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INTRODUCTION

We are back and we are picking up where we left. *The Institute of Salesian Studies* of *Don Bosco Hall* (Berkeley – USA) and the *Centro Studi Don Bosco* of the *Università Pontificia Salesiana* (Rome – Italy) are proud to present the new volume of the *Journal of Salesian Studies*, after a hiatus of several years.

The first aim of the collaboration between the two institutes was to preserve this valuable tool of Salesian studies for the Salesian community. The rich history of the Journal with the great variety of articles has relevance. Not only within the Salesian world of the Congregation of the Salesians of Don Bosco but also far beyond. Moreover, we are convinced that in the future the scientific and academic articles of the Journal can contribute to the diffusion and deepening of the spirituality, pedagogy, history of Saint Francis de Sales, Saint John Bosco, the Salesians, and the Salesian family in the broadest sense of the word. Reality teaches us that within the Salesian world English is increasingly becoming the most widely read and spoken language, not only in Europe but also in both the Americas and Asia. More than ever there is the need for a journal published in this language.

The content of the Journal will not change that much. We continue to publish articles in English, articles that deal with the education and evangelization of the youth in a Salesian perspective; contributions describing Salesian identity, charisma, spirituality; articles focusing on the preventive system from a historical or a new perspective, items looking at how the historical heritage can still have meaning today, communications of best practices in certain areas, and new books published around the world. Central figures are certainly Saint Francis de Sales, Saint Jane de Chantal, Don Bosco, Madre Maria Domenica Mazzarello. In each issue there is also a place for book reviews and presentations of books related to the topics of the Journal.

However, starting afresh, several choices have been made on a strategic level. First and foremost, work is being done and will be done on broader cooperation between the different continents. We live in a globalized world and the Journal

not only wants to contribute *to* the entire English-speaking area but wants also to receive contributions *from* all four corners of the world. Exemplary of this is that in this first issue not only brings contributions from North America, but also Europe and Asia. We hope to receive more and more articles from different parts of the world.

In addition, and that is a second strategic choice, the Journal is made available in digital format (pdf and kindle) on various forums and this free of charge. This means that there is no paywall anymore: the articles are considered a contribution to the expansion and development of the Salesian identity, spirituality, pedagogy and history. Making the Journal freely available increases the accessibility of knowledge of the Salesian heritage.

At the same time, however, it will also be possible to order the Journal in a printed version via the option “print-on-demand”. In this way, we retain the possibility to make it available in the countless libraries, study houses, religious communities, etc. This procedure has been deliberately kept as simple as possible. (For the procedure see page 114 or see our website.) To be informed of the publication of a new issue it is enough to subscribe to our newsflash or to follow our Facebook page.

The first steps towards relaunching this magazine were taken in late fall 2019 and early winter 2020, with reciprocal visits to both institutes. Even though the intention was to make a quick restart and not waste time, as is known, the global pandemic threw a spanner in the works. We learned from Sint Francis de Sales: “Have patience with all things, but chiefly have patience with yourself.” But the first issue of this new volume is now a fact, the second issue is in the making.

In this issue we find four articles. In the first article, Joe Boenzi (USA) explores how pop culture storytelling and the gospel can provide clues to revive Don Bosco’s message for young people today. He describes how young heroes like Harry Potter can give new meaning and how the young Don Bosco can once again become a model for young people.

With the second article, we dive into the archives. John Rozario Lourdusamy (India) studied the spiritual profile and teachings in the first seven volumes of Don Bosco’s epistolary. Even though the letters Don Bosco wrote were not primarily intended to transmit spiritual experiences. By busting the letters, Rozario succeeded in bringing out several interesting themes. In this issue we find the first part of his two-part contribution.

The last two articles are linked to each other by their common theme. My contribution (Wim Collin, Belgium) primarily studies Don Bosco’s Memories

of the Oratorio to investigate the role of the presence of an educator in the choices Bosco made. In the second part the biographies written by Don Bosco are examined (the well-known ones such as Savio, Magone and Besucco, but also the less well-known ones such as Pietro, Severino and Valentino) to investigate what is the effect of the absence of the educator in education means.

In the last article, Paul Formosa (Malta) takes up the theme of presence again. He builds a bridge between the concepts of the Salesian presence between the young and the presence in therapeutic encounters. Don Bosco's experience and indications have meaning even today in contexts we would not expect.

In the book reviews section, we find a review by John Dickson (United Kingdom) of the first volume of the Salesian Sources. A few years ago, this masterpiece appeared in the English translation, and soon the second part will also be available in the Italian version.

To conclude, we need your help with the relaunch of this Journal. First, we need writers: people who want to contribute on a scientific or academic level to this Journal. People that write about history, spirituality, education around the figures of Don Bosco and Saint Francis de Sales and the broad movement around these saints.

But we can also use other help! We need your help with the promotion of the Journal. Share the news, share articles, and share the entire issue. That is the message, the digital version of the magazine is offered free of charge, and with the *Institute* and the *Centro Studi* we will continue to watch over the quality of the articles.

After all, we also need people from within our Salesian world who can proofread and correct errors. English is one of the most widely spoken languages, but for almost everyone it is the second language. So, every sentence has to be read once, sometimes even twice to make sure there are no errors in it. That kind of help is also more than welcome.

You can contact me with all questions, comments, and suggestions. I hope you enjoy reading it.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Wim Collin', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Wim Collin, sdb
Editor in Chief

STORYTELLING, POP-CULTURE AND RE-LAUNCHING THE GOSPEL MESSAGE WITH DON BOSCO AMONG A NEW GENERATION OF POST-MODERN YOUNG PEOPLE

by Joe Boenzi

There would be so much to say on the themes of pop culture, storytelling, the education of the young in a changed and changing world. Each of these vast themes are being addressed in these years by sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, educators and philosophers. And here I am, a Salesian who teaches theology after beginning as an educator of middle-school youth with learning and behavioral disabilities. I say this to help my readers to understand that I am no authority but a student of these themes for the interest and the needs of those among whom I have worked. Because I have facilitated some workshops and taught some courses on these themes, the organizers of the forum have invited me to share something with the group.

Right from the start you should understand the limits of this presentation, which are my limitations. Besides those listed above, I have also limited this paper by looking at pop culture and storytelling mainly as it has developed in the English-speaking world, and more specifically in the United States – propagator of many pop culture icons through the mass media. The dominance of the USA in this field only begins in the decades immediately following World War II, which some think is precisely the period when pop culture was on the rise.

Does pop culture grow out of the American experience? Or has the post-war American mindset been shaped by pop culture? It is not my purpose to resolve this question, but simply to offer some observations from the American experience in the past decades.

Of course, the United States is a nation of immigrants, and so it is not surprising that some of the very icons of American pop culture have arrived from other shores, just as the dominant language used in the USA – English – is colored by the idioms of many different immigrant communities. Formed of many different peoples, America is pluralist in its reality, and Americans strive to stress that which unites them rather than differences that might divide them. Thus, while most Americans consider themselves people of faith, and consider their heritage to be Judeo-Christian, there is not much explicit religious discourse in the public forum. Having said this, it is also true the America is not hostile to religious values and supports the practice of religion, particularly in the areas of civil rights, health care and community organizing and education.

1. What is Pop-Culture

First of all, it is important to be precise here and say that ‘pop culture’, as understood in English-speaking contexts, is not the same as ‘popular culture,’ (something that Americans would call ‘folk culture’).

Popular culture is the set of traditions have come down over the centuries from the real life of our ancestors (our folks). To celebrate popular culture is to cultivate the identity of a people in an intergenerational fashion. It speaks of wisdom, of the tried-and-true, of great ideals set in simple, forthright ways.

Pop culture, on the other hand, does not grow out of tradition. It is a manifestation of fashion trends. It changes continuously. If anything, it reflects ‘what’s hot,’ or ‘what’s in’ only at a given time and in a given place. As such, it makes use of an immense field of cultural expression and many forms social media: magazines, newspapers, cinema, radio, television and social media over the internet. It finds expression in music, songs, games, styles of dress and make-up, recreation and sports, travel and the work place. It is no wonder, then, that those who speak most about pop culture prefer not to delineate it rather than define it – that is, to trace its outlines and describe its processes rather than to attempt to confine it within a definitive container.¹

Pop culture is nurtured by many different subcultures and, in turn, spawns more subcultural expressions. Because pop culture is interested in selling products, it strives to appeal to the largest possible audience. It is shaped by various currents and experiences, but especially by market forces. It is fed by commerce and feeds new commercial ventures, often without intending to do so. Those people who are most inclined to enter into the logic of buying and

¹ Cf. Raiford A. Guins and Omayra Zaragoza Cruz, *Popular Culture: A Reader* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 19.

selling are most in touch with the newest trends; those who are not interested in new products or services (or who cannot afford them), soon find themselves on the outside looking in. However, if they do look in (through the media or the social networks), they may find themselves beginning to participate again.

Pop culture is linked with commodities and social life. It takes into account tastes and performance. It advances, consciously or unconsciously with technology and the market place.² While commerce and technology often is only made possible thanks to the contribution of older and well-placed people, pop culture itself is most often associated with young people, or at least with adults who still retain a youthful style and approach – even to the point of being extreme and immature.³ This may come from the early definition of the term popular in English, which did not originally denote trendy or pleasing to the populace. It was a term used with disdain, that was often a substitute for vulgar or suitable to the common people – and the common people were those without social or political power.⁴

In this light, pop culture belongs to those who are not politically powerful, but who hold sway by sheer numbers. It is the expression of their likes more than of their aspirations; it represents their values and what they want to celebrate most in life. Typically popular values and expressions are found in the songs that people like to sing, so that a valid manifestation of pop culture can be found in pop music.

2. Broadcast media, music and Pop-Culture

Pop music began to emerge after Guglielmo Marconi patented the wireless⁵, affording opportunities for rapid communications but also for a huge outreach for the entertainment industry.

Not only did radio transform whole sections of distant rural populations from being amateur musicians into expert listeners, radio also broke the divisions of race and ethnicity, language and class – especially among youth. This took a little time to realize. During the first years of radio broadcasting, transmissions were limited to no more than three hours a day.⁶ Through the

² Cf. Guins, and Cruz, *Popular Culture*, 83, 147-148, 211, 349-350.

³ Cf. Morag Shiach, 'The Popular', in *Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. Raiford A Guins, and Omayra Zaragoza Cruz (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 57.

⁴ Cf. Shiach, 61-62.

⁵ For a recent biographical study, see: Calvin D. Trowbridge Jr., *Marconi: Father of Wireless, Grandfather of Radio, Great-Grandfather of the Cell Phone, The Story of the Race to Control Long-Distance Wireless* (Seattle: BookSurge Publishing, 2010).

⁶ Cf. Anthony Rudel, *Hello Everybody! The Dawn of American Radio* (Orlando: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 9-10.

1920s, as radio stressed content over technology, American families became more enthusiastic over the invention that linked city dwellers with country folk. Radio brought crucial events, live and direct, into American homes: political debates and concerts, market and weather reports; on Sunday mornings radio transmitted worship services complete with choir pieces and stirring sermons.⁷ Radio shows designed as entertainment were broadcast live, in front of a studio audience. For rural families that tuned in their radio, this was like a night in the theater or in the concert hall, where they could listen to the latest compositions together and enjoy musical renditions be they traditional or innovative. Between the wars, the radio brought families together.

In the 1950s, television replaced radio as the gathering point in American homes. The new medium brought new types of broadcasts, and only those artists who knew how to innovate were successful. For whereas radio shows revolved around old-fashioned storytelling, the television screen functioned much like a mirror in American homes. How Americans viewed entertainment and learning and politics changed dramatically.⁸

Radio changed too. Many radio show hosts found themselves in a new role: that of disk jockey. Now radio became a place to play and sell recorded music, but this very fact led the way to a new kind of recording artist – one that would influence American culture in a massive and perhaps subversive way.

Elvis Presley is an example of the new American recording artist. Here is a rural, white boy living in the segregated American South who, without his parents' permission or approval, secretly tunes his transistor radio to African-American radio stations where he falls in love with Black music (Gospel, rhythm and blues). Without really knowing what he is doing, (Presley could not read music and did not read the newspapers), Elvis crosses the race lines in 1954 when he records his first record – it costs him \$3.00 to do so in a Memphis back-street studio. Here was a new sound: a white guitarist singer doing black rhythm and blues in the Deep South. The cheap recording went viral.⁹ Rock 'n Roll was born along with the invention of the teenager.¹⁰

⁷ Cf. Rudel, 61.

⁸ Cf. David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994), 188.

⁹ Cf. Halberstam, 457-465.

¹⁰ The word teenager first came into existence in 1947. The term was not the designation of educators, psychologists or sociologists, but the invention of marketing men who recognized that they could target young people between the ages of 12 and 25 – an age group that had more spending money and less self-control during the immediate post-war period than any similar age group in previous decades. For a thorough exposition of the social history that led to the invention of 'teenagers,' take the time to read: Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Pre-History of Youth Culture: 1875-1945* (London: Penguin Books, 2008).

The transistor radio, affordable recordings, the invention of long-play, high-fidelity and stereo sound systems – and a teenage population with more disposable funds than ever before, made it possible for country boys such as Elvis, who came from remote and even backward areas, to create music that would be identified with a generation. Teenagers had their own music – music that parents did not understand and barely tolerated, if they did at all.¹¹ Yet, it was through ‘their music’ that young people crossed into new terrain, met and accepted people of different races and cultures – often young people their own age – and grew in attitudes of acceptance of those same people whom their parents saw as strange, different, difficult or dangerous. Pop music allowed this to happen. It changed young people, and young people changed pop music.

Even in the 1950s, radio was more regional than not. Elvis Presley quickly conquered the rural American landscape and the South in 1954 as station after station played his songs, but radio alone was not enough to make him a national sensation. For that, Presley’s promoters needed television. In 1955 and 1956, the most successful television program was a Sunday night hour-long show hosted by Ed Sullivan. In terms of his personal style, Ed Sullivan was stiff, cautious, meticulous. His voice was shrill and he spoke with an idiosyncratic accent. In his suit and tie and traditional haircut, Sullivan seemed to be the total antithesis of all that television represented. Yet, he was beloved of the American television public because he was able to introduce any variety of entertainers, amateurs, young and obscure, with respect and even reverence. He put newbies at ease; he made foreigners feel welcome; he spoke clearly to the television public in such a way as to win their confidence too. Now of course, a man like Ed Sullivan felt that Elvis Presley brand of music was improper on several counts, and it took some pressure before he yielded and arranged for Presley to do three appearances on his Sunday-night program. The first time Presley appeared, the cameras only shot him in close-up, to avoid showing his gyrating hips and sensual dance steps. By the time Elvis made his third appearance, the cameras showed his whole act, ratings for the show were extraordinarily high, and Ed Sullivan ended by telling the audience as he shook the young singer’s hand ‘I want to say to Elvis Presley and to the country that this is a real decent, fine boy. We’ve never had a pleasanter experience on our show with a big name than we’ve had with you. You’re thoroughly all right.’¹²

¹¹ President Dwight D. Eisenhower despised the small record-players that his grandchildren used, no doubt because he abhorred the music that teenagers liked. His grandson recalls that Eisenhower ‘was shocked to learn that ‘O Sole Mio’ and ‘Army Blue,’ two of his favorite songs, had been ‘adapted’ by Elvis Presley as ‘It’s Now or Never’ and ‘Love Me Tender.’ He weighed banishing the music from his range of hearing.’ David Eisenhower, with Julie Nixon Eisenhower, *Going Home To Glory: A Memoir of Life with Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1961-1969* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 85.

¹² Ed Sullivan, quoted in Halberstam, 479.

Elvis made his breakthrough in radio, but he became the ‘King of Rock ‘n Roll’ only after his television appearances with the tried and trusted Ed Sullivan. For his part, Ed Sullivan continued to introduce new acts into American homes, including a quartet of British rock musicians in 1964 who called themselves ‘The Beatles.’ With that gesture, what was popular in Britain became part and parcel of American pop culture.

3. The Harry Potter Phenomenon

Fast-forward forty years, from the early 1960s to the summer of 2000. Bookstores all over the UK and the USA closed their doors on the Friday night 7 July as usual, but instead of going home, personnel redressed the shops, cleared aisles, and set up counters where they could more easily sell a book that was to be released only on 8 July. At the stroke of midnight, Platform One in Kings Cross Station (London) sounded with the steam whistle of a red-colored, old-fashioned steam locomotive whose cars opened into bookstalls ready to sell thousands of copies of Bloomsbury’s new release – fourth book in a literary saga about ‘the boy who lived’ – Harry Potter. In the USA, book stores opened their doors precisely at midnight to a flood of children and their parents, teens and college kids who had been waiting for months to learn more about the orphan boy Harry who had somehow become their role model and hero. Before the weekend was over, three million copies of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire were sold in the USA alone.¹³

People who had never heard of Harry Potter before were surprised by such manifestation – for the young people who came to the bookstores at midnight were not simply buying a book (and who ever heard of kids who were anxious to buy a book?). Many were in costumes representing favorite characters in the previous three volumes. The doors opened to excited screams of girls who in 2000 outdid the teenagers of 1955 who screamed at the beat of Elvis, or in 1964 howled at the tunes of the Beatles. The night was brighter than Mardi Gras or Halloween – and all for a fictional boy who saw himself as ordinary. ‘You’ve made a mistake [...] I’m Harry. Just Harry,’ he would have said.¹⁴

¹³ Cf. ‘2000-2009 – The Decade of Harry Potter Gives Kids and Adults a Reason to Love Reading’, from <http://mediaroom.scholastic.com/node/277>, retrieved 24 August 2013.

¹⁴ The statement comes in the first book of J.K. Rowling’s series, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*.

Some would contend that Harry Potter is not even just Harry. Harry Potter is just a story. He cannot be ‘the boy who lived’ because he never lived at all.

Harry Potter, the literary creation of Joanne Rowling (pen names: J. K. Rowling, Robert Gallbraith), who had never published a book before Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone. What’s more, she wrote the entire book longhand while her first child Jessica, then an infant, napped during the afternoon. With her experience as a middle-school teacher, Jo Rowling wrote with middle school children in mind – particularly boys who had difficulty with reading. Harry Potter, who has the title role in her book, is a boy who has undergone difficulties and for whom school has never been a joy. Young readers – and particularly boys – could understand Harry to be someone like themselves, who had to deal with pain and sorrow in order to find his way. He had to look carefully and find friends among his peers and among adults – often simply opening his eyes to the reality around him for, though at first, he dared not believe it, Harry had more friends than they imagined.

With all this, someone who never read a Harry Potter book might wonder if he is a model or an anti-hero? Is he someone who is strong or someone who is unworthy of imitation? And what is this talk about magic? Does Harry live in dangerous territory, and if so, is it prudent to invite young readers to learn his story? Is the Harry Potter phenomenon a product of media hype or does his story truly appeal to children, teens and young adults who see their lives reflected in this new mirror that appears most effectively in the old media of print.

4. Young people are reading again

This is the biggest surprise. After decades of radio and television and a decade of internet streaming video... after years of electric products that ‘bring good things to life,’¹⁵ and electronic media that have allowed young people to walk alone, wired into their own immediate worlds¹⁶ – Harry Potter introduces young people to the printed page where their imagination couples with grammar and syntax to awaken them to all that learning can mean. The young were the ones who turned Harry Potter into a pop cultural icon. Tightly written, planned in every detail and every character, makes it ‘easy to believe that Harry Potter’s prolonged hold on world consciousness can be blamed on strategy, or that it has been crosshatched into the fabric of culture by people who intended

¹⁵ ‘We bring good things to life’ has been the slogan of General Electric since 1979.

¹⁶ We know so many products, the names of which have become standard terms in contemporary languages: Sony Walkman®, Discman®, Apple products such as the iPod® and the iPad®, and various MP3 players.

to do just that from day one. But Harry Potter has actually been a very intimate phenomenon, the story of small groups of people acting in ways they shouldn't, doing things they usually wouldn't, and making the kind of history that, without Harry, they pretty much couldn't.¹⁷

Teens who could never finish a book in the past became the most ardent Harry Potter fans. Some adults were not only surprised, but apprehensive. Here and there accusations appeared before some school board or in some church congregation that Harry Potter had bewitched young people with tales of magic, witchcraft and wizardry. Perhaps because the American edition of the first Harry Potter book was entitled *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* caused some religious people to become suspicious of its contents and merits.¹⁸ Some worried parents even brought lawsuits against school boards and libraries demanding that Harry Potter books be removed from shelves.¹⁹ But the young people understood Harry best, and thousands of young adolescents and college youth reacted most vociferously against the negative accusations and proposed book bans. The young fan base had entered into Harry's suffered journey – for in the books, he goes through great sufferings; they were not about to let him suffer in real life. Fans created new associations, new forms of music, new type of broadcasting, even new sports in order to share their enthusiasm and their passion for the Harry Potter universe.²⁰

¹⁷ Melissa Anelli, *Harry, A History: The True Story of a Boy Wizard, His Fans, and Life Within the Harry Potter Phenomenon* (New York: Pocket Books, 2008), 18-19.

¹⁸ Author J. K. Rowling did not re-title her book for America. This was done by the publisher, Scholastic Books, for editors were concerned that children and young adolescents would not understand many of the UK expressions or the classical references. The first three volumes, in fact, were re-written by the editors for this very reason. However, in some cases the practice created real problems. In America, of all places, where in colonial times there were witch hunts, the name *Sorcerer's Stone* conjured negative images.

¹⁹ For an extensive report on accusations against the Harry Potter series in terms of lawsuits, denunciations, appeals to religion, see Melissa Anelli, *Harry, A History: The True Story of a Boy Wizard, His Fans, and Life Within the Harry Potter Phenomenon* (New York: Pocket Books, 2008), 177-201.

²⁰ If we had time we could speak of websites, podcasts, wizard rock bands, *quiddich* games, international conventions and more that young people between the ages of 15 and 25 have made happen since the year 2000. Two important Harry Potter websites were founded and staffed by teenagers (*MuggleNet*) and by young adults (Leaky). In February 2006 three 15-year-old boys working with *Mugglenet* launched the first Harry Potter podcast and called it called *Mugglecast*; they made their last podcast today, 27 August 2013, after 269 episodes. The Leaky Cauldron's podcast began a few short weeks later and was called *Pottercast*. Its purpose was to offer news and analysis of the Harry Potter universe, and carried more listener participation than *Mugglecast*. The team at *Pottercast* made their last podcast one month ago, on 31 July 2013 (run a search in iTunes for episodes and dating).

What made young readers so passionate about Harry Potter? Storytelling – that is the content but also the development of content: the story in its telling.

5. Storytelling and youthful heroes

Storytelling, the foundation of folk cultures from the earliest times, has made a new appearance as part of pop culture during the last several decades in the western world. In particular, adolescent heroes and growth stories seem to demonstrate a great impact on the imagination and motivation of young people, their parents and educators.

Youthful heroes are not new. The first great work of American literature is the story of a boy who runs away from an oppressive life in the Deep South with a black runaway slave. Their attempt to reach freedom takes place as they paddle a raft up the Mississippi River. I am referring to *Huckleberry Finn* and the slave Jim – characters first created by Samuel Clemens in 1876 but who appeared in their own adventure in 1884.²¹ In 1926, the American publisher of children's books, Edward Stratemeyer, commissioned a series of mystery novels that featured two high school boys, Frank and Joe Hardy. The sons of a New York detective, the Hardy brothers and some close friends were depicted as striking out to solve some local mysteries in their small piece of rural America. The first three books appeared in 1927, composed by Canadian journalist Leslie McFarlane under the penname of Franklin W. Dixon. Other writers continued the series, which would include 58 volumes, and go through periodic revisions to update language and attitudes in the late 1950s and spinoff series in the 1980s.²² As the Hardy Boys proved to be a success, the Stratemeyer Syndicate began publishing for a series for girls called the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories. The first Nancy Drew story appeared in 1930, and over the years several writers composed several hundred books for the series under a penname Carolyn Keane.²³

Among many such adolescent heroes at the start of this century,²⁴ we find the names of Bobby Pendragon, Percy Jackson, Michael Vey and Eragon. These American teenagers compare favorably to two younger Europeans: a German boy by the name of Bastian Balthazar Bux, and an Irish lad by the

²¹ Cf. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (San Francisco: American Publishing Company, 1876) and Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1884).

²² The first volume in the series was: Franklin W. Dixon, *The Hardy Boys: The Tower Treasure* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1927; revised series edition 1959).

²³ The first volume in the series was: Carolyn Keane, *The Secret of the Old Clock, Nancy Drew Mystery Stories* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1930).

²⁴ See Appendix A.

name of Artemis Fowl. Twin or sibling heroes has also become a regular feature of teen fantasy adventures of the new millennium, which has introduced readers to Carter and Sadie Kane, Sophie and Josh Newman, or Alexander and Aaron Stowe. Another twosome, though not blood twins, are orphans who partner to defeat unscrupulous criminals and politicians: Chevron Savon (girl) and Riley (boy), protagonists in *W.A.R.P.*, a series by the author of Artemis Fowl, which is just making its way into lives of teens.

In the lives of every one of these teen literary heroes, there are elements of magic and mystery. Yet, they are all more real than the young heroes of the past. Mark Twain's nineteenth-century boy hero and antihero, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, appeared in five books but they never changed and certainly never grew into manhood. The detective youths of the twentieth century – the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew – go through hundreds of adventures, but remain the same age in every story that was produced over at least three decades. The teen heroes of the twenty-first century follow the lead of the most influential of all the young heroes, Harry Potter.

How? They grow.

During the years in which J. K. Rowling published her seven-book saga (1997-2007), and Harry's story was followed by millions, he grew from an eleven-year old battered child into a seventeen-year-old young adult leader. As he grew, he changed and made decisions – indeed, he assumed his role before a hostile society and gave of himself in the battle against abuse and injustice. This fact – that Harry grows – is what made him real to young readers, many of whom grew up with him. When Warner Brothers brought the Harry Potter story to the big screen (2001-2011), the young readers of Rowling's books became the films' most avid fans and most severe critics.

6. The hero's Journey

To try to understand the breadth and depth of the Harry Potter phenomenon, scholars turned to the theme of the 'heroic journey' common in mythology and fairy tales. They found a comprehensive outline and description that journey in the works of the American mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), who, in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. According to Campbell, the heroic journey is an element that is found in all the mythologies of all cultures.²⁵

²⁵ The theme of the heroic journey represents the core of Campbell's study. See: Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*; Bollingen Series 17; 2nd rev. ed., reprint (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 49-244.

David Colbert essentially follows Joseph Campbell's exposition of the heroic journey, which, according to Campbell, is steeped in human consciousness and is the mythic journey to maturity and wholeness. Following Campbell's lead, Colbert shows the journey to consist of three stages: Departure, Initiation and Return.²⁶

Departure

- The hero is first seen in our everyday world. He is beginning a new stage in life.
- A herald may arrive to announce that destiny has summoned the hero. (Colbert 208)
- The hero may refuse the call to adventure. He may have any number of reasons, from everyday responsibilities to a selfish refusal to help others. But if he does, he will find that he has no choice in the matter. (209)
- The hero meets a protector and guide who offers supernatural aid, often in the form of amulets. (210)
- The hero encounters the first threshold to a new world. The protector can only lead the hero to the threshold; the hero must cross it alone. He may have to fight or outwit a guardian of the threshold who wants to prevent the crossing. (210)
- The hero enters 'the Belly of the Whale,' a phrase drawn from legends like the story of Jonah to signify being swallowed into the unknown. (211)

Initiation

- The hero follows a road of trials. The setting is unfamiliar. The hero may encounter companions who assist him in these trials. Invisible forces may also aid him. (211-212)
- The hero is abducted or must take a journey at night or by sea. (212)
- The hero fights a symbolic dragon. He may suffer a ritual death, perhaps even dismemberment. (212)
- The hero is recognized by or reunited with his father. He comes to understand this source of control over his life. (213)

²⁶ Cf. David Colbert, *The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter: A Treasury of Myths, Legends, and Fascinating Facts*. Updated & complete ed., (New York: Berkley Books, 2008), 208-218.

- The hero becomes nearly divine. He has traveled past ignorance and fear. (213)
- The hero receives ‘the ultimate boon’ the goal of his quest. It may be an elixir of life. It may be different from the hero’s original goal because he is wiser. (214)

Return

- The hero takes a ‘magic flight’ back to his original world. He may be rescued by magical forces. One of his original protectors may help him. A person or thing from his original world may appear to bring him back. (215)
- The hero crosses the return threshold. He may have difficulty adjusting to his original life, where people do not fully comprehend his experience. (215-216)
- The hero becomes the master of two worlds: the everyday world, which represents his material existence; and the magical world, which signifies his inner self. (216)
- The hero has won the freedom to live. He has conquered the fears that prevent him from living fully. (217)

It is typical of hero literature that the protagonist is the last to realize the powers and gifts that he has. Modesty and humility based in realism is one of the attributes that enable the hero to learn from those around him and to grow into his heroic role. Nor does this mean that the hero is understood, appreciated or affirmed. In responding to the challenges before him, he is faced with opposition, misunderstanding and skepticism, even from his friends. In Harry’s case, even his best friends suspect that his motives are less than pure. Ron, in book 5, shows his annoyance that Harry is simply ‘acting the hero’, while Hermione warns him that he has a ‘saving-people thing.’²⁷

J. K. Rowling offers us a very human hero in the person of Harry Potter. In his early years, he is embarrassed by how total strangers can make a big fuss over him, while his own family members are likely to forget his birthday and would rather that he not come home for Christmas. In his last years in secondary school, when he knows that he must face many dangers, he fears that his friends will be targeted by his enemies, and he is likely to withdraw with few explanations, only to exasperate his many friends – friends that he cannot believe that he has. The admonishments of his friends will infuriate Harry at the time, but will cause him to doubt himself and his own

²⁷ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (London: Blumsbury, 2003).

intentions later. Self-doubt and the need to purify one's intentions is a necessary passage in the journey of every mythological hero. In fact, Colbert notes, 'to battle the dark forces in the world, heroes must face the dark forces within, and rediscover in each adventure that they are worthy of victory.'²⁸

7. John Bosco and youthful Heroes

As we have seen, many youthful figures have been presented to young people, and have captured the imagination of children, adolescents, and youth, as well as discerning adults who live and work among the young. We certainly remember that Don Bosco presented models of youthful heroes to his young people. During this year we have, throughout the Salesian world, reflected on the three youths of Don Bosco: Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco. Actually, Don Bosco presented stories of other young people as well – fictional are real-life boys – but these three seem to be the most outstanding (or at least the best remembered).

What Don Bosco was doing in presenting youthful models was innovative in his day. Three decades before Mark Twain told the saga of Huckleberry Finn Don Bosco wrote the life of Dominic Savio. Both books were bestsellers in their context, even though Finn was fiction and Savio was real.

Europeans were barely beginning to gain a new sense of life stages. 'Adolescence' and 'youth' were new social categories at that time.²⁹ Don Bosco worked from experience, not from theory, and yet he identified adolescents as models for their peers: 'Ask yourselves,' he wrote in the introduction to the life of Dominic Savio, 'if they could do it, why can't I?'

Models of what? When writing the life of Michael Magone, Don Bosco stressed the role of friendship, counseling, confession, devotion to Mary, and gratitude. In writing the lives of Francesco Besucco and Dominic Savio, however, he focused the reader's attention on love of Jesus and love of neighbor: theological charity and pastoral charity. These three adolescents, Don Bosco told his youthful readers, were models of a good Christian life – heroic models, in fact. In other words, they were models of youthful holiness.

²⁸ Colbert, *Magical Worlds*, 218.

²⁹ Cf. Peter N. Stearns, *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society*, 2d ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990), 86-87.

8. The young John Bosco as a model for young people

In preparation for the bicentenary of Don Bosco's birth, the rector major Fr. Pascual Chávez invited the Salesian family to take up some of saint's principal writings: the Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales and the Lives of the three young people. New editions have appeared, or older editions have been reprinted and distributed.³⁰

What might be interesting to remember is that, besides reading Don Bosco's stories about the young, in the years after his canonization Don Bosco himself became the object of storytelling. Illustrated editions of the saint's biography were produced with young people in mind, not to mention collections of stories for the use of catechists and religion teachers.³¹

In a role reversal, Don Bosco the educator of the young is often depicted as a young person himself. People learned who he was from his earliest days – in the years when he was growing up with his mother and brothers, in his adventures as a poor, barefoot farm boy, through his schooling, in his seminary days, in the early years of his priestly ministry. Many of the stories originated with Don Bosco's own account, extracted from the Memoirs of the Oratory by Giovanni Bonetti, who rewrote his spiritual father's accounts first in episodes which he published in the *Bollettino Salesiano*, and later in a popular biography published three years after Don Bosco's death.³²

³⁰ San Giovanni Bosco, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales: Dal 1815 al 1855*. Saggio introduttivo e note storiche a cura di Aldo Giraudo (Roma: LAS, 2011); *Vite di giovani: Le biografie di Domenico Savio, Michele Magone e Francesco Besucco*. Saggio introduttivo e note storiche a cura di Aldo Giraudo (Roma: LAS, 2012); *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855: the autobiography of Saint John Bosco*; translated by Daniel Lyons, with notes and commentary by Eugenio Ceria, Lawrence Castelveccchi, and Michael Mendl (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1989); *Memorias dell'Oratorio de San Francisco de Sales, de 1815 a 1855*. traducción y notas histórico-bibliográficas de José Manuel Pillezo García; estudio introductorio de Aldo Giraudo; con la colaboración de José Luis Moral de la Parte; Colección: Don Bosco, n. 10 (Madrid: Editorial CCS, 2003). In addition to these entries, new English translations are being prepared for publication by Paulines Press in Nairobi in this year.

³¹ See, for example: Eugenio Ceria, *San Giovanni Bosco nella Vita e nelle Opere*; Illustrazioni di Giovanni Battista Galizzi (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1938); Pompilio Maria Bottini, *Catechismo di Pio X commentato con fatti, detti, sogni e scritti di san Giovanni Bosco*. 3 voll. (Colle Don Bosco: Libreria Dottrina Cristiana, 1949-1954); Luigi Chiavarino, *Don Bosco che ride: i «fioretti» di san Giovanni Bosco*. 29^a ed. (Cinisello Balsamo: Paoline, 2001); Peter Lappin, *Stories of Don Bosco* (Pallaskenry: Salesian, 1958).

³² Giovanni Bonetti, *Cinque lustri di storia dell'oratorio salesiano, fondato dal sacerdote D. Giovanni Bosco* (Torino: Tipografia Salesiana, 1892); English version: *Venerable John Bosco's early Apostolate. A translation from the work of Giovanni*

How faithful to the historical facts are these accounts? Frankly, this is not an issue. What these many books succeeded in doing was to make of Don Bosco an icon of Catholic culture and, if you will, pop culture. Don Bosco, the most photographed saint in the nineteenth century, famous as the ‘Vincent de Paul of Italy’ and the champion of poor and abandoned youth, is depicted in many of these popular works as rising out of a life of poverty and grave difficulty to become the advocate of new generations. And as his stories became more and more known, artists in other media began to weigh in. Don Bosco became the hero of graphic novels soon after his canonization – the most famous series being done by the most famous cartoonist of the mid-twentieth century, Jijé from Belgium.³³ In 1935 a feature film produced in Turin and directed by Goffredo Alessandrini, was a masterpiece of special effects and sound recording for the era.³⁴ Nearly half of that film presented the boyhood of John Bosco. The movie was dubbed into other languages and distributed for well over 40 years in 16 mm format in church circles. Other films followed, as did slide montages, filmstrips and radio dramas.

What is the importance of any of this? Nothing, except to reflect that Don Bosco’s immense popularity in the middle of the twentieth-century can also be traced to the success in telling his story – an effort made by the Salesians, by past pupils, and by artists, magazine editors and media personalities as well as serious authors, educators and religious. As a result, many people in the Catholic world knew Don Bosco’s story, including young people.

9. Striking similarities

I’m running out of space here, but let me just mention that there are many similarities between the image of the young John Bosco and Harry Potter. Both are orphans in infancy – John of his father and Harry of both parents. The death of their parents are their first memories. Both have face difficulties during their childhood – John because of poverty and the attitude of his older step-brother Anthony, Harry because of his isolation and the antagonistic attitude of his physically bigger cousin Dudley. Both leave home at age eleven – John to learn farming with the Moglia family and later to go to

Bonetti, S.C.; with a preface by His Eminence Cardinal Francis Bourne (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1907).

³³ See: Jijé (Joseph Gillain), *Don Bosco* (Marcinelle: Dupuis, 1942, 1943; nouvelle version 1950).

³⁴ The film *Don Bosco* (1935), directed by Goffredo Alessandrini and starring Gianpaolo Rosmino and Ferdinando Mayer, was produced by Compagnia Italiana LUX (Torino). A DVD version has recently become available, and many segments are available on YouTube.

school in the city, Harry to go to the school of Hogwarts to develop unknown skills and fulfill the expectations of others.

The parallels are many³⁵, but I am certain the J. K. Rowling – a Scottish Protestant – had no knowledge of the real-life story of John Bosco when she began to write the adventures of the fictitious but realistic Harry Potter. The stories of Don Bosco introduce young people to the invitation to walk with God; the saga of Harry Potter are an invitation to choose love over hatred, justice over ambition, modesty over false grandeur. In a world of fear and intimidation, those who accompany Harry Potter (certain teachers and certain classmates) call him constantly to calm, to reason, to balance, while he brings a strong dose of charity and compassion to all that he does.

Don Bosco speaks of Reason, Religion and Loving Kindness, and these principles are moved out of abstraction into concreteness in each of the well-known episodes of his life as a youngster, as a priest, as an educator. Harry's steady commitment to do his duty, come what may, is seen by youthful readers as a reasoned approach in a chaotic, oppressive world. He can withstand extreme adversity, he is told by his mentor Albus Dumbledore, because his mother who loved him intensely and heroically, left traces of that love in his blood – and Harry has to learn to make that loving compassion his own. As for Religion, J. K. Rowling does not use religious language explicitly until the seventh book, which features striking New Testament quotations.

Even so, most of her symbols are Christian ones, from the golden griffon to the song of the phoenix, in an elaborate texture that is not accidental.

All that is presented here is by way of suggestion: the Harry Potter phenomenon in the chaos of what many consider a post-Christian, post-modern pop culture demonstrates that teens can respond not only to a good story, but to stories of goodness. If Don Bosco was one of the most popular figures of holiness to past generations, part of the reason was because his disciples and admirers knew how to tell his story. If we were to recuperate the art of storytelling, might we again invoke the approachable Don Bosco to help us make the Gospel understandable to the young and the working classes in the future?

³⁵ See Appendix B.

Appendix A

Recent adolescent heroes	
Bobby Pendragon	Robert ‘Bobby’ Pendragon is the lead figure in The Pendragon Adventure, a series of ten fantasy/science fiction novels by Donald James MacHale, published by Simon and Schuster (New York) between 2001 and 2010; paperback editions came out a year following each of the original hard-bound versions. Like Harry Potter, Bobby Pendragon ages over the course of the series, beginning at age 14 and finishing the series as he nears 18. Other writers have expanded on the Pendragon universe with short stories that have been included in a three-volume collection called Carla Jablonski, and Walter Sorrells, <i>Before the War</i> , 3 vols. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009).
Percy Jackson	Hero of a five-volume saga that begins with: Rick Riordan, <i>The Lightning Thief</i> ; series: Percy Jackson & The Olympians, 1 (New York: Hyperion, 2005). Since he first started elementary school, Percy Jackson has been considered little more than an underachiever. Try as he may, everything he touches seems to end in disaster. Other children ostracize him; teachers discipline him until he ends by being expelled. The pattern has repeated itself year after year. Finally at the end of his last year of middle school he finds himself under attack by evil forces beyond his reckoning. Close friends reveal to this thirteen-year old that he is a demigod, and he must be brought to a safe haven where he can be prepared to face the worst. Thus, a 13-year-old New York boy finds himself faced with threats from gods and monsters that would have challenged the original Perseus (for whom he is named).
Michael Vey	Teenage protagonist in a series that begins with: Richard Paul Evans, <i>Michael Vey: The Prisoner of Cell 25</i> (New York: Mercury Ink, 2011). Michael Vey is a thirteen-year-old boy with special, electric powers that he has received due to genetic experimentation carried out on his parents before his birth. His story appeared in print for the first time in 2011. The third book of the trilogy will appear next month.

Eragon	The saga of Eragon begins with a fifteen-year old farm boy – Eragon by name – and was written by a fifteen-year old country boy by the name of Christopher Paolini. The first volume was published by the author's parents in 2002, and republished for a wide distribution in August 2003 by Knopf. The Inheritance Cycle developed during the writing from a trilogy to a saga, with the fourth and final volume appearing in 2011. See: Christopher Paolini, <i>Eragon: Inheritance Book One</i> (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). Through the four-volume cycle, Eragon is transformed into the defender of many different communities besides his own. He is the protector of families even when he fears that he may never have a family of his own. He is helped in his mission because he becomes a dragon rider.
Bastian Balthazar Bux	Michael Ende, <i>Die unendliche Geschichte</i> (Stuttgart: K. Thienemanns Verlag, 1979). English version: <i>The Neverending Story</i> ; translated by Ralph Manheim (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983/London: Penguin Books, 1984). Bastian is a boy who reads books, and his reading leads other readers to reflect on the role of fantasy in post-modern life. In the land of Fantastica, Bastian first follows and then teams up with a boy his own age by the name of Atreyu. Bastian, timid and intimidated, must learn to be straightforward and open.

Twins	
Carter & Sadie Kane	A hearty sibling rivalry exists between brother and sister Carter and Sadie Kane in the Kane Chronicles, beginning with: Rick Riordan, <i>The Red Pyramid</i> (New York: Hyperion, 2010). In addition to the war of the sexes, this brother and sister team bring all the tensions of a culture clash since they are the children of a racially mixed marriage who are separated in childhood after their mother's death. In their mid-teens, Carter is a cerebral, African-American male, while Sadie is a media-savvy, socially adept White girl with a south London accent. At the start of the series they have nothing in common except the same parents (according to Carter). Throughout the series, besides contending

	with ancient Egyptian curses, they become family for one another.
Sophie & Josh Newman	The fifteen-year-old Newman twins are looking forward to summer jobs in their hometown of San Francisco but end up in the middle of an ancient power struggle between alchemists and wizards. Irish storyteller Michael Scott recounts their adventures in a six-volume series that he first published in 2007 and completed in 2012. Cf. Michael Scott, <i>The Alchemyst: The Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flammel</i> (New York: Delacorte Press, 2007).
Chevron Savon & Riley	Chevron and Riley first appeared this year. They are protagonists in a science fiction, political law-enforcement fancy called W.A.R.P., a series by the creator of Artemis Fowl. Cf. Eoin Cofler, <i>W.A.R.P., Book 1: The Reluctant Assassin</i> (New York: Hyperion, 2013).
Alex & Aaron Stowe	The Stowe brothers are identical twins who live in the highly controlled, dystopian land of Quill. For all their looks and mannerisms, the two thirteen-year-olds are very different. One is artistic, while the other is scientific; one is valued and the other is unwanted. How they develop will influence their contemporaries and their community in a startling new series that is still unfolding. Cf. Lisa McMann, <i>The Unwanteds</i> (New York: Alladin, 2011).

Appendix B

Parallel Themes in the young Potter and Bosco		
	Harry Potter	Giovanni Bosco
The good player	Harry as the Quiddich seeker boosts his housemates sense of worth	Giovannino walks tightrope to win his friends to God
Self-image	Harry in the Mirror of Erised	Giovannino who greets the priests on the road
Lost orphan	Harry boards the train to Hogwarts all alone	Giovannino wanders the countryside and meets many refusals until he arrives at Moncucco
School	Harry at Hogwarts	Giovanni in Castelnuovo, and Chieri
Wise man	Albus Dumbledore	Don Calosso
Guides	Minerva McGonagall, Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, Rubeus Hagrid	Luigi Guala, Giovanni Borel, Giuseppe Cafasso, Marcantonio Durando
Friends	Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Ginny Granger, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood	Luigi Comollo, 'Giona' e 'Levi', Giuseppe Blanchard, Giorgio Moglia, Luigi Nasi
Dangerous places	The Forbidden Forest	Worldly companions in school; the streets of Torino by night
The protector	The stag (patronus)	The dog (grigio)
The rules	Harry faces the just and unjust rules at Hogwarts, in the Dursley family, in the ministry of magic	Giovanni faces the rules prohibiting frequent Communion in the seminary, the less than pastoral practices of diocesan parishes that neglect homeless youth

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THE SPIRITUAL PROFILE OF DON BOSCO EMERGING FROM THE COLLECTION OF HIS LETTERS

(Part 1)

by John Rozario Lourdasamy

The *Epistolario*,¹ or the Collection of letters of Don Bosco, is a privileged source of knowledge of the person of Don Bosco from close proximity, through the mediation of daily life events. As there is no particular writing of Don Bosco that would explicitly illustrate his spiritual journey in its entirety,² and given that the personal letters are authentic resources which are useful in the examination of attitudes and values of the persons concerned, the letters of Don Bosco become the documents that capture better the portrait of Don Bosco: his life, his overwhelming activities, the multiplicity of his relationships, his character, his thoughts, and his heart.³ Thus, it is possible to trace the characteristic patterns of the spiritual path trodden by Don Bosco

¹ “*Epistolario*” in Italian stands for the “collection of letters”, and is also the title usually given to such collections or works. In this study the word “*Epistolario*” refers to the collection of letters of Saint John Bosco. A practical point is deemed necessary: since more than 95% of the letters are in Italian, a language which is not accessible to most of my readers, I have provided an English translation whenever it seemed advantageous, particularly for direct quotes. Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from Italian and French contained in this paper are my own.

² Even the *Memoirs of the Oratory* – one of the most personal writings of Don Bosco, consisting of some autobiographical elements – was not intended primarily to be an autobiography. It was presented as the theological understanding of the origins and the early developments of the Oratory and the Salesian work. It was a project and a model for the future. For further clarity in this regard, see: Pietro Braido, “«Memorie» del futuro,” *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane* 11, 20 (1992): 97-127.

³ Cf. Pietro Braido, “Prospettive di ricerca su don Bosco,” *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane* 9, 16 (1990): 257.

through his written words where his authentic human nature and deeper convictions become evident in the ordinary circumstances of life and in his interaction with others.

The *Epistolario* of Don Bosco, edited by Eugenio Ceria,⁴ was the first attempt to gather together all the letters of Don Bosco and to publish them. More than five decades after the work of Ceria, the unearthing of more letters of Don Bosco and the necessity of scientific methodologies had naturally led to the recent publication of the critical edition of the *Epistolario* of Don Bosco edited by Francesco Motto.⁵ This is a valuable source that has been accepted by scholarly circles as more trustworthy and more scientific than those that were available for the scholars of yesteryear. The mere numbers of letters written by Don Bosco would take anyone by surprise. From E(m) I which was published in the year 1991 up to E(m) VIII published in January 2019, a total of 3955 letters have been published so far, covering the span of 49 years of the life of Don Bosco, between 1835 and 1883. Surveying the critical edition of the *Epistolario* – which is yet to be completed⁶ – this paper tries to examine

⁴ Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario di S. Giovanni Bosco*, Vol. I (1835-1868), lett. 1-717, ed. Eugenio Ceria (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1955); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. II (1869-1875), lett. 718-1387, ed. Eugenio Ceria (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1956); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. III (1876-1880), lett. 1388-2122, ed. Eugenio Ceria (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1958); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. IV (1881-1888), lett. 2123-2845, ed. Eugenio Ceria (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1959).

⁵ Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario*, Introduzione, testi critici e note a cura di Francesco Motto, Vol. I (1835-1863), lett. 1-726 (Roma: LAS, 1991); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. II (1864-1868), lett. 727-1263 (Roma: LAS, 1996); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. III (1869-1872), lett. 1264-1714 (Roma: LAS, 1999); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. IV (1873-1875), lett. 1715-2243 (Roma: LAS, 2003); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. V (1876-1877), lett. 2244-2665 (Roma: LAS, 2012); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. VI (1878-1879), lett. 2666-3120 (Roma: LAS, 2014); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. VII (1880-1881), lett. 3121-3561 (Roma: LAS, 2014); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. VIII (1882-1883), lett. 3562-3955 (Roma: LAS, 2019). From now on, this contribution will be cited simply as E(m). As for the citations from individual letters, the method and the order followed would be: E(m), the number of the volume, the page number in the volume, the indication of the person with the name when available, and finally the date along with the month and year when available. Where there are more than two letters for a single citation, the names and dates may be left out for want of space, unless we consider them as essential for additional clarity.

⁶ The letters pertaining to the last four years and one month of the life of Don Bosco (i.e. from January 1884 to January 1888) remain yet to be published. Considering the frequency of his letters, we may expect an addition of at least six hundred letters. Motto expresses that the final possible total number of letters could be 4600, which would be about 1800 letters more than those found in Ceria's edition [Cf. Francesco Motto,

and summarize in brief the essential aspects of the spirituality of Don Bosco emerging from the vast collection of his letters in the light of the scientific knowledge imparted by the scholars in Salesian spirituality.

Don Bosco was an active person, and his spirituality was the spirituality of active life.⁷ Gleaning through his complex activities, we can presume the presence of an inner force that must have driven him. Although Don Bosco was not a person who would reveal his inner nature so easily, we do find him expressing it occasionally, in a natural and familiar way. This study is the fruit of the search to know his personality, his thoughts and vision of life, the charism and spirituality emerging from his written words or words uttered almost from his mouth. As we focus our attention on tracing out the figure of Don Bosco as a profoundly human and a spiritual person in the light of his correspondence with people from all walks of life, we delve into the “mystery” of his life which is yet to be explored⁸ and bring out some deeper insights on the spiritual characteristics of the person of Don Bosco. In other words, this paper deals with the reconstruction of the spiritual profile of Don Bosco through the prominent personal – spiritual characteristics that emerge from his letters.

Who is Don Bosco in essence in his letters? This is the question which will help us to draw a sort of “silhouette” of Don Bosco, as we concentrate more on what he reveals of himself in his letters – the idea that authors in Salesian spirituality often answer in the negative because of the nature of the person that Don Bosco is – and thus reconstruct his image from our study and findings. It could be pointed out that the aspects enumerated here are not exhaustive but are kept only to the essentials.

1. The Personal Vision of God and the “God-Synchronous Orbit” of the Spirituality of Don Bosco

The relationship with God is the foundation of all spiritual experiences. Prominent among the fundamental traits of the Christian spiritual experience is the explicit reference to Christ or Christocentrism for interpreting God and human beings. This is one of the essential characteristic nodal points for evaluating any authentic Christian experience in Spiritual Theology, even

“L’edizione critica dell’Epistolario di don Bosco,” *Ricerche di Storia Sociale e Religiosa* 88, 1 (2016): 293].

⁷ For the spirituality of Don Bosco being called a “spirituality of active life”, “spirituality of the man of action”, and “dynamic spirituality”, and for further clarifications, see: Joseph Aubry, ed., *The Spiritual Writings of Saint John Bosco*, trans. Joseph Caselli, 2nd ed. (New York: Salesiana Publishers, 2006), 13, 19, 25.

⁸ Cf. E(m) I, 7.

though there may be varying modes of living the Christian life and there might be various means of interpreting the spiritual life of individual Christians.⁹ Besides accepting the revealed truth, Don Bosco has the conscious realization that it is “in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

The dogmatic and catechetical elements of faith that Don Bosco imbibes from his childhood, those that he learns during his seminary training in Chieri and which matures at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, begins to blossom forth as his mission to the young takes firm roots at Valdocco. His consciousness of the presence of God in his life, his thoughts, and ideas on the person of God become further well-defined, which then are constantly communicated, either explicitly or implicitly, to those in touch with him. Don Bosco’s vision of God and his relationship with the divine are revealed in the characteristics such as the sense of God, the sense of the Word of God, and the sense of the soul. The consciousness of the Divine gives a particular orientation and a sense of being to Don Bosco.

The sense of God pervades the mind and the heart of Don Bosco such that his items of correspondence can never be devoid of a mention of God.¹⁰ The “all-pervading God consciousness” of Don Bosco is often evident. While it is natural to find references to God in the personal letters of a general nature as well as in correspondence of a specifically spiritual nature, and in the requests for charity, the same holds true even in the letters to state officials – however evident or latent the mention of God may be. For instance, the vicar of the city, Marquis Michele Benso di Cavour is told that the success of the work of the Oratories shows that “the Lord blesses His own work”, and that the protection sought for the Oratories is because they have no shadow of material gain in mind but only gaining souls for the Lord. The superintendent of studies in Turin, while given the explanations towards the accusations against the Oratories and the personnel, is also offered an appeal to the heart: “we can both deserve God’s blessings and the gratitude of human beings by helping poor youngsters and taking them off the streets.”¹¹

Evident to an attentive reader of the letters – particularly those letters dealing directly with the goodness and the holiness of the others – is the fact that as Don Bosco talks of the virtuous lives of others, his own ideals glow. In one of the earliest letters, where Don Bosco writes a detailed testimony of the life of cleric Giuseppe Burzio, whom he had observed closely when both were in the seminary at Chieri, we observe not only the cleric’s high ideals of the

⁹ Cf. Jesús Manuel García, *Teologia spirituale. Epistemologia e interdisciplinarietà* (Roma: LAS, 2013) 359-360; 362.

¹⁰ For instance, among the emerging themes in the letters of Don Bosco for the four-year period of 1869-1872 in E(m) III, the word or the noun most frequently found - 414 times in 451 letters - is God (in Italian: *Dio* and *Iddio*).

¹¹ E(m) I, 66, 589-590.

state embraced, but that of Don Bosco himself. He makes it clear that while all the wonderful external qualities can make someone lovable by others, even greater should be the commitment to piety, which indicates the beauty of heart and which makes the soul dear to God. The hidden acts of the profound virtues are said to be manifested in the spiritual qualities such as, sanctifying oneself, fervour, piety, constancy, frequenting the sacraments, devotion to Mary, love for modesty, sincerity, purity of the soul, the custody of the senses, humility, and the consciousness of the sublime ecclesiastical vocation.¹² “Before becoming a priest, it is important that I become a saint,”¹³ is not only the earnest desire of cleric Burzio who, like the biblical figures of Abraham and Enoch, walked before the Lord – *Ambulabat coram Deo* (cf. Gen 17:1; 5:22, 24) – but also the inner longing of Don Bosco both as a cleric and when he learns to be a good priest at the *Convitto* in Turin.

The vision of God in Don Bosco is expressed first and foremost in terms of God as the Creator, and God as the Father. He who created all things and all beings, continues to provide for everyone at all moments of life. The personal experiences of the Provident God take on further insights as per the concrete situations in life, and are expressed on various occasions. Don Bosco is convinced that it is the Lord who inspires all good things, and all such inspirations from God would eventually lead to His greater glory, besides bearing good fruits in the lives of the people. He often exhorts people to follow the inspirations from God. He seems firmly persuaded to think and exhort that God inspires His people and they would do His Will if they follow those that they judge best in the Lord.¹⁴ The experiences of God’s providence in the past is for Don Bosco the assurance of God’s help in the future. Amidst the dangers and the extreme needs in which poor young people are placed, he is not worried about economic difficulties, but wants at any cost to come to the aid of needy young people. That is an absolute priority. The helps that he seeks are to save poor young people from the perils of immorality and heresies. He is ever ready to abandon himself and everything into the hands of Divine Providence which he believes will never be lacking, just as he had found in similar situations in the past.¹⁵

The goodness of God is visible everywhere. Such a consciousness leads Don Bosco to see the goodness in others. He sees God’s Providence revealed in the good-hearted nature of others. After the approval of the Constitutions, he expresses his heart saying: “everything regarding our Congregation ended on a happy note. I found benevolence in everyone, and the Holy Father was

¹² Cf. E(m) I, 49-52, letter to the Oblate priest Felice Giordano, on 16 April 1843.

¹³ E(m) I, 52, letter to the Oblate priest Felice Giordano, on 16 April 1843.

¹⁴ For instance, Cf. E(m) II, 564, 577.

¹⁵ For instance, Cf. E(m) III, 81-82, 155.

indeed the most affectionate father to me.”¹⁶ The belief in the all-pervading goodness of God makes him ready to receive even the unfortunate events. “If we take happiness from God’s hand, must we not take sorrow too?” (Job 2:10), seems to be the attitude of Don Bosco too. The generous promise of Duke Tommaso Gallarati Scotti to share one tenth of his produce is reciprocated with another promise that God would use even more abundant measurements. But, if God in His immense goodness judged it better not to make the earth yield a rich harvest, and instead of temporal benefits grants spiritual blessings, even then Don Bosco would affirm that it is the holy hand of the Lord and he would be ready to share one tenth of the sufferings as well.¹⁷ Fortune or misfortune, Don Bosco is ready to receive anything from God.¹⁸ Keeping to the promise, when the Duke sends his contribution after a good harvest, Don Bosco gratefully prays that the same goodness of the Lord may continue for the generous Duke.¹⁹

The God of loving kindness is another characteristic of God in Don Bosco’s letters. In the narrations regarding a dying man, God is presented as giving chances to lead a life worthy of Christians and is pleased with the vows made to Him. If the promises are not kept, God sends warnings, and offers further opportunities to turn towards Him. Human beings, however sinful they may be, can be the receivers of the graces of God by means of the Sacraments of Confession and Communion. If one fails to listen to the warning signs, earlier or later, he or she may arrive at a point of no return. Thus the Lord forewarns, possesses fatherly affection, counsels, offers loving corrections, and speaks with the language of the heart.²⁰ In Don Bosco, there is a desire and the inner longing for God’s house. While he looks forward to visiting the “palazzo” of Countess Luigia Viancino to meet her in person, the desire of the saint is increased all the more when a chapel is added to the palace.²¹ The longing for the house of the Lord is similar to the desire of the psalmist: “*Domine dilexi decorem domus tuae et locum habitationis gloriae tuae*” (Ps 26:8). The zeal of Jesus for the house of the Lord (cf. Jn 2:17) seems to consume also Don Bosco.

No task is undertaken by Don Bosco without entrusting it first to Divine Providence. In any new undertaking for the benefit of the young, he is convinced that if it is God’s work, it will succeed. When things do not turn out

¹⁶ E(m) IV, 279, letter to Commander Francesco Clodoveo Monti, on 24 April 1874.

¹⁷ Cf. E(m) III, 88, letter to Duke Tommaso Gallarati Scotti, on 10 May 1869.

¹⁸ For Don Bosco, even grave disasters are the works of the merciful Lord. But the apparent temporal misfortunes would be turned into spiritual blessings by God: “God knows how to bring out good from the evil that human beings do” [E(m) I, 360, letter to Count Carlo Cays, on 18 September 1858].

¹⁹ Cf. E(m) III, 101, letter to Duke Tommaso Gallarati Scotti, on 24 June 1869.

²⁰ Cf. E(m) I, 71, letter to priest Giovanni Borel, on 31 August 1846.

²¹ Cf. E(m) IV, 307, letter to Countess Luigia Viancino di Viancino, on 8 August 1874.

to be a success, he assumes that his projects are not perhaps the Will of God.²² While he expresses his belief in these words, he already sees the marvellous ways of Providence even before the first Salesian missionaries set foot in Argentina. He recognizes the wonderful trace of God's help in the interest and the protection extended by the Mayor and the President of the Foundation for the school, in the missions at S. Nicolás in Argentina, as he exclaims: "How sweet are the ways of Providence!"²³ Such concrete experiences of the providence of God gives him the conviction not to undertake any new activity without that inner assurance. This inner attitude is expressed spontaneously: "Everyone knows that this poor person writing would not have begun the work, unless he trusted in the Lord's Providence and in the piety of those who have such a work at heart, which will be useful to religion and civil society."²⁴

Doing God's Will is the constant preoccupation in Don Bosco. Besides believing in Divine Providence, what is forceful and decisive is feeling the obligation not to transgress the Will of God, even at the cost of fighting against the devil – the personification of evil. Regarding the contract to buy a house at Nizza Marittima, he is convinced that it is God's work: "*God wants this work and we cannot refuse without going against his Holy Will*, and if we cooperate, we will be sure of a good result."²⁵ Once the conviction is made, the firm decision to face any hardship is also made, because "*God wants it and that's enough*".²⁶ This is perhaps the indispensable criterion for Don Bosco in the mission to the young.

Giving oneself to God is imprinted in the mind and the heart of Don Bosco. The deep desire and the secret of his heart is revealed to Countess Girolama Uguccioni on 5 December 1877: "While going to Rome and on my way back, I hope to visit you in Florence. But *do not forget to pray for this reckless individual, who always speaks of giving himself truly to the Lord*, but is always the same."²⁷ The resignation to God's Will, and the perseverance in

²² Cf. E(m) IV, 284, 329-330, 340, 342-343, 361, letters to the Rector of the Irish seminary in Rome, Toby Kirby, between May and December 1874.

²³ E(m) IV, 406, letter to José Francisco Benitez, the Mayor and President of the Commission for the foundation of the school in the missions at S. Nicolás in Argentina, on 2 February 1875.

²⁴ E(m) VI, 100, circular letter to the benefactors, in March 1878.

²⁵ E(m) V, 99, letter to the Salesian director Giuseppe Ronchail, after 22 March 1876. (*italics mine*).

²⁶ E(m) V, 174, letter to the Salesian director Giuseppe Ronchail, on 20 July 1876. (*italics mine*).

²⁷ E(m) V, 517, letter to Countess Girolama Uguccioni, on 5 December 1877. (*italics mine*).

Don Bosco's expression, "giving himself truly to the Lord" finds its reflection at least on two occasions in the *Memoirs*: first, in the providential meeting with Don Calosso with reference to the sermon on "the necessity of giving oneself to God"; and the

prayer in order to seek God's designs remain constant also regarding the health conditions of Frather Buffa: "I regret that Don Buffa has not yet been given back complete health by the Lord. Does God want him in heaven? If that is the Divine wish, *fiat*. But we pray..."²⁸ Regarding the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome, priest Dalmazzo is told: "we have a great undertaking, but *God is with us, and so we have nothing to fear*."²⁹ While the role of divine Providence and the purpose of the greater glory of God are repeated often, the appeals for help in building the Church becomes an occasion to promote devotion to Jesus, Mary, and the Saints, with expressions such as, the Sacred Heart of Jesus is the source of all graces, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus is the inexhaustible source of graces and favours.³⁰

The Catholic Church teaches that the instinct of faith or the spiritual instinct which is linked to the fundamental truth of faith, helps the individual believer to spontaneously act in conformity with the Gospel and with the apostolic faith. Intrinsically linked to the virtue of faith, this spontaneous and natural knowledge of the individual Christian flows from, and is a property of faith.³¹ Reflecting in the light of this truth, we find one specific perception permeating the whole life of Don Bosco: the thoughts and his written words reveal the ever-present sense of God. Besides the fundamentals of faith that are often evident, there is a unique sense of the Providence of God. For Don Bosco, God the author of life is the one who leads history, guides the lives of individuals, and gives orientation to every event of his own life. Even the seemingly adverse circumstances and the temporal misfortunes are turned into positive spiritual blessings by the merciful God. The presence of God is invisible. But for Don Bosco, the invisible hand of God often becomes remarkably obvious. This perception of God leads him not only to live in the presence of God always, but also helps him to orient himself to the movements of the source of life. Having made the decision to follow God's designs, Don

second, on the day of the clerical investiture, "to give himself entirely to the Lord" (Cf. Giovanni Bosco, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*. Saggio introduttivo e note storiche di Aldo Giraudo (Roma, LAS, 2011), 70; 102. For the English Edition, see: John Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855. The Autobiography of Saint John Bosco*, with notes and commentary by Eugenio Ceria Lawrence Castelveccchi and Michael Mendl, trans. Daniel Lyons (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1989), 35, 122). Such a resonance between the *Epistolario* and the *Memoirs* offers the scholars an opportunity for further clarity as well as a comparative study between the letters and the other writings of Don Bosco.

²⁸ E(m) VII, 314, letter to the master of novices, Giulio Barberis, on 11 March 1881.

²⁹ E(m) VII, 150, letter to the Salesian procurator in Rome, Francesco Dalmazzo, on 7 July 1880. (italics mine).

³⁰ For instance, Cf. E(m) VII, 382, 475.

³¹ Cf. International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (Philippines, Paulines Publishing House, 2014), n. 49.

Bosco keeps himself aligned towards God and His ways. Ever filled with the eager longing of the deer that longs for flowing streams, and of the soul thirsting for the living God, the heart of Don Bosco longs to live in the presence of God like the sparrows finding their home amongst the Lord's altars, ever singing the praises of the Lord (cf. Ps 84:1-4). It is such a decision, conviction, and the desire for living in God's presence that we find in Don Bosco in the letters. He is constantly and habitually oriented towards God, and the divine Will becomes his primary criteria of any discernment. Due to this spiritual identity emerging from the *Epistolario*, Don Bosco could be best described as a man in "God-Synchronous Orbit".³² God's Will is the only thing necessary, and Don Bosco longs to be in continuous harmony with God. This becomes the primary and the essential criteria of understanding and interpreting him. It is in the light of this God-oriented approach that Don Bosco is understood best in his letters.

2. The Primacy of Personal Salvation and Salvation of Souls

Don Bosco often identifies himself to his boys and to the Salesians as the friend of their souls. The self-descriptions as the father, brother, and the friend of the souls, bring forth the earnest and one of his deepest desires of the heart. The self-assertion remains the same even as he writes to lay persons: "Don Bosco is always the friend of the soul."³³ That souls have been redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ is the reason and the source of his love

³² "God-Synchronous Orbit" is an expression borrowed from an Indian author - A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, from the insightful statement found in his last book, published just a month before his death and titled: *Transcendence: My Spiritual Experiences with Pramukh Swamiji*. Summarising the ultimate stage of the spiritual ascent in his life, which began through his father and was sustained by remarkable guides, he states: "Now, finally, Pramukh Swamiji has put me in a God-synchronous orbit. No manoeuvres are required any more, as I am placed in my final position in eternity" (A.P.J. Abdul Kalam - Arun Tiwari, *Transcendence: My Spiritual Experiences with Pramukh Swamiji* (Noida, Harper Collins Publishers, 2015), 50).

What is specific in the expression is the "synchronization" or the movement of a satellite in harmony with the Earth (Geo-synchronous orbit), and the Earth is the source of all life forms. Abdul Kalam (1931-2015), a noted Scientist and a former President of India, while describing his spiritual experiences, comes out with this original expression -- "God-synchronous orbit" -- to express the relation between God and himself, and his urge to be attuned to God continuously.

Though found outside of the context of Don Bosco and outside the Christian context, the spiritual essence that is evident in the expression leads me to use it – which in my opinion describes in a precise and fitting way what Don Bosco is in his letters.

³³ E(m) IV, 217, 278, 287.

for his sons as he clarifies: “my affection is founded on the desire to save your souls,” and the “good of our souls is the foundation of our mutual affection”.³⁴

Don Bosco is convinced that he is called to be God’s humble instrument for the salvation of the young. The only concern of his heart is the salvation of souls. To the boy Pietro who perhaps responded in a bitter or in an insolent way, Don Bosco explains his motive and appeals to the boy’s heart: “I have nothing against you. Don Bosco is always your friend, he always wishes good things for you, and he seeks nothing but the salvation of your soul.”³⁵ Affirming the single-minded purpose of all the members of the nascent Congregation, he instils the same objective in the mind of the young cleric Giovanni Bonetti in 1863: “Take heart! Let your efforts be directed towards preserving the unity of your Will with those of the superiors, because they all want only one thing --to save many souls, and among them their own souls.”³⁶

The realization of being an instrument in saving souls, urges him to transmit the same objective into the hearts of others. For Don Bosco, the one thing necessary is the salvation of one’s soul. The annual spiritual retreat conducted for the young girls, women, and the teachers at Mornese has the particular motive: “*Only one thing is necessary: to save our souls; porro unum necessarium.*”³⁷ Convinced of this singular necessity, he reminds the Salesians that the priests be in solidarity with one another in everything that concerns their eternal salvation and that of the young people.³⁸ The help requested from the Sister Enrichetta Dominici in the formulation of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, though it might be an annoyance for her, leads to assurance that the help would redound to the greater glory of God. If they succeed in winning over some souls, she would have played a major part.³⁹ The attitude of instilling the consciousness of the soul remains the same even amidst the fear of suppression of religious houses. He assures those affected by the issues, saying that as he prays that God may disperse the plans of the wicked and preserve the house of the Lord, he also affirms that in any case they would not have to fear the salvation of their souls.⁴⁰ Amidst the expulsion of religious from France, when Salesians and the Salesian houses are

³⁴ E(m) IV, 208, letter to Salesian priest Giuseppe Lazzero and the artisans at Valdocco, on 20 January 1874.

³⁵ E(m) I, 527, letter to the boy Pietro, before 2 October 1862.

³⁶ E(m) I, 628, letter to young cleric Giovanni Bonetti, at the end of the year 1863.

³⁷ E(m) IV, 476, circular letter for the spiritual retreat for women and teachers at Mornese, in July 1875. (italics as in *Epistolario*).

³⁸ Cf. E(m) III, 501, letter to the boys in the school at Lanzo, on the feast day of Saint Stephen, in 1872.

³⁹ Cf. E(m) III, 325, letter to the Superior of the Sisters of Saint Anne, Mother Enrichetta Dominici, on 24 April 1871.

⁴⁰ Cf. E(m) IV, 82, letter to the abbot of San Paolo in Rome, Francesco Leopoldo Jacobuzzi Zelli, on 21 April 1873.

saved through the providential efforts of the clergy and the Catholics of the city of Marseilles, Don Bosco is grateful to God, to Mary, and to those good-hearted persons, and his prayer is for the souls. He prays that God, who is rich in graces, may bless them all and grant them the singular favour of saving their souls, and the souls of all those whom Divine Providence sends under their care.⁴¹

When the soul is lost, everything is lost. Hence, it is important to live in the grace of God. Assuring his prayers both for the soul and for the bodily health of the person who is ill, Don Bosco does not hesitate to exhort that “if someone dies, they die only once, and it does not cost anything to place oneself in the grace of God; but losing the soul, everything is lost”.⁴² As for acquiring the little land containing an old building which he calls “the house of immorality”, which is near the square adjacent to the Church of Mary Help of Christians, though it costs much, he is sure that help would come, because the only intention is preventing offence to the Lord and to save souls.⁴³ The reward by the Lord for the charity done for the same intention is that if one has saved the souls of others, one would save one’s own.⁴⁴

Personal salvation has primacy over the mission towards the salvation of souls. The exhortation is the same whether they are Salesians or other ministers of God, or those who cooperate in this divine call. The salvation of souls – one’s own first, and the souls of others next, is the order of priorities. The preoccupation to save others must indeed be founded on the urge to save oneself. However, saving others remains an excellent way to save oneself. By saving a soul, one saves oneself. Don Bosco’s requests for charitable contributions towards the mission for the young must be understood in the light of salvation. He assures that the mission carried out is for souls and that the one who helps to save a soul secures their own salvation, as Saint Augustine says.⁴⁵

The consciousness of personal salvation lies deep down in Don Bosco. “Lest, after preaching to others I myself should not be castaway” (1 Cor 9:27), is the personal preoccupation of Don Bosco. Hence, he often asks others to pray that he might save his own soul. The boys and the Salesians in the school at Lanzo are recommended to keep him in their valuable prayers: “so that I may not have the misfortune of preaching to save others and then lose my own poor soul. *Ne cum aliis praedicaverim, ipse rebrobus efficiar.*”⁴⁶ Praying for

⁴¹ Cf. E(m) VII, 224, letter to Fr Clément Guiol, on 16 November 1880.

⁴² E(m) IV, 173, letter to a lady whose name is not known, on 20 October 1873.

⁴³ Cf. E(m) IV, 401, circular letter to people, on 19 January 1875.

⁴⁴ For instance, Cf. E(m) IV, 403, 404.

⁴⁵ Cf. E(m) III, 406, letter to layman Biagio Foeri, on 13 March 1872.

⁴⁶ E(m) IV, 386, letter to the Salesians and the boys of the school at Lanzo, on 5 January 1875.

the salvation of the soul of Don Bosco is a way of loving him, as the young boy Victor Cesconi is told in January 1880: “May God bless you dear Victor, and free you from the dangers of the soul; and if you love me, please pray to the Blessed Virgin Mary so that I may save my soul.”⁴⁷

The mission towards the salvation of souls is a divine call which can never be transgressed, and to help those involved in saving souls is also a divine work. It is the most divine work to cooperate with God in the salvation of souls: “*Divinorum Divinissimum est ad salutem animarum Deo cooperari.*”⁴⁸ Reflecting further, aside from the *Epistolario*, we can affirm that Don Bosco is in harmony with the idea of Saint Philip Neri that no sacrifice is so pleasing to God as zeal for the salvation of souls. Don Bosco is convinced that the work for the salvation of souls is the holiest of holy actions, and that by saving the souls of others one could save one’s own soul.⁴⁹ In the *Epistolario*, Saint Francis de Sales is presented as the model for the spirit of gentleness, zeal for the glory of God, and for the salvation of souls.⁵⁰ Perhaps it is for all these reasons that Paolo Albera states that “saving souls was Don Bosco’s watchword”.⁵¹ While personal salvation is the constant preoccupation of Don Bosco, the salvation of souls is the *raison d’être* of his entire mission to the young. This sense of the soul that derives its motive from the salvation brought by Christ, remains the indispensable reason for his being, for his relationship with others, and the essential motive behind all his multifarious activities.

3. The Joy of Being with the Young

The heart overwhelming with love, joy and concern towards the young, immediately catches the attention of the reader of the letters. Reading the letters to the young – nearly 200 letters up to the year 1883 – which include the letters to the young clerics and seminarians, and addressed at times to the directors of the Salesian houses, one cannot but be captivated by the sincere heart of the writer. Whether Don Bosco addresses himself as a father or a brother or a friend, reading the contents, an emotional reader might even be fascinated and led to feel that he is being addressed too. “You are truly my delight and my consolation, and I miss one or the other of these two things when I am far from

⁴⁷ E(m) VII, 36, letter to young boy Victor Cesconi, in the beginning of January 1880.

⁴⁸ E(m) III, 83, letter to Marquis Antonio Gerini, on 5 May 1869.

⁴⁹ For further reflection on this passionate theme of Don Bosco based on one of his homilies - one year prior to the letter that we have mentioned just above, see: Giovanni Bosco, “Il panegirico di don Bosco in onore di san Filippo Neri (1868): Edizione critica a cura di Aldo Giraudo,” *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane* 34, 64 (2015): 63-107.

⁵⁰ Cf. E(m) V, 52, circular letter to Salesians, on 16 January 1876.

⁵¹ Paolo Albera, *Lettere circolari di D. Paolo Albera ai salesiani* (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1922), 333.

you,”⁵² is the way the boys at Valdocco are addressed in 1861. The boys in the junior seminary at Mirabello are told in 1866: “I can certainly tell you that when you go elsewhere you will find people who are more learned and far more virtuous than I, but it will be difficult to find someone who seeks what is good for you more than I do.”⁵³ When he is away in Rome, the expression of love for his dearest sons in Jesus Christ is that even when he is far away from them, every moment he thinks of them, and occupies himself for them.⁵⁴ In 1877, after being away from Turin for little more than two weeks, Fr Michael Rua is told: “tell our youngsters that it seems to be half a century since I saw them”.⁵⁵ In the similar circumstances in 1880, he is impatient not to find himself among them and eagerly looks forward to getting back to Turin.⁵⁶ Such is the eagerness of Don Bosco to be with the young.

There are profound reasons for these expressions of love and the care shown towards the young. The love of the Lord and his love for their souls are the fundamental reasons for this exceptional love. The laywoman Giuseppina Pellico is told about her brother Silvio, that he loves the boy in the Lord and Don Bosco promises to care for the boy just as if he were his own brother.⁵⁷ Addressing his boys at the junior seminary at Mirabello in July 1864 about his arrival, he says that he is coming amongst them as a father, friend and brother and asks them to place their hearts in his hands for a while so that they would be happy. Furthermore he makes his deeper intentions clear, saying that when their souls are filled with the peace and grace of the Lord, he would be happy and would have the much-desired consolation of seeing them all friends of God the Creator.⁵⁸ That the young grow in closeness to the Lord is his wish and prayer, as he wants the Salesian director Francesia to communicate to the boys at Varazze that he loves them in the Lord and that he prays for them every day in the holy Mass asking for their stable health, progress in studies, and true wealth – the holy fear of God.⁵⁹

True happiness in God is what Don Bosco desires for the young. In order that they might attain such happiness and that he could help them towards it, he seeks their absolute confidence in him. Such a confidence in him is one of the dearest things in the world for him. In person or through the letters if one speaks to him with confidence, he is well-pleased. The young cleric Giovanni

⁵² E(m) I, 452, letter to the boys in the Oratory at Valdocco, on 23 July 1861.

⁵³ E(m) II, 280, letter to the boys in the junior seminary at Mirabello, on 26 July 1866.

⁵⁴ Cf. E(m) IV, 420, letter to Fr Michael Rua, after 22 February 1875.

⁵⁵ E(m) V, 321, letter to Fr Michele Rua, on 5 March 1877.

⁵⁶ Cf. E(m) VII, 65, letter to Salesian priest Celestino Durando, on 16 March 1880.

⁵⁷ Cf. E(m) II, 355, letter to laywoman Giuseppina Pellico, on 13 April 1867.

⁵⁸ Cf. E(m) II, 59, letter to the boys in the junior seminary at Mirabello, in the beginning of July 1864.

⁵⁹ Cf. E(m) V, 39-40, letter to Salesian director Giovanni Battista Francesia, on 10 January 1876.

Turco is told: “Your letter made me very happy and I was so pleased that you talked to me with our old confidence, which for Don Bosco is the dearest thing in the world.”⁶⁰ That the openness of heart and the unlimited confidence on the part of the young pleases him and offers him a reason for joy is revealed to another cleric: “I really liked your letter. In it you make me know that your heart is always open to Don Bosco. Continuing like this, you will always be *gaudium meum et corona mea*.”⁶¹ In a similar situation, the young boy Antoine Homsy is told: “I received your letter, which pleased me very much, because you open your heart to me and I can give you good advice.”⁶² Besides confidence, the good conduct of the boys really pleases him and he considers it as a wonderful gift for him.⁶³ Through Fr Francesia he makes it clear to the boys that if they want to give something really pleasing to Don Bosco, it is by receiving a holy Communion according to his intention.⁶⁴

The joy of being with the young and being pleased by their goodness is similar also with his Salesian sons. Don Bosco is happy when he sees the eagerness to work for the young, to work in the missions, and when a Salesian has positive things to say about another Salesian. Fr Giacomo Costamagna is told about Luigi Lasagna: “He is really good. He speaks so well about everyone and particularly about you, and it makes me happy.”⁶⁵

For Don Bosco, words always turn into actions. Love for poor young people leads him to work for them in various ways. We see him happy and looking for ways and means to help when the young express their desire to follow the religious and priestly calling.⁶⁶ He is very expressive and pours out his heart of love when the boys express their love and their desire to join the Salesian Congregation. When the young man Benvenuto Graziano communicates to Don Bosco that after the period of his military service he would like to join Don Bosco, the latter expresses his great consolation at receiving the young man back, and leading him to fulfil the path that forms the object of their thoughts.⁶⁷ Young Tommaso Barale is told that his precious gift to Don Bosco is desiring to be among his Salesian sons for they could speak among themselves with words and paternal affection, and they would be of one

⁶⁰ E(m) II, 445, letter to Salesian cleric Giovanni Turco, on 25 October 1867.

⁶¹ E(m) IV, 404, letter to Salesian cleric Erminio Borio, on 28 January 1875.

⁶² E(m) VII, 442, letter to young boy Antoine Homsy, on 22 October 1881.

⁶³ Cf. E(m) IV, 436, letter to Fr Michele Rua, on 12 March 1875.

⁶⁴ Cf. E(m) V, 40, letter to Salesian director at Varazze, Giovanni Battista Francesia, on 19 January 1876.

⁶⁵ E(m) VII, 430, letter to Salesian Provincial of Argentina, Giacomo Costamagna, on 1 October 1881.

⁶⁶ For instance, see: E(m) III, 111, 123, letters to Pope Pius IX, in July and August 1869.

⁶⁷ Cf. E(m) V, 57, letter to young army man Benvenuto Graziano, at the end of January 1876.

mind in everything.⁶⁸ A specific insight that we find in Don Bosco is that he always gives some practical suggestions to the young, to perform or to do, in order to become apostles among others. One such action is making more people familiar with the *Catholic Readings*.⁶⁹

Don Bosco feels the urge and considers that his primary responsibility as a priest and as an instrument of God is to lead the young to God and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Giuseppe Roggeri is reminded of the contract made among them, of being friends so as to love God with one heart and one soul, and is asked to recite certain prayers if he wants Don Bosco as his friend.⁷⁰ Similar agreement is made with the young boy Victor Cesconi and the boy is reminded of it through his mother, Zeglia Cesconi. The pact is that Don Bosco would pray for little Victor every day during Mass, and the boy in turn must pray for Don Bosco every morning.⁷¹ The occasional contacts with the boy through his mother, and the later personal communications with the young boy, bring out the heart and the method of Don Bosco in forming the young.⁷²

Moving further from the initial familiarity of friendship and joyful expressions, Don Bosco gradually strikes at the roots of the relationship with God. The letters written to the boys collectively deal with both the spiritual contents and external behaviour. As he encourages the boys, he does not fail to admonish them saying that they are his consolation and that no one should pierce his heart with the thorns of bad conduct.⁷³ The letters to the boys in common contain various spiritual counsels to the young. In them he acknowledges the love of the boys for him and opens his paternal heart to them. Encouraging them for their expressions of faith and moral conduct, he often draws up a practical plan of action for them, insisting on avoiding laziness, frequenting the sacraments of Confession and Communion, and the devotion and frequent recourse to Mary the most holy mother.⁷⁴ Hence, for Don Bosco, human relationships begin from God and therefore must always end in God. The love of the young necessarily leads to the love of God.

How can we summarise the joy and the love of Don Bosco towards the young? Jesus in the Gospel declares his joy of being with the little children (cf.

⁶⁸ Cf. E(m) V, 334, letter to young man Tommaso Barale, on 28 March 1877.

⁶⁹ Cf. E(m) II, 502, letter to young boy Giovanni Pestarino, on 23 February 1868.

⁷⁰ Cf. E(m) I, 306-307, letter to young boy Giuseppe Roggeri, on 8 October 1856.

⁷¹ Cf. E(m) IV, 508, letter to the laywoman Zeglia Cesconi, the mother of Victor, on 15 August 1875.

⁷² For instance, Cf. E(m) III, 378, 393; E(m) IV, 104, 123; E(m) V, 55, 160, 276; E(m) VI, 70; 180.

⁷³ Cf. E(m) III, 501, letter to the boys at Lanzo, on the feast day of saint Stephen in December 1872.

⁷⁴ For instance, Cf. E(m) I, 628-630; E(m) II, 97-98; E(m) IV, 207-208, 385-386; E(m) V, 38-39.

Lk 18:16), and desiring that everyone be saved (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4), and reveals his intention as the Good Shepherd who “came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Saint Paul, in his letter of joy, besides calling the Philippines his joy and crown, also indicates Christ as the source from which all can draw real joy (cf. Phil 4:1). Following Christ in the Gospel way, Don Bosco expresses his love for the young, and demonstrates his joy and the profound intentions of saving their souls through his actions.⁷⁵ Besides the joyful situations, even amidst difficulties and fatigue, the thoughts about his boys and his Salesian sons revive him.⁷⁶ Recovering from his serious illness and physical weakness in 1871-1872, he writes from Varazze to the boys in Turin about another weakness of his: “I feel a great urge to be there. While my body is here, my heart, my thoughts, and my very words are always with you at the Oratory. This is indeed a weakness which I cannot overcome.”⁷⁷ This weakness of Don Bosco which he cannot overcome is what characterizes his love of neighbour concerning his sons.

4. Gratitude: Multiple Reasons and Multiform Expressions

Gratitude shines resplendent in the letters of Don Bosco. In fact, the very first letter in the *Epistolario* shows the gratefulness of cleric John Bosco to the family of his friend Annibale, when he expresses that he could never forget the generosity towards him when he had gone to Pinerolo.⁷⁸ The sense of gratitude is often visible. Whether it is towards God or towards others, Don Bosco’s words indicate his heartfelt gratitude. Some might consider it as the natural consequence of receiving help from charitable people towards the mission for the young. Although the letters containing the sentiments of gratitude for all his benefactors might in fact be a considerable number, the similar attitude of Don Bosco towards others at various situations in life, and the manifold ways of expressing his gratitude, shed light on the nature of the person that he is. Gratitude is an evident sign of the spiritual profile of Don Bosco emerging from the letters.

Prayers, novenas, and the holy Masses offered for the benefits received on behalf of poor young people are the frequent signs of gratitude. The assurance of the prayers of boys is not just a promise, but an evident reality as evidenced by the specific descriptions of suffrages at the death of the

⁷⁵ Cf. E(m) IV, 244-245, letter to cleric Giovanni Cinzano and students at Valdocco, on 7 March 1874.

⁷⁶ Cf. E(m) V, 40, letter to Salesian director at Varazze, Giovanni Battista Francesia, on 10 January 1876.

⁷⁷ E(m) III. 395, letter to priest Michele Rua, on 9 February 1872.

⁷⁸ Cf. E(m) I, 45, letter to layman Giuseppe Strambio, in 1835-1836.

benefactor, the Count of Antignano.⁷⁹ When Countess Girolama Uguccioni expresses her fears about her grandchildren, Don Bosco assures her of his prayers during Mass, and assigns six boys to pray and offer their holy Communion for her intention for two months.⁸⁰ On receiving an offering for the small bell for the new Church, Don Bosco asks his collaborator to visit the benefactress in person, to thank her and to assure her that on the feast of the presentation of Mary, all the boys would be receiving holy Communion for her intentions.⁸¹ This way of expressing gratitude with a special remembrance during the holy Mass is common in the letters.⁸²

Some of the expressions of gratitude in the letters are: “thank you for all your charity”; “thank you for the kind offering sent”; and, “you add charity to charity and we pray to God to add blessings upon blessings on you”.⁸³ While charity is described as precious charity in moments of difficulty, the benefactors Cavaliere Tommaso and Countess Girolama Uguccioni are described as “two treasures of beneficence and benediction for us”.⁸⁴ Count Annibale Bentivoglio of Rome who offers an ornament studded with gems for the raffle is thanked wholeheartedly for the new way of offering charity.⁸⁵ Don Bosco’s attitude on receiving any type of benefits from others for the works of charity seems to be: “thanks to God and gratitude to you”.⁸⁶ For him, gratitude should not be a fleeting sentiment, but a permanent remembrance and an attitude. Amidst difficulties involved in buying the property at Nizza, France, the Salesian Fr Giuseppe Ronchail is told to make a catalogue of the names of the benefactors who in any small way had contributed for the purpose, so that as long as the institution exists, there would be prayers offered for them in the morning and evening.⁸⁷

Gratitude has its roots in the blessings and the reward of God. This thought is reiterated while thanking people for the benefits received. Don Bosco declares that every small contribution has a great merit before the Lord, like the widow’s mite (cf. Lk 21:1-4).⁸⁸ It is God and mother Mary who would repay the goodness of the donors. Expressing that it is his duty to extend his

⁷⁹ Cf. E(m) I, 217, letter to Fr Pietro Giuseppe De Gaudenzi, on 31 January 1854.

⁸⁰ Cf. E(m) II, 364, letter to Countess Girolama Uguccioni, on 2 May 1867.

⁸¹ Cf. E(m) II, 451, letter to Federico Oreglia, on 18 November 1867.

⁸² For instance, Cf. E(m) III, 121, 127, 158; E(m) IV, 84, 157.

⁸³ For instance, Cf. E(m) II, 49, 50, 51.

⁸⁴ Cf. E(m) IV, 161, letter to Count Alessandro Arborio Mella, on 3 October 1873; E(m) III, 40, letter to priest Michele Rua, on 14 January 1869.

⁸⁵ Cf. E(m) II, 336, letter to Count Annibale Bentivoglio, on 16 February 1867.

⁸⁶ Cf. E(m) II, 340, letter to vicar capitular of Alba, Pietro Giocondo Salvaj, on 8 March 1867; E(m) V, 521, letter to priest Clément Guiol, on 12 December 1877.

⁸⁷ Cf. E(m) V, 108, letter to the Salesian director Giuseppe Ronchail, on 12 April 1876.

⁸⁸ Cf. E(m) VI, 101, circular letter to benefactors, in March 1878.

heartfelt gratitude,⁸⁹ he assures that the holy virgin would repay with coins that would never diminish,⁹⁰ and that God's reward will be the joy of being together as a family in heaven, with the celestial banquet.⁹¹ Prayers for the benefits received are for the blessings of God which are hundredfold in this life and eternal life later.⁹² The offerings in charity manifest one's detachment from money as demanded by the Holy Gospel, and generous sacrifices are the privations that deserve special graces from God.⁹³ The gratitude expressed particularly in later years include the precious gifts of both living well and dying well. He prays that everyone may obtain health and grace, and that God might bless and keep them all in His holy service with the grace of living well and dying well.⁹⁴

The sense of gratitude is further intensified when charity leads directly to the spiritual benefit of others – not only individuals, but also the Congregation and the Church as well. The overwhelming gratitude for helping to save the clerics from going to compulsory military service is expressed by stating that there is no doubt the clerics would pray all their lives for the ones who had snatched the weapons from their hands and replaced them with a breviary. Furthermore, the clergy, the Church and the faithful are grateful because the clerics who received the benefits would, as ministers of God, constantly invoke the blessings of God on all.⁹⁵ The more the need, the more the gratitude. When the Salesians in France are saved from being expelled and the Salesian house at Marseilles is saved in 1880, the joy and the gratitude of Don Bosco knows no bounds. Profoundly moved, and reciting a *Te Deum*, he expresses his gratitude – first to God, then to mother Mary, and then to the parish priest Clément Guiol and the Catholics of the city.⁹⁶ The heart of gratitude is manifested even beyond the shores of Italy and France for the manifold benefits extended to the Salesian missionaries in Argentina: “This is in capital letters! I must thank you, but I am thanked instead. It is indeed your exceptional goodness. In every way, it's all for the greater glory of God. Many thanks for the offer towards our missionaries.”⁹⁷ The duty to thank the people who have been good to the missionaries continues as another benefactor is

⁸⁹ Cf. E(m) IV, 390, letter to benefactress Anna Fava, on 9 January 1875.

⁹⁰ Cf. E(m) IV, 78, letter to benefactress Eugenia Radice Marietti Fossati, on 14 April 1873.

⁹¹ Cf. E(m) VII, 406, 418, letters to benefactress Emilia and Baron Aimé Héraud, on 29 July and on 4 September 1881 respectively.

⁹² For instance, Cf. E(m) II, 256, 259, 368; E(m) III, 435; E(m) IV, 68, 72, 516, 518; E(m) VI, 253, 469.

⁹³ Cf. E(m) III, 388, letter to Countess Emma Brancadoro, on 2 December 1871.

⁹⁴ For instance, Cf. E(m) VII, 63, 108, 210.

⁹⁵ For instance, Cf. E(m) IV, 177, 181, letters to Countess Carlotta Callori, on 14 November and 26 November 1873.

⁹⁶ Cf. E(m) VII, 223, letter to Fr Clément Guiol, on 16 November 1880.

⁹⁷ E(m) VII, 35, letter to Countess Bosco of Ruffino, on 3 January 1880.

thanked, saying that he had always admired the charity of the benefactor in helping them establish and stabilize the houses and schools in “Buenos Ayres”.⁹⁸ Truly, Don Bosco shines out as a man of gratitude even beyond the shores of the sea.

The novel ways of expressing gratitude include obtaining spiritual gifts from the Pope for the individuals and their families. While special blessings are obtained for priests from the ecclesiastical authorities,⁹⁹ honorary titles are obtained from the Pope and from the State authorities for the benefactors as a sign of gratitude. An honorary title is sought for Doctor Albertotti, for the free service he renders to the boys at Valdocco. The titles sought are in recognition of the service of charity towards religion and towards the country. Don Bosco believes that such titles would also be an encouragement to others, for doing good and for the good of souls.¹⁰⁰ The goodness of men could be proclaimed as long as it leads to the glory of God and for the good of souls. Feast days and name feasts become opportunities to thank the good-hearted people. At times he invites them to take part in the feasts at Valdocco, and reminds the Salesians also to do the same.¹⁰¹ Popes and ecclesiastical authorities are thanked through prayers and offering of holy Communion for their intentions because, as it could very well be seen, the recipients of the benefits do not have other means with which to show their sincere gratitude.¹⁰² Gratitude is shown for the benefits received by the Salesians, for the hospitality shown to individual Salesians and to himself, and for the benefits received in the mission lands.¹⁰³

Gratitude takes on many forms such as poetry, humour with an offering, humour mingled with a holy desire, offering of the first fruits of the garden, and the gift of candies.¹⁰⁴ “Kindly accept these tomatoes. They are the first fruits of the first harvest at Alassio”,¹⁰⁵ is a sign of gratitude. The benefactress who is ill is sent some edible birds and is told: “Kindly accept these birds which, though they may not help you to fly, at least they may give you a little strength to walk.”¹⁰⁶ The heart of thanksgiving ever shines resplendent. Every benefit is received with gratitude. Don Bosco’s readiness to accept and correct

⁹⁸ Cf. E(m) VII, 291, letter to the benefactor of the Salesians in Buenos Aires, doctor Edoardo Carranza, on 31 January 1881.

⁹⁹ See for instance, E(m) II, 337-338, letter to Pope Pius IX, before 21 February 1867.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. E(m) III, 251, 256-259, 275; E(m) IV, 199-200; E(m) VI, 71-73.

¹⁰¹ For instance, Cf. E(m) III, 357; E(m) IV, 260, 436, 438; E(m) V, 90; E(m) VII, 316-317.

¹⁰² Cf. E(m) IV, 585, letter to Cardinal Giacomo Antonelli, on 20 December 1875.

¹⁰³ Cf. E(m) II, 186; E(m) III, 65, 66, 68; E(m) IV, 532; V, 464, 465.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. E(m) III, 392; E(m) IV, 466; E(m) VII, 396.

¹⁰⁵ E(m) V, 53, letter to Count Federico Callori, on 18 January 1876. Also Cf. E(m) V, 53.

¹⁰⁶ E(m) V, 59, letter to Countess Carlotta Callori, on 3 February 1876.

the errors pointed out in his writings, brings with it his gratitude as well.¹⁰⁷ While paying back the loan lent to him, the expression is: “the debt of gratitude still remains, which I certainly cannot pay, except with prayers, invoking heavenly blessings on all those in your family.”¹⁰⁸ Don Bosco often remembers the servants of the Salesian houses, such as cooks and those rendering their services for the boys, and thanks them, and asks the Salesians to care for them.¹⁰⁹ He is grateful to his boys for their prayers, particularly during his serious illness.¹¹⁰ The words of gratitude to his patient secretary Gioachino Berto is that God might make him a saint like the biblical figure of Job.¹¹¹ Welcoming the Archbishop of Buenos Aires and the delegation from Argentina and accompanying them for more than a month in spite of his fatigue and immense activities, Don Bosco is happy because: “we have truly done as much as possible to show our benevolence and gratitude.”¹¹²

The letters of Don Bosco are strewn with words and signs of gratitude that his relationship with neighbour is marked by gratitude. An aspect so frequently and evidently surfacing, gratitude could be considered a special virtue practised by Don Bosco. It is habitual and is consciously exercised in various circumstances and in various forms. The presence of gratitude is in fact a sure sign of the presence of other values. In this regard, Anton Witwer says that, by thanking we remember not only all that others do for us, but also our dependence on them. Sensitivity to the love of others depends on the inwardly felt gratitude which is a fruit of the exercise of thanksgiving. Whoever gives thanks puts the other at the centre, and thus lays the foundation for a true relationship.¹¹³ It is for this reason that Saint Ignatius indicates as the first point of the method for making the general examination of conscience, to give thanks to God our Lord for the benefits received.¹¹⁴ One cannot take for granted that thanksgiving is a common, spontaneous, and natural effect in everyone, for the benefits he or she receives. It is not so for all. In fact, Jesus Himself is surprised that out of the ten lepers healed, only one turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and prostrating himself at the feet of Jesus, thanked Him, making Jesus

¹⁰⁷ Cf. E(m) IV, 110, letter to the Archbishop of Urbino, Alessandro Angeloni, on 3 June 1873.

¹⁰⁸ E(m) IV, 147, letter to senator Giuseppe Cataldi, on 19 August 1873.

¹⁰⁹ For instance, Cf. E(m) III, 47, 173, 179; E(m) V, 83; E(m) VI, 103, 123.

¹¹⁰ Cf. E(m) III, 395, letter to priest Michele Rua, on 9 February 1872.

¹¹¹ Cf. E(m) VII, 299, letter to his secretary, priest Gioachino Berto, on 10 February 1881.

¹¹² E(m) V, 404, letter to Salesian missionary in Argentina, Luigi Lasagna, on 16 July 1877.

¹¹³ Cf. Anton Witwer, “La mistagogia – problema odierno o sfida continua per il teologo spirituale. Alcune riflessioni riguardo alle possibilità dell’annuncio della fede e dell’approfondimento dell’esperienza di fede,” *Mysterion* 2, 8 (2015): 189.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Elder Mullan (New York, P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1914), 14.

wonder: “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” (Lk 17:16-17). Gratitude is an intentional act, leading to conscious efforts of being connected to God and neighbour. Don Bosco seems to possess it in abundance.

5. “Spiritual Shyness” of Don Bosco and His Unintentional Self-Disclosures

Don Bosco is said to be characterised by “spiritual shyness”, for he does not easily reveal his interiority.¹¹⁵ “Extremely reserved”, he rarely expresses anything of his personal spiritual experiences.¹¹⁶ In the *Epistolario*, while Don Bosco readily agrees and even advocates that the goodness of others be made known for the greater glory of God and for the benefit of human beings, he seems to prefer that the secrets of his inner world remain hidden forever. This is what he acknowledges in the preface to the *Memoirs* too.¹¹⁷ However, there appear to be some exceptions in the letters.

As fortunate as we might consider these letters to be, we do find certain instances – though not so often – wherein he reveals his inner nature, without being conscious of it. We might consider it a “happy fault” – *felix culpa*. The moments of such self-disclosures vary from the expressions just escaping his pen, to the revelations warranted by the necessity of the circumstances, particularly those involving the Oratory. Yet in other situations, the “first person statements” or the “third person descriptions” help the attentive reader to trace and track down the person of Don Bosco.¹¹⁸

The simplicity of life-style that Don Bosco wants to lead and his desire to be treated like a “poor mendicant” while he plans to visit Countess Gabriella Corsi, is revealed in his prior notice to her: “Please understand that I am a poor mendicant, and I want to be treated like one in matters of accommodation, meals, and all other things; whatever bread and soup I shall receive, let it be for the love of the Lord.”¹¹⁹ That he does not desire personal glory offered by his admirers, but is ready to meet people any time if it concerns the good of the souls or charity towards his poor boys for which he wishes to thank them personally is expressed thus: “I think we will have time to satisfy everyone.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Eugenio Ceria, *Don Bosco with God*, trans. Michael Smyth (Bengaluru, Kristu Jyothi Publications, 2014), 138.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Aldo Giraudo, “Echi della dottrina salesiana nell’itinerario spirituale personale descritto da don Bosco nelle «Memorie dell’oratorio»”, *La parola e la storia. Uno sguardo salesiano, studi in onore del Prof. Morand Wirth*, ed. Aldo Giraudo (Roma: LAS, 2017), 384.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855*, 3.

¹¹⁸ For instance, for the first-person statements, Cf. E(m) III, 70, 108; and for the third-person descriptions, Cf. E(m) I, 257; E(m) II, 61.

¹¹⁹ E(m) III, 356, letter to Countess Gabriella Corsi, on 12 August 1871.

[...] As for those who come to offer compliments, thank them and send them.”¹²⁰

Don Bosco asserts his identity as a Catholic priest and as the one who has consecrated his life to God for the benefit of the young, whatever the situation might be, even as he professes his love for his country.¹²¹ Amidst the struggle regarding the “temporalities”, as he comes forward voluntarily to play the role of the mediator between the Church and the State, he makes his stand clear: “Although I stand quite apart from political matters, nevertheless I have never refused to play a part in things that can be of some advantage to my country.”¹²² Regarding the Church-State relations he reveals his resolute stand of “give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mt 22:21).¹²³ Thus, Don Bosco’s fortitude and the ever-present consciousness of his priestly identity is revealed.

The personal advice and counsel that Don Bosco ardently seeks from the Pope and the other ecclesiastical authorities in moments of conflict, particularly regarding the difficulties in his relationship with Archbishop Gastaldi, are evident in the letters.¹²⁴ The inner urge to open his heart readily to the ecclesiastical authorities in order to seek advice shows the reasons for his insistence with the boys and Salesians to place unlimited confidence in him and in the superiors. We see him practising what he keeps preaching in the letters. Amidst the difficulties with his Archbishop, Don Bosco pleads to be counselled and guided.¹²⁵ His overwhelming love for Pope Pius IX, to fulfil every wish of the Pontiff, and to obey without any reservations, is known when he is asked to deal with certain issues regarding the Congregation of the Sons of the Immaculate Conception or Hospitaller brothers of the Immaculate Conception: “Every thought of the Holy Father is for me an absolute command. If it seems to His Holiness that I and my Salesians can do something pleasing to him, we are ready without any reservation.”¹²⁶

Don Bosco’s preoccupation to make his confession is manifested in his little note to Fr Giovanni Giacomelli who had been his companion while

¹²⁰ E(m) III, 360, letter to Countess Gabriella Corsi, on 18 August 1871.

¹²¹ For instance, Cf. E(m) III, 398, letter to the President of the Council of Ministers and Minister of Interns Giovanni Lanza, on 11 February 1872; E(m) V, 216, letter to doctor Lorenzo Peverotti, on 6 September 1876.

¹²² E(m) IV, 128, letter to the President of the Council, Marco Minghetti, on 14 July 1873.

¹²³ For instance, Cf. E(m) IV, 166, 167, 172. Also Cf. E(m) V, 338, 345.

¹²⁴ For instance, Cf. E(m) IV, 376-378, 464, 468.

¹²⁵ Cf. E(m) V, 478, letter to the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Bishops and Regulars, Cardinal Innocenzo Ferrieri, on 12 October 1877.

¹²⁶ E(m) V, 244, letter to the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, Cardinal Luigi Bilio, on 3 November 1876.

studying at Chieri and who became his regular confessor after the death of Fr Golzio. The preoccupation is almost that of losing his faith if he does not make his confession as he writes in the note: “Tomorrow between 10 in the morning and 12 noon, if you can take a walk this far, you would do me a great favour, otherwise I will become a Jew.”¹²⁷ Two more personal attitudes of Don Bosco are evident in his letter to another classmate and a friend: the first attitude is of keeping silent when needed, and the second, of not wanting to lose the friendship even amidst a personal misunderstanding on the part of his priest friend. Don Bosco’s letter to his friend amidst the issues regarding the closure of the secondary school at Valdocco, forcefully brings out the assertive nature of Don Bosco particularly when the priests of the Oratory are criticised negatively without proper foundation. Even at this moment the unwavering friendship he wants to extend proves his inner nature.¹²⁸

The secret of planning a project and carrying it out is revealed in the letter to a benefactress who asks for some ideas or ways of promoting the pious work and on how to procure the sources necessary. Exhorting her to pray and to invite others to pray to God, and to receive holy Communion as the most effective means of earning the graces of God, Don Bosco reveals himself in the first-person expression: “My unique support has always been the recourse to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary Help of Christians.”¹²⁹ The depth of Don Bosco’s prodigious zeal to serve the young is revealed to Carlo Vespignani, when the latter comes up with a project to help the young in need. Promising his readiness to make every effort and sacrifice to carry out a project that is directed towards poor young people, and believing in the inspirations and directions of God, Don Bosco reveals himself: “In matters which help the young in danger or serve to save souls, I rush forward to the point of temerity.”¹³⁰ The determination to make any sacrifice in this regard is affirmed again after few months: “For my part I will spare nothing, in order to attempt to gain some souls for the Lord.”¹³¹

The affectionate and the charming personality of Don Bosco is revealed in the letters. He also possesses the gift of striking immediate familiarity with others. In November 1877 while he informs and consoles the mother of the young priest Giuseppe Vespignani, who departs for the missions, Don Bosco writes: “Fr Giuseppe goes to America and Fr Giovanni will take his place. Will you permit him?”¹³² Such an affectionate nature is revealed often in his

¹²⁷ E(m) IV, 471, letter to Fr Giovanni Giacomelli, on 26 June 1875.

¹²⁸ Cf. E(m) VI, 443, letter to his classmate and priest friend Angelo Rho, on 24 July 1879.

¹²⁹ E(m) V, 343, letter to benefactress Marianna Moschetti, on 11 April 1877.

¹³⁰ E(m) V, 345, letter to layman Carlo Vespignani, on 11 April 1877.

¹³¹ E(m) V, 440, letter to Monsignor Santo Giuseppe Masnini, on 30 August 1877.

¹³² E(m) V, 516, letter to Maddalena Vespignani, the mother of the Salesian missionary priest Giuseppe Vespignani, on 30 November 1877.

relationship with some benefactors. While Tommaso Uguccioni Gherardi is addressed as good and dear father, the wife of the benefactor – Countess Girolama Uguccioni – is addressed as his good mother, and told that even when he runs short of time with a thousand and one things, he does not want to miss sending at least a filial greeting to his good mum and good dad, both of whom show great charity towards him so many times.¹³³ After Countess Carlotta Callori¹³⁴ and Girolama Uguccioni, Countess Gabriella Corsi from Nizza Monferrato too becomes a good mother to Don Bosco.¹³⁵ Addressing Countess Luigia Viancino as his good mother, and though feeling a little delicate, Don Bosco feels free to ask her if she could arrange for some means of transport in case the public means is unavailable, and comments: “see this son, with what liberty he speaks!”, and signs off as “the humble urchin”.¹³⁶

Visions and prophesy – in the sense of foretelling, and explanations about miracles do appear in the letters. Writing from Marseilles to the master of novices at Valdocco, Giulio Barberis, Don Bosco writes: “May God bless you all and grant each of you the grace of a good life and a holy death. May God grant this grace, especially to him whom I shall not see again when I return to Turin.”¹³⁷ In the letter to Fr Michael Rua on the next day, Don Bosco asks him to care for the health of the dear Fr Remondino, and again after about two weeks tells Rua that if the sickness of Fr Remondino worsens, to allow him to be admitted also to perpetual vows and to assure the priest of his prayers.¹³⁸ Aubry and Motto indicate that Fr Bartolomeo Remondino, a priest-aspirant passes away after about three weeks, and Don Bosco, after a long absence from Turin returns only later to Turin.¹³⁹ When Don Bosco is asked by Amelie Lacombe about certain revelations or supernatural communications, he seems to answer in a generic way.¹⁴⁰ But it is interesting to note that in his letter to Countess Marie Sophie Colle he mentions the vision he himself had, and concludes saying: “At the instance when God in His infinite mercy deigns to make known to us something, I shall promptly communicate it to you.”¹⁴¹ Another vision is described to the same Countess, after about two months,

¹³³ Cf. E(m) III, 327, 375, 389; E(m) IV, 371, letters to Tommaso Uguccioni Gherardi and Countess Girolama Uguccioni, at various times.

¹³⁴ Cf. E(m) III, 391, 392, 394, letters to Countess Carlotta Callori, at various times.

¹³⁵ For instance, see: E(m) IV, 68, 69; E(m) V, 118, 458, letters Countess Gabriella Corsi, at various times.

¹³⁶ E(m) III, 467, letter to Countess Luigia Viancino of Viancino, on 30 September 1872.

¹³⁷ E(m) VI, 324, letter to the master of novices, Giulio Barberis, on 10 January 1879.

¹³⁸ Cf. E(m) VI, 327, 334, letters to priest Michele Rua, on 11 and 28 January 1879.

¹³⁹ Cf. Aubry, *The spiritual writings of Saint John Bosco*, 326; E(m) VI, 324, 335, notes by Motto. Also Cf. E(m) VI, 13, 32.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. E(m) VII, 387, letter to laywoman Amelie Lacombe, on 1 July 1881.

¹⁴¹ E(m) VII, 392, letter to Countess Marie Sophie Colle, on 3 July 1881.

regarding the deceased son of the Countess, Louis Colle.¹⁴² The correct way of interpreting the extraordinary events in his life also seems to appear in his letters. While Don Bosco does not seem to deny such extraordinary events, he wants people to consider them as miracles of God rather than miracles of the human being: “How easily the common people allow themselves to be deceived! Everything is of the Lord, the effect of His immense mercy, but they would want to judge them as the works of man.”¹⁴³ About a year later, he explains the mystery: “God blesses our works, favours and protects them. But the works, not having the necessary means to support them, God Himself comes to the help, with graces and even extraordinary favours, [...] Thus, the mystery is explained.”¹⁴⁴

Don Bosco does not want the people to attribute to him – not even to his interventions – the graces obtained, followed by the blessings given by him. The generosity of the divine Providence is miraculous for him and the benevolence of the people surprises him. He is wonderstruck by the donations or charity given by the benefactors and the people in France, to pay the debts that he owes. Writing to Fr Giovanni Bonetti, Don Bosco exclaims: “Thank the Lord. I would not have imagined the number of blessings of heaven coming down so much abundantly as these days. Blessed be God. Keep on praying.”¹⁴⁵ He continues to marvel at seeing the hand of God, besides being assured interiorly, as he expresses to Fr Giovanni Cagliero: “Our things proceed well. God blesses us. Let’s go ahead.”¹⁴⁶

The profound humility practised by Don Bosco makes him not exalt himself at any moment, but rather leads him to give glory to the Lord always. It is this humility which is the reason for his “spiritual shyness”. Fortunate are we to have gathered the spiritual pebbles, either spontaneously expressed or consciously asserted due to compelling reasons. They help us to confidently point out his convictions that form part of his deep interiority. Revealed or concealed, his words and actions confirm one of the underlying principles of all his life that God must increase and be glorified always.

(To be continued.)

¹⁴² Cf. E(m) VII, 417, letter Countess Marie Sophie Colle, on 30 August 1881.

¹⁴³ E(m) VII, 61, letter to priest Clément Guiol, on 4 March 1880.

¹⁴⁴ E(m) VII, 313, letter to priest Clément Guiol, on 7 March 1881.

¹⁴⁵ E(m) VII, 318, letter to Salesian priest Giovanni Bonetti, on 20 March 1881.

¹⁴⁶ E(m) VII, 319, letter to Salesian missionary priest Giovanni Cagliero, on 20 March 1881.

THE ROLE OF THE “EDUCATIONAL PRESENCE” IN THE MEMOIRES OF THE ORATORY AND SOME BIOGRAPHIES WRITTEN BY DON BOSCO

The Salesian educator as a guide in the vocational realization

by Wim Collin

Talking about the educational presence, as presented by Don Bosco in the biographies of youngsters like Savio, Magone, Besucco, means we have to analyze these documents to see how he, in a narrative way, describes his own role in their lives. Even if he doesn't mention himself by his own name, sometimes we find direct and indirect references to him. Because the lives of these boys are well known, we would like to add to our analysis three other biographies: Pietro, Valentino and Severino.¹ In these writings, we can find similar indications concerning the educational presence, and we can learn what the absence of a good educator means for the life of youngsters.

The biographies of these youngsters are, for Don Bosco, a narrative way to talk about the goal of his pedagogy in the Oratory and thus contain a lot of elements regarding his educational ideals. Before analyzing in the second paragraph the educational presence and his influence on the choices youngsters have to make, we start recalling the biography of Don Bosco himself in which the role of the educator is explained.

¹ Giovanni Bosco, *Pietro: Ossia la forza della buona educazione*, 2nd ed. (Torino: Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1881). (= Pietro); Giovanni Bosco, *Severino: Ossia avventure di un giovane alpigiano raccontate da lui medesimo* (Torino: Tip. dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, 1868). (=Severino); Giovanni Bosco, *Valentino o la vocazione impedita: Episodio contemporaneo* (Torino: Tipografia dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales, 1866). (=Valentino)

1. The reference figure and the educational presence in some writings of Don Bosco

In his «Memorie dell'Oratorio»² John Bosco writes that when he was concluding the fifth year of the *retorica* in Chieri, he was looking for answers to what he should do with his life, and how to answer the call of God he felt deep in him. The dilemma was: follow the dream he had when he was young or go back home. At that particular moment, he was making the following reflection:

Oh, if only I had had a guide to care for my vocation! What a great treasure he would have been for me; but I lacked that treasure. I had a good confessor who sought to make me a good Christian, but who never chose to get involved in the question of my vocation.³

When it comes to a discerning process in the Salesian tradition, we can find two key elements, and both are present in the reflection made by Don Bosco: “the guide who takes care of the vocation” and “a good confessor”. In the first part of this paragraph, we will try to clarify what it means to be a good confessor according to the ideal of Don Bosco. In the second part, we will be referring to some figures that helped Don Bosco in his own discernment process. In that way, we can understand what it means to be a good guide. In the last part of this paragraph, we will briefly study the way in which Don Bosco presented the different stages of discernment in the *Giovane Provveduto*⁴.

1.1. The double meaning of the sacrament of reconciliation

One of the first things one learns about Saint Ignatius of Loyola is learning to find God in all things. Likewise, one of the first things a young Salesian learns about their founder is the importance of the Holy Communion and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The confession is, in the pedagogical and spiritual vision of Don Bosco, a very valuable instrument for several reasons.

The sacrament of communion, confession and stable confessor are the indispensable means to reach heaven.⁵ Or as Comollo, Don Bosco's friend in the seminary, said: “Confession and communion were my support in all the

² Giovanni Bosco, *Memorie dell'oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*, ed. Aldo Giraudo (Roma: LAS, 2011). (=MO)

³ MO, 98

⁴ Giovanni Bosco, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi doveri degli esercizi di cristiana pietà per la recita dell'Uffizio della B. Vergine e de' principali vesperi dell'anno coll'aggiunta di una scelta di laudi sacre*, 81st ed. (Torino: Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1880). (=GP)

⁵ FS, 1055-1056. Cf. FS, 1015.

dangerous years of my youth.”⁶ It is not surprising that the confession takes an important place in the spiritual life of a youngster; it has a triple meaning and purpose. First of all, the sacrament means the reconciliation of the sinner with God, the forgiveness of sins, the recommencement and the “turning back” to the right path in life. Secondly, this sacrament is necessary for the immediate preparation to the holy communion; without a good confession, it was impossible to go to communion and receive the Holy Body of Christ.⁷ And thirdly, the relationship with the confessor means a moment of spiritual direction; it is the moment in which the spiritual director has the possibility to accompany, guide and direct the young person in his human as well in his spiritual growth.⁸

According to don Pietro Stella, the sacrament of confession is the most developed in the GP, precisely because of its meaning.

For Don Bosco the confession done in a good way was the resumption of true life and the nourishment of it. In the confessional, Don Bosco gave the young man (to each young man) his particular guiding; for this reason, he wanted the youngsters to keep in mind the advices received in confession and put them into practice. The confessor is the loving father, to whom with utmost trust one must manifest any guilt and his word has above all definitive value in the choice of the state.⁹

Also, in the biographies of Savio, Magone and Besucco, we find several chapters on the meaning and the importance of confession.¹⁰ These chapters not only describe the value of confession but, above all, describe the way in which, step by step, one has to prepare himself for a good confession. Confession and spiritual accompaniment are considered as the only way for youngsters to become truly happy. The beginning of accompaniment in his biographies means a turning point in the lives of the youngsters, a change that will lead them to find a deeper and more lived form of happiness, not the superficial happiness they used to live. The clearest example is the one described in the life of Magone. When he found out that his happiness was superficial compared to his friends and his “companion” told and explained to him how to deepen his personal life. “Go to the confessor, open up the state of your mind; he will give you all the advice you need. We always do this when we have problems; and therefore, we are always happy.”¹¹ Then follows the

⁶ FS, 990.

⁷ Pietro Stella, *Valori spirituali nel «Giovane provveduto» di San Giovanni Bosco* (Roma: P. Athenaeum Salesianum, 1960), 116.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ For Savio chapter XIV (FS, 1055-1058), Magone chapter V (FS, 1099-1101) and Besucco chapter XIX (FS, 1139-1140).

¹¹ FS, 1096-1097.

general confession and communion. Thanks to his companion, he left his old life behind to start a new life in the Oratory.¹²

The sacrament of reconciliation receives its value because it is related to the sacrament of the holy communion. God became man for the first time in the incarnation of his only Son, and after his death on the cross, he is present every time again in the Eucharist, in bread and wine, body and blood. The youngster who wants to receive the body of Christ must therefore prepare himself with great care. To stress the importance of this sacrament, Don Bosco, when he spoke of confession in the biography of Magone, changed the way he was telling the story and addressed the reader directly: “A word to the youth”.¹³ In this chapter, he repeats in a very synthetic way the appeal to not fall into temptation and sin. And when this happens, he encourages the boys to ask for forgiveness. “Remember, Don Bosco writes, that the confessor is like a father who has the boy’s health in mind and wants to help in any way he can. It will be the same confessor who will decide on the frequency of communion.”¹⁴

The link between confession, the stable confessor and the sacrament indicates clearly, according to Desramaut, that Don Bosco had in mind a spiritual pedagogical path.

The forgiveness of God procures to the soul the indispensable security for one’s own progress. It is a generator of joy and peace. The peace of the son of God reconciled with his father excludes the paralyzing alienation, but it is not a form of free safety, because from confession to confession, the penitent, who is also a soul that accepts spiritual direction, must feel stimulated to reject every form of evil and to practice the virtues that are most necessary for him. Always purified by the blood of Christ in the sacrament, he is encouraged to constant progress. Especially since Don Bosco did not separate penance from the Eucharist, the most marvellous engine of Christian charity. It is necessary, in order to grow in holiness, to confess and to communicate oneself! ...¹⁵

On the other hand, besides the “spiritual” meaning of the sacrament of reconciliation, the confession had also a strong pedagogical meaning. The sacrament is not only a way to help the youngster in his spiritual growth but helps also in his human evolution. He asked them to open their hearts, because the confession is more than the singular fact of forgiving sins. It is the accompaniment of the youngster in his becoming more human and more Christian. Don Bosco wanted to talk with them in confession in the same way

¹² FS, 1041.

¹³ FS, 1099.

¹⁴ FS, 1012.

¹⁵ Francis Desrameaut, *Don Bosco e la vita spirituale* (Torino: Elle Di Ci, 1970), 111.

as he did on the playground: as a father, a friend, and a guide.¹⁶ In the actions of Don Bosco, there was no difference between the formal confession and the few words he said to the youngsters on the *cortile* of the Oratory. This double goal, spiritual and human, is not separable, because true happiness is only reached being a good Christian and an honest citizen.¹⁷

1.2. The young and even older Giovanni Bosco guided by others

After don Vojtáš' analyses in his contribution "The Art of Salesian Encounter, Accompaniment and Discernment"¹⁸, he stated that the saint himself was only able to accompany, because he experienced in his life, during his own youth, how it was to be guided by someone else. Don Bosco became what he was because he found guides on his path.

It would be one-sided to describe Don Bosco's way of accompanying young people without dwelling on his experience of being accompanied. It seems logical and convincing to affirm that if one believes in accompaniment, one will allow himself to be accompanied or desire to do in the different phases of his life. But before being accompanied "in fact", the basis is to be a disciple with the attitude of the search for the signs of the Spirit in concrete situations and of practice the virtues connected with being a disciple.¹⁹

Using the MO, don Vojtáš stresses three significant moments in the life of Don Bosco, in which is clearly shown how others have been Giovanni Bosco's spiritual director. These three persons are don Calosso, secondly the uncle of his friend Comollo and thirdly don Cafasso in the Convict at the church of Saint Francis.

The encounter with don Calosso was crucial in the life of the young Bosco. When he described this meeting, according to don Vojtáš, he did this in the same structure he later described the encounters with Savio, Magone and Besucco. The formal structure of the meeting seems to be an important part of the way the Salesian educator is present in the life of the youngsters.

A second important moment was the vocational discernment of Bosco, more specially the moment in which he, while living in Chieri, had to decide whether joining a religious congregation or entering the seminary.

¹⁶ Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica: Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*, vol. 2 (Roma: LAS, 1981), 310–311.

¹⁷ Valentino, 4.

¹⁸ Michal Vojtáš, *The Art of Salesian Encounter: Accompaniment and Discernment* (Torino: 2018), 8.

¹⁹ Vojtáš, *The Art*, 8.

John Bosco retrospectively tells it in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* in a context of discernment and prayer that can be described phenomenologically as the creation of a vision of the future permeated by trust in God's Providence. John makes a novena according to this intention and receives the sacraments with great fervour. John Bosco entrusted to the advice of the uncle priest of Luigi Comollo. Infact, the advice of the uncle of Comollo goes in this direction, suggesting John to enter the seminary where he will be able to know better what God wants from him. In these situations, the discipleship of John Bosco made a transformative leap, perceiving himself as a disciple in the permanent search for the voice of the Spirit in concrete situations. The centre of his discipleship is the attitude of the search and not the "materiality" of the accompaniment that would seem to become more occasional and less profound.²⁰

Very interesting is that, in a narrative way, Don Bosco applies on his own his discernment process the indications he gave when he wrote the GP. The different faces of discernment described in the GP are clearly visible in the story Bosco tells when he himself has to choose his own state of life.²¹

The third moment of discernment according to don Vojtáš was when he, as a cleric and later on a young priest, had to decide to give his life for the poor and abandoned youth. This was expressed in the emblematic meeting of the young priest with the boy from Asti, Bartolomeo Garelli, in the sacristy of the church of St. Francis of Assisi. It is there, after that meeting, that Don Bosco himself describes that he understands the purpose of his actions and his vocation.

It was on those occasions that I noticed how many were brought back to that site because they were abandoned to themselves. Who knows, he said to me, if these young men had a friend outside, who took care of them, helped them and instructed them in religion on holidays, who knows they can not keep away from ruin or at least reduce the number of those, who return to prison?²²

It is correct of Vojtáš to say that the realization of this decision is the result of a guiding process and the insight of Cafasso. He was the confessor and spiritual director of Don Bosco in the Convict.

²⁰ Vojtáš, *The Art*, 9.

²¹ The theme of the choice of state is introduced gradually in the GP. In the 1863 edition, the first edition of the GP was in 1847, Don Bosco added the "Prayer to know his vocation". The prayer instead was almost at the end of the second part the "Particular Exercises of Christian Piety". In the GP of 1878 (= GPC) the prayer is slightly modified and inserted at the end of the chapter "concerning the choice of the state". Cf. Stella, *Valori spirituali*, 6-13.

²² MO, 129.

There is, however, one priest, Giovanni Borel, who stayed out of the spotlight in the analysis of don Vojtáš. For years Borel was beside Don Bosco and helped him, accompanied him in his pastoral work and directed his endless zeal and energy for the youngsters. When we analyze attentively the MO and other testimonies of the first years of Don Bosco's presence in Turin, we can discover the importance of this person and his role in the process of purifying his vocation. Giovanni Borel was for many years the one who stayed aside Don Bosco. He was not the spiritual director of Don Bosco, nor the inspirer of the saint, but he was present in the most significant moments of the development of the apostolate and the founding of the Salesian Congregation. This makes us think that his role in the accompaniment of Don Bosco was unknown and largely underestimated. From the reading of the MO he can be considered as a kind of tutor of Don Bosco.

The history of the relationship between Giovanni Borel and Don Bosco began when he was still a student of the first year of theology in the seminary of Chieri (1-3 November 1837)²³ and ended with the death of the theologian on September 9, 1873. It was not until Don Bosco went to the Convict in Turin that Borel appears very regularly in his life. In the MO Don Bosco mentioned twice how he encountered Borel during his stay at the Convict. Borel was described as the example of a good priest.

The first time this priest was mentioned when Bosco was going to the school of San Francesco da Paola, a school for the aristocracy and mobility of Turin, where he was going to learn how to preach. Borel, who was the spiritual director of that school, held on Saturdays and Sundays homilies and sermons for the students.

At that time, I began to preach publicly in some of the churches in Turin, in the Hospital of Charity, in the Hospice of Virtue, in the prisons, and in the College of St Francis of Paola. I preached triduum, novenas, and retreats.²⁴

In the same period, Don Bosco encounters him in the prisons of the city where he goes for some practical training. Borel was one of those priests who took at heart the situation of the youngsters in the prisons. It was Cafasso who was sending Don Bosco there to learn how to win the hearts of those guys. Don Bosco writes about this:

From the first moment that I met Fr. Borrelli [sic.], I always judged him to be a holy priest, a model worthy of admiration and imitation. Every time I was able to be with him, he always gave me lessons in priestly zeal, always

²³ Aldo Giraudo, *Clero, seminario e società: Aspetti della restaurazione religiosa a Torino* (Roma: LAS, 1993), 263-265.

²⁴ MO, 132.

good advice, encouraging me in doing good. During my three years at the Convitto, he often invited me to help at the sacred ceremonies, hear confessions, or preach for him. Thus, I already knew and was somewhat familiar with my field of work. We often had long discussions about procedures to be followed in order to help each other in visiting the prisons, fulfilling the duties entrusted to us, and at the same time helping the youngsters whose moral condition and neglect drew the priests' attention everyday more.²⁵

Twice in a row, Borel was there to "teach" Don Bosco how to do his job and become a good shepherd for the youth. As we investigate more in detail, it becomes difficult to interpret these two facts as a coincidence or isolated encounters.

At the end of his years at the Convict, Don Bosco couldn't decide what he wanted to do. Cafasso, the rector of the Convict, gave him three choices or three proposals: a) "vicecurato" in Buttigliera d'Asti; b) teaching in the Convict and; c) spiritual director of the "ospedaletto" next to the Rifugio. Because he couldn't decide, Cafasso sent him again to don Borel. "Get your things and go with T. Borel; there you will be director of the small Hospital of S. Filomena; you will also serve in the Work of the Refuge. In the meantime, God will put in your hands what you must do for the youth."²⁶ Cafasso, by sending Don Bosco to live with Borel, gave the young priest some extra time to discern, and at the same time, he assured himself that Don Bosco wasn't left alone; Borel could help the young priest in his "discernment" and encourage him in going on with his work for the street boys. It will be Borel and Bosco, when the Oratory will be transferred from the church Saint Francis of Assisi to the Ospedaletto, who will work together.

When Don Bosco, later on, became the director of the Oratories, Borel stayed in the neighbourhood. There were a series of facts showing how Borel stayed beside Don Bosco. When Giovanni Bosco fell seriously ill, Borel took his place and continued the Oratory²⁷, when the marchioness of Barollo was worried about the health of Don Bosco and Borel defended him,²⁸ at the beginning of the "wandering-oratory" Borel preached about the cauliflowers²⁹. Not to speak of his financial contributions, his help in introducing Don Bosco to some benefactors, signing contracts, negotiating with civil and ecclesiastical authorities...

The Salesian historiography did not highlight other opportunities of collaboration by Borel. After the Oratory found its final place at Valdocco and

²⁵ MO, 133.

²⁶ MO, 133.

²⁷ MB II, 496.

²⁸ MO, 210-212.

²⁹ MO, 138-140.

Don Bosco had trained his own staff, the MO and «*Memorie Biografiche*» (MB) only sporadically report Borel's presences at Valdocco. This was due to two reasons. The first reason was that Lemoyne and other biographers, after having documented the first steps of the work, focused mainly on the person and action of Don Bosco, leaving aside other aspects. The second reason, certainly linked to the first, was that over time the role of Giovanni Borel changed. If at the beginning he was put into play all his prestige and his commitments by signing contracts of rent and purchases, and in supporting the young Bosco or even replacing him in times of illness; afterwards, as Don Bosco grew in responsibility and his vocational decision became more mature, Borel took a step back. But we know for a fact that Borel almost every week came to the Oratory to preach and confess. The last significant encounter of Don Bosco and Borel was described by Caviglia.

Last encounter, the most significant one of his life, which I will call without any other, Salesian. – We are in the year 1869. After endless difficulties overcome with the direct intervention of miracles, in Rome, on February 19, the Salesian Congregation is canonically approved, and on 2th of March the decree is returned to Don Bosco. – On March 25 he arrives in Turin, and at half past seven in the evening he enters the Oratory. – Borel is ill in bed, with his heart always ready to hear the voices coming from the nearby Oratory. – At that moment he hears the shouting, the hymns, the music. And then the poor old man leaps from his bed, and dragged himself to the Oratory and asks Don Bosco: Is the *Pia Società* approved? – Yes, it's approved! – Deo gratias! Now I can die happy. – And without adding something else he turned home, and got back to bed.³⁰

If we count together all the interventions which we have mentioned, only a few, we can see how Borel was present in the life of Don Bosco in two different ways. Once the Oratory grew from a little initiative to an institution, Borel was no longer the one who accompanied Bosco, and he became a collaborator in the true sense of the word. But in the beginning, Borel certainly is more than only a collaborator. Cafasso sends him to Borel during his time at the Convict, and afterwards, he almost forced him to go and live with Borel. It was the same Borel who guaranteed the success and the continuity of the Oratory, while Giovanni Bosco, the young priest, had the time to learn from his experience, grow in responsibility and matured in his vocation. They lived for several years together; they worked together on the same project. In that sense, we can only conclude, reading the indications Don Bosco himself gave in the MO, that Borel has been for Don Bosco a kind of tutor or supervisor at the beginning of his priesthood. Borel was the constant presence who accompanied and guided the choices of Bosco. We can only conclude that the

³⁰ Alberto Caviglia, *L'amico di Don Bosco, dattiloscritto*, in *Fondo Don Bosco*, 553 B1-E1, 20-21. Cf. MB IX, 557.

insight of Cafasso to send Don Bosco to Borel in the several stages of his formation as a young priest, to accompany him and to guide him step by step, has been a good decision.

2. Choosing his own state of life and the role of the educator in the biographies written by Don Bosco

Very briefly, we will describe the process of accompaniment in the lives of Savio, Magone and Besucco, to see and examine in the second part of the paragraph the importance of the role of the educator and educators in their discernment process and their stay in the Oratory. The educator has an important role in the spiritual and intellectual growth of the youngsters. Without their help, a good education and a good outcome are almost impossible.

Afterwards, in the same way, the less known biographies of Pietro, Valentino and Severino will be analyzed. Although the reason why Don Bosco wrote them is not the same, they can open the perspective to the deeper meaning of the accompaniment.

2.1. The formative proposal in the biographies of Domenico Savio, Michele Magone and Francesco Besucco

The description of the life of Domenico Savio and the biographical profiles of Michele Magone and Francesco Besucco can be considered as exemplary biographies, not only for the young people of the Oratory of Valdocco, but also for the youngsters outside the Salesian environment. After the use of some lives of young saints, such as the one of Luigi Gonzaga, Don Bosco began to write the stories of the young people who lived in the Oratory to propose them as models.

Some of you may wonder why I have prepared a Life of Dominic Savio, and not of other youths who were here at school, and lived lives of eminent virtue. It is quite true that Divine Providence deigned to send us several boys who were examples of holiness, such as Gabriel Fascio, Louis Rua, Camillus Gavio, John Massiglia and others; but the incidents connected with these are not so conspicuous and remarkable as those of Savio, whose whole life was wonderful. However, if God gives me health and grace, I intend to publish a collection of facts concerning these other companions, both to

satisfy your desires and my own, and so that you may imitate what may be compatible with your state.³¹

The same reason, taking advantage of the exemplarity of the life lived, was also the motivation to write the biographies of Magone³² and Besucco³³. The recognition of these youngsters is very important. Even readers who aren't familiar with the setting of the Oratory can recognize themselves in one of the three youngsters. Savio is the model of holiness, the prototype to which all must mirror themselves. Magone is the boy in which almost everyone recognizes, lively and full of energy. And Besucco, the young shepherd of the Alps, represents those young people willing to learn and study. In Besucco's life, we find the fullness of the spiritual and pedagogical vision of Don Bosco.

The formative approach of Don Bosco in all three lives is almost the same and coincides with the structure of the biography. First of all, there is the presentation of the life of the boy until the moment of the encounter with Don Bosco. This encounter marks the first moment of transition. The educator accepts the boy in his religious and human situation and checks if he is willing to start a new way of life. We recognize this phase clearly in the words of Magone when he is talking to Don Bosco near the Carmagnola station.

— My dear Magone, would you like to leave this kind of life and learn a trade or even take up some studies?

— I would certainly like that, he replied, because this sort of life does not appeal to me - some of my friends are already in prison and I fear that I will follow, but what can I do? My father is dead, my mother is poor, so who can help me?³⁴

Something similar happened at the Becchi on the first Monday of October 1854 when Don Bosco met Domenico and his father for the first time.³⁵ Even in the letter of the parish priest of Besucco, writing to Don Bosco and asking to accept the young boy in the Oratory, we can find the same elements.³⁶ When the boy's answer was positive, he will be asked to enter the educational environment of Valdocco. It is the young boy himself who must respond to the challenge, and it is he himself who has to choose to go to the Oratory.

Once the boys arrived in Valdocco, they encounter some problems. At their new home, a companion takes the role of Guardian Angel and explains

³¹ Vite, 39-40.

³² Vite, 113-114.

³³ Vite, 161-162.

³⁴ Vite, 116.

³⁵ Vite, 53.

³⁶ Vite, 189.

the rules of life in the Oratory. Adapting to a new situation is not easy; this is the beginning of a second transition, generally called the moment of crisis.³⁷ For Savio, this happens after six months in the Oratory while hearing the sermon on the easy way to become a saint. He was so impressed and confused that he remains silent for a few days.³⁸ The same melancholy hit Magone; after a while, he felt bad, not because he was ill, but because he saw his companions happy and he did not understand the reason or the motive.³⁹ It did not take a lot of time for Besucco to enter the crisis after his arrival in Turin.

In his humility, Francis looked upon his companions as more virtuous than himself and he rated himself poorly when comparing his conduct with theirs. A few days later he again approached me with a rather perturbed look on his face.⁴⁰

It was at this point when young people went to talk to Don Bosco. This moment was considered the crucial and decisive moment in the pedagogical accompaniment of the youngsters. Don Bosco asked the boys to entrust themselves to him in order to be able to guide them to a successful and happy life. Savio said: "Tell me, therefore, how I must regulate myself to begin such an undertaking."⁴¹ Magone responded to Don Bosco's proposal: "Go ahead, he said, I am willing to do anything that you command me. [...] I am desperate and I do not know how to do it."⁴² Even for Besucco, this happiness is a reason to go ask for help: "I am here in the midst of so many good friends, I would like to make myself very good for them, but I do not know how to do it, and I need you to help me."⁴³

From this moment, the "new life" of the boy began. The educator gives advice to help them to get on the right track. The first piece of advice given is the recommendation to be happy and to create an attitude of happiness. The moment of crisis, of melancholy, of sadness is overcome by joy. It is the fundamental and almost primordial attitude recommended to Savio, Magone and Besucco.⁴⁴ The second advice is to fulfil one's duties, always adapted to their proper state and age.⁴⁵ The third advice is to have a profound spiritual life that is characterized by piety, confession and communion. These three elements, "joy, study [duty] and piety", common to the "exemplary

³⁷ Vojtáš, *The Art*; See also the Introduction of Aldo Giraudo in: Bosco, *Vite di giovani*.

³⁸ Vite, 61-62.

³⁹ Vite, 120-121.

⁴⁰ Vite, 197.

⁴¹ Vite, 62.

⁴² Vite, 121.

⁴³ Vite, 196.

⁴⁴ Vite, 62, 121, 195-196.

⁴⁵ Vite, 62, 129, 195

biographies” are considered by don Aldo Giraudo “the most complete and concise enunciation of the spiritual pedagogy of Don Bosco”⁴⁶.

The way these attitudes are put into practice is different for the three boys. For Savio, his membership of the “Immaculate Conception Sodality”, his devotion to the “Most Holy Sacrament” was important.⁴⁷ While in the life of Magone other accents appear: his devotion to the Virgin Mary, the virtue of purity and friendship with others.⁴⁸ Francesco Besucco stressed the way of making confession, communion, the veneration of the blessed sacrament and the spirit of prayer.⁴⁹

By doing and living according to the pedagogical proposal of Don Bosco, the young man saves his soul and becomes a saint. Don Stella, in fact, writes that Don Bosco made an extraordinary and personal interpretation of the idea of Christian perfection in writing these biographies. The purpose of the education explained in the biographies is the lived holiness “not linked to the psychophysical maturity of man” but related to the reality. “There is a holiness, the perfect state of life even for the young. A young man is holy when he fulfils with assiduous exactness the duties of his state, which Don Bosco summarized in the formula of Dominic Savio: *Piety, Study, Recreation*; in the great program left in Besucco, with the words: *Happiness, Study, Piety*.”⁵⁰

2.2. The role of the educator in the life of the youngsters

The most important figure in the life of the youngster is the educator. In the first place, as we read the biographies, this role is taken up by their own parents. Already in the first chapter of the biography of Domenico Savio, Don Bosco describes how it was the preoccupation of his parents to give him a good education.

His parents dearly loved their son and had only one idea – to bring him up as a good Christian. Dominic was naturally good, with a heart which was a fertile field for the things of God. He learned his morning and night prayers readily and could already say them by himself when he was only four years old.⁵¹

The importance of the parents was stressed by the testimony of the letter of the vice-parish priest of Carmagnola, when he wrote a letter of recommendation for Michele Magone to Don Bosco. He stated that his mother

⁴⁶ FS, 987.

⁴⁷ Vite, 71-74; 78-82.

⁴⁸ Vite, 132-134; 134-137; 137-139.

⁴⁹ Vite, 199-201; 201-203; 203-204; 204-206.

⁵⁰ Stella, *Valori spirituali*, 95.

⁵¹ Vite, 42.

was fully occupied with providing food on the table and had no time to help or assist him in his education.⁵² The parent or the parents have to be the first educators in the life of the youngster.

When the boys arrive at the Oratory, the parent role is taken over by the educator. This educator is the point of reference in the youngster's education. The quality of this person is of extreme importance. He accompanies the key moments in the educational process and the lives of the boys: He is there when the discernment is done to go to Valdocco, in the very first beginning; He is present when the second transition takes place and the youngsters ask to be educated; He helps them making life-changing decisions and afterwards he guides them through the whole process; He accompanies them in big and little choices.

One of the important characteristics of this reference figure is that he doesn't take or make decisions for the youngsters. He lets them free, it is their free choice, and they must decide by themselves. They have to agree with the terms and the conditions. Therefore, the reference figure accompanies the discernment process without intervening. The boy decides for himself to go to the Oratory and expresses the will to be educated. During this second transition the boy decides to go to his reference figure, because he is told to do so or he is already used to do so. After he explained and discovered the source of his sadness, he decides to change his life. It is the educator who accompanies the process. He indicates the path, but it is the boy himself who has to walk the road. He adjusts, but never decides for him. Like in the life of Savio, Don Bosco adjusted the rules of the company of the Immaculate,⁵³ and in the life of Magone, he asked him not to run too fast about the vocation to the priesthood.

The reference figure shows empathy, helps the boy to grow in self-awareness, improves the quality of life, develops his strengths on a short-term basis, and takes into account also the far future. He is coaching the youngsters to take their lives in their own hands, but in a very open way. The reference figure sometimes looks more like a mentor, he is not taking decisions for the *boys*; they have to do that independently. Even if the mentor knows what changes are required in the lives of the youngsters and even if he knows clearly in what directions the boy has to go to become fully human and Christian at the same time, the reference figure only guides the process.

There were in the tradition of the Oratory of Valdocco a lot of secondary guides surrounding the new students that arrive. The boys were accompanied by others who explained to them the "do's and don'ts" of the Oratory. In the biography of Michele Magone, they are literally called

⁵² Vite, 117.

⁵³ Vite, 79-81.

Guardian Angel.⁵⁴ And the second article of the rules company of the Immaculate obliged to the members help others, explain the rules and guide others to live a good life in the Oratory.⁵⁵ Interesting to see is how, once they found the right track, they themselves became Guardian Angel for the others.

In that sense, the biographies are not only an example for the reader of the successful life, but in life itself the boys were examples for their companions. Precisely for this, they become a pedagogical model. Already in their lives, they were examples for other young people; Savio, Magone and Besucco were the Guardian Angels. Young people who educate young people are an inherent element and fundamental aspect of Salesian pedagogy. The youngsters Savio, Magone and Besucco are presented to the others not because they could become examples, but because they were already examples of Christian lifestyle during their lives.

Countless are the examples in the life of Dominic Savio. He taught catechism in Valdocco, gathered his companions during the holidays at home, approached friends to talk about religion... almost in every free moment he had.⁵⁶ Also Besucco, even before arriving at Valdocco, was for four years instructing the children of his village.

A catechist for the young people was needed and Francis filled the position for four years. He taught carefully and enthusiastically, the boys were pleased to have him and showed him great respect. Hence the parish priest chose him to teach catechism to a large class in Lent.⁵⁷

Michele Magone started helping youngsters to prepare themselves for the confession and communion. In one of the episodes in his biographies, we can read how Don Bosco described the way a Guardian Angel has to do his task.

One of his companions was always in trouble. He was handed over to Michael to see what could be done to bring him to his senses. Michael set to work on him. He started by getting to know him and befriending him. He played with him in recreation; he gave him little presents; he passed on to him little notes on which were written pieces of advice and so got to know him very closely but did not speak about religion with him.⁵⁸

It was Don Bosco himself who recommended "the always troubled companion" to Magone.

⁵⁴ Vite, 120.

⁵⁵ Vite, 79.

⁵⁶ Vite, 63-66.

⁵⁷ Vite, 182.

⁵⁸ Vite, 138.

The reference figure and the Guardian Angel are, however, not the only two elements who help the youngsters in their spiritual growth and their human wellbeing. Important also are the environment, the formative community, the programs, the activities, the education, larger structures ecc. Together they become the frame of reference in which the youngster is accompanied.

2.3. When the educator is not what he is supposed to be

The three young boys, Savio, Magone and Besucco, accepted the proposal made by Don Bosco and willingly entrusted themselves with confidence and dedication to Salesian education in the Oratory. Thus the reference figure and the Guardian Angels had a decisive role to play in their education. Looking into the biographies of Pietro, Valentino and Severino, the conditions of education are not ideal, sometimes far from the ideal. The educators are not what they are supposed to be and do not do what helps to guide these guys to a more mature human and Christian life. Perhaps sometimes, the non-ideal conditions and the consequences or wrong choices are closer to today's everyday reality.

2.3.1. Brief presentation of the biographies of Pietro, Valentino and Severino

For the kind of analysis and interpretation that we will make, it is important to distance ourselves from a rather technical and historical analysis of the writings. For critical technical analysis, Father Schepens has done that for the story of Pietro⁵⁹, and the Fathers Pulingathil and Decancq respectively for the lives of Valentino⁶⁰ and Severino⁶¹. Instead we look at young people as Don Bosco had described them in their biographies. We have to look at the story as it was transmitted by Don Bosco to know the role of the educator.

⁵⁹ Jacques Schepens, «*La forza della buona educazione*»: *Etude d'un écrit de Don Bosco*, in *L'Impegno dell'educare: Studi in onore di Pietro Braido promossi dalla Facoltà di scienze dell'educazione dell'Università Pontificia salesiana*, ed. José Manuel Prellezo (Roma: LAS, 1991), 417-434.

⁶⁰ Bosco, *Valentino*.

⁶¹ Bart Decancq, «*Severino*»: *Toepassingen van een opvoedingsideaal*, (Sint Pieters Woluwe: Don Bosco Provinciaal, 1996); Bart Decancq, «*«Severino»: Studio dell'opuscolo con particolare attenzione al «primo oratorio»*,» *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane* 11, 21 (1992): 220–318.

a) *Pietro, the power of the good education*

Pietro is the main character of the story published for the first time in the «*Letture Cattoliche*» in November 1855 under the title: "The power of good education. Curious contemporary episode". It was modified and republished five years later. In 1881 it was published in its final version. The first edition of "Pietro" has 108 pages divided into 14 chapters and was published before the life of Domenico Savio (1859).⁶²

In the introduction "To the reader", Don Bosco wrote that Pietro was not entirely written by himself but "was modelled on a work entitled: *Un mari comme il y en a beaucoup, une femme comme il y en a peu.*" Then he continued, "the reader will see in fact what force the good education has on the destiny of sonship; you will see a model mother, an exemplary son. A mother who, in the midst of a thousand difficulties, succeeds in giving the best education to her son and bringing her husband back to the good path."⁶³ The precise purpose was to show the power of good education and how Pietro became an instrument of God helping his father and his friends to rediscover the faith and to convert back to the Catholic Church.

In the story of Pietro, we heard how his mother did everything to give her son a good education. She taught him to be a good Christian and wanted to send him to school. His father, Giovanni, saw things a bit differently; it was important that his firstborn earned money to help feeding his three brothers. His mother did everything possible to protect her child from bad influences, ideas and behaviour at the workplace. Nonetheless, Pietro and his mother found a way for his preparation for the first communion.

His father became confused when he saw the result of the journey made by his son while preparing for his first communion. He was so touched by his example that he himself underwent a process of transformation and conversion. He wanted to become a good Christian. The return of the father to the Catholic religion means happiness and prosperity for the whole family.

When Pietro was going into military service, his parents were afraid that his "good education" would be under attack again. According to his mother, the biggest danger in the army was not the opponent but the danger to the soul caused by companions. He managed, however, to win the hearts of his companions and "always remembered the promise made to God to be faithful to him, in spite of the bad examples and the wicked counsel of his companions,

⁶² Schepens, «*La forza della buona educazione*», 417. We use the version of 1881: Giovanni Bosco, *Pietro: Ossia la forza della buona educazione* (Torino: Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1881).

⁶³ Pietro, v-vi.

in many of which, after their first and second communion, no improvement in life appeared.”⁶⁴

b) Valentino and the impeded vocation

In the year in which Don Bosco wrote the fourth edition of the life of Savio, Valentino’s biography was published. The complete title was: “Valentino or the impeded vocation. Contemporary episode”. It “appeared in a printed edition of December 1866, in the collection of *«Letture Cattoliche»* in one of the typical small-sized and small-sized booklets.”⁶⁵ The life of Valentino is told in 61 pages divided into ten chapters.

The booklet with the biography of Valentino strangely did not have an introduction. Don Bosco did not address the reader with a few words to indicate what he was going to tell and what the reader must pay attention to. The subtitle triggered the reader and revealed the content: “the impeded vocation”. His father impeded the religious vocation of his son Valentino. He was “frustrated in his ideal” as Stella says.⁶⁶ The biography showed the consequences of the impediment. The aim was, therefore, to warn the reader about the danger of going against the will of God in the choice of the proper state, in particular like for Valentino, the priestly vocation.

Already from the first pages, it was clear that Valentino’s father, Osnero, was not very pious and did not care about the religious education of his only son. Like in the story of Pietro, it was the mother who took care of the religious education. The problems started when suddenly his mother died “when he was beginning to needing her the most”⁶⁷. The mother begged him before she died to remain a good Christian.

The father was immersed in his work sent him to a boarding school in the city. The choice of the school was made very quick and superficial. The education offered in the school was good but only partial good: there was no or insufficient religious education. When Valentino complained about this, his father’s answer was: “If you cannot pray, confess and go to mass every day [...] you can compensate everything during holidays.”⁶⁸ This had consequences

⁶⁴ Pietro, 106.

⁶⁵ Giovanni Bosco, *Valentino o la vocazione impedita: Introduzione e testo critico*, ed. Matthew Pulingathil (Roma: LAS, 1987), 25. We are using in this article the version of 1866: Giovanni Bosco, *Valentino o la vocazione impedita. Episodio contemporaneo*, (Torino: Tip. dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, 1866).

⁶⁶ Stella, *Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*, Vol. 2, 212.

⁶⁷ Valentino, 7.

⁶⁸ Valentino, 11.

in the life of Valentino, he distanced himself from his faith and his behaviour changed.

This was the moment when his father got worried. He decided to chance course and after the summer holidays he sent Valentino to Valdocco. There he enjoyed good education for several years. In Valentino matured the desire to become a priest. His father, however, was totally opposed to the idea. With the help of his friend Mari, he tried to change the mind of his son and cancel the thought of becoming a priest. Don Bosco wrote, “The saddest misfortune that a young man can catch is an evil guide; Unfortunately, our Valentino was also a victim of it. My pen shakes in my hand as I write.”⁶⁹ Bad friends, drunkenness, games, bars, dancing, theatres, prostitution and money become part of Valentino’s life. In jail, because he was involved in a murder, Valentino asked his father: “Why have you prevented my vocation?”⁷⁰

c) Severino, the adventures of an alpine lad

The biography of Severino is in 1868 the last of the three biographies we took into consideration to be published. His story appeared in the month of February in the *«Letture Cattoliche»*. The complete title was “Severino or adventures of an Alpine lad, told by himself”. It is the largest biography of the three, has 186 pages in 26 chapters and a conclusion. In the story, there are extensive descriptions of Protestantism, in particular of the Waldensians and the Calvinists, which makes the work considerably more voluminous.

The subtitle “adventures of an alpine lad” of Severino’s biography does not reveal anything of the content of the story. The biography begins immediately with the first chapter that serves to introduce the story. The reader has to read some chapters before he understands the fundamental point of the story and the reason why so many people are gathered, as Don Bosco tells, around the sickbed of Severino. “Don Bosco wrote the story of Severino with apologetic and educational concerns.”⁷¹ On the one hand, there are, as in the other biographies, the indications of the Salesian educational proposal; on the other hand, there are a lot of apologetics against the Waldensians and Protestantism and warnings against their doctrine.

Severino tells his adventures. His father Gervasio was the pillar of the family, educated his sons in the Catholic religion, accompanied them in preparing for the holy communion, and maintained his family economically with great success. Emilia, his mother, was different. She was worried about external things, and a little can’t handle money. Misfortune made that Severino

⁶⁹ Valentino, 35.

⁷⁰ Valentino, 42.

⁷¹ Decanq, *«Severino»*, 254.

and his father must go to work in the city as masons. Despite everything, they remained faithful to the religion. “If God provides the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the lilies of the field, why shouldn’t he provide for us? We place our trust in him and do all we can to sweeten the bitterness of a sad future. Courage then, work, prayers are our program of life.”⁷² This situation, however, changes when his father dies. Severino, an orphan at fifteen, stayed in the city to work; in that way, he was able to help his five brothers and mother.

Severino was not only a hard worker, he was also into studying and reading. This was a great gift but it became his weakness. He couldn’t distinguish between what was good for reading and what was bad, like he cannot distinguish good friends from bad friends. The encounter with the Waldensians, the protestants, marked for Don Bosco the beginning of the end.

Even if he did not intend to be a Protestant, he remained there for many years. From Turin he moved to Pinerolo, afterwards to Luzern and finally to Genève. Due to a severe illness, he was recovered in the hospital. He realized that he was denied the sacraments of confession and couldn’t receive the viaticum.⁷³ And that was when he realized that he had made the wrong turn. By evaluating his own health, his moral state and remembering his father’s advice, he went home like a real prodigal son.⁷⁴

Once in Turin, the Protestants still made some attempts to prevent the reconversion, but with the help of the Director of the Oratory he succeeded. “I was born a Catholic, I want to live and die Catholic.”⁷⁵ Don Bosco heard his confession, administered the sacrament of the sick and advised him to begin a novena to Mary Help of Christians.⁷⁶ Severino got better and returned with his mother to his country of origin. “My days returned to be a source of consolation, proving that only the practice of religion can consolidate harmony in families and the happiness of those who live in this valley of tears.”⁷⁷

2.3.2. The role of the educator in the life of the youngsters

The stories written by Don Bosco can truly be seen as a warning for young readers, their parents and educators. Don Bosco indicates what the result can be of the absence of a good education, more specifically the absence of a reference figure in the life of young people.

⁷² Severino, 22.

⁷³ Decancq, «Severino», 223-224.

⁷⁴ Severino, 1; 153-154; 167.

⁷⁵ Severino, 167.

⁷⁶ Severino, 171.

⁷⁷ Severino, 175.

Pietro's education, due to the effort of his mother, causes a change in the life of his father; the fact that Valentino's father did not want him to become a priest destroyed his life. The adventures of Severino with the Waldensians were initiated by having one bad friend. In the biographies of the last two, it is certainly a question of negative or wrong choices. Both boys have lost their good life.

a) The Reference Figure

The first and probably the most important element to have a good education seems to be the presence of a qualitative reference figure. This is, as we mentioned before, the educator who accompanies the young person in his process of growth, transmits values, teaches the art of life. We recognize this figure in many people in the mothers of Pietro and Valentino and Severino's father. They contribute and help their sons with their education and help them to make wise choices. We see clearly in the description of Pietro's life how the mother, despite the hostile environment, manages to guide the educational process of her child. The fact that she remains faithful to her educational principles and is loyal to her son, and advises him what to do in certain situations, is exemplary for the accompanying process and role of the educator. The mother says the day before Pietro starts working:

Poor Pietro [she tells him] you owe obedience to your father and mother. In this tender age we force you to work because you have to earn your part of your nourishment. Poor boy! Be patient: we are very poor. It is therefore we, even if you still little, must put you to work. You will find yourself with some little companions; always remember the good advice I gave you. You know, dear Pietro, that we must love God, so obey him and never offend him. If like not working, to go and steal something, disobey your parents, do not stop and don't listen to them. Take care, my dear Pietro, to tell me every night what your companions have told you during the day. So I will always be able to give you appropriate advice on what you need to do and what you need to escape. Be punctual to your bosses, courteous with your companions; if someone beats you do answer, because you know that God does not want it.⁷⁸

And Pietro worked diligently and obeyed the directions given. We repeatedly heard how Pietro told his mother what happened during the day and how they together talk about strategies to overcome difficult and dangerous situations.

A reading of the lives of Valentino and Severino shows instead what the consequences are when the reference figure is absent. When Valentino's education was entrusted to the teachers of the first college, where there was no

⁷⁸ Pietro, 4-5.

religious education and accompaniment, he got lost. The absence of religious education has a negative influence on his behaviour. When he later on wanted to become a priest and was left in the hands and under the influence of evil people, this determined in a negative way the choices made by Valentino. In the case of Severino, the loss of the father and the absence of a strong maternal figure had as a result that Severino himself went looking for reference figures to help him, but they helped him in making the wrong choices.

Youngsters, so we can see in these three biographies, need reference figures, not people who choose for them, but adults who help them discern and make their own choices, as clearly shown in the life of Pietro. They need a guide along the road who is present and who can give some advice, which can help, support in all circumstances.

b) The opposite of the Guardian Angel: the bad friend

As made clear in the first part, the Guardian Angel, the friend who takes care, the friend who protects, is important in the life of these youngsters. In the biographies of Pietro, Valentino and Severino, we encountered the opposite of the Guardian Angel. They encountered in their lives friends with bad behaviour and unfortunate intentions; we call them “bad friends”. These mates force youngsters to make unacceptable choices and take unlucky decisions. They, for example, try to convince Pietro to eat meat or cheese on Friday, and other little stuff with which they tempt Pietro. The bad friend is Severino’s companion who takes him to the Protestant church. In Valentino’s biography we meet the prototype of a bad friend: Mari, as he was called, deliberately made Valentino make the wrong choices to make him forget his vocation. This shows clearly that youngster, at least in the biographies written by Don Bosco, need good advice, need people who indicate the right road to take.

We find in the three lives explicit warnings regarding the danger of bad friends. The mothers of Pietro and Valentino repeat it insistently; Severino’s father repeats it, together with the warning for the bad books, right before he dies.

You, O Severino, as the eldest of your brothers, never cease to give them a good example with the practice of virtue. Remember every time that your father loved to be reduced to poverty, than that he betrayed the duties of honest man and good Christian. Then you have something that makes me fear much of your future. This is your great eagerness to read as it is, regardless of whether they are good or bad readings. Take care therefore to avoid bad books

and bad newspapers, and at the same time those companions who try to get away from the path of virtue.⁷⁹

Don Bosco was very realistic about this in his writings: there are good friends and bad friends in life. It is important for the educator to help the young to understand and manage these different friendships. A good friend helps in the choices that must be made and helps in the personal growth. Bad friends also offer advice but they only help to do the wrong things. If the boys are strong enough and have had a good education, they were guided well. These bad friends also can offer them opportunities to grow personally by resisting temptations, as we see in the life of Pietro. Otherwise, when the education is not sufficient and the boy isn't that strong, he ends up like Valentino.

As in the lives of Savio, Magone and Besucco, also Pietro and Severino become the prototypes of good friends. They themselves will become a reference figure, set a good example, help others make choices. When Pietro was forced to join the army, his behaviour becomes exemplary for his companions.

When it was time to eat or to put himself to bed he regularly made the sign of the holy cross and his usual prayers, and the mourners diminished so that in a few days those who laughed with him became his admirers. But the wonder is this: some comrades who, out of pure human respect, did not do their prayers, gradually began to follow his example and three months weren't finished since Pietro was among them, that all started praying regularly. He thanked God for the courage he had given him and was happy seeing so many of his companions doing their religious duties.⁸⁰

At the end of Severino's biography, we read how he himself gave concrete advice that helped the listeners that gathered around his sickbed. And obviously, he helped adult-readers in educating well the children and the younger ones in making good choices.

c) The Significant Others

Apart from the reference figure, the adult guiding the lives of these youngsters, the Guardian Angels, we can define a third group of people. We see that Don Bosco did not stress a lot on their role. However, the way they intervene in crucial moments is important, and their contribution is vital in the process.

⁷⁹ Severino, 33.

⁸⁰ Pietro, 80.

In the life of Pietro, for example, we encounter the good boss who supports Pietro's choices was mentioned twice. And when he was a soldier, he met a superior who encouraged him in his devotional life. Valentino also at one moment met an adult who gave him accommodation during the winter.

Several times in these stories we met a priest. When Pietro's father was converted, he sought advice in the Oratory. When Valentino wanted to change school and while discerning his vocation, a priest helped in the process. When Severino was in Genoa at the hospital and afterwards in Turin and found himself in difficulty, a priest entered the scene. The priest in these cases helped to clarify the motivations and choices.

Along the way, the youngsters need to encounter persons who help them and encourage them in the choices made. These adults seem to be aware of their role as educator; they help to walk and encourage them to walk the right way.

Conclusion

In the lives of Pietro, Valentino and Severino, we can still find other elements that complete the effort of the educator. For example, the presence of a clear, integral, and well-defined educative project, including religious education. Pietro's mother, when it became clear that her son could not go to school as she wanted, made a very smart choice regarding the education of her child. She adapted the education she wanted to give to her son to the situation. She didn't think everything was lost when he had to go to work. The environment where he worked was not good, so every evening she devoted time to him to reflect together on the situation. Valentino was sent to two different schools. The first school offered an educational project including only a professional and human formation. The second college was better because it not only offered professional and human education but also took care of the religious aspect of the formation. Severino threw himself into the hands of the Protestants due to a lack of alternative proposal.

Don Bosco even gave indications in these biographies on certain attitudes of the educator: "not judging" and "giving new opportunities". When Pietro's father became faithful again, he found in the person of the director of the Oratory someone who was capable of listening. "Speak my friend, I am a poor priest that has seen already every kind of misery, not one human story does trouble me. Speak, open your heart, talk to me as a friend."⁸¹ Without judging, the director welcomes him and gives the opportunity to explain his thoughts. Afterwards, they reflected together on how to face the new challenge

⁸¹ Pietro, 42.

and become a true father of his family and a new child of God. Similarly, for Severino, when after his stay at the hospital, he returned to the house of his mother in Turin. Severino spoke with the director of the Oratory. It was for him very easy to open his heart and talk to the priest about what he did for ten years. The director did not condemn him but gave him the sacramental absolution with which he took away from Severino’s shoulders all the weight of the past.⁸² More than once, the story of Severino reminds us of the biblical passage of the prodigal son and the merciful father (Lk 15: 11-32). “He was dead and now he lives.” The educator, according to Don Bosco, has to take the role of the merciful father, be companionate and give new opportunities. This is the right attitude for the educator described by Don Bosco.

The role of the educator or the “educational presence” in the writings of Don Bosco was analyzed in three different ways according to the nature of the writing. The first paragraph focused on the Memoirs of the Oratory, where it has been shown how figures as Comollo, Cafasso, Borel take up an active role in the discernment process of Giovanni Bosco. Without their help and mentoring, this is what we learn discernment would not have come to a good end.

The second nucleus of writings focuses on the biographies. In the first group, the well-known lives of Savio, Magone and Besucco are shown positively, how Don Bosco himself sees the importance of the educational presence when it comes to discerning the proper state of life.

In the second group, analyzing the less known biographies written by Don Bosco, we saw and investigated how the absence of good educators and guides has a detrimental influence on the choices these youngsters make. This allows us to conclude that an educator, the Guardian Angel, a good confessor, and good friends are indispensable to let the process of discernment come to a good end.

Abbreviations

GP = *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de’ suoi doveri degli esercizi di cristiana pietà per la recita dell’Ufficio della B. Vergine e de’ principali vespri dell’anno coll’aggiunta di una scelta di laudi sacre.*

GPC = Bosco Giovanni, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de’ suoi doveri degli esercizi di cristiana pietà per la recita dell’Ufficio della B. Vergine e de’ principali vespri dell’anno coll’aggiunta di una scelta di laudi sacre*, Torino, Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1879.

⁸² Severino, 167-168.

FS = Prellezo José Manuel – Motto Francesco. – Giraudo Aldo., *Fonti salesiane. 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera: raccolta antologica*, Roma, LAS - Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 2014.

MB = Memorie Biografiche

MO = Memorie dell'Oratorio

OE = Opere Edite

Pietro = Bosco Giovanni, *La forza della buona educazione. Curioso episodio*, Torino, Tipografia Paravia e Comp., 1855.

Severino = Bosco Giovanni, *Severino. Ossia avventure di un giovane alpigiano raccontate da lui medesimo*, Torino, Tip. dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, 1868.

Valentino = Bosco Giovanni, *Valentino o la vocazione impedita, Episodio contemporaneo*, Torino, Tipografia dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales, 1866.

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TWO PATHS, ONE JOURNEY: THE MEANING OF PRESENCE IN THE SALESIAN EDUCATION AND THERAPEUTIC ENCOUNTERS

by Paul Formosa

John Bosco (1815-1888), is a widely recognised 19th Century educator from Northern Italy, who contributed to the change in the prevailing notions of education and young people. He sought to empower the positive in young people, when education and learning were still mostly repressive in style. Bosco realised that youth could only be reached through understanding, trust, friendship and kindness...”¹ The major political and industrial upheaval taking place at the time saw countless young people leaving their home and family in the country to look for employment in industrialised cities such as Turin where John Bosco lived and worked, often resorting to crime for survival. It was such young people that Bosco sought to help by realising that they were “not only searching for a job, but also yearning for a caring relative or adult.”² In this milieu, Bosco offered them lodging and an education through a caring and spiritual presence.

Bosco sought to create a movement in favour of young people, developed through the Salesian Congregation, that he named after St. Francis de Sales whom Bosco presented as a model to his followers. This movement, the Salesian charism, evolved in the social context just described, but in retrospect Bosco himself could see how it was intimately linked to his own personal life experience.

¹ Louis Grech, *Salesian Spiritual Companionship* (Malta: Horizons, 2018), 188.

² Grech, *Salesian Spiritual Companionship*, 251.

Many commentators on Bosco's work agree that, "his pedagogy was both holistic and sacramental in nature."³ Gallagher calls it "the sacrament of the present moment."⁴ Sacrament refers to the presence of God in people's lives, and Bosco, being a man immersed in the spirituality of his times, believed that God was constantly present through the everyday activities of everyone. Sacrament and wholeness need presence both on the human level as well as on the spiritual plane.

'Presence' in the Educational System of Don Bosco

Since the earliest studies on Bosco's educational methods, the value of presence has been presented as fundamental. Early writers were clearly influenced by the style of writing of their time and the educational influences present. Moreover, they wrote in a style that aimed at making Bosco seem as saintly as possible. They therefore emphasized elements of divine intervention and presented him through the paternalistic perspective valued at the time.⁵ However, they recognised that Bosco's fundamental concern is the person rather than the system. Bosco challenged a system that was based on the authoritarian figure of the educators that instilled fear in their subjects and exercised authority without creating any sense of familiarity. On the contrary, Bosco created a space for presence and relationships as against the repressive system that negates relationships and creative presence and avoids familiarity.⁶

Bosco, in a very pragmatic and effective way, confronted the validity of the *modus operandi* and created his own method with the value of a personal presence at the centre. McPake agrees with Guy Avanzini in emphasising that Bosco had in mind "love and presence that is seen, that is felt, that is experienced."⁷ At the heart of Salesian presence lies the Italian word '*amorevolezza*' referring to the key element of the Salesian way of relating to young people. Often translated as "loving kindness" it highlights the value of authentic relationships in any educational encounter that speaks the "language of the heart."⁸

³ Martin McPake, *The Constitutions - A Simple Commentary* (Madras: The Citadel, 1978), 50.

⁴ J. Conor Gallagher, in the Preface of Jean Pierre De Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, (United States: Tan-Books, 2010), vii.

⁵ Patrick Egan and Mario Midali, *Don Bosco's Place in History* (Rome: LAS, 1993), 30.

⁶ John Morrison, *The Educational Philosophy of St. John Bosco* (New York: Salesiana Publishers, 2010), 101.

⁷ McPake, *The Constitutions - A Simple Commentary*, 114.

⁸ Francesco, *Esortazione Apostolica Evangelii Gaudium* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), 101.

More recent writers, inspired by new developments and deeper research have moved away from the romanticized style of the early writers and in their analysis uncovered a more humanistic approach that is more akin to the contemporary understanding of a supportive presence. Grech states that “Bosco promoted humanism and all that is good in the human nature.”⁹ Arthur Lenti states that Bosco had in mind “mature, impartial, spiritual, generous, selfless self-sacrificing love. It is the love enjoined by Jesus. More simply, Don Bosco would say that the educator should love the youngsters in the same way that good Christian parents should love their children.”¹⁰ Rather than the traditional, saintly approach, here Lenti is highlighting the elements of care and concern for the welfare of the young person present in Bosco’s understanding of an educative presence.

Lenti emphasizes that

“Don Bosco had a comprehensive concept of education. It entailed the total development of the person, bringing out to the best possible effect on the person’s potentialities in view of the individual’s functioning as a mature Christian adult in society – a good citizen and a good Christian.”¹¹

In discussing the meaning of presence for Bosco, Carlo Loots refers to Andries Baart who did a very detailed research among pastoral workers that work in a big city with areas of poverty.¹² He was interested in understanding how the loving and supportive closeness of pastors “without a desk, a room or a consultation hour”¹³ functions with people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Baart says that ‘presence’

“... is being there for others without focusing directly on problem solving ... The most important thing these pastoral ministers bring is the faithful offering of themselves: being there, making themselves available...”¹⁴

⁹ Grech, *Salesian Spiritual Companionship*, 80.

¹⁰ Arthur Lenti, *Don Bosco Educational Method* (New Rochelle: Salesian Publications, 1989), 7.

¹¹ Arthur Lenti, *Don Bosco History and Spirit*. Vol. 3 (Rome: LAS, 2008), 139.

¹² Carlo Loots, “The Theory of Andries Baart as a Source of Inspiration for Education and Assistance” in *Salesian Forum*, (Unpublished, 2018): 1–13.

¹³ Andries Baart, *Een Theorie Van Presentie* (Den Haag Lemma, 2006), 11.

¹⁴ Andries Baart, *The Presence Approach: An Introductory Sketch of A Practice* (Utrecht: Catholic Theological University, 2002), 1.

In education, Bosco believed that the educator needs to move beyond the formal context and engage with young people in a personal, nonformal environment. “The educator must establish an abiding presence with young people. He must seek to be in touch with young people in all possible situations of the school day and beyond, especially in activities that allow the educator to associate with young people not simply in the role of a teacher but as a brother or friend.”¹⁵ Bosco himself urged those working in Salesian environments that only by loving the things the young people love, will the young person in turn love the things that the educator proposes.¹⁶

Education starts from an encounter at the human level, “meeting the students on their own turf.”¹⁷ In Bosco’s style of engagement with the young people, one can find some similarity with the ‘I–Thou’ relationship presented by Martin Buber: “Every human person looks bashfully yet longingly in the eyes of another for the yes that allows him to be.”¹⁸ An education that supports the transformation of each person reflecting “the uniqueness of the individual”.¹⁹

The resulting atmosphere that was created by Bosco was conducive to “diminish the inevitable tensions between superiors and subjects and allow the latter to achieve their full growth as persons.”²⁰ In *Don Bosco’s Option for Youth and his Educational Approach*, Luciano Pazzaglia, refers to this environment as “the serene environment of a family”²¹ while Sullivan describes it as “a hospitable space for learning.”²²

¹⁵ Lenti, *Don Bosco History and Spirit* (Vol. 3), 156.

¹⁶ Salesian Congregation, *Constitutions and Regulations* (India: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2015), 258-268.

¹⁷ Arthur Lenti, *Don Bosco Educational Method* (New Rochelle: Salesian Publications, 1989), 7.

¹⁸ Martin Buber, *To Hallow This Life - an Anthology* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1974), 75.

¹⁹ Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 141.

²⁰ Luciano Pazzaglia, “Don Bosco Option for Youth and His Educational Approach” in Patrick Egan, & Mario Midali, *Don Bosco Place in History* (Rome: LAS, 1993), 289.

²¹ Pazzaglia, “Don Bosco Option for Youth and His Educational Approach” in Patrick Egan, & Mario Midali, *Don Bosco Place in History*, 289.

²² David J. Sullivan, *Catholic Schools in Contention* (Leamington: Veritas, 2000), 185ff.

Presence as Presentness

Presence is at the heart of Gestalt theory. Much value is given to the immediate, transient moment that allows flow figure formation to take place. We are affectively present insofar as we are immersed in the here and now. However, the sequence of contacting in the present moment that is of such great importance “is often hard to grasp because we so often jump out of the present ongoing experience to take the objective third person view point.”²³ The therapist has to be constantly aware of the changing figure and moves along with it.

From a Gestalt theoretical perspective, one engages in a healthy process only when one is able to maintain awareness in the present. Cohen refers to this as present-ness.²⁴ In the therapeutic environment, the therapist needs to be constantly aware of and responsive to emergent events. By responding to each unique moment in the here and now, the therapist inspires the client to enter the same present-ness.

The concept of present-ness, however, is not enough to explain the whole meaning of presence. “The actual and fulfilled present – exists only in so far as presentness, encounter, and relation exist.”²⁵ In view of the phenomenological approach of Gestalt therapy, the process of contact in the here and now “allows awareness (the ability to be fully present at the contact boundary with the other) to be the guide so as to find a new therapeutic solution that always comes out of the experience of the situation and therefore out of how client and therapist work to co-create it.”²⁶ It is in the meeting in between that the co-creation can emerge. Healing can happen through a relational meeting between the therapist and the client. “Healing does not result from something the therapist does to the client... it comes from their meeting.”²⁷ As Buber would declare, “only as the You becomes present does presence come into being.”²⁸ According to Hycner “when two people surrender to the

²³ Daniel N. Stern, *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life* (New York: WW.Norton, 2004), 33.

²⁴ Alan Cohen, “Presentness and Presence in Gestalt Therapy,” *Gestalt Review*, (2018): 21-24.

²⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 63.

²⁶ Margherita Spagnuolo-Lobb and Nancy McWilliams, *The Therapeutic Presence in Psychoanalysis and Gestalt Psychotherapy an Update in Present Society* (Siracuse: Istituto di Gestalt HCC Italy srl., 2018), 5.

²⁷ William Heard, *The Healing Between - A Clinical Guide to Dialogical Psychotherapy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993), 11.

²⁸ Buber, *I and Thou*, 63.

‘between’ – called ‘existential trust’ – the possibility of I-Thou relation emerges.”²⁹

E. Nevis (1987) defines presence as a “living out of basic assumptions regarding how one influences or helps others.”³⁰ He says that “the therapist possesses an underlying vision and theory for how to engage people”³¹ which is then reflected in his behaviour. The therapist needs to be fully aware of his own assumptions and beliefs as well as his ability to create connections built on trust. E. Nevis proposes that the therapist must “provide a presence otherwise lacking in the system.”³² Nevis recognizes that it is hard to grasp the mystery of how presence evolves, just as others like Halpern acknowledges that presence “is hard to grasp.”³³

Presence as Presencing

According to Scharmer³⁴, co-founder of the Presencing Institute, there are two ways of learning: from the past and from the future. Scharmer describes ‘presencing’ as both being actively present in the moment as well as a felt sense of the field of future possibilities. It is a form of ‘emergence awareness’ that focuses on the present existing whole but takes inspiration from the source that is the arising, potential future. The latter takes place for instance by focusing on future possibilities without being afraid. For this movement to happen, Scharmer speaks of the necessity of three openings to take place: of the mind, of the heart and of the will. The three stages imply the recognition of past-driven reality, the acceptance of the need to let go, and the desire to be inspired by one’s future possibilities. This concept can be related to the metaphor that is attributed to the sculptor Michelangelo, who worked hard to release the hand from the marble prison, because he is inspired by the vision of the future figure.

The Theory U model, co-developed by Otto Scharmer, is represented as a U shape that moves from the left-hand side to the right-hand side of the U. For this movement to take place the person must be open to let go of obstructions of thoughts and emotions from the past, to move ‘outside the

²⁹ Rich Hycner, “Dialogical Gestalt Therapy: An Initial Proposal,” *The Gestalt Journal*, (1985): 23-49.

³⁰ Edwin C. Nevis, *Organizational Consulting: A Gestalt Approach* (New York: Gardner Press, 1987), 70.

³¹ Nevis, *Organizational Consulting: A Gestalt Approach*, 71.

³² Nevis, *Organizational Consulting: A Gestalt Approach*, 86.

³³ Sharona Halpern, “On Presence: The Consultant as Model and Presentness and Presence,” *Gestalt Review* 22, 1 (2018): 32.

³⁴ Otto Scharmer, *Theory U* (California: Koehler Publishers, 2016).

institutional bubble.’ Only when the ‘letting go’ happens can the individual embrace change affectively through a process that Scharmer identifies as the ‘letting come’. The U-model then leads in an upward direction towards the reintegration of the self and the exploration of new and innovative ideas.

Otto Scharmer offers the concept of presencing from the field of leadership, but it can present an interesting and challenging approach to the field of Gestalt Therapy.

We’ve come to believe that the core capacity needed to access the field of the future is presence. We first thought of presence as being fully conscious and aware in the present moment. Then we began to appreciate presence as deep listening, of being open beyond one’s preconceptions and historical ways of making sense. We came to see the importance of letting go of old identities and the need to control and as Salk said, making choices to serve the evolution of life. Ultimately, we came to see all these aspects of presence as leading to a state of “letting come,” of consciously participating in a larger field for change. When this happens, the field shifts, and the forces shaping the situation can move from re-creating the past to manifest or realizing an emerging future.³⁵

A Holistic Presence

A deep, holistic understanding of Presence is an essential component of any meaningful encounter. Throughout his educative experience with young people, Bosco seeks to create favourable conditions in view of a formative relationship, establishing channels of communication that paved the way for meaningful encounters. In an intelligent, affective and intuitive way, he puts into action psychological processes aimed at eliminating prejudices and mistrust. This type of unique presence can be described as “the capacity to reach people, to create the conditions that foster connection, growth, development and learning.”³⁶ From a slightly different perspective this can be related to the emptying and seeing with fresh eyes that Scharmer talks about in his Theory U model, creating space for trust and reciprocal sympathy. This consequently opens up for the youth significant horizons of meaning.

One notices that Bosco makes himself totally present to the youngster. This reflects the ‘I-Thou’ relationship spoken of by Buber “It is only possible

³⁵ Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, & Betty Sue Flowers, *Presence* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2005), 13.

³⁶ Halpern, “On Presence: The Consultant as Model and Presentness and Presence,” *Gestalt Review*, 27.

when I step into the elemental relation with the other [client], that is when he becomes present to me.”³⁷ In this manner the young person feels understood, welcomed and sustained. These are emotional moments of contact, called ‘moments of meeting’ by Buber (1970) and referred to by Stern³⁸ as ‘now moments’. These moments of meeting both between therapist and client as well as between educator and student are “not a technique but an existential stance, which includes *presence*, *inclusion* and *confirmation*.”³⁹ Such moments of being ‘seen’ and fully ‘acknowledged’ by the other, mark change moments in their lives.

An honest, creative presence needs to be one that listens carefully at every moment. Whether during therapy or in an educative environment, the therapist or the educator helps to create the space for self-discovery and growth. When dealing with the process of facing neurotic introjects, the “task in education as well as in therapy here is to help the young by authentic dialogues guiding and supporting the process of self-discovery of their own values and competencies in their maturing process.”⁴⁰ Introjection, is the unconscious identification with a significant other that interrupts the process of growth and “the maintenance of an introjection prohibits full contact with both self and others.”⁴¹

While therapy leads to healing and deeper awareness of self, it also has an educational value expressed through its support of clients to help them “discover potentials, support personal growth, work on sharpening the senses and awaken innate compassion.”⁴² This was also powerfully present in the educational philosophy John Bosco, in how he was present to the young people and is deeply reflected in the development of his educational system.

Conclusion

Even though Psychology as a self-conscious field of experimental study began in 1879, for Bosco the concepts of presence, presentness and presencing

³⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, 70.

³⁸ Stern, *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life*.

³⁹ Stephanie Sabar, “What’s a Gestalt?,” *Gestalt Review*, (2013): 6 - 34.

⁴⁰ Hans Peter Dreitzel, “The Sabotaging of Introjects: Some thoughts about processing introjects in Gestalt therapy in a changing culture,” *Gestalt Today Malta*, (2019): 33.

⁴¹ Richard G. Erskine, *Relational Patterns, Therapeutic Presence Concepts and Practice of Integrative Psychotherapy* (London: Karnic Books Ltd., 2015), 234.

⁴² Dreitzel, “The Sabotaging of Introjects: Some thoughts about processing introjects in Gestalt therapy in a changing culture,” *Gestalt Today Malta*, (2019): 37.

were already ingrained in his Educational system since 1841 when he started his mission with young people in Turin.

In the light of recent developments in the field of Gestalt and other related fields, the concept of presence as experienced by Bosco and developed by many researchers and therapists can be compared and confronted to enlighten each other. Through the synthesis of the various approaches the understanding of presence can be better recognized, understood and lived within meaningful educational and therapeutic encounters.

BOOK REVIEW

Salesian Sources. 1. Don Bosco and his Work

by John Dickson

The Salesian Historical Institute's *Fonti Salesiane. 1. Don Bosco e la sua storia* (Roma; LAS 2014), English translation: *Salesian Sources. 1. Don Bosco and his Work* (Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2017) is a notable literary and historical achievement. This first volume of the series, in its 1515 pages, devoted to Don Bosco and his work, contains a selection of many different sorts of writing: letters, sermons, circulars, and sets of regulations and constitutional documents as well as biographies and memoirs, written by Don Bosco and carefully selected from the 37 volumes of his writings. It should be seen as the culmination of a process of historical research and understanding that goes right back to the latter period of Don Bosco's life when the early Salesians set up a committee to collect and preserve everything they could find out about their founder, to the extent it is said, of examining his waste paper basket.

Their motive was clearly hagiographic and resulted eventually in the 19 volumes of the *Memorie Biografiche*, of Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, and Eugenio Ceria. Later historians such as Pietro Stella, Pietro Braido and Francis Desramaut applied their critical-historical training to get behind the hagiography to discover the Don Bosco of history. The present volume is the result of the vast efforts of many historians who have laboured to produce critical editions of the vast amount of written material that Don Bosco authored during his life. What we have here is a judicious selection of those documents for the first time translated into English and therefore available to a new generation of students of Don Bosco in an international language.

The overall introduction to these documents, written by the three editors: Francesco Motto, José Manuel Prellezo and Aldo Giraudo is an indispensable guide to reading this vast collection of the writings of Don Bosco, as are the specific introductions to each part. "If we extrapolate just one or a handful of aspects and think this is enough to give us a complete profile, we falsify or at least limit the understanding of such a

rich and profound figure.”¹ This concern to offer a wide perspective explains the length and the vast breadth of this selection of his writings, and their organization into three parts: historical, educational and spiritual, which of course, are not mutually exclusive.

We are wisely warned early on that “Don Bosco’s writings are not the only tool for understanding him and his work.”² His writings reveal aspects of his thinking and practice and throw some light on his outlook but will not alone allow us to correctly interpret the real person. “To understand Don Bosco’s being, his thinking and activity, the key final effort must be to locate him within the classic coordinates of time and space.”³

Each of the editors offers their own specific introduction to each part of the collection but together they offer an immensely wide and rich background in which to understand the man and interpret his writings.

The Historical introduction to part one offers in a very limited space, a fascinating, detailed and accurate picture of the challenging social, political and cultural milieu in which Don Bosco lived and worked. In part two, the Pedagogical introduction offers the reader not just the educational thinking that was current in Don Bosco’s context but offers real insights into how, in practice, he was influenced and yet himself shaped his own original educational approach. In part three the Spirituality introduction offers a profound insight into the currents of spirituality which influenced Don Bosco’s own upbringing and education and which allowed him to develop his own particular spiritual approach to young people.

These introductions then offer the reader of this collection an invaluable interpretive key for understanding the documents that follow.

Part One: Writings and Testimonies on the History of Don Bosco and Salesian Work

Part One, among other documents, offers the reader the earliest written account of his Salesian foundation from 1854. Don Bosco wrote in the *Draft Regulations for the boys of the Oratory of St Francis de*

¹ Salesian Sources, 1 Don Bosco and his Work. (Roma: LAS, Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2017), xlvi. (= SS1)

² SS1, xlv.

³ SS1, xlv.

Sales in Turin in the Valdocco district. “But I wish it understood from the start it is not my purpose to lay down any law or precept for anyone. My one aim is to set out what we do in the Boys’ Oratory of St Francis de Sales at Valdocco and the way it is being done.”⁴ Don Bosco comes across primarily as a practitioner who is engaged in reflective learning. His Gospel inspiration is clear “to gather into one all the children of God scattered all over the world.”⁵ We also have some fascinating insights that have been obscured in later traditions. For instance, as to the origins of his work for youngsters he tells us that “... the Rev. Fr. Cafasso used to teach catechism every Sunday to bricklayers’ boys in a little room attached to the sacristy of the aforementioned church. The heavy workload this priest had undertaken cause him to interrupt this work which he loved so much. I took it up towards the end of 18141, and I began by gathering two young adults in that same place that were in serious need of religious instruction.”⁶ This overlooked reference as to origin of the Salesian work, offers a wider context for understanding its beginnings.

Don Bosco, early on in his work, realised that steering clear of politics was the only way to ensure the future of his work and that his youngsters stood a chance of getting an education and building a new life as honest citizens and good Christians. To achieve this end he was quite happy to tell his story with a particular social emphasis on his saving the city from potential criminals and public disorder.⁷

What really upset him though, were the complaints that accused him of fomenting public disorder, revolution and unlawful assemblies, when what he was seeking to do is teach catechism and offer youngsters the opportunity to be educated.⁸

His recourse to the public authorities for financial support and his collaboration with his friends among the local clergy and eminent members of Turin’s society are clearly documented here and offer an interesting insight into his ‘non-political’, practical and empirical approach to working for young people.

⁴ SS1, 29.

⁵ SS1, 27.

⁶ SS1, 29

⁷ SS1, 34. In his account of his interview with the Vicar of the City, Marquis Cavour

⁸ SS1, 42. See his letter to the Minister of the Interior

The variety of sources in this first part cover the expansion of the Salesian work, Don Bosco's work as founder, his involvement with the Holy See in negotiations with the Kingdom of Italy, his difficult relationship with the Archbishop of Turin, his missionary initiative and his ongoing search for financial resources. At heart is his zeal for working for young people in need.

In his detailed responses to the critique of first report on the state of the Salesian Congregation that he offered to the Vatican Officials, we see Don Bosco struggling with the Curial mind. They clearly pointed to the unusual features of Don Bosco's scheme, the retention of property rights by the members, the use of 'civil titles' like 'Inspector' instead of religious titles like 'Provincial' and the anomalous situation of the Salesian Sisters, who were so closely aligned to the Salesians as to be almost indistinguishable. His delays in responding, and his appeals to his connection with the deceased Pope Pius IX, show Don Bosco's practiced way of dealing with some of his critics.⁹ Similarly when the civil authorities in Turin insist that the Oratory is a Private Secondary School and has to have 'registered teachers', he appeals to the charitable status of his foundation and tries successfully to delay the implementation of the decree till he can regularize the status of his teachers. He comes across as impatient of detailed regulations and very determined to get his own way. What drives him is well illustrated when he writes about 'politics' where what is uppermost in mind is his unswerving determination to work for the good young people and offer them opportunities for education which will keep them out of harm's way and to form upright citizens who are far from causing grief to civil society.

The same fundamental motivation drives Don Bosco in his foundation of the Cooperators. In his earliest draft they are clearly to be directly involved in apostolic work with young people, but as circumstances dictate and as his work grows, he has more need for the financial and practical support from his lay co-workers and they transpose into more of a pious association of benefactors.

With the foundation of the Sisters, Don Bosco pursues a practical strategy of getting local diocesan approval and then, multiplying their

⁹ SS1, 90-108.

presences without ever attempting to get Pontifical approval, given his already uncomfortable experience of the Roman Curia.¹⁰

In his conflict with Archbishop Gastaldi, we see his unwillingness to set up a separate noviciate or seminary being defenced as a practical response to the contemporary anti-clerical climate, where such foundations which were outside the obviously ‘charitable work for the poor’ would easily attract unwonted criticism from public opinion.¹¹

Equally in his expansion of his work to South America, he was happy to present it both as primarily ‘pastoral assistance to Italian immigrants’ in order to attract Italian government support and at the same time as a ‘missionary outreach to the native peoples’ to attract the support the Vatican officials who might be able to offer financial and other encouragement.¹²

Perhaps most revealing of all are his letters begging financial and other support from his benefactors and friends. The rapid expansion of his work with almost no government support, meant that he had to rely on fund-raising from the public and his lotteries and begging letters indicate the huge demands this made on his time, energy and patience. When we think that he probably spent more time and effort writing letters like these, it is right that they should have a significant place in this collection.¹³

Part Two: Writings and Testimonies of Don Bosco on Education and Schooling

From the documents presented here it is clear that Don Bosco was not an Educationalist in the professional sense of a scholar of education, but primarily an Educator in the practical sense and his writings show a profoundly practical person at work directing and building up a huge educational enterprise. We should not expect a systematic presentation of a system of education, rather what we find here are fascinating testimonies and the insights that emerge from the reality of starting and building up single-handedly and almost piecemeal an immense international educational enterprise.

¹⁰ SS1, 171ff.

¹¹ SS1, 261ff.

¹² SS1, 306ff.

¹³ SS1, 249ff.

While the ‘Letter from Rome’¹⁴ well known, the other documents in this collection will be less well known such as *the Sway of a Good Upbringing*¹⁵ or the confidential discussions with the Politician Urban Rattazzi and his discussion with the teacher Francis Bodrato.¹⁶ Don Bosco was creative and inventive in sharing his insights into how young people respond to education in its widest sense. Don Bosco clearly comes from a deeply religious background and at the heart of his outlook is the importance of the inner spiritual dimension of young people and the fundamental relationships of trust and confidence that they build up. This is far from being a set of technical educational maxims but rather a humanistic or holistic approach to helping young people through the experience of growing up.

Given that the various documents presented as ‘Guidelines’¹⁷ are the clearest approach we get from Don Bosco in trying to pass on the central Insights on which he based his work, they are still very far from a systematic presentation. They are much more a set of reflections and advice.

When we come to the various Regulations, and Rules one can see that those for the Oratories are much more innovative and creative than those for the Boarding Schools. Perhaps Don Bosco felt much more at home where the whole organization was voluntary and free of charge, outside conventional structures. In organizing technical schools and boarding schools where already the state was involved and salaries had to be paid, then the direct engagement of the young people themselves in running the educational enterprise is much less evident than in the Regulations for the Oratory.¹⁸

What emerges for this reader is the paternal care and consideration that Don Bosco insisted on for young people by the adults involved in their education. What seems to be less emphasized is the active engagement and maturing growth in initiative and independence of the young people he worked for. This perhaps, is a result of the fact that most of the young people he worked for were compelled by economic

¹⁴ SS1, 501.

¹⁵ SS1, 413ff.

¹⁶ SS1, 466, 473.

¹⁷ SS1, 477ff.

¹⁸ SS1, 558ff.

necessity to enter the adult world of work from an early age and our extended adolescence was almost unknown.

Part Three: Writings and Testimonies of Don Bosco on Spiritual Life

The third part of the Documents is devoted to Writings and Testimonies of Don Bosco on Spiritual Life. The first section on Guidelines of Spiritual Life for the young opens with extensive sections from the *Companion of Youth*, where distinguishing the particular insights of Don Bosco, from the conventional spiritual background of the context in which he lived and worked is not that easy, suffice it to say that his emphasis on two central aspect of his approach are key: “a kind of Christian life that will make you happy and contented”¹⁹ and his testimony that “others may be much more virtuous and much more learned., but you would be hard put to find anyone who loves you more than I do in Jesus Christ”²⁰. Happiness and contentment and knowing that they are loved are his key spiritual insights into young people’s spiritual growth. This shapes the material he offers for consideration in the ‘Seven Reflections’ for each day of the week, which is practically a simplified form of the Spiritual Exercises, beginning with God and his love for the young and then the challenges of growing up to be a good Christian and honest citizen.²¹ Don Bosco follows St Francis de Sales in the Introduction to the Devout life in simplifying the key aspects of the Christian life and reducing them to a reflection for each day of a week for a retreat.

In his devotions for the Six Sundays and Novena to St Aloysius²², his reflection on the saint’s charity towards his neighbour, mentions his heroic dedication to the sick in the Roman Plague that took his life. Don Bosco is not afraid to challenge his youngsters to work among their companions to bring them to path of salvation. And of course, when the plague hit Turin, he actually involved his youngsters in the emergency hospitals that were set up. He completes the novena with reflections on the love of God, the love of prayer and the Happy Death, a theme he takes up again in the Prayer for a Happy Death.²³ Life was brutally short for so many of the young people he knew and worked for, so an

¹⁹ SS1, 695.

²⁰ SS1, 696.

²¹ SS1, 709.

²² SS1, 722.

²³ SS1, 730, 761.

emphasis on the theme of a Happy Death matched the situation in which he lived and worked.

In Don Bosco's Morning and Evening Prayers he offers short and simple prayers that any young person could be expected to know but characteristically allows that in the evening "when you do not have enough time to say the Rosary, say at least three Hail Marys etc. to obtain her protection"²⁴. He knows his young people and the prayers he recommends are frequent throughout the day but brief and is happy to substitute a shorter prayer instead of a longer one.

His prayers to accompany the young person at Mass are also brief and wisely encourage engagement with the pattern of the liturgy for the situation where the service was conducted in Latin by the priest and altar servers facing away from the congregation²⁵.

In the section devoted to Guidelines on Spiritual Life for the Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians²⁶, we can see Don Bosco struggling particularly in the Constitutional documents with an unfamiliar and uncongenial style of thought and writing. Characteristically, he prefaces the 'First draft of the Rules for the Salesian Congregation' with a section on the 'Origins of the Society'²⁷ in narrative style, where he claims that "in order to maintain unity in spirit and discipline on which the success of the oratory work depends, as far back as 1844 a number of priests banded together to form a kind of congregation, while helping one another by mutual example and instruction"²⁸. This passage or preface was written to assure the Curial Officials who would have to examine the Rule of the stability of the Congregation, and that "They regarded Fr. John Bosco as their superior. And although no vows were made, nevertheless the rules that are here presented were [already] observed in practice"²⁹. This claim shows Don Bosco's capacity to write a narrative for a specific audience, with the undoubted benefit of hindsight.

More significantly, he wrote: "the first exercise of charity shall be to gather together poor and abandoned young people in order to instruct

²⁴ SS1, 734.

²⁵ SS1, 736.

²⁶ SS1, 872.

²⁷ SS1, 875.

²⁸ SS1, 876.

²⁹ SS1, 877.

them in the holy Catholic religion, especially on Sundays and Holy Days...”³⁰ which defines the key purpose of the Salesian Congregation and defines its practices of piety, including the characteristic Salesian allowance that if one is prevented by the calls of the sacred ministry then the half-hour mental prayer can be substituted by “frequent ejaculatory prayers and offering to God with greater fervour and love those labours that keep him from the prescribed exercises of piety”³¹ which drew the wrath of the Curial revisers.

Don Bosco felt constrained to produce a Rule or Constitutions in order to get Vatican approval but found this exercise extremely difficult and complex because it was outside his personal experience, never having been a religious, and as a result he had to resort to a ‘cut and paste’ exercise adopting sections from the Constitutions of existing orders.

In his attempt to draw up the Salesian Sisters Rule a similar pattern was followed but on one occasion, we can see the inner voice of Don Bosco breaking through the constraints that getting the rule approved involved. In Chapter 18 General Rules: no.8 states, “The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians will always be happy with their Sisters, laughing, joking etc., always as it would seem the angels do among themselves....”³², not a very characteristic picture of 19th century convent life.

Don Bosco, however, was not frightened to propose a challenging and selfless dedicated style of life to his religious, involving cheerful hard work, selfless dedication, acceptance of the difficulties and sacrifices involved in working among poor and deprived young people and their families and all for the love of God.

One of the unusual methods that Don Bosco used to communicate his message was through his accounts of his dreams, which were often programmatic and with a clear educational or homiletic purpose. These accounts, often recorded by those who listened, offer us an insight to the vivid method of communication which Don Bosco often used with his youngsters.³³

³⁰ SS1, 877.

³¹ SS1, 901.

³² SS1, 931.

³³ SS1, 992ff.

In his address to the first French Cooperators and later to the Turin group Don Bosco outlines his vision of an active and committed lay involvement in the work of Christian charity that is education of the young and the poor³⁴.

In his splendid sermons on Fr. Cafasso and Philip Neri, we see that Don Bosco identifies their apostolic zeal and energy which he himself, had absorbed in the milieu of the post-Napoleonic Piedmontese Church in which he grew up. Joseph Cafasso had been a life-long example, director and friend to Don Bosco since his boyhood and we can see summed up here his own vision of the 'Zealous Priest' and was his model. Philip Neri, was the great 16th century apostle of the young.³⁵

Among all Don Bosco's writings, the section of the Biographies of Young People is in some ways the most revealing of his educational and spiritual outlook. They are certainly writings of their times, with his repeated warnings against swimming (which sounds very strange to a modern audience). However, what is more important is his deep awareness of the Spirit of Holiness which is so evidently at work in the lives of these young people and the levels of human maturity and selflessness that is evidenced there.³⁶ The fact that most were published very shortly after the death of their subjects makes them more credible as they were being read by contemporaries who had lived with their subjects day by day. What is also clear is that for Don Bosco they represented the best of his educational outlook and insights in practice.

He clearly worried about young people taking on physical penances which were inappropriate for their age and might endanger their health. He encouraged them instead to engage positively with their companions with patience and generosity and to accept the difficulties of everyday life as God's path for them. Writing the lives of young people whose lives were cut short by illness or an early death reflect preoccupation of the culture of this period and are no doubt one way of reacting to the high levels of mortality among young people of the period. For Don Bosco, from his first youthful effort in the life of Louis Comollo, his seminary companion, to the lives of his students at the Oratory from the midst of his adult life, he demonstrates his personal

³⁴ SS1, 1011ff.

³⁵ SS1, 1074ff.

³⁶ SS1, 1119ff.

involvement with those he was writing about and his pastoral care for them and his grief at their death.

The final and in many ways, for me the most significant and revealing document in this collection, is the *Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales from 1815-1855*.³⁷ Probably as a result of having forbidden its publication to anyone outside the Salesians, Don Bosco, as the wonderful story teller that he is, offers us an almost unguarded insight into his own life story and the story of his vocation.

In his introduction he writes that besides allowing its readers to learn from the past, and how God has always been our guide, "It will give my sons some entertainment to be able to read about their father's adventures.... Should they come upon experiences related, maybe with complacency or the appearance of vain glory, let them indulge me a little. A father delights in speaking of his exploits to his dear children."³⁸

The promise of the introduction is fulfilled in wonderful tales of entertaining his companions with juggling and acrobatic tricks as a preface to his prayer sessions or the wonderful exploit of his competition and wager against the acrobat in Chieri.

We see not just a young person who had immense creativity and capacity but who struggled with the limitations of poverty, family circumstances and sibling rivalry. His longing to become a priest and his struggle to get the education necessary shapes the early part of the narrative but his irrepressible sense of fun allows him to cope mischievously with the priest investigating him for 'magic' by hiding and then finding his watch and wallet.³⁹

What emerges early on in his first meeting with Joseph Cafasso is the clash between John Bosco's boyish sense of fun and the prevailing clerical culture of his age. Cafasso, the seminarian, replies to John's invitation to guide him round the village feast at Morialdo, with the prevailing 'other worldly' reply: "My dear friend the entertainments of a priest are church ceremonies," to which John retorts wisely: "But Father, though what you say is true, there is a time for everything, a time to pray and a time to play"⁴⁰. The challenge of a Clerical culture that

³⁷ SS1, 1325ff.

³⁸ SS1, 1325.

³⁹ SS1, 1362.

⁴⁰ SS1, 1342.

John experienced is highlighted in the social distance with which local clergy treated the greetings of young persons, in deep contrast to the warmth and affection he received from Don Calosso, the local chaplain, who prepared him for secondary school.

The period of his secondary schooling at Chieri, shows him at his most creative self and his friendship with the Jewish boy whom he calls Jonah also shows both his capacity for deep friendship and his own limitations and the cultural legacy of anti-Semitism in his description of Jonah's mother. The conflict that this clash produced within him is highlighted in the famous incident where he agrees to play his violin at a family party only to find to his dismay that an impromptu dance had commenced at the sound of the music. Then in an extreme reaction he smashed the violin into pieces and never played again. One wonders whether the interior struggle between his inner creativity and freedom and the external suffocating and judgemental clerical culture perhaps, explains the breakdown in his health after the death of his close friend, Louis Comollo.⁴¹

He was blessed by the three years of post-ordination study that he undertook at the Pastoral Institute (Convitto Ecclesiastico) where his creativity and energy were wisely directed towards his pastoral ministry with young people at risk and in the prisons.⁴²

All this leads both to his unconventional extra-parochial ministry with young people and his conflict with the parish clergy and the Marchioness Barolo and the suggestion that he was insane. What is very striking is that through all this he is stubbornly determined to resist all the pressure to give up his work for the young even at the cost of his own health and reputation. One of the most touching moments recorded is when he breaks down and cries, 'perhaps for the first time' he tells us, and cries out: "My God, why don't you show me where you want me to gather these children"⁴³. We are able to see into the heart and soul of Don Bosco in a way that rarely if ever appears elsewhere in this extensive collection of his writings.

Clearly from his account, his dismissal by the Marchioness Barolo, his desperate search for a new premises for the Oratory and his continued efforts in prison and writing had almost fatally undermined

⁴¹ SS1, 1384.

⁴² SS1, 1393.

⁴³ SS1, 1423.

his health so that even his recuperation at Murialdo was undermined by his youngsters coming to visit him. After discussion with Fr Cafasso and the Archbishop, "It was agreed that I could return to the Oratory provided that for a couple of years I would refrain from hearing confessions and preaching. I disobeyed. When I got back to the Oratory I continued to work as before and for 27 years I had no need for doctors or for medicine"⁴⁴.

This is an astonishing admission that he disobeyed, and one that his pastoral zeal justified but here one can see highlighted his stubborn character and the respect and obedience due to his Spiritual Director and Archbishop.

Don Bosco evidences his unwillingness to become involved in the political movement for Italian Unification where he records his interview with Roberto D'Azeglio and subsequently with enthusiastic priests who demand he takes part in a demonstration. In the political ferment of his age, he was determined to remain neutral, whoever he offended.⁴⁵

One cannot but enjoy the way that don Bosco relates his encounters with the 'supernatural', his significant and repeated dream at the age of nine, his strange encounter with, or apparition of Comollo after his death, the wonderful grey dog that guards and protects him from danger. All are related with a light-hearted touch that belies the deep sense that as Don Bosco says at the beginning that God himself has always been our Guide.

What is wonderful is that the Memoirs finish with Grigio's last appearance in 1866 when he appeared to accompany Don Bosco to visit his friend, Louis Moglia at Moncucco, at the farm where John had been taken in as a farmhand as a boy.⁴⁶

This mention of the Moglia family at Moncucco really highlights one of the most intriguing gaps in Don Bosco's narrative, his stay at the Moglia farm as a boy. In the footnote provided, we get little more than a passing reference to this event, when some further explanation might have been helpful.

⁴⁴ SS1, 14.

⁴⁵ SS1, 1435.

⁴⁶ SS1, 1478.

In general, the footnotes in this volume, and particularly to the *Memoirs of the Oratory* show a detailed depth of knowledge of all the notable people and clergy and who are mentioned in the narrative, an immense task in itself, and offer us that invaluable historical background which is so important for understanding the Don Bosco of history.

The Memoirs of the Oratory to this reader, are by far the most revealing writings of Don Bosco in this immense collection and in a way it is sad that they only appear at the end of the first volume rather than at the beginning. Here one gets a glimpse of the living and breathing Don Bosco, with his youthful enthusiasms and stubborn determination to become a father and teacher of the young, especially those who are poor or abandoned.

Conclusion

The Sources finish with a helpful select bibliography and an excellent thematic index.

This collection of Salesian Sources volume 1, now offers to an English-speaking readership, increasingly without a knowledge of Italian, an unparalleled opportunity to have access to the original documents that will enable them to research and reflect on Don Bosco first hand. While overall the translation reads very well in modern English, with its love of short sentences and direct statements sadly especially the translation of the introduction seems to come from another hand with a tendency to copy the Italian sentence structure more literally at the expense of translating the thought.

We have to thank the Salesian Historical Institute under Fr. José Manuel Pallezo, Fr. Francesco Motto and Fr. Aldo Giraudo for the immense scholarship and effort that has gone into compiling and introducing this first volume of Salesian Sources and for its translation into English, something historians, Salesian formation staff and students and the wider Salesian family will benefit from for many years to come. Our thanks also go to Kristu Jyoti Publications for producing this beautifully presented and bound volume, a tribute to the Indian Salesians' wonderful development of Don Bosco's concern for the press and social communications.

COMMUNICATIONS

Towards the fourth centenary of the death of Saint Francis de Sales (December 28, 1622)

International Conference on Saint Francis de Sales

Date: 18-20 November 2022

Place: Salesian Pontifical University Rome Italy

Info: francescodisales2022@unisal.it

Almost four hundred years have passed since Francis de Sales died in Lyon while returning from a trip to Annecy, on December 28th, 1622. In his relatively short life, at his death he was only 55 years old, the bishop of Geneva has changed forever the landscape of theology and more specifically of Christian spirituality. It is no coincidence that he was awarded the title of Doctor of the Church by Pope IX in 1877.

Francis was born on August 21, 1567, in Savoy to a noble family, went to the Jesuit College of Clermont in Paris and completed his studies with a doctorate *in utroque iure* at the University of Padua, when he was 25 years. He chose the ecclesiastical state instead of making a career in the judiciary as his father wanted.

He was a famous speaker. He “conquered” with his word and, above all, with his writings the Chablais, a region located in the north of Savoy, which a few decades earlier had passed to Protestantism. Once bishop, he reformed the diocese of Annecy-Geneva, entrusted to him, and founded, together with Jeanne de Chantal, the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary.

Francis de Sales was above all a spiritual director. He sometimes wrote up to 40 letters of spiritual guidance a day. It is from the collection of letters to Madame Louise de Charmois that his most famous work was born: “The introduction to the devout life”. In those letters, he explained, step by step, how one could deepen his spiritual life and his relationship with God. From its first publication on this work of spiritual accompaniment became extremely popular and was very soon translated into several languages.

The great merit of this small work is to strengthen the conviction that the spiritual life can be offered to everyone. Emphasizes that love for the other

does not contradict love for God but rather is the result of love for God. Until then, it was thought that the spiritual life was only for religious friars and nuns or priests. Spiritual works for the laity were only simplified versions of what was written for consecrated persons or priests. For Francis, however, holiness, the highest fulfilment of the spiritual life, could be made accessible to all, without exception.

In addition to the use of understandable language and short and easily digestible chapters, it is striking that Francis was not only spiritually and linguistically competent in conveying his message, but he is also exceptionally gifted in human and psychological terms.

“The Introduction” can be considered a classic of spiritual reading. Its content transcends any social and cultural context because it is readable and applicable to all. It allows to discover and identify the profound truth of faith in God, and above all because it still retains its meaning today.¹ The ideal of holiness within reach of all, promoted by the Bishop of Geneva, long before the Second Vatican Council, was not only taken up by the Council Fathers but, again recently, brought to attention by the Apostolic Exhortations *Gaudete et Exsultate* and *Christus Vivit*.

A few years after “The Introduction to the Devout Life”, in 1616, Francis de Sales wrote another masterpiece: the “Treatise on the love of God”. In this theological, philosophical, and spiritual book, Francis explains the relationship between man, creation, and God himself. The book is intended for people who are already a little advanced in their relationship with God. Or, as he says, “have advanced in the way of Christian perfection”. More balanced – “The Treatise” is conceived as a book and not as a collection of letters – tells of the love of human life, of divine love, and the relationship between the two. It is clear that this treatise is the fruit of reading and study, but above all of his personal experience and the spiritual guide of Jeanne de Chantal and the first Visitation Sisters at the Annecy Monastery.

Francis de Sales is remembered as a bishop who had a particular eye for the spiritual life of his people, but he was also a man with a very profound personal spirituality. It was in the simplicity of ordinary life that he found God. “I found a loving and kind God in the highest and most rugged mountains, where many humble people sincerely and truly believe in Him, and where deer and chamois praised Him on smooth ice.” The accessibility of his language, the recognizability of the images used in the texts, and the Christian testimony

¹ Wendy M. Wright, “The Introduction to the Devout Life as Spiritual Classic,” in *Encountering Anew the Familiar: Francis de Sales’ Introduction to the Devout Life at 400 Years*, ed. Joseph F. Chorpenning (Rome: International Commission for Salesian Studies, 2012): 23-35.

of his own life made Saint Francis de Sales a popular saint until the nineteenth century.

Four hundred years after his death, to honor the man and to study his heritage, the Salesians of Don Bosco and the Institute of Spiritual Theology of the Salesian Pontifical University of Rome organize an international conference. This conference will be held at the end of the jubilee year in autumn 2022. It will consist of two parts. The first will highlight how Francis de Sales and his legacy are a source of inspiration for various congregations and religious families. In the second part, different themes will be addressed: pedagogy, communication, history, spirituality ... For the variety of themes, several speakers have already been invited, among others, scholars like Wendy Wright (USA) and Judith de Raat (The Netherlands) and Eugenio Alburquerque (Spain), Vincenzo Marinelli (Italy), Aimable Mussoni (Italy), Michal Vojtas (Italy). More information on the conference will be available in the next issue of this Journal.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The Journal of Salesian studies is an academic publication covering topics primarily related to the Salesian tradition of Saint John Bosco, including its connection to the wider Salesian tradition relating to Saint Francis de Sales. In order to progress the Salesian mission, and to properly understand and discern the call of Salesian discipleship, many articles take on a historical perspective, and to delve into the origins of the Salesian charism, spirit, educational style, and its historical application through time. These historically-based articles are designed to encourage the critical reflection of the reader, and to draw connections to its current application. However, many articles make more of an immediate practical application.

The Journal of Salesian Studies, therefore, welcomes proposals and contributions that bring to the fore any of the following subjects:

- Education and evangelization of youth
- Don Bosco's charism and method
- Timely and pertinent topics relating to Salesian work in today's world
- Historical research in topics relating to the growth and development of the Salesian Society
- Francis de Sales' charism, spirit, and historical influences, as well as related persons and topics such as Jane de Chantal and the Visitation Order
- Profiles of personalities who have made a notable contribution in Salesian history, such as Mother Mary Mazzarello or founders of other congregations who have Saint Francis the Sales as a source of inspiration
- Book reviews of publications that are either explicitly Salesian, or publications which may be of interest to those involved in the education and evangelization of youth)

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Articles and proposals may be submitted to:

collin@unisal.it

BOOKS FOR REVIEW

Books of a particular interest to the Salesian spirituality, pedagogy, history, as outlined in the above “Call for Papers”, ought to be submitted for review to the following address:

Journal of Salesian Studies | Book Review

Wim Collin

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CONTENT

Introduction	5
Storytelling, Pop-Culture and Re-Launching the Gospel Message with Don Bosco among a New Generation of Post-Modern Young People . 9 <i>by Joe Boenzi</i>	
The Spiritual Profile of Don Bosco Emerging from the Collection of his Letters	31
<i>by John Rozario Lourdusamy</i>	
The Role of the “Educational Presence” in the Memoires of the Oratory and some Biographies written by Don Bosco	57
<i>by Wim Collin</i>	
Two Paths, One Journey: The Meaning of Presence in the Salesian Education and Therapeutic Encounters	85
<i>by Paul Formosa</i>	
Book Review	95
Communications	109
Call for Papers	112
Books for Review	113
How to Print your Copy	114
Content	115



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Articles

Storytelling, Pop-Culture and Re-Launching the Gospel Message with Don Bosco among a New Generation of Post-Modern Young People

by Joe Boenzi

The Spiritual Profile of Don Bosco Emerging from the Collection of his Letters (Part 1)

by John Rozario Lourdusamy

The Role of the “Educational Presence” in the Memoires of the Oratory and some Biographies written by Don Bosco

by Wim Collin

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