Starting Again from Don Bosco



Ian Murdoch SDB



978-0-9555654-3-4

Don Bosco Publications
Thornleigh House, Sharples Park, Bolton BL1 6PQ, UK
ISBN 978-0-9555654-3-4

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In gratitude to God
for the gift of the Society of Saint Francis de Sales
founded by St John Bosco 150 years ago
18th December 1859

Ian Murdoch SDB

CREDITS

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Photos ANS Roma
Artwork Peter Gaskell and Val O'Brien

Published by **Don Bosco Publications 2009**
Thornleigh House, Sharples Park, Bolton BL1 6PQ United Kingdom
Tel 01204 308811
www.don-bosco-publications.co.uk
ISBN 978-0-9555654-3-4

Design & Production Printoff Graphic Arts Ltd 01282 877922 [ref 37973 - 04/09]
Printed on paper manufactured from a sustainable source using vegetable based inks

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Foreword

Father Ian Murdoch SDB passed away on Thursday 8th January 2009, at sixty years of age.

His life and death was the first gift the Australian-Pacific Province of the Salesians of Don Bosco made to God in this year of celebration of the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation (18th December 1859).

He was without doubt the best-prepared, most passionate and creative student of the figure, the times and the work of Saint John Bosco, in this Province. The pages that follow produce the slightly reworked text of a spiritual retreat given to Salesians in Australia, the United Kingdom, Fiji and Samoa in 2008. The final Conference on Don Bosco's understanding of *salvation* was never delivered by Ian. He wrote it for a combined meeting of Principals and Religious Education Co-ordinators from Salesian schools that took place at Ascot Vale on 7th and 8th November 2008. By that stage Ian was hospitalised, but he allowed a modified version of his text to be read at that gathering by Fr Chris Ford, the Chair of the Salesian Principals Association of Australia. It is added to the retreat conferences as an *appendix*. I have written a brief explanatory introduction to it there.

Ian's life was at all times associated with the presence of Don Bosco in Australia and the Pacific. He did his secondary schooling at the Salesian College in Port Pirie, South Australia. He was one of the founding students at that school. After his secondary education he entered the Salesian Novitiate at Oakleigh, Victoria in 1966, and completed his years of training, both as a Salesian and a budding academic historian, in Melbourne, Australia. Ordained in 1975, he began a long career of secondary teaching that ran from 1976 till 1991. From 1982-1987 he was the Principal of Salesian College, Brooklyn Park, and his years as a secondary teacher came to an end with a period as the senior history teacher at Salesian College, Chadstone, from 1988-1991.

Ian always had a fascination with history, especially with the presence of the Church in European history. Until quite recent times, of course, the history of Europe and the history of the Church in Europe overlapped heavily. As Pope Benedict XVI laments, this is no longer the case. Ian never entered that debate, but always believed that our present understanding of Church and Society has much to learn from the critical study of their interaction in the past.

Courageously, on the basis of an original undergraduate degree earned while still in his years of formation for the Priesthood, he set out on a research degree in medieval history at Monash University in Melbourne in 1974. He worked assiduously in the



construction of a critical edition from a collection of unedited texts of a commentary of Pierre d'Ailly (1350-1420), on a work of William of Occam (1285-1349). Unknown to most who will read Ian's pages that follow, Occam and his commentator were major figures in the turmoil of 14th and 15th century European and Church history. Occam, a radical Franciscan philosopher strongly opposed the papal claim to secular authority; d'Ailly argued that only an Ecumenical Council could appoint a pope to resolve a schism. Behind this choice lay Ian's fascination with the various movements within the Franciscan tradition, and the tumultuous years after the great schism (1378-1415) that led to debate over the relationship between the Pontificate and an Ecumenical Council, culminating in the Council of Basel (1431-1449).

What is amazing about this achievement, however, is that Ian researched and wrote his extremely sophisticated work without ever withdrawing from full-time ministry as a Salesian educator. There were a few rushed international trips to visit libraries and to speak to world authorities, but they had to be fitted into school holidays. His appointment to Salesian College Chadstone in 1978 located him close to Monash University, and it was there that he brought this work to its conclusion. He graduated as a Doctor of Philosophy in 1981.

A further remarkable and little-known fact about Ian's life across these years, as a secondary teacher and a part-time scholar, was his conviction that his Salesian vocation was to be worked out as a teacher in a secondary school. There were opportunities to use his specialised training elsewhere, but it was not until 1992 that he joined the staff at the Catholic Theological College, a member body of the Melbourne College of Divinity. But his Salesian commitment did not lessen with this step into tertiary education. In 1992 he was appointed the Rector of Salesian Theological College, Oakleigh, the house of formation for young Salesians of the Australia-Pacific Province. After a period of intense study of Don Bosco and Salesian sources, and a year as the Rector of the community at Chadstone (1998-99), he was appointed the Provincial of the Salesians in Australia and the Pacific in 2000.

His years as Provincial (2000-2005) were the most difficult period for all Church leaders who bore the brunt of the recognition of the serious failures of clergy and religious in the area of child abuse. Ian courageously recognised failure among his fellow Salesians. He tirelessly sought to see that justice and care were given to victims, and that the offenders felt the full weight of both civil and Church law. Inevitably, he was also the one sometimes scurrilously attacked by some parts of the media who were more interested in sensationalism than justice and care. Since he was a thinking man, who kept himself to himself, we will never know the extent of his pain over these years.

Why tell this story? Ian's adult life has been a finely tuned blend of two passionate commitments. First, he showed unfailing loyalty to Don Bosco and his presence in Australia and the Pacific, as a secondary and tertiary educator, as a Rector and formator of young Salesians, and as a Provincial. Secondly, he dedicated himself, as a serious historian, to the critical study of the lessons our present and future must learn from our past. He is a Salesian who is also a significant historian. As such, he was ideally trained to take up the challenge, issued by the Rector Major of the Salesians, Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva SDB, that the Congregation return to a serious and in-depth study of Don Bosco so that we might renew our mission to poorer young people and our search for holiness with a firmly grounded understanding and appreciation of our founder.

Ian only had one year of professional training in the study of Don Bosco and his setting, under the skilled direction of Arthur Lenti SDB, at the Centre for Salesian Studies at Berkeley, California USA in 1998. He was admirably equipped to turn his well-trained historical mind and critical approach to the *Don Bosco* material, both primary and secondary, that is currently available. Once he took up his role in the formation of young Salesians he began this work with earnestness. However, as with his doctoral dissertation, it all had to be *fitted in* as he did his task as the Rector of the formation community, and then as Provincial. It was not until January 2006, that he was able to accept the offer of a position as a visiting scholar at the Catholic University of America, Washington DC, to begin systematic research and writing. On his return to Australia, he was almost immediately diagnosed with cancer, and submitted to serious surgery. Once the surgery was completed and Ian was back on his feet, it was a question of waiting and seeing.

The following two years were dedicated to full-scale research and teaching. He continued his interest in the Middle Ages and the Franciscan movement, but became increasingly involved in the study of Don Bosco and his legacy. This intensified when I asked him to preach all the Spiritual Retreats in the Province in 2008, focussing upon the challenge of a contemporary and critical reading of Don Bosco. The pages that follow contain that Spiritual Retreat. By early 2008 it became clear that the cancer had returned, but Ian preached all the retreats across the Province, including the Pacific. Indeed, he preached the retreat in Apia, Samoa, only weeks before he had to be hospitalised. Ian himself has reworked his Conferences very slightly. All who attended the retreat will recognise Ian's voice through these pages. The day he was taken from Auxilium College Lysterfield to the Prince Alfred Hospital he asked for time to spend at his computer. There were a few precisions that he wanted to add to the script. In the period after his hospitalisation, in palliative care at Gawler, close to his origins and his family, he retouched two more of the Conferences.

I saw Ian in Gawler on Wednesday, 18th December 2008. During the course of our conversation Ian told me that he regarded the last three years of his life as the time when he had achieved all that he had dreamt of: he had come to know Don Bosco well. Now, in his sorely felt absence, he is able to share some of that knowledge with all of us in the pages that follow.

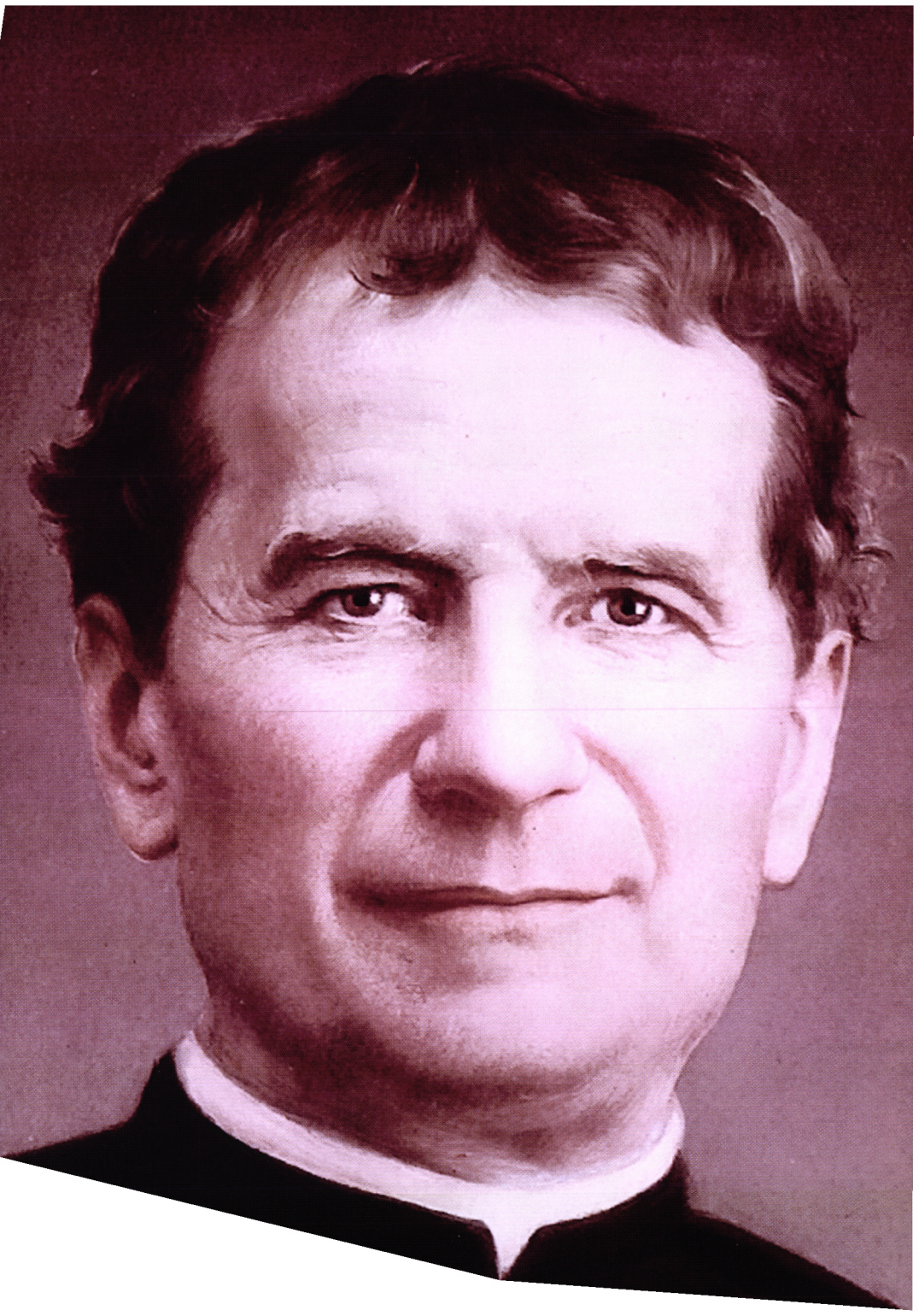
The text is produced as Ian left it with us. As they are conferences given at retreats, there are internal references to something that will be covered in a later Conference, or that was covered earlier. There are no footnotes that refer forward or back. No attempt has been made to introduce a scientific apparatus. The voluminous and sprawling work of Don Lemoyne and Don Ceria, known as the *Memorie Biografiche* (19 volumes) is referred to as EBM (English *Biographical Memoirs*) with the relevant volume and page numbers indicated. However, references to and citations from General Chapters (abbreviated as GC followed by a number indicating which Chapter), citations from major figures in Salesian scholarship, and from a number of Rectors Major, especially Don Egidio Viganò, are not documented. There was no need for such indications in the spoken word. I could have searched out the references, but it is Ian's spoken word that you have in your hands, and I trust, will be in your hearts.

As the Provincial of the Australia-Pacific Province, I join my confrères in wondering what the Lord is asking from us as he takes so many young and major figures to himself, well before, what we would think, is their due time. This mysterious element reaches back in this Province's history, as far as the death of Michael Maiocco, who died in 1942 at 41 years of age and John Biloni, who died in 1946 at 38 years of age. Indeed, Ian is the third ex-Provincial we have lost in his early sixties. The others were Fr Fedrigotti, aged 64 and Fr Cornell aged 65.

Reading this script has allowed Ian into my wondering, to instruct me. Ian's final message to us all, repeating Don Bosco, rings powerfully as the Province, and indeed the Congregation, face our challenges at the beginning of 2009, the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation:

Make yourself humble, brave, persevering.
In due time you will understand everything.

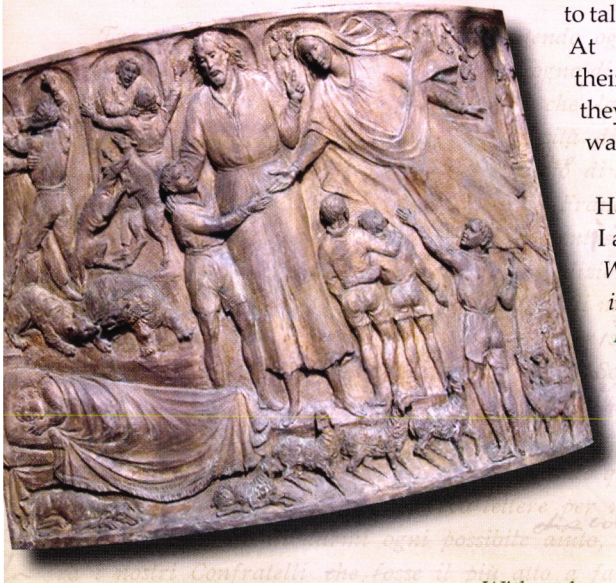
Francis J. Moloney SDB
Provincial of the Australia-Pacific Province
Feast of St John Bosco,
31st January 2009



John Bosco's Dream

I was nine or ten years old when I had a dream.
All my life this remained deeply impressed on my mind.
In this dream I seemed to be near my home in a fairly large yard.
A crowd of children were playing there.
Some were laughing, some were playing games,
and quite a few were swearing.
When I heard these evil words,
I jumped immediately amongst them
and tried to stop them by using my words and my fists.

At that moment a dignified man appeared – a nobly dressed adult. He wore a white cloak, and his face shone so that I could not look directly at him. He called me by name, told me to take charge of these children, and added these words:
Not by blows, but by gentleness and love must you win over these friends of yours.
Start right away to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue.



Confused and frightened, I replied that I was a poor, ignorant child. I was unable to talk to those youngsters about religion. At that moment the kids stopped their fighting, shouting, and swearing; they gathered round the man who was speaking.

Hardly knowing what I was saying, I asked,

Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?

Precisely because it seems impossible to you, you must make it possible through obedience and the acquisition of knowledge.

Where, by what means, can I acquire knowledge?

I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her, all wisdom is foolishness.

But who are you that speak so?

I am the son of the woman whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day.

My mother tells me not to mix with people I don't know unless I have her permission. So tell me your name.
Ask my mother what my name is.

At that moment, I saw a lady of stately appearance standing beside him. She was wearing a mantle that sparkled all over as though covered with bright stars. Seeing from my questions and answers that I was more confused than ever, she beckoned me to approach her. She took me kindly by the hand and said,
Look.

Glancing round, I realised that the youngsters had all apparently run away. A large number of goats, dogs, cats, bears, and other animals had taken their place.
This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, brave and persevering. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children.

I looked round again, and where before I had seen wild animals, I now saw gentle lambs. They were all jumping and bleating as if to welcome that man and lady.

At that point, still dreaming, I began crying. I begged the lady to speak so that I could understand her, because I did not know what all this could mean. She then placed her hand on my head and said:
In good time you will understand everything.

With that, a noise woke me up and everything disappeared. I was totally bewildered. My hands seemed to be sore from the blows I had given, and my face hurt from those I had received. The memory of the man and the lady, and the things said and heard, so occupied my mind that I could not get any more sleep that night.

I wasted no time in telling all about my dream. I spoke first to my brothers, who laughed at the whole thing, and then to my mother and grandmother. Each one gave his own interpretation. My brother Joseph said,

You're going to become a keeper of goats, sheep, and other animals.
My mother commented,
Who knows, but you may become a priest.
Anthony merely grunted,
Perhaps you'll become a robber chief.
But my grandmother, though she could not read or write, knew enough theology and made the final judgement, saying,
Pay no attention to dreams.

Conference One

Give me souls, take away the rest

Living out & Living up to our Charismatic Identity

In 2006 the Rector Major announced a three-pronged theme for the 26th General Chapter:

1. Da mihi animas, cetera tolle.
2. Charismatic identity and apostolic zeal.
3. Starting again from Don Bosco to reawaken the heart of every Salesian.

Like a trident, it was meant to prod us and goad us with each of those three points, and get the oxen moving. The 26th General Chapter is behind us now, but I'm sure we haven't heard the last of it yet. What I would like to do is to open up some questions for reflection and exploration.

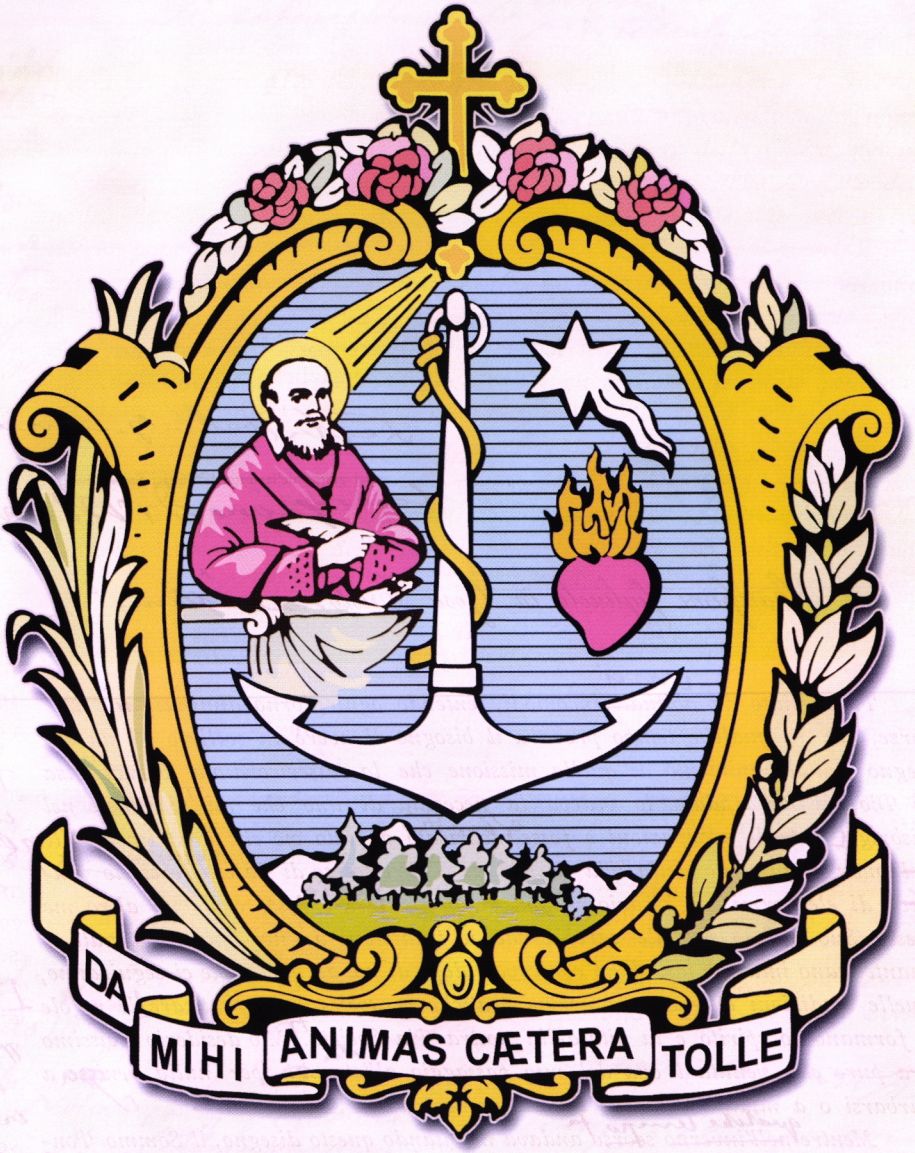
Starting again from Don Bosco to reawaken the heart of every Salesian can be taken as a statement of intent. *Starting again from Don Bosco* carries with it a different weight of meaning from returning to Don Bosco and staying put. *To reawaken the heart* is a whole lot more than to add to the content of our knowledge.

One of the indispensable sources for starting again from Don Bosco, for reawakening our hearts, is also one of the most problematic – that great baggy monster, the *Biographical Memoirs*. A perfect example is the following account of the adoption of *Give me souls, take away the rest*, as the official motto of the Congregation:

> Up until this time the Congregation did not have its own official coat of arms as all other religious families. As a seal, the pious Salesian Society had used the figure of St Francis de Sales surrounded by a Latin text. It was only on September 12th 1884 that Father Anthony Sala submitted a sketch of a Salesian coat of arms to the Superior Chapter, when given the opportunity of having it placed between the coat of arms of Pius IX and Leo XIII. The design had been drawn by Professor Boidi and was comprised of the following: a shield with a big anchor in the middle; to the right, the bust of St Francis de Sales and to the left, a flaming heart with a six-pointed star on top; below, a forest with high mountains in the background; at the bottom, two branches (one of palm, the other of laurel) with the stems entwined and encircling the shield half way; on the lower portion, a waving streamer with the words, *Let the children come to me.*[3]



[3] EBM XVII, 337-8


DA
MIHI
ANIMAS CÆTERA
TOLLE

Some objected to this motto because others had already used it. Father Julius Barberis suggested that it be changed to *Temperance and Labour*; this idea being prompted by Don Bosco's dream in which the two words had been proposed precisely as the distinguishing coat of arms of the Congregation. Father Celestine Durando would have preferred *Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us*. It was Don Bosco who solved the dilemma by saying:

> A motto was already adopted in the early days of the Oratory, at the time of the Convitto, when I was visiting the prisons: *Give me souls, take away the rest*.

The Chapter acclaimed Don Bosco and agreed to this historic motto. This motto had been visible from of old, written in big letters on the door of Don Bosco's little room, so testified the oldest pupils of the Oratory, among whom were Canon Ballesio and Cardinal John Cagliero, who said they had seen it there as children.

That seems to settle the matter, but in fact it raises more questions than it answers. Pursuing these questions brings into much sharper focus the true import of each of the three prongs making up the trident: ***Da mihi animas, cetera tolle; Charismatic identity and apostolic zeal;*** and ***Starting again from Don Bosco*** to reawaken the heart of every Salesian. Why does it matter that our motto is *Give me souls, take away the rest* rather than something else? What difference does it make?

In the first place, we might notice that it is surprisingly late for the matter to be open for discussion by the Superior Chapter (in 1884 – less than four years before the death of Don Bosco). What's more, there are some genuine alternatives, not least the first one that is sidelined in an introductory aside. It's hard to believe that the official seal did not have prior approval from Don Bosco. And if we can be told what all the other texts are, why are we told only that on the seal the figure of St Francis de Sales is surrounded by a Latin text, without being told what that text was? In fact, the words were *Learn from me for I am meek* (Mt 11:29), a saying of the Lord and a reference to St Francis de Sales' spirit of gentleness, adopted by Don Bosco as one of the resolutions for his priestly ordination.

There are also echoes of the initial vocation-mission dream,[4] *Not by blows, but by gentleness and love must you win over these friends of yours.* This seal had been in use for some years, and can be found at the bottom of letters written and signed by Don Bosco before 1884. In Don Bosco's circular letter of 1883, *On Inflicting Punishments in Salesian Houses*, the third recommendation – *Do not make it appear that you are acting in anger* – refers directly to Jesus' teaching, *Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart.*

Don Bosco makes use of the accepted methods of his own time and place for the interpretation and application of the scriptures. In the process he brought together three motifs that were near and dear to his own heart: the example of Jesus in the

[4] See page 8

gospels, St Teresa of Avila's saying, *Let nothing disturb you* (linked to 1 Kings 19:1-11), and the meekness of St Francis de Sales, whom he calls *our admirable patron, gentle and wise educator of the heart that he was*. This lends added weight to the credentials of the image of St Francis de Sales with the inscription, in Latin, *Learn from me for I am meek*, already in use on the official seal of the Congregation, strengthening its claim to become the official motto of the Congregation when the matter was under discussion by the Superior Chapter in 1884. Seen in this light, *Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart* has credentials that are no less impressive than those of *Give me souls, take away the rest* – and yet this alternative is conspicuously absent from Fr Lemoyne's account of the discussion that follows among the members of the Superior Chapter.

Next is *Let the little children come to me* (Mt 19:14, Mk 10:14, Lk 18:16). This text is also a saying of the Lord. We are told that some objected to this motto because others had already used it, but it's worth noting that it had appeared in the preamble to Don Bosco's early Constitutions from 1858 onwards, until it was finally taken out in 1873 when Rome removed it along with the historical summary. Had the Superior Chapter really wanted to, could this have been an opportunity to bring it back in another form?

Work and Temperance, of course, is not a saying of the Lord. Nor is it a saying we would immediately associate with St Francis de Sales. In itself, it is not necessarily specifically Christian or even religious. *Work and Temperance* could just as well be a campaign to improve the moral fibre, work ethic and prosperity of a society or a nation. But we need to bear in mind that it carries with it the weight of earlier advocacy by Don Bosco himself. The account of the meeting of the Superior Chapter refers to a dream of Don Bosco in which these two words had been proposed as the coat of arms of the Congregation. This was the dream of the bellowing bull (EBM XII, 334-342), told by Don Bosco in 1876 as a keepsake at one of the spiritual retreats at Lanzo:

> Take heed: you must have these words engraved on your coat of arms as your watchword, your badge. Note them well: *Work and Temperance will make the Salesian Congregation flourish.*

In 1877 we find Don Bosco writing to Fr Joseph Fagnano in South America, telling him:

> Always remind all our Salesians of the motto we have adopted: *Work and Temperance*. These are the two weapons with which we can overcome everyone and everything. [5]

At Valdocco in 1879, relating another dream, Don Bosco spoke of Work and Temperance as the two pillars of the Congregation, stating that:

> The Congregation will have a long life provided that its members love work and temperance. Should either of these pillars fall, your entire edifice will collapse and crush superiors, subjects and followers beneath it. [6]

[5] EBM XIII, 245
[6] EBM XIV, 89

Would there have been a different outcome had that meeting of the Superior Chapter taken place between 1876 and 1879 instead of 1884? One thing we can be sure of is that no-one, not in 1876, not in 1879, not even in 1884, could possibly have foreseen that emphasis on work and temperance over and above all other considerations would lead to a movement – *Salesians of the strict observance*. In 1887, a Polish priest, named Bronislao Markiewicz, was accepted into the Salesian Congregation, and made his perpetual vows to Don Bosco himself. After he returned to Poland as a parish priest to work among the poor, he founded a Society with male and female branches called *Work and Temperance*. After he died in 1912, the Society was recognised by the Church and gave rise to two Congregations under the protection of St Michael the Archangel, and their members became known as Michaelites. Bronislao Markiewicz was beatified on the 19th June 2005. [7]

The suggestion that probably seems to us to be the least imaginative and the least exciting is *Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us* from Father Celestine Durando. But we need to remember that Mary, Help of Christians, had loomed large since the 1860s, and increasingly Don Bosco had come to be identified with promoting devotion to Our Lady under this title. The imposing Church of Mary, Help of Christians had stood since 1868 as a concrete expression of this devotion, and as the centre of a rapidly growing spiritual family. The legend inside the church, *Here is my house, from here my glory goes forth* was no idle boast. The great picture of Mary, Help of Christians above the high altar had become known as Don Bosco's Madonna. I'll come back to this later.

That leaves us with Don Bosco's choice – *Give me souls, take away the rest.* Ought we to take at face value, with no questions asked? Don Bosco's assures us that it goes all the way back to the days when he began to visit the prisons of Turin as part of the practical pastoral experiences for priests at the Pastoral Institute attached to the Church of St Francis of Assisi.

We can certainly trace it back as far as the early years of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales at Valdocco. Cagliero, who entered the Oratory in 1852, was among those who testified that they had seen *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle* written in big letters on the door of Don Bosco's little room. According to the Life of Dominic Savio (1859), this was a talking point with Don Bosco when Dominic entered the Oratory in October 1854. It also appears in a photograph taken in 1861 of Don Bosco in the room where he lived from 1853 to 1861, although it is over the window rather than on the door. I can think of at least two explanations. One is that like many of us, Don Bosco moved things around from time to time. The other is my preferred option: Don Bosco, never slow to see a good photo opportunity, placed it there so that it would be seen to advantage in the photo.

[7] Ceria, Annali II, 674-5; http://www.sdb.org 13 April 2008



Give me souls, take away the rest certainly has solid credentials. It might not be a saying of the Lord, but it is scripturally based (Gen 14:21), and importantly, Don Bosco attributed it to St Francis de Sales. According to his Life of Dominic Savio, these were the favourite words of St Francis de Sales.

Seen in hindsight, there is little doubt about Don Bosco's unerring instinct in choosing *Give me souls, take away the rest* as best expressing the practical exercise of pastoral charity he had founded, and the spirit in which he wanted it carried out. It was fully consonant with his original intention of founding a congregation of oratories, and with what he had written in the draft Constitutions of 1860:

> It is the purpose of this congregation to gather together its members, priests, seminarians and lay people too, in order that they may strive for perfection through the imitation, so far as it is possible, of the virtues of our divine Saviour, especially in charity toward poor young people.



What is more, *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle* is all of a piece with his whole life and work in a way that is not true of the alternatives. This takes us back even further, from the prisons of Turin in the 1840s to the little house at Becchi and the initial vocation-mission dream. Just as Don Bosco has grown into the dream, so too his spiritual and educational horizons have continued to expand over a lifetime and he has grown into the full meaning of *Give me souls, take away the rest.* If the practical exercise of pastoral charity in the spirit of St Francis de Sales was the inspiration for his early oratory apostolate in the Turin of the 1840s, it was also to be the inspiration for the world-wide apostolate of the Salesian Society of the 1880s in all its different forms and settings.

Nor can there be much doubt that *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle* is preferable as a short-hand statement of our charismatic identity as Salesians than any of the alternatives, something for us to live up to and to live out, without some of the hesitations that might attend:

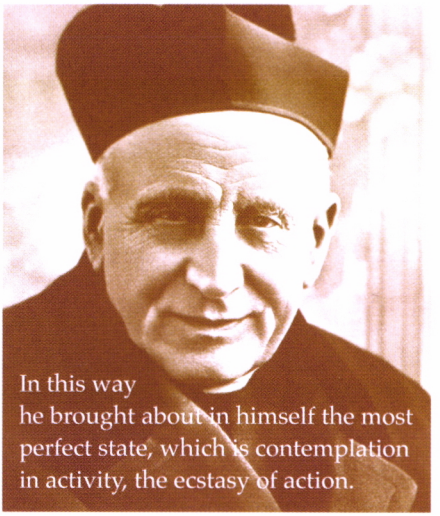
- Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart
- Let little children come to me
- Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us
- Work and Temperance

It is worth noting **how** and **where** *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle* is employed in our present Constitutions. The first instance is in Part I, *The Salesians of Don Bosco in the Church:* Chapter 1, *The Society of St Francis de Sales.* Constitution 4, *Form of Our Society,* reads:

> Inspired by the goodness and zeal of St Francis de Sales, Don Bosco called us Salesians, and gave us a programme of life in the motto, *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle.*

The second instance is in Part II, *Sent to the Young – In Communities – Following Christ:* Chapter 7, *In Dialogue with the Lord.* Constitution 85, *The Gift of Prayer,* reads:

In praying, the Salesian community responds to this call; it deepens its awareness of its intimate and living relationship with God, and of its saving mission, making its own, Don Bosco's prayer: *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle.*

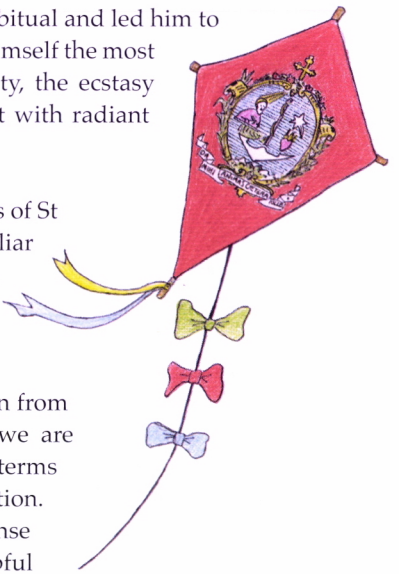


A programme of life; a motto; Don Bosco's prayer – *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle* is all of these things.

Constitution 86, *Salesian Prayer*, speaks of apostolic prayer in which praying and living are spontaneously united, and of Salesian prayer being drawn from life experiences and flowing back into it. In this way we see what is meant by what has been called the grace of unity.

In his Strenna for 1931, Father Philip Rinaldi wrote:

> Don Bosco united in the most perfect way his tireless, absorbing, extensive external activity, full of responsibility, with an interior life based on the presence of God which little by little became habitual and led him to perfect union. In this way he brought about in himself the most perfect state, which is contemplation in activity, the ecstasy of action, in which he spent himself to the last with radiant tranquillity for the salvation of souls.



The term, *ecstasy of action,* is taken from the writings of St Francis de Sales. Father Rinaldi was already familiar with the term and applied it to Don Bosco in 1931, encouraging members of the Salesian family to know and imitate the interior life of Don Bosco.

Perhaps it's time we started preferring terms drawn from the Salesian tradition in the broad sense when we are expressing our spirituality, instead of borrowing terms from other traditions, including the Ignatian tradition. I, for one, find the term *ecstasy of action*, in the sense in which it is used by St Francis de Sales, more helpful than the hybrid term *contemplatives in action*, and truer to the inner dynamics of *Give me souls, take away the rest.*

The kite is up; I'm handing it over to you now.

Conference Two

Towards a Definitive Vocational Commitment

Make yourself humble, brave, persevering

When the Rector Major was in East Timor, he told the Rectors:

> Read *Memoirs of the Oratory* – You will find answers to your future there.

In India, at the closing of their centenary celebrations, he told the Salesians:

> Love and learn about Don Bosco more and more. Read *Memoirs of the Oratory* at least once a year, not as a chronicle of the past but a testimony to the future.

The paradox about the Memoirs, or memories, of the Oratory, being memories of the future rather than memories of the past, echoes Don Bosco's own words in the preface to *Memoirs of the Oratory*:

> Now, what purpose can this chronicle serve? It will be a record to help people overcome problems that may come in the future by learning from the past.

To capture the meaning in English, it could also be translated as, *It will serve to overcome future difficulties in the light of the lessons of the past.* Or even better, because it puts the emphasis where it really belongs, *It will show us the way, by learning from the past, to overcome difficulties that may arise in the future.*

In this light, I want to begin with the chapter that comes at the end of Part I of *Memoirs of the Oratory,* the First Decade, from 1825 to 1835. The Chapter title is *Choosing a State in Life:*

> So the end of the rhetoric year approached, the time when students usually ponder their vocations. The dream from Murialdo was deeply imprinted on my mind; in fact, it had recurred several times more in ever clearer terms, so that if I wanted to put faith in it I would have to choose the priesthood towards which I actually felt inclined. But I did not want to believe dreams, and my own manner of life, certain habits of the heart, and the absolute lack of the virtues necessary to that state, filled me with doubts and made the decision very difficult.

We might notice that the reference to the initial vocation-mission dream is rather ambiguous, hinting at inner conflict and unresolved tensions. *If I **wanted** to put faith in it I would **have** to choose the priesthood.*

Don Bosco has already told us in the prologue that he had not spoken about the dream of his boyhood to anyone else apart from his mother and brothers and grandmother until 1858, more than thirty years after the event, when he went to Rome to speak to Pius IX



about the Salesian Congregation. In fact, it was only for *Memoirs of the Oratory* in the 1870s that he put it in writing for the first time, nearly fifty years after the event. With the whole process of discerning his vocation behind him, Don Bosco was well aware of the difficulties attendant on the most important choices he had made at crucial moments of his life. His telling of the dream of his boyhood is coloured and informed by everything that has happened since. It is a dream in which two noble figures hold out to him as a life's choice the gift of self in service, without over-simplifying the issues involved, and without offering any certainties about what lies ahead:

> You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love. Start right away to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue.

In John's response there is nothing of false humility or modesty, but simply recognition of the enormity of the task, the limitations of the human subject, and all the complexities of the human situation:

> Confused and frightened, I replied that I was a poor and ignorant child, quite incapable of talking to those youngsters about religion…Hardly knowing what I was saying, I asked, Who are you to demand the impossible of me?

We know that Don Bosco went to the trouble of going back to the original rough copy of *Memoirs of the Oratory*, where he had written that the lady said to him, *Make yourself healthy, brave, persevering*, and correcting it to read, *Make yourself* ***humble****, brave, persevering*. John's response is, *I began to cry, and I begged the lady to talk to me in words that I could understand.*

The Chapter, **Choosing a State in Life**, coming at the end of the First Decade, when John is nineteen, shows just how indeterminate and open-ended the boyhood dream is:

> If only I had had a guide to care for my vocation! What a great treasure he would have been for me; but I lacked that treasure. I had a good confessor who sought to make me a good Christian, but who never chose to get involved in the question of my vocation. Thinking things over to myself, after reading some books which dealt with the choice of a state in life, I decided to enter the Franciscan Order. If I become a secular priest, I told myself, my vocation runs a great risk of shipwreck. I will embrace the priesthood, renounce the world, enter the cloister, and dedicate myself to study and meditation; thus in solitude I will be able to combat my pride, which had put down deep roots in my heart.

The phrase *I will be able to combat my pride, which had put down deep roots in my heart* takes on added significance in view of the lady in the dream's *Make yourself humble, brave, persevering*. We'll come back to that in a moment.

Where does joining the Franciscan monastery of Our Lady of Peace in Chieri leave him in relation to the Murialdo dream? If God was calling him to a special kind of apostolate on behalf of the young, how could he hope to be able to do that as a Franciscan under obedience? Then comes another dream:

> A few days before I was due to enter, I had a very strange dream. I seemed to see a multitude of these friars, clad in threadbare habits, all dashing about helter-skelter. One of them came up to me and said: You're looking for peace, but you won't find it here. See what goes on! God's preparing another place, another harvest for you.

I take it that this dream is not meant to be an exposé of what Franciscans were really like, but a projection of what is going on inside the nineteen-year-old John and his conflicted self. There is still a long way to go to the Don Bosco of the *Da mihi animas*, who is a firm believer in the redemptive and sanctifying power of apostolic activity. Next, Don Bosco tells us:

> Something cropped up that made it impossible for me to carry out my intention. And since the obstacles were many and difficult, I decided to reveal it all to my friend Comollo.

He doesn't elaborate, but coming as it does after his strange dream, it was serious enough to dissuade him from entering a way of life which would have run counter to the evident thrust of the vocation-mission dream.

He takes the advice of Louis Comollo and his uncle, Fr Joseph Comollo, and joins the diocesan seminary instead. There's some more food for thought in the advice to John, contained in Fr Joseph Comollo's reply to a letter written to him by his nephew, Louis:

> Having given careful consideration to the matters you wrote to me about, I would advise your friend not to enter a monastery at this time. Let him don the clerical habit. As he goes on with his studies he will better understand what God wants of him. He should not be afraid that he will lose his vocation, because by shunning the world and by being diligent in prayer he will be able to overcome all obstacles.



Once again, the references to John's being afraid that he is going to *lose his vocation*, and how he will be able to overcome *all obstacles*, suggest that there's more to this than first meets the eye.

All of this comes after Don Bosco has already expressed doubts about his own dispositions and suitability:

> My own manner of life, certain habits of the heart and the absolute lack of virtues necessary to the priestly state, filled me with doubts and made the decision very difficult.

Instead of dismissing this as false modesty on the part of Don Bosco, we should pay him the compliment of taking him at his word, taking him seriously. In the preface to the ***Memoirs*** he told us:

> I am now putting into writing those confidential details that may somehow serve as a light or be of use to the work which Divine Providence has entrusted to the Society of St Francis de Sales. But I must say at the outset that I am writing for my beloved Salesian sons; I forbid that these things be made public during my lifetime or after my death.

In Part I of *Memoirs of the Oratory*, the First Decade from 1825 to 1835, Don Bosco recalls the innocent pride he took in all his youthful accomplishments – acrobatics, magic tricks, music and singing, drama, poetry recitations, playing an instrument, running, jumping, and tree-climbing. The decade ends with the chapter, *Choosing a State in Life*, in which Don Bosco confesses, *pride had put down deep roots in my heart.*

At the beginning of Part II, the Second Decade, 1835 to 1845, Don Bosco tells us:

> My life in the past had not been wicked, but I had been proud and dissipated, given over to amusements, games, acrobatics, and other such things. These pursuits gave me passing joy, *but did not satisfy the heart.*

He then goes on to give us a whole series of examples of what he means by *certain habits of the heart*, and that *pride had put down deep roots* in his heart, beginning with the way he soaks up high praise for his first attempts at preaching at the age of fifteen: *in fact vainglory somewhat carried me away*. Playing the violin, hunting, card-playing and preaching continue to be occasions of pride and vainglory until after he is ordained.

If, in retrospect, Don Bosco is prepared to refer to certain habits of his heart, and the absolute lack of virtues necessary to the priestly state, this is because pride and vainglory are directly opposed to the advice of the lady in the dream of his boyhood: *Make yourself humble, brave, persevering.* Don Bosco's narrative shows how pride goes before a fall, literally. Shortly after his ordination, Don Bosco is on his way to Lavriano to preach on St Benignus. *I was determined to win glory from it*, he tells us, *but*

God wanted to teach a terrible lesson to my pride. He comes a cropper when he is thrown from his horse and is taken down a peg or two. The moral of the story, as he tells it, is *after this warning, I firmly resolved that in the future I would prepare my sermons for the greater glory of God, and not to appear learned and erudite.* It is not by accident that the very next chapter is the Convitto Ecclesiastico. *Here,* Don Bosco says, *one learnt to be a priest.*

In telling this story at his own expense, Don Bosco is true to his words in the preface, that *Memoirs of the Oratory will serve as pleasurable entertainment for my sons as they read about their father's adventures, and that I am a father who speaks of his experiences to his beloved children. They will rejoice in coming to hear the exploits of him who loved them so much, and who tried, in small as in great things, to work always with their spiritual and temporal good in mind.* But there should be no mistake about it; this is no mere contrivance, a narrative device on Don Bosco's part purely for the sake of entertainment. He is using these anecdotes to raise the crucial matter of motivations and intentions, his and ours, of doing things not for ourselves, but for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls.

As a counterpoint to his development of the theme of pride in relation to the purifying of motivations and intentions, Don Bosco gives us a whole litany of all the things he is going to give up. In order, these are public shows during fairs or at markets, dances, the theatre, games of dice, conjuring tricks, acrobatics, sleight of hand, tightrope walking, violin playing and hunting, reading secular literature, bara rotta,[8] tarots, bird-nesting, rabbit hunting, and using high-falutin language in his sermons. The fact that he has to renounce hunting and the violin several times is indicative of the struggle.

We can put some of this down to a *flight from the world*, a turn to asceticism, rigidity and diffidence in the seminary under the influence of Louis Comollo. It's only later that we discover he *hasn't* given it all away. Significantly in the context of the beginning of the Oratory, Don Bosco tells us about games and recreation for his boys in the laneway between the convent of the Sisters of St Mary Magdalene and the Via Cottolengo. On a day-outing to Superga there is bocce,[9] piastrelle,[10] and stilt-walking, a bugle, a drum, a tambourine and a guitar, and horse-riding. This becomes even more evident after the establishment of a permanent home for the Oratory at Valdocco:

> When we came out of church, there was a period of free time for each to do as he pleased. Some continued their catechism class, some practised their singing, some worked at their reading. Most of them, however, jumped about, ran, and enjoyed themselves in various games and pastimes. All those exploits of jumping, running, juggling, tightrope walking, stick balancing that I had learned long before from acrobats, were practiced under my instruction. In this way I could

[8] A game in which two sides stage a kind of mock battle. The losers are those who are reached by their opponents before they manage to find a refuge (bara).
[9] Bocce is similar to lawn bowls, played on a dirt court.
[10] Piastrelle is a throwing game played with flat pebbles.

control that crowd, which, in the main, could be described thus: Like a horse or a mule, unintelligent.

This is when we see the Don Bosco of *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle* begin to emerge. His is an apostolic spirituality, in which everything is done for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls – the *Da mihi animas.* Activities that had once seemed incompatible with the priestly state have been subordinated to the good of souls. As Don Bosco knew from personal experience, motivation and the intention are paramount. Either consciously or unconsciously we can be seeking our own good rather than the good of souls. It is in this light that we need to understand the *cetera tolle* – as referring to all the impediments, external and internal, that need to be taken away for the sake of souls: *Take from me all that could be an obstacle to total service.* A too narrowly ascetical interpretation of the *cetera tolle* is not borne out, either by Don Bosco himself, or by the saint he attributed it to, St Francis de Sales. It was Fr Viganò who said in 1982:

> Temperance is not the sum of what we have given up, but a growth in the practice of pastoral and pedagogical charity.

Fr Luigi Rulla and a team of researchers at the Gregorian University in Rome published the findings of an in-depth study over twenty or thirty years under the title, *The Anthropology of the Christian Vocation.* Volume I is on the interdisciplinary bases, which include philosophy and theology as well as depth psychology. Some of the authorities are Lonergan, Rahner, and Cardinal Wotyla, as he was at the time. Volume II is the existential confirmation based on empirical data from hundreds of young people about twenty years old, men and women, all Catholics, with or without a vocation to the priestly or religious life. A key conclusion is that:

> Self-transcendence, besides being a gift, is also the final result of a personal conquest which can be reached only gradually by a long personal journey of active cooperation with divine grace. What the individual wishes to become does not consist in self-actualisation or self-fulfilment, but corresponds to a call from God, accepted in a vision of faith.

This is something Don Bosco knew from his own experience. It is only through a gradual process of grace, building upon nature, that Don Bosco arrives at the inner freedom to fully embrace the conviction that apostolic activity with the young is both redemptive and sanctifying, the inner freedom to fully embrace *Give me souls, take away the rest.*

Not the least of the gifts from a loving father to his sons, in the pages of *Memoirs of the Oratory,* is the realisation that his discernment of his vocation and his vocational journey were not qualitatively different from our own, and that the Salesian spirituality he has left us in narrative form is not monastic or ascetic, it is *apostolic.*

Don Bosco has carried out exactly the advice he puts into the mouth of the parish priest of Alfiano, Joseph Peleto:

> Give up your high-falutin language and stick to dialect wherever possible, and when you use Italian, speak the language of the people, the people, the people. Instead of speculations, use examples, analogies, and simple practical illustrations. Bear in mind that the common people understand hardly anything you have to say because the truths of the faith are never sufficiently explained to them.

Don Bosco doesn't simply *tell* us this;
in *Memoirs of the Oratory,* he *shows* us how it is done.



Conference Three

Habits of the Heart

Motivations & Intention

After Don Bosco moves to the Pastoral Institute attached to the Church of St Francis of Assisi in Turin in 1841, he meets a whole new generation of young people growing up without much help from family, Church or society, young people referred to in the literature of the times as being *poor and abandoned* or *at risk.*

Fr John Baptist Lemoyne was the first to point out, as long ago as 1901, that:

> For Don Bosco, Bartholomew Garelli represented not only countless other boys, but the many peoples he would evangelise: that he might gather into one the children of God (Jn 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 gifts and graces.

The experience of youth ministry at the Oratory of St Francis of Assisi introduced Don Bosco to something very different from his previous experiences with the simple country children of Becchi and the young students of the school at Chieri.

Gradually it begins to dawn on Don Bosco that the dream of his boyhood will be played out not among his childhood companions of Becchi, not among the young hopeful students of Chieri, but on the streets and in the squares of Turin. As Don Bosco begins to realise this, increasingly it challenges him and demands a commitment. A new option for the young takes shape, and the oratory experiment at St Francis of Assisi continues with increasing success until 1844.

Given that the post-ordination course at the Pastoral Institute normally lasted two years, and that after completing the course Don Bosco stays on for a third year, during which he also acts as tutor, it is hardly surprising that as his third year and his time at the Institute are coming to an end, Don Bosco enters another critical period of vocational discernment.

Once again, Don Bosco entertains the idea of joining a religious congregation, this time the Congregation of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary, with the idea of going to the foreign missions (not the Oblates of Mary Immaculate; the Congregation of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary, founded by Fr Pio Bruno Lanteri, had a Vicariate Apostolic in Burma, now Myanmar).



On the advice of Fr Cafasso, his spiritual director, Don Bosco makes a spiritual retreat in June 1844 to discern his vocation. After the retreat Don Bosco tells Fr Cafasso that he was going to become a religious. In reply, Fr Cafasso said:

> Forget about becoming a religious. The foreign missions are not for you. You can't even stand a minute in a closed carriage without getting sick to the stomach, and you want to cross the ocean? You'd die during the voyage. Continue to work for your boys. This and none other is God's will for you.

This raises the same questions as the earlier episode when he was thinking about joining the Franciscans, especially in regard to Don Bosco's option for the young. At one point in the *Biographical Memoirs*, Don Bosco says:

> If Our Lord calls me to religious life, he will find someone else to take care of the young people.

The second crisis came in October 1844. Don Bosco tells us in *Memoirs of the Oratory*:

> One day, Father Cafasso took me aside and said, *Now that you've finished your studies, you must get to work. These days, the harvest is abundant enough. What is your particular bent?*
>
> *Whatever you would like to point me towards.*
>
> *There are three posts open: curate at Buttigliera d'Asti, tutor in moral theology here at the Convitto, and director of the little hospital beside the Refuge. Which would you choose?*

The crisis in this case is not from within, but from the circumstances. His reply to Fr Cafasso's question shows that his commitment to the work of the Oratory was not faltering:

> *My inclination is to work for young people. At this moment I see myself in the midst of a crowd of children calling to me for help.*

But none of the assignments offered realistic possibilities in that respect.

Fr Cafasso advises him to accept the chaplaincy at the Little Hospital of St Philomena for severely handicapped girls between the ages of 3 and 12, still under construction, and in the meantime to help Fr John Borel at the Pious Institute of Our Lady, Refuge of Sinners, and live with him there. *Meanwhile*, Fr Cafasso tells him, *God will show you what you have to do for the young.*

Don Bosco knows that he is caught in a bind:

> At first this advice seemed to cut across my inclinations. With a hospital to take care of, preaching and confessions in an institute for more than four hundred girls, there would be no time for anything else. Nevertheless, this was the will of heaven, as I was soon assured.

Thirty years later, Don Bosco confided to Fr Barberis just how heavily this weighed upon him:

> It was the year 1844. I was due to leave the Pastoral Institute of St Francis for Priests and move to the Refuge to live with Fr Borel. I was truly worried about what I should do with my youngsters who attended religious instruction on Sundays and Holy days. I did not know whether I should let go of them or continue to care for them. My desire was to continue the work of the oratories but I did not see how I could. On the last Sunday I was to stay at the Pastoral Institute, I had to notify my youngsters that they were no longer to meet there as usual. As a matter of fact, I was debating whether I should tell them that there would no longer be any place to meet, since the Oratory would be terminated – or else I should tell them where the new meeting place would be.

In the event, for six successive Sundays, the Oratory met in Don Bosco's and Fr Borel's rooms situated above the entrance to the Refuge. Then the Marchesa di Barolo allowed the Oratory the use of two rooms in the chaplaincy quarters of the Little Hospital still under construction. Don Bosco and Fr Borel obtained the Archbishop's permission to establish a chapel there, and to conduct religious services. Don Bosco's own Oratory, under the patronage of St Francis de Sales, met there for the first time on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception 1844.

The time spent at the Little Hospital came to an end in May 1845. Reflecting on the way the oratory programme was conducted there, with the use of the chapel for the Sacraments and catechetical instruction, and the use of a laneway between the Convent of the Sisters of St Mary Magdalene and the Via Cottolengo for games and recreation, Don Bosco says:



> We thought that we had found heaven on earth; then we had to leave our beloved haven to go look for another.

The next time Don Bosco's Oratory met, it was at the Church of St Peter's in Chains at the disused Holy Cross Cemetery. Forbidden further use of that church, the Oratory roamed without a fixed place until July 1845. Next Fr Borel and Don Bosco obtained the city's permission for restricted use of St Martin's chapel at the Dora

Mills until December 1845. Denied further access because of complaints, they rented rooms in the house of a retired priest, Fr John Moretta, until March 1846. Once again evicted for the same reasons, Don Bosco and Fr Borel obtained the use of an open field belonging to the Filippi brothers for a couple of Sundays in March 1846.

The tendency of tradition has been to romanticise this period of eighteen months when the Oratory was on the move as the *Wandering Oratory*. As the old saying has it, however, *the devil is in the detail.*

Don Bosco recalls:

> With no one to help me, my energy gone, my health undermined, with no idea where I could gather my boys in the future, I was very disturbed. I withdrew to one side, and as I walked alone I began to cry, perhaps for the first time. As I walked I looked up to heaven and cried out, My God, why don't you show me where you want me to gather these children? Oh, let me know! Oh, show me what I must do!

At this dramatic moment, Don Bosco is approached by a Mr Pancrazio Soave, who asks him, *Is it true that you're looking for a place where you can build a laboratory?*

Not exactly a laboratory, replies Don Bosco, *but an Oratory.*

At this Soave says, *I don't know the difference, but I know somewhere that might do. Come and see it; it belongs to a good man named Francis Pinardi. Come with me – you'll get a good deal.* Pinardi had bought the house and one acre of land from the Filippi brothers in 1845, and then rented the house to Soave, who had come to Turin to start a starch factory. So there are wheels within wheels; it's in the nuts and bolts that we begin to appreciate all the challenges Don Bosco faced.

Don Bosco found a large field with a house on it and under construction a large shed running the length of the house. A contract between Francis Pinardi and Fr John Borel was signed for the rental of a three-room shed from 1st April 1846 to 30th April 1849, at three hundred lire a year. This was to become the permanent home of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales.

The confusing of an Oratory with a laboratory has rightly earned its place in the story of Salesian origins. Events prove Soave to be right in a sense he does not intend. The Oratory of St Francis de Sales would indeed become a flexible and adaptable instrument in Don Bosco's hands for a developing experiment in education and youth spirituality, in a state of continuous evolution as Don Bosco's educational horizons broadened in response to the needs of the young.

All of this came at a personal cost to Don Bosco. When the Little Hospital was dedicated and opened in August 1845, he began to serve as its chaplain, the job

for which the Marchesa di Barolo had hired him in the first place. Nevertheless, on Sundays, he would spend the whole day with the Oratory. In addition, he would be available to his boys during the week to help them as needed.

Don Bosco had been ill since leaving the Pastoral Institute in 1844, and his illness was getting progressively more serious. He promised Fr Borel, Fr Guala and Fr Cafasso that he would take a complete rest in January 1846, but when the time came he didn't keep his promise.

In September 1845 the Marchesa went to Rome to seek approval for the Constitutions of her Congregations, the Sisters of St Anne and the Sisters of St Mary Magdalene, and didn't return to Turin until May 1846. The Oratory had only recently settled at the Pinardi House (1st April), which had been inaugurated as a chapel on Easter Sunday (12th April), and had been blessed by Fr Borel the following day.

Not unreasonably, when the Marchesa di Barolo returned, she expected Don Bosco to do the job for which she had hired him. She wrote to Fr Borel to express her concerns, summing them up as follows:

> 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 round the doorways of my institutes. I firmly believe that Don Bosco needs a complete rest because of his weak lungs. I shall not continue his salary, which he can surely use, unless he agrees to go away from Turin to some place where there will be no cause of harm to his delicate health. This is all the more important to me as my respect for him grows.

Under pressure from the Marchesa to give up his Oratory work, and to become part of a society of priests under the patronage of St Francis de Sales she was planning to establish, Don Bosco resigned (or was dismissed). While he was allowed to keep his room at the Refuge for three months until August 1846, he was now without a salary, and would have to find new lodgings.

With the help of Fr Borel he acted immediately to sub-lease three rooms on the second storey of the Pinardi house. The lease was signed on 5th June. In December, Don Bosco gained control of the whole second storey of the Pinardi house by sub-renting the remaining rooms from Mr Soave.

The Marchesa di Barolo has sometimes been cast as the villain of the piece, if not quite the wicked witch of the West. That really won't do. She shares more common ground with Don Bosco than we care to admit. Both of them belong to that remarkable group of social saints of nineteenth century Turin who were putting pastoral charity into action by running a whole host of projects to address human needs which were not adequately provided for by society at the time. After their split, the Marchesa continued to provide support, anonymously, for Don Bosco and the Oratory.

Don Bosco himself concedes that the Marchesa introduced what he terms an ultimatum with expressions of appreciation and gratitude:

> I am very pleased with the care you take of my institutions. Thank you for all you have done to introduce in them hymn-singing, plainchant, music, arithmetic, and even the metric system.

He also concedes that her expressions of concern for his health were not exaggerated. The period of the Oratory on the move had taken its toll on him, and in his own words, by March 1846 his health was undermined. By July he was on the verge of collapse, and was forced to take leave for a long period of convalescence at the house of his brother Joseph, in Becchi.

In Don Bosco's writings we find a clear recognition that his definitive vocational commitment to poor and abandoned youth came between 1844 and 1846. After that it never wavered. In a memorandum he addressed to Pope Pius IX in 1864, Don Bosco wrote:

> The purpose (of this Society) is to continue (the work) which for about twenty years has been in progress at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales.

The year of reference is 1844, when the Oratory was re-founded, out of the earlier experiment at St Francis of Assisi, as Don Bosco's very own.

On this basis, the time of the wandering and the settling at Valdocco can be seen as the period of Don Bosco's vocational maturity. On the one hand there is, on Don Bosco's part, total dedication, pervasive joy and bright hope for the future of the work; on the other, daunting trials and difficulties encountered for the first time: serious sickness, exasperating difficulty of finding a permanent home, objections of parish priests, suspicion and harassment by the police, abandonment by friends and helpers, and more. Through it all, Don Bosco never wavered:

> I had an inner certainty about what I was doing, and felt that events would prove me right at the end. [11]

We need to remind ourselves that at the time Don Bosco makes this decision to cut the ties with the institutions and programmes he has previously been involved with and go out on his own, he is barely thirty years old.

Don Bosco's definitive vocational commitment to poor and abandoned youth between 1844 and 1846 is clear evidence of movement in the direction indicated by the dream of his boyhood, how humble, how brave, and how persevering he is becoming. They are three qualities that right one another and find equilibrium. Don Bosco will need them all in the years that lie ahead.

[11] Historical Sketch of 1854

Some thought-provoking suggestions along these lines can be found in Fr Desramaut's study of Don Bosco in the context of the times. For instance, he says of Don Bosco's polemical writings against the Waldensians:

> In the early 1850s, Don Bosco had not yet realised all the lessons of the dream at the age of nine.

He finds that:

> Apologetics and Don Bosco were hardly a compatible blend.

He contrasts Don Bosco's polemical diatribes and harangues with his genuine concern for Luigi de Sanctis, a Catholic priest who had joined the Waldensians.

Don Bosco was haunted by the salvation of people. He wished the total happiness of his strange friend, says Fr Desramaut, suggesting that the true expression of Don Bosco's heart is indeed to be found in his motto, *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*. Desramaut concludes:

> In 1855 the reciprocal animosity of the Waldensians and Don Bosco lessened in comparison with preceding years. One can say that the spirit of charity and understanding of St Francis de Sales was on the rise at Valdocco.

If the *brave* and the *persevering* already stand out in Don Bosco during the make or break years of 1844-1846, the *humble* will be tested in the fire and proven by later events. Not least among them were his troubles with the Roman authorities before finally gaining approval for the Rule, and his troubles with Archbishop Gastaldi of Turin.

In the Regulations for the Festive Oratories, dating from the 1850s, we find Don Bosco drawing upon one of the resolutions from his ordination, at the same time alluding to the words of *the man of dignified bearing* in his boyhood dream:

> This Oratory is placed under the patronage of St Francis de Sales, because those who intend to dedicate themselves to this kind of work should adopt this saint as a model of charity and affability. These sources will produce the fruits that we expect from the Oratories.

By way of introduction to his period of vocational crisis and discernment at the age of about nineteen, Don Bosco tells us, *The dream I had had in Murialdo remained deeply imprinted on my mind.* This is true not only for the three decades covered by *Memoirs of the Oratory,* but for the remainder of his life.

In good time you will understand everything, the Lady in the dream had promised him. Don Bosco grows into the dream gradually, trying it on for size in what was a continuing and extended process of vocational discernment. Through all of this, he is humble, brave and persevering in pursuing the way of life, put to him by the two

noble figures – the man and the lady of his boyhood dream. The field he makes his own is the apostolate to the young, especially the ones who are poor, abandoned and at risk. He learns how to win them over, not by blows, but by gentleness and love.

Understanding everything however, was gained only through the mature achievement and reflection of a lifetime. In May 1887, Don Bosco, ill and failing, attended the consecration of the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome. While celebrating Mass he was overpowered with such emotion that he was forced to interrupt the celebration no less than fifteen times. Later his secretary, Fr Charles Viglietti, who had assisted him at the Mass, wanted to learn the reason for his tearful emotional outburst. Don Bosco replied:

> With the mind's eye I saw vividly laid out before me the scene of my childhood when at about the age of ten, *I dreamt of the Congregation*. I could see and hear my mother and brothers, as clearly as though they were there present, arguing over the meaning of the dream.

What evidence we have tells us that it was only towards the end of his life that Don Bosco *understood everything* of his initial dream.

To you, Father, our praise is due
for Don Bosco
the dream that inspired him
the trials that tempered him
and the signs that guided him;
for those who have shared
his indomitable zeal
men and women,
religious and lay,
in every time and place;
for the humble beginnings
at Valdocco
and for every educative
environment called
to be a revelation
and gift of your love;
for the immense ranks of
young people
who invade our life
and disturb our heart
prompting it to imitate
that of the Good Shepherd.

To you, Father, our praise is due
with Mary
our powerful Helper
in the Holy Spirit
through the Risen Christ.
Amen.



Conference Four

Family Broken – Family Reconstructed

Don Bosco's Father & Mother & Oratory Family

In his late fifties, Don Bosco looked back at his early childhood, and remembered how at the age of only two he lost his father. The sense of loss is still there:

> I don't know how I reacted on that sad occasion. I only remember one thing, and it is my earliest memory. We were all going out from the room where he had died, and I insisted on staying behind. My grieving mother addressed me: *Come, John, come with me.*
>
> *If dad's not coming, I don't want to come,* I replied. *My poor son,* my mother replied, *come with me, you no longer have a father.* Having said this she broke down and started crying as she took me by the hand and led me away. I began crying too because she was crying. At that age I could not really understand what a tragedy had fallen on us in our father's death.

Growing up as part of a single-parent family had a lasting effect on Don Bosco. It made him set special store on the importance of family, but without underestimating or sentimentalising the realities of family life.

His mother, Margaret, widowed at the age of 29 after five years of marriage, made the courageous decision not to remarry, but to keep her two sons, Joseph and John, and her stepson Anthony, together, and to devote herself completely to their upbringing and education.

The three boys could not have been less like each other. Strife, within the family, becomes so severe that Margaret is forced to send John away, to work as a stable boy on a neighbouring farm, until matters could be legally settled through the division of the Bosco estate among the children. Perhaps the pain of this memory, and a sense that it did not reflect well upon the family, were reasons Don Bosco did not see fit to include it in *Memoirs of the Oratory*, in the process, throwing out the chronology.

It was Margaret's great merit to keep the family together, and to keep Anthony, orphaned at the age of nine, from being completely cut off. She saw to their religious upbringing, taught them their catechism, took them to church and prepared them for the Sacraments:

> Her greatest care was given to instructing her sons in their religion, making them value obedience, and keeping them busy with tasks suited to their age. When I was still very small, she herself taught me to pray. As soon as I was old enough to join my brothers, she made me kneel with them morning and evening. We would all recite our prayers together, including the rosary. I remember



well how she prepared me for my first confession. She took me to church, made her own confession first, then introduced me to the priest. Afterwards, she helped me to make my thanksgiving. She continued to do this until I reached the age when she judged me able to use the sacrament well on my own. [12]

In the telling of memories, we can see how the mother has influenced the son, and how the son consciously attributes to the mother features of his own educational style.

She used the beauty of nature to remind her sons continually of their Creator. On a fine starry night she would point to the heavens and say:

It is God who created the world and put all those stars up there. If the firmament is so beautiful, what will Paradise be like?

At the beginning of summer, looking at a scenic view of the countryside, or a meadow colourful with wildflowers, or at the sight of a beautiful dawn or sunset, she would exclaim:

What beautiful things the Lord has made for us!

This is another good example of the two-way dynamic of *memories of the future*, showing how, in light of the past, future needs may be met. In *The Companion of Youth* (1847), when Don Bosco is discussing the *Things needed for a young person to become virtuous,* he begins with the Knowledge of God:

Lift up your eyes to the sky, my children, and observe what there is in the heavens and on earth. The sun, moon, stars, air, water and fire are all things which at one time did not exist. It is God who is all powerful who brought them into existence from nothing by creating them.

An experience like this acts as a powerful occasion of grace in *The Life of Michael Magone* (1861), and Don Bosco comments on Michael's ability *to see in everything the finger of God, and the duty of all creatures to obey him.*

If this was something that Don Bosco had learnt at his mother's knee, it was from her that he learned existentially that trust in God is never in vain, even in the most desperate moments. Don Bosco tells us that his father died recommending to his mother, confidence in God. With the drought and famine of 1816-1818 coming after Francis Bosco's death, the household is plunged into a deeper situation of poverty. Don Bosco tells us:

My mother, not allowing herself to be discouraged, went round to the neighbours to try to borrow some food. She did not find anyone to help. She told us, *My dying husband said I must have confidence in God. Let's kneel then and pray.* After a brief prayer she got up and said, *Drastic circumstances demand drastic means*. Then she went to the stable and, helped by Mr Cavallo, she killed a calf.

[12] Chapter 1

Father Lemoyne's Life of Mamma Margaret recounts the tale of the ant and the cicada, a story with a moral told to John by his mother. A blind neighbour of theirs had once been well-off, but had squandered everything he had. The local mothers used to point him out to their children, telling them, *While we were slaving away like ants, he would be singing and having a good time. He was as happy as a cicada. Take notice what happened to him.* It comes as no great surprise that one of Don Bosco's characteristics was a lifelong insistence on the importance of work and temperance. Fr Desramaut links this directly to Don Bosco's extraction, the socio-cultural environment of the region in Italy where Don Bosco lived, observing that *the Piedmontese character is more that of the industrious ant than the noisy cicada.*

What makes the story more than a moralistic *Don't let this happen to you* is Margaret's response. Realising that the blind man sometimes went hungry rather than beg, Margaret used to leave a hot bowl of soup for him on the windowsill just before nightfall, to spare him the ignominy of begging or of having people see him begging. This adds another layer to the story, making it a lesson in the practical exercise of pastoral charity as well as a lesson in work and temperance. The additional lesson wasn't lost on Don Bosco, who would go on to become one of the great social saints of nineteenth century Turin, people like Joseph Cottolengo, Giulia Colbert and Joseph Cafasso, who exercised pastoral charity in a whole range of projects which combined a deep concern for the spiritual well-being of people with human and social welfare.

Don Bosco's telling of the dream of his boyhood points to his mother's intuition of his true vocation, in view of the influence of Father Lacqua's schooling and guidance, and John's activity with the local children. This comes across in the exchange of different interpretations of the dream:

My mother mused, *Who knows, you may become a priest.*

The trouble with Anthony began in 1825, over whether John should further his education at school, perhaps with priesthood or a profession in view. In the socio-cultural context, Anthony's inability to see why John should be allowed to study at the family's expense is understandable. The upshot is that John's formal schooling was interrupted and delayed, and was not resumed until after the legal settlement with Anthony. This was to leave Don Bosco with a lasting appreciation of the importance of a good education, and a heart that went out to young people whose circumstances meant that they had little opportunity for a good education.

Margaret decides to send John away, and he will still manage to get some schooling at Castelnuovo and Becchi. When Anthony gets married and starts a family, he is given the use of *the little house*, and Margaret goes to live with Joseph at the Sussambrino farm. The way she manages to find her way, and John's, through a difficult situation tells us a lot about her strength of character. She continues to nurture and foster

John's vocation, in 1830 enrolling him in the public school of Chieri, placing her trust again in God's guiding providence. While Margaret would always stand in support and be available with encouragement and advice, John was set free, and the decisions were now his, to make and to live by.

This is apparent in the advice she gives him when he is about nineteen, struggling to discern his vocation and planning to enter the Franciscan novitiate:

> I want you above all to consider carefully the step you will take, then follow your vocation without regard to anyone. The most important thing is the salvation of your soul. The pastor urged me to make you change your mind because I might need your help in the future. But I want to tell you that in this matter I am not to be considered because God comes first. Don't worry about me. I am not depending on you, and I expect nothing from you. Remember this! I was born poor, I have lived poor, and I want to die poor. What is more, I want to make this clear to you: if you decide to become a secular priest and become rich, I will never pay you a single visit. Remember that well.

The comment about becoming a rich secular priest has often been quoted, but usually without giving the context necessary for its correct interpretation, that is, *don't worry about me.*

When he is leaving for the archdiocesan seminary at Chieri, she tells him:

> If you should ever begin to doubt your vocation, then for heaven's sake do not dishonour the priestly habit. Put it aside immediately. I would much rather have a poor farmer for a son than a priest who neglects his duties.

When John is seriously ill after the death of Louis Comollo, Margaret nurses him back to health.

At his ordination in 1841, she says more to him than the oft-quoted, *To begin to say Mass is to suffer:*

> John, you are a priest now and you have begun to say Mass; from now on you are closer to Jesus Christ. But remember that to begin to say Mass is to suffer. You will not be aware of this immediately, but little by little you will come to see that your mother was right. I'm sure that you will pray for me every day whether I am still alive or already dead, and that is enough for me. From now on, think only of the salvation of souls, and do not worry about me.

This makes it abundantly clear that what she says clarifies the meaning of the *Da mihi animas.*

In 1844, when John is leaving the Pastoral Institute, Margaret does not interfere with his choices. According to the *Biographical Memoirs*[13] relatives and friends tried to induce Margaret to persuade her son to accept the post of tutor in a wealthy Genoese family with a salary of 1,000 lire a year, in order to improve his own family's standard of living. Her reply is:

> What would those 1,000 lire profit him, or me, or his brother Joseph, if John were to lose his soul?

When John collapses in July of 1846, and spends four months convalescing at his brother Joseph's house in Becchi, once again it is Margaret who nurses him back to health. In November 1846, after Don Bosco recovers, he asks his mother to come back with him to Valdocco, to help him to look after the boys who frequent the Oratory. The moment they arrive together at Valdocco on 3rd November 1846 is the theme of the last of six paintings by the artist Giovanni Crida in the sacristy of the Basilica of Mary, Help of Christians, widely used throughout the Salesian world to illustrate and illuminate the Strenna for 2006. In a circular letter of 1896, Don Rua wrote:

> November 3rd 1846 – this is a wonderful day, the beginning of all Salesian works.

Not only does Don Rua's judgment rest on more secure historical foundations than the multiplicity of accounts given by Don Bosco of when it all began, but also it recognises clearly the importance of the presence of Mamma Margaret at the origins.

When she was invited to move into the Pinardi House, where all she finds are bare rooms, I wonder whether she reflected that her words about not visiting her son if he ever became rich had come back to bite her? She says yes, solely to please God and out of generosity. *If you think such a move is God's will I am ready to go right now.* She detaches her heart, not only from her grandchildren at home, but divesting herself of something that was profoundly sacred to her, looked after and guarded with utter care until now: her wedding trousseau, something she wouldn't even touch to help her son with his studies and to pay for his seminary fees. Don Bosco tells us:

> My mother sent for her wedding trousseau, which up to then she had jealously preserved intact. From some of her dresses we made chasubles; from the linen we made amices, purificators, surplices, albs, and altar cloths. My mother also had a little gold necklace and some rings; they were quickly sold to buy braid and trimmings for the sacred vestments.

Now her confidence in God is complete, without any other human confidences or attachments, her detachment is absolute, offered to God and his complete will. Joy and song are spontaneous – they cannot be contained: *Woe to the world if it should learn we're just penniless strangers* is the song she sings.

[13] EBM II, 30

The next decisive moment in *Memoirs of the Oratory* comes with the establishment of the home at the Oratory:

> Now it happened that late one rainy evening in May (1847), a lad of fifteen showed up soaked to the skin. He asked for bread and shelter. My mother took him into the kitchen and put him near the fire; while he warmed himself and dried his clothes, she fed him a bowl of soup and some bread. As he ate I talked to him. He told me, I'm a poor orphan… I have nothing left and no one to turn to… At this he broke down and cried. My mother cried with him. I was moved.





Notice how homely and domestic the details are: kitchen, fire, warmth, wet clothing being dried out, soup and bread. This is unmistakably a family setting, one that Margaret Bosco helps to create, and it is she who volunteers:

> If you wish, I will put him up for tonight, and tomorrow God will provide.

In a minor miracle of storytelling, Don Bosco tells the story of the first resident in the home at the Oratory in such a way that it brings full circle the story of his earliest memory, the loss of his own father. The characters and the situation are strikingly similar, and they evoke the same strong emotions: an orphan, a father lost, a mother in tears, and a father figure found. This orphan is the first of many children for whom Don Bosco will provide a home at his Oratory family:

> Convinced that for many children every effort would prove useless unless they were offered shelter, I set about renting more and more rooms, even though the cost was exorbitant.

The family is reconstructed, the Oratory and its educational mission takes a step forward and finds completion in becoming a home of welcome.

Pietro Stella suggests that one of the reasons for the strong familial cast of Don Bosco's spiritual and educational outlook was his own experience as a boy who had lost his father. This made him very sensitive to boys in a similar plight, and he ended up becoming their father. He based his educational method on affective relationships, such as would be at work in a good Christian family. He fostered the *family spirit* because it provided a taste of family life to youngsters who had, perhaps, never had such an experience. This was the lasting legacy of those early days when Don Bosco was the father and Margaret the mother figure of the family.



She spent the last ten years of her life caring for the children of the Oratory as her own, and they in turn accepted her and loved her as a mother. They called her *Mamma*, just as Don Bosco did.

Her life, the way she raised the three Bosco boys, her fostering and support of John's vocation, are powerful testimony to the importance of the family as the cradle of life and love, where one first learns how to become human. She was also the mother of the educative family created by Don Bosco at Valdocco. Fr Viganò wrote:

> Mamma Margaret's heroic move to Valdocco served to permeate the environment of those poor boys with the same family style from which has sprung the Preventive System and so many of our traditions that go with it. Don Bosco knew from experience that the formation of his own personality was deeply rooted in the extraordinary climate of dedication and kindness (self-giving) of his own family at the Becchi, and he wanted to reproduce its most significant qualities in the Valdocco Oratory among those poor and abandoned youngsters.

We know the names of some of the many boys without a family, abandoned, orphaned or far from home, to whom Don Bosco became a father, for whom and with whom he set up a home and a family at the Oratory: Joseph Buzzetti, Carlo Gastini, John Cagliero, Joseph Rocchietti, Michael Rua, John Baptist Anfossi, Pietro Enria, Michael Magone. There were many other boys who were taken in for studies, for apprenticeships, for religious and social education, who would succeed in life, thanks to the decisive support offered by the Salesians to their poor families. Dominic Savio and Francis Besucco were in this category.

The thrust of our Salesian vocation, wrote Fr Viganò, *is naturally towards the poor and the lowly. They are the ones who above all have need of the family.*

It was for them Don Bosco conceived his characteristic ethos – as Pietro Braido says, *kindliness that educates in a happy, united family environment.*

Conference Five

The First Criterion of Renewal

Returning to the Heart of the Founder

We have seen how closely the Salesian life and mission and the whole Salesian educational and spiritual heritage are linked to Don Bosco's personal experiences in the family home and his experiences as he grew up. This is why Don Bosco takes *Memoirs of the Oratory* back, not to 1846, or 1844, or even 1841, but right back to 1815, the year of his birth. It also accounts for the conversational, even intimate tone that Don Bosco adopts in *Memoirs of the Oratory*. As he tells us in the preface, he wants to talk to us as a father talking to his beloved sons.

Fr Viganò observed that it was from the family style of the early Oratory that there came the Preventive System and many of our traditions that go with it, and went on to point out that Don Bosco did his utmost to instil his educational and spiritual experience with the boys of the Oratory into the text of the Constitutions, seeing in them not a dry as dust legal document, but a living testament. This is why he was able to say, *To love Don Bosco is to love the Constitutions*, and, as he handed a copy to the first missionary expedition to Patagonia, *Here is Don Bosco going with you.*

Don Bosco's Constitutions were first drafted in 1858 but not definitively approved until 1874. The earliest drafts, between 1858 and 1864, are of particular interest because they have not yet been subjected to outside pressure in the form of critical observations by the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. As the more faithful representatives of Don Bosco's original thought, they let us see some of the spiritual insights and principles for the Salesian life and mission he wanted to incorporate into his Constitutions.

Some of the most important spiritual insights and principles in the early Constitutions are contained in Articles One and Two of the chapter on the purpose of the Salesian congregation. This is how they read in the draft of 1860:

> It is the purpose of this congregation to gather together its members, priests, seminarians, and lay people too, in order that they may strive for perfection through the imitation, in so far as it is possible, of the virtues of our divine Saviour, especially in the exercise of charity toward poor young people.
>
> Jesus Christ began by doing and teaching. In like manner shall the members begin by perfecting themselves through the practice of both the internal and external virtues and through the acquisition of knowledge; then they shall apply themselves for the good of their neighbour.



The traditional understanding of the purpose of religious life distinguished between a general purpose (striving for personal perfection or holiness, that is, for perfect charity) and the particular purpose (a specific activity relating to worship, apostolate or work of charity undertaken in addition to the common general purpose). These two purposes are expressed in coordination, in parallel, as twin purposes or twin principles. The ascetical and canonical tradition tended to view the special purpose of an institute as additional and secondary. Official sanction for the idea that the special purpose is an essential purpose of the religious life, entrusted to the institute by the Church and exercised in the Church's name, does not come until the Decree on the Religious Life of the Second Vatican Council.

Don Bosco never swerved from his conviction that for his Salesians, holiness is achieved through the work of charity undertaken in imitation of Christ's pastoral charity, and in the earliest drafts of the Constitutions expresses the purposes in *subordination*, to express that the general purpose (Christian perfection or personal sanctification) is achieved *through* the special purpose (work of charity).

Given that the ascetical and canonical tradition tended to view the special purpose as additional and secondary, and that it's not until the Decree on the Religious Life of the Second Vatican Council that we find official sanction for the idea that the special purpose is an *essential purpose* of the religious life because it is entrusted to the institute by the Church and exercised in the Church's name, we can see how startlingly original the idea of personal sanctification through the work of charity must have appeared in the 1860s.

Moreover, even though Don Bosco quotes the sentence, *Jesus Christ began by doing and teaching*, the *doing* generally taken to refer to the 30 year-long hidden life of Jesus and the *teaching* to refer to his three years of public ministry, we know that Don Bosco wanted the formation of his Salesians to take place in the context of the apostolate, and his emphasis is very much on the imitation of Christ in his ministry to the young and the poor *(in like manner)*, rather than on any prescription of a period of exclusively ascetical preparation followed by a period devoted to apostolic activity.

Don Bosco intended the chapter on *Purpose* to be preceded by two other chapters, a preamble and a historical sketch of the Society. These were meant to provide the key for a correct understanding of the chapter on *Purpose* and the whole project set forth in the Constitutions. Those two chapters were all about the option for the young in imitation of Christ's charity. In the preamble, he gives the supporting theological rationale for the work of the oratories and the Congregation. This is where he says clearly:

> Our divine Saviour himself by his deeds gave us clear proof of this truth (the importance of educating the young). For in fulfilling his divine mission on earth, with a love of predilection he invited children to come close to him: Let the little

children come to me...Our efforts therefore must aim at safeguarding the faith and the moral life of that category of young people whose eternal salvation is more at risk precisely because of their poverty.

The historical sketch prefacing the Constitutions is entitled, *Origins of this Congregation*. What this insists on is the fundamental continuity (in fact, identity) of the Salesian Congregation with the work of the oratories. Don Bosco never had any other understanding of the Society: it existed in embryo in the work of the oratories, and its aim was to serve the young. This explains his repeated claims that the Society, as well as the Constitutions, dated back to 1841, or to some other early date in Oratory development (1844, 1852, 1854, 1858). We know of at least eleven memoranda to this effect drawn up by Don Bosco and presented to Church authorities during the decade 1864-1874.

Eventually, the spiritual insights contained in the chapter on *Purpose*, were lost in the process of responding to the critical observations of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, and then revising and reworking the text. In 1874, a Commission of Cardinals insisted on the removal of the historical sketch and the preamble, on the grounds that it was not customary to include *historical commendations of the institute*. That took away the supporting theological and historical rationale of Don Bosco's Constitutions, and severed the chapter on *Purpose* from its context.

Don Bosco resisted the inexorable process of making his Constitutions fit the canonical mould with as much humility and bravery and perseverance as he could. This is when he begins to put into writing the story of the spiritual and educational experience he had lived with the boys of the first Oratory, presenting it as charismatic and normative for his Salesians, an unmistakable statement of intent conveyed in its title, *Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, 1815 to 1855*.

In 1879, we find him prefacing a report to the Holy See with what he calls a brief historical notice:

> In 1841 this Congregation was but a Sunday catechism class and a garden for young people's recreation on Sundays and Holy days. To this work there was added in 1846 a home for poor apprentices. A number of priests and lay gentlemen helped with this work of charity as extern cooperators. In 1852 the archbishop of Turin approved the institute by giving of his own initiative to Fr John Bosco all necessary and appropriate faculties, and by appointing him superior and head of the work of the oratories. Between the year 1852 and 1858 community life got under way, together with a boarding school and a programme for the training of seminarians. In 1858 Pius IX, of saintly memory, urged Fr John Bosco to establish a pious society with the aim of preserving the spirit of the work of the Oratory.

From the standpoint of historical method, Don Bosco's statements are open to challenge with regard both to the general thesis and to detail. The bond uniting the Salesian Society with the work of the oratories as one identity is a retrospective, ideal projection rather than a historical reality. The same can be said for the opening statement in the Historical Sketch of 1864:

> From 1841 to 1848, although there was as yet no community life, (the members) practised a number of rules established in accordance with the spirit of this Congregation.

What needs to be borne in mind, however, is that Don Bosco is concerned not with the letter but with the spirit of history. He wishes to throw into the boldest possible relief the bond between the work of the Oratory and the Society which grew out of it and because of it. The Salesian Society, as Don Bosco conceived it, is the *Congregation of the Oratories*. He regarded the Oratorian experience as charismatic and normative, and that is why he had resisted the removal from his Constitutions of the first two chapters and all references to times and places, representing historical experiences that he considered charismatic and normative.

When Fr Viganò was talking about the *rereading* and *rediscovery* of the Salesian charism, he said:

> The return to the sources could not be an archaeological voyage of discovery through ancient documents but a revisiting of moments in the foundation process and of the heart of the founder in his original experience as a disciple of Christ. It had to be a living and creative re-evaluation, based on personal communion with the founder through the experience of a whole institute which had shared his spirit and mission through the years.

One of the places where we can do this is in the 1854 Introduction to the Draft Regulations for the Oratory. Don Bosco begins by quoting from chapter eleven of John's Gospel:

> *To gather together into one, the scattered children of God.*[14] These words of the holy Gospel tell us that our divine Saviour came down from heaven to earth to gather together all the children of God scattered over all the world. It seems to me that such words could be applied literally to the young people of our own times. The young constitute the most fragile yet most valuable component of human society, for we base our hopes for the future on them. They are not of themselves depraved. Were it not for parental neglect, idleness, mixing in bad company, something that happens especially on Sundays and Holy days, it would be so easy to inculcate moral and religious principles in their young hearts – of order, good behaviour, respect, religious practice. For if the young are found to have been ruined at that young age, it will have been due more to thoughtlessness than to ingrained malice.

[14] Jn 11, 52

These young people have real need of some kind person who will care for them, work with them, guide them in their virtue, keeping them away from vice. The problem lies in finding some way of gathering them, so as to be in a position to speak to them and to guide them in their moral life.

Here we find ourselves re-reading the mystery of Christ from the Salesian standpoint of Don Bosco, and this takes us to the heart of Don Bosco. *To gather together into one the scattered children of God* comes after the extended parable of the Good Shepherd in John's Gospel. Don Bosco alludes to the same verse in *Memoirs of the Oratory*, nearing the climax of events in 1846:

With no one to help me, my energy gone, my health undermined, with no idea where I could gather my boys in the future, I was very disturbed. I withdrew to one side, and as I walked alone I began to cry, perhaps for the first time. As I walked I looked up to heaven and cried out, *My God, why don't you show me where you want me to gather these children?*

We have already seen how the taking in of the first boarder at the Oratory in 1847 was another foundational moment, with Don Bosco losing no time in gathering together the scattered children of God, especially those of an orphaned character.

In the *Biographical Memoirs*, Fr Lemoyne quotes the same scriptural verse in the context of an earlier foundational moment, Don Bosco's meeting with Bartholomew Garelli in 1841:

For Don Bosco, Bartholomew Garelli represented not only countless other boys, but the many peoples he would evangelise: that he might gather into one the children of God. [15]

This is why Fr Viganò claims that the first characteristic element of our original identity is an Oratorian heart:

The early days of the Oratory at Valdocco should not so much be regarded as the beginning of this or that kind of institutional work but rather as the earliest and clearest expression of Don Bosco's pastoral charity. We must go back, therefore, for our first criterion of renewal to the heart of our Founder. It is an oratorian heart not in the sense of setting up a fixed kind of work, but in the sense of living and expressing a characteristic pastoral outlook that must distinguish every Salesian presence in whatever kind of work we undertake.

Article 40 of the Constitutions tells us:

Don Bosco lived a pastoral experience in his first Oratory which serves as a model; it was for the youngsters a home that welcomed, a parish that evangelised, a school that prepared for life, and a playground where friends could meet and enjoy themselves. As we carry out our mission today, the Valdocco experience

[15] cf. Jn 11, 52

is still the lasting criterion for discernment and renewal in all our activities and works.

The principal source of Article 40 is the Special General Chapter of 1971-1972, which insisted on what it called *dynamic fidelity* to Don Bosco, implying flexibility in the face of new situations and new problems, and creativity in responding to new presences, with one eye on our origins and the other on the changed needs of the present day. This is very much the approach of the revised and updated Constitutions of 1984.

As a model, the Oratory is not identified with a particular structure or institution, but rather with a specific pastoral standpoint for assessing our present works or those to be taken up in the future – evangelisation of the young, especially poor youngsters and young workers; the fostering of vocations; apostolic initiatives in densely populated working-class areas, especially through the means of social communication; and the missions. Don Bosco's Oratory is a complex but concrete criterion which leads us to transcend the material character of works and enter into Don Bosco's heart to make judgments and plans in line with the specific style of his pastoral charity.

The revised and updated Constitutions also succeed in embodying many of Don Bosco's spiritual insights and principles, and even some of his favourite expressions. This is particularly true of the chapter on the Salesian spirit, Articles 10-21. In Article 11 there is a re-reading of the mystery of Christ from the Salesian standpoint of Don Bosco, condensing in miniature the gospel vision with which he had wanted to preface his Constitutions:

> The Salesian spirit finds its model and source in the very heart of Christ, apostle of the Father. Reading the Gospel we become more aware of certain aspects of the figure of the Lord: gratitude to the Father for the gift of a divine vocation offered to all men; predilection for the little ones and the poor; zeal in preaching, healing and saving because of the urgency of the coming of the Kingdom; the preoccupation of the Good Shepherd who wins hearts by gentleness and self-giving; the desire to gather his disciples into the unity of brotherly communion.

Last, but by no means least, the reinterpretation of our charismatic identity can also be found in the new formula of profession, and in the symbols given to us for religious profession, one for temporary profession and the other for perpetual profession.

The medal of Don Bosco, given to temporarily professed Salesians, depicts Don Bosco in a way that reflects his Oratorian heart (represented by the words, *Da mihi animas*), a living model for every newly professed Salesian. The reverse side of the medal is blank, allowing for the engraving of the name of the confrère receiving it, as a sign of his determination to make a definitive commitment.


MIHI VIVERE CHRISTUS EST

Perhaps the most expressive symbol of our characteristic presence in the Church is the cross of the Good Shepherd given to those perpetually professed. The design is inspired by the second century fresco found in the Roman catacombs of Priscilla and recalls the parable of the Good Shepherd in John's Gospel. Pastoral charity is personified in Jesus, who is carrying a sheep on his shoulders with two others at his feet; on each side of the figure the artist has placed two saplings, on each of which is perched a dove with an olive twig in its mouth. Rich in Christian tradition, the engraving inculcates trust, teaches kindness and sacrifice, excludes all violence and promises peace and hope. It brings to mind the words of the Gospel: *the Good Shepherd is ready to lay down his life for his sheep. I know my own and mine know me. And there are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock and one shepherd.* On the reverse is a saying of Don Bosco with his signature: *Strive to inspire love – Fr John Bosco.*

These words summarise the Salesian spirit and our pastoral educational approach to the young. It is taken from a memorandum written by Don Bosco in 1863 which he gave to Don Rua when he appointed him rector. *Since I cannot always be at your side, I write as a loving father who opens his heart to a most dear son*, and then he gives him various pieces of advice, among which is *Strive to inspire love.*

Love, not fear, is what we are meant to inspire;
and this not only in the hearts of the young, but also in one another!



Conference Six

Community

The Hinge on which All Religious Congregations Turn

There is a standard form to be completed and returned to the Generalate when someone leaves the Congregation. In this situation, the person exiting is to be asked his reasons for departure. Looking at returns from the large numbers exiting the Congregation over the last ten years, the reasons given have to do not so much with the vows, with obedience, poverty and chastity, but overwhelmingly with community.

In the lead-up to the 25th General Chapter in 2002, Provincials and their Councils were invited to forward suggestions for the Chapter theme. That consultation resulted in a strong consensus that one of the things that needed to be addressed was the whole area of community.

So the theme chosen for the 25th General Chapter, *The Salesian Community Today*, was a timely one. That theme was subdivided into three parts: Our Fraternal Life, Gift of Prophecy and Communion; Our Evangelical Witness; and Our Animating Presence Among the Young.



The Acts of GC25 take two basic points of reference for all our communities: the Jerusalem apostolic community in chapter four of the Acts of the Apostles, and the Valdocco community. It does this in a way that carefully avoids idealising or sentimentalising the realities and complexities of life in the past or in the present. Both Acts and the Letter from Rome of 1884 show that the communities of the origins experienced difficulties of life in communion, and the hardship and struggle involved in commitment to the mission. The intention of the Acts of GC25 is not to provide a blueprint for the ideal community, but to describe the communities as they are, in their reality with their strengths and weaknesses. The Rector Major left us in no doubt about this:

> When the documents speak of the recovery of community life, this is not a nostalgic memory of the past but an incentive to creative fidelity, challenging all of us to become involved in the process of envisioning and then creating the kind of community we all want. When they speak of effectiveness, the reference is to that of a personal kind which becomes a deep commitment to the pursuit of the desired goal. We must avoid the ingenuous presumption that communities can be changed by producing documents. If that were true we should have already attained our objective.

The revised and updated Constitutions of 1984 bear no outward resemblance to the Constitutions drafted by Don Bosco and the various stages they went through over fifteen years before they were finally approved by the Holy See in 1874. As we have seen, however, they are faithful to Don Bosco's spirit and his intentions.



We can see another example of this by comparing two Articles on community. The first is from the 1860 text of Don Bosco's Constitutions:

> All the gathered members lead the common life bound only by the bond of fraternal charity and the simple vows, which unites them to form one heart and soul, in order to love and serve God by the virtue of obedience, of poverty and of holiness of life.

The second is from the Constitutions of 1984:

> God calls us to live in community and entrusts us with brothers to love. Brotherly love, our apostolic mission and the practice of the evangelical counsels are the bonds which form us into one and constantly reinforce our communion. We thus become one heart and soul, to love and serve God, and to help one another.

The company of those who believed were of one heart and soul [16] – is Don Bosco's favourite scriptural text when he is talking about religious community. There are at least twenty instances in his writings between the Church History of 1845 and its inclusion in the first text of the Constitutions in 1858. It is repeated in each of the earliest drafts of his Constitutions.

Does this mean that Don Bosco subscribed to a rosy and overly optimistic view of religious community? Not at all. Nowhere is this more evident that in a memorable passage on fraternal charity in the introduction he wrote for the edition of the Constitutions published in 1875, where the polarities of community life are expressed in terms of heaven and hell:

> When this brotherly love reigns in a community towards one another, and all rejoice in another's good, just as though it were their own, then that house becomes heaven itself, and justifies the words of the prophet David – How good and pleasant it is when brothers live in unity. But as soon as self-love gains dominion there, and disagreements and dislikes arise among the members, then that house quickly resembles hell. Our Lord takes great pleasure in seeing brethren dwelling in his house in unum, that is, united in heart and mind, serving God and helping one another in charity. This is the praise given to the early Christians by St Luke, that they so loved one another that it seemed that they had but one heart and soul.

Less well known is what Don Bosco says about community in a conference he gave on the feast of St Joseph in 1876: [17]

> Another factor which I see as truly most important, something we must strive to acquire and ever retain, is brotherly love, that bond which holds religious societies and congregations together. I think I can call it *the hinge on which all religious congregations turn.* Holy Scripture repeats that we must have great love for one another, a love whereby the well-being of one is the well-being of all, the suffering of one, the suffering of all. We are to uphold each other, without criticising the deeds of another confrère, without being even a little jealous of his position, his popularity and success. Do away with envy! The welfare of one must be the welfare of all; the sorrow of one, the sorrow of all. Is anyone being persecuted? We are all to feel

[16] Acts 4, 32

[17] EBM XII, 459-464

persecuted, sympathising with him. Is anyone sick? We are to feel downcast, as though we were sick. Then, in unity, let us promote good works, regardless of who offers the initiative. We know that not everyone possesses equal talent, knowledge or opportunities. Hence, let a strong brotherly love reign among us so that what happened in the Church will also occur in our Congregation. Besides the apostles there were seventy-two disciples, deacons and other evangelical co-workers, all toiling in harmony with each other, all bound together by firm brotherly love. That is why they succeeded, as they did, in changing the face of the earth. So, too, with us.

If we can already hear in this the voice of experience, with few illusions about human nature, even more striking is what Don Bosco had to say at the Second General Chapter in 1880:

Vocations have been declining at a frightening rate, throughout the Church at large and unfortunately also among us. There was a time when, if a young man showed the least sign of a vocation on coming to us, we were able in most instances to bring him along, mould him according to our spirit, and make him a priest. This is no longer the case. There is evidence, stronger by the day, that our schools little by little are going the way of all other schools. Our pupils today are no longer driven by that impulse toward good, toward religious practice, and toward imitating their religious educators, which was so much in evidence in olden times. How are we, then, to reverse this trend, so that vocations can be fostered as before?

It is hard to believe this was written in 1880; ***Memories of the Future*** **of another kind!** So what remedies does Don Bosco prescribe?

First of all, we must begin by treating each other, and all confrères, with mutual charity and gentleness. Young people would be strongly attracted to our way of life if they see that charity and gentleness reign among us. Secondly, we must extend to our pupils the same love with which we treat our confrères. When this happens, the youngsters will be captivated, and once we have gained their affection we will be able to influence their vocation. This has been my experience. A boy decides to leave the school. I do not interfere, but when he is about to leave I approach him in a friendly manner and say to him: You are leaving for home, and that's fine; but you will be doing me a great favour if you tell me frankly what has prompted your decision to leave. Often the answer is: I would have liked to become a Salesian, but I see that the Salesians don't get along and speak ill of each other. I no longer want to be one of them. I point out that those few that are at fault do not reflect the spirit of the Congregation, that the majority of Salesians are good religious. Again the usual reply is: That's true; I realise that there are many virtuous Salesians; but what I have seen has made such a bad impression on me that I have lost the desire. Under the circumstances, I am afraid I would not do any good. Others leave because of some defect they have noticed in their superiors. The superior in question may well be a saintly man, but he may have a

tendency to deal with the boys in a rough or impatient manner. All his virtues are overlooked; that defect of his becomes the deciding factor.

Let me repeat: gentleness and charity among ourselves and toward the boys are the means most conducive to good education and fostering vocations. This is how boys reason: If the Salesians so love one another, they will also love me should I be one of them. True, one should not join the Congregation in order to find love. But this is how boys reason. So they come in, they begin to do well, and gradually they become real assets for the Congregation and do much good. Under different circumstances they would never have entered, and they would in most cases have gone completely astray and come to a bad end. Gentleness and charity, on the other hand, would spell salvation for them.

It could hardly be clearer that for Don Bosco, the way we live together in community is a spiritual value in its own right. In fact, community is a true source of spiritual energy for the attainment of both the general purpose and the special purpose of religious life. Fraternal charity with its spiritual inspiration and the vows by their binding power produce a unity in heart and soul which fosters the spiritual life and lends support to individual commitments. In other words, community life is not simply the base of operations, having no sanctifying value in itself.

One of the features of the revised and updated Constitutions is a new chapter on the fraternal and apostolic community (Articles 49-59). Article 50, as we saw, contains Don Bosco's favourite scriptural allusion – *We thus become one heart and soul to love and serve God, and to help one another.* But the emphasis of the chapter, as a whole, represents a shift away from the community, understood predominantly in terms of what used to be called *the common life,* to community, conceived in terms of the Second Vatican Council's theology of communion:

To live and work together is for us Salesians a fundamental requirement and a sure way of fulfilling our vocation.

This is why we come together in communities, where our love for each other leads us to share all we have in a family spirit, and so create communion between person and person.

The community is a reflection of the mystery of the Trinity: there we find a response to the deep aspirations of the heart, and we become for the young – signs of love and unity.

God calls us to live in community and entrusts us with brothers to love.

Brotherly love, our apostolic mission and the practice of the evangelical counsels are the bonds which form us into one and constantly reinforce our communion.

Once again, we notice how faithful that is to Don Bosco's spiritual insights, even though it's now placing them in a new context, which is the theology of communion, a theology that has been developed in our own time, following the Second Vatican Council.

Article 51 of the Constitutions is not only about working together on the mission but also about seeking and finding God together, praying together, celebrating life together, sharing our hopes and dreams. It is about true family spirit and communion between person and person that goes much deeper than the mentality of simply living under the same roof and sharing a car pool in order to get the job done.

If Article 51 describes the internal life of the community in terms of the spirituality of communion, it also picks up what was said in the concluding sentence of Article 20, on the Preventive System. In fact, when Article 20 and Articles 51-54 are read side by side, we cannot fail to notice that the classic language of the Preventive System – presence, assistance, going before, providing for, anticipating, welcoming, family spirit, pastoral charity, Christ the Good Shepherd – are being employed to characterise our relationship to God, our spirituality, and also to describe the way we live together in community, *from Go to Woe* (C 52 & C 54).

In fact, the spirituality of communion is transposed to the distinctively Salesian key of the Preventive System. We are to one another in community what we are to the young and those to whom we are sent. We live together in community through the exercise of a charity that knows how to make itself loved. The Preventive System is not only about relations *ad extra*, it is also about relations *ad intra*, or *inter nos*. We have our own distinctive *take* on community life, which is one facet of our charismatic identity, a reason why we should not be too quick to regard religious life as though it were a homogenised product or a generic brand.

When the Rector Major sent his letter, following the extraordinary visitation of the Province in 2003, there was one sentence in particular that leapt off the page at me:

> I am convinced that the future of the Congregation depends on whether or not we can make communities that are humanly attractive, spiritually robust, pastorally meaningful and vocationally fruitful.

That is a carefully weighted and well-balanced statement: communities that are humanly attractive, spiritually robust, pastorally meaningful and vocationally fruitful. I take it that there's a sense in which they are all connected – humanly attractive, spiritually robust, pastorally meaningful and vocationally fruitful. If our communities are not as vocationally fruitful as we would like, perhaps that raises some questions about how humanly attractive, how spiritually robust and how pastorally meaningful they are.



DON BOSCO

We believe that our community
is brought to birth by the gratuitous initiative of the Father
sinks its roots in the Lord's Passover
is a gift ever new of the Holy Spirit.

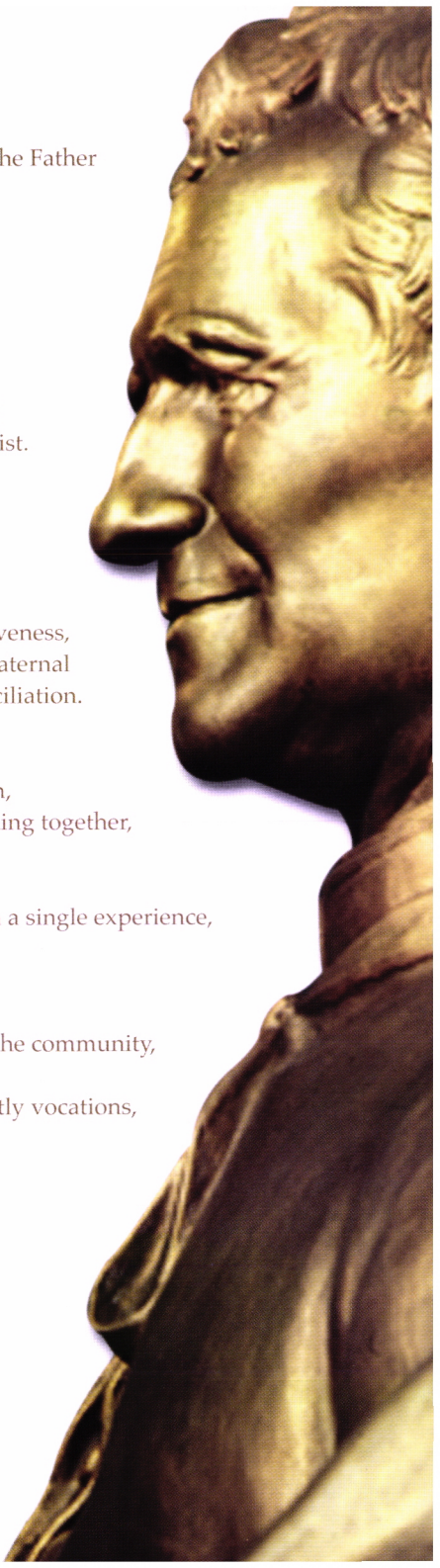
We believe that we are called to live in community
following Christ, obedient, poor and chaste
according to the charism of Don Bosco
in the service of the young, especially the poorest
to walk together towards the full maturity of Christ.

We believe that the Salesian community,
guided and sustained by the motherly presence
of Mary, Help of Christians,
is built up around the Word, the Bread and Forgiveness,
and that, through the practice of charity and of fraternal
correction becomes the place of mercy and reconciliation.

We believe that the practice of the Preventive System,
as an inspiration and a way of living and of working together,
deepens our relationship with God,
helps our fraternal relationships to mature,
and unites Salesians, the young and lay people in a single experience,
in an atmosphere of family, trust and dialogue.

We believe that the Salesian mission is entrusted to the community,
in which we all share and are co-responsible,
in the complementary nature of the lay and priestly vocations,
in the appreciation of talents, roles and services.

We believe that each of our communities,
living the family spirit,
and attentive to the needs of the locality,
in union with the whole Salesian Family,
becomes for the young people and our brothers
an example of life rich in humanity and grace,
a luminous sign of love, a school of spirituality,
a vocational call and a prophecy of communion.



Conference Seven

Our Evangelical Witness

The Central Place of Obedience

As mentioned earlier the theme chosen for the 25th General Chapter, held in 2002, was the *Salesian Community Today*. This was subdivided into three parts: Our Fraternal Life, Our Evangelical Witness, and Our Presence Among the Young.

In introducing its treatment of the second aspect of the Chapter theme, Our Evangelical Witness, the Acts of GC25 begins with the statement:

> The community at Valdocco, led and guided by Don Bosco, strove to live this witness in a complete and harmonious manner. In the dream of the ten diamonds Don Bosco himself, presenting the Salesian identity, outlined its fundamental characteristics and the dangers to which it is exposed.

This influences the subsequent arrangement and development of material, concluding with the vows, which are dealt with under the titles:

- The central place of obedience
- The concrete nature of poverty
- The splendour of chastity

These titles – the *central* place of obedience, the *concrete* nature of poverty, and the *splendour* of chastity – are phrased in a way that picks up the dream of the ten diamonds.

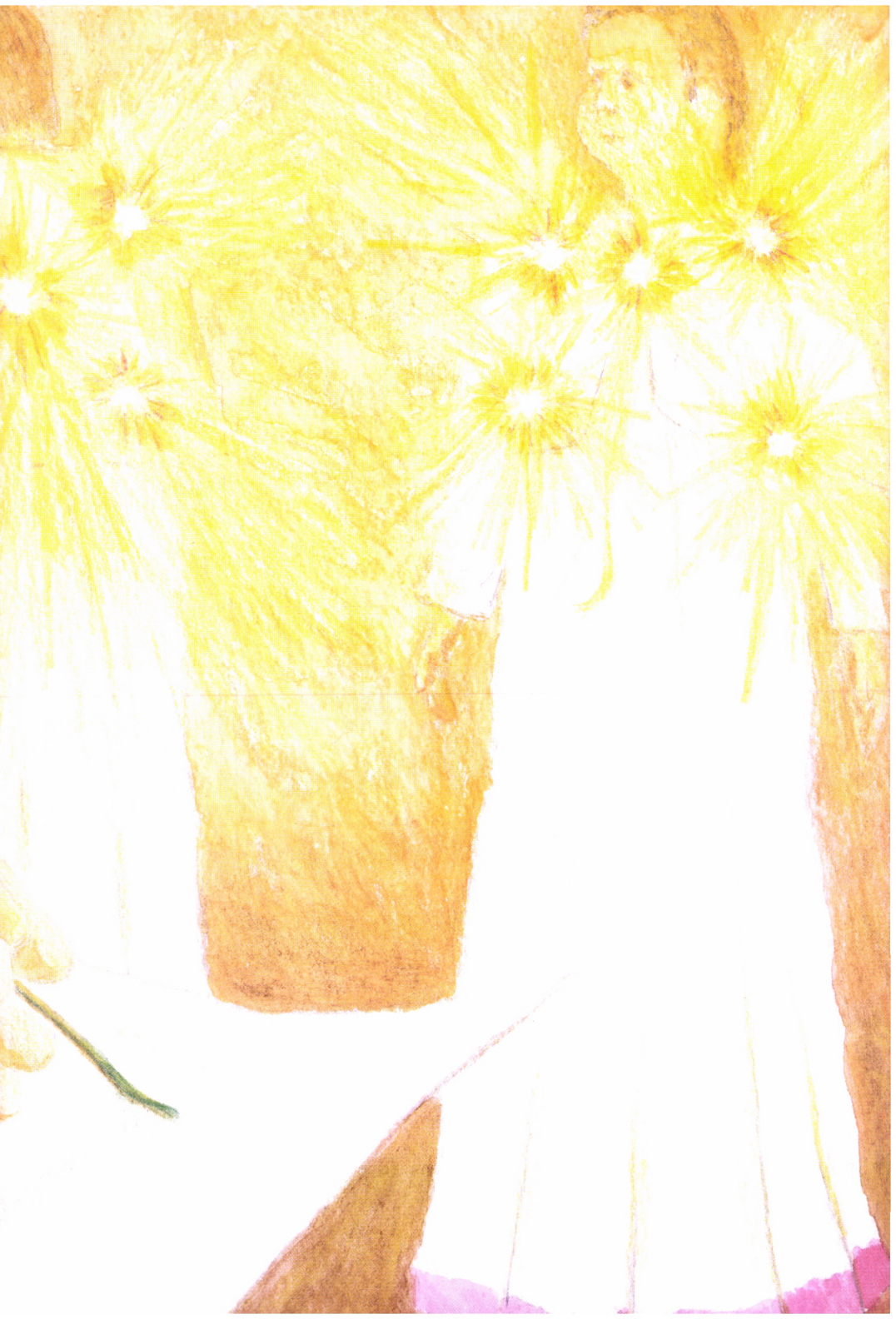
The Text of the Dream of the Ten Diamonds [18]

This text follows the fair copy made by Don Berta (with Don Bosco's personal corrections) from the first draft in Don Bosco's own handwriting. [19] We have also used the critical edition of Sister Cecilia Romero. [20]

For the instruction of the Salesian Society

On 10th September 1881, Feast of the Most Holy Name of Mary, the Salesians at San Benigno Canavese were making their Retreat.

[18] The Acts of the General Council 300 1981 [19] Salesian Central Archives: 132 Sogni 5 [20] I sogni di Don Bosco – ed. crit., Turin 1978 LDC



The Model of the True Salesian

On the night of the 10th September I dreamed I was in a large and splendidly ornate hall. I seemed to be walking up and down with the Rectors of our houses when there appeared among us a man of such majestic mien that we could not take our eyes off him. He gazed at us, and without a word began to walk a few paces ahead of us. He wore an imposing long mantle with a stole-like collar tied at the neck with a ribbon that hung down in front. On the stole was written in luminous characters, *The Salesian Society*, and on the ribbon, *as it should be.*

The august personage wore ten huge and splendid diamonds, and it was almost impossible to look away from him.

Three of the diamonds were on the breast of the mantle and were inscribed FAITH, HOPE and CHARITY. The diamond of CHARITY was positioned over the heart. On the right shoulder was a fourth diamond: WORK; and a fifth, TEMPERANCE, was affixed to the left shoulder.

The other five diamonds adorned the back of the mantle and were arranged in a square, with the largest and brightest diamond of OBEDIENCE in the middle. The upper right diamond was the vow of POVERTY, and under it, REWARD. On the upper left was the vow of CHASTITY, with a dazzling splendour all its own that caught and held the attention as a magnet attracts metal; below it was the diamond of FASTING. The bright rays from the square of diamonds were directed towards the central diamond of OBEDIENCE.

Clarifying Maxims

To avoid confusion it should be noted that each diamond had rays like small tongues of flame on which various texts could be read.

FAITH carried the maxims – *Take up the buckler of faith and battle against the snares of the devil.* Another ray read, *Faith without works is dead. Not he who hears but he who keeps the law will possess the kingdom of God.*

On the rays of HOPE there was written – *Hope in the Lord and not in men. Let your hearts always be set on the attainment of true joy.*

The texts of CHARITY read – *Bear one another's burdens if you wish to fulfil my law. Love and you will be loved. Let your love be for your soul and the souls of others. Recite the Divine Office with devotion. Celebrate Holy Mass with care. Make loving visits to the Holy of Holies.*

The rays of WORK carried the inscription – *Remedy for concupiscence; powerful weapon against all the temptations of the devil.*

TEMPERANCE had the text – *Take away the fuel and the fire will die out. Make a pact with your eyes, your appetite, your sleep, so that these enemies may not ravage your souls. Intemperance and chastity cannot go together.*

On the rays of OBEDIENCE – *Obedience is the foundation and perfection of holiness.*

On POVERTY – *The kingdom of heaven is for the poor. Riches are thorns. Poverty is not practiced by words but by love and deeds. Poverty opens the gates of heaven.*

On the rays of CHASTITY – *All virtues come together with it. The clean of heart see the secrets of God and shall contemplate God himself.*

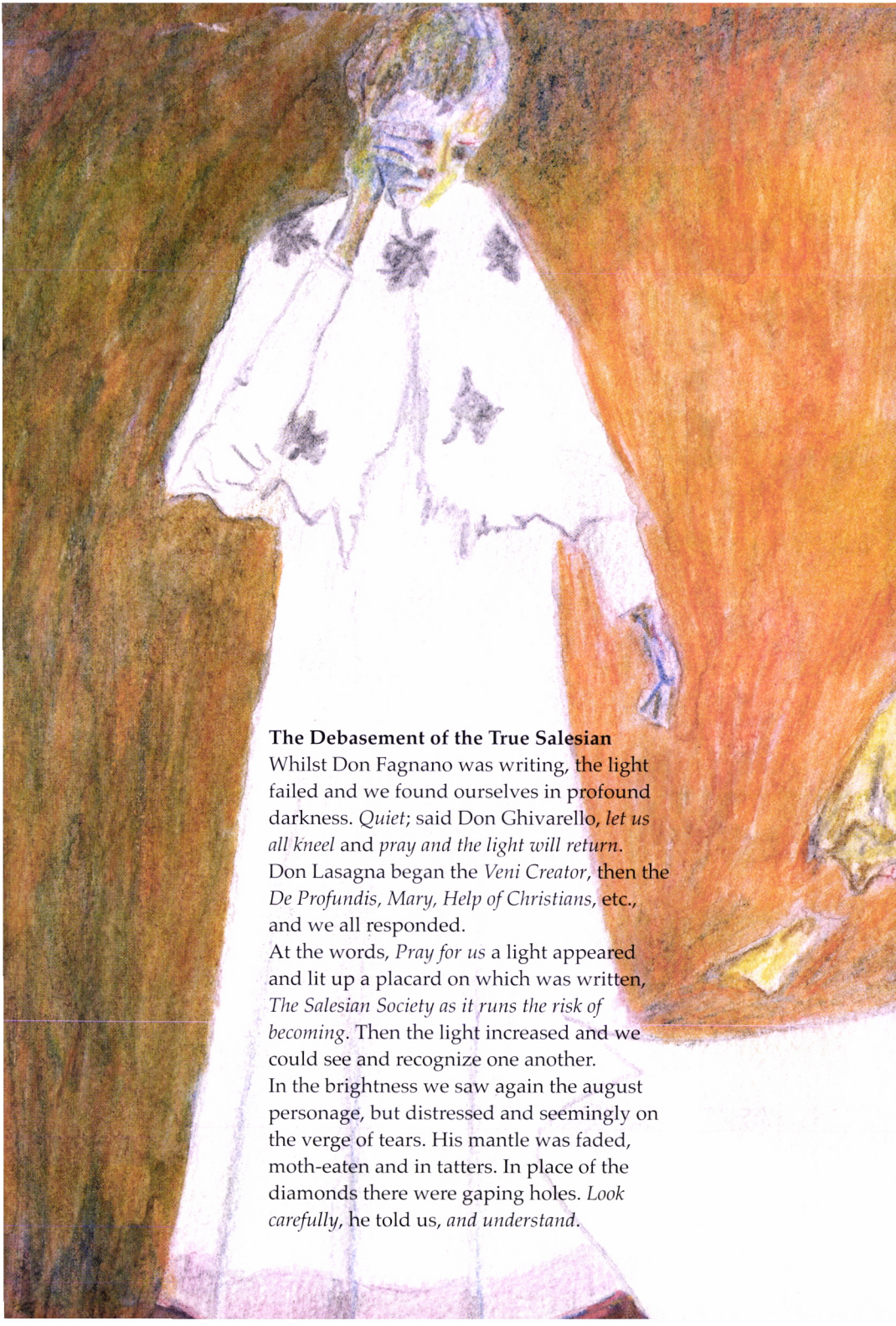
On the rays of REWARD – *If the rich reward attracts you, do not be afraid of the many hardships. He who suffers with me rejoices with me. What we suffer on earth is momentary; the joys of my friends in heaven are eternal.*

On the rays of FASTING – *The most powerful weapon against the snares of the devil. It keeps watch over all the virtues. Fasting puts to flight all sorts of foes.*

Authoritative Warning

On the lower part of the garment there was a wide pink hem on which was written – *Here is matter for preaching morning, noon and evening: Treasure small acts of virtue and you will build solid holiness. Woe to you if you neglect small things: little by little ruination will overtake you.*

Some of the Rectors were standing, some kneeling; all were in silent amazement. Suddenly Don Rua said excitedly, *We must write these things down lest we forget them.* He looked for a pen but could not find one. He took out his notebook and searched for a pencil. *I shall remember,* said Don Durando. *I must get it down in writing,* Don Fagnano cried out, and began writing with the stem of a rose. We all watched and could read his writing. When he stopped, Don Costamagna continued to dictate, *Charity understands all things, sustains all things, conquers all things; we must preach it in word and deed.*



The Debasement of the True Salesian

Whilst Don Fagnano was writing, the light failed and we found ourselves in profound darkness. *Quiet*; said Don Ghivarello, *let us all kneel* and *pray and the light will return.* Don Lasagna began the *Veni Creator*, then the *De Profundis, Mary, Help of Christians*, etc., and we all responded.

At the words, *Pray for us* a light appeared and lit up a placard on which was written, *The Salesian Society as it runs the risk of becoming*. Then the light increased and we could see and recognize one another.

In the brightness we saw again the august personage, but distressed and seemingly on the verge of tears. His mantle was faded, moth-eaten and in tatters. In place of the diamonds there were gaping holes. *Look carefully*, he told us, *and understand*.



I saw that the ten diamonds had become so many grubs gnawing away at the garment. In place of the diamond of -

FAITH	was written	*Sleep and sloth*
HOPE	had become	*Indecent laughter and frivolity*
CHARITY	was now	*Neglect of the things of God. They love and seek their own desires and not the ideals of Jesus Christ*
TEMPERANCE	was now	*Gluttony – their god is their belly*
WORK	was now	*Sleep, dishonesty and idleness*
OBEDIENCE	was replaced by	*a large hole with no message*
CHASTITY	carried the text	*Concupiscence of the eyes and pride of life*
POVERTY	was now	*Bed, clothing, drink and money*
REWARD	was now	*Our heritage will be earthly goods*
FASTING	was just a hole with no message.	

We were all terrified. Don Lasagna fell in a faint. Don Cagliero was as white as a sheet, and leaning on a chair called out, *Is it possible that things have already come to such a sorry pass?* Don Lazzero and Don Guidazio were beside themselves and reached for support. Don Francesca, Count Cays, Don Barberis and Don Leveratto were on their knees, rosaries in hand and praying. Then we heard a sombre voice that told us, *See how that splendid colour is now faded.*

The Message of the Young Man

We were grouped together in the darkness when a remarkable thing happened. We were plunged into pitch blackness, and suddenly there appeared a brilliant light in the form of a human body. At first the light dazzled our eyes. Then we were able to make out a handsome young man of imposing and charming mien, dressed in white garments delicately worked in gold and silver thread. He approached us and spoke these words:

> *Servants and instruments of the omnipotent God, hark and take heed; be strong and courageous.*
>
> *What you have seen and heard is a message from heaven for you and your brethren. Pay attention to it and understand it well.*
> *Forewarned is forearmed, and the faults you have witnessed can be avoided.*
>
> *All the texts you have read must form the themes of your preaching. Speak of them unceasingly in season and out of season. But be careful to practice what you preach so that your works will shine forth and build up a strong and healthy tradition for your present brethren and future generations of your sons.*
>
> *Listen carefully and heed these words:*

Be circumspect in accepting novices. Cultivate them with great care. Be prudent in admitting them to vows. Test them well and keep only the good. Send away the frivolous and the fickle.

Meditate morning and evening on the observance of the Constitutions. If you do this the help of God will never fail you. You will be a revelation before men and angels, and your glory will be God's glory. It will be said of you:

> This is the Lord's work and it is marvellous in our eyes. Then all your brethren and your sons will sing with one voice: Not to us, Lord, not to us but to your name give glory.

These last words were sung, and to the speaker's voice there joined a multitude of other voices so melodious and resonant that we were left benumbed and bemused, and to prevent ourselves from swooning we joined in the singing.

When the music ended there was darkness. I awoke and saw that it was already daylight.

Don Bosco's Footnote

This dream lasted most of the night and in the morning I was exhausted. Still, for fear of forgetting it I rose quickly and made a few notes that have helped me recall what I have written here on the Feast of the Presentation. I was not able to recall everything. One of the many things I have learned with certainty is this: immense is the Lord's mercy in our regard. Our Society is blessed by heaven. But the good Lord expects us to do our part.

We can forestall the evils that threaten us if we preach on the virtues and vices noted in the dream; if we practise what we preach and pass on to our brethren the authentic tradition of our past and future good works.

Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us.

How can the dream of ten diamonds speak to us today – how does it touch our lives?

This is a dream meant for every Salesian because he is a Salesian. It is particularly appropriate for days of reflection and meditation, for spiritual formation and for personal examen. Don Bosco is speaking directly to each one of us today.

Details of date and setting are always important to Don Bosco. It is no coincidence that in its dreaming (on the 10th September) and in its being written down (on the 21st November), the dream of the ten diamonds is between the Feast of the Most Holy Name of Mary and the Feast of the Presentation. The Mother and Teacher given to Don Bosco in the dream of his boyhood is a powerful presence. For Don Bosco, she is both the symbol of victory over personal sinfulness, the symbol of holiness and consecration, and also the symbol of victory over evil in society through the apostolate of the Salesian Congregation.

Place is important too. The setting of the dream is in the Salesian heartland – San Benigno Canavese was not far from Turin. Forty five novices were there, under the direction of Fr Barberis. It was also not far from Lanzo, where the Second General Chapter had taken place only twelve months before. This was a General Chapter when Don Bosco had expressed his fears and concerns for the spiritual health of the Congregation, emphasising the importance of religious obedience, the attraction and care of vocations, and sound formation as a good foundation for future generations. Each of these concerns surfaces again in the dream of the ten diamonds.

The personage who is described as *majestic* and *august* in the first scene and as *distressed* and *seemingly on the verge of tears* in the second is a reflection of every Salesian, present and future. In the first scene he conveys the authentic image of the true Salesian, *the Salesian Society as it should be*, and in the second its disfigured and debased antithesis, *the Salesian society as it runs the risk of becoming*.

The Acts of GC25 draw on the writings of Fr Rinaldi and Fr Viganò, for its interpretation of the front and back of the mantle. For Fr Rinaldi, the front represents the Salesian life in its activity, and the back represents our interior life. Fr Viganò speaks of two sides to the Salesian coin: the obverse is the social work of the Salesian, the *Da mihi animas,* and the reverse is the secret constancy and asceticism, the *cetera tolle.* The back of the mantle, he says, represents our special style of consecrated life, a depiction of our Salesian following of the obedient, poor and chaste Christ, according to the gospel way of life traced out by Don Bosco.

What Don Bosco does in the draft texts of his Constitutions by placing obedience as the first of the vows for his Salesians, he does in visual terms in the dream of the ten diamonds. Obedience is the largest and brightest diamond; its position in the centre of the square of diamonds is mentioned twice; it is where the bright rays from the square of diamonds converge; and the text it radiates, *Obedience is the foundation and perfection of holiness,* lays claim to pre-eminence.

So, perhaps, we should resist the tendency to simply follow suit with *poverty, chastity and obedience,* as though the religious life is a homogenised product, a generic brand. We should be asking why is it that Don Bosco's Constitutions, our Constitutions today, and the formula of profession, all follow the order, obedience, poverty and chastity? Over the years I've lost count of the number of times we've been through the exercise of the scrutiny of poverty, but I'm still waiting for a scrutiny of obedience. Despite the fact that charismatic identity was an important part of the theme of GC26, somehow evangelical poverty was singled out again, and the precious opportunity to place our evangelical obedience under the microscope instead was missed.

Writing in *The Companion of Youth* (1847), Don Bosco stated that obedience is the foundation of every virtue. Obedience is the principal and primary virtue for theological and psychological reasons. Without a guide, young people are like tender plants: they do not take root and grow straight unless they are cultivated and guided up to a certain size. That is why it makes sense for young people to obey, respect and trust their parents and other superiors. Youths who attend an Oratory are advised to have a filial trust in the Rector. Don Bosco shows sympathetic insight into the situation of the young; there is no need of extraordinary penances and mortifications. There is already enough penance for the young in the mortification and self-control required during prayer, school, study and play, in patiently putting up with inconveniences, insults and injuries, and above all in having to do what they are told. As he says in the *Life of Dominic Savio* (1859):

> The penance God wishes from you is simply obedience. If you obey, that will suffice for everything.

This was at the heart of young people finding their way to holiness through carrying out their ordinary, everyday duties in accordance with their age and condition.

In the introduction to Don Bosco's Constitutions and in his conferences to Salesians, the primacy of obedience is suggested by reflection on the nature of the religious life in general and the ideals of Salesian life in particular. Don Bosco writes in his Constitutions:

> The prophet David would beseech God that He would give him light to do His holy will. Our Divine Redeemer, moreover, has assured us that He came not to do His own will, but that of His heavenly Father. It is in order that we may be sure of doing the holy will of God that we make the vow of obedience.

The central insight about the following of Christ who came not to do his own will but that of the Father stands up well to the test of time. In a keynote address to the Second General Chapter, held at Lanzo in 1880, twelve months before the dream of the ten diamonds, Don Bosco had said:

> Among the many concerns of this chapter, perhaps the most urgent is that of restoring religious obedience. All Salesians, especially those in positions of leadership, must be willing to make real sacrifices to ensure orderly progress. The members of the Superior Chapter ought to be the first to set an example of absolute and self-sacrificing obedience.

For Don Bosco, lack of obedience jeopardised the very goal of religious life, the practical exercise of pastoral charity for the young. We need to bear in mind the words of Pius IX to Don Bosco in 1858:

> Don't be content with simple promises, for in that case the link between superiors and subjects would not be adequate. You could never be sure of them, nor could you count on them for any length of time.[21]

Behind this are some unhappy memories of the crises of the Oratories between 1848 and 1852, when a number of priests and helpers and older boys had left Don Bosco over a number of different issues, which included attitudes towards the Risorgimento, the liberal revolution, and the movement towards the unification of Italy. From this time onwards, Don Bosco increasingly thought of recruiting his helpers from boys who had been with him from an early age.

After the Salesian Congregation (but not yet the Salesian Constitutions) had been approved in 1869 by the Apostolic See, Don Bosco gave a conference in which he said:

> Things are no longer the same, my sons, now that our Congregation is approved. We are mutually bound to each other; I to you, you to me, and all of us to God. We are no longer private individuals but a Society, a visible body. This is, so to speak, the hinge on which our whole Society turns. Without obedience there would be chaos. If, instead, obedience reigns, we shall form but one body and soul to love and serve the Lord.

[21] EBM V, 561

During the Second General Chapter in 1880, Don Bosco returned to the theme of obedience in the third session, and again in the ninth session. *A unified principle of action is lacking, and everyone goes his own way.*

Clearly, he is singling out the vow of obedience as a basic factor in the bond of unity, yet it would be a mistake to think that Don Bosco understands obedience in a narrowly juridical and legalistic sense. He consistently emphasises the element of generous commitment to and availability for the mission, for the work of charity. It was the *virtue* of obedience that was important to him, not merely the juridical vow.

In Don Bosco's view, the vow of obedience was the spiritual structure whereby a religious, consecrated in poverty and chastity, became totally available to the superior for the work of charity, which ultimately became the means of personal holiness. They're all connected. That was behind Don Bosco's idea of manifestation of conscience to the superior, so that the superior, in strictest confidence, would know what the person is really like, and how he is best deployed. The ideal is united as one heart and one soul: *A close bond of unity may be perfectly maintained through the monthly manifestation – the best means of maintaining the Salesian Congregation as it was conceived.* While this is internally consistent and coherent at the level of ideas, in practice it raised too many difficulties and objections. When the Church authorities wouldn't approve of it, Don Bosco was forced to scale it down to an *account of one's external life.*

In the third and final scene of the dream of the ten diamonds, a young man, dressed in white, encourages and exhorts the Salesians to build up a strong and healthy tradition for your present brethren and for future generations of your sons. Just to make sure that we know this is meant for us, there's a postscript by Don Bosco, challenging all of us to pass on to our brethren the authentic tradition of our past and future good works. *Our society is blessed by heaven*, he tells us, *but the good Lord expects us to do our part.*

The dream of the ten diamonds is an original and uniquely Salesian source for understanding and living out the religious life in a distinctively Salesian way, an important frame of reference for our Salesian charismatic identity.

While there is no reference to the dream of the ten diamonds in the present Constitutions, the insights and emphases expressed in the dream shaped the structure and informed the spirituality of the Constitutions as the text was being rewritten by three successive General Chapters. Don Bosco's spiritual insights are preserved, confirmed and in some instances enlarged upon in the light of the theology of the Second Vatican Council, at times in a striking way. Noteworthy is Article 11:

> The Salesian spirit finds its model and source in the very heart of Christ, apostle of the Father.

This grounds our obedience in Christ's own obedience to the Father, and places the vows in the overall context of the following of Christ who was obedient, poor and chaste. This prevents us from reducing the vows to mere abstractions of obedience, poverty and chastity. We are not following abstractions; we are following a person. There is nothing abstract about the Christ of the gospels; there is nothing abstract about our following of the Christ who was *obedient, chaste and poor.*

Subsequent Constitutions are equally faithful to Don Bosco's insights, and make it abundantly clear that Salesian obedience is not authoritarian.

Article 44 – the mission is given to the community.

Article 45 – common and complementary responsibilities: *each of us is responsible for the common mission, and participates in it with the riches of his own personal gifts.*

Article 50 – The bonds of unity.

Article 61 – Fraternal and apostolic love.

Article 64 – Gospel significance of our obedience.

Article 65 – Salesian style of obedience and authority.

Article 66 – Shared responsibility in obedience: *In the community, in view of the mission entrusted to us, we all obey.* This applies to every Salesian without exception, including the Rector, the Provincial, the Rector Major and the members of the General Council.

Article 69 – Personal gifts and obedience. *Each one places his abilities and talents at the service of the common mission.*

Don Bosco related the dream of the ten diamonds only seven years after the approval of the Constitutions. We have already seen how the dominant note in the spirituality of Don Bosco's Constitutions is pastoral charity exercised in imitation of the love of Christ the Good Shepherd.

It was Fr Rinaldi who first pointed out that the diamonds in front and the diamonds at the back of the mantle have been carefully positioned so that they are complementary, and Fr Viganò who proposed that in the configuration of the five diamonds at the front, we see the *Da mihi animas*, and in the five diamonds at the back, the *cetera tolle.*

Don Bosco's narration of the dream explicitly tells us that the diamond of obedience is positioned on the back of the mantle in such a way that it is complementary to the

diamond of charity on the front of the mantle. What is more, we are told that the diamond of charity is positioned *over the heart, on the breast of the mantle.*

The rays from this diamond read, *Bear one another's burdens if you wish to fulfil my law. Love and you will be loved. Let your love be for your soul and for the souls of others. Recite the Divine Office with devotion. Celebrate Holy Mass with care. Make loving visits to the Holy of Holies.* In the transition from the authentic image of the true Salesian in the first scene to its disfigured and debased antithesis in the second scene, the last words are spoken by Fr Costamagna of all people. They are an allusion to one of the greatest passages on pastoral charity in the New Testament: *Charity understands all things, sustains all things, conquers all things: we must preach it in word and deed.*

This is the same passage Don Bosco had quoted four years earlier, in his treatise on the *Preventive System in the Education of the Young:* The practice of this system is all based on the words of St Paul, who says: *Love is patient, love is kind… it bears all things… hopes all things, endures all things.* [22]

Constitution 20 reminds us that Don Bosco passes on to us the spiritual and educational experience which he called the Preventive System as a way of living and of handing on the gospel message, and of working with and through the young for their salvation.

> The Preventive System permeates our approach to God,
> our personal relationships, and our manner of living in community,
> through the exercise of a charity that knows how to make itself loved.

[22] 1 Cor 13:4, 7

Conference Eight

Walking with the Young

At the origins, Don Bosco was the father figure of this Oratory family, and Mamma Margaret was the mother figure. This is the historical basis of what passed into tradition as a lasting legacy, the family spirit in Don Bosco's Oratory family. The Strenna for 2006 was *Ensuring that special attention be given to the family, the cradle of life and love and where one first learns how to become human.* The Rector Major proposed a paradigm of family as the cradle of life and love, where one first learns how to become human.

Finding ways of unscrambling the Strenna and making it specific and concrete is not so easy. In the case of this particular Strenna, we were not the only province in the Salesian world to draw on Crida's evocative painting of Don Bosco and Mamma Margaret arriving to take up residence at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, on 3rd November 1846. The scene is rich in connotations and symbolism. In his circular letter on the fiftieth anniversary of the occasion, Don Rua did not hesitate to describe this as a wonderful day, the beginning of all Salesian works.



Between April 1846, when the Oratory found a permanent home at Valdocco, and July 1846, when Don Bosco was taken seriously ill and had to spend four months recuperating at his brother Joseph's house, Don Bosco somehow managed to put the finishing touches to a little booklet of reflections and prayers called, *Six Sundays and a Novena in Honour of St Aloysius*. Not long after resuming full-time duties and taking up residence at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales in November 1846, he compiled and edited *The Companion of Youth*, published and reprinted twice in 1847.

The fact that these spiritual writings for his boys come from the very time when he was feverishly at work with his early apostolate for youth tells us how much importance Don Bosco attached to nurturing the spiritual life of the young. If the Oratory was to be a home



that welcomed and a playground where friends could meet and enjoy themselves, it was also meant to be a parish that evangelised and a school that prepared for life. The evangelising and catechetical intent of Don Bosco was there right from the start. From its origins, the Oratory was to be home, school, parish, playground – not merely home and playground.

The Companion of Youth in the Practice of Religious Duties had four parts: an introduction in the form of a personal address to the young by Don Bosco; a series of meditations explaining the religious way to understand one's own existence; a devotional section; and a liturgical section. At first it appears to be simply a manual of prayers and practical devotions, but as Don Bosco explains in the introduction, he intended it to serve as a method and a way of life, a spiritual programme adapted to the young.

We know that Don Bosco borrowed freely from, among others, Charles Gobinet, a noted educator and devotee of the spirit of St Francis de Sales, whose *The Instruction of the Young in Christian Piety* (Paris, 1655) was translated and widely read in Piedmont, and a priest from Milan whose *Angelic Guide: Practical Instructions for the Young* was published in Turin in 1767. The morning and evening exercises of Good Christians contained in *The Companion of Youth* are almost entirely those found in the catechism of the Turin Archdiocese and other dioceses of Piedmont.

Overall, *The Companion of Youth* was remarkably free from the gloomy influence of Jansenism and the atmosphere of doom and gloom hanging over the spiritual life. By the time he was 32, with the help of the post-ordination course he took at the Ecclesiastical College in Turin, and under the guidance of Fr Cafasso, he was putting behind him the introverted, rigorous spirituality of his seminary years, and moving towards the inner freedom needed to give himself completely to a life of pastoral charity in action, summed up by *Give me people to serve, take away the rest*. Forty years later, in *Memoirs of the Oratory,* he acknowledged his debt to the Ecclesiastical College of Turin, the place *where young priests could learn the practical aspects of their sacred ministry. This proved very valuable to the Church, especially as a means of eradicating the vestiges of Jansenism that still persisted in our midst.*

In Don Bosco's own lifetime, *The Companion of Youth* went through 122 printings of about 50,000 copies each, in at least three editions. It was translated from Italian into French, Spanish and Portuguese. It has been said:

> Anyone proposing to write the history of religious devotion and worship in Italy in the nineteenth century must read this book. There is in it no trace of Jansenistic rigorism or of superstition. It appeals to the heart, recalls the pure sources of Christian life, and fosters frequent reception of the Sacraments. Some might classify this as a new approach, but really it is a prudent return to the classic teaching of old.

The Companion of Youth - *Calling on the Young*

There are two special ways by which the devil entices young people from the practice of virtue. The first is to convince them that the service of God consists in living a life of melancholy, devoid of all pleasure and enjoyment. This is not the case, my dear friends, so I should like to teach you a kind of Christian life which will make you happy and contented. I desire to show you what true enjoyment and pleasure is, so that you may follow the advice of the holy prophet David, *Serve ye the Lord with gladness*. This, then, is the purpose of the present book: *to teach you how to serve God and to be always happy.*

The second snare is the hope of a long life, with the expectation of conversion in old age or when death threatens. Be careful, my dear children, because many have been deceived in this manner. What assurance have we that we shall *ever* reach old age? We cannot expect death to await our convenience at old age, since life and death are in God's hands, and He apportions them as He sees fit.

However, if God grants you a long life, give ear to the serious warning which He has uttered: *Train a child in the way he should go and even when he is old he will not depart from it.* In other words, if we lead a good life when we are young, we shall be good when we are old, and our death will be happy, the beginning of eternal bliss. On the other hand, if vice takes hold of us in youth, it will gradually grow in the course of the different stages of our life until death, which will be the terrible herald of a most unhappy eternity. That this misfortune may not befall you, I have drawn up a scheme of life, brief and easy enough, which will enable you to be a joy to your parents, and a glory to your country, making you good citizens upon earth, and one day blessed inhabitants of heaven.

This book is divided into three parts. In the first part you will find the principal things which you must do, or which you must avoid, that you may live as good Christians. In the second part there is a collection of practical devotions for use in church and school. Finally, you will find an instruction in dialogue form on the fundamental truths of our holy Catholic religion, suited to your needs.

My young friends, you are very dear to me. It is enough for me to know that you are young, to become interested in your welfare. There are writers better and more learned than me, but it would be difficult to find one who has a greater love for you in Jesus Christ, or a greater desire for your true happiness. I am devoted to you, because you hold in your hearts the treasure of virtue. With its possession, you own everything; without it, you become the most unhappy and the most unfortunate creatures in the world.

May God be always with you, and grant that by the practice of these few suggestions you may save your souls, and thereby increase His glory. That is the sole purpose of the writer of these pages. May heaven grant you a long and joyful life. May your greatest treasure ever be a holy fear of God, who will be your recompense in time and eternity.

Yours sincerely
John Bosco, Priest

Don Bosco is addressing young people who have faith. He wants them to realise that the Christian way of life is not sad by nature, that in fact it tends to broaden into increasing joy. The viewpoint he expresses is not original. The idea that the basic yearning in human beings is the desire for happiness can also be found in the *Angelic Guide: Practical Instructions for the Young:*

> I have drawn up a scheme of life, brief and easy enough, which will enable you to be a joy to your parents, and a glory to your country, making you good citizens upon earth, and one day blessed inhabitants of heaven.

Characteristically, Don Bosco allows for nature as well as grace in the way of Christian life he proposes to the young in *The Companion of Youth*, not restricting it to supernatural and otherworldly goals. Where St Alphonsus before him had written:

> You were not born nor should you live to enjoy life, to get rich or to become powerful, to eat, drink and sleep like the beasts, but only to love your God and attain eternal salvation.

Don Bosco joined the natural to the supernatural purpose, and wrote instead:

> You are upon this earth not only to enjoy yourself, to accumulate riches, to eat, to drink, and to sleep, as the animals do; your end is by far greater, more noble and more sublime. You must love and serve God, and save your own soul.

Between 2002 and 2006, we were one of the co-sponsors of a national Youth Spirituality Project carried out by the Australian Catholic University, the Christian Research Association, and Monash University. Our participation in the project is acknowledged in two books where the findings of the project were published last year. The first is *Putting Life Together: Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research*, by Philip Hughes. The second is *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia*, by Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton and Ruth Webber.

According to the summary of findings in *Putting Life Together:*

> The focus of life for almost all young people is on enjoyment. There are two primary ways in which they see enjoyment as being expressed: through close friendships and experiencing excitement. There are many other ways through which enjoyment of life is sought, such as music, study and getting a good job, being in the natural environment and participating in creative activities, for example. Most young people see themselves as trying things out in their search to construct an enjoyable life.

In diagram form, the aims of life focus on enjoyment of life, to feel good about self, excitement (performance, travel and sport), and good friends. Among the means to these aims, the more immediate are seen as music, fairness, helping one another,

and care of the environment. At one remove are a peaceful, secure world, study and an interesting job. God is a remote presence, and is generally seen in terms of an ideal parent or friend.

Philip Hughes draws two conclusions that strike a strongly Salesian chord: firstly, that engagement with the young must be relational, and within this context questions of faith can be considered; secondly, what he calls *immersion experiences* are an essential part of educating young people to the faith.

The *Spirit of Generation Y* finds that:

> Nearly three quarters of Gen Y survey participants strongly agreed with the statement: *The thing is to enjoy life and make the best of it here and now...* It was clear that many young people approved of living for the moment rather than worrying about the future.

Activities for finding peace and happiness were rated in the following order: listening to music, working or studying, being creative artistically and being close to nature, shopping, meditating, and drinking alcohol and taking recreational drugs.

On the surface, it might appear that not much has changed from Don Bosco's time to our own where religion and happiness are concerned. This is deceptive, because there is a very different set of reasons for the situation that applies in each case. Jansenism, such a concern for Don Bosco, has ceased to be an issue. Instead it is the prevalence of secularity in the modern world, not only in the sense of the retreat of religion in public life, and the decline of belief and practice, but also in the sense of the whole context in which our moral, spiritual or religious search and experience takes place. Society itself is secular in the sense that there is a settled moral order in which belief in God is no longer regarded as something automatic, axiomatic, and socially obligatory. Instead it is regarded as a choice that one makes for oneself, something freely chosen in a way that would have been unthinkable in an earlier time.

A detailed and incisive critique of this situation can be found in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Taylor, a prominent philosopher from McGill University in Canada, is a practising Catholic). He points out that we have gone from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others. The default setting has changed from belief to unbelief. The condition of secularity is something we all share, believers and unbelievers alike. To some extent, the debate between belief and unbelief can be seen as a debate about whether or not there is anything beyond human flourishing, and this is not just in terms of *rival creeds* (Taylor documents in detail the implicit tenets of a secular humanist creed counter to the Christian creed), but also in terms of differences of *experience and sensibility*. What follows from this is

the need to address both the cognitive domain and the affective domain as part of faith development.

This is directly relevant to the findings of the Youth Spirituality Project, which validates the importance of experience and sensibility in addition to the intellectual content of religious education. There is no better example of this than the impact of the recent Days in the Dioceses and World Youth Day. Other examples include the success of the Youth Mass at St Patrick's Cathedral in 2004 for the fiftieth anniversary of the canonisation of Dominic Savio, and a whole group of Year 12 students which was virtually unanimous in nominating the spiritual retreat they had made together as their best experience of the year.

Going back to what Don Bosco says at the conclusion of his introduction to *The Companion of Youth:*

> My young friends, you are very dear to me. It is enough for me to know that you are young, to become interested in your welfare. There are writers better and more learned than I, but it would be difficult to find one who has a greater love for you in Jesus Christ, or a greater desire for your true happiness.

While similar sentiments were also expressed by the author of the *Angelic Guide: Practical Instructions for the Young,* Don Bosco's words take on added significance. They carry the full weight of conviction in the light of his definitive commitment to the young in the years 1844-1846, culminating in his collapse in July 1846. This was no idle boast.

Don Bosco incorporated the *Six Sundays and a Novena in honour of St Aloysius* into *The Companion of Youth.* Don Bosco's grasp of the importance of the principle of sacramentality is immediately evident. He was adept at devising practical programmes of devotion and spirituality. He established within the Oratory population a youth association called the Company of St Aloysius to provide a programme of the Christian life and apostolate for as many as possible of the better boys. In 1847 the feast of St Aloysius was celebrated at the Oratory for the first time. The preparation and celebration of the feast is a real object lesson in Don Bosco's educational and spiritual method.

Here we make holiness consist in being very happy was not an abstraction, a mere slogan – it was something that his boys could experience for themselves. *I want us to rejoice in body and in spirit, and to show the world how we can be happy in body and in soul without offending God and my wish is that we should make a happy feast of it, in the Lord and also in the kitchen.* An eyewitness of the feast of St Aloysius in 1851 tells us:

> Nothing was missing for a great celebration of young, committed Christians – singing, instrumental music, recitals and such things performed on a simple yet

masterfully prepared set. A hot-air balloon and a fireworks display ended the day. One could plainly see the joy and happiness on those youthful faces who were unwilling to leave. It was truly a family feast for 1500 youngsters who so admire and respect their father.

I recommend St Aloysius, wrote Don Bosco, *because he is proposed by the Church as the special protector and model of youth.* St Aloysius's mother was from a family named Tana, in Chieri, where Don Bosco had completed his schooling and studied for the priesthood. The Tana family house can still be seen in Chieri today. Don Bosco capitalised on St Aloysius' local connections, but St Aloysius had died in 1591 at the age of 23. We have no way of knowing whether the Oratory boys really regarded St Aloysius as an ideal that wholly corresponded to their desires and needs, but we do know that they had very little in common with his whole social and religious background, or the extraordinary spiritual path he followed in doing great penance, first as a layman, then as a member of the Society of Jesus.

St Aloysius might well serve as a model for youth in pre-industrial society, where there was lack of differentiation between younger and older members of the age group. By the time of Don Bosco, the shift from a predominantly agricultural and handicraft phase to the industrial phase was under way, a new stage of life, that we now call adolescence, was emerging, and there was a new generation of young people from the urban working class.

In order to present holiness as an ideal that was both attainable and attractive to young people, and to show how holiness was connected to the duties of one's age and condition and state of life, Don Bosco began to look for stories of youthful holiness that were closer in age-group, social background and life-setting to the boys at the Oratory than St Aloysius. In the next chapter we will look at Don Bosco's lives of Louis Comollo, Peter, Dominic Savio, Michael Magone, Francis Besucco, and Valentino.



Conference Nine

There can be no true education without religion

It's hardly surprising that Don Bosco's experience of working with his boys and educating them to be good Christians and solid citizens in their own context should continue to grow and develop, and that we see a change taking place in his way of teaching young people about holiness.

Instead of simply offering them historical examples of piety and heroic sanctity, like St Aloysius Gonzaga, he starts to tell them stories about youthful holiness, stories they are able to identify with.

The prototype was the life of Louis Comollo, one of his companions in the seminary at Chieri, who had died in 1839 at the age of 22. Written in draft form in the year of Comollo's death and published in 1844, it went through further editions in 1854, 1867 and 1884.

Originally it was dedicated to the seminarians at Chieri, and its stated aim was to propose a model for them, while paying tribute to a saintly close friend who had been such a decisive spiritual influence in Don Bosco's own life. Subsequent editions presented Comollo to a wider circle of readers. He was the modern St Aloysius, a model for any young man (especially if aspiring to the priesthood), and a model for anyone concerned about one's own salvation (editions of 1854 and 1867). He was a saint, a model for the Christian life as such (edition of 1884).

In a number of important respects, however, understandings of Christian and priestly life and spirituality at the seminary of Chieri in the 1830s left a lot to be desired. The emphasis was upon flight from the world, upon death, judgment, and the question of predestination, a sense of sin that restricted sacramental life, fostered excessive penance and mortification, and cast a pall of gloom over the spiritual life. In Comollo's case this was further exacerbated by his temperament and frail constitution. Don Bosco was also affected, although to a lesser degree. It is only later that he finds healing, wholeness, and sure identity, especially as a result of the time he spent at the Ecclesiastical College of Turin under the guidance and spiritual direction of Fr Cafasso. In passing, we should note that in *Memoirs of the Oratory*, Don Bosco specifically cautions his readers against emulating some of the things Comollo did, including excessive penances and mortifications. This was the same advice he gave to Dominic Savio.

In order to present holiness as an ideal that was both attainable and attractive to the young, and to show how holiness was connected to the duties of one's age and



condition and state of life, Don Bosco began to look for stories of youthful holiness that were closer in age-group, social background and life-setting to the boys at the Oratory than either Aloysius Gonzaga or Louis Comollo.

This was at a time when the Risorgimento, the liberal revolution and the movement towards the unification of Italy, was gathering pace. The Boncompagni Law of 1848 began the process of transferring authority over schooling from Church to State. As it became clear that the intention was to remove first the influence of the Church and then the influence of religion from public education, Don Bosco began a series of publications devoted to the theme of Christian education and the necessarily religious character of all education. *Only religion*, he wrote, *is able to begin and bring to a happy ending the great enterprise that is education.* When Don Bosco was writing *Memoirs of the Oratory*, the liberal revolution, the unification of Italy and the loss of Rome and the Papal States were a fait accompli. Harking back to the past, he wrote:

> Here it is good to recall that in those days religion was a basic part of the education system.

Don Bosco's first pedagogical story, a story with a thesis and a moral, appeared in 1855. The first part of the text was pirated and translated from French into Italian from an edifying tale called *A Husband such as many, a Wife such as few.* Adapted by Don Bosco, it became *The Power of a Good Education: A Recent Episode*. The hero, Peter, is the son of a drunken father, who is presented as a product of religious indifference, and of a mother who is very concerned about the Christian education of her child. Against the will of his wife the father sends his son, at the age of eight, to a match factory to earn his living. Don Bosco says:

> Here you will see a model mother and an exemplary child. A mother in the midst of a thousand difficulties succeeds in giving the best education to her son, who brings her erring husband back on track. A son who responds to his mother's affectionate care: a son whom we can say becomes the instrument of divine providence in bringing his father back to religion; and who also becomes a support for the family.

The practice of religion brings back joy and harmony to Peter's family, as the father once again commits to family life rather than to the bar. The Oratory, with all its activities, becomes an important place for supporting the boy's good will and the educational concerns of his mother. He goes there whenever he can at midday and in the evenings after work, *because the boys there were instructed willingly and freely.* In a cross-promotion, we are told that Peter carried a copy of *The Companion of Youth* in his pocket, and used to read it every day. It comes as no surprise that he turns out to be such a good Christian and a solid citizen too.

Despite its highly derivative nature, *The Power of a Good Education* is informed by Don Bosco's own experiences as an educator. Without naming himself, Don Bosco writes himself into the story, where he is a significant presence in the background as the Rector of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, who receives Peter's father kindly, and then becomes the catechist, counsellor, and confidante of young Peter. The story contains in rudimentary form Don Bosco's basic educational and spiritual principles: the interrelationship of family and Oratory as the prerequisite for a sound education; the force of good example; holiness based on doing one's daily duty; on obedience, on prayer, and on charity nourished through the active apostolate.

Between 1859 and 1864, Don Bosco wrote the stories of three boys who lived and studied at the Oratory. These three boys served his educational and spiritual purposes better than Peter or Louis Comollo or Aloysius Gonzaga.

The first edition of the Life of Dominic Savio was published in 1859, the same year that the Casati Law completed and regulated more strictly state control over education from kindergarten to university. The importance Don Bosco attached to the story of Dominic Savio, with its underlying pedagogical thesis – there can be no true education without religion – can be seen from the amount of time and energy he was prepared to devote to the careful revision and expansion of the text, taking it through five editions from 1859 to 1878.

In the Life of Dominic Savio, Don Bosco gives concrete formulation to his style of pastoral care as a spiritual director of the young. Written in the first person, bringing real persons and real events into sharp focus, it is a model of a special brand of spirituality Don Bosco proposed to the young: not just personal holiness, but the practical exercise of pastoral charity – holiness through the apostolate, in the spirit of *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle.* The practical exercise of pastoral charity was to begin at home, with their companions at the Oratory, and from there it was to extend beyond the Oratory, as it did during the cholera epidemic in Turin in 1854.

1859 was also the year when the establishment of the full five-year secondary curriculum at the Oratory was completed. This marked the real beginning of the expansion and growth of the boarding high school at the Oratory. What had started out very much in the nature of a home attached to the Oratory was completely transformed into a large institution which by the mid 1860s had 600 boarders.

Boarders in this student community, living and studying at the Oratory in the 1850s and 1860s, provided Don Bosco with material he could tailor to suit his educational and spiritual purposes. Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco were boys, like all the others who came to the Oratory, but Don Bosco used their lives to explain three different examples of youthful holiness.

Taken together, these three lives give us a compendium of Don Bosco's style of education and spiritual direction of the young. The different types (Savio, from a good Christian family; Magone, from a *broken* home, though not a juvenile delinquent in any way; Besucco, an unspoiled shepherd boy from the mountains) give us three angles on Don Bosco's approach. These three lives have been called *the synoptics of the Preventive System;* by implication, the fourth *Salesian* gospel would be *Memoirs of the Oratory.*

Give him a chance, and you will see he is another St Aloysius, Dominic Savio's teacher tells Don Bosco. Material from *The Companion of Youth* about giving oneself to God and becoming a fine garment for God early in life is recast in the form of a dialogue between Don Bosco and Dominic. *Now that I know I can be happy and holy too, that is what I want most of all,* says Dominic. *I praised his decision,* Don Bosco tells us:

> I insisted that he must not worry because the Lord's voice is not heard in the turmoil of the soul. I told him that first of all I wanted a steady, moderate cheerfulness. I advised him not to weaken in his duties of study and prayer, and I suggested that he never skip recreation with his companions.

It is when we see Don Bosco responding to spiritual crises in the lives and hearts of the young that we gain the deepest insights into the meaning of loving kindness, presence and assistance in Don Bosco's educational method.

The advice that Dominic gives to one of his companions is a leaf straight out of Don Bosco's book:

> Here we try to make holiness consist in being very joyful. We try to do our duties well and willingly pray. You can start right now and take as your slogan, Serve the Lord in holy joy.

This is how Don Bosco describes his first impressions of Dominic Savio:

> Early on the morning of the first Monday of October I saw a boy coming toward me with his father. His bright smile, his joyful and respectful manner drew my attention to him.

A little later Don Bosco tells us that Dominic was popular with his classmates, even those who were not inclined to piety, because he was so joyful and full of life, and his conversation included stories and jokes which got everyone laughing. Looking at holy pictures and statues of Dominic Savio, we have to wonder, *Who wiped the smile off his face?*

By the same token, the tendency has been to pay too much attention to one of Dominic's First Communion resolutions at the expense of another. *Death rather than sin* is thoroughly conventional, and appears in the act of contrition in the catechism

of the Archdiocese of Turin. More original, more personal, and ultimately, I would argue, more Salesian, is *My friends will be Jesus and Mary.*

It was Alberto Caviglia (1868-1943), an early pioneer in the critical study of Don Bosco's writings and educational methods, who first noted that Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco came into contact with saving grace in different ways, and that Don Bosco, educator and teacher as well as father and friend, approached each one and offered him the support he needs. Fr Caviglia tells us:

> The Life of Magone is a classic of the education of the heart. It is totally based on a principle that Don Bosco considered to be above any other educational concept, that to educate it is necessary to enter into the very heart of a young person, and that, when he responds, the total education (or call it pedagogy, it does not matter) is assured. Because of this, the Life of Magone will remain for all time the classical document of pedagogy as envisaged by Don Bosco.

In the Life of Michael Magone, Don Bosco also incorporates material from *The Companion of Youth*. After separating some boys who were fighting, Magone tells them, *We are reasonable beings, so we go by reason not by force,* something Don Bosco had said in *The Companion of Youth.*

Long before Don Bosco used the formula, *reason, religion and kindness* for the first time in 1877, he had used other triads, notably three words beginning with s. Sometimes *sanità, sapienza, santità,* at other times *sanità, studio, santità,* for *health, wisdom, knowledge, wholeness and holiness*. In the Life of Francis Besucco, he coined another triad, this time *Cheerfulness, Piety, Study*. Concerned with daily life rather than abstract concepts, perhaps this best sums up Don Bosco's approach.

The rationale for these lives of youthful holiness can be found in two of Don Bosco's *Good Nights*. In 1864 he told the boys at the Oratory:

> How fine it would be if everyone were to try to imitate Magone and Besucco in fostering God's love among his schoolmates and in drawing the unwary away from the danger of sin. Everybody can prevent bad conversations, as Savio did; everybody can in a kindly way cool the tempers of quarrellers and fighters. Savio and Besucco used to pick a schoolmate to lead to God, and then they would set out to win him over. How? By patiently going over lessons with him, by lending their own gloves when his fingers were stiff with cold, by putting their own coat about him outdoors, or by giving him something to eat with his dry bread. These are little trivial things, but they mean a great deal. With such little things quarrels were prevented, good advice was willingly received, grumbling ceased, and reminders to keep house rules were willingly accepted.

In 1875, during a novena in preparation for the Feast of All Saints, Don Bosco was even more direct:

> There are many boys who are now saints in heaven and they were once flesh and bones as we are! I will even go further: how many boys are there now in Heaven who were not only mortal like us, but who lived here in this very House, strolled through these same porticoes, prayed in the same church, and obeyed the same rules and superiors. They became saints and are now in Heaven, as we have every reason to hope is the case with Savio, Magone, Besucco and many more. Now we must say: if they could, why not I? If those boys became so good, living under the same conditions as we do, why can't we do the same?

Don Bosco had been unable to say this of St Aloysius, and even of Louis Comollo, for that matter, but he is able to say it of Savio, Magone and Besucco, and that is the point.

Another angle on where Don Bosco is coming from is provided by his Life of Valentino, which appeared in 1866. This is a story where Don Bosco's vocational agenda comes to the fore, and provides another demonstration that without religion there is no true education. Valentino's father makes a twofold mistake. First of all, because he undervalues the role of religion, he wrongly believes that he can get his son to be a virtuous and honest citizen without first making him a good Christian. Secondly, he lacks personal involvement and dedication to his son's upbringing. He has liberal and secular ideals, is inclined to see religion as superstition or something for women and children, and pays more attention to his business than to the personal care of his son:

> Administration, markets, fairs, parties at cafés and hotels did not give him time to look after his son's upbringing.

The results are disastrous. Thanks to the intervention of Valentino's mother, he is sent to a boarding school where religion is taught well, where it is recommended and put into practice. Placed with good priests, far from bad companions and bad books, and put with good friends, through *music, recitals, drama,* Valentino forgets his dissipated life and becomes virtuous. There are no prizes for guessing that it was a Salesian boarding school that was able to repair the damage and contribute to Valentino's formation in virtue!

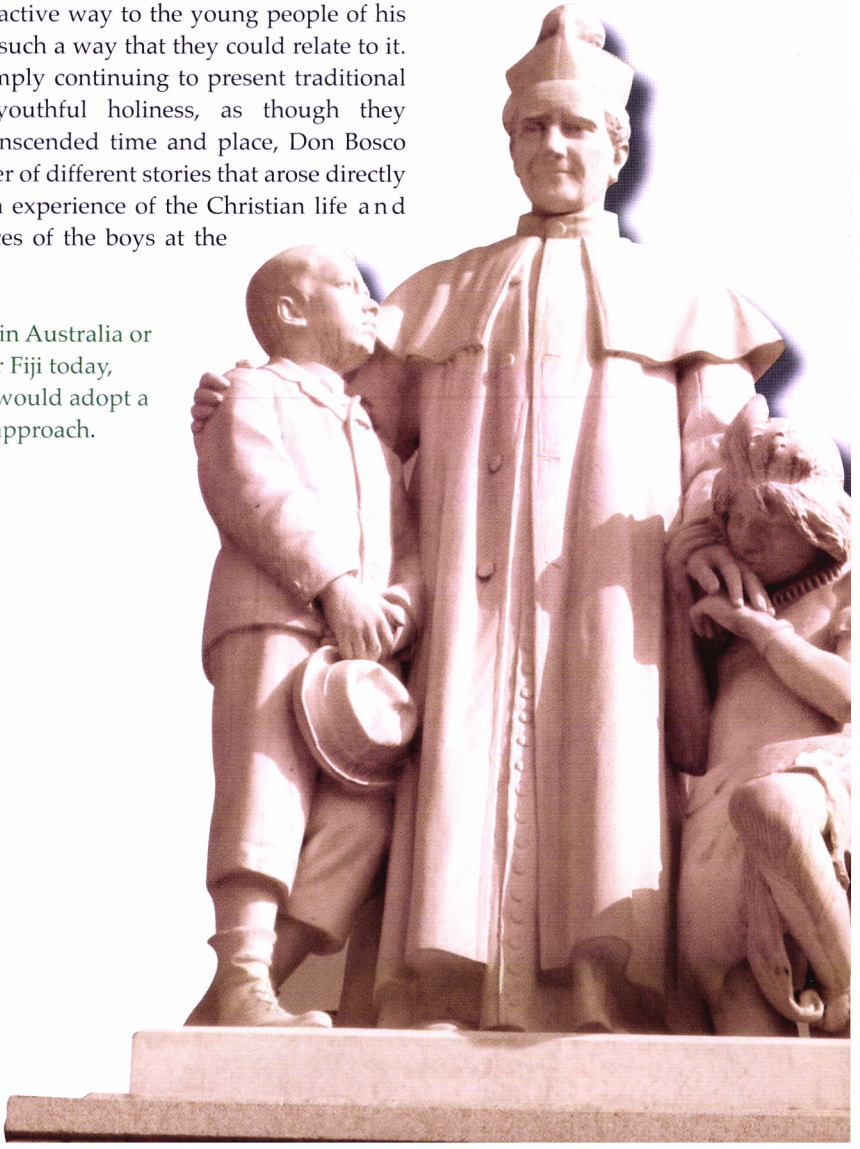
Later on, the obstinacy of Valentino's father, who persists in putting impediments in the way of his son's religious calling, and (in fact, worse still) puts a teacher in charge of him to distract him away from religion, brings disaster to the boy and to himself.

In all this, we can see how faithful Don Bosco was to the advice he had been given as a seminarian:

> Give up high-falutin language, and stick to dialect wherever possible. When you use Italian, speak the language of the people, the people, the people. Instead of speculations, use examples, analogies, and simple, practical illustrations. Bear in mind that ordinary people understand hardly anything you have to say, because the truths of the faith are never sufficiently explained to them.

Don Bosco realised the need to adopt a more flexible and creative approach to presenting the Christian life in an attractive way to the young people of his own time, in such a way that they could relate to it. Instead of simply continuing to present traditional models of youthful holiness, as though they somehow transcended time and place, Don Bosco used a number of different stories that arose directly from his own experience of the Christian life and the experiences of the boys at the Oratory.

If he were in Australia or Samoa or Fiji today, I am sure he would adopt a similar approach.



Conference Ten

Don Bosco's Devotion to Our Lady

Between 1800 and 1861, the population of Turin increased by more than four times, from 50,000 to 204,000, making it one of the fastest growing cities in Italy. Much of this was due to the migration of poor people from the country to the city. They settled wherever they could, but especially in the existing poorer districts along the rivers Dora and Po to the north and north-east. To house the wave of immigrants, apartment buildings several storeys high were added to already existing slums, and the northern districts became overcrowded slums with appalling living conditions.

A network of canals that provided water-power for small manufacturing industries made the area damp and smelly. Small manufacturing industry at the time included things like gun and gun-powder works, a sugar refinery, a factory for the production of printing machinery, a textile mill, tanning and leather works, and a wood-processing factory. Most of them were noisy, dirty, and dangerous. They were generally small businesses, but some employed as many as a hundred workers.

Sanitation and public hygiene were non-existent. The public sewer which drained from the centre of the city was allowed to run in the open before reaching the river, and both the city's slaughter-houses were located in this area. There were epidemics of typhus, cholera, and smallpox, and a high incidence of things like tuberculosis, bronchial and lung diseases, and dysentery. Life expectancy in the city of Turin at the time was 35 years. The rate of sickness and mortality among babies and children was high.

In the rapidly growing Turin of the 1840s, it was the children of labourers and migrants living in the slums of the northern districts who were most at risk and liable to be homeless, neglected, or left to themselves. It is no coincidence that the first oratories for poor and abandoned boys began in these northern districts, the first in 1840 by Fr John Cocchi, and by Don Bosco a few years later.

When the Oratory of St Francis de Sales was established in Valdocco in 1846, it was only a quarter of a mile away from a gun-powder factory and three warehouses. On 26th April 1852 there was a massive explosion, heard fifteen miles away. If the flames had not been prevented from reaching the third warehouse, which contained 800 barrels of powder, the damage would have been even more extensive. The Oratory was rocked by the explosion; Don Bosco tells us:

> The Oratory house, which was badly constructed, suffered serious damage; the deputies sent us an offering of 300 francs to help repair it.



Don Bosco printed 5,000 copies of a picture card showing figures from the Oratory in the foreground, the exploding magazine in the background, and above the scene, protecting her city and especially the Oratory, the figure of Our Lady of Consolation. The superscription reads *In peril and danger, turn to Mary,* and the dedication beneath is from *The sons of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, to Our Lady of Consolation:*

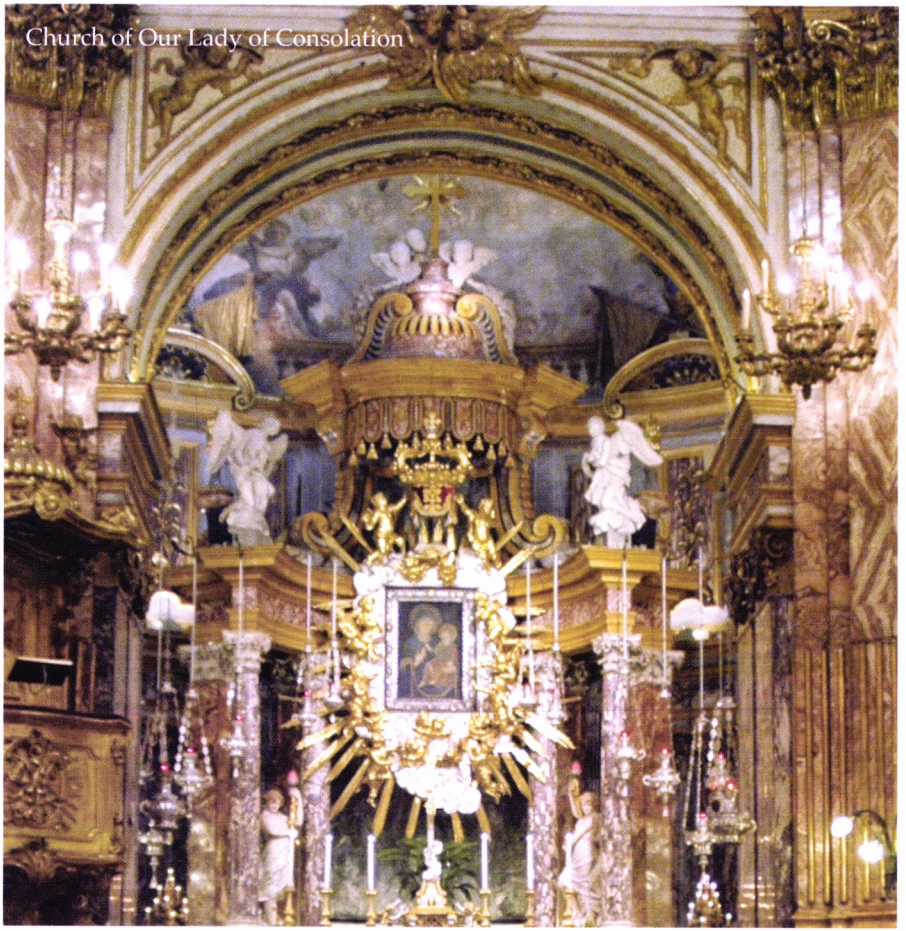
We, from the ignited gunpowder
Through your mercy spared,
At your feet, great Virgin,
Give thanks bowed in veneration.

When Don Bosco had been taken seriously ill in 1846, it was at the Church of Our Lady of Consolation, about six blocks away, that the Oratory boys kept vigil until his recovery. We know that the first statue of Mary in the Pinardi chapel was of Our Lady of Consolation, the Madonna of the people of Turin. Don Bosco cultivated devotion to Mary under this title, believing that to feel themselves protected by a consoling Mother responded well to the needs of the young who were poor and in danger. In *Memoirs of the Oratory* he tells us that a procession from the Oratory to the Church of Our Lady of Consolation for a sung Mass at which the Oratory choir and musicians would perform, became an annual event. In the *Biographical Memoirs* [24] we are told that at the death of Mamma Margaret in 1856, Don Bosco prayed to Our Lady of Consolation, *Most compassionate Virgin, my sons and I are without a mother! Please be our mother from now on.*



In 1854 came the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception by Pius IX. This was a title that carried with it strong political implications. Noting Pius IX's habit of choosing December 8th for important events in his reign, one historian comments:

> The recurrent choice of that day was not unintentional. The Immaculate was in fact the only creature who had been withdrawn from Satan's lordship, she who had crushed the head of the serpent. Recourse to her protection could be taken for a symbol of a counter-revolutionary mysticism, once the identification between Satan and the Revolution had been established.


Church of Our Lady of Consolation

In many ways, Don Bosco and Pius IX were kindred spirits. It comes as no surprise to find Don Bosco saying that *All our great initiatives had their beginning on the feast of Mary Immaculate.* It's second nature for us to associate the date with 1841, Bartholomew Garelli, and the Oratory of St Francis Assisi, and of course this is the chronological and symbolic centre of *Memoirs of the Oratory.* But we should notice that Don Bosco associates this date with the Oratory of St Francis de Sales and the Oratory of St Aloysius as well. The Oratory of St Francis de Sales meets for the first time on December 8th 1844 with the blessing of a chapel named after Francis de Sales, next to the Little Hospital of St Philomena, one of the Marchesa di Barolo's institutes. The Oratory of St Aloysius, in the Porta Nuova quarter of Turin, was opened on December 8th 1847. In this way, Don Bosco directly associates the foundational moments of his Oratories with Mary Immaculate.

[24] EBM V, 374

As Fr Caviglia points out, Don Bosco encouraged devotion to Mary Immaculate in a way that transcends historical particularity. He turned the article of faith (Immaculate Conception) into a programme of devotion and spirituality. He made Mary Immaculate a living presence among the boys of the Oratory. She seemed to be the ideal educator for youngsters who had to overcome the difficulties inherent in their human and Christian growth. Much of this was centred in the programme and activities of the Immaculate Conception Sodality among the Oratory boys, and the annual celebration of the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, with its accompanying spiritual preparation. From the ranks of the Immaculate Conception Sodality came nine of the sixteen founding members of the Salesian Society who gathered in Don Bosco's room on 18th December 1859.

Just as the liberal revolution, from 1848 onwards, provided the context which made the title *Immaculate Conception* a household word among conservative devout Catholics, and gave that title its peculiar religious-political slant, so the relentless progress of the revolution culminating in the takeover of the Papal States and the unification of Italy in 1861 saw the title *Help of Christians* come into prominence, a title that was even more politically charged in its original context. The miraculous occurrences near Spoleto on 1862, where the Virgin Mary spoke to a young child from her image on the wall of an old ruined church, ushered in what might be called the decade of Mary, Help of Christians.

On 27th May 1862, a report by the Archbishop of Spoleto appeared in Turin's Catholic daily newspaper. Three days later, Don Bosco told the story or parable of two pillars (or columns) in a *Good Night* to five hundred boys at Valdocco. When we see what's happened to that, we can understand Don Bosco's general insistence that what he said in his *Good Nights*, and especially his dreams, were not meant to go beyond his audience, the boys and Salesians at the Oratory in Valdocco. The parable of the two columns belongs to us, not to anybody else.

We need to start from the fact that Don Bosco is talking quite specifically to the boys and Salesians at Valdocco. He is speaking as educator and spiritual director of the young, at the end of the month of May, and what he wants them to do is to make some good resolutions. In other words, they're not just passive onlookers at some projection of future events as an apocalyptic spectacle. The story Don Bosco tells is meant to engage his audience by casting them and casting the Oratory in its imagery, making them part of the meaning.

Barely two years had passed since the annexation of almost all the Italian regional states, including the Papal States, and barely a year since the proclamation of the kingdom of Italy. Not surprisingly, the pope in Don Bosco's story is depicted as hard-pressed and under attack on all sides. We are told specifically that the weapons used in the attack on the Church by the powers of the world include books, flammable

materials, and newspapers. This is an unmistakable reference to the anti-Catholic liberal press and its war of propaganda against the Church. Don Bosco regarded these weapons as so damaging that he had established his own printing shop at the Oratory between 1861 and 1862, not only to give his boys a trade, but also to return some of the heavy fire from anti-Catholic liberal propaganda.

The pope is not named in Don Bosco's story, so that his plight seems emblematic of a whole succession of popes from Pius VI at the time of Napoleon to Pius IX. Given Don Bosco's devotion to Pius IX, and the small collection that had been taken up at the Oratory and sent to Pius IX when he was in forced exile between 1848 and 1850, after being forced to flee from Rome, it was only natural that his young audience would think of Pius IX, the pope at the time.

An unusual detail in Don Bosco's story is the way that the pope is hit and falls, but gets up again, then is hit for a second time and dies. Seen in the historical context, the first setback, serious but not fatal, could be a veiled reference to events that had already taken place, the pope's flight from Rome and the period of forced exile in Gaeta, and the loss of the Papal States in 1860. The fatal setback would have to be something worse – possibly a veiled reference to the taking of Rome in 1870 and the loss of temporal power by the pope. Don Bosco did not need a crystal ball; in March of 1861, the first Prime Minister of Italy, Camillo Cavour, had made two speeches in Parliament declaring that the unification of Italy would not be complete until Rome became its capital, with the pope surrendering his temporal power. This was the liberal policy of *a free Church in a free State*. To Pius IX and Don Bosco, this was anathema.

The liberal revolution had come close to home for Don Bosco, directly affecting his work at the Oratory, causing an internal and external crisis between 1849 and 1852. His patron and good friend, Archbishop Fransoni of Turin, was exiled in 1850 following his protests against the abolition of Church courts. Interception of correspondence from Archbishop Fransoni led to house searches for incriminating documents at the Oratory from 1860 to 1861, adding to Don Bosco's reasons for being so consistently negative towards the Risorgimento.

If the epic struggle and triumph of the Church provides the broad backdrop to the parable of the two columns, when it comes to drawing some resolutions from the story, they do not come from the images of ships or the battle. They are drawn directly from the image of the two columns – the Blessed Sacrament and Mary, Help of Christians. Working on a much broader canvas, and on a grand scale, Don Bosco gives dramatic expression to something he had previously emphasised in the Life of Dominic Savio with one of Dominic's resolutions for his first communion: *My friends will be Jesus and Mary.*

The consecrated host and the inscription, *salvation of all believers*, on the second column should be seen in context of the campaign for frequent communion


MARIA AVXILIVM CHRISTIANORVM ORA PRO NOBIS

which was gathering momentum in the face of Jansenist rigorism followed by the Dechristianisation programme that had been part of the French Revolution. At the Oratory, Don Bosco presented Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament as a personal friend with whom it was possible to enter into dialogue by means of frequent communion, personalising reception of the sacrament by means of visits to the Blessed Sacrament and prayer, in this way building and deepening a relationship with the Lord.

There is nothing particularly original to Don Bosco in the broad scenario of the story of the two columns, or its main elements. They can be found in sermons, articles, illustrations and cartoons in Catholic publications of the time. Don Bosco's *Good Night* is another reflection of the turbulent political situation in Italy, and the need for reassurance that *the gates of hell would not prevail.*

It seemed that the Help of Christians was now about to act in defence of the Church, perhaps leading to the overthrow of the liberal establishment. Caught in the euphoria of these events, Don Bosco decided to build a monumental church dedicated to Mary, Help of Christians in front of the Oratory. One of the inscriptions for the interior of the church read:

> Pius VII instituted the feast of Mary, Help of Christians to commemorate the 24th of May when with Mary's help he was released from prison at Savona.

As expectation of direct intervention by Mary, Help of Christians to defeat the enemies of the Church and overthrow the liberal secular state in Europe (as she had rescued Pius VI and Pius VII and overthrown Napoleon) began to subside, Don Bosco left behind the narrowly political ideology of the serpent of European liberalism, and began to speak in broader historical terms, developing a more universal vision of Mary as Helper: in reference to the past, as the power behind the triumphs of the Church throughout its history; in reference to the future, as the promise and guarantee of the ultimate success of the Church's mission, and that of the Salesian Society in particular.

Seen in this context, the period of the building of the Church of Mary, Help of Christians, from the time work began in 1863 to the dedication in 1868, represents a watershed in Don Bosco's outlook, a maturing of his pastoral approach and a broadening of his vision from the original idea of a church for his house, his local area and his congregation, to the idea of a basilica, a place of pilgrimage, the home of a spiritual family. In the commission he gave to the artist Lorenzoni, commissioned in 1867 to paint the great portrait of Mary, Help of Christians, we can see how far Don Bosco has come from the picture cards of Our Lady of Consolation in 1852 and from the vision behind the story of the two columns in 1862. By 1867, what Don Bosco wanted was the Most Holy Mary on high, among choirs of angels, then the choirs of prophets, apostles, martyrs, confessors and virgins; on the ground, emblems of

Mary's great victories and the peoples of the world raising their hands towards her asking for help. He had to scale it down when Lorenzoni pointed out that no church would be big enough to hold a picture representing so many people.

We still finished up with a painting 13 by 24 feet, encased in a gilt frame, above the high altar, dominating the whole of the interior. Mary, Help of Christians, holding the child Jesus on her left arm, stands in the middle of the picture, royally dressed, a crown on her head and a sceptre in her right hand. She is surrounded by angels and by the apostles and saints.

The Holy Trinity is present in the Son she clasps to her heart, in the Holy Spirit hovering over her head, in the eye of the Father which from on high surveys the whole picture. At the bottom, between the apostles Peter and Paul, the hill of Superga can be seen, with the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Victory, and below it the new Church of Mary, Help of Christians.

It is abundantly clear from the original commission and from the painting itself that the representation of Mary, Help of Christians in the great altarpiece transcends historical particularity and portrays a Marian eschatology that was strictly tied to the political-religious circumstances of the times. In effect, it is a portrayal of Mary as the Mother of the Church, in all her majesty and in all her mystery.

One point of convergence remains. On the pinnacle of the Basilica of Mary, Help of Christians stands the statue of Mary Immaculate. These two titles continued to give specific shadings to Don Bosco's Marian spirituality and Marian devotion, and our tradition is characterised by the use of both titles. In the most commonly used form of the prayer of entrustment at the conclusion of meditation, we address Mary as, *Immaculate Virgin, Help of Christians, foundress and support of our Congregation.*

Looking back on his life, Don Bosco said that everything was done with Mary's help. This was already clear to him by the time he was writing *Memoirs of the Oratory.* He recognises that she was the lady given to him as his mother and teacher by the man of dignified bearing in the dream of his boyhood. *This is the field of your work,* she had indicated to him; *Make yourself humble, brave, persevering. In due time, you will understand everything.*

A born storyteller, Don Bosco tells us how he turned his hand to a whole series of trades and fields of work. As a boy, schoolwork and farm work. At the age of thirteen, he takes up tailoring, making buttonholes and hems, single and double seams, cutting out underwear, waistcoats, trousers and coats. *I like to think I became a master tailor,* he tells us. We know that he also picked up some blacksmithing.

At the age of 18, he is a waiter and a bartender, making liquors and jams, coffees and chocolates, sweets, drinks and ices. *I was doing it only for fun and relaxation,* he says.

Later he tells us that he succeeded in mastering games, magic, and acrobatics:

> If in the fields of Murialdo I was only a beginner, now I had become something of a master.

Aged 19, about to enter the Franciscans, he has the strange dream in which one of the threadbare, helter-skelter friars tells him, *God's preparing another place, another harvest for you.*

On summer holidays from the seminary in Chieri:

> On the lathe I turned spindles, pegs, spinning tops, and wooden balls. I made clothes and shoes and I worked wood and iron. To this very day there are in my house at Murialdo a writing desk, a dinner table, and some chairs, masterpieces to remind me of my summer holiday activities. I worked in the fields, too, harvesting hay and wheat. I trimmed the vines, harvested the grapes, and made the wine, and so on.

It's not until after his ordination in 1841 that it slowly begins to dawn on him that his field of work is with the kind of young people he meets for the first time on the streets and in the squares of Turin. These are the particular people God has given him to serve, and they are very different from the young people who were his friends in his own student days in Chieri, and very different from the children of the countryside round Becchi where he was born.

One of the conjuring tricks Don Bosco plays on us in *Memoirs of the Oratory* is to tell us the dream of his boyhood in such a way that it fades, melts and dissolves from Turin with its slums and streets and squares, to Chieri with its churches and very pretty provincial market-town appearance, to Becchi, the open fields and countryside and the little house, the place of the dream.

The way Don Bosco tells the initial vocation-mission dream also makes it unmistakably clear that it was not from any of the recognised authorities of his own time in the field of education – people like Fr Ferrante Aporti and Fr Joseph Rayneri from the University of Turin – that Don Bosco learnt to become father, teacher and spiritual guide to the young. It was the lady given to him in the dream of his boyhood as teacher.

Over the years, she had shown him exactly what was to be his field of work, and with her help he had gone from being only a beginner to something of a master.

Conference Eleven

New Frontiers

The Special General Chapter of 1971 invited us to act ***as*** *Don Bosco did, rather than repeat in a servile way* ***what*** *he did,* and instead of indulging in a mere mechanical reproduction of his every action, to understand the spirit which inspired his work. This spirit, which he summed up in the saying, *I have always gone ahead as the Lord inspired me, and as circumstances demanded,* saw the growth and expansion of his work, and the same spirit will see it continue to develop today. *True adherence to our founder,* said the 20th General Chapter, *demands* ***fidelity*** *to one's work with dynamic initiative, and courageous* ***energy*** *without detriment to authentic fidelity.*

Even more pointedly, the Special General Chapter went on to say, *Responding to the needs of concrete situations in the light of the original mandate of Don Bosco is something beyond mere imitation.* Don Bosco encourages us to this end when he writes his confidential advice to his sons (the reference is to *Memoirs of the Oratory*) with the intention of putting at their disposal *a rule for overcoming future difficulties by learning from the past.* Learning from the past is not the same as repeating the answers of the past!

In 1978, making his closing address to the 21st General Chapter, Fr Viganò stated boldly and clearly that *For our first criterion of renewal, we must go back to the heart of our founder.* To start again from Don Bosco is not simply to return to Don Bosco with the intention of duplicating everything he said and did; it is to understand his heart, and it is in doing this that our own hearts are reawakened. This is firmly in the tradition of St Francis de Sales, taken up by Cardinal Newman:

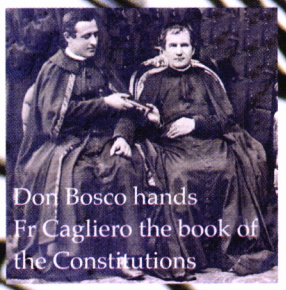
> Heart speaks to heart, the tongue speaks only to ears.

Fr Viganò's circular letter of 1995, *Reading the Founder's Charism Again at the Present Day* was in effect a last will and testament:

> The foundational reinterpretation could not be a simple and more or less scientific study of the sources; it had to be a spiritual discernment made by committed disciples, from within the same vocational experience. It had to be a consideration by those able to grasp the soul of their own institute, what it stands for, its dynamism, its manner of following Christ and of working in the Church, and of loving young people in the world in the state in which they are at present found. The return to the sources could not be an archaeological voyage of discovery through ancient documents but a revisiting of moments in the foundation process and of the heart of the founder in his original experience as a disciple of Christ. It had to be an organic and dynamic re-evaluation implying personal communion with the founder through the experience of a whole institute which had shared his spirit and mission through the years.

Coming closer to the present, in his closing address to the 25th General Chapter, the Rector Major told us:

> Looking at the path the Congregation has followed in these last thirty years, it can



Don Bosco hands Fr Cagliero the book of the Constitutions

Missionary Crosses

be seen that the changes have not always been along a straight line. I think that the greatest difficulty was not the renewal of the Constitutions or of the structures of government or of pastoral practice, but the spiritual renewal, which involves a deep interior conversion.

My guess is that most of us would subscribe to that reading of events. Returning to Don Bosco, going back to the heart of our founder, starting again from Don Bosco, reawakening the heart of every Salesian, are not simple, straightforward tasks. Even establishing the so-called facts of history has had its moments. The *Biographical Memoirs* have proven to be a mixed blessing, and the historical character of Memoirs of the Oratory is somewhat problematic too. On the document placed beside the coffin at Don Bosco's funeral, Don Rua had written, *He was born at Castelnuovo d'Asti, 15th August 1815.* Not until late 1889 did inspection of the baptismal register of St Andrew's parish church reveal the correct date of birth to be 16th August. The erroneous belief that Don Bosco's half-brother, Anthony, had been born in 1803 instead of 1808 helped to perpetuate the stereotype of a bully, instead of someone who had been orphaned at the age of nine, confused and somewhat alienated at the age of seventeen, deemed to be head of the family, yet finding himself isolated, one against three.

It was only 50 years ago, in 1955, that an important article in *Salesianum* reconstructed the chronology for the second decade of Don Bosco's life, correcting *Memoirs of the Oratory* and the *Biographical Memoirs*. This marked the beginning of critical Salesian studies. Twenty years later, research through records in local archives established that Don Bosco was born in the Cascina Biglione, where his Father was tenant farmer. It was only after the death of his father in 1817 that the family moved to the *little house,* which Don Bosco calls *my house, the place of the dream*. The Salesians bought the little house in 1920, believing that this was where he was born. This led to unfortunate consequences. As part of a plan to have the whole hill under Salesian control, the Biglione farmhouse and property was acquired in 1929 at the time of Don Bosco's beatification. Before research showed that Don Bosco had been born in the Biglione farmhouse, it was demolished in 1958 to make way for the mausoleum that's there now. When I look at old photographs of the Casa Biglione and its successive modifications and expansions, I find the effect more pleasing to the eye than the skyline of Colle Don Bosco as it is today. Makes you wonder, doesn't it?

These are cautionary tales. It's important to get our own history right before we start building castles of Salesianity and spirituality in the air. Spiritual traditions are not derived from abstract theory but from attempts to live out gospel values in a positive yet critical way within specific historical and cultural contexts. Sometimes our own imagination can get in the way. It was only in 1998, when I set foot in the sacristy of the Church of St Francis of Assisi in Turin, and the internal courtyard, that I discovered to my surprise that the sacristy area is a much larger

space than the small courtyard. I had imagined it differently, and quite wrongly. I had also felt sorry for Don Bosco when the Oratory was on the move, imagining him traipsing round Turin, when in fact it was more like going round a large block. This led me to realise that the real ordeal wasn't so much being on the move, it was more about Don Bosco at the ripe old age of thirty, being brave enough to go out on his own and trying to make a go of it without the infrastructure and support he really needed, and without being sure where it would come from.

The experience of visiting the Salesian holy places also helps overcome the tendency to think of starting again from Don Bosco in a way that sees him as a figure in splendid isolation. He was part of a remarkable group of social saints in nineteenth century Turin, people like Joseph Cottolengo, the Barolos, Joseph Cafasso and Leonard Murialdo. Joseph Cottolengo's Little House of Divine Providence, with its motto, *The love of Christ impels us* (2 Cor 5,14) was a powerful exemplar of the practical exercise of pastoral charity for the marginalised, the poor and abandoned, the neglected and at risk. It was the Barolos who were responsible for reform of the prisons of Turin, and the Marchesa who employed Joseph Cafasso and Don Bosco as chaplains. The Palazzo Barolo, with its splendid central double staircase, served as a salon, a cultural meeting place for leading figures in society, writers and artists and politicians. Don Bosco met the Marchesa di Barolo for the first time in 1844, when he was thirty and she was sixty. The age difference, which isn't always grasped accurately, is part of the reason for Don Bosco's ambivalence towards this formidable woman.

Conversely, Joseph Cafasso was only four years older than Don Bosco, despite the tendency to portray him as considerably older. The monument honouring him as the priest of the gallows is only one example of the esteem he enjoyed in the history of Turin and the history of the Church in nineteenth century Italy. According to the official processes for his canonisation in 1947, he was the co-founder, father and first collaborator of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, and without Fr Cafasso, Don Bosco's work could not have come into being.

For me, what stands out the most about Don Bosco when he is seen in the context of his life and times is the way that ultimately, with the help of grace, he transcends the limitations of his own place and time, and whatever limitations there are to his own personality and makeup. We can include his origins and family background, his socio-cultural environment, his father's death, family difficulties, widowed mother, agricultural crisis, famine. It's all there in Chapter One of *Memoirs of the Oratory.*

We see his horizons gradually expand from Becchi (a cluster of about ten farmhouses in the district of two or three hundred people called Murialdo) to Castelnuovo (a town of about 3500 inhabitants two and a half miles away), then nine miles farther to Chieri, a provincial market town of 9000 people, and another nine miles to Turin, the capital of the Kingdom of Sardinia, with a population of about 120,000 people.

Don Bosco pokes fun at himself with the theme of small-town boy made good: *One who is raised in the backwoods and has never seen anything beyond a few small country villages is easily impressed by any little novelty* is how he recalls his first impressions of Chieri.

His early education is interrupted and limited, and his seminary education, at the regional seminary in Chieri rather than in Turin, leaves a lot to be desired, with scholasticism in decline, rigorism in the ascendant, and his fourth year of theology condensed into two months. Nothing like that could happen today, could it – not with our new Ratio!

Don Bosco grew up and spent his formative years in a conservative, rural world, yet he carried out his pastoral activity in an urban setting, the city of Turin, which was fast transforming itself into an industrial and financial centre, where the emerging middle-class was pushing for the unification of Italy. All of his education took place in the reactionary climate of the restoration of throne and altar, which only served to reinforce the naturally conservative instincts of someone from a family of poor tenant farmers who worked on the land. Yet he had to deal with the advent of constitutional liberalism, and later with the problems that the unification of Italy brought with it, with the suppression of the Papal States, anticlericalism, social unrest in Southern Italy, European expansionism and the colonising push of the second half of the nineteenth century. He had been born in a time when there was a strong reaction to the Enlightenment and the upheavals of the French Revolution. He was educated at a time when the prevailing culture was strongly influenced by romanticism and idealism. He carried out his ministry in the second half of the nineteenth century, a time influenced by positivism, which saw in science and in evolution the ideological rationale for progress, freedom and culture.

Don Bosco's attitude combined an intransigent mentality with practical flexibility. Despite his unswerving Catholic commitment of the most conservative kind, and despite a thoroughly negative judgement of the events and persons that brought about the unification of Italy, he was perceptive enough and flexible enough to adapt to social and political change, able to respond in open and forward-looking terms, and so his work was able to go ahead. Such were his contributions to Church and society in his own times that despite the fact he was ideologically opposed to the Risorgimento, a recent series devoted to the making of modern Italy includes a volume on Don Bosco written by Pietro Stella. The Piedmontese ruling class, people like Cavour, Ratazzi, and Lanza, who were the architects of the liberal revolution and the unification of Italy, knew and admired Don Bosco and his humanitarian work. From 1849 on he was personally known to Pius IX and his Secretary of State, Cardinal Antonelli. The fact that he was both a Piedmontese humanitarian and a priest made him acceptable to both sides. Don Bosco was known *on both sides of the Tiber*.

This allowed him to become involved in a private capacity in sensitive Church-State negotiations over many years, chiefly concerned with the problem of nomination and appointment of bishops to vacant dioceses.

Perhaps it was Don Bosco's passion for the Christian education of the young, his heart's desire to gather together into one, all the children of God, scattered far and wide, that enabled him to transcend his ideological limitations and uncertainties. Young people, their problems and needs, led him to venture into areas he could never have foreseen and into fields which, if it had been his choice, he would never have gone. His educational and spiritual horizons continued to expand in response to the needs of the young.

Fr Viganò summed up the mentality underlying the foundational reinterpretation carried out by the whole Congregation over the course of four General Chapters, with the maxim, *With Don Bosco and the times – not with the times of Don Bosco.* That is still a good principle to adopt when we talk about starting again from Don Bosco.

Don Bosco's response to the introduction of legislation transferring authority over schooling in Italy from Church to State was a series of stories – Peter, Dominic, Michael and Francis – with the underlying pedagogical thesis, there can be no true education without religion. In the 1870s, writing *Memoirs of the Oratory,* looking back to his own student days at Chieri, he recalls that *in those days religion was a basic part of the educational system.* That was the goal Don Bosco pursued according to the best lights of his own day. The Special General Chapter reminded us, we should act as Don Bosco did, rather than repeat in a servile way *what* he did: to pursue the thesis that there can be no true education without religion, according to the best lights of our own day.

Don Bosco's theology of the Church and his theology of the Sacraments was loyal to the Church in his own time, which was the era of Vatican I. Writing in the 1870s, Don Bosco acknowledges the importance of his time at the Convitto Ecclesiastico in eradicating the vestiges of Jansenism and putting behind him the introverted, rigoristic piety of his seminary years. Don Bosco's emphasis on frequent reception of the Sacraments was to counteract the baleful influence of Jansenism, the restrictions it placed upon the sacramental life, and the atmosphere of doom and gloom it left hanging over the spiritual life in general. These are not issues for us in the same way. Yet the tendency has been to go on repeating that frequent confession and communion are the pillars of the Preventive System, without heeding Don Bosco's rider, *never require the youngsters to go to the holy Sacraments, but just encourage them, and offer every opportunity to make good use of them,* and his insistence that these should be positive, faith-building experiences for the young.

Other circumstances, too, account for some of the practices in boarding schools. Vocations were an important part of Don Bosco's agenda, and we need to be aware of the minor-seminary nature of many of the boarding schools. What is more, when most of the teachers and assistants were Salesians, practical necessities of timetabling and supervision dictated that the boys should go to daily Mass and prayers too. This no longer applies.

Fidelity to Don Bosco consists not in continuing to repeat what he said and did, but in being loyal to the Church in our own time, with a different theology of the Church and a different theology of the Sacraments. Some years ago the Rector Major gave us as a Strenna, *Let us make every family and every community the home and school of communion by fostering a spirituality of communion in the building of a culture of solidarity and peace.* Instead of simply repeating Don Bosco, the Strenna and the commentary renew and apply Don Bosco's fundamental insight about the importance of Eucharist and its impact upon our lives, recasting it in terms of the Second Vatican Council's theology of communion. Creative and dynamic fidelity challenges us to celebrate Eucharist among ourselves in community and with the young in such a way that the whole life of the community, not just the sacred synaxis, becomes more Eucharistic, so that the whole life of the young, not just the time they spend in church, becomes more Eucharistic. We need a broader, more existential and more contemporary theology of the Eucharist and the Sacraments if we are to do justice to our Salesian tradition today.

Don Bosco and the Preventive System: Insights for New Times is the title of a booklet by Carlo Nanni (Faculty of Pedagogy, Salesian Pontifical University, Rome). He doesn't shirk the difficult questions:

> What can we do to ensure that frequent communion, confession and devotion to Our Lady become the pillars supporting the Preventive System as they were for Don Bosco? I believe that he saw them as an educative goal to be reached rather than to be mandated immediately and indiscriminately. This goal requires patient and lengthy formation in matters of faith, and much work to clarify the beliefs and the practices the youngsters have acquired on the way. This is where the true Salesian catechesis comes in. I believe that we are following Don Bosco's way when we provide a climate where the youngsters can experience communion rather than isolation, individualism, narrow-mindedness, fear of anything that is different. We are following in Don Bosco's footsteps when we give youngsters vibrant and joyful experiences of prayer and liturgical celebration, Mass included, that arouse in them the awareness of God the Creator and Father of us all, with Jesus the Redeemer of all, and with the Holy Spirit indwelling in each person. Is not our educating them to forgive in line with sacramental Confession? And so also is our educative presence, our spiritual accompaniment, our encouragement to become aware of the spiritual realm and to give ourselves to others.

When we present Our Lady as the one who listened to the Word of God, who pondered in her heart the mystery of Jesus' incarnation, who became the handmaid of God and of her neighbour, who suffered as she followed her son right up to Calvary and the foot of the cross, and who was present as a mother to the disciples after the death and resurrection of the Lord, who watched over the first tentative steps of the Church, who in the Christian tradition is still the comforter and consolation of the poor and all those who work for freedom and God's salvation, in my opinion and in the light of the teachings of Vatican II, we are fostering, as Don Bosco did, devotion to Mary, Help of Christians and to the Immaculate, as we present Mary as the model and example of redeemed humanity growing to fullness of life. Our Lady can be a significant person, humanly attractive to all, even those who are seeking but cannot yet bring themselves to believe. We need to open up a conversation on this. It is worth it: the quality of the Preventive System, our effectiveness as educators who are inspired by it, depend upon it.

Someone who is perhaps a little closer to home who has some valuable insights to offer is Timothy Radcliffe OP: [25]

All the Sacraments are rooted in our bodily life: birth and death, sex and food, sin and sickness. It is in these most physical activities that God's grace meets us and heals us, grace perfecting nature. With my body I thee wed.

It is here that God comes to meet us in the Sacraments, which embrace all the dramas of our lives: birth and death, eating and drinking, sex and healing. This is where the pilgrimage to the Kingdom starts. This is the truth of what we are. Most of the doctrines of Christianity make no sense unless we have a clear understanding of the goodness of our corporeal existence: Creation, Incarnation, the Sacraments, the resurrection of the dead, all rooted in our flesh and blood.

This is the sort of thing I mean by a more existential, contemporary theology of the Sacraments, one that reaches out to meet the needs of young people today.

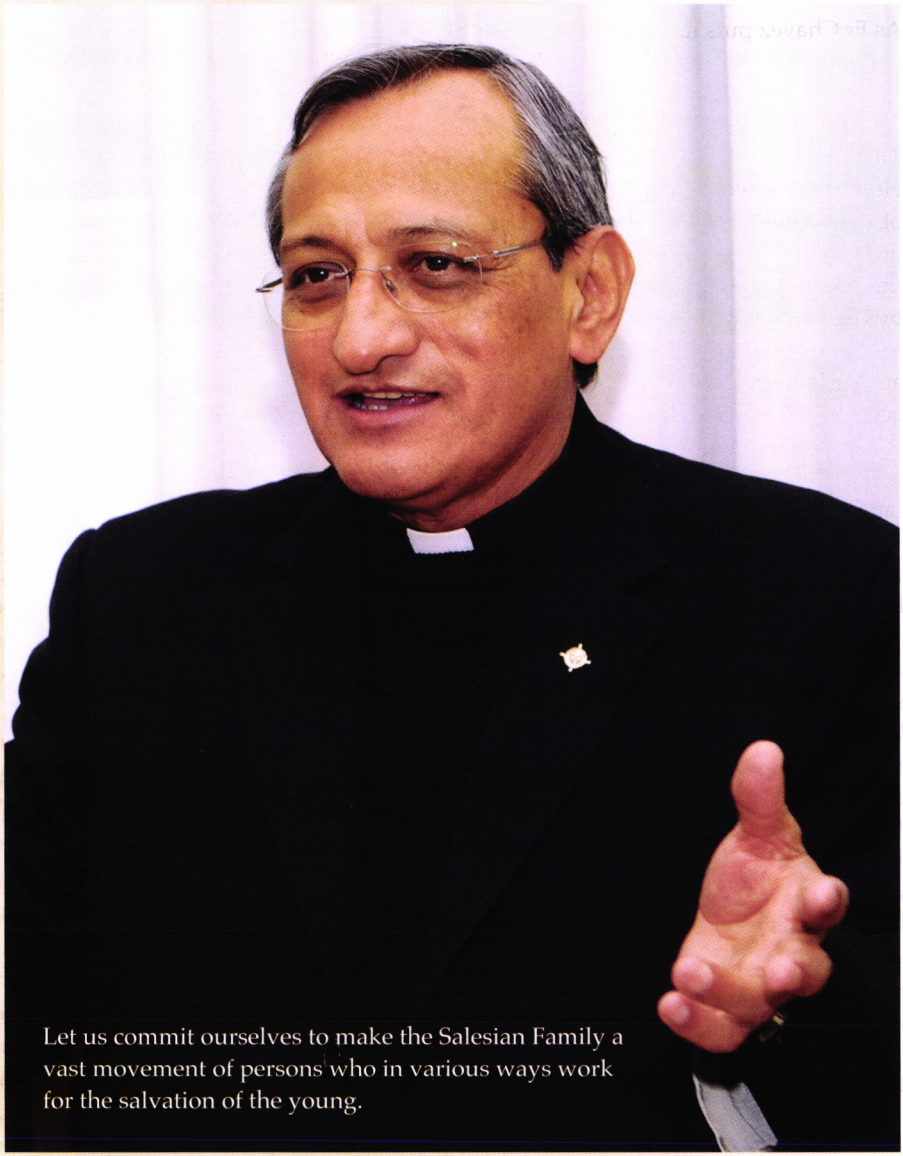
It was Don Bosco's practice to conclude a spiritual retreat with a particular souvenir or keepsake. Let me follow in his footsteps. As a keepsake, I leave you the same advice that the lady in the dream of his boyhood gave to Don Bosco:

Make yourself humble, brave, persevering.
In due time you will understand everything.

[25] *What is the Point of Being a Christian* (Continuum International Publishing Group 2005) pp 90-91

Introduction to the Appendix

The following reflection from Ian Murdoch's pen was never presented by Ian. Written late in his illness, it responded to a request from the Chairperson of the Salesian Principals Association of Australia, Fr Chris Ford SDB.



Let us commit ourselves to make the Salesian Family a vast movement of persons who in various ways work for the salvation of the young.

Every year the Rector Major of the Salesians of Don Bosco chooses a theme that he asks Salesians all over the world to take as a focus for their thought and action that year – *the Strenna*. The theme chosen by Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva SDB for 2009, was taken from the *Constitutions of the Salesians of Don Bosco:*

> Don Bosco inspired the start of a vast movement of persons who in different ways work for the salvation of the young. [26]

As Fr Chávez puts it:

> Let us commit ourselves to make the Salesian Family a vast movement of persons who in various ways work for the *salvation* of the young.

The theme is central to the ongoing presence of Don Bosco in today's society. However, the word salvation is open to many meanings. Immediately on publication of the theme for 2009, the Principals of the Salesian schools in Australia asked the question: What is meant by *salvation* in this context? In order to seek an answer to this crucial question, Chris Ford asked Ian to write a paper on what Don Bosco meant by the word salvation, often on his lips and in his writings. It was to be presented to a meeting of all the Salesian Principals and the Religious Education Coordinators at the Salesian Province Centre, Ascot Vale on 7th and 8th November 2008. It was accompanied by a further reflection on the biblical and theological meaning of the expression.

Ian, hospitalised by this stage, gave Chris Ford permission to take his paper, and use it in whatever way he saw fit. However, for the purposes of this volume, we have retained the reflection as it came from Ian's pen. If you have read this book thus far, by now you are aware of Ian's careful use of written sources that are contemporary with Don Bosco in his attempt to understand exactly what he meant when he addressed certain issues. For this reason, Ian reproduced English translations of some of Don Bosco's correspondence that give first-hand evidence of what he meant by salvation. They fill several pages before Ian's own analysis begins. Ian wanted the Principals and Religious Education Co-ordinators to have these texts before them, and to reflect on them. In reproducing Ian's work as an appendix to this volume, I am leaving these sources in place. I am doing this for two reasons. In the first place, I wish to respect Ian's approach to the question. Secondly, a careful perusal of this material is an excellent introduction to the study that follows. As the Salesians of Don Bosco celebrate 150 years since their foundation (December 1859), it is fitting that this reflection on the very purpose of the Salesian mission, the salvation of the young, brings to a close Fr Ian Murdoch's years of reflection on our Founder.

Francis J. Moloney SDB
Provincial

[26] Constitution 5

APPENDIX

Source Documents

1. From Don Bosco's letter of March 13th 1846 to Marquis Michele Cavour, Vicar of Turin

The role which your Excellency plays in everything that concerns the public good, both civil and moral, leads me to hope that you will welcome a report on a catechetical programme we have started. Since its purpose is the good of young people, you yourself have on a number of occasions shown favour and support for it. The purpose of this catechetical programme is to gather those boys who, left to themselves, would not attend religious instruction in any church on Sundays and Holy days. The following principles are basic to our teaching: (1) an appreciation of work; (2) the regular reception of the Sacraments; (3) respect for all superior authority; (4) avoidance of bad company.

These principles which we skilfully strive to inculcate in the hearts of the youngsters have produced marvellous results. This is a great achievement when one considers the calibre of the young people who, though generally ranging from ten to sixteen years, lack any kind of education, religious or academic. Most of them in fact have already fallen a prey to evil, and are in danger of becoming public nuisances or of being put in places of correction.

You are a good-hearted person, and have at heart everything that may contribute to the common good of society. For this reason we seek your protection on these our endeavours.

On the back of the letter is Cavour's notation to his secretary:

Reply that I have spoken with His Excellency the Most Reverend Archbishop and with Count Collegno; that there is no doubt in my mind, that is, I fully agree, that much may be gained from a catechetical programme; and that I shall be happy to see the Rev Father Bosco in my office at 2 pm March 28th. Benso di Cavour.

2. From Don Bosco's letter to King Victor Emmanuel II, before November 14th 1849

In our days there is an even greater need to care for neglected young people, to instruct them in their religion and to give them some education. In the oratories the youngsters are educated to a love of work, respect for authority, and obedience to the law, in accordance with the tenets of our holy Catholic faith. This is done through sermons, the teaching of catechism, and classroom instruction.

Together with this letter there is filed a report by a government official which reads in part:
Don Bosco renders a great service not only to the city of Turin, but also to parents and society throughout Piedmont. The work being done in the capital easily provides a model for similar work in the provinces, where delinquency among young people at risk is not unknown, and is in fact on the increase, much to the discomfiture and scandal of the good people. The Reverend Don Bosco is doing his best; but he is just a poor priest, lacking the means to meet even the most basic needs. He must, therefore, rely on charity, public as well as private. For the government has a large vested interest in controlling and ensuring order among this class of people whose numbers have increased and are increasing alarmingly. These are the young people who live on the street, without schooling, without discipline, open to being seduced for the smallest price, and I don't know what else.

3. From Don Bosco's letter of March 11th 1850 to Fr Antonio Rosmini
The plan is to put up a new building for an Oratory, the purpose of which would be the civic, moral, and religious education of such young people as are most at risk. Several Oratories of this kind have already been opened in Turin. Of them, as things have turned out, I find myself in charge. The harvest is a thorny one indeed, but it is huge, and much fruit may be hoped from it. The crying need now is for more priests, but priests truly imbued with pastoral charity.

4. From Don Bosco's first raffle appeal, December 20th 1851
A modest charitable activity, known as the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, was begun ten years ago in this city. Its sole aim is to help intellectually and morally those young people who through parental neglect, through association with depraved companions, or through lack of material means, are exposed to the ever present risk of corruption. A number of persons committed to the moral education of working people were painfully struck by the ever-growing number of idle and ill-advised young people who roam the streets and squares of the city and make a living through begging and tricks. They are a burden to society, and more often than not they are the perpetrators of all kinds of mischief. While there are those who laudably labour to promote the arts and sciences, to advance technology, and to educate the sons of the well-to-do in secondary schools and colleges, the modest Oratory of St Francis de Sales seeks to impart a thorough religious and civic education to those who have been less favoured by fortune, but who have the will and talent to be of use to themselves, their families and their country.

5. From the introduction to the draft regulations for the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, 1854

To gather together into one, the scattered children of God. These words of the holy Gospel tell us that our divine Saviour came down from heaven to earth to gather together all the children of God scattered all over the world. It seems to me that such words could be applied literally to the young people of our own times. These young people, the most vulnerable yet most valuable portion of human society, on whom we base our hopes for a happy future, are not of their nature depraved. Were it not for parental neglect, idleness, mixing in bad company, which happens especially on Sundays and Holy days, it would be so easy to inculcate in their young hearts the principles of order, of good behaviour, of respect and religion. For, if it so happens that they are ruined at that young age, it is due more to thoughtlessness than to ingrained malice.

6. From the preamble to the earliest draft of the Salesian Constitutions 1858

At all times it has been the special concern of the ministers of the Church to promote, to the best of their power, the spiritual welfare of the young. The good or evil moral condition of society will depend on whether young people receive a good or a bad education. Our Divine Saviour himself has shown us the truth of this by his deeds. For in fulfilling his divine mission on earth, with a love of predilection he invited children to come close to him: Let little children come to me. At the present time this need is felt with greater urgency than ever before. Parental neglect, the abusive power of the press, the proselytising efforts of heretics, demand that we unite in fighting for the Lord's cause, under the banner of the faith. Our efforts must aim at safeguarding the faith and the moral life of that category of young people whose eternal salvation is more at risk precisely because of their poverty. This is the specific purpose of the Congregation of St Francis de Sales.

7. From Don Bosco's letter of November 9th 1859 to Pope Pius IX

We, the people of Turin, are facing much greater dangers. Our Archbishop is in exile. Our Vicar General is reduced to silence by threats and harassment. The Protestants enjoy official protection and are hard at work spreading their errors, with plenty of money. The press is given free reign and the teaching in the schools is unchecked. All these evils acting together have poisoned the moral and religious life of the people with their deadly contagion. In spite of this we have been and are doing all we can to neutralise this evil and its effects. We have formed a kind of society consisting chiefly of priests and seminarians. Together we try our best to spread good books and journals. We preach, conduct spiritual retreats, triduums and novenas, and are engaged in catechetical instruction. All this we do with the sole aim of inculcating the fundamental truths of the Catholic faith and respect for the supreme head of Christendom.

8. From Don Bosco's letter of March 21st 1862 to Prime Minister Ratazzi

I take this occasion to express my pleasure that you have become Prime Minister. You have always lent a helping hand to young people in need, and I look forward to a continuance of your kindness in this regard.

9. From the letter of Justice Minister Vigliani to Don Bosco, October 15th 1873

What's needed is that both sides give evidence of good will and Christian tolerance. Then a settlement may be reached that satisfies all requirements. You are a devoted priest and a committed citizen. I beg you therefore to take the most effective steps to persuade the Holy See to meet the government halfway. For the government needs to find a way to conciliate the requirements of the law, which is above the will of any individual minister, and the concessions that will make the granting of the Exequatur possible.

10. From Don Bosco's letter of January 1875 to the Salesian Boarding High School at Lanzo

May God keep you all through many years of a happy life. I would like to stress a few subjects and pray Heaven for your good health, good moral conduct, and serious studies.

Health is a precious, heavenly gift; take good care of it. Beware of immoderation which is a frequent cause of illness, avoid excessive exercise, and the resulting fatigue; beware of sudden changes from hot to cold.

Studies: you are in school to acquire skills in order to earn a living. Regardless of your circumstances, profession and future position, you have to be able to support yourselves honestly in case you should lose what you have inherited. Never let it be said that you live by the sweat of others.

Good moral conduct is the link which connects health and learning. It is also the foundation on which they rest. I'm telling you the truth! Good morals will make you wise and strong.

You will be loved by superiors, companions, parents, friends, and fellow citizens, and, to go one step further, you will be liked and respected even by the wicked. Chin up, then, my dear sons; try your best to achieve, to study, to cherish and promote the great treasures of health, learning, and morality.

11. Don Bosco at the First General Chapter of the Salesian Congregation, 1877
While keeping aloof from politics, we shall always avoid anything that might compromise us with the constituted authorities, whether civil or ecclesiastical. All we ask is to be allowed to care for poor and neglected young people and to help them in any way we can. This, we believe, is the only way in which we can advance Christian morals and the good of society.

The Association of Salesian Cooperators has the good will of all because it does not get involved in politics. The reason why, in my view, we are allowed the freedom to go about our work undisturbed is that our Congregation is in no way involved in politics. I wanted our Constitutions to have a special Article forbidding all members to get mixed up in politics, in any way. Such a provision was included in the manuscript drafts, but when our rules were submitted to the Holy See, and our Congregation received its first approval,[28] the Article was removed by the specially appointed examining commission.

In 1870[29] the Congregation was up for definitive approval, and the rules were to be submitted again for examination. As if nothing had been said on the subject, I again inserted the Article that forbade the members to get involved in political questions. Again they rejected it. Convinced of its importance, I once more inserted it in 1874, when the Constitutions had to be examined Article by Article by the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars before definitive approval. Once more it was removed, but this time they attached a written explanation: This is the third time this Article has been struck out. Of itself, it appears to be generally acceptable, but in this day and age circumstances may well force one in conscience to enter the political arena, since politics are often inseparable from religion. In such cases good Catholics cannot be forbidden political activity. So it was that the Article was definitively removed. We may therefore get involved in politics when it is advantageous and genuinely advisable. Apart from such cases, however, let us abide by our established rule of not engaging in any political activity.

12. Don Bosco to the Salesian Cooperators of Turin 31st May 1883
Would you like me to suggest to you a relatively easy undertaking that will be most beneficial and bear results as rich as you could desire? Well then – devote yourselves to the sound education of youth, especially the poorest and most needy, who seem to be in the majority; in that way you will wisely succeed in giving glory to God, in benefiting religion, in saving souls and in contributing effectively to the reform and wellbeing of society. Reason, religion, history and personal experience all show that religious and civil society will be either good or bad according as young people, who are our greatest treasure, are good or bad.

[28] 1864
[29] Read 1869

Don Bosco, the Salvation of the Young, & the Future of the Church and Society

I want to thank Chris Ford for my brief, which is, and I quote:

> *Would you be able to present something for us*
> *that includes the idea of Salvation of the Young in the Mind of Don Bosco?*

In accepting that brief, I am very conscious of the warnings sounded by two of the greatest living authorities on Don Bosco, Francis Desramaut and Arthur Lenti. Desramaut is up front in pointing out that Don Bosco's stated views on the Bible, history, miracles, the Church, world religions, the Sacraments and on many other matters, are very different from our views today. Lenti states:

> We do not pretend that Don Bosco's social model was a modern one. It was in fact a model that, in spite of its intense moral and religious inspiration, had already been left irremediably behind. Faced with a social and political order that seemed to deny every day more traditional moral and religious values, he envisioned (at least sentimentally) not the coming of a new Christian order but the restoration of the old – the confessional state, a stratified and orderly society in which respect for authority and private property and hard work prevailed, and in which social order and peace were fostered by the Church's moral doctrine and the fear of God.

We don't want to find ourselves in the situation of fools rushing in where angels fear to tread.

Let me begin with a story taken from the 1884 edition of Don Bosco's Life of *Louis Comollo*. Comollo had been one of Don Bosco's companions during his last year in secondary school and then in the seminary at Chieri, from 1834 to 1839. Elsewhere, Don Bosco tells us that one day the two of them were deep in conversation after reading a long passage from the lives of the saints. Half in jest and half in earnest, they had spoken of what a consolation it would be if the one who died first were to return with news of his condition. They talked of this so often that they drew up this contract:

> Whichever of us is the first to die will, if God permits it, bring back word of his salvation to his surviving companion.

The word *salvation* is being used in the context of life after death. Emphasis is individualistic: fate of individual, judgment to be faced by person dying, separation from loved ones. This is characteristic of modern attitudes towards death in comparison with medieval belief that dead were still in a community with the living.

Comollo died on April 2nd 1839, at the age of 22. This is Don Bosco's description of what happened the night after Comollo's burial:

> On the stroke of midnight, a deep rumble was heard at the end of the corridor. The rumble became deeper and louder as it drew nearer. It was like the sound of a large cart, or a railway train, or even artillery fire. I do not know how to describe the sound adequately except to say that it was such a mixture of throbbing and rather violent sounds as to leave the hearer utterly terrified and too frightened for words.
>
> As the rumble drew nearer it made the ceiling, walls, and floor of the hallway vibrate like sheets of metal struck by the hand of some mighty giant. Yet the sound approached so that it was very difficult to pinpoint how close it was, the way one is uncertain where a locomotive is on the track just from the jet of steam.
>
> All the seminarians in the dormitory woke up, but no one spoke. I was frozen with fear. The noise came nearer and nearer and grew more frightening. It reached the dormitory; of itself the door slammed open. The roar grew louder, but there was nothing to see except a ghostly multicoloured light that seemed to control the sound. Suddenly there was silence, the light intensified, and Comollo's voice was distinctly heard: Bosco, Bosco, Bosco – ***I am saved.***
>
> At that moment the dormitory grew even brighter. The noise erupted again, much longer and louder than before. It was like thunder, so violent that the house seemed about to collapse; then suddenly it stopped and the light vanished. My companions leapt from their beds and ran in all directions. Some huddled in one corner of the room while others gathered round the prefect of the dormitory, Father Joseph Fiorito from Rivoli. Everyone passed that night waiting anxiously for daylight. All this deeply affected me; I was so scared that I would have preferred to die.

The operative expression is *I am saved*. Salvation is something for the individual, which comes after death and judgment. Very inward-looking, self-absorbed and preoccupied with one's own salvation. Disjuncture between this world and next world is emphatic. Human response to supernatural apparition is one of fear and terror – *frozen with fear, so scared I would have preferred to die.*

Don Bosco didn't die, but he was seriously ill for months afterwards, from what seems to have been a combination of depression and nervous breakdown.

The events surrounding Comollo's death, especially the pact struck between Louis and John, are indicative of the spiritual life at the seminary of Chieri, which was lived under the sign of judgment, under the constant scrutiny of God, rather than under the sign of love. The conversations that took place between Louis and John were part

of a larger discourse having to do with fears regarding predestination and personal salvation, accentuated and reinforced by the theological and spiritual climate of the seminary and its stern disciplinary code. Comollo was an extreme example of how a seminarian might be affected by the pervasive rigoristic influences affecting practically every aspect of seminary life and formation: speculative and dogmatic theology, moral and sacramental theology, pastoral and sacramental practice, the doctrine and practice of the spiritual life, ascetiscism, ecclesiastical discipline, and so on. There was an imbalance in the emphasis placed upon the last things, death, judgment and hell, and the question of predestination. The sense of sin and the concept of holiness and its demands that were inculcated had the effect of restricting sacramental life, of fostering excessive ascetical practice, and of casting a pall of gloom and fear over the spiritual life itself. The emphasis placed on the tremendous responsibility of priests in the care of souls, and on the danger of damnation incurred for any failure to correspond, exerted heavy pressure on *serious* candidates.

In Comollo's case, this was exacerbated by his temperament and a frail constitution. Distressed with the world and himself, he found refuge and consolation in religious practices that did not entail social involvement. When asked about his prayer life, he replied, *I use a wholly material image that will make you laugh. Closing my eyes, in my imagination I enter a large, exquisitely adorned hall. At the end of it is a majestic throne, on which the Almighty is seated. Behind him are the choirs of the blessed. I prostrate myself and do my praying with the utmost respect possible.*

While others were at recreation he, joined only by his friend Bosco, would recite the penitential psalms, the Office of the Dead, or the Office of Our Lady, for the sake of the souls in purgatory.

Comollo's life in the seminary seemed to be one long examination of conscience. Every thought, word and deed was scrutinised under the gaze of the divine judge. He spent the last year of his life meditating on a book called *Hell Laid Open before the Christian, so that he or she may not fall into it*, and during his final days he was fixated on Christ as judge and the final judgement with its irrevocable sentence. On his deathbed, he had the following vision, as recorded by Don Bosco:

> As I stood there in fear of the divine judgment, in an instant I found myself in a deep and broad valley where raged a furious windstorm that sapped me of all strength. At the centre of this valley I saw a gaping abyss out of which leaped huge fiery flames. I stood at the brink, terrified lest I should fall into that fiery furnace. I turned around trying to flee, but a swarm of frightening monsters came up to push me into the flames. At that point out of sheer despair I began to yell for help. I made the sign of the Cross, at the sight of which the monsters bowed their heads, squirmed and receded somewhat. But they still kept me at bay. Then out of the gloom a band of shining warriors came to my aid. They attacked those monsters

killing some and putting the rest to flight. Freed from that terrible danger, I started to make my way across the valley and eventually reached the foot of a high mountain. Its top was accessible only by a stairway cut into its deep slope, the treads of which were swarming with numerous venomous serpents ready to strike at whoever tackled the ascent. There was no other way to the top, but I stood there terrified and exhausted not daring to attempt it. Then a beautiful and richly attired lady, clearly none other than our dear Mother Mary, took me by the hand, set me on my feet, and invited me to follow her as she led the way up those stairs. As she stepped on the treads, those serpents turned their venomous heads away allowing us to pass through. When we reached the top I was ushered into a magnificent garden, where I saw things beautiful beyond imagining. This had such a quieting effect my heart and gave me such peace of mind that, far from being any longer afraid of death, I am now looking forward to it, eager to be united with my Lord.

Again, the imagery conveys all too clearly Comollo's overwrought emotional state, the obsessive phobias brought on by viewing salvation in narrowly monastic and ascetic terms as flight from the world.

Originally, Don Bosco intended his *Life of Louis Comollo* as a tribute to a saintly friend who had been an enormous influence on his own spiritual life. Above all, what Don Bosco recognised and admired in Comollo was his rich interior colloquy with God, Mary and the saints, and the solidity of his inner life. In later editions of the *Life of Louis Comollo*, Don Bosco would propose Comollo not only as a model for seminarians, but also for anyone concerned with their own salvation (1854), and later again as a model for the Christian life as such. The life of Louis Comollo, *the modern St Aloysius*, became a model for good conduct at the Oratory; members of the Immaculate Conception Sodality promised to *strive to imitate Louis Comollo*.

There are places in the *Life of Louis Comollo* where it is possible to see how Don Bosco's treatment of Comollo is influenced by the close bond of friendship between the two, as well as the lessons Don Bosco wanted to impart to the boys of the Oratory. For example, Don Bosco writes that:

> For all his concentration on the spiritual life, Comollo never looked unhappy or sad. On the contrary, he was always cheerful; and, out of his happiness, he was able to cheer others up with his gentle way of speaking. He loved the words of the prophet David: *Serve the Lord in gladness.*

We should not be deceived by any superficial similarity between this and the way Don Bosco himself championed cheerfulness as a way to holiness for the young. For Comollo, the motto, *Serve the Lord joyfully* was a summons to inner peace, which was to be attained and preserved through the realisation that one was living in God's grace. It was not a motto for gatherings of scores of boisterous young people.

Comollo would never have become a pastor and educator of the young in the Turin of the mid-nineteenth century.

Nor can we ignore Don Bosco's ambivalence towards Comollo's tormented search for outward discipline and regularity. The severity and ascetic tension in Comollo's lifestyle and the rigoristic emphases present in priestly formation at the seminary reinforced each other in their influence on John, but despite that John did not imitate Louis' excessive penitential practices: *In one thing alone I did not even try to emulate him, and that was in mortification*. Later, Don Bosco consistently took the line that there was already enough penance for the young in the mortification and self-control required during prayer, school, study and play, in patiently putting up with inconveniences, insults and injuries, and above all in having to do what they were told. He consistently discouraged extraordinary penances.

Don Bosco's priestly formation took place in a general atmosphere of ascetic tension, of ongoing control and inhibition. This ascetic tension helped to drive his friend Comollo to his death, and John Bosco himself to the very limits of his strength. After his priestly ordination, Don Bosco spent three years at the Pastoral Institute of Turin. *Here*, Don Bosco tells us, *one learnt to be a priest*, and pays tribute to the role played by the Pastoral Institute in *eradicating the vestiges of Jansenism that remained in our midst*. He singles out three priests of the Pastoral Institute – Luigi Guala, Joseph Cafasso, and Felix Golzio. He tells us:

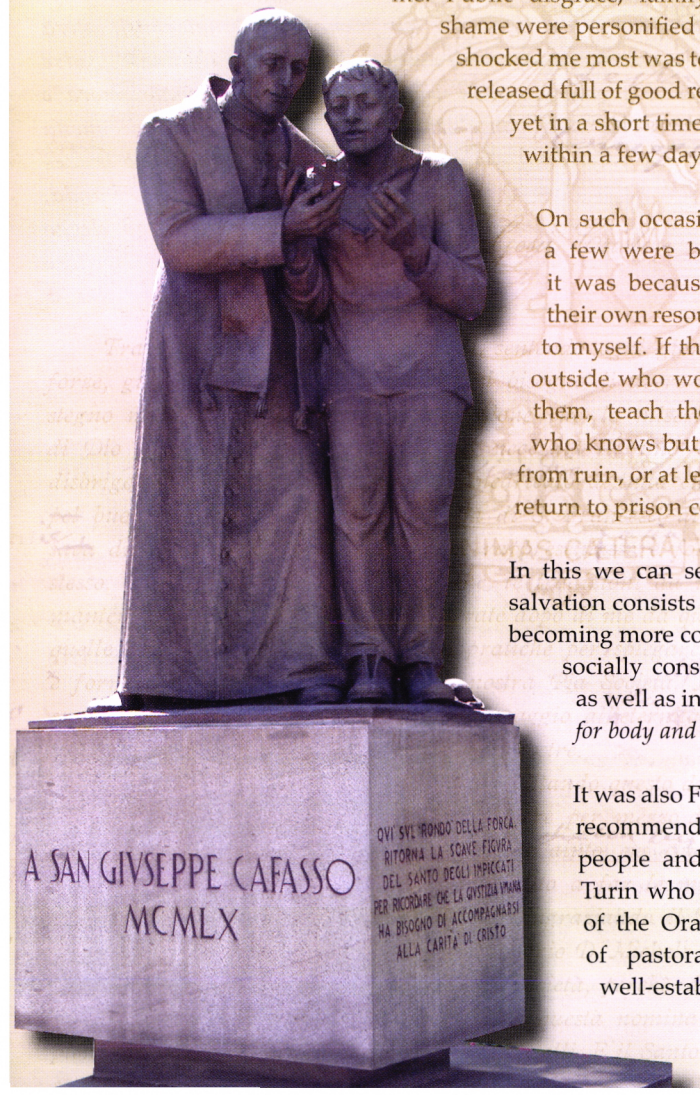
> In the prisons, hospitals, charitable institutes, the sick in their homes, I felt the salutary effects of the zeal of these three shining lights of the Turin clergy.

The course at the Pastoral Institute provided practical pastoral experiences in catechetical instruction, visits to prisons, advising young people in reformatories, and preaching in educational institutes for boys and girls. The three years Don Bosco spent at the Pastoral Institute was a time of inner healing and religious maturation, a time when he moved decisively from an anxious introverted spirituality focused on ascetical and devotional practices, or on fear, to an apostolic spirituality based on love of God and the exercise of pastoral charity towards others.

Not only did Don Bosco serve his apprenticeship under Fr Cafasso in prison ministry, catechetical instruction of the young, and the work of retreats, he also took Fr Cafasso as his spiritual director in the full sense of the word for the spiritual life and the apostolate. Cafasso was the first to organise a ministry to the prisons of Turin that responded to need (both spiritual and material) in a significant manner. This included catechetical instruction, celebration of liturgical feasts, Mass and the Sacraments, conversation and counselling, material help to inmates and family, and regular distribution of cigarettes and tobacco (which helped to dull the senses and deal with the stench in the prison wards). Cafasso, in particular, was the comforter of those condemned to the death penalty, and became known as the priest of the gallows.

The spot where the gallows used to stand is now a busy traffic roundabout, known as the Gallows Roundabout; a monument honouring Cafasso was built there in 1960 for the centenary of his death. It was in the prisons of Turin that Don Bosco gained first-hand knowledge of the plight of juvenile delinquents and young people at risk. Just how much he was affected by this experience is immediately evident from his description of it in *Memoirs of the Oratory*, which he wrote more than thirty years later:

> It was Fr Cafasso who first took me into the prisons, where I soon learned how great was the malice and misery of mankind. I saw large numbers of young lads, aged from 12 to 18, fine healthy youngsters, alert of mind, but seeing them idle there, infested with lice, lacking food for body and soul, horrified me. Public disgrace, family dishonour, and personal shame were personified in those unfortunates. What shocked me most was to see that many of them were released full of good resolutions to go straight, and yet in a short time they landed back in prison, within a few days of their release.
>
> On such occasions I found out how quite a few were brought back to that place; it was because they were abandoned to their own resources. Who knows? I thought to myself. If these youngsters had a friend outside who would take care of them, help them, teach them religion on feast days, who knows but they could be steered away from ruin, or at least the number of those who return to prison could be lessened?



In this we can see how the notion of what salvation consists of for these young people is becoming more concrete, more practical, more socially conscious: in the here and now, as well as in the bye and bye: *lacking food for body and soul*.

It was also Fr Cafasso who introduced or recommended Don Bosco to charitable people and institutions in the city of Turin who began to support the work of the Oratory. The practical exercise of pastoral charity was already a well-established tradition in Turin,

Piedmont, and Lombardy. A quite remarkable circle of *social saints* engaged in a range of projects to meet the material and spiritual needs of those who were not provided for by society at the time, effectively combining the gospel message with human development.

In 1814, Carlo Tancredi Falletti, the Marchese di Barolo, and his wife Juliet Frances Colbert, the Marchesa di Barolo, made Turin their permanent home. Pioneers in prison reform, they were instrumental in having a proper women's prison built, and in having chaplains appointed for prison ministry. Between 1821 and 1822, they founded, on the outskirts of the city in the Valdocco district, the Pious Work of Our Lady, Refuge of Sinners, for girls at risk and women released from prison. In 1832, they founded a house to shelter abandoned and runaway girls less than fourteen years of age. Together they founded two religious institutes of women to care for girls who were orphaned and at risk, and for early childhood education. In 1844, the Marchesa di Barolo began construction of a hospital for girls, called *The Little Hospital of Saint Philomena*.

The Barolo institutions were not the only works of charity concentrated in the Valdocco district of Turin. In 1832, Joseph Cottolengo established *The Little House of Divine Providence*, placing it under the patronage of St Vincent de Paul, with the motto, *The charity of Christ drives us forward*. He declared:

> All the poor are our patrons, but those who seem to be the most disgusting and repellent are our dearest patrons, indeed are our jewels.

The Little House grew into a small town, caring for the incurably sick, the destitute, the aged and infirm, epileptics, the mentally ill, sick and abandoned children.

Other *social saints* of nineteenth century Turin, born after Don Bosco, include Francis Faà di Bruno, Leonard Murialdo, Joseph Allamano, and Pier Giorgio Frassati. The pride of neighbouring Lombardy was Lodovico Pavoni, born in 1784 and died in 1849. Several decades before Don Bosco, Pavoni had established in Brescia, for poor and abandoned youth, an oratory; an arts and crafts technical school with printing, copperplate engraving, bookbinding, stationery, silversmithing, ironwork, carpentry, woodwork, metalwork and shoemaking; and a hospice for poor and abandoned artisans. Pavoni also anticipated Don Bosco in his use of the good *Christians and honest citizens* formula, which originated in the social and political context of domination by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, an absolutist regime.

The influence that the Pastoral Institute had on Don Bosco, and his being drawn into the orbit of these *social saints* of nineteenth century Turin and the north of Italy, can be seen as early as 1846, in *Devotion to the Mercy of God*, a series of meditations prepared by Don Bosco for the Barolo Institutions, stressing God's boundless mercy toward all. This is the earliest witness we have to an important spiritual option made by

Don Bosco: God is by his very nature good and loving, the source of all good things, ready to embrace the sinner with tender, loving care. This is in contrast with the image of God as a severe judge proposed in the traditional diocesan catechism, and in line with the more benign approach to pastoral theology in which God was presented as a Father rich in mercy.

In 1847 Don Bosco compiled and edited *The Companion of Youth in the Practice of Religious Duties*. At first it appears to be simply a manual of prayers and practical devotions, but as Don Bosco explains in the introduction, he intended it to serve as a method and a way of life, a spiritual programme adapted to the young:

> I should like to teach you a kind of Christian life which will make you happy and contented. I desire to show you what true enjoyment and pleasure is, so that you may follow the advice of the holy prophet David: Serve ye the Lord with gladness. This, then, is the purpose of the present book: to teach you how to serve God and to be always happy.
>
> I have drawn up for you a scheme of life, brief and easy enough, which will enable you to be a joy to your parents, and a glory to your country, making you good citizens upon earth, and one day blessed inhabitants of heaven.

In what becomes characteristic, Don Bosco allows for nature as well as grace in the way he proposes the Christian life to the young, not restricting it to supernatural and otherworldly goals. Where St Alphonsus before him had written:

> You were not born, nor should you live, to enjoy life, to get rich or to become powerful, to eat, drink and sleep like the beasts, but only to love your God and attain eternal salvation.

Don Bosco joined the natural purpose to the supernatural purpose, and wrote instead:

> You are upon this earth not only to enjoy yourself, to accumulate riches, to eat, to drink, and to sleep, as the animals do; your end is by far greater, more noble and more sublime. You must love and serve God, and save your own soul.

Referring to *The Companion of Youth*, an authority of that period has said:

> Anyone proposing to write the history of religious devotion and worship in Italy in the nineteenth century must read this book. There is in it no trace of Jansensistic rigorism or superstition. It appeals to the heart, recalls the pure sources of Christian life, and fosters frequent reception of the Sacraments. Some might classify this as a new approach, but really it is a prudent return to the classic teaching of old.

The year 1848 was a turning point in the history of modern Europe, and it also marks a watershed in Don Bosco's educational and spiritual outlook, the terms in which he understood the salvation of the young and the practical steps he took in order to work more effectively towards this goal. The revolutions of 1848 signalled the end

of attempts to restore the old order based on the alliance between *Throne and Altar*. In Italy, liberal reforms following the granting of a Constitution for the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia established freedom of the press, abolished the Church's traditional privileges, disbanded religious corporations and confiscated Church property, and reorganised all education on a secular basis. By 1854, a coalition of centre-right led by Cavour and centre-left led by Ratazzi held power, pursuing the separation of *Church and State*, or as they preferred to put it, *a free Church in a free State*. The existence of the Papal States, of which the Pope was sovereign ruler, was incompatible with national unification; there was little room for compromise and negotiation where the vital questions of Rome and the temporal power of the Pope were concerned. In the event, unilateral action on the part of the leaders of the liberal revolution saw the progressive annexation of the regional states, including the Papal States, the unification of Italy in 1861, and the taking of Rome in 1870 as the capital of Italy. By 1876, the more radical and anticlerical Left gained the ascendancy. It had become increasingly difficult to reconcile the fact of being a Christian and being a citizen within the new secular and increasingly anticlerical liberal State of Italy.

Seen in this light, Don Bosco's continuing use of the *good Christians and upright citizens* formula in the period after 1848, during the confrontation between Church and liberal State in Italy, carries with it a new set of connotations. In *The Power of a Good Education* (1855), Don Bosco shows the beneficial effects of a religious upbringing in the life of the young hero, Peter, and his family, thanks to the influence of the Oratory. Later, when Peter is conscripted into the Piedmontese army about to depart for the Crimea, his words are, *Don't be upset, father; we are citizens and we have to serve our country*, clinching the point that the Oratory is producing good Christians who are also loyal citizens. The story concludes, *If children are well brought up, the coming generation will be orderly, industrious, and anxious to comfort their parents. Then we shall see better times, and have a population who will be an honour to the country, the prop of families, the glory and credit of religion*. This was to be the first in a series of stories with a pedagogical thesis, based on Don Bosco's experience and conviction, that there can be no true education without religion.

Despite the fact that Don Bosco's evaluation of the events and key players in the *Risorgimento* was consistently a negative one, and he never really left the conservative position, the liberal revolution and the progressive secularisation of society had the effect of crystallising within Don Bosco the realisation that only through the education of the young could a Christian society be preserved or restored. When the opportunity came to enter the field of education in a major way, Don Bosco was among the first to take up the challenge. It was his educational and spiritual experience with the young over many years that broadened his horizons and made more concrete his understanding of everything that was related to the salvation of the young. Together with the perception that young people were variously at risk, the world over, he saw the young, not only as the building blocks of a renewed Christian society in his day,

in his city, but also as the vehicle for the renewal of society in any time, in any place throughout the world.

What had begun as a group of people to continue Don Bosco's work of charity for poor and abandoned boys – the work of the Oratories eventually became the idea of some kind of religious congregation, an educational congregation, to continue his work. The decisive moment came in a meeting in 1857 with Ratazzi, Minister for the Interior. When Don Bosco expressed his fears that an association, humanitarian but also clearly religious, might be suppressed by the government, Ratazzi reassured him that no liberal government would interfere with the right of individual citizens to associate and to use their time, money and ability for any lawful purpose they might choose.

In his early Constitutions, Don Bosco proposed a religious life that was not meant to mirror traditional images, which were now prone to arouse antipathy and anticlericalism. To a society that pictured religious as lazy, unproductive, useless individuals, Don Bosco wanted to present his Salesians at work by the side of the common citizen, in particular by the side of the needy. His followers would be religious in shirtsleeves, happy and hardworking. Don Bosco wanted to depict a new type of religious with a new kind of civil worth as priest or religious, no longer aloof from society or displaying a provocative inertia and uselessness:

> Our times call for action. The world has become materialistic, and so we have to go out of our way to make known the good that we are doing.
>
> Today the world wants to see things being done. It wants to see priests working, teaching, and helping poor destitute youths in hospices, schools, workshops and so on.
>
> Cardinal Di Pietro, the bishop of Albano, has offered us his seminary, indicating that an abundant harvest awaits us. He knows that we are not looking for money but just for hard work.
>
> Now – besides praying, which is never to be neglected, one must be engaged, actively engaged in work, if we are not to court disaster.
> A person who does not know how to work is not a Salesian.

The upshot is that by the 1870s Don Bosco had founded the Salesians, the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians and the Salesian Cooperators. The Salesian work had spread throughout Italy and to Europe, and to the overseas missions in South America. It seemed that Don Bosco's concern for the salvation of the young knew no boundaries.

Such were Don Bosco's contributions to Church and society in his own time that despite the fact he was ideologically opposed to the *Risorgimento*, a recent series devoted to the making of modern Italy includes a volume on Don Bosco written by Pietro Stella. The Piedmontese ruling class, people like Cavour, Ratazzi and Lanza, who were the architects of the liberal revolution and the unification of Italy, knew and admired Don Bosco and his humanitarian work. Those who stood for radical progress saw in Don Bosco a zealous priest who, despite his anti-liberal ideas, was making a significant contribution to the education of the young. From 1849 on, Don Bosco was personally known to Pope Pius IX and his Secretary of State, Cardinal Antonelli. The fact that he was both a Piedmontese humanitarian and a priest made him acceptable to both sides. Don Bosco was known *on both sides of the Tiber*. This allowed him to become involved in a private capacity as a mediator between Church and State in Italy in times of the estrangement following the liberal revolution, the unification of Italy, and the taking of Rome, particularly in the matter of the nomination and appointment of bishops to vacant dioceses.

Somehow we need to start drawing this all together, and ask what we need to do to make some practical applications to the situation of young people today, and how we can go about addressing their needs. In my introduction I referred to the warnings issued by Fr Desramaut and Fr Lenti. We have seen for ourselves how salvation of the young in the mind of Don Bosco was subject to development and growth, depending on a number of variables. These included his seminary education followed by the time he spent at the Pastoral Institute of Turin; the social and political situation of Turin and the Italian peninsula at the time of the Risorgimento; the educational and spiritual experience he lived with the boys of the first Oratory at Valdocco; and his founding of the Salesian Congregation and the wider Salesian Family.

Their caveats notwithstanding, both Lenti and Desramaut conclude that ultimately Don Bosco transcends his limitations. Lenti sees a deepening of Don Bosco's understanding of the needs of the young, and with that the call to meet those needs through long-term as well as immediate programmes. Realising that society was changing, and that many more young people were abandoned and neglected in social and religious terms, he became increasingly more concerned about working for a new Christian society in new political and social circumstances through education of the young. He saw the renewal, regeneration, and salvation of society as primarily a work of education, and he believed that the overall solution to the problems of religion and society lay in education.

Desramaut arrives at the paradoxical conclusion that one of the main features of Don Bosco's spirituality is that it is a *modern* spirituality. By this he means a genuinely Catholic sensibility to the living and sacramental presence of God, a sense of incarnation in the actual present (which Desramaut says goes hand in hand with the spirit of renunciation and orientation to the next life). This needs to be spelt out a bit.

Whether it's his activities with the simple country children where he was born in Becchi, the young members of the cheerfulness society in secondary school at Chieri, the Company of St Aloysius, the Companion of Youth, the celebration of Feast Days and Feast Day meals at the Oratory, the outdoor excursions in the autumn, theatrical performances, music and singing, or the books he writes for the spiritual formation of the Oratory boys, there's no question about Don Bosco's grasp of the principle of incarnation and sacramentality. He was adept at devising practical programmes of devotion and spirituality. *Here we make holiness consist in being very happy* was no abstraction, an empty slogan – it was something his boys could experience for themselves. An eyewitness of the feast of St Aloysius in 1851 tells us:

> Nothing was missing for a great celebration of young, committed Christians: singing, instrumental music, recitals and such things performed on a simple yet masterfully prepared set: a hot-air balloon, and a fireworks display ended the day. One could plainly see the joy and happiness on those youthful faces who were unwilling to leave. It was truly a family feast for 1500 youngsters who so admire and respect their father.

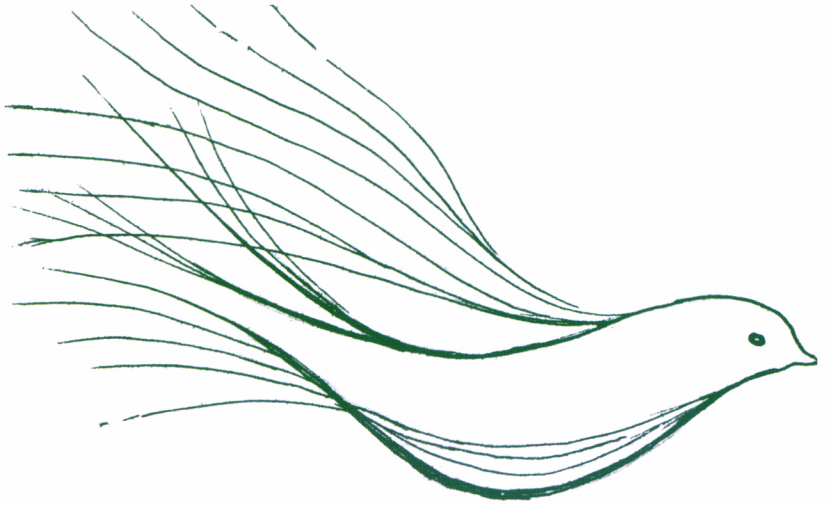
As Don Bosco said:

> I want us to rejoice in body and in spirit, and to show the world how we can be happy in body and in soul without offending God; my wish is that we should make a happy feast of it, in the Lord and also in the kitchen.

That speaks volumes for the salvation of young people in the mind of Don Bosco!

In the same spirit, Don Bosco was able to take an article of faith, the definition of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854, and turn it into a practical programme of devotion and spirituality for the boys at the Oratory, centred on the sodality of the Immaculate Conception, with its own particular forms of internal and external active apostolate, and out of this group came nine out of the sixteen founding members of the Salesian Congregation. We see the same thing on an even grander scale during the 1860s with the building of the great Church of Mary, Help of Christians and everything that it represented. In the very process of building, it evolves from a church for his house, his local area and his Congregation, into a basilica, a place of pilgrimage, the centre of devotion and a point of reference for a spiritual family, a sanctuary of world-wide renown as well as an active centre for spreading devotion to Mary, Help of Christians. Salesians departing for South America would receive their missionary cross at the feet of Mary, Help of Christians, seen in all her majesty and all her mystery as Mother of the Church, the promise and guarantee of the ultimate success of the Church's mission, and that of the Salesian Society in particular.

Minutes of the Act of Foundation of the Salesian Congregation



Turin, 18th December 1859

Nel Nome di Nostro Signor Gesù Cristo

Amen.

L'anno del Signore mille ottocento cinquantanove alli diciotto di Dicembre in questo Oratorio di s. Francesco di Sales nella camera del Sacerdote Bosco Giovanni alle ore 9 pomeridiane si radunavano, esso, il Sacerdote Alasonatti Vittorio, i chierici Savio Angelo Diacono, Rua Michele Suddiacono, Cagliero Giovanni, Francesia Gio Battista, Provera Francesco, Ghivarello Carlo, Lazzero Giuseppe, Bonetti Giovanni, Anfossi Giovanni, Marcellino Luigi, Cerruti Francesco, Durando Celestino, Pettiva Secondo, Rovetto Antonio, Bongiovanni Cesare Giuseppe, il giovane Chiapale Luigi, tutti allo scopo ed in uno spirito di promuovere e conservare lo spirito di vera carità che richiedesi nell'opera degli Oratorii per la gioventù abbandonata e pericolante, la quale in questi calamitosi tempi viene in mille maniere sedotta a danno della società e precipitata nell'empietà ed irreligione.

Piacque pertanto ai medesimi Congregati di unirsi in Società o Congregazione che avendo di mira il vicendevole ajuto per la santificazione propria si proponesse di promuovere la gloria di Dio e la salute delle anime specialmente delle più bisognose d'istruzione e di educazione.

In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Amen

In the Year of Our Lord 1859, on the 18th of December in this Oratory of St. Francis of Sales at 9 in the evening, the following gathered in Fr John Bosco's room: [Fr John Bosco] himself, Fr Vittorio Alasonatti, the Seminarians Deacon Angelo Savio, Subdeacon Michele Rua, Giovanni Cagliero, Gio. Battista Francesia, Francesco Provera, Carlo Ghivarello, Giuseppe Lazzero, Giovanni Bonetti, Giovanni Anfossi, Luigi Marcellino, Francesco Cerruti, Celestino Durando, Secondo Pettiva, Antonio Rovetto, Cesare Giuseppe Bongiovanni, and the young man Luigi Chiapale. All united in one and the same spirit with the sole purpose of preserving and promoting the spirit of true charity needed for the work of the Oratories on behalf of neglected young people at risk. For in these disastrous times of ours such young people are liable to be corrupted and plunged into godlessness and irreligion to the detriment of the whole of society.

The Gathered group then decided to form a society or congregation with the aim of promoting the glory of God and the salvation of souls, especially of those most in need of instruction and education.

ed approvato di comune consenso il disegno proposto, fatta breve preghiera ed invocato il lume dello Spirito Santo, procedevano alla elezione dei Membri che dovessero costituire la direzione della società per questa e per nuove congregazioni se a Dio piacerà favorirne l'incremento.

Pregarono pertanto unanimi Lui iniziatore e promotore a gradire la carica di Superiore Maggiore siccome del fatto a Lui conveniente, il quale avendola accettata colla riserva della facoltà di nominarsi il prefetto, poichè nessuno vi si oppose, pronunziò che gli pareva non dovesse muovere dall'uffizio di prefetto lo Scrivente il quale finqui teneva tal carica nella casa.

Si pensò quindi tosto al modo di elegione pur gli altri Socii che concorrono alla Direzione, e si convenne di adottare la votazione a buffagi secreti per più breve via a costituirne il Consiglio, il quale doveva essere composto di un Direttore Spirituale, dell'Economo e di tre Consiglieri in compagnia dei due predescritti uffiziali.

Or fatto Segretario a questo scopo lo Scrivente, ei protesta di aver fedelmente adempito l'uffizio

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The project met with unanimous approval. Hence, after a short prayer and the invocation of the light of the Holy Spirit, the group proceeded to elect the members that would make up the central body of the Society and would lead this and future communities, if it should please God to grant increase.

The group then unanimously requested Him [Don Bosco] who has been the initiator and promoter to accept the office of Major Superior, as is becoming in every respect. He accepted the office on condition that he should have the power to choose for the office of prefect the present writer [Alasonatti], who has held that office in the house up to the present.

The group then considered the method to be followed in electing the other members of the central governing body, and it was decided to hold the election by secret ballot. This was deemed the speediest way of setting up the council, which was to consist of a spiritual director, of a financial administrator, and of three councillors, in addition to the two already mentioned officers.

The writer was appointed secretary and solemnly declares that he has faithfully discharged the task

commessogli di comune fiducia, attribuendo il suffragio a ciascuno dei soci secondochè veniva nominato in votazione; e quindi eseguiti risultato nella elezione del direttore spirituale all'unanimità la scelta nel Chierico Suddiacono Rua Michele che non se ne ricusava. Il che ripetutosi per l'Economo, riuscì e fu riconosciuto il Diacono Angelo Savio il quale promise altresì di assumersene il relativo impegno.

Restavano ancora da eleggere i tre consiglieri; pel primo dei quali fattasi al solito la votazione venne il Chierico Cagliero Giovanni. Il secondo consigliere sorti il Chierico Gio Bonetti. Pel terzo ed ultimo essendo riusciti eguali i suffragi a favore dei Chierici Ghivarello Carlo e Provera Francesco, fattasi altra votazione la maggioranza risultò pel Chierico Ghivarello, e così fu definitivamente costituito il corpo di amministrazione per la nostra Società.

Il quale fatto come venne finquì ampiamente esposto fu letto in piena congrega di tutti i prelodati soci ed ufficiali per ora nominati, i quali riconoscendone la veracità, concordi fermarono che se ne conservasse l'originale, a cui per l'autenticità si sottoscrisse il Superiore Maggiore e come Segretario

Sac. Bosco Gio-

Alagonatti Vittorio Sac. Prefetto

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The task entrusted to him by general agreement. As the balloting progressed, he recorded the votes by the name of the individual concerned; and this was the result of the elections: the Seminarian, the Subdeacon Michele Rua was unanimously elected spiritual director, and he accepted [the appointment]. The same procedure was followed for the financial administrator, with the result that Deacon Angelo Savio was elected. He also accepted, pledging to discharge the duties of that office. Three councillors remained to be elected. The balloting for the first of these resulted in the election of the Seminarian Giovanni Cagliero. The second councillor to be elected was Gio[vanni] Bonetti. The balloting for the third and last [councillor] resulted in a tie between seminarians Carlo Ghivarello and Francesco Provera. A second balloting produced a majority favouring Seminarian Ghivarello. Thus the central administrative body of our Society was definitively established.

The report of these proceedings, as summarily described herein, was read before the assembly of all the members and elected officers and was approved as true to fact. It was then unanimously resolved that this original document should be kept on file, and to guarantee its authenticity the Major Superior and the Secretary affixed their signatures.

Father John Bosco

Father Victor Alasonatti, Prefect



In Gratitude