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The “Big Rat” and the “Mad Priest of Turin”— Don Bosco’s Relationship With Prime Minister Rattazzi

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Urbano Rattazzi Discovers the Oratory

Perhaps of all the leading political personages of the Italian Risorgimento with whom Don Bosco enjoyed some measure of friendship, Urbano Rattazzi’s name, like Abou Ben Adam’s, led the rest.¹ Often during his life,

¹ Urbano Rattazzi (b. June 20, 1808, Alessandria, Piedmont d. June 5, 1873, Frosinone, Italy) was a Piedmontese lawyer and statesman. During the early years of the Italian Republic, he held several important cabinet positions and twice served as prime minister. His later policies conflicted with Garibaldi’s attempts to march upon and occupy Rome with volunteer Italian troops when the Eternal City was still garrisoned with French troops.

Urbano Rattazzi, a *deputato* from Alessandria, was elected to the Sardinian Parliament in 1848. For the next ten years he would play an important role in Piedmontese politics: He maneuvered with Cavour to forge the famous *Connubio* in 1851, an alliance of the center Left and center Right parties which would dominate the political arena during most of the Cavourian decade. Rattazzi was elected president of the chamber of deputies (1852-53), later minister of justice (1853-1854), and then created minister of the interior for two terms (1854-1858; 1858-1860). His crowning political achievement was the premiership. He was prime minister with two separate though short-lived terms: March 1862–December, 1862; and April, 1867–October, 1867.

Rattazzi has often been characterized as being violently anticlerical and devoid of principle. But events in his life and many of his writings hold this view in dispute. He was especially generous with Don Bosco’s work for poor children, and preferred tactful solutions in facing political opposition. It was his ambiguous association with Garibaldi that proved his undoing. During his first stint as premier after Cavour’s death, he at first half-heartedly sanctioned Garibaldi’s offer to capture Rome, then occupied by the French. He soon changed his mind and sent Italian troops to intercept Garibaldi. The flamboyant general was wounded in the ensuing battle of Aspromonte (1862). Strong public opinion condemned Rattazzi’s decision to halt the

Don Bosco's path would cross that of kings, prime ministers, cabinet members, and an occasional political snollygoster. But it was with Rattazzi that the priest of Valdocco developed a fascinating and even amicable relationship. And he was admired and esteemed by him in return.

The two first met when, for some unexplained reason, and perhaps to whet his curiosity about the man who was creating such a stir in the Valdocco district in the early 1850s, Rattazzi decided to pay the priest an unannounced visit. Indeed, Rattazzi had learned that some of Turin's ecclesiastics had thought him "mad" and had even unsuccessfully attempted to hustle him off to the local institute for the mentally disturbed. Unobserved he slipped into the Oratory chapel one day during religious services.

A catechism lesson was in progress. Don Bosco had just narrated the story of Pope Clement who had been unjustly banished from Rome to the Crimea by Emperor Trajan.² As was his wont, Don Bosco began to quiz his young listeners

"Sword of the Risorgimento" who had become a legend in his own time, and he was forced to resign (1862). In 1867, when Rattazzi was serving his second term as prime minister, there was a repeat scenario. Alleging that he had Rattazzi's tacit approval, Garibaldi once more marched on Rome. Again Rattazzi changed his mind and ordered Italy's most popular military hero's arrest. The complications that followed forced Rattazzi's resignation a second time.

Though now out of the political arena, Rattazzi continued to attend regular sittings of parliament until his death in 1873. In his last years he veered from the political Left, abandoned his longheld insular Piedmontese prejudices, and broadened his compassion for the oppressed. In his late years he championed the interests of the depressed people of southern Italy and lobbied for their more humane treatment. It was perhaps this more humanitarian attitude that led the Italian statesman, De Sanctis, to characterize Rattazzi in his last years as "The most Italian-minded of the Piedmontese." ("Il più Italiano dei piemontesi.")

² The pope that Don Bosco alluded to in his catechism lesson, as an exemplar of a Christian who remained steadfast to his faith under fire, was Pope Clement I, also called Clement of Rome. According to Tertullian, Clement (whose feast we celebrate on November 23) was the third successor of St. Peter. Verifiable particulars of his life we have none. In spite of biographical uncertainties, Clement of Rome is an important Apostolic Father whose eminence is founded on his "First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians."

Perhaps Don Bosco was using the legendary accounts of Clement's banishment and martyrdom for dramatic effect. Though we have no ear-witness account of what Don Bosco narrated to his catechism class that afternoon, the final years of Clement's life in Crimea do have attention-grabbing interest to satisfy any young audience. For example, in Butler's *Lives of the Saints* we read that Clement was condemned to work in the stone quarries and "as the nearest drinking water was six miles away, Clement miraculously found a nearer spring for the use of the numerous Christian captives. He preached among the people with such success that soon 75 [!] churches were required. After refusing to obey an imperial order to render sacrifice to the gods, he was thrown into the sea with an anchor tied around his neck. Angels

to elicit their reactions to the moral he had drawn from his story: How the early Church had not only survived but also thrived from unjust persecution. Suddenly and unexpectedly one of his pupils questioned the questioner in turn. And the boy's query left the priest momentarily stumped. The lad wanted to know whether the government authorities of Piedmont had acted unjustly in their recent imprisonment and banishment of the then archbishop of Turin, Luigi Fransoni.³ Although briefly discomfited, Don Bosco deftly brushed aside the sticky political implications that a forthright answer would have required. And perhaps the sight of that solitary and even ominous figure seated in the rear of the chapel convinced him that for the moment, discretion was the better part of valor. His simple, if evasive, answer as recorded by biographer Lemoyne was:

came and built him a tomb beneath the waves, which once a year was revealed by a miraculous ebbing of the tide."

³ Much of Don Bosco's early success in his oratory apostolate can be traced to two sources. The first was the patronage of the then king of Piedmont, Charles Albert, who not only would not allow royal officials to meddle in Don Bosco's oratory activity, but who also sent him occasional financial support. The second was the then archbishop of Turin, Luigi Fransoni (1789-1862) who admired and encouraged the young priest's zealous work among the poor children of the capital and supported him at every turn.

Fransoni came from a noble Genovese family. He was ordained bishop of Fasano at the early age of 32; ten years later he was appointed archbishop of Turin. His ultra-conservative political views put him frequently at odds with the new constitutional monarchy. In his youth he had experienced the consequences of the blood-letting and wild excesses that came in the wake of the French Revolution. To him the demand for "democratic reforms" only meant a continuation of more of the same.

Fransoni constantly fought against the liberal tendencies that were beginning to emerge in his archdiocese. When Don Bosco was nonplussed by his young interrogator's query about whether the archbishop "had been unjustly imprisoned," it would have been difficult for him to have given a straightforward answer without compromising his apolitical stand.

Archbishop Fransoni's imprisonment and subsequent exile was directly attributed to his reaction to the Siccardi Laws which had recently been enacted. An article of this legislation required errant priests and religious to appear before civilian courts and they were now subject to the same penal laws as the laity. Ecclesiastics no longer had the right to have their cases heard in church courts. A firmly entrenched and hard-nosed reactionary, Fransoni looked upon the passage of the Siccardi Laws as abhorrent and a threat to his authority as archbishop. He promptly directed a circular to be sent to all the members of the clergy, ordering them to first obtain permission of their ordinary should they be hailed into a civilian court for any reason. This peremptory act of Fransoni was both a challenge and a declaration that he viewed the Siccardi Laws as both null and void. For his trouble, the archbishop was packed off to jail and shortly after banished from Piedmont.

This is neither the time nor the place to discuss this matter. Perhaps we can talk about it on some later and more suitable occasion. For the present let me just say that the enemies of the Church throughout history have always aimed their attacks against her leaders. When we read about popes or bishops or priests who have been jailed, exiled or even killed, it does not necessarily mean that they were guilty as charged. Very often they met death simply because they did their duty as they saw it. And let us not forget that our Lord was unjustly condemned to die by Pontius Pilate. He who was the Son of God was called a rabble-rouser and blasphemer. Jesus taught his followers to obey all legitimate authority by telling them to render to Caesar what belonged to Caesar, and to God what belonged to God.⁴

After the religious services were over and the boys were streaming through the chapel doors to their playground games, Rattazzi waited patiently outside for Don Bosco to emerge. Unknown to him the priest had exited through a side entrance and had gone up to his room. After a brief interval the minister asked a lad to be led to Don Bosco. There a brief but very enlightening conversation ensued between the two. The report of their exchange was no doubt traced by Don Bosco's biographer to Father John Bonetti's account which had been published in detail thirteen years earlier in his *Cinque lustri di storia dell'Oratorio*.⁵

The early but intriguing part of the conversation between minister and priest was probably traced to the presence of the unnamed boy who had showed Rattazzi to Don Bosco's room. Father Bonetti seems to insinuate that the youth remained discreetly in the background for security reasons since the person dressed in black was a total stranger to Don Bosco. Moreover, several threats had recently been made on the priest's life. As Bonetti notes, "The boy, who according to custom during those perilous times, had, after introducing the gentleman, remained in the room until told by Don Bosco to leave." The two then sparred with each other:

Don Bosco: "May I ask to whom I have the honor of speaking?"

Rattazzi: "My name is Rattazzi."

⁴ *Memorie Biografiche di S. Giovanni Bosco*, ed. G. B. Lemoyne, SDB, (Torino, 1905), Vol. 5, 5-56. Hereinafter citations from the Italian edition will be cited IBM; quotations from the English version, *The Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco*, will be referred to as EBM.

⁵ For this first encounter between Don Bosco and Urbano Rattazzi see Giovanni Bonetti, *Cinque lustri di storia dell' Oratorio Salesiano*, (Torino, 1892), chapter XL, 462-462. Bonetti's fascinating book on the first twenty-five years of the Valdocco Oratory can also be found in an English translation entitled *St. John Bosco's Early Apostolate* (London, 1934). See chapter XL 282-295.

Don Bosco: "Rattazzi? You mean the man they call the 'gran ratass.' The former president of the king's council and now one of his ministers?"⁶

Rattazzi: "None other."

Don Bosco: (Smiling as he extends his wrists.) "Well, you can handcuff me now. I guess I shall be enjoying free lodging at the king's expense in the city jail."

Rattazzi: "What makes you say that?"

Don Bosco: "I saw you in the back of our chapel, and you heard everything I said about our exiled archbishop. My comments didn't do our government any credit."

Rattazzi: "Not at all. I think you handled yourself well; and the way you answered that boy was very judicious. No government official could take you to task for what you said. Besides, I quite agree with you, the church is no place to discuss politics; and that lad was in no position to understand all the political implications of the archbishop's banishment. Besides, you had every right to express your opinion, which you did in a forthright manner. I'm sure you realize now that we live under a constitutional government, and everyone of the king's ministers is responsible to the people for his words and actions. And everyone has a right to criticize him—even you, Don Bosco. As for me, although I did not support the position the archbishop took which caused his banishment, yet I can really say that I'm glad the government's decision to expel him was not taken during my term as minister."

Don Bosco: (Again with a beguiling smile.) "I am glad to hear that, sir. I am also relieved that I won't be spending time behind bars and will continue to breathe the fresh air here in Valdocco. Now that we have put that matter to rest, let's change the subject."

Obviously that Sunday afternoon encounter with Rattazzi in 1854 was Don Bosco's first face-to-face meeting with the minister, whose name, if not his face was familiar to him. Rattazzi had been elected *deputato* (member of the lower house of parliament) seven years earlier, just one month after King Carlo Alberto had granted his people the famed *Statuto*, the constitution of 1848. His

⁶ There is every reason to believe that Don Bosco and Rattazzi carried on their conversation in the Piedmontese dialect. This enabled Don Bosco to refer to the minister as the "*gran ratass*," which in Piedmontese signifies "a big fat rat," and hence the source of the term featured in the title of this essay. Don Bosco was well aware that newspaper cartoons, especially in the sleazy tabloid, *Il Fischietto*, often depicted Rattazzi's face on the body of a humongous rat. After the creation of the political alliance, the *Connubio*, between Rattazzi and Cavour, the two were often depicted in cartoons as "the big rat" (Rattazzi) and "the fat cat" (Cavour).

constituents were from the Alessandria area; he had participated in the first sitting of the Piedmontese parliament created by the new constitution

Don Bosco's facetious pun on his name—Rattazzi, the *gran ratass*, had highly amused him and put him at ease in the presence of the priest. He then directed his conversation to his personal fact-finding mission that had brought him to the Oratory in the first place. The two then spoke together for the better part of an hour. The minister was curious to learn the scope of Don Bosco's activity in Valdocco. How had it all started he wanted to know. Was the priest's untiring work among the impoverished and homeless children of the city producing any positive results? How was he able to cope with so many seemingly unmanageable boys with so few resources? The answers to his queries came frankly and willingly.

That Sunday meeting between the priest and the minister marked the start, if not of a wonderful friendship, certainly of a politically correct relationship which over the years matured into genuine respect on both sides. And the visitor that day did more than just elicit general information about Don Bosco's Oratory. He also drew from Don Bosco the first recorded explanation of his educational philosophy, which more than twenty years later he would sum up in his seminal treatise he entitled "*Il Sistema Preventivo Nella Educazione Della Gioventù.*"⁷

When Rattazzi began to see for himself that the priest was operating an oratory where several hundred obstreperous street boys could be kept under reasonable control without resorting to the arm of the law, he asked for an explanation. "Don Bosco, don't you have at least two or three gendarmes on the premises to help you keep this juvenile horde in line?" On learning that there were no police lurking about, the minister's curiosity was piqued. How was this priest able to

⁷ In a way, the Siccardi Laws (overwhelmingly approved on March 9, 1850), marked a radical break in Sardinia's centuries-old tradition of submission to Rome. With this legislation Turin now declared that the State could now do what it liked with the Church, irrespective of previous concordats and agreements. It also signaled a new militancy against the Holy See on the part of the Piedmontese state. Above all the enactment of the Siccardi Laws ushered in a period of almost virulent anticlericalism that would continue well into the next century.

As seen above these laws abolished ecclesiastical jurisdiction in civil and criminal cases. Ecclesiastics who broke the law were now haled before a civil magistrate. They did away with the right of asylum in churches and forbade ecclesiastical corporations to acquire property without the consent of the government. They also reduced the number of holy days and feast days; and penalties for failing to abstain from work on designated religious feast days were abolished. In this latter case we can see the significance of Don Bosco opening his Oratory on those frequent '*giorni festivi*' when working boys and young apprentices were forbidden to work and had no place to go. After 1850, although these festive days were greatly reduced, boys continued to frequent the Oratory in large numbers. For the text of the Siccardi Laws see *Sussidi per lo studio di Don Bosco e della sue opera*, Vol. I, 77-78. Extra-commercial edition (Rome, 1986).

manage this motley crew without having to resort to strong-arm tactics? In his own city violence was the stock-in-trade of young thugs and youth gangs that were mushrooming in the capital. What was Don Bosco's secret he wanted to know.

This probably gave Don Bosco the opening he was looking for. His response, documented by John Bonetti in his history of the early days of the Salesian Oratory, captured Don Bosco's basic educational ideas. There were two time-tested ways of raising and educating children he explained to Rattazzi. And both were diametrically opposed to each other. The first he designated as "the repressive way" of dealing with children. Authority figures laid down rules of conduct in sharply defined terms and strictly enforced them. The practitioners of this method emphatically believed that sparing the rod spoiled the child. And in 19th century classrooms, the schoolmaster's dictum, "A boy has a back. Whack it! It understands," prevailed. Children growing up under these conditions quickly learned that when rules were broken there was no appeal. Punishment was swift and relentless.

Don Bosco then went on to outline the method he advocated in his work among the young. Corporal punishment and physical abuse were strictly forbidden. He and his associates dealt with boys who came to his oratory by creating a rapport with them that was based on kindness and caring. If there was any secret at all it could be found in the relationship that the adult created with the child: You talk to the child, he listens. He talks to you, and you listen. In such an environment moral values could more easily be inculcated, and religious instruction was willingly accepted. This approach Don Bosco called his *Sistema Preventivo*.

The *Legge Rattazzi* and the Man Who Led the Onslaught against Religious Institutions in Piedmont

By mid century relations between Rome and Turin began to worsen. If the enactment of the Siccardi Laws of 1850⁸ had served notice that the ties between the

⁸ Shortly after Cavour was made prime minister, he accepted Rattazzi's offer of cooperation to gain control over parliament. The two created a united front by merging their parties (Cavour and the Center Right with Rattazzi and his Center Left). The merger of their political leadership formed a single liberal front that became known as the *Connubio (marriage)*. Its real objective was to erect a barrier which the forces of reaction and the clerical party (i.e. conservatives) could not overcome. This alliance was forceful in diverting any opposition against Rattazzi's bill which became the Law of the Convents. Cavour said later that the *Connubio* he had masterminded with Rattazzi was the finest act of his political career. It was also instrumental in raising Piedmontese politics to the level of a fine, if devious, art. For a brief summary of the Siccardi Laws cf. Denis Mack Smith, *Cavour* (New York, 1985), 48-49. Smith

Holy See and Piedmont were becoming moribund, the passage of the Law of the Convents (*Le Legge Rattazzi*) sounded their death knell.

By 1852 Camillo Benso di Cavour had emerged as the leading force in Piedmontese politics. For the next ten years, until his death in 1861, he would exert controlling influence in the destiny of the Sardinian state. Working in tandem with the newly-appointed minister of justice, Urbano Rattazzi, a bill was drafted in 1854 to dissolve most of the religious orders in Piedmont. In essence the bill called for the suppression of conventual religious life in the hundreds of monasteries and convents which for uncounted years had been subsidized by the Savoy dynasty and in recent years by the newly-established constitutional monarchy.

Not to be seen as the villain in the piece, Cavour, who always avoided a fight with the Church when he could help it, alleged that his motives for this drastic legislation were purely economic. The royal purse could no longer afford to spend a million lire a year to subsidize the stipends of the clergy and the upkeep of numerous convents and monasteries that were solely devoted to the contemplative life.

Rattazzi, on the other hand, gave his stance a religious spin. He maintained that the current lifestyle of contemplative monks and nuns had become "useless," "medieval," and "anomalous in modern society." The minister, while he held no grudge against contemplative religious life as such, explained that these religious orders in the modern world were no longer relevant. Therefore, there was no reason that the state should be burdened with their upkeep. He did not deny their significant contributions in ages past, but in this "century of progress," their value was now as dead as a doornail. In his address to parliament, and speaking like the lawyer that he was, he defended his position:

I fully realize that in ancient times and in the Middle Ages, there was a viable place for religious bodies whose sole function was to lead an ascetic and contemplative life (for this bill I am introducing applies only to them). It is also undeniable that these religious groups rendered a great service to civilization by cultivating the arts and sciences, preserving precious monuments, and by engaging in and promoting agricultural development. Moreover, civil law at that time accorded these religious bodies protection and also respected their identity. But those days are past, and I no longer see any use or advantage for modern society in preserving and perpetuating these now outdated religious organizations.⁹

sees the passing of this legislation as "a major landmark in the modernization of Piedmont."

⁹ *Discorsi pronunziati alla Camera dei Deputati nelle tornate delli 11 gennaio, 15-17 febbraio, 1855 dai ministri commendatore Urbano Rattazzi e conte Camillo Cavour sul progetto di legge per la soppressione di comunità religiose e per altri provvedimenti intesi a sollevare i parroci bisognosi.* (Tipografia Botta, Turin, 1855,

Salesian historian, Giovanni Barroero, in attempting to evaluate the rift that occurred between Rome and Turin on this occasion sees the source of the problem as one of financial stress rather than religious and ideological as Rattazzi maintained. The failed war of Piedmont's attempt to expel the Austrians from northern Italy had severely drained the resources of the kingdom, and Cavour was attempting to cope with a depressed economy and create a manageable budget, regardless of where the chips would fall:

In May of 1854 the government of Turin declared it was no longer in a position to provide financial assistance to the common clergy and to the contemplative orders of the realm. And if the Holy See refused to come to the assistance of the state by helping to defray the cost of subsidizing the poorer section of the clergy in the kingdom as well as the maintenance of convents and monasteries which were devoted to the contemplative life, then the state would find a solution of its own. This was clearly a threat to sequester the resources of the Church in Piedmont and the assets of the many religious communities.¹⁰

When the specifics of the Law of the Convents reached Rome, Pio Nono was understandably distressed. To read that "Monks and nuns had become not only useless but actually harmful because their abstention from work was exercising a very bad effect upon the economy and indirectly rendered the common workers' labor less respectable and respected," compelled him to take action. He counterattacked the proposed legislation in an allocution in consistory where he utterly condemned the proposed law.

But more to the point, the Pope's argument strongly defended the goals and purposes of the "useless contemplative orders" for the principal reason that they happened to be pursuing what the whole tradition of the Church had always regarded as the "most perfect way of life" for those few who had the vocation to pursue it.¹¹

The Law of the Convents was not aimed at *all* the religious orders in Piedmont. As the first article clearly specified, it was meant to target only those religious communities that were not involved or committed to teaching, preaching, or devoted to the caring of the sick:

41-42). For historian Pietro Stella's evaluation see *Don Bosco: Life and Work* (New York, 1985), Chapter VI, *passim*.

¹⁰ See *Sussidi I* (*passim*).

¹¹ Even the veteran politician, Della Margherita (no enthusiast of papal politics), gave the Pope's words an interesting spin when he dryly observed before the members of the Lower House: "Even though the ancient Romans were pagans, they respected the virtue of the Vestals. And yet in this Catholic country of ours, we show no respect for virgins consecrated to prayer and the service of God." E. E. Y. Hales, *Pio Nono: A Study in European Politics in the 19th Century* (New York, 1954), 182.

"All religious orders are declared abolished, with the exception of the Sisters of Charity and those of St. Joseph, as well as those orders and communities dedicated to public instruction, preaching, or the care of the sick, which are mentioned by name in the list released by royal decree."¹²

Death Comes to the Royal Family—Don Bosco's Chilling Predictions

It was while parliament debated the fate of the Law of the Convents that the bizarre episodes surrounding the *Grandi Funerali in Corte* (State Funerals at the Royal Court) unfolded.¹³ Some intriguing questions regarding Don Bosco's predictions and their incredible fulfillment beg to be answered. Did Rattazzi at any time discuss with Don Bosco the proceedings regarding the *Legge Rattazzi* that were then in progress? Did any members of the senate and/or lower house confide to him the secret negotiations surrounding the ongoing debates? How was Don Bosco able to predict with astonishing accuracy the deaths of the several members of the Royal House of Savoy, who at the time were neither ailing or dying?

The melodramatic scenario of the "State Funerals at the Royal Court" is well known in the annals of Salesian literature and need not be reprised here. But we do learn from Lemoyne's account that Don Bosco was neither a silent nor

¹² *Cessano di esistere, quali enti riconosciuti dalla legge civile, le case poste nello stato degli ordini religiosi, i quali non attendono alla predicazione, all'educazione od all'assistenza degl'infermi. L'elenco delle case colpite da questa disposizione sarà pubblicato con Decreto Reale contemporaneamente alla presente legge. (Da Raccolta ufficiale Leggi e Decreti del Piemonte, anno 1855, legge n. 878).* The more relevant articles for the study of the Law of the Convents can be found in *Sussidi I op. cit.* 81-84. The title "Law of the Convents" it should be noted is a transliteration from the Italian. In this context the term "convents" applies not only to the religious houses and convents of women religious, but also to the monasteries of men. Just how extensive was the damage created by this law? E. E. Y. Hales writes that "The Law of the Convents had a devastating impact upon the Church in Piedmont: 334 communities (from 35 religious orders and congregations) comprising some 5,500 religious men and women were deprived of state subsidies for their existence. The number of religious now cut off from the bounty of the state represented about two-thirds of those living in religious communities in the Kingdom of Sardinia." Hales, *op. cit.*, 179. See also A. C. Jemolo, *Church and State in Italy, 1850-1950* (Oxford, 1960), 12. Translated by David Moore.

¹³ Don Bosco's biographer, John Baptist Lemoyne, covers the subject of the *Grandi funerali in corte* in considerable detail in *EBM V*: Chapters 17, 18, 21. In fact, some scenes of his narrative are described in melodramatic settings: The galloping shadowy horseman, the pounding on Don Bosco's bedroom door in the dead of night; the mysterious, scarlet-clad messenger, etc. The king, Lemoyne notes, was repeatedly warned not to take action on Rattazzi's bill lest fearful consequences would follow. But the monarch did not take kindly to Don Bosco's premonitions; if anything he considered the priest to be a bothersome meddler prying into his private affairs.

impassive spectator as he awaited the fate of Rattazzi's bill.¹⁴ He had warned Victor Emmanuel II of the dire consequences that would befall him and the royal family if he signed the bill into law. How informed was he that the king was not a willing accomplice to Rattazzi's and Cavour's plan to strip the Church of its religious properties and assets, and that he finally buckled under only because of the pressure put upon him by his prime minister and most of his ministers?¹⁵

The consequences as foretold by Don Bosco if the King ratified Rattazzi's bill into law were swift. Towards the end of the debates he was notified of the death of the Queen Mother, Maria Teresa, the widow of his father, Carlo Alberto. Shortly after, as the Law of the Convents was receiving its finishing touches, the King was informed of the unexpected deaths of his wife, Queen Maria Adelaide and his infant son. The nation was plunged into grief, and a wave of sympathy swept across the country. But the King's nightmare was not over. While he was still in mourning he was forced to prorogue parliament when he learned of the death of his brother, Fernando, Duke of Genoa. The young duke's sudden demise took everyone by surprise. Just a few months earlier he had been given command of the Piedmontese troops destined for the front in Crimea. In the space of only three months, the lives of the monarch's mother, brother, wife

¹⁴ Don Bosco saw the government's seizure of monasteries and churches as an act of boldfaced robbery. He shared his views with the readers of the April, 1855, issue of the *Catholic Readings*. In that number he printed Baron Nilinse's pamphlet entitled, "Stealing Church Property and Its Consequences." Highlighted in the frontispiece of the baron's treatise was a grim quotation from St. Ambrose: "What! A private citizen's home is inviolable, and you dare lay hands on the house of the Lord." The message was clear.

¹⁵ Actually, Victor Emmanuel was strongly against signing Rattazzi's bill into law. He even told a Vatican official that he was prepared to force Cavour's resignation rather than agree to the confiscation of Church property. But he was also aware that the weight of parliamentary opinion would turn against him if he did not sign. At the last moment Senator Calabiana, bishop of Casale, introduced a counter-proposal which elated the king. The bishops of Piedmont (Fransoni excepted, of course) were willing to relieve the state budget of supporting the poorer clergy by making a voluntary annual payment of a million lire, thus rendering the new law unnecessary. The king immediately sent for Cavour to inform him of the "gratifying news." But the wily prime minister delayed announcing the bishops' offer in parliament. This gave the liberal press time to denounce the "bishops' bribe" (as it came to be called), as a plot hatched in Rome for the purpose of controlling the government and subverting the constitution of 1848. Meanwhile in high dudgeon Cavour tendered his resignation; when it was refused, he warned the king that a clash with his ministers over the bill would ruin the country. Student demonstrations and protests in the streets succeeded in cowing the king into submission. By the time the dust had settled, the bill squeezed through the senate by eleven votes. On May 29, 1855, the reluctant royal signature was appended to Rattazzi's bill dissolving more than 300 religious communities belonging to 35 religious orders and congregations.

and infant son had been snuffed out, and Don Bosco's chilling predictions of "State Funerals at the Royal Court" came to a melancholy end.

Naturally, Don Bosco, like Pio Nono, saw these deaths as a visitation from God for the injuries inflicted upon his Church because of the passage of the Law of the Convents. Some of the more secular-minded historians have taken a more mundane view. Typical is Denis Mack Smith's snide observation that, "These deaths aroused a *superstitious fear* (emphasis mine) of supernatural retribution, especially after Pope Pius IX explained to the King that these afflictions were clear evidence of divine retribution."¹⁶

"Like a Bolt from the Blue"

The ratification of the *Legge Rattazzi* caused Don Bosco some anxious moments. For some time now he had been at work, drafting a set of rules for a new religious society to carry on his work.¹⁷ But some of his closest associates, upon learning what he had in mind, urged him to cease and desist. The brouhaha that followed in the wake of the enactment of the Law of the Convents had created, they argued, a most unfavorable climate for anyone intent on founding a new religious foundation. "In their opinion the times were not propitious, and the government was uncompromisingly hostile to religious orders. All these things, they claimed would smother his society at its very inception."¹⁸

Don Bosco did not have to be reminded that "the times were not propitious." An article of the new law specifically prohibited the founding of a new religious order without government approval. And the anticlerical mood of the liberal members of parliament, which had just shut down more than 300 religious communities, was not about to welcome a new one with open arms. No doubt Don Bosco saw his way out of his dilemma. The very words of the first article of the Law of the Convents provided a loophole. The new law called for the withdrawal of statutory recognition from those religious groups which were not committed to education, preaching, or nursing. The purpose of the new society he envisioned would be totally dedicated to the education of poor and neglected children. Certainly such an objective would pass muster and keep within the parameters of the law's restrictions.

Unobtrusively Don Bosco continued his work on the rule for his projected society. But he took no overt action. If he found himself between a rock and a hard place, it would be the legislator who had masterminded the anti-religious legislation that would extricate him. On more than one occasion Urbano Rattazzi had tried to egg Don Bosco on to find a workable solution to the problem he

¹⁶ Denis Mack Smith, *Cavour: A Biography* (New York, 1985), 79.

¹⁷ *EBM* V: 459.

¹⁸ *EBM* V: 459.

would eventually have to face: perpetuating his work after his death. Finally, he broached his own plan, which he had been mulling over for some time, to him. In the ensuing exchange between Don Bosco and Rattazzi, Lemoyne recounts the answer to the problem Don Bosco had been searching for:

"Don Bosco," Rattazzi told his friend, "I hope you will live to a ripe old age. But remember, you're mortal like everybody else. So have you ever given thought to what will happen to your work after you are gone? Who is going to continue educating and caring for the poor children you have been sheltering in Valdocco all these years? I'm sure you want someone to carry on your work. But how are you going to manage that?"

It was a question Don Bosco had never expected to hear from the very man who had pulled the life support system from the hundreds of religious communities his legislation had disbanded. Half in jest, Don Bosco replied:

"Your excellency, I'm not ready to step into the grave just yet. For the present I manage to carry on thanks to the help of friends and benefactors. But since you ask, what would you suggest I do?"

"I know you don't want to register your oratory work with the government as an officially-recognized charitable enterprise. So be it. My solution then to see that your work does not die with you, would be to organize some of your priests and close associates into a society of your own devising. Imbue them with your spirit, and inculcate the methods you are using so successfully. Once you have accomplished that, they should be able to carry on your work after you are no longer with them."

Don Bosco could hardly believe his ears! He later confessed that Rattazzi's proposal hit him like a bolt from the blue (*Le parole di Rattazzi furono per Don Bosco uno sprazzo di luce*). The minister then revealed the government's official position concerning future religious groups that would be tolerated under the new law:

No lawfully constituted government such as ours can oppose the establishment and development of such a society, just as it does not oppose organized groups and entities that are formed by lawyers, doctors, educators, and similar bodies. The existence of any association of free citizens, and yours would be one of them, will not be jeopardized as long as their goals and objectives do not conflict with state laws and other legal institutions. Moreover, my dear Don Bosco, I can assure you that the King will support your endeavors because your work is so eminently humanitarian.¹⁹

Not only did Rattazzi throw his influence behind his words in support of the creation of a new religious society, but he also brought his legal expertise into play. Almost twenty years later, Don Bosco himself revealed that "Rattazzi even

¹⁹ EBM V: 460-461

wanted to assist me in drafting several articles of our Society's constitutions. He applied his legal skill directly towards those which dealt with our Society's relation with civil and state law. I can truly say that it was Rattazzi who helped draft those sections of our rule which later served as safeguards against any government harassment or intrusion."²⁰

Don Bosco's Madcap Adventure—The Generala Episode

The colorful story of the Generala outing is another of those episodes that has become part of Don Bosco's incredible adventures with the youths of Turin. In recent years revisionist historians have begun to question the authenticity of Don Bosco's romp in the woods with more than 300 youthful lawbreakers who called the juvenile reformatory, just outside Turin's city limits, their home. But proof that that spring picnic during Easter week did take place, as described by his biographer, is considerable.²¹

A précis of the sequence of events surrounding the Generala outing can be outlined as follows: Don Bosco had just concluded a series of religious talks during Easter week for the young inmates of the Generala, a detention center for juvenile delinquents. Though the youths may have been a captive audience, their behavior had been so exemplary and their sincerity to improve their lives so genuine that Don Bosco felt compelled to reward them in some fashion. What better way than to enjoy a picnic in the park—in this case at the royal park at Stupinigi, just a few miles away.

When Don Bosco presented his request for such an outing to the director of the reformatory, he was given a flat refusal. "Are you mad! Jail regulations prohibit any such activity." Bowed but not beaten, Don Bosco next approached the prefect of the province, Charles Farcito of Vinea, who promptly refused him in even stronger terms. But the priest would not take no for an answer and made his plea before his true and tried friend, Minister of the Interior Rattazzi. Startled at first by the request, the minister mulled the matter over. Perhaps getting away from the grimy jail walls for a day would do wonders for the inmates' morale. Besides, the respect and obedience they had shown the priest deserved a break. However, Rattazzi laid down one condition: A coven of plainclothesmen would discreetly shadow the group and intercept any attempted runaways. But on this

²⁰ EBM V: 462

²¹ Michele Molineris, SDB, writes a very spirited vignette of the Generala story in his *Incontri di Don Bosco* (Castelnuovo Don Bosco, 1973), 242f. He adduces contemporary witnesses and documentary proof as evidence of the veracity of the episode. His treatment of Rattazzi depicts him as a diamond in the rough (*Il burbero benefico*) and attempts to portray Urbano Rattazzi 'warts and all' for the general reader. Pietro Stella, SDB, takes a more cautious position about the whole event. He ignores the incident entirely in his biography, *Don Bosco: Life and Work*.

point Don Bosco became adamant. No police, in or out of uniform. He would assume full responsibility if anything went wrong and declared he was ready to put his life and reputation on the line if anything went amiss. "You can lock me up if so much as one of the boys is missing when we return." A shared chuckle between the two sealed the deal.

The following spring morning broke clear and inviting. Once outside the walls, the more than 300 juveniles, now free as the wind, scampered madly all over the countryside. Mass in the royal chapel was the first order of the day. Then the younger inmates played at various games; the older, savoring their freedom, just lounged on the fresh spring grass. After a gargantuan lunch (supplied by the host), the fun and frolic came to an end. The return trip was somewhat more subdued. Despite his protests, Don Bosco was hoisted on the donkey that had brought the provisions, and he was escorted back to the Generala like a conquering hero. The bizarre romp in the woods, which at first had all the earmarks of a disaster waiting to happen, had a happy ending for all concerned. Not the least of whom was the warden of the reformatory who sighed with relief when every last inmate was accounted for at check-in time.

The day after the excursion to Stupinigi, Rattazzi elated over the way Don Bosco had pulled off the impossible (some of the minister's associates had urged him not to approve the "madcap scheme"), spoke at length with Don Bosco in his office. What never failed to amaze Rattazzi was the firm, yet relaxed ascendancy the priest always maintained over the youngsters under his care. And his control over the motley crew of the Generala had proved even more remarkable. Those were not just poor and abandoned children. Among that horde of 300 youths was more than a fair share of petty thieves, unruly thugs, juvenile hoodlums, and incorrigible guttersnipes whose only serious crime was that they had been abandoned by their parents. What was Don Bosco's secret in dealing with such a cross section of young misfits, his friend wanted to know.

The exchange that followed, recorded by biographer Lemoyne, gave Don Bosco the opportunity to articulate for the record one of his first pronouncements of his educational philosophy. These simple statements would become the foundation of his "Salesian Way" of educating the young, known in his later writings as his *Sistema preventivo*.

The educator, Don Bosco explained to Rattazzi, has really only two options to effectively deal with young people. He can use forceful measures, with the subsequent threat of dire punishment, if his orders are not obeyed. In this case, the *modus operandi* used at the Generala to keep inmates in line: when rules are broken chastisement is usually swift and severe.

But the educator has another option, one certainly more demanding on him, and one that can push his patience and tolerance to the edge. It basically consists in treating a child with kindness and understanding. Once young people know that you have their welfare really at heart and learn that they will not be brow-

beaten into submission for even minor missteps, they will respond. Moreover, this method opens the channel for inculcating moral values. Once that is accomplished the child's heart becomes open to God's love and to the practice of his religion.

Rattazzi nodded his approval, but he furrowed his brow. He had seen for himself how Don Bosco's Salesian Way had been so effective in numerous circumstances. But he had his doubts that spoiling the child by sparing the rod could work in state institutions for young offenders. These centers for incorrigible youth, he told his friend, could only succeed when they used strong-arm measures. Then, perhaps without realizing it, Rattazzi got to the heart of the matter: "The compassionate influence of religion over the hearts of young people is something the state cannot match. That domain, Don Bosco, is exclusively yours."²²

The Countess Comes Calling

Urbano Rattazzi was 55 when he married thirty-something Countess Maria Stodolmina Bonaparte-Wyse. Maria, born in Ireland and educated in Paris, was the daughter of Sir Thomas Wyse and Letizia Bonaparte. She had been recently widowed when she met her future husband. After a whirlwind courtship, the attractive widow married Urbano Rattazzi on February 3, 1863 in the parish church of San Francesco da Paola, near the bank of the River Po. Until his death in 1873 the two remained very attached to each other.

Described as vivacious, sophisticated, and highly intelligent, Maria wrote romantic novels which catered to the taste of the intelligentsia in whose salons she could frequently be found. But the sensationalism of one of her novels, *The Road to Paradise*, proved her undoing. In it she caricatured several of Florence's rich and famous and their scandal-tinged intrigues. Unwisely she did little to mask their true identity. Soon she became a persona non grata, no longer invited to the city's gala balls, and cruelly snubbed by Florence's high society. The breaking point occurred when an anonymous note informed her that she was no longer welcome in the capital and could take herself and her novels elsewhere. En route to Paris she was urged by her husband to visit Don Bosco during her stopover in Turin.

²² Two lengthy accounts of the Generala story are available in English. Giovanni Bonetti's narration of the incident is found in the English translation of *Cinque lustri di storia dell'Oratorio Salesiano fondato dal Sac. D. Giovanni Bosco* (Torino, 1892). See *Don Bosco's Early Apostolate* (London, 1934), Chapter XLII. Bonetti's description of that spring outing was probably the principal source for Lemoyne's account which was published in the fifth volume of the *Memorie Biografiche* in 1905. See *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, Vol. V: 140-146.

As Urbano had requested her, Maria dutifully appeared at the Oratory with a retinue of servants and attending dignitaries. Don Bosco had prepared well for her arrival and gave her the full red-carpet treatment. The countess was entertained with music and song and verse. A grand tour of the Oratory followed. Amid all the fanfare, Maria Rattazzi was deeply touched by Don Bosco's humble yet winning manner.

Shortly after her departure she telegraphed her husband: "I have just returned from my visit to Don Bosco. It was a most delightful experience. He was indeed everything you said he was—and more! I can honestly say that I have met one of the great personages of our day."

Her husband was quick to reply: "I knew you would be well received. I am so happy that you managed to see with your own eyes one of the marvels of our times."²³

Urbano Rattazzi—Don Bosco's Frequent Friend in Need and in Deed

As time went by, the ties that bind between Rattazzi and Don Bosco strengthened considerably. Although their ideological differences were poles apart, circumstances seemed to draw the odd couple (anticlerical antagonist and pious priest) closer together. Always in need of funds to further his work, Don Bosco frequently appealed to the minister for assistance. And the latter, in his own fashion, found ways and means to divert modest sums from the state's treasury to alleviate his friend's distress.

²³ For some inexplicable editorial reason this touching vignette of Countess Rattazzi's visit in Valdocco has been omitted in the English version of *The Biographical Memoirs*. It can be found in the Italian edition: *IBM V*: 797f. After her husband's death, Countess Rattazzi married a third time but always retained the name of her second husband, Urbano Rattazzi. A recent biography, *Urbano e Maria Rattazzi: La Storia di un Grande Statista Italiano* (Milan, 1993) by Pierfelice Borelli, describes the relationship of Urbano and Maria in extensive, if sugary, detail. According to Borelli the two lived in a state of connubial bliss until the husband's death in 1873. But Angiolo Biancotti suggests that the pair's wedded years were not all moonlight and roses. See "Madame Rattazzi, una delle figure femminili più interessanti del secolo scorso," in *La Martinella, Maggio-Giugno, 1961*.

Maria Rattazzi was a prolific writer of popular pulp fiction. More than fifty works, which include novels, essays, poems and social dramas, are attributed to her. She used various pseudonyms to cloak her identity as she reported the scandalous amours of Florentine society. Unfortunately, despite her husband's plea to use a pen name for her novel, *The Road to Paradise*, she insisted on using her own name. The cream of Florence's high society was not amused at her tell-all exposé. Two months after the book's publication, Maria was on a train bound for Paris.

For example, in the beginning of 1856, shortly after the passage of the Law of the Convents, Don Bosco launched out on an ambitious building project. The Oratory had become too cramped for comfort. More space to shelter the increasing number of homeless children was desperately needed, so plans were drawn up to add a new wing to the existing building. It was on that occasion that the priest in Valdocco decided to beard the lion in his den. In an unprecedented petition he applied to the government for a building loan. The amount he requested was considerable, far in excess to what he really needed. But there was method in his madness. Don Bosco reasoned that if he requested an excessive amount, the state treasury might meet him halfway and dole out a modest subsidy. His appeal was directed to the then minister of the interior, Urbano Rattazzi. In part the minister replied:

Although the undersigned is favorably disposed toward your project of enlarging the present facility, it is with genuine regret that the present state of the treasury forces us to decline your request for a government loan.

However, all was not lost. Don Bosco's ploy was partially successful. As he had anticipated, Rattazzi authorized a modest subsidy. Not to set a precedent, he made it clear that the amount released by the treasury was *not* for construction purposes but "to alleviate the ordinary needs you have at the Oratory." With regrets that he was unable to provide more, Rattazzi authorized the sum to be drawn from the general fund.²⁴

But in calls for assistance between the minister and the priest, the latter was not always at the receiving end. Help, in one form or another, flowed in both directions. On various occasions Don Bosco would accept into his Oratory school boys who had been recommended to him by Rattazzi. These youths were generally "desperate cases" whose next option was the juvenile lockup. Once Rattazzi pleaded with his friend to take under his care a "desperate case"—his own nephew. The boy had become so incorrigible that even his own parents had given up on him. And Uncle Urbano was seriously thinking of shipping him off to a correctional facility for juvenile delinquents. In desperation he pleaded with Don Bosco, his last resort. Would he take the boy under his care. He would and he did. The Salesian Way was put to the test. Father Michael Rua, who later established a close bond with Rattazzi's nephew, reported that the boy not only turned his life around, but left the Oratory trade school after he had mastered a trade. He became a skilled worker, raised a family, and lived an exemplary Catholic life.

Not infrequently Don Bosco was embarrassed by the show of deference and courtesy accorded him in public by Rattazzi. Whenever the priest called on the minister to solicit his advice on some knotty problems, he had to enter an ante-

²⁴ *EBM* V:282

room usually full of impatient functionaries and clients and civil servants all awaiting their turn to confer with the minister. On being informed of Don Bosco's entry, Rattazzi would leave his office, go out into the waiting room and signal the priest to enter his office—leaving a dozen or so disgruntled callers to cool their heels.

The two were not above exchanging little pleasantries to help break the formality of tension-filled meetings. On one occasion, when he was ushered into Rattazzi's office to discuss a particular sensitive issue, Don Bosco facetiously compared the large number of clients in the waiting room to the usual long lines of penitents waiting outside the confessional as Easter approached. Rattazzi smiled at the analogy and replied: "There's only one difference, good Father. Those who leave the confession box do so with peace in their hearts and with prayerful thanks for the one who restored that peace in their lives. Instead those who leave my office without getting what they came for, leave with a silent curse which I may not hear, but certainly feel."

Some of Don Bosco's friends among the clergy became overly concerned about the way he was hobnobbing so frequently with a member of the political establishment that had shown nothing but hostility to the Church. But Don Bosco brushed aside their innuendoes. He knew he had everything to gain and nothing to lose in discreetly cultivating the prime minister's friendship.

Unfortunately for Don Bosco's interests, Rattazzi's two terms as prime minister were short-lived. In February 1860, following his resignation, he was replaced by Luigi Carlo Farini, and the close relationship between the two was greatly weakened. Things were never the same after that. Dark days loomed ahead for the Oratory. Lemoyne would later write that Farini was the one man who more than anyone else was destined to come down hard on Don Bosco and the Oratory. Subsequent events proved him right. But not before Rattazzi threatened to have the new prime minister censured in Chamber for the illegal and bullying tactics he was using in conducting unannounced house searches in Valdocco. Anxious to let well enough alone, Don Bosco pleaded with Rattazzi to let things be. He knew that Farini's hostility would only worsen if he was publicly provoked.²⁵

Even when Rattazzi no longer trod the corridors of power, his friendship with Don Bosco never waned. "From time to time he would drop in at the Oratory to visit with the priest, so deeply did he revere Don Bosco. And when speaking to others about him, he would always refer to him as a "great man."

²⁵ Don Bosco did not submit quietly to the Prime Minister's harassment. He decided to resort to the written word rather to engage in a verbal confrontation. He addressed a formal letter to Farini outlining the work that was being done in the Valdocco Oratory on behalf of the hundreds of homeless children whom no one else seemed to care about. It is both a forceful and informative document and deserves to be read and studied. (*EBM* VI: 365).

And to prove his allegiance to his friend, he would on occasion personally advise him what steps to take to avoid harassment from government authorities.

Although there was little love lost between the Church in Piedmont and the two-time prime minister, the spark of his religious faith was never quite extinguished in Rattazzi. He once asked his priest friend if he deserved the excommunication which had been leveled at him for his attacks against the Church. Don Bosco demurred. He did not give him a direct answer but promised to look into the matter more thoroughly with some knowledgeable churchmen. Several days later the two met again. Don Bosco ruefully shook his head. He had been unable to find any authoritative voice who might have condoned his friend's hostile acts against the institutional Church.

Shortly before his death, Rattazzi had a chance encounter with his old friend on a street in Rome. The former prime minister was visibly shaken at their meeting. He asked Don Bosco for his prayers and entreated him to have the Oratory boys pray for him, "so I won't be condemned to hell." He then continued in a state of near despair: "I feel very poorly these days. I believe my end is near." Shortly after that meeting he took to his bed. Although he pleaded to have a priest assist him as he lay dying, his friends and members of his own household prevented the priest from entering his room. A few weeks later on June 5, 1873, Urbano Rattazzi died.