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‘School Days ... Golden Rule Days’...

John Bosco’s Public School Years

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Introduction

The road traveled by John Bosco, as child and teenager, in his quest for an education, proved to be a bumpy one, marked by frequent twists and turns and occasionally stalled by unforeseen roadblocks. But despite occasional disheartening setbacks, John’s high hopes in his pursuit of an education would prevail over disconcerting frustrations.

Before his entry into Chieri’s diocesan seminary in 1835, John would, over a span of ten years, attend three public schools. His first exposure at age nine to classroom instruction lasted through two winter terms and took place in the primary school in Capriglio, a small hamlet within walking distance of his Becchi home. But because of Anthony’s increasing hostility, several years would elapse before Margaret’s son would next enroll, at age 15, in Castelnuovo’s town school (*scuola commune*).

John attended the public school in Castelnuovo from December 1830 to June 1831. His schooling there began with high expectations but ended on a disappointing note. Subjected to unrelenting harassment from a septuagenarian curmudgeonly schoolmaster who treated his pupil as a misplaced country bumpkin, John felt compelled to drop out of school.¹

¹ Commenting earlier on John’s keen disappointment in not being able to continue his schooling in Capriglio, biographer Lemoyne wrote: “He ardently desired to study, yet for four years not only would every road be barred to him, but even every ray of hope. No sooner would a glimmer appear than some unforeseen circumstance would blot it away.” John Baptist Lemoyne, *The Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco*, (New Rochelle, New York) English translation, vol. 1, 142. Hereinafter, the English version of the Lemoyne’s Memoirs will be cited *EBM*. The original Italian work, *Memorie Biografiche di Don Giovanni Bosco*, will be cited *IBM*.

If discontinuing his attendance at the Capriglio school seemed to dampen “every ray of hope” for John’s future education, becoming a school ‘dropout’ at Castelnuovo must certainly have quenched every last remaining ‘glimmer’. But John remained undaunted, and only his stick-to-it-iveness (and his mother’s persisting urgings) would enable him to eventually reach each his goal.

As autumn of 1831 drew to a close John, more determined than ever to pursue his education, with his uncle's support and his mother's urging, applied to and was accepted by the royal public school in Chieri. His four years in that town school (1831-1835) were to be happy ones, full of adventures and misadventures which he himself would faithfully describe many years later with a touch of nostalgia in his memoir.² For John this period of his life would be a crucial one in his growing-up process. The early 1830s were to be his greening years when the farm boy from Becchi matured into young adulthood.

It is these three phases of John Bosco's school years that form the basis of our study.

The Restoration in Piedmont

King Carlo Felice's 'Ironbound' Education Code of 1822

John's entire public school education, as child and teenager, took place during the historical period known as the Restoration. This era of Italian history began at the close of the Congress of Vienna. After the captains and the kings had departed from the Austrian capital in 1815, this new epoch saw the redrawing of the map of Europe, the reshaping of minds, and the remaking of everyday life. Historians who have traced the development of the Restoration in Piedmont are in general agreement that for 33 years following the Congress, it was the Church and the military that dominated life in the Kingdom of Sardinia.³ Turin, its

² Thanks to Don Bosco's reminiscences of his school days found in his autobiographical *Memorie dell' Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales*, we possess his own description of his schoolboy adventures (and other fascinating incidents of his early apostolate) which sometimes seem to border on the incredible and make-believe. Had these same episodes been drawn from secondary sources, one would almost feel tempted to follow the injunction of James Fenimore Cooper when he urged the readers of his redskin sagas (*Last of the Mohicans, etc.*) to accept his adventuresome tales "with a certain suspension of disbelief."

As for those "really marvelous" schoolboy adventures, biographer Lemoyne had both the good judgment to let Don Bosco narrate his own stories and the wisdom not to embellish them. "We shall not venture an opinion on these happenings," he wrote, "nor seek to explain them. An unbroken tradition has made them history at the Oratory. When asked about them, Don Bosco never denied them...and he told us of many other similar happenings, some of them really marvelous." *EBM* I: 142.

³ In this essay when the term Kingdom of Sardinia appears, it is used synonymously with Piedmont. In 1720 the Duke of Savoy acquired the island of Sardinia and was allowed by other European powers to take with it the title of king. From that time on the correct name of the state in diplomatic language was "Kingdom of Sardinia," and the ruler of Piedmont was officially known as the king of Sardinia—even though Sardinia remained throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a little-populated and economically undeveloped island.

capital, was often described as a city that was “half barrack and half cloister.” But most important this three decade period, from 1815 to the fateful “*Quarantotto*”, witnessed the entrenchment of a conservatism that touched every aspect of life and society in Piedmont.

It all began uneventfully enough when an exiled king and his ministers emerged from the semi-feudal atmosphere of the island of Sardinia and returned to claim his throne in Turin. As Victor Emmanuel I and his brother, Charles Felix, entered the capital after their long exile in Sardinia, the populace cheered them loud and long. But not a few were more than a little surprised when the King and his royal entourage rode into the capital dressed in the mode of 1789 with their three-cornered hats and perukes with pigtails.⁴

The reappearance of the two brothers who brought the trappings of the past with them proved to be a harbinger of things to come. King Victor Emmanuel, whose conservatism had intensified during his long years in exile, set out immediately to turn back the clock. The way things had been before the French occupation was the way things were going to be in the newly restored Kingdom of Sardinia. The aristocracy and the Church regained their ancient rights. All enlightened social and legal reforms that had been set in place by the French were promptly swept away. The army returned to aristocratic control, and education to the supervision of the Church. Ecclesiastical courts were revived, and all professors of the University of Turin who were suspected of liberal tendencies were summarily dismissed.

The extremism of such reform-in-reverse is difficult to comprehend from a modern perspective. The King, for example, refused to wear clothes styled after the beginning of the French Revolution. Travelers were discouraged from using the fine roads and mountain passes the French had built simply because they had been constructed by French engineers. Men who held high positions under the French because of their skills were demoted to make room for inexperienced courtiers who had been with the King in Sardinia. To get ahead in the new order of things no longer depended upon what you knew but whom you knew. One of these sycophants even wanted to destroy a magnificent bridge over the River Po solely because it had been built by the French. Fortunately, the queen saved it. She had a villa on the far side of the river, and the bridge was preserved so that she could have easy transport between her villa and the royal palace. To this day it stands and it still spans the Po in all its splendor.

Victor Emmanuel’s all-out efforts to wipe clean the presence of the French occupation and to restore the uses of the past in his kingdom soon created unrest among the military and the aristocracy. The French had given the Piedmontese their first taste of representative government and they found that it was good. In

⁴ It was from this time on that the word “*codino*” (pigtail) passed into Italian speech as a nickname for the supporters of the “*ancien regime*”.

late winter in 1821 a rebel group in the military demanded a constitution which the King refused. Deeply disturbed by a revolt that followed, Victor Emmanuel, unable and unwilling to satisfy the people's cry for a constitution, abdicated in favor of his brother Charles Felix. On March 13, 1821, the citizenry of Turin was shocked to learn that their erstwhile king and his family had decamped from the capital and had left for Nice at dawn.

King Charles Felix soon proved to be just the other side of the same coin. Ultraconservative and absolutist in nature, he looked upon the revolution that had caused his brother to abdicate as an accursed thing and he meant to stamp it out. True to form he issued an edict that began: "The King is the only person empowered by God to judge of the fittest means to be used by the monarch in ruling his subjects, and it is the first duty of a royal subject not to complain."⁵

Historians have not dealt kindly with King Charles Felix's ten-year reign. They affirm that he had no qualification for playing the grand monarch. Alone among the grand line of the princes of Savoy he was no soldier. He hated state business and court ceremonial and let it be known that he "had not become a king to be bored." For a decade the liberals in Piedmont lay stunned at the actions (and inaction) of their overbearing monarch.

But Charles Felix had one saving grace—a determination to improve education in his kingdom. Just one year into his reign, he promulgated an education act on July 23, 1822, which was to have a profound effect on the subject of our story. It was entitled "*Gli Ordinamenti di Carlo Felice: Regie Patenti Colle Quali Sua Maestá Approva L'annesso Regolamento per le Scuole tante comunali che pubbliche e Regie.*"⁶

The "Regie Patenti" of 1822

The rules and regulations of Carlo Felice's *Regie Patenti* were to have a profound effect on John Bosco's school department, social behavior, and academic achievement. While the 205 articles of this education code served as a kind of straitjacket for the state's schoolchildren, constraining their conduct and dictating the content of their curricula, John in many ways became the beneficiary of some of its regulations. For example, article 21 of the *Regie Patenti* declared that schooling in the kingdom's *scuole comunali* was to be tuition free. This eliminated one less burden—and it could have been a

⁵ Bolton King, *A History of Italian Unity* (New York, 1899), vol. 1, 40.

⁶ The complete text (in Italian) of this education code promulgated in 1822 can be found in Secondo Caselle's *Giovanni Bosco a Chieri, 1821-1831: Dieci Anni Che Valgono Una Vita* (Torino, 1988), 54-63. Unfortunately the text is microscopic in print and frequently blurred; hence it makes for difficult reading. There is no extant English version of the code. Hereinafter this ponderous title will be referred to as the *Regie Patenti*.

prohibitive one—for John’s first educational experience in the village school of Capriglio. Again, for four years running in Chieri’s public school, John was designated the recipient in his class of the “*Minervale*”, a kind of scholarship grant countenanced by article 31 and awarded to the superior student in each grade.⁷ Thus John was exempt from paying the annual student fee of twelve lire at the beginning of each school year. In his memoir, Don Bosco matter-of-factly alluded to this windfall in an almost offhand manner:

In those days there was a praiseworthy practice in effect through which the town fathers granted a prize to at least one student in each grade. It consisted in remitting the annual twelve-franc tuition fee which each student was required to pay. To win this award, one had to excel both in studies and in deportment. I was lucky enough to be exempt from the payment of this fee during my four years in Chieri.⁸

In his self-effacing way Don Bosco may have credited Lady Luck for having freed his mother from paying this, for her, very heavy tuition charge, but luck had nothing to do with it. As his record shows, John Bosco proved to be a brilliant student during his four years in Chieri’s public school.

From the hindsight of a century and a half, social historians generally look back upon Carlo Felice’s *Regie Patenti* as an oppressive instrument that exercised mind control over the student, legislated his religious practices, and dictated his moral conduct. For better or worse, its rigid directives had a pervasive influence on John’s adolescent year in Castelnuovo, and later his teenage school experiences in Chieri.

Angiolo Gambaro, a highly regarded 19th century educational historian has written that the spirit and the rules of the *Regie Patenti* “were more suited to the novices of a convent than to schoolchildren.” Francesco Cognasso, popular commentator of Piedmontese society and culture has this unflattering evaluation of Carlo Felice’s educational legislation:

⁷ The association of the term *Minervale* with schools and schoolmasters goes back to Roman times. This Latin term derives from the name Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom. The word *Minervale* was used in ancient times when it referred to payment made to Roman schoolmasters in the form of gifts and presents made to them when the feast in honor of Minerva was celebrated. In our context, the *Minervale* was the equivalent sum of 12 lire which every student was required to pay at the beginning of each school year. The aggregate of these fees was then used to defray school costs, including teachers’ salaries. As indicated above, a student’s superior academic performance and his exemplary deportment exempted him from this fee. See Natale Cerrato, *Il Linguaggio Della Prima Storia Salesiana* (Rome, 1991), 136.

⁸ Giovanni Bosco, *Memorie dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, E. Ceria, ed. (Torino, 1946), 57. Hereinafter the original Italian text will be cited *IMO*.

Seventy-five of the 205 articles of the king's education code dealt with the religious duties of pupils and schoolmasters. Bishops and parish priests issued all sorts of certificates attesting to the moral probity of the teacher who was himself generally a priest. The Code did permit a laymen to teach in the schools of the kingdom, but only if priests were not available to assume this role. In all such cases, the lay teacher had to wear the cassock—the one indispensable insignia of his teaching position.

...Constraints to insure the student's proper moral behavior were everywhere. He could be expelled if his "confession card", requiring the pastor's signature, showed that he had not fulfilled his monthly confession obligation. Moreover, this card had far-reaching tentacles. Until it was duly signed by the youth's pastor, affirming that he had been regular in his religious duties, he was declared ineligible to take his end-of-the-year examinations.

...The injunctions of the *Regie Patenti* dogged the student's life every step of the way. He could not enjoy a drink with his cronies in the ubiquitous town cafe. He could not stay in an hotel, attend a stage presentation, or be seen at a public dance. If caught in the act by the police in such heinous situations, the culprit was immediately hailed before the school authorities.

...The school curriculum left little room to expand one's mind. In the upper grades, Latin and an abundance of philosophy were the standard fare. The Piedmontese dialect, rather than the Italian language, was the vehicle of instruction. The school police saw to it that the classroom was hermetically sealed off from the invasion of any liberal ideas. Rote memorization was worshipped. It was not important what the student knew, only what he could remember. Students in the last two years of school, their courses in the humanities and rhetoric, had to learn endless passages in Latin by heart. As Peter Bersezio remembered: "...because we had to cram all this useless baggage in our heads, there was very little room for anything else. As a result we were totally ignorant of everything under the sun."⁹

⁹ Francesco Cognasso, *Life and Culture in Piedmont* (Turin, 1970), 254-255. Elsewhere in his evaluation Cognasso writes that any teacher who taught in state schools in those days and advocated democratic principles or voiced republican sentiments in the classroom was immediately reported to the police. He cites the example of Vincenzo Troya who went on to become a well-known author and educator. Troya was dismissed from his teaching post because a school inspector found the words "Italy" and "liberty" inscribed in one of his pupil's exercise books.

Perhaps it is easier to understand why the education code of Carlo Felice was so saturated with religiosity when one considers that its chief architect was a young Jesuit, Father Prospero Taparelli (1793-1862) brother of the illustrious Massimo d'Azeglio. He became a Jesuit in 1814 and changed his name to Luigi Taparelli. At his profession of vows he renounced all claims to fame and fortune and gave up a considerable inheritance. The author of the *Regie Patenti* was a man of deep piety and engaging simplicity of life and character. In his superb biography of Massimo d'Azeglio, Luigi Taparelli's brother, Ronald Marshall notes that in his later years

Outwardly at least, the long arm of the *Regie Patenti* produced its desired effects. Students were manifestly docile and cowed into submission for fear of reprisals or punishment. However, reminiscing on his student years in Chieri, Don Bosco apparently had no reason to chafe at such ironbound regulations. In fact, he commented on the salutary results of school discipline as he experienced it:

This strict training produced marvelous results. Many years went by without any swearing or unbecoming language being heard. The pupils were as docile and respectful at school as they were at home. And it often happened that in very large classes everyone was promoted at the end of the year. This was the case with my own classmates in the third class, humanities, and rhetoric.¹⁰

Capriglio (1824)

John was eight years old when his mother resolved that it was time for her boy to go to school. She felt in her heart that her peasant son was not destined to become a man of the soil like past generations of her forebears. How to secure proper schooling for John and provide for his education would become a driving force for Margaret Bosco.

Her first option was to enroll her eight-year old in the public school in nearby Castelnuovo. There he would be instructed in the four R's: reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic, and religion. But insurmountable obstacles quickly arose. Trudging from Becchi to Castelnuovo and back twice a day—a stretch of around ten miles—was too much for a pair of short if willing legs. Boarding her son in town was beyond Margaret's meager resources; and then there were incidental expenses such as books and school supplies which she could not afford. Even if she found a way to achieve all this, she still had to contend with her stepson's sullen and persistent demands that the time had come for John to pull his weight on the farm.

Margaret's inability to enroll her son in school in Castelnuovo was only a temporary setback. She next set her sights on the village school of Capriglio. There she felt confident her son would quickly master his ABC's. It must have

“...as an educationist Father Taparelli had ideas far ahead of his time: he limited the time given to the classics and extended that assigned to modern languages. He introduced geography, world history, and natural history into the curriculum, employing specialist teachers.” Ronald Marshall, *Massimo d'Azeglio, An Artist in Politics* (London, 1966), 54. The architect of the *Regie Patenti* had come a long way.

¹⁰ Saint John Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory*, ed. Michael Mendl, SDB, et al. (New Rochelle, New York, 1989), 73. The English translation of Don Bosco's autobiographical *memoirs* will hereinafter be cited *EMO*. This English version is particularly rich with substantial notes and collateral reference sources.

come as something of a shock for her to learn that Father Giuseppe Lacqua, the local parish priest who doubled as schoolmaster, refused to admit her boy into the village school. But he was well within his rights in not accepting this new pupil. The recently promulgated *Regie Patenti* education act clearly stated that only children of the local commune were entitled to attend the *scuola comunale* of their village. And the Bosco's lived outside its jurisdictional boundaries.¹¹

Deeply disappointed Margaret decided to play a waiting game. She prayed, but she also planned. In the meantime a neighboring farmhand who had heard of her plight came forward and volunteered to teach John the basics of reading. It was not what Margaret wanted, but for the time being she would make do. And so it was that a completely unforeseeable offer from an anonymous neighbor introduced her son to the magic of the printed word.¹² By winter's end of 1823 John had learned to read "tolerably" well.

By now Margaret Bosco, waiting for the opportune moment, was more determined than ever to secure a place for her son in the village school of Capriglio. That moment came when she learned that her sister, Marianna Occhiena, had been engaged by Father Lacqua as his housekeeper. Margaret pressed Marianna to induce the parish priest to accept "just one more pupil" in his school. John's aunt loved her nephew very dearly, so she planned a frontal assault in her foray to weaken the pastor's resistance. Either John was admitted into his schoolhouse or she might find it necessary to leave the parish house. It was an offer Father Lacqua could not refuse. Marianna had those rare qualities every priest sought in his household servant: she was an indefatigable worker with a well-deserved village-wide reputation of being a devout and discreet woman. He was not about to jeopardize losing an ideal housekeeper by barring her favorite nephew from his classroom.¹³

So it was that a bright-eyed and eager nine-year-old appeared for his first day of school that early morning in November of 1824. His classmates, all younger by several years than John, stared at him with mixed looks of suspicion and

¹¹ *Regolamento per le scuole fuori dell' università (Regie Patenti)*. See Title 2, Article 20.

¹² The identity of the man who first taught John "how to read and spell tolerably well" has never been ascertained. Though nameless, Don Bosco's first biographer writes that at some late date this anonymous farmer "told Father Michael Rua how happy he was to have had the good fortune of being John Bosco's first teacher." *EBM* I:75.

¹³ Margaret Bosco's sister, Marianna Occhiena, never married. For many years she faithfully served Father Lacqua as his housekeeper in Capriglio. When the priest retired to the town of Ponzano she dutifully followed and continued to serve him until his demise. After Father Lacqua's death, Don Bosco invited his aunt to live at the Oratory with her sister who had located in Valdocco some years before. Marianna Occhiena ended her days at the Oratory. See *EBM* II:23.

curiosity. To them he was a stranger, even an intruder, someone who lived outside the reaches of their campanile.¹⁴

During those first weeks of school, until they got to know him better, the newcomer's schoolmates ragged him unmercifully. To them he was a clodhopper. His ill-fitting clothes made him a natural target for their jibes and taunts. But John, who could have broken a few noses, took it all in stride and ignored their badgering. It did not take long for his tormentors to see the genuine goodness in the ‘new boy’ and they warmed up to him quickly. In reminiscing over those first heady school days in Capriglio we find no account of the baiting the newcomer endured from his schoolmates. Don Bosco remembered only the good things:

I had now turned nine. My mother wanted to send me to school, but difficulties got in the way. The distance to Castelnuovo from home was more than three miles; moreover, my brother Anthony was opposed to my boarding there. A compromise was eventually agreed upon. During the winter season I would attend school in the nearby village of Capriglio. In this way I was able to learn the basic elements of reading and writing. My teacher was a devout priest called Joseph Delacqua [sic]. He was very attentive to my needs, seeing to my instruction and even more to my Christian education. During the summer months, I went along with what my brother wanted by working in the fields.¹⁵

John was fortunate in finding in Father Joseph Lacqua an understanding teacher and caring priest. He quickly grew fond of the lad whom he had at first been unwilling to accept in his school. In a short time he was helping him with his schoolwork, loaning him books, and even giving him occasional private lessons.

Don Bosco never forgot the gentle priest who befriended that anxious little boy who appeared in his classroom that winter morning in November. Throughout his early years he kept in touch with his first teacher, and soon after his ordination young Father Bosco visited the aging priest, who according to Lemoyne, was still teaching school at the age of 85. It was a tearful reunion on both sides.¹⁶

¹⁴ “*Campanilismo*”, a not uncommon characteristic of small rural villages in Italy, was a distrust of all social, cultural, and political contacts beyond the point where the bell in the campanile, or church tower, could be heard. Even when Italians emigrated to foreign lands at the end of the last century, they continued to move within narrow circles and found it difficult to integrate with their new countrymen who did not share their particular dialect, customs, and food.

¹⁵ *IMO*, 18.

¹⁶ Don Bosco's affection for Father Lacqua was long and abiding. Among Don Bosco's personal papers, a letter from his old teacher, dated July 28, 1841, was

Little is known about those two winter terms that young John spent in Capriglio's village school. But one thing is certain—he “developed a passion for reading.” (“*La lettura divenne la sua passione*”).¹⁷ In late 1826 or early 1827 John was forced to discontinue his schooling at Capriglio. Thus ended on an abrupt note his first public school experience. Most likely, Anthony's almost threatening demands that his younger brother carry his load of the farm chores was more than Margaret could endure. It was then that after a short stint as a stable boy at the Campora farm in Serra di Buttigliera, his mother sent John to work as a stable boy at the Moglia farm. He was only eleven.

Castelnuovo (December, 1830—June, 1831)

It was a little before Christmas before I was able to enroll in the public school in Castelnuovo.¹⁸ For several years before that I had on various

found. In it Father Lacqua thanks Don Bosco for the Mass stipends he had sent him and informed his one-time pupil that he was anxiously awaiting the day when he would visit him in Ponzano. He mentions that he is still teaching at the age of 85 (!) and longs to be released from that responsibility. This touching letter can be read in its entirety in the English version of the Biographical Memoirs, volume 2, 22-23. Don Bosco did indeed keep his promise in October of 1841. His trip to Ponzano turned out to be more than just a routine visit. How he lost his way in the dead of night, frightened the local villagers who mistook him and his traveling companions for brigands, and finally found lodging drenched from the rain in a hilltop castle are all told in charming detail in *EBM* 2:22-27.

¹⁷ John's “passion” for reading became an obsession. “His brother Joseph used to tell us that even at mealtime John always had a book propped up against his plate and would read while eating. The book I saw most often was the catechism which he carried everywhere with him.” John Baptist Lemoyne, *Vita di San Giovanni Bosco* (Torino, 1977) revised edition, volume 1, 35.

¹⁸ Castelnuovo, now Castelnuovo Don Bosco, was a town of 3000 inhabitants when John attended the public school there in 1831. It is situated in the Asti region about 15 miles east of Turin. Although Lemoyne refers to it as a “small town with big-town airs,” in its day it was an active center engaged in animal husbandry, and its twice-a-year town fairs drew considerable crowds who were attracted by its highly developed textile products.

Castelnuovo was also the home of Saint Joseph Cafasso, Don Bosco's confessor and spiritual advisor, and of Saint Joseph Allemano, Cafasso's nephew, founder of the Missionary Society of the Consolata and an alumnus of the Valdocco Oratory. Salesian Cardinal John Cagliero, and Bishop John Baptist Bertagna, Don Bosco's longtime friend and rector of the diocesan theological seminary, also claimed Castelnuovo as their hometown.

In the town's central piazza stands the first known monument erected to honor Don Bosco. The impressive marble figure of “The Blessed Friend of Youth” looks lovingly down on two children (one clad in Indian garb) who stand by his side.

Don Bosco's attachment to the town he loved was a lifelong affair. Newly ordained, he spent the first six months ministering to the townsfolk of St. Andrew's

occasions managed to receive private lessons. But starting my first day in school with a real teacher made me feel rather apprehensive. It didn't take me long to realize that my knowledge of Italian grammar left much to be desired and that I would have to improve it before I could begin my introduction to Latin.

In the beginning I used to walk to school every day, but this soon proved rough on me as the harsh winter weather began to set in. Getting to school from home meant making four trips a day during which I covered a distance of almost thirteen miles. Soon I managed to find lodging with a good man, a tailor in town, whose name was John Roberto. I might add that he had quite a talent for singing, especially when it came to Gregorian chant. And since I must admit that I had a pretty good voice, I soon found myself singing along with him. It wasn't long before I too began appearing in public, accompanying signor Roberto with fair success.

Since I wanted to make the most of my spare time while living with Signor Roberto, I took up tailoring which was his trade. He did everything to help me. So before long I was making buttonholes and hems, and sewing single and double seams. From there I went to cutting out patterns for underwear, waistcoats, trousers, and jackets. In fact, when my landlord saw how adeptly I was learning my trade, he strongly urged me to stay on with him and perfect my trade, and even hinted that in time I might one day take over the business. But my ambitions, of course, lay in another direction. I was determined to pursue my studies and get an education. While I did keep up with my tailoring, I never lost sight of my real goal. ¹⁹

parish, in which church he had been baptized on August 17, 1815. The pastor of St. Andrew's, Father Antonio Cinzano, who had formed a close relationship with the young priest tried to persuade him to remain in Castelnuovo as his assistant, but Cafasso convinced John to attend the Convitto in Turin. Nevertheless the parish rectory of St. Andrew's became almost like a second home for young Don Bosco, and Castelnuovo was always the first stop when he took his oratory boys on their annual week-long autumn jaunts in the countryside.

¹⁹ *IMO*, 45. Looking back at his public school days in Castelnuovo after a quarter of a century Don Bosco seems to imply that things were now pretty well in hand and everything was proceeding smoothly. But his pleasant reminiscences do not square with the facts. Actually, it was rough going for John from the very start. In the beginning John's uncle, Michael Occhiena, had arranged with John Roberto to provide his nephew with a noontday meal, meager though it was. And when the early winter weather was too severe and the walk home for the schoolboy too hazardous, John would stay over at Roberto's house (and go without supper). After a few weeks these spartan conditions were partially remedied when payment in kind took care of John's meals while he lodged with Roberto. And John's mother supplemented his fare with a supply of bread she brought him once a week. As for sleeping accommodations, the schoolboy was allotted a cubbyhole under the stairs for his night's rest.

Even though John had been a late arrival—school had begun in early November—he quickly caught up with his classmates. His teacher, Father Emmanuel Virano, was amazed at how quickly his new pupil had adjusted to his school work and how effortlessly he surpassed his classmates. (“*I progressi di Giovanni erano tali da attirare l’ammirazione del suo maestro.*”) ²⁰

Fortunately for John, who had also earlier found a caring and supportive teacher at Capriglio, the same good fortune, though it was to be short-lived, was his lot in Castelnuovo. In his memoir Don Bosco left us but a faint sketch of the man whom he called “my beloved teacher.” But biographer Lemoyne would later complete the picture when he described him as a priest who possessed remarkable teaching skills: “...a learned man and a very able teacher who was much respected by his pupils. His lessons were so well organized to the needs of the individuals and so well planned that willing students advanced rapidly.” ²¹

It was praise that was well deserved. Certainly any schoolmaster who had to cope with an overflow class of seventy pupils (the maximum class load set for a teacher by *the Regie Patenti*), while giving instruction in Latin grammar to five different groups on five different levels all in the same classroom needed every ounce of skill and energy he could muster.

So for the first four months things went on swimmingly for John. Living in town and spared the long grueling walks to and from school every day, he had ample time to plunge into his schoolwork. But such an auspicious start came to an abrupt and disappointing end. In April, 1831, Father Virano was appointed pastor of nearby Mondonio. His teaching days at Castelnuovo were over. It was with a twinge of nostalgic regret and sense of impending doom that Don Bosco would later write:

My teacher, Father Virano, was made parish priest of Mondonio in the diocese of Asti. In April our beloved teacher took up his new assignment. The man who replaced him could not control his class. In fact, he almost scattered to the four winds everything that Father Virano had taught us in the preceding months. ²²

In his memoir, Don Bosco did not identify the “man who replaced him [Fr. Virano].” Perhaps he was willing to let bygones be bygones, but Virano’s replacement turned out to be a complete disaster for student John. Father Nicholas Moglia, the new substitute teacher, was the brother of Louis Moglia with whose family John had lived and on whose farm he had worked as a stable boy and farmhand for more than a year. A curmudgeonly septuagenarian, the new schoolmaster tended to view all schoolchildren as wayward creatures—bundles of

²⁰ *IBM*, 1:222.

²¹ *EBM*, I: 166.

²² *IMO*, 47.

undirected, sometimes destructive passions—who needed law and order to tame them. For some inexplicable reason he took a strong aversion toward the farm boy from Becchi, crudely referring to him as a country bumpkin, accusing him of copying from his classmates whenever he turned in a superior assignment (which was often), and badgering him at every turn. Even Don Bosco’s biographer was nonplused in trying to explain Moglia’s animosity toward John. Was it the boy’s humble roots—a peasant born, a peasant bred? As Lemoyne wrote:

He [Father Moglia] was convinced that because John came from Becchi, he must of necessity be a dolt—a good-natured one, perhaps, but a dolt nevertheless. Moglia reasoned that since John, already fifteen, had been placed in the beginner’s class, this was unassailable proof that he would never make any sense out of his studies.²³

In fact, when John pleaded with him to be placed among the more advanced Latin students, the response was cruel and demeaning:

I must say that for a farm boy from Becchi you are a bit pretentious. What has anyone from Becchi every amounted to? My advice to you is: Quit studying Latin. You’ll never make any sense out of it. Go hunt for mushrooms and poke around for birds’ nests—now that’s something you should be good at. There’s where your talent really lies. Why you insist on studying Latin at all is a mystery to me.²⁴

The old schoolboy singsong taunt, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” in John’s case rang false. His teacher’s continuing derisive remarks did hurt, and John decided to call it quits. He dropped out of school, but remained in Castelnuovo till the end of the term. To earn his keep he continued to work in Roberto’s tailor shop.

With more time on his hands, now that he was no longer attending school, he put those hands to good use. Evasio Savio, the local blacksmith, took the boy into his smithy and gave him a part-time job. Again John proved adept at learning a trade. Soon he was putting it to good use. When he joined his brother who was sharecropping on the Susambrino farm that summer, he repaired broken tools at the farm forge. Nor did his tailoring skills go to waste. John converted a corner of a shed into a makeshift tailor shop and mended the workers’ clothes.²⁵

On August 16, Margaret’s son reached his 16th birthday. A turning point in his life was approaching. His mother, more than anyone else, understood her boy’s hunger for an education. She became determined more than ever to place

²³ *IBM*, I:229.

²⁴ *IMO*, 47.

²⁵ *EBM*, I:175.

him in a school where he could fulfill his ambition. Her first attempt in the Capriglio village public school had been a start with mixed results. Castelnuovo had been a dismal failure. This time she looked to Chieri. When she proposed to John that he attend the public school there, her son was elated. It was a dream come true. In more ways than one. Shortly before his mother's suggestion, he had had a dream. He shared this experience with his friend, Joseph Turco. "I've got something wonderful to tell you," he confided buoyantly: "Last night I had a dream. I dreamt that I would go on with my studies, become a priest, and then be given the care of many, many boys. That will be my life's work."

Soon things began to fall into place. Margaret matter-of-factly began to pack John's things for school. But money was short, and her meager resources were stretched to the limit. Moreover, her stepson Anthony, the family's breadwinner, had recently married and now had his own family to think of and provide for. John realized that his mother was facing an almost impossible task. He then decided to do something that for him did not come easy. He would canvas the neighbors for help. "Let me take a couple of empty sacks and make the rounds of our friends. I'm sure that they will have something they can afford to spare to help put me through school." And they did. In abundance—but mostly in kind: bread, cheese, corn, wheat. But for hardscrabble farmers, money was too scarce to provide. Nevertheless, the impossible dream was about to become reality.²⁶

Chieri (1831—1835)

Generally speaking, for the priest who labored as the village schoolmaster in Restoration Piedmont, teaching was more of an involuntary avocation than a fulfilling vocation. And for more than a few his salary, supplemented by parish-related services, barely enabled him to avoid a life of penury.²⁷

²⁶ Lemoyne writes that help for John's school expenses did come from an unexpected source. Learning that Margaret's son was desperately scrounging for the means to meet his school expenses, an anonymous woman from Becchi went straight to the parish house in Castelnuovo where she forcefully informed the pastor, Father Dassano, of the situation. Loud in her praise for Margaret's boy, and louder in her protest that this deserving son was being neglected by the very person who should be assisting him, she stunned the priest into action. In fairness to Father Dassano, it was the first that he had heard that Margaret Bosco had decided to send John to a public school in Chieri. Dassano took prompt action. He called on some of the more prosperous members of his flock and collected a small purse that enabled Margaret to outfit John with shoes and some badly needed school clothes. See *EBM* I: 184.

²⁷ The salary scale of the public school teacher was firmly fixed by the *Regie Patenti*. For example, a teacher of the rhetoric course received a stipend of 800 lire per annum; the teacher of the humanities, 720 lire; the teacher of Latin grammar, 640. In those schools not subsidized by state funds, especially in small towns and villages,

With a superabundance of priests in the archdiocese of Turin, an assignment as parish priest in an urban or rural parish, though much sought after, was not easily attained. Reaching a pastorship was more difficult still. A teaching post or a chaplaincy were among the few options a newly ordained priest had.

Young Father Bosco would later face similar options shortly after his ordination. His first was that of tutor in the household of a wealthy Genoese family with a salary of 1,000 lire per annum. Friends and relatives of the Bosco's felt it was an offer John should not refuse and tried to convince Margaret that her son should accept this windfall opportunity. She spurned the idea with her memorable reply: “My son in the home of a rich gentleman? What would these 1,000 lire profit him, or me, or his brother, if he were to lose his soul.”²⁸

A second option was a chaplaincy in his native Morialdo. The interested parties tried to sweeten the offer with the promise of an increase in the customary salary. A third option, perhaps the most attractive for the young priest, was the position of curate in Castelnuovo where he was greatly admired by the community and worshipped by the children. As an added inducement, he would be working alongside Father Anthony Cinzano, an old and close friend.

But John sidestepped all three options that would have assured him a relatively comfortable future. Instead he was guided by Father Cafasso's advice and enrolled in the Convitto in Turin for his ongoing priestly education.

In his masterful study of the state of the clergy in Restoration Piedmont, Father Aldo Giraudo notes that there were almost 200 priests (average age, 47.5) teaching in obscure village schools or in small towns in the purlieu of the capital. Furthermore, Giraudo's extensive research concludes that the performance of the average priest-teacher receives a “satisfactory” grade (“*generalmente soddisfacente*”). However, this evaluation should be read with caution. The clerical schoolmaster is viewed as “satisfactory” not so much for his academic competence and for “keeping” a good school, but because his contribution to parish activities (especially in the hearing of confessions) was highly satisfactory to an overburdened pastor. As for the quality of classroom instruction of the typical clerical teacher, Giraudo adduces no evidence that the pupils did anything more than regurgitate the previous day's lesson on demand. A good memory was the prime indicator of a student's success. And keeping “order and discipline” in the classroom was looked upon as the teacher's ultimate triumph.²⁹

the local authorities set the salary scale, and it was generally considerably lower. In Chieri, for example, John's first teachers received about 400 lire per annum. Certainly not a lucrative compensation when one learns that a day laborer earned almost as much (if he was fortunate enough to be hired the year round).

²⁸ EBM, II:30.

²⁹ Aldo Giraudo, SDB, *Clero, Seminario, e Società (Roma, 1993)*, 109-115

As long as Carlo Felice's *Regie Patenti* remained in effect, all public school education on the primary and secondary levels in Piedmont was the preserve of the Church. The local bishop even had the last word in the appointment of teachers. It was his "placet", in the form of a written testimonial which vouched for the candidate's probity of life and exemplary conduct in the community, that gained him entree into the schoolhouse. Such watchful oversight must have proven frustrating for the layman who aspired to enter the teaching ranks. Close scrutiny of his personal life added to the fact that he had to wear the traditional priest's cassock in the classroom must have dampened the spirits of many a promising layman from entering the teaching profession, such as it was.³⁰

As John approached his sixteenth year, the Bosco family was going through the travail of dislocation. To bring the contentious relationship with her stepson to an end, Margaret arranged for a division of the family property. Anthony, who had married Anna Rosso of Castelnuovo, had moved into that part of the house that had been deeded to him. Margaret's son, Joseph, now eighteen had left the Becchi homestead in the fall and had begun a sharecropping partnership with his friend, Joseph Febraro, on a nearby farm known as the Susambrino where Margaret had taken up lodging. With the bitter disappointment of his final weeks of schooling at Castelnuovo behind him, John worked alongside his brother in the fields.

It was while these changes were taking place that John had gone on his "begging" errand among the neighbors. Shortly after, Father Dassano managed to drum up badly needed money for the youth's school expenses. At this point in time Margaret Bosco, aware that if her son were to pursue his dream of getting the education he so passionately wanted, decided to act. With her brother Michael's support she began arrangements to place John in Chieri's public school (*Real Collegio di Chieri*).³¹

³⁰ "All professors, teachers, and substitute teachers in this capital, or in Genoa, or in the schools of the region, must at the beginning of each school year present to the school officials a testimonial from the bishop of the diocese in which they are teaching. This aforementioned testimonial must vouch for the individual's good conduct and moral character attesting to the fact that his past performance has redounded to the good of religion and to the state." (*Regie Patenti*, article 48).

"Anyone unable to present such a testimonial before the allotted time shall be forbidden from teaching in a public school of the realm." (Article 49).

³¹ Michele Molineris disputes Lemoyne's claim concerning the status of the public school in Chieri as a "royal school" ("*Scuole regie di Chieri*" *IBM*, I:246). According to Molineris the Chieri school where John began his Latin studies was not a royal but a public school (*scuola pubblica*) supported by the local community. A royal school, on the other hand, was defined as an institution that was subsidized by state funds. Royal schools, mandated by the *Regie Patenti*, were established only in Piedmont's leading cities. But it is difficult to reconcile Chieri not having a royal school since the city was "the principal city of the province (*capoluogo di*

So it happened that at age 16, still a country boy at heart and unaffected by city life, John got his first taste of life in a ‘big’ city. It was the first week of November, 1831, and school had just begun.³² Ten years later he would leave Chieri,³³ a self-assured young man, well grounded in the traditional theology of the day, and filled with a burning desire to answer the call of ministry to the young. It was especially in his late teens while attending public school that the farm boy from Becchi would mature psychologically and when the boy became a man. These four years (1831-1835) would prove to be a real challenge for the country boy from the backwoods of Becchi. They were to test his resourcefulness and mold his character, but above all they would give him the opportunity to achieve what he had so long yearned for—a chance for an education.

The transition from the Susambrino farm to Chieri was to be a stressful period for John’s mother who had to scrimp and save to find suitable room and board for him. Unable to meet payment for his lodging with hard cash, Margaret settled her accounts with the widow Matta, with whom her son would lodge

mandamento) and housed the chief administrative official of the region (*intendente*). A garrison of soldiers was also located there. The city boasted of the establishment of two banks, a squad of carabinieri, and a local magistrature” (G. Casalis, *Dizionario geografico-storico- statistico commerciale*. Torino, 1851) But the fact that John’s schoolmates had to pay an annual tuition seems to support Molineris’ claim. See Michele Molineris, *Don Bosco Inedito (Colle Don Bosco, 1974)*, 179f.

³² Schools in Piedmont during the Restoration opened for classes on November 3. The school which John attended closed its doors at the end of August. See Title 3, Article 22, of the *Regie Patenti*.

³³ When John attended school in Chieri, the city had a population of 9,000 inhabitants. Situated nine miles southeast of Turin it was a thriving city in its day. Lemoyne presents an almost idyllic description of it: “...the air is pure. Six gates give access to its beautiful streets lined with churches, impressive buildings, convents, monasteries, and educational institutions...The town is also rich in monuments, reminiscent of past glories. At the time of our narrative Chieri had 9,000 inhabitants. Twenty cotton mills employed 4,000 workers and several silk mills provided jobs for 500 more. Its outdoor market was among the largest in Piedmont.” *EBM*, I: 187.

Chieri was also a student center catering to hundreds of students in dozens of schools. Various religious groups (Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans, and female religious orders) operated schools in the city.

It stretches one’s credulity to accept Lemoyne’s assertion that John, newly arrived from a summer working on the Susambrino farm, was not at all impressed by a town like Chieri and “did not let himself get carried away by so many new sights.” Lemoyne would later write that when Don Bosco visited Rome for the first time in 1858 he was indeed impressed by the sights of a great city. He could hardly wait for the next morning to dawn so he could set out on a sightseeing tour and whet his insatiable curiosity in visiting monuments, churches, and other places of interest in the Eternal City. And he was impressed! A leopard does not easily change its spots. (*EBM* 5:534).

during his first two years in Chieri, by paying for her son's keep in kind: sacks of vegetables, bushels of corn and wheat, flagons of wine.³⁴ Demands on her meager resources decreased in time as Lucia Matta remitted John's costs for room and board because of the wholesome influence Margaret's boy was exerting over her own lackadaisical son. At his landlady's request John began to tutor John Matta, and in time his efforts turned the indolent youth into an above-average student.³⁵

Had Margaret Bosco been required to pay the annual twelve-lire school fee required of every pupil, as well as meet the incidental expenses that every student in time becomes accountable for, it is most probable that John's experience in Chieri would have been short-lived. Money in the Bosco household was virtually nonexistent. But John soon proved to be very enterprising and resourceful—

³⁴ In the 19th century it was not unusual for parents to pay for their children's education in kind (goods and commodities). In the United States, for example, in the years John Bosco was attending school in Chieri, it was a common practice for farm families who were generally cash poor but crop rich, to pay for their children's tuition in that popular rural institution known as the American academy, with products of their farms. A few academies were blessed with reasonably large endowments, but these remained the exceptions. Most of the thousands of academies of a population thinly spread in mid-19th century America were totally dependent upon the fees and tuition of their students. Tuition especially was the lifeline of those institutions and payment was often made in various forms: "...one day's work, one horse collar, one steel trap, five pounds of coffee, six pounds of sugar, fifty pounds of flour, and four bushels of wheat," are listed as payments by parents for their children in an Indiana academy. See Theodore Sizer, *The Age of the Academies* (New York, 1964).

³⁵ Lucia Matta, nee Lucia Pianta, a widow and friend of Margaret Bosco, was also putting her son through school when John arrived in Chieri. She had rented a house (*la casa Marchisio*), and in agreement with the school authorities and the local pastor (as required by the *Regie Patenti*), her home had been approved to lodge students attending the public school in Chieri. Two students were already renting rooms from Lucia Matta when Margaret applied. However, the monthly rent of 21 lire for room and board was far more than Margaret could afford. So she parlayed farm produce in lieu of hard cash to pay for her son's stay. In turn John made himself useful to the landlady by performing numerous household chores for her.

The widow Matta quickly realized that John's talents and wholesome conduct far exceeded the rental fee she demanded of Margaret. After a few months she arrived at a mutual agreement with John's mother. Her new lodger would tutor her son in exchange for his room and board. This went on for two years (1831-1833). The widow had chosen well. As long as he was in John's presence, her son's attitude changed dramatically for the better. He surprised his teachers by his remarkable progress in his studies, and above all delighted his mother. But John's influence on young Matta went far beyond the textbook. In time John Baptist Matta became mayor of Castelnovo, and in 1867 he enrolled his son Edward in Don Bosco's Oratory school. See Aldo Giraudo and Giuseppe Biancardi, *Qui é vissuto Don Bosco* (Torino, 1988), 93-94. Also *EBM*, I: chapters 28 and 31 passing.

qualities which would stand him in good stead in the future. Demands for his tutoring services, which both parents and classmates eagerly sought, helped him defray most of his school expenses. Word that John was a youth who could be relied upon quickly spread and soon odd jobs came his way. Moreover, his superior ability as a student and his exemplary deportment in and out of school exempted him from paying the *Minervale*, or the annual tuition charge of twelve lire. As noted above, John was to enjoy this exemption throughout the four years he spent in school.

When John enrolled in the public school in Chieri in 1831, the scholastic program and the grade sequence then in effect conformed to the requirements set by the *Regie Patenti*. The six year grade schedule (John completed the first three in just ten months) is seen below:

John Bosco's Public School Years in Chieri (1831—1835)

School Year	Class	Teacher	Special Events
1831-32	Sesta (Elem.Latin I) Quinta (Elem.Latin II) Quarta (Elem.Latin III)	V. Pugnetti P. Valimberti V. Cima	Organizes “Happy-Go-Lucky Club.” Death of John’s friend, P. Braja. Lives in the Marchisio house with Lucia Matta for two years.
1832-33	Grammatica (Latin Grammar)	G. Giusiana	
1833-34	Umanità (Humanities Course)	P. Banaudi	Strikes up friendship with “Jonah”. Challenges, defeats the mountebank. Seeks admission into the Franciscan Order. Tends bar at the Pianta Caffè. Takes up lodging with Cumino the tailor.
1834-35	Rettorica (Rhetoric Course)	G. F. Bosco	Meets L. Comollo. Resolves his vocation problem. Prepares to enter the seminary.

“School Days...Golden Rule Days”

In Chieri

When John was ushered into the beginner’s classroom (“*Sesta classe*”) on his first day of school he was understandably edgy and even somewhat embarrassed. Among classmates five and six years younger than he, the newcomer felt like a giant among pygmies (“*La mia corporatura mi faceva comparire come un alto pilastro in mezzo ai miei compagni.*”).³⁶ Why the new arrival was placed on the bottom rung of the school ladder was later explained by Don Bosco himself: “Since my schooling up to then had been somewhat spotty and had not really amounted to much, I was advised to start among the beginners.”³⁷ Obviously the headmaster had been guided only by hearsay when he assessed John’s prior school performance. What he did not know was that the stocky farm boy who towered over his pint-size classmates in size and intelligence had earlier been tutored by Father Calosso and had spent endless hours alone with his books. And if he experienced first-day jitters, it was understandable. Still fresh in his mind were those frustrating months in Castelnuovo where he had been the target of an aging and somewhat doddering and crusty schoolmaster. But that was soon to change. For a new boy in a strange town, a friend in need was about to become a friend in deed. His encounter with the man who would become one of his first teachers augured well for the future.

The first person I met was Father Eustace Valimberti whom I still remember with great fondness. He began giving me lots of good advice on how to stay out of trouble. Then he invited me to serve his Mass, an opportunity I frequently took advantage of since it also gave me the opportunity to profit from his kind counsels. Next he took me to see the headmaster of the school and later introduced me to all the teachers.³⁸

If Father Valimberti’s kindness helped ease John’s anxiousness on that first day of school, his new teacher’s welcome put him completely at ease. Father Valerian Pugnetti not only opened his heart to the boy, but would soon even open the door of his home to him. Reminiscing on those first anxious days,

³⁶ *IMO*, 48.

³⁷ *IMO*, *ibid.*

³⁸ *IMO*, 48. Actually the priest who befriended John was Father **Placido** Valimberti. In the first volume of his *Memorie Biografiche*, Lemoyne repeats Don Bosco’s misnomer. The headmaster of the school was the Dominican Father Pius Eusebius Sibilla, a state appointee since the Chieri school was a state institution. As the school’s principal administrator there is a strange absence of any kind of interaction between headmaster Sibilla and student John Bosco. In Don Bosco’s account of his school days in Chieri the man most responsible for the operation of the school is a silent and distant figure. (See *EBM*, I:188).

Don Bosco would write poignantly of the way his first teacher assisted him with his lessons and invited him to his table. In looking for an explanation for Pugnetti’s warmhearted treatment he wrote: “I suppose it was because I was much older than his other pupils, and the goodwill I always showed must have won him over. I shall always remember how he never failed to go out of his way to give me a helping hand in every possible way.”³⁹

Father Pugnetti did everything possible to smooth the way for his new pupil, but John from the start had felt out of place among his diminutive classmates. He stood head and shoulders above them in every way. For the first two months he worked hard and long at his books and assignments with the express purpose of showing his teacher that he deservedly belonged in a higher grade. In January of 1832, he asked for and received permission to take an examination that would prove his competence and merit a more advanced standing in school. The test results clearly indicated that he had indeed been misplaced. He was promptly promoted to the fifth grade (“*Quinta classe*”). John was elated at the news of his promotion. Not only would he no longer be confined among the little folk, but he was especially pleased to learn that his new teacher was the man who had earlier befriended him, Father Placido Valimberti.

During that winter of 1832, as far as John’s work in school was concerned, nothing succeeded like success. By spring he had been placed at the head of the class. Again he renewed his request to take another placement examination with the confident expectation that he would be promoted to a higher grade. He passed with flying colors and was moved up to the “*Quarta classe*.”

This time John’s teacher was not a priest. Vincenzo Cima, seminarian and lord of the “*Quarta classe*”, had a reputation for being a tough-minded and demanding pedagogue. Their initial encounter seemed headed for a rocky start. As the stocky curlyhead farm boy from Castelnuovo faced his new teacher for the first time, Cima sized him up and down, and then exclaimed loud enough for all the class to hear: “Well, what we have here is either a big blockhead or some kind of mental giant.” Looking straight at his new pupil he demanded, “So what have you got to say for yourself?”⁴⁰

Though taken aback for a moment, John did not lose his poise. Somewhat abashed he answered, “I guess I’m just something in between. All I want to do is study hard in school and get along with everybody the best way I can.” Cima’s ominous tone melted. John’s sincerity had completely disarmed him. “If you can show me that goodwill, then believe me, I’ll keep you busy with your school work.” His voice softened as he continued “If any problems come up, just let me know and we’ll work them out together.” Greatly relieved John ended that

³⁹ *IMO*, 39.

⁴⁰ *IMO*, 49.

episode with the words, "It was wonderful to hear those words, and I thanked him with all my heart." ⁴¹

Now happily settled in the new class and surrounded by companions closer to his age and size, it did not take long for John to make his presence known. An incident soon occurred which made him the subject of conversation throughout the school. The oft-told story of the forgotten textbook which demonstrated the prowess of John's incredible powers of total recall has become one of the legendary episodes of his adventurous school experiences. We let Don Bosco himself narrate it without embellishments:

After a few weeks in his [Cima's] class, something happened that soon had everybody talking. One day our teacher was going over a passage from Cornelius Nepos' life of Agesilaus in our Latin literature text. I had thoughtlessly left my book at home and was trying to cover up my forgetfulness by studiously concentrating all my attention on my Latin grammar, pretending it was the same text that everyone else was following. My classmates quickly caught on to what I was doing, and pretty soon someone began to snigger, and then others took it up. Before long the whole class was laughing out loud.

Their outburst naturally upset the teacher who looked straight at me since I had become the center of attraction. "I want to know what's going on," he shouted. Then he ordered me to stand and read and construe the Latin passage he had just explained.

I got up from my seat and read the assigned passage just as though I was reading it right out of the textbook. Next I translated the passage and followed that by repeating the teacher's explanation—all from memory, of course, since I did not have the actual Latin text before me. When I had finished, my classmates broke out into a round of applause to express their admiration for what I had just done. But this only riled the teacher even more. No doubt his feelings were hurt and his pride too since it was the first time that anyone could recall that his class had ever gotten out of control.

By now the teacher had drawn close to me. He suddenly covered the book I was holding with his hand. The ruckus I had created must have really angered him, and he took a swing at me. But I saw the blow coming and ducked out of the way. He then demanded an explanation for the commotion I had caused.

The explanation came but not from me. Different voices in the classroom piped up the answer. "He didn't read from our Latin textbook at all," someone cried. "That's his Latin grammar he's holding," a second added. A third voice chimed in, "He did it all from memory!"

⁴¹ *IMO, ibid.*

It then dawned on my teacher what had really happened. But to reassure himself he decided to test me further. He told me to continue to read from that passage he had just finished explaining. I did so. After I quoted several more sentences from memory, he ordered me to stop.

He paused long enough to let things cool down. By now the hostility in his voice was gone. He then turned to me and said: “Because of your remarkable gift, I’m going to forget everything that has happened here today. You have been blessed with a remarkable talent. So all I’m going to say to you is: Put it to good use.”⁴²

John completed his first year of school in Chieri with outstanding success and came out of it unscathed. In ten months he had skipped his way through three grades (*Sesta, Quinta, Quarta*), and at the school year’s end was promoted into the advanced Latin course of *Grammatica*. His performance in the classroom, in fact, had been so remarkable that his name was inscribed in the honor roll for that year (“*In albo studiosorum grammatices*”).⁴³

In the summer of 1832, John returned to Castelnuovo where he tried to induce Father Joseph Vaccarino, the newly appointed pastor of nearby Buttigliera d’Asti, to initiate him into the study of the Latin classic authors. But the priest declined, alleging that the duties of his new assignment precluded any activity of this kind.⁴⁴ So John spent the summer working and studying at the Susambrino farm.

⁴² Englished from *IMO*, 49-50. The incident which took place in Vincenzo Cima’s class was an early demonstration of John’s phenomenal memory, a talent which no doubt contributed much to his success in school. He used to say that all he had to do was to read something once to remember it always. It was not an idle boast. By his final year in Chieri, he had become an enthusiastic and omnivorous reader of Latin and Italian classics, and he often used his power of total recall to amuse and entertain his friends: “I often gave public and private recitations...I knew by heart many long excerpts from the classics, especially the poets Dante, Petrarch, Tasso, Parini and many others.” (*EBM*, I:233).

Nor did Don Bosco’s extraordinary memory wane with age. His biographer has written that as late as 1886, when on one of his frequent strolls with his Salesians, he would on occasion recite entire chapters from St. Paul’s epistles in both Greek and Latin to them, for he knew the entire New Testament in both languages by heart. (*EBM*, 1:185 *passim*).

⁴³ A student’s grade was designated by a single Latin word, or two at the most. Its evaluation could be either devastating or exhilarating. The following were the grades given to students after their end-of-the-year examinations: *Male* (hopeless); *Nescit* (practically a dunce); *Medie* (has to struggle); *Fere bene* (shows good promise); *Fere optime* (very good performance); *Egregie* (superior student). As a matter of record, all of John’s grades during his four years of public school in Chieri fell within the last two categories.

⁴⁴ Father Vaccarino was to regret that he had shunted off John’s request. As he later told a friend: “Had I known then what Divine Providence had in store for this young man, I certainly would not have hesitated to accept this pleasant task. My

Like every other student who enrolled in a state school during those years, John was subjected to a code of conduct that transcended the academic curriculum. From the moment he crossed the threshold of the classroom until the hour he went to bed, his every waking hour was lived within the constraints imposed upon him by the articles of the *Regie Patenti*—all 205 of them. Even after the last school bell had rung, vigilant eyes would dog his every step. Students were forbidden to enter any local cafe or attend a stage performance. Swimming for school boys was banned. Playing in the streets, especially if it disturbed the horses or annoyed the merchants, was frowned upon. No student was to be seen dining in a city hotel restaurant or in a *trattoria*. He was to banish even the thought of attending a public dance or wearing a masque at carnival time. Students were strictly enjoined to mind their manners when in the presence of a teacher. Any act of disobedience or disrespect called for a three-day suspension, to be followed by a public apology before the entire student body. Any prolonged absence from school called for prompt expulsion. Nor was a student to have in his possession a book of any kind that had not been previously inspected by the headmaster.⁴⁵

Throughout John's four years in Chieri, Latin was the preeminent academic offering. Close behind was the study of the Renaissance master poets. An examination of the syllabi and the curricula of the Chieri *collegio* clearly indicates that the school was in essence a Latin grammar school. It is not surprising, therefore, that the homeland of the Renaissance clung to the classical curriculum in its secondary schools more doggedly than any other western country. And Chieri's public school was no exception. This reflected the firm hold that the classical languages had upon the intellectual life of Italy. To gain entry into an Italian university (or seminary) in the 19th century, the knowledge of Latin was a *sine qua non*. During John's student day in Chieri, all lectures at the University of Turin, for example, were regularly given in Latin. And, of

studies, and any sacrifice would have been a small price to pay, if I could now say: 'I was privileged to teach Don Bosco.'" (*EBM*, I:204).

⁴⁵ John was not about to let his natural exuberant nature be fettered and manacled by such restraints, reasonable though they may have appeared to him. By the end of his first year in Chieri he organized a kind of "Merrymakers Club"—*La Società dell'Allegria*. Its sole purpose was to give its members an outlet for honest fun. Membership requirements were few: A glum exterior was forbidden; swearing and offensive language were grounds for expulsion; each member was expected to be exemplary in his religious and scholastic duties. Other than that, John's merrymakers put on entertainments ("I was much in demand"), helped struggling students and even tutored them at home. In his memoir, other than a brief account of his organizing the *Società dell'Allegria*, Don Bosco described no specific activities that his group engaged in. But one can be sure of one thing—a good time (notwithstanding the *Regie Patenti*) was had by all. (See *EMO*, 68-69).

course, any candidate who aspired to the priesthood had to be virtually conversant in the language of the Caesars and of the Church. ⁴⁶

Small wonder then that Latin dominated the curriculum in John’s school, from the first babblings of declensions and conjugations in the *Sesta* to the total immersion in the masterworks of classical Rome in the final year of *Rettorica*.

* * *

In retrospect, John’s first year of school in Chieri had more ups than downs. As one of Lucia Matta’s boarders, he was now reasonably well fed and lodged. Expenses for room and board had been waived because of the tutorial help he was giving the landlady’s son. He had earned the praise of his teachers and had gained the admiration of his schoolmates. In just ten months he had completed half of the six-year school cycle. Just when it seemed that things could not get any better, they did.

⁴⁶ It was Herbert Spencer, the prominent English philosopher and Don Bosco’s contemporary who first attempted to loosen European schoolmasters from their ancient moorings of Latin and Greek. In his famed essay, “What Education is of Most Worth?” his resounding answer left little room for doubt: “Scientific education, not classical learning, because it prepares a young person for complete living.” Spencer later wrote that when his essay was published, its leading thesis that the teaching of the classics should give place to the teaching of science, “was regarded by nine out of ten cultivated persons as monstrous.”

Sixty years earlier, in Colonial America it was Benjamin Franklin who first attempted to dethrone the classical languages (quite unsuccessfully) from the lofty perch they had so long enjoyed in England’s colonies. He considered Latin and Greek the “quackery of literature” and compared them to the “*chapeau bras*” of learning, like the hat carried by elegant European gentlemen, a hat never put on the head for fear of disarranging the wig, but always carried quite uselessly under the arm.

Later in life Franklin recounted with approving good humor an incident which illustrated, according to him, the futility of studying the classical tongues. During the treaty negotiations between the Six Indian Nations and Virginia in 1744, the Colonials offered to take six Indian boys to be educated in their College of William and Mary where they would be taught Latin and the wisdom of the ancients. The Indian chiefs considered the offer carefully, then declined with the explanation that in times past several of their young men had been sent to colonial schools to study the ancients. But the chiefs complained that they had come back “bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the forest, unable to bear hunger or cold, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, or kill an enemy, spoke our own languages imperfectly, were neither fit for warriors, hunters, nor counselors. They were totally good for nothing.”

Then the Indians made a counterproposal: They would take twelve Virginia lads back with them into the forest and see that they were given a proper education. H. Smyth, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1905-1907, 10 vols.), X, 97-105. The offer was not accepted.

Dominican Father Hyacinth Giusiana was now John's teacher of the *Grammatica* course of his second year (1832-1833). Again it was his good fortune to fall into the hands of an understanding teacher and mentor who in a short time became very fond of his new pupil. Don Bosco never forgot the man whom in his memoir he called his "cherished teacher" ("*venerando mio professore*"). The bond created that year between the two would hold firm until Giusiana's death in 1844.⁴⁷

Except for a bizarre and vaguely described school incident of that year, little has surfaced regarding John's performance in Father Giusiana's *Grammatica* course. Yet it was his Dominican mentor who rescued him from what could have been an embarrassing and damaging predicament which his pupil had thoughtlessly brought on himself. Had it not been for the priest's intervention, John's early bubble of success could easily have burst.

The story is sketchy at best. It seemed that in August of 1833, as the school year was coming to an end, an official dispatched to Chieri by the authorities in Turin had arrived to examine the students of the upper grades. His assigned task was to examine them, evaluate the results, and recommend those who qualified for promotion into the next grade. Father Joseph Gozzano had a reputation of being a kind of merciless and cold-blooded inquisitor. He also knew that his reputation had preceded him. To build up their confidence he assured all the examinees that "he would not be unduly strict." But his well-meaning words did little to assuage their collective sense of impending doom. However, Giusiana's pupils had been well prepared, and all 45 were promoted into the *Umanitas* course. One barely made it by the skin of his teeth. His name was John Bosco.⁴⁸

Looking back on that occasion, Don Bosco's explanation for his near failure is fuzzy at best. His recollection of the affair is short on details but long on

⁴⁷ A native of Cuneo, Father Hyacinth Giusiana (1774-1844) also took John's spiritual direction in hand and became his confessor. Shortly after his ordination, young Father Bosco let his "cherished teacher" know that he had not been forgotten. Among other things, he was not about to forget the man who ten years earlier had saved his schoolboy skin. "I went to Chieri and said Mass in St. Dominic's church where my old confessor, Father Giusiana was expecting me with fatherly affection. He was so deeply moved that his eyes welled up with tears during my Mass. I spent the entire day with him; it was like being in heaven." (*EBM* I:387).

⁴⁸ Articles 72 and 73 of the *Regie Patenti* mandated that examinations for students attending schools of the realm, who were preparing to transfer into the upper grades, had to submit to outside examiners. "Only those students who have passed their examinations at the end of the school year and have been examined by an authorized official can be promoted into the succeeding Latin class", ("*Da una classe di Latinità all' altra*") Article 72. "This qualifying examination will be given in the principal city of the district and administered by a delegated official as directed by the chief school administrator [in Turin]" Article 73. Chieri had been designated as that "principal" city.

speculation. He wrote, “All forty-five of the students in my class were promoted, as for me, I nearly failed because I had allowed some of my classmates to copy my answers.”⁴⁹ There is no further explanation of what had actually happened. No doubt John had used poor judgment in allowing his more harassed (and wilier) friends to copy his school work. And it was not the first time. On other occasions his companions had exploited his generous spirit and had copied his work and had even persuaded him to do their assignments for them. Some stiff warnings from John’s teachers soon brought this practice to a halt.

In the meantime, Father Giusiana had come to his pupil’s rescue. He arranged for him to sit for a makeup examination which he passed effortlessly. Apparently John’s indiscretion was not held against him for he again found his name “*in albo studiosorum grammatices.*”

As All Saints day 1833 neared, John’s third year in Chieri was approaching. During late summer and early fall, between farm chores and work in the fields, he had given every spare moment of his time to his books. Now he was about to enter the wonderful world of the ancient classics and the Italian Renaissance poets.

Father Giovanni Bosco (no relation), who had originally been assigned to teach the course in the humanities (*Umanità*), was for some unexplained reason replaced by Father Pietro Banaudi (1802-1885). For John it proved to be a happy trade-off. Young Banaudi was that uncommon schoolmaster who had the rare talent of being a man among men and a boy among boys. Highly regarded by his pupils he never had to resort to the rod. Don Bosco described him later as “a model teacher” who “loved his pupils as if they were his own sons. They in turn treated him like an affectionate father.”⁵⁰ The image of this warmhearted and inspirational teacher would long remain in John’s memory. And who is to gainsay that it was not Father Banaudi’s kindly ghost that hovered over Don Bosco’s shoulder when he was defining the qualities of the ideal Salesian educator in his famed treatise on education which he drafted in 1877?⁵¹

⁴⁹ *EMO*, 70.

⁵⁰ However, Banaudi was not averse to knocking heads if necessary. It was he who entered the classroom during the celebrated brawl when John had gone to Comollo’s rescue. Louis had been taunted by several bullies and a free-for-all had ensued: “At that moment the teacher [Father Banaudi] came into the classroom. Seeing arms and legs from everywhere amidst an out-of-this world uproar, he began to shout and to strike blows left and right.” After Banaudi had learned the cause of the brouhaha, he laughed the whole thing off. Boys will be boys. For John and Louis, it was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. For this uncharacteristic display of John’s temper, see *EMO*, 79, and *EBM* I: 251-252.

⁵¹ For the most definitive study to date on Don Bosco’s educational thinking, see Pietro Braido, *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù in Introduzione e testi critici a cura di Pietro Braido, SDB*, in *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane*, 171-321. (Roma, LAS, 1985).

Under Banaudi's guiding hand John honed his language and literary skills. It was during the year of the humanities course that the eager learner became hooked on books. He began borrowing copies of literary classics from Elia, the Jewish bookseller for a *soldo* apiece. Frequently he would devour the work of some classic author by the glow of a flickering candle and then return the book on the following day. But this relentless reading of literary works almost proved his undoing:

Often, when I would awaken in the early morning hours, I would find myself holding on to the copy of some book, like selections from Livy, which I had begun reading the night before. This almost uncontrollable desire to read eventually damaged my health, and for the next several years, I sometimes felt that I already had one foot in the grave. But I learned my lesson and have since then advised others not to overdo things. The night is meant for sleeping. A person may be strong and healthy, but continually reading into the late hours will eventually take its toll on his health.⁵²

Perhaps nothing better demonstrated the close bonding that Banaudi had created with his pupils than their display of affection on the occasion of their beloved teacher's namesday. With effusive poetry and purple prose, garnished with small gifts, they feted their beloved priest on the feastday of St. Peter. For Banaudi it was a day when his cup raneth over.

Not to be outdone, some weeks later he invited his whole class to a picnic in the country to mark the approaching end of the school year. Good wine and good food, spiced with enthusiastic singing, were plentiful on that occasion, and a good time was had by all. On their return to Chieri, the festive group was stopped by a friend of Banaudi. The two had a hurried whispered exchange. It appeared that something was amiss and needed the priest's attention. After a quick good-bye, he left with the stranger.

Shortly after their host's departure, the happy group returning home chanced upon some schoolmates who were heading for a nearby canal for an afternoon swim. The "red pool", despite its deep water and treacherous swirling eddies, was a popular swimming hole. The stifling heat quickly persuaded a few of John's companions that a cool dip in the canal would be a refreshing climax to a wonderful day. But what had begun as a splash of fun in the canal ended in tragedy. Soon after John and his friends reached town, a breathless messenger brought the news that their schoolmate, Philip Camandona, had drowned. Ironically, it was the same youth whose voice had been so persuasive in convincing some of his companions to join the swimming party.⁵³

⁵² *EMO*, 108.

⁵³ The incident of the drowning pool can be found in Michele Molineris, *Don Bosco Inedito* (Colle Don Bosco, 1974), 222f; in Secondo Caselle, *Giovanni Bosco*

John’s love for classical literature never burned so brightly as it did at the end of his humanities course. Father Banaudi had done his job well. And if the proof of the pudding is in the eating, that proof, in John’s case, was never better illustrated than at the end-of-the-year examinations when the state-authorized examiner descended upon Chieri to decide the fate of the students of the upper grades.

John exuded supreme confidence as examination day drew near. No sooner did he learn that Father Francesco Lanteri, the state examiner, had arrived in town that John contrived to meet with him personally. Lanteri was not a little surprised when he learned the reason for John’s visit. Almost with an air of bravado, the youth let it be known that he was anticipating good grades for his impending examination. In his memoir Don Bosco did not describe the conversation that was supposed to have taken place on that occasion. Lemoyne, who must have learned of it from Don Bosco, recorded a scrap of that unusual exchange which took place on that August day in 1834:

“What can I do for you, son,” Father Lanteri asked the youth who stood before him.

“Actually, I’ve come to see you because I have a request to ask.”

“What is it?”

“I want you to know that I’m expecting good grades from you for my examination.”

Father Lanteri took no offense from this almost presumptuous request. Perhaps it was because of John’s disarming naiveté. He even smiled and answered, “I must say that you certainly don’t beat around the bush.”

On the following day John faced his examiner. When queried on the works of the Greek dramatist Thucydides, he responded brilliantly. Lanteri then picked up a

Studente (Torino, 1988) 116; and in *EBM* I:244f. It has sometimes been obliquely intimated that John objected to joining the swimming party and cavorting nude in the canal waters because it offended his sense of modesty. Perhaps to some extent it did. But it should also be remembered that article 42 of the *Regie Patenti* severely forbade swimming for students in the Chieri school. (*‘Resta rigorosamente proibito agli studenti il nuoto...’*) First-time offenders faced a two-month suspension. A second offense constituted grounds for not being promoted to the next grade. (Article 43: *“La seconda esclusi dalla promozione alla classe superiore in fine dell’anno”*). With examinations only a few weeks away, John and most of his schoolmates were not about to take that risk.

text that contained selections from Cicero. As he thumbed through the pages, he asked the ever-confident John:

“Well, what selection from Cicero shall we discuss?”

“Whatever you like,” came the answer.

Lanteri riffled through the volume and stopped at the “Paradoxes of the Stoics”(Paradoxia Stoicorum). Offering the open text to John he suggested: “How about reading and translating this opening passage?”

“If it’s all the same with you, I’ll recite it from memory.”

He then proceeded to do so and followed up his recitation with a near-perfect translation of the passage, also from memory.

Lanteri brought the examination to a halt. He had heard enough to realize that he had just examined a student of extraordinary talent. He told John, “Let’s end it here. Shake hands my boy. I think the two of us can certainly be friends.” With that he shut the text and began to chat amicably with the youth who had given such a remarkable performance. And yes, John did receive the “good grades” he had asked for.⁵⁴

John completed his course in the humanities with the same impressive results he had demonstrated since his arrival in Chieri. In fact, his performance had been so exceptional that his teachers attempted to persuade him to forego his final year of rhetoric and apply for the qualifying examination that would gain him entry into the two-year philosophy program:

On the strength of my performance in my examinations, my teachers, especially Father Banaudi, encouraged me to take the examination for the course in philosophy....But since I had enjoyed my study of literature so

⁵⁴ *IBM*, I:327. Secondo Caselle, commenting on John’s conversation with the state examiner thought that the youth’s attitude towards him was rather cheeky, “*con faccia tosta*”. (Caselle, *op. cit.*, 116). But Father Lanteri apparently had the good sense to realize that he was facing a sincerely ambitious student who was determined to receive “good grades” in his examination and would prove it with his performance. Father Lanteri (not to be confused with his contemporary the Venerable Pio Lanteri) was born in Briga in 1810. His father was a doctor who lived and practiced medicine in Nizza. The young Lanteri studied at the University of Turin where he received his degree in classical literature. He was respected as a gifted and erudite writer and authored textbooks on history and Latin literature for school use. Lanteri died of tuberculosis at the age of 42.

much, I decided to enroll in the final and last class which was the course in rhetoric.

This was one occasion in which John profited by not listening to his teachers. The ensuing course in rhetoric would not only give his public school education its final polish, but would also enable him to pursue an in-depth study of the classics and hone his writing skills.⁵⁵

Again heaven smiled on John when he returned to Chieri for his concluding year in public school (1834–835). Father Giovanni Bosco, his teacher for the rhetoric course, had returned from a leave of absence as the school year was about to start. Although in his memoir Don Bosco does not mention him by name,

⁵⁵ When John returned to Chieri for his final year in public school (1834-1835), he learned to his keen disappointment that Father Banaudi had terminated his teaching career in that city. He was only 32. It is difficult to reconcile his departure at such an early age with Lemoyne’s statement that “... Father Banaudi, John’s former teacher, had retired [from Chieri] after many long years of teaching.” (*EBM*, I:248).

Banaudi may have been gone, but he was not forgotten. During the Easter holidays of the following year, John paid his beloved teacher a surprise visit in the town of Barge. In an undated letter, probably written after his return to Chieri, John describes his encounter with Banaudi. The priest had just completed Palm Sunday services when he observed John waiting for him in the town square. Their reunion was an emotional one and the elated pastor insisted that his former student remain with him as a house-guest as long as he could. But after two days, John felt it was time to leave. Banaudi became distraught and pleaded with John to stay longer—“...even going so far as to hide my umbrella !” Don Bosco wrote later.

It was a disconsolate pair that slowly took the road leading out of town. Their parting was a tearful one. “When I hinted that it was finally time to leave, tears came to his eyes and his voice choked. I tried to speak but could not. Then we both regained our composure, exchanged a few more words and shook hands. Without looking back I hastened back to Pinerolo.” (*IBM*, I:359-360).

Other than John’s visit with his teacher in Barge, Banaudi’s whereabouts remain unknown for many years. But we do catch a glimpse of him again almost twenty years later. In that year (1855) Don Bosco was working on the final draft of his *La Storia d’Italia*. Lemoyne contends that Don Bosco on several occasions conferred with Banaudi to solicit his measured judgment regarding certain controversial events in church history. However, Father Albert Caviglia puts a different spin on the reason for these meetings. In his critical edition of Don Bosco’s *History of Italy*, Caviglia maintains that the author wanted Banaudi to review his manuscript and suggest language and stylistic improvements. He sought his master’s touch to enhance the quality of his writing:

“...At times Don Bosco used to bring portions of his completed manuscript to Father Peter Banaudi, so that the former teacher of his humanities course at Chieri could give his work a critical evaluation. Lemoyne has suggested that the author wanted him to verify certain events in Church history. But it is my contention that Don Bosco hoped to profit from any stylistic and literary improvements his former mentor could offer.” Alberto Caviglia, *La storia d’Italia, capolavoro di Don Bosco* (Torino, 1935),1xx.

several contemporaries have described teacher Bosco as an affable and understanding man. This would later be confirmed in Don Bosco's first published work, his brief biography of Louis Comollo (1844). In its pages his praise for his namesake and former teacher is effusive. "He [Father Francesco Giovanni Bosco] had become an idol among all the boys in school because of his kindness, patience, and the courteous way in which he dealt with his pupils. I shall long remember the special interest he always took in helping us with our studies."

There is little record of John's academic achievement during his last year as a student in Chieri. But we do know that he completed the rhetoric course with his usual diligence and merit, winning school honors and again was exempt from paying the annual student fee, the *Minervale*.

By summer's end of 1835, John Bosco's public school experiences had come full circle. Four years had elapsed (1831-1835) since the ingenuous and apprehensive farm boy had arrived in the big city in search of his impossible dream of securing an education. Now his nonage was behind him. His personality and character had matured. The boy had become a man. In the process he had cut a wide swath during his four years in public school.

Had it been customary in those days to vote for "the most popular boy in school," John would have won that award too, hands down. Each of his teachers had come to recognize and appreciate his intellectual gifts which melded so genuinely with his religious aspirations. He had become the unchallenged leader of his school companions. Even their parents doted on him seeking him out at every opportunity to tutor their sons. They invited him into their homes because they saw in him the ideal role model for their sons. He in turn repaid them by entertaining them with story and song and hocus-pocus from his bottomless bag of magic tricks. In the end it was his courteous affability and the wholesome goodness of his personality that charmed and attracted parents and companions alike to him.

In retrospect, one of the unheralded blessings John enjoyed during his Chieri experience was that he was never "institutionalized"—that is, never constrained to live out his school days behind the confining walls of a *collegio* where forbidding school rules would have inhibited his initiative and stifled his enthusiasm.

Rather, John lived the life of a free spirit, having to make it on his own. By tutoring his schoolmates and doing odd jobs he always managed to get by. Sometimes he went hungry, a hunger that he partially appeased by his voracious appetite for books. But most important, he got a realistic taste of the world and in the process learned what spirited students, poor in the goods of this world but with a rich vision of the value of an education, had to endure to survive. These experiences he never forgot.