

# THE SECRET OF SAINT JOHN BOSCO

Henri Gheon

## Foreword

Our world, having too long renounced obedience, is now in love with servitude. The individualist has become a Bolshevik or a Nazi. No longer ago than yesterday there were not enough sarcasms to hurl at a religion which tried, said the world, to force all men into one mould—for its confessed purpose was to imprint upon us all the likeness of Him who came among men and so assumed the fullness of man, that we can say *Ecce Homo*.

They forgot that this same religion also teaches the unalterable, irreducible diversity of creation. In the whole world there are not two daisies, two blades of grass, two butterflies alike: above all, not two men. Man is not simply a flesh and blood dynamo, mass-produced, complete with spare parts. For us, each soul, each human person, is the term of a separate act of creation, new, unpredictable, not to be copied. Not the least of us but has this essential originality; and the Supreme Artisan would scarcely have made us thus original merely to annihilate the gift in elevating us to Himself.

A Nietzschean friend of mine who had stayed at the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino, humbly confessed the thing that had surprised him most: in this society of monks living by a common faith, subject to a common rule, he had come to be aware of an extraordinary variety of type; individual characteristics, far from fading out, had apparently grown more distinct. If he turned Communist, could he say the same of Russia, where man is subject only to man, with no intrusion of God?

Experience teaches us—even if we will not take theology's word for it—that Grace respects the gifts of nature, adds to their power and value by purifying, elevating and bringing them to completion. The world of spirits and glorified bodies will be no less glowingly varied, contrasted, individual in its members than this earth and its inhabitants. There you will see every man as God created him, with his own special qualities fixed in their perfection: to the great surprise, no doubt, of those simple, harmless folk who smile superiorly and fear that heaven would bore them.

As a matter of fact, I was not too sure myself that I would not find the saints rather boring company. When I came to go into their affairs in my books and plays, I felt rather like my Nietzschean friend among the Benedictines. The saints gave me the same sense of wonder and surprise as one of those medleys of people that you get wherever many races mingle—in frontier towns, or on the piers of a great port, or on the deck of an immigrant ship—simple or subtle, prosaic or romantic, heroic or frail-seeming, tragic or comic: comic, indeed, surprisingly often. I went from St. Cecilia to St. Maurice, from St. Giles to St. Genesius, from St. Germaine to St. Alexis, from Aquinas to the Little Poor Man of Assisi. Each one was a totally different problem.

Nor need we look so far for our examples. Our own day furnishes plenty. Within the space of a few years the Church has canonised two men and two women, the women French, the men Italians, all four of the nineteenth century. The women, cloistered and contemplative, lived hidden from sight—Therese of Lisieux and Bernadette of Lourdes. The men, John Bosco and

Joseph Cottolengo, were out in the world, in the very thick of it, never resting, but thrusting more boldly into it. There you have contrast in plenty—but no opposition: only proof of rich resources, a widening horizon for the divine field.

In this book I speak of St. John Bosco. One more saint, you say wearily. And one more personality, I answer.

## 1. Childhood

### I

Turin is the least tripped of all the towns of Italy. It has none of the things the tourist loves—neither paintings, nor great buildings, nor historical associations; not even charm. Founded under the Romans, it was already flourishing under the Emperor; but the centuries that lay before the Renaissance seem to have passed over it without leaving a trace of their passing. The turbulence of clans, bandits, communes: the activities of princes, popes, monks, merchants: the creations of artists, the eccentricities of saints: the violence and magnificence, the heroism and luxury, the sensuality and sanctity fermenting in the Italian peninsula—none of this disturbed its poise, its self-sufficiency, its placidity. The aesthetic sense, apparently, woke late in Turin; the Piedmontese school produced no real masters, as you may see from its museum, which does, however, contain some superb pictures—by masters not of Turin. The tourist, relying on his guide-book, passes a couple of profitable hours in the museum; sees also, perhaps, a collection of armour comparable to the Armeria in Madrid; then dashes back to his train.

I do not hold it against him that he refuses to waste any of his time in the countless churches (mostly Jesuit in style) which confront him at every step, with their over-painted, over-ornamented, over-gilded interiors like so many ballrooms or theatres. I do not, I repeat, hold it against him, though this style is dear to me for reasons that have no place here. Some of them—San Francesco, San Lorenzo, the Consolata, the Cathedral—are very beautiful; but Europe swarms with churches as good. From the artistic point of view, not one of them is worth a second look. But so much granted, everything still remains to be said—and to be seen and admired.

For Turin is not this museum or that picture, this hidden wonder or that picturesque surprise. Turin has no details to speak of. Turin is an ensemble, a totality. It is a city, the essence of city, city qua city, the most perfect specimen in all Europe. Doubtless there are small towns—Salzburg for one—as perfect and complete in their sheer town-ness. But of great cities, not one. And with all my heart I pity the poor wretch who does not, at first contact, fall under the spell of its order, its lines and masses, its unity, majesty, plenitude and vigour.

The Romans laid down its ground plan; from which, we may pretty safely conjecture, it did not depart. Certainly, in the course of those three "classic" centuries—the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth—it was redrawn and rebuilt upon the original design with a rigorous precision that left nothing to chance. It was then that it took its definitive form, and new sections added since have been carefully conformed to it.

Geometry presided at its birth, controlled its growth, watches over its maturity. It has vast open places all square or rectangular; long wide boulevards intersecting at right angles; arcades, arcades, more arcades, the Rue de Rivoli multiplied by a hundred; lofty facades; massive balconies, with the same type of brackets and railings; and there is the same sense of balance and proportion, repeated to infinity in windows and doors, where there are buildings and where there are none, in the thickness of walls and in the spaces between. And you would say that every block was from one single quarry, carved in the same light smooth hard luminous stone, of the same newness and the same antiquity. Add the churches, the cupolas, the campaniles, and you have the monument which is Turin, a great architectural design carried out without flaw, and each year spreading its order a little further into the disorder of the outer suburbs. You may accuse it of monotony, but it is the monotony of Versailles and the Vatican.

Don't think of it, either, as a lifeless city. It is alive with a population placid but active, a little heavy but quite vital. It is in business and in finance. The waves of the Dora and the Po link it with the life of the fields. It has wharves and bridges, and, beyond the circlet of river, rich orchards. Nature does not come much into the city, but rings it round enchantingly to a green horizon, with the Alps in an irregular half-circle touching in the sky-line to the north.

I love Turin and the country round it with the love one gives to rationality and economy, stability and largeness. I feel that the people there give themselves time to breathe and go steadily on their way. I should live there as happy as they: easily and decently, with no great spiritual tensions, certainly, but with the Faith as certainly there.

So much for the place as a place. But there is something more. Turin has three treasures beyond price, which the tourist wastes no time on, and the guide-book, any guidebook, barely mentions. They are not in the order of art and not in the order of nature; and what other order could detain the tourist?

First is the Holy Shroud, the true likeness of Christ, in reverse as on a photographic negative, imprinted on the cloth that wrapped Him in the sepulchre. This sorrowful relic is rarely shown to the faithful. It is in a golden shrine at the far end of the choir of the Cathedral, above the altar with its enormous silver candlesticks standing guard. The Cathedral is the oldest church in Turin, and different from the others in its sober gravity. Its tall white columns are plain and businesslike: so that your prayers there are plain and businesslike too.

Second, there is the House of Divine Providence founded by St. Joseph Cottolengo, wherein the most hideous afflictions of our race are tended and loved for the love of God. With its inmates allotted to one or other section according to the nature of their suffering, the place has subsisted for a century with no regular means of support, yet always with sufficient for its needs. God keeps them from day to day; and in relays—the blind, the deaf and dumb, the crippled, the lame, hunchbacks, the cancerous, the incurable of every sort, idiots (fools too)—they come to the gleaming chapel to adore our Lord in His Eucharistic Body. This immense hospital gives us the measure of the miraculous charity of Christ. The whole thing has grown from the narrow room, still to be seen, where one winter evening a hundred years ago a worthy man put into his own bed a cripple picked up in the street.

Close by, in the same suburb of Valdocco, once a slum, now clean and new and crowded with institutions, is Turin's third treasure. It is the Don Bosco Institute. Like the House of Divine Providence, it is a city in little, or rather three cities in one, grouped round the statue of the Saint and the Church he built to our Lady Help of Christians, that she might watch over the souls of his young vagabonds. High above the church is the Virgin crowned with stars. With her right hand she blesses the nuns of her order, with her left the printing-works that scatter the gospel of her goodness over the whole earth; and with her cloak she seems to cast her protection over the buildings of the Oratory and the Salesian Order grouped at her back with their workrooms, classrooms, porches, playgrounds. Less than a hundred years ago it was a hovel of ill-repute, a dank and crumbling outhouse in the shapeless slum area of Turin. St. John Bosco made it into a spiritual paradise, a solidly grounded paradise, for the lost or imperilled children he had won back from the world; and his inexhaustible charity carries on the same battle to this day. From the miserable wreck of a house that he found here, Charity has radiated to the ends of the earth, from Europe to the wilds of Patagonia. No less is symbolised here; this city within a great city, concrete and massive as the great city, stands for the victory of the Spirit of God.

Thus for all its solid framework, for all the logic and clarity of its style, Turin is not simply a splendid body without a soul. What was in the mind of the Father when in this place, close by the shroud of His Son, He brought into being two such miracles of practical Christian charity? Surely He wished to show that the power of the Precious Blood was not to remain the secret of contemplatives whom the world knows not, that it must issue not only in prayer, but in works that all may see. Surely there could be no better way of meeting on its own ground the materialism of an age choking with the pride of its inventions, refusing to accept God on faith, clamouring for "results." Here are results with a vengeance.

## II

We shall leave Turin, only to come back when Don Bosco comes. For the moment we turn to his birthplace, twelve or fifteen miles away, in the heart of the country. The mountains have vanished; the city is hidden by the line of hills that enclose the valley of the Po. Towards the south-east the hills slope less steeply. We come to Chieri, a little town in the plain, more country than town. The land round it is flat, then on a higher level flat again, pleasant, animated, without violent transitions. Meadows innumerable: grass, poplars, willows: hillsides deep in vines, the vines in regular rows like high walls between which a man could walk and be hidden; fields of corn and maize; scattered mulberry trees; and ever and again, on some higher point of ground, a charming village—Andezano, Asignano, Monbello, Muriundo, and, further off, Moncucco, of which we shall have more to say. So we come to Castelnuovo d'Asti, a fair-sized market-town, perched on a rock and crowned with three towers: its baptistery had the honour of seeing the spiritual birth of John Bosco.

This countryside has been with justice compared to Burgundy. But it differs from Burgundy by its square bell-towers, always light, often windowed, the slight slope of its roof, the height of its vines, the soft warm colour of its bricks and stones. Its wine is less potent, though as sparkling. But like Burgundy it is a pleasant country, quiet and unpretentious. It seems indeed to be less and less pretentious, to go out of its way to be even more humble, to soften its angles and tone down its emphases as it draws near the saint's birthplace: to the point of having no features at all when it gets there.

Becchi is not even a village. You could hardly call it so much as a hamlet: it has seven or eight peasant cottages scattered about a large-sized farm, where the cottage people go, from time to time, to work. The settlement is on a piece of rising ground planted with vines and orchards, sloping down again to meadowland, and on the left to woods. At our back, half seen through the trees, is the hamlet of Murialdo, Becchi's nearest "centre"; in front is the village of Buttigliera, its steeple clear against the sky, at the far side of a valley with level floor, open to the winds, and with the same grass, poplars and willows as all the other valleys of that region; to the right you can see as far as Castelnuovo d'Asti, the centre of canton and parish, of material and spiritual life.... Murialdo, Buttigliera, Castelnuovo: further off Moncucco: Capriglio d'Asti just out of sight: with one sweep the eye can take in almost the whole field in which the saint's childhood was lived.

Forget, if you can, the modern buildings which fortunately or unfortunately have replaced the cottages once grouped with the Bosco cottage on that slope. Obviously it was right to build a chapel: but not so obviously right to choose an angular style out of harmony with the place. It was right, too, to construct a terrace for the convenience of pilgrims; but scarcely necessary to build it so that it hides the field where as a boy John Bosco worked at winning souls by walking a tight-rope. They have painted this on the wall—but a painting is no substitute for the earth and the trees that witnessed it. Where is the barn, the square door opening on to the fields, the homely untidy farmyard? They have built up the house on its blank-wall side. At least they have respected its front and its interior. It looks out through the same windows, meets the world at the same door; the rooms are as they were, as poor as he knew them. The sky remains and the landscape. Imagination can do the rest: and piety, if by chance we have it.

On 16 August, 1815, one day after the Feast of the Assumption—a warm clear day we can pretty safely assume—John Bosco was born under the old round tiles of this same roof that still slopes gently towards us. Up the rough wooden staircase fixed on to the brickwork of the front they mounted to help the mother in labour in the second room under the roof. On the ground floor was a kitchen, on a level with the yard; on the floor above, two low rooms, narrow and without furniture—where would be space for furniture?—to take three grown-ups and three children; in the first is the fireplace, in the second the big bed; alongside is the loft, where presumably the boys slept. The whole place was neighboured on one side by a cowshed, on the other by a barn—grain, beasts, men behind one wall. Only down in the kitchen was there room to move. Poverty, bareness, meanness of aspect: but God's sky above: and God's presence within.

For this last explains everything. Nothing less could explain it. The poor mother may very well have gone, the day before her child's birth, to the Feast of Our Lady at the church in Murialdo—a good many miles, bad roads, but these peasant-women are so tough. Or perhaps the traditional procession may have come across the fields to Becchi for her consolation. Of this at least we may be sure, that Francesco Bosco's wife, Margarita Occhiena—a young woman still, barely twenty-seven, and very holy—passed the fifteenth in joyful and triumphant communion with the Mother of God. To the Mother of God she offered her sufferings, and surely, too, her son—still in her, still hers. He was born the next day.

They took him off at once, as was the custom, to Castelnuovo d'Asti; he was washed pure of the stain of original sin. Pure he remained to the end of his life. Well might he write, "I was born on the fifteenth of August." So he was, spiritually. He had two mothers, and he was a credit to both

of them.

His father was a day-labourer, of the solid Piedmontese race. He worked his own small field, and he worked for hire on the one big farm of the neighbourhood. By a first marriage he had a son Antonio, a rough, stupid sort of boy. The sudden death of his first wife left him—with a son and an old mother to look after—no alternative but to find another wife. At Capriglio he found a girl of his own class who had brought up four younger brothers, now old enough to fend for themselves. Margarita Occhiena came to Becchi, accepting her new duties with the same seriousness and solicitude. Her husband's mother became her mother, her husband's son her son. When she had her own first-born, Joseph, she treated him no better than Antonio; and when her second was born, John, she again fought back the preference that in spite of herself she felt for him. He was strong and lively; he showed himself full of intelligence and ardour, the exact opposite of his brother Joseph, who was quiet, slow and timid. Their step-brother Antonio, older by ten years, was more than inclined to ill-treat them. It needed strength and prudence to keep them at peace while preserving the right balance of kindness and justice. But the father was there, and they stood in awe of him.

By sheer misfortune, for he was a strong man in his prime, he died when John was two. One day when he was working at the big farm and bathed in sweat, he had gone down into the cellar on some errand for his employer. He was an easy-going man, and said nothing about the pain that followed. Suddenly he was down with pneumonia, and in four days he was dead. The first clear memory Don Bosco retained of his childhood—as he tells us himself—is connected with this.

"Fortified with all the consolations of religion," he writes, "urging upon my mother trust in God, my father died at the early age of 34, on the seventeenth of May, 1817."

The child was present and did not want to leave the room.

"Come, John, come with me," said his mother sorrowfully.

"If papa does not come, I won't go away."

"Poor little son, come with me," said his mother once more. "You have no father now."

She had to take his hand and drag him struggling from the room.

"I cried," adds the saint, "because I saw her crying. For at my age I could not measure the extent of my loss."

The mind of a child refuses to entertain the thought of death: he could only see it as nothingness, and nothingness cannot be thought. The child is born for life, his powers reach out to what is. And he is in the right; there is no death.

So the young mother was left alone, to face an overwhelming task: an old grandmother practically helpless, a twelve-year-old step-son who was already a problem, two infants, barren fields. For her widowhood had come in a time of calamity that spared no one in the province. A

flaming summer that came too soon had burnt up the harvest, ruined the vines; there was no money and no work. Food reached fabulous prices. "Men were found in the fields," Don Bosco tells us, "dead of starvation, their mouths full of chewed grass."

The situation called out every quality she had, her head, her heart, her trust in God. By what relentless economy she pulled through, what daily and hourly determination to waste no smallest shred of effort made or help offered, we do not know. Only the God who helped her knows. The crisis passed. The family survived. From now on she was more than ever the mother, her management more expert, her power of work stronger and more enduring, her faith firmer. She had set her hand to her destiny and would bring it to its supreme end—which was to raise her children in the supernatural order of grace. A mother of this mettle, of this quality, was the mother John Bosco had to have. The innate vocation of the saint from childhood cannot be explained without her. He brought much; she gave him more.

We of his day find it hard to imagine the solid piety of those peasant families which produce a Bernadette, a Cure d'Ars, a John Bosco. It is nowhere stronger than in the Piedmontese. Nothing troubles it, nothing lessens its integrity. To the ideas we call new, the emancipations and aberrations of the age, it is sheer granite. It takes the child in the cradle and before he knows reasons or joys or hopes he has the habit of the Faith. It would be folly to wait till the child is capable of choosing, freely and with full deliberation, this or that set of duties, beliefs, practices. One inalienable right the family has over the child, the right of choosing for him; and of so choosing that when his own time of choice comes he shall not choose error. And for them error means to forget God and God's purpose for men.

In the Bosco home, God was served first. In the early morning, the whole family was on its knees praying His blessing on the day, at table His blessing on the meal, at night His blessing on their rest. So a child learns to pray long before he learns to read, as early as he can utter a word or join his hands. The mother could not read; but her memory was richly stored and her speech was wise; all her life she had lived upon truth. Her devotion was not narrow and mechanical, divorced from life; for her children she drew lessons from the light, the flowers, night, the stars. If God has, for no merit of ours, given us so lovely or so magnificent a scene, what will Paradise be like? She was in rapture over a star, or a rose: "What lovely things the Lord has made for us!" In the evening, she told them stories with that easy racy homeliness that John was later to show—wonders from the Bible, from the Infancy of Our Lord, from the lives of the saints. She taught them, not grimly or as lessons, the elements of the catechism, and the notions of right and wrong. She made them talk and did not laugh as she heard them; she made herself one of them, and her authority did not suffer. When they did wrong, she corrected them with the uttermost gentleness, yet showing her own grief; she wanted them neither cowards nor hypocrites; within the freedom of God's law, they must develop freely. Her decisive word, constantly repeated, was "God sees you." They could hide nothing from God; they hid nothing from their mother.

Thus the existence of God—creator for our adoration, father for our needs—and of the pure and lowly Jesus His Son, was as real for them as the existence of the man next door mending his harrow in

the yard; prayer to God was as natural and necessary to life as eating, drinking and sleeping.

Their mother looked so happy at prayer that they could not but try to pray like her. They made the effort, and it came of itself.

How can we please God? By work and obedience, self-respect, love of others, the cheerful acceptance of things good and less good—the duties of our state, disappointments, hardships, misfortunes. The one goal of existence—since God has so decided and only a fool would choose some other—is to save our soul for eternity. They were poor people, but daily bread—lacking often enough—was never the first care. Salvation first: the most pressing reality is the soul; lose that and you lose all. But what is the soul? As their mother spoke of it, the two elder boys understood more or less; they believed and that was enough. But John opened his eyes wide, and within him something ardent and mysterious stirred to life at her words. Unknown to himself, his life had found its centre. He had received the seed of his future apostolate. At five, the seed began to quicken.

### III

Do not for one moment picture him as a little monster of perfection, with no personality, no reactions, anaemic as a plaster saint. The retiring, timid, peaceable, passive one was not John, but his brother Joseph—an intelligent, hardworking boy, marked from the beginning with the mark of those who will never go above or below the level of a decent obscurity. But John was a very different matter: a square-set boy, with a strong shapely head hard as a pebble under its thick curly hair, the sort of head that knows what it wants and wants all it knows. Inside that head, as it chanced, there was a will for good; had it chanced otherwise, one may tremble to think how immense a power for evil he might have been. "With his ardent nature," writes his best biographer, Pere Auffray, "he had a strong, concentrated self-will. We must face the fact squarely: it did not fall short of pride . . . obedience cost him very dear. 'If I had not become a priest and a religious,' he admitted one day to close friends, 'I should be the most abandoned [of] freethinkers.'"

There then was the powerful will; guarding and guiding it was a vast and lucid intelligence, avid to know, to understand, to assimilate, to reduce to order, to see issues—equipped, thus, for decision and for action. What else? Eyes at once dark and clear, deep and sparkling, looking the world in the face, missing nothing, but tender above all; a body thick-set but flexible; strong, clever hands; a sensitive generous heart. All this is of Piedmont, a country of mountaineers and builders, robust, obliging, positive, rooted in the soil—and matter-of-fact, rooted in the "object." But there were other qualities in him that belong rather to Italy, poetry to go with the Piedmontese prose. He had a love of games and of good stories, a fertile imagination never at a loss for inventions, a gift for comic yet revealing mimicry, worthy of an actor at the *Commedia dell'Arte*. He was a serious small boy, reflective, sparing of words, thinking a great deal more than he said; but when he came out from his corner to amuse his brother, you would not have known him: he overflowed with whimsicality, gaiety, fantasy: he was poet and comedian with the barriers down. At such a moment you could see that he was twofold, divided between reality and fantasy, deeply rooted in the concrete and as easily free of it. He was at once solid and winged. And if one could have known his dreams!

He was soon to be five, and he busied himself with all sorts of small tasks about the house. He

untangled hemp, broke up small sticks of wood, swept or tidied the kitchen, and when needed watched the two cows in the meadow. The other small boys invited him to join in their games; his mother said yes, and he rushed out to them. He rushed out indeed more than she liked; the devil was in his limbs; she saw him return with lumps and bruises, half-sobbing.

"Every day it's the same," she said. "Why do you go with those boys?"

His answer was curious: "Because, when I'm there, they behave better."

"Yes, and you come back with your head cut!"

"Oh! That was an accident."

"You are not to go again."

"Mother!"

"You understand?"

"Oh, all right! if you don't want me to; but when I am with them, they do as I wish and stop fighting."

And he believed it! The mother anyhow let herself be convinced. Perhaps already she saw the good that radiated from his small being. On one point only she was immovable; he must not go with boys notoriously bad; the rough and uncouth she would tolerate, not the downright evil. But in fact John had already made his own choice. He knew the scent of impurity before he knew what the thing itself was. He knew that a rotten apple will rot every apple in the basket; he must keep himself pure and clean; he was too weak yet to look upon vice with impunity. Even into old age he retained so close a devotion to chastity that he dared scarcely say the word for fear of evoking the contrary image in the hearer's mind. It is practically certain that in this matter his senses never troubled him; quite certainly he was always far too overwhelmed with the work in hand to listen to them.

So he ran, fought, played with the small boys of Becchi and seems to have gained a notable ascendancy over them. But one would hardly guess what this five-year-old set out to do: to teach them the catechism. Not all of them had a mother as he had; the church was a long way off; and what would become of them if they went on in ignorance of the elemental truths on which their salvation depended? "It seemed," he said later, "as though that were the one thing I had to do on earth." He had come to awareness of his vocation.

To be strictly honest, while he told them such exciting and gripping stories as those of Joseph and his brethren, Esther at the court of Assuerus, and Moses in the bulrushes, it all went beautifully; they listened breathlessly, for he acted the scenes, brought the characters to life with a naturalness and vivacity which held his young listeners spellbound. But when he came to the Commandments of God and the Church, they found it less entertaining and quickly had enough. As he stuck to it, they resisted; when he still stuck to it, they made fun of him. They played marbles and tossed

pennies. They swore on purpose to annoy him. Some took his part, sides were formed, whence arguments, blows, general melee. Nor was he the last to plunge into the fray; injustice enraged him, and thus early his apostolate knew nothing of the soft answer. He knew his strength, and in the name of holy truth he tore into battle. He had come to bring peace, and lo there was war. It was a sad disappointment. When he got home, he could no longer say without conscious lying: "When I am there, they stop fighting." But he kept at it. If you are a John Bosco, nothing can discourage you. A day would come, perhaps, when he would be listened to.

Did he find peace at home? Antonio was growing up, already almost a man; he was a hard worker, a true peasant. He could not see beyond his field; God blessed his field' but his field it was; and for a peasant it is sufficient for salvation that under God's protection he should till, plant, harvest; there is indeed no other way of salvation. "Joseph should be one too; also John. Oh, and why not John? Because he had nothing to say? Because he had a lot to say? He seemed more intelligent than the others, did he? And he had a taste for study? He wanted to learn to read—a peasant!—rubbish all of it."

When the mother was away, Antonio gave orders, acted the master. The brothers resisted. They would obey their mother, but not him. Joseph gave way. But we have already seen something of John: the least abuse of power irritated him; a harsh or unjust rebuke struck at his self-will. He stayed obstinate; Antonio raised his hand; but the little fellow could look after himself, with feet, fists and teeth. Thus it was that one evening their mother, returning from the market, probably, where she went on Thursdays to sell her butter and eggs, found her three boys fighting, the elder mauling the two younger. She cried shame on him for abusing his age. Antonio taunted her:

"Step-mother! Step-mother!" She took it squarely.

"I have always treated you as my own son. You cannot deny that. I have the right and I have the strength to correct you. I will not. And now, strike your mother."

Antonio was beaten, naturally. That calm firmness in face of a tempest of passion was a mighty lesson for John. Would it have been enough to change him, in whose veins flowed all the violence of his elder brother? Not by itself; heaven was in it too. But we must marvel at the ceaseless collaboration, the way in which his earthly and his heavenly mother united for his formation till he reached manhood.

Antonio was against his being sent to college; they needed his work on the farm. But he went. The school of Castelnuovo d'Asti was some three miles away—too far for a child, even so strong a child. Margarita's birthplace, Capriglio, was much nearer. For two winters John Bosco trudged there daily to be taught by Don Delacqua, a very holy priest, to read and write, and—as an extra—to know God better. Between whiles, he took the cows to pasture.

Half-cowherd, half-schoolboy, he took his book to the fields with him, kept one eye on it and one on the cows. If he was too deeply absorbed in his reading, it was all one to the cows. Urchins came prowling round to break a silence that was beyond their understanding. The day was so fine and sunny, the perfect day for a game.

"Are you playing, John?" "Not today. I'm studying." "Oh, come. That can wait."

One day when they would not be shaken off, dragging him by the heels and throwing earth on his book, he hurled at them: "Leave me alone! I want to be a priest."

This admission, utterly unexpected, made such an impression on the boys that they stopped worrying him and went off quietly.

In this same field, close by the house, little John Bosco—John Boschetto as they called him—used every day to exchange his own piece of white bread for the black bread of another boy, on the presence that he preferred black bread. In his poor home beggars and wayfarers were received, sometimes given a bed, always food; from their poor portion the family fed the poorest. John was then about nine.

## 2. The First Dream

### I

At that time he had his first dream. Or at any rate the first he has told us of, the first he took seriously. Many another dream must have come by night to his teeming and inventive brain. He was to dream more and more, as reality came to take on the texture of his vigils, and confirm more precisely the visions of his sleep.

"A dream?"—asks Athalie. "Should I worry about a dream?" There are times when it would be prudent. It is an error to see in our dreams nothing but the divagations of our unconscious self. They are woven of the same threads—though unpicked and re-ordered—that compose the stuff of our life and our being. In them we find tossed together memories of yesterday and memories of our remotest past, significant things and totally insignificant, our regrets, hopes, fears, illusions, our most intimate impulses satisfied or repressed. There is in them some mysterious element which is in us yet may not be of us. Reality is transposed into another key, or in a different scale, logical or incoherent—and nothing is more incoherent than logic pushed as far as it will go—plausible or incredible. Sometimes it is like the casting of a spell, a gulf lost in mist in which we rise or sink, our senses receiving nothing, our soul alone receptive. Sometimes it appears as a material presence, more solid and convincing than the objects we can hold in our hand, and these times our bodies rejoice in it or suffer. Chance perhaps; more often reaction, an impression too powerfully received and still vibrating deep within us. But if it is chance it can be directed, if it is vibration it can be set stirring by one in us, but distinct from us.

Theology teaches us that angels—bad or good—have complete power over matter, provided God permits. Easily then they can stir some cell in our brain whose activity is associated with some special feeling or image or thought, so that we have the illusion of being tempted or enlightened. I do not say it happens often. But it is possible, and it is not unlikely. And obviously God can create a reality that fills our mind in sleep under the form of a dream as easily as He can create a vision for our waking mind. It is by the mode of dreams that God chose to guide Don Bosco along his way from early childhood to the end of life. Your unbeliever will, of course, find a

perfectly natural explanation: John Bosco, obsessed by his vocation to the priesthood, invented images that favoured it—unconsciously, of course, but inevitably. Very well. Let us look at what he invented.

His first dream starts with reality. He is near the house, in a fair-sized yard where are playing a multitude of children; so far merely an enlargement of his everyday experience. Some laugh, some play, many blaspheme. This, too, he knows in real life. John Bosco cannot tolerate so direct, wilful and public an insult to God. He rushes forth to silence them, shouting, his fist raised. This is still normal; it is the way he always reacts, hot-blooded, carried away. So much of his dream is sheer matter of every day: he is simply re-living intensely an episode with the other boys that has occurred too often for his taste; even in sleep he is the champion of the Faith.

At this point in the dream, while he is lashing out vigorously, there appears "a Man in the prime of his age, nobly clad"; a white mantle covers all his body and his face shines so that one cannot look upon it. This personage calls him by his name, orders him to put himself at the head of the unruly troop, and adds this counsel:

"It is not with blows, but with gentleness and charity that you will make them friends. Begin immediately to instruct them on the ugliness of sin and the reward of virtue."

Confused, overwhelmed, John's one idea is to refuse; he is but a poor ignorant child, incapable of speaking on religion to boys of his own age. These, no longer laughing, quarrelling, blaspheming, are grouped about the Man.

"Don't you see," murmurs the child, "that you are commanding the impossible?"

"What seems to you impossible," replied the strange visitant, "you will make possible, if you choose, by obedience and study."

"Where and how shall I get the knowledge?"

"I shall give you a Mistress, under whose guidance alone one can become wise, without whom all knowledge is foolishness."

"But who are you, then, to speak like this?"

"I am the Son of Heaven whom your mother teaches you to salute three times a day."

"My mother has forbidden me to have anything to do with people I don't know. Tell me your name."

"Ask my name of my Mother."

At this word a Lady approaches, majestic to see, wearing a cloak that blazed in every tiniest particle, as if each point was made of the most brilliant star.

More and more overcome, John at her signal comes up to her, and the Lady takes his hand kindly.

"Look," she bids him.

The children had all vanished; in their place growled a multitude of wild beasts, wild goats, tigers, wolf-dogs, brown bears and white bears....

"This is your field, the field in which you must labour. Make yourself humble, strong, vigorous, and the miracle I shall work in transforming these wild animals before your eyes you shall work upon my children."

John looked again and now saw only a great flock of lambs, thronging and gambolling round the Man and the Woman.

At this point in the dream John began to weep and begged the Lady to explain, for he knew not what it meant. She laid her hand on his head, saying:

"You will understand all in due time."

Thereupon a great noise woke John Bosco; the dream was ended.

He could not get back to sleep; his fists and his face hurt him; he still felt the blows he had given and taken in the imaginary fight. Nor could he get the two mysterious personages out of his mind. In the morning he could not keep the dream to himself, but told first his brothers, then his mother and even the old grandmother, in the hope of finding some hint of a meaning in it.

"You are to be a shepherd," said Joseph. "Or a bandit chief," said Antonio. "Perhaps he will be a priest?" suggested his mother.

"You should pay no attention to dreams," was the prudent conclusion of the old grandmother. No more was said. But the boy thought of it endlessly, not as a fantasy embroidered by sleep upon some waking interest, but as a call or a message which he could not yet interpret, but must at all costs manage to interpret. This dream-prophecy was to be repeated a great many times, with a number of additional details, every one of which was to have its real counterpart in the future. It was an epoch in his life, the first intervention of the preternatural.

"I do want to be a priest," he confided to his mother. "I've had the idea a long time."

The confession was easier to make since she had thought of it as a possible meaning for his dream.

"It will not be easy. And why do you want to? Do you even know?"

"I know very well. I want to devote my life to children. I shall make them love me. I shall work for their souls."

He had already begun. His goal began to take clearer shape. He would use his gifts since he had gifts, his learning since he could already read and had a head full of stories and a few facts mixed in. Right down to his strong supple body he would put himself at the service of souls. All the talents he had received from Providence should be made to bear fruit to the very last one. From his tenth year his obsession was the apostolate, a total devotion, every means in his power used for that and for nothing else.

When there was a fair in the neighbouring villages, Margarita, who was already a saint but not above a little recreation, took her children to it as a treat. It might be Castelnuovo; first there would be vespers; then off to the low square with its little tributary shopping—streets gay with the coloured stuffs hung out by the drapers and the pedlars; there in the square they would stand in front of the baskets, and the counters and the booths; and the mother saw no harm but much fun in the absurd patter and the acrobatic tricks of the mountebanks. John was as happy as a king, but he kept his eyes wide open. Nothing could stop him observing, asking how and why. He had to know all things, for all things can be of use—especially, perhaps, the useless.

I have said that he was a great reader; it was a delight to hear him tell stories. At running and jumping he was the best of them; and he could turn somersaults; the other boys liked to watch him at it, and in any case his body needed action, needed to feel its own strength. Therefore he trained himself to every game that might be turned to advantage. It was an odd preparation for the priesthood, odd but not to be laughed at.

At one fair there was a ventriloquist who imitated a cow and a calf, and could speak without opening his mouth; John saw how he did it; he tried it himself. A comedian staged a whole comedy on his stand with a number of characters—Harlequin, Pulcinella, the Doctor, the Braggart; John's mind photographed the whole affair. A conjurer puzzled the yokels by taking coins out of their noses, changing water into wine, clubs into hearts, drawing live chickens out of omelettes or hats. How the devil does he manage it? No, it's not the devil, only the man. John did not quite see, but he would return; if the man could do it, John was no fool either. The same with the acrobat who walked a tight-rope and made three complete somersaults in the air before reaching the carpet; his body and John's were not made of different materials; what one body can do, another body can do.

"Come along, child." "Another minute, Mother." "Very well. A minute. Are you so much interested then?"

Back at home, the moment he is alone, he does his lessons, says his prayers, and starts on the reproduction of what the ventriloquist did, and the comedian, and the acrobat, and the conjurer. He spent hours out with his cows, practicing and risking his neck; he turned Catherine wheels, walked on his hands, did complicated somersaults, tried to keep his balance on a cattle-rope stretched between two trees.

Spills, failures, bruises: his will was stronger than all. He had brought his soul to obedience and was not going to be beaten by his body. He stuck at it, and with such success that very soon he was able to give a performance. All the decent amusements provided by the actor, juggler, conjurer, tightrope man at the fair at Castelnuovo—one small boy would provide for his own

village. In my imagination I see his guardian angel keeping very close to him, breaking his falls, keeping his feet from slipping, speeding his flight in the air, landing him safe on his feet. It is pure imagination of course; but guardian angels are not a myth; and if John's angel did lend a hand in this performance, John's merits are no less for that.

Why did he take so much trouble? you ask; would it not have been better to pray a little more? But for John Bosco there was not then, and there never would be, any separation, segregation, of prayer from action. Doing meant no cessation of praying. His somersaults were prayers, as later his works were to be. His one thought was to give back to God all that he had received from God—his strength and agility and the colour of his personality, as well as his mind and his heart. God having inspired him to an apostolate among the children of his own age, he set about cultivating the means—the childish, frivolous, diverting means—most likely to win them. You don't catch flies with vinegar; that was how St. Francis de Sales saw it, who was later to be John Bosco's patron. He turned himself into an entertainer partly for his own sake—for the pleasure of difficulty overcome—but mainly for theirs.

John Bosco was a personality, a phenomenon. The rumour spread. In winter he was invited round to the houses of neighbouring farmers, to read aloud to them by firelight or candlelight. He would read with much gesture such things as the *Reali di Francia*. But he always began and ended with a Hail Mary, in which everyone must join, young and old, with a shrug of the shoulders often enough; there was no getting out of it; the boy had to be humoured. He held them, he had them.

In the summer the method was different. In the field by the house he founded his first Sunday class, his first Oratory. He would take his stand under the big pear-tree, stretch a rope between two trees, spread his strip of carpet on the grass, arrange a small table, set down the bag with his conjuring things. Then he shouted and clapped his hands; the crowd gathered quickly, for shows are rare in the hamlet of Becchi. Then he took his rosary from his pocket.

"We shall say first the third part of the Rosary, the Glorious Mysteries, in honour of Sunday."

They grumbled under their breath, but they obeyed.

"And now, please, a hymn to the Blessed Virgin."

That over, he stood up on a chair and explained the Gospel of the day as he had heard it explained that morning at High Mass; and they might have been listening to the curate of Buttigliera or the parish priest of Castelnuovo d'Asti. If someone is foolish enough to object, his answer is instant: "Very well. But I won't do my tricks. Take it or leave it. Besides, if you don't pray, I may break my neck."

He could always turn a laugh. And then the show began. The preacher was transformed in the twinkling of an eye into a showman. He gave them everything, from farce to conjuring, from the leap of death to walking the tight-rope. He ended with prayer and a short sermon very much to the point on blasphemy, or obedience to God and the Church.

They came from many miles off to see the show. There were at times more than a hundred people

in that small field, with all the children of the district in the front row, utterly dazzled. Taking advantage of his ascendancy, John Bosco took them aside, counselled them, composed their differences. The work of the Oratory was not simply here in the seed; it had already budded.

## II

Thus it was that, thanks to his tricks, the farmers of Becchi and the places round, who had not the energy to go to mass at Castelnuovo or Buttigliera—the roads were bad to the one, the other meant a six-mile walk each way—yet did something to hallow the Sunday; and their children, left to themselves heard something of God.

At ten he seemed to the priest at Castelnuovo so advanced that he

allowed him to make his first communion two years ahead of the age then usual. For some time past his mother had prepared him, explaining the difficult points in the Catechism, helping him to conform his conduct to its rules, taking him frequently to confession, guiding him in the examination of his conscience. He went to confession three times that Lent. On the morning of Easter Sunday, by her counsel, he spoke no word to anyone that he might be alone within himself preparing for the visit of God made Man. What the visit meant to him, he has not told us; he always kept silence on the deep joys of his soul. The family returned home, and till evening John, excused all household tasks, read and prayed.

"You are beginning a new life," said his mother. "Guard yourself and become better."

He made his first communion at the end of March, 1821, immediately after Easter. In the same season—from the beginning of April—a mission was preached in the village of Buttigliera, and John Bosco decided to follow it. A mission is an event in a remote hamlet. It was the year of Jubilee, and the Jubilee indulgences could be gained without actually going to Rome.

Hence a very great attendance at the sermons preached morning and evening by the famous preacher who was giving the Mission. If one went both morning and evening, it meant a double journey each way, a total of ten miles a day. There was nothing in that to daunt John Bosco. On the way home, while the others chattered, he thought about his future, and prayed God to change the mind of his very difficult brother Antonio. More from stupidity than ill-will, Antonio was heavily against John going on with his studies. Lessons were expensive, and John was now of an age to earn. A boy of John's build, strong to work and born a farmer, ought to be a farmer: why make a scholar of him, a gentleman? (For Antonio, and for many beside him, priests were "gentlemen.") Let people stick to their place.

So, one April evening when the buds were beginning to show on the branches, John Bosco was coming home from Buttigliera. A priest of seventy noticed his silence, which contrasted with the vigour of his stride.

"Where are you from?" he asked. "Becchi." "You are following the Mission? Your mother's sermons are not enough?" "Her sermons are very good, but I like to hear the priest who is giving the Mission." "And you understand some of it?" "All of it, Father." "You're very sure. I will give

you four soldi if you can repeat even four of his words." "From the first sermon or the second?" "As you will. What was the first about?" "About the necessity of giving oneself to God in time, lest we lose our salvation at the last hour." "Perfect." "Shall I repeat the whole sermon?"

To the utter amazement of the priest, John repeated first the morning's sermon, then the evening's; not like a little parrot, but as a boy thinking, recapturing the words by first recapturing the ideas. He had not only remembered; he had understood. Then the priest questioned the boy closely, about his family, his tastes, and the education he had had. He could read and write, no more; he had not so much as a notion of what grammar might be. But he would have liked to study. He told of his ambition to be a priest, of his deepest ambition to preach to the young. But alas! though his mother was wholly with him, there was the veto of his brother Antonio.

The old priest looked deep into his eyes, read his soul. As they parted, he took the boy's hand and said:

"I am Don Calosso, from Murialdo. Come and see me on Sunday with your mother. Have confidence, my son. We shall see what can be done."

He took the road to Murialdo and John to Becchi, each in his own way overwhelmed, rather suspecting the immense horizon their meeting had opened.

A compromise was reached. The boy should go every morning to be taught by Don Calosso in his presbytery; the rest of the day he should work on the farm as before. Antonio took it sourly, but Margarita stood firm. For the first time John knew the friendship of a priest. Almost all the priests he had tried to approach looked down on the peasants. Don Calosso was a simple gentle soul; he loved his pupil, taught him grammar and the elements of Latin. For Latin his head was thick; but what got into that head stayed in it. With tenacity and memory together, he had to succeed. He always took a book with him into the fields; and at night he buried himself in it. Which exasperated his elder brother beyond endurance.

"Where will it get you? You will never be anything but a peasant like the rest of us, whether you like it or not."

"I shall be what God wills."

At that point he had to rush away to escape a box on the ears; but nothing discouraged him. The whole of Sunday he spent at Murialdo; he served mass, sang, began the practice of meditation upon divine things, and by taking part in games made new friends. Consider one incident. One feast day there was an open-air dance close by the church; the crowd was flocking to it, though the bell had sounded for vespers. John tried to get the boys to come to church, but failed; his protestations, arguments, appeals to their piety made them laugh. So he began to sing a popular song so beautifully—the beauty of his voice was another of his talents which we have not so far had occasion to mention—that they gathered round to listen. Slowly he began to move; the crowd followed; still singing, he moved towards the church, into the church; the crowd went in with him.

With the fine weather, the work to be done on the farm increased, and Antonio's hostility passed all bounds. He could not stand the sight of a book in John's hands. That summer was a season of storms in the home—abuse, arguments, violence. The elder brother's jealousy turned to hatred. The mother intervened, but in vain: she now had a man to deal with.

"John is not to study any more."

The beloved lessons with Don Calosso had to stop till the autumn. John gave way, but his submission did not do him much good. It was as though his elder brother read the vocation ever present, ever alive, in him, and raged with the determination to stifle it; no humiliation, no futile persecution, was spared. He was head of the family and in charge of the work: the Bosco's small belongings were his to order as he would. For the sake of peace, the mother proposed a solution that was agony to her; but we know that she never shirked sacrifice.

"John, my son, life is no longer possible here. God cannot bless a disunited family. Your brother Antonio is risking damnation. Go and find work somewhere else, on some other farm. I know God will guard you." John went.

### **3. Out In The World**

#### **I**

It was the February of 1829, a hard winter. He was fourteen. He took his books and his few clothes in his knapsack. He set off along the valley like a tramp, making towards Castelnuovo. Wherever he asked for work he was refused. Winter slows down everything; only in the spring do the farmers want extra labour. They gave him food and a place to sleep; in the morning he must be off. He thought he might have luck with the Moglias, mentioned to him by his mother. Their farm was, and is still, on the earth track that swings up rather abruptly to the left off the Moncucco road, half a mile or so short of the village. The Moglias were successful farmers, good and charitable people by all accounts; but they saw no point in taking on one more farm-hand, probably unskilled, who would cost more than he could possibly be worth; in the dead season it would have been utter folly.

When he presented himself, the family were occupied in binding osier into bundles, from which you can guess how little there was to do.

"Go straight home, my boy," said the father. "Wait till the Annunciation. Then you can come back."

"For charity," begged the poor child. "You won't have to pay me a penny, I don't ask for anything . . . but let me stay!"

"Impossible. Off with you."

"No. I'll sit here on the floor and I won't budge. You'll have to throw me out."

He did as he said. He began to gather up the osier like the others. And he wept.

Luigi Moglia's wife, Dorothea, began to coax her husband.

"You might take him on trial, for two or three days."

"Give him my cows to mind," suggested Teresa, Luigi's fifteen-year-old sister. "I shall go and work in the fields with you."

So it was decided. And John Bosco made himself so useful that he soon received a salary of fifteen lire a year, rising to twenty, and even as high as thirty. He stayed at the farm two years.

It was a time of hiddenness and obscurity, such as all saints must pass through. His Memoirs tell us little about it, save that he was not idle. "My eyes were barely open when I was at work, and I did not stop till I went back to bed." Yet, as he later avowed, it was "the loveliest and most romantic time" of his life. For the first time he was away from home, the centre of all his actions, the corner-stone of his thought; and he had set out into the world on his own to seek his fortune. A boy of his mettle had to learn to fend for himself. A John Bosco only knows himself, only finds himself when natural supports are shorn away, and he has no one but God to rely upon.

The Moglias' farm is worth a closer look. It remains as he found it, a good hundred years ago. It is barely visible from the main road, half-way up a slope between ploughed fields and vines, facing the deep wheel-ruts of a lane that leads to a handful of poor houses. It reigns unpretentiously over the hamlet named from its owners. Weatherworn, cracked, crooked, still sturdy; its sole concession to appearances an occasional coat of whitewash. Round reddish tiles; a wooden balcony just under the roof; cowshed, barn, house, all three shoulder to shoulder in one continuous line; the farmyard piled thick and slippery with manure—nothing healthier, they say—sheds, an ancient mulberry tree, hay everywhere, washing hung out to dry. There is nothing whatever to distinguish it from all the other farms of the district, all faithful to tradition and scornful of what is called hygiene—leave that to the sun and the air, the rain and the cold. A massive flight of stairs leads down to the yard, up to the living-room, far bigger than the kitchen at Becchi; it has a long table, and you are still shown at the lower end the exact spot where John Bosco stood his bowl. An ancient, very ancient Moglia—she is not far off ninety—told us with tears of the friendly visits the saint used to pay to the family he had served so long before.

"One thing you must grant him—he never forgot a kindness."

And here, under the roof, is the attic, or rather cupboard, that was his bedroom; we know he wasn't very tall, but there was just space for him to stand or lie down. It was in this dark corner, frozen in winter, roasting in summer, that in the silence of the night he clung to his hope. For he had not given up; he could still dream.

In the shade of the mulberry tree, the last living witness of his testing-time, we saw a cart standing with two oxen, its curious shaft raised in the air like a horn. A small boy clambered up the ladder with a bundle of sheaves. It might have been John Bosco. Here, indeed, time seems to have stood still. If you would live again for a brief moment the heroic boyhood of the founder of

the Salesians, it is to the Moglias' farm that you must go.

The farm-hand toiled away; the apostle clung on. At every free moment he refreshed his memory, ran over again Don Calosso's lessons; he prayed and meditated; entertained and instructed the children round. When the lady of the house was away, she confided her three-year-old boy to John; the child loved him and followed him everywhere. Luigi Moglia was more surprised than pleased at the manifold gifts of his farm-hand. One day, when they were out together sowing, the Angelus rang from Moncucco. John stopped, and knelt in the furrow. The good man shouted his disapproval.

"Here, what's this? Get up, get on with your work."

"I do more by praying than you by working," answered John. "If you pray and sow two grains, four ears grow. If you don't pray and sow four grains, two ears grow. I'm giving you good advice."

"I don't want advice from a bit of a boy like you."

He was a very odd bit of a boy. He had already won the heart of Don Cottino, who was in charge of the parish. On Sundays he went off to mass, over the fences and through the gardens of the charming village of Moncucco.

With his games and his prayers he gathered the children together in front of the brick tower and the white-columned peristyle of the church. Don Cottino gave him permission to assemble his little crowd in one of the schoolrooms and teach them in his place—and better luck to him than Don Cottino ever had.

Month followed month.

## II

The Moglias had no thought now of letting him go. Antonio did not want him back. Margarita kept patience, perfecting herself in the exercise of total abandonment to God's will. That summer John would be fifteen. Could he ever catch up with the others, even if he were able to resume his studies? But how could he possibly resume his studies? There was no point in thinking about a thing so hopeless.

At that moment, heaven raised up an uncle: one of those uncles who, if they don't come from America, at least deserve to have gone there; one of those angel-uncles, uncles ex machina, who turn up just when everything is wrong to put everything right.

Margarita had a brother, Michaele Occhiena, who had made money in cattle-raising. He had, of course, helped his sister, but she was not much given to asking. From a distance he followed the progress of his nephews Joseph and John; but he was not told of their troubles. Probably he had heard John spoken of as an unusual boy, a boy with a future: he was with the Moglias, it seemed.... And then one winter morning, crossing a meadow, he met the boy.

"How are things, youngster? You're satisfied with your place?"

"Yes and no."

John seized the ball on the first bounce. He told his uncle how matters stood, told him his hopes, all that was in his heart, his grief and disappointment. The uncle was surprised and much moved; he decided to set matters right instantly: and with him instantly meant instantly. He was that kind of man.

"Take your herd back, say good-bye to your master and mistress, and pack your things. I am going to market at Chieri. I'll meet you at Becchi this evening and talk to your mother. If anyone objects, tell them it's by my orders. You understand?"

That night—pushing in front of him the boy who had not dared to go home by himself and so had spent a good part of the day hiding in a ditch—Michael came into the living-room, confronted the raging Antonio and announced his decision: John was to live in the house, and go every day to Buttigliera or to Castelnuovo and have his lessons from the parish priest. As both parish priests declined, they fell back on Don Calosso, who was growing daily more infirm, but was delighted to see his pupil again.

Then, at the last moment, Antonio, who had been champing at the bit all through, opposed his veto. This was too much for Margarita. She asserted her rights with masculine energy. Since they could not agree together, they had better separate. The court should divide up the small heritage of Francesco Bosco between Antonio and the two younger boys. Antonio should cultivate his share, she would handle the children's. After the usual lengthy formalities, it was so arranged. Antonio went to live in the hamlet near by. Margarita and Joseph stayed in the farmhouse; and John went as a boarder with his old master in the presbytery of Murialdo.

There was perfect accord in the tiny book-littered room between the boy of fifteen, vowed totally to God, and the gentle infirm old man whose one thought was to give him to God. Work went with a magnificent sweep, with master and pupil linked in love and praying together without ceasing.

"You shall be the son of my soul, little John, the last, the dearest and surely the best. All that remains to me in this world, I bank on your future. You have taken the decisive step; the road is open. Living or dead, I shall ensure you the means of going to the very end of the road without hindrance."

What exactly did he mean by that? John Bosco thought it was all a dream. After so many obstacles, so many reverses, could he now simply glide with a stream that would take him where he would go?

"Don Calosso," he wrote later, "was for me as the Angel of the Lord."

John loved him more than a father; he did nothing save for him; his joy was to serve him, to wear himself out in his service. With him, all seemed easy. Suddenly Don Calosso was taken from

him.

The old priest had sent him on an errand to Becchi. Hardly was he there when someone from Murialdo came after him with the news that his master had had a seizure and urged him to return. John found him in bed; Don Calosso knew him, looked at him, tried hard to speak to him, but could not utter a word. He groped under his pillow and managed to drag out the key of his drawer: he placed it in his hand, with a gesture as though to say: "For you. Don't give it to anyone else. What you find in the drawer is for you. For you alone."

Don Calosso was two days dying. When his heirs—distant relations—arrived John gave them the key. He knew that in the drawer was six thousand lire, and that Don Calosso meant them for him—enough to carry on his studies without worry. But he feared to do harm to his neighbour.

He could think only of his grief, his loneliness of spirit, the loss of his master and friend. So utterly overcome was he that Margarita, fearing for his health, sent him off to his grandfather at Capriglio for rest and change. There, in a dream, he saw himself severely rebuked for having put his trust in mortal man and not in the goodness of God.

God's goodness never wearies; but God does not mind wearying men. Don Calosso was dead; but John must not despair. A month before that, Don Calosso's successor had appeared. A month before, the boy had met a young theological student, Don Joseph Cafasso of Castelnuovo d'Asti. He was to meet him again, but the first meeting must be related.

It was a Sunday in October: a feast of Our Lady had gathered all the people of Murialdo in the square. Before the religious ceremonies, the crowd of grown-ups and children were looking at the games or taking part; there were shooting galleries, stall, booths. John noticed a young ecclesiastic who seemed to stand apart; he leaned against the church door, a small man, with shining eyes and pleasant face. John was charmed by his appearance and could not resist speaking to him.

"Father, if you would like to see the fair, I should be glad to take you round."

The young ecclesiastic thanked him, and asked a few questions about the boy and his studies. John answered—he never needed a second invitation. Then he repeated his suggestion.

"My dear friend, the only performances that priests need to see are those that take place in church. The only novelties that should interest them are the practices of religion—these for the priest are ever new, ever more new. I am waiting for the church to open to go in."

"Father, there is a time for everything, a time for games, a time for prayers."

The cleric began to laugh, but was calm and serious again as he replied:

"When you embrace the clerical state, you sell yourself to Our Lord; nothing of the world's sights should concern you save what turns to the profit of your soul and the greater glory of God."

John Bosco might have replied that he had already succeeded in serving God by his "tricks"; the accent of Don Cafasso was so deep and pure that it touched the very depth of his soul; and it was as though he had met an angel on his way, whom it would have been great profit to see more of.

But the time for Don Cafasso had not yet come. The new masters, into whose hands he now fell, were inadequate, supercilious and even some of them hostile.

First, he went to Castelnuovo for Latin classes with a certain Don Moglia; he went morning and evening—twelve miles a day on foot. He did not mind about his legs, but he had to be careful of his shoes; he carried them on his back. To save a journey, his mother soon decided to give him food to take in his wallet. Then she arranged for him to lodge in Castelnuovo with the tailor Roberto Gioanni, she paying for his board in kind.

He was not happy there. His companions jeered at him; for he was older by years than any of them and more backward than any; and dressed like the ace of spades. The teacher, being a fool, had got it into his head that John was a stupid yokel, incapable of learning. When John handed in a badly done exercise, the master was noisily sarcastic. When—by how much labour!—John did a good exercise, he accused him of copying from the next boy. It was useless for the next boy to protest that it was not so; useless even for the whole class, as they did one day about one of John's translations.

"I know what I am saying, be silent. He is an ass. And he will always be an ass. Nothing good comes from Becchi!"

Away from home, John had lost his prestige; he had to learn humility. When he went back to Roberto's house, discouraged by the master's injustice and the jeers of the boys, he thought of Don Calosso and of his mother. Gioanni tried to distract him a little.

"Sing with me," he said.

The tailor was a good singer; bending over his work, he would be singing love-songs all day; he even went in for a little plain-chant.

"You can work while you sing. Take a needle. I'll teach you to sew."

John, endlessly curious, quick with his hands, soon was able—as he tells us himself—to sew buttonholes, hems, seams, and to cut out drawers, breeches and waistcoats. At the end of a few months, if he had not made much progress in his studies, at least he was a model apprentice: still one more trade up his sleeve for the bad days, if bad days there must be. Cowherd, ploughboy, vine-dresser, comedian, acrobat, tailor: did God mean him to be a priest as well as all the other things? God's ways are very odd.

When vacation time came, John found his mother and brother at the farm of Sussambrino, near Becchi; they had recently taken it on the principle of paying the rent out of produce. He had to admit to them that things were not going too well: to put it bluntly he had wasted his year. Was he tempted to give way? I don't think so for a moment. He had been horrified by the lofty

incomprehension the priests showed towards the boys entrusted to them, by the small profit these young souls drew from instruction that lacked warmth, intimacy and tenderness; but he was all the more determined to change the only too accurate opinion people had of the local clergy when he got into their place. His disappointment merely gave him fresh reasons for perseverance. And at that moment heaven gave him a sign—his old dream, but with a new detail.

John saw approaching him a tall woman leading an immense flock. She called him by his name:

"You see, Giovannino, I am entrusting the whole flock to you."

"How shall I be able," the boy objected, "to take care of so many sheep and lambs? Where shall I find them pasturage?" "Fear not: I shall be with you." And she vanished. As he told this new dream, John was radiant with joy: "Now I'm sure I shall be a priest." Margarita took the matter in hand and managed so well that when the schools reopened, John was at Chieri, at the college. So finished the peasant part of his life.

#### **4. Chieri**

Chieri is not strictly speaking a city, but a small town living modestly on the half-ruined heritage of its mediaeval past.

With its narrow streets, high walls, low shops, shapeless "squares"—more suited to the jostle on fair and market days of farmers with their cattle, gardeners with their fruit and vegetables, than to the solemnities of municipal or princely ceremonial—it is in striking contrast with the monumental regularity of the great city of Turin, no farther away than the other side of a range of hills. When Don Bosco went there, it still had many convents, many fine churches from Gothic to Baroque, a triumphal arch, a Major Seminary and what we should call a grammar school. It had a floating population of students, or rather schoolboys, lodging with the local people and following the school courses; and a fixed population of shopkeepers, weavers and religious. Simple, pleasant, picturesque, rubbing shoulders with the farms and the orchards of the countryside, dominated by the clear outline of a church on a hillock, it was the sort of place in which a boy fresh from the farm might feel at home. John Bosco loved his time there.

He boarded with a certain Lucia Matta, who lived at Chieri for the school year with her son, a schoolboy like John. He had to pay just under twenty lire a month, but must also run errands for Lucia, and look after his own room, and help the son with his lessons. To get a little money together and pay up three months in advance, John Bosco went round and made a kind of collection among his neighbours of Becchi and Murialdo. They knew him and believed in his vocation, and they gave him what they could—eggs, butter, cheese, grain; he sold it all at Castelnuovo on his way to Chieri. Every week his mother brought the best of her chestnuts and a big loaf baked in the communal oven.

John—wretchedly lodged, wretchedly fed, wretchedly cold, leaving his books and his classes only for the most menial tasks—was bathed in bliss. With his full sixteen years, he looked like a giant among the little fellows in his class. He began in the sixth grade, but was first in his class

within two months and was promoted to the fifth; he worked like a slave and in another two months had gone up to the fourth. Already he had caught up two years, and his new teacher—Don Cima Giuseppe, a very severe master—realised his quality. All the powers of his mind seemed to flower at the one moment, as if the state of suppression and inactivity in which they had so long been held had been secretly ripening them. He understood everything, retained everything. One day when he had forgotten to bring his book—the *Agesilaus* of Cornelius Nepos—when his turn came to construe, he opened his grammar book instead and pretended to read the text; he had it all in his memory and from his memory he read it, without hesitation or error.

"Sir, sir," gasped one of the boys, "he isn't reading from his book, he hasn't his book."

The master found that it was so.

"For your excellent memory," he said, "I pardon your forgetfulness. Consider yourself fortunate to have such a gift—and use it for good."

But what follows is beyond the human. Gift does not account for it. His companions tell us that time and again he learnt in a dream the passage his teacher would set him to translate next day, and that he had it translated in advance. Like Joseph, he was nicknamed Dreamer. And the Dreamer did not lose his head in the clouds; his principal dream was God. His confessor, the theologian Maloria, often received him in the tribunal of penance, urged him to receive Holy Communion more frequently than was then usual, and thereby quieted his mind and his heart and saved him from the unhealthy curiosity too common in big schools.

The ascendancy that John Bosco had acquired over his new companions quickly resulted in the best of them grouping round him. He founded a society, excluding the worst boys—those who spent their Sundays and their evenings in small thievery and general dissoluteness, who swore and talked obscenities; the indifferent, who rather let themselves be led by the worst, were not admitted either; he must have no dead weight. The members undertook to avoid every word and action not permitted for a good Christian, and to observe faithfully all their school and religious duties. They met in the evenings at the home of one or another of them to read, pray, learn, receive one another's advice or correction. On feast days they met at church, followed the offices, discussed the gospel together and progressed in its understanding.

Rather gloomy recreations, you might say. They did not think so. Surprisingly they named their society the Society of Joy. Once their duties were over, they were out in a body on the roads, singing, laughing, visiting wayside chapels, picking bilberries and wild strawberries in the woods; when the days were longest, they made their way from San Guglielmo to San Giorgio, by the Madonna del Pino or the basilica of Superga, right into the capital itself. They explored Turin, its palaces and sanctuaries. There are enough lovely things in the world to occupy and divert the eye without soiling it.

They were a cheerful crowd as they gathered—bundles on their backs, rosary in hand—round the bigger boy, cleverer and more agile than they, gayer, more learned and holier, already planning out the field of his future conquests. For the rest of his life he was thus to march ahead, dragging

his young companions in the way of Christ his Master. He had put on the shoes of the apostle, he only needed the robe; nothing now was to bar his way.

So much fun naturally attracted the others, the hesitant, the easily led. To win them he resumed his acrobatics, but with more moderation than of old—for he got much pleasure from them himself, and he had taken to denying himself pleasure.

It chanced one day that an acrobat set up on the square, and on the Sunday he began his show, at the very moment when John was leading his little company to the Jesuit Church to hear an informal instruction. Now they liked these instructions. But young boys, even pious boys, naturally prefer a circus to a sermon. John lost his followers, and, puffed with his success, the acrobat prolonged his stay. John, not discouraged, determined to beat him on his own ground. He challenged the acrobat to a public contest in running, jumping and tight-rope walking. The news flew round, curiosity was stirred and the acrobat found that he must take up the challenge.

"Twenty lire that I get to the end of the town before you." "Put down your twenty lire!" The boys clubbed together and raised the money. John won easily. "Forty lire to whichever of us jumps the stream." They jumped: the acrobat just escaped falling into the water: John won his second victory. "The dancing stick—eighty lire this time."

The boy's hat began to turn round on the end of the stick, and as it turned the stick moved lightly—in little measured leaps from finger to finger, to his elbow, chin, nose, forehead, then back to its starting point. The acrobat was confident; he did it in an even more difficult way, to the wonder of the audience; but he had reckoned without his nose, which was longer than he realised; at the last moment the nose got in the stick's way, and the stick over-balanced.

The expert, beside himself with rage, pointed to an elm, nearly as high as the church tower.

"A hundred lire whichever gets furthest up."

"A hundred lire it is."

The acrobat went first. He was lost among the leaves, and a moment later was hanging on the topmost branch, which looked like breaking under his weight. He came down very pleased with himself. But John was not only agile; he was mischievous too—he had all a monkey's gifts—and when he reached the topmost branch he took a firm grip and stood on his hands. His feet were so clearly above the tree-top that the acrobat, admitting his defeat, had to make up his mind to pay out. He was in tears.

Certainly he would never again upset the Sunday services. John, sorry for him, took him to the inn, had him at dinner with his young friends, paid the bill, and gave him back the rest of the winnings—two hundred and fifteen lire out of two hundred and forty.

Not that he did not need the money. In spite of help from the neighbours, his mother after two years could not go on paying board, and John left Lucia's house. He found a job, and a corner to sleep, with an inn-keeper on the main square who was also a pastry cook. Like St. Alexis, John

slept under the stairs. He rose at dawn to sweep the public room before class. He was kept late in the evening to wash the glasses and act as billiard marker. You can guess what he made of it. It taught him more of human nature and confirmed him in his rooted horror of evil. But he seized the chance of adding one more trade to his equipment: helping the pastry cook, he learnt to make pastry and custard, and to dress cakes with anyone.

And this same boy, back in his cupboard—they still show the place at Chieri—found means to read by candlelight and memorise the loveliest lines of Dante, Petrarch, Tasso, in a popular edition he had bought cheap from a Jewish secondhand dealer; he recited them to his friends, to the children. Soon in the class of Rhetoric, he came to read Livy, Cicero, Tacitus, Virgil, Horace, Ovid: he did a little Greek as well, some arithmetic and drawing: but he never set much store by his learning.

First in everything, he was the mainspring of the class. He had turned his companions into something like model pupils: but there was one very definite fly in the ointment. He did not always show the necessary patience; his nature was not fully brought into subjection, and at times it burst out. At recreation he was sometimes tempted as of old to enforce order and good conduct, truth and justice, with his fists; he forgot the lesson of his dream—for you can't live with the brutal without some tinge of their brutality. One only among his fellow-pupils seemed the incarnation of that evangelical ideal which his soul cherished but his temper found so difficult; but this was so quiet a boy, so little forthcoming, that John never liked to approach him. "A saint," they said; or perhaps merely soft, like the dough John used in the bakery. From this arose an incident.

The class had assembled before the master arrived, and as he was late they proceeded to enjoy themselves. The din was infernal. John Bosco disapproved, was probably amused, in any case could do nothing to check it. They jumped on the desks, hurled books, pellets and lumps of chalk. One boy only, a new boy, sat quiet in his seat.

"Come along, Luigi," cried the wildest of them. "I'm not playing; I have nothing to do with your games; I'm working." "Come as I tell you." "No." "Come, or I'll hit you." "Hit if you like."

Then the ringleader gave him two ringing smacks in the face. The boy took it quietly. In a perfectly calm voice he said: "Are you satisfied? I forgive you. But leave me alone."

The assailant withdrew, feeling a fool. John Bosco gave his hand to the boy, Luigi Comollo. He had found the example he was looking for.

We are told that the only human friendship John allowed himself in this world—I mean that most intimate friendship which God never allots save sparingly to the saints—was with Luigi Comollo. It was he who taught John Bosco to govern his wrath, even his righteous wrath. Is it too much to hold that John Bosco might never have learnt that lesson without him?

There is an extraordinary quality in the close friendship of two boys of the same age when it is marred by no disturbing element at all. It was a new experience for John, whose heart had been given only to his mother and his old master: in contrast this was a relation of equals, pooling the

same ardours, troubles, hopes in face of a same future. Life and its assaults were still before them, and had made no serious inroad upon the integrity of their youth. In slow strolling round the gymnasium yard, they shared their innermost thoughts. God would keep the reckoning—all that He had given and all that He asked, all they had given Him and all He asked still, their own soul and their neighbour's soul.

Years later, Don Bosco wrote a short Life of Luigi Comollo, a life so strikingly contrasted with his own. He admired, envied, imitated him—as the fire might imitate the spring of water, or the lion the lamb! For Comollo was one of those beings of election placed and guided by God on the outer edge of the world's life, charged with a secret mission—in which the world has no part. In the presence of this perfection, in living contact with it, John Bosco was panic-stricken. Here he was at the end of his college studies; about to enter the Major Seminary—he still had to raise the money for this somewhere, but that was a detail: Providence would see to it. He was to be a secular priest. Dare he be? It would mean being thrown into the world, exposed every day and every hour of every day to worldly interests, to the temptations of pride. to the demands of the active life, demands ever more clamorous in proportion to the success of his work; and he knew that he was not the man to keep his ambition for conquest within limits: he must be all or nothing. And if he lost his own soul, could he save others? Suddenly the exceptional powers that he felt within him—powers of will, intellect, action, domination—seemed to him as so many sworn enemies of his soul: he must not use them, he must break them. He must wrap himself in prayer like Luigi Comollo—prayer must be his cloak and his armour. And since he could not have his friend's inner spiritual cell, built of silence and quietude, he must seek a cell of stone. He dare not be a secular priest: he would be a Franciscan. A religious lives on the charity of Christ; in Christ his poverty finds maintenance.

One day we shall find the devil in Don Bosco's path; had the devil some part in these scruples? After all, it would have been good business for him to deprive God of a living force, a man of action of that magnitude, by shutting him up in a convent. John sought the advice of his confessor—who refused to give it. He went to see his old priest at Castelnuovo, who was not favourable to his plan, opposing it with reasons of perhaps too human a savour—Margarita's old age and the duty of a son. Margarita would have none of it.

"We are discussing you, not me," she said, "your vocation, not my comfort. You're not to become a parish-priest merely for me to have someone to talk to. Poor I am, and so I shall die. I'm not looking for a rich priest, son."

It must be repeated that the Piedmont clergy were "gentlemen." Her argument tilted the scales. John knew the Fathers, and was immediately accepted for their noviciate at Turin. So that was that. God had lost his man of action: had he gained a contemplative?

Making his farewells at home, John met the local blacksmith. The blacksmith saw no point in convents: a monk—what's a monk?—a parish-priest now—that's something.

"Why not be a parish-priest?"

"No; the convent fixes everything," John answered. "We cannot afford the expense of the

seminary."

"If that is your reason, I shall speak about it at the presbytery; look in there this evening."

"You're settling things too fast," said the priest of Castelnuovo. "Do you know, if I were you, I'd go and take counsel with Don Cafasso: he's a saint."

John remembered the young priest whose attitude and conversation had so struck him in the doorway of the church at Murialdo. He was barely four years older than John, and had just been ordained. He was continuing his theology at the ecclesiastical College of St. Francis of Assisi in Turin. He received John, recognised him, sized him up and spoke his decision with absolute confidence.

"Continue your preparations to enter the Major Seminary. God will see to it."

## **5. The Seminary**

### **I**

It meant going round begging: this was done: and John could go on with his studies. A little more than a year later, clad in the soutane of a seminarian, he received his mother's blessing in tears. God had decided.

"Remember, my little John," she said, "that it is not the habit that is the honour of the priestly state, but virtue. You were born under the sign of the Most Holy Virgin; I gave you to her then, and I renew the gift."

On that solemn day, 25 October, 1835, John set down on paper his inward resolutions.

He would attend no public spectacle; would appear at festival dinners only when absolutely necessary; would give up acrobatics, the violin and hunting, things that accord ill with the true priestly spirit.

He would be much in retreat: would drink, eat, sleep only so much as his health required.

As he had served the world by reading books not religious, he would try to serve God by reading books of devotion.

With all his strength he would resist the very shadow of an act, word or thought against the virtue of chastity, and at the same time would neglect no slightest practice for the preservation of that virtue.

To the ordinary exercises of piety he would add every day a time for meditation and spiritual reading; every day also he would give his neighbour some example or some maxim tending to the elevation of his soul.

Then, in front of Our Lady's statue, he made a formal promise to observe these resolutions to the letter. His new life had begun.

From his friends and the more well-to-do people of the district he had received his cloak, soutane, hat, even his shoes. For the first year a priest of Turin, Don Guala, provided the fees. For the second John was helped by an allowance made by the Seminary to needy and deserving students—Don Cafasso, who had made up his mind to see him through, completed the sum. We shall have much to say of this great soul: Don Bosco and Don Cafasso linked their destinies for eternity—even to beatitude in the court of Rome.

## II

Closing the massive gate behind him, John went up the countless steps of the magnificent high stairway to the cloisters and courtyards, the cold severe buildings—in the Italian classical style—of the Seminary of Chieri. In its faintly Jansenist atmosphere he was to pass ten years of his life along with fellow-students at every level of human and spiritual value, under the frigid guidance of masters who remained remote, having no love for their pupils—or, if they had, hiding it successfully under the impassive mask which was held to become the dispenser of learning. A doctor of the law is not necessarily an apostle. John saw this, and suffered under it—suffered less for himself than for his companions: not every soul can come to flowering under so bleak a sky.

The memory of Don Cafasso's qualities still lingered within those austere walls. Those who had known him spoke often of him to the newcomers. A soul of the same sort, as tender, pure and modest, came to fill his place a few months later. It was Luigi Comollo, come at last to the Seminary. So John had regained his dearest friend, and their intimacy went on as though there had been no gap of time. Two other young men—Guglielmo Gangliano and Giovanni Giacomelli—joined them. The four were the elite—the leaven in that doughy mass, where too many were indifferent and some impure.

Don Bosco in his Memoirs tells of much that saddened him at this time. He notes one or two things worse than indifference—such as the kind of reading indulged in by some of the seminarists. But his main complaints are of another sort. He notes how infrequent were the opportunities for confession and communion. On this point he often broke bounds—giving up his breakfast to go to communion in the near-by church of St. Philip Neri. His superiors winked at his breach of the rules—they knew his quality. But how could they have deprived men who were to be priests of the very food of faith?

He speaks also of his studies; and of the temptation he was under of contrasting the beauty of classical Latin with the crudeness of the Latin of the Church: were beauty of language and the teaching of the truth really irreconcilable? The Imitation, read before the Blessed Sacrament, convinced him of his error: so much substance so lucidly expressed. He turned to the Fathers of the Church, and in St. Jerome he found the Golden Rule of his future apostolate: "For a representative of God it is less a question of speaking well, than of amassing so much knowledge that the least gesture, step or word may instruct men's hearts."

During his years in Philosophy he made much progress in the study of Greek outside class hours.

His learning did not run to glumness. At recreation he took part in all the games. But he denied himself this as often as might be, because he liked it too well. He preferred to start up some scholastic discussion with his friends in a corner of the refectory: or better to go with Luigi Comollo to the chapel to adore the Blessed Sacrament.

But there were holidays: too long: four whole months: time to lose everything. John spent the time with his people; making himself useful with spade and sickle-reaping, harvesting the grapes, gathering the small boys as of old to teach them the Faith, serving, singing at mass, poring over his books at night. He had many temptations. Thus, one fine morning he began to chase a hare which was running over his field. From field to field, from vine to vine, he followed it like a greyhound, and caught it—he was always one to carry a thing right through. As he returned, hiding his trophy, one of the group of boys with whom he had been standing, said:

"You look like a smuggler."

Without his soutane, in his shirt sleeves, his straw hat tossed back, he did not look the perfect seminarian. He was filled with shame, and wept for his broken promise to hunt no more. He asked God to pardon his neglect: the whole incident is very human and likeable. It might have been any one of us.

During term—time he was allowed to reform his Sunday group among the boys of Chieri: the Society of Joy came to life again. The boys would wait for him at the gates, with much shouting.

His mission still ran in the same line as of old. He had just seen himself in a dream, dressed as a priest in rochet and stole: he was in a tailor's work room, and he was sewing a great many pieces of cloth on to an old garment. He asked Don Cafasso, whom he often consulted, what might be the meaning of this dream. Don Cafasso replied:

"It is not so much new garments—that is, the pure—that God will give you to shape and sew; he will have you work in the old, upon the weak and the corrupt, that one day you may make them presentable."

It is worth noting that he was granted another dream at this period, of the same sort as the first dream of all, to remind him of the prime necessity—gentleness, persuasion. He still had some way to go in the imitation of his friend, Luigi Comollo.

In the summer he took Luigi with him to the fields. The priest at Capriglio sometimes asked them to speak from the pulpit. Luigi was timid, John Bosco perfectly assured. At the beginning he thought the thing to do was to heighten and force the ordinary tone he used with the children. No one understood him.

"When you speak to the simple," said the priest, "speak simply."

This advice was the same as St. Jerome's: keep only to the substance of his grand learning; and to teach this to others, be as natural as possible. With his learning thrown in, he was to leave the Seminary as much a peasant, as much of the people, as much what nature had made him, as when

he entered.

Reaching out to the future, John told all his plans to Luigi; he was already building his castles in Spain, nor was this as presumptuous as might seem, since the reality of his achievement was to eclipse his dreams. His immediate ideal was a healthy holy life, with Luigi for model! Luigi, quieter and more reticent, had no such long views on the future as John; he seemed to divine that his life was soon to end. His field of destiny was not of this world: yet he said nothing of this to John, for fear of clouding his happiness.

All the same, death came often into their conversation. Men must face squarely—and early—the fact that they will die; and these two had the special problem of what the death of either must mean to the other. How, for instance, would death affect their friendship? The one who remained must maintain contact with the other, but how? By prayer obviously, but whither must the prayer be directed? As to one in purgatory or as to one in heaven? They made a compact between them: the first to die should beg of God to allow him, and to enable him, to acquaint his friend upon earth of his entry into eternal beatitude.

That year, it looked like a bad grape season. They paused among the vines:

"It will be much better next year," said John Bosco. "I hope so," answered Luigi. "But I shall not drink next year's wine." "Naturally; you drink nothing but water." "By that time I shall drink of a better wine," replied Luigi, as though in his own despite. "How do you mean?" "Oh, it doesn't matter." "Certainly it matters."

Luigi had to explain.

"I have such a thirst for the wine that is only drunk in heaven, that perhaps God will call me soon, though I am so unworthy to drink it."

The following year, on the morning of the Annunciation, a pernicious fever took sudden and violent hold upon his poor body, so frail that it seemed scarcely to veil the soul. The illness lasted a week. Luigi was delirious, raved, struggled, leapt from his bed; and, as happens often with the holiest, knew that terror of damnation which is hell's last effort against the elect soul, seeking to lead it by way of despair to doubt and denial. John held his hand. Friendship, the last anointing, the viaticum, prevailed against the Tempter; Luigi died peacefully at dawn on the Tuesday after Easter—2 April, 1839.

A day passed. John waited—broken, divided, reduced in one act to half of himself, the less pure and precious half. He awaited the sign. If he might but know that his friend had entered into the plenitude of happiness in heaven, that happiness might aid John Bosco left upon earth. The night after the burial, the twenty men who slept in John's dormitory were violently awakened by strange sounds. It was as though a carriage, or rather a train, was rolling heavily up the corridor; it plunged and crashed like the thunder of artillery, set the floor and the ceiling shaking, burst wide the door and poured into the room an unearthly light which suddenly grew marvellously bright. Then, in the silence, many of them heard a voice, soft, singing, happy. But only one made out the words:

"Bosco, I am saved."

The light ceased and once again came the uproar. Soon everything was over. But John, ablaze with joy and gratitude, could not reassure the others.

"You shall not be too much attached to the things of this world," he had resolved as a boy of ten after the death of a blackbird for which he had grieved beyond measure. "God wills all."

God wills all. He had loved Luigi beyond measure. So God had taken Luigi from him. His heart, hungry for love, could still turn to Luigi: but to Luigi in the arms of God, in God. Every love of creature that does not lead to God is vain.

He had still two years in the Seminary, spent in filling with God the void in his heart that Luigi Comollo had left—with God and therefore with his neighbour—but without singling out any one special friend. Yet who will deny that Luigi may have come from time to time to cast a ray of his own happiness upon his friend's distresses?

## **6. The Oratory On The Move**

### **I**

John Bosco was ordained priest on 5 June, 1841—the eve of the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, in the private chapel of the Archbishop of Turin. On the sixth, in that church of St. Francis of Assisi which was to be the birthplace of his Oratory, he said his first mass privately, with only Don Cafasso present. His second mass he said at the Consolata, in honour of Our Lady. Two days after, on Corpus Christi, he sang the High Mass at Castelnuovo d'Asti before all who had known and befriended his childhood. Then he returned home with his mother.

He was no happier than she. We can imagine her now in her late maturity, verging upon old age, as she appears in the one portrait that has been preserved. She wears a huge linen bonnet tied under her chin; the forehead is high, broad and pure, with scarcely a wrinkle; piercing eyes, gentle yet severe too; a long curved nose, a delicate firm mouth; perfect calm wrought out of deep care. In her face there is intelligence and simplicity, certitude and nobility. Compare her face with her son's: in spite of certain resemblances, his is the peasant's face, hers the aristocrat's. To hold, and worthily to hold, in her own house the place of authority given her by God, she had had to reflect much, to meditate and pray, to purify her will, to achieve serenity and early self-mastery. She had accomplished the task set for her. Antonio, her step-son, was in his own home, with no occasion of quarrel; her Joseph was managing the farm, and doing it well: her son John was a priest. This dearest, and wildest of her dreams, had come true with the others. There were tears of joy and a flood of prayers that June evening in the narrow kitchen. The son she loved best was ordained to offer the body of her Saviour daily upon the altar.

"But remember what I tell you, my son. To begin to say mass is to begin to suffer. You will see it soon."

John Bosco was then twenty-five.

## II

What was to be his work? Should he be tutor in a family? He loved children. Should he be curate at Murialdo or Castelnuovo? It was his own country. Don Cafasso advised a period at Turin, at the Convitto, an Ecclesiastical College established by Don Guala in what had once been a Franciscan friary close by the church of St. Francis of Assisi.

The idea of the place was to provide protection, mutual assistance, aids to moral and religious perfection. Don Guala, assisted by Don Cafasso, gathered together young priests rather lost in the hugeness of the city, to strengthen them against the dangers, difficulties and disappointments of their life. Actually they were training a sort of crack regiment, which should shake the parish clergy from their torpor, wage war against Jansenism and root out the bourgeois mentality which is everywhere and in all times the death of the spirit. For patrons they had St. Francis de Sales, St. Charles Borromeo and St. Alphonsus Liguori. The young priests prayed together, studied together, and were initiated together into the various offices of their ministry. They visited the poor, the sick, prisons: taught catechism where they could gather a class, and preached retreats when necessary. In the house they avoided excessive mortification, but lived like religious. Thus their time, divided to best advantage between prayer, study and work, was not eaten into by material cares. Yet contact was made and kept with the world, for you must understand the world to overcome it. Father John Bosco never regretted the three years he spent in that house.

So far he had no means, apart from his dreams, of knowing what a capital city was like—a hive of activities, strange happenings, buying and selling, luxury and pleasure, misery and vice: a hive distilling, in its public or secret places, more poison than honey. In his apostolic missions with Don Cafasso and Don Guala he saw new quarters rising on all sides, to the great increase of wealth, to the great increase of poverty. A frenzy of building had seized upon Turin some time before. The future is to the big cities, was the universal slogan; and the whole countryside was being emptied to contribute to Turin and to live on Turin! Hundreds of young builders swarmed in from their villages in the hope of having an easier livelihood and a gayer life.

They did not all find work; those who earned money wasted it; those who could not earn it, set about making it in any illicit way that came to hand. In the arcades you might meet emaciated bricklayer's labourers out of work, wandering by the shops, holding out their small white caps for alms or planning some piece of thieving. They slept in bands, in nameless hovels, sharing their vermin and their worse corruptions. In the less settled parts of the suburbs disorderly bands of boys played at pitch and toss, dice, small gambling games; quarrelled, fought, cursed, corrupted the idle children they met. Some of them, certainly, were already thieves; some even lived upon women (to say nothing of other abominations of which John Bosco did not so much as know the names); some few had not stopped at serious crime. They were all on the road that led surely to the prisons, which also he visited—under the hail of their sarcasms—and in which he saw more depravity, hardening and cynicism than shame and repentance. He looked on the unfortunate children with pity and with love. He loved the immortal spirit that still breathed in them. Who must answer to God for these souls already soiled so hopelessly? What effort had ever been made to save them?

In one of those centres of corruption the Canon Cottolengo had built the Little House of Divine Providence. It was already huge and filled to overflowing. With no support save his love and his faith, he had succeeded in providing for the ruined bodies of his fellows a bed, a table, a fire.

"There is work for you here," he said to Father John, who had come to gaze on the miracle.

But John was under the pressure of another task not less urgent. What Cottolengo had done for the body's leprosy, Don Bosco must do for the soul's. For the body's leprosy is in time and will end; but the soul's will never end if no remedy is brought to it. And it must be taken in hand in childhood or it will never be cured. The world is full of boys gone corrupt and corrupting others.

"I shall go to them," he decided.

He was not deterred by any worry about risking his cloth in that field of blasphemy, thievery and impurity. As he made his way through it he prayed silently for the courage to bear without disgust or uncontrollable revulsion whatever he might hear or see. He would go up to groups of boys, looking as cool and care-free as might be, and force himself to smile. Gentleness was not his natural mode, but anything else was hopeless.

"What are you playing at, boys?"

"Hell! A priest!" said one.

"What's it got to do with you?" queried another.

Most of them simply stared at him, and took no further notice. Some of them insulted him. He went away. He returned another day. The second day was no better than the first, but back he came. He kept at it. Success, when it came, came oddly enough: for after all his vain efforts to win souls from the streets, the first he managed to win came to him of themselves.

The very first to come—towards the end of that year—chose the morning of the Immaculate Conception, though he was not aware of it. John Bosco was preparing to say mass, according to his custom, in the church of the Convitto. He was putting on his vestments at the far end of the huge sacristy when a boy of sixteen appeared at the door.

"Have you come to serve mass?" asked the sacristan.

"No, I have never served mass."

"Then what have you come for? You are simply one of those vagabonds who go round thieving everywhere. Get out, and be quick about it."

He pushed the boy back into the church, banged him over the head with a broom, and slammed the door in his face. But Father John was on the move.

"What are you beating that boy for? What harm has he done? I forbid you to treat my friends like

that."

"Your friends? That little ragamuffin!"

"All children are my friends, especially beaten children. Bring him back; I want to talk to him."

The sacristan, stammering and furious, brought back his victim, who was in tears.

"Come here, my friend," said John Bosco gently. "You have not yet heard mass?"

"No," answered the boy.

"Well, you are going to hear it, and afterwards I will talk to you about something agreeable."

The priest went up to the altar. The boy heard mass. Then his unexpected protector took him aside and asked him a number of questions.

His name, it turned out, was Bartolomeo Garelli. He was born at Asti. He had worked at bricklaying, his father and mother were dead, he could neither read nor write, he had not made his First Communion, but he could remember that, when he was a tiny boy—ever so long ago—he had been to confession. He had never learned his catechism, and now, of course, it was too late, for the other boys would laugh at him.

"If I took you by yourself, would you accept?" "Certainly I would." "Right—that is fixed. When shall we begin?" "Whenever you like." "This evening?" "Yes." "Why not straight away?" "If you wish." "You know that you are my friend?"

A few kindly words, and the boy, who had merely drifted in without knowing particularly why—for shelter, perhaps, or warmth, or simply to have a look—was completely won. The first lesson began.

The following Sunday half a dozen big boys, ragged and foul-mouthed, came with Bartolomeo Garelli—their companion in wretchedness—to John Bosco. They were joined by two boys picked up by Don Cafasso. They stood round the young master in a little room behind the sacristy. This room had once been a yard. In the middle stood a vine stump whose shoots spread out to cover the ceiling and curled outwards to cover the roof with leaves and bunches of grapes. It was still winter in the souls of these nine boys, but there was the budding of springtime; their souls would flower and ripen with the vine. All the future harvest of Don Bosco and his sons was rooted in this hallowed place; the Oratory was born.

John Bosco thus carried on his life and study in the Convitto, and his missionary action outside—his own perfection, and its influence; the ordinary exercises of the duties of his state, the extraordinary enterprises he had added on his own account. These grew visibly. By the beginning of February he had twenty boys; by the Annunciation thirty. Soon there were a hundred of them, most of them just out of school, some from the town, some from the country, some of them orphans, some abandoned by their parents, some quite simply left to their own resources by a

family too poor, too numerous, or not sufficiently interested to bother about them. They met on Sundays. They attended the services in the church, were taught their religion, played various games. The young priest shared their games, and where he was there was no risk of boredom.

When the small room proved too small, they moved into a chapel alongside the sacristy. They moved again into the courtyard of the Convitto. This rather disturbed the silence of the house, but Don Guala and Don Cafasso allowed it. There the Oratory remained for three years.

This was already something of a miracle. Don Bosco worked a good many others in his daily ministry. God had decided to establish the reputation of His servant in preparation for the hostility which was growing in the background, and would soon burst into action. At the Hospital of St. John, a wretched woman, stricken with tuberculosis, obstinately refused to receive the Sacraments. Don Bosco was sent for. He spoke of matters indifferent, amused and comforted her. Suddenly, in a perfectly natural voice, he said: "We are trifling. If you only knew, my poor friend, that you have only a few hours to live, barely time to make your confession and communion, and receive Extreme Unction! There is no point in keeping it from you. To-morrow you will be in eternity."

The woman believed him, accepted the spiritual help he offered, and died the following night.

Another time he demanded of a very rich woman, wife of the Portuguese Minister, that, as a penance for her sins, she should personally carry alms to a family in need.

"It is impossible, Father," she said.

"Why? Have you lost your money?"

"No, of course not. But I have not the time. I will go later. My carriage is waiting."

"It is your own affair. But I advise you to make three invocations to your Guardian Angel, for you will need his protection this very day."

The lady, very much startled, left him, got into her coach with her daughter and her maid. Suddenly the horse stumbled; the carriage turned over and the women were thrown out. Three desperate invocations to the Guardian Angel, and they rose unharmed.

Upon his advice the same miraculous aid was gained by a young builder, who fell to the street from the fourth floor of a house.

In this way John Bosco was gathering friends, protectors, benefactors—the Ambassadors among them—for the gigantic work of which he was now laying the humble foundation. It is necessary, thus early, to see John Bosco as the prophet and miracle worker; that view of him might easily be eclipsed as we see him in action as the genial person, the friend of everybody, the successful man of affairs. In this exceptional man were gathered and concentrated all the powers of our nature—strength, endurance and physical skill, intellectual vigour, a grip on reality and a spirit of enterprise, ingenuity, an unbreakable will, a fiery activity and superb good humour.

But all the gifts of the supernatural came to re-double his natural gifts, to support and illumine them; it was only by supernatural grace that the gifts, of his nature could achieve complete realisation.

Pius XI said later that he knew no life of a saint wherein the direct and miraculous action of God was more continuously manifest. Therefore, in the mass of prosaic details that we have to relate, we must be on our guard against losing contact with the miraculous element at the heart of the activity.

### III

1844. John Bosco, now in his thirtieth year, had finished his period at the Convitto. Where was he to be sent? Already he saw so wide a horizon that there were no conquests too wild for his missionary spirit to grasp at. For one moment he thought of joining the Oblates of Mary, to preach the Gospel in Indo-China or Peru. Don Cafasso stopped him.

"Give up that idea. Your work is here. God has set you for the instruction and salvation of the young. That, and no other, is God's Will."

A learned theologian, Don Borel, was of the same opinion. The Oratory came first. From the Oratory everything else must start. So the young priest was appointed as second chaplain to the Refuge, an orphanage maintained and controlled by the Marchesa di Barolo. Thus he would be able, in his spare time, to carry on his work. This pious lady—French by birth, a descendant of Colbert—was, or had been, something of a figure in society. In her literary salon she had received the greatest men of her age—de Maistre, Balzac, Lamartine, poor Silvio Pellico, and even Cavour. At the age of fifty she decided to devote her immense fortune to works of prayer and charity. She founded two Orders of women—the Sisters of St. Anne and the Sisters of Mary Magdalen—and likewise this Refuge, named after St. Philomena, where Don Bosco came to work with the head chaplain, Don Borel. She liked him and welcomed him.

Much given to prayer and mortification, she yet had one fault, not uncommon in people who are too rich and too used to having their own way. Her wishes were imperative, imperial. What good had to be done, must be done by her and not by others—they would do it less well. This self-will in charity was all that stood between her and a perfection of sanctity equal to that of her new chaplain. He was as determined as she, but there was no pride in him.

At first she agreed that Don Bosco might transfer the Oratory to the neighbourhood of the Refuge. It occupied a small yard, on one side the Orphanage and house of the good Sisters, on the other two narrow rooms converted into a chapel. This new home was inaugurated, under the patronage of St. Francis de Sales, three years to the very day from that first visit made by Bartolomeo Garelli to the Church of the Convitto, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. But it was nowhere near large enough. A hundred and fifty boys were too many for the space. The din from the yard was frightful. What made it worse, the Marchesa's gardener was trying to grow a few beds of flowers in the yard. No way has yet been found to prevent a street urchin picking a rose when he wants to, or breaking down a dahlia when he is trying to find a ball lost somewhere within it. The gardener complained. The Marchesa listened. After all, the Oratory was

not her work. She told Don Bosco to take his boys away.

By now there were three hundred of them. Near the cemetery of St. Peter, Don Bosco came upon a patch of grass and thistles, surrounding a chapel. The priest told him he might make use of it. Air and space, no flowers to ruin—the place was a dream. The priest's servant bore this disturbance of her routine for several Sundays. Then one day, her master being away, she let loose the fury that she had been reining in with such effort. The wretched children, playing some ball game, had frightened one of her hens, a broody hen, the best hen she had. She told this, and a good many other stories, true or false, to the chaplain when he returned. He had to bow to the lady's will. So off they went again.

"The more you transplant cabbages," said Don Borel, "the bigger they grow." In an enterprise of this sort, difficulty is a great help. There were more of them than ever when they met at the Dora Mills in the little open space in front of the Church of St. Martin. There was no shelter; there was an endless passage of horses and carriages. Inconvenience could go no further. But the games went on. But all the noise, with an occasional ball thrown into a carriage, and some banging on the doors, soon proved too much for the inhabitants. The Municipality forbade Don Bosco to use the church for catechism and Benediction. He had to move again. So off they went, still light-hearted. After all, this was liberty—and adventure. They would leave Turin at dawn and go off together to some church or chapel in the suburbs—the Monte dei Cappuccini across the river, the Madonna del Pino, or the Basilica of Superga. There they could do all that had to be done—instruction, confession, mass and communion—and could make their way back at leisure. In the afternoon they would race out into the country—to some uncultivated field or unused meadow: there they might play till nightfall, and Don Bosco provided food. How did he manage to keep his little world, particularly to keep it in food? That is simply one more of God's secrets.

But with the bad weather they had to find something with a roof over it. They rented three rooms in a house near the Refuge, the Casa Moretta. They were packed so tight that there was no need for a fire. It was here that Don Bosco established his evening classes for newcomers and those who were slower to learn. But the other tenants in the house objected, and the whole pack of them were thrown out. They started again in a field which had a ruined hut. But the proprietor very quickly saw that he was offering asylum to the kind of horde that Attila would have rejoiced to lead, there were four hundred of them to trample his ground, and the grass was done for.

With the return of spring they were back in the open fields, marching along to the music of a trumpet, a drum and a guitar.

"Four hundred vagabonds," thought the world.

"Budding criminals," said all good citizens.

"Revolution!" hissed Municipal authority.

For, alas, there were all sorts among these boys. None very bad, few very good. Don Bosco's kindly but unyielding authority, the joy of intimacy with him, drew the best out of them, and all were the richer for the contact. He had many disappointments, but more consolations. He told

everything to his fellow-priests.

When he spoke of the Oratory he grew excited, flushed. His imagination, fed by dreams—for the dream of the lambs had already come to him several times—took one single leap through time and space, saw all the splendours of a future which might still be distant, but which seemed to him at his very finger ends.

"You should limit yourself," they told him. "Keep a score of the better boys, and let the rest go."

"Do you realise what you are saying?" he answered. "I have in mind a huge establishment, the spot is quite near at hand, with a spacious yard, a building for a multitude of boys, arcades, a church, and, naturally, priests and lay helpers—a whole staff."

"Where is it, Don Bosco?"

"I don't know, but it exists, and it is for us."

Don Borel, who had given him such encouragement, began to doubt his mental balance. But Don Bosco was not to be discouraged. None of it was his own invention. In his dreams he had seen the development of the Oratory; first a humble chapel, then a small church, then an enormous temple on the soil bathed in the blood of the martyrs, around it other buildings, an open place swarming with boys, and in the midst a monument—his. He had seen himself surrounded by all the crowds who in these past months had been leaving him; he had known that for the development of his work he must very soon found a Salesian Institute. And the one who guided him in his dreams was Our Lady: how could he doubt? She had even given him a white ribbon, on which one word was written—Obedience. How might he refuse to obey?

"He is certainly unbalanced," thought Don Borel, "perhaps even deranged."

This, indeed, was the opinion of most of the priests of Turin, who accused him of taking away the boys from their parishes. Remember that not one of Don Bosco's boys had ever bothered with any church before they knew him. No matter. Don Bosco was getting the boys: it was their business and not his. They were not slow to hint that he was out of his mind, and that the company he kept compromised the Church and dishonoured his priesthood.

The Marchese di Cavour, the Governor of Turin, sent for him and ordered him to dissolve, with the least possible delay, his band of "rioters."

"I have no politics," replied Don Bosco. "I shall obey my religious superiors."

The Marchesa di Barolo, less and less indulgent to his fantastic ideas, gave him a choice between her Refuge, where he was still chaplain, and the Oratory. All his supports were giving way.

"I cannot deviate," he explained to his benefactress, "from the way that Providence has marked out for me. My choice is made."

"He prefers his ragamuffins to my Orphanage," cried the irascible lady.

His "madness" grew. It was talked of in high places, and after a short inquiry which confirmed the rumours they decided to send him away, "for a rest," to an asylum. After all, had he not admitted to his inquisitors that he thought of founding an Order? And when they asked him about the habit that his religious would wear, he had replied: "I shall clothe them in virtue. They shall go through the streets in their shirt-sleeves, like bricklayers." His meaning was that the habit does not make the monk, and that a true apostle can never go far enough in poverty. But if one wanted evidence of mental derangement, this would do.

He had probably heard some rumour of what was coming, or he may have been warned in a dream. At any rate, he received without surprise the visits of two respectable priests of Turin, one of them parish-priest of St. Augustine's. They had come in a carriage. After some little talk they suddenly suggested in the most cordial tone a little ride round the district.

"A little air will do you good," they said. Don Bosco agreed. In deference to their age, he refused, in spite of their insistence, to enter the carriage before them. When they were both in, he slammed the door and shouted to the driver:

"The asylum, full speed! These two gentlemen are expected."

As a matter of fact, when they reached the asylum and got out, their fury was such that they were taken for madmen and nearly shut up.

After that nobody risked any further attempt upon his liberty.

Just when he seemed to be abandoned by all—with no position, no support, and no idea where he could lodge his boys or even himself—a man offered him a shed in a thinly populated part, good enough for shelter and for such amusements as they might have. He wanted thirty lire a month.

"Courage," said Don Bosco to his boys. "Next Sunday we shall meet in our new Oratory: don't forget the name and address—Pinardi's house in the Valdocco."

The youngsters jumped with joy, singing and shouting; a few of them were too startled to move. They knelt down for the last time in the field they were leaving and recited a rosary. The place he had visited in his dreams, round which an immense city was to rise and grow, he had found at last—of that he had not the faintest doubt. If Don Borel were again to ask him, "Where is it?" he could now answer: "I know; it is here."

## **7. The Pinardi Shed**

### **I**

That Sunday was Easter Day, 12 April, 1846. The bells were ringing in all the steeples of Turin, ringing for the resurrection of Our Lord, and, though the ringers knew it not, for the resurrection

of the Oratory. The Oratory had its church!

The young troop set out and soon found itself before the place. It was not the comfortable sanctuary of St. Francis of Assisi, nor the gigantic Duomo, nor the Consolata, with its curving lines like a hive of golden cells. It was a damp, low room, with cracking walls and mouldy beams, hollowed out like a cellar or cave under a wretched house. When it rained the water poured into it from the yard, and they might have skated when it froze. So low was it that the owner had had to dig out earth lest they knock their heads against the beams. It was the last word in misery, a swamp huddled in beneath the remains of a roof.

To call it "the Pinar di shed" was sheer flattery; and the house it belonged to, the Pinar di house, was a poor one storied place with an iron balcony and rags of washing hung out to dry—dirty, creaky, decrepit, and inhabited by unspeakable tenants. But that was not the worst. The door of the shed looked straight into a tavern—a dismal hole frequented by every kind of villainous youth, and the secret meeting place of an association of Waldenses, a militant sect which had sworn death to Catholicism.

The whole quarter was of a piece. It stretched from the other side of the Refuge and Cottolengo's Institute, over a shapeless mosaic of bits of land, sewers, odd ends of garden, rubbish heaps, with a scattering of hovels and broken fences, and here and there a rough path—apparently for the convenience of thieves, since no one else used them. It was called the Valdocco, and people did not venture there by night without a revolver in their pocket. At the other end a suburban market drew all the sweepings of the city out to see the mountebanks, the card-sharpers and the peddlers of old iron and old clothes, the "taro" players, street singers, fake blind men and professional beggars. It rivaled the Parisian "Court des Miracles" where the beggar-criminals swarmed. In establishing his Institute here, Don Bosco meant to bring back to that title all its meaning, all its supernatural nobility. He was ready to nail up over his door the imperious inscription which in one of his dreams Our Lady's finger had traced on the front of the future Institute:

*Haec est Domus Mea; Inde Gloria Mea.*

This is My House: My glory shall shine from it.

Thus the outhouse became a chapel; its furniture was a wooden altar and a few forms, its illumination an old oil lamp. In addition, it had to serve as a class-room, a study room, and at need a recreation room. But the great advantage was the wide stretch of land beside it, for there was no one here who could dispute their right to it. If the neighbours did not like it, they might lump it. His lease was in order. Archbishop's House, after long wavering, gave its approval.

But the moment he had won his victory, Don Bosco crumpled up. He had laboured too hard; he had given too much. There was not only this special work. It had not caused him to neglect any of his other duties, and they were heavy. There were the prisons which he still visited, the Refuge where he taught the orphans catechism, Cottolengo's Hospital where he ministered, and the countless clients he had, men and women, nobility, business people and the poor. No one of these had suffered because of the time he gave to his boys.

The essential mark of charity is that it knows no limits; he gave himself wholly to all. And if you think of the worries, refusals, calumnies, persecutions—all of them futile additions to the burdens he already had to carry—the marvel is that he had managed to hold out so long. Endless steps to be taken, journeys to make, to find work, bed and food for his boys; endless confessions, sermons, games to play; so much patience, so much persistence, money spent before he had it; souls difficult, darkened, stubborn, to be won only after many failures or perhaps not to be won at all but lost; and the losses weighed unbearably on him. Think again of nights when he scarcely got to bed at all, meals he had no time to eat. Think of rain and fog and cold draughts and the north wind—his soutane soaked, perspiration pouring from him; the colds he had no time to bother about, the stomach that had to be ignored, the legs too weary to move, yet moving. In midsummer this man of rock and iron was brought down with pneumonia. His heart pounding, a film of blood on his lips, he fainted away in the room which the old Marchesa was letting him keep as a special favour for a few months longer.

It seemed that he would die. We may imagine the shock to his mother and his brother Joseph, who had been warned immediately, to Don Cafasso and Don Borel: and above all to the five hundred boys for whom he was God upon earth. Some watched inside the room, others at the door. They all wanted to see him once more, were it only for an instant. Having nothing else they might do for him, they decided to assail heaven with a despairing volley of prayers, even those who prayed little or not at all: those to whom the words of the prayers he had taught them already meant much, those to whom they were still no more than words. It may well be that the providence of God laid this cross upon their shoulders simply to complete their instruction and to bring to flower the seed He had sown in them. They gathered at the Consolata in front of the statue of the Black Virgin, and by day and by night they begged her to cure their adopted father. They prayed in their beds, they prayed at work on their ladders. Some of them fasted for him, some made imprudent vows—such as that they would make this or that sacrifice every day of their lives, or say a particular decade of the Rosary at given intervals. Only Don Bosco asked nothing; he wanted the will of God, no more. His friend, Don Borel, had to force him to say between his already clenched teeth: "Cure me, O Lord, if such is your good pleasure, in the name of my children."

Don Bosco turned the corner. God granted him forty years more of life, of well-doing and of labour. The first time he came out after his illness was a triumph. They carried him shoulder high, with shouting, singing and tears, from the door of the Refuge to the shed in the Valdocco. In front of the altar they intoned the Te Deum, so that every house of ill-fame in the neighbourhood shook on its crumbling foundations.

But for the time he had to go off to convalesce in the air of the place where he was born. He was actually advised not to come back to Turin in less than a year. His boys were calling for him, and he could not stay away. But where was he to live? The Marchesa di Barolo had disposed of her room. In plain fact, he was on the street. Then it was that the idea came to him to take a room near his "work," in the actual house to which the Pinaridi outhouse belonged. He was able to get four small rooms and a tiny loft. It was enough for himself and his mother—for he had persuaded her to come with him, to keep house for him, and to safeguard his reputation in that vicious place.

On 3 November of that year, the pair of them set out for Turin. For Margarita it was a great sacrifice at her age to change her habits, leave the old house and the old field, leave almost all the

old furniture which had witnessed her hard courageous life, and shut herself up in a city slum with neighbours almost in her lap—and such neighbours! With a basket of clothing on one arm and two or three necessary household articles on the other, she walked alongside her son. He was still too weak to carry more than his breviary and his missal. They made a short halt at Chieri. As they were coming into the town they met the theologian Giovanni Volo. When he saw them covered with dust and overcome with weariness, he could not restrain his tears. He had no money with him, but he took his watch from his pocket and gave it to Don Bosco.

"One proof more," said Don Bosco to his mother, "that Divine Providence has not forgotten us. Confidence, mother!"

Confidence she had to have in plenty not to lose heart at sight of the wretched shed and the no less wretched tenement to which her son took her. It was night time: the tavern across the way resounded with drunken songs; the dark staircase was steep and sticky with filth. Yet soon after the mother and son had set down their things, some of Don Bosco's boys, who had come too late to greet them, heard them singing in harmony, by way of thanksgiving, "Angioletto del mio Dio"—the celebrated song addressed to his guardian angel by Silvio Pellico.

They sang while they were arranging their things, and did not stop singing till all was in order. Some pieces of furniture taken from the Refuge or brought from Becchi, a crucifix, a statue of Our Lady and a blessed palm, were all they had and all they needed to make the place homelike. Then silence wrapped their sleep, and Don Bosco may well have had one of his great dreams.

Next day the old mother's heart was wrung. The house was besieged by boys asking for bread or clothes or shoes, and there was little left to give them. They had had some provisions sent from the country—wine, corn, chestnuts, beans; and to cover their initial expenses they had sold part of their vineyard and a field. But it went nowhere. It would have been very difficult to buy on credit the vestments he needed as a priest; his mother made them up out of her wedding dress. She paid the rent with her wedding ring and her small gold chain, the only jewelry she had ever had. God knows if she was attached to them, the poor woman. But her smile never faded. More than once she had to give up her own room or her kitchen to her son's pupils; and every day she had to give up her peace for the great tumult that went on. When she began a small garden, they trampled down her cabbages and lettuces; and the few grapes that came on her vine they ate. She saw filth and vermin, she who was always so clean in her poverty; and she saw sin, she who could not abide it. It had to be for the sake of her son's work. After all, he probably suffered as much as she, and it was no change for her—any more than for him—to hold herself at God's disposal.

## II

The pressing needs of his enterprise put Don Bosco on his feet again. More vigorous and tireless than ever, he was not to know a moment's respite from now till he was very old. He was to give men a new measure of what a man of genius can do when grace impels and prayer supports him. His work took form and spread. The chief obstacle to its extension was the utter illiteracy of the street urchins whom he proposed to set on the right road. Very well, they must be taught to read and write. They must be taught the Italian equivalent of C-A-T Cat. He set up evening classes,

taught by his older boys; to them in turn he taught the elements of Italian grammar, French, Latin, arithmetic, drawing, singing. The best of his catechists he turned into teachers of the others, and what had been Sunday's work became the work of every day. From all quarters of the city pupils flowed in, and he knew not where to put them.

"Let us do as the bees do," he said; and he set up a subsidiary class not far from the Central Station under the patronage of St. Aloysius Gonzago. Two years later he had taken in hand the Institute of the Angel Guardian. The whole city was to be conquered.

But we must not anticipate. Don Bosco, whirled on by his zeal, had still other plans in mind. Often he came home late. Margarita was uneasy, for the quarter was not safe. On one particular evening he had run into a band of vagabonds who insulted and even threatened him.

"What do you want, my friends?"

"Your friends?"

"Why not? I like you, you see—though I don't know you." "It's Don Bosco," said one.

"Yes, it is Don Bosco—you are thirsty, I bet."

"I'm always thirsty."

"Of course you are. Your friends too? Come, the lot of you. I will buy you a drink at the tavern across the way."

"It's not possible!"

"I tell you it is."

The boys could not get over it.

They went in, sat down, had their drink. There was plenty of laughter, for Don Bosco could make anybody laugh. He told stories, and heard theirs. There was good in those boys, he told himself. He must see them again. He invited them to come on Sunday and amuse themselves with his own boys. They didn't say no.

"And now go home to bed. Good night."

"Where to, father? We have no home."

"None of you?"

"None of us."

"All right. Then come to bed at my place."

They went home with him and he put them up in the loft on straw; so that they might undress he even lent them sheets and blankets. It seemed to him his plain duty. If he had met Christ, would he have given him a bed or not? For him that question settled it. If he could only get the money together, he would provide beds for all his boys. He would have them to live with him. That was his new plan.

The following morning, when he went up to wake his guests and offer them soup, he found that they had gone off with the blankets and sheets. He wept; and he wondered how he should face his mother. He was sure he would succeed better next time. His mother scolded him, but her heart was no colder than his; a short time afterwards she received in the same way a small boy, a bricklayer's assistant who came to the door streaming with rain. She dried him, gave him a change of clothing, made up a bed in the kitchen. She did all that a mother could do, and if Don Bosco was startled, she was able to retort: "Yes, your mother has taken a lodger too."

That evening indeed she had made the first bed for the Oratory. It was she too who unwittingly founded another tradition. Before the boy went to sleep, she gave him quite a short instruction about the Faith—and this was the origin of the evening talk which is of obligation in Salesian Colleges. The bricklayer boy who had thus come to lodge with Margarita was soon joined by another twelve-year-old whom Don Bosco had picked up near the Convitto under one of the trees in the avenue.

"Here is another son God has given us, Mother. You must make up another bed."

So Margarita adopted sons and Don Bosco rented rooms. Two or three years later he had taken over practically the whole of the Pinardi house. The other tenants simply fled away before an invasion that was not only noisy but religious" The boys shouted louder than the tenants, but their language was better.

Don Bosco decided to buy the house. He did it without having a sou in his pocket. When the saints go in for imprudence, they do it on a magnificent scale. They incur the obligations, and God settles the bill. After all, God had already settled so many minor accounts that he would not let a large one be dishonoured. In Don Bosco this very mystical virtue was allied with a remarkably keen business sense. Nobody could cheat him—for that would have been to cheat God: and God does not let Himself be cheated.

Signor Pinardi, the owner, wanted eighty thousand lire for the house as it stood. Don Bosco thought it was worth no more than twenty-eight thousand. He offered thirty, cash down in a fortnight. The seller wanted a small present for his wife over and above the contract price: the purchaser agreed. He had now nothing to do but find the money. Margarita was a little doubtful, profound as her faith was. Probably she had some small feeling of shame when, within the period, first ten thousand, then twenty thousand, then an extra three thousand—to cover the expenses of the sale, which Don Bosco had overlooked but Heaven had not—dropped into the empty treasury. A countess, Rosminian father and a banker had of their own motion sent in the three sums. The Pinardi house belonged to Don Bosco.

He could lodge up to thirty boys: and somehow he managed to feed them. His mother prepared

their soup, a very thick polenta or a minestra that the spoon stood up in. And with the two or three pence Don Bosco gave them they bought some extra to their own taste. It was a feast. They ate anywhere, in the kitchen, in the street, sitting on the stairs. They drank and washed their dishes at the fountain, then went off to work. They were all employed in the city or the suburbs by employers of Don Bosco's choosing. When they happened to be out of work they helped Margarita. The evening classes and the Sundays brought in four or five hundred other boys. There was no end to the worries and the things to be attended to by the poor mother who had hoped to finish her life in prayer. She sometimes felt like handing over her apron to her son. "Work is prayer," she reminded herself. Now or never was the time to try the maxim out.

Don Bosco went on dreaming and turning his dreams to reality. For one thing he had to have a real chapel: they were impossibly crammed in the shed: the worship of God needed a little more space. Who would give God a lodging? Don Bosco held out his hand and no one refused; he ran a lottery and it had an immediate and incredible success. King Victor Emmanuel entered a huge sum and the Court followed. On 21 July, 1851, the first stone was laid; and within less than a year the church of St. Francis de Sales, shoulder to shoulder with the house and the shed, stared defiance over the courtyard wall at the tavern. The builder had begun his work, never to stop.

Very much as we see it today, at the far end of the first courtyard in the Salesian Institute, in a quiet corner to the left, the plain white front of the church shows a square door with flat columns surmounted by a cornice in which is a half-circle of window beneath an arch. The frontal juts out triangular in shape; a slender cross rises over all. A bell-tower—quite small, like all the bell-towers of that region—thrusts up from the tall roof on the epistle side; it held first a small bell, then, as money came in, a larger. The interior of the church is simple, pleasant, under the broadened arch; they furnished it and decorated it. Don Bosco kept the list of all the benefactors who had contributed to its adornment and paid them homage in his Memoirs. Signor Michaele Scanagatti gave the chandeliers, Don Cafasso the pulpit, the Marchese Fassati the Lady altar, Dr. Vallauri the high altar. On the day of the solemn opening there was a display of fireworks; the National Guard was present under arms and fired a salute to the Blessed Sacrament.

Thereupon, without wasting a moment, this unwearying builder sketched out the plan of a symmetrical wing to the right of the Pinardi house, to be used as a shelter for the growing number of his lodgers. It was to have two stories and two iron balconies, a loft, a covered yard. The roof was scarcely in place when the whole thing collapsed under heavy floods of rain. They resumed work in the spring, spent a little more money on better materials and better workmanship, and the building is there to this day. The Pinardi house, which was between this new wing and the chapel, was demolished three years later and replaced by a new building, Don Bosco's third. Thus by 1857 the central court of the future Institute had taken shape, weight, durability. With its light arcades, it had a good deal of charm, for Don Bosco had taste. What did he not have?

The main part of his structure was now in being. Round these three buildings the great architectural design that he had in mind could arise. Here was the cell from which all the rest of that prolific offspring was to grow. If we stand in a corner against the chapel wall, in the shade of the two twisted and knotted arms of the old mulberry tree that used to stand alongside the road to the tavern and still lives on, we can imagine ourselves back in that distant time when the Institute sprang from the earth. The bell sounds, and it is the same bell; on the balcony of the second story, Don Bosco might very well appear as he was in his prime. Nothing has changed. There is the

cheeping of sparrows in the streets, the twittering of swallows; the shouts of his children.

His rooms were in the right wing of the new buildings, over the head of his boys. He twice changed his bedroom, but remained on the same level. When they added the graceful gable that is still there for our admiration, he had at his disposal a private chapel, a new room (the room in which he was to die) and a light narrow gallery pierced by six circular windows forming a sort of balcony over the yard. A few vine stems sticking to the wall flowered under his windows there they are still, and bearing fruit every year. Higher, in the triangular frontal, between two bull's-eye windows, a statue of the Virgin watches. It is the symbol of his work: humbly and powerfully of this earth, yet reaching towards heaven, depending upon her. Above all, no one should fail to visit his humble rooms, which are always open to pilgrims. Nothing save the presbytery of the Cure d'Ars introduces us so directly and authentically into the inner life of a saint. We should be grateful to those who keep it so. All the saints are not so fortunate.

And now, in the splendour of this double success—material success and spiritual, for every stone laid bears witness to a soul saved—do not forget that it came into being, took root and grew, in a period of fanatical liberalism, scepticism and atheism.

## **8. Grand Scale Controversy**

The movement of the risorgimento was at its height. Italy, long divided, again felt the stirring within her of one common soul. Modern ideas had crossed the Alps. The French Revolution and Napoleon's campaigns had aroused and spread among all the peoples of Europe that democratic mysticism, the passion for liberty at all costs. Liberty of the individual, liberty of the nation: these had as their consequence rebellion against all tyrannies—against established powers, traditional forms, revealed dogmas. The "tyranny" most directly aimed at was that of the Church of Rome. We know how the house of Savoy, which claimed first Piedmont, and then the whole Peninsula, was to play its own hand in the adventure that followed, yet without losing the Faith; but this book is not a history book. Remember only that the two reigns of Charles Albert and Victor Emmanuel II sounded the rallying cry of Italian liberties. These liberties obtained their charter, Turin its constitution; and the first war of independence against Austria—begun well and finished badly—aroused in the people a warlike exaltation of which the clergy had sometimes to bear the brunt. The fever spread even to the seminaries and all but ruined the work of Don Bosco. He kept his fire-breathing boys together, but had to agree for a time—this was in the days of the shed—to give them as instructor a former Bersagliere who had fought in the campaign of 1848: playing at war, the boys found a vent for their excitement.

Apart from this one concession—demanded by the virtue of prudence in the face of a great danger—Don Bosco always refused to have anything to do with party struggles. Parties pass, but the Church remains. He determined to keep his work on the spiritual plane. But when this was threatened, by frontal or by flank attack, he mobilised all his resources—his tongue, his pen, even his fists; for under provocation the apostle could turn pugilist. Taking advantage of the disturbed state of men's minds, the Masonic lodges and the Protestant sects, especially the Waldensians, did all in their power to corrupt and terrorise the people of Piedmont, so healthy and reasonable and bound in all its fibres to the religion of its ancestors: and this work of corruption and terrorisation

they did in the name of liberty and progress and the national need. They quickly discovered in Don Bosco a power of growth, resistance and defiance that was to destroy their dark enterprise at its root. Battle was joined and the devil played his part.

So did Heaven.

Preaching was not enough. It could not reach everybody. The thousand or two children who came thronging to his Sunday institutions, the few hundred neophytes who attended his evening classes, the handful who lodged with Margarita, were as nothing to the hordes he could not reach—unemployed, vicious, contaminating each other and spreading contamination beyond their own ranks. All these feeble ones were at the mercy of the apostles of anarchy and irreligion. The propaganda of error is free; freedom of thought will not have it otherwise. The Waldensians were unrelenting. They flooded the city, the suburbs, and above all the working-class centres with pious snarling pamphlets which attacked in God's name the most precious and efficacious practices of the Catholic Church: fasting, abstinence, confession, extreme unction, holy water and candles, prayers for the dead, pilgrimages, priests, even the mass, and more than all devotion to Our Lady. Images and relics must be cast overboard, priests married and convents closed. They denied purgatory. For sacraments they allowed only baptism and communion, but one could be saved without these, for their value was purely symbolic. Only God was left for them to believe in. If the poor Piedmontese were to throw overboard all the rest of their traditions, God would go overboard too. Once started on the road of negation, how can an ignorant man stop? Don Bosco seized his pen and replied.

He was superbly equipped for the task. He was a speaker, but he could write too. His culture was wide. He knew his authors. He could handle rhyme easily. He could write for the people as well as for the learned. It was not for nothing that in his boyhood he had developed all his gifts; not one of them but stirred from its sleep to help him now. After a day spent in running from one job to the next, from a rich woman's salon to a man dying in an attic, catechising and hearing confessions, balancing accounts, planning for the future—and occasionally picking up a soul or two on the run—he sat down at his table and wrote. For every pamphlet a counter-pamphlet.

He became overnight a journalist, populariser, controversialist. He poured out instructive—and destructive—pamphlets on the Pope, the Church, Holy Communion. Against the blasphemers he held up the personality, remembered so tenderly, of his one-time fellow-pupil Luigi Comollo. In 1853 the heretics had published an almanac, the Fireside Friend: he replied with *Il Galantuomo*, wherein, along with the matter usually to be found in this kind of publication—jokes, conundrums and useful information—he included stories of permanent value to the soul. Later he wrote a History of Italy, a History of the Church, a Bible History, tales and plays for children, and even a little book on the metric system. It was all clear, simply phrased, intimate, without a touch of gloom or dullness. It was the kind of thing to achieve his end—particularly when it was given away free. Thus he got together his collection of Catholic Readings—so vivid and so various that it came to be not only admitted, but actually prescribed in the institutions of public instruction. But that was not yet. In the meantime it struck at the very heart of the enemy, fought them on their own ground. Nor was his campaign only in writing.

Don Bosco did not shirk physical encounter with the adversary. He learnt that a boy who had

belonged to one of his institutions, but had been led away by the Waldensians, was in danger of death. He went straight to the house. The Waldensian pastor was on guard. Don Bosco pushed him aside as gently as might be, and went straight to the dying boy.

"My little Peter, is it you?"

"Don Bosco! Don Bosco!"

"You repent, I hope."

"Get out!" cried the pastor.

"I mean to stay. To begin with, I shall take a seat."

"You don't know who it is you're talking to."

"I do, I do indeed, Sir."

"I am Amedeo Bert, the Waldensian minister."

"And I am Don Bosco, Director of the Institute of St. Francis de Sales."

"What do you want with this boy?"

"Only to save his soul."

"He belongs to us now."

"But he did belong to me. In any case, he can choose. I shall not force his conscience."

The pastor could scarcely refuse this appeal to freedom of thought.

"Whom do you choose?" Don Bosco asked.

"Oh, you! You! Don Bosco! I was born a Catholic, and I want to die a Catholic," cried the dying boy vehemently.

The pastor put on his hat. There was nothing else he could do. There are some defeats that leave no room for discussion.

Obviously this unseasonable zeal had to be discouraged, even if it meant suppressing the apostle altogether. They turned to force. Among the heretics there was no lack of roughs; the very dregs were with them. The order went forth, and the attacks began. Don Bosco was watched at every street corner. He was insulted and assaulted: it may be that they did not know his physical strength; at seventy he could still crush a walnut between his finger and thumb. He jolted his assailants rather badly, but they returned in greater numbers. He had to have a bodyguard, chosen

from the toughest of his boys. But a bodyguard is no defence against a bullet; he was fired at through the chapel window: the bullet just missed him, in fact ripped his soutane under the arm. Another day he was called out to visit a dying man. Before taking him into the sick-room they offered him a glass of Asti. He was not particular, and would not have cared what he swallowed to gain a soul; but he was doubtful, and merely raised his glass. Then they dropped presence, and tried to make him drink. He called in his boys posted at the door. He pointed to one of them and said that the boy would drink instead of himself.

"No, no, not he."

"I see, you want to poison me—not anyone else. Perhaps you will do better next time. Good-bye."

Another evening again, by the bedside of an old woman he found four men with thick sticks. He kept one eye on them and approached the bed. The old woman, who seemed in surprisingly good health, started an argument amongst the men on some meaningless point. There was an instant uproar; the candle was blown out and blows rained upon Don Bosco. He put a chair over his head, groped for the door, reached it, and hurled the chair at his assailants.

All this was prosaic enough; but in one series of incidents there is an element beyond the natural. It began one autumn evening in 1852. Don Bosco was making his way home across the most broken and deserted part of the slum district. He was alone. He observed that he was being followed—by a dog, a huge dog that looked like a wolf. At first perturbed, he called it. The dog responded to his caresses, walked alongside him and, as though in obedience to some mysterious order, accompanied him to his door; at that point the dog simply turned about and walked off. What exactly did the incident mean? Don Bosco soon met him again in similar circumstances, walking by his side and making off the moment he reached his door. It happened once, twice, ten times. Whenever he was returning alone at night he could be sure of the dog's company. He named him Grigio, that is, Grey: he often had reason to be glad of his company. On one occasion two shots were fired at him from behind a tree; they missed, and the bandit closed with him. But Grigio was there with his strong teeth, and the bandit fled away shrieking. Another time, in a lane near the Consolata, two men threw a sack over Don Bosco's head: it would have been all up with him, but for Grigio: Don Bosco had not seen him, but the dog was there. He leapt forward with his fighting hackles up and drove his terrible teeth into the throat of one of the Waldensians, while the other fled for his life. Don Bosco had to call Grigio off his prey. A third time the same unlooked-for help saved his life in an ambush. They had posted a dozen men who surrounded him with their sticks raised to strike when Grigio arrived upon the scene: his growl was enough.

The animal became popular, for he sometimes came into Don Bosco's house. He was like the rest of his breed, a fine muzzle and ears upright, bushy tail and thick hair. He refused food and drink. The smaller boys played with him and teased him; Grigio took it placidly. But he never came without reason. Sometimes it was to meet his friend at the door before some night journey; sometimes to make sure that Don Bosco had reached home when, for instance, he returned by carriage instead of on foot. Sometimes even to prevent him going out. On one such occasion he lay down on the threshold and barred the exit. Don Bosco tried to shift him, and he resisted, growling; he would have bitten his master if he had tried to pass. When Don Bosco gave up the

idea of going out, the dog went off quietly. Hardly had he gone when a friendly neighbour rushed in to warn the saint that they had decided to take his life that evening. He had overheard their plans. The trap was set. Grigio knew it. When this period of persecution was over the dog stopped coming.

For the persecution did cease. Don Bosco overcame his adversaries primarily by charity. Discord reigned in the camp of the Protestant Waldensians. They had attempted to draw up a catechism of their doctrine, but each had his own view of what their doctrine was. A Catholic priest, de Sanctis, who had apostatised, was in conflict with his colleagues. He was deprived. Don Bosco was sorry for him and sent him a message in which without yielding one inch of his own convictions he invited him to eat at his table, and even to live under his roof. His idea was that if they got to know each other better and to hold friendly discussion, grace might heal this stricken soul whose anxiety and torment he had divined. To have a heretical theologian living with him seemed to be pushing the spirit of forgiveness and love about as far as it could go. Only the saints dare push it so far. The Waldensian, moved even to tears, did not accept his invitation in its fulness, but did visit Don Bosco. He was not converted, but the saint's gesture produced such an impression on the leaders of the sect that the bravos were given orders to respect Don Bosco's person in future. Grigio's protection was no longer needed.

Ten years later, in the country, where he had to visit the Moglias' farm, he was warned that the road was not safe.

"Oh, if only I had my Grigio!" he cried.

Night was falling. A dog ran to meet him, leaping and frisking round him with joy. It was Grigio, naturally. He accompanied him right to the farm, walking alongside him as of old. For fear of a fight with the farm dogs, Don Bosco thought it wiser not to go through the yard. Grigio followed him into the living-room, and lay down in a corner. They all talked and had supper, the whole Moglia family being present.

"And now we must feed Grigio," said Luigi Moglia.

But Grigio was gone: he was not in the fireplace, nor under the table, nor under the chest. Yet since his entry no door or window had been opened. He had evaporated.

In 1883—thirty-one years after his first appearance—this very peculiar dog turned up again at Bordighera, to guide Don Bosco when he had lost his way. That was the end: the story of the dog finishes there.

Providence can use a dog. An angel could quite well take the form of a dog. At the very least we can assert that the animal—if animal it was—had a nose for sanctity, and would fight for it. If it was a miracle, God worked so many other miracles for Don Bosco that this one need not surprise us. Among other things, he multiplied loaves and brought a dead man to life. Both episodes are worth relating.

One day the three hundred pupils of the Oratory were drawn up to receive their small loaf. The

baker's bill was twelve thousand lire—nearly five hundred pound sterling!—and he would give no more bread till it was paid. Don Bosco asked to have brought to him whatever bread was in the house. They scraped up fifteen small rolls, not one more. They counted them for him. But he did not bother to count them: what difference did it make? He began the distribution and, three hundred times, his hand drew from the bottom of the basket the bread God owes his poor. With three hundred rolls drawn out of it, the basket was still not empty; the original fifteen were still there. The young Delmazzo saw the miracle—he tells us the story himself—and stayed on at the Oratory, which he had meant to leave. He became a model Salesian.

Don Bosco multiplied nuts, multiplied consecrated hosts. But, as I have said, there was a miracle more wonderful still. A small boy was on the point of death. His agonised parents had sent for Don Bosco too late. Like Our Lord, he said as he came among them: "Your son is only sleeping." They left him alone with the corpse.

"Charles, Charles, arise!"

He drew away the sheet. The child opened his eyes.

"Oh, it's you, Don Bosco. I have been calling for you so long. I thought I was going down to Hell for a sin I have never confessed. I could tell it only to you. But a beautiful lady chased away the demons, saying: 'Let him be, he is not yet judged.' I was delivered and you have come."

He confessed his fault and lived another two hours.

"Would you rather stay on earth or go to Paradise?" the saint asked him.

"Oh, to Paradise, Don Bosco!"

"Au revoir, then, my son."

Later he was to tell an intimate friend what the gift of miracles cost him.

## **9. Founding The Salesian Order**

### **I**

Let us return to the Oratory. It was making fresh progress. Don Bosco had realised how dangerous it was to send off the boys who were lodging with him to work each day in the city. They were fine boys, but they were not saints. In the city they learnt evil words and unhealthy curiosity. Obviously it would be better for them if they could practice their trade on the spot. He therefore proceeded to set up workshops in all the rooms of the building that were still empty—rooms for joiners, locksmiths, binders, printers, shoemakers and tailors—for his small world had to be clothed as well as lodged. Don Bosco soon mastered all these trades, gave advice and even lessons in them. Thus his young artisans, kept from the world till they had reached maturity, were in no danger of losing outside what they had gained within. Further, he had to set up classes for

those boys who by taste, education and intelligence showed a special aptitude for study. He dreamt of establishing a kind of embryo seminary in which vocations could be born and nurtured, but he did not see how to manage it. His first efforts to found a community failed dismally. Priests already ordained and established had no desire to take on new and heavy obligations. He had begun as far back as the Convitto time with four youths—Gastini, Buzetti, Bellia and Reviglio. He had built great hopes on their joining in his work; but of the four, two gave up the idea of the priesthood, and the two who persevered went as secular priests to their own districts. He had made two priests, and that was something, but he had not gained the helpers he needed.

But if his first essay had failed, all was not lost. Another generation was growing up, a generation that contained Rua, Cagliero, Francesia, Savio, Turchi and others like them. He settled down to wait for these to grow up.

Some three or four years before, he had been shown a prophecy in sleep. Down a magnificent trellised gallery which ran far off towards a marvellous horizon, he was walking with a troop of young men. The road was carpeted with full-blown roses, lovely to look at, soft to walk on. But as they advanced they began to feel the thorns, and these bit the more cruelly the further they went. Gradually his companions fell away from him, and he found himself alone, still dragging on his bleeding feet. Suddenly a group of young clerics ran to meet him, crying:

"Don Bosco, Don Bosco, here we are! All yours, ready to follow you."

Then they went on their way together over thorns and flowers.

Thus he knew which would desert him and which would persevere in the way: he could put a name to each of them. He even knew the destiny that awaited the most faithful. But he had to be as kindly and charitable to one as to another, as persevering even with those who he knew would not persevere.

Giovanni Cagliero from Castelnuovo d'Asti, who was to be a cardinal, was brought to him by a priest "on the pleasant hill of Murialdo." He adopted the little country boy.

Giovanni Baptisti Francesia, from San Giorgio Cavanese, the future Salesian scholar-poet, came to Don Bosco at the word of another small boy, who whispered to him: "Come along, he's a good priest. He gives us roasted chestnuts."

At Castelnuovo too, a little later, he discovered Dominic Savio, the St. Aloysius of the Oratory, who may one day be raised to the altar; and also Paolo Albera, his second successor at the head of the Salesian Order.

His immediate successor, Michael Rua, he first met as a little town boy going to the Friars' School, who often crossed his path in the streets of Turin and had attracted his special notice. When the saint was crossing the market of Porto Nuovo a horde of small boys would rush up, for he always had something in his pocket to distribute—sweets, medals, images. To Michael Rua, who was one of them, he never gave anything save a sign—and this sign interested the schoolboy extremely. Don Bosco would open his right hand and would bring the left across it as though

cutting it in half; and he would say: "That is for you, my little Michael!"

For Don Bosco knew, knew with certainty, that this child had been sent to share with him till death the burden of his gigantic enterprise, that they would be half each in everything. That is what his gesture signified.

Thus Providence gathered the grain—Rua, Francesia, Rochetti, Cagliari, then Savio, Albera and others. Don Bosco sent the children into the city to attend the classes of two of his friends—old Signor Bonzanino who taught the third class, and Don Picco, who taught rhetoric. The years passed, the grain had germinated, was about to ripen. One evening, as though for an instruction, Don Bosco gathered them in the small entry to his room and asked them if it was their will to help him. He said nothing to them of the priesthood nor the religious state, but only of a common effort in the spiritual life, which should issue in advice and example to their younger fellows. One by one he raised them up to the idea of vocation. One by one they took the soutane. They felt themselves united, solid, built together, sharing one plan and one hope. Before the word was actually pronounced, they had already formed a "society." Don Bosco gave it explicit foundation on the evening of 6 January, 1854.

"My dear friends"—I give the substance of what he said to them—"during the Novena which precedes the feast of our Patron, St. Francis de Sales, I suggest to you that we begin today, with God's aid, a period of practical exercise of charity towards our neighbour. At the end of this period you may bind yourselves by a promise, and this later may be transformed into a vow. From this evening we shall call ourselves Salesians." He was then thirty-eight.

It may at first sight be a little surprising to see the rough and ready Don Bosco thus placing his work under the gentle protection of the holy and eloquent bishop of Geneva. But the learned, subtle, accomplished writer of the Introduction to the Devout Life was also, as we forget too easily, the apostle to the people in the Chablais. It would be unjust, even scandalous, to attribute to him, as the ignorant do, a facile devotion, a rose-water asceticism, a mysticism faintly shadowed and impregnated with sensuality. Equally, it would be falsifying his work outrageously to see him as especially an apostle to the upper classes. This man of refinement, with his gift for poetry of wonderful sweetness and savour, was not only the most exact and most rigorous of spiritual directors, but also the most simple and cordial and approachable of diocesan missionaries. His concern was not exclusively with the Marquise de Chantal or Philothea. He knew how to talk to artisans and farmers. His delicate hand was no stranger to their horny fists and rough handshake. He was at home on their level, he was one with them. Simple with the simple, great with the great, he brought to them all, without distinction of origin or creature, the purest honey of the Gospel, the oil of sweetness, the balsam of charity.

Different as Don Bosco was from him by nature, even perhaps by reason of their difference, it was this element of gentleness—combined with the tireless propaganda by pen, word, example and action—that he singled out for admiration, veneration and close imitation in St. Francis de Sales. Violent by nature, he reached out towards his contrary. For patron he chose the tenderest of saints, as once for friend he had chosen the most sensitive of his fellows. What was most obviously lacking in his own robust temperament, with his too great awareness of strength and power of achievement, he seemed to draw from those two—dominion over self, calmness in face

of injustice, equable temper, unfailing kindness. Kindness indeed was a gift he was born with; but it was only by unremitting effort that he managed to assure it that central and dominating place in his life which it had to occupy if it was to spread its rays over the whole Christian Church. In this effort he was aided by Luigi Comollo, by his mother, by St. Francis de Sales, by the inspiration of the Madonna and her son.

The primary lesson he learned from his patron saint was—"First give yourself, then give God." Give yourself whole and entire with no reservations whatever—all your time and strength and experience and knowledge, all your heart, all your joy. And the joy to be communicated above all was the joy of a pure conscience, an active body, a life well filled, a heart open to every appeal, a soul elevated to God. Show the happiness of the Christian, make men feel its reality without too much emphasis upon the Christian's sufferings; make them admire the Christian ideal, want it, accept it. Those were the three steps. Do not preach fear until you have preached love. Hence the necessity of limitless patience and sympathy and simplicity. Do not treat souls from above; take them where they are—on the very level of the earth if it must be so; listen to them, win their confidence, tame them as you would tame a wild bird. Draw the sting of the evil in them by cultivating and bringing to life whatever tiny spark of good is still hidden within them. Teach them to spread and strengthen their spiritual wings; teach them to fly in that new air; without hurting them, without their even feeling it, break the strands of the net that trammels their flight. Once they have known the upward flight, how could they ever wish to sink back again to earth, when every impulse bears them towards God?

The idea of the Salesians was to humanise the approach to the Eternal Truth by kindly will and kindly action. "You can bring salvation to anyone," St. Francis de Sales insists, "provided you make him like salvation."

"You can't begin too soon," adds Don Bosco, "the task of making him like it."

That is why the Salesian apostolate is aimed first at the young, at those, above all, who are most unloved, poor, unreceptive.

The period of "the exercise of practical charity towards one's neighbour" prescribed by Don Bosco reached its end, it would seem, to the honour of the young apostles; for Don Bosco accepted their promise. An unlooked-for calamity came to put that charity to the test. Cholera struck the town with a suddenness and a violence which seemed to render all help vain. In three summer months there were 2,500 cases; 1,400 died, 400 of them in the Valdocco, the greater part uncared for, abandoned by their neighbours, their friends, even their family. The inhabitants who were still uninfected fled away or bolted their doors. Don Bosco called upon his first Salesians and his bigger boys. He picked out fourteen; next day he had forty, and for three months all of them spent themselves with him in stricken homes and hospitals. They comforted the sick, buried the dead. Trembling but determined they abandoned all prudence; the work to be done was so pressing that they no longer even gave themselves time to wash, and they used their own bedclothes to wrap the dying. But not one of them was infected.

On 25 March in the following year, 1855—the Feast of the Annunciation—Don Bosco had a private talk with young Don Rua in his tiny room—the one where we can still read on a card

hanging on the wall the inscription which so moved Dominic Savio on his first visit:

Da mihi animas; et caetera tolle.

Rua was sixteen and Don Bosco judged him worthy to pronounce before the others his vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. A crucifix was on the table, Don Bosco stood, Rua at his feet.

Here in secret and in silence commenced that marvellous sharing of every burden which the saint had foretold to the schoolboy in the tumult of the street. Here the Order of Salesians was born, in the presence of three witnesses only—the founder, the first novice, and God.

The same unpretentious ceremony took place for the others. No change was made in the studies nor in the spiritual exercises, nor in the popular apostolate of the mysterious congregation; but the vows forged a stronger and more sacred chain binding soul to soul. Encouraged by Don Borel and Don Cafasso who was his confessor, Don Bosco prepared the Rules. He drew ideas from other Orders, but with a special outlook of his own.

Anti-clericalism was still raging; religious were looked at askance by authorities and people; they were reproached with their wealth; their habit, instead of drawing men, repelled them; if they made an exception in Don Bosco's favour it was because his work was considered in its externals as a free work, humanitarian and social rather than religious in character. They were, of course, totally wrong, but Don Bosco thought well to take advantage of their error; it was vital for him to maintain contact with the people whom he would raise, educate and so save. The closer his Order remained to a semi-lay Third Order and to the secular clergy, the more chance it would have to maintain the position it had won, and to widen the field of its conquests.

Meanwhile, Margarita was growing old, and she now had a hundred and fifty boys under her care. She was helped in her task by a group of pious women who had opened a workroom. But her part was still heavy. She would go on to the end, free at least from the cares she had had while her son's future was still uncertain. Could she ever have dared to dream of such a success in his poor house? That very success was crushing her. Her son had done all that—her little John. No, he had no further need of her; he would never lack helpers. In her utter weariness she could sing the *Nunc Dimittis* of the aged Simeon. Early in the winter of 1856 she took cold; pneumonia came and was too much for her; she died in a week. It was an immense grief for her son and for all her sons. She was the mother of the Oratory, of all the small ones and all the big ones, of all those whom she had enlightened, consoled, instructed, served, the white shadow of the saint, his tenderness incarnate. They would never again see her pass from her little kitchen garden to the main yard.

Don Bosco was utterly overcome. He had never thought—when had he a moment to think?—upon the time when this disaster must certainly come. For two hours after, he sought refuge in the sanctuary she had loved so much—because of Our Lady—in the underground chapel of the *Consolata*, where so many suppliant Aves have sounded.

"Our Lady of Consolation," he cried, "you see I no longer have a mother . . . and I have so many children. You will take her place, won't you? I give you her place. Watch over my children—"

Virgin Mary!"

It may have been at this time, it may have been later, that he saw, as he came into his Oratory, Our Lady standing like a statue above an immense church, wearing a crown of stars of marvellous brilliance. Our Lady of Consolation—or, as she became, Our Lady Help of Christians—was soon to watch as a Mother over the buildings, yards, chapel, festal Oratory, workshops, Salesian Order—the whole realm over which Margarita, his mother, had reigned.

## II

Here it seems best to relate an incident that took place some months earlier than his mother's death. It gives us some notion of Don Bosco's mysterious ascendancy and the boldness of his action.

He had never given up his ministry among the prisoners. This particular year he had preached the retreat before Easter to the young prisoners in the general prison, the biggest of Turin's gaols. The results, as usual, were remarkable, and all the wretched youths received communion. Then, in the bigness of his heart, he thought he would secure for them a reward here upon earth—a day of freedom under his surveillance in the open air. His idea was to take them out in the morning, to go to the Royal park at Stupinigi, some six miles away; there they could forget everything in races, games, tests of strength and skill; they would return in the evening. The Director of Prisons was appalled at the suggestion.

"Very well," said Don Bosco, "I shall go to the Minister."

The Minister was Urbano Rattazzi, who loathed priests but admired Don Bosco.

"Pick your day," he answered; "I shall give you a sufficient body of police to look after the ruffians."

"No, Excellency, I don't want any police. What I want for these men is absolute liberty. Anything else would spoil their pleasure. I promise you that I will bring them home, every one of them, to supper."

On the strength of this assurance the Minister agreed—though he took secret measures to catch any escapees! On the appointed day they set off in a body; food for the three hundred convicts was carried on an ass; Don Bosco, his face beaming, marched at the head of them. He poured out all he had of strength and ingenuity and gaiety and love; and not one of the prisoners would have dreamed of causing him pain by escaping. He concerned himself with all of them, and for the space of one day he set every man free from his fear and revolt and evil instincts; and when, tired out, he took the road for home, the young criminals laden with bunches of greenery put him by force on the ass, and he returned in the midst of them through the streets of the city like Our Lord on Palm Sunday. A man who could do that could do anything.

Thus it was that a work almost without organisation—at any rate with insufficient organisation—like the Oratory with its lodgers and its members from outside, did not break down

under the stress of the ill-temper of so many of the boys, of their mediocrity, irresponsibility, idleness and even impurity: for in so immense a flock there were, of necessity, some deeply corrupt. On the contrary it grew more firmly and solidly under that eye of his, at once masterful and filled with love. Don Bosco saw all the defects in his priests and his catechists, his professors, superintendents, students, apprentices. But he trusted in God; he eliminated none but the really corrupt. He would not have blasphemy; he was absolutely inflexible about impurity. For the rest, the gentlest of means; even the Salesian Rule, the cornerstone of the whole structure, was not drawn up upon any deliberate scheme. He shaped it on the living model, suited it to human nature; he let it form itself with God's aid upon the happenings of every day.

"Play, wear yourselves out!" he told his children. "While you are playing you have no time for evil thoughts."

"Be their friend at every instant," he told his young priests, "win them back, don't punish them. Share their lives to win their hearts."

If we add love for their trade—this also was something of a game, since gaiety belongs everywhere—the practice of the duties of their state, the reception of the two sacraments essential to the soul's life, and devotion to Our Lady, we have the complete outline of the Salesian apostolate. It only remains for the Rule to expand, to fill in the outline and make it more explicit. It was to this that Don Bosco set himself slowly and with scrupulous care.

When the Rules were drawn up his idea was to apply for their approbation in Rome. To this he was strongly urged by Mgr. Franzoni, who had been expelled from his archiepiscopal city of Turin and was living in Lyons.

The Minister of the Interior, the same Urbano Rattazzi whom he had already found so easy to manage in the matter of the prisoners, assured him of the support of the State; he it was, indeed, who suggested to the Society the formula which later enabled it to escape the persecution levelled against religious Orders: "An association of free citizens living together for the purpose of doing good"; if the free citizens happened to be priests, that was their own affair.

In 1858 Don Bosco approached Pope Pius IX. The Pope was kindness itself; he actually introduced the question of a Congregation as a thing desirable and necessary to give proper security to the future of the saint's many foundations. This Congregation should be rather a Society with Rules of easy observance; they should not be distinguished by a religious habit from secular priests; the less distinctive their appearance, the more would they be able to accomplish. Such were Rome's wishes. They were Don Bosco's wishes, too. Ten days later he laid his plan before the Pope.

But the Pope is not alone, and his Commissions act slowly. After two years of waiting in vain, Don Bosco decided to act. He told his sons of his resolution—the Society was to be explicitly established; after all, it had the blessing of the Holy Father, and this was quite enough to start on. He gave them a week to think it over; on the Sunday he asked their decision; there were two defections only. They elected a Council. The Superior-General was to be Don Bosco, the spiritual Director, Michael Rua—though he was only a sub-deacon—the Members of the Council,

Cagliero, Lazzerio and Bonetti. But Don Bosco hesitated to impose solemn vows. He waited two years longer. It was not till 14 May, 1862, that his twenty-two disciples bound themselves—for three years, since they could not yet do so for life—to observe the Rules of the Society. Don Bosco was then forty-seven.

He was right not to hurry. He had lost some by the way and, to his grief, Dominic Savio was not at the ceremony—which, like the first reception, took place in the saint's small room—for God had already taken him in the flower of his sacrifice; and the others were already praying to him. The Society that was coming to birth felt certain that it had a saint in Heaven.

The Society prospered though it still lacked official approbation; John Bosco sent to Rome a further copy of his Constitutions. He might well have despaired if he had not put the matter on Our Lady's shoulders.

"You need a field?" she had said to him in a dream. "Here is the field. A chapel? Here it is. A house for your children? Again, here it is. Refectories, dormitories, workshops, classes, arcades? I give them to you. A great church dedicated to me? It is before you, and on the very spot where Saints Solutor, Adventor and Octavius, martyrs of the Theban Legion, were struck down."

He had had the field, the buildings, the chapel of St. Francis de Sales; therefore he would also have the church. He had seen it thus, and he would bring it to pass.

He often saw her, as I have said, when he crossed the courtyard of the Oratory. He pointed her out to his boys.

"Don't you see her, right up there at the top of the dome? Our Lady Help of Christians, with her crown of stars?"

But no; they saw nothing but the sky over the old hovels of the district: no dome, no Our Lady. But in 1868 even the blindest could see her.

Don Bosco fought six years more for his Rules, six years more for his great church. It was inaugurated on 9 June; and when seven months later, 19 February, 1869, the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars solemnly and definitively approved the Salesian Society, it was under the great dome of Mary Help of Christians that all Don Bosco's sons intoned a chant of thanksgiving.

Let us look again at his double campaign. First, the church. The battle went on from day to day. There was trouble about the ground, trouble about the title to be given to the basilica (in the Valdocco Our Lady's holy name was held to be provocative!); there was begging of money from business men, from princes, from ministers, from the clergy and the laity, from town to town, from province to province, and right up to the steps of St. Peter's throne. Lotteries, begging—letters, miracles. When he had not a penny left he simply improvised a miracle.

The old Commander Cotta was dying. Don Bosco reassured him:

"No; you will not die yet. My church needs you. How much will you give Our Lady if she gets

you out of this?"

"Two thousand lire a month for six months!"

"Done!" The old Commander recovered, and paid.

A man stricken incurably with rheumatism sent for Don Bosco to cure him; for the rumour of his cures began to spread.

"If you cured me," said the sick man, "I should certainly help you."

"Help me first, my dear sir; I want three thousand lire."

"Father, it is impossible!"

"So much the worse."

"You refuse to cure me?"

"Not at all; I have shown you how."

"No doubt you have, but I haven't the money with me."

"Go to the bank and get it. Here, get up and dress! While you are doing it we shall pray."

And the rheumatic got out of his bed (for the first time in three years), got into his carriage and returned, cured—with the money.

He made his boys pray hard, for our miracle-worker did not lack nerve—he pretended that he owed his church to them! He resolved that a child's hand should put in the final stone. It was little Emmanuel, son of the Marchese Fassati, whom he carried up to the top of the dome with him.

The other problem, that of securing official approbation, met with the same difficulties and triumphed by the same means. There were endless steps to be taken and oppositions to be countered, endless contradictions and disappointments. Once they had secured the decree of approbation he caused his sons to pronounce their perpetual vows, but the Commissions had to be approved by the bishops. Don Bosco haunted bishops' houses. The Archbishop of Turin refused to support him; he was an old friend before he was made a bishop, but it seemed clear to him that Don Bosco's Congregation would be in competition with his own seminaries. He announced that he would not ordain anyone who had not passed through the seminaries: his diocese must come first.

"The service of souls must come first," Don Bosco answered, "whether they are of the diocese or not."

Rome required thirteen corrections in the Rules he had proposed. He made nine of them. At the

moment when success seemed assured, the whole thing was cast into uncertainty by the hostility of two cardinals and the Secretary-General of the Roman Congregation—for a good many letters reached Rome from people who disapproved of him.

He rushed to Rome. By an extraordinary coincidence he was summoned to the bedside of a child in danger of death, who chanced to be the beloved nephew of Cardinal Berardi, one of his most determined opponents. Don Bosco gave the child his blessing and told his parents to pray to Our Lady Help of Christians, who would cure him. Our Lady consented. The Cardinal was won.

Thereupon Don Bosco went to Cardinal Antonelli. He was suffering from an attack of gout, which prevented him, as he carefully explained, from leaving his room to plead Don Bosco's cause. Don Bosco gave him the same advice: Our Lady would enable him to resume his ordinary activities; in fact, he would be able by next day to go to the Holy Father. Our Lady again agreed. Cardinal Antonelli changed sides.

There remained Mgr. Svegliati, the Secretary-General. He had what we should now call influenza, and was coughing terribly. There is not much to be said for influenza, but to the Cardinal it had this advantage at least that it kept him in bed and gave him a good pretext for ignoring Don Bosco's appeal.

There was the same scene as with the previous cardinals, the same conversation, the same prayer to Our Lady Help of Christians.

"I promise you that if she puts me on my feet again I will go and vote for you to-morrow," said the sick man incautiously.

Our Lady was not likely to make a fuss about one cure more or less. The cough quieted during the night. The result was that at the Council the three most obstinate of his opponents appeared as fanatical partisans. The cause was won, but it took years yet to obtain approbation for the Rules. At the meeting of the four cardinals in curia, one more vote was necessary.

"I give mine," said Pius IX. This was in 1876.

The great church was now in being, rich and majestic, pure in line—a great success for that period with its red pillars, its light frontal, its two bell-towers, its cupola. Upon this cupola rested the statue which for so long had rested only on a dream, the statue of Our Lady Help of Christians, Gate of Heaven, Gate of the Salesian Institute.

A dream, too, had been the Society whose final approbation found it already fully formed, with its Superior-General, its Counsellors, its spiritual director, its bursar, its masters, novices, students, foremen, pupils and the immense crowd of boys who lodged there; from these boys, indeed, the whole thing had really taken root. From the time of the vision of the held, all that he had dreamed had been realised to the letter—the wild beasts, the lambs and the counsels of gentleness given by Our Lord. Don Bosco had obeyed the Master, the Master had served Don Bosco.

The Archbishop of Turin would not admit that he was beaten. And there was much envious grumbling beside. The saint was fully able to defend himself; he did not for one moment imagine that he had finished with trials. They reproached his Salesians with being neither fish nor flesh, neither seculars nor religious. For seculars they were too cloistered, for religious too free. They gave too little time to prayer; in the matter of mortification they were satisfied with the fasting and abstinence demanded of all the faithful; they gave too much place to exterior activity, attached too much importance to play. Don Bosco might well have replied that sixteen hours of apostolate—at recreation, at study, in class, in chapel, in the work-rooms—sixteen hours of practically unbroken contact with young souls to be formed and saved—without sparing his strength or his heart or his mind, surmounting in himself every reaction to impatience and fatigue and boredom and downright disgust, with the constant will to put a grain of charity and, as it were, a spark of God into each of his acts and each of his words, a drop of spiritual joy into each of his troubles—was at least the equal of the bodily austerities of many monks; and was even, perhaps, one form of prayer. For surely such perseverance in the voluntary accomplishment of duty towards one's neighbour all the days of one's life, minute by minute, is only to be conceived in the light of God; and one who refused to cling to God, who even for one instant lost the thought of God, would not have the strength to persist.

Yet this was what the apostle demanded of his sons, and what, by example, he obtained from them.

Against his sons now, as against himself formerly and another before him, it was made cause of complaint that they were on familiar terms with publicans and sinners; and further that they were compromising the dignity of their cloth in rough boyish games; that they kept severity for a last resort, only to be used when every means of persuasion within the power of a loving heart had completely failed; finally, that they were trespassing upon parish activities—and, remember, the only existing parish activities had been created or kept in being by Don Bosco.

The truth is that men did not see the vital need of these bold innovations. They did not grasp that Don Bosco's whole aim was to bridge the gulf between clergy and faithful by breaking down in the clergy those century-old habits of indifference and even of contempt for the people, against which St. Francis de Sales, St. Vincent de Paul, St. John Baptist de la Salle, and St. Philip Neri, had fought so hard in their own day. What made it worse was that in Don Bosco's time the multitude had had its faith and hope so deeply undermined in the name of liberty that it could the more easily do without its pastors. Here they were entering upon a new era, sceptical, materialist, atheist, an era of stupid and vulgar paganism, favoured by the law and preached by the mighty. A new kind of apostolate was demanded to bring back the scattered sheep, particularly the poor and the ignorant. St. John Bosco was its initiator and master. All our present-day effort, so powerfully encouraged by the Holy See—boys' clubs, mid-day masses, settlement work, study circles, vacation schools, Catholic journalism and even the Christian theatre—sprang first from his head; not one item of it but was first put into operation by him.

In raising up Don Bosco and the Salesians, Providence was just a century ahead of our time. They taught us all we know. . . . And even then Don Bosco was not at the end of his projects. He had still twenty years to live.

## 10. The Daughters Of Mary Help Of Christians

### I

Doing Good has to be paid for. Enough has not been said about all that Don Bosco had to go through. Some of his trials we know, he could not conceal them; and some he let slip out; and some we shall never know.

In 1867 one of his controversial pamphlets, *The Centenary of the Apostle Peter*, had been deleted to the Congregation of the Index, and just escaped condemnation in Rome. His Archbishop, Mgr. Gastaldi, caused him every kind of difficulty. Civil authority was constantly investigating his activities, on the pretext that he was plotting with the Pope against the State. His fellow-priests were jealous of him. Some of the best of his sons gave up the Salesian Society for the secular clergy. Illness, from which he had for some time been free, returned to the attack.

From the age of forty the saint had suffered from appalling varicose veins in his legs, though he did not take one step the less for that. In 1856 his right eye had been so badly damaged in a storm that he was in grave danger of losing it. Terrible headaches, bleeding haemorrhoids, an intolerable eczema, recurrent attacks of miliary fever combined to wear him down. The worst of these attacks came in 1871, complicated by an agony of cardiac rheumatism which all but killed him. Yet he recovered. Later he had a good deal of spitting of blood. The result was that by the end of his life no trace was left of the magnificent health that had once been his.

Early in 1862 the devil, who had made a habit of disturbing the short nights which were all he had, saw a chance to finish him off altogether. In his new room—close by the old one, but on the other side of the same building—there was an outburst of diabolic activity at once grotesque and almost unbearable. It lasted two years and was comparable to that which *The Cure d'Ars* suffered. There were the same uproars, raging storms the thunder of galloping squadrons, endless chopping of wood, furniture dancing fantastically. The bed was shaken and overturned, the bedclothes torn to shreds, tongues of fire leaped out of the cold stove. The devil sat on him, dragged him up by the shoulders, ran an icy brush over his face, trampled on him, loosed wild beasts against him—bears, tigers, serpents—and sometimes even took the form of a prehistoric monster, filling the whole room with his scaly length, plunging and roaring. His devoted boys in the simplicity of their hearts stood guard at his door. But they were panic-stricken and rushed headlong down the stairs. In a vain attempt to get a little sleep the saint went once or twice to sleep in the house of the Bishop of Istria, his best friend; but the devil followed him.

In the morning Don Bosco would come down into the yard with drawn face and hollow eyes, bent, bloodless, looking twenty years beyond his age.

"Can't you exorcise him?" they asked.

"Oh, he would go elsewhere. When he chances to leave me alone, he goes off to worry one of the boys."

"Ask him what he wants, at any rate."

"Do you think I haven't done so?"

"And what does he answer?"

"No matter.... Pray."

The boys prayed hard. But Don Bosco found for himself a way to get rid of his enemy. As a matter of fact, the enemy gave it up. The secret means the saint used to bring this about is certainly not within everyone's power. We know nothing with certainty of its nature—save what he has told us, namely that ritual formulas, holy water and the sign of the cross were only one part of it. It is to be noted that the devil's assault took place at the same time as the profession of the first of the Brethren.

But, with the devil off his hands, he had still plenty of other troubles. Immediately after the approbation of the new Society, his beloved Don Borel, who had never doubted him save for one moment, who was his strongest support in a good half of his enterprises, was accidentally killed. Don Bosco had now lost his two oldest friends. For already, as far back as 1860, Don Cafasso had taken the road towards that Eternal Beatitude which Rome has declared he has certainly attained.

To the date of his death Don Cafasso had remained Don Bosco's confessor, the most intimate confidant of his soul. Don Cafasso could never fathom the mystery of his penitent's achievement, yet he of all people should have been able to understand it. It was he who had consoled, counselled and befriended the younger man; by prayer and example he had led him to the plenitude of renunciation and charity. In the asylum and in prisons he had been the spiritual champion and friend and brother of the most degraded souls. They called him the Apostle of the Gallows. His was the mission of accompanying condemned men to the scaffold; to the end he assisted them with words so sweet, so purely supernatural, showing the joys of Heaven with so much truth and fire, that they died in love with death. The service St. Catherine of Siena had rendered Niccolo di Toldo was his specialty.

"It will soon be a pleasure to be beheaded," muttered the executioner.

He died practically in the confessional, bowed under the burden of the shame and the crimes which it was his task to hear and absolve in God's name—crimes for which he made atonement with his fasts and his watchings, the sweat of his anguish, his weariness, his own self-annihilation. As he drew his last breath he opened his arms to Our Lady, who seemed to bend over him to help him in this last act.

The pilgrim should visit his simple room in the old house of the Convitto and pray before his relics at the Consolata. It was in these hallowed places that the work of the Salesians, barely as yet in germ, was watered by him to strong life.

## II

Don Bosco was now alone. There was no one for him to lean upon. All leaned upon him, and his

strength was growing less. But he could not rest satisfied with assuming the whole weight of the works he had already founded; he must go on founding new, laying endless new burdens upon his shoulders.

By 1871 his house in Turin had already some fifteen subsidiary houses in Italy. He established three in France—at Marseilles, Nice and Toulon—one in Spain. Everywhere he gathered collaborators. For them he set up the Institute of Late Vocations. None before him had thought of thus opening a way to the priesthood for adults, mature men with no opening worthy of them, men whose noblest aspirations life had failed to satisfy. But quite suddenly another need thrust itself upon him, the problem of the education of girls. It was slowly borne in upon him that as much should be done for them as for boys, for they were in the same peril. As a matter of fact, the extreme of his modesty, the fear he had of losing even for an instant by look or touch the baptismal innocence which he had preserved in soul as in body, had always kept him from concerning himself too closely in the troubles of the other sex. It seemed enough that he should pray for women; that was all he felt called upon to do—before they had reached what is called the canonical age—by way of helping them to save their souls.

We must not forget one fact that can be urged in his behalf; he was born in a family of boys. In his direct apostolate he shut out from view—or tried to—roughly one-half of the world. We cannot fail to notice in a great many priests a certain mistrust, even an obscure dislike, of our mother Eve, first cause of our troubles, and by participation of all those who perpetuate her charms. It may even go so far as to prevent them from realising that man's beauty could ever be a temptation to woman, so sure are they that woman's beauty is a temptation to man; thus half-naked girls seemed to them more of a danger than half-naked boys; whereas, in fact, it is very much the same thing. Men and women, alas, we all bear the same wound, and we all need the same healing.

In 1856 a country priest, Don Pestarino of Momese, had gathered together in an Association under the patronage of Mary Immaculate a number of girls of his parish who were willing to help him with his various works. Here it was that Maria Dominica Mazzarello felt the first stirring of her vocation. With one of her friends she founded a sort of tiny Institute where little girls, most of them orphans, came to be taught to sew, read, write and pray. The older girls gathered round her and finally they came to live together as a community. The experience of the Convitto, with the Oratory springing from it, was reproduced on the feminine plane. Don Bosco heard of it, and refused to have anything to do with it. Yet the idea would not lie still in his brain. Very quietly it reproached him. It was all very well for him to say: "It's no affair of mine." Everything was an affair of his; Providence needed him for everything.

Once again he had a dream. He was walking in Turin. Crossing the Plaza Vittorio Emanuele, he was suddenly surrounded by a multitude of small girls, jumping, running, and shouting, as wild as boys. They recognized him, acclaimed him, supplicated him.

"Take care of us, Don Bosco."

He tried to send them away.

"Do not abandon us," they begged.

Don Bosco was deeply moved. "I cannot do anything for you. Trust in God's providence."

But the bigger girls insisted: "Must we then roam the street at the mercy of every temptation?"

He hesitated. But a Lady whom he knew well stood before him and said in a voice gentle yet admitting no reply: "These also are my children. Take them. I give them to you."

For some time after, Don Bosco made his sons pray for the work that was tormenting him. Then he went off to Don Pestarino at Mornese and they agreed together to turn Maria Dominica Mazzarello's little community into a congregation. She was made Prioress, and on 5 August, 1872, the Feast of Our Lady of the Snows, the Bishop of the Diocese of Acqui in Don Bosco's presence clothed fourteen Religious and received the first vows of some dozen Novices. The Congregation of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians had come to life.

"You shall be," said Don Bosco, "the stones of a living and immortal monument that I wish to raise to Our Lady in gratitude for her innumerable benefits."

The "monument" was a monument of worries. Don Bosco added a wing to his city in miniature. It stands today before the Church of Mary Help of Christians, facing the Salesian Institute.

Four years later, in 1876, the Union of Salesian Co-Operators was officially established. Thus one more idea took substance, or rather took name and title: for actually it came to birth in the very earliest days of the Oratory. It had been necessary from the first day to organise the boys who flowed in from all quarters of the city, long before he could train up the best of them to be priests. The handful of his priest friends—we have named practically all of them at one point or other of this book—who were willing to devote to his work the time left over from their own proper occupations would never have been sufficient for the purpose. He had to call upon the laity. If only he could persuade the flower of the Catholics of Turin, the nobility and the upper middle class, the intellectuals, all those who were reasonably well off and therefore had some spare time, to devote themselves to his boys! At first he had to plead with them. It was so new an idea—it was, in fact, ten years earlier than the first St. Vincent de Paul Conference. But many of them, the most generous, gave of their all—their time and care as well as their money. Seeing them thus engaged, Don Bosco suddenly grasped the importance that the Lay Apostolate must have in a time of over-crowded slums and under-crowded seminaries. When thirty years later the Salesian Society assured him a sufficiency of priests to guard his flock, he did not abandon the collaboration of the laity. In his Rules, which were still under discussion, he provided for a kind of Third Order which might relieve the main Order of certain duties; and might be even more successful in establishing contact in hostile quarters where the priestly habits would empty a street at sight. It was always the one idea, to fill up the moat, break down the barrier. "Where you cannot go yourselves, send representatives who will be better received."

The Salesian Co-Operators were already carrying out their function; external members of the Society, bound up and incorporated with it, they had their share in everything. When Rome approved the Rules in 1874, it did not accept the clause providing for incorporation. But while

the Union of Co-Operators had thus to resign itself to remaining autonomous, it continued to act in the shadow of the Society: sharing its work, its prayers and its graces. It was recognised in 1876.

## 11. The Mission Field

Thus in addition to the Salesian Order and its work for boys, we have the three immense activities—the work for Late Vocations, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Union of Salesian Co-Operators. So much might have seemed nearly enough. But not to Don Bosco. The wheel kept turning.

We must say a word about this wheel. It was in a dream that Don Bosco first saw it. He saw a city square with an enormous wheel lying on its hub in the middle of the square. A mysterious personage, an angel perhaps, started it spinning. Each turn of the wheel represented ten years of the life of his work. The wheel spun noisily. Yet it seemed to Don Bosco that during the first turn he was the only one to hear it. At the second turn all Piedmont heard it; at the third all Italy; at the fourth all Europe; at the fifth the whole world.

This curious dream took place in 1861. Thereafter Don Bosco often spoke enthusiastically to his young men of Foreign Missions. In his new room we can still see the map of the world that he used to pore over. He concentrated especially, and with especial pity, on the desert places of South America, where the Gospel had never penetrated.

There, behind a range of mountains scarcely marked on the map, were thousands awaiting the voice of God. So he was assured in a new dream, in 1872. He saw an immense untilled plain, its level monotony broken by no hill; in the far distance the steep face of a mountain. Moving about on the plain were a multitude of men, almost naked, immense in height and fierce of face, their skin dark and coppery, long cloaks of fur on their back, and their hair grotesquely arranged; in their hands they carried a lasso and a kind of long lance. The dreamer saw them doing all kinds of things—hunting wild beasts, carrying lumps of bleeding flesh on the end of their lances, fighting with one another and with soldiers in European dress. The plain was strewn with bodies. Suddenly in the far distance he saw a long line of missionaries moving forward, missionaries of all Orders. The savages saw them immediately, rushed upon them in fury, massacred them, cut them in pieces, carried their limbs lance-high in triumph. Thereupon another troop of young men rushed joyously forward in quest of martyrdom. There were amongst them novices and priests; and the dreamer, startled, knew them for Salesians. They stretched forth their hands, opened wide their arms, smiled; he longed to stop them, to urge them to flee, but their cheerfulness disconcerted the savages and then won them; they dropped their weapons and received the newcomers with all imaginable marks of courtesy. The Salesians sat down in the midst of them, asked them questions, instructed them and converted them. They recited the Rosary and the savages did their best to do likewise. Finally, they intoned a hymn of praise to Our Lady.

Such was the dream. But who were the savages? Don Bosco hesitated long between Africa, China, the Indies, Australia. His mind was not clear. As it happened, in 1874 the Arch bishop of Buenos Aires of his own accord invited him to undertake the evangelisation of Tierra del Fuego.

He hesitated no longer. He already knew who was to be the chief of his missionaries. At the time of the cholera epidemic of 1854, the boy Cagliero, worn out by his devotion, had contracted another disease, typhoid fever. Don Bosco thought he was going to lose him—one of his best boys, to be ranked with Rua and Savio. He thought about him so intensely that the small sufferer appeared to him in a vision lying on his death-bed; a tribe of red-skins, amongst them two giant warriors, were bending over the child anxiously and lovingly. A dove flew by, an olive branch in its beak; it hovered over the boy, let the olive branch fall on his pillow and flew away.

"You will not die," said Don Bosco to Cagliero after that prophetic dream. "You will be a priest and you will go far, very far."

The time had come. The first expedition—organised in 1875—consisted of four priests and six laymen, led by Don Cagliero. It gathered together in the evening of November 11 for the farewell ceremony in the Sanctuary of Our Lady Help of Christians.

"You are a small band," the saint said, "but who knows if a great tree is not going to spring from that small seed. You will be in quest of souls, not money or honours. You will care for the children, and through them win the parents. Let the world know that you are poor in clothes and food and lodging, and you will be rich in the face of God and powerful over the hearts of men. Do what you can, God and Our Lady will do the rest."

The year following he saw them all in a dream, both those he knew and those who would come after them, not only in this century, but in all the centuries to come, ever more numerous and more ardent, amongst peoples of all colours, in Brazil and Paraguay, in the Congo, the Indies, Siam, China and Japan. It was the last turn of the wheel.

Yet he was building more churches, St. John the Evangelist in Turin, the Sacred Heart Basilica in Rome, more schools, more houses. He led the apostolic campaign on every front, confessing and preaching everywhere, amongst rich and poor, giving out tracts—scores of copies—begged on all sides for miracles and seldom refusing.

"Do not ask me for anything," he would answer; "pray to Our Lady Help of Christians."

It was she, not he, who cured the paralysed woman, held up by the crowd in front of her church on the day of its consecration. The woman, catching sight of the saint, forgot her paralysis and rushed up to beg that he might get her into the sanctuary.

She it was, not he, who restored sight to that despairing girl who in the Sacristy of the Oratory began little by little to discern the medal of Our Lady offered her by Don Bosco. He let the medal fall. She picked it up without hesitation.

It was she again who forced a certain sceptical doctor down on his knees to beg Our Lady to cure him; Don Bosco was only her agent.

"She wishes it," he said.

She wished it so well that she brought him to his knees; and immediately cured him, body and soul.

She again it was who brought a certain General Officer, supposed to be dying, to the communion rail. Don Bosco had refused to take him the viaticum. "I have not time," he said, and reassured the family by affirming that the dying man would receive communion, somehow or other, the next day. And so it was.

Similarly, it was she who brought to a head an abscess in the throat of Paul, small son of Count Eugene de Maistre. All that happened was that Don Bosco placed the medal of Our Lady Help of Christians on the neck of the child when he was in danger of death. It was not his doing.

But the public would not see it so.

"Long live Don Bosco! Long live the saint!" they shouted at him in the street.

All right. If they would have him a saint, a saint he would be—though he knew perfectly well that he was no such thing. It was all the same to him.

## **12. Death**

Singularly enough this simple man, before obtaining Eternal Glory in the Bosom of the Father, was to know glory here upon earth—not only in his own little canton, like the Cure d'Ars, but everywhere. The Cure was upset when they took his portrait, and thoroughly disliked the idea. Don Bosco certainly attached as little value to that kind of thing as possible, but he was a practical man. To convert souls, he had to have bricks; to buy bricks he had to have money and credit. He had been designed by God, in Huysmans' expression, as His "brasseur d'affaires." This involved the cheerful acceptance of all the glory that came his way, though he never sought it. He turned the glory into money; he used it to the last possible point and made up for it by humbling himself abjectly in the secrecy of his own prayer. He adapted himself to things as they were with perfect grace. "You want Don Bosco? Very well, you shall have Don Bosco." He posed in every sort of attitude and every sort of costume, at prayer and in the confessional, at Paris wearing neck-bands, at Barcelona in a biretta; he would as cheerfully have posed in a frock-coat in London, or in a burnous in the Sahara. It is the custom of the Salesians to adopt the dress of secular priests in any country they pass through, and ordinary lay clothes if there happen to be no secular priests. He was the first to give out portraits of himself:

"The devil makes a splash? We shall make one too! The devil is up to date? So are we!"

There is an immense collection of these portraits. Look into them as closely as you will, you will seek in vain for any touch of pride, of complacency, even of simple vanity, on that face of his—square, powerful, rugged, open, profound: in his later days refined by suffering: even in the prime of his strength radiant with simple kindness. There is authority in it and intelligence and powerful magnetism.

Don Bosco was as free with his presence as with his likenesses, when the likeness alone did not satisfy those unimaginative souls who might become converts, or helpers, or even (one adds cheerfully) subscribers of money. Once when his purse was empty he undertook a begging tour—exhibition might be a better word—in France. Since his old face had the power to support his works and gain souls for God, it was his plain duty to show it about.

Come to the year 1883. He was nearly seventy. He had lost the sight of one eye, and most of the sight of the other. In walking he had to rest on a cane or on the arm of a friend. The day is long past when he could wear out the youngest, like that day when he arrived in Rome by train, and filled his eyes with the loveliness about him, reciting lines of Horace to the glory of the Tiber, which he was seeing for the first time. But his good humour remained, for that he had to persuade others to share.

Crossing the Paillon, which for a change was running a torrent, he fell in and took a bath. As he had only one soutane, and the Salesians of Nice with whom he was staying were in the same penurious state, he simply went to bed and there received the numbers of people who wanted to see him.

"This," he said, "is a true Don Bosco house."

At Hyeres he was staying with Count Colle, the most generous of his benefactors, whose son Louis had died at the age of seventeen from consumption. This child, at whose death-bed he had been present, often appeared to him in a dream—or in a "distraction," for by this name he called those dreams that he had when he was awake. He did not need to sleep to dream; suddenly his spirit would go off and be lost in the supernatural. He saw the boy several times playing in the gardens of heaven or radiant with glory, or drawing water inexhaustibly from a well, a symbol of the grace which he spread. But this time, during his mass at Hyeres, the boy showed him a relief map of a distant land where his missionaries worked; and everything was shown on the map so precisely and with such truth to reality that thereafter he was able to describe the scenery of Tierra del Fuego as if he had been there. The mystical presence of this boy was to be a consolation for his old age. He set out again strengthened.

He went to Toulon, Marseilles and Avignon. Everywhere crowds went wild with excitement. At Lyons he gave an impromptu geographical lecture—marvellously detailed—on Patagonia, which he had just visited in one of his "distractions." After a halt at Moulins he at last reached Paris. The whole of Paris already knew him. He lived there with his friends, the De Combauts, in the Avenue de Messine. He received visitors in the house of the Senhillacs in the Rue de la Ville-L'Eveque; their house was never empty. He preached at the Church of St. Thomas Aquinas, at the Madeleine, at Saint-Pierre du Gros-Caillou. In this last place Cardinal Lavigerie presided. He visited endless convents, said mass in endless parishes. Wherever he went he was besieged. An inexplicable enthusiasm had taken hold of the Parisian crowd—and at such moments the Italian crowd is a mere shadow of the Parisian. He signed portraits, scattered images and medals, blessings and counsels, heard confessions, made converts, worked miracles—and received enormous sums of money for his works. One day in the Rue Sevres, near the Square du Bon Marche, the reception became a riot and the riot a triumph. They snipped pieces from his soutane, stole his handkerchief. He stood up in his cab and covered all Paris in one great gesture.

"I bless you all, my friends; yes, all, and I bless France."

The house he founded there was opened two years later in Menilmontant. It is claimed that he received the homage of Victor Hugo; but this perhaps is only a legend.

At Amiens and at Lille there was the same triumph. He shirked nothing, not even public dinners. He returned by way of Dijon and DBle. He was scarcely back before he set off again for Frohsdorf, where the Comte de Chambord begged his last help.

"Monseigneur will not reign," Don Bosco told him, "but it may be that the Holy Virgin will cure him."

The improvement in the Prince's health lasted a few weeks only; then he died suddenly. There is mystery about his death.

Don Bosco was at the end of his strength. The new Pope was alarmed. We know how generously his predecessor had always helped the saint. And the saint had given back to Pius IX in faithfulness, prayers and even in advice as much as he had received from him. He venerated the Pope and admired him. He had worked quietly but ardently amongst his many Roman friends for the triumph of the dogma of papal infallibility. More than once he delivered to the Pope messages from the other world: one such message concerned the conversion of England, which was seen in a dream by Dominic Savio. It was Pius IX who gave him the formal order to write out his dreams and his "distractions," for the Holy Father had no doubt of their supernatural origin. But the friendship between them was not approved in certain quarters. A small group began to use every means to discredit Don Bosco. When calumny had no effect, they actually intercepted his correspondence with the Pope. "Don Bosco has stopped writing to me," said the Pope. "The Pope does not answer my letters," said Don Bosco. Each of them wondered what he had done to displease the other. Don Bosco was no longer received in Rome. Pius died without seeing him again, but he spoke of him on the very day of his death. The Father of the Salesians had known no harder trial. A few days before the Conclave, he met Cardinal Pecci, who was to be Leo XIII. He kissed his hand and said to him quite simply:

"I hope soon to kiss your Eminence's foot."

"I forbid you to pray for that."

"You cannot forbid me to ask God whatever I please."

"Who are you to talk to me like this?"

"I am Don Bosco."

It may or may not have been a prophecy. At any rate, it was fulfilled. Leo XIII did not forget it, and Don Bosco was re-established in the Pope's confidence. From him he obtained the "privileges" still necessary for the complete independence of the Society of Salesians. Leo XIII granted these over the heads of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars.

"Go," he said, "for it is God who guides you."

When he realised that Don Bosco was so far gone, Leo XIII told him to name his successor. He named Don Rua, who would never again have to share with the saint the burden of his work, but must henceforth carry the whole of it. At the same time Don Cagliero, Vicar Apostolic of Patagonia, was made a Bishop. He was consecrated at the Church of Mary Help of Christians, and embraced his old master before he yielded to his insistence and let him kiss his ring. The olive branch that fell from the dove on to his pillow when he seemed to be dying signified the Oil of Consecration. All was accomplished.

Yet from somewhere or other the saint drew strength the following spring to go to Spain to preach, collect funds and establish a house. There were miracles in Barcelona as there had been in Paris, and Turin, everywhere. He no longer counted them. He was given a mount called Tibi Dabo for the Church of the Sacred Heart. Tibi Dabo—I shall give unto thee—was God's reply to the ceaseless prayer of his apostle. "All that you have asked of me, all that you will yet ask of me, I shall give you, dear Don Bosco."

He was present at the consecration in Rome of another great church, likewise dedicated to the Sacred Heart. This was May 16, 1887. He returned to Turin. He had nothing now left to do but to die. He was practically blind. His legs would no longer carry him. In good weather he was driven out in a carriage. His last visit was to his "philosophers" in the house of Valsalice. "I shall come back here as guardian," he said, pointing to the spot where his tomb was to be under the stairway in the entrance.

All that summer he scarcely left his room. Surrounded by the map of the world and a skull, a collection of books and a reliquary, he received and listened to penitents, workers, men of business, his priests, his work boys. He had them lay him down on a low couch, with a bed-table on which he wrote in a trembling hand his last precepts, his testament of charity. For long now he had not been down to the church to say his mass. In an adjacent room they set up a small chapel, which can still be visited. The first shouts of his boys, chained up over night, mounted to him from the yard. He prayed quietly. He imagined the present, foresaw the future of his innumerable foundations—already sixty-four houses on two continents—two hundred and sixty-seven novices, seven hundred and sixty-eight priests (In 1934 there were 9,444 priests and 959 novices in 718 houses; and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians numbered 7,768 in 71Z houses.); a throng of vocations in France, Poland and even in England; everywhere the same programme of games and work, the same joy, the same liberty—the liberty of the sons of God.

At the beginning of December he had to give up saying mass. He could only lean against the altar, having no longer the strength to turn round to give the Blessing. Mass was said for him, and he received communion like one of the faithful. On the 6th he had them carry him to the church to embrace his new missionaries on the point of starting for Ecuador. He could not now go very far. He was bidding adieu to the whole of his life. Warned by a dream, Mgr. Cagliero came to Turin. He had had a fall from a horse, and had malignant fever as well; suddenly he heard an urgent voice murmuring:

"You must assist Don Bosco, who is dying. Hurry."

He set out immediately. He brought Don Bosco a precious gift, a little Indian girl who wished to work out her salvation as a religious of his house. It was the homage of the pagan lands which owed to him the light of faith.

On the 8th the saint took a last meal in the refectory to honour the Bishop of Liege, Mgr. Doutreloux, one of his great friends.

A few weeks more and he could no longer leave the house; but he did not cease to see visitors. His body was broken and helpless, but mind and heart remained as clear, as strong and as fresh as in his youth. The peasant, the priest, the scholar, even the comedian stirred again within him and displayed their gifts with marvellous spontaneousness. He had a word for everyone: always the perfect word: and in every word was the plenitude of charity. He forgot nothing that concerned others; he was still interested in everything and in everybody. For that was the secret of his genius and his sanctity: that he could put himself in the place of others.

On December 17, some thirty of his big boys came for confession in the usual way. Don Bosco was so weak that it seemed out of the question; but he had heard them:

"Yes. send them in; it is the last time, you understand. They must come in."

He still owed them one last counsel in the secrecy of the sacrament, one last word of love.

They were praying for him, fasting and weeping in every part of the world. They begged God to cure him. This time he refused to pray for his cure. What he wanted was a good end and that was all. There was no more he could do for his sons upon earth. The sooner he went to help them from Paradise the better.

On December 24 he was brought the viaticum. They carried him to the room that opens on the gallery. The priest who was to give him communion was his confessor, Don Giacomelli, whom he had known in the Seminary; but he gave way to the missionary bishop, that same little Cagliero whom Don Bosco had loved. When he advanced, ciborium in hand:

"Help me," begged the saint, weeping, "to receive my God worthily."

He dragged on another month, paralysed in every limb. There was one moment of improvement; he used it to renew his adjurations to his sons.

"Pray! Keep praying! Prayers! Courage!"

Above all must his children pray to Our Lady for the preservation of their chastity. They must receive the Body of Our Lord to become strong. Earlier he had begged Our Lady for a thousand places in heaven for his Salesians, then for ten thousand; then for a hundred thousand. She granted them. He still wanted more.

"Tell my children that I await them all."

On January 29, 1887, the Feast of St. Francis de Sales, his patron, he sank into a torpor which presaged death. He seemed to be in delirium, but his feeble voice murmured on with counsels, consolations, prayers. At the sound of the evening Angelus he said: "Viva Maria!" Then his lips closed. Early in the morning Don Rua gathered his priests, who filed into the room. Then came the students, then the apprentices. They knelt and kissed his hand. The death agony began. Mgr. Cagliero bent over the dying man. "We are here, Don Bosco," he said; "pardon the trouble we have been to you and deign to bless us in sign of pardon."

He took the inert hand, raised it and made the Sign of the Cross as he pronounced the words of benediction. Then the Angelus rang; they recited the prayers with tears. There was a rattle in his throat. The rattle ceased. He uttered three sighs for Jesus, Mary and Joseph, whom they were invoking for him, and in honour of the Blessed Trinity. His lips grew still. That was all.

First they placed him, clad in his vestments, upright in the chair from which he had listened to so many souls in anguish, in that gallery whose windows look over the yard. Once again his children filed by. Then—in the same position, in stole and surplice and biretta and with the crucifix in his hand—in the little church of St. Francis de Sales, the first he had built. And the whole town thronged sobbing to do homage to what had once been Don Bosco. No such crowds had ever been seen in the Valdocco—aristocrats, traders, business men, workmen, beggars, boys good and bad, public officials and the whole people. In the evening Don Francesia spoke in his name to his sons, from his own pulpit between the altar and the confessional where they had been used to seeing him.

The requiem took place on the 2 February at Our Lady Help of Christians in the presence of an enormous crowd; and the stone fell into place in the house of Valsalice on the tomb that awaited him. There was grief in the nation, grief throughout the world.

And there was not a penny in the Order's coffers to feed the thousand mouths which till that moment had never known want.

## **Epilogue**

With Don Bosco gone, how was the work to survive—materially or spiritually? What or who could be its support? It had lost all it had upon earth. He was the corner-stone, the key-stone and the cement. The whole thing had been a saint's paradox, and the saint was no longer there to sustain the paradox, and the paradox continued to be sustained by the saint's sanctity.

The Salesian Order had spread all over the world, possessed houses and missions and countless priests and co-operators. All this would have been as nothing if they had not been of the stature to face the demands which Don Bosco had imposed upon himself and dreamed of imposing upon his sons.

A work founded upon authority has some chance of survival, for authority can be passed on. It descends from the great to the small in hierarchical order, each one using his power to keep the one below him in place. But a work founded upon liberty should, humanly speaking, engender

only anarchy. And Don Bosco's was founded upon liberty.

He saw before him the mind of a child. He refused to constrain it. College for him was the very antithesis of a barracks or a prison. It was a place of election, wind-swept, living, where souls and bodies must grow together to their flowering. There must be a minimum of discipline in the classroom, complete liberty outside it. That liberty is not so much watched over by the master as observed, directed and gradually shaped. The master must approach each boy, must take interest in all that interests the boy—his family, his work, his tastes, his pleasures—as much as a friend of his own age could, or even more; he must win his confidence and affection and use them effortlessly to inculcate in the boy a knowledge of good and evil, desire for the best, horror of sin, a taste and need for prayer. Above all, prayer and trust in God and the sense of the presence of God must not be reserved for certain times or certain places. They actually came out of church for their evening prayer, that they might learn to pray everywhere. The young must not be stupefied by sermons. These should be short, familiar, plentifully illustrated, within their grasp. The evening prayer for which the boys gather in the yard should last two or three minutes, not more, an incident in their play, as joyful, as pleasant to them.

Since the master has taken so keen an interest in whatever games the boys are playing, they in turn will naturally take as keen an interest in the sermonette he gives them. In the course of the day he must make this or that incident the occasion of a simple, brief sermon; he will be listened to and listened to with pleasure; because it will be knit into the main background of the day. Establish the child's life on the plane of joy, and hence of love; the love of God will surely follow the love of the master. There must be no going in a body to confession or communion. Those who want to receive the sacraments are free to do so, no one is forced to; it is the master's job to win the unwilling boy to the sacraments.

And if a boy has behaved badly, he must be punished only in the last extremity, and that without humiliation or violence; if possible, the worst of the punishment should be the master's sorrow. Obviously punishment of this sort could only be effective if there were real affection between master and boy; and, equally obviously, in the hands of the wrong kind of master the whole thing could be intolerably sentimental. One can only say that, as it actually works in Salesian schools, it is not so.

If an incurably bad boy is found in the class he must be expelled without scandal, on some pretext that will not damage his reputation. For obviously among this vast number of boys it is not to be supposed that all will yield to affection. Some certainly fail to do so. But at least an effort should be made to win the majority. That was Don Bosco's method. He read souls, and souls felt that he was reading them. A particular boy studiously avoids him, is never seen at confession, is certainly conscious of something wrong within himself. As all hands reach out towards the saint except that boy's hands, it is his that the saint seizes. He looks at the boy.

"You look green today," he says with a smile.

"Me, Don Bosco?"

"Yes, my boy, you look green; there is something wrong. . . . All right," he adds, "run along and

play."

If the boy is incorrigible, he leaves the Institute. If not, you will find him knocking humbly at Don Bosco's door; and even before he has opened his mouth Don Bosco has told him one by one all the faults he has been hiding.

It is as easy as that—for a saint; for a man who from end to end of his active life never allowed himself more than a maximum of five hours' sleep. Consider for a moment what his day was. He rose from bed, fell on his knees and prayed for an hour. Then pen in hand he meditated on the needs of his boys, of his work, of the whole Church. Then down to the confessional, where he heard a score or two of confessions. He said mass neither hurriedly nor slowly—not slowly for his time had to be carefully measured, so much to God, so much to God's business on earth. Then out into the yard full of uproarious games, where he had to take the hand of every boy who felt like it, look at them all, recognise them all, find a word for everyone, a jest or a smile, and at need join in a game in spite of his age.

At last came breakfast, a hastily swallowed cup of coffee. After that in his room he spent the whole morning giving attention to all the troubles and all the demands from outside. He came late to lunch, bolted it down while giving instruction and encouragement to the Community gathered round him; and, with dessert before him, was besieged by the merciless curiosity of a noisy crowd of urchins. Then another whole hour alone with God. After which he hurled himself on his mail and dashed off a hundred or two letters, carefully thought out, detailed, charitable, the letters of a man who does not know how to half-do anything.

His mail finished, off to the City, climbing stairways, getting money out of the rich, handing it over to the needy; discussing with his architects, with the governor, with the bishop; and never losing patience for a single instant. Back home for dinner he received the reports of his assistants, had much intimate discussion with them, then stayed a while with the boys who, as in the morning, had invaded the refectory. The evening prayer and hymn of joy finished the day. There were still certain private conversations, visits to his room by the boys, by his schoolmasters, by co-operators. By now it would be close on midnight. But Don Bosco might very well have more writing to do; and his sleep when he got it was only too likely to be disturbed by dreams which suggested new duties to be accomplished.

For never less than nineteen hours of each day he was on duty, and in nineteen hours he never lost communion with God. His prayer was uninterrupted. It presided over all his actions. The more he did, the more he prayed. In him the two commandments mingled and fused into one. His soul had now only one act; with all its power it reached out towards God.

Such, according to Fr. Auffray, was Don Bosco's day. And there are three hundred and sixty-five days in the year; and he lived thus for forty-five years. That was the price paid to keep the work going.

But now the saint was gone. What exactly was to happen? Obviously they must have more saints. They did have more saints—he saw to it. Because sanctity, complete detachment from self, companionship with souls at every instant, are the pillars of his work, and his work must endure.

We have an unanswerable answer to the sceptics. His work has endured. It has grown and spread wide. It is in Africa, the Indies, China, Japan. The same sap of charity flows in all its branches, amongst the Nuns as amongst the Priests of the Order. It has already produced four Beati. Go and visit the yards, arcades, class-rooms, workshops, churches, the theatre. Mingle with the animated crowd of boys, and admire the young masters who are with them from morning till night, raising them to the life of the spirit.

When people know with full certitude that they are loved by those who pray, they likewise turn to prayer. And it is not difficult to love one's brethren and show them that love when the heart is full of the love of God. The lesson of Don Bosco is the outpouring of the human person in love of neighbour.

The little cowherd—acrobat—catechist has thus become the apostle of the new age. St. Joseph Cottolengo, looking at his poor soutane, said to him long ago:

"You will want a stronger one, for many people will hang on to it."

To-day all the faithful are "hanging on" to it. He was proclaimed Blessed on 2 June, 1929, by Pope Pius XI, who, while still a school-master, had visited the Oratory and seen how important was to be the work of St. John Bosco. For he is the newest St. John. On 8 November, 1933, the solemn process of canonisation consecrated his years of intercession with God and Our Lady.

I have finished, but I feel I have not fulfilled my design of making men love him as he deserves to be loved, of making him live again as he was in life. In my mind I see again the four modest rooms, which with the gallery beside them form the prow of that immense ship of stone which he built for his warfare of charity: the room in which he welcomed Dominic Savio and received Michael Rua's vows; the room in which he gathered such a mass of spiritual treasures, cares, plans, sufferings, confidences, vocations, cures of body and soul, prayers, visits from heaven; and the room in which he died; and the room in which every day at dawn the Host was consecrated by his hands; and the gallery bathed in light from which he looked down upon his boys. I see the vine against the wall, the skull, the map of the world, the precious relics of that other "original," St. Philip Neri, alongside the old couch and the bureau; and his iron bedstead and his books and all the memories of him that the little museum retains—his worn but ever clean vestments, sacerdotal ornaments, the greyish nuts that he miraculously multiplied, the altar against the wall in front of which they found him one day in ecstasy raised in the air. And seeing all this I feel him so present that I fear I have betrayed him and have delivered to the reader his shadow only, and not his substance.

What the memory of Don Bosco really clamours for is not a book, but a film—an immense popular film, packed with adventures, games, dreams, miracles, with fields and vineyards, sordid slums, shameful hovels and all the misery of soul of children abandoned to their own perversity; and over all the great pure breath of joy that came from the lungs of the little farm boy and scattered the mists.

There is a Bolshevik film called *The Way of Life*. Vagabonds picked up in the street find happiness and peace in the mysticism of work. Tools in a tabernacle, that is their end, that is their

God; before it they fall prostrate, so the film shows.... How long will it suffice them?

The film I propose would be called The Way of Goodness. It would show the same vagabonds, the same corruption, and a hand and a voice recalling them to the holy law of work. But they would be the hand and voice of a man of prayer who knew how to put the things of this world in their true order. In my film they would place their tools in the church, at the foot of the altar—in order that the true God would deign to join them to those tools of the carpenter Joseph which the Boy Jesus handled.

Labour is not an end in itself, capable of assuring peace among men and happiness, even if this world's justice rendered to labour all its due. How can this world's justice do so, without the assistance of love in the plenitude of its gifts? But human love is avid. From the tabernacle before which St. John Bosco had his pupils kneel, Eternal Goodness flamed forth. The love that burned in him and inflamed his brethren was so marvellously ardent, active and powerful to save, only because he drew it from the Eternal Goodness of God as His Son showed Him forth.

"Suffer little children to come unto Me."

"Unto Me," said the Saviour, and no one may stand in the Saviour's place unless he speaks in His name and imitates His virtues.

From Secrets of the Saints by Henri Gheon (Sheed & Ward, 1944).

---

Provided Courtesy of: Eternal Word Television Network 5817 Old Leeds Road Irondale, AL  
35210 [www.ewtn.com](http://www.ewtn.com)

HOME - EWTNews - FAITH - TELEVISION - RADIO - LIBRARY - GALLERY - CATALOGUE - WHAT'S NEW MULTIMEDIA - GENERAL ESPAÑOL