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# EXPO '84 AND DON BOSCO'S PEERLESS PULP-T O-PAPER-TO-PRINT PRESENTATION

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For centuries the city of Turin had enjoyed the prestige of being the capital of the Kingdom of Sardinia. When Northern Italy finally achieved unification in 1860 under Camillo Cavour's astute hand, it became the new nation's administrative and moral leader. But this preeminence was to be short-lived. At the 1864 September Convention the decision was made to transfer the capital of the new Italy to Florence. The move was violently resisted by the aristocracy and the upper classes. Riots broke out in the capital leading to the deaths of 50 people; numerous others were injured. [1]

The transfer of the nation's capital to Florence brought on a period of acute economic crisis in Turin. Commerce ground to a halt, factories shut down,

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[1] The September Convention was concerned, basically, with the Roman Question. Napoleon III agreed to withdraw his troops from Rome within two years and pledged himself to observe the principle of non-intervention. In return, Italy would guarantee the Pope's territory against attack, and would transfer its capital from Turin to Florence. Some Neapolitans argued strongly that their city would make a more fitting capital than Florence. The inhabitants of Turin were outraged when the news suddenly broke out that their city was being abandoned, and serious rioting erupted which was put down with considerable bloodshed. Florence replaced Turin as the capital city until 1870 when Rome became the capital of a unified Italy. Adolfo Omodeo said of the September Convention that "It satisfied no one and resolved nothing; it gave only some years of uncertain truce in a thorny diplomatic struggle." A. Omodeo, *L'Eta del Risorgimento italiano* (Florence, 1945), 411-412.

the banks closed their doors. Doomsayers predicted that the once proud capital of Piedmont was on the verge of collapse, never again to regain the eminence it had enjoyed for centuries. Though now shorn of its prestige as the new nation's capital, Turin was determined to carve out for itself a leadership role as the kingdom's unchallenged industrial and commercial center. New industries arose, entrepreneurial enterprises sprang up, and an emerging bourgeoisie class composed of business and professional people began to dominate Turinese society, replacing the former aristocratic royalist elite. Turin not only survived the economic crisis, it became the focus of an economic boom.

This economic miracle was highlighted by an event that drew the attention not only of the Italians throughout the peninsula but of Western Europe as well. That event was the National Exposition of Italian Industry and Commerce held in 1884 in Turin's Parco del Valentino, the city's beautiful and extensive public park on the left bank of the Po River. [2] The leaders of the exposition were all men of distinction and of affluence. The Royal House of Savoy threw its weight behind the affair by appointing young Prince Amedeo, Duke of Aosta and brother of King Humberto I, as honorary president of the exposition, and Count Ernesto di Sambuy, mayor of Turin, as its honorary vice president. Tommasso Villa, the city's leading jurist and Ulrico Geisser, head of Turin's bank, headed the executive committee.

The land area designated to house the various buildings and exposition facilities was extensive—almost 520,000 square meters. The exposition consisted of eight large exhibit halls. These in turn were partitioned off into 29 different sections. The main halls ranged from the arts and crafts pavilion to the science, agricultural, and industrial exhibits. The thrust of the exposition

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[2] The Turin Exposition of 1884 helped to assuage the wounded pride of the city that had once been the proud capital of Italy. It provided the sort of once-in-a-lifetime extravaganza so dear to the popular heart. Above all it testified to all its countrymen the benevolent influence of science and technology. The exposition served its hosts as a "school of incomparable excellence" in manufactures, in agriculture, and especially in the emerging technological advances that Italy was experiencing. Whatever else the Turin Exposition contributed to the new nation, it demonstrated conclusively that Italy deserved its place in the sun in a country that had arrived as a belated comer of the industrial revolution. Perhaps it was the "Festival of Lights" that more than anything else thrilled the populace. On February 27, 1884, on the eve of the exposition, as an opening act to the exposition drama, the new phenomenon of electrification was dramatically introduced in Turin. The Porta Nuova train station was flooded in light, and the Piazza Carlo Felice, the lovely park fronting the station was festooned with multicolored electric bulbs. See *Le ore povere e ricche del Piemonte,* ed. Gianfranco Gallo-Orsi (Turin, 1988), 63, 293.

Perhaps the most electrifying event of Turin's 1884 "National Exposition of Italian Industry and Commerce" was the new phenomenon of electrification. The facade of the Porta Nuova train station was bathed in light, and thousands of electric bulbs festooned the Piazza Carlo Alberto and the thoroughfare leading to it.

was to feature the latest inventions and technical developments of the world of industry. Numerous exhibits underscored Italian contributions in the fields of science and industrial development. Prominent among them was the dazzling display of the latest model carriages, coaches, and public conveyances of the firm of Diatto and Locati. Ghidini silks, leather products of Gilardini, the electric lamps of Cruto all elicited admiration and the enthusiastic cries of the public.

It was all a veritable feast for the eyes. However, the public's appetite and thirst were equally challenged. Gaily decorated booths along the banks of the smooth-flowing Po refreshed the weary visitor with gastronomic creations of northern Italy's savory cuisine. The famed wines of the Asti and Langhe regions (Barolo, Barbera, Nebbiolo, Grignolino, Fresia, Malvasia, Moscato), whetted the thirst of the exposition visitors while their children munched on Talmone chocolates and Stratta-Baratti sweets. Only the most abstemious could refrain from such tempting delights.[3]

Turin's EXPO '84 was to become the bittersweet culmination of Don Bosco's remarkable and varied career as publisher, author, and printer. For almost 40 years he had been active in the cause of the Catholic press and as editor of educational publications. Beginning as a young priest in 1845 he began to churn out an endless stream of books and pamphlets designed to educate and to edify. Included in these publications were catechetical and religious books, a trilogy of historical works, a manual on the metric system (recently made mandatory in Piedmont), student biographies, and paperbound books aimed at pleasurable reading.

Don Bosco's first ambitious publication, the pamphlet-size *Catholic Readings* (1853) was an instant success. To lure readers to these *Letture Cattoliche,* each subscriber received a free copy of Don Bosco's *Gentleman's Almanac.* This pocket-size grab bag of humorous episodes, edifying anecdotes, and nuggets of wit and wisdom quickly captured the readers' imagination and was avidly anticipated every new year. [4] Among the school publications which Don Bosco edited for classroom use was a well-scoured, but attractive series of Latin and Italian classics. In the wake of this successful series there followed *The*

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[3] The Parco Valentino had also been the scene of other more modest expositions in 1829, 1832, 1844, 1850, 1868. But these events had been restricted to the park's medieval castle. Only in 1884 did the exposition go "outdoors". The lovely verdant setting along the Po River was used for booths featuring outdoor restaurants, display booths, and open-air theatrical presentations. For an interesting descriptive account of the Turin Exposition, see R. Gervasio, *Storia aneddotica descrittiva di Torino* (Torino, 1970), Vol. III, 282.

[4] The origin of Don Bosco's almanac, *Il Galantuomo* is treated in the *Journal of Salesian Studies*, "The Gentleman's Almanac: Don Bosco's Venture into Popular Education", Vol. II, No. 2 (Fall, 1991), 54-77.

*Young Readers Library* which soon found an appreciative audience. On the lighter side Don Bosco edited a collection of plays and skits for amateur theatricals. 1877 marked the appearance of the *Salesian Bulletin.* This family-oriented monthly promptly became a ubiquitous visitor—reaching thousands of households and apprising its readers of Salesian activities at home and in far-flung mission outposts in the New World.

From the beginning Don Bosco had dreamed of owning and operating his own printing establishment. He finally realized his dream in 1861. From a single antiquated hand press, his Oratory print shop, constantly updated with modern equipment, grew in time to an impressive size. Gradually Don Bosco's entrepreneurial drive would create what was to become the Saint Francis of Sales Oratory Press. By the mid 1870s, now operating with modern motor-driven machinery, the Oratory Press reached such a high level of productivity that it became the talk of the town. In fact, the major printing plants in Turin began to view the upstart press in Valdocco with an envious though alarming eye. To the owners of these rival printing establishments the Oratory Press presented forceful and even threatening competition. Don Bosco attempted to assure them, not always successfully, that his only ambition was to produce educational materials aimed at the religious instruction of his readers.

In 1877 the Oratory Press took a bold step forward when it purchased a revolutionary chemical process designed to enliven its publications with attractive photographs. Nor did this daring initiative end there. To assure himself of complete control of his printing operation by manufacturing his own paper supply, Don Bosco resolved to buy and install his own paper–making machine. Such an acquisition would give him total charge of the printing cycle—from paper pulp to the printed page.

To achieve this goal, he set out to purchase at prohibitive cost a paper–making machine that was the pride of Mathi, a small town outside Turin. At that time paper manufacturing in Piedmont was a highly specialized and restricted craft, found only in several plants operating along the Sesia river. Don Bosco had learned that a Michele Varetto, recent owner and operator of a small power-driven paper mill in Mathi had died. After his death, his widow had leased her husband's machinery and equipment to various mill owners. In 1877 she sold the paper making machine outright to Don Bosco. [5]

Now its proud owner, Don Bosco had the marvelous Mathi machine installed in the Oratory print shop. But the pleasure of his new conquest was

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[5] For Don Bosco's pursuit and acquisition of the Mathi paper making machine, and the manufacturing of paper during this time, see Franco Racca Cravioglio, *L'industria cartaria in Piemonte nell' Ottocento e l'intrapredenza di Don Bosco* in *Studi Piemontese* (Torino, 1987), Vol. XVI, 391-396.

short-lived. When purchased the Mathi machine was a modern marvel, but in a few years, because of rapid progress in paper making technology, it became a museum piece. The Mathi was now seen as a lumbering relic of antiquated curiosity.

Undismayed, Don Bosco set out to invest again in the latest state-of-the art paper making machine manufactured by the Swiss firm of Escher-Wyss in Zurich. Its acquisition by the Oratory Press created an inevitable fallout effect. Its decades-old predecessors along the Sesia river area were now regarded as antiquated machines of a bygone era.

What lay behind Don Bosco's decision to participate in EXPO '84? Certainly the opportunity to showcase the growth and progress of his Oratory Press was motivation enough. But perhaps, closer to the truth, was the favorable time to demonstrate to thousands of EXPO visitors who thronged the Workers Pavilion, the advanced vocational training his boys were receiving at the Oratory print shop. And, of course, the gleaming new machines—Don Bosco's pride and joy—spoke for themselves.

Don Bosco lost little time in registering his Oratory Press as an exposition entry. The organizing committee dutifully approved his project and allotted him ample space for his exhibit. His plan called for the production of a book from start to finish. The process began with the manufacturing of the paper, the casting and composition of the type, and finally the printing, collating, and binding of the book itself. All this in one continuing operation before the very eyes of the viewer.

There were, however, a few anxious moments before the demonstration went on public display. The paper–making machine due from Switzerland was late in arriving. When it finally reached its destination, its time-consuming and expensive installation strained all of Don Bosco's meager resources. But by early June—EXPO '84 had opened its doors in April—the peerless pulp-to-paper-to-print exhibit was ready for viewing.

The space allotted to the Oratory Press exhibit took up four separate sections. The first, which occupied approximately 150 x 15 square feet, highlighted the amazing paper–making machine—the exhibit's star attraction. Operated by a thirty-horsepower engine, it was for its time, a marvel to behold. The Wyss wonder gulped down large batches of rags and wood chips, speedily processed the mixture, compressed it through a rotary cylinder, and in a trice delivered long sheets of paper which were then cut to the desired size.

Close by a spiffy, new made-in-Bavaria printing press operated in full view. Consuming reams of paper produced by the Escher-Wyss machine, it printed flawless pages of Breschiani's elegant translation of Cardinal Patrick Wiseman's popular novel, *Fabiola,* complete with attractive illustrations.

In the background, but in plain view and next to the Koenig and Bauer press, typesetters displayed their skills for the admiring public. A miniature type

foundry, from the firm of Kustermann Brothers of Berlin, operating under the supervisory staff produced the type used in the operation.

Not one to lose a chance to turn an honest profit, Don Bosco had set up a well-stocked booth featuring exposition souvenirs, religious articles, and a wide assortment of the Oratory Press's books and pamphlets. Visitors to his exhibit had no choice but to file by the booth as they exited.

A crew of twenty, Oratory students and shop instructors, manned the entire operation. To provision his hungry and thirsty crew, Don Bosco had designed a special conveyance that brought food and refreshments daily from Valdocco. The Wyss-wonder also had to be fed. To supply the paper–making machine, a lumbering wagon from Mathi regularly delivered a load of pulp mulch and rags from which a ton of paper was manufactured each day. [6]

But all work and no play could make Giovanni a dull boy. So even though the exposition pavilions drew their biggest crowds on Sundays, the Oratory exhibit was shut down on Sunday. This enabled the work crew to attend Mass and enjoy a well-deserved rest. This respite did not escape the jibes of the anticlerical press. *Il Fischietto*, Turin's unsavory humor magazine which mercilessly lampooned the foibles of the clergy featured a cartoon showing two puzzled exposition visitors staring at a 'closed' sign hanging over the entrance of Don Bosco's exhibit. [7] Below was the following caption:

> Visitor: 'What is going on? Why is Don Bosco's exhibit shut down tight while all the others are open? Isn't it part of the Workers Pavilion'?
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> Guide: 'It sure is! But you see, today being Sunday, this is his idea of a little joke. He wants everybody to see how a day of rest should be observed in the hall of labor. Besides, this way he doesn't have to pay his crew.'

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[6] Description of these activities can be found in the Salesian Central Archives: *Relazione su l'Esposizione Generale di Torino 1884*, ASC 960 C/3. A contemporary account entitled "Don Bosco's Boys at the National Exposition", is available in G. Arneudo's *La cartiera di Don Bosco* (Torino, 1884). Turin's Catholic newspaper, *L'Unita Cattolica*, covered the exposition extensively in its May 22, 1884 edition. Ceria treats this episode in the life of Don Bosco in his *Memorie Biografiche* (Italian edition) Vol. XVII, 248f.

[7] V. Marchis, "La formazione professionale: l'opera di Don Bosco sullo scenario di Torino, cittá di nuove industrie" in *Torino e Don Bosco*, ed. G. Bracco, (Torino, 1989) Vol. I, 217-238. The *Fischietto (The Whistle)* was a constant thorn in Don Bosco's side. For the way the anticlerical press frequently badgered and ridiculed Don Bosco, see Michael Ribotta, *Journal of Salesian Studies* (Berkeley, California, 1992), "Hero or Villain: Don Bosco as Seen in the Press of His Time", Vol. III, No. 1, 79-108.

But far more disturbing for Don Bosco than the carping derision of the nattering nabobs of the anticlerical press was the refusal of the exposition officials to award his exhibit the gold medal which it richly deserved. The National Exposition of Italian Industry and Commerce had been an outstanding success. Don Bosco expected his hard work and his exhibit's smashing performance to be amply rewarded. He was stunned to learn that he had been passed over. This despite the unanimous acclaim of the EXPO visitors who conceded that the Oratory exhibit was the best organized, the most impressive, and without doubt the most attractive in the field of the graphic arts. The awards committee attempted to justify and defend their decision by declaring that the Oratory exhibit had used foreign– rather than Italian-made machines and technology. First prize went to the publishing firm of G. B. Petrini of Turin.

A silver medal, symbolic of second prize, was awarded to the Oratory Press, not so much for the merit of its exposition exhibit, but for its notable achievements in the graphic arts over the years. The awards committee then reaffirmed Don Bosco's ineligibility for the gold, declaring in an official announcement that he had exploited foreign-made machines at the expense of Italian products. As a sop for an exhibit that had garnered a great share of the public's applause, Don Bosco was presented with a citation for his contribution to the Workers Pavilion. It read in part: "...this testimonial is hereby awarded to the Oratory Press for the widespread distribution of its varied publications, made easily accessible to the reading public because of their modest prices. ..." Damned with faint praise.

The Catholic press was outraged at such blatant narrow-mindedness. A contemporary journalist writing under the byline of 'The Old Curmudgeon' protested testily:

> Don Bosco's wonderful presentation, exhibited in the Workers Pavilion received a slap in the face instead of the gold medal which was deservedly his. Though his Oratory Press was cited for its enterprising spirit and the diffusion of good literature, the humanitarian achievements of its creator were completely ignored.
>
> This is the man whose Oratory workshops train countless youths to earn an honest living; this is the man who takes into his institutions homeless boys who, if left to roam the streets of this city would only swell the already alarming number of juvenile delinquents whom the police cannot cope with; this is the man who is educating the castoffs of society and who is helping to control the increscent mob

of young barbarians who are threatening our very community because they face a future that offers them nothing but frustration and despair. [8]

Don Bosco did not take the committee's slight lying down. In a lengthy and uncharacteristic letter of protest, bristling with indignation and muted anger, he laid out his grievances to the exposition's executive committee in no uncertain terms. The awards committee he wrote had done him wrong. Nor would he be placated with a consolation prize. His exhibit should receive the gold medal it had coming to it or it would accept no prize at all. An abridged version of Don Bosco's letter follows:

October 25, 1884

To the Honorable Members of the Executive Committee:

On the twenty-third of this month I forwarded to the executive committee of the National Exposition of Italian Industry and Commerce a letter regarding the decision made by the awards committee which presented the silver medal award to our institution's Oratory Press. I refer to our exhibit displayed at the recent exposition. I wish to enlarge here on the accomplishments of our press in recent years:

1° For the past sixteen years our Oratory Press has published the popular *Italian Classics Series*. This collection of annotated and expurgated texts has exceeded 300,000 copies.

2° Our low-priced and very popular *Catholic Readings (Letture Cattoliche)*, now in its thirty-third year of publication, has reached the two million mark.

3° Our annotated series of *Latin and Greek Classics* for classroom use, which we have published since 1864 and which has gone through numerous editions, is being used in many secondary schools.

4° Our Latin, Greek, and Italian dictionaries, each with its own accompanying grammar, all edited by the personnel of our various Salesian schools, are very much in demand and have received consistent high praise. These reference works are highly regarded by educators and school authorities everywhere.

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[8] *L'Arte tipografica alla Esposizione di Torino*. "Appunti tecnici-impressione e critiche e lettere di un Malcontento." (Firenze, 1885), 143. See also *Memorie Biografiche* (Italian version) Vol. XVII, 255.

5° Our Oratory Press has published numerous other educational publications including history, geography, and pedagogy manuals whose quality and modest cost are much appreciated. For years now these texts are in constant demand. ...

One important factor relating to all of the above has either escaped the attention of the awards committee or has been ignored by them. Its omission compels me to bring it to your notice. The printing of all the above publications that have come off our presses has been done by the students of our schools. These are the boys we have sheltered in our institutions because they were homeless and unwanted; housed and educated in our schools they have received their training in our print shops. Upon leaving our institutions, they have had no trouble finding jobs in their field, and I can honestly vouch that the great majority are earning an honest livelihood.

Furthermore, knowledgeable people have told me that the quality of their work has always met the highest standards of the printing profession. It was the performance of our student artisans that was the focus of our exhibit. And yet their outstanding skills received no recognition from your committee. In fact, reliable critics have informed me that other exhibits (some of whom received awards) in no way matched the performance of our young printers.

Here I must again voice my protest in regards to the criteria used by the awards committee who made no effort to visit and evaluate our exhibit. How could they pass judgment on its performance and merit if they did not take the time to visit and examine it...?

The execution of our paper–making machine, if I understood correctly, was judged as a separate entry and was declared ineligible for the gold medal for the flimsy reason that the machinery used in our exhibit was manufactured outside of Italy. And though this machine was one of the most attractive entries in the Workers Pavilion, it received only a certificate of merit. Not taken into account was the enterprising initiative of those who were responsible for exhibiting it. Ignored too was the skill of the crew who operated it. And the fascinating production of a printed book, from pulp to the bound volume, was completely discounted. The general public was very vocal in its admiration of our exhibit's performance. And yet all the above was given mere perfunctory attention by the committee and unfairly dismissed. ...

With this letter, therefore, I am formally requesting the awards committee to reconsider their decision. Their refusal to do so leaves me no option but to reject any prize or testimonial that does not recognize our exhibit as meriting the gold medal award. Moreover, if no action is

> taken by the awards committee on this matter, I insist that the committee refrain completely from publicizing our exhibit display and that no statement regarding its presentation be released to the press. ... [9]
>
> Your obedient servant,
> Father John Bosco

Regrettably the story does not have a happy ending. The awards committee was not swayed by Don Bosco's frank but ineffectual protests. They let their decision stand. The exhibitor from Valdocco had to be content with finishing as an also-ran. Perhaps there was small comfort in the fact that the exhibit of the Oratory Press at the Turin Exposition had opened the eyes of the public to what was going on in Don Bosco's shops. Don Bosco himself admitted as much: "By participating in the Turin Exposition of 1884, I have been able to demonstrate to the thousands of visitors that for forty years I have been able to show what our Oratory shops have accomplished. We have not only lodged and educated thousands of homeless and abandoned children, but have also trained many youths to earn a living by equipping them with a trade, thereby enabling them to find their rightful place in the workforce."

If Don Bosco's exhibit did not win him a gold medal, it did win him the admiration of the throngs that viewed his exhibit at EXPO '84. It showed thousands of visitors what forty years of dedicated and tireless work had achieved. Even Don Bosco's carping critics could not withhold their grudging appreciation.

In 1888, at the month's mind memorial service in the church of Mary Help of Christians, Cardinal Gaetano Alimonda, archbishop of Turin, delivered the eulogy remembering his saintly friend. The Cardinal drew a compelling analogy that evoked the memory of Don Bosco's exhibit at the Turin Exposition four years earlier:

> Don Bosco's great contribution to society as an educator and promoter of the welfare of working youths was his unique talent of molding co-workers and members of his Society into his own image. With their assistance he then imprinted upon homeless and often rebellious children his image of the character of a child of God. Thus he

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[9] The full transcript of this communication forwarded to the executive committee of the Turin Exposition of 1884 can be found in the Salesian Central Archives (Rome) identified as ASC 960-B/11-C/2. It is also available in the Italian version of the *Memorie Biografiche,* Vol. XVII, 253-255; and in the collected letters of Don Bosco *(Epistolario)* No. 2517.

> transformed what at first was ugly and coarse into his perception of a Christian youth.
>
> Much like his paper–making machine and printing press which he so proudly exhibited at the Turin Exposition in 1884. There, astonished onlookers watched with wonder and surprise as unsightly cartloads of rags and pulp were magically turned into attractively bound books.
>
> In a similar fashion Don Bosco's character-making machine imitated his exposition marvel. Where the latter turned unsightly heaps of tatters and wood chips into beautiful volumes, the former crafted from the castoff children of society beautiful souls for God. Not even the renowned printing firms of Pomba, Treves, and Sonzogno, to my knowledge have been able to duplicate an operation that could create a book from start to finish as the Oratory Press demonstrated at our Turin Exposition. [10]

That Cardinal Alimonda should include Don Bosco among some of the most successful printing establishments in Piedmont would suggest that the latter's Oratory Press had attained in his lifetime considerable prestige and recognition in the world of the graphic arts. In fact, it was a matter of record, that in Don Bosco's sunset years, his organizational skills, ingenious originality, and gritty determination in meeting challenges head-on, had enabled him to launch his print shops, and in particular his Oratory Press, to the forefront in a new emerging world of mass communication.

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[10] See, "Don Bosco in His Times: Eulogy Delivered by Cardinal Gaetano Alimonda on the Occasion of the Month's Mind in the Church of Mary Help of Christians, March 1, 1888". *Tipografia Salesiana* (Torino, 1888), 22-23.