

Journal of Salesian Studies

Spring 2000

Volume XI

Number 1

**Institute of Salesian Spirituality
Berkeley, California, USA**

An Introduction to Don Rua's Letters to England

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Michael Rua (1837-1910) was a pupil, then the lifetime collaborator and finally, the first successor of St. John Bosco as Rector Major of the Salesian Society (1888-1910). During his Rectorate the Salesians grew from 1030 members in 64 houses to 4420 confreres scattered across the globe. Don Rua's letters to England offer the reader a glimpse of the character of their writer and of the pastoral care he took of a small group of relatively insignificant Salesians in what was very often the inhospitable atmosphere of the British empire at the height of its power.

Although Don Rua's virtues and life have been critically analysed and written about during the process of his beatification, there still remains much to be discovered of the man who by inclination and position was largely overshadowed, at least in the minds of most Salesians, by the towering charismatic figure of Don Bosco. The collection of Don Rua's letters sent to the confreres of the English Province in the twenty years of his Rectorate has, at present, reached the number of 224. They represent only a tiny fragment of what must have been the unrelenting and massive correspondence that he carried on with the confreres in every mission right across the world.

Whilst we must be very careful not to draw any general conclusions from this tiny sample and while evidently this correspondence focuses on the immediate problems of a particular historical and geographical situation, nonetheless, the personality of the writer, his outlook, his spirituality and style of governance and his underlying concerns do clearly emerge from even a cursory reading of these letters.

The fact that so much of this correspondence survives despite there being no copies kept for reference by the sender is largely the result of the devotion and care taken by the early confreres of the English Province. Fr. Charles Macey, Fr. Giovenale Bonavia, Fr. Eugenio Rabagliati and Fr. Enea Tozzi were among the first recipients. Fr. James Simonetti who served as Novice master for 53 years and Fr. Angelo Franco were also aware of the letters and the desire to preserve them. In an age that was more concerned with making Salesian history than recording it they recognised the importance of these letters as testimony to the sanctity of Don Rua and as a precious source for the heritage of the province.

Fr. Martin McPake, who served as both novice master and Regional Councillor for the English speaking Salesian Region, took a strong interest in collect-

ing Don Rua's letters not only from England but also from other parts of the region such as South Africa, Malta, and from the central archives in Rome.¹

In the main these letters are addressed to Fr. Charles Macey who was sent to England in 1887 and became the Superior the following year on the unfortunate death of Fr. Edward McKiernan from TB. Fr. Macey remained effectively in charge until 1919. Don Rua corresponded with Fr. Macey for twenty years and his patience and perseverance with the problems involved are worthy of comment. Other correspondents frequently addressed by Don Rua were Fr. Enea Tozzi, who was sent to England as novice Master before he was ordained and then went to Cape Town to extract the foundation from the bankruptcy into which it had fallen, and also Fr. Eugenio Rabagliati who was one of the original pioneer group who went to Battersea in 1887 and who succeeded Fr. Macey as Rector of Battersea when he became Provincial.

What we have are 224 personal letters, which range from short notes scribbled on the backs of visiting cards to two and three page letters. All are handwritten, most in the secretary's hand, though Don Rua usually took the trouble to fill in the names and places and sign them personally. If these letters to the confreres of the English province are in any way typical then, given that the province consisted of effectively a couple of houses in England and a house in Cape Town, Don Rua's correspondence must have been immense. He, himself, remarked on Don Bosco's extraordinary and laborious correspondence, but this comment might well apply to Don Rua himself. What touches the reader more than anything else is Don Rua's deep personal concern for young people and Salesians themselves. His work as Rector Major was far from the ascetic but somewhat remote figure that his portraits convey, but rather of a man who brings great gifts of a heart and soul to the ministry of guiding the Society.

The Writer

Michael Rua was born in Turin on June 9, 1837, the last of the nine children of John Rua and his second wife Joanna Maria Ferrera Rua. The death of his father when Michael was eight must have left its mark. In 1848 while he was attending the Christian Brothers school in Turin he met Don Bosco who used to come to hear confessions and Michael began to attend the Oratory in 1849. In 1850, when he had finished school, his obvious intelligence made Don Bosco suggest that he begin the study of Latin with Felix Reviglio, first with Fr. Merla and then at the school of Professor Bonzanino. While engaged in his studies Michael also helped with teaching catechism to the younger boys at the Oratory.

In 1852, he was invited by Don Bosco to receive the cassock as a sign of his serious desire to study for the priesthood and he began his studies of philoso-

¹ Editor's note: All excerpts of Don Rua's letters quoted in these pages are the translation of the late Fr. Martin McPake.

phy and theology at the diocesan Seminary. While he was thus occupied he took a more and more active role in the running of the Oratory itself, gradually assuming the duties of general assistant for discipline, in charge of the dining room and eventually director of the school program as well as running the Oratory of St. Aloysius Gonzaga.

On January 26, 1854, Don Bosco first introduced the idea of founding a religious order to his helpers and the chronicle records that the cleric Rua accepted this proposal with a lively sense of joy and offered himself with four other companions to Don Bosco for consideration. In the following year Don Bosco accepted the private vows of Michael Rua and in 1860 Michael was ordained priest. Fr. Francesia recalled that after his first Mass at the Oratory during the celebration that followed Michael thanked them all for the kind tributes etc. and solemnly promised that he would dedicate his whole life for the Christian education of poor youngsters. Fr. Francesia remarked: I am delighted to be able to say that he was faithful to his promises.²

After his ordination, Don Bosco encouraged Michael in good preaching by inviting him to preach at the Oratory and to various religious communities. He also continued to study moral theology with Canon Giuseppe Zappata, and he completed his teacher's diploma at the University of Turin 1863.

Don Bosco then sent him to be the Rector of the first Salesian foundation outside Turin at Mirabello where he stayed for two years. According to Ruffino's chronicle he behaved just like Don Bosco. He was always with the youngsters attracting them by his amiable character and because he was always telling them new things.

On the death of Fr. Victor Alasonati in 1865 he was recalled to Turin to become the prefect and general administrator of the Oratory, and on November 15th he made his perpetual vows as a Salesian. The responsibilities that he exercised especially during the absences of Don Bosco undoubtedly weighed on him. He worked so hard that Don Bosco once commented that there is only one person here who might but for the grace of God die of work and that is Don Rua who is always working more than the others.

In 1869 the Society received its Decree of Approval and in 1874 the Rule was approved and Don Rua was appointed as Prefect General, first in place after the Rector Major. By a decree of the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars in 1884 he was appointed Vicar General of the Society and in 1888 on the death of Don Bosco became the Rector Major of the Salesians.

For the next 22 years Don Rua was to guide the growth of the society. On Don Bosco's death there were 64 houses in 6 countries, while during Don Rua's period in office he made 341 new foundations. The Salesians found themselves in 29 new countries, including South Africa, the United States, India and China.

² SCR: *Positio super Virtutibus Michaelis Rua*. Torino 1947, 4.

He encouraged the development of the work of the Oratories by introducing Social Circles; he developed the theoretical and technical programs of the trade schools and introduced technical and commercial subjects into grammar school curriculum. He also promoted the work of the missions among the Kivaros in Ecuador and the Bororos in Brazil. During his period of office the decisions of the various General Chapters were incorporated into the Revised Constitutions as the Organic Articles which were later to become the definitive Regulations of the Salesian society.

It has to be said that physically and temperamentally he was completely different from Don Bosco. He was slightly built and much less of an extrovert than the founder. His task of taking on the expansion of the work of the society after Don Bosco's death which depended almost completely on the charitable donations of the friends of Don Bosco meant a personal enormous outreach to contact and persuade and encourage their charity. In the Church at large many found it impossible to believe that the Salesians could survive without Don Bosco. Some suggested that the Salesians should be amalgamated with another more stable order. Only with the resolute intervention of Msgr. Emiliano Manacorda, Bishop of Fossano was Don Rua nominated as rector major for 12 years.³ Among the Salesians themselves, even some of the most prominent members like Don Giulio Barberis⁴ found themselves reluctant to accept Don Rua's leadership in place of their beloved Father and founder. In 1899 and in 1901 when the Holy Office forbade the Rectors to hear the confessions of any of their dependents, despite Don Rua's efforts to reach an understanding, a number of them knelt outside his room in protest because he refused to hear their confessions.⁵ His reputation as the "living rule" and the severity of his iconography have not helped to endear him to a new generation, to-day perhaps even more conscious of the visual image and unaware of the difficulties he faced in taking over from such an evidently charismatic leader. His later years as Rector Major were not without their trials. Rome's decision to separate the Salesian Sisters from the Congregation in 1906, the suppression of the houses of Ecuador in 1896, France in 1902 and the loss of 6 priests, 2 clerics, 1 lay brother, 4 domestics and 38 pupils in the earthquake that shook Messina and Reggio on Dec. 28, 1908 all touched his heart. More painful still was the so-called Varazze affair when in July 1907 two Salesians were accused of indecent acts with minors and of holding black masses. Two confreres were imprisoned pending investigation and the anti-clerical press whipped up the crowds who attacked other Salesian schools in Italy. Eventually the charges were traced to the heated imagination of one of the pupils and his

³ M. Wirth: *Don Bosco et les Salesiens*. Torino, 1969, 247.

⁴ G. Barberis a cura B. Casali: *Lettere*. See introduction.

⁵ See W. J. Dickson: *The Dynamics of Growth*, 151. Holy Office decrees of 1899 and 1901 in M. Wirth *Don Bosco and the Salesians*.

imaginary diary.⁶ In the meantime Don Rua was devastated and suffered till the trial found the Salesians not guilty.

Writing in a circular letter in 1907 Don Rua recalled that after Don Bosco died, kneeling beside the corpse of our good Father he solemnly promised that he would do everything in his power, in so far as he could, to preserve his spirit, his teaching and the minutest traditions of Don Bosco's family.⁷ That he took seriously his promises is abundantly evident from the letters that follow. He spent himself unstintingly in an enormous work of correspondence and visitation that is now difficult to imagine. He died on April 6, 1910, as the whole society was preparing to celebrate his Golden Jubilee of Ordination.

Don Rua's Correspondents in England

The vast majority of the letters are addressed to Charles Bernard Macey who was superior of the Salesians in England from 1889 after the death Fr. Edward McKiernan until 1909 when he was replaced by Fr. Francis Scaloni. Charles Bernard Macey was born in Salisbury, Wiltshire on December 28, 1854, to a Protestant family with 12 children. He worked in a men's outfitters and came to the notice of one the leading Catholic lay women of the age, Lady Herbert of Lea because of his attendance at the Catholic Church where she worshipped. He became a Catholic at the age of 16 and spent some time as a pupil at Downside Abbey near Bath, probably at her instigation. Wanting to become a priest he was advised to go to Don Bosco in Turin again by Lady Herbert who had written an appreciation of Don Bosco for the Jesuit periodical *The Month*. In 1880 at the age of 25 he entered the Oratory and was the first Englishman to receive the cassock from Don Bosco. He was professed at San Benigno Canavese on October 4, 1882, spent some time working in the Salesian House in Nice before he was ordained in Turin on September 24, 1887, just before joining the first group of Salesians who arrived at Battersea on November 16, 1887, welcomed by Fr. Francis Bourne. When Fr. McKiernan died on December 30, 1888, Fr. Macey was asked by Don Rua to take over.⁸

For the next 20 years Don Rua corresponded regularly with Fr. Macey. Much of the correspondence is taken up by the financial problems of buying property and building the Sacred Heart Church in Battersea and the other houses in England. More significant perhaps was the encouragement that Don Rua always offered to a Superior who in many ways was far from ideal. What Fr. Macey seems to have been able to do best was to inspire a number of young men to join the Salesian Society. During his period of office the number of Salesians including novices rose from 4 to 75, and his kindly manner and his

⁶ M. Wirth *op. cit.*, 252.

⁷ M. Rua: *Lettere Circolari*, 1965, 431.

⁸ See RL2.

gentlemanly ways won him immense affection and lasting loyalty from many of his subjects.

However, his relatively short experience of Salesian life at the source and his tendency to adopt prevailing English "clerical" models of priesthood and religious life had serious consequences for the development of the work in England. The fact that the coadjutor brothers often felt like second class members of the community and that the Irish also felt unappreciated marked the weaknesses of a man who was often accused of having favorites.⁹ The adoption of clerical dress for the coadjutor brothers and the use of religious titles such as Brother and the use of religious names all come from Fr. Macey's own particular background.¹⁰ The extraordinary Visitation by Fr. Paul Virion in 1908 highlighted the problems involved in Macey's personal style of regime.¹¹

As a result Fr. Macey was replaced as Provincial by Fr. Francis Scaloni, the Provincial of Belgium, on August 31, 1909.

The absence of Fr. Scaloni during the first World War from 1915 left Fr. Macey in charge again till he finally retired to Chertsey in 1919 with some of his favorite disciples, where he died on August 4, 1928.

A second large group of letters was addressed to Fr. Eugenio Rabagliati. He was born into an extraordinary Salesian family at Occimiano near Casale in the Monferrato region just outside Turin. His older brother Evasio joined the Salesians in 1875 and became one of the pioneers of work for the lepers in Columbia. Eugenio entered the Salesian school at Borgo San Martino and made his first vows in 1885. As a subdeacon he came to England in 1889 and was ordained priest later the same year. He acted as the choir master at Battersea until Fr. Frederico Barni came in 1893 and for many years after he left in 1896. He became Rector there from 1904-5 and went to Chertsey where he died in 1928. His family contacts with Turin and his personal relationship with Don Rua as well as the ease with which he wrote Italian meant that he was a frequent correspondent of Don Rua and the other superiors including Frs. Paul Albera and Philip Rinaldi. While he played what might be termed a very secondary role, yet both Fr. Macey and Fr. Rua trusted him implicitly. He seems to have had a somewhat anxious and timorous nature and found the job of rector very unpalatable. That the school at Chertsey ever got off the ground can be attributed at least in part to his zeal in contacting Italian families and persuading them to send their sons to the new boarding school there.

Fr. Enea Tozzi was the other most significant correspondent. He was born in Lugo near Ravenna in Italy on April 7, 1875. While he was a student at the Salesian school in Faenza he had the chance to spend three days at the Oratory in Turin. When he went to greet Don Bosco, the saint withdrew his hand and said:

⁹ See Dickson, *op. cit.*, 168-172.

¹⁰ See Dickson *op. cit.*, 121, 167, 168.

¹¹ See Dickson *op. cit.*, 166ff.

"We aren't friends", which the young Tozzi took as a sign that Don Bosco knew that he had promised his mother not to fall into Don Bosco's net. After a couple of days when Tozzi had changed his mind and went to say good-bye, Don Bosco replied: "See now we are friends and you will never ever abandon Don Bosco." He made his novitiate at Foglizzo and his final vows at Turin on November 23rd and completed his studies of philosophy at the Gregorian University in Rome. He was ordained in Turin in 1897 and came to England in 1898. He worked at Burwash in 1898 where he taught philosophy and was novice master for the co-adjutor candidates. In 1902 he was sent to Cape Town to take Fr. Barni's place after the bankruptcy and remained there till 1926 when he was appointed as Provincial of the English Province till 1940 when he was moved to the USA as Extraordinary Visitor and the Rector Major's (Fr. Peter Ricaldone) Special Representative for the Allied Countries and central America and later as Provincial. He returned to England to the house of theology at Melchet Court and died at Sherfield, England on February 26, 1959. Most of the letters refer to his time as Rector of Cape Town and they involved the problems of a lack of personnel and of trying to build a new institute. Perhaps above all it was the personal support that Don Rua gave to Fr. Tozzi that was the most important feature of the correspondence.

Fr. Tozzi's piety and zeal were undoubted even by his critics as was his business sense and capacity for detailed administration. Writing in 1914, Fr. Francis Scaloni commented:

It is certain that this house finds itself in a very difficult situation. The virtue and the capabilities of the Rector are unquestionable, but his health is deeply compromised. It really seems that his back and even more his heart are affected, which results in a nervous excitability from which he suffers and which at the same time alienates the hearts of his less virtuous confreres. Furthermore his temperament which is not very expansive, rather timid, and quite austere does not allow him to let people forget by a smiling face and an amiable manner the just reprimands he gives in which there is a certain excess of formality.¹²

Don Rua's personal encouragement and genuine care are evident in his letters aimed at building up the quality of the direction of the Salesian work right across the world.

Don Rua's Style of Pastoral Care

The care Don Rua took to reply to each of his correspondents was proverbial¹³ and his sensitivity to their feelings is shown in this reply he wrote to a group of Battersea pupils who had sent him feast day greetings:

¹² ASC CA9605 Scaloni sul casa di Cape Town 13.02.1914.

¹³ M. Wirth *op. cit.*, 248.

My dear Sons of the House of London, Many thanks for your letters and good wishes for the feast of our revered patron St. Francis de Sales. I wanted to read through them all, each in turn, and this explains why only now am I in a position to reply and thank you, something I do from the heart, for the kind feelings you expressed and for the good dispositions you show. May the Lord bless your good intentions and grant you always to persevere in them. My special and cordial congratulations to those who wrote in Italian and I urge them to keep up their study of this language. For the rest I look forward to hearing from them in Italian at some future date.¹⁴

Writing to Fr. Giovanni Cerutti in South Africa, Don Rua shows a level of personal feeling for the plight of two orphaned boys which probably reflects his own personal experience of losing his father at eight years of age.

I am sure that you must know by now the misfortune that has overtaken the young Weglia brothers: they have lost both their parents through mushroom poisoning. I have been asked to look after them in their sad plight and so I earnestly commend them to your care asking you to give them board and lodging and find a guardian for them in agreement with the authorities. Since this is such a clear case of charity, I trust you will do everything you can to see this matter through and make holy and generous provision for these orphans.¹⁵

For Don Rua, who was clearly aware of the financial problems of the Cape Town house, to ask for this generous provision is indeed an act of charity, which he could appropriately call "holy."

Obviously, as Rector Major, his more normal area of direct pastoral concern was that of the Salesians themselves. When Fr. Giovenale Bonavia died Rua wrote to Fr. Macey with warmth that comes across as both deeply felt and generous:

No sooner had I received Fr. Rabagliati's letter and your card with the disturbing news of Fr. Bonavia's grave condition than a telegram arrived announcing his death! The sorrow it caused me was as deep as your own, and I offer you my heartfelt sympathy. I know you will pray much in suffrage for his soul: we shall do the same. We entertain the hope that the Lord will welcome him soon into his everlasting embrace, if he has not yet done so. I cannot praise you too highly for all the attention you showered on him in the effort to stave off the catastrophe. God will reward you... Be brave in the meantime, don't lose heart, but keep on working with zeal and constancy. God will assist you. You will also have the help of my prayers. Greetings to all and heartfelt blessing. Good-bye dear friend, on your part pray for yours affectionately in J and M.¹⁶

¹⁴ RL64 (18.2.98).

¹⁵ RL201 (24.8.1908).

¹⁶ RL112 (26.1.1904).

Don Rua's pastoral concern is also shown in a letter to Fr. Michael McCarthy about his return to New York:

However, when you go there, you must make up your mind to work like a good Salesian. As you know, we were invited over there to look after the Italians and so we must devote our attention to them. We have an obligation of charity towards them and must care for them kindly and graciously without distinction, the poor, the uncouth and the ignorant and not simply the rich. Our work is to win souls for God. As our patron St. Francis de Sales says: you catch more flies with a spoonful of honey than with a barrel of vinegar. May the Lord bless you and help you to be an apostle among the poor Italians. To that end I shall pray for you and you must pray for yours aff in J and M.¹⁷

Don Rua was fond of Francis de Sales' famous metaphor of the honey and writing to Fr. Macey he used it as a way of describing the kindness that would attract vocations:

Your dear house will have to find us a good supply of men, and you and the rest of the superiors will have to be the honey to attract many, very many dear young coadjutors to our Pious Society.¹⁸

He was likewise keen that members of the society should keep up the natural family ties of love and affection that would sustain them in their work:

From a letter written to me a few days ago by your mother I have learned, with sorrow, that you have not written to your family since you left Turin for your present house. Your mother is waiting anxiously to hear how you are keeping and as soon as possible you should satisfy her desire. You will please me greatly if you do.¹⁹

Don Rua was quite happy to use his personal friendship for the confrere to secure his willing assent. He finishes the letter in a warm and friendly fashion:

Pray a little for the scribe of this present letter for he will not forget you in the holy Mass nor in his prayers to our Holy Mother, the Help of Christians.²⁰

Don Rua clearly took a personal interest in the individual confreres especially those experiencing difficulties. Writing about Fr. Ernest Blackborrow he says:

¹⁷ RL125 (7.10.1904).

¹⁸ RL86 (22.11.1902).

¹⁹ RL104 (22.09.1903).

²⁰ RL104 (22.09.1903).

I had invited him to come out here; however, if he is happy in his vocation without this help, all the better. Cheer him up and try to rekindle his zeal and love for the congregation, and give him my best regards.²¹

Unfortunately, he still felt unsettled and eventually left the Congregation. Don Rua's care still reached out to him:

I received your welcome letter of the April 24th concerning our poor confrere Blackborrow. I had two letters from him as well, but only today have I been able to reply. Read my letter if you wish, and kindly send it on to him, as I do not know his present address.²²

His concern for confreres who were sick often clearly motivated his correspondence:

I am distressed about poor Luigi Franceschi. Take good care of him even though he is out of the house.²³

He wrote three months later:

With great sorrow we received news of the death of our confrere Luigi Franceschi and we have recommended him to the prayers of the retreatants at Valsalice. I hope you will be able to prepare and send us the obituary notice in keeping with our traditions when any of our confreres dies.²⁴

Elsewhere he inquired about a cleric with diabetes:

Can you let me have some news about the cleric who was suffering from diabetes? Were you able to get the medicine sold by Don Bologna as I suggested? Did it do any good?²⁵

Don Rua shows particular care too for the French confreres exiled from their homeland by the anticlerical laws:

I think you will be receiving a small group of confreres from France in a few days time...we must be very kind to our dear confreres in exile, away from their homeland.²⁶

²¹ RL69 (04.12.1899).

²² RL73 (20.05.1900).

²³ RL74 (30.05.1900).

²⁴ RL75 (15.08.1900).

²⁵ RL86 (22.11.1902).

²⁶ RL97 (27.07.1903).

In a very different context, in the field of Canon Law where Don Rua had himself suffered considerable embarrassment his attitude is instructive:

As far as the cleric [Dominic] Brownrigg is concerned, the one who made the perpetual vows, although he had only been admitted to triennials, I do not think you need to worry. With knowledge and commitment he has made his perpetual vows, and so on his side he is bound to the Salesian society for all his life: but since on our side we admitted him only to triennial vows, we are obliged to keep him for only three years. But if he turns out well the last thing we should dream of doing is to send him away; and when his three years are drawing to a close, if you let us have a favorable opinion of him we shall admit him to perpetual profession; and so without disturbing him either now or later, the simple renewal of vows made at the end of the retreat will set everything right.²⁷

Don Rua's concern not to disturb the young confrere's commitment is touching and his capacity to deal with canonical points with a great personal compassion instead of the rather rigid legalistic view which had become fashionable in reaction to the "modernist" movement at this period, shows him as a wise and moderate leader.

Overall his pastoral zeal and compassion emerge quite strongly from these letters and should stand first in any attempt to draw a portrait from them.

Don Rua's Style of Governance and Obedience

From the Reformation to the French Revolution and more so in the century that followed, the ideal of human liberty, and the importance of individual conscience has become one of the keystones of modern western thought and democracy. The latter half of the nineteenth century was clearly marked by the rise of the nation state and the predominance of the liberal ideology that prompted it since 1848.

The Catholic Church, however, under Pius IX had notably disassociated itself from both these developments, both in its official pronouncements, in the Syllabus of Errors 1864 and the Decree of Papal Infallibility 1870, and its practical piety, which encouraged a religious devotion to the person and office of the Pope. Although his successor, Leo XIII, had initially moderated the Church's intransigent outlook by, for instance, encouraging the "ralliement movement" in France, and opening the Papal Archives to historians, yet the condemnation of "Americanism" in 1899 and the subsequent election of Pius X, were in fact, the prelude to a full blown intransigent reaction. This led to the excommunication of leading modernists like Loisy and the imposition on all office holders in the Church of the Anti-modernist oath in 1908.

All this led to an increasing stress on uniformity and religious obedience of an unquestioning variety and the practice of "creeping infallibility," which en-

²⁷ RL74 (30.05.1900).

dowed clergy and religious superiors, male and female alike, with an authority of almost papal proportions.

Don Rua, in these letters, in striking contrast to his context, shows a refreshingly open attitude to religious obedience which encouraged the local superiors to consult their communities, and to take responsibility for their local situation.

It has to be recognised that already in the chapter on Obedience in the Salesian Constitutions, Don Bosco had softened the current canonical tone of Obedience by insisting that the confreres should consider "the superior in everything to be a loving father"... "in whom he should have every confidence." Further he emphasized the benefit of a "rendiconto" or friendly chat at regular intervals between the superior and the confreres, "sharing his daily life step by step."²⁸ "Let no one be anxious to ask for any particular thing or to refuse it; but on perceiving that such and such a thing is either harmful or needful to him, let him respectfully mention the fact to his superior who will prudently make the provision that his needs require."²⁹

In these letters perhaps the most notable evidence of Don Rua's attitude came in the year after the tragic death of Fr. McKiernan when he replied to Fr. Macey's letter:

You are left somewhat frightened of having the title Parish Priest, even though you've been discharging all the duties for some months. Let us put our trust in the Lord and in the protection of Mary Help of Christians, they will not abandon us. If it is the responsibility of having the direction of the house that makes you frightened, it would be easy to arrange matters, leaving to you the office of Parish Priest and to Don Bonavia [scored out were the words "that of Director" and written in the words] to help you in the matters regarding the house. Do me the favor of thinking these things over in front of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and then write to me letting me know what you think before I write my letter to the bishop.³⁰

This style of non-directive obedience was clearly called for in the new and difficult situation in which the Salesians found themselves, in a new culture, in a desperately poor parish in a part of London well known for poverty and vice.³¹ However the tone and style went clearly against the current integrist thinking which dictated that "superiors always knew best." Moreover, Fr. Bonavia was well known at the Oratory in Turin and also had the traditional background of studies and formation for superiors, but clearly Don Rua had decided that whatever the drawbacks the opportunity of having a Englishman as superior could not

²⁸ G. Bosco: *Costituzioni della Società di San Francesco di Sales* (1858-75) 95-97 (LAS-Roma, 1982).

²⁹ *Idem.*

³⁰ RL (22.01.89).

³¹ W. J. Dickson: *The Dynamics of Growth*. (LAS-Roma, 1991), 65-70.

be missed, given how different the English culture was. Furthermore, Don Rua was prepared to live with the consequences of his decisions and his 20 years of correspondence bears eloquent testimony to how much that cost him.

The same style is evident nearly ten years later when deciding on the printing of appeals:

Have a look at it; if you wish to add to it or subtract you may do so then if you think it is wise; you can have the English translation lithographed and send it whenever you think the moment is right. And after you have thought through this, tell me frankly whether it would be better if it carry your signature, in which case it would be well to make some small changes.³²

In much more significant matters Don Rua was quite prepared to bow to local knowledge and custom, however foreign it might seem to the Salesian tradition, for instance in the question of the lay brothers wearing clerical dress. Don Run was prepared on Fr. Macey's recommendation to allow the lay brothers to wear clerical dress, uniquely in the Salesian world, despite other arguments to the contrary.³³

You may hold on to this letter in view of the permission it contains to confer a religious habit on our coadjutors—a permission which up to now is wholly exceptional. The results may have consequences for coadjutors in other countries.³⁴

Fr. Rua, however, expected the local superiors to report back their experiences regularly to Turin and given the number of reminders evident in the correspondence, Fr. Macey did not often comply.

As I looked through the annual reports from the Provincial to the Rector Major, I did not notice yours for this last year. Try to push yourself a little and let me have it for I am anxious to have news of all your houses: I should like every house to become seedbeds of good Christians and honest citizens and above all of zealous Church students and fervent missionaries.³⁵

His personal concern for local Rectors is clearly illustrated in his inquiries about Fr. Rabagliati who had taken over as Rector of Battersea when Fr. Macey was made Provincial.

In the mean time, if you have the chance to do so, let me have some news about your Rector. Tell me how he is getting on and whether he is coping in the midst

³² RL61 (14.08.1897).

³³ RL80 (02.09.1902).

³⁴ *Idem.*

³⁵ RL131 (04.12.1904).

of all his business. Is he managing to keep cheerful and serene in spirit and outlook? I recommend him to your care. I know how much good will he has. If you can ease his position by your kindness you will make his job lighter. May Christ rise in your heart! Happy feast-day to you all.³⁶

One suspects that part of this care was to try to avoid the difficulties that can easily ensue when a new superior takes over while his predecessor is still in the house. Fr. Macey had asked whether he was still a member of the local house council and was told "no." In his next letter Don Rua recommended more encouragement of the new Rector:

You must encourage him by your kind ways and introduce him to his role as Rector, just as a Master would guide his disciple. You can also let him know about the new tasks he will have to take on, telling him that if he meets any difficulties he can make a note of them and consult you later on how to surmount them kindly and calmly. You can help him to do so.³⁷

Writing to Fr. Eugenio Rabagliati himself Don Rua offers encouragement to someone who seems tempted to lose heart.

My dear Fr. Rabagliati, Thank you for all the news although it wasn't of the cheerful kind. Don't be alarmed, however, with patience, charity and prudence you will win through. Providing the house is running well, as long as God is being served and sin kept out, we have reason to be glad; even if it means some suffering on our part, of opposition or even humiliations. Be of good heart and stay cheerful in the Lord.³⁸

As well as advice and concern for the Superiors, Don Rua shows a real concern for those confreres in vocational difficulties.

We are grieved to hear about the cleric [Thomas] Ready. I had such great affection for him and hold him in such high regard. If you could persuade him to come out here you would do me a great favor. Who knows, if we were able to talk things over he might change his mind about the very serious decision he is on the point of making.³⁹

On the other hand Don Rua can be decisive when the end of the road has been reached:

It would be better to get [Charles] O'Connor to lay aside the clerical habit. With all the weaknesses that cling to him already we now have disobedience: he could

³⁶ RL115 (30.03.1904).

³⁷ RL116 (11.04.1904).

³⁸ RL138 (10.01.1905).

³⁹ RL84 (27.10.1902).

never be admitted to holy orders. Make it your concern to get him to take this step.⁴⁰

Clearly, many of these letters from the Rector Major to the Provincial and local Superior are concerned with the organization and administration of personnel. Yet Don Rua reveals himself in them as being warm hearted, concerned and anxious to adapt to the needs of a situation he did not know personally. Rather than issue "diktats" he is anxious to encourage the local Salesians to take responsibility, while at the same time offering deeply personal support and encouragement. His approach to Obedience and the governance of the Congregation must rank highly among his strengths.

Don Rua and Poverty, Finance and Property

Much space in Don Rua's letters was devoted to questions of finance, which form part of the history of the Salesians in England and South Africa (See Dickson *op cit*). The perilous state of the Battersea finances and the bankruptcy that occurred in Cape Town in the early years were heavy burdens that the Salesians had to bear. As Don Rua reminded Fr. Enea Tozzi:

At this point I want to add a word about your request that we help you to settle your account with the Oratory. Believe me we would do so willingly were it possible, but we are so hard up that at times we do not know how we can carry on with so many creditors who never give us a moment's peace. Very often one of them threatens to take us to court.⁴¹

Constant worries about how to finance the rapid development of Salesian work across the world was clearly one of the major preoccupations of Don Rua in those early years. This meant that naturally, aesthetics had sometimes to take second place. With regard to the newly painted school chapel at Battersea designed and painted in the lavish style of the pre-Raphaelite painters by Fr. George Fayers, Don Rua commented:

I have seen the photo of the interior of your chapel It looks really good and from what you tell me it cost virtually nothing. Deo Gratias.⁴²

Clearly though the problem of the central administration was the result of the local inability to pay. Hence one is not surprised to see a letter acknowledging that fact and wiping the slate clean.

⁴⁰ RL89 (04.03.1903).

⁴¹ RL102 (20.08.1903).

⁴² RL116 (11.04.1904).

You must have noticed from the latest balance sheet that because of your financial difficulties the Superior Chapter paid off your outstanding debt to the oratory itself.⁴³

Don Rua showed a touching concern, however, in the midst of his pressing financial worries for the needs of confreres who were traveling to work in South Africa.

The three confreres who are bearing this letter are on their way to the Cape of Good Hope. Do what you can to tell them all they need to know for the journey and while you are at it, it would be good if you could get them a reduction on the journey. We have given them a little money, but it is not enough. Try to make good the deficit to save them from embarrassment on the voyage. Fr. Tozzi sent me a wire to say he is unwell so the sooner they can leave the better.⁴⁴

On the other hand he is anxious that Fr. Michael McCarthy should be reminded of the poverty from which he came and the poverty to which he is committed by vow:

As for Fr. McCarthy, it would be helpful if like a good brother you were to remind him of the poverty he came from before entering the Society, pointing out at the same time that he ought to live the poverty he has promised by vow.⁴⁵

In all of these letters there is nothing of the grimness to which poverty had been reduced in the reputation Don Rua sometimes had at the hands of his hagiographers who depicted him eating the crusts of bread left by the Oratory boys.

Don Rua's Spirituality

Though these letters are focused on business and administration, Don Rua's own spiritual outlook emerges somewhere in almost every letter, if only as a farewell thought. What becomes clear, though, is his complete confidence in God and a very deep sense of the Communion of Saints. Praying for one another, asking the intercession of Mary and the saints are all fundamental aspects of his everyday spiritual outlook and practice. For Don Rua, his daily Mass, his prayers and the prayers of other members of the society play their part in deepening our communion and our trust in the God who creates and saves us. God and the world of the spirit are not "out there" or removed from our real concerns but his kindly Providence provides for us.

⁴³ RL77 (15.05.1901).

⁴⁴ RL133 (12.12.1904).

⁴⁵ RL155 (26.05.1905).

As for the expenses incurred maintaining your novices at Burwash, have great trust in Divine Providence, commend yourself to Mary, Help of Christians and to St. Joseph and you will find the means forthcoming.⁴⁶

But this trust does not imply foolish over-confidence in expanding the work beyond the means:

You will have to be patient and limit your field of action unless the Lord sends you some extraordinary mark of his Providence. It took Don Bosco 16 years to have a house like yours and 27 before he had a chapel like yours. We must not be rash in our undertakings. We must pray and be patient.

May the Lord bless you all and grant you that through the intercession of St. Francis de Sales and Don Bosco you may be able to make your institute a true sowing ground for good and holy Salesians.⁴⁷

For Don Rua the Communion of Saints offered a deep mutual support, not just from those heavenly patrons but also from one Salesian to another:

Pray a little for the soul of this priest writer, for he will not forget you in his Holy Mass nor in his prayers to our Blessed Lady, the Help of Christians.⁴⁸

Don Rua's piety was centered on the prayer of thanksgiving and the uniqueness of Christ as our Savior:

Splendid! We must thank God for having enabled you to extend your work steadily for the good of so many souls who must go to the feet of Jesus if they are to have eternal salvation. Let Jesus be your Master, help and consolation in this great work and Mary Help of Christians will never fail to shield you with the mantle of her protection.⁴⁹

For Don Rua the virtues of courage and patience are the practical outcome of this trust in Divine Providence. To Fr. Tozzi, who often needed encouragement he wrote:

I am very pleased at the zeal, which you certainly display to improve the situation gradually. God willing, you will see your hopes fulfilled and the holy purposes you have in mind. Don't lose heart: I have written again to the Provincial asking him to visit you when he can and to give you light and guidance in your holy endeavors, but sadly, I see he has not granted your desires in this respect. Be patient.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ RL62 (6.10.1897).

⁴⁷ RL63 (21.11.97).

⁴⁸ RL104 (22.09.1903).

⁴⁹ RL105 (03.10.1903).

⁵⁰ RL116 (11.04.1904).

Again to Fr. Tozzi, he wrote:

I can understand and sympathize with you in your present anxieties, but you must pluck up courage. At this end we will do everything we can to give you reason for joy. *Respice stellam, voca Mariam.* Recommend devotion to the Sacred Heart, to Mary most holy and to St. Joseph.⁵¹

Don Rua's *respice stellam* seems to recall the angel's message to Abraham "Look up at the stars, count them if you can. I will make you the father of many nations." Coupled with the constant reference to Mary's intercession this clearly forms the pattern of his piety. Don Rua's faith led him to believe that there was a genuine communion between God and man, where we are invited to collaborate in his saving mission:

Well may you say: "the Poor Lord!" We superiors must do all we can to make him loved and served with greater fervor and fidelity and bring our subjects to understand the importance of the bonds we have forged with God.⁵²

One of Don Rua's most affectionate correspondents was Fr. Rabagliati whose family was well known to Don Rua and who found the office of Rector at Battersea something of a struggle. Don Rua's words of encouragement show his ideal of a fraternal community on mission, rich in piety, works of charity and hope of eternal glory:

Well done, Deo Gratias! Continue in your fervor, all of you united in the bond of charity, constant in piety, in work, in good example: God will bless you, you will do much good and you will grow rich in merits and eventually in heavenly glory. Greetings and from the depth of my heart my blessing. Farewell, farewell, pray for me.⁵³

Conclusion

While in retrospect, one might argue that Don Rua made an error in appointing Fr. Charles Macey as the Rector and first Provincial of the English Province and as the special Visitation Report of Fr. Paul Virion in 1908 showed there were considerable difficulties as a result. Nevertheless, Don Rua never ceased to try to support and advise Fr. Macey for the twenty years that followed. Don Rua was not infallible, but his perseverance, deep humanity and warmth and a willingness to share his own deep faith enabled the English province to grow

⁵¹ RL153 (13.10.1905).

⁵² RL183 (10.02.1907).

⁵³ RL139 (17.01.1905).

despite the problems. The person these letters reveal is not one that I suspect many readers will be familiar with, and this offers us the impetus to publish and offer them to a wider readership.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Editor's note: We look forward to John Dickinson's publication of the letters.
