds inflicted upon Jesus by our sins; lastly, that all sinners may understand the harm done to the soul by staying away from God.

The seven tender meditations on the Seven Sorrows, which are not found in the *Giovane Provveduto*, implored Our Lady for the grace of responding to God's mercy in order to merit eternal salvation; for the ever abiding presence of Jesus and Mary in our hearts; for the finding of Jesus again, if lost through evil passions or temptations of the devil; for Mary's pardon for our offenses to Her; for the recognition of the great value of suffering; for the softening of our hearts, and true repentance for the sins which have caused Her so

<sup>7</sup> The *Giovane Provveduto* is a prayer book compiled by Don Bosco for the young. The English version is entitled *The Companion of Youth* and is available from Salesian Publications, Blaisdon Hall, Longhope, England, or from Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, N.Y., U.S.A. [Editor]

much suffering; that our last breath may be united to Mary's sighs, as they issued from the bottom of Her heart during Our Lord's Passion.

The booklet had the following introduction:

The primary purpose of this little work is to facilitate the recollection and meditation of the bitter sorrows of Mary's tender heart. These practices are most gratifying to Her, as She Herself has more than once revealed to Her devotees, and also most efficacious to us in obtaining Her protection.

To make these meditations easier, they are first presented as a crown commemorating Mary's Seven Sorrows; then one should meditate upon each, as though performing the Way of the Cross.

May the Lord accompany us with His divine grace and blessing, that we may succeed in our endeavors, and that we may be truly and frequently mindful of Mary's sorrows for our spiritual welfare and for God's greater glory.

This booklet, printed anonymously from the presses of Speirani and Ferrero, had a wide circulation and several reprints. It further proves Don Bosco's lifelong tender devotion to the Passion of Our Lord and the sorrows of His heavenly Mother which we saw remain so ardent in him to the very end of his life. It was no accident that Divine Providence disposed that the renowned artist [Joseph] Rollini should paint Our Lady of Sorrows on Don Bosco's tomb. It reminds Don Bosco's sons of their spiritual father's admonition never, by their conduct, to be a cause of sorrow to their most loving heavenly Mother, so that She may not have to say of any one of them: "All you who pass by the way, look and see whether there is any suffering like my suffering." (Lam. 1,12)

## CHAPTER 22

### *A Spiritual Guide*

THE year 1844 saw a change in the duties of the *Convitto's* superiors. Father Guala's leg pains became so intense that he was obliged to give up his regular preaching and lecturing on moral theology, and to entrust to Father Cafasso all scholastic and disciplinary matters. Confined to his room, Father Guala limited his activity to the overall management. Whenever his infirmity kept him from celebrating Mass, he would, to the student's edification, receive Holy Communion. This desire to be united with his Redeemer in the Holy Eucharist was a sublime lesson to the student priests.

Don Bosco became Father Cafasso's assistant, coaching the less gifted students in moral theology, and sometimes preaching in St. Francis of Assisi Church. Father Cafasso was very much impressed with Don Bosco's extraordinary ability to plan his daily activities. He also had a persistent idea concerning his young friend, which he would not disclose, and an unabating esteem for him which came close to veneration. Bishop Cagliero was an eye witness to this for a good ten years.

When he had first come to the *Convitto*, Don Bosco had confided everything to his spiritual director, among other things, a dream in which he had seen himself as a tailor mending old clothes.<sup>1</sup> Father Cafasso had looked at him intently and asked: "Can you mend clothes?"

"Yes, and I can also make trousers, jackets, coats and even cassocks."

"We'll put you to the test!" And every time they met he would ask: "How are things, tailor?"

<sup>1</sup> See vol. I, p. 285. [Editor]

Grasping the meaning of this query Don Bosco would reply: "I am awaiting your decision."

Father Cafasso, discerning and farsighted in judging men, scrutinized each student's character and inclinations before assigning him a suitable place in God's vineyard. "His profound knowledge of moral, ascetic and mystical theology," wrote Don Bosco, "combined with his alert insight and sharp discernment of souls, enabled him to fathom and sum up in a few words the ability, piety, learning, propensities and capabilities of each of his student priests. He would always say: 'This one will be a good pastor, that one, a good curate, a third one, a good chaplain; here is a prudent spiritual director for a convent; there is a worthy director of a school.' If someone asked him personally, he would reply: 'You'll make an excellent prison chaplain'; or, 'Your mission is to assist patients in hospitals where you'll do much good.' To others: 'You'll become a well-known and successful Lenten preacher, a zealous missionary, a good teacher and catechist, a reliable spiritual director.' Events always proved him right."

Among the *Convitto's* students, this engendered unlimited confidence in his judgment, and no one ever regretted having followed his advice.

Don Bosco's primary purpose at the *Convitto* was study; all his other undertakings, complex though they were, he regarded as merely accessory. He was intensely interested in sacred studies, especially bible and church history. He had special plans for these subjects. The peace and silence that reigned in the monastery of the *Monte dei Cappuccini* [Capuchin Hill] and that of the *Madonna di Campagna* [Our Lady of the Fields], where he had several close friends among the Capuchins, made him desirous of retiring for a while among them, or in some other solitary place, to deepen his knowledge and better prepare himself for preaching.

One day he disclosed this desire to Father Cafasso, whose only reply was a smile.

Nor did he abandon the idea of becoming a missionary. He felt strongly inclined to bring the light of the Gospel to infidels and savages, among whom he would meet thousands, even millions of boys. He was enthused over the fact that after a perilous and almost uncharted journey, the Oblates of Mary had, in 1839, pene-

trated the kingdoms of Ava and Pegu,<sup>2</sup> where they preached the true Faith; and that, in 1842, this missionary territory had been entrusted to them, and a member of their congregation had been appointed bishop. Great were the fruits of their apostolic labors. Father Cafasso, who noted everything Don Bosco undertook, let him study French and Spanish, but when he began to take up English, he told him outright: "The foreign missions are not for you!"

"Why not?" asked Don Bosco.

"Just try to go. You can't even stand a minute in a closed carriage, let alone travel a mile, without getting sick to your stomach. You have repeatedly found that out and you want to cross the ocean? You'd die during the voyage." Thus, this project too went up in smoke, not so much because of an unsurmountable difficulty, but out of compliance with his superior's advice.

Other ideas that kept cropping up gave him no rest, especially toward the close of his third year at the *Convitto*. Don Bosco had a lofty esteem and strong love for every religious order and congregation. Destined by God to found the *Pia Società di S. Francesco di Sales* [The Pious Society of St. Francis de Sales], he believed and felt that he was called to the religious life. He himself confided this to Father Angelo Savio, a pupil of his at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales in its early years. He was so convinced of this calling, which he felt sure would also provide him with the means for the steady care of boys, that he discussed it with the Oblates of Mary on his visits to the shrine of *La Consolata* [Our Lady of Consolation]. Therefore, whether the old idea of becoming an Oblate of Mary had been rekindled,<sup>3</sup> or whether he wished to startle Father Cafasso out of his prudent reserve and elicit from him an authoritative reply in reference to his vocation, Don Bosco told Father Cafasso of his new train of thought. The holy priest listened attentively to all his plans and arguments, and when Don Bosco finished speaking he gave him only a sharp and resolute "No!"

Amazed though he was at Father Cafasso's tone, Don Bosco

<sup>2</sup> Ava and Pegu were the ancient capitals of Upper and Lower Burma respectively. [Editor]

<sup>3</sup> See Vol. I, p. 380f. [Editor]

refrained from even inquiring about the reason for this refusal. He continued to pray fervently that the Blessed Virgin might show him how and where best to exercise his sacred ministry on behalf of souls. Despite his strong inclination to dedicate himself especially to the welfare of more neglected boys through the festive oratory, he still did not want to rely on his own judgment, fearing that he might have misconstrued his dreams, clear though they were. Meanwhile the time was approaching when, according to the *Convitto's* regulations, Don Bosco would have to leave and decide on the kind of priestly duties he would assume. A number of pastors were seeking him as their curate, among them Father Joseph Comollo, pastor at Cinzano and uncle of the deceased seminarian Louis Comollo. Father Comollo had obtained Archbishop Frasoni's consent to have Don Bosco become administrator of his parish, since he himself could no longer care for it, due to old age and sickness. This assignment, however, would be quite brief, for the old priest was nearing the end of his days. But God, who lovingly cared for so many poor boys, had plans also for the one who was to be instrumental in their salvation. One day Father Guala called Don Bosco to his room. The latter knew nothing, as yet, of the appointment made by the archbishop. Father Guala advised him to write a letter to the archbishop, thank him for the honorable position offered him, but respectfully decline it, since he felt no inclination towards it. Don Bosco obeyed and his request was granted. We can deduce from this how Father Guala also had an intuition of what Don Bosco's life work would be.

The time had now come for the yearly spiritual retreat at St. Ignatius Shrine<sup>4</sup> and so Father Cafasso told Don Bosco: "To make a right decision in your vocation, you must meditate upon it before Our Lord and pray, pray much. A spiritual retreat is about to start at St. Ignatius. Go there and beseech God to make His will clear to you. Then let me know your intentions."

Don Bosco set out with Father Cafasso who, foreseeing the extensive mission and the grave responsibilities his pupil would assume, wanted to prepare him to be the worthy executor of God's plan. It was June. For the first time Father Cafasso was preaching the meditations to the priests. He was well prepared: the past ten

<sup>4</sup> See p. 96. [Editor]

years had also made him ready for the instructions, and from then until his death, he preached almost every year at one or two retreats. His plain, simple words, outlining the exact Christian and ecclesiastical obligations, were persuasive, touched the heart, moved his listeners to tears, and spurred them on to a holier life. The good he did was far reaching. It was not he who spoke, but God's grace. Everyone was anxious to hear him again the following year. All the priests on retreat went to Father Cafasso for confession and left in joy and peace, full of ardor, zeal and courage, comforted, and determined to better their lives and persevere in their good resolves.

Don Bosco took part also in the laymen's retreat. Father Guala insisted on being taken up there to preach it. Afterwards, Don Bosco returned to the *Convitto* and expectantly waited, anxious to know what Father Cafasso would tell him, now that the retreat was over. But it seemed that Father Cafasso had no such intention. Don Bosco's future seemed somewhat perplexing. It was certain that he was going to leave the *Convitto*, and, Father Guala had intimated that diocesan positions and dignities were not for him. On the other hand, Father Cafasso was against his entering a religious order or volunteering for the foreign missions. What was he to do? He felt the need for spiritual and material assistance, but to whom could he turn? What would his spiritual director decide? To learn Father Cafasso's mind he resorted to a sort of stratagem. He went to him and told him that he had packed his few belongings and that before leaving to become a religious he had come to pay his respects. With a friendly smile, the good priest replied: "Why the hurry? Who will take care of your boys? Don't you think that you have been doing them some good?"

"Yes, but if Our Lord wants me in the religious life, He will have someone else care for them!"

Father Cafasso looked at him very gravely and with a certain fatherly solemnity said: "My dear Don Bosco, forget about becoming a religious. Unpack your trunk, if you ever did pack it, and continue to work for your boys. This and naught else is God's will!" Smilingly, Don Bosco bowed his head to his spiritual director's grave and resolute words. He had found out what he wanted to know. True, the road he would have to follow, the means and the



location were still unknown, but he did not worry. God, who had spoken through Father Cafasso, would provide. He knew he could expect crosses, privations, adversities, humiliations; but he was not frightened. "Charity . . . is not ambitious." (1 Cor. 13,5) He could have aspired to honorable positions. With his talents and his tact in dealing with people and situations, with his firmness and determination, a brilliant and lucrative career would have been his, with the possibility of even high offices. Instead, he accepted poor boys as his inheritance and lifework. Only an ardent love of his fellowmen could have induced him to accept so heavy, yet so welcome, a sacrifice.

## CHAPTER 23

### *Controversial School Reforms*

ON July 10, 1844, an edict of Charles Albert established throughout Piedmont the so-called *method* schools, which now go by the name of *normal* schools. Their purpose was to instruct elementary school teachers in the best teaching methods. Their first instructor was to be Father Ferrante Aporti, whom Charles Albert had called to Turin from Cremona. Letters of high recommendation from the viceroy of Lombardy<sup>1</sup> had led to his choice.

Father Aporti's arrival in Turin was a triumph. By their noisy welcome and applause, the liberals and sectarians openly declared him to be one of their own. Meanwhile, from Lombardy, Archbishop Frasoni had received rather unfavorable reports regarding this priest. There were overtones of war by the godless against God and His Church.

The *method* school was formally opened on August 26, 1844, in a hall of the Royal University, and was to be in session until the end of September. No one would be admitted to examinations for certification as an elementary school teacher in the provinces of Turin, Pinerolo and Susa starting from the school year 1844-45, without an attendance certificate from the *method* school. Examinations were scheduled for September 30; certificates for first and second year elementary school teachers and for professors of *method* would be issued by the university secretariat. No sooner did Father Aporti start his pedagogy lectures, than the liberal writers gave them so much praise and publicity that thinking men became apprehensive. Meanwhile Don Bosco kept watch to see what would develop.

<sup>1</sup> Cremona, situated in Lombardy, was then administered as an integral part of the Hapsburg Empire. [Editor]

The archbishop notified the School Reform Board that he disapproved of the attendance of ecclesiastics at Father Aporti's lectures, and he directed that there be posted in every church sacristy a handwritten letter of his, forbidding every priest of his archdiocese from doing so. The king went into a rage and declared that he would not revoke either Father Aporti's appointment or the *method* lectures. Liberal councilors who had the king's injudicious ear, fanned the flames of his royal indignation. One of the surest ways of betraying the king was to set him against Archbishop Frasoni by discrediting with calumny this great prelate whose good sense, virtue and steadfast integrity hindered their designs.

Meanwhile, letters were exchanged between the king, then staying at Racconigi, and the archbishop, who paid him a visit to clarify his stand in the controversy. Charles Albert received him with coldness at first, because he was obviously still upset; but soon he warmed to him, listened to his words, and ended by declaring himself thoroughly satisfied with the archbishop's explanations. But it was not long before the king's anger was rekindled. The archbishop had reprimanded a pastor in Turin for permitting Father Aporti to celebrate Mass in his church without the chancery's previous authorization. This was a ruling of the archdiocesan synod, a dutiful act of obedience towards ecclesiastical authority, flouted by Father Aporti but necessary to avoid incurring suspension from the priestly ministry. Perhaps courtiers had presented this incident as a deliberate affront to the sovereign himself. Thenceforth discord broke off the warm relations which till then had existed between king and archbishop. Father Aporti became such a favorite of the king that the latter, some years later, [1848] recommended him to Pius IX for promotion to the archbishopric of Genoa. The king also appointed him a senator of the realm. But even though the king was acting in good faith, the archbishop's moves were based on facts and not mere suspicion. From well informed sources and from Don Bosco, he had received disturbing reports. Although a young priest, Don Bosco was on excellent terms with many influential persons at every level. He had friends among civil servants, staff members of the royal palace, high-ranking military officers and Turin university professors. Some through

friendship, some in an unguarded answer to a discreet inquiry, others for motives of conscience, made known to him the little or much that they either suspected, or knew for certain from tell-tale indications or indiscretion on the part of some who had secret inside knowledge. In fact, a number of teachers were secretly engaged in a conspiracy to banish from the classrooms any vestige of Catholic Faith. With satanic cunning they were drawing up a long-range teaching program which, if followed consistently and patiently over a period of time, would unobtrusively destroy all faith in the children's hearts. For this reason, the archbishop feared the insidious plans directed against the Church and consequently also against the throne. The position of those in the know was most delicate, so they begged the archbishop never to reveal their identity. He was far too prudent ever to compromise anyone.

Since reports on the *method* school were contradictory and he wanted to know exactly what was being taught, he directed Don Bosco to investigate and report to him personally. Don Bosco then began attending Father Aporti's lectures at the university and in no time made his acquaintance. Many teachers were attending the course, so many that the large hall was filled. Among Father Aporti's students was Father Jacopo Bernardi, a learned emigrant from Venice,<sup>2</sup> and Professor Ranieri, a man of sound principles and a renowned educator, who had fallen for Father Aporti's teachings. Some fifteen or twenty boys sat up in front, forming a demonstration class in practice teaching.

What religious ideas formed the basis of Father Aporti's pedagogic system was not easy to detect, due to the numerous and cryptic maxims with which he cloaked his true intentions. However, Don Bosco soon noticed that the truths of faith were indirectly excluded. Father Aporti did not want hell ever to be mentioned to the young. At one time he exclaimed: "Why talk of hell to children? Such morbid ideas can only hurt them. Such fears are not good for their upbringing." The holy fear of God was thus excluded. He then propounded theories which, though not openly eroding religious truths, could nevertheless be considered infected

<sup>2</sup> Father Jacopo Bernardi (1813-1897) was an educator and a liberal. He taught history and philosophy in Venice, but had to flee to Piedmont because of his liberal ideas. At that time, Venice, like Lombardy, was administered as an integral part of the Hapsburg Empire. [Editor]

with heresy. For example, he would ask the boys, one at a time, "Who is Jesus Christ?" The boys would give various answers. After much questioning, he would solemnly say: "Jesus Christ, God's Word, is the eternal Supernatural Truth." That Christ was true God and true man, that His human and divine natures were united in one person, was not mentioned. Then he would ask, "Who is the Blessed Virgin?" The boys would give answers which Aporti would reject, stating, "The Blessed Virgin is a privileged Person," without explaining what made Her "privileged." In private conversation with Father Aporti, Don Bosco asked him why he did not explain his definitions. Father Aporti replied that young people were not yet capable of understanding them.

After a few weeks Don Bosco gave the archbishop a factual report. Archbishop Frasoni listened to him attentively and then said: "That's enough. Don't go there any more." Thenceforth Don Bosco stayed away from Father Aporti's lectures.

Father Aporti also introduced Robert Owen's system in the Po kindergarten. There all the pictures of the Blessed Virgin and the Saints were banned from the walls and were not to be given to the children as prizes. Only the crucifix was permitted in the classrooms. The kindergarten regulations were not inspired by that truly Catholic spirit which should have first place in the children's hearts and minds. This, too, Don Bosco had noticed and reported to the archbishop, as also the obvious design to crowd together in the classroom little boys and girls, with great danger to the candor of their souls. "One mangy little lamb," said Don Bosco, "will suffice to infect all the others: the infection will spread among those candid souls like lightning." Many years later, when Father Francis Cerruti, [S.D.B.] showed him the introduction he had written to the regulations for the kindergartens of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco, recalling those days said to Father Cerruti: "Do you want to know who Father Aporti really was? He was the spokesman of all who want to reduce religion to a mere sentiment. Never forget this: one of the evil features of modern pedagogy is its aversion to mentioning eternal truths and, above all, death and hell."

The archbishop was deeply troubled by all this. At first he bided

his time, hoping perhaps that the king, on realizing what was happening, since he neither wanted nor knew about it, would put an end to it. At the same time, he remained adamant in refusing to permit his diocesan priests to attend Father Aporti's lectures. Perhaps he feared the adverse influence of these lectures on his younger teaching priests. In fact, the agitation aroused by Gioberti's writings was gathering momentum.

However, there were bishops and eminent laymen who did not fully agree with the archbishop. They realized that these innovations had come to stay. In fact, on August 1, 1845, by royal decree, the "Teachers' Method School" at the university was designated as the training school for teachers majoring in education. It was a one-year course. The regional *method* schools for the training of elementary school teachers were to provide a course from August 1 to October 20. Father Aporti continued to inspire and supervise them.

Though Bishop Losana of Biella, who was Councilor Extraordinary of the Realm, approved whatever was good in these *method* schools, he nevertheless feared the spread of secularism among the people. He, therefore, hastened to make it obligatory for all seminarians to take the examination for certification as elementary school teachers prior to their ordination. Bishop Ghilardi took the same precautions so that the clergy might retain control of elementary education. Both succeeded in their intent. Bishop Charvaz of Pinerolo sent his vicar general to Turin to attend Aporti's lectures.

The kindergartens, as well as the evening and Sunday classes then in the planning stage, also weighed heavily on Archbishop Frasoni's mind. As regards the kindergartens, trouble could easily have been prevented by entrusting their operation to Sisters. The children would then receive a sound religious education. All that was needed was to increase the number of teaching Sisters, and this posed no difficulty, for there were not as yet legal qualifications set for kindergarten teachers. Marquis and Marchioness Barolo had done just that, and later, fortunately, many municipalities and private persons had followed suit. But unfortunately one could not then imagine or foresee the spread of kindergartens in every

city and town. As the number of factories employing hundreds of married women grew, a place to care for small children would become a social need.

Before passing judgment on the evening and Sunday schools, Archbishop Frasoni queried Father [Maria Antonio] Durando, superior of the Vincentians, who wisely replied in writing that, "If well supervised, these schools can produce excellent results; mismanaged or controlled by people without moral principles, they can foster irreligion. It is therefore necessary that pastors should gain control over them and make them religious, otherwise in a number of them the teachers and directors will be those *young ladies and gentlemen* who do not even attend Mass on Sundays or holy days. Should they be abandoned to farm cooperatives we would one day regret it, but in vain, for by then faith and good morals would already have been effaced."

Don Bosco fully agreed with Bishop Losana, Bishop Ghilardi, Marquis Barolo and Father Durando. He said so countless times, and repeatedly told several bishops to meet the challenge of the new times and devise new ways of safeguarding the youth of their dioceses. "Rather than worry about where these institutions get their inspiration and backing," he said, "one should carefully study their nature and, if good in themselves, strive to give them a sound Christian direction, and thereby save them from corruptive irreligious influences." In due time he himself, as we shall see, practiced what he preached. If these counsels and measures had been accepted and promptly put into effect, perhaps a great deal of harm would have been avoided, and clergymen and devout laymen would not have been looked upon as enemies of science, of education, and of the public good.

Yet, it should be noted, that at the time, the issues were not as yet clear. The sectaries had rushed to carry out their secretly drawn plans, and the clergy and the laity were unprepared for the struggle. Many priests did not grasp the gravity of the situation, and would in any case, have hesitated to support what seemed a useless opposition, for the government continued to pay lip service to religion. The archbishop's disagreement with the king alienated from him men in official circles whose support he needed. More-

over, his see was situated in the capital of the realm, the hotbed of all the sectaries' plots, and any measures he might have taken would have met with maximum opposition. Against him especially, the Masonic lodges vented their implacable hatred, because they knew him to be a firm and apostolic man.

Notwithstanding this, the archbishop remained calm and undaunted. After much thought and prayer, he at long last sent for Father Aporti. He knew that he was on a collision course with an opponent that was to be feared because he was the idol of the sectaries. It was not so much a question of schools or more effective pedagogical methods, but rather of Aporti's religious orthodoxy. The archbishop requested him to discontinue his pedagogical lectures in their present form, which he and other qualified people believed to be tinged with heresy, dangerous to the faith, and contrary to the realm's school regulations. The archbishop also warned him that should he persist, he would regretfully be obliged to fulfill his sacred duties and take disciplinary measures. Father Aporti ignored the warning, continued his lectures, and some years later ceased to celebrate Mass.

As soon as it became known, the archbishop's determination caused an upheaval among the liberals, while opinion differed in religious circles. Don Bosco took no part in this regrettable dissension: everyone believed that he was totally disinterested in such matters. On the contrary, he waited until Father Aporti's unjustified resentment had cooled. After having consulted Father Cafasso no doubt, and having received the archbishop's consent, he resumed friendly but cautious relations with the priest. Don Bosco had plans for his own Sunday and evening schools to be opened in the future, as soon as Divine Providence would provide him with the means. His plans were far reaching, but he kept them locked in his heart. He needed a supporter on whom he could rely at the outset, should trouble develop, one who would help him overcome whatever difficulties might arise, a person of standing among those controlling public education. At that time, Father Aporti was such a man, and he fitted into Don Bosco's plans. Don Bosco had gained his esteem by showing himself favorable to popular education, and by occasionally consulting him on teaching methods. Furthermore, Don



Bosco, without saying much, had a special gift of steering the conversation so as to bring out the talents of the people with whom he was conversing. This will be noted as our story unfolds.

Nevertheless, if Father Aporti's protection was advantageous to Don Bosco's undertakings, we may be sure that the latter repaid him with advice which, if followed, would have redounded to Father Aporti's spiritual welfare. In the beginning, Father Aporti perhaps wished to exploit his popularity among the sectarians for his own personal advantages. Later, however, he modified some of his statements which sounded rather unorthodox. He also consented to have the Blessed Virgin's picture displayed in the kindergartens alongside the crucifix. Despite his failings great and small, and his tenor of life which was not in conformity with the sanctity of the priesthood, Father Aporti later upheld an orthodox approach to education, that is to say, that education should be based on religious beliefs and practices. He deserved praise also for declining in 1848, at the Pope's request, the archbishopric of Genoa, for which office he had been proposed by the government. Is it not probable that Don Bosco contributed in some way, perhaps indirectly, to Father Aporti's commendable decision? Be that as it may, we do know that Don Bosco never came in contact with anyone, even a king, without saying something which directly or indirectly, would remind him of God and eternity.

It is also a known fact that whoever dealt with him was inspired to a moral and spiritual reform in his personal life, or at least to a betterment of himself through some good deed. He had the gift of conquering people's hearts. Even certain anticlericals, without acting against their sworn oaths, gave him whatever he asked for his charitable and religious undertakings. They were like a certain king who, recognizing St. John the Baptist as a just and holy man, defended him, and, heeding his words, performed many good deeds. Despite the great opposition and the many harassments that were Don Bosco's lot, he nevertheless found friends and supporters in all the cabinets which succeeded one another in office for more than thirty years, and in all their departments. Even in the most difficult situations he remained unscathed.<sup>3</sup> Long after Don Bosco's

<sup>3</sup> At that time anticlericalism was rampant in Italy, and elsewhere on the continent. [Editor]

death, the mere mention of his name worked like a charm whenever a petition was presented to high government officials; they were moved, and granted whatever was asked.

What gave Don Bosco such ascendancy over men's hearts? He evoked admiration by his inexhaustible charity towards poor children and by his firm, enterprising, resolute spirit solely concerned with truth and justice. It was evident that no obstacle could daunt him, for his intentions were always upright. He suffered, struggled, prayed, and was ready, if necessary, to give his life for his noble mission. His strength did not suggest obstinacy, an offshoot of pride, but strove fearlessly towards its goal, when such was God's will and when both the public good, even that of his adversaries, so demanded. He was never dominated by false zeal. He pursued his undertakings calmly and at a steady pace, never by fits and starts, or with hasty decisions. His constant norm was that of Jesus to His Apostles: "Behold I am sending you forth like sheep in the midst of wolves. Be therefore wise as serpents and guileless as doves." (Matt. 10,16)

Prudence is a trait of saints. Like the serpent, Don Bosco shielded his head from the enemy's blows, that is, he worked for his and his neighbor's salvation with means suited to the end. He was adamant on this point and never compromised. He shunned politics, whether speaking in public or writing for the press, lest he be suspected of leaning one way or another and risk being hindered from doing good. In those difficult times, he refrained from public opposition or hostile actions against the government as such, although he frankly attributed all the disorders which took place and the things which harmed the Church to the sectaries and those civil servants who abused their office. A man of few words, he pondered everything before speaking. He knew how to keep silent when, to voice his thoughts would have caused harm and impeded good. He kept a secret faithfully. He never uttered a word which, if repeated, might be construed as offensive to authorities or even to private persons. He honored those to whom honor was due because of their position, and to them he expressed his gratitude for even the semblance of a favor. He was always ready to be of assistance even to his opponents: he defended them if unjustly accused, and he praised them for their good deeds or for their knowledge

and talents. Patient when reprimanded, unjustly accused or persecuted, he knew how to control himself, remain calm, and yield when resistance was not a duty. He was ever mindful of Our Divine Saviour's admonition for avoiding greater evils: turning the cheek to one who wants to strike, giving up also a tunic to him who is robbing us of our cloak, walking two miles with him who forces us to carry his bundle for a mile. [Cf. Matt. 5,39-41] Yet, marvelous to say, he rarely found himself in such situations. In the plans of Divine Providence, Don Bosco came in contact with outstanding politicians, liberals and even sectaries who, relying on his sincerity and discretion, had recourse to him for very important personal or family reasons, and found him to be a true friend. And, as if this were not enough, more than once Don Bosco, by foiling intrigues that would have harmed the reputation or possessions of some of his most powerful opponents or, by anticipating their honest desires knew how, indirectly, to attract them to himself and win their benevolence. In all his doings there was the natural ease of one who has formed a habit of prudence by constant practice.

At the same time he abhorred lying, duplicity, underhanded scheming; his speech and manner were always above suspicion, and he edified all those who approached him by following the *yes, yes; no, no* of the Gospel [Cf. Matt. 5,37] This simplicity rendered him affable to everyone without exception, and they in turn loved and respected him for his courtesy and gentle ways. Always charitable in word and expression, he never flattered, and when he praised anyone, it was with sincerity. He was fearless in upholding the rights of God and His Church, but, while he was an open enemy of error, he respected and loved those who erred, and they became convinced of his sincere regard for them and knew there was no deceit in him.

His simplicity suggested a good-natured temperament, and this attracted all kinds of people to him, great and small, learned and ignorant. Simple but not credulous, he would not stand for anything compromising his conscience or unbecoming to priestly dignity. Nevertheless, worldly-minded and superficial people, especially at first, regarded him as a simpleton and a visionary because, instead of aspiring to some high and lucrative post, he gave himself totally to the care of poor children. "It is curious to note," an

eminent author wrote, "how almost all great men are simple in manner, and how this simplicity is often taken as an indication of little worth." This observation is enlightening in regard to Don Bosco. Novelty seekers paid no attention to him, judging him to be of no account, or at most an unimportant humanitarian. Thus, little by little, Don Bosco was able to begin his undertakings, to the benefit of Church and country, winning the esteem and help of all those who, unprejudiced and endowed with good sense, understood the importance of his plans. This was a fruit of his remarkable foresight.

He realized that, in the turmoil aroused by national aspirations, the course to follow was to approve what was good and patiently moderate what was bad, and of that there was much. He saw how the revolutionary tide was swelling and how eventually it would become so devastating as to overthrow and sweep away all obstacles. Direct opposition would have been humanly impossible: not only ineffective but also self-defeating. So he decided to walk along the bank of the torrent, taking care lest he himself be swept away by those waters. Then, he tried to rescue as many as possible from the whirlpool, dissuaded many from coming too close to it in their deplorable ignorance, built dikes in those inlets where the bursting waters could be contained, and prepared a vast amount of material with which, once the swollen waters had subsided, he might dedicate himself to the task of moral reconstruction. As our story unfolds, the reality of what we have merely hinted at will be confirmed. His prudence was joined to simplicity and kindness, and in him we shall see fulfilled Christ's words: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the earth." (Matt. 5,4)

## CHAPTER 24

### *Efficacy of Speech*

DON BOSCO'S talents and solid virtues had attracted the attention of a number of influential priests, among them Father [Aloysius] Nasi. They seriously feared that the archbishop might assign him to some parish far from Turin; to forestall such an eventuality, they enlisted Father Cafasso's aid. Father Cafasso, who was totally opposed to permitting his pupil to leave Turin, resorted to a temporary arrangement whereby, without transgressing the *Convitto's* regulations, Don Bosco could remain in the city. He called on his close friend, Father [John] Borel, the king's chaplain emeritus and now director of the *Pia Opera del Rifugio*<sup>1</sup> and asked him to board a good priest.

Surprised at such an unusual request, the hard-working priest, an indefatigable confessor and preacher, replied:

"But I do not need an assistant. There is not enough work at the *Rifugio* even for me!"

"Do me this favor and you won't regret it," insisted Father Cafasso. "As for his room and board, I will pay for it."

"And what will this priest do in my house?" asked Father Borel.

"Let him be free to do whatever he pleases," answered Father Cafasso, with a smile that presaged something unusual. "We have at the *Convitto* this young priest, Father John Bosco, who, as you know, has started a festive oratory for boys. Last year he completed the moral theology course; this year he tutored and heard confessions. It's time for him to get an appointment and leave his place at the *Convitto* for someone else. If we let him be appointed assistant pastor in some village, he'll be a wasted priest; his field of activity would be too restricted and he could never do the vast good that

<sup>1</sup> An institution for wayward girls. [Editor]

the Lord expects of him. Find some way to keep him busy here in the capital. It is absolutely necessary. With his energy and zeal, he will do much good for youths, for he is destined by Divine Providence to become the Apostle of Turin."

Father Borel, already a friend of Don Bosco, was delighted at the proposal, and took it upon himself to see it through. A few weeks prior to Father Cafasso's visit, Marchioness Barolo had commissioned Father Borel to find a chaplain for the St. Philomena Hospital. Without delay, Father Borel proposed Don Bosco. The marchioness approved his choice, but advised him that it would be several months before Don Bosco could move in, for the building was barely finished and had yet to be furnished. But Father Borel insisted: "We must have this young priest immediately; otherwise he'll be sent elsewhere and we'll lose him for good. Don Bosco is a priest we can't afford to lose." The marchioness then consented to assign to him immediately, six months ahead of time, the annual stipend of 600 *lire*, while Father Borel agreed to house him in one of the rooms at the *Rifugio*.

By the time these arrangements were completed it was mid-September. To test Don Bosco once more, Father Cafasso sent for him, and, speaking as though he had forgotten the solemn advice he had given him a few months previously, said: "You have now completed your studies and it is time to go out into the field and exercise your priestly ministry. In these days the needs are many and the harvest is abundant. To what work do you feel especially inclined?"

"Whatever you will suggest," replied Don Bosco.

"There are three positions open: curate at Buttigliera d'Asti, or tutor in moral theology at the *Convitto*, or chaplain at St. Philomena Hospital near the *Rifugio*. What's your choice?"

"Whichever you think best."

"Don't you feel inclined one way or the other?"

"I feel inclined to work among boys, but I'd rather have you decide. I'll take that as God's will."

"Right now what would you rather do? What's on your mind?"

"At this moment I seem to find myself in the midst of a crowd of boys asking me to help them."

"Well, then," concluded Father Cafasso, "take a few weeks' vacation. In the meantime I'll think about a position for you and when you return I'll tell you your destination."

Don Bosco decided to go to Canelli. On the morning of his departure, while he was dressing, Father Cafasso sent for him and said: "I would like to know whether you've thought over what I told you."

"If you ask me," said Don Bosco, "I prefer staying at the *Convitto* to give the evening lectures."

"Good. Now take care of whatever you have to do."

Don Bosco had admitted to a preference for the *Convitto*, for he did not know where else he could gather his young friends.

Meanwhile he left Turin, spent the night at Asti, and with Father Charles Palazzolo<sup>2</sup> continued on his way to Canelli where they were to preach a mission to the people of that village.

They were going afoot though it was rather far, and on the way they were surprised by a heavy rainstorm that lasted quite a while. Wet to the skin, they halted, toward evening, at a roadside farmhouse not far from Riva di Chieri. It belonged to a man named Genta. Busy putting loaves into an oven, he was startled by their sorry appearance and even feared they might be rogues in disguise. He soon realized that he was mistaken and welcomed them warmly. He provided a change of clothes, set a good supper before them, and hastened to a chapel some distance away, to borrow a breviary and an ordo<sup>3</sup> for them. Informed of their presence at the farm, the chaplain came to meet them and stayed with them until midnight. After a much needed rest they resumed their journey the following day. Along the road they met a man driving a cart: from time to time he broke out into the most horrible blasphemies to urge on his horses. Father Palazzolo could not stand it and he said to him: "Are these the prayers you say? Is this the way you profane God's name?" and went on in this vein. Incensed, the man began to shout abuses, declaring that he would take no reprimands, that priests were no better than others, that he should mind his own business or he would be sorry. Father Palazzolo paid him

<sup>2</sup> See p. 28. See also Vol. I, p. 219f. [Editor]

<sup>3</sup> A liturgical calendar listing the feasts and the "order" of official worship of the Catholic Church for each day of the year. [Editor]

back in his own coin. Things were becoming serious and so Don Bosco intervened. He first asked his companion to go on ahead to Canelli, which was now quite near, and start preaching the opening sermon. Then he began to walk alongside the man, who was still puffing with anger. After some explanation for his companion, he expressed sympathy for the man's hard lot, praised him for being an honest man, soothed his feelings, started a cordial conversation, and soon made friends with him. Then with great tact he skillfully brought him round to agreeing that God's holy name must be respected, told him of the punishments awaiting blasphemers, and ended by urging him to make his confession.

"All right," the man answered deeply moved, "but where?"

Don Bosco pointed to a shady meadow alongside the road. The man halted his cart, and, as Don Bosco sat at the foot of the tree, the penitent, kneeling beside him, made his confession with deep contrition. Then, full of joy, he went a long way with Don Bosco. At their parting he could not find words to express his gratitude.

As he was entering Canelli, Don Bosco was struck by the words of a boy who, in answer to a friend's query, "Where are you going?" replied, "I am going to gather grapes." These words rang in Don Bosco's ears almost as a prediction of the abundant vintage which the Lord was preparing for him. In his old age he still movingly recalled that insignificant incident and the deep impression it had made on him.

The mission lasted about ten days. He then went on to Castelnovo, where he also preached a novena for the feast of the Holy Rosary and heard many confessions as he had done at Canelli.

Don Bosco's sermons were very effective among the countryfolk and young people. He was especially skillful at teaching and inspiring rude and ignorant people. Don Bosco said later:

This was really amazing; more so to me, because in my sermons, always so eagerly received, there was nothing new or studied. I spoke of things that any ordinary priest would know better than I. It was on these occasions that I realized there is no need for sublime, rare or unusual topics, to preach effectively and please the people. All they want is to understand what the preacher is talking about. If they do,



they are satisfied, if not, they are bored. Constant practice in this kind of speaking taught me how to preach. Had I studied the best works on sacred eloquence and read the sermons of the most celebrated preachers I am sure I would not have succeeded in being effective with the people. One thing that countryfolk do not like in sermons is for the priest, after introducing the topic, to say: "Now I begin"; then he sits down, as he likewise does, for instance, before the peroration, for no understandable reason at all. I am of the opinion that a sermon should be preached as a unit, except when one must exhort the congregation to give alms.

Then, it is also necessary to narrate in the minutest detail whatever example one has chosen for pointing out a moral. But above all, and I shall never tire of repeating it, the people must understand. Whatever the preacher says must be adapted to their intelligence, and he should say nothing obscure or beyond their understanding. At times the topic may be trite, but, presented in minute detail, it can make a deep impression. I plunged into preaching without following any method or stiff rules of eloquence; my only concern was to be understood, and to highlight those details that greatly appeal to people. For this reason, large crowds came to listen to me with pleasure. They would not have done so if my sermons had been broken up into an *introduction*, and *part one*, *part two*, or if I had started by saying: "With my first point I wish to prove to you this or that," and "with my second point I shall proceed to prove." This is too stiff and formal and boring to people.

A prerequisite for preparation and logical development of a sermon is a clear idea of the topic: it will then expand of its own accord. A good draft is sufficient: the actual words will be prompted by the circumstances. An episode or incident, no matter what its circumstances of place or time, can form an introduction: similes, parables, fables and allegories are most suitable, as they can imprint a truth indelibly. I still remember how effective was a sermon of mine in which I wanted to explain that God *bene omnia fecit*. [He has done all things well—Mark 7, 37]. I wanted to prove that it is God who disposed all things as they are, and that the whole of creation shows a marvelous order directed to our well-being. My purpose was to exhort the people to accept everything which happens to them as coming directly from God. I told them this parable. A man weary from walking, stopped under the shade of a cluster of oak trees. While looking about him, he wondered to himself: "Why did the Lord give such small fruits as acorns to these huge and lofty trees? Look at that small, ugly pumpkin plant hardly able to hold itself up, and God gave it such big fruit! How much better it would be if those big pumpkins were hanging up there from the branches of

that oak! What a sight it would be if hundreds of pumpkins were dangling from all those branches!" And so thinking he fell asleep. Meanwhile a light wind arose and an acorn fell on his nose and he awoke with a start. "O Lord," he cried, jumping to his feet and stroking his nose, "you were right in giving tall trees such small fruit. Poor me, if a pumpkin had fallen on my head from that height I'd be dead!"

Another time I wanted to impress firmly upon my listeners how foolish it was to be proud and vain. How was I to go about it? If I had quoted all pertinent texts of Holy Scripture and of the Fathers of the Church, the boys would have paid little attention. Bored, they would soon have forgotten the whole thing. So I told them, in minute detail and with embellishments of my own, Aesop's fable about the frog that wanted to become as big as a bull, and puffed itself up until it blew up. I narrated this as if it had happened at the Valentino Park, and I weaved into it a variety of ridiculous circumstances. I even reconstructed a dialogue between this frog and other frogs to highlight some morals to be drawn. The effect seemed to me extraordinary. Yet what could be more trite than this tale?

So said Don Bosco, who, however, did not preach haphazardly, as one might like to think in order to justify his own laziness. His reasoning was based on sound theology, of which he had extensive knowledge. He never disregarded the rules of logic and sacred eloquence, which had guided him in writing his many sermons. But above all, the secret of his efficacious preaching to all, both the educated and the uneducated, lay in the fact that he did not preach himself but Our Lord Jesus Christ. We read in Sirach: "When a man is wise to his own advantage, the fruits of his knowledge are seen in his own person; when a man is wise to his people's advantage, the fruits of his knowledge are enduring: . . . One wise for himself has full enjoyment, and all who see him praise him; one wise for his people wins a heritage of glory, and his name endures forever." (37,21-22. 24-25)

## CHAPTER 25

### *A Noble Lady*

SUMMER over, Don Bosco returned to his incomparable teacher and friend at the *Convitto*. At first Father Cafasso remained silent, nor did Don Bosco think it wise to make inquiries. After a few days Father Cafasso took him aside and, in a kindly tone, said: "Why don't you ask me where you are to go?"

"Because I want to recognize God's will in your decision, and I consider it essential to keep entirely out of it. Send me wherever you wish, and I'll go immediately."

"Well then, pack your belongings and go to the *Rifugio*. There you'll be chaplain of St. Philomena Hospital and, at the same time, with Father Borel you will exercise your priestly ministry on behalf of the girls in Marchioness Barolo's institution. There too God will not fail to make known to you what you should do for poor boys.

At first glance this advice seemed totally contrary to Don Bosco's inclinations and the good of his festive oratory. The spiritual care of a hospital, preaching and hearing confessions in an institution of more than four hundred girls, as the *Rifugio* was, might make him abandon his work for boys. But it was not so, as we shall see.

Before continuing with our story, however, we should introduce the marchioness. Juliette Colbert, a native of Vendée, [France], had married Marquis Tancredi Falletti of Barolo,<sup>1</sup> and of her it could be said, even as we read of Tabitha in the Acts of the Apostles: "This woman had devoted herself to good works and acts of charity." (Acts 9, 36) Indeed, she used her abundant wealth to help the working classes and the poor. A most generous and alert woman, she used to say: "Whatever you give to charity is never lost. Let us not keep track of what we give. God will take

<sup>1</sup> A small town in Piedmont, Italy. [Editor]

care of that." She liked to visit the women's prisons where, with official authorization, she would spend from three to four hours every morning. Here she would endure insults and sometimes even blows. She accepted these humiliations, prayed and induced others to pray, gave generous alms, and thus was able to turn these wild creatures into repentant and resigned women. Marvelous conversions were the fruit of her virtue, prudence and wisdom. She obtained the government's permission to transfer women prisoners from the prisons of the Senate building, the *Correctionel* and the *Torri* [Towers] to a building called *Casa delle sforzate*, [Women's Prison] in a healthy locality. Here she gave them a set of regulations which she had drawn up and discussed with the women themselves, and in which work, prayer and the daily chores of each woman were judiciously distributed. She had called to Turin some Sisters of the Congregation of St. Joseph, which had been founded in Savoy, and to them she entrusted the care and management of this prison. To house them she added, at her expense, an entire floor to the prison building, and this house of punishment took on the aspect of a peaceful convent. She obtained the king's pardon for many of the inmates, and like a loving mother she continued to help them after their release from prison.

Yet all this was not enough to satisfy her innermost desire for good works. Previously, at King Charles Felix' request, she had brought to Turin the Sacred Heart Sisters to educate upper-class girls, and had placed at their disposal a large, magnificent villa not far from Turin. So, in 1834, she decided to do the same for less privileged girls by building a large boarding school a short distance from the *Consolata* [Our Lady of Consolation Church], where the monthly fee was only fifteen *lire*. Then she founded the Institute of the Sisters of St. Anne [of Providence], wrote their rules which were approved by the archbishop, accepted novices, and placed them under the care of Sister Clementine from Savoy, a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph. The admirable success of the novices and the sisters who were later professed were proof of Sister Clementine's competence, and so the boarding school came into being.

Near this boarding school she erected another building to house thirty orphan girls, called Juliettes, after her own name. Upon

completing their education and leaving the institution, each girl received a 500 *lire* dowry.

In various parts of the city she established foster homes for working girls, in each of which she set a housemother to care for the little group of girls assigned to her. The marchioness gave her free bed and board besides an annual salary. This housemother prepared dinner for them, and in the evening after work, the girls gathered about her. The girls learned their catechism, reading, writing, sewing or embroidering, cooking and other domestic chores. The girls, who had to be of upright moral character, were taken to Mass every morning, and attended all the Sunday church services.

When the marchioness learned that there were no girls' schools in several of the poorer parishes of Pinerolo, and that Catholic parents not infrequently sent their daughters to Protestant schools, she gave Bishop [Andrew] Charvaz the necessary funds to build Catholic schools, and asked the Sacred Heart Sisters to train women who wished to become teachers. She also saw to it that these future teachers could make their annual spiritual retreat at the convent of the Sacred Heart Sisters.

When King Charles Albert invited the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament to come from Rome, and gave them the funds to found a convent, the marchioness immediately assigned an adequate sum of money for their maintenance.

For all the institutions that she founded, it was her policy to draft regulations, put them into force and establish endowments. Of these the first and oldest was the *Rifugio*.

To the marchioness flocked large numbers of young single women who needed a helping hand. Some she reconciled to their parents, others she rescued from a shameful servitude, and for many she found honest employment. At the same time she planned to build a home for these unfortunate girls who wished to reform their lives, a shelter large enough to accommodate two hundred of them; and build it she did at Valdocco. She placed it under the patronage of Mary, Refuge of Sinners [hence its name, *Rifugio*], and entrusted it to the Sisters of St. Joseph. Then, when some of these repentant women expressed the desire never to return to the world, but to consecrate themselves by vow to serve the Lord for the rest of their

lives, she built St. Mary Magdalen Convent, adjacent to the *Rifugio*. It could accommodate about seventy of these new sisters, while the chapel was large enough for both communities. Nor was this all. Next to the convent she built a home for the *Maddalenine* [Little Magdalens] or problem girls under twelve years of age, whose education she entrusted to the Sisters of St. Mary Magdalen. Lastly, in 1844, next to the *Rifugio* and St. Mary Magdalen Convent, she built St. Philomena Hospital, a little hospital for crippled and sick girls. Its construction was nearing completion [at the time Don Bosco was taking up his duties at the *Rifugio*].

The cluster of institutions, then, was to be Don Bosco's field of labor. The fact that Father Cafasso suggested him for the work and that the archbishop regarded him worthy of so delicate a task, which seemed to require a priest of more mature age and wider experience, redounded to Don Bosco's honor. They were convinced that his solid virtue and unblemished life compensated for his youth.

Don Bosco, accompanied by Father Borel, went to pay his respects to the marchioness, widowed since 1838 of a man worthy of her. Not only Turin, but many other cities in Piedmont had been the beneficiaries of her generosity. Don Bosco, a man to appreciate noble deeds, knew full well that when a cholera epidemic had swept through Turin in 1835, this magnanimous lady, who was vacationing near Moncalieri, had hastened back to the city; day in and day out she had nursed the sick in private homes and hospitals, consoling the dying and promising to take care of their poor widows and children, which she faithfully did. Both Father Cafasso and Father Borel had also told him that the marchioness had a very lively and domineering temperament, but that she made every effort to check it, for she effectively cherished a constant aspiration to grow in virtue. This knowledge was to guide him in his dealings with her.

The venerable lady was now sixty years old. At this first meeting Don Bosco detected a great humility under her majestic demeanor, and sensed that her reserve and noble bearing were blended with the affability and kindness of a mother and of a lady given to charity. He was satisfied with this first interview.

The lady, too, took to him immediately. But before going to the *Rifugio*, Don Rosco wished to make known his misgivings about

his duties as chaplain. He feared that they would force him to forsake his boys. He was willing to preach and hear confessions, but would not want all the duties of a chaplain. He acquiesced when Father Borel explained how he himself would attend to the more demanding duties of this office. He also requested that he freely receive visits from his boys, who would be coming for catechism. To induce him to accept the position, the marchioness not only consented to this, but also allowed him to gather his festive oratory boys in the neighborhood of St. Philomena Hospital, as yet uncompleted. Thus, he had reason to hope that the work he had begun would not die out.

Don Bosco next went to visit the *Rifugio*, which at the time was at the very edge of the city, past the western customs gate and not far from the right bank of the Dora River. Beyond it, except for the insane asylum and the new barracks which marked the last line of city buildings, stretched the open countryside. All about were meadows, vegetable gardens, uneven and only partly cultivated lots, ditches, ravines and rustic cottages scattered here and there at considerable distances from each other, but all within the parish limits of SS. Simon and Jude Church in the *Borgo Dora*. Don Bosco remained a while in cordial conversation with Father Borel. Rector and chaplain of the *Rifugio*, he was the priest whose advice Don Bosco, when still a seminarian in Chieri, had sought for guarding his vocation, and who, with him had often given sermons and visited the prisons.

Father John Baptist Borel was a saintly priest, whose virtue and learning aroused the greatest admiration. He lacked nothing which could be expected of a priest made after God's heart and the Church's needs. Outstanding was his indefatigable zeal for the welfare of souls.

A distinguished priest of Turin wrote the following, which Don Bosco preserved:

"Have you seen a man skilled at his work?" (Cf. Prov. 22,29) That was the first thought that came to my mind as I got to know more closely Father Borel, of happy memory. One may say of him, without

fear of error, that he was a valiant *bersagliere*<sup>2</sup> of the Church. He was always on the go for the salvation of souls, never refused to undertake any priestly task, if he had the time; and in order to find time he turned night into day with long hours of vigil. He never took a vacation, saying that in the biography of saints he had never found a chapter on their vacations. His recreation, after meals, consisted of writing to the authorities or to wealthy people to seek their assistance for the poor; or else he would visit the sick and distribute alms; he would meet with other priests to discuss missions, spiritual retreats and catechetical instructions. In this field especially, according to his great friend Father Cafasso, he was perhaps the best preacher in the diocese because of his command of the Piedmontese dialect, his sayings, jokes, witty remarks, and his skill in clearly explaining difficult doctrines by making use of the most appropriate similitudes. He was at his best when speaking to young people; they were his delight. He so endeavored to make himself understood, even by the most ignorant and uncouth, that he exemplified the saying of the Venerable Father Prever of the Congregation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri: *The world is funny, and our sermons too must be funny*. The number of times he preached defies counting, for in Turin he often gave sermons in five or six institutions a day. He also heard the confessions of innumerable persons of all ages and social condition.

Don Bosco never ceased to tell us edifying and amusing stories of Father Borel's work in the prisons, of his ingenuity with the convicts, and of sudden and marvelous conversions brought about by his charity. One day, while trying to persuade the inmates of a large cell to fulfill their Easter duty, a man was pointed out to him as being most unwilling. Father Borel went over to him and half jokingly, half seriously, he seized the reluctant convict by the collar, and took him to a nearby room, where he succeeded in getting him to make his confession.

Another time, while eight or ten of these inmates were lying asleep in the sun, the good priest, seeing a vacant space at the side of one of the most restive, lay down beside him and covered the

<sup>2</sup> *Bersagliere*, an infantryman belonging to a special swift corps in the Sardinian army. It was established in 1836 by General Alessandro Lamarmora. [Editor]



faces of both the convict and himself with his hat. As everybody laughed, the man awoke, and jumped to his feet, embarrassed. Father Borel, however held on to him, drew him aside, heard his confession, and then let him go in peace. With similar tricks he heard the confessions of many others that day, and in the evening, while changing his clothes from head to foot, he declared: "Thank God, we caught some fine fish today."

From the very outset, Don Bosco and Father Borel appreciated each other, and helped and encouraged each other to do good. "Whenever I could spend some time with him," wrote Don Bosco, "I always heard and saw lessons of priestly zeal, and received good advice. During the three years that I was at the *Convitto*, he often invited me to take part at sacred functions, to hear confessions and to preach with him, so that I gradually caught on to the work at the *Rifugio* and became somewhat familiar with it. We often talked at length on how we could help each other when visiting the prisons or carrying out our priestly duties."

And so it was that the two priests of God, both animated by the same spirit, talked at length especially about ways and means of helping boys, whose upbringing, or lack of it, demanded the most solicitous care, day by day.

Meanwhile, Don Bosco's room at the *Rifugio* had been readied. It was located over the first entrance on the street later named *Via Cottolengo*, and was adjacent to Father Borel's; the doorkeeper lived on the ground floor. To these new quarters Don Bosco was supposed to bring his festive oratory boys. He took a look at the building. Where could he assemble his boys? The lack of space troubled him.

"Let's not worry," said Father Borel. "For the time being use your room, then we'll see what can be done."

"If you only knew how many are already coming to St. Francis of Assisi," Don Bosco replied.

"As soon as we move into the priests' quarters near the hospital, we should be able to find a more suitable place."

Don Bosco returned to the *Convitto* rather worried about his boys. At the same time, as he himself later told us often, he considered it a singular grace from God to be able to work so closely

with the saintly Father Borel. That, indeed, was a great consolation. He also considered himself fortunate in being able to live under the same roof with Father Sebastian Pacchiotti, another zealous priest assigned to the *Rifugio*. With him too he struck up a warm friendship.

## CHAPTER 26

### *A New Location for the Festive Oratory*

**A** WONDERFUL thing happened during those days to comfort Don Bosco, by disclosing future events to him. Let us narrate it in his own words from the pages of his memoirs:

On the second Sunday of that year (1844) I was to tell my boys that the oratory was being transferred to the Valdocco area. I was, however, truly worried because I was uncertain about the exact location, the means and the people [to help me]. On Saturday night, I went to bed feeling uneasy, but that night I had a new dream which seemed to be a sequel to the one I had had at Becchi when about nine years old. I think it best to put it down literally.

I dreamed that I was in the midst of a multitude of wolves, goats, kids, lambs, sheep, rams, dogs and birds. The whole menagerie raised an uproar, a bedlam, or, better, a racket that would have frightened even the bravest man. I wanted to run away, when a Lady, dressed as a shepherdess, beckoned me to follow Her and accompany the strange flock She was leading. We wandered aimlessly, making three stops along the way, at each of which many of those animals changed into lambs, so that the number of lambs continually increased. After a long trek, I found I was in a meadow, where those animals were grazing and frolicking, making no attempt to bite each other.

I was exhausted and wanted to sit by the roadside, but the Shepherdess invited me to keep walking. A short distance away, I came upon a large playground surrounded by porticoes, with a church at one end. Here I noticed that four fifths of those animals had become lambs. Their number was now very large. At that moment many young shepherds came to watch over them, but they remained only a short time and walked off. Then a marvelous thing happened: many lambs turned into shepherds, and they, in increasing numbers, took care of the flock. When

the shepherds became too many, they parted and went elsewhere to herd other strange animals into pens.

I wanted to leave, because I thought it was time for me to say Mass, but the Shepherdess asked me to look to the south. On doing so, I saw a field in which maize, potatoes, cabbage, beets, lettuce and many other vegetables had been planted. "Look again" She said. I did so, and beheld a monumental church. In the choirloft I saw choristers and musicians who seemed to be inviting me to sing Mass. On a white streamer inside the church there was emblazoned in large letters *HIC DOMUS MEA, INDE GLORIA MEA* [Here is my house and hence my glory will come forth]. Still dreaming, I asked the Shepherdess where I was, and the meaning of all this walking, the stops, that house, the church and then another church. "You will understand everything," She answered, "when with your bodily eyes you will behold all that you now see in your mind." I thought I was awake, and so I said, "I see clearly, and with my bodily eyes; I know where I am going and what I am doing." Just then the bell of St. Francis of Assisi Church rang the *Ave Maria* and I awoke.

The dream lasted nearly the whole night and there were many other details. At the time I understood little of it because, distrusting myself, I put little faith in it. As things gradually began to take shape, I began to understand. In fact, later on, this dream, together with another, formed the basis of my planning while at the *Rifugio*.

On the second Sunday of October, 1844, the feast of the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin, Don Bosco told his crowd of boys that the oratory would move to a new location near the *Rifugio*. At first they were rather upset, but when, to reassure them, he told them that the new place would be bigger, more pleasant and more comfortable than St. Francis of Assisi Church, and that there they could sing, run, jump and play to their hearts' content, they were overjoyed. Each of them could hardly wait for the following Sunday to see all the new things which their youthful fantasy conjured up. Don Bosco also told them that, for special reasons, they were to come in the afternoon and not in the morning.

So, in the early afternoon of the third Sunday of October, [then] the feast of the Purity of Mary, a swarm of boys of various ages and conditions came running down to Valdocco in search of Don

Bosco and the new oratory. "Where is Don Bosco? Where is the oratory? Don Bosco, Don Bosco!" It was an invasion! Hearing all this shouting and commotion, the neighborhood people came out of their homes somewhat alarmed, fearing that the boys had come with some evil intent. None of them had as yet heard of Don Bosco or of his festive oratory, so they shouted back: "Who cares about Bosco! What oratory? Go away, you rascals." Thinking that the people were making fun of them, the boys shouted even louder in their quest, and the neighborhood people took it in bad part and threatened to beat them. Things were beginning to take a bad turn, when Don Bosco, aroused by the clamor, realized that it was his young friends looking for him and the new oratory. He could hear them repeating: "He told us to come here! Who knows where he lives?" Then a boy pointed to a doorway and in a loud voice shouted: "Don Bosco lives there! Follow me." At that moment Don Bosco came out of the house.

His appearance was greeted with a roar: "Oh! Don Bosco, Don Bosco! Where is the oratory? We are all here. . . ." Everybody ran to him and all arguments ceased. As the clamor died down, the people's anger changed to amazement. Staring, they asked themselves who this priest could be, who these boys were, and so on. When the boys inquired about the oratory's whereabouts, Don Bosco told them that the real oratory was not yet ready, that meanwhile they were to come to his room which was large enough to accommodate them. The boys then swarmed up the stairs, each one trying to be the first to enter Don Bosco's room. They sat on the bed, on the floor, on the desk, and even on the window sill. That Sunday, all went quite well, although they could not give full vent to their high spirits during recreation. Yet, they were satisfied. Don Bosco's good and kind ways, his jokes and humorous stories made up for the tight quarters. As he had done at St. Francis of Assisi, he taught them a little catechism and some prayers, told them some edifying stories, and led them in singing a hymn to the Blessed Virgin.

The following Sunday brought great confusion. Many of the neighborhood boys had come along and there was simply not enough room. Boys were everywhere: in Don Bosco's room, along the corridor, and on the stairs. In his room, Don Bosco taught

catechism and explained the Gospel, while on the stairs Father Borel, who had offered to help, did the same for the boys crowding each step. Their recreation [in such crowded quarters] was quite a comedy. One boy lit the fire, another put it out; here a boy swept the floor without having first wet it down; another went about dusting; still some other boys washed dishes and, in the process, broke a few. Tongs, coal shovel, pail, pitcher, washbasin, chairs, books, clothes, shoes, in short every object in sight was turned topsy-turvy, while the older and more judicious boys tried to put them where they belonged. Our dear Don Bosco looked on amused, and he only asked them to be careful not to break or damage anything. "Charity is patient," (1 Cor. 13, 4) and, indeed, for many years Don Bosco practiced to a heroic degree the virtue of fortitude, by maintaining constantly his self-control in the midst of noisy, uncouth youngsters!

This went on for six successive Sundays and holy days. In the morning, after hearing the boys' confessions, Don Bosco took them to Mass in one or another of the neighboring churches. Sometimes he would leave the choice to them: "Where should we go for Mass today?" he would ask. There would be a variety of answers. Some would shout *La Consolata* [Our Lady of Consolation Church]. Others preferred churches in other locations, such as at the *Monte dei Cappuccini* [Capuchin Hill], *Sassi* or *Crocetta* [in the outskirts of the city]. Then they would all set out and, with Don Bosco in their midst, go to the church whose choice he had approved, reciting the rosary on the way. More often than not they would go to *La Consolata*. In the evening, they usually had Benediction at St. Barbara's School. The Christian Brothers, who ran it, readily gave Don Bosco permission to use the school chapel, since for some time now he had been helping them greatly by preaching and hearing their students' confessions.

Nevertheless, it was far from easy to perform the other practices of piety. Several of the older boys recall how, on the morning of All Saints' Day, the boys all wanted to go to confession. But how could they? They were all tightly jammed in Don Bosco's quarters and adjacent rooms, and there were only two confessors for about 200 boys, packed as tight as sardines in a can. "We can't go on like this," said Father Borel on that occasion. "We must find a more suitable place."

Don Bosco then asked to see Archbishop Fransoni and explained what, with his consent, had already been done, the good that had resulted from it, and how much more could be expected. The archbishop fully appreciated the importance of this work but, foreseeing the objections of some pastors, he prudently asked: "Couldn't these boys go to their own parishes?"

Don Bosco answered: "Many of these boys are not from Turin. They are transients and don't even know to which parish they belong. They are poorly dressed, their dialects are almost incomprehensible, and they can neither understand Italian nor make themselves understood. Some are already big and don't dare go to [catechism] classes with smaller children. Those who live in the city, either because of parental neglect or the enticement of amusements or bad companions, never or hardly ever go to church."

There was no need to say more, for the prelate answered warmly: "Go and do whatever you think best. I give you all the permissions you need. God bless you and your work. I shall not fail to help you all I can. From what you tell me, I realize you need more room and a more suitable place. Call on the Marchioness Barolo. I myself will write to her. She might be able to do something about this and give you quarters near the *Rifugio*."

Don Bosco called on the marchioness. Since St. Philomena Hospital would not be ready until August of the following year, 1845, the charitable lady agreed to convert two large rooms of the priests' house adjacent to that building into a chapel. To reach it, one had to go through the hospital's main entrance and then walk through an alley that, running between the hospital and the Cottolengo Institute, led to the priests' residence. An inside stairway opened on to the third floor, planned as the priests' recreation room. The second floor was to be reserved for their living quarters when they would move from the *Rifugio*.

This was the site chosen by Divine Providence for our festive oratory's first church. The archbishop, in a decree dated December 6th, [1844], granted Don Bosco the faculty to bless it, say Mass, give Benediction and hold triduums and novenas. The furnishings were assembled on short notice. There was a simple wooden altar in the form of a table, with the necessary sacred vessels and linens, a gilded tabernacle with a little throne and two adoring cherubs,

a cope, a reversible chasuble, an old stole, other necessary items and four altar-boy cassocks. Marchioness Barolo had donated 70 *lire* toward the purchase of twenty candlesticks, 30 *lire* for rugs, and 20 *lire* for surplices.

The chapel was first used on a day that will always be joyfully remembered: December 8th, the feast of Mary Immaculate, under whose maternal protection Don Bosco had placed the festive oratory and his spiritual children. On this feast day he blessed the first chapel in honor of St. Francis de Sales, said Mass, and distributed Holy Communion to a number of youths.

Several things made this rite memorable. First, the chapel's poverty: there were no kneelers, pews or chairs. They had to make do with a few rickety benches, old chairs and unsteady stools. But Divine Providence did not tarry in coming to their aid, nor did the generosity of good people ever fail them. The weather could not have been worse; but this did not prevent the boys from coming in great numbers, so much did they love the oratory and Don Bosco. The snow lay thick on the ground, and was still falling heavily, like a mountain blizzard. Since it was bitterly cold, it was imperative to have a large brazier in the chapel. Some remember that as it was carried in the open under the falling snow, the live coals crackled, much to the boys' delight. But what the boys never forgot were the tears running down Don Bosco's face during the Mass. He was weeping with joy, for he saw that the oratory was becoming stronger. Now he would be able to gather a larger number of boys, give them a Christian education and draw them away from the perils of spreading immorality and irreligion.



## CHAPTER 27

### *A Heavenly Patron*

THINGS began to take shape in the new festive oratory. A generous person had a good number of benches made for the boys to attend church services with greater comfort. The name of St. Francis de Sales was becoming a household name, and at the very outset Don Bosco determined to have the feast day of this amiable saint celebrated with all solemnity.

Here we may well ask: "What prompted Don Bosco to dedicate this oratory to St. Francis de Sales?" While still at the *Convitto*, Don Bosco had inwardly decided to place all his undertakings under the protection of the Apostle of the Chablais,<sup>1</sup> but before disclosing this intention of his he waited for Father Cafasso to express his opinion on this point. And Father Cafasso did so. One day, talking with Father Borel about Don Bosco's difficulties, his patience in all his dealings, and the continuous growth of the oratory, Father Cafasso remarked that, till then, this work had not been placed under the protection of a patron saint. After a brief discussion, he suggested St. Francis de Sales and Father Borel agreed. Don Bosco was of the same opinion for three main reasons.

First, because Marchioness Barolo, in her desire to help Don Bosco, planned to found at the *Rifugio* a congregation of priests under this title, to care for the spiritual needs not only of her many institutions already in existence, but also of those she planned to establish. Among the latter were a boys' boarding school at Barolo, and a school in Turin to accommodate over a hundred girls under twelve years of age. This would be named after St. Joseph and form part of the complex of buildings at the *Rifugio*. With this in mind,

<sup>1</sup> St. Francis de Sales labored for the conversion of the Calvinists in that region from 1594 to 1598. In 1599 he was appointed coadjutor to the bishop of Geneva and, in 1602, he became bishop of that see. [Editor]

she had had a mural of St. Francis de Sales painted above the entrance hall of the priests' residence.

Second, the work Don Bosco had undertaken for the welfare of boys required unruffled calm and forbearance, and therefore he wished to place himself under the special protection of a saint who had been a perfect model of these virtues.

But there was a further reason. At that time, several errors, especially Protestantism, were beginning insidiously to infiltrate into the lower classes of Piedmont, particularly in Turin. Hence Don Bosco intended to honor this saint, and thus obtain from God through his intercession special success in winning souls for the Lord, along with knowledge and fortitude to combat effectively the same enemies that the saint had so splendidly triumphed over during his lifetime, for the glory of God and the Church, and to the benefit of innumerable souls. In short, Don Bosco believed that the spirit of St. Francis de Sales was the best suited, at the time, to the education and upbringing of the working classes.

He had studied in depth the life and works of this admirable apostle, and when talking to his boys then, and later on as well, he would bring out some sayings or episodes of the saint's life. Above all he endeavoured to portray to them the saint's gentleness which had brought back to the Church so many heretics.

Years later Father John Bonetti wrote: "He told us of St. Francis de Sales' character in his youth, how he had not been endowed by nature with a calm and gentle nature, but had acquired it at the cost of many sacrifices. As Don Bosco spoke we applied his own words to him, for we know from his own admission, that as a boy he had been hot-tempered, impetuous, forceful and impatient of opposition; yet we now saw him a model of meekness, peaceable, and so self-controlled that he seemed never to be pressed by problems. We were convinced that he must have exercised continual self-control to such an heroic degree as to succeed in becoming a living copy of St. Francis de Sales' love for his fellowmen."

The festive oratory, then, had made a good start in this chapel dedicated to the great bishop of Geneva. "When the news spread," wrote Don Bosco, "that there was a little church exclusively for boys, with church services just for them and a place where they could come and go freely, jump and play, many other boys from

the Valdocco area were attracted, whose parents belonged to the working class. Our chapel, which only then began to be called *oratory*, became smaller and smaller. We managed, though, but had to spread out into the bedrooms, kitchen, corridor, and vestibule. There was a catechism class in every nook and cranny: the whole place became an oratory." Needless to say, Don Bosco had a hard time finding people willing to help him. Some of the older boys were trained by him to take care of some of the classes. These he would gather in his room on weekdays, when free from priestly duties, to instruct them and encourage them with small gifts in his loving, affable way.

On Sundays and holy days the boys flocked in great numbers for confession, Mass and Holy Communion. After Mass, Don Bosco would briefly explain the Gospel. In the afternoon, he taught them catechism and sacred hymns. Then he gave them a short instruction adapted to their intelligence and pleasantly illustrated with edifying examples. Afterwards, they sang the Litany of the Blessed Virgin, and Don Bosco imparted benediction with the Blessed Sacrament, which was not preserved in the chapel during the week. Before and after services, the boys played at their games and other amusements under the supervision of Don Bosco, Father Borel, his righthand man, and the better, more dependable boys. Their playground consisted of the long narrow alley, between St. Mary Magdalen Convent and Cottolengo Hospital, leading to the public thoroughfare and the road in front of the priests' residence. Don Bosco often checked the adjacent lots to make sure that none of his boys had wandered off. He tried every means to draw them to the oratory. He gave them playballs, *bocce*,<sup>2</sup> *piastrelle*,<sup>3</sup> and *stilts*. He also promised to provide, very soon, see-saws and other playground equipment, and to teach them gymnastics, singing, instrumental music, and other things as well. Occasionally, he gave them little gifts of medals, holy pictures and fresh fruit, or treated them to breakfast or an afternoon snack; at other times, he supplied the poorer boys with trousers, shoes and other clothing. Often he would contact the parents and make them take better care of their children.

"But," wrote Don Bosco, "a warm welcome, is what, above all,

<sup>2</sup> Italian lawn bowls played outdoors on a long narrow court. [Editor]

<sup>3</sup> Flat pebbles, slightly larger than pucks, used in a throwing game. [Editor]

attracts boys. To obtain good results in educating youngsters, one must find a way first to win their love; then they will fear to displease him." The boys knew that Don Bosco loved them and would always love them. In fact, he knew them all individually by name and surname, and also remembered those who no longer attended the oratory. This we know from what Father Borel told us, and this we have been able to verify, even though the number of boys he dealt with, whether boarders or day students, ran into the thousands.

It was at this time, that is, toward the end of 1844, that Don Bosco inaugurated and gradually expanded his evening and Sunday classes. They were soon opened in other parts of Piedmont and now are widely established throughout Italy. This was a work of charity, a necessary one if people were to understand that priests were second to none in promoting the public good. Consequently, on Sundays and holy days, after church services, and on weekdays in the evening, except Saturdays and the vigils of holy days, many boys, at a stated hour would come to the priests' residence [near the *Rifugio*], and Don Bosco and Father Borel, ever ready to help, would convert their own rooms into classrooms and teach them the three R's. Their purpose was not only to enable the youngsters to have a quicker grasp of their trade or craft, but above all to improve their religious instruction through reading and the study of the catechism. Both Don Bosco and Father Borel, however, had noticed that a certain number of the boys who could not read found it difficult to learn by merely listening to the teacher. Nevertheless, these classes in the three R's were of signal benefit to a vast number of boys. Having to work for their livelihood and therefore unable to attend school, they would otherwise have remained illiterate and deprived of the most elementary education, to their grave material disadvantage.

At this time Don Bosco devoted special attention to youths just released from prison. He saw that they were willing to forget the past, lead an honorable life, carry out their religious duties and become honest citizens if only they could find a helping hand, someone who would offer them some diversion on Sundays and holidays, assist them in finding a job with an honest employer and take some interest in them.

It was while he was at the *Rifugio* that Don Bosco began to grasp

the meaning of *being a tailor*, whose task was to mend worn-out clothes,<sup>4</sup> a phrase he sometimes repeated when speaking to his boys. This remark excited their curiosity and they would often ask him when and how he had ever seen himself as a tailor. But for many years he would only reply: "If it might in some way be useful to you, or bring greater glory to God, I would tell you."

In the meantime, while helping Father Borel in hearing the girls' confessions at the *Rifugio*, he continued to preach in the city churches and hear confessions at St. Francis of Assisi. He could not detach himself from Father Cafasso, and faithfully followed the advice of Sirach: "Associate with a religious man, who you are sure keeps the commandments; who is like-minded with yourself and will feel for you if you fall." [Sir. 37, 12] Father Cafasso reciprocated and reserved for him a room at the *Convitto* where he could devote some time to study, undisturbed, for in the early days of his oratory work he did not have the necessary books for the many pamphlets he was writing to defend and spread the Faith.

The *Convitto's* library was well stocked. For many years Don Bosco went there every day, about four in the afternoon, and remained until nine. Some domestics accompanied him home. Later on, finding it impossible to go there in the afternoon hours, he curtailed this study period from eleven A.M. to noon, and only some time later did he go there evenings. But whether his stay was long or short, he never missed calling on his teacher and benefactor, whose full confidence he enjoyed. His purpose was not merely to discuss with Father Cafasso some point of moral theology, norms of spiritual life, or things pertaining to the oratory, but also to seek inspiration from his holy life and especially his incessant penances. At times, Don Bosco tried to induce him to be less rigorous with himself by allowing to himself what he allowed to his students. In Don Bosco's manuscripts we find a reference to these visits:

Father Cafasso had already been at the *Convitto* ten years. His breakfast consisted of plain dry bread, and even this he later gave up! He

<sup>4</sup> In a dream he had while still in the seminary, Don Bosco saw himself as a priest wearing surplice and stole, sitting in a tailor's shop and mending old clothes. See Vol. I, p. 285. [Editor]

also limited himself to only one meal a day, consisting of soup and another small dish. His night rest, even in winter, lasted barely five hours. In view of his heavy workload, I once told him to take something better suited to his frail physique. "Alas," he replied cheerfully, "the time will come when I shall have to grant something more to this body; but I don't want to gratify it any sooner than I have to."

At other times I respectfully chided him and pointed out that his austerities would undermine his frail health, all the more so now that his strength was waning day by day, but he would reply: "O Paradise, Paradise! What strength and health will you give to those who enter you!"

These and similar examples of virtue Don Bosco always kept in mind and made known to others, while practicing them himself, as we shall see during the course of this story.

The year 1844 was fast drawing to a close and Christmas dawned. Don Bosco had from the very start taught his boys to serve Mass well, and so the sacred ceremonies were held with proper decorum. The solemn festivity was celebrated with a general Communion, which to Don Bosco was the most appreciated gift on earth. After teaching youngsters to purify their souls with the sacrament of Penance, the Holy Eucharist was in his estimation the best means of educating them and keeping them away from vice and sin. Our Lord, worthily received, sealed in their hearts the lessons Don Bosco had taught them, and returned to him their love. This accounts for Don Bosco's influence over them. This, too, explains the ease with which he taught them to be well-mannered and docile.

In the midst of these well deserved consolations, Don Bosco had had to start searching for means with which to operate his oratory. Perhaps Father Cafasso had suggested this idea, in order to inure him to the difficulties of such an undertaking, always ready, however, to help him in emergencies. Don Bosco was extremely reluctant to present himself to wealthy families for financial aid and to expose himself to the embarrassment of a refusal. It simply was not customary in Turin for priests to knock on doors and beg for alms. Well-established charitable institutions were flourishing and self-supporting, thanks to their large revenues. Father Cottolengo himself did not go out in search of help: it just came to him. Yet Don

Bosco humbled himself, generously overcoming his repugnance in order to do God's will all the days of his life. But the Lord smoothed out the first steps along this thorny path.

Father Borel, who was convinced that Don Bosco's undertaking was a clear-cut work of Divine Providence, strengthened him by assisting him as much as he could. This is what he said to Father [Michael] Rua and again in 1870 to Father Paul Albera:<sup>5</sup>

"When Don Bosco came to Turin he seemed timid and reserved, especially when he had to make up his mind to go begging for his oratory. The first donation he received, 300 *lire*, came about as follows. I was a frequent visitor at the home of the wealthy and noble Gonella family, and so I told them what a fine young priest Don Bosco was. I described his work and his future plans; I asked them to be generous with him and promised to have him call on them so that they might meet him and thus get to know and appreciate him. Then, I praised those fine people to Don Bosco, spoke of their contributions to charity and without further ado suggested that he pay them a visit. At first he hesitated, objecting that they were total strangers to him, but finally he gave in and went. He was warmly received and after a brief conversation won their esteem and admiration, so that when he took his leave they gave him 300 *lire* for his boys. Without his knowing it, I paved the way in similar fashion elsewhere, and he soon had other benefactors in Turin."

How great a sacrifice this must have been for Don Bosco was clearly revealed in 1886. He had asked some of the older boys at the Oratory to solicit people in town and to write personal letters to their own friends and acquaintances, asking for donations, since Don Bosco was in poor health and could no longer provide for the needs of the house. When some of the boys objected that they did not have the heart to do so, for they lacked his poise, an outstanding trait of his, Don Bosco answered: "Ah! You have no idea what it cost me to beg!" This notwithstanding, he trampled on his timidity and human respect. He was begging for the glory of God, and for his needy young orphans with the conviction that by offering the rich an opportunity to give alms, he was bestowing a gift on them

<sup>5</sup> They became the first and second successors of St. John Bosco in 1888 and 1910 respectively. [Editor]

too. The Lord blessed his humility and his appeals won the hearts and generosity of the people.

Another difficulty he had to overcome was his reluctance to deal with women, but this too, was a source of good. In the homes of the wealthy, he greatly edified everyone by his modest reserve and his simple, easy manner. So modest was he that he never looked women fully in the face. Those who knew him from the early years of his apostolate, to this day testify: "He was as an angel coming into our homes!"



## CHAPTER 28

### *God's Angels*

TOWARDS the end of 1844, Don Bosco was busy finishing a book promoting devotion to the Guardian Angel. He had started on it while still at the *Convitto*. He personally was very grateful to God for the privilege of being entrusted by Him to an angel's custody. We heard him quote countless times: "To His Angels he has given command about you, that they guard you in all your ways. Upon their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone." (Ps. 90, 11-12) Hence he had a warm love and deep devotion to his Guardian Angel whose feast day he celebrated every year. He was so convinced that his Angel was ever at his side, that one might say he saw him with his eyes. He would greet him several times a day with the *Angele Dei* [O my good Angel, . . .], and throughout his life he greatly trusted in his protection. He recommended himself and his boys to him, and we might even say that his Guardian Angel assisted him in founding and governing his undertakings.

One day, Don Bosco was narrating how Blessed Joan of the Cross, had been privileged from her childhood to see her Guardian Angel, how he had guided her to the religious state, how having become the convent's superior she had ruled it wonderfully through every difficult situation; and how, whenever any infraction of the rule took place, he would suggest to her ways and means of correcting those concerned. What Don Bosco said, made us wonder whether he himself was not favored with the very same privileges, and we could not rid ourselves of the thought. In fact, did he not, throughout his life, reveal the most humanly inscrutable secrets? What of his dreams, and that mysterious person who was ever at his side? Who might he be?

Be this as it may, he knew how to instill in his boys a great

reverence and love for their Guardian Angels. He often intoned, and the boys sang with great élan, a hymn in honor of the Guardian Angel which he had set to music. He used to tell them: "Be ever more convinced that your Guardian Angel is really present, that he is ever at your side. St. Frances of Rome always saw him standing before her, his arms clasped on his breast, his eyes uplifted to heaven; but at her slightest failing, he would cover his face as if in shame, and at times turn his back to her."

To instill trust in one's Angel, Don Bosco often narrated the story of Tobias and the Archangel Raphael, the miracle of the three young men who remained unscathed amid the flames of the furnace in Babylon, and other similar stories abounding in Holy Scripture and church history. Nor did he ever tire of speaking about this most dedicated heavenly friend in his sermons. "Be good," he would say. "This will make your Guardian Angel happy.—When sorrows and misfortunes, physical or spiritual, afflict you, turn to your Guardian Angel with strong trust and he will help you.—How many people in mortal sin were saved from death by their Angel that they might have a chance for confession.—Woe to those who give scandal! The Guardian Angels of their innocent victims will cry out for vengeance to God."

How generous was Don Bosco's advice in private talks, now to one, now to another, and especially to his penitents according to their needs! "Remember that you have an Angel as a companion, guardian and friend.—If you wish to please Jesus and Mary, obey your Guardian Angel's inspirations.—When tempted, invoke your Angel. He is more eager to help you than you are to be helped!—Take courage and pray: your Guardian Angel also will pray for you, and your prayers will be answered.—Ignore the devil and do not be afraid of him: he trembles and flees at your Guardian Angel's sight.—Ask your Angel to console and assist you in your last moments."

Later, many boys told Father Rua how they had received extraordinary graces and escaped danger, thanks to this devotion which Don Bosco had inspired in them.

He also suggested certain days on which his boys could honor in a special manner their Guardian Angels. In speaking and in writing he expressed himself as follows:

1. *Tuesdays* are set aside by the Church for a special remembrance of the Guardian Angels. If you wish to imitate St. Aloysius, who dearly loved his Guardian Angel, I suggest you practice some special mortification in his honor on these days: you might give up something you like, pray with your arms crossed on your chest, or kiss the crucifix; and, if you can, give some alms as the Archangel Raphael advised Tobias to do.

2. *Your Birthday*. It marked the beginning of your Guardian Angel's charge over you. Therefore, on this day renew the promises you made in his presence at Baptism, namely, that you will love and imitate Jesus Christ and obey His holy law. Sanctify this day by making a fervent Communion, or by praying a little more than usual, or by performing some other act of devotion in token of your gratitude to him for having first shown his love for you by becoming your Guardian Angel.

3. *The first day of every month*. You will be glad if, following the example of so many devout people, who are interested in saving their souls, you will meditate on some of the Last Things by seriously considering the purpose for which God created you and examining the state of your conscience. You should ask yourselves what would happen to you if you should die at this particular moment, and then you should go to confession and Communion. Do good while you still have time.

What we have related [is not restricted to the years covered by this volume], but embraces Don Bosco's whole life. Even in those early years of the oratory he knew how to avail himself of this powerful means to attract to a virtuous life boys who had formerly been street urchins. They faithfully followed his counsel. One day, an astonishing incident confirmed their good Father's instructions. It was a Sunday and they were all gathered in the sacristy of St. Francis of Assisi Church. Don Bosco, after giving each boy a holy picture on which a prayer to the Guardian Angel was printed, had given them this exhortation: "Pray to your Guardian Angel. Invoke his aid if you should find yourself in any serious danger of body or soul, and I assure you that he will help and protect you."

It so happened that a few days later, one of them, an apprentice bricklayer, was working on a new building. As he went to and fro on the scaffold, one of the supports suddenly snapped and he felt the wooden planks on which he and two others were standing give way. At the first ominous splintering of wood he realized that there

was no way out. The scaffold collapsed, and the three of them plunged from the fourth story to the street below, amid a rain of planks, bricks and stones. Falling from such a height meant certain death. But our good boy, while falling, remembered Don Bosco's words and loudly invoked his Guardian Angel. "O my good Angel, help me!" His prayer saved him. Of the three boys that fell, one died instantly, and another, critically injured, died shortly after reaching the hospital. As the people rushed to our young apprentice, believing him dead, he scrambled to his feet safe and sound, without even a scratch. He lost no time in climbing up again to help rebuild the scaffold. When, on the following Sunday, he returned to St. Francis of Assisi, he told his astonished companions what had taken place. It was a wonderful confirmation of the truth of Don Bosco's promise. Consequently, the boys' trust in their Guardian Angels became all the stronger and produced wonderful spiritual fruits in their souls.

This singular event prompted Don Bosco to compile the aforementioned booklet: *Il Divoto dell' Angelo Custode* [The Devotee of the Guardian Angel]. In seventy-two pages he gave the reasons which should induce the faithful to seek and merit the protection of this most sublime spirit. He divided his subject matter into ten considerations, which were to serve as preparation for the feast of the Holy Angels:

- God's Goodness in Entrusting Us to the Care of His Angels*
- The Angels' Love for Us*
- The Angels' Daily Favors to Us*
- Their Special Assistance in Time of Prayer, Temptation, and Tribulation: At Our Death and Judgment and in Purgatory*
- The Angels' Compassion for Sinners*
- The Love We Should Feel for Our Angel in Return for His Love for Us*

Each consideration was followed by a brief spiritual memento, a suggested good deed and an anecdote.

The good deeds suggested for the novena in honor of the Guardian Angel were as follows:

1. Recite the *Angele Dei* at least morning and evening, and also thank God for His goodness in granting us the protection of such exalted celestial princes.

2. When you go to church, especially to assist at Mass, invite your good Angel to adore Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament with you, and to do so on your behalf when you cannot be there. Resolve also to pay homage to the Blessed Virgin Mary three times a day by reciting the *Angelus*. It will please Her and your Guardian Angel. This prayer has been enriched by the Supreme Pontiffs with many indulgences.

3. Regard every success in your work and every danger from which you are saved as the result of the prayers, enlightenment and aid of your Guardian Angel. Therefore, pray to him every morning and evening, when in doubt or anxiety and especially when undertaking a trip. Whenever you have to go out, pray to him fervently for his blessing and protection from any mishap.

4. Get used to offering your prayers to God through your Guardian Angel, because, on being presented by him, they will be more acceptable to God. During Mass, the Church prays that the Holy Sacrifice be offered *per manus Angeli* [by the hands of the Angel]; hence, when you attend Mass, offer the Holy Host and the chalice to His Divine Majesty, through your Guardian Angel's hands. Today, at Mass, make an effort to increase your devotion to him.

5. When tempted, turn immediately to your Guardian Angel and ask him with all your heart: "My Guardian Angel, help me now. Do not let me offend my God."

6. Put up with unavoidable annoyances when dealing with people of different temperaments and habits, and do this also in order to enjoy the company of the Angels in heaven.

7. Avoid, like the plague, bad companions and questionable conversations. Your Angel would be disgusted because your soul would be in danger. If you follow this counsel, you can trust in your Angel's assistance.

8. Every morning and evening recommend the last hours of your life to your Guardian Angel, and earnestly entrust to him your eternal salvation. [Say to him:] "In your hands is my destiny." [Ps. 30, 15] Honor him today by visiting the sick or by some almsgiving.

9. Every day, reaffirm your faith in your Guardian Angel. You can be sure that, if you are faithful to him in your lifetime, he will help you with all his power at death's hour and at your judgment. Make a good examination of conscience today and prepare yourself for a good confession.

To this exhortation was added a suggestion:

Do your utmost for the souls of the faithful departed, who from the flames of purgatory beseech your pity and aid; all the more so, because God will dispose that what you do for them, others will do for you. Today, recite the *Angele Dei* and the *Angelus*, and offer them up with all the attached indulgences in suffrage of the holy souls in purgatory. Celebrate the feast of the Holy Angels by a fervent reception of Penance and the Holy Eucharist. Pray to your Guardian Angel with love, and trust that he will not let you fall into sin.

It will be noted that these acts of devotion to the Guardian Angel, and all other devotions he recommended, were always directed towards Holy Communion.

The booklet ended with a hymn written by Silvio Pellico:<sup>1</sup> *Angioletto del mio Dio* [Little Angel of my God], a listing of the indulgences granted to the sodality canonically erected in St. Francis of Assisi Church, and some acts of devotion to the Guardian Angel, later reprinted by Don Bosco in the *Giovane Provveduto* [The Companion of Youth].

The introduction was as follows:

A proof of man's excellence is the fact that he has an angel to guard him. After God created heaven and earth, and all things in them, He left them to follow the course of natural laws, according to the order which daily Providence ordained for them. With man it was not so. Besides enriching him with noble spiritual and physical faculties and choosing him to preside over all other creatures, God decreed that a celestial spirit take care of him, assist him day and night, from the first moment of his appearance in the world, accompany him along his journeys, defend him from the dangers of body and soul, warn him to avoid evil, and suggest that which is good. How sublime the dignity of man, how great the goodness of God! What a pressing duty for us to fulfill!

To encourage the faithful to a lively devotion to these blessed spirits,

<sup>1</sup> See footnote on p. 105. [Editor]

which Divine Providence has assigned as our guardians, the Roman Pontiffs have already granted many indulgences to the prayers in honor of these angels, and to the sodalities instituted to promote their veneration. In order to further arouse the gratitude and trust which we owe to these, our heavenly friends, we have prepared this booklet. The strongest and most heartfelt motives which should urge us to avail ourselves of their holy patronage are presented in the form of a novena. Blessed is he who, when meditating on his Angel's sublime nature, will honor him as here suggested, and will nourish a constant devotion to him. This will be a pledge of eternal salvation, because theologians and masters of the spiritual life, basing themselves on the Holy Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church, consider a tender and constant devotion to the Guardian Angels as one of the signs of predestination.

May the Lord bless this booklet and whoever will read it.

With this work of his, Don Bosco hoped also to obtain from these heavenly spirits security, stability, and protection for his oratory and the other works he would undertake. Indeed, it is written: "The Angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them." (Ps. 33, 8)

He finished writing this dear booklet of his while still at the *Rifugio*. Above all, he strove for simplicity and clarity of expression, as was his wont. Before printing it, he had it read by one Peter Malan, nicknamed *Parin*. He had been the original founder of the *Rifugio* and now was its doorkeeper. We say *founder* because the good man, years earlier, seeing girls in the streets neglected by their parents, homeless and exposed to many dangers, began to gather them into his home and place them under the care of his wife. She would prepare their meals, take care of them for a time, even lodging them for the night, while her husband worked to provide what was needed. He also sought employment for them either as maids in some good family, or as clerks in the store of some conscientious woman. Marchioness Barolo, upon learning of this heroic work of charity, took it over, founded the *Rifugio* as we have already said,<sup>2</sup> and appointed Parin as its doorkeeper.

Malan, who was poorly educated, listened attentively while Don Bosco read to him the booklet, but occasionally he misunderstood

<sup>2</sup> See p. 184. [Editor]

things. For example, when he heard the account of that young bricklayer who had been saved by his Angel in his fall from the scaffold, he thought the boy had fallen while blaspheming, and so he exclaimed: "Serves him right, God cannot be mocked!" Don Bosco was surprised at this and similar misinterpretations and, realizing that his somewhat elevated style was at fault, he patiently revised his booklet, read it over again to Malan, who this time understood it.

The booklet was printed in 1845 by Paravia. It had a wide circulation and, according to what a zealous priest affirmed to Father Rua, it succeeded in arousing in many a great devotion to the Guardian Angels.



## CHAPTER 29

### *For Church and Souls*

OUR Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come. May the Catholic Church, the only true Church of Jesus Christ, grow and triumph. May all nations recognize her rights and the rights of her head and bishops. May all minds look to the Church Teaching as the sole custodian of revealed truths, the divine witness to the authenticity and authority of the Scriptures, the infallible teacher of mankind, and the supreme judge in all questions of doctrine. May all obey her and observe her moral and disciplinary laws until the time when, after her victories on earth, she will triumphally reign in heaven for ever and ever with the countless souls she saved."

This was Don Bosco's continual fervent prayer. This was his ardent desire as he assiduously pursued his studies on church history. How brightly his faith shone forth as he repeated these great truths whenever he spoke or wrote! How often he used to insist that other priests should bring them out in their sermons! All his thoughts and actions were directed primarily toward the exaltation of the Church. He rejoiced in her joys and glories and shared her afflictions and persecutions. He strove manfully to increase her happiness and conquests, to alleviate her sorrows and compensate for her losses, by leading back many sheep to her maternal bosom and thus enlarging her family with new children. He knew what his duties were, both as one of the faithful and as a priest. A man of keen vision, he coordinated even his most insignificant actions with those of the universal Church, like a humble soldier who, alone and steadfast at his post, always does his share and, at times, through boldness or chance, is able to strike a decisive blow for victory. This is why he never missed an opportunity to give a bit of good advice, to hear a confession, to preach, to admonish, or

to take part in prayer; he considered all these things eminently important. With this lofty notion of his mission he not only never diminished his enthusiasm for his apostolate of youth, but continued to dedicate himself untiringly to the other tasks of the sacred ministry.

Don Bosco always had a warm spot in his heart for prisoners. Indeed he must have been responsible for many conversions among the convicts over a period of twenty years or more. However, he always talked about the amazing results obtained through Father Cafasso's kindness and hardly ever said a word about the spiritual good he himself was doing for those unfortunate men. We learned a great deal more of this from Father Borel who loved and venerated him as one loves and venerates a saint. He told us of Don Bosco's persevering efforts to train as his own assistants some of the convicts who had sincerely amended their lives. Among them he chose those who were intelligent, educated, well-spoken, and thus capable of reaching even the most stubborn prisoners and disposing them by a right word or two, to heed and practice the priest's recommendations. They were well acquainted with all the objections of their fellow convicts against religion and its rites, their blasphemies against Divine Providence, and their calumnies against the clergy. Don Bosco would rehearse with some of them the kind of dialogue they were to engage in open debate in order to refute their prejudiced ideas and implant sound principles into their distorted minds. For example, as he was conversing with them or was beginning to teach them the catechism, one of his assistants would abruptly break in with a question or an objection arousing everybody's attention and curiosity. Don Bosco would then reply. Questions and answers were spiced with so many clever remarks, popular sayings, amusing or edifying incidents, that the truth, though presented humorously, would sink in, provoke thought and unfailingly lead some of them to turn over a new leaf and begin to live a truly Christian life. Don Bosco therefore had the great joy of seeing men who had long since given up all thought of God, approach the sacraments with a fervor that would edify even people advanced in virtue.

Nor did he win souls merely by prayer and zeal. He wrested the grace of their conversion by generously sacrificing himself for them.

He never said a word about his penances, but we know that he was often seen with his eyes red and inflamed, or with a splitting headache, or a racking toothache, which often lasted for days, either before he set out to visit the convicts or when he returned home. Should he have to do anything which required peace and quiet, the pain would cease all of a sudden, only to return with full force once he had accomplished the task in hand. From these and various other signs which he noticed from time to time, Brother Joseph Buzzetti, [then a boy], was inclined to believe that God must have sent these afflictions to Don Bosco at his own request, in exchange for a specially desired conversion of some hardened sinner. In fact, Don Bosco once admitted to Father Dominic Ruffino that he had begged the Lord to inflict on him the penance which he should have imposed on the convicts, adding: "If I don't do this, what penance can I possibly give those poor fellows?"

It is not surprising therefore that Our Lady should sometimes invisibly visit those prisons and bless the apostolic labors of Don Bosco, Father Cafasso and Father Borel, animated as they all were by the same heroic zeal. An amazing conversion took place during these years, and we heard it from the very person who was a leading figure in it. This man had run away from home as a boy, and later had joined the army. After winning his sergeant's stripes, he was sent with his regiment to Nice. He was leading an immoral life and spurned anything connected with religion. Out of mere curiosity he happened one day to visit the neighboring shrine of the *Madonna del Laghetto* [Our Lady of the Lake].<sup>1</sup> There he personally saw a paralyzed young girl, almost on the verge of death, being brought to the shrine. He noticed her deathlike appearance, heard the prayers and sobs of those about her. All of a sudden he saw the color flow back into her cheeks as the girl rose to her feet with a cry of joy, perfectly cured. It was a triumph of Mary's motherly love. It was truly a miracle that he had witnessed, and he was convinced of it. But instead of being moved by it, he became furious at God whose existence he denied. What he had seen was a condemnation of his own conduct. More than forty of his fellow soldiers had witnessed the event; they had just arrived in Nice as part of troop replacements and, naturally, had

<sup>1</sup> For further information see Vol. XI, p. 401. [Editor]

hurried to visit this famous shrine. On the way back to the barracks they were eagerly discussing the miracle which they had all seen. The sergeant became irritated by their talk, and began to deny the truth of what he had seen, calling the soldiers bigots and idiots for maintaining that it was so. They protested, of course. He then shouted that even though he himself had been present he had not seen anything miraculous in that cure and ordered them to shut up. When one soldier dared to talk back, the sergeant had him confined to the barracks prison.

Such godlessness did not go unpunished. Shortly afterwards he was condemned to ten years' imprisonment for a grave crime. Fuming and cursing, he could not reconcile himself to his loss of freedom. On noticing a picture of Our Lady of Sorrows on the prison wall, he was so diabolically enraged that he struck a match to set it afire. But he could not. Some mysterious force had suddenly gripped him. He looked about in dismay, but, seeing no one, soon realized that he was being held back by some heavenly hand. At once he felt a change of heart and, falling on his knees, he wept uncontrollably for a long time. He asked to see a priest, made his confession, and was so overwhelmed with joy on receiving absolution as to reach the very peak of happiness. His repentance was like that of Saul on the road to Damascus. From that moment he determined to expiate his sins by a resigned and joyful obedience to the strict prison rules and make amends for his scandalous life by good example in word and deed. Thus he managed to persuade many of his fellow prisoners, even the most resentful, to make their peace with God by a good confession. When he at last was set free, he continued to live an upright life and was soon able to redeem himself and regain the esteem and confidence of those who had known him.

Other fellow soldiers followed his example and were equally steadfast and zealous in their conversion. One of them, after his discharge from the army, used to permit poor neighbors to pick grapes from his vineyards and whatever was left he used to put aside for the sick during the winter months. He devoted all his possessions to performing acts of charity. He was also always ready to defend his Faith anywhere if others spoke disparagingly of it. Regardless of what people might think, whether in cafés, taverns

or on the public streets, he would stand up to anyone who dared start an improper conversation, and if anyone retorted by reproaching him with his former conduct, he would declare: "Yes, I once talked that way, when I was a swine like you." Grateful for all the good Don Bosco had done him, he always remained on cordial terms with him. He became too, a great supporter of Don Bosco's work and often visited him. By this and similar conversions, God rewarded Don Bosco's charity and he regarded as a blessing the crosses he had requested and borne for the sake of souls.

A few other incidents will illustrate how readily Don Bosco undertook any task, as long as he could assist someone spiritually. In 1845, there were several German families living in Turin, because many Germans were serving in the Piedmontese army. Only a few Italian priests knew German, and, since all of them were busy with their regular work, no one was available for German confessions. Consequently both the soldiers and their families were totally neglected in their spiritual welfare. Some zealous people called on Don Bosco to tell him of this need and asked for his help. What could he do? He did not know any German. Easter was approaching, and the Germans wanted to fulfill their Easter duty; furthermore, several of them were seriously ill in the hospital. Don Bosco, concerned with their spiritual welfare, decided to study German. He got a grammar and other books, found a good teacher and spent a whole month studying all he could. He then drew up a list of the most important questions a confessor would be likely to ask such penitents and their most likely answers, wrote some brief exhortation to sorrow for sin and asked his teacher to translate and explain it all to him. After sixteen lessons, for which he paid twenty *lire*—a not insignificant sum considering his slender means—he began to hear confessions in German and was glad to find how well he got along with the Lord's help. As word of this got around, Germans willingly came to him and kept him quite busy in the confessional. They also hastened to take him to the hospital where he was joyously welcomed by their ailing compatriots, some of whom he assisted and comforted before death. The Germans flocked to his confessional for about three years, after which, owing to some friction between Piedmont and Austria, they returned to their country.

As long as there was need, solely for the sake of confessions, Don Bosco continued to study German and gradually expanded his list of questions and answers. When that need ceased, he discontinued studying it and so in later years could remember only a few words and phrases. One evening in 1876, he remarked to his boys, "I learned some German when the oratory was just beginning, but, as with all other foreign languages, one soon forgets it if he does not continue to keep it up. A few years ago I tried to talk a little with three German bishops in the Irish College in Rome, but with my many mistakes I could not make myself understood. The bishops, too, talked so fast that I couldn't make out a single word. We, then, switched to Latin. We all made a lot of blunders but, at least, we could understand one another. Latin is quite handy in discussing philosophical or theological subjects, but it presents difficulties when the conversation is about food, kitchen utensils, work tools, room furniture, customs and so on. Nevertheless, an enterprising priest once wrote a paper in excellent Latin entitled *De gryllis capiendis* . . . [How to Catch Crickets]." These words caused great merriment among the boys. When their laughter subsided, he went on: "Now, seriously speaking, I urge you to take every opportunity to study languages. Every language that we learn removes a barrier between ourselves and millions of our fellow beings in other countries, and enables us to help a few and sometimes very many of them. I have heard numerous confessions in Latin and in French. Even Greek helped me with an Eastern rite Catholic in the Cottolengo Hospital. If we only could embrace the whole world in charity and lead it to the Church and to God!"

Meanwhile, Lenten catechism instructions had been given daily at the *Rifugio* with great regularity to prepare the boys and young men for their First Holy Communion or their Easter duty. But since their numbers were constantly growing, and the space was never adequate, Don Bosco and Father Borel decided to find a place where several of the classes could meet with their respective catechists. Just north of the *Rifugio* and on the right bank of the Dora River, stood the church of the Holy Cross Sepulcher, which had a large vestibule and a fine courtyard. It was popularly known as the cemetery of St. Peter-in-Chains because it had been used as a burial place before the new public cemetery

was opened. Several outstanding noble families had their tombs there.

It seems that Father Borel, with the simple authorization of the pastor of SS. Simon and Jude Church and the agreement of the chaplain took a large number of boys there and continued to give them catechetical instruction until the beginning of Holy Week. The catechists found the location satisfactory and were making plans to continue using it. However, the church belonged to the municipality, and certain ill-disposed persons informed the City Comptroller's Office of these plans. At that time this office had more authority than the present City Council. It consisted of a committee of the more important town councilors, and it had complete control of the city finances. The head of the Comptroller's Office had the title of Master Comptroller, First Decurion and also Vicar of the city, and was superior in rank even to the mayor. At that time Marquis Cavour was the Vicar of Turin.

The complaint was registered at City Hall. The municipal archives still hold the record of the deliberation, dated Easter Sunday, March 23, 1845.

"Informed of meetings held by the so-called catechists in the chapel of the cemetery of St. Peter-in-Chains, the Comptroller's Office has decided that as of now, access to the aforesaid chapel for the above purposes is to be forbidden, and if necessary, the syndics should ask the Vicar to use his authority to prevent the catechists from holding any further meetings there."

This was the beginning of many trials which were to test severely Don Bosco's devotion to his work. But he was afraid of nothing because he was certain of his vocation.

Meanwhile, appreciative of the honor of being a member of our Lord's kingdom on earth, Don Bosco showed his respect for the Pope's primacy of honor and of full jurisdiction over the entire Church by submitting to His Holiness, Pope Gregory XVI, a request for spiritual favors. Some of them were to be in behalf of

fifty supporters of his work or cooperators, both men and women, who would continue to show a special zeal for the spiritual and temporal welfare of his boys. His letter and the favorable rescript were as follows:

[No Date]

To His Holiness Pope Gregory XVI

Most Holy Father,

Father John Bosco of Castelnuovo d'Asti, in the diocese of Turin, Piedmont, duly qualified to hear the confessions of the faithful, humbly prostrate at the feet of Your Holiness, earnestly implores:

1. The indult of a privileged altar twice a week. This is the first time he is applying for such a favor.

2. The faculty to celebrate Holy Mass an hour before dawn or an hour after midday for a just and reasonable cause, it being understood that nothing more will be accepted for such a Mass than the customary stipend.

3. A plenary indulgence at the moment of death for the suppliant, his relatives and in-laws unto the third degree, and for fifty other persons chosen by the petitioner.

May God, etc. . . .

The reply was as follows:

April 18, 1845

From an audience with His Holiness

His Holiness referred the request to the Ordinary with the necessary faculties to allow the petitioner to celebrate Holy Mass one hour before dawn or one hour after midday, for a legitimate and just cause, with the single condition that nothing more than the usual stipend be received by the petitioner in connection with this indult. Notwithstanding any disposition to the contrary. As for the rest, His Holiness grants the



favors requested in the form customary in the Church and prescribed by the Apostolic See.

Cardinal A. Del Drago

by L. Averardi, *Substitute*

It was with great joy and reverence that Don Bosco received this rescript which enabled him to show his gratitude to those who were helping him. The first person who probably benefited by this plenary indulgence was Mrs. Erminia Agnese of the noble Provana del Sabbione family, wife of Count Charles Albert Cays, friends of Don Bosco since those days and great admirers of his virtues. Don Bosco hastened to inform the Count and Countess that he wanted them to share in the great favor which the Pope had conferred upon him. They welcomed him gladly and insisted that he stay for dinner. Since there was still some time, he was ushered into a sumptuous drawing room where he could busy himself with the papers he always carried around with him. Here an incident occurred which the Count told us. "I suddenly came back into the room where I had left Don Bosco and surprised him all bent over moving toward the window. 'What are you doing, Don Bosco?' I asked. He replied, 'I am removing the carpet from underneath this chair, because it is hardly fitting for such an insignificant person as I.' He said this with so much simplicity that I was filled with admiration for the humble estimate Don Bosco had of himself."

The Countess was most grateful for the favor granted by the papal rescript. It was soon to bring her much consolation during the course of her final illness a few months later. At that time Count Cays gave Don Bosco [as a souvenir], the certificate of the noble lady's last Easter Communion in her parish church of St. Teresa. Don Bosco saved it among his papers. The certificate bore this imprint: 1845. *Magister adest et vocat te.* (John 11,28) [The Master is here and calls you]. It was Our Lord calling unto Himself Mary Magdalen, one of his first disciples. A happy omen for a lady so charitable towards Don Bosco and the poor.

Shortly after this Don Bosco requested and received from Rome the following declaration for the spiritual benefit of his boys, de-

sirous as he was to render more fruitful for them their recitation or chanting of the Litany of the Blessed Virgin.

### DECLARATION

The indulgence of two hundred days already granted by Pope Sixtus V of happy memory, and by Benedict XIII to all the faithful of both sexes every time that they, with a contrite and devout heart recite the Litany of the Blessed Virgin, was confirmed and increased to three hundred days by Pius VII. Furthermore, he graciously granted a plenary indulgence to all faithful Christians who recited the aforesaid Litanies every day, to be gained on the five holy days of obligation in honor of the Blessed Virgin, that is: The Immaculate Conception, the Nativity, the Annunciation, the Purification, and the Assumption, provided that truly sorry they shall go to confession, receive Holy Communion and visit some church or public chapel and pray there devoutly. Finally, His Holiness wished these indulgences to be applicable also to the souls of the faithful departed and to be valid forever.

In testimony of which, etc.

Given in Rome by the Secretariat of the Sacred Congregation of Indulgences, May 28, 1845.

A. Archbishop Primivalli, *Substitute*

These two petitions were Don Bosco's first requests to the Roman Congregations. When asked by one of his pupils why he had made them, he replied: "It was not only the indulgences I was interested in. Above all I wanted to begin establishing direct contact with the Apostolic See. I was pleased to think that my humble name should have come to the attention of St. Peter's successor, the heir of his divine powers. I wanted to approach him in the only way open to me at the time."

We may add that this faith and this love for St. Peter's successor never waned in his heart. He was already a firm believer in and defender of the infallibility of the Pope, even before this had been proclaimed as a dogma. He venerated all the acts, ordinances, and teachings of the Pope, even when not pronounced *ex cathedra*. He frequently would say that the Pope's words should be considered

a paternal command, and he urged his boys always to obey the Holy Father and to distrust anyone who might speak disparagingly of the Vicar of Jesus Christ.

For forty years of Don Bosco's life, the Papacy, in the person of two successive pontiffs, was destined to experience many trials and tribulations. Don Bosco always strove to prevent or at least alleviate these trials as much as he could, even at the cost of drawing down on his own head the harassment of the Pope's enemies. He went along with the views and wishes of the Holy Father even at the cost of grave humiliations. But we shall speak of this in due course.

## CHAPTER 30

### *Disappointments and Trust in God*

NOTHING could keep Don Bosco from thinking at all times about his oratory. Prudently looking ahead, he foresaw that the day would come when he would have to leave St. Philomena Hospital, now a haven for his boys. Fearing that they might again be left to their own devices even if for only a short while, he started looking about for a larger and more permanent spot, and none too soon. Marchioness Barolo in fact had more than once expressed her irritation at seeing the place continually overrun by noisy boys, a nuisance to her adjacent institutions. The thoughtless picking of some roses along the hospital entrance walk had also caused some resentment, and the marchioness had complained to Don Bosco about it.

One morning, he took a walk and, wandering aimlessly, absorbed in his thoughts, he found himself in front of St. Peter-in-Chains Church. He felt like calling on the chaplain, a certain Father Joseph Tesio, a former Capuchin, to ask him whether he would permit the boys to gather there for a while. Even before Don Bosco could finish his question, Father Tesio warmly interrupted with: "Why, of course! Come whenever you please, you and your boys. I shall be only too happy!" He probably did not know that the City Comptroller's Office had forbidden the use of those premises [for the teaching of catechism to the oratory boys];<sup>1</sup> the catechists, likewise, had no knowledge of this prohibition, because they had ceased going there after the boys had performed their Easter duty.

By requesting Father Tesio's permission, Don Bosco had in mind to make an experiment which Marchioness Barolo had approved, since it fitted in with her own wishes. On Sunday, May 25,

<sup>1</sup> See p. 218. [Editor]

therefore, Don Bosco, after celebrating Mass at St. Philomena Hospital, in the afternoon took the boys to St. Peter-in-Chains Church. It so happened that Father Tesio was out. The boys were filled with wild enthusiasm at the sight of the long portico, the spacious yard, and a real church for their services. Their joy knew no bounds.

But, unfortunately, they had hardly begun to rejoice when their joy was turned into bitter disappointment. Near the tombstones, they encountered a formidable adversary. But not among the dead. This was a living adversary, none other than the chaplain's old housekeeper. As soon as she heard their singing, their raucous voices, and the clamor, she came storming out of the house in a rage. Cap askew and hands akimbo, she began to upbraid them in a flow of language typical of an infuriated female.

Her indignation rose to a peak when they began to play ball, and one of her hens, brooding in a basket, scampered away, scared by a small boy, while her egg rolled to the ground and broke. A girl also joined in the scolding, a dog began to bark, a cat to mew, the hens to cackle, until it finally sounded as though a grand war had broken out in Europe.

As soon as Don Bosco realized what was happening, he hurried over to calm her, and tried to tell her that the boys meant well. They were only playing, they had not been doing anything wrong, and if any inconvenience had arisen, it could easily be tolerated and perhaps remedied. But it was like talking to the wind, for there is no anger like a woman's. (Cf. Sir. 25,19) Far from calming her, poor Don Bosco found himself the target of a torrent of abuse and vituperation. Like a mad shrew, clenching her fists, she screamed first at the boys and then at Don Bosco. "If Father Tesio doesn't send you away from here at once, I know what I'll do. . . . And you, Don Bosco, why do you let these ragamuffins run wild instead of keeping them under control, these dolts, noisemakers, loafers, and young ruffians? Don't you dare set foot here, again next Sunday, or there'll be trouble!"

But charity is not spiteful. (Cf. 1 Cor. 13,4) To put an end to the shocking scene, Don Bosco ordered the recreation to end immediately; then he turned to the woman and said gently: "Dear lady, you are not even sure of being here yourself next Sunday, so

why make such a point about telling us that you won't let us ever come here again?" Then he went to the church, followed by the boys, among whom were the Melanotti and Buzzetti brothers. They never forgot what had happened that day, and years later, told Father Caesar Chiala about it, and he recorded their account.

Several of the boys commented afterward to Don Bosco: "What a horrible woman to scream like that!" But he made excuses for her, saying that they should feel sorry for the poor thing because she was not feeling well. To others, who pointed out that it would be better not to play there anymore, he remarked: "Don't worry. That woman won't be around to scold anyone next Sunday."

After they were all in church, Don Bosco taught them some catechism, after which they recited the rosary. He then dismissed them and they went home, confident that they would be able to return the following week and have a little more fun. But they were mistaken, for that was the first and last time that they ever gathered at that spot. As Don Bosco was coming out of the church, the shrewish housekeeper continued to grumble and hurl threats in his direction, supported by a few of the neighborhood gossips, who had come running up when they heard the noise. A serious-minded boy, Melanotti, a native of Lanzo, who at that moment had drawn nearer to Don Bosco, told us that the saintly priest showed no sign of irritation or anger, but turned to him with a sigh and remarked quietly: "Poor thing! She tells us not to set foot here again! If she only knew that next Sunday she will be in her grave!"

Just at this moment Father Tesio came home. His house was just behind the apse of the church. At once the housekeeper ran up to him and painted Don Bosco and his boys as some kind of revolutionaries, violators of holy places, and just plain rascals. Although the chaplain was aware of his housekeeper's habit of flying into a rage over trifles, he became, nevertheless, indignant at the boys when he heard her list of spiteful charges. Hurrying out of the house, he caught sight of Don Bosco at the farther end of the little square, talking to a few lingering boys. Hastening over to him, he said to him in an angry tone: "Don't you come here again next Sunday, raising Cain and disturbing everybody. I'll see to that! Never again, never!" As Father Tesio walked back to his

house, Don Bosco said to him: "I feel sorry for you! Are you sure you will be alive next Sunday?" Melanotti also heard this remark of Don Bosco. As he accompanied him back to the *Rifugio* he could not help admiring his calm.

During the course of the evening the housekeeper again regaled Father Tesio with stories about what the boys had done until he finally sat down and, under her dictation, wrote a stiff complaint to City Hall. He put Don Bosco's boys in a very bad light, asserting, among other things, that they had also defaced the tombstones. He termed their gathering an intrusion and a provocation.

Regretful as it is to report, that was the last letter the poor chaplain ever wrote. The following day, Monday, he sealed it and summoning the housekeeper, told her: "Have this letter delivered to City Hall." Those were his very last words. A few hours later, as the messenger was on his way, Father Tesio suffered a stroke, and [on Wednesday,] May 28, [1845], at thirty minutes past midnight, he died at the age of 68 after receiving the Last Sacraments.

His letter made such an alarming impression on City Hall, that a warrant was immediately issued for Don Bosco's arrest, should he dare to return to St. Peter-in-Chains Church with his boys.

But hardly had one grave been filled, when another had to be dug. Father Tesio's housekeeper followed him two days later, [May 30], stricken in the same manner. The week was not over and both these adversaries of the oratory had disappeared from this earth. It is easier to imagine than to describe what terror these two deaths caused in the neighborhood. It was impossible not to see the Hand of God in all this, and the boys were so intimately convinced, that instead of straying from Don Bosco, they became more warmly attached both to him and to the oratory. They promised never to forsake either one. Father Borel's conviction was the same. One day, [at the *Rifugio*], while he was at table with Father Pacchiotti, his assistant, Don Bosco and Father Bosio, it just so happened that the reading<sup>2</sup> they were listening to was about St. Philip Neri. The passage described how those who had persecuted him died shortly afterwards. Father Borel immediately remarked that the same was happening in regard to Don Bosco, and that consequently it was clear that all should help him, under all

<sup>2</sup> Reading aloud at table is still a custom in religious communities. [Editor]

circumstances, even difficult ones, confident that by so doing they would be cooperating with Divine Providence.

The following Sunday, May 31,<sup>3</sup> an ordinance was nailed to the door of the church, forbidding any gathering within its precincts. Since a large number of boys had not heard any word to the contrary, they flocked there, only to find the gates locked and the guards on duty. Frightened, they ran to the *Rifugio*, where Don Bosco welcomed them warmly. There they had their usual morning and evening church services.

Father Cafasso, meanwhile, believing that with Father Tesio's death all opposition would cease, endeavored to secure from the municipal authorities Don Bosco's appointment as chaplain of St. Peter-in-Chains. The spacious rooms of the adjacent rectory would have been ideal for gathering his boys on Sundays, and Don Bosco himself would have enjoyed greater freedom of action. With this in mind Father Cafasso wrote a letter to the Countess Bosco di Ruffino, wife of one of the syndics.

Turin, May 29, 1845

Most Gracious Countess:

Father John Bosco, a former student of this *Convitto*, is at present chaplain at the *Rifugio* of Marchioness Barolo, where he has started an undertaking redounding to God's glory. On Sundays and holy days he gathers a large number of neglected boys, in order to instruct them and keep them out of mischief. Since the inadequate space makes it impossible to continue his work there, he is about to apply, with the Marchioness' approval, for the post of chaplain at St. Peter-in-Chains near the Dora River where he will have adequate facilities for his worthy undertaking. Since this matter will promote the greater glory of God, I should like to recommend it to you, should you, in your prudence, think it advisable to mention it to the count. Please forgive the liberty taken and permit me, meanwhile, the honor of remaining, with the deepest respect,

Your devoted servant,

Father Joseph Cafasso

<sup>3</sup> A chronological error; it should be June 1. [Editor]



Despite various recommendations of this kind, the attempt to get the post was unsuccessful. Some considered these gatherings inconsistent with the respect due to cemeteries, others feared damage to the mausoleums, but most likely the main reason was that in official circles someone was beginning to show his hostility to Don Bosco's oratory. However, Don Bosco was not dismayed. Some time later, the following petition was sent to the City Comptroller's Office.

[no date]

Your Excellencies and Gentlemen:

The Reverend Fathers, John Borel, Sebastian Pacchiotti, and John Bosco, are in charge of the spiritual direction of the Pious Institute of Mary Most Holy, Refuge of Sinners. By authority of His Excellency, the archbishop, they also direct an association of boys who meet every Sunday in an oratory under the patronage of St. Francis de Sales. This oratory at present has its headquarters in the residence of the above mentioned priests, where the boys are taught catechism, attend Mass, receive the sacraments, and at times have Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

On the past few Sundays and holy days they have numbered over 200. In view of this and of the proximity of summer, it has become necessary to transfer the oratory to more spacious quarters so as not to abandon an undertaking of well-proven benefit to the young. St. Peter-in-Chains Church is from many points of view very suitable for the customary devotions of these oratory boys. Your Excellencies, so zealously intent on promoting in every way the civic and moral welfare of this city, give us reason to hope that this undertaking will meet with your support.

We, therefore, respectfully beg you graciously to grant us the use of St. Peter-in-Chains Church for the services of these young people, if Your Excellencies should deem it suitable, and under whatever conditions Your Excellencies may choose to prescribe.

The City Comptroller's Office did not grant the request, as may be seen from the minutes of a meeting on July 3, 1845.

City Comptroller's Office, No. 22  
July 3, 1845

The Master Comptroller presents the request submitted by the Reverend Fathers Borel, Pacchiotti and Bosco, who petition for authorization to avail themselves of St. Peter-in-Chains Church for the purpose of teaching catechism to the many boys who now gather in the small chapel of the *Rifugio* institute.

In view of the decision taken at a previous session, which rejected the petition on the grounds that it was not fitting that a church adjacent to a cemetery should be used for other purposes than that originally intended, the City Comptroller's Office decides that it cannot grant the petition and rejects it by a majority vote.

Signed: Bosco di Ruffino, *Syndic*

D. Pollone, *Master Comptroller*

Cesare Saluzzo

Vittorio Colli

After this refusal, Don Bosco resigned himself to God's will. It was from God alone that he hoped with certainty to obtain the help that men denied him. He experienced great comfort in making his retreat at St. Ignatius; there he received from the Lord the graces he personally needed, and there too, through the sacrament of Penance, he was able to lead home to God more than one prodigal son. He also took joy in remembering, as Father Borel wrote in his diary, the devout church services and very numerous Communions that had taken place in the small chapel at the *Rifugio* a few days before, on the feast of St. Aloysius. Previously, at the *Convitto*, it had not been possible to celebrate this feast with ceremony and manifestation of devotion, because crowds of people came and went all day. At the *Rifugio*, instead, Don Bosco was entirely on his own, and could arrange morning and evening church services as he thought best. From that day on, he celebrated this favorite feast day with increasing solemnity, availing himself of this opportunity to instill a love for holy purity in the hearts of

his boys. No words can adequately describe how hard he worked to prepare them worthily to render homage to St. Aloysius. If the feast of this saint is celebrated with so much fervor today, not only at the Oratory in Turin but in all other Salesian houses, it is due to the zeal which marked Don Bosco's first celebration, a zeal that he intended should become a tradition among his spiritual sons.

## CHAPTER 31

### *A Comforting Dream*

SEVEN months had now elapsed since the oratory had moved to St. Philomena Hospital. The number of boys had increased. They considered their quarters a little heaven all their own, and hoped that they could still stay there for a long time. This appeared to be all the more likely since the walls of the spacious wards were drying very slowly and would not be ready for occupancy for some time.

The marchioness was very satisfied with Don Bosco, who was extremely devoted to his work for her charges. During the week, he helped Father Borel with the spiritual direction of the nuns and of the wayward girls. He also formed a girls' choir and taught mathematics to a few nuns who were studying to be teachers. He heard confessions, preached, and lectured on the religious life and virtues. Bishop Cagliero, who quite often served as chaplain to the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Sisters of St. Magdalen, told us of the words of praise they often had for Don Bosco, whose extraordinary virtues singled him out from other priests also learned and exemplary in virtue. The sisters venerated him as a saint. They also stated that devout persons, coming to possess some little thing of his, cherished and guarded it as a precious relic.

In July, the last hope that the oratory could prolong its stay at the *Rifugio* was shattered. Marchioness Barolo, though sympathetic toward all works of charity, was nevertheless determined that the oratory should vacate its present quarters, because the date set for her hospital's opening, August 10, 1845, was drawing near. It was respectfully brought to her attention that the rooms used as chapel, classroom, and playroom for the boys had no direct access to other parts of the hospital, and that the lattices [on the windows] were not movable and had their slats turned upward. She was also

assured that the greatest care would be taken not to cause any inconvenience, but the good lady would not yield. She owned the place, and it had to be as she said.

Don Bosco, though, was ready to do anything rather than forsake his boys and he had told the marchioness so quite frankly. But he was very worried, not knowing where to gather them. He cast an eye on the neighborhood of Portanuova, but Father Borel tried to change his mind and easily persuaded him to stay in the Valdocco area.

Strange dreams, lasting through the night, came to comfort Don Bosco, as he confided once and only once to Father Julius Barberis and to us on February 2, 1875. In these mysterious visions a series of interlaced scenes kept recurring along with various new ones. But the previous scenes never wholly faded from view. They blended with the marvels of new dreams, all seeming to converge on one point only: the future of the oratory.

This is what Don Bosco told us:

I seemed to be in a vast meadow with a huge crowd of boys who were fighting, swearing, stealing, and doing other blameable things. The air was thick with flying stones, hurled by youngsters who were fighting. They were all abandoned boys, devoid of moral principles. I was about to turn away when I saw a Lady beside me. "Go among those boys," She said, "and work."

I approached them, but what could I do? I had no place to gather them, but I wanted to help them. I kept turning to some people who were watching from a distance, and who could have come to my aid, but no one paid attention or gave me any assistance. I then turned to the Lady. "Here is a place," She said, and pointed to a meadow.

"That's only a meadow," I said.

She replied: "My Son and His Apostles did not even have a place to lay their heads." [Cf. Matt. 8, 20] I began to work in that meadow, counseling, preaching, hearing confessions, but I saw that almost all my efforts were in vain. I had to have some building where I could gather and house those abandoned by their parents and those despised and rejected by society. Then the Lady led me a little further to the north and said: "Look!"

I did so and saw a small church with a low roof, a small courtyard,

and a great number of boys. I resumed my work, but since the church was becoming too small, I again appealed to the Lady and She pointed out another church, much larger, and a house adjacent to it. Then She took me closer, to a field that was tilled and that lay almost opposite the facade of this new church. "In this place," She added, "where the glorious martyrs of Turin, Adventor and Octavius, suffered martyrdom, on these clods soaked and sanctified by their blood, I wish that God be honored in a very special manner."<sup>1</sup> So saying, She put out Her foot and pointed to the exact spot where the martyrs had fallen. I wanted to leave a marker there so as to find the place again when I returned, but I could not see a single stick or stone. Nevertheless, I kept the place clearly in mind. It coincides exactly with the inner corner of the chapel of the Holy Martyrs, previously known as St. Anne's Chapel; it is the front left corner as one faces the main altar of the church of Mary Help of Christians.

In the meantime, I found myself being surrounded by a very vast and ever increasing number of boys, but, as I kept looking to the Lady, the premises and the means were also growing accordingly. I saw then a very grand church on the very spot She had pointed out as the place where the soldiers of the Theban legion had been martyred. There were a great many buildings all around, and in the center stood a beautiful monument.

While these things were taking place and I was still dreaming, I saw that priests and clerics were helping me, but after a while, they left. I tried everything to get others to stay, but after a while they too left me alone. Then I turned once more to the Lady for help. "Do you want to know what to do to keep them?" She asked. "Take this ribbon and bind their foreheads with it." Reverently I took the white ribbon from Her hand and noticed the word *Obedience* written on it. I immediately gave it a try and began to bind the foreheads of these volunteers. The ribbon worked wonders, as I went ahead with the mission entrusted to me. All my helpers gave up the idea of leaving me, and stayed on. Thus was our Congregation born.

I saw a great many other things, but there is no need to relate them now. (Maybe he was referring to important future events.) Suffice it to say that ever since, I have walked on sure ground as regards the oratories, the Congregation, and the manner of dealing with outsiders, irrespective of their position. I have already foreseen all the difficulties

<sup>1</sup> Adventor and Octavius were soldiers of the Theban legion. They suffered martyrdom under Emperor Maximian. Their feast is kept on November 20. [Editor]

that will arise and I know how to overcome them. I can see perfectly, bit by bit, what is to take place, and I go forward without hesitation. It was only after I had seen churches, schools, playgrounds, boys, clerics and priests helping me, and I had learned how to advance the entire apostolate, that I began to mention it to others and speak of it as a reality. That is why so many people thought that I was talking foolishly and believed I was insane.

Here then was the source of that unshakeable faith in the ultimate success of his mission, of that sureness that seemed temerity, in tackling all sorts of obstacles, that taking on of colossal undertakings which were more than any man could handle and bring to completion.

As for the spot pointed out by the Blessed Virgin to Don Bosco as the place of the martyrdom of SS. Adventor and Octavius, from which St. Solutor fled, wounded by a lance, to die at Ivrea as he vowed allegiance to Jesus Christ, we can give a lengthier explanation.

I was determined never to tell anybody of this dream, and even less inclined to manifest what I knew about the precise spot of that glorious event. Therefore, in 1865, I suggested to Canon Lawrence Gastaldi<sup>2</sup> that he write the lives of these three Theban martyrs, after doing some research; and that, with the help of history, tradition and topography, he point out the probable spot where they were martyred. The learned canon agreed, and published an historical study on these three martyrs. After a lengthy examination of the evidence, he concluded that it was not possible to designate exactly where they were martyred, that it was certain they had sought safety outside the city gates near the Dora River, but had been discovered and martyred near their hiding place. He also stated that the vast stretch of land extending from the city gates to the Dora River, west of the borough of that name, was in ancient times known by the name of *vallis* or *vallum occisorum*, the valley of the slain, and is now popularly known by the first three syllables, *Vald'occo*, possibly with reference to the three martyrs who were killed there. It was also undeniable that this

<sup>2</sup>In 1867 he was consecrated bishop of Saluzzo and in 1871 was promoted archbishop of Turin. [Editor]

area had obviously been blessed by God, since wonderful works of charity and devotion had risen there, another clue that the spot had been bathed by the blood of those brave Christians. The author added that, after carefully studying the ancient topography of the city, he was of the opinion that the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales was built near that hallowed spot, or perhaps enclosed it within its walls.

Don Bosco was delighted with this information which, in a way, confirmed what he had learned in his dream. Even from the very beginning of the Oratory, he showed a particular devotion to these holy martyrs. Every year on the feast day of St. Maurice, the commander of the Theban legion, he linked his name to that of his glorious legion and to his three soldiers, and saw to it that their feast was celebrated with many Communions in the morning and with solemn vespers in the evening, with a homily in their honor, and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.



## CHAPTER 32

### *On the Move Again*

IN its beginnings, our oratory resembled the nomadic families of the ancient patriarchs. Every now and then it was on the move, just as they had been. "I remember," Joseph Buzzetti once told us, "how Don Bosco would sometimes cheer us by reminding us that as the Jews, on leaving Egypt, roamed the desert and pitched their tents anywhere, we, too, were to hope that God would sooner or later give us a promised land to establish a permanent home."

Don Bosco was quite sure that it would happen. "He who fears the Lord is never alarmed, never afraid; for the Lord is his hope." (Sir. 34,14) Nevertheless, he called on Archbishop Fransoni and asked his help for permission to use St. Martin's Church, popularly called the "Mills Church," after the adjacent city-owned mills on the east side of *Piazza Emanuele Filiberto*, over near the Dora River. The archbishop readily agreed. He thought highly of Don Bosco, backed him in every possible way, and enjoyed long, friendly talks with him. Occasionally, he would invite him to dinner. A few times he even went to confession to him, and he graciously consented to administer Confirmation to the boys at the *Rifugio* itself.

The archbishop's letter to City Hall was accompanied by a memorandum from Father Borel, who was well known in the city, and during those years often represented Don Bosco to the civil authorities. In his humility, Father Borel kept heaping praises on his dear friend, Don Bosco, giving him all the credit for the good work being done at the *Rifugio*. He extolled him while minimizing his own contributions and undertakings. Don Bosco has attested to this in writing.

Since the syndics and all the officials at City Hall were now

convinced that the spiteful charges made by the late chaplain of St. Peter-in-Chains against Don Bosco's boys were groundless, the following permission was readily granted. The answer to Father Borel was as follows:

City of Turin

Office of the Comptroller, No. 250

Turin, July 12, 1845

Very Reverend Father:

The Comptroller's Office, to which I referred your request, has agreed to permit the use of the "Mills Church" for the purpose of teaching catechism to boys from noon until three o'clock, on the understanding that said boys are not to be permitted in the inner courtyard of the mills and that such instruction will not in any way interfere with the celebration of Mass on Sundays and holy days. I am pleased to inform you of this permission and feel confident that you will do all in your power to prevent anything which would necessitate its withdrawal. Kindest regards.

Yours very truly,

D. Pollon, *Comptroller*

As soon as Don Bosco received this letter he went to look over the church, made arrangements with the caretakers, rented a room on the main floor of an adjacent building for his own use, informed the Borgo Dora pastor of the permission granted him, and, before the day was over, worked out a program with Father Borel.

On July 13, [1845], the ninth Sunday after Easter,<sup>1</sup> the boys heard Mass for the last time in their first chapel of St. Francis de Sales. When it was over, Don Bosco told them the sad news that they would have to move again. For a moment the boys were upset and depressed, because they had grown fond of the place as though it were their own. But he reassured them, cheered them up, and then invited them all to return in the afternoon to help

<sup>1</sup> A chronological oversight; read ninth Sunday after Pentecost. Easter, that year, fell on March 23. [Editor]

carry the chapel furnishings and games to their new quarters. They all came. Father Borel addressed to them a few parting words:

The place we are now leaving should mean no more to us than a roadside inn where a traveler stops briefly on his journey to rest. So, don't feel bad. Start marching again! Follow your oratory faithfully on its wandering journey . . . Never grow tired. Divine Providence will provide permanent quarters. But, in the meantime, make permanent quarters for it in your own hearts; there it will be safe from the ups and downs of life . . . Faithfully say your morning and night prayers, diligently attend your catechism classes, always go to Mass on Sundays, go to confession and Communion often and willingly. Avoid those who swear, give scandal, talk indecently, or try to keep you away from church by making fun of you. That way you will give the oratory a permanent place in your hearts. Do you agree? And so, my dear boys, goodbye.

Deeply moved, Father Borel, after a short pause added in a firm voice: "But first let us thank the Lord for giving us a new place at the mills: *Te Deum laudamus!*"

As he finished, at a nod from Don Bosco a curious and amusing scene began to take place. The boys picked up benches, kneelers, chairs, framed pictures, candlesticks, the altar crucifix, sacred vestments, cruets or some little statue, while Don Bosco, surrounded by all this confusion, kept trying to make them leave in his room the objects which he considered useless for the new oratory. The more sports-minded boys carried stilts, *bocce*<sup>2</sup> and other games. All were anxious to see their wonderful new quarters, so, filing out in a mass exodus, they went to set up their new headquarters at the [Dora] Mills. The sight of all these noisy lads excited the curiosity of the whole neighborhood. Crowding at their doors and windows, the people kept asking what was happening and where the boys were going. This helped considerably in making the oratory well known in that neighborhood and in attracting a great many new boys.

After reaching their destination and depositing everything in

<sup>2</sup> See footnote No. 2 on p. 198. [Editor]

the room which Don Bosco had rented, they all crowded into the church. With that rare charm and that unforgettable touch so typical of him, Don Bosco gave the following talk to the huge crowd of boys:

My dear boys, cabbages grow bigger and better when they are transplanted, and so it is with our oratory. It has moved from place to place, but wherever it has gone, it has thrived and our numbers have rapidly increased. Our stay at the *Rifugio* was fruitful. As before at St. Francis of Assisi Church, you continued to frequent confession and Communion, you received spiritual and material assistance, catechism lessons and sermons, games and pastimes. We began to have a real oratory at St. Philomena Hospital, where we had a chapel all our own in quiet and convenience. We seemed to have found a permanent place for ourselves and to have settled in peace, but Divine Providence again desired us to leave and move here. For how long? We don't know. Whatever happens, let us hope that like transplanted cabbages, our oratory will draw an increasing number of boys who want to be good, who love to sing and play in the band, and that, in time, we shall have not only our Sunday and evening classes, but a day school and workshops as well. Then, we shall together celebrate many beautiful feast days. So let us not be downhearted, or doubt for a single moment that our oratory will prosper in the future. Let us cast all our worries at the feet of Our Lord, who will take care of us. He has already blessed us, helped us, and provided for us. He will also find a suitable place for us, for His own greater glory and the good of our souls. But, meanwhile, let us remember that Our Lord's graces are like so many links in a chain, all joined together. Let us not break the chain by sin; rather, let us appreciate the first graces He gives us; thus we shall receive more and more. Do your share, too, by cooperating with the aims of the oratory. Frequent it regularly and get all the benefit you can from it, so that with God's help you may lead a virtuous life, be loyal to God and country and finally, one day, be able to dwell in that heavenly home where Our Lord Jesus Christ, in His infinite mercy, will give each of us the reward we have earned.

That evening, besides the religious devotions in the church, there was an added attraction in the form of a dialogue which

Don Bosco had written. It was dramatized by several of the boys in the courtyard before all the others. Everyone burst into happy laughter at the jokes of the young comedian. The dialogue was about their moving to new quarters, the circumstances accompanying it, the strict injunction not to trespass into the inner courtyard of the mill or cause any interference with the Sunday Mass for the millers and city employees.

Since Don Bosco considered himself merely a material instrument in a great project started by the Blessed Virgin Mary Herself, he held, and continued to hold, this undertaking in such great esteem that the least incident connected with it became an event deserving of its own special celebration. The boys too welcomed this novelty that added so much to their merriment. With another dialogue and songs he had solemnized the opening of the chapel of St. Philomena Hospital. He had done the same when moving to other places and when finally settling at Valdocco, as well as on many other occasions he deemed important enough. But he kept changing the main character in each of the dialogues. Sometimes it would be a zany talking in the Piedmontese dialect, or a German trying to speak Italian, or a stutterer hissing or gurgling in an attempt to speak, and so on. Joseph Buzzetti kept copies of these dialogues for many years, but they could not be found after his death.

After this memorable day, on Sundays and holy days, crowds of boys could be seen hurrying to that part of the *Piazza Emanuele Filiberto* where the mills entrance was located. Yet, despite the encouraging words of Don Bosco and Father Borel, we have to admit that the boys did not like their new quarters at all. In that church they could hold only part of their religious devotions. Parochial rights precluded the celebration of a second Mass, the distribution of Holy Communion, an essential oratory practice, and any other religious service. So many people attended the only Mass said by the chaplain, that the boys could not get in. So, on the mornings of Sundays and holy days they had to go to some other church for Mass and then go elsewhere for their afternoon devotions. It was all the more difficult and all the less fruitful. Most unsuitable was the space available for recreation. Many boys had to play on the street and in the square in front of the church,

where people, carts, carriages, and horses were continually passing and interrupting their games. But since they had no other place, they did the best they could, while waiting for some better gift from Divine Providence. The older and younger boys now totaled about 300 and Don Bosco could no longer take them to the Christian Brothers' chapel for Benediction, since they would crowd the place and interfere with the regular Sunday services for the students.

## CHAPTER 33

### *Further Opposition*

IN August 10, 1845, Marchioness Barolo inaugurated her little St. Philomena Hospital. Generously equipped with all necessities, it took care of crippled or sick girls between the ages of three and twelve, an age which made their admittance into other hospitals difficult. Five Sisters of St. Joseph handled the administration and supervision, while the Sisters of St. Mary Magdalen, a distinct congregation (as we have already mentioned) under their own ecclesiastical superior, took care of the patients. It can readily be imagined how grateful poor families were to the marchioness. Don Bosco was appointed chaplain or spiritual director. Along with Father Borel and Father Pacchiotti, he moved from the rooms they had been occupying, overlooking what is now *Via Cottolengo*, and into their new residence. Here on the second floor, along a narrow corridor, a single row of four or five little rooms with windows facing south had been assigned to the priests. They were separated from their former residence by a fairly large garden, enclosed by walls, where the little patients came or were brought by the Sisters to get some fresh air. Don Bosco had charge of all church services, religious instruction and spiritual direction.

Meanwhile two peaceful months [for Don Bosco's oratory] went by at the mills. But the calm was only a prelude to a storm which was to cause Don Bosco serious worry. Hostility and harassment pursued them here too, a sign that the oratory was truly a work inspired by God. The millers, apprentices, clerks, carters, secretaries and other employees, annoyed by the boys' playing, singing and noise, took to shouting at them from the windows; then, joining forces they lodged a formal complaint with City Hall, describing the boys' get-togethers in the most unfavorable terms. Noticing how promptly they obeyed Don Bosco's slightest gesture

or word, they maintained that these meetings were dangerous and that at any moment their recreations could turn into a riot or a revolution. A fine insurrection these poor boys could have launched without any arms or money! Nevertheless, the rumors gained some credence. The boys were falsely accused of damaging the church and the pavement of the courtyard; furthermore, if they were allowed to continue meeting there, they would soon wreck the whole place. Consequently, the authorities were requested to forbid them the use of the church and access to the premises. In their complaint to the mayor, Don Bosco was portrayed as the ringleader of a shiftless band of urchins.

Irritated by this bill of particulars, the city authorities summoned Don Bosco to present his side of the story. Calmly and serenely, he denied the allegations and branded the accusations unwarranted; would the gentlemen be so good as to come themselves or send someone to verify the facts; he was sure that they would find no damage to the church. They did send an inspector, and his findings gave the lie to what the mill employees had stated: no damage had been done to the church, to any walls, the pavement of the courtyard or anything else. There was only one scratch on a wall, which a boy might have made with a sharp nail. For such a trifle, the City Council had been appealed to as if the city were about to be destroyed! Much ado about nothing!

"Imagine me being accused of promoting revolutions!" Don Bosco exclaimed with a smile, as he told some of his friends about this incident several years later. "And, to think of it, it is to my credit that I *did* prevent a revolution, one that would have been very noisy indeed, a *women's revolution!*"

He then told of an amusing incident which had occurred in *Piazza Emanuele Filiberto*. This square, octagonal in shape and surrounded by buildings, was the city's open-air marketplace. Here, daily, anything and everything was on sale: textiles and apparel of all kinds, shoes and hats; farm tools and hardware; implements; metal, glass or terracotta containers of all shapes and sizes; fresh and dry fruits; vegetables, game, poultry, fish, ready-to-eat foods and whatever else you can think of. Two wide streets crossed at the center dividing the market into four distinct zones, each with its own alleys and lanes and its maze of sheds, tents, huts, stalls,



and wheelbarrows. Quite a bizarre sight! At each end of the street crossing the marketplace from north to south, were two small squares: one, at the southern end, lined with lofty porticoes known as *Piazza Milano* or *Porta Palazzo* from the nearby royal palace; and the other, without porticoes, at the northern end called *Piazza dei Molini* [Mills Square], where the oratory was then located. All three squares were considered as one, and to them vendors by the hundreds and buyers by the thousands flocked from all parts of the city, especially for food bargains. From morning until late at night there was an incessant hubbub, a continual coming and going, swelled by out-of-town traffic of carts loaded with produce, swarms of women displaying baskets full of fruit and vegetables from their farms, jugglers, wandering minstrels, charlatans, florists and barbers who, in those days, in outdoor shops shaved men and sheared dogs. Groups of idlers, and hordes of children racing helter-skelter completed the picture.

Most of the stalls were run by women who sat behind them like so many queens. Woe betide anybody who failed to appreciate their exalted status! Time and tradition demanded not only that they be held in respect, but that they should not be addressed by anything less courteous than the formal *Lei* or "Madame." If any customer happened to address them informally by the familiar "you," they would instantly bridle and say: "Sir, I never led goats to pasture in your company." Yet they were kindhearted, had great devotion to Our Lady of Consolation and generously gave to the poor. The Cottolengo Hospital and similar institutions were never left disappointed by them; the carts they sent out to collect foodstuffs always returned fully loaded.

The reader will forgive this digression, but it was necessary to give a detailed description of this area of the city because it was the scene of many a good deed performed by Don Bosco, as we shall see later on.

Don Bosco was well known around the marketplace and the women naturally had much to say about the good work he was doing for poor boys, who in large numbers flocked to the "Mills Church." From time to time he also used to buy large amounts of fruit to give to the boys.

He was also much admired for his virtue. A clue to this admira-

tion may be seen in a resolution he jotted down in 1845 in his brief *Memorie ai miei figli i Salesiani* [Reminiscences for My Spiritual Sons, the Salesians]:

Since, as soon as I enter the sacristy, people want to see me for advice or ask me to hear their confessions, I shall make a brief preparation for Mass before leaving my room. I shall also do the [ritual] washing of hands in my room, and again, if time permits, in the sacristy.

From this resolution we may conclude that wherever he said Mass, be it at St. Francis of Assisi Church or at the *Rifugio*, or in any other church in town or out of town, people would try to talk to him; this would happen also when he was invited to preach in rural parishes. Father Rua told us that even as a little boy he had heard common people, as well as his own family circle, talk about Don Bosco's sanctity.

But now let us tell the amusing episode mentioned above. A certain Count Rademaker, a wealthy Portuguese gentleman, had fled from his own country to escape a political upheaval and its aftermath. When things had quieted down, he had been appointed as his country's ambassador to the court of Savoy. His wife was the same lady whom Don Bosco had once warned about a mishap she would suffer along the road to Chieri.<sup>1</sup> They had two sons whose exemplary conduct filled their parents with joy. The younger one eventually became a Jesuit, while, at the time of this episode, the elder brother was already a priest. He, however, was tormented by excessive scruples, and Archbishop Fransoni and Father Cafasso had entrusted him to Don Bosco's care, in the hope that Don Bosco, by sound instructions in pastoral theology and wise spiritual direction, would free him from such spiritual torment. Of course, this brought Don Bosco in close, friendly contact with this noble and staunchly Catholic family and their domestic staff.

Their majordomo, a certain Carvalho, went shopping every morning in *Piazza Emanuele Filiberto*. Not knowing Italian, he had bought a Portuguese-Italian dictionary which he always car-

<sup>1</sup> See p. 133f. [Editor]

ried about with him for use in language emergencies, even though women at the stalls spoke only the Turinese dialect. As he wandered about the marketplace he had often heard porters and muleteers use a certain word which, to his ear, sounded either like an exclamation, a form of endearment, or a greeting, according to the expression on the face of the person uttering it. Eager to learn its meaning and increase his Piedmontese vocabulary, he asked a man about it. This fellow, a prankster who enjoyed a laugh, explained that the word was a flattering expression of respect and admiration. Of course, it was anything but that! When Carvallo came to the marketplace the next morning, he wasted no time in trying out the new word on the saleswomen at their stalls. The effect was not as he expected! At first they put up with it, but when he kept repeating it, they retorted indignantly in Piedmontese dialect: "Mister, mind your language!" Carvallo, of course, did not understand what they were saying, but, seeing them with their arms akimbo and indignation on their faces, he finally sensed that he had been made a fool of. Shortly after, he met Don Bosco coming across the square, and asked him what the word meant.

"Why do you want to know?" Don Bosco replied.

"Because when I used it on those saleswomen, they all glared at me and stopped treating me with their customary cordiality."

"I'd say so! That word is very offensive."

"Good heavens! What have I done?" exclaimed the poor major-domo.

Turning back toward the market stalls where he had made purchases, he insisted that Don Bosco go along with him and explain the misunderstanding, for he was aware how highly the women esteemed Don Bosco. As the poor man went from stall to stall offering his apologies it did not take much to persuade the women that Carvallo, being a foreigner, had not intended to offend anybody. They were all the more willing to forgive his mistake since he never stinted on his purchases but often paid much more than the price they asked, his employer being rather generous-minded on this score.

As soon as he was able to understand and to make himself understood, he became a rather unique type of customer.

"How much is this?" he would ask, for example.

"One *lira*."

"So little?"

"That's right!"

"How much more would you like?"

"Just listen to that! Give me whatever you wish."

"I'll give you three *lire*. Is that all right with you?"

"You bet!" Of course, he quickly became the idol of the market, but Don Bosco had helped in the first steps of this reconciliation. This episode was a source of amusement to all who came to know of it, including even the scrupulous son of Count Rademaker.

However, that marketplace also awakened other memories in Don Bosco's mind. It reminded him of another meeting which he never forgot. It was at the city mills nearby that he first met a small eight-year-old boy named Michael Rua, a pupil of the Christian Brothers.

In 1830, the Turin municipal schools and those of the Institute for the Education of the Poor had been entrusted to the care of these same Brothers. Don Bosco had just begun his priestly ministry among them, which was to continue for several years until 1851, as we came to know from Professor John Turchi who as a boy heard it from Don Bosco himself.

Don Bosco used to go to their schools, especially St. Barbara's, every Saturday and stay there a good hour to give a talk on religion. His purpose was to exhort the pupils to make good confessions and approach the sacraments frequently. Michael Rua who was present at those talks was soon won over by him, and later told us his early recollections as follows:

I remember that, on Sundays, when Don Bosco came to say Mass for us and often also to preach, as soon as he entered the chapel [on his way to the sacristy] something like an electric shock seemed to run through all the children. They would jump to their feet and leave their places to mill about him until they had succeeded in kissing his hand. It took quite some time before he could get through to the sacristy. There was nothing the good Brothers could do to prevent this apparent disorder and so we had our way. Nothing of this sort happened when other priests came, even pious and renowned ones. On the evenings

appointed for confession, the other priests found themselves with nothing to do if Don Bosco happened to be there, because all the boys wanted to go to him to disclose their innermost thoughts. The secret of this attachment could only be explained by their awareness of the spiritual and untiring love he felt for their souls.

Some time in August, 1845, one of Michael's playmates told him about the oratory at the *Rifugio* and showed him the necktie which he had won in one of the lotteries which Don Bosco sometimes held to amuse the boys during their recreation. Michael was enticed. Together they ran to the *Rifugio*. But just in those days Don Bosco had moved the oratory to the city mills. So the two little friends hurried there. They were received so warmly by Don Bosco that Michael was completely charmed. At that moment, Don Bosco had standing before him the one destined by Divine Providence to carry on his mission. During the next three years, Michael went only a few times to the *Rifugio* or to Valdocco to visit Don Bosco, but from that first meeting Don Bosco never lost interest in him.

## CHAPTER 34

### *Forced Rest*

**A**LFTER several years' trial of the constitutions she had written for the Institutes of the Sisters of St. Anne and the Sisters of St. Mary Magdalen, Marchioness Barolo decided it was time for her to go to Rome to acquaint the Holy See with these congregations and seek papal approval for them. That she would probably have a very difficult time obtaining such an approval did not dismay her. Only recently, for example, it had been refused to some sizable congregations that had been active for many years, among them, the Sisters of St. Joseph. The archbishop agreed with her decision, however, so she set out for Rome toward the end of September, 1845.

Someone else, Marquis Massimo d'Azeglio,<sup>1</sup> had preceded her to the Papal States but for very different reasons. He had accepted, or had been forced to accept, the task of uniting all the secret societies in one common effort, and directing all their varied intrigues and activities toward the achievement of Italian unity and independence under King Charles Albert of Piedmont. The marquis, a *carbonaro*,<sup>2</sup> had during autumn covered wide areas of Romagna and Tuscany urging the conspirators to stop their agitation and armed insurrection and, instead, begin a legal assault on the Pope while putting their trust in King Charles Albert. Many of the Masonic lodges, however, favored the idea of a republic, and not a few had little faith in the promises made to them in the king's name. The arguments Massimo d'Azeglio used to win them over were both specious and brutal.

If we were asking Charles Albert to do anything contrary to his own interests, you would perhaps be right, but we are asking him to do more

<sup>1</sup> See footnote 1 on p. 113. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> See footnote 5 on p. 2. [Editor]

for himself than for us. We ask him to let us help him become greater and more powerful than he is now . . . If you ask a thief to be honest and he promises to do so, you may well doubt his word. But when you invite him to steal, you need not fear that he will break his word . . . Furthermore, should the king hesitate and tarry in making up his mind on this noble venture, public opinion would force his hand; should he try to resist, he would lose his throne.<sup>3</sup>

Massimo d'Azeglio returned to Turin to report to the king as he saw fit on the successful outcome of his mission. He then met with the republican leaders of Mazzini's party to win their approval, or at least overcome their reluctance to the idea of a constitutional monarchy. Though they did not abandon their goals, the latter seemed to go along with him; however, some time later, they set this condition for their acquiescence: "Before the king attempts to liberate Italy, let him first rid his kingdom and his army of the influence of the Jesuits."

In support of this contention, Father Vincenzo Gioberti, a follower of Mazzini, in 1845 published *I Prolegomeni* as a sequel to his *Del primato morale e civile degli Italiani* [On the Moral and Civil Primacy of the Italians]: his second work was worse than the first one.<sup>4</sup> Meant to stir up public opinion, it was eagerly read by reactionaries and fellow travelers. The book overflowed with venom against the Jesuits and that Catholic mentality which he called *Jesuitism*, in order to be able to attack it "without alarming simple-minded people." Father Gioberti declared that, "his book would probably be put on the Index," because of its bold ideas. Nevertheless, he maintained that he had again decided on an "indirect" attack in order to have greater freedom of expression. That is what we read in his letter to Pinelli and Mamiani.<sup>5</sup> As regards the Jesuits, his attack was anything but "indirect;" but it was as regards the rest of the faithful for, indeed, it attacked them all subtly.

Gioberti had dedicated this impious work to Silvio Pellico,<sup>6</sup> who, justly indignant, rejected the hypocritical homage and completely

<sup>3</sup> Massimo d'Azeglio, *I miei ricordi*, Chs. 33 and 34.

<sup>4</sup> See p. 114. [Editor]

<sup>5</sup> Balan, *Storia d'Italia*, Vol. VII, p. 617.

<sup>6</sup> See footnote 3 on p. 105. [Editor]

ignored the resentment of the secret societies which showered abuse on him because of his noble act.

While these maneuvers were taking place, at times openly and at times secretly, Don Bosco was obliged to spend a few weeks at Castelnuevo in the hope of restoring his health and getting over his disappointment at being obliged to discontinue, for lack of space, his classes in reading and writing and the highly promising music lessons. His exhausted condition caused friends grave concern.

After choosing a few of the better boys to join him in enjoying the pure air of Becchi, Don Bosco entrusted the oratory to Father Borel and left Turin the first week in October, after first advising his brother Joseph that a small party would accompany him. Joseph readied the hayloft for sleeping quarters and with the assistance of good Mamma Margaret provided whatever was necessary to make things pleasant for Don Bosco and his little guests, who were received with genuine warmth. For a time the quiet little house became quite a lively place. Its rooms were filled with joyous sounds every autumn for many years to come.

A few days after his arrival, Don Bosco wrote to Father Borel one of those letters whose every line reveals a charming candor.

Castelnuevo, October 11, [1845]

My dear Father:

Nine days have already passed since we parted and it seems a very long time. I happily arrived at Chieri, safe and sound, the same day I left Turin, but as soon as I got there, the feeling of exhaustion which was bothering me in Turin overwhelmed me to such an extent that, immediately after a light meal, I was obliged to go to bed. The following day I felt well enough to get up and continue my trip home. I was not well at all for the first four days. I was somewhat depressed because I missed my usual recreation [at the oratory with the boys]. Since Sunday, however, I've been feeling very much better, thanks to a little fun and some singing with Peter, Felix Ferrero and Natalino.

My present occupations are: eating, singing, laughing, running around, bustling about, etc. . . . Isn't Father Pacchiotti ever coming to see me?



And what about you? A visit from either one of you would be enough to cure me completely. Think it over and, by all means, do come.

We shall start harvesting the grapes next Thursday. It looks as if we shall have an excellent crop, whereas the neighboring villages have all had a touch of worm or hailstones. (Gente and Gamba<sup>7</sup> are making such a noise I can't even think.) I am going to make a good wine drink, not for you, but for Father Pacchiotti. Next Sunday (My oh my, what a racket!) we'll have a little party here and we'll use the new wine. Our boys will sing the Mass. How is Father Pacchiotti? Did the catechism class go all right? Here I have seven little rascals. In the latter part of next week, God willing, I shall be back in Turin. (I'll write more later; this is all I can do now.)

Fr. John Bosco

Meanwhile the boys from Morialdo and his old friends from Castelnuovo and other neighboring villages were flocking to Don Bosco, drawn to him by his gracious disposition and by his words full of eagerness for their spiritual welfare. Among them was John Filippello, who as a boy had accompanied him from Becchi to Chieri when John had gone there the first time for school.<sup>8</sup> So, one day Filippello asked him confidentially: "What are your plans, now that you have received faculties for hearing confessions? Since your assignment at the *Rifugio* seems to be temporary what will you do next?"

Don Bosco replied: "I shall not be a simple priest living by myself or with only a few companions, but I shall have many priests with me. They will obey me and dedicate themselves to the education of young people."

Filippello did not dare to pursue the subject, but from that day on, he had the feeling that Don Bosco was thinking of founding a religious society or congregation, as Don Bosco himself some years later disclosed to Father Secundus Marchisio.

Those few days of vacation passed quietly for Don Bosco, comforted as he was by his mother's love, his brother's affection, the companionship of his good pastor, Father Cinzano, and mail from

<sup>7</sup> Two of the boys he had brought to Becchi. [Editor]

<sup>8</sup> See Vol. I, p. 186. [Editor]

Father Borel. Don Bosco's heart, however, was always in Turin. He longed to return to his beloved little rascals and relieve poor Father Borel of the many tasks involved in looking after the oratory and in taking the boys to this or that church for Mass, while being already overloaded with his own work. Nevertheless, Don Bosco was unable to leave Castelnuovo on the day he had hoped. He explained the reason for his delay in a second letter to Father Borel:

October 17, [1845]

My dear Father:

It happened exactly as I had feared; my ailment got worse and I could not even walk. I have improved considerably since yesterday, however, and this morning I said a late Mass at ten o'clock. If I do not suffer any further mishap, I hope to be back in Turin on Thursday or Friday. What surprises me is that I feel more cheerful than I should in my present condition.

Father Cafasso told me about the new priest who is going to live with us. I am ready to go along with everything Father Cafasso has suggested, as long as you and Father Pacchiotti are satisfied; all the more so since I already know this priest; he is very good and has an excellent disposition.

I received your letter yesterday; the news you gave me was good. Please tell Mother Clemenza to keep in good spirits, and that when I'm back in Turin we shall exchange greetings. Tell Mother Eulalia to be careful not to become sick. I hope the Mother Superior of the hospital will keep our little sick girls happy; when I return I shall bring doughnuts for all of them. But, above all, see that Peter prepares good meals for Father Pacchiotti; I want to find him in good health and in a good humor when I get back.

Good cheer to them and may the Lord be with them.

Your dear friend,

Don Bosco

The new priest to whom he referred was probably Father Bosio who had been a good friend of Don Bosco at the seminary. Father

Cafasso was thinking of recommending him to Marchioness Barolo as Don Bosco's assistant at St. Philomena Hospital.

Father Cafasso was aware that, left alone, Don Bosco would not be able to keep up his many activities very much longer. A partial account of his work during this year appears in the letter below, addressed to Father Francis Puecher, director of the Institute of Charity in the novitiate at Stresa. Don Bosco was already acquainted, though superficially, with the Institute of Charity, both through correspondence with the novice master, and through conversations he had had [in 1840] with the religious at the *Sagra di S. Michele* [St. Michael's Shrine].<sup>9</sup> Now he wanted to know more about it, and in writing.

Castelnuovo d'Asti, October 5, 1845

Very Reverend Father:

I wrote you last year on behalf of a young lawyer who wished to join your congregation but who was prevented from doing so by family matters. Now, another lawyer has the same desire; he is twenty-three years old, has completed a course in philosophy as well as civil and canon law, and has been active as a deputy lawyer. Some months ago he decided to leave the world and consecrate himself to God in the Institute of Charity for the welfare of his own soul and others. He is well-off financially and of more than average intelligence. I need to know whether or not he will be accepted and on what terms.

I have written a church history textbook and on the last pages have listed all the recently founded orders. I need to know the following, and would appreciate it if you would inform me briefly:

1. The name of the founder and the year of foundation of the institute.
2. Its purpose.
3. Whether or not it has been approved by the Holy See and also the present number of houses.

I can assure you that this information will be used for the greater glory of God and the honor of our holy religion.

<sup>9</sup> See Vol. I, p. 368. [Editor]

Please forgive my liberty in writing to you. May the good Lord bless you. I am honored to be, with the deepest esteem and veneration,

Your obedient servant,

Fr. John Bosco

P. S. My church history is about to go to press and I need the above information as soon as possible. If you would like to contact me, I shall be at Castelnuovo until the fifteenth of this month; after that date I shall be back in Turin.

He did not have to wait long for the information. When he returned to Turin he wrote again to Father Puecher.

Turin, October 31, 1845

Very Reverend Father:

A slight ailment made me put off writing a letter of introduction for Joachim [Guanti]. I hope that everything will work out well, thanks to your usual kindness.

Many thanks for the information you sent me. It was very helpful, as you can see for yourself from the enclosed copy of the book. If you should be in a position to spread copies of this church history in your area, I could let you have them at one-third off the list price in order to promote the spiritual welfare of youth, for whom especially the book has been written.

Please accept my most cordial regards and forgive my haste.

Your obedient servant,

Fr. John Bosco

The first edition of his *Storia Ecclesiastica* [History of the Church] with its praise of monastic communities, along with the help Don Bosco gave young men in entering the religious life, fostered his cordial relations with the Institute of Charity. Since

this congregation did not have a house in Turin, Don Bosco took fatherly care of its young members who had been sent there for schooling. On December 6th of that same year he again wrote to Father Francis Puecher: "I am delighted frequently to see the student Constantine Comollo and his colleague studying their philosophy courses so assiduously at the University of Turin." Father Puecher replied the following day: "I am quite pleased that you see our students, and I recommend them heartily to your care. I consider every act of friendship extended to them as though it had been done to me personally."

The vocations which Don Bosco was able to discover and foster among his boys won for him the affection of several religious orders and congregations to whom he directed the young applicants in accordance with their inclination, temperament, education, and spiritual maturity.

## CHAPTER 35

### *Don Bosco's Church History*

**D**ON BOSCO was as much interested in having good textbooks as in having good prayer books. In October 1845 he completed his *Storia Ecclesiastica*,<sup>1</sup> a church history of some 200 pages.

Some mention should be made here of the reasons that prompted Don Bosco to write this book. In its preface he says:

After some years' experience in teaching boys, anxious to bring within their reach as much knowledge as possible, I began looking about for a brief outline of church history adapted to their mental level. I found some excellent works, but they did not serve my purpose either because they were too voluminous or because they digressed unnecessarily into secular history; others were rather more in the nature of learned polemical dissertations on the many splendors of the Church, while still others, translated from foreign languages, specialized in some periods of history. But what aroused my indignation was the way certain authors seemed to be embarrassed in treating of the Roman Pontiffs and of the more glorious events of the Church.

Therefore in order to have a book suiting my own requirements, and to accede to the request of prominent people, I decided to publish this compendium of church history.

I have read everything I could find on the subject both in Italian and other languages, and have culled from these works those sentiments and expressions that better reflect the Italian, or rather the Roman spirit, and those that are better suited to the intelligence of young boys.

I have omitted, or merely noted, whatever was profane or secular, arid, less important or controversial. On the other hand, I have stressed things which struck me as being very moving and inspiring, and care-

<sup>1</sup> *Storia Ecclesiastica, ad uso delle scuole, utile ad ogni stato di persone, compilata dal sac. Bosco Giovanni*. Torino, Tipografia Speirani e Ferrero, 1845.

fully described such matters in detail, so that not only the mind but also the heart of the reader might be spiritually touched.

To make it easier to grasp the more important facts, I have divided the book into epochs and chapters, and written it in the form of a dialogue. Throughout the whole book I have followed the suggestions of several wise and learned persons.

I do not think that anything could be more important and at the same time more satisfying to anyone born and reared in the Catholic Church than a history which presents this religion's early beginnings and growth, and clearly describes its spread and consolidation in the face of so much opposition.

May the Lord bless this humble effort for His greater glory and for a better understanding of a history second only to that of the Bible. Heaven bless the reader that will use it well.

Don Bosco dedicated his book to the provincial of the Christian Brothers in Turin, Brother Ervé de la Croix. His explanation was as follows:

The esteem and respect which I feel for you prompts me to dedicate this little book to you, for it is the only tribute I have to offer. I know very well that your modesty and humility will shy from it, but since it was written solely for God's greater glory and the spiritual advantage of young people in particular, to whom you have dedicated yourself, I do not think you will have any excuse for refusing it.

Please be so kind as to accept this tribute and bestow your patronage on it. Let it no longer be mine but yours, and please see to it that it come into the hands of those who may benefit from it.

In the meantime I have the honor to remain, with the deepest respect,

Your most humble and obedient servant,

Fr. John Bosco

In this book Don Bosco poured out all his faith and love for the popes.

He started by defining the Church; then he went on to describe

the hierarchy and introduced St. Peter as he first exercised his Supreme power at the Council of Jerusalem and as he welcomed the firstfruit of the Gentiles in Cornelius. He then showed Peter establishing his see in Rome where he suffered martyrdom after performing countless astonishing miracles. Don Bosco then continued with his story. The following outline will give the reader some idea of the nature of the work.

Peter was succeeded in Rome by an unbroken succession of 255 popes, heirs to his authority, recognized by all the faithful as Vicars of Jesus Christ, enlightened by the Holy Spirit. The first thirty-three popes steadfastly withstood persecution, testifying by their blood to the divinity of Jesus Christ and of His doctrine, and asserting their supremacy over the universal Church. They promulgated laws which all true Christians obeyed and which, for the most part, are still binding to this day.

Heresies, schisms and secular powers arose against the Papacy. The popes summoned hundreds of bishops from all parts of the earth to ecumenical councils at which they presided either in person or through their legates: decisions taken at these august sessions were valid only on the Pope's confirmation. "Rome has spoken; this issue is closed!" St. Augustine declared. At the Council of Chalcedon 630 bishops listened to Pope St. Leo's letter condemning the heresy of Eutyches and cried out unanimously: "We all believe that Peter has spoken through the words of Pope Leo! Anathema to him who does not likewise believe!" At the Second Council of Lyons which accomplished the [temporary] reunion of the Greek and Latin Churches under Pope Gregory X, the assembly of Eastern and Western patriarchs, of more than 500 bishops and 1,070 abbots and learned theologians, unanimously declared that the Roman Pontiff was the true and legitimate successor of Saint Peter, and that anyone refusing communion with him could not possibly be saved. The Fifth Lateran Council condemned the conventicle of Pisa and declared it an error to believe that an ecumenical council is above the Roman Pontiff.

In Don Bosco's eyes the Pope stood for everything most dear and worthy of love in the whole world. He was more jealous of the Pope's honor than of his own. So, when writing of Pope St. Marcellinus, whose steadfast faith in the face of persecution was vindicated



by the learned Leo XIII in the lessons of the breviary, Don Bosco wrote: "Seventeen thousand Christians received the palm of martyrdom in one single day, among them Pope St. Marcellinus, who, with intrepid courage, to his last breath, urged others to stand firm amidst their torments."

Don Bosco also brought out the fact that most of the tyrants and heretics who attempted to sully the purity of the Faith or who challenged the spiritual and temporal rights of the Church or of the Pope, were the very first to be punished by divine justice with misfortunes and dreadful deaths. On the other hand he described the spread of the true Faith, the appearance of the Fathers of the Church in the shadow of the Papacy, the founding of religious orders through the centuries and countless numbers of saints.

Century by century, he pointed out the beneficial acts of the Roman Pontiffs towards mankind, along with an uninterrupted series of miracles testifying to the divine nature of the Catholic Church. He closed his narrative with a chronological list of the ecumenical councils from Nicaea to Trent and of the popes from St. Peter to Gregory XVI.

But a good Catholic must also be a good patriot. In discussing the universal history of the Catholic Church, Don Bosco did not forget the Christian glories of his own land and here and there made frequent mention of them. He recalled the holy martyrs of the Theban legion, Secundus, Solutor, Adventor and Octavius, who shed their blood for the Faith in Turin in the year 300 A.D. He recalled St. Maximus, bishop of Turin, who died in the year 417. Greatly devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary and generous towards the poor, Maximus was so successful in combating the errors of Nestorius and Eutyches and in keeping his flock immune to their errors that in a council at Rome he was given the first seat after Pope St. Hilary. He spoke of Agilulf, duke of Turin and later king of several territories in Italy, who died in 615. A convert from Arianism, he concentrated all his efforts on spreading the true Faith throughout his dominions, exiling heretics, sweeping away the last traces of paganism, founding, together with St. Columban, the famous monastery of Bobbio, and building the church of St. John the Baptist in Turin. Nor did he forget Princess Adelaide of Turin, who in 1064 made generous donations to St. Mary's Church in

Pinerolo in suffrage of the souls of her deceased parents. He mentioned the visit of St. Francis of Assisi to Turin, the sect of the Flagellants, the miracle of the Blessed Sacrament, the almsgiving of Blessed Amadeus of Savoy and Blessed Sebastian Valfré, apostle of Turin and of all Piedmont. He also made mention of Father Brunone Lanteri and of the Oblates of Mary, of the Venerable Cottolengo who founded the Little House of Divine Providence, "a colossal, astonishing marvel of Christian charity," of the Institute of Charity, founded by the renowned Father [Anthony] Rosmini, whose members, after a sound intellectual and spiritual formation, were to dedicate themselves, as needed, to various priestly duties. Don Bosco also described the numerous institutions founded by Marchioness Barolo.

We would like to make one last remark: since this church history had been written primarily for school children and for his oratory boys, Don Bosco entwined in his narrative edifying episodes of heroic boys. They so enthused his young readers as to make them ready for any sacrifice for their Faith and for the preservation of God's grace in their hearts.

As soon as this book appeared, it was found to be ideally suited for children, because of the judicious selection of factual material, its easy style and its chaste expressions. It was favorably received and widely used in schools to the great benefit of youngsters, whose welfare was the paramount thought and aspiration of Don Bosco. The book has gone through eleven reprints and has sold a total of 50,000 copies to date.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> 1901. [Editor]

## CHAPTER 36

### *A Wandering Oratory*

**F**EW crosses awaited Don Bosco in Turin. City Hall had not yet acknowledged the millers' complaint or reached a decision. The uncertainty of the situation was painful enough for Don Bosco, but he was dealt yet another blow in a letter to City Hall from an official of the mills. After repeating and exaggerating all the malicious rumors spread by opponents of the oratory, he declared it impossible for the millers and their families to do their work or enjoy any quiet. He also pointed out that some youngster, while thoughtlessly playing, might fall into the wide deep canal which propelled the mill wheels. He even went so far as to say that such a mob of boys was a hotbed of immorality.

The city syndics knew that the charges were false but, overruled by a majority of the City Council, they issued an order, courteous in tone and addressed to Father Borel, forcing Don Bosco to move his oratory from the city mill premises.

City of Turin  
First Department of Administration  
General Services, No. 407

Turin, November 18, 1845

Very Reverend Father:

The Comptroller's Office has been informed of the annoyance caused by the young boys attending catechism classes in the city-owned church adjacent to the Dora Mills in accordance with the permission granted to you. The Comptroller's Office has therefore decided to revoke this permission as of January 1st.

We regret very much that the above mentioned annoyances have obliged us to take this step and we feel certain that you will comply with it. Meanwhile we remain,

Yours very truly,

Di Serravalle, *Syndic*  
Bosco di Ruffino, *Syndic*

Don Bosco told his boys of the decision of the city authorities amid general disappointment and vain regrets. Some of the older boys lamented this injustice with Don Bosco, but he replied at once: "It really doesn't matter. Divine Providence in Its own good time will defend the innocent." And this is what actually took place.

Not all the enemies of the oratory were able to enjoy their victory. That letter was the very last one for that mill official, for, as soon as he finished it, violent tremors seized his right hand. He had to resign, and three years later he went to his grave. Ironically, his little orphaned son was later given shelter by Don Bosco at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales in Valdocco. Charity is kind and receives all equally. (Cf. 1 Cor. 13, 4)

However, Don Bosco now realized that his work, so beneficial to boys and to the city as a whole, especially on Sundays and holy days, far from being appreciated was, in fact, spurned. Personal comfort and quiet were not to be sacrificed for the public good. Nevertheless, he was patient, determined to carry on, and he overcame such outrageous response with heroic docility. He was worried, but not dejected.

That this fortitude of his was a gift of the Holy Spirit is proven by the fact that speedily, courageously and quietly he brought to completion many great undertakings in very difficult circumstances and in spite of bitter opposition. He rejoiced in his sufferings and offered everything to God, so much so that even the most arduous and repulsive tasks he regarded as easy and pleasant. Was it really a pastime for him to stay with boys who were uneducated, coarse, noisy, not always grateful, clumsy even in showing their gratitude? Was there much satisfaction in exerting oneself to teach boys who

were either dull or stubborn or lazy? Yet he treated them all with so much affection and concern that not even the best of fathers could have done better! Yes, Don Bosco so loved them that, for the sake of their souls, he would gladly have faced and endured any torment and even sacrificed his own life.

Within a month he and his 300 boys would be homeless, as it were, without a roof to shield them from rain, snow or bitter winds. For a couple of Sundays, he still availed himself of the time extended by the municipal authorities and said Mass in St. Martin's Church, but he no longer let the boys play within the mill premises. After their catechism lesson in the afternoon, he took them across the Mosca Bridge and along the Dora River, to the open fields to the left as one enters the city gates. Here he would hand out bread rolls and big helpings of fresh fruits or dried meat. The boys would then play till nightfall with whatever Don Bosco could give them: *bocce* and *piastrelle*,<sup>1</sup> stilts, and skip-ropes. Sitting on a little mound, he supervised them while now and then reciting his breviary.

During all those weeks he tried to find some other meeting place but without success. Many people, out of curiosity, had gone to St. Peter-in-Chains Church and to St. Martin's near the mills to hear what had happened to the chaplain, his housekeeper, and the mill official who had complained to City Hall. A kind of panic had seized the people, so that even goodhearted and wealthy persons would banish the very thought of possibly offering shelter to Don Bosco and his oratory on their property. "Yet they also felt that opposing our efforts was tantamount to opposing God Himself," Don Bosco wrote. "We are not saying that He sent such terrible punishments precisely to avenge us, but He permitted these tragedies to take place to make people understand that He did not want opposition to our oratory." On the other hand, it was not long before other things occurred which showed clearly that the Lord blessed all those who helped promote and support such a beneficial undertaking. Many people in Turin and elsewhere repeatedly declared that their own and their family's financial situation had taken a turn for the better from the time they started to help Don Bosco's underprivileged youngsters.

<sup>1</sup> See footnote Nos. 2 and 3 on p. 198. [Editor]

In those days, however, there was no ray of hope! Don Bosco, therefore, felt it necessary to confer with Father Cafasso, Father Borel, and Father Pacchiotti. Charity does not act rashly. What were they to do? It was impossible to take the boys back to the *Rifugio*, and it was not desirable to continue using St. Martin's Church until January 1, because of the millers' growing ill will in the aftermath of the city authorities' decision. There was never any idea of giving up the catechism classes, but where could they be held? After praying, they decided to continue the oratory at all costs. St. Martin's Church would be used for religious instruction in bad weather only; the square fronting the mills would serve exclusively as a meeting place and a point of departure; the oratory would have to become a wandering oratory.

December had just begun, and for a few Sundays they carried on as we shall now describe. In the morning the boys met in the square fronting the mills, where Don Bosco was waiting for them. Each boy brought his own food for the whole day. Don Bosco, then, as a good captain, would line them up, warning them to be quiet at least while inside the city. Then, at a given signal they would set out on their trek with Don Bosco at their head, though he was fasting and in poor health. He usually took the joyful crowd of boys a couple of miles out of town, to such spots as *Sassi*, *Madonna del Pilone*, *Madonna di Campagna*, *Monte dei Cappuccini*, *Pozzo di Strada*, *Crocetta*, or other places. Since he was most anxious that his boys should go to confession, when they reached their chosen destination Don Bosco would ask the pastor or the superior of the monastery for a favor which was never refused, namely some kindly priest to help him with the confessions. Then all the boys filed into church for Mass, after which Don Bosco gave a short homily.

The boys' devout behavior edified everybody, even the monks, where the church was attached to a monastery. Don Bosco's sermons greatly captivated the boys. One day he explained the reason for this to Father Louis Guanella: "If you want to win over children and preach fruitfully to them, tell them stories, parables or similitudes, but, above all, fill in your story with the smallest details. This will excite their interest in the people of the story and what

they are doing. Children will share their joys or sorrows according to what impresses them most, and will anxiously follow a story to its very end."

Towards the close of day, Don Bosco gathered the boys again in an adjacent courtyard for a short catechism lesson, and the singing of a sacred hymn, followed by a story with some moral teaching. Then he took them for a walk to the nearby hills along more or less deserted roads, or to some spot where they could have fun without disturbing others. These field trips were also expensive. Fresh air and exercise made the boys so hungry that many of them ate whatever food they had brought along even before lunch time, and then, of course, Don Bosco would have to buy more bread for them.

At dusk, as the sun set behind the Alps, he would give the return signal, and all would march back to the city and to their homes, eager to tell their families about the good time they had had and what Don Bosco had said and done. Don Bosco, however, before returning to the *Rifugio*, would slip into some church with two or three of the older boys to make a visit or assist at Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. And God was with him!

At last, on December 22, [1845], the Fourth Sunday of Advent, they said farewell to St. Martin's Church. After a last prayer in honor of St. Martin, its titular saint, the boys filed out and Don Bosco, lifting his eyes to heaven, remarked: "The Lord's are the earth and its fullness." [Ps. 23, 1] Turning to the boys he added in a tone of complete trust: "Let's be patient! The Blessed Virgin will help us! Now let us look for another place."

"But where?" the nearest boys asked him.

"He who provides a nest for the birds and a den for the wild beasts in forest caves will not forget us," replied Don Bosco.

On Christmas Day the boys flocked in great crowds to the *Rifugio*. What could he do? His room was already small to begin with and was cluttered with games and church articles that had been brought over from St. Martin's Church and from the temporary chapel at St. Philomena Hospital. Don Bosco was surrounded by crowds of boys who were ready to follow him wherever he went, but he did not have an inch of land that he could call his own and

where he might gather them. It was now very cold outdoors. No one, not even Don Bosco, knew where they would eventually find shelter. That day they went to a nearby church for the three Christmas Masses, but how different it was from the previous Christmas! A sense of sadness dampened their joy.

Don Bosco was worried, but he concealed his anxiety for fear that the boys might lose heart and drift off. He cheered them by telling them wonderful things about their future home and the buildings which then existed only in his own imagination and in God's plans.

"Don't be afraid, my dear boys," he would tell them. "A fine building is waiting for you right now. Soon we'll be able to live in it. We'll have a beautiful church, too, and a big house, and large playgrounds. Thousands of boys will come to play, to pray, and to work."

It is astounding how the boys believed him! One would think that the critical situation he was in would mark the end of all his oratory dreams and make the boys drift away. Far from it! The boys were always on the increase, and they kept repeating Don Bosco's prophecy to one another. In 1856, when many of them were grown men, they told Mr. Joseph Villa<sup>2</sup> about these prophecies and remarked how he himself could see that they had all been fulfilled.

It is also remarkable that in all these wanderings of the oratory, the departure point, the destination and temporary quarters were always in the area known as Valdocco,<sup>3</sup> as though some hidden magnet had drawn him there. One of his dreams had unveiled to him yet another marvelous sight. He disclosed this, briefly, and only to a few intimates, in 1884, but its most striking aspects had escaped his lips on various occasions, at long intervals over a span of twenty years, whenever with great emotion and almost ecstatically he would gaze upon the church of Mary Help of Christians. We at his side treasured his words and carefully jotted them down each time, and then were able to reconstruct his dream as follows:

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Villa began attending the festive oratory at Valdocco in 1855 when he was 19 years old, and continued going to it till the end of his life in 1870. [Editor]

<sup>3</sup> See p. 232f. [Editor]



Don Bosco seemed to be at the northern edge of the *Rondò* or Valdocco Circle. Looking toward the Dora River, along the tall trees which at that time lined the boulevard now known as *Corso Regina Margherita*, he happened to see, about 200 feet away, near the present *Via Cottolengo*, three handsome youths, resplendant with brilliance. They were standing in a field then planted with potatoes, maize, beans and cabbage, and they stood precisely on the spot which in a previous dream had been pointed out to him as the place where the three soldiers of the Theban legion had gloriously suffered martyrdom. They gestured to him to come and join them. Don Bosco hurried over and, with great kindness, they took him to the farther end of that field, where the majestic church of Mary Help of Christians now stands.

During that brief walk Don Bosco saw wonder upon wonder, and finally he stood before a Lady remarkably beautiful and majestic, splendidly clothed, around whom stood venerable men who resembled a senate of princes. Hundreds of people in glittering array formed Her retinue as though She were a queen, and other similar throngs were visible as far as the eye could see. The Lady, who stood where the main altar is now located, beckoned to Don Bosco to draw nearer. When he was close to Her, She told him that the three young men who had accompanied him were the martyrs Solutor, Adventor and Octavius, and he interpreted this to mean that they would be the patron saints of that place.

Then, with an enchanting smile and affectionate words, She encouraged him never to abandon his boys, but to carry on the great work he had begun with even more determination. She informed him that he would encounter many serious obstacles, but that they would all be overcome and swept aside by his firm faith in the Mother of God and Her Divine Son.

Finally She pointed out to him a house which really did exist and which he later found out belonged to a man named Pinardi. She also showed him a small church on the same spot where the church of St. Francis de Sales and its adjacent building now stand. She then raised Her right hand and in an infinitely melodious voice said: *Haec est domus mea: inde gloria mea* [This is my house: hence my glory will come forth]. On hearing these words Don Bosco was so moved that he woke up. The Blessed Virgin, for truly this was She, and the entire vision faded slowly from view as the mist at dawn.

Confident of God's goodness and mercy, Don Bosco renewed his self-consecration to his great mission at the feet of the Virgin. Still

elated by his dream, he hastened in the morning to the house the Virgin had pointed out to him. As he was leaving, he said to Father Borel: "I'm going to take a look at a house that may serve for our oratory." But what an unpleasant surprise he got! Imagine his disappointment when, reaching the spot, instead of a building with an adjacent church he found a house of ill repute. When Don Bosco returned, Father Borel eagerly asked him about it. His reply, without further explanation, was that the house on which he had counted was not suited to their purpose.

## CHAPTER 37

### *A Temporary Haven*

IT was now late fall and long walks outside the city limits with the oratory boys were no longer feasible. Don Bosco had to find some place in the city, no matter what the cost, for his boys to meet on Sundays. With Father Borel's support Don Bosco explained his needs to a certain Father Moretta, a kindhearted priest, who finally agreed to rent him three rooms in a house which he owned not far to the west of the *Rifugio*. It could be reached by *Via Cottolengo*, which was then nothing more than a narrow path. It was the second house on a small lane running alongside the Filippi meadow, where an iron foundry was later built. It had only two floors; the three rooms he rented were upstairs facing south. Entrance to them was through the courtyard, closed in on three sides by the building, and an outdoor staircase which led to a wooden balcony and to the rooms. Unknowingly, the boys were getting nearer and nearer to the goal of their wanderings, their promised land.

They stayed here for about three months. Space was inadequate, but they were happy to have a roof over their heads in winter, a place where they could meet for confession, lessons, and recreation, when the snow lay thick on the ground and the buildings and streets were enveloped in dense fog. Since they still lacked a chapel, they kept going to Mass in one of the neighboring churches, usually *La Consolata* or St. Augustine's, where many of the boys continued to receive Communion with great devotion. It was to St. Augustine's that they went on the feast of the Epiphany and on a few other solemn occasions for Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. All through that winter their religious activities were limited to a simple catechism class on the evening of every Sunday and holy day, and to the singing of sacred hymns before a small improvised

altar on which Don Bosco had set a small statue of Our Lady between two candlesticks, adorning it as best he could. He saw to it that the boys could also play games suitable to the limited space such as *lotto*,<sup>1</sup> and *oca*<sup>2</sup> or geography games, dice and checkers. Sometimes, also, *hot hands* or blindman's buff kept them all amused and, occasionally, Don Bosco entertained them with sleight-of-hand tricks of his own. We learned this from Stephen Castagno, who as a boy lived in that neighborhood. All the equipment for outdoor games, brought over from the *Rifugio*, was now useless and piled up in a corner.

Don Bosco's presence was enough to keep order among that crowd of youngsters who had never known discipline before. But he could not be with them everywhere at all times, especially when they went to the neighboring churches for Mass. He needed helpers for supervision, as well as benefactors for meeting the now considerable expenses of keeping the boys busy and giving them prizes. And he found them. "Right from the beginning," Don Bosco wrote, "there was a certain Mr. Gagliardi, a storekeeper, whose novelty shop was opposite St. Maurice Basilica. He could not afford to contribute money and, therefore, offered to help me in supervising the boys. He also tried to interest other people in our behalf. Then there was Mr. Montuardi, who gave thirty *lire* to Father Borel monthly for about two years; and the generous, rich banker, Comendator Cotta. These and other gentlemen undertook also to find good employers for those boys who could not find work."

These benefactors were joined by a brilliant young priest of Turin, Father Hyacinth Carpano, who came from a rather wealthy family. He had been ordained in 1844, and was sent to Don Bosco by Father Cafasso. Tirelessly devoting himself to preaching and teaching catechism, with his kindness he got along very well with the boys and took part in their games. From Don Bosco he learned, out of love for Our Lord, to devote his life to the welfare of the young; he also used to go to the prisons along with Father Borel

<sup>1</sup> A game of chance played with cards having numbered squares corresponding to numbered balls drawn at random, and won by covering five such squares in a row. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> It was played with two dice over a board with sixty-three squares in various sections. The fifth and ninth square in each section had the picture of a goose. [Editor]

and Don Bosco. Later, he started to gather neighborhood students in his own house, help them with their lessons and safeguard them against spiritual dangers. He taught Latin several hours a day to boys who wanted to go on to the priesthood, and held spiritual retreats for boys in the city reformatory known as the *Generala*. He took into his own home as many as ten boys at a time on their release from prison; he fed them, educated them, and found work for them with good employers.

With Father Carpano's help, Don Bosco was able to resume his own classes, which had been suspended for almost six months. The number of boys now attending was only 200, due to lack of space, and they were divided into three classes, one in each room. The benches from the temporary St. Francis de Sales Chapel [at St. Philomena Hospital] were put to use. Every evening, after work the boys came to learn reading; wall posters were used as teaching aids. For hours at a time, the monotonous singsong of the alphabet, whole words being spelled out syllable by syllable, and simple or compound sentences could be heard echoing across the ice-coated fields and meadows. Three distinct choruses competed with one another, breaking off now and then when interrupted by their teachers.

Even in the first days when the oratory boys gathered at St. Francis of Assisi Church, Don Bosco had realized the importance of teaching reading and writing especially to the older boys who were still illiterate. Although they were almost out of their teens, they were still completely ignorant of their Faith. He knew that mere verbal instruction would have taken too long, with the possible danger that they would soon grow tired and quit. He, therefore, wanted to enable them to study the catechism by themselves, but at that time he had neither space nor teachers and had to be satisfied with much less.

In Father Moretta's house, instead, as at the *Rifugio*, the evening and Sunday classes were kept up fairly regularly. Many boys availed themselves of this opportunity, and, eager to learn, they responded very satisfactorily to the efforts of Don Bosco and of his helpers. Some classes for a few apprentices were held also in the daytime. The schedule was flexible and suited to the various trades of the boys; the main subjects were arithmetic, drawing and geography.

While Don Bosco dedicated himself with such great devotion to young street urchins, he did not neglect another task just as important, namely, safeguarding the innocence of those youths who had received a good training in Christian homes, and instructing them in their religion. For this purpose he would weekly call at certain public schools where he had friends among the teachers. He carried on his mission of education by teaching religion in a pleasant and instructive manner to the students in the Christian Brothers' schools or in those of *Porta Palazzo*, St. Francis of Paula, *Porta Nuova* or elsewhere.

He was always glad to substitute for any religion teacher absent or sick, and offered his services to private schools where religion was not part of the regular school curriculum. Among the latter, his favorites were Professor Bonzanino's [Latin] grammar school and Father Matthew Picco's school of rhetoric, whose pupils came from the foremost families of Turin. To the great delight of these two teachers he gave lessons every Saturday. His charm, candor and simplicity of manner easily won over the hearts of all the pupils. His appearance in a classroom always brought gladness. He chose his topics from bible history. He was so enthused over this subject and everything related to it, and he so loved to speak of it, that he never failed to keep these appointments, for about ten years. His basic motive was to urge his pupils to go to confession and Communion frequently.

Although his sincerity and zeal were obvious, not everybody looked upon his visits to the city schools with a benevolent eye; nor did the coming and going of so many boys at Father Moretta's house go unnoticed. All this gave rise to much idle gossip. This type of school was a novelty and, naturally, it aroused much comment, some favorable, some not. During that winter of 1845-46, certain rumors began to spread which brought pain to the boys, if not to Don Bosco. Quite a few people, even the serious-minded, considered his work useless and even dangerous. Some spiteful gossips in the city began calling him a revolutionary and a madman, some, even a heretic. The oratory was said to be just a ruse to lure the boys away from their own parish churches and fill their heads with questionable ideas.

This last charge was the most widespread and was inspired by

the erroneous belief that Don Bosco favored a system that had acquired a deservedly doubtful reputation after being censured by the archbishop of Turin. It was remarked that, though he did not tolerate anything sinful or unmannerly, he nevertheless allowed his boys to indulge in every kind of uproarious activity. The system of education then dominant in the schools was symbolized by a teacher's sour look and a whip; consequently, Don Bosco's new method seemed too liberal.

He tried to justify his method to his critics when he met them in the streets or when they came to visit him, but the more he explained the truth of things, the more they suspected something sinister. We are of the opinion that these critics, among whom were certainly some who sided with the secret societies, deliberately spread such rumors in the hope that the boys would desert him and thus end these Sunday gatherings. But these boys, who really knew Don Bosco, not only did not lose their respect for him, but felt it grow stronger, and clung to him with greater affection than ever.

Some priests, also, saw in Don Bosco something truly extraordinary, which they were unable to explain, especially his activity and his remarkable ability to win hearts and dominate the masses. They used to exclaim: "Woe to us and to the Church, if Don Bosco is not a priest after God's own heart! . . . Is he?" So they opposed him, because they could not be convinced that he was really following directives from above in carrying out his mission.

Father Cafasso, meanwhile, realizing that Don Bosco was misunderstood and distrusted even by the authorities, tried to dispel prejudices whenever he could and at the same time enlist the support of benefactors and friends to help him. He too was criticized for his ceaseless efforts to aid Don Bosco, and many prominent priests thought that he was being deceived on this score. Despiney mentions this in his introduction to his book on Don Bosco, where he says: "Several of his friends (Don Bosco's), who were nevertheless deeply attached to him . . . spoke to Father Cafasso, his confessor, pointing out that he would do a real service to the Church if he would set due limits to Don Bosco's intemperate zeal."

Father Cafasso calmly and smilingly listened to these criticisms, which in one way or another reached him very often. He invariably replied in a grave, almost prophetic tone: "Leave him alone, leave

him alone . . .” No one in Turin would deny that Father Cafasso had a certain discernment of spirits; he had proved as much in many delicate situations. Yet there was the thought that this supernatural gift was somehow not totally effective in regard to Don Bosco. These people all returned to the charge so constantly and with so many reasons as to evidence, at least, a very special solicitude for God’s interests. Father Cafasso was his usual self: affable, kind, courteous and very patient, but his reply which became very famous, always was: “Leave him alone.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Despiney, *Don Bosco*, page x.



## CHAPTER 38

### *A Welcome Endorsement*

**B**Y the end of 1845 Don Bosco seemed hardly able to go on with his work because of his steadily declining health. Marchioness Barolo, informed by Father Borel, replied from Rome to do whatever was necessary for Don Bosco's health, no matter the cost. A few days later she sent 100 *lire* for the oratory. Father Borel hastened to acknowledge as follows:

January 3, 1864

My dear Marchioness:

Your generous suggestion regarding our beloved Don Bosco and the goodwill you show him prove how much you value this devoted priest. He will certainly not fail to profit by it, and, on my part, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Since the beginning of December, when it became obvious that Don Bosco needed rest, Father Pacchiotti said the hospital Mass leaving to Don Bosco the second Mass at the *Rifugio*. The marked improvement in his condition proved how wise this move had been, but, of course, we cannot consider him as perfectly recovered. I have firm hope, however, that he will soon be well again, since, thanks to your solicitude, he will be able to take a complete rest from his duties at the *Rifugio* by going away for a while, and he will be under orders also to drop all other activities.

Today he gave me a definite reply about his intentions and promised that the day after the Epiphany he will place himself under orders. He will have to do a lot of explaining to Father Guala and Father Cafasso, if he does not keep his promise. Incidentally, the two good Fathers have offered to send us another priest for the second Mass at the *Rifugio*. Should all our efforts and diligence prove insufficient to the needs, I shall call on the superior of the Oblates for one of the usual confessors.

As soon as, God willing, I shall come across a priest imbued with the spirit necessary for this work, I will not fail to inform you. Again may I express my gratitude for your offer of an additional priest for our work.

Your obedient servant,

Fr. John Borel

For a while, therefore, Don Bosco had to resign himself to a partial rest by giving up his duties at St. Philomena Hospital and at the *Rifugio*. But no one dared to suggest that he give up his boys. The oratory in Father Moretta's house depended on Don Bosco's own warm personal presence if it was to be kept alive in the face of so many drawbacks.

When the feast day of St. Francis de Sales came around, the only way the boys could celebrate with some degree of solemnity was by attending Mass in a neighboring church. But when they came back to their oratory quarters, they found that Don Bosco had prepared a delightful surprise for them in the form of presents totaling more than fifty *lire* in value, according to Father Borel. So they spent a very happy day.

Meanwhile, as Archbishop Fransoni had foreseen, the oratory ran up against an obstacle encountered by every project not under parish control, regardless of its worth, if it has not been publicly approved by a decree of the competent authority. Except for some rescripts, which were interpreted as granting him some personal, temporary authorizations, Don Bosco had received so far only verbal permissions and approvals.

In early 1846 many zealous priests met in Turin to consider ways and means of promoting the spiritual welfare of their people. Both Father Borel and Father Giacomelli were present. The subject of catechetical instruction came up. Father Charles Dellaporta, pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, took the occasion to complain of Don Bosco's festive oratory. He maintained that the boys attending it formed a group of independent parishioners and that eventually they would not even know their pastor. It was, therefore, his opinion that Don Bosco had not shown sufficient respect to the

parochial authorities to whom he was subject, and should not have presumed to undertake anything without first asking their permission.

This point of view, more plausible than true, was instantly refuted by Father Borel, who declared that the archbishop was fully informed of what Don Bosco was doing, and that, furthermore, very many of the oratory boys were from outside Turin and not from the local parishes, and unless someone looked after them they would not even attend Mass on Sundays. As regards the small number of local boys among them, they were for the greater part older fellows, so unruly and ignorant that no one would be able to control them, except Don Bosco, who exercised a magic spell over them. Left to themselves, he argued, they would certainly not have turned to their parish church but would have fallen in again with bad companions and eventually have been lost. It was obvious that these boys could be better instructed and more easily kept out of harm by frequenting the oratory than by any other means. He said that he regretted very much that Don Bosco's true intentions were not sufficiently well known and appreciated; that Don Bosco never tried to lure boys away from their own parish churches but only accepted those who came to him on their own; that by his word and example he instilled in them respect for the clergy and prepared them to become in due time faithful and devoted parishioners; that he himself could testify to all this. Father Borel concluded: "Let us assume that they could all be induced to come to your churches. Is it not true that there are thousands of these young apprentices flocking to the city and forming an ever increasing new population? Who is to maintain order and peace in such an undisciplined group? Who will take care of each of them? Would they not be a disturbing element to your other parishioners? Haven't pastors and curates enough to do already, especially on Sundays? I maintain that we should hope and pray that not one, but ten or twenty such oratories be opened in this city. You may be certain that there will be no lack of boys either for the oratories or the parishes." The majority of the assembly agreed with Father Borel and the discussion passed on to other matters.

But the pastor of Mount Carmel was not yet convinced. He insisted that the principle of parochial jurisdiction over every single

member of the flock should be fully and integrally upheld. He simply could not permit any authority other than his own to be recognized within the limits of the parish which had been canonically entrusted to him. Some colleagues of his were of the same opinion. They were not inspired by pitiable ambition or envy; they were sincerely concerned for the welfare of souls. Their line of reasoning was as follows: "Don Bosco's oratory takes boys away from the parish. This means that especially at catechism time our churches will be empty and we will not even know the children whom we shall have to account for to God. Hence, let Don Bosco stop gathering them about himself and let him send them to our churches!" In conclusion they decided to present their point to Don Bosco himself.

One day, therefore, two pastors called on Don Bosco for that purpose.

"The boys who come to me do not in any way interfere with attendance at the parish churches," Don Bosco replied.

"Why not?"

"Because nearly all of them are from out of town. They have come to Turin for work and they are not under parental supervision. The greater part of our oratory boys come from Savoy, Switzerland, the Aosta Valley, Biella, Novara, and Lombardy."

"Couldn't you send them to the parish church in their neighborhood?"

"They have no idea of what parish they belong to."

"Why don't you tell them?"

"It is practically impossible. Their various dialects, the instability of their domicile for reasons of work, and the example of their friends, who for the most part are not churchgoers, are an insurmountable obstacle that prevents the boys from coming to know and attend their parish church. Moreover, many of them are already young adults; some are fifteen, eighteen or twenty years old and their religious ignorance is appalling. Who would ever be able to induce them to attend a catechism class with boys eight or ten years old who already know more than they do?"

"Couldn't you bring them to their parish church and teach them there yourself?"

"I could, at most, in one parish, but not in all since I cannot

multiply myself. These boys are scattered all over the city. The only feasible solution would be for each pastor, either personally or through others, to come to the oratory on Sundays, pick up his group of boys, and take them to their parish church. But, in practice, that wouldn't be easy either. Many boys come to the oratory because they enjoy their games and outings. (Don Bosco might have added "and the kind way in which they are treated.") With these means I attract them to catechism class and church services. Without these attractions, they probably wouldn't go to any church at all; neither the pastors nor Don Bosco would have them, and their souls would suffer. To avoid such a danger," he concluded, "it would be an excellent idea if every parish had a definite place where these boys could meet and play."

"This isn't possible. We have neither space nor personnel."

"Well, what are we to do then?" Don Bosco said.

"Do as you see best for now," the two pastors finally said. "In the meantime we shall hold a meeting and see what can be done."

Shortly after this conversation all the pastors in Turin met to discuss whether the oratories should be supported or opposed. There were arguments pro and con, but a favorable verdict prevailed. Father Augustine Gattino, pastor of Borgo Dora, and Father Vincent Ponzati, pastor of St. Augustine's, were directed to transmit to Don Bosco the following resolution:

The pastors of the city of Turin, having met in conference to discuss the oratories, after weighing pros and cons and realizing that no parish is in a position to start its own oratory, have resolved to encourage Don Bosco to go on with his work until some other decision shall be taken.

Here we would like to make the following observation: pastors are certainly obliged to impart religious instruction to both children and adults in their jurisdiction. But when they see or know that this instruction is being properly given in some other place, it seems to us imprudent, to say the least, to take a stand against it.

The pastors of Turin, ever concerned with and eager to promote the spiritual welfare of youth, never made this mistake. Rather,

several of them not only supported the already existing oratories by urging parents to send their children there, but, in the course of time and at great personal sacrifice, opened new ones. Worthy of mention, in this regard, are the pastors of the following churches: The Great Mother of God, SS. Peter and Paul, St. Julia, St. Alphonsus, Our Lady of Salvation, Sacred Heart, St. Joachim, and Our Lady of Peace. By this means they experienced the joy of seeing the little lambs of their own flock well cared for and protected from rapacious wolves. Archbishop Fransoni, on his part, continued to support and encourage Don Bosco, helping him in every way he could and urging his pastors to do likewise.

Despite these annoying distractions, Don Bosco continued sending to the press the works he had readied during that winter. A forty-six-page pamphlet entitled *Le sei Domeniche e la novena in onore di S. Luigi Gonzaga, con un cenno della vita del medesimo Santo* [Six Sundays and a Novena in Honor of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, with an outline of the Saint's life], joined his previous publications on Louis Comollo, the Seven Sorrows of Mary, the Guardian Angels and church history.

With this outline Don Bosco gave a true portrait of St. Aloysius and highlighted what had been his own first ideals which he, in turn, now wished to instill into his pupils, namely, the virtue of purity safeguarded by prayer and penance; the vocation to the religious life faithfully followed; the desire to become a missionary and suffer martyrdom for Jesus Christ. I shall quote this page lest it be utterly lost since the second edition is totally out of print. Don Bosco wrote:

St. Aloysius was considered an angel because of the purity of his life and his eagerness to do penance. He was the firstborn son of Marquis and Marchioness Gonzaga, lords of the castle of Castiglione. Already as a child he gave hints of that sanctity to which the Lord was calling him. Even at the age of four he loved seclusion and would often withdraw to some quiet corner of the house or garret where he could pray fervently on his knees, his hands crossed over his breast. To this spirit of prayer, which was a life trait of his, he joined the most rigorous penances: he never warmed himself no matter how cold it was; he went so far in

fasting that he limited his food to only one ounce a day; he spread chips of wood in his bed to torment himself even while asleep; he often slept on the bare ground; he frequently flogged himself so that his garments, hair shirt and even the floor became stained with his innocent blood. Furthermore, in his desire to suffer day and night he always wore a belt studded with sharp points around his waist.

When he was ten years old, realizing how pleasing to God was the precious virtue of purity, he went to church and before the image of the Blessed Virgin he vowed chastity throughout his life. Mary was very pleased by the offering of this holy youth and faithful servant of hers, and so helped him that he was able to enter eternal life with his baptismal innocence untainted.

As he grew older and understood the grave dangers to be encountered in the world, he resolved to abandon it, his family, his friends, and his entire inheritance, and dedicate himself entirely to God, his soul and eternity. Finally, after overcoming many obstacles, especially on the part of his father, he succeeded in joining the Society of Jesus, where he distinguished himself in every kind of virtue, practiced to the limit of human perfection.

He envied those who had been able to give their lives for the Faith and ardently desired to die a martyr. Indeed he did obtain from Our Lord the grace of dying a martyr, but a martyr of charity. During a fierce plague in Rome, Aloysius volunteered to nurse the victims; he himself succumbed and, taken back to his monastery, was shortly at death's door. It happens that those who seldom think of death are terrified and aghast at its approach, sometimes even falling into despair. Not so with Aloysius. For him death meant union with God and eternal happiness. So, when he realized his end was near, beside himself with joy, he cried out to those who visited him, "We are going, we are going!"

"Where?"

"To heaven, to heaven! Please sing a *Te Deum* for me."

Then he became silent for a while and, in trying to pronounce the holy name of Jesus, died with a smile on his lips, in 1591, at the youthful age of twenty-three years and eight months.

The pamphlet had the following preface:

Here, beloved boys in Jesus Christ, is a model and an example for you to look up to in setting a pattern of life that will lead you to true

happiness. St. Aloysius has been extolled as an example of innocence and virtue for everybody, but especially for young people, because he has at all times been able to obtain great favors from God for them. To promote devotion to this great saint and for the spiritual advantage of the faithful, the popes have granted a plenary indulgence to all who, having been to confession and received Holy Communion, sanctify the six Sundays immediately preceding the feast day of this saint, or any other six consecutive Sundays, by works of charity and prayers in honor of God. This indulgence may be gained for each of the above Sundays and is applicable to the souls in purgatory. That you may know what to do, I am presenting in this pamphlet the works of charity and prayers for each day to assist those who want to practice this devotion and thus share in the graces and special favors which St. Aloysius never fails to obtain for those who honor him.

Then, for each Sunday and for each day of the novena, Don Bosco described one of the saint's principal virtues, followed by a short prayer and some act of virtue. These acts of virtue consisted of some practices of piety or spiritual nosegays which were, so to say, the extract or essence of the suggestions, sermons, and private exhortations that from the very beginning he used to give his boys. They were as follows:

If your conscience finds you guilty of some sin, sincerely ask the Lord's pardon and promise to go to confession as soon as possible.

Never put off doing penance to your old age, when you will be unable to bear it.

If anyone tells you that you should not treat your body with such austerity, answer him that he who does not want to suffer with Jesus Christ on earth, cannot be happy with Him in heaven.

Resolve today never to indulge in immodest looks and never to talk of immodest things.

Resolve today to approach the sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist as often as possible, and to put into practice your confessor's advice.

Say your morning and night prayers before a crucifix and kiss it often to gain the many indulgences granted by the popes.



Whenever you are able, visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, especially when He is exposed for the Forty Hours devotion.

Do everything possible to set a good example for others. Invite a friend of yours to a sermon or to confession.

Shun bad companions and idleness, the unfortunate cause of waste of time, and begin today to live a new life pleasing to God.

Make a daily effort to recite your morning and night prayers with devotion and recollection, and during the day offer some short prayer to God and to your patron, St. Aloysius.

Every morning think of what your death would be like were you to die that night.

The spiritual nosegay for the feast of St. Aloysius was:

On this day offer all your acts of devotion to St. Aloysius to obtain from him the grace of final perseverance.

The first edition of 3,000 copies was printed by Speirani and Ferrero. The contents of the pamphlet were also inserted in *The Companion of Youth*.

The pamphlet, later revised and enlarged, went through eleven editions. At present it is very difficult to estimate the total run of copies. This pamphlet showed once more that the Church was always uppermost in his thoughts. He addressed his readers as follows:

Catholics are fortunate in having a faith which, at all times and in all places has always had glorious heroes of every age and social condition, who by their purity of life achieved a holiness possible only in the church established by Jesus Christ.

He concluded: May God, infinitely good and generous with His graces, bless the readers of this pamphlet and fill their hearts with strength and desire to practice the virtues herein described, for the greater glory of God and the welfare of souls.

Don Bosco made a little gift of this pamphlet to all the oratory boys. Soon the words of the hymns, *Infensus hostis gloriae* and *Luigi, onor dei Vergini*, on the last pages of the pamphlet, were on the lips of boys who had formerly known only worldly songs. These hymns became familiar to hundreds of thousands of young boys all over the world. They would certainly never have learned them were it not for Don Bosco's efforts. They extol the virtue of purity, the angelic virtue which Don Bosco never tired of promoting. He would tell his boys: "What do the pleasures of this world amount to? What is not eternal is worth nothing. Those who allow their passions to rule them, overtaken by death and buried in the eternal flames of hell, will shriek in tears: 'Fools that we were and how dreadfully wrong!' " [Cf. *Wisd.* 5, 4]

## CHAPTER 39

### *A Harrowing Experience*

DON BOSCO used to tell us what an angel of God's mercy Father Cafasso was to the unfortunate men condemned to death for their crimes. He put no limits to his charity and never spared himself. He would hasten to any part of the realm, even unsummoned, thus earning from God a most unusual grace: not one of the many condemned men whom he assisted in their last moments died without first being reconciled with God, thus giving Father Cafasso well-founded hope of their eternal salvation. A good many, in fact, moved by his ardent exhortations calmly resigned themselves to their fate. Some were even seen to await the death stroke with a smile on their lips. An executioner once told Father Cafasso: "Death is no longer death to them, but a consolation, a joy, a reward."

Don Bosco followed in the footsteps of his beloved master, for he was animated by the same spirit. As soon as the news got around that an execution was to take place, Don Bosco, at Father Cafasso's suggestion, would approach the unfortunate man on his weekly visits to the Senate prison and gradually persuade him to make a good confession, if he had not already done so. After the death sentence had been pronounced, the priest had the task of consoling the poor man in his anguish. This was not always easy to do: some erupted into blasphemies and refused the sacraments, raving that they wanted to die unreconciled; others, in their rage, attempted suicide to escape dishonor; others yet, from long-standing hatred, would never forgive and seemed to harbor only a cold cynical contempt for God and for men; there were also cases of condemned men being so stunned that there was no way to turn their minds to thoughts of eternity. However, Don Bosco, Father Borel, and Father Cafasso would take turns keeping them com-

pany, and thus succeeded in calming these poor men and instilling in them confidence and trust in the assistance of a priest. After arousing in them a real hope and love of God, they finally got them to make their confession and submit to death as an expiation for their sins.

Once the execution date had been set, if Don Bosco had heard the man's confession, he sat with him through the first half of the death vigil in the *confortatorio*, [a prison chapel where the condemned person received the last ministrations of a priest]. His words were efficacious. He reminded him of the goodness of Mary, his most tender Mother, the refuge of sinners. He pointed out how God had permitted him to reach this sorrowful point on the road lest, if he go unpunished, he might be irreparably lost. He assured him that death, if accepted with complete resignation, was a perfect act of divine love and would bring him to heaven without first passing through purgatory. By recalling to him Christ's words to the good thief on the cross: "Today you shall be with me in paradise," he invited him to cast himself confidently into the arms of God's loving mercy. From time to time he urged the man to repeat acts of contrition or say some other short prayer.

Don Bosco dedicated himself to this work with serenity, love and calm, but the calm was only superficial. It was a matter mainly of will power. On nights such as these he could never overcome a sick feeling that filled him with pity, nor could he ever grow callous with time. The flickering flame of a single candle, the silence enveloping them, the monotonous cadence of the sentry's steps in the corridor, the dragging moments and the inexorable approach of the fatal hour, all conspired to cause him such anguish that he could barely conceal it. Sometimes the condemned man would quiver in a fitful sleep, or mutter words of sorrow, hope, or fear; at other times he would wring his hands convulsively, or would suddenly bolt up, take a few steps, gaze about him with glassy tearless eyes, then collapse in a heap on a bench as though in a fainting spell. For the oversensitive Don Bosco this was agony but, in his heroic charity, he never gave up. Toward midnight, either Father Cafasso or Father Borel would relieve him. After a few last words of comfort to the convict, Don Bosco would go home feverish and exhausted. He never kept vigil until morning; he felt

that he could never muster enough strength to accompany the condemned man to the scaffold.

Only once was he obliged to subject himself to such an experience beyond his strength. In 1846, two of three convicts then on trial were a young man of twenty-two and his father. Don Bosco heard the young man's confession several times, and the youth became quite fond of him. The trial ended in a death sentence. Don Bosco went to see his young friend before his transfer to Alessandria, where the execution was to be carried out. Sobbing, the boy begged him to accompany him. Torn by anguish and affection, Don Bosco tried to reassure him with comforting but evasive words, not finding the strength to make such a promise. The three condemned men were moved as scheduled and the trip took several days as they made the required stops along the way.

As Father Cafasso was about to leave for Alessandria to give his priestly assistance to these poor men, he sent for Don Bosco and asked him to go along; the boy had begged so much to have Don Bosco with him at the end that it would have been cruel to refuse him. Don Bosco objected that he feared he could never stand such an awful sight, but Father Cafasso insisted. Accustomed to follow the suggestion of his spiritual advisor, Don Bosco promptly entered the waiting carriage. They arrived in Alessandria on the eve of the execution. As soon as he saw Don Bosco in the prison chapel, the unhappy boy flung his arms around his neck and embraced him tearfully. God alone knows how Don Bosco suffered. For a moment, he too could not hold back his tears; however, he quickly regained his self control. He spent the whole night with the young man, comforting and encouraging him with the certain hope of a glorious and joyful immortal life. More than once Don Bosco saw a faint smile play across the young man's lips, evidence of a peaceful conscience. He suggested that they pray together to Our Lady, and then he prepared him for his last Communion. Toward two in the morning he gave him absolution again, celebrated Mass in the prison chapel and gave him Holy Communion. Then, after removing his vestments, Don Bosco knelt with him to offer their thanksgiving.

Finally the moment came that was to be the beginning of Don Bosco's ordeal as well as the boy's. Ominously the bells of the

cathedral began their death toll. The cell door swung open to the guards, the Brothers of Mercy, a state witness and the prison warden. The executioner approached each condemned man in turn, knelt and asked his pardon; then he tied each one's hands and placed the noose about his neck. Don Bosco tried to divert the boy's attention by reminding him of God, the Blessed Virgin, his Guardian Angel, and the Saints who awaited him in heaven.

At last it was time to move. Three carts, each drawn by two horses, rumbled out of the prison gates with one convict in each. A local priest rode in the first; Don Bosco took his place beside the young man in the second; Father Cafasso rode in the last one with the unfortunate father. From all sides a huge crowd had gathered in the streets. In his biography of Father Cafasso, Don Bosco described his own feelings as follows:

The sorrowful, slow tolling of the bells kept announcing that these unfortunate men were on their way to pay the price of their crimes. A crucifix was borne before each man; to the side there was a gaunt image of death; about them, black-robed and hooded Brothers of Mercy chanted the *Miserere*. Soldiers and mounted *carabinieri* escorted the carts, while the executioner and numerous other officials made the dismal procession even more grim. The spectators watched in grief and fright; no one had a word of comfort for the poor men. However, at the side of each criminal stood a priest. It was the priest who dried their tears, and, prompted by supernatural love, alternately prayed with them, comforted them, and reminded them of hopes soon to be fulfilled. Crucifix in hand, he kept repeating: "Here is a Friend who loves you, who will not terrify or abandon you. Place your hopes in Him, and heaven will be yours." He then offered him the crucifix to kiss. Abruptly the procession halted before a church. Torch-bearers came out followed by a priest carrying the Blessed Sacrament; he blessed the condemned men and then withdrew as the procession moved forward to death.

Up to this point Don Bosco had been able to control himself, but a few moments later he felt his heart sink within him. He was seized by a gripping horror as he realized that the gallows would soon loom before the eyes of his unfortunate young man. Father

Cafasso noticed Don Bosco's sudden pallor as the carts rounded a corner. He got down from his own cart and halted Don Bosco's which had higher sides than the other two. He said aloud: "The sides of this cart are too high; they don't let you get enough air. Get into the other cart with the boy's father."

Although the man had been to confession and had received Communion, he gave few outward signs of repentance, remaining sullen and, one might say, contemptuous. The carts finally reached the square where the gallows had been erected. The ebb and flow of the thickening crowds cut off Don Bosco's cart as the other two reached the foot of the gallows. The driver did not know which way to go, for, in an effort not to miss the first two executions, many of the people formed a solid block with their backs to him. He shouted at them and so did the guards, but to no avail. To make any progress, they had to knock down some of the milling crowd. As soon as a little space was cleared ahead of them, many, alongside or behind the cart, would attempt to rush in before it. The condemned man noticing the crush sneered coldly and sardonically at them: "Why the rush? If I don't get there, there will be no star for today's performance. As long as I'm stuck here, you can be sure you won't miss the fun."

After a half hour's zigzagging, the cart got to the scaffold. The first two convicts had already been executed, and the young man was swinging from the noose. The father was now led beneath the gallows, but as he stepped up to the fatal platform, Don Bosco's eyes clouded over, he staggered and saw nothing more. Instantly Father Cafasso was at his side, and held him up. He then handed him over to the other priest, while he hurried to give a final absolution to the poor last victim just as they sprung the platform from beneath his feet. When Don Bosco recovered consciousness, it was all over. With Father Cafasso he accompanied the corpses to the Brothers of Mercy chapel and attended the requiem Mass.

From that day on, Father Cafasso never again asked Don Bosco to be present at an execution. Don Bosco, however, continued for several years more to comfort condemned men and hear their confessions while in prison.

Canon Picca used to tell us that as a seminarian he accompanied

Don Bosco on a visit to three of these criminals named Magone, Guercio and Violino, who were hanged in Valdocco Circle. In those days it was a large open area, enclosed by tall trees and formed by the junction of a street and three spacious boulevards. Executions took place until 1852, hardly more than a hundred yards from Don Bosco's home. For some nine years he had to put up with the rumbling of the mobs, the funeral dirge of the approaching procession, and then the awful silence, the rolling of the drums, the mournful chant for the souls of the departed, and finally the chattering and shuffling of the crowd as it dispersed in all directions. All this he could hear from his room, and for him it was torture. With his prayers he accompanied the victims to the presence of God. Though the world had justly declared these poor victims to be criminals they had been washed in the blood of the Immaculate Lamb, and God in His mercy was receiving them among the princes of heaven. Some of them owed their eternal salvation to him.

The last time that Don Bosco assisted a condemned man and heard his confession in the prison chapel was, we believe, in 1857. The man was executed near the walls of the Citadel. Believing him dead, the authorities had cut him down from the beam and placed him in a coffin for burial at St. Peter-in-Chains cemetery, as was the custom. All of a sudden the man was heard to stir, groan and make an effort to sit up. The chaplain and some other people who were still in the church, lifted him out and carried him to a bed. He called for Don Bosco who was of course summoned at once, and came in great haste. A cup of coffee was brought to the man, and he drank it, but Don Bosco realized that there was no hope because the vertebrae of his neck had been broken. He therefore urged him to renew his act of contrition, again gave him absolution and never left him until, two hours later, the doctors confirmed the real death.

These executions were dreadful spectacles, but the punishment matched the crime. The Lord declared: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God man was made." [Gen. 9,6] And in the Book of Proverbs we read: "The wicked man serves as ransom for the just, and the faithless man for the righteous." [21,18]



The punishment of criminals removes the Lord's scourge from cities and kingdoms, and serves as a terrible reminder and wholesome restraint to many who are about to set out on the path of evil.

## CHAPTER 40

### *Without a Roof*

WHILE the events mentioned above were taking place, the spring of 1846 was drawing near, and the oratory again had to move.

A distinguished French writer, speaking of the youngsters who flocked to the oratory in its early days, in a little book he wrote about Don Bosco and his work, thought up a charming comparison that we would like to quote: "Just as on a winter's day we see little birds flock in great numbers wherever a kind hand throws them something to eat, so, too, hundreds of young boys in whom the world was not interested, could be seen gathering around Don Bosco." <sup>1</sup>

These words are certainly true, for many people now realize that it was the catechism instructions, the sermons, the edifying stories, the wholesome conversation and happy games which Don Bosco provided for youngsters at a critical time of their life, which saved them from religious indifference, immorality, and loose living; these were their salvation and life. But to carry this pleasing comparison one step further, just as birds will scatter and look for food elsewhere if someone ill-disposed frightens them as they are about to peck at the precious food, so Don Bosco's earliest sons, the little birds of the oratory, many a time had to spread their wings in flight, first from St. Francis of Assisi, later from St. Philomena Hospital, from St. Peter-in-Chains, from the city mills, and, as we shall see, now too from Father Moretta's house.

Most of the rooms in this building were rented to tenants who, although not averse to the good work being done on behalf of these boys, nevertheless were annoyed by their noisy recreation and by their constant coming and going for evening classes. They

<sup>1</sup> V. D. Bosco—*Notices sur son oeuvre*, par l'abbé L. Mendre, Marseilles, 1879.

lodged a complaint with the landlord, and threatened to move elsewhere unless these meetings stopped. Good Father Moretta had no choice but to inform Don Bosco that he would have to find new quarters and served him notice to move out as soon as possible. He was, however, very apologetic and very courteous. Everybody who knew what had happened to the chaplain and his housekeeper [at St. Peter-in-Chains], and to the city mills official was very deferential toward Don Bosco and his oratory. It was March 2 [1846], and Don Bosco paid the full month's rent of fifteen *lire*.

He had already foreseen this development. Unwilling to turn away the new boys who constantly flocked to him, Don Bosco had approached the Filippi brothers and rented a nearby meadow from them, to the east of Father Moretta's house. So to this meadow the oratory was now moved. It was surrounded by a hedge so sparse that dogs could crawl through it, as they did from time to time, poking their noses through the foliage and adding their barking to the clamor of the boys. A small shack of wood and clay stood in the middle of the meadow, supported on the north side by a horizontal beam because of the sloping ground. It became the storeroom for their games. Don Bosco, however, had no place to shelter the boys from the winds, the rain, and the burning rays of the sun. But "the eyes of the Lord are upon those who love Him; He is their mighty shield and strong support, a shelter from the heat, a shade from the noonday sun." (Sir. 34,16)

The place, nevertheless, had its advantages. The rustic hedge around it soon blossomed into new leaves and flowers, and the joyous laughter, games and songs of the boys attracted attention; their number swelled to 400.

Thus, as men were pushing Don Bosco from pillar to post, God kept increasing the oratory family, thus giving Don Bosco the opportunity to do even more good than before.

Someone may ask: "How could they carry out their exercises of piety in a meadow?" The reply is that they did carry them out in a rather picturesque fashion, or, to put it better, as the Apostles and early Christians had sometimes done. For example, the procedure for confession was as follows: on Sundays and holy days, Don Bosco would walk, at a set hour, from the *Rifugio* to this

meadow where the boys would gradually assemble. Then he would sit on a stool and hear the confessions of some, while others, kneeling on the ground near by, would either examine their consciences or recite their penances. While this took place in one corner of the meadow, the boys who had already gone to confession would form small groups, humming a sacred hymn or listening as one of them read aloud or told an edifying story. Others would busy themselves either with chatting, playing with *piastrelle*,<sup>2</sup> or *bocce*,<sup>3</sup> or trying to walk on stilts. Finally, when it was time, Don Bosco would rise from his makeshift confessional and, in the absence of bells, a boy chosen for this task would beat an ancient-looking drum to summon everybody to the middle of the field. Another boy called for silence by blowing on a raucous trumpet and Don Bosco would then tell the boys what church they were to go to for Mass and Communion. In groups or, at times, processionally they would then march off, devoutly singing sacred songs. This is how Father Ascanio Savio witnessed it. After fulfilling their Sunday precept the boys would return to their homes for breakfast and lunch.

In the afternoon, as early as they could, they would stream back from all parts of the city to their beloved meadow and begin their games, under the supervision of their two guardian angels, Don Bosco and Father Borel, who would be assisted by some of the older and more responsible boys. At the proper time, Don Bosco gave his little drummer the signal to beat a tattoo on his drum and re-assemble the boys. He would then divide them into various groups according to age and knowledge. Seated on the grass, they would listen to a half-hour catechism lesson. Don Bosco, standing on a little mound, usually taught the older boys. After the singing of a hymn, either he or Father Borel, standing on a chair or bench, would give them a short sermon so interesting and instructive that they would listen very attentively. Since they could not have Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, the ceremony ended with the Litany of Loreto or a hymn in honor of the Immaculate Conception to beg Mary's blessing also after that of Her Divine Son. They paid no attention to the many passersby

<sup>2</sup> See footnote No. 3 on p. 198. [Editor]

<sup>3</sup> See footnote No. 2 on p. 198. [Editor]

who would halt to stare curiously at the unusual sight. Afterwards, they would resume their games with gusto and play until dusk. Occasionally several of the lads would ask to go to confession while the others were playing, and Don Bosco would always oblige, regardless of the time or other duties. What faith shone in these poor boys, who only a few months before had scarcely known anything at all about God!

Once all had left, Don Bosco would go back to the *Rifugio*. His heart rejoiced in the Lord, but he was sometimes so tired that he could scarcely stand on his feet, and he had to be helped home or even carried. This was indeed a striking sight! Was it not in some way reminiscent of the devoted multitudes who were taught and blessed by our Savior on the banks of rivers, on mountain slopes, and on the shores of Tiberias?

While the oratory had its headquarters in the meadow, something occurred which I think should not be passed over in silence. One Sunday evening as the boys were having fun, racing to and fro, playing and making a great deal of noise, a boy about fifteen years old came close to the hedge. He seemed to want to cross this slight barrier and join them, but not finding the courage, he stood there and watched with a grim, unhappy expression on his face. Don Bosco noticed him and came over to ask him a few questions. "What's your name? Where do you come from? What do you do?" But the poor boy could not answer. Don Bosco wondered if he was dumb, and was about to speak to him in sign language when he decided to try another approach. Placing his hand on the boy's head, he asked: "What's the matter, son? Tell me, do you feel sick?"

Encouraged by his kindness, the boy answered simply, in a tone that seemed to come from the hollow of an empty cave, "I'm hungry."

The pathetic reply won everybody's sympathy. Someone ran for food, and the boy was given something to eat. As soon as he had finished, Don Bosco engaged him in conversation.

"Have you any family?"

"Yes, but my parents live far away."

"What's your job?"

"I worked in a saddler's shop, but, since I wasn't very good, I lost my job."

"Have you looked for another one?"

"I did, all day yesterday, but I don't know anybody here and couldn't find anything."

"Where did you sleep last night?"

"On the steps of St. John's Church."

"Did you go to Mass this morning?"

"Yes, but I couldn't pay much attention because I was so hungry."

"Where were you going when you stopped here?"

"I was tempted to steal. That's what was on my mind the past few hours."

"Did you ask anybody for a little money?"

"Yes, I did; but they all yelled at me. They all said, 'You're strong and healthy. Why don't you look for a job?' They gave me nothing."

"If you had stolen, you might have landed in prison. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, that's what has held me back more than once. But the Lord took pity on me and instead of letting me go wrong, He led me here to you."

"What were you thinking of, when you stopped to look at us?"

"I said to myself: 'How lucky these boys are. They're happy and cheerful, jumping, running about, and singing.' I envied them. I wanted to join them, but I didn't dare."

"Will you come again on Sundays and holy days?"

"I'd love to."

"Then, by all means, come and you'll always be welcome. For tonight, I'll take care of your supper and get you a place to sleep. Tomorrow I'll find you work with a good man who will give you a job, food and shelter."

Of course, this boy continued to frequent the oratory with great regularity until 1852, when he was drafted into the army. He was always most grateful to Don Bosco, who, by his paternal kindness and thoughtfulness, had saved him from the danger of going astray.

Father John Bonetti recalls also another episode when, on a

Sunday, Don Bosco took his boys on a hike to the famous basilica of Superga.<sup>4</sup> We shall describe it as it was told to us by one of the participants, and we are sure you will enjoy it.

In the morning the boys met in the meadow as usual, and went first to *La Consolata* [Our Lady of Consolation] for Mass. Then, about nine o'clock they lined up by twos, and like a regiment set out for Superga. They took their musical instruments along with them: an old drum, a trumpet, a violin, and a guitar which was totally out of tune; not much, to be sure, but sufficient to make noise, and this was all that mattered. Some boys carried baskets of bread, others cheese, salami, dried figs, chestnuts, apples and other groceries. They were fairly restrained while crossing the city, but as soon as they reached the Po River, the hubbub became louder and so did their chatter, their songs, their shouts and clamor; it sounded as though they were on their way to storm the hill. Leading them was a third year high school student at the Porta Nuova School, named Francis Picca. He was an old timer since he had given Don Bosco a hand with the boys first at St. Francis of Assisi and then at the *Rifugio*; he still kept up this charitable work with the permission of his teacher, Father Bertolio.

Father Borel had gone on ahead, early in the morning, to notify those in charge of the basilica and make the necessary arrangements for a crowd of boys who, in all likelihood, would reach the top of the hill as hungry as wolves. When they arrived at *Sassi*, at the foot of the hill, they found a gentle horse, fully harnessed, which the pastor of Superga, Father Joseph Anselmetti, had thoughtfully sent for their captain, Don Bosco. There was also this note from Father Borel: "Everything has been taken care of; food and drink are all ready. Come up!"

Don Bosco swung himself into the saddle, and, calling the boys around him, read the note to them. They shouted so loud with joy and applauded so lustily, that not only the rider but the horse itself was greatly startled. Having given vent to their feelings of joy, they broke ranks and began the climb, surrounding their commanding general like a guard of honor. On the way, some of them

<sup>4</sup> This basilica, Juvara's masterpiece, rises on a hill called Superga about three miles east of Turin. From the summit of the hill, 2,205 feet above sea level, in fine weather one can look down on Turin or at the wide semi-circle of the snow-crested Alps that rise like a wall at a radius of thirty miles or more. [Editor]

took hold of the horse's bridle, others its ears, a few its tail. The horse was patted and pushed, but the good-natured quadruped endured everything with a patience that would have put to shame even the most long-suffering donkey.

Finally, amid roars of laughter, jokes, snatches of songs and plenty of talk, they reached the top of the hill. As they were soaked with perspiration, Don Bosco made them all assemble in the yard of the building adjacent to the basilica, lest they catch cold by being exposed to the wind on the summit. After they rested a little, he had them all sit at table, as their meal was ready. Father William Audisio, then president of the Ecclesiastical Academy,<sup>5</sup> saw to it that they had an excellent soup and main course while the pastor supplied the beverages and dessert. This was their way of expressing their esteem for Don Bosco and the good work he was doing. After grace, the boys thanked their kind benefactors, and the musicians blasted away on their instruments to the cry of "Long live the president, long live the pastor!" These good-hearted priests appreciated, of course, the boys' expressions of gratitude, but could not help being amused by the strange music which sounded like the squeaky tunes to which monkeys danced in *Piazza Castello* in Turin. But everything went off very well and the boys were happy as kings when at last they got up from table.

Later, Don Bosco told them the history of this basilica dedicated to the Mother of God. He pointed to the plains below which in 1706 had been overrun by strong, daring French forces besieging Turin. He described how Duke Victor Amadeus and Prince Eugene of Savoy had climbed the same hill they were on, and vowed to Our Lady that they would build Her a magnificent church if She would grant them victory. He showed them the Citadel which had been saved by the heroism of Pietro Micca,<sup>6</sup> and described the glorious battle that took place, the liberation of Turin, the great parade, the general rejoicing and the manifest protection of the Blessed Mother over the people of Turin. He also told them about the tombs of the royal family in the crypt and about the academy which Charles Albert had founded, thus giving them some high-

<sup>5</sup> See Vol. I, p. 212. [Editor]

<sup>6</sup> Pietro Micca (1677-1706), a soldier in the Engineer Corps, saved the Citadel by sacrificing his own life in blowing up the tunnel which the French had already penetrated in their attempt to storm the Citadel. [Editor]



lights of their own national history. They then visited the basilica, the royal tombs, the hall containing the portraits of all the popes, the library, and finally they even climbed the magnificent cupola from which they could admire a vast area of Piedmont. They stared with wonder at the majestic crown of the Alps, whose snowy peaks seemed to touch the sky.

About three o'clock they gathered in the basilica, along with many people who lived along the hillside and had been summoned by the church bells. After they had sung Vespers, Don Bosco mounted the pulpit and gave a short sermon. Some still remember that he spoke of Mary's powerful intercession with Her Divine Son, and of what one must do to obtain Her help in prayer. "If it is possible," he said, "first pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament and say a prayer. Then call on Mary to ask for what you think is useful or necessary for you. You may be sure that this powerful, compassionate Mother will obtain for you either the grace you ask or another one equally good, or better."

After the sermon, the choirboys went up into the choir loft and, to Don Bosco's organ accompaniment, sang the *Tantum Ergo* at Benediction. It was not customary in those days for young boys to sing in church. Therefore, that day, the members of the academy and the people, hearing for the first time those silver tones, were quite overcome with amazement. Many wept from emotion, for it sounded as if a choir of angels had descended from heaven to praise God.

After Benediction, several balloons were let loose in the air. Their rapid ascent seemed to invite the watchers to lift their thoughts and hearts to God. Around six o'clock, following a drum roll and a trumpet blast, the boys grouped together and, after again thanking those who had so generously offered them hospitality that day, they began the descent to the city, alternately singing, shouting, or reciting the rosary and their night prayers along the way. When they were back in the city, the boys broke ranks, one by one, as they neared their respective homes and said good night to Don Bosco before rejoining their families to tell them about the events of the day and their impressions. When Don Bosco reached the *Rifugio* there were still with him eight or ten of the stronger boys who were carrying games and empty baskets.

The hike to Superga was repeated many times. Many still remember the hike of about eighty boys in July, 1851. From the *Convitto* Father Cafasso had sent supplies for breakfast, while Father Paolino Nicola Truffat, a Savoyard and Father Audisio's successor as president of the academy, provided a sumptuous dinner. The good priest always gave Don Bosco and his boys a very hearty welcome on their annual hike, and provided their meals at his own expense until 1858.

His successor, who filled this important post under the title of "prefect," was equally generous. He was succeeded by Father Stellardi.

Don Bosco, who did not know the new president very well, prudently tried to reconnoiter the situation before undertaking the annual hike, and sent a smart seminarian to ask for the loan of a few cooking pots to prepare soup. The president readily agreed, and offered to furnish the main dish himself. By 1859, the whole Oratory of St. Francis de Sales took part in the hike, students and artisans alike, led by their band. Father Stellardi always provided something extra for the boys' dinner besides lending kitchen utensils, china and silverware.

In 1864 this joyful traditional hike of the oratory's heroic beginnings was discontinued. The various halls of the building adjoining the basilica had been restored to their former splendor, and admission was only by conducted tour. This put it beyond the means of the oratory boys.

## CHAPTER 41

### *Memorable Outings*

THE 1846 hike to Superga was the first of a long series of similar excursions to various other places in the years that followed. Don Bosco generally announced them in advance and offered them as a type of reward for coming to the oratory regularly, learning the catechism well, behaving oneself at work, and not being averse to approaching the sacraments from time to time. As a good father he did his best to draw his sons to what was good, and to show them that serving God and having wholesome fun went hand in hand, as the royal prophet said: "Serve the Lord with gladness." (Ps. 99,1) This maxim he practiced throughout his life and constantly inculcated in his pupils. A clear, pure conscience is the source of the peace one enjoys in serving the Lord! "Those who love your law have great peace." (Ps. 118,165)

A former pupil named Paul C . . . described in a long letter his first visit to the Filippi meadow, the fun of those gatherings, the Sunday hikes and Don Bosco's friendliness. After telling of his parents' decision to send him to Turin to earn his living as a bricklayer's apprentice, he continued:

I hoisted my pail to my shoulder and left my village to go to Turin. I felt like a young colt breaking loose with no other desire but to run around and frolic. The moral dangers of big cities are grave for all, but a thousand times more so for an inexperienced boy. My father had asked a friend of his, a very good and devout man, to look after me, so I went straight to him for guidance and advice. He found me a job that gave me food and board on the premises. This took care of weekdays, but how was I to spend my Sundays? At times he took me to Mass, sermons or other church services, but after that I was left to myself. Some friends would invite me to games or to play cards with them in a wineshop or

café, where a boy like myself, barely fifteen, would certainly have gone wrong.

One Sunday my father's friend said to me: "Paolino, have you ever heard about an oratory, where crowds of boys go on weekends to have fun?"

"What do they do there?"

"First they go to church. Then they spend the rest of the time in all kinds of games, in singing and playing musical instruments."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" I interrupted, full of curiosity. "Where is it?"

"I'll take you there myself next Sunday, and I'll ask the one in charge to take you in."

I couldn't wait for the days to go by. While working, eating or even sleeping, I seemed to hear music and see boys jumping and playing all kinds of games. At last Sunday came, but because of some family business, my father's friend was unable to take me there. Eager to go, I asked him impatiently for directions and then ran off. It was about 8 o'clock in the morning when I found the longed for oratory of my dreams. I saw a meadow closed in by a boxwood hedge and a large crowd of boys playing games, but in a quiet sort of way. A number of them were kneeling over to one side near a priest, who was sitting on a little mound and hearing confessions.

I was bewildered, fascinated by what I saw! It was as if I had stepped into a whole new world of unknown wonders. One of the boys, seeing that I was new, came over and asked me nicely:

"Want to play *piastrelle*?"<sup>1</sup> This was my favorite game so I accepted eagerly at once. We had finished only one game when everybody suddenly quieted down at the sound of a trumpet. Leaving whatever they were doing, they all crowded around the priest whom I later came to know as Don Bosco.

"Dear boys," he said in a loud voice, "it's time for Mass. This morning we're going to the *Monte dei Cappuccini*. After Mass we'll have breakfast. Those who haven't had time for confession can go some other Sunday. As you know, confessions are heard every Sunday."

When he had finished speaking, the trumpet sounded another blast and everyone started walking in an orderly manner. One of the older boys began the rosary and all joined in. We walked for nearly two miles. I didn't dare to join the boys, but out of curiosity I followed them at a short distance and responded to the prayers with the others. As we began to climb the slope leading to the monastery, we recited the litany

<sup>1</sup> See footnote No. 3 on p. 198. [Editor]

of Our Lady. I thoroughly enjoyed the climb; the trees, the dirt road, and the clumps of woods covering the hillside echoed to our singing and made the walk very enchanting.

During Mass, a number of boys received Communion. After a brief sermon and thanksgiving, we all went into the courtyard of the monastery for breakfast, but since I felt I had no right to eat with them, I held back, waiting to join them on the way home. But Don Bosco came up to me and asked, "What's your name?"

"Paolino."

"Have you had breakfast?"

"No, Father."

"Why not?"

"Because I did not go to confession or Communion."

"You don't have to do that in order to have breakfast."

"What's required, then?"

"Nothing but a good appetite." So saying he led me over to the basket and gave me plenty of bread and fruit.

After we got down from the hill, I went home for lunch, and in the afternoon I returned to the meadow and plunged into the games until dusk. For years afterward I never failed to go to the oratory and keep in touch with Don Bosco, who did so much for my soul and brought so many other boys back to the right path. But what he had to put up with! How patient he was, and how hard he tried to bring back to God some boys who were so proud, ill-natured, rude and sometimes even malicious! Whenever he managed to bring about some improvement, he was so genuinely happy that he counted all his pains as nothing and was strengthened to undertake even more severe sacrifices.

I attended the oratory every Sunday and holy day and went on all the outings; they always excited the boys to heights of enthusiasm. Something usually happened on these outings. Most often it was something pleasant which provided grist for endless discussions, and that was what Don Bosco wanted in order to keep our mind constantly occupied with wholesome thoughts. Even a whole book would not be enough to describe this early period of the oratory's history. It would be impossible for me to write about all that I saw with my own eyes, but I cannot leave out one very remarkable experience.

One day Don Bosco was going with some twenty choirboys to *Sassi* for a religious celebration. When we came to the Po River, we had to turn right along its bank to get to the bridge. Here we were quickly surrounded by a crowd of young boatmen who ferried people across. They barred his way and deafened him with their insistent demands. To

rid himself of such embarrassing requests, Don Bosco motioned to a powerfully built, middle-aged boatman nearby to get his boat ready; it was large enough to carry us all. The boatman shoved the bothersome young men aside and escorted Don Bosco and us down to the pier. As soon as the young boatmen realized that they had lost a prospective customer, they broke into a wild roar, shouting all kinds of insults at Don Bosco. Some of them even got into the boat with us and kept staring at us scornfully. Not in the least upset, the boatman grabbed them, one by one, by their shirts or the skin of their backs, and threw them out bodily upon the shore. They scrambled up the slope to join their companions, and, as the boat began to move away, they picked up stones, piled there for a roadway, and began hurling them at us. Some of the younger lads crouched in terror close to Don Bosco, and others started to cry. We were really in a very dangerous situation. Stones rained down on us from all sides; some splashed into the water and others hit the sides of the boat. Don Bosco, meanwhile, kept reassuring us. "Just keep still," he told us calmly. "You won't be hit." And nobody was, to our great amazement. Soon we were beyond range. Those on the shore then began to shout cat-calls and threats, "We'll get you tonight! We'll take care of you then!"

The boat landed at the *Madonna del Pilone* and from there we went on to *Sassi*. The silvery voices of the choirboys flooded the neighborhood with joy. In the evening we returned on foot and crossed the bridge. We were walking close together, and on the other side of the bridge just as they had threatened to do, were ten or twelve young boatmen glaring at us ready to pick a fight. They were sneering and murmuring, but not a word of what they were saying could be heard. Don Bosco watched every movement they made, but nothing unpleasant happened. Some unknown force seemed to hold them back and keep them from trying violence.

Thus far the boy's letter. Meanwhile, through such exercises of piety and wholesome fun, the oratory boys were made to realize how much Don Bosco really loved them. They tried to repay his fatherly solicitude and genuine interest as best they could, above all by promptly obeying him. A word, a nod, at times a mere glance from him were enough to calm them down, stop an argument, prevent some disorder, or obtain perfect silence from 400 lively youngsters.

Once, while they were wholly taken up with running, playing and raising their usual tremendous racket, Don Bosco had to make an announcement. He signaled with his hand and in an instant all the noise and playing ceased, and all gathered around him to hear his orders. A *carabiniere* who had been watching for some time could not help exclaiming: "If this priest were a general, he could lead his army to victory against any enemy!"

In Turin people talked a lot about Don Bosco. When he walked through the streets with his boys, they came out of their yards or onto their balconies, gazed out windows, or came to the door to enjoy the sight. Some said he was a great saint, others that he was a madman. Sometimes, returning from their outings, the boys would stop and hoist him up to their shoulders while he struggled and protested. But, willy-nilly, he had to let them carry him in triumph as the ancient Romans had carried the emperors on their shields.

Regarding these outings, we have to add that although no constraint was used to keep discipline, there was never the least disorder. There were no fights, no complaints, no attempts at stealing fruit or anything else, irrespective of the number of boys, who sometimes were 600 or 700. Not all were very young; some were husky, bold young men, danger-prone and knife-wielding.

This perfect discipline should cause no wonder. These boys loved Don Bosco with the love of those who know they are loved in return. Whenever he made his way through the streets on week-days, boys could be seen darting out of their shops along the way to greet him. It would have been risky for anyone to fail to show the proper respect for their padre; and woe to anybody who should dare speak slightly of him. When any of them was tempted to do anything wrong, the thought of how displeased Don Bosco would be was enough to make him resist the temptation. Incredible as it may sound, it is, nevertheless, true. His wishes were orders for them. I might add that their devotion to Don Bosco went even beyond reason.

## CHAPTER 42

### *Don Bosco's Bible History*

WE are utterly amazed to realize how many different tasks Don Bosco could take up at one and the same time, even in those years. It was a pace he maintained with surprising ease and without let-up to the very end of his life. The worries arising from the oratory had not prevented him from compiling the *Storia Ecclesiastica* and other books, and this same year he completed work on a fine bible history. Because of his diligence in writing, the words of Our Lord may fittingly be applied to him: "Every scribe instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings forth from his storeroom things new and old." (Matt. 13,52) Nevertheless, as he himself said several times and we have remarked above, he was quite hesitant about publishing his writings. He overcame this reluctance because of his love for his boys. Humility was the constant guide of all he did. When going to the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* to study or write, he used to hand written sheets of his *Storia Sacra* to the porter to read; on his return he would ask whether he had understood what it was all about. If not, Don Bosco would rewrite those pages to make them even simpler and easier to understand.

This work, some 200 pages, published by Speirani and Ferrero, presented the most important events of the Bible in correct, simple, clear language which made it easy for youngsters to grasp its meaning and remember what they had read. These features are characteristic of all his other works. The first edition ended with an account of the ascension of Jesus into heaven. Summing up its contents, Don Bosco made three points:

1. The Messiah had certainly come, because all the prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus Christ.
2. The Messiah had founded a Church, the sole hope of salva-



tion for all men, infallible in its teachings and in its interpretation of the Bible, indefectible to the end of time because of the unfailing assistance of its Founder.

3. This Church is the Roman Catholic Church, which alone through the centuries has preserved the truths taught and confirmed by Jesus Christ and has never broken the lawful succession of His vicars from St. Peter to the present Supreme Pontiff—all of them endowed with the plenitude of power, independent of all human authority.

At the same time the book aimed at refuting the allegations of Protestants, but without the publicity and clamor of controversy. It was intended also to protect his boys against dangerous errors, current at that time. Protestants accused Catholics of not knowing the Bible, and attacked Catholic beliefs with the assertion that many of them had no foundation in Scripture. For this reason Don Bosco, in narrating events of the Old and New Testaments, stressed their relevance to external worship, the doctrine of purgatory, the necessity of good works for salvation, the veneration of relics, the intercession of the saints, devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, confession, the real presence of our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, the primacy of the pope, and similar topics. Almost all the bible histories then in use in Piedmont failed to emphasize these points.

But even more beneficial was the pedagogic method Don Bosco employed. Every important biblical event served as the basis for an instructive maxim expressed in terms which young minds could understand. This too, was the method he followed in his talks. A few examples will suffice. After describing the sacrifice of Abraham, he commented: "The Lord always blesses those who are obedient to His commands." On the massacre of Sichem: "This teaches us that public entertainment can be dangerous, especially for the young." On the exalted position which Joseph held after his release from prison: "The Lord turns everything to the advantage of those who love Him." With reference to the blasphemer and profaner of holy days whom Moses had stoned: "A terrifying example to those who dare to blaspheme the holy name of the Lord or profane the days consecrated to Him. Such punishments and worse are to be feared both in this life and in the next." On the

death of Heli: "The Lord sometimes punishes negligent parents even in this life, and shortens the days of disobedient children." Praising the friendship of David and Jonathan: "This is an example well worthy of imitation, especially by young people who should choose as friends only those who show a love of virtue." Of Solomon he wrote: "We ought to prefer the poverty of Job to the throne of Solomon, for in Job we admire a man whose virtue is the laurel of the saints; but in Solomon we lament the fall of a man who, for all his sublime wisdom, could not save himself from the poison of wealth." Referring to the division of Israel and Juda, he said: "Never seek advice from the proud, or the inexperienced." Reflecting on the miracle of a crow bringing bread to Elias: "See how God cares for His own; let us serve Him, the Lord, and He will see to all our needs." Telling how the boys who mocked Eliseus were torn to pieces by bears: "This is a frightening example to all who scoff at older people or at God's ministers." The defeat of Josaphat, who had taken the godless Achab as his ally, gave him an opportunity to say: "Associating with bad companions can involve one in great dangers." The death of Holofernes inspired him to write this great truth: "All armies are useless unless assisted by God." He praised the model behavior of Daniel and his three companions at the Babylonian court: "Temperance is blessed by the Lord, and is good for both our minds and our bodies." The book also includes some valuable comments on prayer, confidence in God's mercy and goodness, prophecies regarding the future Messiah and the Blessed Sacrament.

From the New Testament I will quote only a single example; it concerns the man who was paralyzed. "In all miracles of healing performed by our Divine Savior, we must admire the remarkable goodness which caused Him to heal first the sickness of the soul and then that of the body. He thus teaches us the great lesson that we must first purify our consciences before turning to God for help in our earthly needs." That is why, when people came to him for help in obtaining graces from Our Lady, Don Bosco always suggested that they first receive the sacraments.

The preface shows us how assiduously and diligently Don Bosco applied himself to sacred science. Indirectly, too, we are led to

surmise how frequently he taught religion to the oratory boys and those in the city elementary and high schools. This preface documents his priestly zeal. He expresses himself as follows:

It may seem superfluous to put out a new textbook on bible history, since so many already exist to satisfy every class of persons. I, too, thought this to be the case, until I began to examine books that are currently in wide use by young people, and discovered that many were either too lengthy or too concise, and that, often enough, because of their involved concepts and the language used to express them, they lacked the simplicity and appeal of the Sacred Scriptures. Others almost entirely omit the chronology so that an inexperienced reader can hardly place the event he is reading, or even know whether it be closer to the creation of the world or to the coming of the Messiah. Finally, in almost all the textbooks, I have come across some expressions which, in my opinion, may arouse immodest thoughts in the impressionable and tender minds of youngsters.

For these reasons I decided to compile a bible history which would relate the more important events of Holy Scripture in language that any boy could read without risking undesirable thoughts. To achieve this end, I narrated the principal stories of the Bible one by one, to groups of boys of varying intellectual ability, observing attentively the impression made on them then and there and the effects that followed. Thus I came to discard some stories, barely mention others, and enrich not a few with greater detail. Also, I consulted many other bible histories and drew from each what best served my purpose.

I have followed Calmet's<sup>1</sup> chronology except for a few minor corrections which modern critics consider necessary. On every page I have always tried to enlighten the mind while ennobling the heart, and make the study of the Bible as popular as possible.

The Holy Scriptures were meant, in God's design, to keep alive in the hearts of men their faith in the Messiah promised by God after Adam's fall. The entire Old Testament, in particular, may be considered a continual preparation for this important event. For these reasons, I have purposely stressed the promises and prophecies which refer to the coming Redeemer.

Following the advice of wise masters to explain the Bible by illustrations, I have included a few engravings of the major events. Since chil-

<sup>1</sup> Dom Augustin Calmet (1672-1757) was a celebrated French exegetist. [Editor]

dren are often puzzled by proper names of cities and countries mentioned in the Scriptures but not found on modern maps, I have added a small glossary listing the ancient names and briefly explaining their modern equivalents.

This Bible History is divided into eras, and these into chapters, which are further subdivided into paragraphs, each dealing with one clear subject. Experience has taught me that this is the simplest way to proceed, if a boy's mind is to assimilate and retain what he reads.

The study of the Bible is its own reward, and so needs no recommendation. The Bible is the most ancient history we have; it is the most reliable, because God Himself is its author; it is the most valuable because it shows the Divine Will being manifested to man; it is the most useful because it reveals and proves the truths of our holy Faith. No other study, therefore, is more important than this one, nor should anyone who truly loves his Faith prefer any other subject to this. If my efforts, such as they are, result in any benefit to the reader, let the glory be given to God, for whose honor alone I have undertaken this task.

Since the work was intended as a textbook, the preface to the first edition contained two quotations (omitted in the third edition) which reveal Don Bosco's prudent foresight. Where he says that he "always tried to enlighten the mind while ennobling the heart," he adds a footnote: "*See Feccia, L'Educatore Primario, prog.*"; and where he says that he "included a few engravings," another footnote reads: "*See F. Aporti, L' Educatore Primario, Vol. I, p. 406.*" In the eyes of certain teachers, this served as a recommendation for his book. Well-deserved praise is always welcome, and Father [Ferrante] Aporti was appreciative of the tribute.<sup>2</sup> As he was accustomed to do in such circumstances, Don Bosco sent him a complimentary copy, with a brief letter of praise interspersed with spiritual thoughts. The praise was not undeserved, for Aporti's writings and activities greatly benefited the cause of popular education.

Don Bosco understood the inner feelings of misguided priests and others who stray from the right path and form groups of their own. Selfishness, greed, jealousy, suspicion and sometimes subjugation to tyrannical power are their common lot. Notwithstanding the acclaim and honors heaped upon him, Father

<sup>2</sup> See footnote on p. 148. [Editor]

Aporti often experienced this bitter truth, especially after he voted in the Senate against the Des Ambrois Amendment, which totally handed over not only monastic property, but the religious themselves into the hands of the government. Despite Aporti's many services to the cause of a united Italy, the liberal newspapers treated him with bitterness, trampled on him, and dragged him through the mire. One of them even threatened him with "two fingers around his windpipe."

In the presence of upright people, those who have gone astray disguise their degradation and remorse by a veneer of lofty pride. They think themselves despised by such people, suspect them of unfavorable judgments, and regard them as their enemies. They crave affection, but find none. Hence, many of them deeply prize anyone who shows them friendship. Don Bosco was such a friend to Father Aporti, who realized that Don Bosco was loyal to the truth and sincere in his words of approval. Don Bosco's frank, open countenance, his respectful manner and friendly words never gave Father Aporti reason to doubt his intentions, and he was always glad to meet him. He repaid Don Bosco by his staunch support and his warm praise of the schools at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales whose Catholic and pro-papal spirit he fully recognized. If Don Bosco was able to conduct classes undisturbed and unhampered by red tape, interference, and government inspections from 1847 to 1860, it was due to the favorable public opinion prevailing among those in power. Father Aporti certainly had a hand in all this.

The *Storia Sacra*, properly approved by the archdiocesan censor, was published in dialogue form in 1847, and immediately adopted by many public and private schools, for which it was intended. Our comments are based on the first reprints of the work, particularly the edition of 1853, where the pedagogical method is better presented and where the ancient geographical names are accompanied by their modern equivalents. This book, suitable for the general public and with minor revisions, has already gone through twenty-four printings with about 60,000 copies sold to date.

## CHAPTER 43

### *Alarm at City Hall*

DON BOSCO was grateful to God for the good his books were doing and for the happy and loyal attendance of the boys at the oratory, despite its many trials. Nevertheless, his smile concealed an additional sorrow, affecting him since the beginning of March. Thoughtless people, seeing him roam about with a crowd of boys, began to criticize him severely, charging that he was making them irresponsible, disobedient to their parents, and undisciplined. They never bothered, of course, to find out whether their parents lived in Turin, and if they did, whether they cared for them. People also noticed how readily the boys obeyed his orders, and, since there was already enough talk of riots and insurrections in various parts of Italy, the affection and obedience of the boys provided new impetus for the absurd rumor that Don Bosco might become dangerous and capable of inciting a revolt in town. This rumor was strengthened by the fact that a number of the boys who now went to church and were beyond reproach, had formerly been real juvenile delinquents. To this wild talk of rebellion, evil tongues had added even more damaging accusations. These caught the attention of the local authorities, particularly of Marquis Cavour, father of the well known Gustave and Camillo. He was then vicar of Turin, the highest ranking authority in the city. Some time before he had happened to see Don Bosco in the Citadel meadows, seated on the grass with a group of boys whom he was trying to teach some religion. Cavour had then asked, "Who's that priest with all those boys?"

"Don Bosco," he was told.

"Don Bosco! Well, he's either a lunatic," the marquis remarked, "or a candidate for the Senate." The "Senate" was the common name, still in use today, for one of the city jails.

With such distorted conceptions, it is not surprising that Marquis Cavour adopted the stand he did, as we shall now narrate.

Don Bosco was summoned to City Hall. After a long talk on the gossip concerning the oratory and its director, the marquis concluded, "I am told that these meetings of your boys are a danger to public order and peace, so I can no longer permit them. Take my advice, Don Bosco. Leave those rascals alone. They will only cause you sorrow and give trouble to the city authorities."

Don Bosco replied, "My sole purpose, Marquis, is to improve the lot of these poor youngsters. I ask for no money. All I want is a place for getting them together, with a shelter against the bad weather, so as to keep them off the streets and busy with games. Meanwhile, I teach them religion and proper behavior, and by this means I hope to cut down on the number of juvenile delinquents and prisoners."

"You are quite mistaken, my good Father," the marquis insisted. "You are only wasting your time. I can't give you any piece of land, because wherever you go we get complaints. And where would you get funds to pay your rent and meet expenses in caring for these vagabonds? I can't allow any further meetings, as I've told you."

"The results I have obtained so far assure me that my efforts are not in vain. I have already been able to gather many boys who were completely abandoned to their own devices, and rescue them from the dangers of irreligion and immorality. I've helped many to learn a skill or a trade under some good craftsman, not only to their own advantage, but also to the benefit of their families and society in general. For many the jail has ceased to be their only home. So far I have not failed to obtain material help. Such things are in the hands of God, who is wont to accomplish much with little, and even create the whole out of nothing. He sometimes avails Himself of worthless instruments to carry out His divine plans."

"Please, now, Don Bosco, obey me at once and promise to disband this group."

"Please do me this favor, Marquis, not for myself but for the sake of so many poor boys who, without the oratory, would probably come to a bad end."

"That is enough. The matter is closed. Do you know whom you're talking to? I'm the vicar of this city and you must acknowledge my authority."

"I know who you are and I do respect your authority."

"Do you know how much power I have? At this moment I can call the police and have them take you where you would not like to go."

"Well, I'm not really afraid of you," Don Bosco replied in that humorous, good-natured way of his.

"Why not?"

"Because that's the way to treat a criminal, and you could never commit such an injustice, Marquis. Only a villain would treat a poor innocent priest as though he were a criminal. That is why I'm not afraid of you."

This dignified resistance of Don Bosco did not please the marquis, who curtly answered, "Please be quiet. I will not argue with you. Your oratory is a cause of disorder. I will and must prevent this. Don't you know that it is forbidden to hold meetings without proper authorization?"

"My meetings," replied Don Bosco, by no means dismayed, "have no political significance but only a religious one. I am only teaching poor boys their catechism with the approval and permission of the archbishop."

"Does the archbishop know about all this?"

"Certainly, because I never do anything without his permission."

"And would you offer any resistance if the archbishop were to tell you to give up this ridiculous project?"

"None at all. I began this work and have continued it with the approval of my ecclesiastical superior, and I would give it up at one word from him."

"Very well, you may go now. I'll speak to the archbishop about it. I hope you won't offer any resistance to his orders, or I shall be obliged to take severe measures against you." So saying, he dismissed him.

As he left City Hall, Don Bosco felt sure that, with this trouble over, his work with the boys would go on undisturbed for a little while at least; but what a shock awaited him! When he returned home he found a note from the Filippi brothers informing him



that they were terminating the lease on the meadow, which he had leased for the whole year. "Your boys," they wrote, "are continually trampling down our meadow; even the grass roots will be killed. We are willing to waive the rent you already owe us, on condition that you evacuate the meadow within fifteen days, as we are unable to grant you further extension." There was nothing to do but accept the inevitable and go elsewhere. It all seemed like a well-prepared plot, but these were only trials which the Lord was sending Don Bosco to emphasize more strongly the importance of the work which He had entrusted to him.

That same day, Don Bosco went to the archbishop to tell him of his interview with Marquis Cavour. The good prelate urged him to be patient and not to be discouraged. He also went to see Count Collegno to recommend his boys to him, and he received encouragement and promises of help. In the meantime, the marquis had heard from Archbishop Frasoni himself that truly it was with his consent that Don Bosco had begun and assumed the direction of the festive oratory. He also understood that there was no chance that the archbishop would call a halt to such work. Although determined to close the oratory, the marquis courteously informed the archbishop that he would give the matter closer attention and would authorize Don Bosco to continue, but only under conditions which would safeguard public order.

As soon as he was informed of this, Don Bosco wrote a letter to the marquis. Fifteen days later he received the following reply:

*Vicariate and General Superintendence of Political Affairs and Police.  
No. 671.*

Turin, March 28, 1846

Very Reverend Father:

With reference to the matter about which you wrote me on the 13th of this month, I have already spoken with their Excellencies Archbishop Frasoni and Count Collegno, and as far as it lies in my power, I am quite willing to support this undertaking. Since you state that you would like to discuss the matter with me in person, you may call on me

at my office, if it is convenient for you, at 2:00 p.m. on Monday, the thirtieth of this month.

In the meantime, I remain,

Yours devotedly,

Benso di Cavour

Don Bosco went, but before allowing the oratory to continue, the marquis tried to impose certain conditions which Don Bosco found unacceptable. He wanted to limit the number of boys who could attend, prohibit outings and walks in a compact group through the city, and eliminate the older boys as being the most dangerous. To Don Bosco's humble and calm objections, he retorted, "What do these rascals matter to you? Let them alone. Don't create headaches for yourself."

Don Bosco left without being able to dispel the threatening storm, though he had measured every word in order not to irritate the marquis any further. The obstinate opposition of the vicar was in part due to his political acumen, for he saw in the oratory an undertaking which, humble in its beginnings, would soon become gigantic because of the man who directed it and the means he employed; and he feared that one day it might be used for unlawful ends. Had he not been convinced of this, he would never have troubled himself either about Don Bosco or the oratory.

Since the beginning of March, the police had been given orders to keep a watch on him. *Carabinieri*<sup>1</sup> and policemen could be seen patrolling the edge of the meadow as early as six o'clock on Sunday mornings, when the first boys began to arrive and they stayed on till 8:30 while Don Bosco was hearing confessions. They trailed him when he led the boys to Mass or took them on an outing. Don Bosco was greatly amused to find himself escorted like a sovereign by this honor guard, and he used to say that because of this and a few other incidents the gatherings in the meadow were the most adventurous period in the history of the oratory.

Difficulties never deterred Don Bosco from his resolve: this was a lifetime trait of his. Once he had reached a decision, after long

<sup>1</sup> The *carabinieri* are the Italian national police. [Editor]

reflection and consultation with his superiors and other prudent people, he never withdrew until he had completed his task. But he started nothing from purely human motives. While asleep he was favored with visions that offered enlightenment. These he narrated to Father [Michael] Rua and others in the first years of his work.

Sometimes he would find himself gazing upon some buildings and a church, the whole complex identical to the present Oratory of St. Francis de Sales.<sup>2</sup> On the façade of the church there was the legend: *Haec est domus mea: inde gloria mea* [This is my house: hence my glory will come forth]. Boys, seminarians, and priests were coming and going through its portals. This vision sometimes gave way to another: in the same place there would appear the little Pinardi house, and around it porticoes adjoining a church, and a large number of boys, clerics and priests. "But this can't be," Don Bosco told himself; "that is too good to be true. Is this a diabolical illusion?" Then he distinctly heard a voice saying to him, "Do you not know that the Lord can enrich His people with the spoils of the Egyptians?" [Cf. 1 Mach. 1, 20].

At other times he seemed to be in *Via Cottolengo*. On his right, there stood the Pinardi house in the midst of a vegetable garden, surrounded by fields; on his left, almost opposite the Pinardi house, was the Moretta house with the adjacent playgrounds and fields, where the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were later to establish themselves. Two pillars rose at the main gate of the future Oratory of St. Francis de Sales, and over them Don Bosco could read the following inscription: *Hinc inde gloria mea* [From here and from there my glory will come forth]. This was evidently the first intimation of a sister congregation which was to flourish beside the Salesians. If he saw the latter, is it not likely that he also saw the Sisters? Be that as it may, he was sparing with words in these matters, so he said nothing at that time.

Meanwhile, the first dream<sup>3</sup> he had had at the *Convitto* was about to be verified. Don Bosco was to make three stops before finding a permanent residence. The first had been at the *Rifugio* and the second at the *Molini Dora*. The Moretta house with its meadow was to be the third. May God be blessed!

<sup>2</sup> The motherhouse of the Salesian Society. [Editor]

<sup>3</sup> See p. 190f. [Editor]

## CHAPTER 44

### *Disturbing Rumors*

**A**S word got around that Don Bosco's work was being opposed on all sides, some of his friends, rather than encourage him to continue, tried to persuade him to give up the project. When they saw how he fretted about the oratory, and could not bear to be away from his boys; how he visited them at work several times a week, devoted his time to them on weekends with a more than fatherly solicitude, and recruited new boys from the streets; how he continued to appear with them in the city squares and to speak to everyone about them, then his friends seriously began to wonder whether he was affected by some mania or other.

Several who had attended the seminary and the *Convitto* with him attempted to persuade him, at least, to change the methods of his apostolate. "You are compromising the good name of the priesthood," they told him.

"How?" Don Bosco asked.

"With your embarrassing ways; you lower yourself in playing with these urchins and letting them traipse after you so boisterously. Turin has never before seen anything like this; this runs utterly contrary to the set ways of the serious-minded and reserved clergy that we have always had here."

When, wasting no words, Don Bosco quickly let them know that he was not impressed by the logic of their admonitions, they began to say to one another: "His mind is gone! You can't reason with him any more!"

One day even Father Borel, who fully shared Don Bosco's ideals, ended up by telling him in the presence of Father Sebastian Pacchiotti: "Dear Don Bosco, lest we risk losing all, let us be content with saving at least part of our project. Let us wait for a more favorable time. For the present, let us dismiss the oratory

boys we now have and keep only some twenty of the younger ones. While we continue to look after these few privately, God will find some way for us to do more and will provide us with suitable premises and other means."

Confident of his own course, Don Bosco firmly replied: "No, no! In His mercy the Lord has begun this work and He must complete it. You know how hard it has been for us, Father, to get many of these boys to give up their evil ways, and how well they have behaved since. I don't see how we can abandon them now to themselves, and expose them to the dangers of the world, to their great spiritual harm."

"But where can we gather them?"

"In the oratory."

"But where is this oratory?"

"For me this is no problem! I see a church, a building, and a playground. It is real and I can see it."

"Where are all these things?" the good priest asked.

"I can't tell you exactly now," Don Bosco admitted, "but they certainly do exist. I can see them and they will be ours."

On hearing these words Father Borel was deeply distressed, as he told some older Salesians several years later. It seemed to him that what Don Bosco had said made it fairly certain that he was mentally ill. "Poor Don Bosco!" he sighed. "Truly his mind is gone." Then, unable to keep back the wave of sorrow that surged in his heart, he came up to him, gave him a parting kiss and walked away with deep-felt tears. Father Pacchiotti, too, looked at him with pity, muttered, "Poor Don Bosco!" and went away sadly.

Several venerable priests, leading members of the diocesan clergy, also came to see him. Don Bosco received them with great respect. They started by telling him that he could do a great deal of good for souls by exercising some other type of apostolate, for example, by giving missions to the people, being a curate in some city parish or devoting himself entirely to the institutions of Marchioness Barolo. Since Don Bosco was listening to them quietly, they thought for an instant that they had succeeded in their task and added: "It won't do to persist in this course. Even you can't do the impossible. Divine Providence seems to disapprove of the work you have

started. It will be a sacrifice for you, but you must make it. Send your boys away."

Don Bosco, raising his hands to heaven, with glistening eyes, interrupted them, "Oh, yes, Divine Providence! But you are all wrong. I am far from being unable to continue the festive oratory. Divine Providence has sent these boys to me, and I will not dismiss a single one of them. Of that you may be sure . . . I am absolutely certain that Divine Providence will provide me with everything they need . . . In fact, the means are already at hand . . . Since no one wants to lease me a building, I shall build one myself with the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary. We shall have many buildings and many classrooms and dormitories large enough to accommodate as many boys as will come. We shall have all kinds of workshops for youngsters to learn the trade of their choice, a fine playground and spacious porticoes for games. We shall have a beautiful church, clerics, catechists, assistants, craftsmasters, and teachers ready to help me. Many priests will instruct the boys and take special care of those who show signs of a religious vocation."

This unexpected reply floored his visitors. They looked at each other in amazement and asked: "Do you mean you plan to found a new religious congregation?"

"What if I do?" Don Bosco replied.

"What habit will your members wear?"

"Virtue!" replied Don Bosco, not wishing to get involved in further details.

But the others, recovering from their shock, jokingly insisted on knowing what habit his new monks would wear.

"Well," Don Bosco replied, "they will all be in shirt sleeves."

Laughter and ridicule greeted this strange disclosure. After letting them have their joke, Don Bosco added with a smile: "Did I say something funny? Don't you know, Fathers, that being in shirt sleeves is a sign of poverty and that a religious congregation cannot last without the practice of poverty?"

"We understand perfectly!" they said, rising to leave. Once outside, they remarked: "Yes, we *do* understand. His mind is gone!"

Don Bosco talked that way because he was intimately convinced that future events would prove how true his words and aspirations

were. He had told Father Cafasso of his dreams from the very beginning to ask his advice and the holy priest had replied: "Go ahead. You may quite safely give special significance to these dreams. I am convinced they are for God's greater glory and the welfare of souls."

Meanwhile the rumor and belief that the good friend and kind father of so many poor boys had lost, or was on the verge of losing his mind kept spreading ever more throughout Turin. His real friends were deeply distressed, but those who did not care or were envious ridiculed him. Nearly all, even those who had been close to him, now kept their distance. If any of them met him in the street, they would either try to dodge him or stop embarrassedly, look at him with a certain expression of pity, and ask:

"How do you feel, Father?"

"Very well, thank you."

"Don't you have a little headache?"

"Not at all."

"You look somewhat flustered . . ."

"Oh! Don't pay any attention to that! Perhaps I've had one too many . . ." Don Bosco would reply laughingly, realizing what was on their minds. Still skeptical and shaking their heads, they would hurry away.

Michael Rua, then a boy, happened to meet in those days the superintendent of a gun barrel factory near the *Rifugio*. The man asked him: "Do you still go to Don Bosco's oratory?" When the boy replied that occasionally he did, the man added: "Poor Don Bosco. Don't you know he is crazy?" On another occasion Michael heard prominent people saying: "Don Bosco is so taken up with those poor abandoned boys that he's gone completely insane."

The chancery office too sent some prudent person to analyze Don Bosco without arousing his suspicions. It was feared that, should these rumors be true, something might happen to compromise the honor and reputation of the clergy. This chancery official came to the *Rifugio* and after a long preamble led the conversation around to the importance of the oratory. Don Bosco did not tarry to wax enthusiastic over the subject which was closest to his heart: "Yes," he exclaimed, "with the help of God we'll be able to get things

done. My house is there and next to it my church where we shall hold magnificent services. I see my priests and clerics gathered together. They are not here yet, but they will come to help me. In this place I see countless boys around me, listening to me, obeying me and becoming good.”

As he listened to Don Bosco in sadness and amazement, the chancery official said nothing, and later, gave his superiors a report of his visit. “He is stark mad!” they concluded. “He has hallucinations. He is obsessed with the idea of possessing things he does not have and never will!” Nevertheless, they remained undecided on what course to follow, also because the vicar general, Father [Philip] Ravina, a close friend of Don Bosco, would not permit any hasty action.

While they hesitated, other self-respecting priests of Turin decided to act. At the close of one of their regular clergy conferences they exchanged some news concerning their fellow priests and Don Bosco in particular. They were worried about him and decided to attempt to restore his mental health, for, in their opinion, he was indeed mentally ill. Their reasoning was as follows: “Don Bosco has a fixation that will eventually lead him to complete insanity. Since the illness is still in its early stages, immediate treatment may possibly cure him and thus avert a total breakdown. Let us take him to the mental hospital, where with proper regard to his priestly character, he will receive the therapy suggested by Christian charity and medicine.”

What we read about Our Lord was now repeated in the case of Don Bosco. “Again a crowd gathered so that they [Jesus and the Twelve] could not so much as take their food. But when his own people had heard of it, they went out to lay hold of him, for they said, ‘He has gone mad.’ ” (Mark 3, 20-21)

Therefore, a priest went to see the supervisor of the mental hospital and registered poor Don Bosco. Then, two well-known priests, Father Vincent Ponzati, pastor of St. Augustine’s and another equally good and learned member of the Turin clergy, were selected to fetch Don Bosco in a closed carriage and, in a nice way, to take him to the hospital. One fine day, they rode up to the *Rifugio* and, after paying their respects, they brought the conversation round to



the favorite topic of the future oratory. Don Bosco repeated for their benefit what he had already told so many others, and with total conviction, as if he already saw it all before his eyes. The two envoys exchanged glances, and then with a certain air of compassion they sighed: "It's really so." What they meant was: "He *has* gone mad!"

Meanwhile, Don Bosco, from this unexpected visit of two prominent fellow priests and their constant flow of questions, topped by that mysterious remark, became aware that they too thought he was insane. Chuckling inwardly, he was wondering what would happen next, when they invited him for a ride. "A little fresh air will do you good, dear Don Bosco," Father Ponzati said. "Come along with us. We have a carriage waiting for us."

Don Bosco, who was smarter than both of them, guessed what they were up to, but without a hint that he was on to their trick, he accepted their invitation and followed them to the carriage. Here the two priests were almost too polite in persuading him to enter first. "No," he objected, "that would be a lack of respect to you. Please get in first."

They fell for it and obliged, believing that Don Bosco would get in after them. But Don Bosco, who indeed wanted to *stay out* for fresh air because he knew it would do him good, quickly slammed the carriage door after them and ordered the coachman: "Quick! To the asylum! They are expected there!"

The coachman cracked his whip, and the carriage sped off for the asylum which was very close to the *Rifugio*. Its big gates were wide open, but as the carriage rushed through, the gates were shut, and the waiting attendants surrounded the carriage and opened its doors. The scene that followed was a comedy. The attendants had been instructed to hold the patient at all costs, though respectfully, but now, unable to tell which of the two it was, they led both priests to a room on the upper floor. Arguments and protests were of no use; they had to go along.

The attendants treated them with consideration, but nevertheless followed routine procedure. When the unfortunate visitors asked to see a doctor, they were told he was out. They then asked to see the chaplain, but were told he was having dinner. Ironically, this was their dinner hour, too. Never in their lives had they found

themselves in such an awkward situation. Finally, at their repeated requests, the chaplain came in. When he recognized them he burst into hearty laughter and had them set free.

We can easily imagine how these two priests felt about their ride. For a long time afterward, they scurried off in the opposite direction whenever they spied Don Bosco coming down the street. This episode proved clearly that he was either perfectly sane, or quite a different sort of a madman, the type of madman whom the Lord chooses to carry out His stupendous works, as St. Paul says: "The foolish things of the world has God chosen to put to shame the wise." (1 Cor. 1, 27)

Meanwhile, during these months Don Bosco went on with his work unperturbed, paying no attention to idle tongues, and patiently waiting for his solicitous detractors to grow tired of their slander. For several Sundays, some fellow priests, who previously had given him a hand, walked out on him because he refused to heed their advice and change his methods in running the oratory. He was seriously ill and hardly able to stand on his feet; yet, single-handedly, he carried the burden of caring for more than 400 boys. This desertion would have discouraged and broken even the toughest of men, but God did not permit Don Bosco to falter. He kept repeating with the royal prophet: "The Lord [is] my rock and my fortress . . . the horn of my salvation." (Cf. Ps. 17, 3)

Yet in all fairness we must admit that not all his fellow priests abandoned him in those most trying days. Archbishop Fransoni never ceased to stand by him, and advised him to go on resolutely with the work he had undertaken. It was truly providential that such a wise prelate, familiar with the ways of the Lord and so well-disposed toward Don Bosco and his oratory, should be at the head of the Turin archdiocese during that stormy period, for otherwise, short of a miracle, the whole undertaking would have collapsed.

Father Cafasso continued to give financial support to the oratory, and counseled Don Bosco that, since, under the circumstances, he could not make people understand his plan, he should bide his time, make no decisions for the moment, and allow himself to be guided by whatever Divine Providence would dispose.

Father Borel, too, was always ready to help, but he watched and kept quiet, full of pity for his friend, who was worn out by pain

and sleepless nights. Anxious to dispel Father Borel's anxiety and assure him of his perfect sanity, Don Bosco at last, in strict secrecy confided to him how more than once God and the Blessed Virgin had shown to him in vision that "the Valdocco area would be the birthplace of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales and of the religious congregation which he intended to found."

This revelation filled Father Borel with joy. He never forgot and often repeated these words of Don Bosco. In 1857, when he saw the first part of the present Oratory of St. Francis de Sales erected, he remarked to Michael Rua, then a cleric: "In his predictions, Don Bosco described this house to me exactly as it stands now. I have to admit that what he said about having seen those buildings in his dreams has now been fully realized."

## CHAPTER 45

### *A Day of Anguish*

IN the midst of all this trouble came the oratory's last day in the Filippi meadow. It was Palm Sunday, April 5, 1846. The previous Sunday evening, in dismissing his boys Don Bosco had told them: "Come back next week, and we shall see what Providence has in store for us." That Sunday had been one of Don Bosco's unhappiest days, a day of bitter affliction, coming, as it did, on top of other anxieties. He had to tell the boys where to meet the following Sunday; yet, despite all his careful inquiries and thorough search, there was not the faintest ray of hope that he could find a place.

The events we have just described had cast doubts on his sanity and stirred up public opinion against him to such an extent that every suitable place was denied to him, no matter how much he pleaded. At his wits' end, but still confident of God's help, he decided to put to the test the prayers of his dear boys, many of whom were truly as pure as angels. Therefore, that morning after he had heard the confessions of a good number of them in the meadow, he called them to himself and told them that they would attend Mass at the *Madonna di Campagna* monastery about a mile and a half down the Lanzo road. "We will go as on a pilgrimage to Mary," he announced, "so that our merciful Mother may grant us the grace of finding soon another place to hold our oratory."

They greeted this announcement with joy and were soon ready to go. Realizing that this was no ordinary walk but an act of devotion, they acted in the most edifying manner; all along the way they alternately recited the rosary, chanted the Litany of the Blessed Virgin and sang hymns.

When they entered the treelined lane leading from the main road to the monastery, they were all amazed to hear the church bells

loudly pealing. I say "they were all amazed" because, although they had been there several times before, their arrival had never been greeted by the festive sound of bells. This was so unusual that word got around that the bells had begun ringing of their own accord. Be this as it may, one thing is certain: Father Fulgenzio, the superior of the monastery, who was then father confessor to King Charles Albert, assured them that neither he nor any other member of the community had ordered the bells to be rung, and that, notwithstanding his efforts, he was not able to find out who had rung them.

The boys went into the church for Mass, and several received Holy Communion. Afterwards, while the kind Father Guardian had their breakfast prepared in the monastery garden, Don Bosco gave them an appropriate little talk. He compared them to birds whose nest has been knocked to the ground, and urged them to ask Our Lady to prepare for them a better and more permanent home. So they prayed to Her with all their hearts, confident that She would grant their request. After breakfast, they returned to town for their last afternoon gathering in their meadow.

They put their fate in the hands of Mary, but at the same time, Don Bosco had someone looking for a new place. Before the day was over, their hopes and above all, Don Bosco's, were to be put to a severe test.

By two o'clock that afternoon nearly all of them were back in the meadow. Knowing that this was the last time they could enjoy themselves there, they seemed to take special delight in trampling the grass from one end of the field to the other. No one kept count, but a lot of grass must have been destroyed to the very roots that afternoon, enough to endanger even the substantial holdings of the Filippi brothers!

As usual, they had their catechism classes, singing, and sermon, just as on other Sundays, and then got back to their favorite pastimes and games. It was not long though, before the boys noticed something unusual to dampen their eagerness for play. The one who had always spurred them on to play, who, like a new St. Philip Neri, had become a boy himself among boys, singing, playing and running with them, their dear Don Bosco, was now alone in a corner of the meadow, thoughtful and sad. It was perhaps the first time

the boys had seen him so aloof. He did not have that smile which so cheered them; he looked sad and distressed and his eyes were misty with tears. He was striding to and fro, praying. Grieved to see him so lonesome, some of the boys came up to him to keep him company, but he told them: "No, go and play, boys, I need to be alone."

He said nothing else, but the older boys knew what was bothering him and why he was distressed. Shortly after noon, he had called once again on the Filippi brothers and their mother, but had been unable to change their minds.

"I rented this meadow for a whole year at twenty *lire* a month," he protested, "and the lease is not yet over. We agreed on this figure exactly because we took into consideration the fact that less hay could be harvested after the meadow had been put to such use."

"We don't intend to suffer a more severe loss than we anticipated," the Filippis told him. "You must look for some other place."

"Where do you expect me to find one?"

"We gave you sufficient notice!" they replied. "You should have found something by now!"

It would be impossible to describe Don Bosco's anguish at that moment. He was like a farmer looking at the darkening sky and the impending hailstorm that would ruin his fields and rob him of his harvest; he was like a good shepherd forced to let his beloved flock, his little lambs, fall prey to rapacious wolves; he was like a father, or, better still, a loving mother compelled to part from her beloved children, perhaps forever. He kept thinking over and over: "All my helpers have turned away from me, and left me alone with all these boys to look after. I'm exhausted, my health is broken, and worst of all, I have two hours to get out of this meadow. I must find some other place to assemble these boys, I must tell them where to meet next Sunday. Yet, despite all my efforts, I cannot find a place and, as of tonight, the oratory will be no more. Have all my past efforts been in vain? Will all this work come to nothing? Must I dismiss and say good-bye to all these boys who are so fond of me? Must I abandon them to themselves once more and see them go back to roaming the streets, slipping into bad habits, heading for prison, losing their souls and bodies? This cannot be the will of God!"

As he mulled over these thoughts, his anguish became so intense that he could bear it no longer. Don Bosco broke down and wept.

Someone may ask "At that moment did he lose that hope, that certainty of his about the future oratory?"

We believe that God that evening permitted Don Bosco to experience the full weight of loneliness and be almost crushed by it in order that, after so much suffering, he might all the more enjoy the special reward that God was at last ready to give him—a safe, permanent home. For it is the wont of Divine Providence to have the most signal favors follow in the wake of painful sacrifices. Even at that depressing moment, however, we do not believe that Don Bosco could lose faith. What St. Paul said of the great patriarch Abraham, we can apply to him: hoping against hope, he believed that he would become the father of many children, according to what was said to him. (Cf. Rom. 4, 18)

Several of the boys who that moment were near him, saw him lift his tearful eyes to heaven and heard him cry: "Oh my God, my God, why don't You show me where I can gather these boys? Please let me know or tell me what to do." It was a prayer prompted by suffering but also by hope, and the God of goodness, the Father of orphans, did not tarry to accept those tears and heed his fervent prayer.

Don Bosco had hardly finished speaking and brushed away his tears, when a certain Pancrazio Soave showed up in the meadow. He stammered so badly that one would need pincers to yank the words out of his mouth. He approached Don Bosco, and, as best he could, asked: "Is it true you are trying to find a place for a workshop?"

"Not for a workshop," Don Bosco replied, "but for an oratory."

"I can't tell the difference," replied the man, "but I know a place that might do. Come and see it. It belongs to Mr. Francis Pinardi, an honest fellow who is willing to rent it to you. Come with me and you'll have a deal."

This unexpected offer was like a glow of light amid dark clouds. Just then, Father Peter Merla, one of Don Bosco's faithful friends, came into the meadow. He was the founder of an institution called *Famiglia di S. Pietro* [St. Peter's Family] whose purpose was caring

for poor spinsters who for one reason or another were alone and unable to find assistance or employment.<sup>1</sup> Father Merla, a fellow seminarian of Don Bosco, knew the good work Don Bosco was doing in a branch of the ministry similar to that dearest to his own heart, and so whenever he had free time on weekends, he would always hurry to help his friend in teaching catechism, preaching, or in any other way he was needed.

"What's wrong?" he asked Don Bosco as soon as he saw him. "I have never seen you so downcast before. Anything happened?"

Nothing has happened, but I have a problem. This is the last day I can use this field, and the day is almost over. I must tell the boys where to meet next Sunday, but how can I? Now, this man has just told me that he knows of a suitable place, and has asked me to go along with him to see it. You came at the right moment. Look after the boys for a while. I'll go take a look and come right back."

"You can count on me," said Father Merla. "Go ahead and take your time."

So Don Bosco went off with Pancrazio, who took him to Mr. Pinardi. He found a little two-story house with a worm-eaten staircase and balcony, standing in the midst of vegetable gardens, meadows and fields. He recognized it as the house of ill repute which he had seen more than once in his dreams.

Don Bosco wanted to go upstairs, but both Mr. Pinardi and Pancrazio told him, "No, not there. Your place is back here." They took him around to a shed behind the building. Along its entire length it leaned against the building, and, since the ground sloped steeply, the roof on one side was no higher than three or four feet. It had formerly been used as a workshop by a hat manufacturer, then as a storeroom for laundry by some women who did their washing in the nearby canal and hung it to dry in the adjoining yard. As he entered, Don Bosco had to be careful not to bang his head. There was no flooring, and in a heavy rain the place could turn into a quagmire. It could have served for a lumber shed. At

<sup>1</sup> A rather lengthy footnote about this institution has been omitted in this edition. [Editor]



that time mice and martens had the run of the place, and owls and bats nested there.

"The ceiling is too low. It won't do," Don Bosco said after sizing it up.

"I can alter it to suit you," Pinardi offered graciously. "I shall dig the dirt out, put in some steps, a new floor, anything you like, because I'd like you to have your workshop here."

"Not a workshop, my good friend, but an oratory, that is to say, a small church for boys."

"Better yet! Now, I'll do it even more gladly. I'm a singer myself. I'll bring a couple of chairs, one for myself, and one for my wife. I've a lamp at home too, and I'll put it here to brighten up the place. I like that! An oratory!"

The good man was quite beside himself with joy at the thought of having a church on his premises. His eagerness to draw up a contract was perhaps no greater than Don Bosco's. It was truly the hand of Divine Providence.

"Thank you," Don Bosco said, "for your interest and your offer. If you can lower the floor at least one foot, I'll take it. What's your price?"

"Three hundred *lire* a year. I've been offered more, but I prefer to lease it to you, because you intend to use it for religious purposes and the public good."

"I'll give you 320, if you'll add this strip of land for a playground and if you'll guarantee to have the place ready by next Sunday when I bring my boys here."

"Agreed! It's a deal! By Sunday it will be all ready."

It was all Don Bosco wanted. Full of joy, he went back to the meadow to tell the boys the good news. "Success!" he shouted. "Success! We've found our oratory! We shall have our own church and sacristy, classrooms and a playground to run about and play. We're going there next Sunday. It's there at Pinardi's."

So saying, he pointed out the place, which was within sight of the meadow. At the news some youngsters were at first dumb with amazement, as though they had not quite heard him correctly, while others felt so overjoyed that they were speechless and looked about in astonishment.

Some, still living, have left us this description:

After a few moments, we could no longer stand still or keep quiet. We dashed about the meadow, we ran wildly in all directions, jumping, capering, throwing our caps in the air, shouting at the top of our voices, and clapping our hands. It was quite a scene. The people who lived around there, puzzled, came up to the meadow to find out what was going on. Father Merla was laughing, and Don Bosco was crying with joy. It was a moment of indescribable emotion and enthusiasm, a scene to be treasured for posterity! Thus, through God's goodness and the intercession of Mary Immaculate, we had passed, as if by magic, from oppressive gloom to incomparable happiness.

After this outburst of joy, Don Bosco called them back, asked for silence, and made a few appropriate remarks on the success of their pilgrimage. Then he invited them to kneel and recite the rosary in thanksgiving. It was an act of gratitude to their heavenly Benefactress and Mother, who had so lovingly and so promptly granted their petition.

Rising from their knees, they took a last farewell look at the meadow they had loved out of necessity, but which they now were leaving without regrets, since they were sure of a better and more permanent location.

The sun had already set, and after a last good-bye and hurrah for Don Bosco, the boys started out for home to tell their families all about the happenings of that memorable afternoon.

The lease for the premises, dated April 1, 1846 and signed by Francis Pinardi and Father John Borel, was to run three years.

## CHAPTER 46

### *A Place at Last*

MR. PINARDI had promised Don Bosco to have the shed ready by the following Sunday, and he kept his word. Realizing how much work had to be done, he hired men; laborers dug and removed the earth; masons knocked down and erected walls; carpenters set a wood floor and, to speed things up, Mr. Pinardi himself and Pancrazio lent a hand. Truly a month's work was completed in a week's time. Meanwhile, Don Bosco had applied to the archbishop for the necessary permissions, and they were granted to him in a decree dated April 10. The following day, Holy Saturday, he completed his preparations, and so, when Easter Sunday dawned on April 12, 1846, everything was ready: the long shed had been converted to a chapel, and there was also a playground for the boys on the north and west sides of the house. No further space was available because the remainder of the field had been rented to Pancrazio Soave.

As soon as some boys arrived, Don Bosco had them carry the church articles from the *Rifugio* and bring over their games from a storage box in the meadow. With these boys he took formal possession of the new oratory while two kind ladies covered the altar with fine linen donated by Father [Hyacinth] Carpano. Though Father Carpano had not been in evidence for some weeks, he now was setting up the candlesticks, the crucifix, the sanctuary lamp and a small framed picture of their patron, St. Francis de Sales.

That morning Don Bosco first blessed and dedicated the new chapel to St. Francis de Sales and then celebrated Mass for his many boys, some neighbors, and other townsfolk. The archbishop, as a token of his satisfaction and goodwill, renewed the faculties he had already granted Don Bosco for the oratory, that is, to celebrate Mass, give Benediction, administer the sacraments, preach, hold

triduum, novenas, and spiritual retreats, admit youngsters to Confirmation and First Communion, as well as allow them to fulfill their Easter duty as in their own parish church.

A brief description of the new chapel is not out of place. It was about forty-five feet long and twenty feet wide. Behind the altar, which faced west, there were two other rooms used as a sacristy and storeroom. The floor, hastily and somewhat shoddily constructed, was wood: not only the mice, but also the cats chasing them could have squeezed through the spaces between the boards. The ceiling was matting covered with plaster. How high was it? Well, we have to admit, it was somewhat lower than St. Peter's in Rome. To give the reader an idea, it is enough to say that when the archbishop came for Confirmation or some other function, he was obliged to bow his head, when stepping on the small platform, lest the top of his mitre strike against the ceiling. Half way down the chapel on the north side, there was also a small pulpit, but not every priest could use it; a tall man would have bumped his head against the ceiling. It was just right, though, for Father Borel, who, short in stature, fitted quite nicely when on Sundays he gave with great zest the afternoon sermon, so much enjoyed by the boys.

This then was the great basilica which they used for Mass and other services for about six years, and which echoed for the first time with music that Easter Sunday. Don Bosco's dreams kept materializing: after a third stop along the way, he was now finally settled in the house which Mary in Her goodness had destined to be his. In thanksgiving for the longed for permanent quarters, the oratory boys went for the next two years, 1846 and 1847, although not processional, to the shrine of *La Consolata* [Our Lady of Consolation] during the month of May to honor Her by receiving Holy Communion. The Oblate Fathers heard their confessions, Father Nasi sat at the organ and the hymn *Te Deum laudamus* soared to heaven from hundreds of hearts purified by the sacraments. Through Her miraculous image, Mary listened and blessed Her sons, showering on Don Bosco all the consolations he needed to continue his hard work. They so shone from his face that, later on, his Salesians, in trials and tribulations, could derive comfort and trust in the future merely from looking at him.

Although the new quarters were not as large as needed, the fact

that they had been rented under a formal lease relieved Don Bosco of the worry and bother of repeatedly having to move from one place to another, and for the time being, these met their most urgent needs. Yet even here, at the start, there were difficulties, not from the landlord, but on account of a nearby house of ill repute and the so-called *Albergo della Giardiniera* [a tavern close-by] in a building owned by the Bellezza family. Here the town good-time Charlies used to gather, particularly on weekends. But because of Don Bosco's vigilance and the boys' prompt obedience to all his orders, no harm came to any of them. In fact, the boys' noisy games, songs and shouts brought about a most desirable effect: the customers began to dislike that spot and so the tavern had to move. But we shall speak of this at length later on.

Young men and boys were now flocking to the oratory from everywhere for a variety of reasons: its permanent quarters, the archbishop's repeated signs of approval, the solemn church services on the major feast days, the small gifts donated by various benefactors, the steadily improving vocal and instrumental music and the rich variety of games and pastimes, such as high-jumping, sprinting, juggling, playing tug-of-war, stilt-walking and other games which Don Bosco's resourcefulness and warm heart could devise. Within a very short time the boys numbered over 700, so that during services they had to crowd into every corner of the church, the sanctuary and even the sacristy itself, overflowing into the yard outside. Several priests who previously had deserted Don Bosco now returned. Besides the ever-faithful Father Borel, Don Bosco now had the assistance of Father Joseph Trivero, Father Hyacinth Carpano, Father Joseph Vola, Father Robert Murialdo, Father Chiaves, Father Louis Nasi, Father Bosio, Father Merla, Father Peter Ponte, Father Traversa, and others too numerous to list.

We must make special mention, however, of Father John Vola, of Turin, a model priest whom Archbishop [Columban] Chiaverotti styled an angel on earth. Deeply devoted to the Holy See and to Archbishop Louis Fransoni, Father Vola was a tireless preacher and confessor in Turin and other towns in Piedmont, an excellent catechist, revered by everybody for his vast learning and deep piety.

Of the substantial inheritance left him by his father, he kept for himself only what he strictly needed and donated all the rest to the poor, to hospitals, monasteries and convents. Don Bosco had first met him while preaching in the convent of the Daughters of the Holy Rosary where Father Vola had been spiritual director for many years. Although Father Vola was eighteen years older than Don Bosco, a cordial friendship sprang up at once between these two holy men. Don Bosco admired his steady calm and self-control, fruit of interior peace, his deep humility and prudent zeal, his courteous manners, his modesty and lack of affectation, and most of all his sincere and solid piety. Father Vola felt the same way about Don Bosco, so he would very willingly come from time to time to give him a hand. He could not take care of the boys' supervision, but until 1856, whenever he went to the Good Shepherd Convent, where he was the regular confessor, he used to stop at the oratory and, if Father Borel was away, he would charm the boys with his delightful sermons.

For these and other reasons the Valdocco oratory quickly began to make very satisfactory progress. Don Bosco wrote: "From this time on, the boys came more regularly and were better looked after. It was amazing how so many boys, for the most part quite unknown to me just a short time before, now willingly followed my orders. In regard to many, one could say quite truly that they were 'as the horse and mule which had not understanding.' [Tob. 6, 17] But I must admit that, despite their appalling ignorance, they always displayed profound respect for church services and for the clergy, as well as a great eagerness to learn more about the doctrines and practices of their religion."

The oratory at that time was run just about the same way as it is today in the day section of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales in Turin and in all the other oratories which have originated from it. It may be briefly described as follows. On Sundays and holy days the church opened early and confessions were heard until Mass time, usually 8 o'clock. At times, however, it was postponed till 9 or later, in order to give everyone a chance to receive the sacraments, since poor Don Bosco was alone and had to do everything; the priests who usually helped him were all busy in their own

churches. During Mass, a few of the older, more capable boys used to supervise the others, while some would lead the morning prayers and the preparation for Holy Communion. After Mass, Don Bosco would remove his vestments, mount the low pulpit and give a short sermon. At first he used to explain the Gospel. Later on, he switched to bible and church history, and he continued this for more than twenty years. His stories, delivered in simple everyday language, with detailed description of the customs and places, delighted both young and old, even priests who happened to be present. Besides instructing the boys in history and religion, these sermons also effectively instilled in his young listeners' hearts a hatred of sin and a love of virtue. Then the boys left the church and, after a short recreation, began their Sunday classes of reading and singing until noon.

At one in the afternoon, games were resumed: *bocce*, drills with wooden rifles and swords, and other forms of recreation involving skill or athletics. At half past two, there was a catechism lesson in the chapel. The boys' ignorance of their religion, instead of dismaying Don Bosco, spurred him all the more to redouble his efforts in order to reach everybody and teach them, in accordance with their individual needs. At first, when most of the boys were new, hardly anyone was able to join him in reciting the Our Father, so that he had to say it all himself; the same was true of the Hail, Mary. Often, one or more of his catechists was unable to come and so, rather than deprive that particular group or groups of a catechism lesson, Don Bosco used to teach all of them himself or parcel them out among the other groups. After catechism, the boys recited five decades of the rosary. Later on they learned to sing the *Ave*, *Maris Stella*, the *Magnificat*, the psalm *Dixit Dominus*, and gradually also other psalms and antiphons, so that within a year they were able to sing the entire Vespers of Our Lady. There followed a short sermon which usually consisted of some anecdote on a virtue or vice, recounted in such a way as to inspire a lively sense of love or disgust in the boys. Afterwards there was chanting of the Litany and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

Recreation then followed. While the greater number of boys had fun playing the games they liked best, those who did not yet know

their prayers well or who, even though older, had not as yet made their First Communion, were taken aside for a special catechism class; boys with good voices practiced singing, and those who did not know how to read or write had a special instruction.

We should not think, though, that the recreation period was a time of rest for Don Bosco; rather, this was the time that called for the greatest solicitude on his part; this was his best "fishing time." And how? Besides seeing that no one got hurt, he used this time, longer or shorter according to the season, to go up to one or the other of the boys as though he had something confidential to tell him, and, whispering into his ear, he would ask him gently and delicately, "When will you come to confession? How about Saturday? I'll be waiting for you." Meanwhile he got a promise from him. To another he would say, "Are you still going to such and such a place or with that friend of yours? Please, do me a favor; don't go anymore." And the boy would promise not to. To a third boy he would remark: "I heard you swearing just now. Be careful not to do it again." And his warning was never forgotten. He would ask another boy: "Will you come to the oratory every Sunday?" and receive a smile and a reassuring reply. "I'd like you to do me a favor," he would say to some one else. "Will you do it?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"I would like you to bring your friend along with you to Communion next Sunday."

Sometimes in the excitement of playing, one of the boys would let slip a vulgar word. Don Bosco would take the boy aside and whisper to him: "Such words do not please Our Lord." He would urge one boy to be more obedient to his parents, another to be more diligent in his studies, a third to be more punctual at catechism and to receive the sacraments more often, and so on. By exhorting each boy in this way, personally and confidentially, he was sure that a large number of them would come on Saturdays and Sundays to make their confession, and to carry out their devotions in a truly devout manner. At the same time, he won their hearts and was able to guide and lead them wherever he wanted.

Occasionally some of the worst elements among them did not respond so readily to this loving solicitude; then he would resort to



other means no less effective. In this connection we recall a certain incident which the boy concerned revealed to us. We shall relate it in his own words:

I was seventeen and had been coming to the oratory for some months, taking part in the recreation, the games, and even the church services. I liked it especially when they sang psalms or hymns and I joined in with gusto, singing at the top of my voice. However, I had not yet gone to confession. I had no particular reason for not going, but since I'd let some time go by since my last one [before coming to the oratory], I couldn't make up my mind to start again. Sometimes Don Bosco would ask me very nicely to perform my Easter duty, and I would promise at once, but with one excuse or another I always managed to evade his fatherly suggestion. I was satisfied with promising, but never went any further. Don Bosco, however, thought up a very clever way to get me to do it. One Sunday, after the church services, I was busy playing *barra rotta*; it was very hot, and although in shirt sleeves, I was quite flushed and perspiring, what with the heat, the fun I was having, and the long game.

I was all taken up with it, when Don Bosco hurriedly called me and asked: "Would you give me a hand with something which is very urgent."

"Sure! What is it?"

"It may be a bit hard for you."

"That won't matter. I can do it. I'm strong."

"Come to the church with me then."

Overjoyed to be able to help him, I immediately left the game and started to follow him, just as I was, in my shirt sleeves.

"Not like that," Don Bosco said. "Put your jacket on."

I did as told and followed him into the sacristy, thinking that there must be something he wanted me to move.

"Come with me into the choir," Don Bosco said.

I followed him to a kneeler. I still had not grasped what he was leading me to, and I was about to lift it and carry it where he wanted it.

"No, leave it there," he said smiling.

"What do you want me to do with it?"

"I want you to make your confession."

"I will. When?"

"Now!"

"But I'm not ready now."

"I know you're not ready, but I'll give you all the time you want. I'll say some breviary, and then you can make your confession, just like you've promised to do so many times."

"If that's what you want, I don't mind preparing. At least I won't have to look around for a confessor. I really need to go to confession. It was a good idea to catch me this way, because otherwise I wouldn't have come, for fear that some of my friends might laugh at me."

While Don Bosco read his breviary, I prepared myself and then made my confession. It was much easier than I had expected because my kindly and expert confessor helped me considerably with the right questions. I was through in no time, and after saying the penance he gave me and a good act of thanksgiving, I ran back to play. After that I never felt any repugnance about going to confession; on the contrary, I was always delighted to receive this sacrament whenever I could and began to go very often.

So far the young man, but we can add that he became most diligent in fulfilling his religious duties and that his example and exhortations attracted many others. When telling the story to his friends, he used to begin humorously by saying: "Do you want to hear the trick Don Bosco used to catch this blackbird?" And, as he told it, he would make them all laugh.

Another remarkable scene took place every Sunday evening when it was time for the boys to go home. Don Bosco was like a magnet from whom the boys could not be detached. Each of them would say good night to him a hundred times and still stay around. In vain Don Bosco kept repeating: "Go home, boys, it is late and your parents are waiting for you." Nobody moved.

This dismissal usually took place as follows: at a sound from the bell, they would assemble either in church or outside, depending on the weather, to recite the *Angelus* and night prayers. Afterwards, six of the stronger boys would hoist him up onto their shoulders as though on a throne, and Don Bosco would have to consent. They would then line up in several rows and, singing as they went, carry him as far as the circle known as the *Rondò*. There they would let him down, and sing a few more sacred songs, the last one always being *Lodato sempre sia il nome di Gesù e di Maria* [Praised for-

ever be the names of Jesus and Mary]. Then a deep silence would ensue as he bade them all good night and a pleasant week, and invited them to come back the following Sunday. With all their might they would then shout in unison: "Good night! Viva Don Bosco." Finally, they would all go home, except for a few of the older boys who used to linger and escort Don Bosco to his house, more often than not, dead tired.

On one of these Sundays in 1846, something occurred which was witnessed by Joseph Buzzetti<sup>1</sup> and a few other boys. To convert his shed into a chapel, Mr. Pinardi had been obliged to dig out three feet of dirt, as we have already said. The soil was heaped up at the northwest corner of the house, only a few steps away from the chapel, and the boys used to climb on it during their games, rushing up and down, like soldiers winning or losing a strategic location. Someone had tried to persuade Don Bosco to have it removed, but he always replied: "Leave that mound there. It will be removed one day when a larger chapel will be built right here." He had not forgotten his dream.<sup>2</sup> Then, toward the beginning of the summer, one day Don Bosco himself climbed the mound, and surrounded by the boys, sang with them to a special melody:

Praised forever be  
The names of Jesus and Mary;  
And praised be forever  
The name of Jesus, the Word Incarnate.

Suddenly, raising his hand for silence he said: "My dear boys, listen to what has just now come to my mind. Some day on the spot where we are now standing there will be the main altar of a church all our own, where you will receive Holy Communion and sing the Lord's praises."

Five years later, construction of the church started, and the main altar was situated exactly where Don Bosco had said that it would be, although the architect who drew up the plans knew nothing of his prediction.

<sup>1</sup> See footnote No. 1 on p. 72. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> See p. 268. [Editor]

## CHAPTER 47

### *Harassment from City Hall*

**A**LTHOUGH order, discipline and calm reigned to a maximum degree in the oratory at Valdocco, the city's vicar, Marquis Cavour, whom we have already mentioned, still insisted that this conglomeration of boys was dangerous, and wanted them disbanded. He therefore asked Don Bosco to see him again at City Hall. Perhaps informers, well aware that Don Bosco was winning so many youths away from their influence, had thought up some fresh accusations or fabricated new lies to distract the authorities' attention from other real political conventicles.

The conversation between Don Bosco and the city vicar took a serious turn. After Don Bosco sat down, the marquis opened fire: "My dear Father," he said, "it's time to put an end to this affair. Since you did not see fit to listen to my advice, I am forced, for your own good, to exercise my authority and demand that you close your oratory."

"I am sorry, Marquis," Don Bosco answered very calmly, "but I feel I must respectfully repeat that I cannot close it. I am doing my duty as a good citizen; I am teaching my boys to read and write and do arithmetic, and helping them to practice their Faith. I am also making them better citizens."

"Look, Don Bosco, I didn't call you here for a debate. Don't compel me to use force. Be more docile. Give your fellow citizens good example in obeying the city authorities."

"But I am most obedient, Marquis."

"Prove it!" replied Cavour with an ironic smile.

"I obey my superior, the archbishop, and I am doing nothing which would in any way harm the civil authorities. I hear confessions, I preach, I say Mass, I teach catechism. I can't see any reason for complaint in that."

"You don't intend to yield? Very well, you may go!"

Don Bosco rose, but before leaving said: "Please believe me, Marquis, when I say that I am being neither disrespectful nor obstinate. Let me add, too, that were I to agree to close the oratory, I would fear God's curse upon myself and you too."

The marquis, however, was determined to win his point. Since he could not persuade Archbishop Frasoni to order Don Bosco to give up his apostolate, he planned to shut the oratory down by a formal decree of the Comptroller's Office. After some weeks of maneuvering and conditioning the members, Marquis Cavour decided to call the City Council into extraordinary session. Since he had not been able to make his point with the venerable archbishop (as fearless in the performance of his duties as he was zealous for the welfare of souls), he wanted at least to have him present at this session, so as to give the appearance that Cross and sword were allied in the death blow he intended to deliver the oratory. When Cavour found the zealous prelate in poor health and unable to attend the session at City Hall, he had the City Council meet in the archbishop's residence.

At the appointed day and hour they assembled there with all pomp and ceremony, and the meeting was formally opened. "With all these magnates assembled in this room," the good prelate once told a friend, "the Last Judgment seemed nigh." The imposing assembly heard arguments both for and against the oratory; much was said about the advisability and inadvisability of allowing so many boys to gather in one spot. In conclusion, since the majority sided with the marquis, it was decided once and for all to forbid such gatherings and to close the oratory, so as to forestall any threat to public tranquility.

Deceit and bad faith would certainly have triumphed had not God provided a staunch supporter for both Don Bosco and his boys. The opposition He, at times, permitted against the oratory contributed to make it better known and to rally powerful friends for it even at Court. Outstanding among those to whom we owe the deepest gratitude was Count Joseph Provana of Collegno who was then Secretary of the Treasury under King Charles Albert. More than once this kind-hearted gentleman had given financial help to Don Bosco on his own or on behalf of the sovereign, whom he kept

minutely informed about Don Bosco's oratory. The king was very much interested in it. He always enjoyed reading the report which Don Bosco would send him on special events at the oratory, and listening to the verbal account which Count Provana gave him. Convinced that Don Bosco's work was very beneficial to the youth of his realm, the king several times notified him that he greatly admired the work to which he had dedicated himself, comparing it to the work of foreign missions and expressing the hope that similar oratories could be opened in all the cities and towns of the kingdom. Charles Albert did not limit himself to words but also sent Don Bosco donations from time to time; that very year [1846] he made him a New Year's gift of 300 *lire* with this accompanying note: "For Don Bosco's little scamps."

With such a friend and protector the cause of the oratory was well assured. In fact, when the king heard of the City Council meeting to decree the closing of the oratory, he sent for Count Provana, who was one of the council members, and charged him to communicate to the City Council his will in the following terms: "It is the king's desire and his specific will that these Sunday gatherings of boys be promoted and protected. Should there be any danger of disorder, suitable measures should be taken to prevent it, but nothing more."

Count Provana had listened in silence to the lively discussion of his colleagues, but when he saw that the order for the complete closing of Don Bosco's oratory was being drawn up, he asked for the floor and made known the king's will on the matter.

Words cannot describe the shock of Marquis Cavour and his supporters at this royal communication. They all bowed their heads in silence, and the meeting was adjourned. Thus, at the very moment when everything seemed over, the Lord made all realize, through His intervention, that nothing had been lost, rather that a gain had been made. In fact, several of the councilors who through prejudice had been indifferent or hostile to Don Bosco, now became friends and benefactors to both him and his sons—all the more eagerly since the king had also given them to understand that he was placing that tiny undertaking under his royal protection.

Despite this, Marquis Cavour continued to show his displeasure.

He again summoned Don Bosco to City Hall, and, after calling him an obstinate priest, ended with this explicit statement: "Your intentions may be good, but what you are doing is fraught with danger. It is my duty to safeguard public order and, therefore, I shall put you and your meetings under police surveillance. The moment anything happens to threaten public peace, I will disband your urchins, and I will hold you responsible for the consequences."

If anything, Don Bosco left Cavour's office with greater confidence than before. As for the marquis, that was his last appearance at City Hall. Either because of the excitement of these events or because of some other malady already afflicting him, the marquis became ill with a terrible attack of gout which finally forced him to take to his bed and, after several years of great suffering, brought him to the grave.

Nevertheless, for the short time he remained in office, the marquis kept sending policemen to the oratory every Sunday, with orders to watch and report on everything said or done in and out of church. But the officers, seeing how this priest, single-handed, could keep order in a large crowd of boys, noting the fun the boys were having with their games, listening to the sermons and instructions given to them, far from finding anything suspicious in these gatherings, were soon greatly impressed and thought very highly of them.

One of them recalled a conversation he had with the marquis.

"Well now," the marquis asked him one day, "what did you see, what did you hear in that rabble?"

"I saw a large crowd of young lads, Marquis, having fun in many ways, without quarreling or bickering, and I thought: 'If only all the youngsters in Turin would behave like this! We would have much less to do, and our prisons wouldn't be so crowded.' Then, in church I heard some sermons that really scared me, and made me go to confession."

"But what about politics?"

"Not a word, naturally, since the boys couldn't care less, anyway. From what I could see, Don Bosco's politics is to train boys to practice their Faith, teach them to read, write, and do arithmetic, see that they have clean wholesome fun, find them suitable employment, visit them during the week and counsel them, in

short, do for them what their parents should do but don't, either because they cannot or do not want to."

"But don't the older boys talk about war and revolution?"

"Never, neither in church nor outside. From what I saw, the only riot or revolution they seem inclined to, or good at, would be around a basketful of food. I'm sure that every one of them would show such valor as to deserve a gold medal. But apart from that, Marquis, there's no danger at all."

This policeman was speaking the truth, just as all the others did when questioned, as they frequently were, by their superiors. Such was then, and has remained to this day, the sole policy of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales and its followers.

Another guard told his captain quite frankly: "Yes, Bosco *does* preach revolt. He even made me revolt against myself, so much so that I made my Easter duty after many years! He spoke about death as though we were already dead or about to die in the next half hour. My, what a horrible place hell must be! I've never heard it described like that before! Yet, in finishing, Don Bosco said that what he had told us was really nothing, that it did not even faintly resemble the real horror. You can be sure I don't want to end up with the devils."

The marquis' order, prompted by unfounded suspicions, brought great spiritual benefit to all the guards. During the sermons they would stand rigid and not miss a single word. Sometimes Don Bosco would invite them, jokingly, to lend him a hand in watching over the boys. On these occasions, Don Bosco began to preach on the more frightful topics, such as hell and its never-ending torments and damnation; death with all its consequences for both the good and the bad; the Last Judgment with its appalling majesty. His words made such an impression that all his listeners were stricken with holy terror, but then he so persuasively spoke of God's mercy and the powerful intercession of the Blessed Virgin and the Saints, that he rekindled in all of them the hope of a heavenly reward.

The guards who had never heard such a sermon and had not been to confession for years, would come to him right after and, fearful and repentant, ask him to hear their confession. He was delighted to do them this act of charity. Since the guards were changed every Sunday, almost all went to confession and Com-



munion. Thus, they became firm friends of Don Bosco and his oratory, and those who had formerly been posted in various parts of the city to forestall any trouble from Don Bosco's boys, no longer worried, for they knew better.

One day Don Bosco remarked: "I heartily regret I did not have a photograph or sketch made of the oratory in those days, so that people could see how well the boys behaved in church and in class, and how many there were and how they looked. It would make quite a sight, I'd say! Imagine several hundred boys, all sitting very quietly listening to my words, and six policemen, in groups of two, rigidly standing with folded arms in three different spots in the chapel, listening too. They really helped me a good deal with the boys, even though they had come exclusively to watch me. It would have been lovely too, to see these same guards wiping their tears with the back of their hands, or shielding their faces with a handkerchief to cover up their emotion, not to say kneeling among the boys, near the confessional, waiting for their turn. Truly, I had aimed my sermons at them more than at the boys."

Meanwhile, with a remarkable sense of prudence, Don Bosco did not want Marquis Cavour to feel that he had been defeated and that his pride had been dealt a severe blow. So, after a little while, he enlisted the good offices of a person on friendly terms with the marquis to arrange for an audience with him. Tactfully, by expressing deep respect for him, he succeeded in soothing the ruffled feelings of the marquis. He cleared the misunderstandings which had arisen by showing how baseless the accusations were, explained his reasons for resisting him, and asked for his support. At the end of the interview, the marquis declared himself satisfied with Don Bosco's explanations and acknowledged that the oratory did much good for youngsters. He promised not to bother it any more. As Don Bosco kept describing all he was doing for the boys, the marquis interrupted to ask: "Where do you get the money for all this?"

Don Bosco raised his eyes to heaven with a smile on his face. "I place all my trust in Divine Providence. If, for example, Divine Providence at this very moment were to inspire you to come to my assistance, I would be deeply grateful to you." Touched, the marquis smiled and gave him 200 *lire*.

Don Bosco returned to visit him several times, especially during his final illness. The sons of the marquis, Gustavo and Camillo, also became friends of Don Bosco and visited him in Valdocco from time to time. The *Palazzo Cavour* was Antonio Rosmini's residence whenever he came to Turin, and it was there, [in Cavour's private residence], that Don Bosco, four years later, often met and talked with the philosopher of Rovereto.

The reader may have noticed that Don Bosco never allowed his troubles to get the better of him. He never gave way to fear or boredom, but went on writing, visiting, advising, and otherwise continuing, with heroic constancy, to overcome whatever difficulties he could. He did the same in countless other unpleasant situations. At all times we shall see him following St. Ignatius' advice always to do one's best as though nothing should be expected of God, and on the other hand, to rely totally on God as though nothing could be done by oneself.

After Cavour's death, no one at City Hall or in the government gave the oratory any trouble for many years. On his own part, Don Bosco never violated any civil laws, although he never acknowledged as just or gave his approval to any legislation contrary to the laws of God and of the Church. When speaking to his own boys and others in public or in private, he was never known to suggest anything but obedience to civil authorities. As he used to say, persons in command are put there by God to rule us. He himself set an excellent example by submitting to those in authority and studying the best way to approach them.

Don Bosco's resolute and farsighted serenity was the real reason why he had so many friends in high places. Whenever a new cabinet minister, prefect of a province, or mayor was appointed, he would never fail to call on him. This naturally made a good impression on the person singled out for such attention, bound him in friendship and brought good results. All the more so since these men were often prejudiced against him and the call enabled Don Bosco to straighten matters out.

"I have come to recommend my young boys to you," he would say, and then would describe in detail all he was doing for the children of the working class. He would conclude: "If you yourself are not in a position to help, then I ask you to keep others from

doing us harm. I place my boys under your protection. Be a father to them." The request was put in such a way that the authorities felt obliged to promise their help.

"But this isn't all," Don Bosco would add. "I beg you not to be shocked at or irritated by reports criticizing the oratory. Please verify the facts and then send for me to give my side of the story. I am always ready to give an explanation. And please be indulgent with our mistakes."

Uttered with such disarming simplicity, his words generally succeeded in winning over the person concerned. Here again, as elsewhere in our story, prudence forbids the mentioning of names. We will only say that one particular person in authority, though forced by unjust and dictatorial orders to harass Don Bosco's work, nevertheless remained his personal friend and did all he could to ease his troubles.

Among the higher provincial or municipal authorities Don Bosco always found powerful protectors who helped him out of several unpleasant situations; and there was even one high-placed anti-clerical, who, while never giving active support, would never permit any harm to him by parties opposed to Don Bosco's work.

## CHAPTER 48

### *Unusual Boyish Devotion*

EVERYWHERE and at all times, youths have responded generously to those who were sincerely and genuinely interested in their welfare. Crowds of young children used to gather around our Divine Saviour, because He loved them far more than even an affectionate father loves his own children. St. Philip Neri, the apostle of Rome, was always surrounded by young people wherever he went, for he treated them with inimitable kindness. The same is true of St. Joseph Calasanz, St. Jerome Emiliani, the Blessed Sebastian Valfré, St. Francis de Sales and many other saints whom God entrusted with the salvation of children. In our own times, the facts we are about to relate furnish undeniable proof that Don Bosco too was deeply loved by his boys.

Besides caring for his oratory, Don Bosco also carried out his priestly ministry in the prisons, at the Cottolengo Hospital and at the *Rifugio*; his free time was negligible. Such endless daily tasks necessarily compelled him to work long hours at night to produce the books needed by youngsters, and the work nearly cost him his life.

Only a few weeks after he had taken possession of the Pinardi shed, his already fragile health worsened so notably that his doctors warned him to refrain from any kind of work unless he wanted to die in the prime of life. Father Borel, who valued him and cared for him as a brother, realized the danger and sent him to stay for a while with good Father Peter Abbondio, pastor at *Sassi*, a suburb of Turin at the foot of Superga. Don Bosco would spend his weekdays there and on Saturday evenings would return to Turin to be with his boys on Sundays. Notwithstanding the kindly concern of the pastor, and the healthful air, that rest did not restore Don Bosco's strength as expected. One reason was that, unable to

sit back and do nothing, he took on the chores of a curate. Again, his nearness to Turin drew many of the oratory boys to pay him frequent visits. Between them and the boys at *Sassi*, he had his hands full. But there was more: the oratory boys were not the only ones who came to *Sassi*, in groups or singly, whenever they could; there were also the pupils of the Christian Brothers, who, one day put him in a doubly embarrassing situation. What follows was narrated to us by Charles Rapetti, bursar of St. Primitivus School, and by other people who witnessed the event.

Among the various schools which the Christian Brothers were running very successfully in Turin was St. Barbara's, a municipal school with several hundred boys. Don Bosco used to go there every week to hear confessions and several boys even walked to the Valdocco oratory for the same purpose; nearly all were his penitents.

Toward the end of spring that year the boys had a spiritual retreat. They were expecting Don Bosco to come for confessions, and for this reason hardly any of them thought about going to confession to any other priest. Finally, the closing day of the retreat came, and the boys, that morning, on arriving at school found out that Don Bosco had not come. They, therefore, individually requested permission from their respective teachers to go to him at Valdocco. Not finding him there and learning that he was at *Sassi*, they set out in various groups, some being under the impression that *Sassi* was a stone building<sup>1</sup> nearby, and others that it was a place on the outskirts of Turin. The poor youngsters had no idea of the distance, which was several miles. When they reached the Po River they should have realized that they were leaving the city limits, and should have gone back to school. Thinking before acting never has been a trait of the young, and so, listening only to what their hearts prompted, one after the other they continued their search undaunted.

It was a rainy day. Somewhere across the river, the boys, unfamiliar with the countryside, lost their bearings and wandered about looking for Don Bosco through meadows, fields, and vineyards. People they met asked them: "Where are you going? Whom are you looking for?"

<sup>1</sup> *Sassi* in Italian means stones. [Editor]

"We're going to *Sassi* to look for Don Bosco. Where's *Sassi*? Where's Don Bosco?"

"You're going the wrong way," the farmers told them. "Go back, follow the turn of the road and go up the hills. But who is this Don Bosco? That's not the name of the pastor at *Sassi*, and there is no priest there that we know of by that name."

"It can't be," the wandering boys replied, "they told us that Don Bosco is at *Sassi*, so he *must* be there."

Some of the boys who had lagged behind, unknown to the first groups, got the name mixed up and kept asking: "Where's *Sassari*?"

Laughing, the people told them: "*Sassari* is in Sardinia, and you get there by boat." The boys were humiliated.

Finally somehow or other, from different roads they converged on the *Sassi* parish church, some 300 of them, soaked in perspiration, bespattered with mud, so tired and hungry that anybody would have felt sorry just to see them.

Don Bosco was called. On seeing so many of his little friends, he was deeply moved.

"What brings you here, my dear boys?" he asked. "Did your teachers give you permission?"

One of them spoke for all: "We've been having our spiritual retreat during the last few days. Today is the closing day and we want to go to confession to you. We expected you yesterday at St. Barbara's. When we didn't see you this morning, we got permission from our teachers to go to look for you at *Valdocco*, and from there we came here, in different groups. We did not know that all of us were doing the same thing. We didn't tell the superiors we were coming here because we thought we'd be back at school in time for Mass and Communion. Many of us want to make a general confession, and almost all want to make their annual confession."

One can easily realize the amazement of Don Bosco and his hosts. They could not help admiring such youthful enthusiasm, but they tried to persuade the boys to return to school at once, to relieve the anxiety of their teachers and parents. It was like talking to the wind: they had to give in to the boys, who insisted on staying for confession. Don Bosco and the pastor had quite a problem on their hands. How could they ever take care of such a large crowd

of boys, who wanted to make general or annual confessions? How could they get them back to school in time for Communion? Not even a dozen priests would have been enough, and all the boys wanted to confess to only one priest! They were finally persuaded that this was not possible and that they would have to postpone their Communion until the following day. After this had been achieved, exhausted though he was, Don Bosco went into the confessional. So did the pastor, his curate, and another priest, a teacher at the municipal school, and they were all busy until one o'clock in the afternoon. Even so, they could not fully satisfy the devotion of the boys.

But there was yet another problem. The boys had left Turin much like the crowds that had followed Jesus to the desert. In their single desire to go to Don Bosco for confession they had not thought of bringing along anything to eat, since they all assumed that they would be back home for breakfast. So, besides satisfying their devotion, Don Bosco also had to quiet their pangs of hunger, for they were starved after such a long hike on empty stomachs. Unable to repeat the miracle of the loaves, the good pastor relieved Don Bosco's embarrassment by substituting his own charity for the miracle. He took all he had: bread, *polenta*,<sup>2</sup> beans, rice, potatoes, fruit, cheese, in short, everything edible which he could find, and set it before his famished guests. Since there was not enough food in his own larder, he appealed to the neighbors for more. Thus the youthful army was fed, and was later able to return to the city without fainting along the way.

But if Don Bosco and his generous host were embarrassed that morning, an even greater embarrassment awaited the Christian Brothers, the retreat preachers, and guests at St. Barbara's. At the time set for Mass and general Communion, of the 400 pupils only a score or so were present: all the rest were either at *Sassi* or wandering around near there.

Something similar, but on a much smaller scale, happened later on. On a school holiday a group of these same pupils, among them a brother of Michael Rua,<sup>3</sup> started off for *Sassi* early in the morning to attend Don Bosco's Mass and receive Communion. Those who had not been able to go to confession before setting out, confessed

<sup>2</sup> Mush made of cornmeal. [Editor]

to him. Mass, of course, was delayed till a late hour; but the boys were happy and in good spirits when they returned to the city; Don Bosco too felt greatly consoled. Michael Rua heard about the spiritual joy and fond recollections of that happy outing from his brother, who was three years older.

Incidents such as these clearly show how well loved Don Bosco was by the boys who knew him. They also tell us that *Sassi* was no place for Don Bosco to rest and restore his poor health.

<sup>s</sup> See footnote No. 5 on p. 202. [Editor]



## CHAPTER 49

### *A Decisive Choice*

MARCHIONESS Barolo had now been in Rome some eight months, struggling to overcome serious difficulties in obtaining papal approval for the rules of her religious institutes. Her continual prayers to the Blessed Sacrament, her repeated visits to Pope Gregory XVI, to cardinals and other high prelates, as well as a letter of recommendation from King Charles Albert, finally produced the desired result from the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. Her success came as a great surprise to many people who had thought it impossible.

The marchioness returned to Turin on May 6, 1846, with the constitutions of her institutes amended and approved, and she was given a joyful welcome by the Sisters of St. Anne, the Sisters of St. Mary Magdalen and other people who benefited by her charity. Together with the other priests of the *Rifugio*, Don Bosco also welcomed her, and partly from her and partly from Silvio Pellico,<sup>1</sup> her traveling companion, he came to learn how arduous was the task of obtaining the Holy See's approval of new religious congregations at a time when the Holy See's policy was one of wait and see. This was a rule to remember and go by, for years to come; still he found in it reasons to rejoice, for he was reminded of the mysterious promises he had received in his dreams. In fact, with his usual smile and in a light vein, he kept telling the marchioness: "Give me plenty of money, give me millions, and you'll see what I can do. I will soar so high that I will cover the whole world with my wings."

The marchioness, already informed that City Hall was opposing his oratory, and aware of the rumors about him, was painfully surprised at these words of his and shortly after, while paying a

<sup>1</sup> See footnote No. 3 on p. 105. [Editor]

visit to the Sisters of St. Joseph, almost in tears, she repeated his words and added: "Pray for him. I am afraid that saintly man will really end up insane!"

She, therefore, resolved to persuade him to curtail his exhausting work. Seeing that his health was noticeably worsening, she sent for him and firmly suggested several months of complete rest in some remote and healthy spot, offering him 5,000 *lire* for a treatment she rightly considered necessary. "Marchioness," Don Bosco replied respectfully, "I am very grateful to you for your kind offer, but I did not become a priest to look after my health." Father Borel, who was present and knew Don Bosco well, admired this reply so much that he would often recall it in proof of his friend's holiness. Without mentioning names, he also quoted it often in his instructions to priests and seminarians.

The marchioness was not to be put off, however. Sincere though she was in her offer, she hoped that Don Bosco would forget all about his boys if he were to leave Turin for a time. In the beginning she had not minded his involvement with the oratory, but now, fearing possible inconveniences from the boys' occasional visits to Don Bosco at the *Rifugio* and at St. Philomena Hospital, she was determined that he should devote himself entirely to her own institutes. Exclusively absorbed in her own undertakings, she did not fully grasp Don Bosco's mission, even as she had failed to grasp the mission of the Venerable Joseph Benedict Cottolengo.<sup>2</sup>

Having made up her mind, she went to Don Bosco one day and said: "I am very pleased with the work you are doing for my institutes. I am particularly grateful to you for introducing hymns, plain chant, and organ music during church services, as well as for teaching arithmetic and the metric system in the school, along with so many other practical things."

"There is no need to thank me, Madame," Don Bosco replied. "A priest has a moral obligation to work. I was only doing my duty and God will reward me, I am sure, if I deserve it."

"I also want to say, or rather repeat, that I am very sorry your many activities have undermined your health. You cannot possibly look after the spiritual direction of my institutes and your homeless boys as well, particularly since their numbers have grown be-

<sup>2</sup> See footnote No. 2 on p. 51. [Editor]

yond all limits. My suggestion is that from now on you limit yourself to your duties as chaplain of St. Philomena Hospital, that you stop visiting the prisons and the Cottolengo Hospital; and above all, that you stop looking after boys. What do you say to that?"

"My dear Marchioness, God has helped me so far, and I hope that He will help me also in the future. Please do not worry. Father Borel, Father Pacchiotti and myself will see to it that everything is taken care of to your complete satisfaction."

"But I cannot stand by and see you kill yourself. Whether you realize it or not, trying to do so many different things at the same time is only ruining your health, and it may also hurt my own institutes. Then, there are rumors going about . . . with regard to your mental faculties. I am, therefore, obliged to advise you . . ."

"To do what, Madame?"

"To give up either your oratory or my hospital. Think it over, and give me your decision at your convenience."

"I have already thought it over, and I can give you my answer now: You have money and means, and you will have no trouble in finding all the priests you want to direct your institutes. But poor boys have nothing, and that is why I cannot and must not forsake them. If I were to give them up now, the work of several years would be lost. So from now on I shall gladly do all I can for the *Rifugio*, but not as a full chaplain. I am giving up this post to devote myself more fully to the care of these boys."

"But where will you live? How will you manage without a salary?"

"I shall go wherever Divine Providence calls me. Up to now God has never let me lack for anything, and I am confident that He will not fail me in the future."

"But your health is gone, your mind is giving way, and you need rest. Please listen to my advice (I am speaking now as a mother, Don Bosco): I will continue to pay your salary and even increase it, if you wish, but go away for a few years, or as long as you need. Get a thorough rest and when you are fully well, come back to the *Rifugio*, where you will always be welcome. Otherwise you put me in the painful position of having to dismiss you from my institutes. If you oblige me to take this step, you will go deep into debt for the sake of your boys. Then you will come to me for

help, but I tell you frankly right now that I will refuse all your requests. Please think this over seriously."

"I have already thought it over for a long time, Madame. I have dedicated my life wholly to the welfare of these poor boys, and no one will ever make me stray from the path that the Lord has marked out for me."

"You prefer your ragamuffins to my institutes? Very well, then, consider yourself dismissed as of now, and I shall arrange this very day for someone to take your place."

At this point Don Bosco brought to her attention that an instant dismissal would give rise to unpleasant rumors and that they had better proceed calmly, to preserve among themselves that charity which, one day, standing at God's tribunal, they would wish to have maintained.

The marchioness calmed down at these words and then said: "Well, I will give you three months, after which time you will have to leave the spiritual direction of my institutes to somebody else."

Don Bosco agreed and, confident of God's help, abandoned himself to the loving care of Divine Providence. It was this confidence which assured the success of his work, for the Holy Spirit says: "Cursed is the man who trusts in human beings, who seeks his strength in flesh." (Jer. 17, 5)

But the marchioness did not give up so easily. In an attempt to get him to give up his idea by pointing out how uncertain his future would be, she sent her secretary, Silvio Pellico to him with the instruction: "Renew the offer I made to Don Bosco. If he accepts, good; I'll do whatever he wants. But if he again refuses, repeat to him what I said, that he is never, never to come to my door asking for alms. He will soon need money, I can see that, but I will not give him a *soldo* or even a *centesimo*."

Don Bosco was not impressed and replied that he regretted displeasing such a kind lady, to whom he was deeply indebted but, since he knew that the Lord had entrusted him with the care of boys, he was afraid of going against God's will by forsaking them, and that this was the sole reason that made him turn down her generous offers.

Father Cafasso and Father Borel were soon apprised of this unfortunate clash. After a call on Father Cafasso, from whom, how-

ever, she learned nothing of Don Bosco's intentions, the marchioness wrote the following letter to Father Borel:

May 18, 1846

Dear Father Borel:

A conversation with Father Cafasso has led me to believe that a clarification between ourselves is necessary, dear Father. Such an understanding, I believe, had best be sought in writing rather than in speaking, all the more so because whenever I have the honor of speaking with you, you never allow me to express my respect for you, my admiration for your virtue and my gratitude for the zealous care you have always shown for my institutes.

When St. Philomena Hospital became the latest addition [to my institutions], we considered it necessary to appoint a chaplain for it. There was no one better qualified than you for advice. You selected the excellent Don Bosco and introduced him to me. I, too, liked him from the very first and noticed a certain spirit of recollection and simplicity about him which is typical of holy men. My acquaintance with him began in the fall of 1844, and the hospital was not expected to be ready for occupancy, and in fact was not, until August, 1845. In my anxiety to secure the services of such a worthy priest, I agreed to engage him then and there, and start giving him his regular salary. A few weeks after he had taken up residence with you, both the Mother Superior of the *Rifugio* and myself realized that his health could stand no work. You will recall how many times I told you to give him special consideration and let him rest, and so forth. You did not listen to me, asserting that priests have to work, etc.

Don Bosco's health continued to get worse, up to the time of my trip to Rome, but, although he was already spitting blood, he kept working. Then I received a letter from you, informing me that Don Bosco was in no condition to carry on the work he had been hired for. I replied immediately that I was prepared to continue his full salary, on the sole condition that he take a total rest, and I am ready to fulfill that promise now. Do you really think, Father, that hearing confessions and preaching to hundreds of boys is no work? I believe it is hurting Don Bosco, and he must go far enough from Turin as not to have to subject his lungs to any strain. When he was at Gassino, these lads kept coming to him for confession, and he used to walk them back to Turin.

Since you are a kindly person, Father, I have doubtlessly deserved the unfavorable opinion you have of me, as you have clearly told me that I am against the religious instruction which these boys receive every Sunday, and the care that Don Bosco takes of them during the week. I do really believe that the work is excellent in itself and worthy of those who have undertaken it. However, on the one hand, I firmly contend that Don Bosco's health does not permit him to continue such work, and on the other, I find it rather improper that these boys, who previously used to wait for Don Bosco at the door of the *Rifugio*, now should wait for him at the entrance of the hospital.

Without bringing up the past—about which Father Durando<sup>3</sup> feels exactly as I do—I will mention only what took place yesterday. Mother Superior of the hospital told me that a girl of loose morals, who had been dismissed from the *Rifugio*, visited the hospital with the family of one of our patients. With her there was a woman whose little girl was taken from her at the suggestion of the pastor of Annunciation Church, and is now at the *Rifugio*. I sent both of them out of the hospital.

A few minutes before, seeing a group of boys at the door of the hospital, I asked them what they wanted and they told me they were waiting for Don Bosco. Some of them were not so young. Now both this bad woman and this girl, whom I had asked to leave the hospital and who were angry, passed through the midst of these boys. What if this girl had said something about her shameful profession to these pupils of Don Bosco?

To sum up briefly:

1. I approve and praise the instruction being given to the boys, but because of our type of inmates, I object to the boys' habit of gathering around the doorways of my institutes.

2. I firmly believe that Don Bosco needs a complete rest because of his weak lungs, but I shall not continue his salary, which he can surely use, unless he agrees to go far enough from Turin as not to be in circumstances which would do anything harmful to his delicate health. This becomes all the more important to me as my respect for him grows.

I know, Father, that we differ on this point. Were it not for my conscience, I would be ready, as always to submit to your judgment.

With unalterable regard and profound respect I am honored to be,

Your devoted servant,

Marchioness Barolo née Colbert

<sup>3</sup> He was the superior of the Vincentians in Turin. [Editor]

This letter reveals both the determination and the great charity of the marchioness' noble heart. She did not refrain from calling on Don Bosco one day, while he was busy working in his shed now converted to a chapel. As yet, he did not have a room for himself in Pinardi's house, since the leases of the tenants had not expired. The marchioness looked about the hovel of a building and entered the shed. She stared for a moment at the crude, cramped quarters. Knowing nothing of Don Bosco's heavenly mission, she interpreted his refusal of her generous offer as a mere whim and an act of obstinacy which prompted him to prefer his present wretched state to her generous offers.

Informed of her presence, Don Bosco came up to greet her, but as soon as she saw him, the marchioness wasted no time in saying: "What do you hope to accomplish here without my help? You haven't a penny, I know! Yet in spite of this you won't take my suggestion? All the worse for you! Think it over well before you make up your mind! Your whole future depends on it!

What a study in contrast, Don Bosco and Marchioness Barolo! He had accepted the post of chaplain and spiritual director of St. Philomena Hospital only as a temporary measure. His priestly work among the girls was strictly one of duty and exclusively for motives of charity, while in regard to boys there was added a holy inclination prompted by divine grace. Hence, despite the fact that his present post had the great attraction of offering him security, respect, and material advantages for the rest of his life, he still preferred the evangelical poverty of his true vocation. He prayed to the Lord: "Incline my heart to your decrees and not to gain." (Ps. 118, 36) Nor was his determination shaken by the thought that he would certainly forfeit the favor and goodwill of the marchioness who was extremely generous toward all works of charity. Unswerving in his decision, he responded coldly to the appeal of the noble lady and remained impassive to her remonstrations. Willing though he was, as we shall see later, to help in her institutions, he would never stoop to ask for any assistance that might commit him, out of gratitude, to something that would be harmful to his oratory.

On her part, unyielding in what she believed to be the right thing to do, the marchioness could not forgive Don Bosco for giving up her institutes, although she always esteemed him highly for his

virtues. Don Bosco's withdrawal meant to her the loss of a cherished project of hers, namely a congregation of priests to whom she could entrust her charitable institutions and who would keep alive their original spirit. In Don Bosco she had sensed the necessary qualities for the superior of such a congregation.

She was a powerful woman: she had the backing of the king and all the authorities, she was rich and of noble lineage, she was popular because of her charities; consequently she could not help resenting Don Bosco's invincible resistance to her wishes. Her relatives had quickly detected her annoyance and she herself spoke of it to friends who visited her, so that, little by little, as the reason for her resentment became known more and more, it served Don Bosco admirably, who was keen about keeping his reputation untarnished. His unexpected dismissal from the *Rifugio* could have given rise to heaven knows what suspicions unless people really knew the true reason. Don Bosco was mindful of the warning in the Scriptures: "Cherish your good name." This explains why he acted the way he did and why he gave, at times, almost provocative answers. They were meant to force the marchioness to make known the real reasons for his dismissal.

In the meanwhile he continued to call on her, though their relationship was now an exercise in diplomacy, the marchioness treating him stiffly and Don Bosco replying with great gravity. At times their meetings even took on a comic appearance. Very calmly, but rather sardonically, the marchioness would ask him as he entered her reception room: "You are penniless, aren't you?"

"Not at all," Don Bosco would reply affably, but still grave and reserved in manner. "I did not come for money. I already know where you stand on that score and I have no intention of importuning you about it, all the more so, since I do not need anything . . . and if you will permit me to say so, with no offense intended, I do not need you either, Madame."

"Is that so?" she would retort. "How is that for pride?"

"I," continued Don Bosco, "do not want your money, but I can truly say that, while you do not relent your stand even when you know that I am in need, I would act very differently toward you. I know that what I am saying is quite unthinkable, but if you were to fall on hard times and need my assistance, I would be ready to



take the cloak off my back and bread from my mouth to help you.”

For a moment the marchioness was speechless, but then recovering her usual poise, she replied: “I know you are putting on a show of not needing my help and rejecting my aid! Canon Cottolengo did the same. He didn’t want my money either.”

This good noblewoman, gruff only in appearance, kept her irrevocable word of never assisting Don Bosco *personally*, but she had no intention of refusing all help to his oratory. From time to time she secretly sent money to him forbidding her messenger to reveal where it came from. In a ledger kept by Father Borel to record all the alms given to the festive oratory, there is an entry for May 17, 1847, which shows that the marchioness, through Father Cafasso, donated 810 *lire* for a few Masses. In June of the same year she lent carpets from the *Rifugio* for the feast of St. John [the Baptist] at the oratory. Again in June, 1851, there is another entry of 50 *lire* from the marchioness to Father Borel. These offerings were given to Don Bosco by Father Borel, while other sums, less frequently, were probably handed to him directly by various people who were strangers to him. Those familiar with the noble lady’s habits have no doubt that the donations were hers.

We wish also to add that the marchioness was a woman of remarkable piety and genuine basic humility, despite her vigorous personality. Whenever Don Bosco came to visit her, as he was about to leave she would kneel before him and ask for his blessing. This we know from Father Giacomelli, who added, with the simplicity of a candid soul: “She never asked mine!”

Meanwhile, toward the end of May, Don Bosco began looking for a lodging; he had to leave St. Philomena Hospital in August. He was also worried about the new life to which he would have to adjust. Until now he had always lived in a family, whether at school, in the seminary, in a parish, at the *Convitto* or at the *Rifugio*: from now on, he would be all alone. But he knew how to trust in his heavenly Mother, from whom he had always obtained help and strength in need.

He was not long in reaching a decision. Ever since he had transformed the Pinardi shed into a chapel, his first thought had been to establish his residence in the house after ridding himself of his dubious neighbors. Pinardi’s house was one of ill repute and dis-

order and, if God's will had not been revealed very clearly to him, Don Bosco would have been guilty of serious imprudence. He tackled the problem without delay. Its solution would take time and money. As far as time was concerned, he had to be patient; as for money, he had to be ready to make any sacrifice. It was most imperative that he permanently drive away the shameless tenants from that building.

Mr. Pinardi had rented all the dwelling units of his house, five on the upper floor and six on the main floor, to Pancrazio Soave. Pancrazio, keeping a few rooms for himself and his tiny starch factory, had sublet all the others. Don Bosco, therefore, began negotiating with him. He started renting the rooms one by one at double their rate, as the different leases expired or the tenants vacated them. On June 5 [1846], he rented three adjoining rooms facing west on the upper floor at five *lire* each a month; their lease extended from July 1, 1846 to January 1, 1849. He limited himself to taking over the keys, without occupying the rooms or even setting foot in them. Soave found the leases very profitable, but he kept telling Don Bosco: "Come and live in those rooms!"

"I don't need to just yet," Don Bosco would say. "They are too few for my purpose. I shall occupy them as soon as I can have the whole house!" His true purpose, however, was to avoid living under the same roof with people of disreputable character, lest he expose his priestly reputation to idle gossip.

## CHAPTER 50

### *A New Pope*

**D**ARK clouds were gathering on the political horizon. Toward the beginning of May 1846, Count Camillo Cavour's article *Des Chemins de fer en Italie* appeared in the *Revue Mensuelle* of Paris. The article described not so much the natural benefits which Italy would derive from commerce, thanks to the new railways which had shortened distances, but rather the moral benefits. Many other books were written on this subject in Piedmont to create a public opinion favorable to the liberal party. All of them harped on national independence, but none advocated the destruction of the temporal power of the popes. This, however, was the purpose of the *carbonari*,<sup>1</sup> even though they studiously concealed it so as not to outrage the conscience of Catholics.

While a suitable opportunity was being sought to push King Charles Albert into espousing the desired cause, unexpectedly the Austrian government itself offered one. For two years Piedmont had been permitting Ticino<sup>2</sup> to import salt from Genoa and Marseilles, and transport it through Piedmont. Austria had protested, alleging certain customs rights of its own which Piedmont refused to acknowledge. After a lengthy dispute, realizing that its protests would be of no use because they were unfounded, Austria retaliated on April 20, 1846 by more than doubling the duty on wine. This naturally evoked great bitterness among the Piedmontese winegrowers who were acutely harmed by the tariff.

This state of friction delighted the liberals. When a strong article in defense of Piedmont's rights and honor appeared in the official gazette by order of the king, Marquis Roberto d'Azeglio<sup>3</sup> organized

<sup>1</sup> See footnotes Nos. 5 and 6 on p. 2. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> A Swiss canton bordering on Italy. [Editor]

<sup>3</sup> Roberto d'Azeglio (1790-1862), like his brother Massimo, was an outstanding statesman and patriot of the Risorgimento. He was also very active in establishing kindergartens in Piedmont. [Editor]

a great popular rally at which shouts of "Long live the King of Italy" were to be raised. The rally was to be staged on the occasion of the king's yearly review of the troops. Charles Albert, however, warned in time of what was afoot, chose to remain in the palace rather than precipitate events.

When this maneuver failed, an association of winegrowers was formed and publicized with praises to the king, festivities, and conventions, all inspired by political ends. At an agricultural convention on Mortara, Lorenzo Valerio<sup>4</sup> openly declared that Charles Albert, with the help of destiny, would expel the foreigner from Italy.

In the midst of this agitation, Don Bosco published a 150-page book entitled *The Enologist*. In spite of long, patient research, we have been unable to unearth a single copy. After covering such topics as the cultivation of grape vines, the requirements for a good wine cellar, the various ways of preparing vats, barrels and other vessels, Don Bosco went on to explain the different ways of making wine, the right time for transferring it to other vats, and the means of preventing it from going sour or acquiring an unpleasant taste—one of the reasons why unfortunate families often find all their work ruined and their only source of income lost.

Don Bosco, interested also in the temporal welfare of his fellow villagers, had begun the book toward the end of 1844, almost as a pastime, he said. But it was not Don Bosco's habit to do things without a good reason also as regards timing. It seems that a first draft had been too brief, and now, instead, he treated the subject at greater length. He distributed several thousand copies among the peasants and made a gift of the book to some pastors, doctors, and mayors he knew. He personally presented some copies to several people in Turin who were posing as champions of liberty for the people, and he did not neglect certain influential members of the various conventions. Though not taking an active part in politics himself, he espoused the ideals and aspirations of the people in what concerned their temporal well-being. Everywhere, the topic of the day was trade and wine-tariffs, and with this book of his, Don Bosco showed himself to be what he truly was, a friend of his fellow countrymen and a champion of true progress and prosperity.

<sup>4</sup> See footnote No. 1 on page 148. [Editor]

The book also won him the sympathy of many persons whose support he considered important.

Meanwhile in the midst of these incipient political stirrings, Don Bosco was mindful of the Pope; he often spoke of him to the oratory boys, who in June of that year had a chance to show their veneration and affection for the visible head of the Church. In the early part of the month sad news spread throughout Turin, evoking profound sorrow in all devout Catholics. The mournful tolling of bells soon confirmed that Pope Gregory XVI, grieved by the endless revolts of subjects whose minds had been poisoned by the secret societies and by the thought of even sadder things to come, had died in Rome at the age of eighty. The following Sunday in speaking to his boys, Don Bosco praised the indomitable spirit of the deceased Pontiff and emphasized the grave loss to the Church, especially in those troubled times. Among other things he recalled the Pope's generous gesture of the year before, when he had graciously granted a plenary indulgence to be gained at death by fifty people to be chosen by Don Bosco from among the more zealous spiritual and temporal benefactors of the oratory. After a fervent exhortation, he invited the boys to join him in reciting five decades of the rosary for the repose of the Pope's soul, and they joined him most heartily.

After this tribute of gratitude to the deceased Pope, Don Bosco added that, just as a flock cannot be left without a shepherd, the Church too could not remain without a visible head to govern it, and therefore another Pope would be elected. He then urged the boys to pray that the Holy Spirit would illumine and guide the cardinals to choose one soon, and the boys responded generously.

On June 16, 1846, Cardinal John Mastai Ferretti, bishop of Imola, was elected Pope, and took the name of Pius IX. Shortly after the news was received, even in the humble little chapel of St. Francis de Sales a hymn of thanksgiving rose to God for having given the Church, after such a brief interval, another head, another father of all the faithful, one who would turn out to be also a great benefactor of the oratory.

The new Pope was of a kindly and generous disposition, truly big-hearted, but firm. He was a man of keen intelligence, vast knowledge, smooth eloquence, and solid and profound piety. He

was also well versed in politics and familiar with the ways of the sectaries. Everyone knew his patriotic sentiments and the Christian spirit which animated them. He had formerly preached missions in Sinigallia<sup>5</sup> and had spent some time in Chile as secretary to the nuncio. He was deeply devoted to the Immaculate Virgin and had a strong interest in poor boys, having been president of both Giovanni Tata and St. Michael hospices. His inclinations, therefore, were like Don Bosco's whose ideals he would grasp so well as to become his generous and affectionate protector.

Shortly after he ascended the papal throne, Pius IX issued a few edicts on administrative reforms, and on July 17 he granted a generous amnesty to well over a thousand political prisoners and exiles who had been convicted of conspiracy or insurrection.

As soon as the amnesty was announced, Italy, and the whole world resounded with the cry, "Long live Pius IX!" Rome was suddenly plunged into delirious joy, wild as an orgy: public demonstrations, celebrations, banquets, patriotic parades, triumphal arches, illuminations of the city, odes, music and the ovation of an immense multitude greeted the Pope wherever he went. Pius IX himself asked for moderation as a sign of obedience, but the secret societies, whose leaders had organized these public demonstrations and carefully regulated them for their own ends, kept on arousing the people under pretext of exalting the Papacy. In this they were unwittingly aided by the vast majority of Catholics who were prompted by sentiments of faith and love for the Pope.

The secret societies labored indefatigably to force Pius IX to make one concession after another, as they showered him each time with flattering tributes. They hailed him as a *liberal* Pope, in the hope that their lie would not be challenged. Writers who had been in the habit of insulting the Papacy, now praised Pius IX to the skies. Leading European newspapers acclaimed his patriotic spirit in the hope of overcoming King Charles Albert's indecision and reluctance. Massimo d'Azeglio<sup>6</sup> wrote articles for seven publications, including two magazines, one British, the other French, in which he exalted and magnified Pius IX as the hope of Italy, depict-

<sup>5</sup> A city in the province of Ancona, Italy. [Editor]

<sup>6</sup> See footnote No. 1 on p. 113. [Editor]

ing him as the Pope portrayed in the *Instruction* issued in 1820 by the secret societies.<sup>7</sup> Turin followed the example of Rome; the drive for freedom, deceitfully attributed to the Vatican, was now also infiltrating the clergy. Mazzini's followers kept aloof and implored their leader to do likewise, to step aside and leave free reign to Gioberti, Massimo d'Azeglio, Mamiani and others who were working for the same ends. Indeed they were, but, at the time, their efforts were directed toward laying the foundation for a constitutional government rather than for a republic.

Notwithstanding his love and enthusiasm for the Pope, Don Bosco was not taken in by the cheap lyrics of the street. Although the honors rendered to Pius IX seemed a fitting tribute to his divinely constituted authority and personal holiness, Don Bosco, nevertheless, detected in them the seeds of serious political developments harmful to the Church. So he passed the word along to his co-workers, to the older and more judicious boys, to be on their guard and not to let themselves be carried away by popular enthusiasm, but to stand united with the Pope and the archbishop, ready to obey their instructions. Archbishop Frasoni, too, perhaps the first among the bishops to do so, sensed the true motivation behind these demonstrations, the hypocrisy and evil aims of the secret societies, and he wasted no time in clearly alerting his flock and especially his intimate friends, including Don Bosco, not to let themselves be taken in by false ideas of freedom through their love for the Papacy. For this reason, there was growing in certain quarters a sullen resentment against the noble prelate, who, ready to endure any persecution rather than fail in his duty, continued to govern his diocese with admirable peace of mind, carefully attending to the needs of each individual parish.

It was at this time that Archbishop Frasoni delegated Don Bosco to go to Viù, [a little village] in the Lanzo valley, to look into the conduct of a woman, who was being referred to as *the saint of Viù* because of a mode of life which seemed to be extraordinary. Rumors had it, and she herself did not deny it, that, for a long time, no one had seen her take nourishment. People made donations to her, which, in truth, she made good use of by aiding poor or orphaned girls. Her advice and prayers were in demand.

<sup>7</sup> See pp. 4ff. [Editor]

Don Bosco complied with the archbishop's request and, after obtaining detailed information, was convinced that the woman was of good moral conduct and obedient to the laws of the Church. He suspected, however, that ignorance and vainglory went hand in hand with this. All he had to investigate, therefore, was her *reputed* sanctity, and this was to be judged by the sincerity of her intentions; there was no need to waste any time on the wonders attributed to her.

After making his retreat with Father Cafasso at St. Ignatius' Shrine, Don Bosco went down to Lanzo and invited a friend of his, Mr. Melanotti,<sup>8</sup> a café owner, to go with him to Viù. Once there, he went straight to the pastor and sent Melanotti to tell *the saint* that he would soon call on her, but in such terms as to indicate that he was in no particular hurry, and attached no importance to this visit. Mr. Melanotti, well briefed also about observing the woman's slightest word or gesture, went and delivered his message. *The saint* did not seem very flattered by his cold message and could barely conceal her impatience after an hour had gone by without her visitor showing up. At last Don Bosco appeared and was ushered into the presence of the woman, who was sitting on a chair of her own amid her admirers. She expected Don Bosco to greet her with a certain show of respect and reverence, but, without a word or even a glance, he took a seat next to the people around her and listened to their conversation.

Suddenly Mr. Melanotti turned to him and said: "Don Bosco, we are very lucky to have *the saint* in our midst and to be able to hear her wise words and spiritual advice."

"That's all very well," Don Bosco replied, "but I'd like to speak to this lady alone and discuss some confidential matters of great importance with her."

Already annoyed by his manner and now vaguely aware of some threatening danger, the woman rose and with an authoritative tone and gesture replied: "It is my policy to talk in public, so that everyone may hear and see how I conduct myself. I am not trying to fool anybody. I want only the *yes, yes; no, no* of the Gospel."

"Granted," answered Don Bosco: "I can see your point and your

<sup>8</sup> A native of Lanzo, he, as a boy, had attended the oratory in Turin with his brother. See also p. 225. [Editor]



interpretation of Holy Scripture, but please let me talk to you privately for a moment, and I think you'll not regret having listened to what I have to tell you."

After a moment's hesitation, the woman walked out of the room, beckoning Don Bosco to follow her. Melanotti took up a position from where he could easily witness what was happening. When they were in the adjoining room, with the door ajar, the woman waited for whatever it was Don Bosco had to tell her. After a brief silence, he began in a low voice. "How long have you been plying this trade of cheating, make-believe and gossip?"

"What?" cried the woman, barely able to control herself. "I don't understand!"

"Since you don't understand, I'll repeat my question," Don Bosco said calmly.

"Me, a cheat, a make-believe?" exclaimed the woman, in a rage.

"That's right," Don Bosco went on, "you are a cheat and a woman full of pride. By abusing God's name, you deceive ignorant people with your tricks."

"*You* are the one who is proud," the woman screamed, now quite beside herself and ready to spew forth a long string of insults.

But Don Bosco cut her short at once, and with a smile, said calmly: "I had no intention of offending you. Do you know why I talked to you as I did? I had to find out whether you are really a saint or whether your saintly life is a mere hypocrisy. But since you completely lack the one virtue indispensable to a saint, namely humility, I am convinced your sanctity is nothing but a sham, an evil means for living at the expense of others and enjoying the esteem and veneration of the fools who believe in you. And this I say in the name of the archbishop who sent me here." He then revealed to her, quite frankly, as if he was absolutely certain of it, everything that his fine sense of intuition had led him to guess. He also described to her the shame and the great harm she might suffer if some day, as could easily happen, some incredulous, inquisitive person were to spy on her and find out her secret.

The woman was stunned and petrified. She realized his authority; in those days a deception of this kind could have met with severe punishment under the civil laws also, should she be denounced. So, after Don Bosco had addressed a few charitable words to her,

exhorting her paternally to put her conscience right and to live a more Christian life without resorting to such false trappings, she acknowledged her guilt and replied: "I did not think you were so shrewd. Thank you for your advice. I will do exactly as you say, but I implore you not to disclose what has taken place between us. I solemnly promise I will at once give up my practices."

Don Bosco allowed her to retire, without suffering any embarrassment or loss of prestige, from the path she had so unadvisedly chosen. From what he learned later, she kept her word. She moved to another village for a time, acted like every other mortal being, and thus discredited any false rumors about her. Don Bosco had detected in her much ignorance, but also good faith, in that she thought she could use questionable means to help poor girls. Don Bosco made his report to Archbishop Frasoni, who was glad to hear that the poor woman had come to her senses and that her credulous followers had become wiser. At the same time he congratulated himself on having a priest who knew so well how to act in delicate circumstance. Mr. Melanotti himself was the source of this narration.

## CHAPTER 51

### *A Timely Booklet*

DON BOSCO was not too tired to plan another book that year. His young boys needed a type of manual which was then nonexistent. In those days, every province, not to say every town of Piedmont had its own weights and measures. This was, of course, a great obstacle to trade. On September 11, 1845, a royal edict, effective January 1, 1850, abolished all the old weights and measures throughout the realm in favor of the metric system.

To prepare the people for the changeover, the government distributed well in advance comparative tables of the new weights and measures to all the different municipalities and published pamphlets explaining the new system in simple language. Teachers began explaining it to their pupils and the mayors of each town were urged to establish evening and Sunday classes for adults.

But even before the government took these measures, as soon as the new edict appeared, Don Bosco went to work and expertly wrote a booklet entitled: *The Metric System Simplified, preceded by the four basic operations of arithmetic, for artisans and farmers by Father John Bosco*.<sup>1</sup> It would not be out of place to note here that Don Bosco always used the title of "Father" before his name in all his books, because he esteemed this title above any other human honor.

The importance of this new booklet of his can be judged by the fine pastoral letter which Bishop Philip Artico of Asti wrote a few years later on the metric system:

Do not be amazed, he wrote in his letter to the pastors, if your bishop is writing on a topic which seems more related to political economy than

<sup>1</sup> *Il sistema metrico decimale ridotto a semplicità, preceduto dalle quattro prime operazioni dell'aritmetica, ad uso degli artigiani e della gente di campagna, per cura del Sacerdote Bosco Giovanni.*

to our apostolic ministry. In His Gospel parables our Divine Master assumed the various roles of master of the household, master of the vineyard, and king distributing talents to his servants for investment. He was so much in favor of industry and commerce that He condemned the unfaithful servant who had not invested the talent he had received. You will frequently find Holy Scripture prescribing and praising just and uniform weights and measures. [We read in Deuteronomy:] "Use a true and just weight, and a true and just measure." (25,15) And in the Book of Proverbs: "Varying weights are an abomination to the Lord, and false scales are not good." (20,23) And again in Sirach: "Be not ashamed of accuracy of scales and balances." (42,4)

Do not think, my venerable brethren, that it is unbecoming for a priest to devote himself to such studies or teaching in order to instruct the simple-minded and protect them against fraud, provided he does not do so at the expense of his other sacred duties and provided that he shuns anything smacking of worldliness and filthy lucre. In fact, we read in the Old Testament that David ordered the priests to look after "every weight and measure." (1 Par. 23,29)

Not the least of Don Bosco's purposes was a concern for one's fellow beings that at times imposes an obligation to educate poor people in economic and social matters, so as to keep them from the swindling of cruel speculators who would take advantage of their ignorance.

His eighty-page booklet was written in question and answer form. Its purpose and form of presentation were explained in a foreword.

Present circumstances impose almost a strict obligation on everybody to acquire a knowledge of the metric system. Very useful and practical for all, this new system has been approved by law and will go into effect in this country in 1850.

Anyone can readily understand how, in a complete changeover of weights and measures, it is very easy to make mistakes, to be cheated, or to suffer severe loss.

To forestall such mistakes and aid the public as well as I can, I have compiled this booklet with a view to rendering the metric system as simple and intelligible as possible, so that even people of limited education can understand it without the help of a teacher.

To make myself more easily understood, I have sometimes departed from strict arithmetical terminology, because my main purpose is to make myself clear.

In the preparation of this booklet I have consulted the works of professors Giulio, Milanese, and Borghino, and also an arithmetic textbook by a Christian Brother.

Since a knowledge of the four basic operations of arithmetic is necessary for the application of the metric system, I explain these briefly in my introduction in order to facilitate the changeover to the new system. I have included a comparative table of both old and new weights and measures. By using the above mentioned four operations according to the new metric terminology, the old weights and measures can be changed into the new ones by the simple process of multiplication.

It is my purpose to offer the average reader a clear, simple explanation. If my poor efforts do not succeed in meeting everybody's needs, they may at least deserve your indulgence. Try this booklet, and take from it what is good.

In late spring the manuscript was handed over for printing to John Baptist Paravia, who ran a press and bookstore under the arcade of City Hall. In the meanwhile, Don Bosco ran into an unexpected mathematical problem which had to be solved before the booklet could go to press. Professor Giulio, distinguished mathematician at Turin University, had also been working on the metric system and he too had encountered a similar problem after handing in his manuscript to Paravia. As they were correcting their galley proofs, they both had to call a temporary halt. Each one, while searching for an answer, was curious to see what the other would come up with. The crux of the matter was to find a formula which would simplify the solution of a very complicated problem. Professor Giulio often passed by the printer's to see how Don Bosco was coming along and grumble over the impasse.

Don Bosco, with a tenacity all his own whenever he made up his mind to see anything through, did not sleep day or night. In his search for that formula, he filled pages and whole notebooks with figures, but in vain. One day, his head full of figures, he took a walk over to the Po River and strode up the hill to Father Picco's summer home, determined to stay there undisturbed until he had

found a solution. He asked for a quiet room and locked himself in, scribbling and cudgelling his brains for several days. Mentally fatigued, he frequently raised his thoughts to God, imploring Him for the necessary light. Father Picco tried to persuade him not to rack his brain, but to no avail. Finally an idea flashed through Don Bosco's mind. He put it to the test and it proved correct. He had found the formula! Instantly he left his desk to tell Father Picco about it. His relatives all came running to hear the good news and find out what it was all about.

"Yes, I've found it," Don Bosco exclaimed, "but now I am so tired and tense that I can't go into detail. It has been several days since I've had any sleep. I'll explain it all to you some other time." And off he went to the printer's to give him the go-ahead. As soon as Don Bosco's little book appeared, Professor Giulio, who had approved his formula, adopted it himself and incorporated it into his own book.

Don Bosco's latest work was outstanding for its simple, accurate and intelligible presentation. Several thousand copies were printed and sold at ten *centesimi* each. Thanks to his efforts, the metric system in a short time became popular and easy to use. Even the common people were so familiar with it that many were saved from swindlers and bunglers.

Apart from helping the common people, Don Bosco had also been thinking about the present and future welfare of his own institution; by promoting something the government had at heart he was winning its goodwill and allaying the suspicions of those who opposed him. Father Aporti, the authorities, and teachers generally praised his booklet very highly. The *Unità Cattolica* rated it as the best textbook for elementary grades and the first of its kind to be published in Piedmont.

Exact accounting is a safeguard of justice [which gives to each his due], and this booklet was helpful in teaching also some simple bookkeeping. Don Bosco was very exact in this, and demanded it of all his co-workers and associates, in keeping with the admonition of Sirach: "Be not ashamed of a lock, placed where there are many hands; of numbering every deposit, or of recording all that is given or received." (42,6-7)

The success of the first edition, however, did not prevent Don

Bosco from going over it again and patiently revising it, as he had done with all his other works. All his manuscripts and the galley proofs of the many editions of his *Storia Ecclesiastica* or *Storia Sacra* are so full of deletions and corrections that reading them is quite an achievement.

We shall anticipate here a few remarks on the editions of his book on the metric system after the year 1846, not only to avoid returning to this subject again, but also because the later editions give a better idea of what Don Bosco was really trying to do.

The second edition came out in 1849, "with many revisions and additions suggested by practice," as the preface said. It was aimed not only at farmers and their families, but also at elementary school pupils. This edition, like the first, had in the appendix a table of different monetary units in use throughout Europe and in the various states of Italy comparing them to the new *lira* or *franc*.

Years later he prepared a third edition, organizing the material in such a way that it not only met the new government programs for the first three elementary grades, but contained everything necessary for a complete study of arithmetic, with definitions of the more important figures in geometry. The new edition was entitled: *A Simplified Arithmetic and Metric System, for use in the elementary grades, with a table of the old monetary units and measures used in Italy compared to the new ones based on the metric decimal system.*<sup>2</sup>

These revisions called for a new preface, which we reproduce here as an example to us all, and to all our own writers, of how important it is to introduce our works, no matter what their topic, with the name of God.

#### *To Our Good Readers:*

This booklet, after a wide circulation through two editions, went out of print. Now, at the suggestion of numerous and prominent people, it is presented in a new edition for use in country schools, adult classes and also in the elementary grades, in accordance with the government's programs for public instruction.

<sup>2</sup> *L'Aritmetica ed il Sistema Metrico Decimale portati a semplicità, per le classi elementari, col confronto dei prezzi e delle misure antiche d'Italia in metrico-decimale.*

People who completed their schooling before the new system went into effect, or those who, by reason of business or work, need to be familiar with both the old and the new systems will find great help in the tables of this book which tell them at a glance how the old standards correspond to those now in use in Italy.

Those who want to convert from one system to the other will find appropriate formulas for weights and measures and for monetary units.

My purpose is to be brief, clear and helpful to the children of the working class. If I have been successful, let the glory be given to God, the dispenser of all good; if not, I hope the reader will at least recognize my good intent and be indulgent. May you all enjoy a happy life.

During Don Bosco's lifetime, the book ran over 28,000 copies through eight editions.



## CHAPTER 52

### *A Serious Illness*

DON BOSCO seemed to have a limitless capacity for work. He never gave himself a moment's rest, and if at times his body seemed to be resting, his mind was more active than usual planning new and bigger projects. The sole relaxation he permitted himself was adorning his little church. From the private papers of Father Borel, we learn that Don Bosco tried to improve the looks of the old wooden altar from their first chapel in St. Philomena Hospital, by adorning it with a new antependium and flower vases. He then hung small crystal chandeliers over it and some red curtains at the little windows, besides providing twenty-four additional benches and two kneelers. In the sacristy he put two more benches, along with a few other items to enhance the decorum of Holy Mass and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. To draw boys in increasing numbers to the church services he also purchased a supply of medals, crucifixes, rosaries, holy pictures, prayer books, and especially a number of catechisms, which he distributed generously.

The boys readily responded to his hopes. They came by the hundreds for confession while for hours he sat motionless, calm and sympathetic, listening to them. People who knew them for what they had been, were astounded by the change in their behavior, for in quite a short time they became virtuous, honest and devout young apprentices. Evident above all was their faith. When any one of them became seriously ill, he wanted Don Bosco at his bedside to comfort him in his final moments. Many people, whom he did not even know, followed the boys' example, so that he was often obliged to go to town to minister spiritually to someone.

Meanwhile, the oratory had celebrated the feast of St. Aloysius, but what a difference in the externals between this solemnity and the feast of St. Francis de Sales observed earlier that year! Father

Gattino, the pastor of Borgo Dora, within whose parish limits the oratory was located, was invited to sing the solemn high Mass, but he was unable to do so and replied as follows to Father Borel: "Because of an indisposition that will not permit me to fast so long, I am reluctantly obliged to decline the invitation. I ask you to be so good as to excuse me. If you have not been authorized to substitute for me on this occasion by the archbishop, I myself delegate you, or anyone else of your choice." By this invitation Don Bosco intended to show deference to the local pastor.

After the feast of St. Aloysius, the oratory boys solemnly celebrated that of St. John the Baptist. Don Bosco had received at Baptism the name of the Apostle John, but since in Turin the feast of St. John the Baptist was very popular and was usually solemnized with bonfires and salvos from the troops taking part in the celebration, the boys, believing this to be his name day, began to present their greetings, congratulations and flowers on that day.<sup>1</sup> Don Bosco let them have their way, and for the rest of his life, his name day continued to be celebrated on the feast of St. John the Baptist. Both these feasts were a success at the oratory in the sense that they brought the result that Don Bosco wanted, namely a very large number of Communions. To mark the occasion Don Bosco had given each boy, 650 of them, as Father Borel relates, a copy of his devotional booklet *Six Sundays in Honor of St. Aloysius*.

Don Bosco always found time for everything, but human endurance has its limits. One Sunday, after his very tiring activities at the oratory, he returned to his room at the *Rifugio* and suffered a fainting spell which forced him into bed. His illness soon developed into bronchitis, with a racking cough and serious inflammation. Within a week poor Don Bosco was at death's door. He made his confession and since it was Sunday, Father Borel went to the oratory and took along several boys to escort him as he carried the Holy Viaticum to Don Bosco from the chapel of St. Philomena Hospital. As they carried the torches, the poor boys were crying so much that they excited the compassion of all who saw them. Don Bosco, instead, was resigned and calm as he lay there awaiting

<sup>1</sup> In Italy and other countries as well, the name day is kept with greater festivity than the birthday. It is a reminder that the child, on his spiritual birthday, was placed under the protection of a saint whose virtues he should imitate. [Editor]

his last hour. His mother had been informed and she came at once to Turin along with his brother Joseph. His condition became critical and he received the Anointing of the Sick. Father Borel, who nursed him with loving care, regarded him as already lost and wept without restraint. At his request, numerous prayers were being said for him in all the institutes of Marchioness Barolo and others in Turin and, of course, at the festive oratory.

Don Bosco wrote the following comment on his illness: "I think I was fully prepared to die at that moment. I was sorry to leave my boys, but I was glad to end my days knowing that the oratory now had a permanent base."

This certainty of his flowed from the conviction that God and the Blessed Mother had wanted and founded the oratory, while he himself was a mere instrument, maybe a useless one. He was convinced that God would surely find many others much better equipped to carry on, and that Father Borel would make any sacrifice rather than abandon the work.

Early in the week, as the sad news of his sickness spread, the oratory boys were overwhelmed by indescribable grief and anxiety. Several of the older ones volunteered as nurses, and, taking turns, looked after him constantly, day and night, in testimony of their great love for him. At all hours, crowds of boys could be seen outside his room waiting for news of him. They were not satisfied with mere information; some wanted to see him, and talk to him, while others volunteered to nurse him or help in some other way. The doctor, however, had forbidden all visitors, and so the nurse would not allow them in. Touching scenes would then take place.

"Just let me take a peek at him," one would ask.

"I won't make him talk," insisted another.

"It's only one word I want to tell him," a third would say, "and I can't bear the thought that he should die without hearing it."

"If Don Bosco knew I were here, he'd let me in," said another.

Still another pleaded: "Please, let me in, or at least tell him I'm here."

But the nurse was adamant.

"Seeing you would be too much of a strain for him," he told them. "You might stifle the faint breath of life he still has. Besides,

if I were to let one of you in, I'd have to let all the others in too, and there would be no end to it."

Hearing this, the poor boys would burst into tears, greatly moving all the bystanders.

"Poor boys!" they remarked. "How much they love him!"

Don Bosco could hear them talking to the nurse and was very much affected. Some of the boys, though, absolutely refused to go away and stood silently by his door in the corridor, in the hope that they might be fortunate enough at least to hear his voice. Sometimes Don Bosco would become aware of their presence, and he would ask: "Who is there?"

"Viglietti, Piola and Buzzetti," the nurse told him.

"Tell them to come in."

The nurse protested a little, but since there were only a few boys there at the moment, he relented and let them in. It is easy to imagine their joy at being able to see Don Bosco, and then their sorrow at finding him in such a condition. After a few words, some of them knelt down to make their confession, because that was the main reason why they had come. It was only with great difficulty that they could be induced to leave.

Their show of affection, however, went beyond words. Realizing that there was little hope for him in human remedies, they appealed to heaven with admirable fervor. Dividing into groups, they alternated in keeping watch at the shrine of Our Lady of Consolation, where they prayed from morning until late at night, imploring Mary to spare the life of their beloved friend and father. They lit vigil lights before the miraculous image, attended Mass, and went to Communion. At night they did not go to bed until they had said a special prayer for poor Don Bosco, begging their families to join them. Several of them spent the whole night in prayer. Some went much further by even vowing to recite the whole rosary daily, some for a month, others for a whole year, and not a few, throughout all their life. During those critical days, several fasted on bread and water and promised to continue fasting for months, and even years, if the Virgin Mary would only make their beloved Don Bosco well again. Some of the young apprentice bricklayers, we know for a fact, fasted rigorously for several days while carrying on their heavy

work, and during the midday break they made hasty visits to the Blessed Sacrament in the nearest church. What would be the result of such fervent prayers and good works?

It was a Saturday in July, a day sacred to the Holy Mother of God, and although many Communion, acts of self-sacrifice, and prayers had been offered up, as evening came there was still no ray of hope to indicate that heaven would heed their supplications. Don Bosco's condition had so worsened that those attending him feared he would die that very night. The doctors, meeting in consultation, were of the same opinion. Don Bosco, drained of all strength by repeated hemorrhages, had already offered up his life to God. He had no other thought than to return his soul to his Creator. In those last moments, while others wept, serene and tranquil, he tried to console them and occasionally murmured some pious pleasantries, which had such a consoling effect on the bystanders that it aroused in them the desire to be in his place themselves.

Was then the scythe of death to cut down such a precious life and inflict a terrible wound on the innocent hearts of so many boys? No, the compassionate Virgin could not grieve so many poor children who had put their whole trust in Her. She was moved by their tears, listened to their prayers and vows and, presenting them to God, obtained the longed for grace. She, indeed, showed Herself a loving and consoling Mother. Through the mercy of God and the maternal goodness of Mary, that night, which according to human estimates was to be the last for the director and father of so many young boys, marked instead the end of their sorrow.

Toward midnight, Father Borel, who was at Don Bosco's side ready to recommend his soul to God and receive his last words, felt inspired to suggest that he too should say a prayer for his own recovery. Don Bosco remained silent. After a few minutes Father Borel again said: "You know what Holy Scripture tells us: 'When you are ill, delay not, but pray to God, who will heal you.'" (Sir. 38,9)

Don Bosco replied: "Let God's holy will be done."

"Then at least say: 'Lord, if it pleases you, let me be cured.'" But not even this would Don Bosco do.

"Please, do it, dear Don Bosco," added his devoted friend. "I am

asking you in the name of all our boys. Just repeat those words, and really mean it."

To please him Don Bosco repeated in a weak, barely audible voice: "Yes, Lord, if it pleases You, let me be cured."

But to himself, as he later told us, he had so formulated the prayer: "Lord, I am still willing to work. If I can still be of service to some soul, then O Lord, through the intercession of Your most holy Mother, restore to me only that amount of health that will not prejudice the welfare of my soul."

Father Borel, in the meantime, having heard Don Bosco's petition, dried his tears, and breaking into a smile murmured: "That will do! Now I am sure you'll get well." He seemed to sense that only Don Bosco's prayers were lacking to obtain the grace they had all been asking for. Nor was he mistaken. Shortly afterward, Don Bosco fell asleep and when he awoke he was out of danger, as if reborn to life.

That morning his two doctors, Botta and Cafasso, came to see him, fearing to find him dead, but when they felt his pulse, they told him: "Don Bosco, you have good reason to go to *La Consolata* and thank the Madonna."

No pen could describe the joy which filled everyone's heart, when it became known that Don Bosco's condition had improved. The rejoicing was such that the boys, utterly unable to express it in words, gave vent to it with tears. But whereas the day before, they had been tears of sorrow, now they were tears of inexpressible joy. "Praise be to God! Praise be to the Madonna!" they shouted in wild enthusiasm. "Praise be to God! Praise be to *La Consolata*! She truly consoled us."

The rejoicing and shouting were renewed more solemnly when Don Bosco, leaning on his cane, took his first walk to the oratory. It was a Sunday afternoon. When the boys heard he planned to pay them a visit, they went to get him at the *Rifugio*. Several of the stronger fellows carried him in an armchair, while the remainder, in front, behind and alongside, formed his retinue. They were so afraid to cause him any pain that they hardly dared to come close. There were tears in every eye, in Don Bosco's too. At the oratory the reception was a scene easier imagined than described. Father Borel delivered a sermon in which, speaking of the

grace obtained from God through Mary's intercession, he encouraged them all to put their trust in Her at all times and to express their gratitude by attending the oratory regularly.

Don Bosco also addressed a few words to them. Among other things, he said: "I want to thank you for the love you have shown me during my illness. I want to thank you for the prayers you said for my recovery. I am convinced that God granted me an extension of life in answer to your prayers. Therefore gratitude demands that I spend it all for your temporal and spiritual welfare. This I promise to do as long as the Lord will permit me to remain in this world; on your part, help me to keep my promise."

He ended with this thought: "My dear sons, this time God was moved by your tears and spared my life. Let us thank Him with our whole heart but remember that, whether we wish it or not, the time will come when both you and I will have to die. So, let us live as befits good Christians in order that one day we may all be reunited in heaven where death, sorrow and tears shall be no more." Then the Blessed Sacrament was exposed and the *Te Deum* sung in thanksgiving, with intense gratitude.

When Don Bosco later learned of the serious vows made by some of the boys without due reflection, he hastened, as a wise spiritual director, to commute them to obligations more spiritually advantageous. Thus he changed fasting to simpler forms of self-denial, the entire rosary to five decades only or other prayers, perpetual vows into temporary ones, and so on.

God was thus replacing with joys the previous sorrows of Don Bosco's sons. As for himself, Don Bosco found new reason for self-humiliation in his illness. A fellow priest, visiting him some time later with other priests, expressed his joy at seeing him well again, to the benefit of so many poor boys. Don Bosco let him talk, and then, in a way that deeply moved both the friend and the other priests, remarked: "If I had died then, I think that I would have gone to heaven. I was prepared then! But now, who knows?"

About forty years later, the same priest, visiting Don Bosco again, asked him: "Dear Don Bosco, do you still remember what you told me in 1846?"

"I remember quite well. I told you that if I had died then, I would have been prepared, didn't I?"

“Yes, but don’t you see how much you have been able to do with the help of God? Oratories, religious congregations, schools, hospices, and foreign missions; your missionaries are all over the world. These things wouldn’t have been done if you had died then.”

“You’re wrong, my friend. These things would have been done. God alone is responsible for them. . . . They are all the work of His hands.” Then he bowed his head, and with his eyes full of tears, said again: “They are all the work of His hands!”

This constant humility of his accounts for the continuous growth of the oratory, starting from that same year, 1846. The most holy Virgin had obtained the help for him which She had promised. Of Her may be said what is written in Holy Scripture with regard to Wisdom: “Long life is in her right hand, in her left are riches and honor.” (Prov. 3,16)



## CHAPTER 53

### *Convalescence at Becchi*

THE illness which nearly brought Don Bosco to his grave and caused so much anxiety had taken place at the beginning of July. His doctor had not permitted him to leave his room until the end of the month, the precise time he was scheduled to leave the *Rifugio* and St. Philomena Hospital. Since, however, the three rooms he had rented from Pancrazio Soave had not yet been remodeled, and he needed a good convalescence, Don Bosco decided to go to Becchi to spend some time with his family. Before leaving the city at the beginning of August, in furtherance of his plans he rented a fourth room from one of Soave's tenants, a certain Peter Clapié. Now, on the upper floor of Pinardi's house there remained only one more tenant to ease out. Don Bosco also wanted to leave some presents for the boys, so besides giving them holy pictures and medals, he bought a few new games: wooden hoops to roll down unfrequented lanes and some mock rifles with which to drill and play soldiers.

He finally left about the second week in August, but as soon as he was out of Turin, Marchioness Barolo, realizing that he would be gone for some time, insisted that his belongings be removed from his room at the *Rifugio* so that it could be occupied by the new chaplain replacing him. Father Borel accordingly had them transferred to the oratory at Valdocco, and acting on Don Bosco's instructions, went to the used furniture mart near the church of SS. Simon and Jude to buy the bare essentials for his humble dwelling. Meanwhile, at the *Rifugio*, Father Bosio, a fellow seminarian of Don Bosco, was taking up his new duties as chaplain.

The oratory was not left without a director, however, for as soon as Don Bosco first became ill, Father Borel took charge. Since the boys were many and he alone could not possibly care for the church

services, the supervision of the boys at play and the placement of those who sought employment, Father Borel asked Father Vola, Father Carpano and Father Trivero to act as his assistants, both mornings and evenings. These zealous priests were very willing to help and devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the work. Sometimes Father Pacchiotti would come from the *Rifugio* to give them a hand teaching catechism. For four entire months, they filled in for the absent founder of the oratory, but they too had to win the boys' respect and affection as Don Bosco had done, with very great patience and painful self-denial, besides considerable financial cost. They learned what it meant to deal with boys who were largely uneducated, many of them often famished, occasionally unruly, ragged and dirty beyond description. Furthermore, as often happens when one wants to help others, they had to put up with a lot of opposition and criticism. They began to appreciate all that Don Bosco had been through and the ordeal he had endured to win the affection of the boys. They soon became convinced that only a heavenly reward could compensate for such sacrifices.

The needs and expenses of the oratory kept increasing daily in connection with the chapel, festivities, games and lotteries, the breakfasts or afternoon snacks for some or all of the boys on certain feast days, the financial help that had to be given to the more needy ones and the rental of the necessary quarters. But Divine Providence never failed to come to their assistance. When the boys went out on a picnic, Father Carpano would often provide their lunch or afternoon snack, spending on the boys whatever he received from his generous and wealthy father. A certain Claretta, a lawyer, donated a handsome sum. For several years Count Bonaudi contributed thirty *lire* a month, while Father Cafasso paid the rent. Marchioness Barolo and Count Collegno also gave financial assistance.

All this can be seen in Father Borel's ledger; he himself wrote all the entries from the last few months of 1844 to the end of 1850. As treasurer of the oratory, he entered in that ledger all the donations he received. For the most part, small but numerous, they all passed through Father Borel who, tirelessly, kept seeking help for the boys.

We judge it quite proper to mention here the names of the earliest

benefactors of the oratory as we find them in the ledger of this saintly priest. They were the following: Canons Fissore, Vacchetta, Melano, Duprez, Fantolini and Zappata; Fathers Aimeri, Berteù, Saccarelli, Vola, Carpano, Paul Rossi, [Sebastian] Pacchiotti, Pullini, Durando; Count Rademaker, Marquis Gustavo Cavour, General Michael Engelfred, Charles Richelmy; Attorneys Molina and Blengini; Baroness Borsarelli and her daughter; Mademoiselle Moia, Chevalier Borbonese, Countess Masino, Mrs. Cavallo and Mrs. Bogner; Benedict Mussa, Anthony Burdin, Gagliardi, and the Bianchi family. These people, together with others whose names are not listed in Father Borel's ledger but whose generosity is known to us, were the real vanguard of that army of cooperators who helped Don Bosco through the rest of his life.

Don Bosco had quietly left for Morialdo, taking along with him a young student named Tonin, who used to come to the oratory. After staying a few days at Castelnuovo with his close friend Father Cinzano, the pastor, he went on to his mother at Becchi. He was eager for news about the oratory, especially about the feast of the Assumption and the procession for which the boys had prepared so carefully. He therefore wrote to Father Borel on August 22, 1846 as follows:

August 22, 1846

Dear Father Borel:

I am writing from Castelnuovo. The trip went well, although the donkey shook me up a good deal. I feel much better now. Eating, drinking, resting, strolling about in the hills and breathing the pure, fresh air have changed my color and appearance in only a few days. I am truly convinced the hand of God had a part in my recovery, for I feel stronger and healthier than I did before I became sick. At the same time I have lost that painful burning dryness which I always had in my throat. *Deo gratias.*

I don't know if it has become cooler in Turin too, but here the air is very invigorating in spite of a drought which has been plaguing the whole countryside. The poor peasants are moaning and sighing, but they are all quite resigned to God's will. Tonin is good company and

keeps me cheerful. How much he would welcome you and Father Pacchiotti if you could come up!

Often during the day I think of the oratory. Send me some news, especially about the procession last Saturday, and, on occasion, please remember me to all the people who are in touch with us. Please say hello for me to Father Pacchiotti, Father Bosio, and Father Vola. I'll write you again soon. Good-bye in the Lord.

Your affectionate friend and servant,

Don Bosco

P.S. Tonin begs you to give the enclosed note to Cavalli.<sup>1</sup>

Father Borel hastened to send word as requested and described how the procession had passed through the lanes and streets of the neighborhood while the celebrant, assisted by two other priests, carried a relic [sic] of the Blessed Virgin. He told him how enthusiastic the boys had been as, by the hundreds, they marched in orderly fashion, singing the *Ave*, *Maris Stella*, and *Noi siamo figli di Maria* [We are Mary's Children] through fields and meadows, drawing people from all over to the delightful sight.

For the first time the newborn oratory had unfurled the Madonna's standard in broad daylight and it did so with a solemnity to be repeated in the coming years in token of gratitude to Mary on Don Bosco's birthday. In fact, Bishop Marcellus Spinola of Milo, now archbishop of Seville, in his book entitled *Don Bosco e la sua opera* [Don Bosco and His Work], wrote:

It is not too bold to suggest that in 1815 the Immaculate Mother, in response to the anxious prayers of the whole world, bestowed her blessing upon the faithful by sending them on August 15<sup>2</sup> the infant

<sup>1</sup> Another student who frequented the oratory. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> Don Bosco always believed (and so did everybody else) that he had been born on August 15. This error was not corrected until after his death by checking his birth certificate. See Vol. XI, p. 301. [Editor]

John Bosco, as a future instrument of Her mercy for the salvation of innumerable souls.

In the meanwhile Don Bosco hastened to acknowledge Father Borel's letter.

[No date] <sup>3</sup>

Dear Father:

I was delighted to receive your letter, which I read through several times with great relish, and I can assure you that if I had wings, I would have made a rapid flight to enjoy the procession and the Communion of our oratory boys. Please tell them how happy this has made me. Go on sending me all the oratory news, good or bad. I love it all.

My health is improving daily; do not fear about my taking up some work. I know how to take it easy. I have already been asked to hear confessions, preach, sing high Mass and do some tutoring, but my answer to all has been a flat "no!"

Tonin will not take his examinations on All Saints' Day, so he is only carrying out his vacation assignment. The rest of the time he goes everywhere with me. He really needs to. Please give Tonin's belongings and books which are still in my former room at the *Rifugio* to the bearer of this letter.

Please send me an ordo because [in saying the breviary] I don't know any more whether the office is festive or ferial. Last Friday and Saturday it rained here quite a lot and the parched countryside has now taken on the appearance of spring.

A most cordial *Dominus tecum* to you, to Father Pacchiotti and Father Bosio, etc. I have a slight toothache.

Your affectionate servant and friend,

Don Bosco

P.S. Send me news of Father Cafasso.

<sup>3</sup> It must have been written from Becchi between August 22 and August 30, 1846. [Editor]

Father Borel did the errands Don Bosco had asked, and sent him a detailed report about the oratory. Don Bosco's reply was as follows:

Castelnuovo d'Asti, August 31, 1846

Dear Father:

Good for you, Father! Both some friends of mine and I enjoyed reading your newsy letter very much. I am very happy that things at the oratory are getting along as we had hoped.

I am glad that Father Trivero is giving you a hand there; but tell him to take care lest he be too strict with the boys; I know that some of them resent that. Please see to it that the oil of charity renders all things agreeable at the oratory.

I am sending you two pigeons from our barn. I do not think Father Pacchiotti will object to them. I wanted to send two chickens instead, but my mother said that chickens are best eaten where they are grown. But we'll talk about this in another letter.

Yesterday, not far from here, there was the burial of a man of whom there has been a great deal of talk. During an earlier illness, which the doctors said was incurable, he was persuaded by some devout person to make a vow that he would go to confession and Communion and attend Mass. God accepted his promise and restored him to health. But the man did not keep his word, even though his wife and several other people reminded him of it. What do you think happened? He was in good health for about a month, but then last Saturday he suddenly took sick again and died within a few hours, unable to receive the Last Rites.

Everyone was talking about it yesterday at the funeral.

Please be so good as to send me copies of the booklets: *The Six Sundays in Honor of St. Aloysius*, *Louis Comollo*, the *Guardian Angel*, and also my *Church History* which you will find in the closet near my desk.

My health is getting better and better, but for the last few days, I have been suffering from a toothache which comes and goes. The grapes are ripe already. Let Father Pacchiotti and Father Bosio know it and give it a thought yourself . . .

I'd like very much to hear about Genta, Gamba, the two Ferreri boys and Piola.<sup>4</sup> How are they doing? Are they behaving?

<sup>4</sup>Students that frequented the oratory and helped Don Bosco in teaching the other boys. [Editor]

Remember me cordially to our friends [at the *Rifugio*], Father Pacchiotti and Father Bosio, and believe me to be with all my heart, in Jesus Christ,

Your affectionate friend and servant,

Fr. John Bosco

P.S. Please give this letter to Father Joseph Vola. I am now going to Passerano for a good time.

Whenever possible, Don Bosco was glad to accept the invitation of some fellow priest or other friend who desired to have him for dinner. He was aware of the importance of social contacts and the demands of friendship, sometimes inconveniencing himself on this account. Wherever he went he remembered the teachings of the Holy Spirit: "Have just men for your table companions; in the fear of God be your glory." (Sir. 9, 16) We shall have something to say later, on the way in which he was able to sanctify these merry gatherings.

In the meantime we would like to remark, with reference to the foregoing letter, that the saying "Out of sight, out of mind" was never true for either Don Bosco or his boys. They were always in his thoughts, just as he was in theirs. Looking as they did upon him as the personification of the sacrament of Penance and of God's mercy and grace, they naturally found his prolonged absence hard to bear. In those early years a boy would often candidly admit: "I would have committed this sin hundreds of times, but for the fact that I knew it would displease Don Bosco. That's why I never did and never will!"

Therefore, even though Father Borel, with the help of the other priests, ran the oratory exceedingly well, it, nevertheless, seemed to lack its heart and soul as long as Don Bosco was absent. The boys talked about him continually, inquired about his health, asked each other when he would return and manifested their common eagerness to have him back in their midst. After he had been away from Turin for a few weeks, they began writing him letters. Then they got together and in small groups started to visit him, actually

walking twenty miles to Becchi and back. They generally set out in the morning and returned at night. Sometimes he let some of them stay overnight: Joseph Buzzetti was one of them. Apart from the joy of seeing him again and being able to talk with him, they had another reason for their visit. They had come to know that the local boys had begun to gather around him and form a small oratory in his own house. Some of the Valdocco boys, on hearing of this, felt a bit jealous and feared that the other boys might steal him from them. One day, one of them said to Don Bosco with a smile: "Either you come back to Turin, or we'll move the whole oratory to Becchi."

Don Bosco calmed their fears saying: "Continue to behave yourselves and to pray, my dear boys, and I promise you I'll be back before the leaves start falling." Although these visits prevented him from getting the complete rest and tranquillity which the doctors had ordered, they, nevertheless, acted as a kind of tonic. He rejoiced and felt comforted in seeing them, talking with them at great length about everything going on at the oratory and sometimes hearing their confessions and giving them advice. The boys, on their part, enthusiastically told their new friends at Castelnuovo and Morialdo about the wonders of Don Bosco. They could not keep silent about the strange ringing of the bells which had greeted them on their arrival at the *Madonna di Campagna* monastery.<sup>5</sup> In their opinion, this was sufficient proof that the oratory boys were the Madonna's favorite sons.

But these stories did not go over very well with sophisticated people who were not inclined to accept the supernatural unless proved. They also irked some of Gioberti's hotheaded followers who disliked Don Bosco's activities and kept referring to them as "Jesuit tricks!" Those who were ill-disposed toward Don Bosco began to ridicule him, asserting that not only the church bells, but also the bells at the altar and in the sacristy had rung and even the organ itself had begun to play on its own. Several of them, chancing upon Don Bosco, did not hesitate to rebuke him harshly and accuse him of hypocrisy. But Don Bosco, unperturbed, kept his peace while they gave vent to their indiscreet zeal, or else briefly explained his side of the story if they were disposed to listen. He always remained

<sup>5</sup> See p. 327f. [Editor]



even-tempered in the face of praise or unjust accusations, applause or sneer, pretending not to notice other people's acrimony or trying to make allowances for it. "Charity bears with all things." (1 Cor. 13, 7)

By this it could be seen that he was a true disciple of Jesus Christ. Internal and exterior mortification was for him a matter of daily practice. One day he was talking with Father Cinzano, his pastor, about the many tribulations which those who aspire to perfection often have to face. As they talked, the topic shifted to Christian mortification symbolized in the Gospel by the cross. They remarked that this cross means especially our own self, our passions, our attempts to overcome our evil drives, and the suffering involved in these spiritual struggles. Knowing the New Testament by heart and having made it the subject of constant meditation, Don Bosco concluded by saying: "We may never put down our cross, day or night, not even for an hour or a minute. For, as our Divine Savior said in the Holy Gospel: 'If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me.'" [Luke 9, 23]

At this point, Father Cinzano interrupted him: "You added a word: there is no 'daily' in the Gospel text."

To which Don Bosco replied: "Three of the Evangelists do not use that word, but please look in St. Luke's, chapter 9, verse 23, and you will see that I haven't added anything on my own."

The good pastor, competent though he was in theological and scriptural subjects, had overlooked that particular verse. Speaking with some friends later, he emphasized how well Don Bosco knew all the books of the Bible and how carefully he followed its precepts and counsels, particularly in controlling his own fiery and very sensitive temperament. Father Cinzano paid this tribute to his beloved pupil many times.

There was only one case in which Don Bosco could not remain unperturbed: when souls were in danger or were lost and when God was offended. Around that time, Joseph Buzzetti told us, Don Bosco had a dream which made him very unhappy. He saw two boys, whom he recognized, leave Turin to come to visit him; but when they came to the bridge over the Po, a horrible and repulsive creature attacked them. After it had slobbered all over them, it flung them to the ground, dragging them for some distance through

the mud, so that they were covered with filth from head to foot. Don Bosco told this dream to several of the boys staying with him, mentioning the names of the boys he had seen in the dream. Subsequent events proved the dream to be something more than mere imagination, because those two unfortunate boys abandoned the oratory, and gave themselves up to a dissolute life.

Meanwhile Don Bosco's health was improving and, from time to time he would venture for a long walk, which greatly benefited him. His request to Father Borel for a diocesan ordo had been in vain because the doctors had ordered him not to tire himself mentally and physically by reciting the Divine Office. Nevertheless, to satisfy his own piety he never let a day pass without reciting at least a portion of it, and before long, he was able to fulfill this obligation in full.

Always a grateful pupil, he went to spend a few days with his good friend and first teacher, Father Lacqua at Ponzano. While there, he also paid a visit to Mr. Moioglio, the druggist, who, as we have already narrated, once gave him hospitality on a stormy night.<sup>6</sup> From here he again wrote to Father Borel, and from this letter, cheerful like all the rest, we learn of his desire to better organize the oratory, according to Father Borel's suggestions, and of his eagerness to assure some of his boys a good start in life. The letter seems a continuation of one sent previously, which we have not been able to trace.

From the *Castello dei Merli*, September 16, 1846

Dear Father:

When I was a child, they used to tell me stories which I later regarded as fairy tales but which I now realize were well founded.

Imagine a group of high hills, the tallest towering over all. After climbing up and down several of them you come to the foot of the *Castello dei Merli* [the Blackbirds Castle] which rises on one of the loveliest hills of Monferrato, about four miles from Moncalvo and eight miles from Casale.

At first glimpse (to one unacquainted with the many trails that lead

<sup>6</sup> See p. 26f. [Editor]

to it) this castle looks like a huge inaccessible structure. Its thick protecting walls resemble so many interlocking cliffs. They stand on solid, lofty arches which descend to cavernous gorges. At first sight, I thought it looked like the cave of the fairy Alcina,<sup>7</sup> or the den of the wizard of Sabina,<sup>8</sup> the Cumaean sibyl,<sup>9</sup> or some similar legendary figure. All these caverns give the castle a very gloomy and mysterious appearance. Both castle and extending caves have been described by several ancient authors in various fairy tales and weird stories, some of which I will tell you when I have time . . .

It is now little more than a month since I left Turin, and I have been constantly improving. During the past week I have tried to recite the whole Office daily and have experienced no difficulty. If I go on this way, I should be in perfect shape by the feast of All Saints. Therefore, I think that you and I ought to have a talk together on many things. This could be done on a Monday, if convenient for you. The Monday I have in mind is the twenty-eighth of this month. Go to the *Vitello d'Oro* inn; the coach for Castelnuovo leaves from there towards evening. Otherwise (and I think this would be better) you could take the train on Monday morning for Chieri, and I could send someone down with a donkey to bring you up here. Before leaving, see Father Cafasso, to whom I shall be writing soon. Let me know what you intend to do, and also tell me whether I am to get some wine or not.

Don't forget to send me an ordo, because I need one badly. As for Genta, I shall soon be having a reply which will be definite and perhaps favorable. The above-mentioned means of transportation may be all right also for Father Pacchiotti and Father Bosio, but especially for Father Pacchiotti, who has made a vow to come to Vezzolano. Will they come?

I spent a few delightful days with a former teacher of mine who lives quite near the *Castello Merli*, and I had a wonderful time. I shall be back home on the twenty-second of this month for the grape harvesting.

Regards to all, and may the Lord bless each of you. Good-bye to you and to all.

<sup>7</sup> A kind of sorceress mentioned in the *Orlando Furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533). [Editor]

<sup>8</sup> An ancient region in Central Italy. [Editor]

<sup>9</sup> The sibyl consulted by Aeneas at ancient Cuma, near Naples. [Editor]

Your humble servant,  
John Bosco

At the end of his letter Don Bosco mentions Vezzolano. It is a famous shrine, an immense Gothic structure surrounded by small hills, in a valley to the north of Castelnuovo. It is said to have been built by Charlemagne in honor of the Blessed Virgin. As a young boy, Don Bosco used to hike there quite often, and later would visit it from time to time.

## CHAPTER 54

### *An Immeasurable Sacrifice*

IT was now three months since Don Bosco had gone home; the prolonged rest, salubrious air and loving attention of his dear ones had completely restored his health. Deeply moved by the frequent visits paid him by the boys in the hope of bringing him back to Turin and literally besieged by their affectionate letters pressing him to return, he had promised to do as they asked and he could not wait for the day to start off for the oratory. But two things worried him and delayed the realization of his desire: one was the advice of friends dissuading him from that step, the other was the problem of taking up residence in an unsavory neighborhood like Valdocco.

His friends, either orally or by letter, kept telling him: "You need to stay away from the oratory at least a year or so to avoid a relapse, which will either permanently disable you or even bring you straight to your grave. Stay home for a while longer; keep busy with some light chores, and when you are really back on your feet, you will be able to resume your work without any fear." The archbishop and Father Cafasso were also of the same opinion, and they had written Don Bosco advising him to stay at home, and assuring him that since the oratory was in good hands, he could put his mind at ease and cease to worry on that score.

In view of the hard work required to run the oratory, his frail health, and the aftereffects of a critical illness from which he had recently recovered only by a miracle, advice such as this was certainly not to be disregarded. But fortunately for the future of his work, a powerful magnet seemed to draw Don Bosco back to his boys, and he felt heartaches, distress and an unspeakable aversion to such suggestions. Therefore, in thanking his friends, orally or in writing, for their kind concern, he made his own St. Paul's

sentiments: "Let me go where the Lord calls me. He who is almighty, who smites down and raises up, will restore my strength and give me the necessary health. And if I were to succumb what would it matter? 'I fear none of these [things], nor do I count my life more precious than myself.' I do not fear what you say nor do I hold my life more important than my ministry; in fact I would be happy to end my days while working for poor boys."

Faced by such obvious determination, which seemed to be inspired by God, Father Cafasso, among others, and Archbishop Fransoni both agreed that he could return to the oratory, on condition that, for a time, he would limit himself only to be present among the boys to direct and advise them, but would refrain completely from hearing confessions, preaching, teaching catechism and other subjects, or doing similar things.

Don Bosco promised, but we shall soon see him at work just as before.

When talking about this one day, we heard him say: "At first, I really intended to obey and keep my promise. But when I saw that Father Borel and his assistants could not possibly cope with everything, and that, occasionally, on Sunday and holy days, many of the boys were unable to go to confession or receive religious instruction, I felt I couldn't stand by idly any longer. So I took up my accustomed activities, and now it is twenty-five years and more since I have not had any need of doctors or medicine. This makes me believe that well regulated work does not harm a person's health." What he said is true, but the primary cause in his case was his heroic priestly zeal.

After overcoming the difficulties presented by his over solicitous friends, Don Bosco was faced with a far more formidable problem. On returning to Turin, he had to settle in Valdocco near the oratory, but he saw how [morally] dangerous it could be to reside there because of the nearby tavern, the *Albergo della Giardiniera*, and some disreputable tenants in the Pinardi building.

In his new quarters he would need a housekeeper, since he would no longer have people to wait on him as he had at the *Rifugio*. Under the present circumstances how could he prudently hire a housekeeper? He could not risk exposing her to moral dangers from those tenants. He was perplexed and worried. Who would help him

out of this predicament? Who would remove the obstacles to his return and permanent residence at Valdocco?

Women have always played a part in events of varying significance for the human race, both for good and for evil. It would take too long to list here all the great heroines who, by God's will, played a distinguished role in the remarkable events in the Old and in the New Testaments. But since for us and for youth in general, the permanent establishment of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales was an event of outstanding importance, it is worth noting that God saw to it that women too should play a significant part. They were the mothers who solicitously and eagerly sent their sons to the oratory; the noble ladies who contributed their alms and donations to its support; the nuns who even worked nights for the small boys sheltered there. But among all these women there was one who played a leading role, who set an example and was an inspiration to all the other women.

She was the first to raise the banner of charity in behalf of poor, forsaken boys, and they rightly called her "mother." She, so to say, placed herself at the head of that long line of countless other women who followed, are following, or will follow in her footsteps till the end of time. This woman was Margaret Occhiena, the widow of Francis Bosco, the mother of our unforgettable father.

Margaret was an excellent housewife, skilled in running a household. She was strong enough to assume the domestic responsibilities for which Don Bosco did not have time. She was widely respected because of her reputation for great piety and the affection she inspired in others. These virtues, combined with her great common sense, would make her a faithful and valuable assistant to her son in his work for boys.

After racking his brain for some time in attempting to solve his problem, Don Bosco decided to go to Castelnuovo and talk it over with Father Cinzano, his pastor; to him he explained his needs and his anxieties. "What about your mother!" the pastor replied, without a moment's hesitation. "Take her along with you to Turin."

Don Bosco, who had expected this reply, voiced some objections, but Father Cinzano brushed them aside. "Take your mother along. No one is better suited than she for the task. Stop worrying. She will be an angel at your side."

Indeed she was. Her simple and affectionate nature concealed a spirit that aimed at the highest degree of virtue and was ready, therefore, for any sacrifice. Don Bosco returned home fully convinced of his arguments. But he still hesitated for two reasons. First, he was aware of the privations and changes in her way of life that his mother would have to submit herself to in her new home. Secondly, he did not have the heart to suggest that she take up a position which would, in effect, make her subject to him. Don Bosco had so much veneration, respect, and love for his mother that a queen could not have asked for more from her most faithful subject. In his eyes, his mother was his all, and both he and his brother Joseph always regarded her every wish as an absolute law. Nevertheless, after thinking the matter over and praying, he realized that there was no other solution, so he came to the conclusion: "Since my mother is a saint, I can make this proposal to her!"

One day he took her aside and spoke to her as follows: "Mother, I've decided to go back to Turin to my beloved boys, but since I can no longer stay at the *Rifugio*, I need a housekeeper. This presents another problem because the place where I'll live at Valdocco is morally dangerous on account of certain people close-by and I am worried about the situation. I need someone with me who can vouch for me morally and forestall any malicious rumor. You are the only person who can do it. Would you be willing to come and live with me?"

At this unexpected suggestion, the good woman spent a few minutes in thought, and then replied: "My dear son, you have no idea how sorry I am to leave this house, your brother, and everyone else whom I hold so dear, but if you think that this would please the Lord, then I am ready to go."

Don Bosco assured her that it was so, and after thanking her, said: "Well, then, let's start getting things ready. We shall leave after the feast of All Saints."

Truly, Margaret Bosco was making a great sacrifice in leaving Becchi. There, in her own house, she was mistress of everything, enjoyed the love and respect of all, young and old, and as a country woman, lacked nothing to make her happy. It was no less of a sacrifice for the other members of the family, who were extremely grieved when they heard that she was leaving. They felt they were



losing a mother who faithfully practiced what St. Paul taught in his letter to Titus: "Elderly women, in like manner, [should] be marked by holiness of behavior, not slanderers, nor enslaved to much wine; teaching what is right, that they train the younger women to be wise, to love their husbands and their children, to be discreet, chaste, domestic, gentle, obedient to their husbands, so that the word of God be not reviled." (2, 3-5)

In her home, there reigned peace and order in the holy fear of God. Knowing the noble and charitable purpose she was leaving them for, all resigned themselves without complaint. Margaret was going to live with her son, not for comfort or recreation, but to share with him privations and sufferings in behalf of several hundred poor, abandoned boys. She was not going because she was lured by money, but because of her love of God and of souls. She knew that the particular portion of the sacred ministry chosen by her son, far from bringing him any financial gain, would drain him of his own resources and later force him to seek alms. Yet such considerations did not stop her. Rather, admiring her son's courage and zeal, she felt all the more inspired to help and imitate him until death. Fortunate, indeed, are priests who have such virtuous mothers.

As soon as word got round that Mamma Margaret was going to Turin with her son, an unexpected scene took place. We have already mentioned that during his convalescence at Becchi, Don Bosco, following an irresistible inclination, had gathered around himself many boys from the neighboring farms and formed a small oratory. Won over by his kind, affable ways, the boys had become so fond of him that they could not wait for Sunday to be with him. Their parents, too, especially their mothers, seeing their sons treated with such kindness and so well instructed, were so delighted that their only wish was that the good priest would stay with them always and continue his wonderful work. Until now, this had been their hope, but when they heard that he was definitely about to leave with his mother, they went to see him and, with all the eloquence their fondness for him could muster, they tried to persuade him to stay.

"If you have to buy things," they told him, "we shall provide the money."

"If I cannot contribute money, I'll donate linen," another woman added.

"I can supply eggs and chickens," promised another.

"Don't worry for a moment," they all assured him, singly, "we won't let you need anything. We'll bring you wheat, corn, and whatever else we have. But please stay and don't deprive us and our children of all the good you are doing."

When they realized that their prayers and entreaties were all in vain, because Don Bosco was not interested in his own welfare or comfort but only in the will and interests of Our Lord, many of the women and boys began to cry openly, considerably upsetting Don Bosco's serenity.

Meanwhile, having sent ahead to Turin a small supply of vegetables, wheat and corn, and having completed domestic arrangements, the day of departure had come, Tuesday, November 3, 1846.

## CHAPTER 55

### *Stark Poverty and Unbounded Trust*

MAMMA MARGARET'S little grandchildren could not control their tears when they saw her at the door, about to leave. The brave woman comforted them by promising to see them again soon, then disengaging herself from their arms, she set out for Turin with her son, on foot. Under her arm was a basketful of linen and other necessary items. Don Bosco carried some notebooks, a missal, a breviary, and inside it, a number of bookmarks, upon each of which he had written a maxim taken from the Bible, the Fathers [or Doctors] of the Church, or some Italian poet. They were like his private moral code. He saved and used these maxims for over forty years, and after his death we found them in his breviary on the desk in his room. For the benefit of those who do not understand Latin, we shall here give them in translation.

#### Maxims from Holy Scripture:

1. "All rivers go to the sea, yet never does the sea become full." (Eccles. 1,7) How marvelous is Divine Providence!
2. "The Lord is good, a refuge on the day of distress." (Nah. 1,7) Trust in God!
3. "Keep your way far from [an adulteress], approach not the door of her house." (Prov. 5,8) Flee from dangerous occasions.
4. "Receive my instruction in preference to silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold." (Prov. 8,10) Detachment from earthly goods!
5. "I recognized that there is nothing better than to be glad and to do well during life." (Eccles. 3,12) Happiness springs from peace of heart!
6. "Honor the Lord with your wealth; then will your barns be filled with grain, with new wine will your vats overflow." (Prov. 3,9-10) God is not surpassed in generosity!

7. "If you have the knowledge, answer your neighbor; if not, put your hand over your mouth. A man's tongue can be his downfall." (Sir. 5,14-15) Think before you speak!

8. "For all of us must be made manifest before the tribunal of Christ, so that each one may receive what he has won through the body, according to his works, whether good or evil." (2 Cor. 5,10) Always think of eternity!

9. "My son, rob not the poor man of his livelihood; force not the eyes of the needy to turn away." (Sir. 4,1) Almsgiving, the debt of charity!

10. "Glory not in your father's shame, for his shame is no glory to you." (Sir. 3,10) Defend his honor and that of your superiors like your own!

11. "No matter the wrong, do no violence to your neighbor, and do not walk the path of arrogance." (Sir. 10,6) Love every one so that you may lead them to God!

Five bookmarks carried maxims from the Fathers [and Doctors] of the Church:

1. "If you observe anything evil within yourself, correct it; if something good, preserve it; if something beautiful, foster it; if something sound, maintain it; if sickly, heal it. Read unwearingly the precepts of the Lord and, sufficiently instructed by them, you will know what to avoid and what to pursue." (St. Bernard to a Priest) Continual examination of one's conduct.

2. "Hold on to traditional doctrines and do not accept any new one, however wise and prudent you may believe yourself to be." (St. Jerome to Demetrius) Absolute and humble obedience to the teachings of the Church.

3. "My brethren, carry with you the key to your cell, but forget not the key to your tongue also." (St. Peter Damian) Jealously guard confidential matters.

4. "Example is more powerful than words, and it is far better to teach by deeds than by words." (St. Maximus, Sermon Sixty-Seven) Be a model of Christian conduct!

5. "Let our wealth and treasure consist in saving souls; and let the

talents of our virtue be hidden within the treasure chest of our hearts.”  
(St. Peter Damian) Zeal and humility.”

Finally, two of these bookmarks were inscribed with verses from Dante and Silvio Pellico: the former deal with our heavenly kingdom and the latter, love of one's fatherland.

1. Up we climbed, he first, I following  
And lovely things I did see the while  
Through a rounded hole, glimpsing heaven;  
Then we emerged to see the stars  
*Inferno, XXXIV*

From the holy wave I then did turn  
Pure and prepared to climb to the stars.  
*Purgatory, XXXIII*

The love which motivates the sun and other planets.  
*Paradise, XXXIII*

2. Italian, believe in all high virtues,  
And the nation every grace from God await,  
And love and progress while hoping and believing  
Toward the conquest of eternal truth.  
*Pellico, Gli Angeli*

So much for the markers found inside his breviary. Now let us follow Don Bosco and his mother as they come down from the hills of Castelnuevo. They traveled in true apostolic fashion, on foot, talking about God and spiritual matters. When they reached Chieri, they took a brief rest visiting the lawyer Vallimberti, a friend of the Bosco family. After a bite to eat, they resumed their journey, reaching Turin by evening.

When they came to the so-called *Rondò*, where the *Corso Valdocco* now intersects with *Corso Regina Margherita*, only a short distance from their new home, they had a pleasant surprise

worth narrating. They met Father John Vola, Jr., another dedicated priest of Turin. As soon as he saw Don Bosco, he hastened to greet him. After congratulating him heartily on his recovery, he looked at him more closely, then at his mother, and remarked, "You look tired and are both covered with dust."

"We are coming from Becchi."

"But why on foot?"

"Very simple. No money!"

"Where are you going to live now?"

"In Pinardi's house near the oratory. My mother will stay with me."

"But how are you going to set up house there? You have no job. How do you expect to make ends meet?"

"I can't answer that question just now; but we are putting ourselves in God's hands, and I trust He will not abandon us."

"Is anyone expecting you there?"

"No, no one."

"But surely you've had somebody get supper ready for you!"

"What can I say? I did not think about it. But don't worry. Divine Providence will look after us."

"That's all very well," Father Vola replied, moved by so much faith and courage, "but in the meanwhile . . . if I had only known . . . if I could only, . . ." and he fished in his pockets. "I certainly admire you very much," he went on, "and I am all for you. Only I'm sorry I don't have a cent with me; but here, take this for now," and as he said this, he took out his watch and handed it to Don Bosco.

"You mean you'll do without it?" asked Don Bosco, touched by his gesture.

"I've got another watch at home. Sell this one and buy whatever you need. I don't have to know what time it is to go home."

Don Bosco thanked him, then turned to his mother and said: "What better proof could we have that Divine Providence is looking after us! So, let us confidently continue our way."

A few yards farther and they reached their new home, which consisted of two small bedrooms, one of which had to double as a kitchen also. The other two rooms were, for the moment, completely bare. Their furnishings were two small beds, two benches, two

chairs, a trunk, a small table, a cooking pot, a saucepan and a few plates. On that first night, they also had a watch, which was sold on the morrow. As can be seen, poverty and austerity ruled supreme.

This squalid condition, which would have distressed and disheartened anybody else, was a source of cheerfulness to Don Bosco and his mother. Margaret turned to her son and said with a smile: "At home I had to see to things, begin tidying up and give orders first thing in the morning. Here, I can see, I will have a much easier time and far less trouble." Then she began humming happily:

The world would be a sorry place  
Were one to feel  
One's self as a total stranger,  
All down at heel

Meanwhile several oratory boys, among them a certain Stephen Castagno, came around under the windows to catch a glimpse of Don Bosco. There they heard him and his mother singing the hymn: *Angioletto del mio Dio* [Little Angel of my God]. This went on for more than an hour, while Don Bosco busied himself hanging a crucifix on the wall above his bed, a picture of the Blessed Virgin, a small *agnus Dei*,<sup>1</sup> an olive branch blessed on Palm Sunday, a small holy water font, and a blessed candle. These objects of devotion were very dear to him and he had great respect for them. He decorated the walls with several inscriptions which he had printed on cardboard. One was the motto of St. Francis de Sales: *Da mihi animas, caetera tolle* [Give me souls; away with the rest], which at the time of his priestly ordination he had taken as his own. He remained faithful to it until death, for he never desired anything but to save as many souls as possible. The second inscription read: "Only one thing is necessary: to save one's soul!" A third was hung above the door and bore the Christian greeting: "Praised be Jesus Christ!"

<sup>1</sup> A small cloth-covered disk of wax bearing the image of a lamb and blessed by the Pope. [Editor]

Then having put his room in order and helped his mother arrange hers, the rest of the week he paid visits to Father Cafasso and his friends, and then waited for Sunday to come.

One can only imagine how the boys rejoiced that Sunday. They had already heard about his return, but when they saw him in their midst at the oratory, their joy knew no bounds. They loved him all the more dearly because they felt sure his recovery was a favor which the Lord and His good Mother, the Madonna had granted to them. A large group of new boys, who knew Don Bosco only from what their companions had told them about him and who had been anxiously waiting to make his acquaintance, pushed forward to join in the applause and greetings of the crowd that surrounded and acclaimed him. Their cup of joy was full at the thought that from now on they could come and see Don Bosco at any hour of the day without anyone making it hard for them.

While he was with them that evening, a chair was brought in at a sign from Father Carpano, and Don Bosco was invited to sit down. The boys then formed a circle around him, large enough to allow room for a chorus who joyously burst out with the strains of a song. The somewhat free verses had been written by Father Carpano, while Father Nasi probably had set them to music. The poetry was not a piece of literature, but it certainly was up to standard in its content of love. It was the first song to echo through the oratory in praise of the beloved father. Joseph Buzzetti, one of the choristers, long treasured a copy of it and gave it to us shortly before his death. The words went as follows:

Mournful roved our eye  
O'er sky and mountain.  
Sere and happy was the house  
Where you resided, oh good shepherd!

Long were the nights, and endless the days!  
The sun, it seemed, stood still,  
Nor did the dawn smile  
The daylight to cheer.



Like the birds, crouching in the nest  
With eyes shut tight and gaping beak  
And restless moving heads,  
While anxiously they watch and await

Their mother who long time ago  
Went forth to hunt for insects;  
So did we beneath the roof  
Sadly await you at your home.

Fervent thanks we give to God,  
Now in delight that to us returned  
The man so wise, the man so good,  
The man adorned with virtue.

We have no other account of this celebration, nor do we know what Don Bosco said to his boys on that occasion. But we are probably not wrong in assuming that he talked about what he felt so deeply in his heart and unfailingly expressed in his actions, namely that he was always ready to endure hardships or privations or any kind of fatigue in order to save their souls and thus earn his own eternal reward.

That Sunday, November 8, 1846, Don Bosco resumed the usual church services as in any other parish church. Several times a week, he would invite the older and less proficient boys to his house, whenever it was most convenient for them, and would spend long hours teaching them catechism and the articles of the creed, an arduous task he kept up for many years. Very often he urged them to go to confession, since he regarded this sacrament as the basis of his system of moral reform and prevention. He impressed on them the importance of keeping one's conscience free from sin. He instilled in them a real horror of sin; when he talked to them about hell, he made them realize how much he himself feared eternal punishment. Therefore, they listened and became receptive to his teachings. Many were the boys who, about to commit their first theft or take their first step on the road to crime, were checked, corrected, sustained and assisted by him. They had placed all their confidence in Don Bosco because they were certain that he loved them.

Professor Francis Maranzano, who in boyhood and many years

later witnessed the wonders performed by Don Bosco, wrote as follows in 1893:

The sincere, ardent love which Don Bosco had for his boys made itself felt in the way he looked at them and the way he spoke; it was so obvious, that they could not possibly question it. Consequently they felt an inexplicable joy, just being with him. This love, together with his affectionate and gentle sense of authority which, rising from his deep piety and solid virtue, formed a halo around his head, caused them to listen most attentively to every word he had to say. When Don Bosco talked, it was as if God Himself were speaking. Only in the light of this powerful ascendancy which he had over them can certain things be explained, which otherwise would seem incredible. Who does not know how light-minded and fickle boys are by nature in their good resolutions? When it's a matter of novelty, curiosity can entice them even to sacrifice, but how are we to explain their kneeling, uncomplainingly, for hours at a time on the cold ground while waiting their turn for confession? What mysterious power could attract hundreds of boys, formerly accustomed to run at will through the streets, over the fields, and along the banks of the river, who had known no other law but their own animal instincts? What miraculous power could have gathered them all around one poor priest? What self-interest, what advantage did they hope to get from following him, in ever increasing numbers, what joy, when he was obliged to pull up stakes and move from place to place, from one building to another, even into a meadow under the open sky?

Where did such devotion and constancy spring from? From Don Bosco's words! He inflamed their hearts, lifted them to heaven, and exerted over them that inexpressible, tender fascination that we all experienced. One glance, one smile from him was enough to encourage even the least obedient boy, to banish all boredom, as by a spell; to transform even the most uninviting spot into a lovely and beautiful place. Everybody listened to Don Bosco so eagerly because he was able to impart to others something of his own sentiments of charity and faith; and Don Bosco's faith was of the kind that could move mountains.

But inspiring as was his triumph of charity, the harsh reality was that now, at the beginning of winter, he was in severe financial straits.

No longer on the staff of Marchioness Barolo's institutes, he had no income; only expenses. He needed money for his own livelihood; for renting more rooms, even if costly, as he was already planning; money to repair the old fencing walls and build new ones; often, he had to provide food and clothing to boys suffering from hunger and cold. Many of them came to his door every day begging for bread, shoes, clothes, and shirts in order to be able to go to work. Neither he nor his good mother Margaret had the heart to send them away empty-handed. Consequently, within a few weeks, they had exhausted the small stock of provisions they had sent ahead from Becchi, and distributed all the clothing and linen they had brought along. How were they to go on? Where were they to get the money to keep up a work which was becoming more difficult every day? It is true that on hearing of Don Bosco's return, several benefactors had sent him a few flasks of wine, some bread, pasta, rice, and butter, but this was soon all gone too.

Although they had both put their trust in the granaries and treasures of Divine Providence, they did not neglect anything within their own power, so that Providence would not have too soon to work miracles. "Let us do what we can," Don Bosco said, "and the Father of mercy will add the rest." So in agreement with his mother, he arranged for the sale of some pieces of land and vineyards which they still owned in their native village. As that was not enough, Margaret sent for her bridal trousseau, which she had carefully preserved: dresses, ring, earrings, necklaces. When it arrived, she sold part of it and used the rest to make vestments for the chapel which was very poorly furnished. Several of her dresses were turned into chasubles, while her linen provided the material for albs, surplices, purificators, and altar cloths. Everything passed through the hands of Mrs. Margaret Gastaldi, who, right from the start, had taken an interest in whatever was needed for the oratory. The money obtained from the sale of Mamma Margaret's necklace helped to buy the gold braid and trimmings for the sacred vestments.

Although Mamma Margaret was already detached from worldly goods, it nevertheless cost her a real sacrifice to part with these precious mementos. When talking about that, one heard her say: "When I looked at those things in my hands for the last time and

was about to sell them or convert them to something else, I felt a little perturbed, but as soon as I became aware of it, I told myself: ‘Come now, what better use could they possibly have than providing food and clothing for poor boys, and honoring the heavenly Bridegroom in church?’ Afterwards, I felt so happy that if I had had a hundred other trousseaus, I would have given them all up without any regrets.”

By doing so, she was putting into practice a maxim that was very frequently on the lips of her worthy son: “When it is a question of serving such a good Father as God, we must be ready to sacrifice our all.”

## CHAPTER 56

### *The Pinardi House*

WE think our confreres will appreciate a topographical description of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales in its early days, and of the rustic building where the Salesian Society was born. One of our early companions and friends, the artist [Bartholomew] Bellisio, made an accurate sketch of it. The front of the house faced south and was the only side to have doors or windows. The living quarters comprised an area about sixty feet by twenty on the ground floor and an equal area on the second floor, which had a very low ceiling. They extended from the side wall of the present church of St. Francis de Sales to the fifth pillar of the porticoes. The total height of the house was slightly over twenty feet. In the front, approximately in the center, where the stairway was located, there was a narrow entrance and to its right, if one were facing the building, a pump which provided plenty of pure ice-cold water. Inside the house, behind the pump, a small door opened on an oblong room with a single window; this served as a dining room for Don Bosco and his first helpers. A single flight of wooden stairs [starting across the hall and facing the outside] led to the upper floor, where, from the landing, one entered, on the left, a small room corresponding to the dining room below, while directly in front, one stepped out onto a wooden balcony which ran along the whole length of the façade. The four rooms, each with one window, opened off this balcony, and there were four corresponding rooms on the floor below. A dormer window provided light and air for the attic. There was a small cellar almost centered beneath the house.

Behind this building, forming one with it of the same length and breadth, on the spot where the superiors' dining room now stands, was the shed which had been converted into a chapel. Its ceiling was only half as high as the house because the roof of the house,

which on this side was much steeper than in front, did not allow sufficient space for another room above it. When the boys were playing, they could easily climb up onto the roof of the shed and then jump down again into the courtyard without any danger of injury; while inside, the taller boys could touch the ceiling with their hands if they stood on a bench.

The double door, three feet wide, surmounted by a wooden cross, faced west. One stepped down through it to the sloping floor. To the right of the door was a small niche with a little statue of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, which the boys carried in procession along the nearby unfrequented roads. Devotion to the Blessed Virgin and to St. Aloysius, Don Bosco stressed, were powerful means for preserving chastity.

Behind the single altar, adorned with a picture of the Blessed Mother, was a fair-sized room which did duty at first as a sacristy. Once the number of boys increased, however, Don Bosco took down the dividing wall and replaced it with two small wooden columns to support the ceiling; then he moved the altar back a bit, leaving some space behind it as an apse. A boy named Coriasso did all the carpentry work. A room on the south side of the ground floor was rented for a new sacristy, and a door was cut into one of its walls right onto [what used to be] the epistle side of the altar. It is a great pity that this chapel was eventually demolished! Later generations would have been able to see the shed which was the beginning of Don Bosco's imposing undertakings.

Behind the apse, where now a passageway leads from the inner courtyard to the garden, there stood another small building, about thirty-seven feet long. Its roof, sloping to the east, was lower than Pinardi's house and leaned against it. This building consisted of two flats of equal size: one facing south, with a door and a window, had once been used as a stable and was now remodeled into a room; the other facing north and formerly used as a lumber room, became an extension of the apse; above it was a hayloft.

Most of the land surrounding these humble buildings, somewhat less than an acre, comprised a meadow with many trees; it was shaped like an irregular pentagon. Mr. Pinardi had bought it from the Filippi brothers for the sum of 14,000 *lire* in 1845. The north side had a straight wall about eight feet high and 190 feet long.

Behind it was an irrigation ditch shielded by a tall hedge, which formed a pleasant background for the wall during the summer. The wall was twenty-five feet from the shed. In this strip of land known as "the oven courtyard" Don Bosco later built a small platform for stage plays and musico-literary entertainments.

About sixty feet from the chapel, a low wall, some ninety-five feet long, marking the western boundary, ran along the garden and Mrs. Bellezza's house, which stood along the southern bank of the above mentioned ditch. This quadrilateral space of some 650 square yards, later covered in great part by the church of St. Francis de Sales, Don Bosco set aside for a playground and here he installed a swing and other play equipment.

Some fifty feet separated the house from the eastern wall, which in turn divided the Pinardi property from that of the Filippi brothers. Their building, about twice as large as Pinardi's, consisted of a main floor and two upper stories with very low ceilings, and its foundations were contiguous with the irrigation ditch mentioned above. It had been rented to a Mr. Visca, and many families of carters lived there with their apprentices. Here were located the municipal haylofts, stables, horses and coaches. This wall, beginning on the north side [where the irrigation ditch was] and forming a slightly obtuse angle where there stood an outbuilding with tubs for laundering, continued on straight for another 180 feet; then bending sharply toward the west, it finally merged with the end wall of a shed owned by Mr. Visca, for another forty-one feet. This shed, used as a hayloft, faced the same way and occupied the same space as the present offices of the Salesian Bulletin, except for the last two windows on the west along the *Via della Giardiniera*.

A hedge ran along the south side of the property; it was shortly afterward replaced by a wall, beginning at the corner of the Visca shed and running along the *Via della Giardiniera*, for about 225 feet, until it joined the wall of Mrs. Bellezza's vegetable garden. The street was lined with mulberry trees. This was the layout of the property and house of Mr. Pinardi as it appears from the map in the municipal files.

Meanwhile, Don Bosco had not lost sight of his goal, namely, the renting of the whole Pinardi building. Therefore, after taking over various rooms as they became available, he finally, by notary's

instrument dated December 1, 1846, subleased from Pancrazio Soave the whole house with its surrounding land for an annual fee of 710 *lire*. He also paid Soave a bonus of fifty-nine *lire*, and allowed him the free use of the rooms on the ground floor for his business until March 1, 1847. The lease was to expire December 31, 1848. In this notary's instrument Don Bosco's signature appeared for the first time as the contracting party.

This success was consoling. Since at several points his property was wide open, he had the fencing walls reinforced and new sections built where there were only some boards and hedges. He had another wall built to enclose the playground on the west. It was in line with the façade of the house, but extended about twelve feet beyond it, before forming a right angle with it and continuing for almost fifty-five feet south toward *Via della Giardiniera* where the main entrance was located. At the other end of the wall, near the chapel, he placed a double iron gate painted green. Opposite the main entrance was the famous field of his dreams, and along its upper edge a road led straight to the royal gun factory. That road is now *Via Cottolengo*. Some distance beyond the *Rifugio*, at the point where the Visca shed began, *Via della Giardiniera* forked off [at a forty-five degree angle] from *Via Cottolengo*.

To complete our picture we must add that the greater part of the property was located in front of the house. Don Bosco had the whole area from the building, where the pump was, to the west wall cleared and leveled to provide a playground for the boys. As for the rest, a part he left as it was: a meadow surrounded by a low hedge where he used to sit with some of the boys under the shade of the trees. Another part he converted into a vegetable garden, soon known as Mamma Margaret's garden, because it was tended by the good woman. Between the garden and the house there was on one side a dirt road, about fifteen feet wide, running up to the Filippi wall. The other three sides were bordered by a smaller path, wide enough for two people to walk abreast. A Mr. Bellia, the contractor who had set up a temporary chapel for Don Bosco at St. Philomena Hospital, was the one chosen for these various alterations.

While Don Bosco was getting his new house and property in shape and was replacing the wooden stairway with one of stone, he had other difficulties to face. He had to put up with the bothersome,



shameless tenants and with people who came around on weekends. Because of prior agreements with Soave, some tenants, who had now become Don Bosco's tenants, could not be made to move out until some time after he had bought the house.

On Sundays there was an incessant coming and going of insolent rabble shouting obscene remarks, yelling wildly as though on an orgy. The epithets they shouted at each other were worthy of the lives they led. It is not difficult to understand how this posed a serious problem and disturbance for the oratory boys. More than once during a catechism class or a sermon, one or more of these ruffians would appear at the church door, laughing loudly or making vulgar remarks; occasionally, even making dares and threats. Don Bosco, however, found a way to get rid of them, at times patiently humoring them, or, when necessary, being prudently firm with them.

One Sunday evening, for example, an officer stalked into the chapel with a prostitute, sat down and nearly pulled the woman down on his lap. It was the hour for the service to begin and the chapel was crowded with boys, who were completely awed by the man's shameless behavior. Don Bosco went to him with blazing eyes and, taking the shameless woman by the arm, pushed her three or four steps outside the door. The enraged officer put his hand on the hilt of his sword but Don Bosco's hand instantly closed over his, gripping it as in a vise, so that he was unable to free himself.

The officer glowered at Don Bosco with rage, but Don Bosco kept his eyes riveted on him with undaunted calm. Not a word was spoken. The officer was biting his lip because of the pain caused by Don Bosco's grip and, seeing that he could not free his hand, he cried: "Now what?"

"Now what?" Don Bosco answered. "If I wanted to, I could have your epaulets removed, because you have dishonored them by your conduct."

At this unexpected threat the officer wilted and, with sober second thoughts, said humbly: "I apologize."

Don Bosco released him and pointing to the door merely said: "Then go."

The officer left shamefacedly.

There were also other troubles. Some young ruffians used to gather in the surrounding open field for some kind of fun. They

gambled passionately, swearing loudly when they lost, occasionally erupting into violent quarrels and fights. Don Bosco would then walk up to them, although they did not always take well to him, and finally with God's help, they would listen to him and comply with his requests. Little by little he managed to win over many of these ruffians and attract them to church services. Before long, their number so increased that not only did they fill the chapel, but catechism had to be taught in the area in front of it. More than once, however, stones rained in the playground while the boys were playing. Not all those ruffians had been won over.

On the east side of the property, the tenants of the Filippi brothers did not give him much trouble. Occasionally, coarse language or snatches of raucous songs could be heard and there was always the danger of thievery, which sometimes happened. But on weekends, at least, there was silence from that quarter, because the carters and their helpers had scattered throughout the various neighborhood wine shops.

The worst trouble came from the Bellezza building, built somewhat like Pinardi's and still extant. As we have already said, it was situated to the west of the Pinardi house, about fifteen or twenty feet from the wall, its windows and balcony overlooking the area in front of the chapel. All its rooms had been rented out to disreputable people. Here too was the wine shop known as the *Albergo della Giardiniera*, a hotbed of disorder and immorality, where the clamor of clinking bottles and glasses and the shouts of gamblers reigned supreme. Every Sunday, reveling, drinking, singing, card playing and dancing went on, to the strains of a street organ or other instruments. Because the place was remote and hidden from the rest of the city, the scum of the population used to gather here: soldiers, customs officials, guards, porters, mule drivers, and day laborers. Fierce fights used to break out frequently, and the screams and blasphemies created an intolerable disturbance. Don Bosco was obliged to ignore what he was powerless to prevent. At times he even had to stop his sermon because the shouting and noise drowned out the sound of his words. When this happened, after asking the boys to be good and keep quiet, which he was sure they would do, he would come down from the pulpit, remove his stole and surplice, and go to the wine shop where the

usual crowd, fifty to sixty people, were, for the most part, roaring drunk. On seeing him, they would hail him with tipsy but courteous greetings. "Don Bosco! Viva Don Bosco! You're a fine priest! If only all priests were like you!"

Don Bosco would make them understand that he wanted to talk to them. When they became fairly quiet, he would say to them: "My friends, I'm glad that you think so highly of me, but I would like you to do me a favor."

"Certainly. Just tell us what it is," they would shout from all sides.

"You see, I'm preaching in my chapel. Would you please stop your music for a little while, just twenty minutes?"

"But of course! Right away! Is there anything else we can do for you?" one of the leaders would ask. "Shut up, all of you!" he then added. "Anyone who wants to go and hear the sermon is free to do so."

Don Bosco would then go back, but occasionally the clamor would break out again the moment he mounted the pulpit. This annoyance lasted until 1853, but even during those early years, Don Bosco never suffered any insult.

Later we shall narrate other episodes concerning this period, but there is one story we shall tell now. One Sunday, two soldiers happened to get into an argument and they challenged each other to a duel. They came out of the tavern and drew their swords. Stumbling and cursing, they gradually reached the vestibule of the chapel, which was full of boys, who of course became very upset. There was much confusion. Don Bosco went to the door and tried to reason with the two men, but they were so furious with each other that they did not even realize he was talking to them. At every moment they threatened to lunge at each other. At last, some of the stronger boys managed to get hold of them.

Don Bosco then told them how disgraceful their behavior was, fighting in a sacred place and giving scandal to the boys. Finally one of the soldiers calmed down a little and said: "Yes, you're right, this isn't the place for it."

They went out, but suddenly one lunged at the other with his sword and wounded him on the shoulder and chest, fortunately not seriously. The other struck back, wounding his opponent on

the head. This calmed their anger a little and they went over to the pump to wash off the blood. The boys saw them standing there, the basin stained with blood, when they came out of chapel.

For these reasons Don Bosco then and there made up his mind to buy up the Bellezza property and to end all these offenses against God. He did eventually succeed, but it was a long and arduous endeavor. In the meantime, he still tried to help these poor people and win their goodwill, as we shall see. He was mindful of this maxim in the Book of Proverbs: "Better is a neighbor near at hand than a brother far away." (27,10)

## CHAPTER 57

### *A Noble Gesture*

AS soon as Marchioness Barolo heard that Don Bosco was back in Turin, living in the Pinardi house, she felt sorry for him because of his poverty and made a final attempt to persuade him to accept a post with her institutes. She therefore chose a trusted messenger at the *Rifugio*, to whom she gave the following peremptory instructions:

“Go and see the priest who has just come with his mother to Valdocco. Together with their ragamuffins, they are dying of starvation. Persuade him to bow to my wishes. Tell him that his obstinacy is unreasonable. And if he still doesn’t agree, tell him again that he is never to come to see me, because I shall close the door in his face.”

Despite the great esteem he felt for the charitable lady, Don Bosco did not yield, and only smiled at the threat he knew she would not carry out. In fact, when he went to her palace to visit her, she received him with the greatest respect, but he never asked her for anything nor did he ever receive anything. Nevertheless, he did not cease to go to the *Rifugio*, now and then, to preach and hear confessions. He also did all he could in behalf of her other institutions, which were growing in importance and public esteem, after the government had given its approval, in July, to the Institute of the Sisters of St. Anne.

That year [1846], various edicts and regulations regarding schools for girls had been promulgated, and some officials interpreted them to include schools conducted in cloistered convents, until now exempted from government control. The bishops appealed to the king, who received them graciously and assured them that these edicts would not apply to boarding schools in such convents. However, they were to be enforced in the schools conducted

by the Sisters of St. Joseph and St. Anne, who were allowed only to appoint their own teachers, provided they had been certified by the Royal University. For this reason, Don Bosco continued to give regular lessons to the Sisters working for a teacher's diploma, and helped them obtain their certificates with distinction so that the order would not have to pay salaries to outside teachers.

Meanwhile, he published another booklet, mainly for the Sisters' benefit. Its history, briefly, is as follows. Marchioness Barolo for many years had been trying to spread a devotion practiced in her institutes of St. Anne and St. Mary Magdalen, and particularly dear to her. It consisted of a six-day exercise to implore God's mercy. During the first three days prayers, alms, or other works of charity were offered for the conversion of sinners; in the evenings, the *Miserere* was sung after a brief meditation, and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament followed. Then, on the last three days, as a thanksgiving for the mercies received, a sermon was preached on the gratitude due to God, followed by the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, the singing of the *Benedictus*, and Benediction. On the day preceding this six-day exercise, a brief explanation was given of its purpose and arrangement.

Since many excellent results had already been obtained through this pious exercise, the marchioness was most anxious to have it conducted also in some public church, if its pastor or rector would take the initiative. Archbishop Frasoni, however, would not authorize it without the prior approval of the Holy See. The marchioness, therefore, appealed to Pope Gregory XVI, who, on March 16, 1846, graciously issued a rescript, through the Sacred Congregation of Rites, approving the devotion. Acceding again to a new request of hers, the same Pontiff, on April 6, 1846, granted a single plenary indulgence to all those participating, on the last day of the exercise, whether held in the institutes of St. Anne or of St. Mary Magdalen, or in any public church designated by the ordinary. There were the usual conditions: true sorrow, confession, Communion, a visit to the designated churches or oratories, and prayers for the intention of the Holy Father, besides attendance at all the prescribed exercises. There was an indulgence of one hundred days for everyone who, truly contrite, took part devoutly in the above devotions, even if only for a single day; this indulgence

could be gained each day. These indulgences were valid for seven years and were applicable to the souls in purgatory. Finally, in response to the repeated pleas of the marchioness, Pope Pius IX confirmed the above indulgences in perpetuity on August 7 of the same year.<sup>1</sup>

The noble-hearted lady rejoiced at these apostolic favors, considering them a kind of spiritual triumph for all her efforts, and she was glad to see that immediately several bishops, pastors, and rectors of public churches took steps to introduce this pious exercise in their churches for the benefit of the souls entrusted to them. Consequently, she was looking for some good writer to prepare a booklet on God's mercy. She gathered several learned priests and laymen and asked them to suggest a capable person. Among those present was Silvio Pellico, who immediately and enthusiastically replied: "Don Bosco!"

"No!" cried the marchioness at once. "Absolutely not!"

The reason for her refusal may have been her desire not to add another burden to that poor priest who already was overworked, but, ultimately the reason might have been her reluctance to obligate herself to a man who, in her estimation, had been so unyielding to her wishes. Silvio Pellico, however, was convinced that Don Bosco was the man for that kind of booklet. As an occasional visitor to the oratory, he had come to know that Don Bosco always encouraged people to trust in God's mercy, and he had often heard him say, when preaching to the boys: "Have you unfortunately fallen into sin again? Don't be discouraged! Immediately go to confession once more and with the proper disposition. The confessor has received from God Himself the power to forgive your sins, not only seven times, but seventy times seven. Cheer up, then; have trust and make a firm resolution. God will not despise a contrite and humble heart."

Silvio Pellico also knew that Don Bosco was very fond of telling stories about God's mercy, especially those dealing with the conversion of sinners, and of narrating incidents which he himself had witnessed or about which he had firsthand information. No one could fail to notice Don Bosco's joy and unction in relating these episodes.

<sup>1</sup> Pius IX succeeded Gregory XVI on June 16, 1846. [Editor]

Silvio Pellico was a friend of Don Bosco and, at his request, he had written some poems. Among them were one about hell and one about heaven, which, set to music by Don Bosco, are still sung in Salesian houses. So, probably by way of returning the favor, he went to the oratory and told Don Bosco what had taken place.

Since his ordination Don Bosco had helped to introduce into several religious institutions in Turin the practice of reciting certain prayers in honor of God's mercy. In short order he wrote a booklet that was very successful in promoting esteem for and trust in God's mercy. Out of respect to the sensibilities of the marchioness he did not put his name on it. The title was: *Esercizio di divozione alla Misericordia di Dio* [Devotion to the Mercy of God]. It was in strict accordance with exercises of piety approved and prescribed by Rome.

After giving the petitions which the marchioness had sent to the Holy See, and the three rescripts which the Holy See issued, Don Bosco proceeds:

Devotion to the mercy of God was instituted not only for the benefit of each individual soul, but also as a means of recourse on behalf of all the nations on earth. Let us remember that we are all sinners, deprived of happiness on account of our sins, and in need of pardon and grace. We are all redeemed by the Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ and called to eternal salvation. If we are docile to divine inspiration, we will detest sin and with our whole heart obey God and the Catholic Church which He founded.

These thoughts were to be presented on the eve of the six-day exercise, and all the meditations were to begin with the invocation: "Oh, Mercy of God! We implore you not only for ourselves but also for all mankind!"

The subjects of the meditations for the first three days abounded with scriptural quotations. The topics were as follows:

1. God is continually merciful toward the just and sinners alike. Everything that God gives to men, both in the spiritual and the material order, is a manifestation of His mercy.



2. The marvelous mercy of God toward sinners is proven by examples taken from Holy Scripture.

3. Particular instances of mercy toward sinners on the part of our Divine Savior are seen during His sorrowful Passion.

For the last three days, he listed three reasons why we should thank God:

1. The compassion He always shows to sinners.
2. The priceless gift of the sacrament of Penance.
3. The means of eternal salvation given us in the holy Catholic Faith.

He then went into detail about the nature of the indulgences, their wonderful effects, and the way to gain them, concluding:

May God's mercy be blessed for ever, and thanks be to our most compassionate and clement Redeemer, Our Lord Jesus Christ, who from the very beginning conferred on His Church the power to make known to us and to let us share in the treasure of the holy indulgences. With only the slightest inconvenience on our part, we are able by this means to fully atone to Divine Justice for all the indebtedness of sin.

He then assigned a practice for each day.

1. Encourage all your relatives and friends to take part, in whatever manner they can, in these devotions.
2. If someone has offended you, forgive him; the graver the offense you forgive, the more you may expect to be forgiven by God's mercy.
3. Give up something today to obtain God's mercy for all sinners, but especially for those who are about to die.
4. Make a contribution to charity according to your means. If you cannot, then recite five times the Our Father, the Hail Mary and the Glory Be in honor of the five wounds of our Divine Savior, with the ejaculation: "My Jesus, mercy."

5. Meditate awhile on the sins of your past life, and prepare yourself for a good confession.

6. Say the Hail Mary and the Glory Be seven times in honor of the Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin, that She may obtain for us true contrition for our sins.

The booklet concluded with this thoughtful and meaningful allusion to the marchioness: "Say at least one Hail Mary, for the person who promoted this devotion."

It was printed toward the end of the year by the Botta Press, Via Consolata 14, at Don Bosco's own expense. There an incident occurred which deserves mention. In the shop, as Don Bosco's manuscript passed from hand to hand, one of the men had the idea of making fun of it, and he began to read it aloud. But God, ever merciful, gave them a proof of His fatherly love. After listening to the first few pages, these scoffers suddenly became silent. Deep sorrow replaced mockery, and they all ended by going to confession and giving up their disorderly way of life.

Such conversions were a heavenly guarantee of the good that the little booklet would do. As soon as it was printed, Don Bosco gave a copy to each girl at the *Rifugio*, and handed over the remainder, several thousand copies, to the Mother Superior. Then he hastened to translate it into French, and this edition he probably gave to the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Marchioness Barolo read and praised the book, but never did she permit anyone to say in her presence that it had been written by Don Bosco. A friend of hers remarked one day that it was hardly commendable on her part that a priest of insufficient means should outdo her in generosity by spending his own money to have it printed, in order to fulfill her wish and assist her spiritual daughters. She turned a deaf ear though, and whenever she met Don Bosco, she not only refrained from expressing gratitude to him for the book he had written to please her, but she never even mentioned it.

Only once did she make an exception to this rule, and here is how it happened. Marchioness Barolo had one day summoned several priests to her palace that they might suggest to her the best

way to employ her money in works of charity. Among them was Father Borel, who had always been, and still was, on excellent terms with her. After several suggestions were made, Father Borel remarked: "Madame, there is in Turin a very zealous priest who really slaves from morning to night. He needs your help."

"I know whom you mean," exclaimed the marchioness immediately. "It's Don Bosco. I'll give nothing to him!"

Father Borel, after commenting on such a strange determination on her part, smilingly mentioned the booklet about God's mercy.

"Well then, take this," the marchioness said. "Here are 200 *lire*; give them to him. But don't let him know that they came from me. Woe betide you, if you do!"

The next time Father Borel came to her, the marchioness immediately asked him about the 200 *lire* and explained her reason for doing so. "If Don Bosco knows I sent it, he is quite capable of refusing it," she said.

This led to a discussion of Don Bosco's work. Father Borel refused to accept her views and he ended the discussion by saying to her in Piedmontese: "Priests don't go asking advice from women, you know!" This remark would have offended a proud person, but the marchioness was not in the least angered. She calmly changed the subject, as she was always wont to do in similar circumstances.

Father Borel knew that she always listened to his advice with benevolence and respect. It is from him that we have gathered information about the character of the marchioness and about Don Bosco's dignified, generous and humble attitude toward her.

## CHAPTER 58

### *Enriching Mind and Heart*

**B**Y renting the Pinardi house Don Bosco had found a small but safe haven after two years of struggle and uncertainty. He realized that still other hardships and hurdles would have to be overcome, but he was not worried because of his confidence in the help of God and the Queen of Heaven. As his original catechists could no longer cope with the situation, more volunteers were now a pressing need, and therefore he began to recruit new ones.

We have already mentioned that he himself taught catechism in various schools in town on weekdays; for example, at St. Francis of Paula's, at those of *Porta Palazzo*, and elsewhere. He therefore decided to appeal to some of the older boys at these schools, and to ask them to come on Sundays and holy days to help him teach catechism at the oratory. He discussed his plans with the rectors and asked them to point out to him the boys they considered best suited for such work. Some of them refused outright to let the students absent themselves from the school religious services on Sunday and holy days, because they were not very well disposed toward the oratory. A certain harmful libertarian spirit was beginning to make itself felt, even among the faithful [and it seemed to them that the oratory was somewhat infected with it]. Others consented, including Father Bertoldo, a good and very devoted friend of Don Bosco, and spiritual director of the school at Portanuova now known as the *Massimo d'Azeglio School*. He suggested and introduced a number of boys, all students of rhetoric. We recall the names of three in particular: Felix Pellegrini, who was later a well-known engineer; Valerio Anzino, who after his ordination became head chaplain at Court, a monsignor and, finally, abbot in perpetuity of the Carthusian monastery at Mantua; and the above

mentioned Francis Picca,<sup>1</sup> who first preached missions and then became a canon in the collegiate church of Savigliano. We must not overlook a fourth, who went on to become a renowned writer and a deputy in Parliament. He was the brother of a close friend of ours who became a Salesian and died as only the saints know how to die. His virtuous life was a great inspiration to his family, to society, and to our congregation. Don Bosco met the boys, explained his need of them, briefed them on the method of teaching catechism, and emphasized the good they would be doing. They accepted the task. Picca and Pellegrini were faithful to it for a long time. Anzino lasted over a year; the others gave up after a try. Don Bosco was not deterred and continued his round of the schools looking for new young apostles to replace the withdrawals from their ranks.

At the same time, he began to organize classes whose progress so far had been hampered by the nomadic life of the oratory and his own long illness. At first, because of lack of space, one class was taught in the kitchen and another in Don Bosco's own room; another was held in the sacristy, while still another met behind the main altar and several even in the chapel itself. Needless to say, these rooms were hardly suitable for the purpose. The pupils were regular little rascals; they were good at breaking things and turning everything upside down. Furthermore, the sound of voices and the going and coming were a general nuisance. But no other arrangement was possible. Mamma Margaret was obliged to take her sewing from the kitchen to the little room at the head of the stairs. We can imagine the heroic patience of that good woman under those circumstances.

A few months later, when Pancrazio Soave vacated some rooms on the ground floor, in accordance with the terms of their agreement, Don Bosco moved in some classes. These he grouped and divided according to the intellectual ability of the pupils. This made for better discipline. Thus, he could teach them in a more suitable place and with better results and could accommodate a larger number of pupils. Soon there were 300.

For quicker and better learning, Don Bosco followed this system. He had them learn the alphabet and the formation of syllables

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 290, 298. [Editor]

for one or two Sundays. Then he took the little diocesan catechism and made them practice reading until they were able to read one or two questions and answers, which he then assigned to them as a lesson for that week. The following Sunday, after reviewing the assigned material, he went on to other questions and answers, and so on. Thus in the course of a few weeks, they were generally able to read and study by themselves whole pages of the catechism. This was a great step forward, for otherwise the older and more backward boys would have taken months to learn enough to make their first confession and Communion.

The Sunday classes were helpful to all, but insufficient, because during the week many slow learners forgot what they had learned the previous Sunday. To avoid this retrogression and to be of more help to these boys, Don Bosco encouraged them to come to the weekday evening classes. They had been discontinued, until Father Borel and Father Cafasso finally gave in and allowed him to follow the promptings of his charitable heart, notwithstanding his poor health.

Through his zeal and energy these classes soon produced two excellent results: first, they spurred the boys to regular attendance, in order to become more proficient in reading and writing (the need of which was beginning to dawn on them), and also to learn many other useful things; second, they afforded Don Bosco another means of keeping the youngsters out of trouble during the evening hours, of instructing them more thoroughly in their religion, of leading them to God and making better Christians of them, which was his principal purpose all along.

Since they had already studied and learned the truths of Faith by themselves, Don Bosco now found it easier and more profitable to teach them their catechism and put them on guard against that freedom of thought which in the stormy years ahead would open the floodgates to heresy and evil in general.

To arouse an even greater appreciation of their catechism he planned and organized contests; he prepared them by frequent drills, repeating questions and answers. He offered them prizes and whatever other encouragement he felt to be necessary.

Don Bosco, however, could neither do everything himself nor, as regards evening classes, rely on the priests who assisted him,

even though they were now more numerous and, definitely, very helpful. Father Cafasso had invited several of his student priests to teach catechism at Valdocco. They came regularly, among them Father Cresto, but they had to be back at the *Convitto* by the prescribed hour before sunset. Others, whom Don Bosco had met in town, accepted his invitation to come and labor in the Lord's vineyard. Canon [Francis] Marengo, who later became a renowned professor of theology at the University of Turin, was one of those enlisted this way. From then on he faithfully came to the oratory. These devoted priests all helped out on Sundays. They took turns hearing confessions, preaching, teaching catechism to the older boys, and they occasionally celebrated Mass when Don Bosco was away. However, they could do no more because of other commitments. Even those with no other particular obligations could not be entirely relied upon, because they were often unable to come. Father Borel used to help Don Bosco quite often, but he too, taken up by various good works and tasks, could give but little time to the oratory. His direction of the oratory during Don Bosco's illness had been an act of heroic charity that made little of the most fatiguing tasks, but this could not be repeated indefinitely.

Where, then, was Don Bosco to find teachers for all these classes and so many youngsters? *He made them*, and this is how he did it! Several of the older boys attending the oratory were very intelligent and desired a better education so that they could obtain more advantageous employment. Don Bosco, therefore, picked out several of them, and at suitable hours gave them, gratis, instruction in Italian, Latin, French, arithmetic, and other subjects in return for their teaching their companions catechism during Lent and other subjects at the evening classes, both weekdays and Sundays. Some of these more capable students belonged to the original group of boys he had gathered about him while still at the *Convitto*.

The experiment proved very successful, although it was a hardship for Don Bosco. Some of these student teachers did not keep their word, notwithstanding the time as well as the money Don Bosco had spent on them for books and subsidies to their families. Only eight or ten at first, this little group of young teachers gradually increased and not only was of service in teaching the other boys, but succeeded in making a place for themselves in society

and becoming influential men in the community, able to help themselves and their fellow citizens. When Don Bosco noticed particular aptitudes and a clear vocation to the priesthood in several of them, he began to give them special instruction. In due time they became excellent priests. This was the origin of the student department at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. To this very day it continues to furnish the teaching personnel for all of Don Bosco's many schools in Italy, France, Spain, England, Austria, Switzerland, the Americas, Palestine and Africa.

There is a precious reference to those days in Don Bosco's own memoirs:

It will not be displeasing to the reader of these pages, if I make special mention of some of those earliest teachers in our oratory, whose names are indelibly printed on my heart and mind. Among others there was John Coriasso, who is now the head instructor in our cabinet shop; Felix Vergnano, now a dealer in ribbons and braids; and Paul Delfino, today a teacher in a technical school. Later there were others, such as Anthony and John Melanotte, the former a druggist, the latter a confectioner; Felix and Peter Ferrero, the first a broker, the second a typesetter; and John Piola, who now runs his own cabinet shop. Later yet, there came Victor Mogna and Louis Genta. These young instructors were also aided by several dedicated men from town, among them Joseph Gagliardi and Joseph Fino, both novelty dealers, and the jeweler Victor Ritner.

So wrote Don Bosco. Yet these young teachers were not always adequate to the task: some, first, required training for their new and difficult work; others could not keep discipline and had to be replaced; still others, uninterested or frustrated, rarely appeared. As the classes increased in number, so did the need for teachers. To meet this need Don Bosco directed all his efforts and endeavors.

With help such as that mentioned above and from others, the evening classes succeeded beyond all expectations. When Don Bosco was through with the little catechism, he had no problem in finding other textbooks adapted to the mental level of the students; his own *Bible History* and *Church History* became very handy. The progress the boys made was but another proof of the



wisdom, knowledge, and, more importantly, the experience and practical common sense he displayed in writing these books.

Meanwhile, he added two new subjects: drawing and arithmetic, including the metric system. Even though arithmetic was not a very popular subject with youngsters, his booklet was received very well and was responsible, as we shall see, for the success of these evening classes that met not only the intellectual but also the material needs of the boys. As the boys learned, they could not help feeling a deep gratitude towards him for the long, laborious, and devoted preparation of these books and for the time, long nights included, consumed in their writing.

It was a wonderful sight, every night, to see the windows in the Pinardi house all lit up and full of boys and young men, as though there were a continual party. In one room they could be seen standing before large charts on the wall, or else with books in hand. In other rooms they sat at desks practicing writing, while others knelt or sat on the floor before plain benches used as desks, and scribbled large letters in their exercise books.

From time to time Don Bosco, to see that order was maintained, would appear on the balcony, glance over the classes, and then go down to the ground floor. His own smile and gesture, urging them to be good and keep quiet, were invariably greeted by quick nods and smiles from his charges. Now and then he would make an inspection tour of the yard and around the house, and then return to his own quarters, which had also been converted into a classroom. He had reserved to himself the explanation of the metric system, and with admirable patience he succeeded in transferring into those little heads the contents of his booklet. The Christian Brothers enjoyed coming to Valdocco in the evening to observe him and study his method of teaching so many boys at one and the same time. They knew both Don Bosco and his books very well, and declared that while, in general, men of genius and great thinkers are not outstanding for memory, Don Bosco, instead, matched his brilliance of mind and generosity of heart with a prodigious memory.

Not limiting himself to purely academic and scientific subjects, Don Bosco enlivened the program by having Father [Louis] Nasi give the boys lessons in Gregorian chant and singing, and he al-

ways wanted this practice continued. He found a valuable assistant for this purpose in Father Michelangelo Chiatellino of Carignano, a student at the *Convitto* of St. Francis of Assisi, who came to the oratory and taught music there for about eight years. He was a fine organist and later accompanied the young choristers when they sang in the churches of Turin, when they made their fall outings, and especially when they went to Castelnuovo and Becchi for the feast of the Holy Rosary.

From this priest we came to know how the young catechists, student teachers and other boys from the oratory were able to inspire boys who did not attend with such devoted confidence in Don Bosco, that they sometimes used to come to him not only for spiritual advice but also to seek guidance and help out of the predicaments into which their lack of prudence had led them. The following story is typical of many others.

A student at the university had borrowed some money from a loan shark. Since he was unable to pay the debt and dared not ask his father for the money lest he come to know the reason for the debt, he was greatly perplexed. Advised by someone to go and see Don Bosco, he did so. Although Don Bosco did not know the boy, he received him with great kindness and listened to what he had to say. He then exhorted him to change his tenor of life and invited him to make his peace with God by a good confession. Afterwards, he sent the boy to invite the moneylender to a talk with him. He wanted to ascertain whether the amount of money stated was correct and whether he could persuade the moneylender to make some settlement compatible with justice, without exposing the repentant youth to his father's wrath. The moneylender appeared, but, after the usual greetings, Don Bosco soon realized that he would not relent. He, therefore, made a swift decision. "So you're the creditor of young so and so!"

"That's correct."

"How much does he owe you?"

"So much."

"What interest do you charge?"

"Five percent."

"Per year?"

"Per month!"

Don Bosco rose to his feet calmly, looked the man in the eye for a while with a penetrating glance full of reproof, and then exclaimed: "Five percent a month?"

Gently seizing the man by the lapels, he repeated: "Five percent a month?" Then repeating the same words he slowly made him back up toward the door, and out onto the balcony. The man was so startled and afraid that his moneylending practices might become known in town that he was speechless. Don Bosco quietly shut the door in his face. He then hurried to the poor student's father and told him all the dismal story in a way that the father accepted with good grace. He emphasized how sorry the son was, begged forgiveness for him, and advised the father how best to pay the debt to the moneylender, while protecting the family reputation. The father agreed to pay the debt, while the moneylender, still remembering Don Bosco's look and words, raised no difficulties about lowering his interest rate to a more reasonable figure. Forgiven by his father, the young man regained his peace of mind and improved his conduct.

All those who approached Don Bosco regardless of who they were, could count on his charitable concern for their welfare. *Pertransiit benefaciendo* [He passed, doing good]. Don Bosco's charity embraced all who came to him. He, too, went about doing good. [Cf. Acts 10,18]

## CHAPTER 59

### *The Mulberry Tree*

**I**F we could estimate all the good, physical and spiritual, which Don Bosco did for each of the boys who gathered around him in those days, and describe the stirring incidents that accompanied them, then we would realize how good the Lord was in establishing the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. Our narrative cannot do justice to the above, but it will, nevertheless, enable us to glimpse the wonders that are still hidden, as the following episode will prove.

A massive mulberry tree stood in front of the entrance to the Pinardi property, on the spot where the apse of Mary Help of Christians Church now stands. Don Bosco loved this tree with the same sort of affection which the ancient patriarchs felt for the oak of Mamre. He used to call it the tree of life because of certain cherished events which took place in its shade. Two in particular are noteworthy; one happened this same year of 1846, the other at a later date. We shall now narrate the first one, basing our story on what we heard from an old alumnus. His account was confirmed by Joseph Buzzetti.

It was a Sunday and the oratory boys were playing, while Don Bosco and Father Borel were strolling along the fencing wall, conversing and supervising the recreation. Three urchins, who had been chasing each other in the nearby fields, heard all the noise and shouting. They stopped and each suggested to the other: "Let's see what they're doing over there."

"Yes, let's see!" the bolder youngster shouted. "Give me a hoist and push me up. I'll get on top of the wall and tell you everything I see."

No sooner said than done. When they reached the wall, the other two boys hoisted their leader up on their shoulders. He got

to the top of the wall and sat there entranced by all the excitement he saw. At this point, one of his chums had a bright idea. "Let's play a trick on him. Give him a push and shove him over."

"Yes, let's go!" said the other urchin anticipating the fun. Helped by the other boy, he clambered up and gave a good shove to the boy sitting on the wall. Then the two accomplices ran away. Taken by surprise, the boy on top of the wall lost his balance and fell down right between Don Bosco and Father Borel.

Startled by his sudden appearance, the two priests took a step back. But when they saw him, afraid and crying, get to his feet and cast desperate glances about, looking for a way of escape, they blocked his way. Don Bosco took hold of his hand, but the boy struggled and shouted: "Let me go! Let me go!"

"Where do you want to go? Just calm down a moment. Why are you so afraid!"

"Because you're going to beat me and put me in jail."

"Not at all! Why be afraid? Don't you see that you're among friends? Stay with us awhile."

"Nothing doing! I don't want to stay with priests. My father always says that priests are—"

"You're wrong, my dear boy. Don't believe that nonsense. You see all these boys here? They are having a lot of fun and we are their friends. Talk to them and find out how I treat them. All I ask of them is to be good and have fun."

By now many of the boys had come over and were listening. Some who knew the boy addressed him by name and he calmed down a little.

"Have you ever been to catechism class?" asked Don Bosco patting him on the cheek.

"Never. And that's why I want to get out of here. If I stay, I'll be forced to."

"Wouldn't you like to hear a fine story?"

"Not now!"

"All right, then. By the way, how old are you?"

"Fourteen. Now let me go." And he tried to jerk himself loose.

"Just a minute. Have you made your First Communion?"

"No."

"Do you ever go to Mass?"

"That's for priests and old ladies. My father would beat me if I went."

"Poor boy!" sighed Don Bosco to Father Borel. "What a case! He will be ruined for good unless we get him on the right path now."

After a moment's pause, he turned again to the boy, who now had stopped crying and had resumed his usual insolent air, and said: "How about coming here to play and have fun with all these friends of yours? What do you say to that?"

"I'd like to, if you don't force me to go to church. I don't care to become a stuffy old fool."

"Do you really think that all these boys are stuffy old fools? Don't you see how well they play and how much fun they have?"

The urchin was watching the boys who were running from one end of the playground to the other. Several of them gestured and called to him to join them, and he kept muttering: "I'd sure like to."

"Well, then, why don't you?" Don Bosco told him.

The boy waited no longer. He ran to his friends and enjoyed himself racing from one end of the playground to the other until it was time to go to church. At the sound of the bell he at once stopped playing and ran for the exit. Don Bosco had watched him all the while, and was there to praise him for his skill and to tell him how glad he was to have met him. Then he let him go.

The following Sunday the boy returned on his own and began to play immediately. Again, when the recreation was over, he made for the exit where Don Bosco was waiting for him. "Where are you going?" he asked. "Wouldn't you like to come to church for a little while with the others?"

"Er," the boy said, squirming, "I'm in a hurry. I must go home because I have to go some place. I'll come some other Sunday."

"Then we'll be seeing each other again, won't we? I'll be waiting for you!" And he gave the boy a small gift which pleased him very much.

The third Sunday he was very punctual at the game, and although he balked a little when it was time to go to church, he did stay there for quite a while. When he left, halfway through Father Borel's sermon, Don Bosco accompanied him to the exit, saying in

a friendly tone, "Another time I hope you won't be in such a hurry to go home. Then you could stay the whole evening with us."

Don Bosco's kind ways finally led the boy to take part in the morning and evening religious services whenever he could. In a few weeks' time the rascal had completely changed his whole outlook and habits. Don Bosco, a past master at timing, was aware of the boy's friendly attitude and trust in him, and at an opportune moment he drew him aside and, strolling up and down with him, told him affectionately: "Come to see me some day behind the altar. You know where; near the confessional! I'll have something pleasing to tell you. You will come, won't you? Say yes. Will you really come?"

"Yes, I will!" the boy answered firmly. In fact, after some instruction, he went to confession for the first time and then made his First Holy Communion.

How often such scenes were repeated during that year and during those that followed. With a charity that was patient and prudent Don Bosco won over very many boys; by overcoming their reluctance and stubbornness, he reconciled them to God and filled them with joy.

Even more astounding was the heroic fortitude which some of these little converts displayed in persevering in their new ways. The father of this boy was a woodcarver. Wicked and irreligious, he had allowed his son until then to run wild, and scandalized him with his obscene language and blasphemies, often forcing him to work even on Sunday mornings. Since he spent his Sundays in some tavern, staying there from early afternoon until late at night, he had not as yet noticed the change in his son. The boy did not dare tell him that he had made his First Communion, but some neighbors mentioned to the father that the boy was frequenting the oratory. The father flew into a bestial rage. "Woe to you if you ever set foot into that place again!" he roared. "I won't have anything at all to do with priests. I absolutely forbid you!"

Knowing how violent his father could be, the boy replied fearfully; "But what else can I do on Sundays? Stay home and get bored to death? At the oratory we play games and have fun."

"I don't care!" roared the inhuman father. "You do as I say, or else . . ." and he started to swear.

"Oh well, I'll do as you want," the poor boy said, facing the prospect of being all alone, since he was determined not to associate any longer with his former bad friends.

When Sunday came around he told his father: "If I can't go to the oratory, I'll take a walk." And so he did, but his walk always took him in the vicinity of the oratory. There he would go in for a few minutes and tell his troubles to Don Bosco, who comforted him saying: "Don't be afraid to come. It will do you good. It's no lie to say you went for a walk. Don't worry; the Blessed Virgin will help you."

The boy would then hurry home and when asked where he had been that afternoon, he would reply: "I went for a walk." This worked for two Sundays but the devil had to stick in his tail. About the middle of the week someone reported to that brutal man that his son was still going to the oratory. Furious, he left the shop and went home to confront the boy, whom he had sent on an errand. As he entered the house, he seized him by the arm and shouted: "Didn't I tell you that you must not go with all the scum around Don Bosco? If you do it again, I'll break your head one of these days! Fine things that Don Bosco of yours has taught you! Just what one might expect: teaching a son to disobey his father! But I'll show you that no one can make a fool out of me and get away with it!"

After his fury was spent, this model father, so jealous of his authority, went back into his shop cursing and grumbling to himself and dragging along his son who had to put up with his outrageous reproaches for several hours.

Terrified by his father's threats and at the same time anxious to see Don Bosco, the boy found himself in a very perplexing situation. The following days went by and he stayed home sad and dejected. When Saturday evening came around, he could hardly sleep a wink. He thought about his friends who were having fun at the oratory, while he was obliged to stay home. He thought about confession and the Communion he was unable to receive. He thought about Don Bosco, about his father, about himself, and tears ran down his cheeks, but he grew calmer after praying. On Sunday morning he got up early. It was bitterly cold, for it was well on into winter. Since he had no errands to run, without saying



a word to anybody, he went straight to the oratory and received the sacraments. Then he went home feeling better. In the afternoon, he returned to the oratory. But for the first time in his life his father had watched to see where his son went. When the boy came home again at dusk, he was waiting for him. Half drunk and brandishing a hatchet in his hand, he yelled: "So! You've been to see Don Bosco!"

In terror the boy turned and fled as fast as he could. The father, followed by his wife, who was trying to calm him and snatch the hatchet out of his hands, ran after him shouting: "If I catch you, I'll kill you, even if you are in Don Bosco's arms!" Already well along in years, however, he was no match for a fourteen-year-old boy running for dear life. When the unfortunate youngster reached the oratory, the door was closed. He hesitated for a moment as to what to do, then knocked, not daring to call out, for fear of betraying his whereabouts. He could hear voices and the approaching steps of his parents. In despair, he looked about him and saw the mulberry tree. He quickly climbed up into it and lay there hugging one of the branches, without making a sound, almost like a criminal afraid of being caught by the police. There were no leaves to hide him and the rays of the moon had already begun to lift the mist. He was barely out of sight when he heard his parents come up panting, looking for him. They ran past the mulberry tree without seeing him and went straight for the oratory gate, beating on it savagely as though they intended to knock it down.

Mamma Margaret, who had looked out of the window at the boy's approach and seen him climb up the tree, immediately understood the reason for the furious uproar outside and ran to tell Don Bosco, who instantly sent someone to open the gate for fear that they might notice the boy if they stayed too long around there. Both the man and the woman raced up the stairs and burst into Don Bosco's room, yelling at him in a threatening tone: "Where's our son?"

Don Bosco answered firmly: "Your son isn't here."

"Of course he's here and I'll find him too," the father growled and cursed. He began to search the room, opening closets, looking under the bed and muttering from time to time, "He must be here!"

"Would you mind telling me who you are, sir?" Don Bosco asked calmly.

"I don't have to tell whom I am; you should know it already! I want to know where my son is." As he said this he made a move as if to look into the other rooms.

At this point, in a calm but commanding tone, Don Bosco said: "Sir, I've told you he's not here. But even if he were here, you have no right to come bursting into other people's houses. Go about your own business, or there will be persons who will see that you do, whether you want to or not."

"Well, I'll go to the police!" shouted the father more exasperated now than ever. "I'll get him out of the clutches of priests!"

"Yes, go to the police," agreed Don Bosco, "but don't forget that I shall go there too, and I'll have a lot to tell them about you. If there are still laws and courts of justice in this world, you'll soon be in hot water!"

Confronted by this resolute attitude on Don Bosco's part, the man and woman, who both had guilty consciences, quietly left and never returned.

But what about the boy? As soon as his two persecutors had gone, Don Bosco, Mamma Margaret, Joseph Buzzetti, and a few other boys who had not yet gone home, hurried to the foot of the mulberry tree and told the boy he could come down. There was no response. The unfortunate lad gave no sign of life. They looked closely and saw by the light of the moon that he was grasping tightly a branch of the tree. Don Bosco repeated in a louder tone: "Come down, my dear boy, don't be afraid. They've gone, but, even if they were to come back, you need not fear. We'll defend you at all costs."

Still, there was no answer. A shudder ran through them all for fear that something dreadful might have happened to him. After calling for a ladder, Don Bosco climbed up into the tree, very much worried. When he got near the boy, he found him half frozen and delirious. He touched him gently, shook him, and called him by name.

Finally, as though in a nightmare, the boy mistook Don Bosco for his father and began to scream like a startled animal. He bit

and fought with such fury that he almost fell off the tree, dragging Don Bosco along with him. Firmly gripping one branch with his arm and holding the poor boy tightly with the other, Don Bosco kept repeating: "Don't be afraid, dear boy, I am Don Bosco. Don't you see I have my cassock on? Look at me. Calm down. Don't bite me, because you are hurting me."

Gradually the boy recovered his senses and calmed down. When he was himself again, he gave a deep sigh and with Don Bosco's help climbed down from that tree, which, truly, he could call his "tree of life."

After they had taken him indoors, Mamma Margaret, her heart filled with pity, warmed him by the fire, gave him some nourishing soup to eat, and prepared a bed for him for the night. The following day, to save him from the cruel anger of his father, Don Bosco found him work with a kindly craftsman near the city. The boy always remained very religious and a few years later, after perfecting himself in his trade, came back to Turin. With great charity he then looked after his not very loving parents in their old age.

## CHAPTER 60

### *First Christmas at Valdocco*

THE year 1846 was drawing to a close, and at the oratory the month of December was marked by joyful events. Father John Vola had donated a small church bell weighing about forty-eight pounds and costing eighty-eight *lire* and fifty *centesimi*. It was to be hung on top of the west wall of the house and, therefore, Don Bosco had two posts erected on the roof with a crossbeam surmounted by a Cross. Meanwhile, Father Borel sent a petition to the archbishop which also testifies to the good results of Don Bosco's apostolic efforts and those of his assistants.

[No date]

Your Excellency:

The priests who give religious instruction to the boys at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales, recently opened and blessed with Your Excellency's authorization in the parish of SS. Simon and Jude in Valdocco, have seen their efforts rewarded by a very great attendance of boys, among whom they have achieved many good results. In order to further foster the boys' piety and attendance, they now wish to install a bell in the belfry. They already have the bell, and therefore humbly ask faculties for the Reverend Father John Vola, Jr., to bless it.

On behalf of the above mentioned priests,  
Father John Borel

In answer to a previous petition dated November 18 [1846], Archbishop Frasoni had delegated Father Augustine Gattino, the

pastor, to perform the ceremony. Since Father Gattino could not accept on account of other obligations, the archbishop delegated Father John Vola on November 14.

Don Bosco who never missed an opportunity of fostering in his boys sentiments of faith by pointing out the importance of the religious ceremony which they would witness, had explained the symbolism of this sacred rite and the reason why the bishop used holy water in blessing the bell. He also encouraged them to get ready for this ceremony by receiving the sacraments. Accordingly, on the Sunday following the granting of the faculty [November 15, 1846], Father John Vola solemnly blessed the bell which he had donated, and great was the rejoicing of the youngsters when it was hoisted up and hung in the belfry. Their delight increased still further when they heard the silvery tones peal forth for long periods at a time.

From now on, on Sundays and holy days, this bell would summon the boys from the neighboring houses almost as effectively as any sermon could have done. Mothers used to comment frequently: "At that sound, on the vigil of feast days, our children can't keep still. They want to put on their best clothes and in the morning they get up very early, saying: 'I have to go to Holy Communion.'"

The first time this youthful fervor showed itself was on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, which that year was enhanced by the report of an apparition of Our Lady at *La Salette* in France. The story of *La Salette* became a favorite topic of Don Bosco and he used to repeat it hundreds of times, not only to awaken in the boys the realization of the supernatural and their devotion and confidence in Mary, but also to instill in them hatred of sin, particularly the three sins that anger Our Lord and call down frightful punishments upon mankind: blaspheming, profaning Sunday and holy days, and eating meat on days of abstinence.

He attached so much importance to this miraculous event that in different years, he published two pamphlets about it, with a total run of more than 30,000 copies. We shall speak of this event, abridging it a bit, but using his own words. To some readers, this may seem a useless digression, but it is not so. From among the countless wonders performed by Mary over the centuries, which

Don Bosco used to recount for the benefit of his boys, as we have recorded, we shall mention only those which made a deep impression on mankind during the lifetime of our Founder. This will enable us to take notice of the part Our Lady played openly in the life of the Catholic Church, and also of the part She played, less openly but no less efficaciously, in Don Bosco's life and in the birth and establishment of the Salesian Society for the salvation of youth. We should notice also that from 1846 on, it is to children that the Blessed Virgin deigned to appear, as if to give them a proof of Her predilection. Let us now describe the event.

Shepherds spent only four months of the year near the barren rocky mountain called *Salette*. This was where little Massimino, aged eleven, and Melanie, aged fifteen, lived. Children of poor, uneducated peasants, their task was to look after the cattle. Massimino knew only the Our Father and the Hail Mary, and Melanie hardly knew anything more. In fact, she had not yet been admitted to First Holy Communion. The two children met by chance on the mountain, on September 18, 1846, when they watered their cows at the same spring.

That evening, before parting to go home, Melanie said to Massimino: "Who will get here first tomorrow?" [As things turned out], next morning, the 19th, they both went up the slopes together, each leading a goat and four cows. It was a clear, beautiful day, bright with sunshine. Toward midday, as they heard the distant sound of the *Angelus*, they made the Sign of the Cross and said a brief prayer. They got out their lunches and went to eat near a small spring to the left of a little brook, into which its limpid water flowed. When they were through, they jumped across the brook, set their knapsacks down beside a dried-up spring, and ran a few steps down to two shady spots next to each other. They sat down, and contrary to their usual habit, soon fell asleep.

Melanie awoke first at half past two in the afternoon. Not seeing her cows, she called to Massimino: "Come on, let's go and look for our cows." Again they jumped across the brook and climbing a little way up, they saw the cows lying on the grass and grazing. Melanie then turned to go back to the shade, but before reaching the brook, she became aware of a sudden light, even brighter than the sun and colored like a rainbow. She shouted to Massimino: "Quick, come down. There

is a bright light down there.” Massimino ran down immediately. “Where?” he asked. Melanie pointed toward the little spring. When he saw the unusual light, Massimino stood still. It was then that in the center of it they distinctly saw a Lady sitting on a pile of stones, Her face hidden in Her hands. She wore white shoes with different colored roses entwined around them. Her stockings and apron were yellow. Her gown white and studded with pearls; a white kerchief, edged with roses, was around Her shoulders and there was a cap or bonnet on Her head, tilted slightly forward with a crown of roses on top. Round Her neck hung a chain with a crucifix attached. On the right arm of the Cross were a pair of pincers, and on the left a hammer.

Melanie dropped her staff in fright. After a few moments the Lady lowered Her hands, revealing a radiant white face, so luminous that it was not possible to gaze at it for any length of time. Then She stood up, crossed Her arms, and said to them: “Come nearer, my children, do not be afraid. I have something important to tell you.”

Massimino and Melanie crossed over the brook as She walked to the spot where they had been lying asleep. She then stood between the two little shepherds and said to them, while tears constantly flowed down Her beautiful cheeks: “If my people will not be obedient, I must let my Son do as He wishes. His hand is so strong and powerful, that I can no longer hold it. I have been suffering for you for a long time. I have to beg my Son constantly not to give you up, but you do not care. No matter how much you pray or do, you will never be able to repay me for all the concern I have shown for you. ‘I gave you six days in which to labor, and kept the seventh for Myself,’ says the Lord, ‘yet no one wants to give it to Me.’ This is what makes my Son’s hand so heavy. If your potatoes spoil, it is all your fault. This is what happened last year; but you paid no attention, and when you found the potatoes spoiled, you cursed my Son’s name. It will be the same again this year, and at Christmas you will have no potatoes left. If you have any wheat, do not sow it; if you do, it will be eaten up by worms, and what grows will turn into dust when you thresh it. Many children under seven will die . . . There will be a great famine . . . Your walnuts will be spoiled and your grapes will rot . . .”<sup>1</sup>

At this point the Lady stopped talking. Her lips moved without making any sound, but the children were made aware of a secret confided to each of them separately, with orders to disclose it to no one, not even to each other.

<sup>1</sup>These prophecies came true. A disease caused immense harm to the vines throughout Europe from 1849 to 1874.

Then, She began to speak aloud again and said in a clear voice: "If people will mend their ways, stones and rocks will be changed into heaps of wheat and the potatoes will grow of themselves in the fields."

She, then, asked the two children: "Do you say your prayers as you should?"

"Not very well, ma'am," they replied.

"My children, say your prayers, morning and evening. If time is short, say at least an Our Father and a Hail Mary, but when you can, say them all."

Then, again resuming a reproachful tone, She went on: "Nobody goes to Mass except a few old women. The other women work on Sunday all through the summer. In winter, the younger people, when they don't know what else to do, go to Mass only to scoff at religion. Nobody keeps Lent; all crave meat like dogs . . ."

Turning to Massimino She asked: "Have you ever seen spoiled wheat, my son?"

"No, ma'am," he replied.

"Yet, you must have when, once, you were near Coïn with your father. The owner of the field told your father to go and see how the wheat was spoiled. Both of you went into the field, took some ears in your hands and when you rubbed them they all fell into dust. Then you returned home, but when you were still half an hour away from Corps, your father gave you a piece of bread and said: 'Take it, my son: eat a little more bread this year. If the wheat continues to spoil like this, I don't think there will be any bread next year.'"

Massimino answered: "Oh yes, ma'am, now I remember. But I had forgotten until you mentioned it."

After that, the Lady said: "Well, my children, make known to my people all that I have told you."

Then She crossed the brook and after a few steps, without turning, She repeated: "Well, my children, make known to my people all that I have told you."

Massimino and Melanie followed Her as She climbed to the spot where they had gone to look for their cattle. She walked on the grass as though Her feet were only brushing the top. Melanie walked in front and Massimino at Her side, but not too close. On that spot the beautiful Lady rose about three feet above the ground and remained suspended in the air for a moment, while Melanie looked at Her ecstatically. She raised Her eyes to heaven, and lowered them again. Her head vanished; then Her arms; then all they saw was a light; then, that too disappeared.



Recovering from her amazement, Melanie asked Massimino: "Do you think She is perhaps a great saint?"

The boy replied: "If we had only known that, we could have asked Her to take us with Her."

"Maybe She is still here!"

Immediately, Massimino lunged forward in an attempt to grasp some of the lingering light, but it too was fading away. The two little shepherds kept searching painstakingly to see if they could find Her, and Melanie remarked: "She does not want us to see Her, so we won't know where She's going."

Since it was nearly sunset they brought their cattle back to the barn. At home, they told their parents of the marvelous things they had seen and heard. They also said that the Lady had revealed a great secret to them and ordered them not to tell anybody. We all know how good children are at keeping secrets; yet they did not add another word. The following day when they returned to the dried-up spring near which they had seen the Lady, a spring that never before had run except after abundant rainfalls and thaws, they were surprised to see that water was now gushing and flowing in a stream limpid and clear. Word of Our Lady's appearance soon spread far and wide and pilgrimages were made to the spot, while villages and towns were converted.

We might add, to round out our story, that the spring kept on spouting plenty of water, that many extraordinary graces were granted, and that on the first anniversary of the appearance more than 70,000 pilgrims thronged over the strip of land blessed by the Blessed Virgin's presence, where a majestic church and a very vast hospice now stand.

For more than two years ecclesiastical authorities looked into the matter, questioning the two children separately many times, for five, six and seven hours at a stretch in an attempt to confuse them and trick them into some contradictory statement, but in vain, for their statements were always the same, even in their form. As for the secret, of which they never said a word even between themselves, it was impossible to get anything out of them, though for over twenty years, hundreds of people tried to wrest it from them in a thousand ways, with cajoling, sudden confrontations, threats, insults, gifts and promises. In 1851, however, after they had learned to read and write, when the bishop of Grenoble ordered them to reveal the secret to the Pope by letter, they obeyed. They wrote and sealed their two separate letters before witnesses. After reading them, Pius IX exclaimed with commotion: "[Divine] punishments threaten France, but she is not the only nation at fault: Germany, Italy and the whole of Europe have deserved punish-

ments. Religious indifference and human respect cause me great fear." He said no more.

Thus far Don Bosco in his pamphlets. Such stories did an immense amount of spiritual good for the boys in the oratory. Don Bosco spoke to them of the Madonna as though he had seen Her in person, so realistic was he in his description, not so much in his words as in the thoughts and the images which he managed to evoke. How often the boys, who [so far] knew nothing about Don Bosco's dreams, felt deeply moved at his words and sang with greater love their familiar *Noi siamo figli di Maria* [We are Mary's children].

The feast of the Immaculate Conception served as a preparation for Christmas. Don Bosco made much of all the mysteries of our Faith. Anxious to express outwardly and with greater transport his devotion to the Incarnate Word and to arouse it and foster it in others, he petitioned the Holy See for the faculty of distributing Holy Communion at the solemn Christmas Midnight Mass in the chapel of the oratory. Pius IX granted it for three years.

After announcing the good news to the boys, he taught his young singers a short Mass and several hymns which he himself had composed in honor of the Child Jesus. He also decorated the small church as best he could and invited several people to join the boys during the novena. The archbishop had granted Don Bosco permission to impart Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament whenever he wanted to, but only on such occasions was he authorized to preserve the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle.

A great crowd of boys was present, for he had instilled into the hearts of his little friends a deep love for the Divine Child. Since he was the only priest available, every evening throughout the novena he heard the confessions of many who wanted to go to Communion the following day. Early every morning he was there again to accommodate those boys who had to go to work. After Mass and Communion, he preached a short sermon, which was followed by the chanting of the prophecies by several catechists he had trained, and by Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

On Christmas eve he heard confessions until eleven o'clock,

sang the Midnight Mass, and distributed Holy Communion to several hundred people. Afterwards, he exclaimed with tears in his eyes: "How wonderful! It was like heaven!" After the service, he gave the boys some refreshment and then sent them home to bed.

After a few hours sleep he was back in church, waiting for the larger crowd of boys that had been unable to attend the Midnight Mass. He celebrated two more Masses, and then went through his usual busy Sunday schedule.

The novena and the feast of Christmas were celebrated this way for many years, until Don Bosco had other priests to help him.

But Christmas, in those early years, had a special flavor about it which made it truly unforgettable, because it not only symbolized the formal and definitive taking over of the Pinardi house, but also confirmed the promises of future buildings that would testify of the Lord's goodness to future generations. How fondly Don Bosco, his heart and mind full of plans, must have repeated on that blessed day, when reciting his breviary, the words of the Psalmist: "O God, we ponder your kindness within your temple! As your name, O God, so also your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. Of justice your right hand is full!" (Ps. 47,10-11)

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## ABBREVIATIONS

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M.M.	Mamma Margaret

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