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Don Bosco's Battle Against Illiteracy

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At St. Francis of Assisi,¹ I was becoming more and more aware of the need for some kind of school. Some of the older youths were completely ignorant of the truths of the faith. But any kind of lengthy oral instruction would have proven boring for them. We did try to improvise some kind of formal teaching to help them, but we were frustrated by lack of space and a scarcity of teachers. Later at the Women's Shelter and at the Moretta house, we started a Sunday school. Finally, when we came to Valdocco, we began a regular night school.

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Since we wanted to get some tangible results from our experiment, we concentrated on just one subject at a time. For example, we brought our young learners along by teaching them to recognize the letters of the alphabet and then helped them to formulate syllables with them. While our Sunday school project proved a real boon for many boys, we soon realized that we were just scratching the surface. Too many of the slower boys quickly forgot what they had learned on the previous Sunday. This led us to do the only workable thing -- we introduced our night school. We had already begun holding some classes in the evening at the Women's Shelter, so by the time we were settled in the Moretta house, we were holding frequent classes in the evening. When we finally moved into the Pinaridi house in Valdocco, we continued conducting our night school; this time we were instructing the boys who came to us, almost every evening.

Our night classes produced two worthwhile results. First, the youngsters were motivated to attend them since they were very keen on learning how to read. Then those classes gave us the

¹This reference is to the church of Saint Francis of Assisi which was adjacent to the ecclesiastical institution known as the *Convitto*. It was there that the newly ordained Don Bosco was pursuing advanced courses in theology.

opportunity of instructing our fledgling students in the study of their religion, which was the primary goal of our night school.²

In his attempt to teach the poor children and working apprentices of Turin their ABC's, Don Bosco was facing a formidable task. Among the children of the working class and the youths who roamed the city streets, illiteracy was rampant. For most of them, any kind of schooling was beyond their reach. In the early 1840's there was, as yet, no state-supported system of education, and the schools run by religious orders were few. In the Italian peninsula in the early 19th century, education was like a desert, broken here and there by an oasis of matchless fertility and luxuriance. The learning of the learned was high, and the ignorance of the ignorant was profound.³ There were several reasons for this: inadequate finances, resistance in rural areas, and relative indifference among the nation's conservative leaders.

Moreover, the very idea that the state should provide basic and compulsory education seemed subversive to the ruling princes of the time. In a country that was a hodgepodge of kingdoms, duchies, and principalities, the reactionary and absolutist rulers feared a literate and instructed populace. Reading and writing had no place in the lives of the Italian peasants and their children. The people's lot was to be one of resignation and acceptance of their work. Terenzio Mamiani echoed this pervasive conviction among Italian leaders in his indictment of their obscurantism:

The duty of the people is to labor assiduously, with diligence and zeal. ... The duty of the people is to accept submissively the instructions and warnings of those who far surpass them in education and science. ... The duty of the people is to practice moderation in their desires, not to disdain their condition, not to envy the rich, to behave in a frugal and sober, obedient and disciplined manner.⁴

²Giovanni Bosco, *Memorie Dell'Oratorio Di San Francesco Di Sales* (Turin, 1946), 182 f. Eugenio Ceria, ed.

³For the phenomenon of an excess of educated men in Western Europe, 1800-1850, see Lenore O'Boyle in *Journal of Modern History*, 1970, 441-495. Though the aim of Professor O'Boyle was to study the overproduction of educated men in England, Germany, and France in the first half of the nineteenth century, some of her findings are also applicable to Italy during this period. Educated men are understood to include a) members of all the learned professions whether or not trained at a university; b) all other persons who attended universities; c) all persons who received an advanced (i.e., beyond the age of fourteen) secondary education of the traditional, classical sort. From the earliest times Italian universities had maintained high standards of culture; but the public authorities had grievously neglected popular education.

⁴Quoted in Stuart Woolf's *A History of Italy, 1700-1860*, (New York, 1979), 326.

In short, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Italy's reactionary princes had dulled the spirit of the masses by keeping them unschooled, illiterate, and subservient.

Even as late as 1861, when official statistics first became available in Italy, out of a population of twenty-three million, seventeen million were illiterate. And in a country where dialects accurately reflected deeply-rooted regionalism and particularism, standard Italian was a second language for the general population. To many Italians, the so-called "national Italian language" would have been unintelligible since only 2.5 percent of the people could confidently speak Italian. Only in neighboring Austrian-occupied Lombardy was there a ray of light. The natives of that region could not complain that schooling in their communes and villages had been slighted by the Habsburgs.

Proportion, per 100 inhabitants, of the Italian population able to read and write, or at least to read, in 1861.⁵

<u>Regions</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>Both Sexes</u>
Piedmont	50.25	39.29	49.23
Lombardy	51.50	41.03	46.34
Liguria	42.76	24.96	33.30
Tuscany	31.60	28.08	29.84
Emilia	27.81	16.71	22.42
Marches	22.52	11.71	17.04
Umbria	21.41	10.62	16.17
Naples	20.52	7.17	13.74
Sicily	16.77	6.16	11.40
Sardinia	14.93	5.60	10.28

(Venice and the Rome were not covered by the census of 1861)

But cold statistics were of little comfort to a priest, who almost single-handedly, was burning with a desire to bring the hope of literacy into the lives of the poor children of the capital of Piedmont. The year was 1844, and the educational opportunities in the city were scanty at best. The Casati Law, which would become the fundamental law for public and private instruction and remain in effect until 1923, was still fifteen years away.⁶

⁵*Report of the Commissioner of Education, for the year 1893-1894.* (Washington, 1896), 329. To state the totals from the opposite point of view, 78.06, 82.21, and 71.45 percent of the population were unable to read, or were, as the Italians say, analphabetic.

Without funds, resources, and teachers, Don Bosco would have to build from the ground up. His early encounters with exploited apprentices, and his frequent visits among Turin's incarcerated juveniles had convinced him that an illiterate child faced life as a working drudge. Many would spend their lives condemned to menial jobs and to jail sentences. Only an ability to read and write would enable them to break the chains of poverty that enslaved so many children of the poor. For Don Bosco "good Christians and responsible citizens" were the products of religion and education.

Consequently, on Sundays and holy days, after church services and on weekends in the evening, except Saturdays and the vigils of holy days, many boys, at a stated hour would come to the priests' residence [near the *Rifugio*], and Don Bosco and Father Borel, ever ready to help, would convert their own rooms into classrooms and teach them the three R's. ... These classes were of signal benefit to a vast number of boys. Having to work for their livelihood and, therefore, unable to attend school, they would otherwise have remained illiterate and deprived of the most elementary education, to their grave material disadvantage.⁷

Don Bosco's early efforts to instruct the youths that visited him at the first oratory sites were temporarily interrupted by a serious illness, no doubt aggravated by a physical breakdown. After a prolonged convalescence at Becchi, one of the first priorities upon his return to Valdocco was to resume his evening classes and to expand their scope:

I rented another room in the Pinardi building, and so there was instruction going on everywhere: in the kitchen, the chapel, on the stairs, and even in my own room. There seemed to be an insatiable hunger to learn to read. In fact, the demand was so great that I rented two more rooms. As was expected, there were a few well-meaning but unmanageable youths who had never experienced any kind of school discipline, so we had to weather some rather disruptive moments until they learned that school and play were not the same thing.⁸

⁶The enactment of the Casati Law was the single most important piece of educational legislation of nineteenth century Italy. The man who gave his name to this charter of the Italian schools was the minister for public instruction, Count Gabrio Casati (1798-1872). The Casati Law is considered by many historians to be Count Camillo Cavour's most enduring legacy, aside from the political unification of Italy. It remained in effect, with numerous alterations and revisions, until the Fascist regime (1923).

⁷Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, S.D.B., *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, (New Rochelle, 1962). Diego Borgatello ed., Volume 2, 199.

⁸Teresio Bosco, *Una Biografia Nuova* (Torino, 1979) ,159 f.

Don Bosco's presence animated those evening sessions. In the beginning, the burden of supervising the classes fell principally upon his shoulders. In fact, he also took over some of the instruction. He would often be seen, in those early days, looking in on classes that were in progress and somehow even teaching his own group of boys. He did this, all the while munching on his dinner which he carried around with him on a plate. One of the youths who received his first schooling in Don Bosco's night classes remembered:

Even after all these years, I will never forget the excitement and eagerness of the boys who came to those evening classes in the Pinardi house. The lamps that glowed in the several rooms made the place stand out like a beacon in the gloom of the night. There were boys everywhere, all eager and impatient to learn their ABC's. In one room you could see wide-eyed beginners straining to read the large print on the reading charts on the wall. Others sat cross-legged on the floor absorbed in their primers. Some knelt in front of the chapel benches, which they used as desks, laboriously tracing the letters of the alphabet into their copybooks. One had to be careful where he stepped, because every square foot of space seemed to be filled with a diligent scholar wrapped up in his work.⁹

Lack of funds often stymied Don Bosco's battle against illiteracy. It was a constant struggle for him to scrounge up needed equipment and supplies. But one of his principal frustrations was the scarcity of books suitable for his needs. It was especially the deficiency of readable texts for religious instruction that compelled him to write his own *Church History* (1845) and later his *Bible History* (1847). Easy-to-read textbooks on these subjects, written for the juvenile reader, were virtually non-existent.

True, there were libraries full of erudite tomes and scholarly works that dealt exhaustively with the history of the Bible and of the church, but they were aimed at learned readers. The schoolchild was easily swallowed up in the morass of Biblical hermeneutics, or became quick victim of the historical clashes between popes and emperors. It was this forgotten audience that Don Bosco had in mind when he wrote his own textbooks. "While compiling his own *Church History*, Don Bosco was not thinking of priests or well educated lay people. ... He was thinking of young people learning a trade, and who pursued their education at night schools."¹⁰

⁹Teresio Bosco, *op. cit.*, 195.

¹⁰Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Work* (New Rochelle, 1985), 260-261. It was not until 1855 that Don Bosco published the *History of Italy*, the third part of his historical

And then there was the third "R". Initiating a student into the cryptic and arcane world of numbers and computation can be a challenge to any educator. Again Don Bosco faced the problem of unsuitable, and often unavailable, textbooks when he introduced basic mathematics in his evening classes. This time, however, there was a sense of urgency. In September of 1845, King Charles Albert had declared that the ancient Piedmontese system of weights and measurements, after a four-year interim, would be abolished and replaced with the metric system.

Don Bosco rose to the occasion: "I had to do the same in teaching arithmetic and the metric system [as he had done for Bible and church history]. True, although the metric system was not to become obligatory until 1850, it was already being introduced as early as 1846 in the public schools. However, there were, in fact, no suitable textbooks, so I supplied this need with a manual of my own entitled, *Learning Arithmetic with the Metric System* (1846.)"

trilogy. It was his most successful venture in the field of historical textbooks. But unlike his *Bible History* and *Church History*, the *History of Italy* did not have a specific market as a textbook. Rather, it was Don Bosco's attempt to acquaint Italian youth with a history of their past and of their heritage. However, it was inevitable that the *Storia d'Italia*, as it was entitled, was seen as a work ideally suited for use in schools.

The *Storia* received rave reviews from Catholic newspapers like *Armonia* and the *Civiltà Cattolica*. Its worth was further reinforced by the high praise accorded it by the minister of public instruction who awarded Don Bosco a cash prize of 1000 lire for his efforts and placed his work among the approved list of books which were annually awarded to public school students. As late as 1905, the *History of Italy* was so highly regarded that J. Higginson Cabot, Ph.D., of Wellesley College, and editor of *Italy*, in *Colliers' History of the Nations*, used it as a basic reference: "For Italian history since 476 A.D., Bosco's *History of Italy* has been the foundation [of our volume on Italy]. It is one of the most satisfactory digests of the very complicated history of the peninsula during the centuries of disunion down to the present time."

Don Bosco's work was pirated during his lifetime by the English printing establishment, Longman Green of London in 1881. The *Storia* was translated into English by J.D. Morell, inspector of schools, who brought out his edition, *A Compendium of Italian History* "up to the present time." Unfortunately, Morell tampered with Don Bosco's work, adding much of his own material to "bring it up to the present time." He also distorted the perspective of Don Bosco's creation by omitting various sections, making the snide remark that while he admired the author, "many of his sentiments and opinions scattered throughout the pages are not in accordance with our English, and especially, our Protestant ideas." One of the "opinions" that jarred Morell's sensitivity was the chapter on the temporal power of the Pope.

Don Bosco's history went through six editions between 1859 and 1874, and sold over 70,000 copies during his lifetime. What motivated Don Bosco to write the *History of Italy* was his desire to present historical events on a moral plane. His warning in his preface that "History is man's inexorable teacher" would later be reflected in George Santayana's timely admonition that "whoever does not learn the lessons that history teaches us, is bound to repeat them."

Don Bosco's predicament was echoed in Turin's newspaper, *L'Armonia*. In its laudatory review of his lucid presentation of the metric system, the reviewer deplored the "high lofty style" of existing textbooks because "they failed to show the relative equivalence between the old and the new systems." The editor then expressed the hope that "people would make profitable use of [Don Bosco's] little book."¹¹ Apparently his advice was well received. *Learning Arithmetic with the Metric System* quickly went through eight printings and 28,000 copies.

But Don Bosco was not about to leave well enough alone. Not content in merely introducing the young learner into the cold calculating study of numbers, he used his text as a vehicle for moral instruction. In many problems and exercises, morality is pervasive and insistent. As Pietro Stella notes, "moralistic intentions could not help but be present." For example, the student was asked to calculate the amount of money that an upright young man would accumulate if, over a set period of time, he did not squander his hard-earned wages, but prudently saved them. Another exercise asked the student to compute the contribution of a youth who gave generously to the poor and assisted a friend at the same time in securing an education. The converse was also employed. To illustrate: a problem asks how much money a lazy layabout would have saved had he been gainfully employed, instead of drinking away the few coins that he had.¹²

Don Bosco's booklet on the metric system did more than teach the "new math" of his day. It also inculcated the notion that education was primarily moral and only secondarily intellectual.

¹¹The metric system was one of the most significant results of the French Revolution. It entered Italy in the wake of Napoleon's occupation of the northern provinces, but it took some time before it overcame the inertia of the customary systems of weights and measures. With the exile of the Corsican invader, Piedmont put back the clock. The legal and social reforms introduced by the French were swept away, and this included the repression of the metric system. It would take almost half a century before King Charles Albert ordered its restoration on January 1, 1850. For *L'Armonia's* review of Don Bosco's booklet on the metric system, see *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, vol. 3, 466.

¹²It was not at all unusual for nineteenth century educators to use classroom textbooks as vehicles for morality indoctrination. For example, Don Bosco's use of arithmetic problems "to teach a lesson" was very reminiscent of the *McGuffey Eclectic Readers* which exerted a great influence upon American schoolchildren. With the moral lessons they attached to their stories and fables, they helped create the American conservative conscience. The *McGuffey Readers* enjoyed an enormous popularity. It is estimated that at least 120 million copies of the Readers were sold between 1836 and 1920. Contemporaries of Don Bosco, the McGuffeys did much to shape the thought of a still-pioneer America. The "little lessons" of their books, with their stories praising the old virtues -- thrift, honesty, hard work, kindness, obedience -- were warmly embraced by the scholastic communities.

Mathematical literacy in the capital and in many areas in Piedmont was given an encouraging boost because of Don Bosco's booklet on the metric system. Numerous educators and teachers were lavish in their praise for his little publication. Turin's Catholic newspaper, *Unità Cattolica*, rated it as the best textbook for elementary schools in print and the first of its kind to be published in the kingdom.

But the author did not rest on his laurels. As the official deadline for the introduction of the metric system neared, Don Bosco pursued his goal of making an unpalatable subject attractive by embarking on a painless experiment. He wrote and produced a three-act comedy, entitled, *The Metric System*. The title was prosaic, but the play was hilarious. At its first showing the audience laughed uproariously at the staged antics and buffoonery, unaware that they were being indoctrinated into the practical values of the new metric system. Among the distinguished guests at the opening performance was the renowned educator, Father Ferrante Aporti, who was both impressed and delighted at the playwright's clever ploy. He remarked: "Don Bosco could not use a more effective method of popularizing the new metric system. In this way people learn it by laughing."¹³

The educator's presence at Don Bosco's play was significant. One of northern Italy's most outstanding educators,¹⁴ Aporti was, in

¹³*The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, vol. 3, 422.

¹⁴Father Ferrante Aporti was born in S.Martino dell'Argine (Mantova) in 1791 and died in 1858. He was one of the first school reformers of the Italian Risorgimento and made a strong impact upon childhood education. It was his belief that manual work, at all educational ages, was to give education a concreteness and rationality, making it a process of educational involvement; the very young were to start off becoming accustomed to discipline, friendly cooperation, and piety. It was among the very young that his theories reached their fruition. It was in establishing *asili* [*kindergartens*] that Aporti was most effective. He transformed preschool education from being mere child care centers where children were warehoused, into a "refuge" (hence the term *asilo*, *asylum*) for children of the poor, where they were safeguarded, fed and educated without charge while their parents were at work.

Aporti's first kindergarten was established in Cremona where it was enthusiastically supported by the local authorities. Soon such institutions began to spread rapidly all over northern Italy.

But Aporti encountered trouble along the way in the form of untrained teachers, suspicious civic authorities, and opposition from Church leaders. In 1844, he was called to accept an invitation from King Charles Albert of Piedmont to establish a normal (teacher-training) school at the royal university. In 1848 he was made a senator of the kingdom of Sardinia (Piedmont), and in 1850 chosen president of the academic council and rector of the University of Turin, positions he held for seven years. Encroaching poor health forced him to leave these positions, although he continued to direct the city's now burgeoning kindergartens. He died on

effect, supporting the teaching methods of the struggling priest in Valdocco. Later he would become a frequent visitor to the Valdocco oratory. In their goals for educating the young, the two were kindred spirits. Aporti had devised an educational plan that aimed at a harmonious combination of moral, intellectual, and physical education. Don Bosco's own educational philosophy, then in the making, would be posited on identical principles. Even Lemoyne, whose treatment of Aporti is unsympathetic if not harsh,¹⁵ admits that the two had much in common: "At that time Father Aporti ... fitted into Don Bosco's plans. Don Bosco had gained his esteem by showing himself favorable to popular education, and by occasionally consulting him on teaching methods."¹⁶

The lack of suitable textbooks, added to the fact that Don Bosco was constantly out-of-pocket, were just few of the handicaps that he was confronted with in his crusade for literacy. Perhaps the most nagging problem, and one that would often stymie his efforts, was the scarcity of teaching aides.

In early nineteenth-century Italy, there was no recognizable teaching profession. The want of classroom teachers was part of a particular paradox -- a paradox compounded of a high regard for education on one hand, and the generally low regard for teachers on the other. As early as the Renaissance, the role of the schoolmaster was hardly an envious position. Tutors generally took over the education of the offspring of the well-to-do. Most of them, in fact, were recruited from the ranks of the clergy.¹⁷ Usually coming from affluent or well-connected

November 29, 1858. There is no English biography of this renowned Italian educational pioneer.

¹⁵Some of Lemoyne's uncomplimentary statements about Ferrante Aporti are founded upon unsubstantiated allegations, and the latter's genuine contributions to education are too summarily dismissed. In reference to these damaging allusions, Father Pietro Braido acknowledges that "Lemoyne is generous with ... information and judgments, which however are not always coherent or likely." Cf. Braido's *Don Bosco's Pedagogical Experience* (Rome, 1989), 63, note. The Italian educator, Angiolo Gambaro, rises to the defense of Aporti in his critical and hard-hitting treatment of Aporti by Lemoyne. See A. Gambaro, *Ferrante Aporti primo centenario della morte* (Brescia, 1962), 417-418.

¹⁶How much Aporti influenced Don Bosco's pedagogical method in teaching is purely speculative. See Vincenzo Cimatti, *Don Bosco Educatore* (Torino, 1939), 21. However, Aporti's methodology must have rubbed off on Don Bosco to some extent. He did attend some of the educator's university lectures, having been asked to sit in on them by Archbishop Fransoni and evaluate the religious content of his ideas and report his findings to him. See Bartolomeo Fascie, *Del Metodo Educativo Di Don Bosco*, (Torino, 1939), 21. Aporti had set up a model classroom of about twenty pupils to illustrate his pedagogical techniques. Pietro Braido asserts that an analysis of Aporti's university lectures in 1844 "show notable analogies and agreements in principles and methods" between Aporti and Don Bosco. *Op. cit.*, 63.

¹⁷After his ordination, young Don Bosco was offered several options in which to exercise his priestly ministry. One of them came from a wealthy Genoese family. They made

families, these pedagogues were charged with preparing the sons of the nobility and the wealthy for the university, a career at court, or a life of ease. Many regarded their task as a bearable stop-gap until they could arrange for more lucrative and prestigious careers.¹⁸

Even as late as the beginning of the unification movement on the Italian peninsula, little had changed since the Italian poet, Francesco Petrarca, had dispensed his advice to a Florentine schoolmaster urging him to give up the thankless task of pedagogy to pursue a higher career as a secretary to a prince:

Let those men teach boys who can do nothing greater, whose qualities are a plodding diligence, a rather dull mind, a muddled intellect, ordinary talent, cold-bloodness, a body tolerant of labor, and a mind contemptuous of glory; who are desirous only of petty gains and have an indifference to boredom ... Let them watch boys' fidgety hands, their roving eyes, and annoying whispering ... neither grammar nor any of the seven liberal arts deserve the entire lifetime of your noble talent ... I pity those who waste their lives in public school.

Schooling and teaching were neither uniform nor institutionalized in most Italian states at the beginning of the nineteenth century. And teachers who were not members of the clergy, were generally treated as second-class citizens. The meagerness of their stipends forced pedagogues and schoolmasters to reduce teaching to a part-time occupation. At the University of Messina, for example, a professor was paid less than the local gendarme. In the enlightened province of Lombardy, which had the best educational record on the Peninsula, a rural teacher received 100 per annum -- the annual wage of a kitchen servant was only four lire less. Little wonder then that the renowned economist, Carlo Cattaneo, warned a friend who was considering a teaching post: "I advise you to seek some way to supplement your income as a teacher if you expect to live in any kind of dignified fashion."

Unable to find, let alone pay, teaching aides to help him with classroom instruction, Don Bosco was constantly searching for willing

him an offer they thought he could not refuse -- a stipend of 1000 lire per annum to tutor their son. Don Bosco declined, not so much because of his mother's strong disapproval ('My son in the house of a rich gentleman?'), but because Father Cafasso had urged him to enroll in the *Convitto*, for continuing education in priestly studies.

¹⁸Kent Roberts Greenfield, *Economics and Liberalism in the Risorgimento* (Baltimore, 1934), 238. The priest teacher is often idealized in Italian literature. In small country villages, the assumption that the parish priest would find himself also the village schoolmaster is close to reality.

associates to lend their time and talent in teaching the children who came to his evening school. Biographer Father John Lemoyne pointedly asked: "Wherein, then, was Don Bosco to find teachers for so many youngsters?" As one who had access to primary sources and to eyewitnesses during those early years, his answer is enlightening:

He made them! And this is how he did it. Several of the older boys attending the oratory were very intelligent and desired a better education so that they could obtain more advantageous employment. Don Bosco, therefore, picked out several of them, and at suitable hours gave them, gratis, instruction in Italian, Latin, French, arithmetic, and other subjects in return for their teaching their companions catechism during Lent. They also taught other subjects at the evening classes, both weekdays and Sundays. Some of these more capable students belonged to the original group of boys he had gathered about him while still at the *convitto*.¹⁹

Boys teaching boys was not, of course, an innovation started by Don Bosco. This novel method of instructing children, especially in large numbers, and where funds were limited, is derived from the English pedagogue, Joseph Lancaster. This concept of older students instructing younger students was conceived by him, not so much as a useful pedagogical device, but as a way of cutting costs. This was a major consideration, for the pupils generally involved in Lancaster's experiment were the children of the poor, and there were no free public schools at the time.

The boys attending a Lancasterian school -- typically numbering 300 or so, but sometimes reaching as high as 500 -- were divided into groups of ten, each presided over by a monitor who was responsible for his charges' general "cleanliness, order, and improvement." There was an

¹⁹*The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, Vol 2, 434.

²⁰For an excellent treatment of the monitorial school see, *Joseph Lancaster and the Monitorial School Movement*, (*Classics in Education*, No. 47. Columbia University Press), Carl F. Kaestle, ed. Monitorial schools had their heyday in the early nineteenth century. In Italy, the "Metodo di reciproco insegnamento", as the monitorial schools were called, sprang up in several areas, despite eventual clerical opposition, and Lancasterian schools were popular in Florence, Naples, and Tuscany for at least a decade. Angiolo Gambaro identifies nine monitorial schools, or "*scuole mutue*", in Piedmont at this time. See his article in *Salesianum*, April-June, 1950, no. 2, p. 216. Nowhere was the monitorial system of education given a more thunderous reception than in the United States. Introduced in New York in 1806, monitorial schools soon became the rage. Governor De Witt Clinton of New York hailed Lancaster as a "benefactor of the human race." But the inherent weaknesses in monitorial instruction in time became apparent, and Lancaster's schools were reduced to a quaint footnote in educational history.

Absentee Monitor, whose job it was to "superintend the enquiries after the absentees," and an Inspection Monitor who checked the improvement of the classes in reading, writing and arithmetic." There were Teaching Monitors and Monitors in charge of distributing and collecting necessary books and over them all a Monitor of Monitors.

A stern and arrogant man himself, Mr. Lancaster at least implicitly encouraged those same qualities in his monitors, and the atmosphere of the classroom was often that of a Marine Corps bootcamp. Whatever the young scholars did, they did on the barked orders of whichever monitor was in charge of them at the time. Especially since the monitors were more or less on their own, the opportunities for applied dictatorship were almost limitless.²⁰

Don Bosco's use of "Teaching Monitors" was short-lived, for adult associates soon rallied to his cause in his literacy campaign, and later his young Salesian seminarians taught in the oratory school. Moreover, the Lancasterian system of discipline would never have been countenanced by Don Bosco. Although Lancaster abhorred physical violence, disruptive students were badgered with public ridicule instead of the rod. Recalcitrant students were forced to wear a heavy wooden slab around their neck, or their legs were shackled so that they had to hobble around until exhaustion took its toll. Shame rather than pain was the Lancasterian way. A dirty-faced boy, for example, would have his face washed by a girl before the entire assembly. But in fairness to Lancaster the man was more benign than punitive. Meritorious pupils were handsomely rewarded with cards of eulogy, gauds of merit, tickets worth cash, and -- in exemplary cases -- the honor of holding some school or classroom office.

If Don Bosco was not attracted by the Lancasterian philosophy, he did appreciate the potential, if limited, use of monitors, not so much for purposes of instruction but as aides and assistants in the overall learning process. The use of monitors, a spin-off of Lancaster's monitorial schools, could still be found in Salesian schools well into the twentieth century. In the 1925 edition of the *Constitutions of the Society of Saint Francis of Sales*, monitors were assigned specific tasks. In article 192 the prefect of studies is directed to have them implement their customary roles: "He shall uphold the traditional custom of monitors and submonitors in the studyhall, the classrooms, the refectory, etc."²¹

²¹ *Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis of Sales* (London, 1925), 68.

Not all of Don Bosco's personally trained "student teachers" measured up to even minimal expectations. Some of the youths whose education he had underwritten with his time and money simply disappeared or failed to honor their pledged commitment which they had given to their mentor: "[Some] of these young teachers were not always adequate to the task; others could not keep discipline and had to be replaced; still others, uninterested or frustrated, rarely showed up."²²

But it was not a lost cause. As biographer Lemoyne saw it, it was a gamble that paid off:

The experiment proved very successful, although it was a hardship for Don Bosco. Some of these student teachers did not keep their word, notwithstanding the time as well as the money Don Bosco had spent on them for books and for subsidies to their families. Only eight or ten at first, this little group of young teachers gradually increased and not only was of service in teaching the other boys, but succeeded in making a place for themselves and becoming influential men in the community. ... In due time [some of them] even became excellent priests."²³

Desirous as he was to develop language skills in his evening classes, Don Bosco, perhaps unconsciously, inhibited the progress of the Italian language in reluctantly letting go of his great love for the Piedmontese dialect. The use of Piedmontese was deeply ingrained in the culture of its people, and it was a rare parent indeed who did not speak it with his children. In fact it was so pervasive throughout Piedmont that the bishops of the dioceses of that region instructed their priests to preach to their people in Piedmontese "so that the congregations might more easily understand the word of God."²⁴

Because of the reality of regionalism, where different cultures and degrees of economic development coexisted simultaneously in neighboring areas, the use of particular dialects was the common practice among the population. Only two or three percent of the inhabitants of the Italian peninsula had Italian as their first language at the time of national unification (1861-1870). Not only was Italian used far less than the various dialects, but the spoken vernacular of one region was unintelligible in the next. In Turin, French was the language of the

²²*The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, Vol. 3, 435.

²³*Ibid.*, 435.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 331.

court;²⁵ in Naples, Sicily, and Sardinia, Spanish was commonly used among the nobility and in government circles; in the Papal States, the church worshipped and administered, and the universities taught in Latin. In fact the clergy everywhere used Latin as a lingua franca, and Piedmont did not abolish it as the medium of university instruction until 1852.

If the Italian language was not welcome at the court of Turin, neither was it enthusiastically practiced at the oratory. In his charming study of the Piedmontese dialect in Don Bosco's life and writings, Father Natale Cerrato knowledgeably notes that for almost twenty years Piedmontese²⁶ was the common means of communicating in the Valdocco oratory. Don Bosco had ambivalent feelings about its use. On the one hand, he loved to preach in Piedmontese to his boys because its pungent and sprightly words and expressions enabled him to use his innate wit to entertain his young audience. However, he also realized that with the unification of Italy looming on the horizon, a common language was a unifying bond that could not be ignored. But old habits die hard, and Don Bosco had to use moral pressure to persuade the staff and students of the oratory that the time had come to introduce the use of the Italian language on a regular basis. In fact, during Lent in 1861, he urged his boys -- as a Lenten practice -- "to speak Italian rather than their own dialect until Easter, saying he was sorry that they were no longer using their beautiful language."²⁷

What strongly motivated Don Bosco in his drive for literacy was the conviction that a knowledge of reading and writing was the necessary entree for any boy to a better paying job, a career in government or busi-

²⁵In Don Bosco's Turin, the Italian language was unacceptable in Piedmontese society in the early years, and the great statesman, Camillo Cavour, was not untypical in being more at home in French literature and English history than in Italian. Cavour, like Giuseppe Garibaldi, had an imperfect knowledge of Italian, and he preferred to write in French. Other people had to revise his newspaper articles, and his secretary found it painful to hear him speak Italian in public. However, what he lacked in eloquence he more than made up for in clarity and precision. His speeches were always to the point and wasted no time on irrelevancies or declamation, which was a welcome change from the rhetorical flourishes and extravaganzas of the orators of his day.

²⁶Natale Cerrato, *Cari li Me Fieuj* (Rome, 1981), 19. Cerrato narrates the incident when a group of student artisans once approached Don Bosco and asked that Italian be made the official language of the oratory even in daily conversations. They wanted to become more conversant in the national language with the hope that it would assist them to secure better paying jobs. Don Bosco readily agreed, and from that day on (February, 1860), the use of the Piedmontese dialect generally declined. However, the student artisans' ambitious plan to use Italian in all circumstances soon fizzled when they were hooted and jeered by their companions for their clumsy diction in the new language. Their bloopers and blunders drew so much ridicule that they quickly retreated into the safety of their dialect. Thus their crusade for Italian literacy came to an abrupt end, but Don Bosco's resolve to use the national language remained unshaken. Cerrato, *Ibid.* 19.

²⁷*The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, Vol. VI, 501.

ness, and the first step towards the priesthood. From his earliest years, young Johnny Bosco had experienced the magic of the written word. As a schoolboy he became hooked on books. A voracious reader during his schooldays in Chieri, he sometimes went through a book a day, thanks to the generous bookseller Elias who would loan him a book for a *soldo* a day.

But even before his regular schooldays at Chieri, books had fascinated young Johnny. When still only a child, he used to read stories to his many young friends from the books that kindly Father Lacqua made available to him. His lively presentation not only cast a spell on his young audiences, but oldsters as well listened to him in rapt attention. Margaret Bosco was often exhorted to bring her son to the community barn gatherings to help enliven the drab winter hours. As he later wrote:

Everybody wanted to listen to me read my stories. It all began when I started reading to my little circle of friends; but soon everyone, it seemed, wanted to gather around me to hear those exciting tales. Because I was still rather little, they had me stand on a chair so that they could see and hear me better.

And the stories he read were not from the lives of the saints. They were epic tales from the *Princes of France*, a popular collection of romantic adventures. They had a cast of characters that could entrance any audience: there were Orlando and Oliver, the heroic paladins from the court of Charlemagne; Gano, the dastardly villain; Turpin, the saintly bishop; and Durlindana and his deadly blade. There was a small price of admission that little John extorted for all this: "I always began and ended my reading with the sign of the cross and then invited my willing audience to join me in a prayer to Our Lady."²⁸

For the rest of his life Don Bosco would be unyielding in his battle to conquer illiteracy. If he used the chapel to nourish the souls of his boys, he used the classroom to enrich their minds. And hands. His first workshops gave the youths of the oratory the opportunity of learning to earn. If his early vocational education program did not succeed in training young apprentices for industrial occupations, it did succeed in making preparation for the workplace their primary function. When pressing duties and constant demands on his time crowded him out of the classroom, he never lost his belief in the efficacy of the school. In this year, declared the Year of Literacy by UNESCO, our imagination turns back to the young priest struggling to teach eager young minds how to read and write in his evening classes. It must be a call of renewed vitality in examining the Salesian school as a true Salesian apostolate.

²⁸Teresio Bosco, *Una Biografia Nuova di Don Bosco*, (Torino, 1979), 36.