Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales

from 1815 to 1855

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF SAINT JOHN BOSCO

Translated by Daniel Lyons, SDB

With notes and commentary by

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DON BOSCO PUBLICATIONS

NEW ROCHELLE, NEW YORK

1989

SAINT JOHN Bosco (1815-1888), known affectionately around the world as Don Bosco, has had dozens of biographers. Few people are aware that he told his own story in the *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855,* his unfinished autobiography.

Several of Don Bosco's early biographers used his memoirs in their research. For the first time, English readers may now read this spiritual and educational classic, unabridged and unadorned, as Don Bosco wrote it. They may admire its simple and direct style and enjoy Don Bosco's escapades and narrow escapes. They may learn from his ways of dealing with youngsters and find encouragement in his struggles. They will see how God used a poor farm boy to write a new chapter in the Church's ministry and how a saint handled his weaknesses and grew in faith, humility, and daring.

Readers of Don Bosco's *Memoirs* will find themselves caught in the turmoil of 19th-century Italian politics. In the 1840s and 1850s Don Bosco's Turin was the heart of efforts to modernize Italian industry and commerce, democratize Italian society, and unite the Italian nation. At the same time, the Catholic Church was striving to maintain its independence and to meet the spiritual needs of a new age. Italian Catholics sought ways to balance their patriotism and their religious faith.

This first English edition of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* has been carefully edited and richly annotated for the benefit of a wide audience: Catholic and non-Catholic, clergy, religious, and laity, educators of all kinds, and historians of the Christian Church and of 19th-century Italy.

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Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bosco, Giovanni, Saint, 1815-1888.

[Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855. English]

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 Castelvecchi, and Michael Mendl.

Includes bibliography, maps, illustrations, and index.

1. Bosco, Giovanni, Saint, 1815-1888. 2. Christian saints —Italy —Biography. I. Ceria, Eugenio, 1870-1957. II. Castelvecchi, Lawrence, 1925-1987. III. Mendl, Michael, 1948- . IV. Title.

BX4700.B75A3 1989 271'.79-dc2o [B] 89-36115 CIP

ISBN 0-89944-135-1 perfect-bound cloth edition

0-89944-139-4 Smyth-sewn deluxe cloth edition

With affection and esteem

the Salesians dedicate

this English edition

of the

Memoirs of the Oratory *to*

POPE JOHN PAUL II

A Note on References

A selected bibliography is offered at the end of the book.

Sources frequently cited are referred to by author, sometimes with an abbreviation of the work:

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BN T. Bosco,	*Don Bosco: Una biografia nuova*
EcSo	Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale*
LesMem	Desramaut, *Les Memorie I de G.B. Lemoyne*
LW	Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Work*
MB	Lemoyne et al., *Memorie biografiche di S. Giovanni Bosco*
Mem	G. Bosco, *Memorie,* ed. T. Bosco
MO	G. Bosco, *Memorie dell'Oratorio* ed. Ceria
NCE	*New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 15 vols.
ReCa	Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia, della raligiosita cattolica,* vol. 2
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SP	T. Bosco, *Don Bosco: Storia di un prete*
SpLife	Desramaut, *Don Bosco and the Spiritual Life*

See the bibliography for complete bibliographic information.

FOREWORD

The Importance of the *Memoirs* for the Salesian Family

by the Very Reverend Egidio Vigano Rector Major of the Salesian Society

It gives me great pleasure to write this foreword for the first English edition of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* of Don Bosco. This jewel of Salesian literature will be a great help toward a better knowledge of Don Bosco's personality in the first forty years of his life (1815-1855); it will make for a better understanding of the early, inspirational apostolate at Valdocco, its evolution, and its steady growth despite difficulties on all sides.

The *Memoirs of the Oratory* is simply written, engagingly intimate, warmhearted; and there is a touch of humor in it too. I hope the few thoughts in this foreword will help readers to benefit much from the profound spirituality that finds its natural seedbed in these writings of our founder. But apart from any reflections this foreword may engender, the thing that will really and truly help Salesians understand the heart of Don Bosco will be the great love we have for him and our firm resolve to know him better, so that at this point in mankind's history we may be able faithfully to continue his mission and spirit.

The renewal of our Salesian holiness, of which I have spoken often, must begin with these memoirs. They have a very special place, a particular significance among Don Bosco's writings. When his memoirs are read in terms of Don Bosco's sanctity — which is essential to understand them fully—they reveal a substance that is quite surprising.

The word "holiness" is hardly found in the test, but Don Bosco's holiness is evident throughout the *Memoirs,* He reveals, for example, a keen awareness that God was using his humble person to establish a great project for the salvation of innumerable young persons, especially the friendless ones.

Pondering what use his *Memoirs* would be, Don Bosco concluded that it "will be a record to help people overcome problems that may come in the future by learning from the past. It will serve to make known how God himself has always been our guide."[1]

These considerations are basic; they prompt me to focus on three contemporary concerns and what Salesians can learn about them in this classic document so abounding in inspiration and foresight, so personally relevant. These concerns are the relationships of tradition and novelty, pastoral charm and ascetical discipline, and spirituality and action.

1. *Fidelity to Don Bosco in an Age of Novelty*

We must face the fact that our generation is totally enthralled by the latest trends. But these novelties do not constitute the whole of reality. In the future there is God, of course; but God does not belong solely to the future

—"Christ yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

The Salesian of our times is still a contemporary of Don Bosco, for yesterday was the beginning of tomorrow! To act as though the Salesian charism were merely the result of the signs of the times would be sheer philosophical immanence without faith. It would be tantamount to substituting for the founder an impersonal, ambiguous, and relative gnosis, disguised with a facelift dictated by fashion.

The true Salesian must anticipate the new times. If he shuts himself off from them, he becomes a mere curiosity in a museum; if he allows himself to be engulfed by them he destroys himself. If, however, in their midst he emerges as a bearer of a permanent charism of the Holy Spirit, then he is indeed true to his vocation.

The Salesian of Don Bosco moves into the new times from a platform of traditions; for him there is no future without fidelity to the past. The Salesian will lose his identity if he does not guard the traditions of his vocation, does not explore their depths, does not develop them. And this demands a "return to the sources" if there is to be any true renewal. The Second Vatican Council tells us that "renewal of the religious life involves ... a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community and an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of the times."[2]

For many people the concept of tradition is distasteful. They feel that anyone invoking tradition is applying the brake rather than pressing the accelerator. Nevertheless, remaining faithful to tradition is the only way we can deal with the signs of the times and preserve our identity. An identity card carries a photograph and specific data, after all, not vague directional promises.

Christianity also makes its promises, but it founds its future on fidelity to its traditions. Once again, Vatican II reminds us: "In his gracious goodness God has seen to it that what he had revealed for the salvation of all nations would abide perpetually in its full integrity and be handed on to all generations."[3] And again: "Therefore the apostles, handing on what they themselves had received, warn the faithful to hold fast to the traditions which they have learned either by word of mouth or by letter, and to fight in defense of the faith handed on once and for all."[4]

Assuredly tradition is not static and entombed: it makes progress within the Church with the help of the Holy-Spirit. The signs of the times do not merely "occasion" superficial external modifications; they actually present a new dimension that must be understood as genuine progress. For this reason it is a mistake to hold that everything was crystal clear in the beginning, and that in practice there is nothing important to be changed. The greater thoughtfulness and human sensitivity that mark the new do not constitute merely an external way of life. Indeed bring with them genuine values hitherto unknown. We are not lacking in loyalty when we say that these values do not begin with Don Bosco or the Gospel, but arise from the contemporary human situation.

It is only by grasping the realities of the signs of the times that we can speak of "living traditions" that contain their permanent Gospel values as a salvation message for mankind in the various stages of its development. Truly, tradition must be living. And this brings us to the nub of the matter: to accept new values and still conserve an authentic tradition, we simply must return to the Gospel through the insights and spirit of Don Bosco. Our striving for relevance, our new attitudes and methods, our decentralization, our debunking of certain moral observances that are no longer valid — all these efforts are of no earthly use to us if we forget the Gospel and the way Don Bosco did things.

For the Salesian of this new world, the signs of the times are particularly important. It is of vital concern, however, for him to turn back to the Gospel through Don Bosco, if he is to preserve his identity and grow in the future. Hence the importance of knowing and deepening our understanding of our origins, of studying the Salesian spirit, of pondering the depths of our Salesian Preventive System. Unless we return to our founder and study him

profoundly, we undermine the dialog between God and the world proper to our vocation, for we are sent by God himself to the young people of the new age.

2. *Two Pillars of Salesian Holiness*

We take it for granted that our lives as Salesian religious cannot possibly be separated from the very real presence of God, from the demands of holiness. This holiness of the new age must be solidly based on two pillars that uphold our vocation: pastoral charity and ascetical discipline. These virtues were not lived fully only by Don Bosco; they are the two principal marks of every disciple of Christ, no matter what his vocation.

A. *Pastoral charity* is described in our renewed Salesian Constitutions as the sum and center of our spirit.[5] It is our heritage from Saint Francis de Sales, doctor of charity, from whom we take our Salesian name.[6] Such charity demands from each of us a heart like Don Bosco's; he said,

"I have promised God that I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor boys."[7] "The Salesian spirit finds its model and source in the very heart of Christ, apostle of the Father."[8] Since, in the first place, our mission is entrusted to the community,[9] the community must be based charity, and our vows will be at its service; "brotherly our apostolic mission, and the practice of the evangelical counsels are the bonds which form us into one and constantly reinforce our communion."[10]

It is charity that spurs our Salesian community to undertake its joint pastoral work. "By the charity to which they lead, the evangelical counsels join their followers to the Church and her mystery in a special way,"[11] says the conciliar Constitution on the Church. Speaking of the universal cal1 to holiness (chapter 5), that Constitution reminds us at "the first and most necessary gift is that charity by which we love God above all things and our neighbor because of God."[12]

It is not through any ideological system but through charity lived publicly according to a practical ideal expressed in their vows that religious (as distinct from the Church's hierarchy and laity) "give splendid and striking testimony that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes."[13]

Pastoral charity is too vast and important a topic to be treated in these brief lines. Here I have been content to emphasize it as one of the most radical and indispensable conditions for a Salesian of the new age. It is not enough for confreres to be well versed in humanities and the sciences. We shall never build for the future if we are not motivated by the charity of the Holy Spirit, that charity by which love of our neighbor is the fruit of love of God. Indeed, the unifying quintessence of charity lies in the fact that our love for our neighbor must depend on our love for God.

B. The second distinctive mark is *ascetical discipline.* We think of the parable of the salt in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 9:49-50; Matthew 5:13; and Luke 14:34-35). Jesus speaks of his disciples as the salt of the earth. The three evangelists comment on the Lord's words; they describe the disciple and his essential make-up. A careful scrutiny of the text makes it clear that the salt is the spirit of sacrificial renunciation indispensable for any disciple.

Oscar Cullman, a Protestant exegete and observer at Vatican II, has made a close study of these texts and has written on the enlightening metaphor of the salt:

> Salt gives life, purifies; but it has this quality only because it is also caustic and causes pain. In this sense the disciple's suffering is great, but for this very reason it confers on him the strength to fulfill his lofty mission as disciple. Now we know that the function of a disciple depends completely on the spirit of sacrifice and total renunciation he must possess. To be a disciple without renunciation and suffering is a contradiction—like the salt that has lost its essential, elements. The essential quality of a disciple is inseparable from the function he must carry out for mankind, and vice-versa. To be a disciple means to be always a disciple for mankind. And since being a disciple demands the spirit of sacrifice, the world needs the disciple who is willing to suffer, renounce himself, and make sacrifices.[14]

Let us not deceive ourselves: if the salt loses its flavor, what use is it? I doubt that those responsible for forming the Salesians of the new age will be found among the leaders shouting fashionable slogans and playing down Gethsemane and Calvary; waxing eloquent in favor of the poor from the comfort of their armchairs; continually thinking up new forms of prayer but rarely speaking with God; relentlessly proclaiming the outdatedness of sexual taboos while calmly accepting amusements and friendships that put their purity of heart at risk; parading as paladins of social justice by playing politics instead of spreading and living the Gospel; downgrading authority in favor of brotherliness, yet neglecting the spirit of sonship we owe to the Father; and accepting neither the obedience of the cross nor self-sacrifice for the good of their confreres.

Let us never forget that our Salesian future must walk the way of holiness; it will require confreres who daily practice *pastoral charity* and genuine *ascetical discipline.* This will help us avoid chasing the will-of-the-wisp, especially when we honestly discuss and examine the future together. History teaches us that it is the holy people who truly open up for the Church the frontiers of new eras.

3. *The Basis of Salesian Spirituality*

The final aspect on which I wish to touch is one that is basic to Salesian vitality in the new times. Indeed, on it hinged Don Bosco's own holiness — that spiritual characteristic of being able to achieve a vital union of being and action, consecration and mission, love of God and neighbor, prayer and work —that is, the "grace of unity."[15] This is a characteristic of the apostolic holiness of the active life to which "the Salesian for all seasons" must witness.

When Don Bosco speaks of his vocation and that of his co-workers, he means it to be realized in a saving mission for the young and the working classes. He was called by God to be active in the Church and was put in charge of a group of people characterized by activity — work, work, work!

Thus it is vital for us to seek a sanctity that is enhanced and perfected by apostolic action. The active life is part and parcel of our vocation; this is recognized and proclaimed by Vatican II in the famous number 8 of *Perfectae caritatis.* The active life belongs to the very nature of our religious life. Our vocation imbues us with a "holiness in activity."

Not all religious vocations are the same; there are quite a number of institutes of the contemplative life. We too must be contemplatives—in action.[16] We have much to learn from pure contemplatives, then, for our different vocations are complementary in the unity of the Body of Christ.

Of course there really is a distinction, but it does not necessarily mean separation. Such a distinction, however, does provide more than sufficient grounds for different vocations. It is a historical fact that certain vocations con-

centrate publicly on those specific areas of the Church's sacramental reality that have more to do with either being or activity, and it is in both of these that the Salesian vocation is to be found. For a Salesian, belonging to the Church means ecclesial action, wherein witness is realized in a specific service.

The distinction does not aim to make any essential division between one aspect and the other, but rather to unite in different forms the various elements that give a characteristic tone to the variegated unity in the Church. Assuredly being part of the Church is, per se, more important than ecclesial action. Between witnessing and service there is certainly a distinction; however, one way of giving witness (and it cannot be called vague or useless!) consists in rendering a service.

It should be abundantly clear that the Salesian called to carry out such a service must never lose sight of the fact that he must carry it out as a *witness;* to do otherwise would falsify his vocation, since the whole Church exists and works as a "universal sacrament of salvation."[17] To witness in his service, the Salesian must possess and daily cultivate the "grace of unity" —which is *pastoral charity* deep in the heart, enthusiastic and mystic. Don Bosco expressed this intimate and ardent unity in his *Da mihi animas, caetera tolle,* which defines the essence of his spirit.

All these requirements will oblige the Salesian of the new era to search into the way of the Gospel traced out by his founder, to play his proper part in human history, to study pastoral practice and the subtle meaning of action. Thus his heart will be steeped in the spirit of Don Bosco's Valdocco Oratory; he will perfect an authentic theology of the active life and discover in it both the riches of holiness and the visible dimension of the sacraments as he pursues his mission to the young and the working classes.

Notes

1. Preface.

2. *Perfectae caritatis, 2* (Abbot ed.).

3. *Dei verbum,* 7.

4. Ibid., 8.

5. *Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales* (Rome, 1985), article 10.

6. Ibid., 4.

7. Ibid., I; MB XVIII, 258.

8. *Constitutions, II.*

9. Ibid., 44.

10. Ibid., 50.

11. *Lumen gentium,* 44.

12. Ibid., 42.

13. Ibid., 31.

14. Oscar Cullman, *La fe y el culto en la Iglesia primitiva* (Madrid: Studium, 1971), pp. 307-308.

15. *Acts of the Superior Chapter,* no. 127.

16. *Constitutions,* 12.

17. Cf. *Lumen gentium,* I.

Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales

from 1815 to 1855

Preface

Many a time I have been urged to write my memoirs concerning the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales.[1] Though I could not readily say no to the authority of the one who advised me to do this, I found it hard actually to set about the task because it meant too often speaking about myself. But now there has been added the command of a person of supreme authority, an authority that brooks no further delay.[2]

Therefore I am now putting into writing those confidential details that may somehow serve as a light or be of to the work which Divine Providence has entrusted to Society of Saint Francis de Sales. But I must say at the outset that I am writing these for my beloved Salesian sons*;* I forbid that these things be made public during my lifetime or after my death.[3]

Now, what purpose can this chronicle serve? It will be a record to help people overcome problems that may come in the future by learning from the past. It will serve to make known how God himself has always been our guide. It will give my sons some entertainment to be able to read about their father's adventures. Doubtless they will be read much more avidly when I have been called by God to render my account, when I am no longer amongst them.

Should they come upon experiences related maybe with complacency or the appearance of vainglory, let them indulge me a little. A father delights in speaking of his exploits to his dear children. It is always to be hoped that the sons will draw from these adventures, small and great, some spiritual and temporal advantage.

I have chosen to divide my account into ten-year periods, because each decade saw a notable development of our work.4

So, my dear children, when you read these memoirs after my death, remember that you had a loving father who left these memoirs as a pledge of fatherly affection before he abandoned this world. And remembering that, pray for the happy repose of my soul.

Notes

1. Don Bosco called his work the work of the "oratory," adopting the term used by Saint Philip Neri (1515-1595)- Don Bosco meant to indicate a place and an apostolate wherein boys, adolescents, and young men could gather for the ultimate purpose of prayer, i.e. Sunday and feast day Mass, confession, communion, preaching, and catechism. As we shall see, he used many means to make piety attractive to these youngsters, including games, outings, schooling, an employment service, and a hostel.

On Saint Philip Neri, see NCE X, 339-341; Butler's *Lives of the Saints,* II, 395-397; V.J. Matthews, *St Philip Neri: Apostle of Rome and Founder of the Congregation of the Oratory* (Rockford, Illinois: TAN, 1984); Louis Bouyer, *The Roman Socrates: A Portrait of St. Philip Neri,* trans. Michael Day (Westminster, Maryland: Newman, 1958).

2. The authority who first advised and then commanded was Pope Pius IX. The saint noted his advice in 1858 but only executed the command of 1867. See the introduction. On Pius IX's pontificate, see the introduction and the comment following these notes.

3. See the introduction.

4. Don Bosco, in another of his writings, also speaks of three decades, but these only involve the history of the Oratory itself. This fact is reported in BM V, 7. Here in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* he makes the division using wider criteria. The first decade takes in his life with his family as a boy and his period as a student. The second covers the period when he was a young seminarian and priest in the district of his birth and in Turin. The third tells the story of what happened to him and the Valdocco Oratory from the time of the Pinardi shed (1846) to the first building operations for the hospice at Valdocco.

Comment on Pius IX

Pope Pius IX (1846-1878), born Giovanni-Maria Mastai-Ferretti at Senigallia in the Marches (province of Ancona) in 1792, directed a Roman orphanage as a young priest and served as a papal diplomat in the new Republic of Chile. He became archbishop of Spoleto in 1827, bishop of Imola in 1831, and cardinal in 1840. His experience as a witness to the uprisings of 1831 and as a bishop within the Papal States convinced him that great social and administrative reforms were necessary in central Italy.

Succeeding the reactionary Pope Gregory XVI on June 16, 1846, Pius faced the nearly impossible task of balancing Italian nationalism and the interests of the Church in revolutionary times—more than complicated by the fact that the Pope ruled one-third of the Italian peninsula as his own sovereign state.

The experiences of 1848-1849 were enough to sour Pius IX on liberalism (and to finish souring the anticlerical political leaders on the Church). Only the presence of French soldiers in Rome enabled the Pope to hold the city against the tide of unification until 1870, when Napoleon III withdrew the troops on account of the Franco-Prussian War. Italy seized the papal city in 1870 and made it her capital. Pius became the "prisoner of the Vatican," as did his successors until Pope Pius XI and Mussolini resolved the "Roman Question" in 1929.

During Pius IX's exile at Gaeta in 1848-1849, the boys of the Oratory made their modest collection of thirty-three lire toward the Pope's relief (see chapter 49). Pius, familiar with the lot of orphans and the poor, was deeply touched. Thus a long and loving relationship between Pius IX and Don Bosco began.

Already thinking seriously about some form of congregation to carry on his work, Don Bosco went to Rome for the first time in 1858 to seek advice from members of the Curia and from the Pope. It was the first of many visits and cemented a close relationship that eventually led Pius to entrust very delicate missions to Don Bosco, and Don Bosco to consider Pius IX as

virtually the cofounder and father of the Salesian Society.

For a brief article on the pontificate of Pius IX, see Eric John, ed., *Vie Popes: A Concise Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Hawthorne, 1964), II, 437-440; or NCE XI, 405-408. Longer biographies in English, both giving most of their attention to Pius's pontificate and both of high quality, are Frank Coppa's *Pope Pius IX* {259 pages) and E.E.Y. Hales's *Pio Nono* (402 pages). On Pius IX and the Salesians, see BM III-XIII, passim.

Chapter 1

My Early Life

First ten years • Father's death • Family difficulties • The widowed mother

I was born on the day dedicated to Mary Assumed into Heaven in 1815[1] in Murialdo near Castelnuovo d'Asti.[2] My mother's name was Margaret Occhiena and she was from Capriglio;[3] my father's name was Francis.[4] They were farmers who made their living by hard work and thrifty use of what little they had. My good father, almost entirely by the sweat of his brow, supported my grandmother, in her seventies and a prey to frequent illnesses; three youngsters; and a pair of farm helpers. Of the three children, the oldest was Anthony,[5] born of his first wife; the second was Joseph;[6] and the youngest was me, John.

I was not yet two years old when the merciful Lord hit us with *a* sad bereavement. My dearly loved father died unexpectedly. He was strong and healthy, still young and actively interested in promoting a good Christian upbringing for his offspring. One day he came home from work covered in sweat and imprudently went down into a cold cellar. That night he developed a high temperature, the first sign of a serious illness. Every effort to cure him proved vain. Within a few days he was at death's door. Strengthened by all the comforts of religion, he recommended to my mother confidence in God, then died, aged only thirty-four, on 12 May 1817.[7]

I do not know how I reacted on that sad occasion. One thing only do I remember, and it is my earliest memory. We were all going out from the room where he had died, and I insisted on staying behind.

My grieving mother addressed me, "Come, John, come with me."

"If papa's not coming, 1 don't want to come," I answered.

"My poor son," my mother replied, "come with me; you no longer have a father." Having said this, she broke down and started crying as she took me by the hand and led me away. I began crying too because she was crying. At that age I could not really understand what a tragedy had fallen on us in our father's death.

This event threw the whole family into difficulty. Five people had to be supported. The crops failed that year because of a drought," and that was our only source of income. The prices of foodstuffs soared. Wheat was as much as four francs a bushel, corn or maize two and a half francs.[9] Some people who lived at that time have assured me that beggars hesitated to ask for even a crust of bread to soak into their broth of chickpeas or beans for nourishment. People were found dead in the fields, their mouths stuffed with grass, with which they had tried to quell their ravenous hunger.

My mother often used to tell me that she fed the family until she exhausted all her food. She then gave money to a neighbour, Bernard Cavallo,[10] to go looking for food to buy. That friend went round to various markets but was

unable to buy anything, even at exorbitant prices. After two days he came in the evening bringing back nothing but the money he had been given. We were all in a panic. We had eaten practically nothing the whole day, and the night would have been difficult to face.

My mother, not allowing herself to be discouraged, went round to the neighbours to try to borrow some food. She did not find anyone able to help. "My dying husband," she told us, "said I must have confidence in God. Let's kneel then and pray." After a brief prayer she got up and said, "Drastic circumstances demand drastic means." Then she went to the stable and, helped by Mr Cavallo, she killed a calf." Part of that calf was immediately cooked and the worst of the family's hunger satisfied. In the days that followed, cereals bought at a very high price from more distant places enabled us to survive.

Anyone can imagine how much my mother worked and suffered in that disastrous year. The crisis of that year was overcome by constant hard work, by continuous thrift, by attention to the smallest details and by occasional providential help. My mother often told me of these events, and my relatives and friends confirmed them.

When that terrible scarcity was over and matters at home had improved, a convenient arrangement was proposed to my mother. However she repeated again and again, "God gave me a husband and God has taken him away. With his death the Lord put three sons under my care. I would be a cruel mother to abandon them when they needed me most."

On being told that her sons could be entrusted to a good guardian who would look after them well, she merely replied, "A guardian could only be their friend, but I am a mother to these sons of mine. All the gold in the world could never make me abandon them."[12]

Her greatest care was given to instructing her sons in their religion, making them value obedience, and keeping them busy with tasks suited to their age. When I was still very small, she herself taught me to pray. As soon as I was old enough to join my brothers, she made me kneel with them morning and evening. We would all recite our prayers together, including the rosary. I remember well how she herself prepared me for my first confession. She took me to church, made her own confession first, then presented me to the confessor. Afterwards, she helped me to make my thanksgiving. She continued to do this until I reached the age when she judged me able to use the sacrament well on my own.[13]

I had reached my ninth year.[14] My mother wanted to send me to school, but this was not easy. The distance to Castelnuovo from where we lived was more than three miles; my brother Anthony was opposed to my boarding there. A compromise was eventually agreed upon. During the winter season I would attend school at the nearby village of Capriglio. In this way I was able to learn the basic elements of reading and writing.[15] My teacher was a devout priest called Joseph Delacqua. He was very attentive to my needs, seeing to my instruction and even more to my Christian education.

During the summer months I went along with what my brother wanted by working in the fields.[16]

Notes

1. Don Bosco always believed that he had been born on August 15. His mother had been dead a number of years when the custom of celebrating his birthday at the Oratory began. Thus she could not correct the mistake about this date. Even on the document placed beside his coffin *(Salesian Bulletin,* March 1888), his successor Father Michael Rua wrote, "He was born at Castelnuovo d'Asti, August 15, 1815."

It was only when the baptismal register was consulted after Don Bosco's death that the mistake was discovered. He had been baptized August 17 in the parish church, Saint Andrew's, by Father Joseph Festa. The register, signed by the pastor Father Joseph Sismondo, states clearly that John Melchior Bosco had been born *heri vespere natus,* i.e. on the evening of the sixteenth.

It was a custom in Piedmont to refer to anything that happened near the fifteenth — roughly from the vigil of the solemnity through its octave —as having occurred "on the Assumption." If, when John was a child, his relatives regularly used this expression of his birthday, his later mistake is understandable.

2. Castelnuovo d'Asti, now known as Castelnuovo Don Bosco, had about 3500 inhabitants in the early nineteenth century. It is about eighteen miles from Turin.

Morialdo, one of four districts *(frazioni)* linked with Castelnuovo, is two and a half miles south of the town. (The other three districts are Bardella, Nevissano, and Ranello.) In 1815, two or three hundred people lived in Morialdo, scattered among a number of hamlets. Don Bosco spelled it "Murialdo" in keeping with the manner in which the Piedmontese of his day pronounced the letter "o".

For remarks on Don Bosco's birthplace, see the extended comment at the end of the notes.

3. Capriglio is a village about four miles east of Morialdo. Don Bosco's mother was born at the Cecca farm in Serra di Capriglio, a hamlet of the town of Capriglio, on April i, 1788. She married the widower Francis Bosco on June 6, 1812. Though the Occhienas owned land, they were so poor that their dowry for Margaret's marriage was some work that one of her brothers performed for Francis. She was twenty-four, and he was twenty-eight.

4. Francis Louis Bosco was born in Castelnuovo on January 20, 1784. He was the fourth of six children born to Philip Anthony Bosco II (1735-1802) by his second wife, Margaret Zucca (1752-1826) —the grandmother of whom Don Bosco speaks. There were also six children from Philip's first marriage. Of these twelve children, only six survived childhood. It was Philip who moved the family from Castelnuovo to the Biglione farm as tenant farmers in 1793. . Francis married Margaret Cagliero on February 4, 1805. She bore him two children, Anthony and Teresa. Teresa, whom Don Bosco does not mention, was born on February 16, 1810, and died two days later.

5. Until recently, all Don Bosco's biographers gave February 3, 1803, as the date of Anthony's birth, on the basis of an 1885 letter from Don Bosco's nephew Francis Bosco, Joseph's son (Stella, LW, p. 10, n. 16). Anthony was in fact born on February 3, 1808. This gives us a clearer picture for interpreting the confrontation in the Bosco house between Anthony and young John (chapters 4-6): The age gap was seven years and not twelve, as formerly believed. Anthony died in 1849.

6. Joseph was born on April 8, 1813, and died in 1862.

7. Francis died on May n after a week's illness. He was in his thirty-fourth year, i.e. thirty-three years old. John was twenty-one months old.

8. The country around Turin is very hilly but fertile. However, the amount of precipitation and the temperature determine the quality of the annual harvest of grapes and cereals. Extremes of rain (drought one year, devastating downpours another) and of temperature are well known.

The famine of 1817-1818 was the result of drought. There had been less snow than usual during the winter of 1816-1817, and spring frosts killed much of the early planting. Then the summer of 1817 was very dry.

9. Literally, "25 francs/i6 francs an *emina."* Don Bosco consistently uses "francs" rather than "lire." Because of Piedmont's close ties — cultural, linguistic, economic, and dynastic — with France, the Piedmontese had used the word "franc" as an equivalent of the lira long before the Napoleonic occupation of Piedmont.

The *emina* was an old Piedmontese measure of capacity. Its size varied from place to place; around Asti it was about twenty-three liters (6.3 bushels). In normal times an *emina* of maize would cost two or three lire. So the famine had, more or less, raised prices by six hundred percent.

10. The Bosco home was attached to the rear of the Cavallo home, which is the oldest structure on the little hill. In recent years, the former Cavallo home has housed the office of the rector of Don Bosco's shrine, a lobby, and a gift shop.

11. This was an act of desperation (T. Bosco, BN, pp. 15-16). The calf was the family's insurance against future disaster when money might be essential, for a fat calf would bring a good price at market. Margaret had decided that the disaster was at hand; there was no other way to feed her family.

12. What this arrangement could have been arouses our curiosity concerning both the suitor and the exact nature of the proposal. Evidently it implied some neglect of Francis Bosco's three sons, which the widow Margaret admirably refused to consider. This is the only reference that Don Bosco seems ever to have made to it, and we know nothing else about it.

13. John would have been six or seven when he first received the sacrament of penance, by which Christ acts through his priestly minister to forgive sins committed since baptism.

Pope Pius XII (1939-1958), speaking to Christian families on the feast of Saint John Bosco, January 31, 1940, referred to the little house at Becchi:

Imagine the young widow with her three sons kneeling for morning and evening prayer. See the children, in their best clothes, going to the nearby village of Morialdo for holy Mass. See them gathered around her in the afternoon after a frugal meal in which there would only be a little bread on which she had invoked the Lord's blessing. She reminds her sons of the commandments of God and the Church, of the important lessons from the catechism, of the various means of salvation. She then goes on to speak in simple but forceful country terms of the tragic story of Cain and Abel, or of the painful death of her dear Jesus, nailed to the cross on Calvary for all of us. Who can possibly measure the lasting influence of the first lessons given by a good mother to her children? It was to such lessons that Don Bosco the priest used to attribute his loving devotion to Mary and to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

14. John's ninth year was August 16, i823~August 15, 1824, when we would say that he was eight years old. From what we have been able to find through research, he should have said, "my tenth year."

15. We should note a few points about schooling in Piedmont. Young John's particular situation also deserves some comment.

The French occupation and the subsequent Restoration had thrown the country into a great deal of disorder. It was not until July 23, 1822, that a government education act was passed. For the first time, this law made the opening of free primary schools compulsory. However, the communes were allowed to recover their basic expenses by charging some tuition, which

often amounted to something like twenty lire for the year; a hired farmhand's wages for the working season was only fifteen lire.

The regulation envisaged instruction in the "four Rs": reading, writing, 'rithmetic, and religion. Lessons were to be given for three hours in the morning and three in the afternoon; in between, the pupils went home for dinner and perhaps for some chores.

The law mandated that schools open on November 3, after the harvest and the double church solemnity of All Saints' and All Souls' Days; they were supposed to be open until the end of September but in practice closed on the Feast of the Annunciation (March 25), when farmhands for the coming planting, cultivation, and harvest were hired in every town square.

Before 1822, in the ordinary rural community, the little bit of reading and writing that was taught would have been given in the home by some older member of the family. This would happen during the long Piedmontese winters when there was little farm work. Anthony almost certainly was taught this way and not in any formal schooling. John apparently had received a little such instruction from a local farmer sometime during 1823-1824.

Because of the many practical difficulties following the French occupation, the education law was a dead letter in most country districts. Most of the teachers were priests who, for one reason or another, were not fully involved in parish work. The large number of priests in the area around Castelnuovo allowed the law to be implemented more easily there; so there were schools at both Castelnuovo and Capriglio.

16. Father Joseph Lacqua (not Delacqua, as Don Bosco writes it) was the teacher at Capriglio in 1824. He was not too happy at the idea of taking a boy from Becchi into his school, nor was he bound to take him, since Becchi belonged to the commune of Castelnuovo and not to Capriglio. Margaret had turned to him for several reasons. Anthony was totally against John's being sent to Castelnuovo, which was farther away from Becchi. Since John had to walk to or from school four times a day, there would be more time for helping out with the farmwork if he went to Capriglio. Finally, Margaret‘s family lived in Capriglio.

Around this time, however, Father Lacqua needed a housekeeper. Margaret had an unmarried older sister, Joan Mary Occhiena (always called Marianne). Father Lacqua asked her to work as his housekeeper. She agreed, possibly on condition that he enroll John in the school. At any rate, the priest did take John into his school; thus John got his first schooling and also had an aunt who could provide lodging for him if the weather turned foul.

Marianne remained Father Lacqua's housekeeper until he died around 1850. She then joined Mama Margaret at the Oratory as a helper in Don Bosco's work there.

John probably attended classes at Capriglio from autumn 1824 to spring 1826, when he was nine and ten years old. He was older than the rest of the pupils, and they sometimes made fun of him. He may have attended briefly in the autumn of 1826, when a family crisis long brewing came to a boil. For more details of this period see Molineris, pp. 133-139.

Comment on Don Bosco's Birthplace

Nearly three miles south of Castelnuovo Don Bosco is Becchi, a cluster of ten farmhouses within the district of Morialdo. It takes its name from Bechis, the surname of a family once associated with the little hilltop. This name, pluralized and Italianized (from the Piedmontese dialect), became *Becchi.*

A little to the south of Becchi and farther up the hill lay the Canton Cavallo, i.e. the property and house of the Cavallos. Here the Boscos owned the farmhouse long venerated as the saint's birthplace; there he grew up, there he came for his vacations, and there (in his own new house) his older brother Joseph lived from 1839 till 1862. Becchi was John Bosco's native place.

But the research of Secondo Caselle *(Cascinali e contadini in Monferrato: I Bosco di Chieri nel secolo XVIII* [Rome: LAS, 1975]), former mayor of Chieri and devotee of Don Bosco, has proven that John was born not at this family farmstead but at the Biglione farm *(castina Biglione)* about two hundred yards still farther up the hill, to the south. Francis Bosco was a tenant farmer contracted to Biglione, and John was born in the Biglione house.

Francis Bosco had two hired farmhands. So the Boscos, though peasants, were not destitute. Having saved his money, in February 1817 Francis was able to buy from Francis Graglia a house lower down the slope on the edge of the Becchi hamlet, with about three-quarters of an acre of land. He paid one hundred lire. The patterns of inflation and recession caused the value of the lira to fluctuate somewhat; so it is difficult to fix its true value in contemporary terms. But during the first half of the nineteenth century it was reasonably stable. Teresio Bosco *(Mem,* p. 178, n. i; SP, p. 45) estimates that the lira was worth about four thousand 1985 lire, or US $2.60. In the 18505 and i86os it cost Don Bosco about eighty centesimi per day to keep each boy in his community (Stella, *EcSo,* pp. 371-372).

Francis intended to renovate the house considerably and perhaps had begun to do so while fulfilling his last contract with Biglione when he caught pneumonia and died in May 1817. That tragedy did not prevent Biglione from suing Margaret Bosco to compel her to fulfill her husband's contract. Margaret moved the family to Becchi in November after the harvest, and she spent another sixty lire on renovations.

The house that Francis had bought was a decrepit affair attached to the rear of the Cavallo home. It contained very modest living quarters and a stable; overhead was a large hayloft, and the whole was roofed with tile. Margaret fixed the downstairs quarters into a decent kitchen-living room and left the stable as it was. Part of the hayloft was left over the stable, the rest of the upstairs being divided into two bedrooms that were accessible either by an outside stairs or by a trapdoor in the kitchen ceiling.

In 1886 Don Bosco dreamt that his mother took him to the top of the small hill just south of their house. Mother and son talked about the good to be done in this area as they looked down on the plain stretching around the hill. Don Bosco woke up from his sleep while still in the middle of this conversation. Afterwards, speaking of this dream, he commented that the hill did seem like a good place for a Salesian foundation since it was in the center of a number of villages too far from the churches. Details of the dream may be found in MB XIX, 382-383.

The Salesians — entirely unaware of the dream at the time — acquired the entire hilltop from its various owners in 1930. Soon after, rector major Father Peter Ricaldone and economer general Father Fidelis Giraudi chose the site for a new Salesian technical school when funds were donated for that purpose. This became the Bernardi-Semeria Salesian Institute, and it was built behind the Biglione farmhouse at the top of the hill.

Then Fathers Ricaldone and Giraudi began to dream of building a great church in honor of the Salesians' newly canonized founder. Actual planning was not possible until the late 19505. Ironically, the site chosen was next to the school and stretching northward; it demanded the removal of the Biglione house, which was torn down in 1958! The great Tempio di Don Bosco was constructed between 1961 and 1965. The house had stood on the site almost directly beneath the main altar of today's tempio.

The entire hilltop today is commonly known as "Colle Don Bosco" (Don Bosco's Hill).

Chapter 2

A Dream

It was at that age that I had a dream.[1] All my life this remained deeply impressed on my mind. In this dream I seemed to be near my home in a fairly large yard. A crowd of children were playing there. Some were laughing, some were playing games, and quite a few were swearing. When I heard these evil words, I jumped immediately amongst them and tried to stop them by using my words and my fists.

At that moment a dignified man appeared, a nobly-dressed adult. He wore a white cloak, and his face shone so that I could not look directly at him. He called me by name, told me to take charge of these children, and added these words: "You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love. Start right away to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue."

Confused and frightened, I replied that I was a poor, ignorant child. I was unable to talk to those youngsters about religion. At that moment the kids stopped their laughing, shouting, and swearing; they gathered round the man who was speaking.

Hardly knowing what I was saying, I asked, "Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?"

"Precisely because it seems impossible to you, you must make it possible through obedience and the acquisition of knowledge."

"Where, by what means, can I acquire knowledge?"

"I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her, all wisdom is foolishness."

"But who are you that speak so?"

"I am the son of the woman whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day."[2]

"My mother tells me not to mix with people I don't know unless I have her permission. So tell me your name."

"Ask my mother what my name is."

At that moment, I saw a lady of stately appearance standing beside him. She was wearing a mantle that sparkled

all over as though covered with bright stars. Seeing from my questions and answers that I was more confused than ever, she beckoned me to approach her. She took me kindly by the hand and said, "Look." Glancing round, I realised that the youngsters had all apparently run away. A large number of goats, dogs, cats, bears, and other animals had taken their place.

"This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong, and energetic. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children."

I looked round again, and where before I had seen wild animals, I now saw gentle lambs. They were all jumping and bleating as if to welcome that man and lady.

At that point, still dreaming, I began crying. I begged the lady to speak so that I could understand her, because I did not know what all this could mean. She then placed her hand on my head and said, "In good time you will understand everything."

With that, a noise woke me up and everything disappeared. I was totally bewildered. My hands seemed to be sore from the blows I had given, and my face hurt from those I had received. The memory of the man and the lady, and the things said and heard, so occupied my mind that I could not get any more sleep that night.

I wasted no time in telling all about my dream. I spoke first to my brothers, who laughed at the whole thing, and then to my mother and grandmother. Each one gave his own interpretation.[3] My brother Joseph said, "You're going to become a keeper of goats, sheep, and other animals." My mother commented, "Who knows, but you may become a priest." Anthony merely grunted, "Perhaps you'll become a robber chief." But my grandmother, though she could not read or write, knew enough theology and made the final judgement, saying, *"Pay no attention to dreams."*

I agreed with my grandmother. However, I was unable to cast that dream out of my mind. The things I shall have to say later will give some meaning to all this. I kept quiet about these things, and my relatives paid little attention to them. But when I went to Rome in 1858 to speak to the Pope about the Salesian Congregation, he asked me to tell him everything that had even the suggestion of the supernatural about it.[4] It was only then, for the first time, that I said anything about this dream which I had when I was nine or ten years old. The Pope ordered me[5] to write out the dream in all its detail and to leave it as an encouragement to the sons of that Congregation whose formation was the reason for that visit to Rome.[6]

Notes

1. Don Bosco is a bit vague about when this first dream occurred. He seems to mean that it was while he was going to school at Capriglio (see chapter i, notes 14 and 16). As we shall see, many of Don Bosco's dates in these *Memoirs* are problematic. In chapter 31 he refers back to this dream that he had "when I was nine years old," which would be 1824— 1825. Shortly before his death, he told his secretary Father Charles Viglietti, "I vividly revisited the scene of the dream I had when I was about ten years old, in which I dreamt of the Congregation" (MB XVIII, 340-341). He was ten in 1825-1826. At the end of this chapter,

he says that he was nine or ten.

Stella (LW, p. 8) suggests that it may have been around the solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, June 29, 1825; the imagery of the dream is consonant with one of the gospels of the feast (John 21:15-19). It is also possible that the question of John's schooling was broached at this time in connection with a desire that he may already have voiced, becoming a priest.

On this first dream, see Desramaut, *LesMem,* pp. 250-256, and Stella, LW, pp. 7-10. On Don Bosco's dreams in general, see the extended comment at the end of the notes.

2. Throughout the Catholic world, Christian practices of piety were woven into different parts of the day. The Angelus in the morning, at noon, and in the evening was one such regular practice. This prayer celebrates the angel Gabriel's coming to the Virgin Mary and inviting her to become mother of the Messiah (Luke 1:26-38). Mary was to remain always Don Bosco's teacher and guide in his youth ministry.

3. Each member of the family showed something of his or her character in the interpretation offered. Joseph is the simple, down-to-earth farmer. Margaret speaks as a woman well versed in the ways of the Lord. Anthony's gruff dismissal of it reveals his rough character. Grandmother Bosco presents the voice of old age, no longer inclined to fantasies. In John we see the wisdom of one older than his years.

4. In asking Don Bosco about the supernatural the very first time they met, Pius IX is not specially singling him out. The Pope was peculiarly sensitive to the supernatural and looked for it whenever he suspected any hint of it (Stella, LW, p. 10, n. 15).

5. Here Don Bosco seems to combine the request of 1858 and the command of 1867. (See his preface.)

6. The purpose of Don Bosco's first visit to Rome (January 18 to April 16, 1858) was to try to secure the future of the oratories he had founded. He wanted to set a firm basis for an institution suited to the times, and for this end he carried with him a letter of recommendation from Archbishop Louis Fransoni of Turin (BM V, 561).

On this visit and the papal audiences, see Bonetti, pp. 348-358, and BM V, 523-602.

Comment on Don Bosco's Dreams

In I *Sogni di Don Bosco* (Turin: LDC, 1978), Cecilia Romero, FMA, has published a critical edition of ten of Don Bosco's dreams for which there exist manuscripts in his own hand, not including this first dream at age nine.

Giovanni Battista Lemoyne places Don Bosco's dreams in the context of his life and work (BM I, 190-191):

Don Bosco and the word *dream are* correlative.... It is truly astounding how this phenomenon went on in his life for sixty years. ... In both the Old and New Testaments, as well as in the lives of innumerable saints, the Lord in his fatherly love gave comfort, counsel, command, spirit of prophecy, threats and messages of hope and reward both to individuals and to entire nations through dreams. . . . Don Bosco's life was an intricate pattern of wondrous events in which one cannot but perceive direct divine assistance. Hence, we must reject the notion that he was a fool, or that he labored under illusions or that he was vain and deceitful. Those who lived at his side for thirty or forty years never once detected in him the least sign that he would betray a desire to win the esteem of his peers by pretending to be endowed with supernatural gifts.

Introducing MB XVII, Eugenio Ceria discusses at length the phenomenon of dreams in Don Bosco's life (pp. 7-13):

The largest and most characteristic kind of dreams that Don Bosco had is made up of dreams that contain revelatory elements going beyond the interpretive power of his own mind. In these dreams Don Bosco reviewed the past, viewed the present, and previewed the future. All this was generally presented to him in symbolic form. But often he was presented with realistic images.... (p. 8)

The manner in which Don Bosco narrated his dreams inclines one to accept their supernatural character. For the saint in his narration did his utmost to forestall that very interpretation. He did this by a simple and humble style of presentation and by avoiding everything that would lead others to suppose that he possessed special merits or enjoyed exceptional privileges. The Servant of God Father Rua, in the Processes [for canonization], rightly qualified the dreams as undoubted visions and expressed his conviction that Don Bosco felt duty-bound, for the good of souls, to relate the things that had been shown to him in dreams, and that this impulse was itself of supernatural origin, (pp. 10 – 11)

For a better understanding of the specific character of these dreams, we should note their logical and purposeful development. This is unusual in dreams. Dreams are usually composed of a confused sequence of images following one another without rhyme or reason. ... In Don Bosco's dreams, on the contrary, there is always a serious and basic order to the dream sequence. And the development, whether it be simple or complicated, proceeds in an orderly fashion and without any of the wild irrationalities prevalent in common dreams. Moreover, whenever "strange" images appear, Don Bosco identifies them as such and upon inquiry receives satisfactory explanations. All this shows that the world of common dreams has been transcended, (p. 11)

In a talk with Don Bosco . . . , Father Lemoyne referred to Don Bosco's dreams as visions, and the saint said that he was correct. This led Father Lemoyne to observe in his notes: "Until about the year 1880, Don Bosco had never used this word [visions] to describe his dreams. During his last years, however, and only in confidential conversations with Father Lemoyne ... he would not object to his using the word even though Don Bosco himself did not use it first." (p. 12)

One of the most serious students of Don Bosco's life, Alberto Caviglia, evaluates his dreams thus in *Don Bosco* (Turin: LICE, 1934. PP- 35-36):

Dreams were a recurring experience throughout sixty of Don Bosco's seventy-three years. A good number of these dreams may be regarded simply as edifying and didactic parables; they are an attempt to express symbolically the ideas, tendencies, and hopes that were part of his spiritual and educational world. But when the future of his work is revealed in a dream with uncanny accuracy, a long time before such developments could possibly have been forecast — then we are dealing with a different phenomenon.

This phenomenon, unique in the history of saints, defies explanation. For one thing, the usual scientific theories of dreams do not explain them satisfactorily. Doctor Albertotti, who was Don Bosco's physician and also a professional psychiatrist, was unable to find a satisfactory explanation in dream theory or telepathic phenomena. The believer may interpret these dreams as visions or prophecies or revelations, etc. The Church does not forbid this interpretation. . . . We may be satisfied with observing that these dreams happened and that their predictions were fulfilled.

Most recently, Morton T. Kelsey (see citation below, Brown edition) quotes from a poem of Saint Gregory Nazianzen, fourth-century father and doctor of the Church:

And God summoned me from boyhood in my nocturnal dreams, and I arrived at the very goal of wisdom.

These lines, says Kelsey, could have been written by Don Bosco (p. x). He continues:

It is quite clear that Don Bosco was a genius in opening himself to this dimension of reality. This ability was probably given to him by inheritance and God's special grace. The important matter is that he developed this ability, used it for God and recorded his experience, (p. xvi)

Kelsey writes that the first dream set the course of his entire life. ... It told in symbolic form what was to be his life's mission. Even though he did not understand it, he couldn't forget it. When he was asked by Pope Pius IX to speak of the supernatural influences in his life, it was this dream that impressed the Pope so much that he ordered Don Bosco to write down his dreams for the encouragement of his

Congregation and the rest of us. (p. xxxvi)

For more about Don Bosco's dreams, see Eugenio Ceria, *Don Bosco con Dio,* pp. 303-326 [McGlinchey translation, pp. 121-132]; Desramaut, *SpLife,* pp. 34-35; Stella, *ReCa,* pp. 507-563.

A handy collection of sixty-two of Don Bosco's dreams is the edition prepared by Eugene M. Brown, *Dreams, Visions & Prophecies of Don Bosco* (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1986). It contains a valuable foreword by Morton T. Kelsey on dreams as a phenomenon of Christian spirituality (pp. ix-xl) and a brief introductory essay by Arthur J. Lenti, SDB, on the various types of Don Bosco's dreams and their critical evaluation (pp. xli-lii). The dreams themselves are taken from the *Biographical Memoirs,* with Lemoyne's, Amadei's, or Ceria's introductions to them or comments upon them.

PART I

The First Decade 1825 to1835

Chapter 3

The Young Acrobat

First entertainments for children Sermons • Acrobatics • Bird nesting

Many times you have asked me at what age I began to take an interest in children. When I was ten years old, I did what was possible at my age and formed a kind of festive oratory. Take note.

Though I was still pretty small, I was studying my companions' characters. When I looked closely at someone, I could usually gauge what he was thinking. This gift won me the love and esteem of the boys my own age, and I was thus in demand as judge or friend. For my own part, I tried always to help and never to hurt. So my companions were quite fond of me. I would take their side when quarrels broke out. Though I was not very big, I was strong and brave enough to stand up even to older companions. Whenever arguments, questions, or quarrels of any kind arose, I acted as arbiter, and everyone accepted my decisions with good grace.

But it was to hear my stories that they flocked round me. They loved them to the point of folly. I drew on many sources for my anecdotes — sermons, catechism lessons, and stories I had read in *The Kings of France,* in *Wretched Guerino,* and in *Bertoldo and Bertoldino.*[1]

When I appeared, my companions and even grown-ups would run to me in a crowd and clamor for a story from a fellow who scarcely understood what he had read. At times, along the road to Castelnuovo or in some field I would be surrounded by hundreds of people, anxious to hear what a poor child had to say. Apart from a good memory, I lacked any knowledge; but they seemed to think I was a great scholar in their midst. "In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king."[2]

In the wintertime, everyone wanted me in the stable[3] to tell stories. All sorts of people used to gather to spend five or even six hours of their evenings listening, motionless, to selections from *The Kings of France.* The poor speaker used to stand on a bench so that all could hear and see. These occasions were described as "listening to a sermon" since we would always begin and end the storytelling with a sign of the cross and a Hail Mary. 1826.[4]

When the weather was fine, especially on Sundays and feast days, a few strangers would come along to swell the

ranks. Things were getting a bit more serious now. The entertainment now extended to tricks I had picked up from acrobats and magicians I had watched in the marketplace[5] and at fairs. I used to watch them closely to get the hang of the tricks, then go home and practise till I had mastered the skill. You can imagine all the falls and tumbles and bumps and crashes I was always having! But would you believe that by the time I was eleven I could juggle, do midair somersaults and the swallow trick,[6] and walk on my hands. I could walk, jump, and even dance on the tightrope like a professional acrobat.

From the programme of one holiday in particular you can get an idea of our general routine.

At Becchi there was a field in which grew several trees. One of them, a pear tree that is still there, was very helpful to me then. I used to sling a rope from it to another tree some distance away. I had a table with a haversack on it, and on the ground a mat for the jumps. When I had everything set up and everyone was eager to marvel at my latest feats, I would invite them to recite the rosary and sing a hymn. Then standing on the chair, I preached to them or, better, repeated as much as I could remember from the explanation of the gospel I had heard in church that morning; or sometimes I recalled episodes from something I had heard or read. After the sermon there was a short prayer, and then the show began. At that point you would have seen, just as I am telling you, the preacher transformed into a professional acrobat.

I did the swallow trick and somersaults, walked on my hands, got myself out of a tied sack, swallowed coins and then produced them from someone's nose. I multiplied balls and eggs, changed water into wine, killed and chopped up a chicken and then brought it back to life again so that it crowed better than before. These were part of my stock in trade. I walked the tightrope like an ordinary path, jumped and danced on it, and hung by one foot or one hand, sometimes by two.

This went on for several hours. At the end of it I was tired. A short prayer brought proceedings to a close, and everyone went about his business. Those who cursed or engaged in bad talk or refused to join in the prayers were not allowed to watch the show.

At this point you might ask me: Going to fairs and markets, watching magicians, getting props for my shows — all these took money; where did I get it?

I had several ways. Any money that my mother or others gave me to buy some tidbit, little tips, gifts, all this I saved for this purpose. I was also quite clever at catching birds in cages, snares, and nets and with birdlime; I was very good at finding birds' nests. Whenever I had gathered enough of these, I knew where I could get a good price for them. Mushrooms, plants used for dyes, heather[7] were all another source of money for me.

Now you might ask me, Did my mother mind my wasting my time playing magician?

I assure you that my mother loved me dearly, and I had boundless trust in her. I would not take one step without her approval. She knew everything, saw everything, and let me do it. Indeed, if I needed something, she willingly came to my help. My companions and generally all the spectators gladly gave me what was necessary to provide them with those amusements.

Notes

1. *The Kings of France* and *Wretched Guerino* refer to Carolingian epic romances put into the vernacular by Andrea da Barberino in the fifteenth century. These stories were drawn from Tuscan or Franco-Venetian sources and were used as a wellspring for a number of popular novels.

The same is true of *Bertoldo,* a tall tale from the sixteenth-century Bolognese Giulio Cesare Croce. He portrayed a deformed but cunning peasant who wormed his way into favor with King Alboino and won his confidence. The author extended the adventures to Bertoldo's son Bertoldino.

2. Don Bosco quotes the proverb in Latin: *Monoculns rex in regno caecorum.*

3. For want of better accommodations, the stables served as community centers for the Piedmontese peasants in the winter months. Fuel was precious, and the body heat of the farm animals helped warm their masters. Sometimes the peasants even slept in the stables in the winter.

4. The text gives the date without explanation. At the beginning of the chapter, Don Bosco indicated that he was doing this already when he was ten. This would be the winter of 1825-1826. Perhaps he only meant to help his sons, reading these recollections, keep their chronological bearings.

5. At Castelnuovo, as in every town, the town square became an open marketplace one day a week. The farmers would set up booths, or just their carts, to sell their produce or livestock to one another and to the townsfolk. They would also buy necessary goods and exchange news and gossip. These weekly markets were natural targets for acrobats and other entertainers wandering from village to village. The weekly market remains customary in Castelnuovo today. In the larger cities one or more squares serve as daily markets not only for foodstuffs but also for leather goods, toys, clothing, electronic goods, etc.

6. The swallow trick consisted of grasping a pole set firmly into the ground, raising the body rigidly to a position horizontal to the ground, and then, legs apart, spinning around the pole. The opened legs were supposed to remind one of a swallow's tail.

7. Wayside herbs and flowers were long used to make household dyes. Synthetic dyes have now replaced them. Perhaps John used to collect madder *(rubia tinctorum}* for red coloring, mignonette *(reseda luteold)* or bedstraw *(galium veruni)* for shades of yellow, and woad *(isadis tinctorid)* for blue. Other flora common in the Monferrato region had their own useful qualities.

The word here translated "heather" is *treppio* in Don Bosco’s text. Even Ceria is not sure of its meaning since it is not to be found in Italian dictionaries. He guesses that Don Bosco meant it for the Piedmontese *trebi* or *terbi*, which would be *erica* in Italian, a kind of heather whose bristles are useful for making rough brushes such as those used to comb down horses

Chapter 4

A Providential Meeting

First communion • The mission sermons • Fr Calosso • School in Murialdo

I was eleven years old when I made my first holy communion.[1] I knew my catechism well. The minimum age for first communion was twelve years. Because we lived far from the parish church,[2] the parish priest did not know us, and my mother had to do almost all the religious instruction. She did not want me to get any older before my admission to that great act of our religion, so she took upon herself the task of preparing me as best she could. She sent me to catechism class every day of Lent. I passed my examination, and the date was fixed. It was the day on which all the children were to make their Easter duty.[3]

In the big crowd, it was impossible to avoid distractions. My mother coached me for days and brought me to confession three times during that Lent.[4]

"My dear John," she would say, "God is going to give you a wonderful gift. Make sure you prepare well for it. Go to confession and don't keep anything back. Tell all your sins to the priest, be sorry for them all, and promise God to do better in the future."[5] I promised all that. God alone knows whether I have been faithful to my resolution.

At home, she saw to it that I said my prayers and read good books; and she always came up with the advice which a diligent mother knows how to give her children.

On the morning of my first communion, my mother did not permit me to speak to anyone. She accompanied me to the altar and together we made our preparation and thanksgiving. These were led by Father Sismondi, the vicar forane,[6] in a loud voice, alternating responses with everyone.

It was my mother's wish for that day that I should refrain from manual work. Instead, she kept me occupied reading and praying. Amongst the many things that my mother repeated to me many times was this: "My dear son, this is a great day for you. I am convinced that God has really taken possession of your heart. Now promise him to be good as long as you live. Go to communion frequently in the future, but beware of sacrilege. Always be frank in confession, be obedient always, go willingly to catechism arid sermons. But for the love of God, avoid like the plague those who indulge in bad talk."

I treasured my mother's advice and tried to carry it out. I think that from that day on there was some improvement in my life, especially in matters of obedience and submission to others. It was not easy for me to be submissive because I liked to do things my way and follow my own childish whims rather than listen to those who gave me advice or told me what to do.

One thing that was a source of concern to me was that there was no church or chapel where I could sing and pray

with my companions. To hear a sermon or attend a catechism lesson in either Castelnuovo or the nearby village of Buttigliera[7] meant a round trip of six miles. That was why they came gladly to hear the acrobat's sermons.

That year (1826) there was a solemn mission in Buttigliera.[8] It gave me a chance to hear several sermons. The preachers were well known and drew people from everywhere. I went with many others. *We had* an instruction and a meditation in the evening, after which we were free to return home.

On one of these April evenings, as I was making my way home amid the crowd, one of those who walked along with us was Fr Calosso of Chieri,[9] a very devout priest. Although he was old and bent, he made the long walk to hear the missioners. He was the chaplain of Murialdo.[10] He noticed a capless, curly-headed lad amidst the others but walking in complete silence. He looked me over and then began to talk with me.

"Where are you from, my son? I gather you were at the mission?"

"Yes, Father, I went to hear the missioners' sermons."

"Now, what could you understand of it? I'm sure your mother could give you a better sermon, couldn't she?"

"Yes, my mother does give me fine instructions. But I like to hear the missioners as well. And I think I understand them."

"If you can remember anything from this evening's sermons, I'll give you two pence."

"Just tell me whether you wish to hear the first sermon, or the second."

"Just as you wish," he said, "as long as you tell me anything from it. Do you remember what the first sermon was about?"

"It was about the necessity of giving oneself to God in good time and not putting off one's conversion."

"And what was in the sermon?" the venerable old man asked, somewhat surprised.

"Oh, I remember quite well. If you wish I will recite it all." Without further ado, I launched into the preamble and went on to the three points. The preacher stressed that it was risky to put off conversion because one could run out of time, or one might lack the grace or the will to make the change. There, amidst the crowd, he let me rattle on for half an hour.[11]

Then came a flurry of questions from Father Calosso: "What's your name? Who are your family? How much schooling have you had?"

"My name is John Bosco. My father died when I was very young. My mother is a widow with a family of five[12]

to support. I've learned to read, and to write a little."

"You haven't studied Donate[13] or grammar, have you?"

"I don't know what they are, Father."

"Would you like to study?"

"Oh, indeed I would."

"What's stopping you?"

"My brother Anthony."

"And why doesn't Anthony want you to study?"

"Because he never liked school himself.[14] He says he doesn't want anyone else to waste time on books the way he did. But if I could only get to school, I would certainly study and not waste time."

"Why do you want to study?"

"I'd like to become a priest."

"And why do you want to become a priest?"

"I'd like to attract my companions, talk to them, and teach them our religion. They're not bad, but they become bad because they have no one to guide them."

These bold words impressed the holy priest. He never took his eyes off me while I was speaking. When our ways parted, he left me with these words: "Cheer up now. I'll keep you and your schooling in mind. Come to see me on Sunday with your mother. We'll arrange something."

The following Sunday my mother and I went along to see him. He undertook to take me for one lesson a day. To keep Anthony happy I was to spend the rest of the day helping him in the fields.

He was pleased enough with the scheme because my classes would not start till the autumn, when the rush of field work would be over.

I put myself completely into Fr Calosso's hands. He had become chaplain at Murialdo only a few months

before.[15] I bared my soul to him. Every word, thought, and act I revealed to him promptly. This pleased him because it made it possible for him to have an influence on both my spiritual and temporal welfare.

It was then that I came to realise what it was to have a regular spiritual director, a faithful friend of one's soul. I had not had one up till then. Amongst other things he forbade a penance I used to practise; he deemed it unsuited to my age and circumstances. He encouraged frequent confession and communion. He taught me how to make a short daily meditation, or more accurately, a spiritual reading. I spent all the time I could with him; I stayed with him on feast days. I went to serve his Mass during the week when I could. From then on I began to savour[16] the spiritual life; up to then I had acted in a purely mechanical way, not knowing the reasons.

In mid-September, 1 began a regular study of Italian grammar, and soon I was able to write fairly good compositions. At Christmas I went on to study Latin. By Easter I was attempting Italian-Latin and Latin-Italian translations. All this time I persevered with my usual acrobatics in the field, or in the barn during the winter. Everything my teacher said or did —his every word, I could say —provided edifying material for my audiences.

Just as I was patting myself on the back because everything was going so well, a new trial came; a heavy blow fell that shattered my hopes.

Notes

1. Until the time of Pope Pius X (1903-1914), children ordinarily did not receive first communion until they were at least twelve years old. Piedmontese pastors were strict about admission to the sacraments. This strictness was partly the result of the rigorism that had greatly affected Piedmontese morality and piety in the eighteenth century (see chapter 19, note 7 and comment, and chapter 27).

John may have been allowed to make his first communion a little earlier than most children partly to help alleviate the family's grief over the recent death of Grandmother Margaret Zucca Bosco, February n, 1826, when John was ten (Stella, LW, pp. 10-11).

Holy communion is the reception of the sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood, the Holy Eucharist (see I Corinthians 11:23-26; Mark 14:22-25; John 6:51-58).

2. The parish church was in Castelnuovo, three miles away.

3. First communion was usually celebrated at the beginning of Holy Week or just after Easter. In 1826, Easter fell on March 26. A Catholic must receive the Eucharist at least once during the Easter season; this is his Easter duty (see chapter 40, note 7).

4. During the diocesan process for Don Bosco's canonization, Father Julius Barberis testified that Mama Margaret had told him that it was John's idea to go to confession three times during Lent, the forty-day period of penance in preparation for

Easter.

5. Undoubtedly Mama Margaret instilled these principles into young John. But in reading this instruction, as well as the following one, which Don Bosco recorded almost fifty years later, we must also remember that the religious educator is speaking to his readers.

6. The pastor's name actually was Joseph Sismondo. Apparently little John scarcely knew him. He died October 3, 1826. Besides being pastor at Castelnuovo, he was also vicar forane, or rural dean, exercising jurisdiction in certain delegated matters on behalf of the archbishop (cf. Code of Canon Law, 553-55)-

7. Buttigliera is about two miles northwest of Becchi.

8. The occasion of the mission was a jubilee. The Popes ordinarily proclaim a jubilee with special pilgrimages and indulgences every twenty-five years, as Paul VI did most recently in 1975. The year 1825 was an ordinary Holy Year in Rome; the next year Pope Leo XII extended the jubilee to the whole world. In the archdiocese of Turin, Archbishop Chiaveroti fixed the time for gaining the indulgence as March 12 to September 12, 1826. Don Bosco remembered the Buttigliera mission as having been organized to help the people of the area prepare for the jubilee year indulgence, which required repentance and confession, communion, and prayer.

Sometimes the Pope announces a special jubilee, such as the one that John Paul II proclaimed for 1983, the "Holy Year of Redemption."

To celebrate his election as Pope on March 31, 1829, and to implore God's assistance, Pius VIII declared such an extraordinary jubilee. Archbishop Chiaveroti set the dates November 8-22 for gaining the indulgence. There was a preparatory triduum of sermons (i.e. a parish mission) at Buttigliera from Thursday, November 5, to Saturday, November 7.

In Don Bosco's *Memoirs* and in Lemoyne's reconstruction of events (BM I, 131-163), there are some obvious errors of fact and other difficulties. Evidently Don Bosco, writing more than forty years after the events, had forgotten about the special jubilee of Pius VIII and assumed that the occasion was the ordinary jubilee year of 1825-1826. Such an explanation, and situating the encounter with Father Calosso on November 5, 1829, rather than in April 1826, immediately clarifies these errors and difficulties.

Although Buttigliera was not in the commune of Castelnuovo, and hence not in the Boscos' and Father Calosso's parish, the renown of the preachers and the special occasion apparently attracted many people from outside the parish, as Don Bosco writes.

9. Father John Melchior Calosso was born in Chieri on January 23, 1760 (thus both Lemoyne and Stella are in error about his age); he was probably ordained in 1782 (the seminary records are incomplete, as are the records of his career). He was pastor at Bruino from at least 1791 to 1813. His brother Charles Vincent was also a priest of the archdiocese.

10. Morialdo was not a parish but only a chaplaincy or a "mission" of Castelnuovo. There had been a vacancy for some time at the Morialdo chapel before Father Calosso's assignment. Old or infirm priests often received such appointments so that they might care for the nearby families and sometimes save them a long walk to their more distant parish churches (there were restrictions on the kinds of services permitted in such chapels). Since Father Calosso was sixty-nine years old when he was sent to Morialdo, it was a suitable duty for him. A local gentleman living in Turin had recently endowed the chapel with a stipend of eight hundred lire a year. Such arrangements were quite common in Piedmont, where, compared to our experience, there were great numbers of priests.

11. If the date that Don Bosco gave (April 1826) were correct, his feat of memory would truly be phenomenal. He was still

only ten years old! As already noted, the encounter actually took place three and a half years later, when he was fourteen. Nevertheless, his recollection was extraordinary.

One might ask how John was able to remember these sermons so well. He did have a great gift in his memory, as he has already recounted and as he will recount further. In this particular case of the sermons, however, there may have been an additional factor. From his description of the encounter, it is obvious that neither his mother nor any other member of the family was with him; they were not attending the mission, probably because of their work at home. Young John may very well have been the family representative at the triduum, entrusted because of his memory as well as his piety with remembering as much as he could from the sermons and repeating them at home for the sake of the rest of the family so that they, too, would be well prepared for the jubilee indulgence. Thus John was more than ready for the challenge of unsuspecting Father Calosso —who, moreover, could easily have taken him for a younger boy since John was small of stature.

12. He must be counting Grandmother Bosco besides the three boys and their mother.

13. The term *Donato* comes from Aelius Donatus, a fourth-century exponent of classical Latin grammar. Books of Latin grammar in Don Bosco's times were referred to by this title.

John's unfamiliarity with Italian grammar, as well as Latin grammar, was normal. Not only was his previous schooling very limited, but his native tongue was Piedmontese, not Italian. Piedmontese remained his ordinary daily language until the process of Italian unification was substantially completed. In 1860, Don Bosco made the use of Italian mandatory at the Oratory; nonetheless, Piedmontese continued in use for some time (BM VI, 277).

Almost every Italian spoke a dialect. "In most of Italy," writes Martin Clark, "Italian, like Latin, was dead language," the exceptions being Rome and parts of Tuscany. One estimate has it that in 1870 only 2.5 percent of Italians spoke Italian. Even the upper classes —including King Victor Emmanuel II in his cabinet meetings —spoke dialect (in Piedmont the nobility often spoke French). Such linguistic variety was, of course, an obstacle to political unity, to trade, and to education, and it contributed to Italians' willingness to emigrate by the hundreds of thousands. (Martin Clark. *Modern Italy, 1871-1982* [New York: Longman, 1984], p. 35) On Don Bosco's use of Piedmontese, see Natale Cerrato *Car ij me fieuj: miei cari fylioli* (Rome: LAS, 1982).

14. This is the only indication that Anthony had any formal schooling. He was not completely illiterate, for he could sign his name on documents. Francis Bosco had probably seen to it that Anthony learned to read and write a little, maybe from a neighbor (see chapter i, note 15). Joseph Bosco, on the other hand, had to sign with a cross; he was only four when Francis died, and apparently no one encouraged him to acquire even minimal literacy.

15. If Father Calosso was the curate of the chapel closest to Becchi, how could John have met him only some months after his arrival? Because Father Calosso was appointed chaplain in Morialdo in September 1829 (Stella, LW, p. 17), not "only a few months before" April 1826, as Don Bosco remembered it, in conjunction with his faulty remembrance of the jubilee year; and because John was not at Becchi in September 1829; he was nearing the end of his two-and-a-half-year stay with the Moglia family (see chapter 5, comment). He returned to Becchi only after the harvest, i.e. at the beginning of November—just in time for the mission at Buttigliera, as Providence would have it.

16. The reader should not miss the strength of this word, which has slipped casually from Don Bosco's pen. To "savor" is much more than to "know" or to "practice." If John indeed "savored" the spiritual life at age fifteen, this speaks volumes about Father Calosso's direction of his soul and about John himself.

Chapter 5

Hopes Dashed

School work and farmwork •News good and bad •Death of Fr Calosso

During the winter, when there was no pressure of work, Anthony was reasonable enough about the time I gave to my books. When spring[1] came, however, and work was more pressing, he began to grumble that he was left to tackle all the chores while I was wasting my time and acting the gentleman. After some lively exchanges involving Anthony, my mother, and me, it was decided in the interest of family peace that I should go to school in the morning and work in the fields in the afternoon. But how could I study? How could I manage the translations?

Take note. The walk to and from school afforded me some time to study. When I got home I would take the hoe in one hand and my grammar in the other, and along the way I would study "When *qui, quae, quod* you'd render"[2] until I reached the place of work. Then glancing longingly at the grammar, I would put it in a corner and begin hoeing, weeding, or gathering greens according to the need.

When there was a rest break, I went off on my own to tudy, a book in one hand, a hunk of bread in the other. I lid the same thing on my way home. Written work had to De done in short periods snatched at mealtimes or in time borrowed from sleep.

Despite all my work and good will, Anthony still was not happy. One day he announced very decisively, first to my mother and then to my brother Joseph, that he could stand it no more. "I've had it up to here," he blustered. "I've had my fill of this grammar business. Look at me," he said, "I've grown big and strong without ever setting eyes on such books."

"That's nonsense!" Carried away by blind rage, I retorted in a way I should not have:[3] "Our donkey is bigger and stronger than you are, and he never went to school either. Do you want to be like him?" This so angered him that only speed saved me from a volley of blows and smacks.

My mother was heartbroken, I was in tears myself, and the chaplain was upset too. In fact when that worthy minister of God got to know how matters stood in our family, he took me aside one day and said, "Johnny, you've put your faith in me, and I won't let you down. Leave that troublesome brother of yours and come and live in the presbytery. I'll take care of you."[4]

My mother was elated when I told her of this generous offer. In April I moved into the priest's house, though I returned home to sleep.[5]

No one can imagine how supremely happy I was. I idolised Fr Calosso, loved him as if he were my father, prayed for him, and tried to help him in every way I could. My greatest pleasure was to work for him. I would

have died for him. I made more progress in one day with the good priest than I would have made in a week at home. That man of God lavished affection on me, and he would often say, "Don't worry about the future. As long as I'm alive I'll see that you want for nothing. And I'll make provision for you after my death."

Things were going unbelievably well for me. I could say my cup of happiness was full. There was nothing else I could wish for. Then a fresh disaster blighted all my hopes.

One morning in April 1828,[6] Fr Calosso sent me home on an errand. I had only just made it to the house when a messenger dashed in at my heels. He said I was to get back to Fr Calosso as fast as I could. He was very ill and wanted to see me. I did not run; I flew. I found my benefactor in bed suffering from a stroke and unable to speak. He recognised me and tried to talk but no words came. He gave me the key to his money and made signs that I was not to give it to anyone. After two days of suffering, Fr Calosso gave up his soul to God. His death shattered my dreams. I have always prayed for him, and as long as I live I shall remember my outstanding benefactor every day that dawns. When Fr Calosso's heirs turned up, I handed over to them the key and everything else.[7]

Notes

1. By Don Bosco's reckoning, this would be the spring of 1827. In fact, it was 1830. In the spring of 1827, he was staying with relatives at the Campora farm in Serra di Buttigliera (see note 4).

2. John used such memory aids as pieces of doggerel to imprint on his brain how the Latin relative pronoun agrees with its antecedent:

Qui, quae, quod, qualora e mcsso Dopo il nome antecedente, D'accordarglisi consente Sol nel numero e nel sesso. When *qui, quae, quod* you'd render: With regard to antecedent, Agree in case it really needn't — Only in number and gender.

3. From Don Bosco's confession we can gauge how much he had to discipline his impetuous nature to make himself a model of meekness. It reminds us of Saint Francis de Sales, who was successful in a similar struggle.

In a retreat sermon for Salesians, Don Bosco imagined someone envying him:

You may remark, "Sure, it's nice for Don Bosco to say, 'Patience,

patience!' But...."

Do you think that it is easy for me to keep calm when, after

entrusting an important or urgent task to someone, I find that

task not done or hadly botched? Believe me, sometimes my blood

boils and I am about to burst. (BM XII, 330)

4. Anthony's attitude had already caused Mama Margaret to send John away from home twice. The first time apparently was during the winter of 1826-1827, and Anthony's hostility was the reason. Margaret sent the boy to stay with relatives of her husband who were tenants at the Campora farm in Serra di Buttigliera. Serra, a district of Buttigliera, is located about a half mile west of Becchi and had a population then of about five hundred (Molineris, p. 144). Lemoyne gives this episode passing mention (BM I, 143-144). It is unclear how long John stayed there.

The second occasion put him much farther from his stepbrother. Margaret sent him to look for a job as a farmhand with the Moglia family outside Moncucco, about three miles northwest of Castelnuovo (six miles from Becchi). He stayed there from February 1827 to November 1829. See the comment following the notes for further information.

5. This was 1830, after John had been away for two and a half years, returned, and been studying with Father Calosso since the previous November. Although the division of Francis Bosco's property probably took place sometime in 1830, quite possibly with the chaplain's help, Anthony's attitude was not improving; rather the opposite.

6. Father Calosso died November 21, 1830. Thus John spent one year studying with his dear friend and spiritual guide, from November 1829 to November 1830. See Desramaut, *LesMem,* pp. 225, 231; and Molineris, pp. 152-162.

7. This simple expression implies a great deal more than it says. This "everything" included all that the key gave access to; there were 6000 lire in that box (2,400,000 lire in 1985 value, by Teresio Bosco's reckoning, or US $16,000). When one considers that the secondary school which John attended in Chieri from 1831 to 1835 charged an annual tuition of 12 lire, one sees immediately that Father Calosso had left a veritable fortune to the son of poor Mama Margaret. The simple way in which Don Bosco describes it is an impressive understatement, which probably should be connected to a dream that he had around this time: see the next chapter and the comment on the dream at the end of it.

Comment on John's Stay at the Moglia Farm

Why did Don Bosco omit such a significant episode? Ceria speculates that he was just reluctant to make family problems public, and especially to give anyone any grounds to criticize his mother. In fact, she has been severely criticized for that decision. Quite simply put, Mama Margaret was caught in a dilemma. She did the best she could. The last thing she wanted to do was to interrupt John's schooling. But Anthony's attitude — together with John's quick temper —meant that John would have been unsafe at home.

Who can say how much that separation cost John? But his love for his mother, in Ceria's opinion, prompted him to gloss over the painful experience, though apparently some details of it were known. Stella (LW, p. 16, n. 30) is much less sure why Don Bosco omitted the Moglia episode from his memoirs. Certainly it was not from any lack of fondness for those good people. In later years he faithfully returned to visit them; when he began the custom of the fall outings, he used to bring the oratory boys to visit them too.

In connection with this period of John's life, Lemoyne writes,

John had a great mind and heart: he was obedient through virtue, not by nature. The poorest man on earth feels like a lord in his own home. . . . God would deal with John as he had dealt with Moses. . . . God likewise would prepare John through a long practice of heroic humility. He, too, would have to leave home and for about two years be forced to work elsewhere as a hired hand. How could he help not feeling keenly this humiliation? (BM I, 142)

As we have noted, Don Bosco is silent about his departure from Becchi as a youth. Various scholars, including Lemoyne, Klein and Valentini, and Desramaut, have reconstructed events thus:

Late in 1826 or early in 1827, John had to discontinue his classes at Capriglio. He lived and worked for a short while with relatives on the Bosco side of the family at the Campora farm in Serra di Buttigliera. He was not really needed there and was a financial burden. John probably returned home briefly, but by February 1827 the tension between Anthony and John was proving too much; Mama Margaret had to send him farther afield. He was only eleven years old. (Stella, LW, pp. 13-17; T. Bosco, SP, pp. 42-45)

John was taken into the Moglia household near Moncucco; they were acquaintances of the Occhienas. It was still winter, two months before farm laborers would normally be hired, so John's arriving on his own met with some initial difficulty, but Louis Moglia finally agreed to take him in. He eventually became a much appreciated member of the household, but of course there could be no formal schooling; he was able to get some informal lessons from the local pastor, Father Francis Cottino, and from the local schoolmaster, Father Nicholas Moglia, his host's brother.

The Moglia family still owns that farm and cherishes the memory of John's stay with them. They receive Salesian visitors most graciously, bringing out their own wine and proudly observing that Don Bosco himself once tended some of the vines that produced it.

We may reasonably conjecture the following scenario:

1. Anthony became a real obstacle to John's education in the years 1825-1827, when Anthony was between seventeen and nineteen years old.

2. Margaret, with the backing of her sister Marianne and her brother Michael, began to plan the division of Francis Bosco's estate among his three sons. This would set Anthony up on his own and free John. But she had to wait until Anthony reached his legal majority in 1829.

3. In the meantime, Margaret sent John away without telling him the plan. Uncle Michael went to Moncucco to bring him home in November 1829, when it was finally possible to confront Anthony and settle the estate with him. (See chapter 6, note 9, for further details on the division.)

In any case, around the feast of All Saints in 1829, Michael Occhiena (1795-1867) came to get John, who returned to Becchi just in time for the Holy Year triduum at Buttigliera.

For further details of this period see Molineris, pp. 143-152; T. Bosco, BN, pp. 41-45; Stella, LW, pp. 13-17.

Desramaut (p. 130) and Giraudo and Biancardi (pp. 67-68) hold that John stayed with the Moglias only a year and a half, from February 1828.

Chapter 6

School at Castelnuovo

Fr. Caffasso • Doubts • Dividing

our inheritance • School at Castelnuovo • Music; the tailor

That year Divine Providence brought a new benefactor into my life. He was Fr Joseph Caffasso[1] of Castelnuovo d'Asti.

It was the second Sunday of October, 1827[2], and the people of Murialdo were celebrating their patronal feast, the Motherhood of Mary. There was a great air of activity about the place; some were preparing the church, others engaged in family chores; some were playing games, others looking on.

One person I noticed was taking no part in the festivities. He was a slightly-built, bright-eyed cleric, kindly and pure in appearance. He was leaning against the church door. Though I was only twelve years old,[3] I was struck by his appearance and felt I would like to meet him. I went over and spoke to him.

"Father," I said, "would you care to see what's going on at our feast? I'd like to act as your guide."

He kindly beckoned me closer. He asked me how old I was, what studies I had done, if I had made my first communion, how often I went to confession, where I went to catechism, and so on. I was spellbound by his manner of speaking and answered all his questions without hesitation. To show my gratitude for his friendliness, I once more offered to show him round the various entertainments and novelties.

"My dear friend," he replied, "the entertainments of a priest are church ceremonies. The more devoutly they are celebrated, the more successful they are. Our pastimes are the practices of religion. These are ever new and therefore should be diligently attended. I'm only waiting for the church to open so I can go in."

I plucked up my courage to add to the discussion. "But Father," I suggested, "though what you say is true, there's a time for everything, a time to pray and a time to play."[4]

He smiled. But I have never forgotten his parting words, which were his plan of action for his whole life: "A cleric gives himself to the Lord. Nothing in the world must be more important to him than the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls."

I was struck with admiration and longed to know the name of the cleric whose words and bearing so breathed the

spirit of the Lord. I learned that he was the seminarian Joseph Caffasso, a student in his 1st year of theology. I already knew him by reputation as a model of virtue.

Fr. Calosso's death was a great loss to me.[5] I wept inconsolably over my dead benefactor. I thought of him in my waking hours and dreamt of him when I was asleep. It affected me so badly that my mother feared for my health. She sent me for a while to my grandfather in Capriglio.[6]

At this time I had another dream. In it I was sorely reproached for having put my hope in men and not in our good heavenly Father.[7]

Meanwhile I thought a great deal about how to go ahead with my studies. I would see good priests working at their sacred ministry, but I could not strike up a close relationship with them. Often I would meet on the road our parish priest or his curate.[8] I would greet them at a distance and bow to them as they passed. In their distant and courteous manner, they would return my greeting and go on their way. Often, I used to cry and say to myself and even to others, "If I were a priest, I would act differently. I would approach the children, say some kind words to them, and give them good advice. How happy I would be if I could talk with my parish priest as I used to talk with Fr. Calosso. Why shouldn't it be so?"

My mother, seeing how upset I was because of the obstacles in the way of my studies, and not having any hope of getting the consent of Anthony, who was now over twenty, thought about dividing our inheritance. There were serious difficulties, however, since Joseph and I were minors. Division of the property would be a complicated and costly business. Nevertheless she went ahead. My grandmother had died some years previously,[9] so our family now consisted of my mother, Joseph, who did not want to be separated from me [and me].[10]

This division took a load off my mind and left me completely free to go ahead with my studies. However, it took some months to complete all the formalities of the law. It was around Christmas before I was able to enroll at the elementary school in Castelnuovo.[11] It was 1828, and I was thirteen years old.[12]

Since I had done my studies privately and was starting a public school with a new teacher, I faced some drawbacks. Practically, I had to begin my Italian grammar all over before I could start studying Latin.

For some time, I walked from home to school every day. But that was nearly impossible during the harsh winter; I had to make four trips back and forth, covering twelve and a half miles daily. I found lodgings with an upright man, a tailor, John Roberta;[13] he had a taste for singing, especially plainchant.[14] Since I had a good voice, I took up music wholeheartedly. In a few months, I could take the stage to accompany him with fair success.

Eager to use my free time, I took up tailoring. Before long I was able to make buttonholes and hems and sew simple and double seams. Later I learned how to cut out underwear, waistcoats, trousers, and coats. I like to think I became a master tailor.[15]

In fact my landlord, seeing how I had taken to the trade, made me a good offer to get me to stay with him and carry on the business. I had other ambitions, however. I wanted to pursue my studies. While I tried my hand to keep myself busy, I never lost sight of my main objective.[16]

That year some of my companions tried to tempt me into danger; they wanted to take me gambling during schooltime. When I said I had no money, they suggested stealing it from my landlord or even my mother. One of them, pressuring me, said, "My dear chap, it's time you woke up. You must learn to live in the world. Putting your

head in a sack gets you nowhere. Just get the money and you can have the same fun as the rest of us."

I well remember what my reply was: "I fail to understand what you're getting at. Am I to believe you're urging me to play truant and steal? But in your daily prayers, don't you say, 'The seventh commandment, You shall not steal'? Anyone who steals is a thief, and thieves come to a bad end. Besides, my mother loves me dearly, and if I need money for lawful purposes she gives it to me. I've never done anything without her permission, and I have no intention of starting to disobey her now. If your pals are doing that, they're evil. And if they're not doing it but recommending it to others, they're scoundrels."[17]

News of this episode got to the ears of my other companions, and no one else proposed to me anything wrong. My teacher heard of it as well and from then on was very kind to me. Even many of the boys' relatives heard of it and urged their sons to associate with me. I was therefore in a position to choose my friends, who loved me and would listen to me like the boys of Murialdo.

Things were going well for me. But I was in for another upset. My teacher, Fr Virano,[18] was made parish priest of Mondonio[19] in the diocese of Asti. In April i83O[20] our beloved teacher went to take up his appointment. The man who replaced him could not keep order. In fact he almost scattered to the wind all that Fr. Virano had taught in the preceding months.[21]

Notes

1. Apparently Don Bosco means the year that he spent with Father Calosso, 1827-1828 according to his memory. Don Bosco always spelled Father Cafasso's name with two /s.

2. In October 1827 Cafasso was sixteen, going on seventeen, and was in his second year of philosophy in the archdiocesan seminary. He began his theological studies in November 1828 and was part of the first group of students to study at Chieri when Archbishop Chiaveroti opened the seminary there in 1829. As we have seen, Father Calosso actually died in November 1830, by which time Cafasso was studying theology; he was ordained in 1833, at the age of twenty-two, after being dispensed from the impediment of age.

In first drafting his *Memoirs* Don Bosco did not recount his meeting with seminarian Cafasso. On revising what he had written, he added a brief marginal note. He did not write out the whole story, for it had already been written elsewhere. He obviously had before him a copy of his *Rimembranza storico-funebre dei giovani dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales verso il sacerdote Caffasso Giuseppe, loro insigne benefattore* [A Eulogy of the Boys of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales for Their Outstanding Benefactor, Father Joseph Cafasso] (Turin: Paravia, 1860). From this book he copied the opening words of this section of the memoirs, "It was the second Sunday of October, 1827, and the people of Murialdo were celebrating," adding "etc." and then, "See the *Rimembranza di D. Caffasso,* pp. 18-20." In turn, Father Berto copied into his draft the passage indicated, ending at the words "I knew him by reputation as a model of virtue."

For a biographical sketch of Father Cafasso, see the comment at the end of the notes.

3. If Don Bosco has remembered correctly the occasion of his first meeting with his future mentor, viz. the second Sunday in October, the meeting is unlikely to have occurred before 1830, when Cafasso was, in fact, about to begin his third year of theological studies. (See Desramaut, *LesMem,* pp. 126-130.) John would have been fifteen years old; such an age better fits his behavior here. The meeting could have occurred slightly earlier, possibly June 29 or July 26, 1830 (the feasts of Saints Peter and Paul and of Saint Anne).

4. Here we have a hint of Don Bosco's future educational system. He gave another hint earlier when he told Father Calosso

that many of his companions were not bad boys but were heading for trouble because they had nobody to look after them. He will add to this in a moment how he planned to relate to boys if he were to reach the priesthood.

5. Don Bosco abruptly resumes the narrative where he left it at the end of the preceding chapter.

6. His widowed maternal grandfather, Melchior Mark Occhiena (1752-1844); apparently John got his middle name from him. Stella (LW, p. 19) observes that John was in that delicate stage called adolescence; he was fifteen, and "his dreams of future goals were shrouded in all the vaporous contours of deep emotion. . . . His adolescent idealism might well have regarded [his relationship with Father Calosso] as a sure sign of his own approach to the altar." Now those dreams had been shattered brutally, and John seemed to have no future except on the farm.

7. The reproach in this second dream suggests that Father Calosso's death had seared John's sensitive heart too much for his spiritual good.

Lemoyne identifies this dream with one related to him by Joseph Turco (BM I, 182-183). Turco was one of John's schoolmates in Castelnuovo, and his family were neighbors of the Boscos in Sussambrino (see note 9, below). In this dream, John told this countryman of his, a great Lady had come toward him leading a large flock of sheep. "Look, dear John," she said, "I entrust this entire flock to you."

Frightened, John answered, "But how can I take care of so many sheep and lambs? Where shall I find pastures for them to graze on?"

The Lady replied, "Do not worry. I will help you."

Lemoyne comments: "This episode corroborates a brief and simple statement in his memoirs: 'At the age of 16 I had another dream.'" In fact, Don Bosco's exact words were, "At this time I had another dream," without giving his age but putting it during his stay at Capriglio (November-December 1830?). The dream described by Turco contains no reproach. So it is probably not the one to which Don Bosco refers here. It resembles the one that will be described in chapter 16, note 2.

The wording and the link with John's grief suggest that this reproachful dream could have occurred between the death of Father Calosso and the day when he simply surrendered the key to the money box to the old priest's relatives. Given the probable interval between the two events and the nature of the dream, this seems more likely than during his stay at Capriglio.

For an exploration of this dream's impact on John, see the comment on it at the end of the notes.

8. The pastor of Castelnuovo was Father Bartholomew Dassano, and his assistant was Father Emmanuel Virano, whom Don Bosco will soon introduce as his teacher.

9. Molineris (pp. 164-167) suggests circumstances and dates along the following lines:

By mentioning his grandmother's death here (1830), Don Bosco hints that the division may have been necessary because her moderating authority was gone. But, as we already noted (chapter 4, note i), she had died on February n, 1826, more than four years earlier. So Margaret's timing must have been based on other motives.

It seems likely that Margaret had decided by late 1829 (see chapter 5, comment) to exert her maternal authority and had

enlisted the help of the new chaplain, Father Calosso, and her brother Michael. Anthony, now of legal age, remained so hostile to John's studies that a division of the inheritance of Francis Bosco appeared to be the only solution. A basic agreement with Anthony was reached so that John was able to return home from the Moglia farm, and he was to go to school in Castelnuovo right away.

The problem with Molineris's theory is that the actual division and John's Castelnuovo schooling did not occur until a year later, during which time John met Father Calosso, was tutored by him, and was still harassed by Anthony.

Perhaps Margaret made her decision while John was still living with Father Calosso. Almost certainly she had the chaplain's help and that of some relatives (Stella, LW, p. 21). After Father Calosso's death, she went ahead with it.

In late 1830, Anthony was twenty-two and preparing for his marriage to Anna Rosso of Castelnuovo, which took place on March 22, 1831. Anthony's approaching marriage offered a good occasion for settling any remaining points of contention; he seems to have been amenable to it, especially since Margaret was more than generous in his regard — she gave him her own share, and she and John went to live with Joseph.

Joseph, now eighteen, had changed his tenant's contract and moved to a new tenancy at Sussambrino, less than two miles south of Castelnuovo. For the time being, Anthony remained in the old house at Becchi, where he could look after the little bits of property that were Joseph's and John's shares.

There is some question about just when Joseph, Margaret, and John moved. The normal time for changing farm contracts was after the harvest in November. One then had four or five months to prepare for the new farm year. Thus Stella (LW, p. 22) supposes that Joseph moved in October 1831. That eliminates John's four-times-daily walk to and from Becchi (which he mentions a couple of paragraphs farther on in his narration) but creates a problem with the summer vacation that he is supposed to have spent at Sussambrino after school closed in Castelnuovo (BM I, 177— 178). And are we to suppose that Joseph went back and forth from Becchi to Sussambrino every day?

If the division of the property had been in the works for some time, Joseph would have been prepared to move as soon as the division was formalized. He might well have waited till March, after his stepbrother's wedding and around the time when he would be needed at Sussambrino. All that we can be fairly sure of is that the move occurred during the winter of 1830-1831.

This means that sometime after John began going to school at Castelnuovo, his home would have been at Sussambrino, nearer to school than was Becchi. The distance Don Bosco says he had to walk daily to and from Castelnuovo would apply, of course, only until Joseph and Margaret had moved. But John's boarding arrangement must have been worked out long before then.

For more information on the various Becchi households, see Stella, LW, p. 22, n. 42, which provides references to Molineris's studies.

10. Don Bosco left out "and me," which would conclude his thought here.

11. The school at Castelnuovo was one of those set up after King Charles Felix decreed that every commune should have an elementary school (the law of 1822).

12. The chronological error continues here. Don Bosco's original draft had "1829," and in a later copy he corrected this to "1828." Actually it was December 1830, and John was fifteen. See Desramaut, *LesMem,* p.231. His schoolmates would have been lads of ten or eleven (Stella, LW, p. 22) —a fact that also helps us to understand John's moral ascendancy over them, though it is certainly not the only reason for it.

13. Uncle Michael Occhiena helped John with the arrangements. At first John used Roberto's house as a base for his midday meal, which he brought with him each day. On cold and stormy days, he slept over (perhaps without supper). Finally he became a full-time boarder. For a reasonable sum (payable in grain and wine, as well as in cash), Roberto provided John with meals and a place to sleep —a cubbyhole under the stairs. Mama Margaret brought John a supply of bread each week.

14. Plainchant or plainsong is the monodic and rhythmically free music of the Roman liturgy, also called Gregorian chant.

15. Don Bosco obviously uses the term jokingly, having in mind the master tailors he had in his own technical schools by the 1870s.

16. Later on John also got his mother's permission to apprentice at Evasio Savio's blacksmith shop a couple of hours a day. (This Savio was no relation to the blacksmith Charles Savio, Dominic's father.) John's quick mind left him with plenty of free time, and he needed extra money.

17. Don Bosco constantly exhorted his boys to choose good companions. His mother advised him on the same subject. Choosing good companions is a key element of the Preventive System.

18. One teacher took the three lowest classes together in one classroom (a total of perhaps thirty boys). This teacher was the curate Father Emmanuel Virano. Evidently he was a good teacher and could keep discipline.

19. Mondonio is a hamlet less than two miles east of Castelnuovo. It was later to be the home of Saint Dominic Savio, Don Bosco's most famous pupil. The Savios moved there in November 1852. One day in October 1854, Dominic walked to Becchi with his father to introduce himself to Don Bosco and to seek admission to the Oratory as a boarding student. The boy quickly became a leader among his peers, but after two years his health began to break down. He returned home at the beginning of March 1857 and died there a few days later, possibly of pleurisy (Michele Molineris, *Nuova vita di Domenico Savio* [Castelnuovo Don Bosco, 1974], pp. 268-270). After his cause of canonization was introduced, the Salesians brought his remains from Mondonio to the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, where they are venerated today.

20. In fact, it was 1831.

21. John does not name the man who took Father Virano's place; it was Father Nicholas Moglia, who was seventy-five years old. John did not rate him highly as a teacher. Apparently Father Moglia did not think that anything good could come out of Becchi. He did not like John. When the lad handed in a well-done exercise, Father Moglia would insist that it was not John's own work. Father Nicholas was related to the Moglias of Moncucco and knew well enough who John was, but for some reason he regarded him as just a country bumpkin (see chapter 5, comment).

Comment on Saint Joseph Cafasso

Joseph Cafasso was born in Castelnuovo on January 15, 1811, of a humble family. He studied there and in Chieri, just as John Bosco would do. From his youth he was noted for his piety. Following his ordination, Father Cafasso went to Turin for further studies. He quickly became disenchanted with the Jansenistic rigorism of the seminary there (see chapter 27), and of the University of Turin, whose theology department was closely allied with the seminary.

So Father Cafasso took up his studies in the pastoral program that Father Louis Guala had organized at the Convitto Ecclesiastico (chapter 27). He distinguished himself there and, upon completing the program in 1836, joined its staff,

specializing in moral theology.

Father Cafasso, a tiny and slightly deformed man, was nonetheless a majestic figure of strong voice, serene disposition, and large heart. He soon became a renowned preacher and confessor, admired for simplicity and moderation; he was a leader in Piedmont's long fight against Jansenism.

Upon Father Guala's death in 1848, Father Cafasso succeeded him as rector of the Convitto. Whether as teacher or as superior, he showed that same care for young priests that so impressed Don Bosco. Thus Father Cafasso had a profound and long-lasting effect on a major portion of Piedmont's clergy.

More noticeable to the general public was his singular ministry in the prisons, especially for the condemned. He prepared over sixty men to die on the gallows and touched every one of them sufficiently to bring him to the sacraments.

Father Cafasso guided and assisted financially the charitable works of many good people besides Don Bosco. Much of this invaluable help Don Bosco will describe in its place.

Father Cafasso died on June 23, 1860. In November and December of that year Don Bosco published his *Eulogy* in the *Catholic Readings,* changing the title to *Biography of Father Joseph Cafasso as Recorded in Two Funeral Homilies.*

Father Cafasso was canonized in 1947. To this day he is known as "the pearl of the Piedmontese clergy." There are no biographies in English except the one in Butler's *Lives* (II, 628-631) and a translation of Don Bosco's eulogies, *The Life of St. Joseph Cafasso,* trans. Patrick O'Connell (Rockford, IL: TAN, 1983). Salesians might be interested in Eugenio Valentini's *San Giuseppe Cafasso: memorie pubblicate nel 1860 da San Giovanni Bosco* (Turin: SEI, 1960).

Comment on John's Dream in 1830

After so many frustrations, for one good year, everything had come right for John. The tense situation with Anthony was gone. His studies were finally progressing. Not only that, but there was Father Calosso's promise that the money needed for future studies would be taken care of. Most of all, for the first time John had as a guide a good and holy priest who fully understood his vocational ideal and who had years of living experience of the priesthood John longed for. Father Calosso seems to have bridged the age gap and become a friend as well as a spiritual guide and provider. One needs little imagination to feel the contrast between this atmosphere and the tension of the Becchi house. To the old chaplain John could open his heart, and in him tangibly feel the providence of God. The road to the priesthood was now open before him.

Don Bosco's young manhood and early priesthood are marked by a paradox. On the one hand there were his strength of character, the clarity of his life ideal (reinforced by dreams or visions), and the practical ability he had to attain any target he set for himself. On the other hand there was the hesitation with which he actually started his work. He repeatedly questioned his vocation, sought spiritual advice and guidance; he came close to joining the Franciscans in 1834. He overcame the hesitancy of this first period, but with the Salesians he constantly recurred to this theme: not even the smallest event in the history of the Congregation was of human making; it was all the work of the Lord through Mary.

If we accept the nature of the events as suggested here, then this early spiritual event and dream-experience was fundamental in searing this docility into the soul of one so naturally active and full of self-confident initiative. We have that deeply spiritual and peaceful "novitiate" year with Father Calosso that prepared him for this character-molding self-surrender to God, even in his spiritual goals. Just when the road ahead was all open and smooth, the Lord stepped into his path and said, "My ways are not your ways."

We do not know the exact form of the dream, only its effect. It is not in the least surprising that Don Bosco should be reticent about such an emotionally-charged experience and all it must have cost a sensitive fifteen-year-old. Tangible grace and a mystical experience would almost seem necessary in a teenager for the kind of self-effacing generosity that John showed with Father Calosso's relatives.

If, however, the dream came during that short interval between Father Calosso's death and the coming of his relatives, this problem remains: all human hope was not yet gone – the little box. Does the complete despair suggested by John's mood and the reprimand delivered in the dream fit better before or after he surrendered the key to his material hopes? There some logic to locating it later.

Chapter 7

School at Chieri

School in Chieri • Kindness of teachers • The first four grades

After the loss of so much time, it was finally decided to send me to Chieri,[1] where I could continue seriously with my schooling. That was in i83O.[2] One raised in the backwoods[3] finds plenty of novelties to wonder at in even a small country village. I lodged with a woman from my own town, Lucy Matta,[4] a widow with one son. She used to stay in the city to help him and keep an eye on him.[5]

The first person I met was Fr Eustace Valimberti, of revered memory. He gave me a lot of good advice on how to keep out of trouble.[6] He invited me to serve his Mass and thus he could always advise me well. He brought me to see the headmaster in Chieri[7] and introduced me to my other teachers. Up to now, my studies had been a little of everything and amounted almost to nothing. Accordingly, I was advised to enroll in the sixth class, which today would correspond to the first year of *ginnasio.*[8]

My teacher was Dr. Pugnetti,[9] also of dear memory. He was very kind to me. He helped me in school, invited me to his home, and was very sympathetic to me because of my age and my goodwill. He went out of his way to help me as much as he could.

My age and my size made me look like a pillar amongst my little companions. I was anxious to get out of that situation. After two months of the sixth class, I was at its head. I took an examination and moved up to the fifth class.[10] I went gladly to my new class because my classmates were more my size, and my teacher was the beloved Fr Valimberti.[11] After two more months, I led the class again and, by exception, was allowed to take another examination and so was promoted to the fourth class, which is equivalent to the second year of *ginnasio.*[12]

Here my teacher was Joseph Cima, a strict disciplinarian.[13] When he saw this student as big and stocky as himself coming into his class in midyear, he joked in front of the whole class, "He's either a simpleton or a genius. What do you make of him?"

Taken aback by that harsh introduction, I answered, "Something in-between. I'm just a poor young fellow who has the goodwill to do his work and get along in his studies."

He was mollified by my reply and went on with unusual kindness, "If you have goodwill, you're in good hands. I'll see that you won't be idle here. Don't worry; if you have any problems, tell me promptly and I'll sort them out for you."

I thanked him with all my heart.

After a couple of months in this class, something happened that gave rise to some comment about me. One day the teacher was explaining the life of Agesilaus in Cornelius Nepos.[14] I did not have my book with me that day, and to cover my forgetfulness, I kept my Donate open in front of me. My companions noticed, and first one and then another began to laugh. Suddenly the whole classroom was in an uproar.

"What's going on here?" shouted the teacher. "What's going on?" he shot at me, this time. Everyone was looking at me. He told me to construe the text and repeat his explanation. I got to my feet, still holding my Donate. From memory I repeated the text, construed it, and explained it. Instinctively my companions expressed their admiration and burst into applause. The teacher was angry beyond description. It was the first time, according to him, that he had failed to maintain discipline. He swung at me, but I saw it coming and ducked. Next he placed his hand on my Donate and demanded of my neighbours the reason for all the commotion.

"Bosco had his Donato in front of him all the time," my companions explained, "but he read and explained the les son as if he had the Cornelius text." The teacher took the Donato and insisted I go on for two sentences more. Then he said to me, "In tribute to jour wonderful memory,[11] I'll overlook *your* forgetfulness. You're blessed. Only see that your gift is put to good use."

At the end of that school year (1830-1831).'" as a result of my high marks, I was promoted to the third class, equivalent to the third year of *ginnasio*. [7]

Notes

1. Chieri was an ancient cathedral city about nine miles southeast of Turin, separated from the great capital city by the Turinese hills, and about nine miles west-southwest of Castelnuovo. With about nine thousand inhabitants, it was easily the largest city in the area of Castelnuovo, and it was the *only* industrial center. The principal industry was the manufacture of cotton and silk textiles; there were some thirty factories, some of them perhaps just domestic enterprises.

By John Bosco's time there was no longer an Episcopal See at Chieri, but there were numerous convents and monasteries—of the Dominicans, Oratorians, Jesuits, Franciscans, and Poor Clares—and, since 1829. One of the archdiocesan seminaries.

The city was also a student center, attracting to its schools several hundred boys and young men each year from the towns and villages of the area. Student life was difficult. Schooling required tuition and books. Housing was hard to find and of poor quality. To meet their rent, food, and school expenses, students had to work after school in jobs like clerking, housecleaning, tutoring younger boys, or tending burses Chieri students dressed poorly, ate poorly, and suffered from the cold of winter. John Bosco's situation was not at all unusual except for his age. His strong peasant constitution helped him to cope with the wretched food and miserable living conditions and even to maintain his athletic prowess—as we shall see.

2. John went to Chieri on November 3, 1831.

3. "backwoods" = *boschi* in Don Bosco's text; he is punning on his name, which means "wood" in Italian.

4. Lucy Malta's (1783-1851) husband Joseph had died in 1824. The Mattas were from Morialdo. While her son John Baptist was studying at the Royal College from 1831 to 1833, Mrs. Matta rented a house in piazza San Guglielmo, off 9 via Mercanti, from James Marchisio.

Mama Margaret sent John to stay with the good lady. This meant she had to pay a steep boarding fee of twenty-one lire a month, which the family could not afford. John covered part of this sum by doing jobs for Mrs. Matta, and his mother supplied the rest in either cash or produce. The landlady soon came to realize what a treasure she had in her house in this young man, and she began to make ready use of him for her son's good. And she stopped asking rent from her tenant.

5. Mrs. Matta's vigilance *(assistere e vegliare}* foreshadows the Preventive System.

6. Here we have yet another intimation of Don Bosco's system. Frequently at the Oratory he would ask good boys to look after new or troublesome boys in the same way. It was part of the strategy of having good companions.

7. The headmaster or principal was appointed by the government since the school was a public one. At this time he was a Dominican, Father Pius Eusebius Sibilla.

8. In the educational system of the time, once elementary education was completed, the first stage of secondary education involved five classes (or years). The first three were sometimes known as grammar 1, 2, and 3, after which came humanities and rhetoric. This period was followed by about two years of philosophy which, for clerical students, would be the first years of seminary studies.

The corresponding system in modern Italy consists of five years of *ginnasio* followed by three years of *liceo.* This prepares for entry to tertiary, or university, studies. There is also a "middle track" *(scuola media)* without access to *liceo.*

In Britain the corresponding system is forms 1 to 5 of compulsory education until one is sixteen or older. These are followed by optional sixth-form studies of two or three years in lower and upper sixth that can lead to entrance to university education.

The five years of the Italian *ginnasio* are approximately equivalent to the four years of college-preparatory high school in the United States or, again approximately, to the five years of Canadian high school.

By the rime Don Bosco was writing his *Memoirs,* the old system had been reformed. So he gives a little explanation. In the 18303 classes were numbered in reverse order. The sixth class was the preparatory form, while the fifth, fourth, and third classes (grammar 1, 2, and 3) corresponded to forms 1, 2, and 3 of the *ginnasio.* The humanities and rhetoric years corresponded to forms 4 and 5 of secondary school. The preparatory year was equivalent to the last year of primary school (eighth grade in the American system). So its pupils were boys of twelve or thirteen, in the midst of whom was thrown this newly-arrived sixteen-year-old country lad.

The secondary and undergraduate school systerns look like this:

Piedmont	*Modern Italy*	*United States*	*United Kingdom*
Preparatory		Grade 8	
Grammar 1	Ginnasio I	Grade 9	Form 1
Grammar 2	Ginnasio 2	Grade 10	Form 2
Grammar 3	Ginnasio 3	Grade 11	Form 3
Humanities	Ginnasio 4	Grade 12	Form 4
Rhetoric	Ginnasio 5	Junior College	Form 5
Philosophy	Liceo	Junior College	Form 6
University	University	College/Graduate School	University

9. John's teacher in the sixth class was Father Valerian Pugnetti. "Doctor" here and elsewhere in the *Memoirs* means Doctor of Theology.

10. January 1832.

11. Father Placido Valimberti.

12. It was now about March 1832. and John had reached tenth grade (form *2).*

13. Cima's first name was Vincent. He was a seminarian.

14. Cornelius Nepos (100-25 BC) was a Roman historian.

15. John Bosco certainly did have a phenomenal memory, which he demonstrated repeatedly. He used to say that for him to read something was to remember it. When he was already well on in years, he could still entertain his secretaries by reciting long passages from Dante. A few months before his death, he was traveling in the coach with Father Rua. The conversation came around to some point of sacred history which had inspired Metastasio (1698-1782). Don Bosco recited whole stanzas from the Italian poet; it was very unlikely that he had read any of the poetry since leading secondary school. Various examples of his extraordinary memory are cited throughout the BM, e.g. I, 294, 315, 331-323.

16. Correct to 1831-1832.

17. In one school year John had done three years' work. No doubt his diligence and his maturity, relative to his classmates, helped him a great deal, as did his memory. Stella writes, "'His marks were brilliant, at least by comparison with those of his fellow students; but his surviving notebooks reveal clearly how incomplete his training in the humanities was at that point" (LW, p. 23).

Chapter 8

The Society for a Good Time

*My companions • The Society for a Good Time * Christian duties*

A11 this time I had to use my own initiative to learn how to deal with my companions. I put them in three groups: the good, the indifferent, and the bad. As soon as I spotted the had ones, 1 avoided them absolutely and always. The indifferent I associated with only when necessary, but 1 was always courteous with them. I made friends with the good ones, and then only when I was sure of them.'

As I knew few people in the town, I made it a rule to keep to myself. 1 sometimes had to discourage people I did not know too well. Some wanted to get me to a show, Others into home gambling, and Still others to go swimming.[4] And there were suggestions that I should Steal fruit from the town gardens or country orchards.

One companion was so bold as to suggest that 1 should steal a valuable object from my landlady so that we could buy some sweets. Gradually I got to know the undesirables and firmly avoided their company. Usually I had a counter to these suggestions. I used to tell them that my mother had asked my landlady lo look after me, and out of love for my mother 1 did not want to go anywhere nor do anything without good Lucy's consent.

This firm obedience to the good woman led to a very happy and practical conclusion. With much pleasure, Lucy asked me to take charge of her only son,* a lively youth more interested in games than in schoolwork. She depended on me to check his homework even though he was in the class above me. I took him in hand as if he were my brother.[4] I used little prizes as bribes to get to him. I played indoor games with him and helped him to be faithful to his religious duties. Little by little he became more tractable, obedient, and studious.[5] After six months he had become so good and diligent that his teacher was satisfied and he won honors in class. His mother was so delighted that she refused to accept my monthly rent.

Since the companions who tried to coax me into their escapades were the most careless about everything, they began to come to me for help because I did them the kindness of lending them my homework or dictating it to them. The teachers frowned on this. They said that it was a false kindness that only encouraged laziness, and they strictly forbade me to do it. I then resorted to less obvious ways of helping them, such as explaining problems to them and lending a helping hand to those who needed it Thus I made everyone happy and won the goodwill and affection of my companions. At first they came to play, then to listen to stories »r to do their homework, and finally for no reason at all, just as the boys at Murialdo and Castelnuovo used to do.

That these gatherings might have a name, we called ourselves the Society for a Good Time.[6] There was a reason for the name, because everyone was obliged to look for such books, discuss such subjects, or play such games as would contribute to the happiness of the members. Whatever would induce sadness was forbidden, especially things contrary to God's law. Those who swore, used God's name in vain, or indulged in bad talk were turned away from the club at once.

So it was that I found myself the leader of a crowd of companions. Two basic rules were adopted: (i) Each member of the Society for a Good Time should avoid language and actions unbecoming a good Christian. (2) Exactness in the performance of scholastic and religious duties. All this helped my reputation, and in i832[7] my companions respected me like the captain of a small army. I was much in demand for entertainments, for helping pupils privately, or for giving lessons or reviews at home.

Thus Divine Providence enabled me to supply my own clothes, school necessities, and other things without having to disturb my family in any way.

Notes

1. Don Bosco returns to a favorite educational theme: the importance of choosing one's companions carefully.

2. Swimming *was* viewed in Piedmont as a moral problem for several reasons:

1. Drowning in the sometimes treacherous waters of the cold, swift streams was a serious risk (see chapter 2),

2. "Skinny-dipping" clashed with the natural modesty of the people even though girls were never present.

3. Lack of adult supervision sometimes allowed improper behavior to occur. Note young Dominic Savio's reasons for not going swimming— as Don Bosco puts those reasons into the pre-adolescent's mouth — in chapter 4 of Savio's biography (pp. 4-5 of the O'Brien edition or pp. 38-39 of the Aronica edition).

3. This note and similarly placed ones were added by Don Bosco during revision of Father Berto's copy of the

4. John Baptist Malta, who died in 1878, was six years senior to John. Yet it seems that he was but one class ahead of John. From Don Bosco one would get the impression dial John had been looking after John Baptist as though the Matta boy were his younger brother.

5. John did magic tricks, told stories, and even composed bits of poetry, as he will mention later. It is not difficult to see how much of Don Bosco's Preventive System is already at work here. And, again, we see the impact that a good companion can have on another youth.

6. The Italian, *Societa dell'Allegria,* is virtually untranslatable. It has been variously rendered as the "Glee Club," "Jovial Society," "Cheerful Company," "Good Times Club," "Happy Fellows Society."

Stella (LW, p. 31) describes the club as a "'secret' society, like the many patriotic societies then flourishing in Italy." Thus Stella reminds us that this was a revolutionary era. In 1830 there had been major, successful uprisings in Belgium and France. In 1831 lesser, unsuccessful ones occurred in the Papal States, Modena, and Parma, and there was unrest in Piedmont in spite of a rigidly controlled press. There was talk of a constitution, hue King Charles Albert, who had just come to the throne, mercilessly crushed a revolutionary conspiracy. After the failures of these Italian ventures, Giuseppe Mazzini founded a new secret society, *Giovine Italia* (Young Italy) in 1831.

Don Bosco has nor yet given any indication in his *Memoirs* of the great national events which were already occurring and which would eventually touch him very personally. As a country schoolboy, in a State that practiced censorship, he was probably not even aware at the time of distant events. But John must have known that there were secret societies like the Carbonari and the Freemasons and that soldiers and the police visited Chieri in 1831 and 1834 to hunt out seditious elements.

Three of John Bosco's characteristics come through in the form taken by the Society for a Good Time, a club In which he was effectively president, even if not so in name. The three qualities are a lively, enterprising apostolic zeal; a real organizing ability: and most of all. the joyful spirit that became the hallmark of all his educational work. The rest of his autobiographical narrative will show how the germ of this apostolic spirit developed.

7. We cannot be certain of the year when John and his friends organized the Society for a Good Time, hut it was probably soon after John arrived in Chieri.

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* John Baptist Matta of Castelnuovo d'Asti has been mayor of his hometown for many years and now owns a pharmacy in the same town.[3]

Chapter 9

Life at School

Good companions • Practices of piety

Amongst the members of our Society for a Good Time I discovered some who were truly exemplary.

Worthy of mention are William Garigliano from Poirino and Paul Braje[1] from Chieri. They were always ready for some good recreation, but only after they had done their homework. Both were reserved and pious, and they gave me plenty of good advice. On feast days, after the practices of piety in common at the college,[2] we used to go along to St Anthony's Church, where the Jesuits gave marvelous catechetical instructions with plenty of stories that I still recall. During the week, the Society for a Good Time used to meet at the home of one of the members to talk about religious matters. Anyone was welcome to come to these gatherings. Garigliano and Braje were amongst the most conscientious. We entertained ourselves with some pleasant recreation, with discussions on religious topics, spiritual reading, and prayer. We exchanged good advice, and if there were any personal corrections we felt we should hand out to each other, whether these were our own personal observations or criticisms we had heard others make, did that. Without realizing it, we were putting into practice the excellent adage, "Blessed is he who has an advisor"; and that saying of Pythagoras,[3]

"If you have no friend to tell you your faults, pay an enemy to do it." Besides these friendly activities, we went to hear sermons and often went to confession and holy communion.

Here it is good to recall that in those days religion was a basic part of the educational system.[4] A teacher faced instant dismissal should he make any statement unbecoming or irreligious. If this was the way teachers were treated, you can imagine how severely pupils were dealt with for any unruly conduct or scandal.

We went to Holy Mass every morning; classes began with the devout praying of the *Actiones* and the *Ave Maria;* they ended with the *Agimus* and an *Ave Maria?*

On feast days all the pupils attended the college church. Before Mass we had spiritual reading, followed by the chanting of the Little Office of Our Lady.[6] Then came Mass and the explanation of the gospel.[7]

In the evening we had a further catechetical instruction, vespers, and another sermon.[8] Everyone was expected to approach the holy sacraments; to prevent the neglect of this important obligation, once a month the students had to present a card to prove that they had gone to confession. If one fell down on this, he was barred from end-of-year examinations, no matter how good he was at studies.[9] This strict training produced marvelous results. Many years went by without any swearing or unbecoming words being heard. The pupils were as docile and respectful at school as they would have been at home. And it often happened that in very large classes everyone won promotion at the end of the year. This was the case with my own classmates in the third class, humanities, and

rhetoric.

I had the great good fortune of choosing as my regular confessor Doctor Maloria, canon of the chapter in Chieri.[10] He always had a warm welcome for me. Indeed, he encouraged me to go to confession and communion more often, advice not too commonly given in those days. I do not remember that any of my teachers ever advised me along these lines. Those who went to confession and communion more than once a month were considered very virtuous; and many confessors would not permit it.

Consequently, I have to thank my confessor if I was not led by companions into certain unfortunate pitfalls that inexperienced boys in large schools have to regret.[11]

During these two years,[12] I never forgot my friends at Murialdo. I kept in touch with them and sometimes went to visit them on Thursdays.[13] On autumn weekdays, as soon as they got wind of my arrival they ran to meet me and always made a big fuss over me. A branch of the Society for a Good Time was started amongst them, too. Those whose good conduct throughout the year recommended them were enrolled. Bad conduct—especially swearing or evil talk—warranted expulsion from the club.

Notes

1. Ceria says that the correct spelling is "Braia" (MO, p. 53); Stella spells it "Braja" (LW, p. 31). Presumably Ceria has Italianized the name, whereas Stella has kept the Piedmontese form.

Garigliano, two years younger than John, was to be his companion at the seminary and at the Convitto Ecclesiastico; he died in 1902. Paul Victor Braja, three years younger than John, died on July 10, 1832. Hence the club must have been organized during the school year 1831-1832.

2. The term "college" *(collegio)* designated a state-run secondary school such as the Royal College that John attended in Chieri. Later in the nineteenth century it came to mean a private, secondary-level hoarding school. It is not to he confused with an American college, i.e. the first level of higher education, leading to a bachelor's degree. See Stella, LW, pp. 124-126.

The chapel was located on the ground floor off one of the two little courtyards where the college was situated, at what is now via Vittorio Emanuele 45.

3. Greek philospher and mathematician (ca. 58o-ca. 500 B.C.).

4. The scholastic legislation of that period is to he found in an official publication, *Raccolta, per ordine di materia, dei Sovrani provvedimenti che reggono gli studi fuori dell'Universita e gli stabilimenti dipendenti dal Magistrato della Riforma [A* Presentation in Topical Order of the Royal Laws for the Regulation of Studies Outside the University] (Turin: Stamperia Reale, 1834). It also contains the royal decrees promulgated in 1822 by King Charles Felix concerning religion, in .a socio-political context of vigorous restoration. The program is wide-ranging and detailed. For instance, in the "Regulations for University Studies" there was article 123: "On days preceding the other great solemnities of Holy Church, the feasts of the Blessed Virgin, and the feasts of the patron saints of studies, after classes the students shall be prepared to celebrate these mysteries."

Don Bosco gave similar advice for his schools and followed many of the particular practices that he evidently learned in the public schools of the 18305.

5. All the prayers were in Latin. The *Actiones* may be translated, "Lord, may everything we do begin with your inspiration, continue with your help, and reach perfection under your guidance, through Christ our Lord" (one of the collects for Ember Saturday in Lent in the old liturgy: now the collect for the day after Ash Wednesday). The *Agimus* is the familiar "We give you thanks, Almighty God, for all your benefits: you who live and reign forever and ever." The *Ave Maria* is the Hail Mary.

Don Bosco's earliest "Regulations for the Hospice Attached to the Oratory of Saint Francis do Sales" (1852) contains this directive: "Work shall begin with the *Actiones* and Ave *Maria,* and shall end with the *Agimus* and *Ave Maria"* (BM IV, 550: cf. IV. 553). In Salesian schools periods of work and study began and ended with these prayers for many generations.

6. The Little Office of Our Lady was a simple, popular version of the Divine Office (Liturgy of the Hours) in Gregorian chant. Since this version \\as virtually unchanging, it was easily learned, even by nearly illiterate people (cf. chapter 40). Before Mass the schoolboys sang only lauds (morning prayer).

7. According to the general custom in nineteenth-century Piedmont, the sermon usually followed Mass.

8. Vespers (evening prayer) was sung from the Little Office. Such evening devotions were the common practice at that time.

9. Modern pedagogical practice, of course, does not tolerate such infringement on the freedom of conscience of pupils. Although Don Bosco notes the apparent good results of the practice at Chieri, he never instituted it in his own schools. Not only was he afraid that boys might be pressured into committing sacrilege, but he wanted an atmosphere of freedom. For this reason, for example, he refused to have the students go to communion row by row—a very orderly way to proceed—because it would be too obvious who did or did not approach the Lord's table; rather, at communion time the boys were to leave their places whenever they chose, if they chose. Likewise, confessors were always available when the boys were in church, and Don Bosco himself would frequently seek out boys who he knew had not been reconciled to the Lord (see chapter 40); but no one was ever compelled to confess or to feign a confession.

10. Canon Joseph Maloria (1802-1857), who had earned a doctorate in theology from the University of Turin in 1825, was much respected for his learning. He had already been Joseph Cafasso's confessor during the lattcr's secondary school days, and he may have helped deepen the friendship between John and Joseph that began when they met at the Morialdo chapel (chapter 6). Father Maloria remained John's confessor from this time through his seminary years. John seems to have visited him often at his home.

As mentioned in chapter 7. note i, Chieri had once been a cathedral city. It still had a chapter of canons attached to its *duomo.* One of them at this time was Saint Joseph Cottolengo, founder of the Little House of Divine Providence in Turin, a couple of blocks away from the place where the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales would one day he established.

11. In this reflection, Don Bosco not only notes in passing the danger of bad companions but also cites a valuable experience that contributed to his teaching that confession and communion are the pillars of a good education. In John's youth, Jansenistic rigorism, which discouraged frequent communion, was still a powerful influence in Piedmont. We will return to this problem in chapter 19, note 7 and comment, and chapter 27.

Don Bosco always linked an adolescent's perseverance in virtue and his growth in the Christian life to the good advice, the encouragement, and the fatherly vigilance of the confessor. It should also be noted that he speaks of a "regular confessor," one who comes to know the heart of his penitent and therefore can offer sound spiritual guidance,

12. In Don Bosco's recollection, these years would probably be 1830-1832. He was in secondary school at Chieri from 1831 to 1835.

13. There was no school on Thursday afternoons, but there was on Saturday mornings.

Chapter 10

Louis Comollo

*Humanities and rhetoric * Louis Comollo*

When we had finished the first courses of ginnasio, we had an inspection. The man who came to examine us on behalf of the School Reform Board' was a lawyer of outstanding merit. Prof. Fr Joseph Gazzani.* He was very kind to me, and I have always retained grateful memories of him; we have maintained a close, friendly relationship ever since. This good priest is still living" in Upper Moltedo near Oneglia.4 where he was born. Amongst his many charitable works, he endowed a scholarship at our college in Alassio11 for a boy desirous of studying for the priesthood.

Though the examinations were conducted strictly, all forty-five in our class were promoted to the next class, which corresponds to our fourth year of ginnasio. I myself nearly failed for giving a copy of my work to others. If I was let through, I am indebted to the protection of my revered teacher Fr Giusiana, a Dominican. He set an extra paper for me, at which I did very well, and I was passed unanimously/'

In those days there was a praiseworthy practice by which the town awarded a prize to at least one student in each grade, remitting the twelve-franc tuition. To win this prize one had to be approved unanimously in both studies and conduct. I was lucky enough to be excused from this fee every year.7

That year I lost one of my dearest companions. Young Paul Braje, my dear, intimate friend, died on in H after a long illness. He was a model of piety, resignation, and living faith. He thus went to join St Aloysius,4 whose faithful disciple he had been all his life. He was mourned I by the whole college, and all the students turned out for his funeral. For a long time afterwards, during their holidays they would receive holy communion and recite the Little Office of Our Lady or the rosary for the soul of their dead friend.

To make up for this loss, however, God sent me another I companion every hit as virtuous as Paul, and even more remarkable in his deeds. This was Louis Comollo, of whom I will have more to say in a moment.

At the end of my humanities year. I did very well. On strength of my results, my teachers, especially Doctor Banaudi, suggested I should ask to take the exam in losophy;10 and, in fact, I was promoted. But as I ended my study of literature, 1 thought it better to continue my programme normally and take the rhetoric course, i.e. the fifth year of ginnasio, during 1833-34." It was during that year that I met Comollo. The life of this precious friend has been told elsewhere,12 and those who want can read it there. Here I mention only the incident that led to my noticing him amongst the humanities group.13

There was a rumour in the top form14 that a saintly pupil was to join us that year. He was said to be the nephew of the provost of Cinzano,15 an elderly priest with a reputation for sanctity. I was keen to get to know him, but I did not know his name. This is how we met: At that time it was common practice to initiate new students through

a dangerous game called cavallina.16 The giddy and less studious ones loved it, and generally they were the most skillful at it.

For several days they watched a reserved youngster of fifteen years17 who had just registered at the college take his seat and settle down to read or study, heedless of the din going on round him. A boorish fellow came up to him, grabbed his arm, and insisted that he join them at cavallina.

"I don't know how," was the other's mortified and humble reply. "I don't know how; I've never played these games before."

"You better join us," said the aggressor, "or I'll kick and beat you till you do."

"You can treat me as you please, but I don't know what the game is, nor do I care to learn."

His crude and ill-natured fellow student grabbed his arm, shoved him, and gave him two slaps that were heard all over the room. That made my blood boil. But I held back for a moment to see if the boy under attack would give the offender what he had coming. He could easily have done so because he was older and stronger than the bully.

You can imagine everyone's astonishment when the good youth, countenance red and almost livid, looked with pity at his malicious companion, and replied only, "Are you satisfied? Now go in peace; I've already forgiven you."

That heroic act made me want to know his name. It was, in fact, Louis Comollo, nephew of the provost of Cinzano, whose praises I had heard so often. From that moment on, he became my close friend, and I can say that from him" I began to learn how to live as a Christian.18 I trusted him completely and he trusted me. We needed each other: I needed spiritual help; he needed a bodyguard.

The shy and retiring Comollo never even tried to stand up to the vicious insults of our companions, whereas all of them —including those older and bigger than I —respected my mettle and my strength.19

That became evident one day when certain boys were bent on making fun of Comollo and another good-natured lad called Anthony Candelo. I wanted to intervene on their behalf, but the bullies gave me no heed. Another day when the harmless pair were being abused again, I shouted, "You'd better watch out. I'll deal with the next one who lays a finger on them."

A considerable number of the taller and bolder spirits ganged together to threaten me while Comollo got two smacks in the face. At that I forgot myself completely. Brute strength moved me, not reason.20 With no chair or stick within reach, I grabbed one of my fellow students by the shoulders and swung him round like a club to beat the others. I knocked down four of them; the rest took to their heels yelling for mercy. Then what? At that moment the teacher came into the room. Seeing arms and legs flying everywhere amidst an out-of-this-world uproar, he began to shout and to strike blows left and right. The storm was about to burst upon me when he learned the cause of the disturbance. He demanded a replay of the action, or at least a show of my strength. The teacher laughed, and so did all the pupils. Everyone was so amazed that I escaped the punishment I deserved.

Comollo had a different lesson to teach me. When we could speak between ourselves, he said to me, "John my

friend, I'm amazed how strong you are. But, believe me, God didn't give you strength to massacre your companions. His will is that we should love one another, forgive one another, and return good for evil."

I could only wonder at my companion's charity. I put myself entirely into his hands and let him guide me where and how he wished. By agreement with our friend Garigliano, we went together for confession, communion, meditation, spiritual reading, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and serving Holy Mass. Comollo knew how to organise us with such gentle courtesy and sweetness that we could not refuse him.

I remember one day when we were passing a church; I was so engaged in chattering with a companion that I forgot to raise my cap. He corrected me at once, but so graciously: "John my friend," he said, "you're so lost in talking to men that you forget even the Lord's house."

Notes

1. This episode occurred at the end of the 1832-1833 school year. John had been in Chieri for two years and done the work of four years (classes 6, 5, 4, and 3).

2. The School Reform Board *(Magistrato della Riforma)* was responsible for supervising the educational reforms mandated in the Kingdom of Sardinia by the law of 1822. In 1833 the board sent an extraordinary visitor to preside at the final exams in the college at Chieri.

3. In BM I, 207, this name is spelled "Gozzani." According to the professor's grandnephew, the correct spelling is "Gazzano." Father Gazzano established the scholarship on March 1, 1872 (MB X, 317).

In his first draft of the *Memoirs,* Don Bosco wrote, "In subsequent years he was very kind to me. In this year (1873) he is still living in Upper Moltedo near Oneglia and does many charitable works. The exams ..." When he reviewed the manuscript, he rewrote it, leaving the word "in" after "relationship," apparently intending to continue, "this year (1873)," but getting a little distracted by the new, complimentary subject he introduced, "This good priest. . . ."

4. More precisely, near Portomaurizio, which is a mile west of Oneglia on the Ligurian coast. The communes were united in 1923 as the city of Imperia. It is sixty miles southwest of Genoa.

5. The *collegio* became the primary Salesian apostolate from the 18603 till quite recently. Alassio is on the Mediterranean coast about fifty miles southwest of Genoa; the Salesians opened a school there in 1869.

6. The surviving records verify this. Father Hyacinth Giusiana (1774-1844) came from Cuneo, forty-five miles south of Turin. He taught grammar and was one of John's favorite teachers at Chieri.

7. No doubt there was more than luck involved in John's success. But being excused from even twelve lire's tuition was a blessing for the hard-pressed Boscos.

8. Don Bosco left the date of his friend's death blank. The family records include this note from Paul's father: "On July 10,

1832, Paul Victor Braia, aged twelve, went to his eternal rest. I can say without hesitation that this son of Philip and Catherine, nee Cafasso, must have gone straight to heaven." When Don Bosco begins this paragraph "In that year," the year in which he was promoted from the grammar section to the humanities year, he means the school year 1832-1833, not the calendar year 1832.

9. Saint Aloysius Gonzaga (1568-1591) was a young Jesuit of noble birth who died while caring for the sick during a plague. Noted for piety, obedience, and especially purity, he is regarded as one of the patron saints of and models for young people. He must have been particularly venerated in Chieri because his mother had been born there (her house is still standing). See NCE I, 332-333; Butler's *Lives,* II, 603-606; Maurice Meschler, *Life of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, Patron of Christian Youth* (Rockford, Illinois: TAN, 1985).

Don Bosco held up Saint Aloysius as a model for his oratory boys and students and celebrated his feast (June 21) with great pomp. In choosing Aloysius as one of his work's patrons, Don Bosco was certainly influenced by the facts mentioned above; he may also have been influenced by Aloysius's status as a religious and a seminarian and possibly by such mundane touches as his own father's middle name and the first name of his great earthly patron, Louis Fransoni, archbishop of Turin from 1832 to 1862. Finally, there was the dearest friend of his youth, Louis Comollo, to whom Don Bosco will come in a moment. *(Luigi* is rendered as either "Aloysius" or "Louis" in English; this work uses the latter generally except for the Jesuit saint, who is almost universally known as Aloysius.)

10. Father Peter Banaudi, from Briga Marittima, taught rhetoric and humanities and was one of John's favorite teachers. He died in Turin on March 29, 1885, at the age of eighty-three. Don Bosco actually calls him *Dottor,* not *Teologo* as he does some of his other teachers (see chapter 7, note 9).

11. Actually, it was 1834-1835; when thai school year ended, John was almost twenty years old.

12. Don Bosco published anonymously an eighty-two-page biography of Comollo in 18.44. It was entitled *Cenni storid sulla vita di Litifli Comollo ...* [A Brief Life of Louis Comollo] (Turin: Speirani and Ferrero). See BM II, 152-156. Ten years later he printed a revised version in the *Catholic Readings* (January 10 and 25, 1854); this time he identified himself as the author. In 1884 he issued a third edition with various additions,

Alberto Caviglia did an in-depth study of Comollo's biography in his edition of the works of Don Bosco (left incomplete at four volumes by Caviglia's death in 1943, with two more published posthumously). Caviglia made a happy discovery, becoming convinced that this biography contains a marvelous outline of the basic principles of Don Bosco's educational program. Caviglia wrote, "The spirit by which Don Bosco led to holiness the youngsters whom he educated and then memorialized in his writings is the same spirit that lives in the two young men Comollo and Bosco." He then added. "The figure, the actions, and the spirit of Comollo are an indispensable ingredient Cor understanding Don Bosco's youth and the development of his character, "ttiis is even more true for understanding his life before his priestly ordination."

Caviglia's work, incidentally, is to be distinguished from the *Qpere edite e inedite di San GiovanniBosco* [Complete Works of Saint John Bosco), reprinted in thirty-eight volumes by the Center for Studies on Don Bosco at the Salesian Pontifical University (Rome: LAS, 1976-1977, 1987).

13. The humanities and rhetoric groups met in one classroom with one teacher. Comollo was a year behind John in school.

14. In the rhetoric class.

15. Louis's uncle —his great-uncle, actually—was Father Joseph Comollo (1757-1843). As provost, he exercised some authority over the other clergy of the town of Cinzano, about five miles north-north west of Castelnuovo.

16. Don Bosco uses his Piedmontese dialect here; in Italian the game is called *cavalluccio.* It is a game a little like leapfrog, but the lads see how many can pile onto one victim's back.

17. Peter Louis Comollo was born April 7. 1817, in the hamlet of Pra in the commune of Cinzano. From his childhood he hoped to become a priest and was noted for his piety. In the fall of 1834, when John first met him, Louis was seventeen.

18. From Comollo. John learned a more perfect practice of virtue. Stella (LW. p, 32), noting Don Bosco's tendency to hyperbole, writes:

John discovered great spiritual richness in [Comollo] . . . Now athirst for the interior life, John was really defending the source and wellspring that he was seeking for his own soul's sake. He was defending the incarnation of the very ideal that seemed to be his own. John had already been moving toward it on his own, but his encounter with the virtuous Comollo tripped the tension wire in his heart. Seeing in him a *hero,* John wanted to he his friend.

It seems strange that John, at nineteen —or even seventeen, according to his memory —should have schoolmates "older and bigger" than himself. On the other hand, when he was fully grown he was only 5'.}" tall (BM IV, i2o|. He proved his strength many times throughout his life: cf. BM IV, 492: VI, 116; VIII, 410; MB XVI, 636; XVII, 205; XVIII, 479, 490. Don Bosco judges his youthful energy rather severely; but in that energy he reveals to us his natural spirit and generosity.

Chapter 11
Various Events

Waiter and bartender • A feast day • A tragedy

We pass on from school affairs to certain events by way of diversion. I changed lodgings during my humanities year to be nearer my teacher, Fr Banaudi, and to help John Pianta, a friend of the family, who came to Chieri that year to open a cafe.[1]

The lodging certainly had its dangers,[2] but as I was moving in with exemplary Catholics and was continuing my friendship with good companions, I was able to make the change without fear of moral danger.

When I finished my homework, I had a lot of spare time; I used to devote part of it to reading the Latin and Italian classics and the rest to making liquors and jams. Halfway through that year I was in a position to prepare coffee and chocolate; I knew the recipes for many kinds of sweets, drinks, ices, and various refreshments. My landlord began by giving me free lodging. Then, gauging the boost I could give to his business, he made me an attractive offer; he tried to induce me to give up my other concerns and work full time for him. But I was doing that work only for fun and relaxation; I had no intention of giving up my studies.

Professor Banaudi was a model teacher. Without having recourse to corporal punishment, he succeeded in making all his pupils respect and love him. He loved them all as if they were his own sons, and they loved him like an affectionate father.[3]

To show our appreciation, we planned a surprise for his feast day.[4] We decided to write both poetic and prose pieces for the celebration, and we had little presents which we thought he would especially like. The event was a splendid success. Our teacher was pleased beyond words, and as a token of appreciation, he took us on a picnic in the country. It was a wonderful day; both teacher and pupils were of one spirit, and each of us strove for ways to express the joy in his heart.

As we made our way back to Chieri, our teacher met someone we did not know, and he had to go off with the man; we were left by ourselves on the road for a little while. At that point some of our companions from the upper classes came up to us and invited us to go swimming with them at a place called Fontana Rossa,[5] about a mile from Chieri.[6]

I was against the idea, and so were some of my companions; but it was no use. A few came home with me while the others wanted to go swimming. It was a regrettable decision. A few hours after we got home, two of our picnic group ran in, breathless and frightened.

"Oh, if you only knew what a terrible thing's happened!" they gasped, "Philip N., who insisted so much that we go swimming, is dead."

"What!" we all exclaimed. "Philip was a good swimmer."

"Maybe he was," went on the excited messenger. "To encourage us to dive in with him, he jumped in, full of confidence, but unaware of the dangerous whirlpools in the Fontana Rossa. We waited for him to surface, but he did not appear. We raised the alarm. When help arrived, the rescuers tried everything, even at risk to themselves. It was an hour and a half later before they recovered the body."

The tragedy depressed all of us. There was no more talk of swimming that year nor the following one (1834).[7]

Some time ago I happened to meet a few of my old friends from those days. We recalled the drowning of our companion at the Fontana Rossa whirlpool with real regret.[8]

Notes

1. The two reasons Don Bosco gives for his change of lodging were really secondary. The main reason was that John Baptist Matta had finished his secondary studies, and he and his mother had returned to Castelnuovo.

Joseph — not John — Pianta was not only a friend of the Boscos from Morialdo, but a distant kinsman of Margaret (Molineris, p. 185). He was Lucy Malta's brother, which means of course that she too was related to Margaret. In 1833 he went to Chieri to open a coffee shop — what is called a "bar" in Italy nowadays. Margaret asked him to board John and look after him. During the day John was to do his schoolwork, and in the evenings he was to help Pianta manage the billiard room. The billiard room also had a piano. Every week Margaret brought John some bread and other food for his main meals, while Pianta was responsible for John's soup (a substantial meal in itself).

Pianta’s place was in the Vergnano house at 3 via Palazzo di Citta. It is now an ice cream shop. The cafe measured about twenty feet by twenty. What was the billiard room, slightly larger at twenty feet by twenty-three, is now a small tailor's shop. The house is just a few yards from the Church of Saint Anthony the Abbot, which made it convenient for John to go to daily Mass. The church is at the corner of Chieri's main square, the piazza d'Armi, and via Vittorio Emanuele and is staffed by the Jesuits. Saint Anthony's was the primary meeting place of the Society for a Good Time and of the regular school assemblies for church services.

When John came to Chieri for the opening of school, however, Pianta had not finished setting up his cafe. So John had to seek temporary lodging with the baker Michael Cavallo —not in his house but in his stable. (Lemoyne calls him Cavalli in BM I, 216.) John earned his keep by caring for the horse and by tending Cavallo's vines a little way out of town. The youth asked only that he be free on Saturday evenings to go to confession. What was the Cavallo stable is still extant across the street from the Vergnano house. This arrangement did not last long, for some good people—just who, we do not know —noticed John's plight and urged Pianta to get on with opening his coffee shop.

2. The dangers that John perceived came from the example given by the customers who frequented Pianta's bar: gambling at billiards and other games, frivolous use of hours at a time, and offensive language.

When the aged Pianta met the Salesians John Bonetti, John Baptist Francesia, and Joachim Berto in Chieri on May 10, 1888, he told them,

It would have been next to impossible to find a better lad than John Bosco. Every morning saw him on his way to serve several Masses in St. Anthony's Church. I had with me at home at that time my aged and sickly mother; it was really impressive to see how kindly he treated her. John would quite often spend entire nights with his books; in the morning I would still find him reading and writing by the light of his lamp. (BM I, 217) However, good Pianta did not see fit to bring up the question of the "spacious" room he had given the young man to sleep in. Lemoyne describes it in this way:

John's bed was a narrow strip over a small oven that was used for baking pastry. John reached it with a small ladder. But when he stretched out in these confined quarters his feet dangled beyond the thin straw-filled pallet and over the edge of the oven (BM I, 216).

This cubbyhole was in a small passageway, n.6 feet long by 6.6 feet high by 2.6 feet wide, between the coffee room and the billiard room.

When Don Bosco was canonized in 1934, the people of Chieri celebrated the event by placing tablets at many of the sites associated with his ten years as a resident there. One such memorial was put on Pianta's former shop, recalling young John's sacrifices. It also mentions his young friend Joseph Blanchard (1818-1893), who sometimes gave John gifts of fruits and vegetables to satisfy his hunger. The Blanchards, who were grocers, had another apartment in the Vergnano house from November 1833 till August 1834 (Molineris, p. 191).

3. Don Bosco, himself an educator with over thirty years of experience behind him at the time of writing, calls Father Banaudi a model teacher. He has singled out the fact that his teacher did not have to use punishments to make himself respected; rather, he used fatherly love for his pupils. We may suppose that Father Banaudi's methodology made a deep impression on his young student. Certainly Don Bosco describes his methodology in words that echo the Preventive System.

4. It is not hard to imagine that John was the chief organizer of the surprise party.

5. This is the local name of a stream that rushes down from the nearby hills on the northwest side of the city. It takes its name, which means "Red Fountain," from its rust-colored waters.

6. The Piedmontese mile is 2466 meters, or roughly a mile and a half in the English measure.

7. This sad event occurred in 1834, during John's humanities year of 1833-1834. Father Peter Banaudi's name day was June 29; so we may place Philip's drowning in early July, though Molineris (p. 225) suggests June 28. Molineris tried, unsuccessfully, to identify further the unfortunate boy who drowned, but he never completed his search.

The next year, the rhetoric year, John's teacher was the priest Doctor John Bosco, whose name was the same as the saint's but who was not a relative. Don Bosco mentions him in the biography of Comollo: "He had become an idol of the whole student body because of his kindness, his patience, the courteous way he dealt with all the students, and the interest he took in helping them succeed in their studies."

Divine Providence was remarkably preparing the future apostle of youth by setting before him outstanding examples of men who educated by means of loving kindness (Desramaut, *SouAut,* p. 72).

8. Don Bosco has passed over several other events of this period. On May 9, 1833, Joseph Bosco married Domenica Febbraro. The couple would have ten children. Joseph had been leasing farmland from the Mattas at Sussambrino since 1831 (see chapter 6, note 9), where his partner was Joseph Febbraro.

On August 4, 1833, John was confirmed by Archbishop John Anthony Gianotti of Sassari in Saint Blaise's Church at Buttigliera d'Asti. This was the same church to which young John had gone to hear the missionary preachers in the jubilee

year of 1829. The sponsors for all seventy-two confirmands were Mayor Joseph Marsano of Buttigliera and Countess Josephine Melina. Those confirmed ranged in age from seven to twenty-nine. (BM I, 207; Molineris, pp. 198-199)

Joseph Cafasso was ordained a priest on September 21,1833, and celebrated his first Mass at Castelnuovo soon after.

Chapter 12

A Jewish Friend

Jonah

I was still a humanities student lodging at John Pianta's cafe, I got to know a Jewish youngster called Jonah. He was about eighteen, was remarkably good looking, and had an exceptionally fine singing voice. He was a good billiards player too.

We met at Elijah's bookstore,[1] and he would always ask for me as soon as he came into the shop. I liked him a lot, and he was very attached to me. Every spare minute he had, he spent in my room; we sang together, played the piano, or read. He liked to hear the thousand little stories I used to tell.[2]

One day he got into a difficult quarrel which could have had sorry consequences for him. He came running to me for advice.

"Jonah, my friend," I said to him, "if you were a Christian, I would advise you to go to confession.[3] But in your case, that's not possible."

"But we Jews can go to confession, if we want to." "Go to confession by all means, but your confessor is not obliged to secrecy. Neither can he forgive your sins or administer any sacraments."

"If you'll take me, I'll go to a priest." "I could do that for you, but a lot of preparation is necessary."

"What sort of preparation?"

"Confession takes away sins committed after baptism. If you wish to receive any of the other sacraments, you must receive baptism first."

"What must I do to be baptized?"

"You must be instructed in the Christian religion. You must believe in Jesus Christ, true God and true man. After that you can be baptized."

"What good will baptism do me?"

"It wipes out original sin, and actual sins too.[4] It opens the way to the other sacraments. Finally, it makes you a child of God and an heir to heaven."

"We Jews cannot be saved?"

"No, my dear Jonah; since Jesus Christ came, the Jews cannot be saved unless they believe in him."[5]

"If it comes to my mother's ears that I want to become a Christian, heaven help me!"

"Don't be afraid; God is the master of all hearts. If he calls you to become a Christian, he will do it in such a way as to satisfy your mother, or provide in some way for the good of your soul."

"You are such a good friend of mine; if you were in my place, what would you do?"

"I would begin to take instruction in the Christian religion. Anyway, God will show you what to do in the future. Take this little catechism and begin to study it. Pray that God will enlighten you, and he will help you to know the truth."

From that day onward Jonah became attracted to the Christian faith. He used to come to the cafe and, after he played a game of billiards, he would come looking for me to discuss religion and the catechism. In a few months he had learned to make the sign of the cross, could say the *Pater,* the *Ave Maria,* and the *Credo,*[6] and knew the other principal truths of the faith. He was very happy and became better every day in his speech and his actions.

Jonah had been left fatherless as a child. His mother Rachel had heard vague reports about Jonah's intentions, but as yet she knew nothing certain. This is how the news broke: One day, while making Jonah's bed she came across his catechism, which he had inadvertently left under his mattress.

She went screaming through the house, took the catechism to the rabbi, and suspecting what was afoot, rushed [to] the student Bosco's lodgings. She had often heard her son speak of him. Picture to yourselves ugliness itself, and you will have an idea of Jonah's mother. She was blind in one eye and deaf in both ears; she had a big nose, hardly any teeth, and a long, pointed chin; she was thick lipped, with a twisted mouth; her voice sounded like the squeal of a foal.[7] The other Jews used to call her the "Lilith the Witch," a name they use for the ugliest thing they can imagine.[8]

I got a fright when I saw her. Before I had time to recover, she opened up on me: "I swear you've done wrong! Yes, you! You've ruined my Jonah. You've brought public disgrace on him. I don't know what will become of him. I'm afraid he'll end up a Christian, and you'll have been the cause of it."

I understood then who she was and of whom she was speaking; as calmly as I could, I explained that she ought to be happy about it and to thank me for doing him so much good.

"And what's the good of that? Is it a good thing for a person to deny his own religion?"

"Calm down, my good woman," I said to her. "Listen. I didn't go looking for your son Jonah. We met in Elijah's bookshop. We became friends without any special reason. He's very fond of me, and I like him too. As his true friend, I want him to save his soul and to get to know our religion, because outside it no one can be saved. Good mother of Jonah, please note that I only gave your son a book and told him to study it. If he becomes a Christian, he does not abandon his Jewish religion; he perfects it."

"If Jonah should have the misfortune to become a Christian, he would have to abandon our prophets, because Christians do not believe in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, nor in Moses and the prophets."

"We do believe in all the holy patriarchs and prophets of the Bible. Their writings, their sayings, and their prophecies are the foundation of the Christian faith."

"If our rabbi were only here, he would know how to answer you. I know neither the *Mishnah* nor the *Gemara* (the two parts of the *Talmud).*[9] But what is to become of my poor Jonah?"

So saying, she left. It would be too long to recount the many attacks that the mother, the rabbi, and various of Jonah's relatives made on me. Neither threats nor violence had any effect on that courageous young man; he withstood them all and continued to take instruction.

Since he was no longer safe amongst his family, he had to leave home and live almost as a beggar.

Many people came to his aid. And that all might be done with due prudence, I recommended my pupil to a learned priest who took a fatherly interest in him. When Jonah's religious instructions were completed, he was impatient to become a Christian. A solemnity was arranged that set a good example for all the people of Chieri. Other Jews were impressed too, and later several others embraced Christianity.

Jonah's godparents were Charles and Octavia Bertinetti, who provided what the neophyte needed.

After becoming a Catholic, he was able to earn an honest livelihood by his own efforts.[10] The newly-baptized's name was Aloysius.[11]

Notes

1. The Jews of Chieri lived in their own ghetto along via della Pace, as prescribed by the laws of King Charles Felix (1821-1831). They were regarded as second-class citizens, officially tolerated. Jonah's home was at the corner of via della Pace and via d'Albussano. The home and bookstore of Elijah Foa were at 12 via della Pace.

2. John and Jonah had several things in common that helped make them fast friends: they were the same age, they were both highly talented, and they were both fatherless. They used to meet in a spot in Pianta's cafe —probably in the billiard hall, since the piano was there —where there was room during the day to study or host a friend during John's rare moments of leisure.

John's friendship for this Jewish youth was not an isolated event. Lemoyne (BM I, 231) cites testimony to his practical kindness. John noticed the trouble that several Jewish boys had with Saturday schoolwork. To prevent their having to violate their sabbath or else suffer the ridicule of their schoolmates for not doing their work, he would do it for them.

3. In the 18305, to be a Christian in Italy was practically equivalent to being a Catholic. Don Bosco realized that Protestants could not receive the sacrament of penance either. The British statesman Lord Palmerston once visited the Oratory. When he saw five hundred boys working quietly in a single study hall, without a teacher monitoring them, he was astonished. He asked Don Bosco how that was possible.

"Sir," his host answered, "we possess a means unknown to you."

"How is that?"

"It's a secret revealed only to Catholics."

"And what is that secret?"

"Frequent confession and communion, and daily Mass heard with devotion."

"You're right," the visitor confessed. "We lack those powerful means of education. But can they be substituted?" "If we don't use the means supplied by religion, we must use threats and the cane."

"Absolutely right. Religion or the cane! I'll inform my government."

This episode, taken from archival material, is recounted in the *Salesian Bulletin,* October 1922, p. 259.

4. More specifically, baptism cancels the actual, or personal, sins that one may have committed before baptism. As John told Jonah earlier, Catholics hold that sacramental penance (confession) is necessary for the forgiveness of serious sins committed after baptism. Original sin is the sin inherited by the whole human race from their first ancestors (cf. Genesis 3:1-24; Romans 5:12-21).

5. Don Bosco describes his conversation with his young friend without making any distinctions. According to the teaching of the Catholic Church:

1. There is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ, and the way to Jesus Christ is through his Church.

2. Those who know that it is God's will that they should belong to the Catholic Church are obliged in conscience to join his Church, or they will be lost.

3. One who honestly tries to please God according to the light of his own natural reason implicitly and unconsciously desires to belong to the Church and to be saved through Jesus Christ. Such a person will be saved. (See, for example, Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae,* III, 8, 3 ad 1; and III, 68, 2.)

Pope Pius XII excommunicated the American Jesuit Leonard Feeney for teaching that one had to belong explicitly to

the Roman Catholic Church in order to be saved (Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston, August 8, 1949 [DS 3866-3872], quoted in J. Neuner, SJ, and J. Dupuis, SJ, ed., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* [Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1975], pp. 235-37.)

John came closest to the Church's teaching when he told Jonah, "God will . . . provide in some way for the good of your soul."

For a summary of the Church's teaching on Judaism since the Second Vatican Council, see the comment at the end of the notes.

6. The Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the Apostles' Creed in Latin.

7. A foal is not yet able to give forth the full neigh of a grown horse. It is nearer to a grunt than a whinny. Don Bosco seems to have wanted to avoid the rougher but more common expression "grunt like a pig." All in all, Don Bosco's unflattering picture of Jonah's mother does no credit to his usual sensitivity to people.

8. There were various Jewish legends about Lilith, whose name comes from Isaiah 34:14 (the RSV renders it "the night hag"). Originally she was a female demon whose name comes from Akkadian. Medieval folklore turned her into the woman who deceived Adam and into a ghost that wandered around at night, devouring children.

9. *Talmud* means literally "instruction." It is the final codification of Jewish law, based on the scriptures and oral tradition, and it dates from the third and fourth centuries. It has two parts, the Mishnah and the Gemara. The first, from the second century, contains the traditional oral law; the Gemara, literally "completion," expands upon the Mishnah through the commentaries of Jewish scholars.

10. The records at Chieri verify the baptism. However, the name is not given as Jonah. Jonah may have been a middle name or a nickname. It is also possible that Don Bosco used a fictitious name to permit the man a certain anonymity. The record for 1834 reads thus:

Bolmida. On 10 August I, Sebastian Schioppo, theologian and canon curate, by permission of the Archbishop of Turin, solemnly baptized a certain Jewish young man of Chieri named James Levi, aged 18. I gave him the name Aloysius, Hyacinth, Lawrence, Octavian, Maria Bolmida. The godparents were Hyacinth Bolmida and Ociavia Mary Bertinetti. (Stella, LW,p. 32, n. 68)

Charles Bertinetti was not the godfather, after all. He was probably there with his wife. Don fiasco's memory has clipped slightly again. See also chapter 16, note 14.

The convert lived as a faithful Christian and retained affection and gratitude toward his friend John. Lemoyne met him at the Oratory around 1880 (BM I, 243).

11. It is possible that John suggested this name himself. We have already noted his devotion to Saint Aloysius (see chapter 10, note 9). In the first five months of his priesthood (from June lo to November z, 1841), Don Bosco was an assistant to the provost of Castelnuovo. Lemoyne asserts that the parochial baptismal register there shows that practically all the boys that Don Bosco baptized had Aloysius for either their first or their middle name (BM II, 14). When Molineris checked the records for that period, he discovered that Don Bosco baptized only three boys, one of whom was named Luigi (pp. 264-265).

It is equally possible that John had nothing to do with the choice. Saint Aloysius was already very popular in Chieri, and the name was commonly given.

Comment on Catholicism and Judaism

Vatican II refined the teaching of the Catholic Church on the Church's role in the salvation of the human race in *Lumen gentium* and in *Nostra aetate.* The former, the Constitution on the Church, affirms that everyone is called to belong to God's people, i.e. the Church, which is necessary for salvation by the explicit will of Christ (no. 13) and subsists fully in the Roman Catholic Church; mere membership is insufficient, though, for one must "persevere in charity" (no. 14). Those who reverence the sacred scriptures, believe in the Trinity, and are consecrated in baptism are also part of the Church even if "they do not profess the faith in its entirety" and are not in communion with Peter's successor (no. 15).

Those who have not yet received the gospel are related in various ways to the People of God.... Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace, (no. 16, quoted in the Abbott edition, New York, 1966}

Nostra aetate is the Council's Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. This landmark document's no. 4 speaks of the Jewish people and says, in particular, "The Jews still remain most dear to God because of their fathers, for He does nor repent of the gifts He wakes nor of the call He issues...."

When Pope John Paul 11 made his historic visit to the synagog of Rome on April 13, 1986, he alluded to (he riches of *Nostra aetate.* He then emphasized three points, quoting several times from that document's fourth paragraph:

The first is that the Church of Christ discovers her "bond" with Judaism by "searching into her own mystery." The Jewish religion is not "extrinsic" to us, but in a certain way is "intrinsic" to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You (the Jews) arc our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers.

The second point noted by the Council is that no ancestral or collective blame can be imputed to the Jews as a people for "what happened in Christ's passion" —not indiscriminately to the Jews of that time, nor to those who came afterwards.... So any alleged theological justification for discriminatory measures ... is unfounded. The Lord will judge each one "according to his own works,[1]" Jews and Christians alike (cf. Romans a:6).

The third point ... is a consequence of the second. Notwithstanding the Church's awareness of her own identity, it is not lawful to say that the Jews are "repudiated or cursed," as if this were taught or could be deduced from the sacred scriptures or the New Testament. Indeed, the Council had already said.. . that the Jews are beloved of God, who has called them with an irrevocable calling (cf. *Lumen gentium,* no. 16, and Romans 11:28-29).

A major Church statement on racism, issued February 10, 19891 resoundingly condemned anti-Semitism as "the most tragic form that racist ideology has assumed in our century" and reminded the world that "entertaining racist attitudes is a sin" *(New York* Tines, February n, 1989, pp. 1, 4).

Chapter 13
Black Magic

Games • Conjuring tricks • Self-defense

In the midst of my studies and other interests, such as singing, music, speech training, and dramatics,[1] which I undertook wholeheartedly, I also learned a variety of new games: card tricks, marbles, quoits, walking on stilts, running and jumping, all of which I enjoyed and in which I was by no means mediocre, even if I was no champion. Some of these activities I had learned at Murialdo, others at Chieri. If in the fields of Murialdo I was only a beginner, that year I developed into something of a master. At that time, not much was known about these sports because they had not been much publicised; so in the popular estimate they were a source of wonder.

What shall I say of these skills? I often gave performances both in public and in private. Since I had an exceptional memory, I knew by heart long passages from the classics, the poets particularly. I could quote at will from Dante, Petrarch, Tasso, Parini, Monti,[2] and others as if they were my own. Likewise, I could thus improvise without any trouble. In those entertainments or concerts, sometimes I sang, sometimes I played an instrument, or sometimes I composed verses which were highly praised — though in reality they were nothing more than excerpts from various authors adapted for the occasion. That is why I have never given any of my compositions to anyone. Whatever I did write down, I have burned.[3]

Conjuring was a source of wonder. People sat wide-eyed at the sight of an endless stream of balls coming out of a little box too small to hold even one, or eggs tumbling out of a little bag. But when they saw me producing balls from bystanders' noses, or heard me tell accurately how much money people had in their pockets, or when they watched me crush coins to dust between my fingers, my audiences got frightened and even lost their heads; they began to whisper that I was a sorcerer, that I had to be in league with the devil.

My landlord Thomas Cumino[4] added to the credibility of this idea. Thomas was a fervent Christian, and he loved a joke. I knew how to take advantage of his character, and I would say, his simplicity, to embarrass him thoroughly. One day, for his feast day he had very carefully prepared chicken and jelly as a treat for his lodgers.[5] But when he carried the dish to the table and uncovered it, out popped a live cock, flapping about and cackling in a thousand ways. Another time he had a pot of macaroni cooked and ready to serve, but at the last moment he found the pot full of dry bran. Sometimes when he filled the. bottle with wine, he wbuld find as he poured it out that itilad turned to water. When he wanted a drink of water, he would find his glass full of wine instead. Sweets changed into pieces of bread, coins in his purse into pieces of rusty tin. A hat became a nightcap; nuts changed into pebbles right in the sack. These were everyday occurrences.

Good Thomas was nonplussed. "These things are not human," he would mutter to himself. "God does not waste time with such frivolities. It must be the work of the devil."

He did not dare mention these matters at home, so he sought advice from a nearby priest, Fr Bertinetti. Suspecting "white magic"[6] as the explanation of these tricks, he decided to refer the matter to the school superintendent, who was at that time a respected cleric, Canon Burzio, archpriest and parish priest of the cathedral.[7]

The canon was a learned man, pious and prudent, and without speaking to others asked me *ad audiendum verbum.* When I arrived at his house, I found him saying his Office[9]. Smiling at me, he made a sign for me to wait.

When he had finished, he asked me to follow him into his study. There he began to question me, very politely, but a serious look.

"My friend, so far I am quite pleased with your conduct and the progress you have made in your studies. Now, however, you are the subject of much talk. They tell me you are a mind reader, that you can guess how much money people have in their pockets, that you can make black seem white, that you can tell what is happening at a distance, and similar things. That makes people talk about you. In fact, some have gone farther and suspect you of being a sorcerer or even that the devil is at work here. Tell me now, who taught you this knowledge? Or where did you pick it up? Tell me everything in complete confidence. I assure you that I will not use it except for your own good."

Keeping a straight face, I asked him for a few minutes to think over my reply. Then I asked him to tell me what time it was. He put his hand into his pocket, but his watch was not there.

"If you haven't got your watch," I suggested, "could you give me a five-soldi coin?"[10]

He checked all his pockets but could not find his purse.

"You rascal," he shouted angrily, "Either you are the devil's servant, or he's yours! You've already stolen my purse and my watch. I can't keep quiet any longer; I must denounce you. Even now I don't know what keeps me "" from giving you a good thrashing."

However, when he saw that I was smiling serenely, he got hold of himself and went on more calmly.

"Now let's take this quietly. Explain these mysteries to me. How was it possible for my watch and my purse to vanish from my pocket unknown to me. Where are they?"

"Well, Father," I began respectfully, "I'll explain in a few words. It's all a matter of sleight of hand, information, and preparation."

"What information could you have about my watch and purse?"

"I'll explain it all quickly. Just after I came in, you gave some alms to a beggar. You left your purse on a priedieu. Then you went into another room, leaving your watch on that side table. I hid them both; you thought you had them on your person, while they were really under this lampshade." So saying, I lifted the lampshade and recovered both objects that the devil was supposed to have taken

good canon had a hearty laugh. He asked me to give $_{h}$im $_{a}$ demonstration of sleight of hand, and how to make things appear and disappear. He enjoyed it all and gave me a little gift. Finally, he told me, "Go and tell your friends that wonderment is the result of ignorance."[11]

Notes

1. Part of the reason why Don Bosco became a successful educator was that he incorporated all these activities, and sports too, into his system. From the first, he seemed to know instinctively that these means would attract youngsters, to whom he could then introduce Jesus and Mary.

2. All his life Don Bosco treasured the poetry of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) and could quote extensive passages from the *Divine Comedy* from memory. Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374), poet and diplomat, helped inspire the Renaissance. Torquato Tasso (1544-1595) wrote epic and dramatic poetry and is best known for *Jerusalem Delivered.* Giuseppe Parini (1729-1799) is best known for his satiric epic *The Day,* Vincenzo Monti (1754-1828) was a poet, professor, and historian.

3. He forgot to burn some. We have been able to find an exercise book of his entitled "A Collection of Sonnets and Various Poems." He began this particular collection on May 27, 1835. Together with items by various authors and friends there are also a few of his own compositions. Among other things is a sonnet which he titled "The Constancy of Pius VII under Napoleon's Oppression." On the front page he wrote, *Quidquld agunt homines, intentio iudicat omnes* (Their intention is the measure of whatever men may do). Above that inscription is a note in Lemoyne's writing, indicating that Don Bosco left this copybook to his faithful friend before he died.

4. In 1834-1835, the last year of John's *glnnaslo,* the pastor of Castelnuovo, Father Anthony Cinzano, sent him to lodge with the Cumino family. Earlier, Joseph Cafasso had also boarded with them for four years. Father Cinzano provided eight lire a month to cover John's room and board (BM I, 248).

The Cumino house is at 24 via Vittorio Emanuele, near Saint Anthony's Church. Mr. Cumino was a tailor. He offered John one of his storerooms as a bedroom. After a few months, Father Cafasso managed to get better treatment for John.

Ceria notes that John had to tend a vineyard and look after a horse belonging to Mr. Cumino (MO, p. 71); he appears to have confused this arrangement with John's earlier stay with Michael Cavallo (chapter n, note i).

5. Italians celebrate a person's feast day (name day) more than his birthday; it is customary for the one celebrating to give gifts or a treat rather than to receive them.

6. There had been a distinction between white magic and black magic since the Middle Ages. The latter was diabolical. White magic was understood to be natural, based on laws of physics that most people would not grasp. From the context it seems that John was accused of practicing black magic rather than the white that he records here and in the opening line of the next chapter.

7. Canon Maximus Burzio rented rooms in the Bertinettis' apartment house — which the couple would one day leave to Don Bosco (see chapter 16, note 15). From 1840 to 1863 the' canon was pastor of Moncucco, where John had stayed with the Moglias from February 1827 to November 1829.

8. This was a legal term which means here, basically, "to tell him what was going on" (Desramaut, *SouAut,* p. 81).

9. The Divine Office consists of psalms, hymns, scripture readings, readings from the Fathers of the Church, and prayers. Priests, religious, and other Christians pray the Office at various times (hours) during the course of the day; hence it is also called the Liturgy of the Hours. The principal hours are readings (also called vigils, formerly called matins), morning prayer (formerly called lauds), and evening prayer (vespers). The lesser hours in Don Bosco's time were prime, terce, sext, none, and night prayer (compline); the reform of Vatican II has reduced these to two hours, midday prayer and night prayer, besides simplifying the main hours.

10. A soldo was worth five centesimi, or one-twentieth of a lira.

11. John quotes the canon's advice in Latin: *ignorantia est magistra admirationis.*

Chapter 14
Champion Acrobat

A race • A jump • The magic wand • The top of the tree

Now that I had been cleared of white magic in my amusements, 1 began to collect my companions round me again and to entertain them as before. Just at that time, there was a certain acrobat whom some folks praised to the skies. He had put on a public show, racing from one end of Chieri to the other in two and a half minutes, almost as fast as a speeding train.[1] Paying little attention to the consequences, , one. day I said that I would like to take on this braggart.[2] An imprudent companion told the acrobat, so I found myself with a challenge on my hands: *schoolboy challenges professional runner!*

The course chosen was a stretch of the Turin Highway,[3] and there was a side bet of 20 francs. I did not have that kind of money, so some of my friends in the Society for a Good Time had to come to the rescue. The event attracted a big crowd. When the race began, my opponent got a lead on me. I soon caught up with him, however, passed him, and before we had reached the halfway mark he was so far behind that he dropped out.

"Well," he said to me, "I challenge you to a long jump, but this time I want to raise the wager to 40 francs, and more if you wish."

I took him on. He picked the place where we were to jump. The landing area was close to the parapet of a little bridge. He had first jump and he landed so close to the [w]all that you could not jump any further. It looked like there was no way I could win. But my skill came to the rescue. I landed in his tracks, and putting my hands on the bridge wall, I vaulted not only the parapet itself but a ditch beyond it. There was a great cheer.

"I want to challenge you, yet again," he said, "to any test of skill you want to name."

I accepted, choosing the game of the "magic wand."[4] The wager this time was 80 francs. Taking the rod, I hung a hat on one end of it while I placed the other in the palm of my hand. Then, without using the other hand, I made the rod hop from the tip of my little finger to ring finger, middle finger, index finger, and thumb; then to the knuckles, elbow, shoulder, chin, lips, nose, forehead; and then, by the same route, back to the palm of my hand.[5]

"No problem," my rival remarked. "This is my favorite event." He took the same rod and, with consummate skill, he made the rod travel up to his lips; unfortunately for him, his long nose got in the way and the rod lost its balance. He had to grab at it to save it from falling.

Seeing his money vanish again, the poor fellow blurted out in a rage, "No humiliation could be worse than being beaten by a schoolboy. I have one hundred francs left. That much I'll bet you I'll get my feet nearer the top of that tree than you will." He pointed to an elm tree beside the road.

We accepted again, though we were sorry for him and half wished him to win; we did not want to ruin him.

He climbed the elm first. He got his feet so high that had he gone any farther, [the tree][6] would have broken and thrown him to the ground. Everyone said it was impossible to climb any higher.

Now it was my turn. I climbed as high as I could without bending the tree. Then I grasped the trunk firmly in both hands, raised my body, and swung my feet up till they were about three feet above the spot that my rival had reached.

Who could ever describe the applause of the crowd, the joy of my companions, the anger of the acrobat, and my own pride at having defeated not just some fellow student but this swaggering braggart?

He was absolutely devastated; however, we tried to comfort him. Moved to pity by the poor man's sadness, we said we would return his money on one condition: that he treat us to a dinner at Muretto's Restaurant.[7] He agreed gratefully. Twenty-two of us went, so many were my supporters. The meal cost 25 francs, so he got back 215 francs.[8]

It had indeed been a Thursday[9] of great joy. I was covered in glory[10] for ha\ing beaten in skill a braggart. My companions were delighted too, for they could not have been better entertained than by a good laugh and a good dinner. The braggart himself was pleased because he had got back nearly all his money and enjoyed a good meal besides. As he took leave of us, he thanked us all, saying: "In handing back this money, you've saved me from ruin. You have my heartfelt gratitude. I'll always remember you gratefully, but I won't make any more bets with schoolboys."

Notes

1. In 1835, when this happened, there were no railroads in the Kingdom of Sardinia.

2. Don Bosco is silent about the reason for his challenge. The man used to give shows in the piazza d'Armi on Sundays, drawing many youngsters away from Saint Anthony's Church. John had tried to get him to suspend his activities during the hours of the liturgical services, but he refused.

3. This lovely old road is to the left of the present main road coming from Turin just before one enters Chieri. It is now flanked by plane trees where there used to he elms.

4. A kind of stick which in those days jugglers made common use of. Its name, of course, goes back to the limes when wizards were supposed to use their wands to produce their magic.

5. In 1885 Lemoyne himself saw how Don Bosco could still handle a stick "with unbelievable dexterity" as he casually played around with it (BM I, 236).

6. Ceria added "the tree" to the text.

7. Perhaps he intended to say "Muletto" (Little Mule). Up to 1915 there was a small restaurant of that name on via Castelnuovo. Caselle *(Giovanni Bosco a Ckieri, 1831-1841* [Castelnuovo Don Bosco, 1986], p. 35) reproduces an 1859 painting that shows it to have been on the piazza d'Armi facing Saint Anthony's Church. Molineris (p. 233) adds that Don Bosco may have confused the name with the name of the Moretto Gate, which led toward Castelnuovo.

8. These figures are in the original manuscript. Father Berto misread the 2 in 25 as a 4 (which it resembles). On the basis of this new value of "45," he corrected the second figure to "195." But Don Bosco revised his secretary's adjusted values and restored the original. The corrections in two different forms of handwriting are clear in the manuscript. This variance explains why BM I, 236, uses the figures 45 and 195.

9. As mentioned earlier, there was no school on Thursday afternoons.

10. Don Bosco can be exceedingly humble when speaking of himself, e.g. when he says of Comollo, "From him I began to learn how to live as a Christian" (chapter 10). At other times his keen sense of humor encourages him to hyperbole regarding his accomplishments, e.g. here and when he speaks of his tailoring skills (chapter 6).

Chapter 15

Hunger for Books

Study of the classics

You might be asking how I could afford to give so much time to these dissipations without neglecting my studies. I will not hide the fact that I could have studied harder. But remember that by paying attention at school I was able to learn as much as was necessary. In fact, in those days,[1] I made no distinction between reading and studying, and I could easily recall material from books 1 had read or heard read. Moreover, my mother had trained me to get by on very little sleep, so I could read for two-thirds of the night at will, thus leaving the whole day free for activities of my own choice. I liked to devote some time to coaching and private lessons, and even though I often did this out of charity or friendship, others paid me.

At that time, there was in Chieri a Jewish bookseller called Elijah.[2] I had come to an understanding with him because of my interest in the Italian classics. For a soldo per volume I could borrow books, returning them as soon as they were read. I read a volume a day from the Popular Library series.[3]

In my fourth year of *ginnasio,* I spent much time reading the Italian authors. During the rhetoric year, I turned to the study of the Latin classics. I began to read Cornelius Nepos, Cicero, Sallust, Quintus, Curtius, Livy, Tacitus, Ovid, Vergil, and Horace amongst others.[4] I read them for pleasure, and enjoyed them as if I had understood everything. Only much later did I realise that I had not. After my ordination when I took on teaching these masterpieces[5] to others, I quickly found how much concentration and preparation were necessary to penetrate their true meaning and beauty.

My studies, extensive reading, and coaching of students took most of the day and a good part of the night. Often when it was time to get up in the morning, I was still reading Livy, which I had taken up the previous evening. This practice so ruined my health that for some years I seemed to have one foot in the grave,[0] Consequently, I always advise others to do what they can and no more.

The night is made for rest! Except in cases of necessity, after supper[7] no one should apply himself to scientific things. A robust person might take it for a while, but it will always prove detrimental to his health.

Notes

1. The memory weakens because of age or illness. Don Bosco has to acknowledge that even he has had to pay the penalty.

2. Apparently Don Bosco did not notice that he had already spoken of Elijah and his bookshop (chapter 12).

3. The Popular Library *(Biblioteca Popolare)* was published between 1829 and 1840 by Joseph Pomba in Turin. It was a one-

hundred-volume collection of Italian classics and Greek and Latin classics in translation. Each of the 160 page, red-covered volumes was small and compact, full of neat, fine, tightly packed print. Ten thousand copies of each volume were printed (Stella, LW, p. 26, n. 52).

4. Sallust, Curtius, Livy, and Tacitus were Roman historians of the first century B.C. and first century A.D. Ovid, Vergil, and Horace were poets *at′* the same period.

In 1882, Cardinal Lawrence Nina complimented Don Bosco on a letter he had written to the Holy See in Latin. The cardinal asked him if he had studied the classics. Don Bosco replied that he had read many of the Latin authors and the better commentaries, and proceeded to reel off the names of the authors and titles of their books. The cardinal was happy to hear it and interrupted Don Bosco to say that he would pass the information on to the Pope. Leo XHI was a polished classical scholar; when he had read the Latin letter in question, he appreciated its style and judged that Don Bosco, whom he thought unacquainted with the classics, could never have composed it (BM XV, 357).

5. Latin was one of the courses offered in his night school (chapters 42 and 50).

6. Lack of sleep was only one factor that worked against John's health. See chapter 16, note 7; chapter 19, note 17 and comment; chapter 22, note 4.

7. The midday heat of the Mediterranean region almost necessitates that a break from work of several hours follow the noon meal. The dependence of a pre industrial, pre-electrical society on natural daylight likewise almost necessitated that supper be eaten around dusk. Although many Italians have tried to retain these customs {very light "continental" breakfast, substantial dinner at noon or one o'clock, and light supper around eight o'clock), industry, commerce, commuting, and the international economy are changing the situation.

Chapter 16

Vocational Decision

Choosing a state in life

So the end of the rhetoric year[1] approached, the time when students usually ponder their vocations.

The dream I had had in Murialdo was deeply imprinted on my mind; in fact it had recurred several times more in ever clearer terms,[2] so that if I wanted to put faith in it I would have to choose the priesthood towards which I actually fell inclined. But I did not want to believe dreams, and my own manner of life, certain habits of my heart, and the absolute lack of the virtues necessary to that state,[3] filled me with doubts and made the decision very difficult.[4]

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.[5]

Thinking things over myself, after reading some books which dealt with the choice of a state in life, I decided to enter the Franciscan Order. "If I become a secular priest," I told myself, "my vocation runs a great risk of shipwreck.[6] I will embrace the priesthood, renounce the world, enter the cloister, and dedicate myself to study and meditation; thus in solitude I will be able to combat my passions, especially my pride," which had put down deep roots in my heart.[7]

So I applied to enter the Reformed Conventuals.[8] I took the examination and was accepted. All was ready for my entry into Chieri's Monastery of Peace.[9] A few days before I was due to enter, I had a very strange dream. I seemed to see a multitude of these friars, clad in threadbare habits, all dashing about helter-skelter. One of them came up to me and said: "You're looking for peace, but you won't find it here. See what goes on! God's preparing another place, another harvest for you."

I wanted to question this religious but a noise awakened me and I saw nothing more. I revealed everything to my confessor, but he did not want to hear of dreams or friars. "In this matter," he said, "everyone must follow his own inclinations and not the advice of others."

Then something cropped up which made it impossible for me to carry out my intention.[10] And since the obstacles were many and difficult, I decided to reveal it all to my friend Comollo.[11] He advised me to make a novena. Meanwhile he would write to his uncle the provost. On the last day of my novena, I went to confession and communion with this incomparable friend. I attended one Mass and served another at the altar of Our Lady of Grace in the cathedral."

Then we went home and found a letter from Fr Comollo which went something like this: "Having given careful consideration to what you wrote me, I advise your friend not to enter a monastery at this time. Let him don the clerical habit[3] As he goes on with his studies he will better understand what God wants him to do. He must not

fear to lose his vocation because aloofness from the world and earnest piety will help him overcome every obstacle."

I followed this wise advice and applied myself seriously to those things which would help prepare me to take the clerical habit. I took the rhetoric examination and then I also took the entrance examination for the seminary in Chieri[14] —in the very rooms of the house which Charles Bertinetti willed us at his dealh,[15] in the rooms Canon Burzio rented. That year the exam was not held in Turin as was usual, because of the cholera which threatened our area.

I would like to note something about the college at Chieri that certainly exemplifies the spirit of piety that flourished there. During my four years as a student in the college, I do not remember ever hearing any talk, not even a word, that could be considered impolite or irreligious.

At the end of rhetoric course, of the 25 students, 21 embraced the clerical state, three became doctors, and one became a merchant.'[7]

When I got home for the holidays,[18] I gave up acrobatics. I dedicated myself to reading good books which. [am ashamed to say, I had neglected up to then. I still kept up my interest in the youngsters, entertaining them with stories, pleasant recreation, sacred music; especially, finding that many of them, even the older ones, were almost ignorant of the truths of faith, I also undertook to teach them their daily prayers and other things more important at that age. It was a kind of oratory, attended by about fifty children, who loved me and obeyed me as if I were their father.

Notes

1. John's rhetoric year was 1834-1835. Since he applied to and was accepted by the Franciscans in March-April 1834 (see note 8 below), he must be mistaken here about the year; he *t* applied in the middle of his humanities year.

2. When John was fifteen or sixteen (see chapter 6) and again when he was about nineteen he had important dreams. He | confidentially told Father Julius Barberis about the latter dream around 1870, In this dream he saw a radiant personage at the head of an immense crowd of boys. This person called out to him. "Come here! Take charge of these children £ and be their guide." John complained that ho did not feel *';* able to handle and instruct so many thousands of youngsters. The personage insisted with compelling authority.

Lemoyne expands Don Bosco's phrase: "In Don Bosco's memoirs we find this entry: 'The dream I had had in Morialdo was repeated when I was nineteen and other times as well'" (BM I, 229). Desramaut offers a lengthy discussion of the number and dates of these recurrences; he is somewhat skeptical of Lemoyne's chronology *(LesMem,* pp. 250-256).

If this dream was a factor in his decision not to enter the Franciscans, it must have occurred during the late spring or summer of 1834; John turned nineteen that August.

The habits to which he refers were probably his love for games, even if they served a good purpose, and his passion for literature (see chapters 19 and 24).

One virtue he thought lacking in him was humility; elsewhere he speaks of the pride that he felt deeply rooted in himself (e.g. chapter 26). His high esteem for the priesthood is obvious. One might also recall that Saint Francis of Assisi considered himself unworthy of the priesthood and remained a deacon to the end of his life. The rigorist theology of the early nineteenth century exalted the priesthood and its responsibilities almost to a frightening degree; this ideal will recur throughout John's seminary days (cf. Stella. LW, pp.52-54).

4. John seems to have been torn between an attraction to the religious life, a fear for his mother's old age if lie entered religion, and a fear for his own vocation if he became a "priest in the world" (see note 6 below). He was quite conscious of his poverty and of the economic burden that his studies were to his mother. The Franciscans of Chieri were ready to waive the usual entrance fees for him.

5. Since John's confessor, Canon Joseph Maloria, was still a fairly young priest—he was about thirty-one—his hesitation to give such vital advice seems understandable. He may also have had some reservations about John himself, says Stella (LW, p. 27):

Perhaps the priest was uncertain about the exact qualifications and needs of his penitent. The young man's piety was clear, but he was an acrobat and showman as well. Or perhaps the priest wished to go slowly with John, who was still taking courses in grammar and the humanities. He may not have wanted John to decide too hastily on a vocation in life. In particular, he may **have** been less than enthusiastic about John's entering the Franciscans as early as 1834, when the Order was facing a terrible crisis in vocations.

In a note (no. 57), Stella reports that the Franciscan Observants exceeded seventy thousand in number during the eighteenth century. The French Revolution and its aftermath were disastrous; their numbers fell to twenty-three thousand in the 1860's and continued to decline until a revitalization that began in the 1880's.

6. "This was no scruple, no empty fear," notes Teresio Bosco (Mm, p. 63, n. i). At that time, he says, quoting Stella (LW,p-39).

Perhaps one of the main worries was professionalism for its own sake among the clergy: i.e., entering a clerical 'career' for merely human reasons rather than from any deeper religious motive. It was one way to secure a decent future for oneself. . . . There was a feeling that a superficial religious sense and an empty interior life boded ill for the priesthood. Bosco adds:

One sign of this danger could have been the superabundance of young men who started out on the priestly path; for the abundance of starters there was a corresponding number of unhappy quitters. Many still regarded ecclesiastical studies as a gateway, a shortcut toward a teaching position or a government job. See also Woolf, pp. 48-49.

7. This anxiety about vocation has to be placed in context. Post-Reformation spiritual writers greatly stressed the importance of the choice of one's state of life: God had predestined every individual's vocation. Consequently, one of the principal reasons for salvation or damnation was how one responded. In the Introduction to the Salesian Constitutions, published in 1875 (about the same time that he was working on these memoirs), Don Bosco wrote:

God, most merciful and infinitely rich in graces, at the time he creates each man, establishes for him a path, by pursuing which he can very easily secure his eternal salvation. The man who enters on that path and walks along it has little difficulty in fulfilling God's will and finds peace. But if he were not to enter on that way, he would run great risk of not having the graces necessary for his salvation.

He continues at some length by quoting scripture, the Fathers, and various spiritual writers *(Constitutions of the Society of Saint Francis de Sales* [Paterson, New Jersey, 1957], pp. 4-7; cf. 1966 Constitutions [Madras, 1967], pp. 8-12]).

Stella suggests a number of books that young John might have read at this time, several of which he later used in his own spiritual writings (LW, p. 28).

In the existential language of our times, we could say that this choice had almost assumed the proportions of a radical human anxiety: "one's state in life had to be freely chosen as proof of one's fidelity to God" (Stella, LW, p. 29). Also, as the comment on his dream in chapter 6 brings out, for John Bosco, surrendering to God's will rather than doing his own had almost certainly become a fundamental principle — notwithstanding that John was very strong-willed. It is in this setting, and with consideration for the rigorist teaching on predestination quite widespread in Piedmont at that time, that we must understand his words about his personal fitness (cf. Stella, LW, pp. 50-52).

This anxiety and the subsequent spiritual and emotional intensity of life in the seminary probably had as much to do with the breakdown in John's health as his all-night reading (chapter 15), or even more. Evidently it was troubling him well before he finished high school since he applied to the Franciscans in the middle of his humanities year (March 1834) rather than at the end of the rhetoric year (June 1835).

8. The Franciscan "Register of the Postulants" verifies that John applied in March 1834 and was examined regarding his vocation, as required by canon law, on April 18 at Turin's Monastery of Saint Mary of the Angels. He was accepted on April 28. The register reports that he was found to have all the necessary qualities and was accepted unanimously *(habet reauisita et vota omnia).*

As part of his application process, John went to Father Bartholomew Dassano, his pastor at Castelnuovo, for the testimonial letters required by canon law. The pastor then went to Sussambrino to talk to Margaret Bosco, urging her to talk John out of religious life: he could do much good as a diocesan priest, make a splendid career for himself, and provide for her in her old age.

Margaret promptly went to Chieri to see her son. It is surprising that he has passed over this in his memoirs, for he always remembered her advice:

Consider carefully the step you will take. Then follow your vocation without regard to anyone. The most important thing is the salvation of your soul. The pastor urged me to make you change your mind because I might need your help in the future. But I want to tell you that in this matter I am not to be considered because God comes first. Don't worry about me. ... I was born poor, I have lived poor, and I want to die poor. What is more, I want to make this very clear to you: if you decide to become a secular priest and should unfortunately become rich, I will never pay you a single visit! Remember that well! (BM I, 221-222)

9. The monastery and church of Our Lady of Peace are on via d'Albussano to the east of via della Pace. Today the monastery belongs to the Vincentians (Giraudo and Biancardi, pp. 83-84).

10. Whatever this was, it must have been something quite serious. Not only did it "make it impossible" for him to become a Franciscan, but he adds that "the obstacles were many and difficult." Together with the dream of the strange friars, John had two powerful influences to discourage his supposed vocation to the Franciscans. Instead, he decided to take the examinations for admission to the rhetoric and philosophy courses, which he mentioned in chapter 10.

11. John met Comollo when Louis came to Chieri in November 1834, the beginning of John's rhetoric year (chapter 10). Perhaps he had not yet entirely ruled out the Franciscans.

12. The former cathedral is still known as the *duomo.* Its formal title is Santa Maria della Scala. During John's youth it was one of his favorite churches, and it remained important to him later. The Bosco clan was originally from Chieri; John's grandfather Philip Anthony Bosco II was baptized in the cathedral on September 18, 1735.

Don Bosco does not mention in the *Memoirs* that he taught Latin to the cathedral sacristan, Charles Palazzolo (1801-1885), who was over thirty years old but wished *to* enter the seminary; he was eventually ordained. This experience, Lemoyne writes, "seems to presage the Sons of Mary Project to be established years later to promote adult vocations to the priesthood" (BM I, 219-320).

At the cathedral John also became a close friend of the bell-ringer, Dominic Pogliano, and his family {BM I, 220, 236). When Canon Burzio was about to investigate John's "black magic," Pogliano tried unsuccessfully to explain to the canon and save John the trouble (BM I, 259).

As a seminarian from 1835-1841, John Bosco continued to come to the cathedral for religious services and also to teach catechism to the young people on Sundays. Four days after his priestly ordination, he celebrated Mass at the altar -of our Lady (June 9, 1841).

13. Upon entrance to the seminary, a young man began to wear the cassock and Roman collar; there was a special ceremony in which he was so vested (see chapter 17).

14. Don Bosco evidently meant the end-of-year exam in rhetoric, followed by one for admission to the seminary. In fact, it was the exams for admission to the rhetoric and philosophy courses that he took in 1834 (see note 10 above); he applied to the diocesan seminary in 1835.

15. Octavia Bertinetti was Jonah's godmother. She and her husband evidently became close friends of John Bosco. Their house was part of the mansion that had belonged to the noble Tana family, to which belonged Saint Aloysius Gonzaga's mother.

Charles Bertinetti died in 1868 and his wife in 1869. They willed all their property to Don Bosco; as a result of this inheritance the Salesians established their work in Chieri (BM XIII, 537-40). This was Saint Teresa's Oratory for girls, which was entrusted to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in 1878 and is still thriving. It is alleged that Saint Joseph Cottolengo once predicted that the Bertinetti home would eventually house religious *(Salesian Bulletin,* August 1878, cited in Molineris, p. 208).

16. Turin was spared during this outbreak of 1835.

17. Lemoyne, his principal biographer and his confidant for many years, writes:

John took leave of his superiors at the school. Father Bosco |see chapter n, note 7] and other prominent ecclesiastics told us John had won the hearts not only of his schoolmates but of the dean of studies, of the spiritual director and of all his teachers as well. They all remained very fond of him and regarded him always as their friend and confidant. As soon as he had finished the course in rhetoric, his teacher [Father Bosco], a doctor in literature and substitute professor at the University of Turin, asked him to be his friend and to he addressed informally [addressed as *tu* rather than *lei]*. This shows the great esteem in which the poor peasant boy from Becchi was regarded by his peers and superiors, not only because of his virtue, but also because a certain contrast, evident in everything he did, made him even more likeable.

John was very active, full of initiative but cautious and deliberate; lie had a brilliant mind and fluent speech but was not talkative, especially with superiors. This was our experience with him as a man: he was no different as a boy. (BM I, 273)

18. "Home" meant Sussambrino, where Joseph and Margaret had been living since 1831. Sometime in this period— apparently during the 1835 summer vacation— John, still unsure of what he ought to do, especially because of his poverty, went to Castelnuovo to see the pastor. Father Dassano had resigned and then been appointed pastor at Cavour. The new pastor was Father Peter Anthony Cinzano. Father Cinzano was not at home, but John chanced to meet his old friend Evasio Savio, the blacksmith (see chapter 6, note 16). Savio advised him to go to Turin and talk to their fellow townsman Father Cafasso. Though only twenty-four, Cafasso already had an outstanding reputation for holiness and wisdom. Without hesitation he advised John to enter the diocesan seminary. Savio also encouraged Father Cinzano, the mayor, and others to take an interest in John's education— i.e. to help with the expenses— which they did, and so did Father Cafasso (BM I, 227-230; Molineris, pp. 236-241). In his memoirs Don Bosco makes no mention of these consultations.

As already recounted, John had met Cafasso in 1830 (chapter 6)1 but this seems to be the point at which he became John's

invaluable mentor and supporter.