



GIANNI ASTI

# DON BOSCO AND VOCATIONS

*For those involved  
in Vocation Promotion*

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The translator fondly dedicates this work to:  
*Fr Oscar Misquitta, SDB*

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# PRESENTATION

Particularly evident in the present educational crisis is the crisis of vocations to the priestly or the consecrated life. This crisis is not only numeric: in fact, one ought to be rightly concerned. It is a crisis regarding the future of the Church especially in the West. While considering the progressive and relentless decline in numbers in seminaries and in religious novitiates, there is perhaps a more worrisome crisis which is a crisis in quality.

In putting together into a single dossier the articles that appeared in the monthly magazine *“Il Tempio di Don Bosco,”* the author is particularly interested in offering guidelines and directives, which on one hand invite us to a generous response to God’s call and on the other hand, manifests a stupendous fascination for a life given entirely to God for the sake of one’s brothers such that they offer themselves completely and joyfully.

Several themes are treated and corroborated by the thoughts of wise and saintly educators, including Don Bosco and enriched with the valuable and practical advice of the author which has matured by the long experience of living in the midst of teenagers and young people during their delicate years of their discernment. He has perseveringly accompanied them along this challenging path. Thereafter, there is a valuable collection of short vocation stories known and unknown, that have done the Church proud, when the Gospel has been announced to the ends of the earth and the Grace of God was offered to those whom God had entrusted to them.

This is certainly a precious gift to youth workers and those in the vocation ministry but it is also precious aid for young

people who want to look seriously at a possible call from God.

To work for vocations today is an emergency that is ever more dramatic at least from a purely human point of view. It should certainly be one of the educational priorities of every Christian educator, priest or layman. This is what the author hopes for and suggests with this precious little book.

FR EMILIO ZENI

*Director of "Il Tempio di Don Bosco"*

# INTRODUCTION

The Year of the Priest, decreed by the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI has just ended and in the year that is just beginning, the Rector Major of the Salesians wants the congregation to focus on vocations. It is fortuitous to reflect on the grandeur of the vocation to the priesthood and the consecrated life while gazing at Don Bosco, a model priest as was the saintly Curé of Ars and strive to make his passion ours too; the passion which urged him to give to the Church so many holy vocations to the priestly and consecrated life.

From the Gospels and the history of the Church we know that God calls some young people to become priests or religious, who renouncing the possibility of forming their own family, give themselves to all people, especially those most in need thus taking the place of Jesus and doing what he did: speaking about God his Father, bringing his forgiveness to them and helping them out of selfishness and sin so that they may live in the joy of his grace.

This “special call” of God which is addressed to some is called a “vocation to the priesthood or the consecrated life.”

The reflections we will make on this vocation, to which some teenagers and young people are called, are intended to be a small contribution to a big problem of the lack of “calls” that we sense, in a particular way in Italy and Europe.

We want to be of some help to those teenagers or young people who at some point in their lives have felt or may feel the Lord’s call and we hope that they will have the courage to follow this special summons.

It is our earnest plea that all parents rediscover the privilege that God gives them when he gifts their son/daughter a

vocation. Our elders were proud when a family learnt that one of its members had this call.

Don Bosco assured us that when a son leaves his parents to respond positively to God's Call, Jesus Christ takes his place in the family (cf *Biographical Memoirs* [MB] 9.704, in *Italian, omitted in the English Trans.*), and he said that we, priests and educators, give the Church a great treasure when we provide them with a good vocation (cf EBM 17.236).

It is our hope that educators and especially priests take special care to nurture within themselves a growing esteem for this vocation already present in the minds of youngsters.

We are convinced that the atmosphere of faith that prevails in families and in our Christian communities is the most fertile ground for the development and growth of vocations.

### **Don Bosco a Vocation Expert**

These reflections will be guided by Don Bosco, a vocation expert in the Church.

He himself, at various times in his life, recalled the thousands of young people he had directed to diocesan seminaries or had the joy of welcoming into his houses as Salesians.

He often confided to his colleagues that some 2000 priests were formed at Valdocco (cf. EMB 5,264-268 MB and 11.41-42). Every year he had about 50 to 55 young people who wanted to become priests, and at least 30 of these he directed to the diocesan seminaries (cf EBM 8.207). We know that for some time he was called upon to be the rector of the diocesan minor seminary at Giaveno, near Turin.

We believe that all this originated from that dream he had at the age of nine, he saw Jesus presented as the Good Shepherd, already foretold by the prophet Ezekiel (cf. Ez 34), who knows his own sheep one by one, offering his life for them and collecting them all into one flock.



It was Jesus himself, through his Mother, the Shepherdess of the dream, who entrusted to him the lambs of her flock to teach them how to become shepherds.

He expected it to be a great mission: to discover in the hearts of so many teenagers the call to “further the presence of Christ the one high priest by embodying within themselves his way of life and making himself visible in the midst of the flock entrusted to him.”

In the pages of this book we shall watch this unfold.

# 1. The Vocation

## Lambs become shepherds

One of Don Bosco's greatest joys was definitely to see from among the boys growing up around him, those who would follow him to the priesthood and the consecrated life. Educators and priests who have had this good fortune (this grace) will experience such a joy.

Of course, this experience of Don Bosco was already foretold by the Lord through the repetition of the prophetic dream which occurred at the age of nine. Few are aware that that dream occurred several times during his life: at sixteen, at nineteen, at twenty-one and then at twenty-two. He himself tells us its most complete form when he was 29: *"On the second Sunday of that year (1844) I was to tell my boys that the oratory was being transferred to the Valdocco area. I was, however, truly worried because I was uncertain about the exact location, the means and the people (to help me). On Saturday night, I went to bed feeling uneasy, but that night I had a new dream which seemed to be a sequel to the one I had had at Becchi when I was about nine years old.*

I dreamed that I was in the midst of a multitude of wolves, goats, kids, lambs, sheep, rams, dogs and birds.

The whole menagerie raised an uproar, a bedlam, or better, a racket that would have frightened even the bravest man. I wanted to run away, when a Lady, dressed as a shepherdess, beckoned me to follow Her and accompany the strange flock She was leading. We wandered aimlessly, making three stops along the way, at each of which many of the animals changed into lambs, so that the number of lambs continually increased.

After a long trek, I found I was in a meadow where those animals were grazing and frolicking, making no attempt to bite each other.

*I was exhausted and wanted to sit by the roadside, but the Shepherdess invited me to keep walking. A short distance away, I came upon a large playground surrounded by porticoes, with a church at one end. Here I noticed that four fifths of those animals had become lambs. Their number was now very large. At that moment many young shepherds came to watch over them, but they remained only a short time and walked off. Then a marvellous thing happened: many lambs turned into shepherds, and they, in increasing numbers, took care of the flock. When the shepherds became too many, they parted and went elsewhere to herd other strange animals into pens (...). You will understand everything, she answered” (MB 2,190-191).*

The dream would reveal to Don Bosco the development of his work in Turin, at Valdocco where, alongside buildings and playgrounds for his boys would rise three churches: The Pinaridi Chapel, The Church of St Francis de Sales and the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians.

In the shadow of Mary Help of Christians and around Don Bosco a miraculous flourishing of vocations would take place.

It is said that a vocation passes through the heart of a mother and this is true particularly through the heart of Mary who oversees the formation of the heart of every aspirant to the priesthood or the consecrated life.

In the meditations that he wrote in his prayer book *The Companion of Youth* which he addressed to his boys, Don Bosco pointed out the ways in which God calls a teenager to this special vocation, the qualities required, the action that the person who is called should take, the means for preserving that call and why not everyone understands the grandeur of this vocation.

We will present Don Bosco’s thought through the episodes that recall the vocational discernment in his life and the lives of his boys.

## 2. A Real Treasure: The Spiritual Director

Before actually examining the ways in which God calls a young man to follow him to the priesthood or the consecrated life, it is necessary to emphasize the importance that discernment and subsequent vocational maturing takes place in the presence of a guide, especially a priest confessor who has known the young man for a fair period of time.

In his exhortation on the formation of priests Pope John Paul II wrote: “It is necessary to rediscover the great tradition of personal spiritual guidance which has always brought great and precious fruits to the Church’s life (...). Children, adolescents and young men are invited to discover and appreciate the gifts of spiritual direction, to look for it and experience it and to ask for it with trusting insistence from those who are their educators in the faith. Priests, for their part, should be the first to devote time and energy to this work of education and personal spiritual guidance: they will never regret having neglected or put in second place so many other things which are themselves good and useful, if this proved necessary for them to be faithful to their ministry as co-operators of the Spirit enlightening and guiding those who have been called” (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n.40).

How fortunate are those young people who in their vocational quest have found a holy priest willing to accompany them.

The fourteen-year-old John Bosco describes the joy that he experienced when he found his spiritual director in the person of Fr Calosso, the new chaplain of the church of St Peter in the little hamlet of Morialdo. At their first meeting during the missions in the parish of Buttigliera John

expressed his desire to become a priest and the priest agreed to help him especially by being a spiritual father to him which in part was already remedied by Mamma Margaret after the death of his father which had taken place two year earlier.

### **A loyal friend of the soul**

We now narrate with some emotion what he says of this experience which he handed down in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* which were written at the express wish of Pius IX: *“Without further delay, John entrusted himself to Father Calosso, who, as we already know, had come only a few months before to Morialdo to provide some spiritual care at St Peter’s chapel. John grew so fond of him that he kept no secrets from him. From then on, the boy spontaneously lay bare to him all his thoughts, words, and actions. Father Calosso was very pleased because such confidence enabled him to guide the boy more effectively in both spiritual and temporal matters. (EBM 1, 136)*

It is said that to let oneself be known is already a fundamental requisite of an adolescent who has full confidence in his spiritual guide and wants to reveal to him his entire life, his ideals and the difficulties he encounters.

In the person of Fr Calosso, Don Bosco already sketches the outline of an ideal spiritual director for a teenager and the basic guidelines of his first vocational journey, which initially consists in fidelity to the Christian life of prayer and the normal duties of study and work.

*“He encouraged me to go to Confession and Holy Communion often and taught me how to make a brief meditation every day, or at least, a short spiritual reading. On Sundays and holy days, I spent all the time I could with him and on weekdays would serve his Mass whenever I could. It was from this time that I began to have a taste for the spiritual life. Till then I had more or less acted just physically and mechanically without a superior motive (...) (EBM 1, 136).*

John's affection and gratitude for his spiritual director increased: *Things were going unbelievably well for me. I could say my cup of happiness was full. There was nothing else to wish for. No one could imagine how supremely happy I was. I idolised Fr Calosso, loved him as if he were my father, prayed for him, and tried to help him in every way I could. My greatest pleasure was to work for him. I would have died for him. I made more progress in one day with the good priest than I would have in week at home. That man of God lavished affection on me.*" (Memoirs of the Oratory, p. 42)

For John the death of Fr Calosso was like being orphaned a second time. The months that followed were filled with suffering.

*"I would see good priests working at their sacred ministry, but I could not strike up a close relationship with them. Often I would meet on the road our parish priest or his curate. I would greet them at a distance and bow to them as they passed. In their distant and courteous manner, they would return my greeting and go on their way. Often I used to cry and say to myself and even to them, "If I were a priest I would act differently. I would approach the children, say some kind words to them, and give them good advice. How happy I would be if I could talk with my parish priest as I used to talk with Fr Calosso. Why shouldn't it be so?"* (GIOVANNI Bosco, Memoirs of the Oratory, Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, NY, USA, p. 48)

No wonder then that Don Bosco become *the Father and Teacher of Youth*. In the soul of a boy or a teenager there is a desire to share his spiritual growth, the ideals and dreams, but he requires that a priest take the first step to approach him and win his confidence. The youngster will then follow and confide to him his own ideals of life to which he feels called or the priest might propose to him the possibility that he has the necessary requirements for a particular vocation. The priest will make him understand that his "yes" to God's call cannot yet be final, especially when he is very young because with the passage of time he may be less willing or realise that he does not have what it takes. He will however

help him to guard the Lord's call, avoiding negative experiences that may seriously endanger or preclude its implementation.

### **The difficulties of a spiritual guide**

The difficulties and sufferings that a teenager goes through in trying to follow the Lord's call are well described by the twenty-year-old John Bosco who is now taking his life in his hands.

*"So the end of the rhetoric year approached, the time when students usually ponder their vocations. The dream I had had in Murialdo was deeply imprinted on my mind, in fact it had recurred several times more in ever clearer terms, so that if I wanted to put faith in it I would have to choose the priesthood towards which I actually felt inclined. But I did not want to believe in dreams, and my own manner of life, certain habits of my heart, and the absolute lack of the virtues necessary to that state, filled me with doubts and made the decision very difficult. Oh, if only I had had a guide to care for my vocation! What a great treasure he would have been for me; but I lacked that treasure. I had a good confessor who sought to make me a good Christian, but who never chose to get involved in the question of my vocation"* (GIOVANNI Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory*, Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, NY, USA).

These words of Don Bosco to priests and spiritual directors suggest that they make a serious examination of conscience when they do not assist adolescents and youngsters in the discernment to know the plan of God for them. This attitude is one that causes a lack of vocations.

Just at this moment of real desolation, Divine Providence came to John's rescue when he came to know Fr Joseph Cafasso. He became his spiritual director and assured him that he would support him to give his life to children and youngsters by even becoming his first benefactor.

About life choices, Don Bosco said: *"Keep in mind that the chief judge of your vocation is your confessor"* (EBM 7,493).

### 3. "Come Follow Me"

Speaking to his boys on the ways in which God calls a young man to follow him, in his meditation on Vocations Don Bosco wrote: "Studying history one can say that sometimes God spoke in an extraordinary way to some young men, calling them to become priests. But this happens very rarely. In all other cases, Jesus manifests his "call" to young people by putting into their hearts a certain inclination to this state of life and then giving them some necessary qualities" (TERESIO Bosco, *Don Bosco ti parla*, Elledici - trans).

#### **A Vocation is born in the heart of God**

We pause now to consider the ways in which God calls a youngster. There are so many different calls, because **each vocation** is something original and is **born in the heart of God** who calls the candidate to help him write a little sacred history of his life, the story of the love that God has for him.

Vocation is a grace, a gift of the creative love of God from the first moment of our existence from which he has thought of and loved us (cf Eph 1.4-6). Each of us is a word of God made flesh. A thought of God realized and turned into a human person.

As Christ is the perfect expression of the Father, the Word of the Father made flesh (cf. Jn 1:14), so every man is a loving word uttered by the heart of God who becomes man, an infinite ray of beauty and infinite love that enters history.

"Those who are called to the consecrated life understand in their hearts that Jesus is the fairest of the sons of men, the heart of the world, so fascinating and captivating as to be swept up in the loving embrace of the Holy Spirit and given



wholly to him. The Virgin Mary begins, with this consecration, a beautiful and exciting love story, through the working of the Holy Spirit, a beautiful and exciting love story which marvellously and passionately overwhelms her whole person and immerses her in a tormenting desire to lose herself totally in Christ” (RAIMONDO BARDELLI, *Vivere L’amore, Elledici – trans.*).

The Lord often makes use of the environment in which the youngster lives. In fact, the inclination to the priesthood or the religious life may gradually arise in a family that is deeply Christian or it may be aroused in the parish, an oratory or in organized groups where young people are involved in an apostolate of service, to the poor which might cause them to ask the question: why not become an apostle for good, for the whole of my life? This explains why various vocations still flourish in some communities.

Even an environment that is barely Christian can lead a youngster to ponder: “Here someone needs to roll up one’s sleeves and do what Jesus did.”

The Lord can use the assistance of a person (a priest, a religious or a lay person) who specifically invites the youngster: “You’re a wonderful lad, have you thought of becoming a priest or a religious or a missionary?”

At other times it could be the contact with a mission, a conference, a letter from a missionary, the biography of a saint that challenges a youngster so that he begins to toy with the idea of following that particular vocation.

Frequently on a day’s retreat the Lord may speak to the heart of a young man during which he begins to understand how living one’s life for God and for others can be a beautiful thing.

Therefore it is useful to offer adolescents and youngsters powerful experiences of God at retreats and spiritual exercises during which they have a living experience of falling in love with Christ and several aspirations are born within

them as a result: they begin to feel a desire to make Christ known to everyone; a yearning for an everlasting love that human love in this precarious age with its limitations does not know; they have a profound need for freedom which will not suffer from the limitations of gifting oneself to others; of aspiring to live a poor, chaste and obedient life as a result of which he challenges a culture of a thirst for power, pleasure and consumerism that slays a man's heart and he dreams of taking that love wherever there is poverty, suffering and loneliness.

### **A Fascinating Ideal**

It is often an idol that intrigues and provokes a teenager or a youngster to follow Christ, causing him to imitate the person in real situations of love and self-giving.

Many boys were captivated by the figure of Don Bosco. Think of Michael Rua, who was eight years old when he met Don Bosco in a square in Turin near the school of the Christian Brothers, *“Michael Rua (...) was soon won over by him. As soon as he entered the chapel (on his way to the sacristy) something like an electric shock seemed to run through all the children. They would jump to their feet and leave their places to mill about him until they had succeeded in kissing his hand. It took quite some time before he could get through to the sacristy”* (EBM 2,247).

Michael was captivated by the charm of Don Bosco and his goodness. After studying as a day student, the Oratory accepted his application and he began to live at Valdocco and began studies to prepare the priesthood.

We recall Francis Piccollo, who, touched by Don Bosco's charity towards the poorest boys, felt that he ought to give Don Bosco as big a gift as possible. He requested Don Bosco to let him stay with him all his life in the service of youngsters, orphans and the poor like himself.

## **When Does God Call?**

Some feel this call at an early age. Don Bosco himself admitted: *“The joy of always living in the midst of boys, bringing them together and teaching them Catechism was already in my mind from the age of five.*

At ten, when performing magic tricks for his companions, little Johnny Bosco felt the need to start with a prayer, then repeat the pastor’s sermon before he began his tricks. This is a boy’s answer to the call that God has already placed in his heart.

To seriously consider vocations of young people and help them to discern and develop these calls is what the Church has done in the past through the establishment of minor seminaries. Because dioceses and Religious Congregations that have closed these institutions major seminaries have also been empty.

Others heard the call a little later, during adolescence or in early adulthood, as happened to Philip Rinaldi, who met Don Bosco at the age of five and despite being by his side from then on, it was only at the age of twenty that he decided to follow the Salesian way of life. He eventually became his third successor.

Still others heard the call when they were already adults as happened to Count Cays of Caselette, a former member of the Piedmontese Parliament and a great admirer of Don Bosco. He witnessed before his very eyes a miracle of a semi-paralyzed little girl healed by the blessing of Mary Help of Christians that Don Bosco gave her, and in that event he saw a sign that confirmed him in his Salesian vocation to the priesthood.

Don Bosco tells youngsters who are reluctant and hesitate to decide: *“Those who feel in their hearts the desire to be priests of Jesus, can believe without a doubt that this desire comes from Heaven: in fact a desire so generous and so elevated can only come from God. Don’t be afraid of not having enough*

*strength to realize this great wish. God, who put it in their hearts will give them all the graces necessary to achieve it” (TERESIO Bosco, Don Bosco ti parla, Elledici – trans.).*

## 4. "Traits" of those Called

To the young, Don Bosco used to say that God manifests the call to the priesthood or the consecrated life by giving them some quality or qualities, and listed as first **a certain inclination to this state of life** and as a second quality **a normal ability to study** and to pass exams demanded by the school. In this regard, he wrote: *"To the people of God, it would be a great misfortune to have ignorant priests."*

The Church has always given great emphasis to the intellectual formation of priests and those called to the consecrated life. Here is what Pope St. John Paul II wrote in his apostolic exhortation: "The commitment to study, which takes up no small part of the time of those preparing for the priesthood, is not in fact an external and secondary dimension of their human, Christian, spiritual and vocational growth. In reality, through study, especially the study of theology, the future priest assents to the word of God, grows in his spiritual life and prepares himself to fulfill his pastoral ministry" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 51).

Let us first see how Don Bosco approached those youngsters who manifested the inclination and how he helped them to reflect on the commitments that this vocation involved which was first of all to study.

### **With Dominic Savio**

The famous meeting between Don Bosco and Dominic Savio who was then twelve years old, occurred at Becchi and their first conversation was appropriately adapted to the son of a seamstress, around cloth that would make a beautiful

garment to offer to the Lord. “*And what are you going to do when you finish school?*”

**“I should love to be a priest,** if that were God’s will.”

“*Very good. And now let’s try a little intelligence test. Take this little book, go over this page, learn it by heart and tomorrow come back and both explain it to me and recite it by heart.*” No more than ten minutes had gone by when suddenly Dominic appeared smiling, by my side:

*“If you wish I will repeat my lesson now.”*

I took the book and, to my surprise, he not only recited the page by heart but explained simply and clearly the meaning, showing that he understood it very well. (JOHN BOSCO, *The life of the Boy Dominic Savio, student of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales*, Turin, G. B. Paravia, 1859).

Don Bosco was impressed by the spiritual progress he saw in this little boy. Dominic’s teacher had already informed Don Bosco but gave little evidence of his ability to successfully study and memorise so precisely.

Those who are called to the priestly or the consecrated life are required to possess a suitable academic background. Other types of formation would cause them to lose precious years and force them to begin their studies all over again.

### **Even a Rogue Can Become a Priest**

Don Bosco was not discouraged with boys like Michael Magone who had already been exposed to negative experiences but that did not preclude a priestly vocation. The conversation that Don Bosco had with Michael Magone was moving. The thirteen-year-old boy had just arrived at the Oratory and he confided in Don Bosco the mischief he had committed: “*Would you like to study or would you prefer to learn a trade?*”

“I’m prepared to do whatever you wish but, if the choice is left to me, I would prefer to study.”

“And if I put you to study, what do you intend to do when you are finished?”

“If a ruffian...,” he said, bowing his head and laughing.

“Carry on – if a ruffian...”

**“If a ruffian...like me could become good enough to be a priest, I would most willingly become one.”**

“We’ll see then what a ruffian can do. **I will put you to study:** Whether or not you will become a priest **will depend on your progress in your studies, your conduct and the signs that will point out whether you have a vocation or not.**”

*“If good will is all that is needed I can assure you that I will succeed and will never do anything to displease you.”* (JOHN BOSCO, *Magone Michael*, G. B. Paravia, 1859).

### **The Signs of A Call**

Regarding the thirteen-year-old Francis this was part of the letter that his Parish Priest sent to Don Bosco: *“This young lad,” he said, “Has been a consolation to me for many years and he is a great help in the parish. He serves Mass, he takes part in Church functions, he teaches catechism to younger children, he prays fervently, he frequents the sacraments in an exemplary manner. I am quite willing to let him go, because I hope that he will become a minister of the Lord.”*

In this introduction there were already signs of a call to the priestly vocation: recollection in prayer, serving at the altar, willingness to read at the services, availability to assist young children by teaching them catechism. These were all indicators of an inclination in the youngster towards the priestly ministry.

However, it would be appropriate if the youngster himself discloses this as was the case when Francis met Don Bosco. At times, it is a priest, a teacher or a parent who might have the courage to point out certain inclinations of the youngster and propose to him the vocation.

That was what Francis bore in his heart and what he told Don Bosco: “Why do you want to continue going to school rather than learn a trade?” asked Don Bosco.

“My greatest wish is to be a priest.”

“Whoever advised you in this?”

“I have always wanted it, and I have always prayed to the Lord for help to realise my aim.” (JOHN BOSCO, *The Little Shepherd Boy from the Alps*, The Life of Besucco Francesco, G. B. Paravia, 1859).

### **The Struggle to Study**

When it comes to studies, above all for those between the ages of twelve and fifteen, adolescents may experience sudden lapses of willingness to study often linked to growth and development issues and a sexual and affective crisis.

They must be accompanied during these difficult times and protected from these devastating experiences especially from a moral point of view. This is a very precious service you can render for the purposes of the preservation of vocations.

This was also what happened to that youngster who would, several years later become the first successor of Don Bosco: Michael Rua. We remember the thirteen-year-old who had taken a summer course given by Don Bosco to help him with his studies under the guidance of a cleric, Joseph Buzzetti. It was August and the heat affected Michael very much, discouraging him. That was when Buzzetti took him aside and tried to reason with him. Michael listened with his head bowed and then went back to study with greater determination. Perhaps he had even thought of the conversation that he had had with Don Bosco at the beginning: “*My dear Michael, what are you thinking of doing when you finish your elementary school?*”

“*Taking my father’s place, so as to help my mother who has sacrificed so much for us.*”

“And would you not like to continue your studies?”



“Oh yes very much! But for now I’ve had enough.”

“But if you were to study Latin and the Lord called you to become a priest, would that please you?”

“Oh, I’d love to. But who knows if my mother would take it well.”

“Try talking about it and then you’ll know if she approves of our plan or not.”

*He went home and his mother listened to him and replied:*

“Maybe! I would want so much to see you a priest! If the Lord gave me this grace I wouldn’t have sufficient words to thank him. Ask Don Bosco if he would be willing **to allow you another year of study to see if you succeed.**” (TERESIO Bosco, Don Bosco: Storia di un prete, Elledici).

And you must admire the esteem that this mother had for the priestly vocation and the great sacrifice that she made by depriving herself of this child who would have been the support of her old age!

## 5. Two Gifts to Treasure

### Health and Purity

The third quality that Don Bosco lists as a sign that the Lord is calling a youngster to the priestly or the consecrated life is the virtue of purity and the gift of health.

When the Lord calls a young man to the consecrated vocation he also endows him with health sufficient to perform well the tasks of that particular ministry.

One can be certain that a young man with rather precarious health, who is called, receives this gift when he begins to follow this call as was the case with little Michael Rua. Rua possessed rather fragile health and came from a family that suffered similarly. His father died young; his brother Louis along with Michael attended the Oratory. Louis died in 1851 at the age of 17 and in March 1853 his brother John also died at the age of 23. Michael told Don Bosco: "It's my turn next."

But Don Bosco, to reassure him about his health, safely prophesized that 50 years later he would reprint a book he had written on the Turin Miracle.

Every vocation to the consecrated life has particular exigencies concerning health: Religious orders or institutes have special requirements because of the austere manner of their way of life or because of the requirements of their ministry which require a strong and robust physique.

### The Tears of a Thirteen-Year-Old

Little Louis Orione entered the Franciscan Convent as a youngster but was sent home for reasons of frail health. Subsequently he was welcomed by Don Bosco at Valdocco

and became a priest in the diocese of Tortona and the founder of several Religious congregations. The thirteen-year-old Louis heard the doctor at the Franciscan Convent say: "If this youngster remains here he will be dead. He has palpitations, he is frail and cannot get up early in the morning for prayer and he cannot walk barefoot....Let him die at home. He won't last more than a year."

One of his companions recalled the day he was leaving: "I can still see him sad and sobbing as he slipped out of the convent door with a bundle under his arm. It was as if he were leaving paradise." Fr Orione himself said: "I wept bitterly on leaving the convent."

The Lord made those tears fruitful and fortified his health for a mission that was different from that of the monastic life. It is the first question that is asked of a candidate with a vocation and sometimes real miracles take place.

### **"Do I Really Have To Die?"**

In the annals of the Salesian congregation, the story of John Cagliero is emblematic. He was a young 16 year-old dying of typhoid. To the doctors who examined him, he was a hopeless case. They advised Don Bosco to administer to him the last sacraments. Very sad, Don Bosco came bearing the Viaticum, but at a certain point he stopped and stared ahead of him as if seeing something that others could not see. Then he walked towards the patient's bed but his sadness and anxiety had passed, he became his cheerful smiling self again. John whispered to him: "Is it my last Confession? Am I really going to die?"

In a firm voice Don Bosco replied: *"It's not yet time for you to go to heaven. There is still a lot for you to do; get well. You'll put on the cassock, become a priest and then taking your breviary under your arm you'll go far, far away."*

In fact, a few days later, the fever left him and John got up and left for Castelnuovo for a long period of convalescence.

Much later, Don Bosco recounted the vision he had seen and the real prophecy regarding the vocation of that boy who would one day become a Salesian priest, a missionary, a bishop and the first Salesian cardinal.

In certain cases, the Church has also made some exceptions to the canonical norms concerning the health of candidates as in the case of the nineteen-year-old seminarian: Fr Cesare Bisognin who was ordained just thirty-three days before his death which occurred as a result of an incurable disease.

Physical health must also be linked to spiritual health and in a special way linked to the virtue of purity.

### **The Virtue of Purity**

The third and fundamental quality that Don Bosco lists for candidates to the consecrated life is purity. He told his youngsters: ***“Keep your thoughts, desires and actions pure. It is crucial for a young man who devotes his entire life to God. When you see a youngster in love with this virtue he begins to look like an angel. I am sure that this is the surest test that God has called him to be his priest.”***

And just as decisively he, said: *“One who feels he cannot keep the virtue of chastity is not made for the priesthood. He can follow any other career. As a priest he would only hurt himself and others”* (EBM 13,625).

And to his Salesians in particular he said: *“He who does not have a well-founded hope of preserving this virtue should not profess in our society. Chastity is necessary for everyone but especially for those dedicated to working with youngsters”* (MB 9,705); *“When a priest lives pure and chaste he becomes a father to souls”* (MB 9,387).

Interpreting the thought of Don Bosco Fr Cagliero added: *“The congregation was not founded for those who come to mourn for their sins; there are contemplative orders for that. We have to welcome those who are ready to plunge into the world working for the good of souls.”*

Don Bosco, however, was not unaware of the difficulties that adolescents may encounter in the practice of this virtue. He asked them to combat it with the help of prayer and the Sacraments of Confession and Communion.

Even before a fall due to the fragility of age he advised the youngster to develop a strong will with regard to following his vocation and in keeping the resolutions that his confessor has suggested. He was referring, of course, to one's own weakness and that of with others.

It must be made clear to our youngsters that certain experiences of grave sin seen in others, especially if they are recurrent preclude the vocation to the consecrated life and are often reasons for the failure to pursue the vocation to the married state too.

A fourteen-year-old youngster sharing with his companions during a meeting on the priestly vocation said with utter spontaneity: "I do not seem to be called to become a priest because I can't keep myself pure." The priest who was animating the meeting reminded the group that it was a virtue most necessary even for those entering the married state, meaning by that: the need to be faithful to one's partner or to oneself for the sake of the partner.

It is necessary to remind everyone of the need of this virtue in our society which degrades love so easily and spurns the ideals of purity that every teenager holds dear to his heart mocking those who dare to express and live this virtue. Just think about the TV and the internet that not only at night but throughout the day bombard our youngsters with this. Parents allow their children to use this form of entertainment unaware of its dangers. Note this emblematic statement that Don Bosco made: *"I will tell you that Chastity is a gem, a very precious pearl especially for a priest* (MB 12, 15).

To confirm Don Bosco's convictions and our own it is opportune to highlight how Pope John Paul II speaks of it in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 44. Speaking of the affective maturity of

priests he says: “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is meaningless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it (...). Education for responsible love and affective maturity of the person are totally necessary for those who, like the priest, are called to *celibacy* that is, to offer with the grace of the Spirit and the free response of one’s own will the whole of one’s love and care to Jesus Christ and his Church. In view of the commitment to celibacy, affective maturity should bring to human relationships of serene friendship and deep brotherliness a strong, lively and personal love for Jesus Christ.”

Don Bosco took great care of this aspect in the formation of youngsters to the priesthood, using particularly Eucharistic devotion and proposing its affective dimension to Christ’s ability to fill with his love the heart of every man who might otherwise seek recourse in other human compensations.

## 6. And Now, What Must I Do?

### The Department of One With A Vocation

In his meditation on vocations contained in the prayer book *The Companion of Youth*, Don Bosco answers this question: *“First of all, you should open your heart to a good priest who may be your confessor. Faithfully follow his advice because he will help you understand better the demands of this call.”*

When writing these words Don Bosco must have looked back to the days when he was nineteen and trying to dispel the doubts regarding his vocation to the diocesan or religious life while he left Chieri and made his way to Turin to seek the advice of a young priest from Castelnuovo, Fr. Joseph Cafasso. He was just twenty-three years old and already considered one of the best spiritual directors around. Calmly and without hesitation Fr. Cafasso advised John to enter the seminary, assuring him that Divine Providence would make known to him the will of God and would provide whatever money he would need for his maintenance. He himself would later become John’s first benefactor as also his confessor.

### A Secret to be Kept

He advised Don Bosco: *“Initially tell no one about your desire”* and later in a meditation during the spiritual exercises, Don Bosco proposed to his boys: *“Today I wish to propose to you two points that could help you to nurture your vocation. The first: it is a secret. St. Alphonsus suggested that one must keep one’s vocation a secret from everyone except one’s spiritual director, because ordinarily others have no scruples about telling youngsters called to the religious state that they can serve God anywhere in the world. Yes, those who are not called to the*

*religious life can serve God anywhere in the world: but those who are called to the religious life will find it difficult to live a good life and serve God. This confidentiality is prudent and necessary. The second is this: **respond immediately to this divine call.***”

The first suggestion that adolescents receive from those who are not competent in spiritual matters is that it is possible to serve the Lord and be holy by living a normal life and pursuing the married state. It is true for many, but it is not so for those who are called to a special consecration which demands a free gift of oneself which a family and some professional pursuits may prevent one from offering oneself for a wider service.

In addition, it is prudent to keep this secret so as to avoid being mocked and challenged by those who do not understand the greatness of this vocation.

One should consider that there are times when at a young age a candidate cannot yet say a definitive “yes.” With the passage of time he becomes aware that he does not have the will or the necessary skills while others will interpret his abandoning this path as a betrayal.

It is important to agree with the confessor when would be the right time to confide in one’s parents about the Lord’s call. Only when the young man is more confident about his vocation should he talk to them so as not to unduly disturb them. Confiding in one’s friends before one’s parents, smacks of insensitivity and a lack of respect for them, causing them much suffering.

### **Discipline yourself to Live a Good Christian Life**

While waiting for the required probation period, the youngster must feed his decision by nourishing his Christian faith through prayer and study. Care should be taken about performing one’s daily duties and his faithful commitment to taking up some apostolic commitments.



In particular, he should now get more and more enamoured with Christ. He should frequently purify himself of evil through Confession and feed his capacity for love through Holy Communion, possibly daily. He should avoid whatever might cause him to lose these necessary qualities, especially piety and purity and he should cultivate a filial devotion to Our Lady.

The youngster should live out his duties of study and service and in his academic pursuits he should engage in all that is expected of him and achieve the best academic results possible but he should also help his peers and those younger than him to succeed in school.

Among his friends he must be a model of an apostolic Christian life without boasting. Church groups or parish oratories, youth centres or various Catholic movements are an excellent training ground for the candidate to the priesthood or the consecrated life.

### **A Time Of Trial**

This time may be compared to the period of engagement that a young couple preparing for marriage undertakes. It is a necessary period during which the youngster learns about and experiences the new way of life that awaits him. It is also an opportunity for the superior of the seminary or religious institute to discern his suitability to that particular way of life.

During this time he should participate in the available training sessions till he comes to spend a prolonged period in the seminary, novitiate or formation community while he waits to begin his course of studies.

His discernment will be more challenging at the end of the years of seminary life or the period established by the particular religious institute. Only when the Bishop proceeds to accept him for ordination to the diaconate or the priesthood or when he is admitted to the religious profession can we truly say that the Lord has called him.

It is the duty of pastors to verify that candidates to the priesthood or consecrated life have the necessary qualities. Among the qualities necessary there are those that are important, especially a sense of balance, common sense and lack of oddities. A sense of balance is required for all vocations but particularly for those who are called to be models and guides to others. To verify the presence of these traits requires a living of the common life in which one's entire human formation comes into play.

Pope John Paul II writes: "The whole work of priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation if it lacked a suitable human formation (...). The priest, who is called to be a "living image" of Jesus Christ, Head and Shepherd of the Church, should seek to reflect in himself, as far as possible, the human perfection which shines forth in the Incarnate Son of God and which is reflected with particular liveliness in his attitudes towards others as we see narrated in the Gospels (...). Future priests should therefore possess a series of human qualities, not only out of proper and due growth and realization of self, but also with a view to the ministry. They need to be educated to love the truth, to be loyal, to respect every person, to have a sense of justice, to be true to their word, to be genuinely compassionate, to be men of integrity and especially to be balanced in judgment and behaviour" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 43).

Don Bosco was a true model of balance and he inspired the young candidates to the priesthood living around him.

## **The Compass**

The other characteristic that acts as a compass to the youngster is joy.

When the prospect of becoming a priest or a religious inspires a youngster to peace and joy we have good reason to believe that the Lord is calling him. The presence of joy in the life of a youngster means that the youngster is on the

right track even if the Consecrated life is more difficult and much tougher.

In this context Don Bosco made a very valuable suggestion: *'If anyone has doubts about the qualities that he possesses with regard to following the Lord's call, I would tell him to stand before a crucifix or the Blessed Sacrament and say to himself: "If I was about to die what would I have liked to have done with my life, what career would I have liked to have taken up that would have helped me to easily save my soul and done good to others?" Think about that and then make up your mind'* (TERESIO Bosco, *Don Bosco ti parla*, Elledici).

The next secret that Don Bosco mentions is the need to respond immediately to the call.

After having received the youngster's deepest confidence, it is the confessor's definitive word that can confirm for the candidate that he can go ahead in the name of God or that the candidate should seek another state of life. If the youngster doesn't place his total trust in the confessor with the right intention to follow his vocation, he is deceiving himself and the Church too.

In the final analysis, it is the confessor who is the guarantor of the vocation. If the confessor does not recommend the candidate to proceed towards the priesthood he is bound in conscience to obey.

## 7. Custody of the heart

In the previous chapter we highlighted two tips that Don Bosco gave to help youngsters nurture their vocation: the first was **to keep it secret** and the second was to **respond immediately**.

During the Spiritual Retreat in 1875 Don Bosco told his boys: *“When God calls you to a more perfect state of life, those who do not want to greatly risk their eternal salvation **must obey and obey immediately**. Otherwise what happened to the young man who was invited to follow Jesus and who said he needed to go home first, Jesus said: “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Lk 9, 62).*

The Lord offers His grace to you at the appropriate time. If you are ready to accept it, you will walk the path of your vocation easily; any delay can endanger your call or you may meet with some severe difficulty.

In the first rules of Salesian life addressed to his boys, Don Bosco wrote: *“St. Thomas says that the divine vocation to a more perfect life must be taken up readily (...). The people of this world, when it comes to someone wanting to enter religious life and assume a more perfect and safer way of life, freed one from the dangers of the world, they say that such resolutions take too much time to verify if the call is really from God and not from devil. But they do not say so when it comes to accepting any prestigious position in the world, where there are many dangers that may cause them to get lost (...). St. John Chrysostom asserts that God, when he calls, does not want us to hesitate even for a moment to respond (...). Elsewhere, the same Saint says, that when the devil cannot distract someone from his*

*resolve to consecrate himself to God, he at least tries to make him delay his acceptance showing him how profitable it would be if he delays for a day or an hour. Because after that day or that hour, there comes another occasion and then he will need more time until the young man becomes weaker and does not experience the assistance of grace and abandons this vocation.”*

Don Bosco’s suggestion remains particularly valid for our time, because the world that surrounds our youngsters causes them to continually make more attractive and convenient choices since they are not inclined to sacrifice and renunciation even if it is made out of love.

These same families sometimes try to dissuade or intend to dissuade their children who show signs of a vocation by placing them in some kind of danger instead of trying to encourage and support them.

### **The “Recollection”**

Here we need to defend the vocation through what we call “recollection” which is a strategy to guard the heart. This is, for example, the normal attitude of a young man who intends to get engaged. He tries to get to know the person he loves, if he is happy with her. He seeks to get to know her intimately and he can no longer be distracted by interests that, though good, could lead him toward other affections.

Being ‘engaged’ to God involves the same guidelines and this is how Don Bosco expressed it to his youngsters in very practical terms: *“A vocation is preserved only through prayer which you cannot practice without retiring from secular conversations and amusements (...). What does it take for one to lose one’s vocation while being in the world? Nothing! Just a day of fun, a friend’s word, a little unguarded passion, a feeble attachment, a thought of fear, a temptation not overcome.*

One who does not give up idle pastimes needs to be convinced that he will doubtless lose his vocation. He will remorsefully regret that he did not abstain from those frivolous

pastimes but he will certainly not give them up. It's so sad for those who did not pay attention to this; they not only lose their vocation but subsequently their souls too!

So now here is St. Alphonsus that holy doctor of the Church (...). *Therefore I believe all links with people and things that prevent or weaken or impede us from following our vocation must be severed (...). To sever every extraneous relationship to one's vocation is what one needs as the principal means to preserve one's vocation (...). The exterior links with places, such as one's town, with things, such as with one's possessions or riches or even with persons who are acquaintances or family members. Sever these links and your vocation will be saved. It seems that nothing pleases the Lord more than making use of these great aids and beginning to do this shows that one is capable of this detachment*" (Introduction to the Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales, 1875).

In reference to these suggestions, we read the same in the Memoirs of the Oratory. When Don Bosco described the day of his donning of the clerical habit, he wrote that on that day the parish priest of Castelnuovo had arranged for party: *"The party turned out to be poorly suited to me. I looked like a puppet dressed up to be admired by the public. There was another drawback. After weeks of silence to prepare for that day, I had to attend a lunch in the midst of men and women gathered to laugh, talk, eat, drink and have fun. They were people who spoke of sports, dances and games. What could they have in common with someone who just hours earlier had donned the garb of holiness as a sign of giving everything to the Lord? The pastor noticed me. On the way back home he asked me why I was so withdrawn in the midst of all the fun. Frankly I said that the function in the morning was at odds with the party in the afternoon (...). In the days that followed, I reflected at length on my lifestyle. I had to turn it upside down dramatically. I was not evil of course, but I was dominated by dissipation, pride, the desire to have fun and play distracted me: all those things gave me momentary pleasure but they didn't satisfy my soul."*

From that experience, Don Bosco took several resolutions that, with necessary adjustments, can still seem suitable for a youngster who wishes to persevere in his vocation.

“To set up a different lifestyle, I would have to always keep the seven resolutions that I wrote:

1. To take no more part in public performances. Do not participate in fairs or go to markets. I will not go to dances or to the theatre. I will do everything possible not to attend luncheons and banquets.

2. I will not perform any magic tricks or acrobatics. Do not walk the tightrope or play the violin. I will not go hunting. I believe that these things are contrary to my life as a priest.

3. I will find time for reflection and study. I will be temperate in eating and drinking. I will sleep only for as many hours as are strictly necessary for my health.

4. So far I've read several secular books. Henceforth I will read books on religious topics, to serve God.

5. With all my strength I will combat all thoughts, words and reading that are contrary to chastity. Instead I will put into practice every little thing that serves to preserve this virtue.

6. Every day I will spend some time in meditation and spiritual reading.

7. Every day I will narrate some edifying facts for the good my classmates, friends and relatives. If I do not meet anyone I will tell them to my mother.

These are the resolutions that I made on the day I put on the clerical habit. So that they remain etched well in my mind I shall pronounce them before the image of Our Lady and I will make her a formal promise to observe them at the cost of any sacrifice.”

Imagine if such resolutions were made by our youngsters today to help them to cherish in their hearts a love for the Lord who calls them to himself. It is precisely this love that

calls one to make certain renunciations which the world would never comprehend regarding any type of vocation.

Again we read in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (n. 44): “In view of the commitment to celibacy, affective maturity should bring to human relationships a serene friendship and deep brotherliness a strong, lively and personal love for Jesus Christ. (...) It is of the greatest importance in developing affective maturity. Thus, the candidate who is called to celibacy will find in affective maturity a firm support to live chastity in faithfulness and joy.”

Some of these resolutions that the seminarian Don Bosco suggested for safeguarding one’s vocation will be taken up in the coming chapters because they are particularly useful.



## 8. Prayer and the Custody of the Eyes

When a young man falls in love with a girl, he tries or every day wants to communicate with her. His mind is obsessed with frequent telephone calls.

Some teenagers are convinced that since a nice girl has come into their lives they study more willingly, they are more docile to their parents and they live their life of prayer and purity with greater fidelity. These feelings surface in anticipation of their engagement during which time they see the world through rose coloured glasses.

Something similar happens when a youngster hears the call to the priesthood or the consecrated life. He feels like living in God's presence and seeks out occasions to converse with him: he discovers spontaneous prayer.

### **Prayer is thinking about loving God**

Prayer is thinking about loving God. For this reason Don Bosco presents this as the first means to preserve one's vocation, like a natural preparation for one's "engagement" with God. That was what he wrote in his meditation on Vocation in his book: *The Companion of Youth*: "First, you need to pray. Talk to the Lord in the morning and in the evening, find the time to go to church and stop to think about him and talk to him before the tabernacle. Pray seriously to Our Lady every day, because she makes you grow more worthy of the Lord who calls you. And go to Communion, this is the greatest form of prayer, on Sundays and also sometimes during the week."

All these expressions seem to reveal a teenager, a young man standing in prayer in the Cathedral of Chieri, before Our Lady of Grace, talking about his studies and his vocation.

In those days the spiritual regimen included participation in daily Mass and prayers at the beginning and the end of their studies.

Encouraged by his confessor Fr. Maloria, he began to receive Communion frequently during the week and his visits to the Blessed Sacrament increased. In the seminary he had for forgo his breakfast in order to receive Holy Communion daily.

The sixteen year old Johnny Bosco candidly disclosed: *“Don Maloria always encouraged me to step up my encounters with the Lord. If I had the strength not to get carried away by bad companions I owe it to his constant encouragement”* (Giovanni Bosco, Memoirs of the Oratory).

The most beautiful part of the adolescence of John was that he lived out his love for the Lord with his best friends *“Luigi Comollo and William Garigliano often went together to Confession and Communion. We made our meditation and our spiritual reading together and served Mass and visited the Blessed Sacrament together”* (Memoirs of the Oratory).

As he offered his young Salesians the first rules of the religious life he wrote: *“We must believe that these vocations are preserved only by prayer. Those who give up prayer certainly abandon their vocation. It takes a lot of prayer and therefore do not let deny yourself a half hour of prayer in the morning and a half hour of prayer in the evening. Do not fail to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament and the Blessed Virgin Mary every day without fail for perseverance in your vocation. And let not a religious fail to communicate frequently during the week. Meditate often on the topic of your vocation, considering how great a grace God has given by calling you. He will greatly secure his eternal salvation as he continues to be ever more faithful to God by following his vocation (...). On*

*the contrary, what danger it will be if he exhibits signs of infidelity.”*

A young seminarian's father confided to his rector: "I do not think my son will pursue his religious vocation, because when he comes home I do not see him ever praying," and in fact, a few months later the young man left the seminary.

Don Bosco's suggestions about prayer are found reproduced in the conciliar decree for priests, *Optatam Totius*: "Spiritual formation (...) should be conducted in such a way that the students may learn to live in intimate and unceasing union with the Father through of his Son Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. Those who are to take on the likeness of Christ the priest by sacred ordination should form the habit of drawing close to him as friends in every detail of their lives. (...) They should be taught to seek Christ in faithful meditation on the Word of God and in active participation in the sacred mysteries of the Church, especially in the Eucharist and the divine office (...). With the confidence of sons they should love and reverence the most blessed Virgin Mary, who was given as a mother to the disciples by Jesus Christ as he was dying on the cross" (OT 8).

Still on the subject of prayer, the apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no 46, evidences the candidate for the priesthood needs to go after Jesus, as did the first two disciples who followed him, according to the description of the Evangelist John: "They came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him" (Jn 1.37-39). In a certain sense, the spiritual life of those preparing for the priesthood is dominated by the search for the Master in order to follow him, to be in communion with Him. Being with the praying Jesus enables the one who is called to live like Jesus, a living and personal meeting with the Father through the action of the Spirit, in a dialogue that becomes a filial conversation that Jesus has with the Father.

## **The Eyes are the Windows of the Soul**

Prayer, that is a colloquy of love between the youngster who is called and the Lord, requires a transparency of life and a purity of heart. For this reason Don Bosco lists as the second means to preserve one's vocation the mortification of the eyes: *"Secondly, we must mortify the eyes. They are the windows of the soul. Through the eyes images enter, deeply disturbing shows pose serious risks to our purity and our own faith. It takes much mortification to distinguish between what is good and what can harm us and we forgo with a firm determination what could hurt us."*

Returning to our initial analogy between the young lovers to be engaged and the young man called to the consecrated life, the young man falling in love and seriously contemplating being engaged to his girlfriend lives out his fidelity by avoiding other friendships and attitudes that could endanger this relationship. He is engaged mainly in keeping his sights focused on the person who will be his companion for life. Turning his gaze to other girls would, to say the least, seem indelicate, if not the beginning of a betrayal. So we are not surprised that this indication should also be especially true for the young man or woman preparing to offer his/her affections and his/her heart totally to the Lord.

On this point Don Bosco remembers what he wrote in the life of Dominic Savio about mortification of the senses. He reminded the young Dominic: *"His eyes were very lively and he had to make no small effort to keep them recollected. From the beginning he repeatedly told a friend: "When I made a resolution to completely control my eyes, I had to make quite an effort; I sometimes even suffered severe strong headaches." The reserve of his gaze was such that those who knew him agreed that he limited himself to strictest modesty. He said: "The eyes are two windows. Whatever passes through the windows, passes, and you can let pass an angel or a devil (...) and let either of them becomes the master of your soul"* (Giovanni Bosco, The Life of Dominic Savio).

Teenagers and youngsters are constantly bombarded with questionable images on television, newspapers, videogames, the internet and they should wage a relentless struggle to guard their purity and their love for the Lord in order to serenely walk the path to the realization of their vocation.

There is a third means that Don Bosco suggests to guard one's vocation: prepare to face any opposition from members of one's family. That topic will be dealt with in the chapter entitled: "Parents and the vocation of their children."

## 9. The First Judge of One's Vocation

For a youngster, a flawed choice regarding his vocation would mean that he would have to traverse a difficult path for the salvation of his soul or to pursue his own sanctification. For this reason Don Bosco seems to offer this valuable recommendation about having confidence in one's confessor who is the privileged advisor regarding vocational discernment.

"I spoke to you about the testimony of outsiders. Now I shall tell you of the only one who can judge our inner dispositions—he will be able to tell us what the Lord wishes of us.

*Once we have chosen a confessor, we must go to him steadily, because unless he knows us thoroughly, how can he advise us on our vocation unless he knows us perfectly?*

Therefore **don't have two confessors**: one for weekdays and one for Sundays, one for more grievous-or seemingly more grievous-sins and one for lesser ones.

In that case, your confessor may think you are a little angel instead of a little devil. His advice will be way off, and you will be directed into a state of life that God never intended for you. It would be even worse to go to a different confessor each time, to try him out.

*Frankly, my dear boys, I wish you would choose a confessor and go to him regularly if you want to know what the Lord asks of you. We have few outside confessors, but you have many to choose from right here in the house.*

*Still, I do not mean to say that one commits a sin by changing confessors. Far from it! Rather, I want to stress that should you*

*unfortunately commit a grievous sin and be afraid to tell your regular confessor, then, sooner than make a sacrilegious confession, go to another confessor or even change your confessor every time...*

*Though, before deciding on his vocation at the end of the school year, such a boy should make a good general confession. The priest will listen to him in all charity, help him over his shame, and point out his true vocation.*

Keep in mind that the chief judge of your vocation is your confessor.

If your parents, pastor, and even school rector should tell you to become a priest, even if you feel inclined that way, but your confessor tells you otherwise, disregard what all the others say and abide by his decision. He is the one you must follow. (EBM 7:493-493)

The confessor really has the responsibility of guiding a young man with regard to his vocation to the consecrated life, helping him to understand and follow it. He will encourage him in moments of doubt, difficulty or extreme temptation and will rejoice with him as he realizes his call.

Conversely as has happened in the past, youngsters have gone against the advice of the confessor and proceeded to accept Holy Orders or religious profession. They have caused and will cause serious damage to themselves and to the Church. Of course, this also applies to those who are inclined to the married state and family life.

In conscience, the confessor cannot give his opinion of the penitent after meeting him just once even on the eve of presenting himself for Holy Orders or religious profession.

We hope that these reflections will especially help young people who are called by the Lord to give themselves in total surrender to serving their brothers, in all those expressions of consecrated life that the Holy Spirit has raised in the Church over the centuries.

We also hope that in parents and educators there develops a greater esteem for these life choices which manifest to the world one of the most beautiful expressions of God's holiness reflected in her children called to live and present his Son Jesus to God's people.

### **A frightening thought**

When Don Bosco explained to his boys the question of the binding opinion of the confessor in regard to the vocational choice, especially to the priesthood or consecrated life, he recalled his own experience. We read in the Memoirs of the Oratory his state of mind as he approached his ordination: *"When I think now of the virtues required for that most important step, I am convinced that I was not sufficiently prepared for it. But since I had no one to care directly for my vocation, I turned to Fr Caffasso. He advised me to go forward and trust in his advice. I made a ten day retreat at the House of the Mission in Turin. During it I made a general confession so that my confessor would have a clear picture of my conscience and would be able to give me suitable advice. Though I wanted to complete my studies, I quaked at the thought of binding myself for life. Before I took the final step I wanted to receive the full approbation of my confessor"* (GIOVANNI Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory*, New Rochelle, NY).

The fear of failure, of not being totally honest, is also common to engaged couples who need the encouragement of a priest who knows them and accompanies them, often until the eve of their wedding day.

I can imagine how much more necessary it is for a young man who is preparing to offer himself completely to the Lord. What scares him is that **"forever"** that the vocation entails.



## 10. Parents and the Vocation of their children

### “Jesus Takes His Place In the Family”

Don Bosco, when explaining to his youngsters about the means to safeguard their vocation, he dealt with the difficulties that arise within the family. He wrote in his *The Companion of Youth*, a meditation and a prayer: *“Third. We must prepare for some opposition, even from our relatives. Some parents think that if a child becomes a priest they are lost. It is a false belief, because when a son leaves home to become a priest, **Jesus takes his place in that family.** This even happened with the parents of great saints. When St. Francis de Sales said that God was calling him to be a priest, his parents retorted that since he was the firstborn of the family he would have to support them and that his inclination to the priesthood was a flight of fancy that would soon pass away. To dissuade him they proposed a noble and costly marriage.*

But Francis was not overcome. Before anything else he wanted to do the will of God. He loved his father and mother most tenderly, he respected them but he knew that in their effort to dissuade him they were going against the will of God and it was wrong.

He became a very fervent priest of God, a missionary and then a bishop. His parents were good Christians despite not being able to understand that it was the will of God. Only later did they realise that the choice of Francis was the best and they were very happy for him.”

When a young man hears the Lord’s call to follow him, manifesting it to his parents and relatives is often very trying because they want to know the intentions of his heart.

Some parents already have plans for their sons who are often the realization of their dreams. Others are afraid that the youngster, while pursuing his heroic vocation would have much to suffer and they wish for him an easier and more comfortable life than the sacrifice of the consecrated life. They forget that all vocations, if I lived well, require sacrifices.

Parents should also remember that children are a gift from God and it is their task is to help them to discover their vocation and follow and realize this vocation especially through prayer, confident that God's dream is larger than their dreams, which is their eternal happiness.

Equally mistaken are those who use various ways and means to encourage their children to become priests or consecrated religious though they haven't got to call. They lead them down a path of certain failure.

Don Bosco, who understood the important role of parents, taught his boys this: *"Lastly, I'll tell you whom you should ask for advice. Firstly, your parents; unfortunately, parents are not always good counsellors because they are not always guided by what is best for their son's spiritual welfare but rather, by worldly considerations. If there is any chance of him to get a wealthy parish, they push him on; if not they persuade him to follow some other path, and sometimes they even resolutely oppose his priestly calling (EBM: 7:493).*

How different was the attitude of Mamma Margaret, who was informed by the parish priest of Castelnuovo that her son wished to become a Franciscan friar. She went to Chieri and said to him: "Listen to me, John. I want you to think well and calmly. When you have decided, follow your path and look to no one else. The most important thing is that you do the Lord's will. The pastor urged me to make you change your mind, because in the future I might need you. But I tell you your mother is not involved in these matters. God comes first. I want nothing from you, I expect nothing from you. I was born poor, I have lived poor and I want to die poor. I

wish to tell you right away, if you become a priest and have the disgrace of becoming rich I will never set foot in your house. Keep that in mind!” (TERESIO Bosco, *Don Bosco, A New Biography*, Elledici).

It is said that the vocation passes through the heart of the mother. It was true of Don Bosco, and it is so for many youngsters who are grateful to their parents for the education and the examples of Christian life they have received in the family. Normally vocations flourish in deeply Christian families; when they are not so, as occurs today, there are not even vocations to the consecrated life.

Don Bosco goes on: *“But if your parents live their faith, they are your best counsellors because they have known you intimately for years and their advice can be naught but good and well-founded. Regardless, always consult them in this matter. Generally, if you ask their advice properly, you will get it”* (EBM 7: 492-493).

Some spiritually delicate and sensitive youngsters find it difficult to leave their parents knowing that they are in some particular or moral difficulties. To them Don Bosco gave these suggestions: *‘Someone may say, “The sole reason why I began to have doubts, and why I became almost convinced that God does not want me to remain here, is because my parents need me. I am very attached to them. I knew I could help them if I was with them, and I could brighten what little life God may still grant them. They too suggest that I come home again. I can give you no other advice on this point than to quote the words of St. Thomas, who states unequivocally, ‘when it is a question of vocation, parents are not friends but enemies.’ You have chosen God as your heritage, your beloved and your all. It is God who created you. He is your father and mother. He is therefore Lord of all. If he calls you, then neither father nor mother should matter.” But you will say: “Who will take care of them. They are in need of help? Our Father who is in Heaven will take care of them. He who clothes and nourishes the birds*

*of the air will think of them. He who does not permit a lily of the field or a blade of grass to die, unless He has so ordained, will think of them.*

*“But I could find someone to look after them and cheer them a bit. I could work harder as a priest, too, to provide them with everything they need.”*

*If someone were to reason in this manner I would tell them: “... try to win souls for the Lord. The Salvation of souls - this is the only profit we should seek! How many vocations have already been lost through this misguided love for one’s parents!”(EMB 11,486)*

### **“Rather Dead”**

Some parents who lack education and spiritual sensitivity would prefer their son were a drug addict or dead rather than oriented to a consecrated vocation. This was the attitude of a mother when Don Bosco told her of her son’s priestly vocation. We recount it briefly summarizing the episode.

One day a countess visited Don Bosco and asked him to bless her four children. Being aware of his special gifts as a priest she jokingly asked him to predict their future, and he, with much kindness said one would be a great general, the second a great statesman, the third would be a doctor; and while the mother, happy and full of pride at these predictions, recalling their illustrious ancestors. Don Bosco put his hand on the head of the last boy and stared at him affectionately and said, *“Of him we’ll make a great priest.”*

The noble lady was shocked, and though she was a really good Christian, because of the worldly prejudices that plagues the minds of the rich and influences their souls, thought it a dishonourable reputation to have a priest in the family, she hugged her son close to her and said: “My son, a priest? I’d rather he takes his life than embrace such a state of life!”

Don Bosco sent the lady away, who returned the next day to apologise for having paid no attention to the insult caused

by her response to his priestly soul and she heard him say again, “Dear Countess, **you despise the greatest gift that God can give a family**, as this sublime gift. Is it a disgrace to be chosen to serve God?”

**“I ask you again, pray for me.”**

After a few months the boy grew very ill and the doctors could not identify the cause of his sickness. He had reached death’s door and Don Bosco was called. This is what we read in the *Biographical Memoirs*: “Don Bosco entered the room of the dying boy. That poor boy took his hand and kissed it; then looked at him with sad and languid eyes, now at Don Bosco and then at his mother, and was silent. It was a scene that really tore my heart. After a long silence, the child made an effort and, extending his feeble hand towards his mother, said: “Mother, do you remember, there at Don Bosco’s? (...)and the Lord takes me to himself!”

At this lament, the mother broke out into inconsolable sobs and exclaimed: “No, my son; it was my love for you that made me speak that way. (...) O my son, stay alive to love your mother ... pray, pray that Don Bosco heals you.”

Don Bosco was so moved, he could not utter a word. Finally, he comforted the mother, and blessed the boy and the sickness left him... “(6.3 MB).

How many parents have been obstacles to the vocation of their children and then have shed bitter tears on seeing them disoriented and unhappy in other states of life to which they were never called. How many, aware of the great gift they received from the Lord, rejoiced at the happiness of the children and accompanied them with their prayers and secured an extraordinary eternal reward for themselves.

# 11. The Joy of a "Yes" to God

The joy and peace that floods the person who takes a definitive decision to follow the Lord can be seen written large on the face of a consecrated religious. Don Bosco describes this as he recalls the day of his ordination and the following celebrations of his first Masses.

Unlike today, the celebration of the priestly ordination was reserved to the bishop and the candidates involved, while the festivities with the participation of the relatives, friends and the members of the parish community took place after the first Mass.

Don Bosco chose to celebrate his first Masses in the little church of St Francis of Assisi, the next at the shrine of the Consolata in Turin and also at the church of St Dominic in Chieri where he was assisted by the priests who had accompanied him during his years of study.

## The First Mass

*“My ordination day was the vigil of the feast of the Blessed Trinity. I said my first Mass in the church of St Francis of Assisi, where Fr Cafasso was dean of the conferences. Though a priest, I had not said my first Mass in my home place for many a day and my neighbours were anxiously waiting for me to say mine there, I preferred to say it without fuss in Turin. **That day was the most wonderful day of my life.** At the memento in that unforgettable Mass I remembered devoutly all my teachers, my benefactors spiritual and temporal, and especially the ever-lamented Fr Calosso, whom I have always remembered as my greatest benefactor.*

On Monday I said Mass in the Church of Our Lady of Consolation to thank the great Virgin Mary for the innumerable graces she had obtained for me from her divine Son Jesus.

*On Tuesday I went to say Mass in St Dominic's Church in Chieri, where my old professor Fr Giusiana was still living. He embraced me affectionately. During that Mass I wept very emotionally. I spent the whole day with him, one I can call a day in paradise (...).*

*Thursday was the solemnity of Corpus Christi (then day of obligation). I went home and sang Mass in the local church and took part in the procession of the Blessed Sacrament. The parish priest invited to dinner my relatives, the clergy, and the people of standing in the vicinity. I went home that evening to be with my family. As I drew near the house and saw the place of the dream I had when I was about nine, I could not hold back the tears. I said: "How wonderful are the ways of Divine Providence! God has truly raised a poor child from the earth to place him among the princes of his people." (GIOVANNI Bosco, Memoirs of the Oratory, Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, NY, USA)*

A young man, having reached his ordination to the priesthood or the consecrated life, relives that moment, perhaps the most beautiful of his life and all that happened, the events, the people who accompanied him, the deceased members of his family who had dreamed of seeing that day and prepared him for it; and then there are the moving memories of loving family members. We recall those moments between Mamma Margaret and Don Bosco: *'That night, Mamma Margaret took a moment to talk to him alone and she said, "You are now a priest, and you celebrate Mass. You are, therefore closer to Jesus Christ. I have not read your books, but remember that to begin to say Mass is to begin to suffer. You will not become aware of this immediately, but little by little you will realise that your mother was right. From now on you must think only of saving souls; never worry about me."' (EBM 1:388)*

A religious lives his “honeymoon,” the first joys of his ministry in the Church and of course he will not yet think about what awaits him of the sufferings he will share with Jesus because of having renounced the world.

The consecrated person experiences the joy of celebrating Mass, of holding in his hands the consecrated host, which is the body and blood of the Lord; of experiencing the joy of belonging to him forever and of imitating him in his poverty, chastity and obedience. He experiences the joy of exercising that spiritual paternity in the ministry of confession and spiritual direction, of accompanying the little ones, approaching the elderly, the sick and being of serving the poor. The joy that the Lord gives to these consecrated souls during moments of prayer, meditation, adoration are moments of nuptial intimacy that fill the loneliness of those who definitely fall in love with Christ, renouncing the possibility of raising a family of their own.

Thus does Don Bosco describes the joy he experienced during the early days of his priestly ministry: *“I found the work a great pleasure; I preached every Sunday; I visited the sick and administered the holy sacraments to them, except penance since I had not yet taken the exam; I buried the dead, kept parish records, wrote out certificates of poverty, and so on. My delight was to make contact with the children and teach them catechism. They used to come from Murialdo to see me, and on my visits home they crowded round me. Whenever I left the presbytery there was a group of boys, and everywhere I went my little friends gave me a warm welcome.”* (MO)

Every young consecrated person could tell his own little love story that he writes everyday with the Lord. His joys are mixed with the sufferings that he experiences as he faithfully follows the Lord but the consolations that only He can give comes in repayment for the many sacrifices he has made.



## 12. When One Says "no" to God

Don Bosco helped his boys to reflect on the consequences they would face if they did not readily follow the vocation to the consecrated life. On this subject he wrote a short novel called: *Valentino or the Vocation Obstructed*. Most likely, behind this story is a real young man known to Don Bosco. He is silent about the name and avoids all references to persons still living.

It is the story of a young man who had a holy mother who had died just when he was twelve years old. Valentino loved her very much. His father was an honest man, completely immersed in his business and did not see to the religious upbringing of his child.

After failing a year in school and an unedifying year in college, Valentino reached Don Bosco at Valdocco. He agreed to attend college but only because this was the wish of his mother. In memory of his mother he began returning to the sacraments and totally changed his life to the extent that he began to think seriously about the priestly vocation.

### **How God's Call is Initiated**

Don Bosco describes the soul of this young man that was open to God's call, before he takes the initiative, stimulated by the atmosphere that was full of spiritual resolutions and fascinating ideals.

"Valentino spent five years at the college to the great satisfaction of his father and his superiors. He had earlier found some difficulty adjusting to the new discipline, but reflecting that this was like his earlier life with his mother he was content and got much pleasure from it. During holidays

he was also of comfort to his father and pleased him; the older he got the more he felt affection for and placed his hopes in his dear son. Meanwhile Valentino was in his final year, with behaviour that left nothing to be desired, though over five years he had not spoken once of his vocation. More than once he had asked the college director to advise about what he should do when he had finished school, “be good,” he had replied, “study, pray, and in his own time God will let you know what is best for you.”

*At Easter time in this fifth and final year, before the retreat, he said that this time he would like to deal with his vocation and although for some time he had felt attracted to the ecclesiastical state, just the same he felt impeded by his earlier bad behaviour.”*

Often, teenagers judge certain past experiences as particularly negative and a contraindication to their vocation. For this reason it is necessary to approach one’s confessor and spiritual director who can give them an objective assessment of those past temptations that are typical of their age and to look forward with confidence to their vocation and the grace that the Lord gives to live it well.

### **Requisites of A Vocation**

Don Bosco, when describing the state of a youngster’s soul recalls the requirements of a vocation: the moral integrity of the candidate, the capacity to apply oneself to study and the inclination to the consecrated life.

“So he came to the director over those days and had a long talk with him, notes of which we have found amongst his letters; here they are:

Valentino: “What are the signs that show if a young man is called or not to the ecclesiastical state?”

Director: “Moral integrity, learning, ecclesiastical spirit.”

“How do you know if you have moral integrity?”

“Moral integrity is known especially by victory over vices which run contrary to the sixth commandment, and for that you need your confessor’s opinion.”

“My confessor has already told me that in that respect I may go ahead in the ecclesiastical state in all tranquillity; and as for learning?”

“For learning you have to listen to your superiors’ judgment and they will have you sit for the appropriate examinations.”

“What is meant by ecclesiastical spirit?”

“By ecclesiastical spirit we mean the tendency and the pleasure we feel when taking part in Church functions compatible with your age and what we have to do.”

“Nothing else?”

“There is one aspect of ecclesiastical spirit that is more important than anything else. It consists in having a leaning towards this state by which one wants to embrace it in preference to any other state that could be more advantageous or bring greater glory.”

“I have all these things. My mother really wanted me to become a priest and I was even keener than she was. I was against it for two years, the two years you know about, but now I don’t feel inclined to do anything else. I will meet some difficulties from my father who would like me to take up a civil career but I hope God will help me overcome any obstacles.”

### **The Renunciations of Consecrated Vocation**

“The director also let him know that wanting to be a priest meant rejecting earthly pleasures, renouncing wealth and the world’s honours, not looking for career advancement, being ready to put up with the scorn of mockers, and being ready to do anything, put up with anything to promote the glory of God, to win souls and firstly to save one’s own soul.”

*“It is precisely these observations,” Valentino replied, “that urge me to embrace the ecclesiastical state. Because in other states in life you are wading in a sea of risks of which there are far fewer in the state we are speaking about.”*

Valentino found it especially difficult because of his father. In fact, back home for the holidays, his father entrusted him to a friend, who tried to dissuade the young man from his vocation and led him to experience the saddest of vices.

In the beginning, Valentino tried to make his confession after his first misdemeanour, but he was prevented, while getting still more involved in the experience of evil. His father was pleased with the work of his friend, because he saw that Valentino did not think any more about his call, but he did not realise the abyss of evil into which his son had fallen, with his wicked choices he was able to subdue the pain of his father.

From prison Valentino wrote a moving letter to Don Bosco in which he described his failure to pursue his vocation and his own life. Here are some excerpts from which we can glean several lessons:

“My beloved Director, the one writing is an old friend and a dear pupil who has now been condemned to hard labour. (...). How sad are the things that that happened after we separated! To block my vocation my unfortunate father entrusted me to a wicked individual who in one way or another seduced me and led me into all kinds of vice. Remorse, horror at my wickedness always went with it; but I could never decide to turn back. The final crime, I am ashamed to say, was murder. Heavens above! What a shocking word! A pupil of yours who had gained first prize for good behaviour, who wanted to embrace to the ecclesiastical state or take up a brilliant secular career is now covered in the worst kind of infamy and calls himself a murderer....”

### **Valentino’s Recommendations**

“In the meantime you should warmly advise parents of other young students to see that they put their children where they

will be brought up in religion and good behaviour, and never oppose their choice of a vocation. Never cease to recommend two things in particular to my old friends (...)

1. Avoid bad companions as terrible enemies who will lead body and soul to ruin;

2. When deciding on their vocation to give it a serious consideration and after praying about it to accept **the advice of a pious, learned and prudent guide.**

And when they encounter difficulties from their parents, they should not follow my example, but calmly pray, insist in all peace and tranquillity with their parents until obstacles are removed and then act in accordance with the adorable will of Jesus. I ask God to grant me the grace to be able to see you once again and be guided by your fatherly advice, and make up for my scandal with a Christian life so that through the Lord's great mercy I may leave this exile and vale of tears to fly to the bosom of the Creator to praise and bless him for eternity."

While we treasure Valentino's recommendations, we think of the initial "no" some youngsters have said that turned into a generous "yes," as was the case of the vocation of Philip Rinaldi which we shall deal with in the next chapter.

## 13. When a "no" becomes a "Yes"

### Why does a youngster say "no" to the Lord's Call

A teenager who begins to pursue his vocation to the religious life and then turns towards another state of life, no longer feels he can carry on in the seminary or the religious institute that welcomed him. He then lives through years of vocational discernment and no one is surprised at his decision and even considers him a traitor to his vocation.

However, such a choice must be understood. Often that choice could have been motivated by the fact that the teenager undertook that path when he was much younger and, still growing up. He then realized that he did not have the necessary qualities to become a priest or a religious or that he now no longer feels enthusiastic about this call. He may also be disoriented by some severe disturbance.

At this juncture we believe that it is useful to go back to the vocation story of Fr Philip Rinaldi, the third successor of Don Bosco.

Philip meets Don Bosco for the first time when he is five, during those memorable autumn walks that the saint organized for his boys. During one of those excursions, Don Bosco went to Lu Monferrato, Philip's town and stood in front of his house. Philip was just 10 years old.

When his father Christopher Rinaldi came to know that Don Bosco had opened a "little Seminary" in Mirabello, a village not far from Lu and he thought of sending his son there. What follows is taken from Don Bosco, a new biography, written by Fr. Teresio Bosco and published by Elledici. Here is the story of his vocation: "The robust and mild little lad took his bundle

under his arm, kissed his mother and father and left on his father's buggy for the college. His heart was a little heavy, as are the hearts of so many youngsters who leave home for the first time. But he was serious and thoughtful and he understood that that sacrifice could open up new horizons in his life that were not the fields and vineyards of his father.

His teacher was the cleric Paul Albera. He wrote: "For me, Fr Albera was a guardian angel. He was appointed to look after me and he did just that with so much love that it amazes me every time I think of him." But unfortunately, there was only one Don Albera. The other assistant was coarse and offensive (...). Don Bosco came twice from Turin to visit the "little seminary," and spoke at length with Philip. They became friends."

During the confession that Philip had occasion to make to Don Bosco during one of those two visits, he saw, for a moment, Don Bosco's face illumined.

"In the spring, unfortunately, a disaster; Philip was exhausted and due to his intense studies during the winter his left eye began to give him serious trouble. On a particularly bad day, the assistant bumped into him in a peculiar way. Philip did not lose his temper. He went straight to the rector to tell him that he wished to go home. It looked like a whim of a moment, but he did not say so.

Philip had made up his mind and no one was able to change it for him. When Don Bosco arrived at Mirabello that year for the third time he was informed that Philip Rinaldi had gone back to his family. That was bad. He wrote him a short note at Lu, in which he begged him to reconsider his decision.

Philip received several letters from Don Bosco over the years that followed. In each of them there was an invitation to reconsider and come back: "Remember Philip, the houses of Don Bosco are always open to you."

Rarely was Don Bosco so insistent with a boy. It almost seemed that he may have seen something specific about his

future. But the boy, while remaining a friend of Don Bosco, did not seem so inclined.”

### **A “No” that lasted ten years**

“1874. Philip was 18 and Don Bosco came to see him at Lu. Just at that time a poor woman came to him walking on crutches and in her arm she had a sick child. She came to beg Don Bosco to heal her. The saint gave her the blessing of Mary Help of Christians and the woman, before Philip’s eyes, threw away her crutches and went home healed. The young man was very impressed but to yet another invitation to join him in Turin was turned down. He said no.

This “no” would weigh heavily on him for the rest of his life: “Having resisted that grace of Our Lord and Our Lady so much in the past, - one day I would humbly say - I can no longer abuse that grace in the future.”

That “no” said to Don Bosco was the first in a long line. He started saying ‘no’ to his prayers, to the scolding of his mother regarding the dangerous friends he kept, to the pastor who asked him to attend Mass. It was a real “religious crisis” that would only be overcome thanks to the prayers of his mother.

1876. Philip Rinaldi was 20. The parents of a good girl came to Christopher his father with a proposal of marriage. But in came Don Bosco from Turin too, who had decided to do battle and take Philip with him.”

### **“He gained me gradually”**

We note the insistence and the patience of Don Bosco which ought also to accompany those candidates to the priesthood: in seminaries the spiritual director, in the Institutes for Consecrated Life, those in charge of formation.

When he became Rector Major, Fr Rinaldi simply said: “Don Bosco did not leave me in peace. He repeatedly wrote to me or made me tell him what he should do to bring him to Turin.



(...) In the end, I felt he won and after some reflection I thought of obeying him.”

Here is the record of those moments: “There’s a long and decisive interview. With the tenacity of a simple peasant Philip revealed all his difficulties. But Don Bosco was a farmer too and he quietly rebutted them one by one. In that boy he discovered the makings of a great Salesian and he did not want to let him go. “He gradually won me over,” wrote Philip. “My parents left me free and my choice fell on Don Bosco.”

The last confirmation came on November 22, 1877 when Don Bosco, who had arrived at Borgo San Martino for the feast in honour of St. Charles, invited Philip to lunch and made him witness a prophecy about who would be his second successor, Paul Albera.

For a second time, during a private conversation, Philip saw the face and the person of Don Bosco illuminated and then resume to normal light. It was a sign that God had ratified his thoughts and his decisions. If he had been slow to recognize and accept the treasure of his vocation, now he intended to render himself worthy and correspond with it. A few months later he wrote: “Rather death than abandon my vocation.”

The stages in one’s vocational journey intended by the wisdom of the Church are a verification of the choice made by the candidate. In Fr Rinaldi this first evidence of an inclination comes with the profession of vows, a decisive sign of wanting to follow Christ through the Gospel way.

“August 13, 1880. Kneeling at the feet of Don Bosco, Philip took his vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. He was a Salesian and he was twenty-four years old.

In the autumn he began his ascent towards the priesthood. He received his minor orders, the sub-diaconate and the diaconate. There was a surprising peculiarity: Philip went ahead not because he wanted to but because Don Bosco, in whom he had the utmost confidence, commanded him to.

He recounts: “Don Bosco told me: ‘On such-and-such a day I will give you the examination and you will take this Order.’ I obeyed him again and again.”

Don Bosco had never behaved in such a manner with any another person: he exhorted him, invited him, but he let the individual decide. With Philip, Don Bosco ordered him. He had clearly read the future of that young man.”

### **“Are You Happy Now?”**

“On Christmas Eve 1882 Fr Philip Rinaldi celebrated his first Mass. Don Bosco was present and as he embraced him he asked: “Are you happy now?” And his reply, as he let him go: “If you keep me with you, yes, if not, I would not know what to do.”

But a few months later Fr Costamagna returned from the Missions of America and Philip, for the first time, overwhelmed with enthusiasm asked Don Bosco if he could be a missionary. This time Don Bosco said ‘no.’ “I will send others to the missions.”

The first successor of Don Bosco, the head of the Salesian Congregation would be Fr Rua and the second was Fr Paul Albera. The third would be Fr Philip. The old Fr Francesia would say of him: “Of Don Bosco, he only lacks his voice. He has everything else.” (TERESIO Bosco, Don Bosco; A New Biography, Elledici).

Philip was not a lazy or reluctant youngster in the ways of God, but only an insecure lad who lived in silent anguish, without knowing into which port he should throw his anchor to find peace of heart. There was no rejection of a vocation, but only uncertainty of spirit, a fear of going down a path that was not meant for him.

So many youngsters live in vocational suffering and risk being lost in the face of the difficulties they encounter. They get discouraged by the troubles they experience along the path to realizing God’s plan for them. They need holy and

enlightened spiritual guides with broad understanding and patience, who can gather their confidences, throw light on their inner world and be of help to them.

Fr Philip, because of a personal experience, was one of these qualified guides, tireless and comforting like a father to the young people supporting them in their difficulties caused by the harshness of their youth situation.

## 14. Will It Be a Well-Spent Life?

Doubts will arise in the mind of a candidate to the priestly state or to the consecrated life: “Will I be undertaking a life that will be well spent considering the duties required of me?”

Every vocation requires commitment and sacrifice but it’s worthwhile considering the One who calls. The candidate deserves our love and our gratitude for the good he is called upon to do to the recipients of his mission who are waiting for his daily and generous “yes.”

Even St Peter dared to ask Jesus: “Lo, we have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have?” Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life. But many that are first will be last, and the last, first” (Mt 19,27-30).

Often, even humanly speaking, the Lord’s call opens wide horizons to a young man and from a human point of view it proposes to him very significant positions in society without him having even sought it.

Think of little Johnny Bosco, with his birth at Becchi into that family and that social context destined to be a farmer and following the example of Anthony and Joseph he was still able to aspire to such high social and cultural horizons.

The dream at the age of nine and the subsequent promptings of the Lord guided him to be one of the most important priests of his time and to have such an important

role in the Church as to be the advisor to the Pope in the nomination of bishops, to be the liaison with the king and the ministers of his time and a well-known educator and pedagogue besides a cultural influence on his time.

Think of John Cagliero, of Castelnuovo, who grew up around him. Who could imagine that this cheeky twelve-year-old youngster, who was at death's door due to typhoid and indigestion, would become a great missionary in Patagonia, a bishop and a cardinal?

### **“I see a mitre in your midst”**

The boys of Don Bosco were aware of some of the well-known prophecies about this youngster

*“Around 1855 several clerics and boys were gathered about Don Bosco at table one day, light heartedly discussing their future. After a moment's silence, Don Bosco assumed a grave, thoughtful air, as occasionally was his wont, and looking at each one he said: “One of you will become a bishop!?” They all looked at him in astonishment. Then he added in a light vein: “But Don Bosco will always remain plain Don Bosco.”*

*At this they all laughed because they were just clerics and had no idea to whom his prediction could refer. None of them came from the upper class, and generally in those days only men of noble lineage, or at least of rare talent and scholarship, were raised to the episcopal dignity. Furthermore, Don Bosco and his institute were still so humble that, humanly speaking it really seemed impossible that any pupil of his would be chosen a bishop – and all the more so since in those days at the Oratory no one was thinking about the foreign missions. But the very improbability of this prediction kept its memory fresh in their minds, not to mention the vanity of some who, for a long time flattered themselves with the illusion that they would be the chosen one.*

*The clerics (John) Turchi, (Felix) Reviglio, (John) Cagliero, (John Baptist) Francesia, (John Baptist) Anfossi and (Michael) Rua were all present and heard Don Bosco's prediction. They also*

heard him say on another occasion: "Who would ever dream that one of you is to become a bishop?" Several other times he was heard to comment: "I wonder if Don Bosco is wrong. I see a mitre among you, and it shall not be the only one. But I am sure of at least one."

*The clerics then would try jokingly to get him to reveal which one of them, then simple clerics, would become bishop, but Don Bosco's answer would only be a mysterious smile*" (EBM 5, 71-72).

Let the person concerned, himself recall these events: "*The following episode is narrated to us by Bishop Cagliero: One day in my early priesthood I met Don Bosco at the foot of the stairs. He looked very tired, so I said to him with filial affection: "Don Bosco, let me hold your hand and help you up the stairs." He did so in a fatherly way. When we reached the top floor he tried to kiss my right hand. I was so stunned that I could not react quickly enough to it. Then I asked him: Why did you do that? Were you trying to humiliate me or yourself?*"

"Neither," he replied, "In due time you will know my reason."

### **The Mysterious Gift of a Ring**

"In 1883, before setting out for France, Don Bosco gave an even clearer hint. After making his will and distributing keepsakes to each member of the Superior Chapter, he gave Father Cagliero a small, sealed box and said: "This is for you!" Sometime later, overcome by curiosity, Cagliero opened it. Inside he found a precious ring.

Finally, in October 1884, after Father Cagliero had been appointed titular bishop of Meggido, he asked Don Bosco to reveal the secret of thirty years before when he had said that one of his clerics would become a bishop. He replied: "I will tell you on the eve of your episcopal consecration." That evening, pacing up and down in his room with the bishop-elect, he said to him: "Do you remember how ill you were when you were still a boy and just beginning your studies?"

“Yes, Father,” Cagliero replied, “and I also remember that you had come to give me the Last Sacraments, but then you changed your mind. Instead you told me that I would recover and, with breviary in hand, go far. You didn’t tell me anything else, though.”

“I’ll tell you the rest now,” Don Bosco said, and he then described to him the two visions in detail. Afterward, Bishop-elect Cagliero begged him to reveal this story to the members of the Superior Chapter that evening at supper. Don Bosco, always very obliging but especially when it would redound to the greater glory of God and the welfare of souls, consented. That same evening we wrote these pages as they were dictated to us by Bishop Cagliero.” (EBM 5,72-73)

We can imagine the rewards of our pastors together with the crosses that come with their ministry, just as we have already mentioned the spiritual joys of priests and consecrated persons. There are consolations that come from their intimacy with God and the exercise of that spiritual paternity that they are called to exercise.

The witness of holiness they offer the world is their ability to love and to live a fulfilled life which becomes a provocation especially to young people to share the same path and to ensure the flourishing of vocations that the Church so desperately needs.

So, a life well spent means *leaving everything to follow Jesus* even while looking forward to the eternal reward that awaits them in Heaven.

St Paul gives us a glimpse with this expression: “No eye has seen, nor ear heard what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2,9).

## 15. Faithfully Following Christ: Chaste, Poor and Obedient

The joy and peace of a young man called to the consecrated life may be disturbed by the thought: “Will I always be able to be faithful to the God who has called me?” This question may also upset those who take up the vocation to the married state.

The answer does not arise from the presumption that fidelity is within the power of man but comes from trusting in the fidelity of God who does not deceive the one called but rather gives him the graces necessary to persevere. It is a gift but it must be asked for *everyday*.

In the new formula of marriage the spouses say: “With God’s grace we promise to be faithful forever.” It is the same commitment that the consecrated person strives to make only through the grace of the Lord who calls him to this particular state of life.

At this juncture we read in the introduction to the beautiful document of John Paul II, *Vita Consacrata*: “Consecrated Life, deeply rooted in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord, is a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit. By the profession of the evangelical counsels, *the characteristic features of Jesus* the chaste, poor and obedient, are *made constantly “visible” in the midst of the world* and the eyes of the faithful are directed towards the mystery of the Kingdom of God already at work in history, even as it awaits its full realization in heaven.

In every age there have been men and women who, obedient to the Father’s call and to the promptings of the Spirit, have chosen this special way of following Christ, in order to devote themselves to him with an “undivided” heart (*cf 1 Cor 7,34*).



Like the Apostles, they too have left everything behind in order to be with Christ and to put themselves at the service of God and their brothers and sisters. In this way, through the many charisms of spiritual and apostolic life bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit, they have helped to make the mystery and mission of the Church shine forth, and in doing so have contributed to the renewal of society.”

Therefore, for a consecrated person, commitment to follow Christ, chaste, poor and obedience is more difficult: these are vows that religious in particular profess in the evocative ceremonies provided for the different orders or religious institutes, after years of preparation.

The diocesan priest, after years of training in the seminary, agrees to live fully the promises celibacy and vowed obedience to his bishop.

### **A Bold Struggle**

The desire to live a life that becomes a courageous struggle against the power of idols, pleasure and consumerism which are adored by most of humanity, often conquers the hearts of teenagers and young people.

To struggle against the wealth that has taken hold of the hearts of men, following in the footsteps of the poor, fascinated many young men like St Anthony the Abbot, St Francis of Assisi and Don Bosco himself.

A thirst for justice and love in the face of ruthless exploiters and corrupt dictators not only produces terrorists but often urges good young men to follow Jesus not along the path of violence but love which even gives life to the desire to bring peace and justice to a world torn by violence and hatred.

In the face of the degradation of love which our poor world knows because it is so inundated with it by the means of communication, many young people feel charmed by virginity and purity and are being seduced by the Lord who whispers to their hearts: *“Come, follow me! I have loved you with an*

*everlasting love.*” They hear the call to an eternal love that does not know the precariousness of time and they already anticipate and await the prelude of life beyond death.

It is God who places in their hearts this spousal love for Him that cannot have competitors. This strong experience of divine love urges the consecrated person to love everyone with the heart of Christ, till they can give life. This explains the most beautiful expressions of love that blossom around those who down the ages have given themselves to the Consecrated Life.

### **Renunciations for the great ideal**

If the ideal looks charming, the concrete waivers that the choice entails can be scary. This was what happened to the youngsters who grew up around Don Bosco, who shared with him the enthusiasm to serve the poorest of the poor children.

On the evening of January 26, 1854 Don Bosco gathered in his bedroom two clerics and two students Rocchiotti, Rua, Cagliari and Artiglia. The cleric Rua noted: “We agreed, with the help of God and St Francis de Sales, to try to perform deeds of charity towards our neighbours and then to bind ourselves by a promise (...). From that evening the name of Salesians was given to those who had set out to take up that proposed exercise.”

Don Bosco knew that one way to involve young people on the mission to rescue their companions was to motivate them to talk about God to their peers which would be an opportunity to make them share the spiritual paternity that was the foundation of true joy of an apostle.

The Lord’s call can intervene immediately in a particularly powerful experience of self-donation, as it did for those youngsters whom Don Bosco had engaged to assist the victims of the cholera epidemic in 1854.

But the fear of this unknown journey, only rooted in God, could scare them and make them hesitate.

### **“Monk or no monk I’ll stay with Don Bosco”**

Here is an account of a memorable encounter: *‘They met the following night, Friday, December 9, 1859. The meeting opened with the usual invocation to the Holy Spirit and a prayer to Mary Most Holy for enlightenment and assistance. Then Don Bosco, after summing up what he had said in previous conferences, proceeded to describe the nature and loftiness of a religious congregation, the everlasting honour accruing to a person entirely consecrated to God, the ease with which he could save his soul, the inestimable store of merits he could gain through obedience, and the imperishable glory and the twofold crown awaiting him in paradise. Then visibly moved, he declared that the time had come to start that Congregation which he had long been planning and for which he had been mainly working. He disclosed that Pius IX had praised his resolve and encouraged him to go ahead and that, in fact, this congregation already existed through the observance of the traditional Oratory rules, even though they were not binding in conscience, and that the large majority of them already belonged to it at least in spirit, and a few by promise or temporary vows. He added that only those would be accepted into this congregation who, after mature reflection, intended to vow chastity, poverty, and obedience in due time.*

He concluded by saying that the moment had come for all who had heard his conferences to state whether or not they wished to join this Pious Society which would be named – or would continue to be named – after St Francis de Sales. Those who did not want to belong to it should make it clear by no longer attending the conferences. He was giving them all a week to reflect and meditate on this important decision with God. The closing prayer was then said, and the meeting broke up in profound silence. Once downstairs in the playground, more than one whispered: “Don Bosco wants to make monks of us all!” The cleric (John) Cagliero, undecided, paced up and down the portico for a long time, various thoughts crossing his mind. Finally, turning to a companion he exclaimed: “I

am determined – and always have been – never to leave Don Bosco. Monk or not, it's all the same to me!” Later he wrote a note to Don Bosco declaring that he deferred completely to his advice and decision. Don Bosco meeting him afterward, smilingly said to him, “Come. This is your life!”

*The conference whose attendance meant adherence to the pious Society was held on December 18, 1859. Only two stayed away. What happened at this meeting is well described in the official records of the proceedings preserved in our archives and here transcribed’ (MB 6,180-181).*

The uncertainty of Cagliero was more than justified since he was going to have to give his entire life to the Lord and to commit himself to live the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and in the service of youngsters under the guidance of Don Bosco. To him and his companions, there wasn't the security of the great religious orders such as the Franciscans, Capuchins, Dominicans, Carmelites or the Jesuits, but only a poor priest, known to be a bit crazy by his confreres because he was wasting his time with the poorest youngsters.

That was the leap into the dark that John Cagliero and many other youngsters like him, who trusted in God made, surrendering their lives generously. Through his grace, the Lord accepted the loyalty of John and helped him to fully realize his vocation.

## 16. The Joy of Baptismal Innocence Restored

One of the most courageous expressions of young people who entrust their lives to the Lord, is to follow Jesus in the practice of the vows of poverty chastity and obedience.

The fascination that young people feel at religious profession is due to the fact that it restores baptismal innocence. As St Thomas already explained, it is (religious profession) likened to martyrdom from which it only differs because that which the vows lack in intensity, martyrdom compensates by duration.

Virginité means being consecrated by the action of the Holy Spirit of love that unites Christ to man in an embrace of spousal love which is baptismal. Indeed, it is the action of the Holy Spirit that works in the consecration. It is fundamentally rooted in the gift of virginity to Christ (it is a vow in religious life and a promise for the secular priest), because this gift “is addressed in particular to the love of the human heart. It places greater emphasis on the spousal character of this love, while poverty and still more obedience seem to emphasize primarily the aspect of redemptive love contained in the religious consecration”(Redemptionis donum, n. 11).

For such a profound reality of this vocation, at the beginning of religious life everything looks beautiful, as in a marriage, especially during the honeymoon for the newlyweds, but soon struggles also appear and there is always someone who tries to tempt the young man as happened to Jesus.

For this reason Don Bosco, writing to young religious, added in the Constitutions of his congregation: “Those who are consecrated to the Lord through the holy vows, offer what is

*most valuable and most pleasing to the Divine Majesty. But the enemy of the soul, realizing that by this means he is wrenched away from his service, strives to disturb the mind with a thousand tricks in order to get him to go back to take on the dangerous ways of the world.*

The core of these deceptions is to sow in them doubts about their vocation so they give in to discouragement and apathy and often return to that world which they abandoned out of love for the Lord and they are known as traitors.

Beloved sons, if ever you are attacked by this dangerous suggestion you should immediately respond in your heart that when you came into the Congregation, God had granted you the precious gift of a vocation and if you are now beginning to doubt, you are being tempted, which probably because of the given situation, you have to really fight this and you have to fight this devilish insinuation. Often the agitated mind tells the doubtful: "You can do better elsewhere." But you should respond right away with the words of St. Paul, who says: "I beg you, you to walk in a manner fitting to the vocation to which you are called, with all humility and gentleness and patience."

If you remain in your Institute and observe the rule perfectly, you are sure to attain salvation. On the contrary, experience has sadly shown that those who left have for the most part been deceived."

### **"Why do you stay with Don Bosco?"**

Thinking about these difficulties the amiable Joseph Buzzetti comes to mind. He was one of the first youngsters who chose to live with Don Bosco. Fr Teresio Bosco offers us a beautiful sketch of him in his *New Biography: Don Bosco*. We shall touch on some characteristics.

We have already mentioned the historic meeting at which Don Bosco proposed to his best youngsters, those that grew up around him, the Salesian mission to serve poor boys,

binding them with the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

The Congregation was being born. On that day Don Bosco felt great joy but there was a veil of sadness deep in his soul: among the seventeen who had accepted the call was his dear Joseph Buzzetti. Wielding a gun (to protect the prizes at that first lottery) had suffered a serious accident. They had to amputate the index finger of his left hand. This, at that time, was considered a serious impediment to become a priest. "In all humility" this incident persuaded Buzzetti to give up the habit clerical.

He spent every hour of his day with Don Bosco at the Oratory. He was in charge of the house maintenance; he assisted in the refectory, set the tables, ensured cleanliness, was in charge of Catechism classes, was in charge of the administration and saw to the dispatch of the *Catholic Readings*. He directed the singing class until 1860 when it was handed over to John Cagliero. With his keen and active mind he was the soul of all lotteries, looked out for jobs for the workshops, ordered the bread and did the procurement for the house.

He felt the Oratory was part of himself. Soon he experienced a real crisis. He sensed that the old patriarchal family life would be modified by the new regulations. He saw things that were entrusted to him gradually passing out of his hands into those of the clerics. Depression and despondency set in and he decided to leave. He found a job in Turin and went to take leave of Don Bosco. With his usual bluntness told him that he was now getting to the bottom of the heap; those to whom he had to answer to were once kids he had taught to blow their noses. He expressed his great sadness at having to leave the house that he had seen from the days when it was a shed.

Don Bosco did not say: "Don't leave me alone. What will I do without you?" He did not feel sorry for himself. He thought

of Joseph, his very close friend: *“Have you found a place? Will they pay you well? You have no money; you will certainly need something for your initial expenses.”* He opened the drawers of his desk: *“You know these places better than I do. Take whatever you need and if it’s not enough, tell me you need more and I’ll try to find it. Joseph, I don’t want you to suffer any hardship because of me.”*

Then he looked at him with that love that he had only for his boys: *“We will always love each other and I hope you will never forget me.”*

Buzzetti then burst into tears. He wept for a long time and said: *“No, I’ll never leave Don Bosco. I’ll stay with you always.”*

In 1877 Joseph Buzzetti decided to ask to join the Salesian Society. Don Bosco wanted to present his request to the newly formed Congregation consisting almost entirely of those boys Joseph had taught to blow their noses. He was unanimously accepted and that was one the happiest days of Don Bosco, a beautiful day.

And keeping him in mind Don Bosco was able to better define the figure of the Salesian Brother which he carried in his heart along with Salesian priests and clerics, members of his first religious family.

The crisis of Joseph Buzzetti is one of many that can occur for various reasons in the life of a young man. These are often exacerbated by the absence of prayer and trust in one’s spiritual director. In these cases it is important to put into practice Don Bosco’s advice: *“While your mind and heart are troubled by doubts or some passion, I urge you not to take any decision whatsoever, because such decisions cannot be according to the will of God, who, in the words of the Holy Spirit, cannot be found in confusion. In such cases, I advise you to present yourself to your superiors, sincerely opening your heart and following faithfully his advice. Do whatever he suggests and you will certainly not be mistaken; because the superiors in the council are committed to the words of the Saviour,*



*who assures us that their responses are as given by himself, saying: He who hears you, hears me.”*

Unfortunately, history teaches us that certain consecrated religious, overwhelmed by a vocational crisis, present themselves to their superiors having already made up their minds in the depths of their hearts with choices that are now irreversible.

All that painfully remains for the superior is to acknowledge and help the young man along the new path he intends to take. Instead he should have stayed in his vocation till the storm had passed.

The Lord permits some crises in order to guide a youngster to a different call. The story of the vocation of Mother Teresa of Calcutta confirms this.

## 17. Vocation and The Madonna

There has not been a candidate to the consecrated life who has not felt the maternal presence of Mary along their vocational journey. A vocation passes through the heart of a mother and this Mother particularly is interested in the formation of the candidate to the consecrated life, assuring him of her help, her maternal intercession and her protection in times of temptation and difficulties.

A confirmation of this are the words of Mamma Margaret, the mother of Don Bosco who, on the evening when her son donned the clerical habit told him about his commitment to honour the habit of the priest and she added: *“When you came into the world, I consecrated you to the blessed Virgin. When you began your studies, I recommended to you devotion to this Mother of ours. Now I say to you, be completely hers; love those of your companions who have devotion to Mary; and if you become a priest, always preach and promote devotion to Mary”* (John Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory*, Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, NY, USA).

Don Bosco said: *“With regard to vocations, the Virgin Mary assists very much and the individual who does a little, with Mary’s help, does a lot. I will not give examples here, but I knew of dubious or entirely wrong vocations which were a great misfortune but which through the intercession of Mary were set right”* (MB 12, 78).

It is well to recall here the words of Fr Cafasso: “When, even by chance, a priest may enter the sanctuary without a vocation but if he succeeds in becoming a truly good son of Mary, it is certain that this mother will obtain from her Son, for goodness and mercy sake, that vocation which he did not

have - the grace of state – he will receive the necessary gifts and the complex of graces that will render him a true minister of the Lord.”

Don Bosco’s recommendations offer us the opportunity to recall the importance of devotion to Mary on one’s vocational journey.

In times of uncertainty and confusion, a candidate who has recourse to Virgin Mary, finds comfort, light and strength especially in the spiritual combat that teenagers go through as they struggle to preserve the virtue of purity.

### **Devotion to Mary and Obedience to the Confessor**

The maternal presence of Mary is evident in the vocation of Evasio Garrone, one of Don Bosco’s Oratory boys who, already at twelve felt the Lord’s call to the priesthood, struggled through difficulties to realize it. We know these details from the extraordinary confession made by Don Bosco, but here we want to highlight the role of Mary in his vocational development: *“From the age of twelve, in fact, Garrone had nurtured a hidden desire to become a priest. However since he knew that his family could not pay for his education, he never breathed a word of his desire to a single soul. At eighteen, when he first heard of Don Bosco, hope was revived in his heart. For the first time he spoke to his parish priest about his desire for the priesthood. The latter listened kindly and helped him to get into the Oratory. We can easily imagine his amazement on hearing himself called by name: “Garrone thank Our Lady. She has answered your prayers after an anxious wait of six years. Always be devoted to her, and She will save you from many dangers.”*

*Once, Don Bosco saw him watering the flowers, and remarked, “Good! I will make you my gardener.”*

*“But, Don Bosco, I want to be a priest,” Garrone replied.*

*“Yes, of course, and a missionary as well!” Garrone did not plan on becoming a Salesian, but, unwilling to displease Don*

*Bosco, he said nothing, finished his work and rapidly left the terrace.*

During that winter he witnessed a miracle: Along with a companion named Franchini he was serving Don Bosco's Mass in the little chapel next to his room. At the Elevation of the Host he noticed that Don Bosco was in ecstasy, his face suffused with a heavenly expression.

**“Always remember your guide, Mary,  
most holy, the help of Christians”**

*“In 1881, after making his last confession of the school year to Don Bosco, Garrone was told, “Garrone, we will not be seeing each other for some time. You will be drafted into the army and will be assigned far from Turin. Always remember that your guide is Mary, Help of Christians. Always put your trust in Her. She will comfort you and keep you from all harm. Remember the promise you made Her in your first Confession at the Oratory.”*

One of the difficult moments, for candidates to the consecrated life, at least in the past was the obligation to military service.

Even Evasio Garrone had to pass that test. Let us return to the story of his vocation and the prophecies that Don Bosco continued make about him which were always fulfilled.

*“Garrone, somewhat small and frail, thought to himself, “Don Bosco is wrong this time. How can I be drafted when I'm hardly a span's height and thin as a rail?” Everyone felt the same way, so the director, gave him a kindly rap on the head and said, ‘Come now. What can King Humbert ever do with you?’”*

Three months later, however, when his number was drawn and he reported for his physical, he was declared fit for service, to everyone's astonishment.

*Assigned to the 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment he had to go all the way south to Catanzaro. From there he was transferred to Cotrone where, on May 20, with no explanation, he was*

*ordered back to Turin to serve in the medical corps and care for patients in the military hospital.*

*He immediately called on Don Bosco who, after hearing his confession, told him, 'Be kind to your patients and make good use of your time. Study hard and learn all you can. Your military training will stand you in good stead. These are the days when you must do good for others, but be on your guard during the short time that you will be in Susa.'*

Garrone did not understand these last words. However, some months later, on being promoted to adjutant corporal, he was assigned to the infirmary of the 5<sup>th</sup> Alpine Regiment. There, except for Our Lady's special favour, he would have been destroyed in both body and soul.

When he returned to Turin, he was chided by Don Bosco for having forgotten the Blessed Virgin who had constantly protected him. Then Don Bosco added, "What you went through will help you do very much good for the boys."

*Reflecting on his situation, Garrone applied for a transfer to Turin, where he remained until his discharge. Every Saturday he went to confession to Don Bosco. Once after hearing his confession Don Bosco said to him, 'Be alert to the needs of such and such a patient. Make sure that he receives everything necessary.'*

*But Garrone had not mentioned any of his patients to Don Bosco. On getting back to base, however, he realized that the patient Don Bosco had meant was a Protestant who was desirous of becoming a Catholic. Since the man was seriously ill, Garrone tried to locate a priest for baptism. Finding no one, he took water and baptized the man conditionally himself. The patient was filled with such joy that he clasped Garrone in his arms. He died ten minutes later.*

*On being discharged from the army, Garrone could not make up his mind whether to enter the seminary or stay on with Don Bosco. He spent three days at home. Then, on the very day he should have reported to the seminary for his entrance*

*examination, he found himself at the Oratory in Turin, scarcely knowing how he ever got there. He was sent to our school adjacent to the Church of St. John the Evangelist to join the Sons of Mary.”*

Don Bosco intended that house for those adults who could no longer enter the seminary and mix with the seminarians who were beginning their studies at the age of 16. Many of the former needed to be followed up personally to help them pick up their academic studies and other ecclesiastical disciplines.

It is significant that Don Bosco wanted to dedicate to Mary this most precious task of supporting adult vocations. But let us get back to Garrone.

“Toward the end of that year, on confessing to Don Bosco that he was repeatedly losing patience with a bedridden patient, the latter told him, “Within three days he will trouble you no longer” said the Blessed.

*Three days later the man died.*

*AS a cleric, Garrone left for South America in 1889 with Bishop Cagliero. Adding to the knowledge he had acquired in the medical corps, he went on to learn a great deal more about medicine and medical equipment, obtaining permission to practice medicine in the vast territory of Patagonia. Thanks to him, the first hospital and pharmacy were opened at Viedma. For a quarter of a century he became one of the most influential figures in the evangelization of Patagonia, adding to his medical skill a spirit of love and sacrifice (EBM 13, 703-704).*

That was how the Lord guided Garrone, already set to join the seminary, to stay with Don Bosco and Mary accompanied and supported him in pursuing his missionary vocation.

Youngsters called to the consecrated life are wise to cultivate a tender devotion to Mary and experience her maternal intercession.

## **18. When the Cross Embellishes a Vocation**

Several years ago, a TV interview with a nineteen year old newly ordained priest, Fr Cesare Bisognin, moved the whole of Italy.

The young sixteen-year-old seminarian suffered a bad knee and immediately received the terrible news: osteosarcoma, an incurable disease that seemed to scuttle his priestly vocation.

He concluded his philosophical studies and began his theology, encouraged by his seminary superiors and his bishop, the Cardinal of Turin, and notwithstanding all the canonical norms, he was ordained a priest at 19.

He celebrated his first Masses from his bed of pain which had become his altar. He lived for another 33 days, giving the Church and the world the witness of an heroic faith, a hope that does not give up even in the face of an advanced illness and of a martyr's love.

### A Victim with Jesus

Even the Salesian Family has stories of young men who had met Don Bosco, lived and enriched the Salesian charism with their aura of suffering: we recall among them, the Polish Prince, Fr Augustus Czartoryski (beatified by Pope John Paul II) and Fr Andrea Beltrami.

We shall discuss Fr Augustus later making some observations on how the call of God reaches everyone, rich and poor alike, of all ages and diverse social strata.

But let us now focus on Fr Andrea Beltrami, a bright young man born on June 24, 1870 at Omegna, on Lake Orta and

who died at Valsalice (Turin) on December 30, 1897 at the age of twenty-seven.

Andrea spent a happy childhood in an exemplary family. He felt called to the priesthood at age of thirteen, when once his mother, returning from church, said to her children: "This evening, before the blessing, standing before the Madonna, she seemed to tell me: You have so many sons, and you don't want to give me one?"

They said nothing; but her words stirred up in Andrea a mysteriously deep impression, so much so that it seemed to come back to him often to the extent that he could not forget it. When he was seventeen, recalling that fact, he wrote to his mother: "I remember that night as if it just happened. Perhaps your prayer has moved the Madonna to call me, unworthy though I am to serve her more closely."

At thirteen Andrea went to study with the Salesians at the house of Lanzo where his Salesian vocation blossomed. At fourteen, he met Don Bosco at Valdocco, on the occasion of his name feast day and had the honour of reading him a brief welcome address and in return he received a few words in his ear that conquered his heart. At seventeen, after his novitiate at Foglizzo, he began his theological studies at Valsalice, where he met the Polish Prince Augustus Czartoryski, who was sent there for his novitiate.

In the following years he was appointed to assist him in his illness and despite the precautions that he took he contracted tuberculosis, which crushed his legitimate aspirations to Salesian life. In response to this terrible diagnosis he exclaimed, "The Lord wants me as a priest and a victim, what could be more beautiful?"

His superiors, seeing the inevitability of the illness and his approaching end, resolved to advance his ordination. Two extraordinary exceptions were necessary, one for his studies and one for his age. He asked Rome for the maximum dispensation, which was eighteen months. In that Don Bosco



had already set the example. Several times, virtuous clerics having reached death's door by some unforgiving illness had the consolation of celebrating a Mass before they died.

In a letter to his rector, Fr Andrea Beltrami wrote: "Do not fret about my illness, but rather rejoice in the Lord; I myself asked God to give me a chance to atone for my sins in this world, where purgatory could be remitted. I have not asked for this illness because I didn't have the faintest idea but I asked for a lot of suffering and the Lord granted my request in this way and allowed me to praise him in this way, may He be blessed for ever. And help me always to carry this cross with joy. I believe that in the midst of my pain I am filled with a joy that is so full and complete I can laugh when I am consoled and wished a recovery. The thought of my sins and of making penance and meditating on the sorrows of Mary Most Holy and of Jesus Christ make any sorrow sweet."

In this case it is not only resignation, but also the desire to suffer in atonement.

Fr Andrea had three regrets: not regretting his lost health, having to abandon his studies that were his passion, not realizing his youth apostolate that he had begun and so brilliantly dreamed of. This triple renunciation made his sacrifice even more generous till it became heroic.

At twenty-three, on January 8, 1893 he was ordained a priest in the small rooms of Don Bosco at Valdocco by Msgr. Cagliero who had recently returned from Patagonia.

### **Neither death nor cure, but living to suffer**

Fr Andrea lived for four years embellishing his priesthood with an endless martyrdom that his sickness had caused.

In June 1897, six months before his death, he wrote to the Rector Major, Fr Michael Rua: "I send you respectful greetings from my sickbed. My health has remained the same. I had a serious haemorrhage; but now, thanks to Mary Help of Christians it is almost completely healed. It has left me feeling

a bit weak, because of the loss of so much blood. I'm happy and content and always celebrate: Neither death nor cure but to live to suffer. I have found true happiness in my suffering. Bless this affectionate son."

Referring to that terrible haemorrhage Fr Andrea wrote to his parents: "As you see, the Lord hears my petitions: neither death nor healing but to live to suffer. The world does not understand this language; but I understand it well. The merits are personal, each one of us by his works earns Paradise and there is no more effective means to get there than sufferings."

The Calvary of his illness lasted for more than six years. He died at Valsalice on December 30, 1897, at the age of 27.

Fr Andrea has taught us to know how to suffer for love of the Lord Jesus by becoming a victim.

That is how a consecrated person, a priest, can be absorbed into Christ to become like him, a sacrificial lamb that offers himself to the Father for the forgiveness of sins and the salvation of sinners.

It is so connected to Salesian Youth Spirituality that the victim aspect of the consecrated religious, united with Jesus, offers his physical and moral sufferings for the salvation of his brethren and by his Salesian vocation, particularly for youngsters.

In consecrated life, as in every other form of life, there are no important traits, intellectual or apostolic, but the love with which everyone lives every moment, even doing the most menial tasks and particularly in trying times when things seem more difficult or in the presence of physical suffering.

## 19. When God Calls You to Go Far Away

A consecrated missionary vocation is to share Jesus with a passion for the salvation of men, extending the mandate he entrusted to the Apostles: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. I am with you always, until the end of the world” (Mt 28,19-20).

“A missionary zeal is born by this command of Jesus, and a consecrated life that works in every part of the world consolidates and expands the Kingdom of Christ, bringing the proclamation of the Gospel, even to the remotest of regions (...). Many consecrated persons have been able to approach different cultures in the attitude of Jesus, who “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil2, 7) and patience and persistence to initiate dialogue they are successful in establishing contact with the many diverse peoples, proclaiming to all of the way of salvation”(*Vita Consacrata*, n. 79).

It is a vocation that requires an even more painful detachment from one’s family because mission countries are far away. In the past, when the means of transport were scarce, slow and uncomfortable, they had to travel long distances to reach countries, learn languages, live cultures and accept civilizations very different and often unknown.

This is why the missionary vocation requires a deep faith and a great love affair with Christ, to be able to overcome moments of loneliness due to the distance from one’s country, family and often the religious community to which one belongs.

**“The thought of being a missionary never left him.”**

Don Bosco was a great missionary without personally going to the missions. He wanted to go to distant lands already after his ordination, during his stay at the Convitto Ecclesiastico. Listen to this conversation that he had with his spiritual director and confessor Fr Cafasso: *“The thought of being a missionary never left him. He felt strongly inclined to bring the light of the Gospel to infidels and savages, among whom he would meet thousands and even millions of boys (...). Fr Cafasso, who noted everything Don Bosco undertook, let him study French and Spanish, but when he began to take up English, he told him outright: “The foreign missions are not for you.”*

“Why not?” asked Don Bosco.

“Just try to go. You can’t even stand a minute in a closed carriage, let alone travel a mile, without getting sick to your stomach. Have you repeatedly found out what it takes to cross an ocean? You’re going to die during the journey.”

*Thus, this project too went up in smoke, not so much because of an insurmountable difficulty but out of compliance with his superior’s advice (EBM 2,160-161).*

Obedience to his confessor and spiritual director did not take away the missionary zeal that Don Bosco was able to pass on to his children. His missionary dreams and truly prophetic revelations, which also involved some of his youngsters and the stories of early missionary expeditions excited the imagination of the boys and fed their spirit of adventure that was so natural in them.

While intending to send priests to the missions, Don Bosco was always ready to deprive himself of his best youngsters, convinced that this generosity in offering missionaries to the Church would be a source of new and more abundant vocations.

There are, in the missionary dreams of Don Bosco little mention of a youngster Anthony Variara, of Leini (Turin), a

very poor orphan who was studying that year at Lanzo. Having lost two very generous benefactors, he was planning to return to Mathi to live with a sister and take up his shepherd's staff once again. But a dream changed his life. *"On his last night at school, he had no sooner fallen asleep than he seemed to find himself crossing the small inner courtyard on his way to the reception room beyond which there stood a small swing with which he hoped to distract himself from his grief. To his wonder and fear he saw Our Lord in the room, and was so overcome by His splendour and majesty that he suddenly fainted and collapsed. The Divine Saviour lifted him and lovingly told him: "Do not fear. Since men forsake you. I will be a father to you Myself. Trust me."*

Kneeling beside Him the boy replied, "Oh Lord, grant me the grace of becoming a priest and a missionary."

With the same ineffable smile, Jesus answered: "Yes, both the one and the other."

*Variara then felt that he was being carried into a distant land inhabited by enemies of the Christian faith where, after witnessing persecutions, he himself was crucified. While, nailed to a cross, he was reciting the Hail Mary with all his heart, Our Lady appeared to him with great splendour, filling him with heavenly joy. Suddenly, however, a mysterious red veil fell between him and the Blessed Virgin blocked his vision. With Her own hand, however, the Blessed Virgin drew the veil aside and again showed Herself to him. While seemingly dying, he had the impression of still kneeling at Jesus' feet in the reception room until, still dreaming, he heard the bell summoning all to Mass.*

"Lord," the boy said, "that's the bell for Mass. May I go?"

"Go," the Lord answered. *He then woke up, and indeed the bell was ringing.*

*Reassured by his dream, Variara went home to his sister in Mathi, but he often returned to Lanzo to spend a few hours at the school. In one of his visits he told the director of his dream*

and the latter kept a record of it. Two years later, Don Bosco accepted him back in school free of charge and provided for all his needs.

After completing his secondary schooling, Variara transferred to the Oratory for philosophy and theology courses, and after taking his vows as a Salesian, he was ordained in 1877. A model of priestly virtues, simplicity, humility, and ardent zeal for the salvation of souls, he was appointed director first at Mathi and then at Saint-Cyr (France). Finally, in December 1891 he was sent to Palestine. Untiring in the priestly ministry, he greatly benefited the boys of the schools of Cremisan, Beitgemal, Bethlehem and Nazareth, finally dying in Jerusalem on October 19, 1913 at the age of 64, after having been director in several houses for over fourteen years” (EBM 9,211-213).

### **Michael Unia, the Apostle of the Lepers**

Even more curious is the vocation of one of the great missionaries of the Salesian Congregation, Fr Michael Unia: “A 27 year old peasant arrived at the Oratory. His name was Michael Unia. He told Don Bosco that he wanted to study to become a priest but not a Salesian.

“I wish to return to Roccaforte di Mondovì, my hometown.”

“But what if the Lord wants you for a greater mission?”

“If the Lord tells me that it is his will...”

“If the Lord should reveal to me your conscience, and I tell you here would you see it as a sufficient sign that he wants you to be a Salesian priest?”

Michael Unia did not know whether to take this seriously or as a joke. He thought about this and then: “Ok, tell me what you see in my conscience.”

Don Bosco told him everything. He listed his good deeds and his sins, in every detail. Unia thought he was dreaming: “But how do you know these things?”

“And I know still more. You were eleven and one Sunday you were in the choir in your church at vespers. A companion near

*you fell asleep with his mouth open. You took the plums from his pocket; you took the biggest one and let it drop into the open mouth of the poor boy. Feeling suffocated he jumped up and down and began running here and there like a madman. Vespers had to be suspended. You laughed out loudly and the priest gave you a dozen raps”* (TERESIO Bosco, Don Bosco: Una biografia nuova, Elledici).

Michael Unia stayed with Don Bosco. He was the first Salesian missionary live among the lepers of Colombia, in a remote location called Agua de Dios. He lived among 730 of them who were affected by the terrible disease and worked tirelessly till the work eventually killed him. He gave them back their dignity as human beings and children of God.

To his first youngsters leaving for the missions, Don Bosco urged them: *“Take special care of the sick, the children, the old and the poor and you will win the blessings of God and of men.”*

The fruits of this recommendation could be seen in a particular way among these lepers to whom another young missionary dedicated himself, Blessed Fr Luigi Variara, who later became the founder of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts, present also in Italy. Perhaps the sufferings linked to the illness of Fathers Andrea Beltrami and Augustus Czartoryski, were at the root of the special missionary vocations to serve the sick, especially the lepers.

## **20. When God Knocks at the Heart of a Prince**

The Son of God, the king of the universe became man by choosing the path of poverty: he was poor in Bethlehem and poor on Calvary. “Being rich he became poor and took the form of a slave and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” (cf Phil 2:6-8)

The appeal of that poverty won the heart not only of St Francis of Assisi but also of many youngsters. Others, however, like the rich young man in the Gospel, did not have the courage to follow Jesus because like him they did not have the courage to follow him. They were very rich and did not have the will to leave it all.

It is thrilling to know so many rich youngsters who have generously heeded the Lord’s call summoning them: “Come, follow me.” (Mt 19,21).

Don Bosco was often surrounded by young Salesians from very poor family backgrounds, several of them were orphans. His congregation did not run short of adult vocations and vocations from the nobility, such as the vocation of Prince Augustus Czartoryski and Count Carlo Albert Cays of Caselette. They represent the rich who became poor for the Kingdom of Heaven, coveting the real riches that no one could steal from them.

### **A prince who plays with the poorest children**

Prince Augustus Czartoryski was a descendant from one of the oldest noble families of Poland. His mother was the daughter of the king of Spain and Augustus could have become the King of Poland. Instead, by a mysterious design of Providence, at twenty-five, in 1883, he met Don Bosco



who was visiting Paris, and was fascinated by his holiness and his paternal solicitude.

Sometime later, passing through Turin with a Polish delegation that went to Rome for an audience with the Pope, Augustus stopped at Valdocco but did not meet Don Bosco. Fr Rua welcomed him and invited him to look around the Oratory and to come back again.

The prince came back to Turin in the first half of June 1887. He booked into a hotel, but after a few days pleaded with Don Bosco to allow him to stay at the Oratory.

“Will you be able to adapt to our frugal board?” the saint asked with a smile.

“Do not worry as to that. Whatever is enough for Don Bosco is enough for me too.”

“Then come by all means, if you wish. Don Bosco will never refuse a seat at his own table to anyone who requests it.”

*At table, sitting beside Don Bosco, the prince was able to voice his feelings and to closely study the holiness of the saint and the life of his spiritual sons. He spent the greater part of his time in meditation, prayer and pious reading. In his concern over the young man’s future, his father put an abrupt end to this delightful sojourn and sent for him to come home. After generously paying for the trouble he considered he had caused to the Oratory, the young man departed for Poland. When he reached the family estate in Sieniawa, he did what Don Bosco had told him and concerned himself with the administration of the family property, which he had come to own in accordance with his rights as firstborn son. Although this pleased his father, his heart was elsewhere (EBM 17,382).*

One day he confided to an aunt who was a Carmelite in Krakow: “I seem to be called to the ecclesiastical state, and to even enter a Congregation so that I may embrace the priesthood in the world. I also think that my vocation is to be among the Salesians.”

Don Bosco knew of the prince's desire to consecrate himself to the Lord so he decided to direct him to the Jesuits or the Carmelites. In Don Bosco's Congregation he would find poverty very difficult because the poverty of Salesian life was lived in the midst of the neediest youngsters. To surmount any refusal from Don Bosco the prince asked for the intervention of Pope Leo XIII; and, bringing his blessing to Don Bosco, he told him that it was the Pope's desire that he be welcomed among the Salesians.

After completing the transfer of his rights as primogeniture in favour of his younger brothers, Fr Augusto, as his companions immediately began to call him, at twenty-nine became an aspirant at San Benigno Canavese. It was a time of trial and later he went to Valsalice as a novice.

This was for him a reversal of habits: he began moving slowly also because of his precarious health. He adapted to the times of common prayer of the novices. He was accustomed to a refined table but gladly accepted the poor

fare of the novitiate. He proved to be prompt and attentive in obedience.

He was friendly and considerate with his classmates who were much younger than himself. He struggled to adapt himself even to their entertainment, games and running around with them. So, he knew well the sacrifices that the consecrated life entailed.

### **God's Dreams Are greater than those of Parents**

Prince Ladislaus, Augustus' father, had opposed the Salesian vocation of his son and did not accompany him to Turin to start of the novitiate nor was he present at his ordination.

We report the story that Fr Augustus told Cardinal Parocchi who was commissioned by the family to dissuade him from pursuing the Salesian life. "I loved Don Bosco when he was still alive and I considered it my good fortune to have met

him in Paris. For many years I thought of the choice of my vocation and for a long time I asked to be accepted among the Salesians. It was only after repeated insistence that Don Bosco decided to count me among his sons.

After a year of novitiate, I myself, with full freedom, wished to make my vows and I did so with great joy in my heart. From that day I enjoyed living in the Congregation, with great peace of mind and I thanked the Lord for bringing to my awareness the Salesian Society and for having called me into it.

In no way did the superiors morally pressure me or try to influence my choice. I did everything voluntarily but I must add that from the beginning the Salesians were opposed to my desire. On no account did they want to accept me. They suggested that I join some other institute and it was only at my insistent knocking that they finally let me in.

I consider it a special grace of the Lord to be made a member of the Salesian Congregation and I am committed to live in this state of life destined by the Lord for me..." (LUIGI Castano, *Augusto Czartoryski, A Prince at the Cross*, Elledici – in Italian).

Don Bosco and then his successor Fr Rua rendered him all that motherly care during his illness, the illness which had already taken his mother at thirty-three.

He was ordained a priest and had the joy of celebrating one of his first Masses for his father who was finally reconciled with him and the members of his family.

The priestly life of Fr Augustus lasted a year. He died at the age of thirty-three at Alassio (SV) sitting on the easy-chair of Don Bosco after much suffering had graced his vocation and which profoundly aligned him with the suffering of Jesus, a suffering that he endured heroically.

That's how a prince renounced an earthly kingdom for a heavenly one.

## 21. God Calls at Any Age

God calls people at all hours and at all seasons of life. Some feel the Lord's call already at the ages of 10-12 years, others later, after having entered the world of work and being involved in a busy Christian life involved with family and society. That was the case with Count Carlo Cays of Caselette (Turin).

### **Count Carlo Cays of Caselette**

As soon as he entered the Oratory at Valdocco, the boys and even Don Bosco immediately began calling him familiarly: "Count Cays." In the youthful and familiar atmosphere of the Oratory the elderly gentleman easily and completely fit into the life of the house. It almost seemed like the visible commendation of Don Bosco and his work. The Biographical Memoirs relates this as follows: (cf MB 13,) *"Charles Cays, count of Giletta and Caselette, was born (in Turin on November 24, 1813) of a very ancient noble family of Nice. A graduate of the prestigious Jesuit Carmine Lyceum, he obtained his law degree at the University of Turin. He married in 1837 and had a son, but his wife passed away in 1845; from then on he made himself a father to the poor, taking special delight in teaching catechism to homeless youngsters at the festive oratories of St Francis de Sales, St Aloysius Gonzaga and the Guardian Angel. He was one of several city noblemen who were won over by Don Bosco's cause and worked under his direction in the physical and spiritual care of the children of the working class. Like his parents and grandparents, he enjoyed the favour of the royal family who spent three months during the cholera epidemic of 1854 in his castle at Caselette, a noted health spot at the foot of the Alps. From 1857 to 1860 he also served in the*

*sixth legislative session of the sub-Alpine parliament. (...) He felt called to the Salesian vocation and insisted that Don Bosco accept him as part of his religious family."*

The conversation between the Count and Don Bosco is illuminating. In it the latter lists the sacrifices that one consecrated to this life at his age would have to encounter especially being always among the boys: *'Don Bosco said: "This is all very well, Count, but are you aware of what it means to become a religious? One has to give up wealth, titles, conveniences and all worldly matters."*

*"I have thought about it and its demands for a long time," the count answered. "Besides, I have experienced that riches, honours and worldly delights cannot satisfy my heart's yearnings nor will they at the hour of death."*

"But you are accustomed to many comforts at home, and you won't have them in a religious house. You will not want for essential things, but I must tell you very frankly that you will miss very many things which you now enjoy in the way of food, clothing, rest, and so on."

*"True, but I also know that a lot of people have done without so many creature comforts and pleasures, and still do. With God's help I hope to do the same."*

"But you are master of your own home, while in a religious community you will have to obey like a simple servant. Have you thought of that?"

"Yes, and I am convinced that when my life's course is over I shall find more comfort in having obeyed than in having given orders."

"Excuse me if I raise another objection, Count. You are no longer a young man, and I wonder if you could physically hold up under our rules."

"True," the count replied with some emotion after a moment's reflection. "I am not young. I am deeply grieved to offer God only the leftovers of my life. Still I am cheered by

the realization that I am not yet decrepit or senile. I am sixty-four but I am in excellent health, and so I can reasonably believe that I shall be able to adapt to community life. At least I don't think it unwise to make a try."

Seeing the count's firm determination and knowing his virtue, Don Bosco might have summarily seconded his holy intentions and promised to accept him as a Salesian, but he did not want to give even the semblance of rushing matters. Therefore, as the novena to Mary, Help of Christians was about to start, he suggested that Count Cays make the novena and spend a few days in reflection and prayer for God's enlightenment.

Notice how candidly Don Bosco presents the commitments of a consecrated religious with regard to the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, especially when the candidate is already advanced in years. In this case it would cost a lot to detach oneself from the habits of one's previous life, from things, persons and one's own ideas. To submit oneself to all the norms of one's new life will require humility, acceptance of corrections and docility in assimilating the ecclesiastical spirit and religious commitments particular to a particular way of consecrated life which will be a true test of one's sanctity.

### **Signs that the Lord gives to Those who ask in Faith**

To understand the will of God, Don Bosco sometimes suggested asking for a sign from heaven. Here's how the Count received it at the end of the novena in preparation for the feast of Mary Help of Christians, while waiting in the antechamber of Don Bosco to meet Don Bosco to express some doubts about his vocation. He saw an eleven-year-old girl, Giuseppina Longhi, paralyzed on her right side go in. He thought to himself that if the child came out healed, he would not hesitate to become a Salesian. A short time later he saw her come out of Don Bosco's room healed after she had

received the blessing of Mary Help of Christians. This was the sign that he asked of Lord to confirm his vocation; and Don Bosco, having been informed of this gladly welcomed him into the Salesian Congregation.

The generous response of Count Cays to the Lord took a long time. For many years his castle was a Salesian house that welcomed orphan children; subsequently it has become a flourishing centre of Spirituality.

## 22. Free To Follow One's Vocation

### **The importance of the signs**

Regarding signs to confirm one's vocation, it is wise to ask the Lord as Don Bosco advised, both for the vocation to the married state as also to the consecrated life. This is not to test God but to ask for the necessary light to understand the choices one ought to make.

We have already examined the presence of these signs in the case of the vocation of Count Cays and Fr Louis Orione. We have seen the touching confession that the latter made at the age of fourteen. Let us now consider the decisive moment of his vocational discernment.

Don Bosco had died. The young Louis went up to Valsalice and prayed there at his tomb. He would have wanted to become a Salesian but he understood that the Lord wanted him elsewhere as a diocesan priest. He thought then of entering the seminary at Tortona. But he first asked Don Bosco for three signs to ascertain his vocation: the conversion of his father, acceptance into the seminary without a written application and he have a cassock stitched without having his measurements taken.

The three signs were fulfilled and Louis entered the Seminary of Tortona.

He progressed safely in his preparation to the priesthood despite the trials he encountered in the seminary: the teasing of some companions and the poor spiritual atmosphere there. A year later Louis changed his behaviour and began helping his companions prepare for the priesthood.



## Freedom to Decide

Louis Orione was one of the many boys who were around Don Bosco and who responded positively to God's call. While they loved Don Bosco they felt free to choose a vocation different from the Salesian vocation. It was a sign of Don Bosco's commitment to strive to offer numerous vocations to the Church.

The testimony of Mons Lino Cassani of the diocese of Novara is interesting. As a boy, Lino had arrived at the Oratory of Valdocco at the end of August 1882. He immediately experienced the charm of Don Bosco. He went and made his confession to him and it took only a few words to get him to believe that he was Don Bosco's favourite. He had witnessed the multiplication of the hazelnuts, he had been invited several times to the refectory of the superiors to eat next to Don Bosco, he had participated in the fun that Don Bosco had with his boys. All this had made Lino feel as if he were attracted to the Salesian vocation.

He could never forget the name feast of Don Bosco: "The feast of St John the Baptist was considered as the feast of Don Bosco. And for that occasion Fr Francesia had composed a beautiful poem in Don Bosco's honour. I was then already in the fourth grade and I was trained to recite it. When my turn came I recited my poem with paper in hand, but all by heart! And then bold and defiant I climbed up the steps to the stage and made my way to Don Bosco in order to present him the paper, as was the custom. But Don Bosco said to me: "No, no, first kiss the ring of your bishop" (to the right of Don Bosco was the Bishop of Novara).

The Bishop commented: "Ah, you, Fr John, he is drawn to you."

And Don Bosco said: "No, no, this is for Novara!"

Then he kissed the bishop's ring and came down, this was a way of saying that Don Bosco would never make me a Salesian" (cf PIETRO BROCARDO, *Don Bosco ti ricordiamo*, Elledici, pp. 49-61).

## **“Don Bosco is calling me”**

Don Bosco narrated a dream that was exactly about Lino Cassani. *“One day after giving a conference, he went on: “Four years ago I had a dream. It was repeated several times. I was coming down the steps from the sacristy to get across the playground and there before me was a youngster with a beautiful bouquet of flowers. He was accompanied by other boys and they came to wish me, but then ... he turned away. But even as he turned around he called other boys to come and meet me. He left me but then I took him by the shoulders and turned him around: Why did you turn your back to me?”*

*The youngster replied: “I am the bell that calls others to church but doesn’t enter.”*

Then he concluded: “That youngster is here.”

*One of the most curious to know was I: “Who was it?”*

Does his name begin with A, B...?

*“If the youngster asks me secretly,” said Don Bosco, “I’ll tell him, if not, I won’t.”*

Several asked him but Don Bosco saw no one. It all ended there.

*At the end of the year (...) the day I was to leave for home, I had already packed my trunk and I was there near the pillar beside the chair from where Don Bosco would speak from that evening. I was standing near the fountain, perhaps I would have a drink when I heard in me a voice that said to me: “Don Bosco is calling you, Don Bosco is calling you.”*

*I made up my mind and went to the room of the saint: “Don Bosco, I have come to wish you because tomorrow I am leaving for home; my parents...*

*“Yes, yes, good, good...”*

*“But first, Don Bosco, I want to make my confession: (He had been my confessor for four years).*

I made my confession as I had done several times in the past then he said to me: “Look here, are you not going to ask

me who that boy was who rang the bell but always remained outside?”

*“Is it I perhaps?”*

*“Yes, it was you.”*

I was, as you can imagine, embarrassed. And he said to me: “Don’t be afraid, don’t be afraid. I will always be with you, I will help you, I will assist you. Don’t worry. Don’t forget me; always come here my house is your house.”

*I left very moved. In time, I entered the seminary.”*

Lino felt the accompaniment of Don Bosco throughout his vocational journey. He dreamt twice: the first time in a dormitory converted into a study hall, in which Don Bosco had predicted that he would become a professor of Theology of the clerics of the seminary. In the second dream he prophesied his appointment as canon of the Cathedral of Novara.

### **“Your Don Bosco is dead”**

This was how Lino recalled the death of Don Bosco: “In 1888 I was a sophomore in high school; we were at recreation in the Bishop’s garden when a friend of mine who was reading a newspaper said: “He’s dead... your Don Bosco!” (...) I was shocked. (...) I cried all night. I couldn’t imagine it possible that Don Bosco could die.”

These considerations are useful for parents and for those who have been commissioned by the Lord to accompany youngsters and teenagers while they discern the will of God when it doesn’t always coincide with the feelings or dreams of adults but are linked to the needs of the Kingdom of God and the needs of the Church.

## 22. To The Seminary or The Monastery

The need for vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life must not urge priests and religious, bishops and religious superiors to hunt for vocations among young people, but must encourage them to make an attentive discernment taking into account all those vocations that the Holy Spirit gives rise to in the service of the Church.

There needs to be great respect for the plan that God has for those he has called, even by parents, educators, especially by confessors and spiritual directors.

Don Bosco worked diligently to provide the Church with good vocations. It is estimated that over the course of his life he accompanied more than 2000 of them and this explains also the expansion of his congregation. Don Bosco was able to deprive himself of his best boys in order to send them to the missions and this certainly drew down the Lord's blessings on the new congregation with a great flowering of vocations.

While more than 2/3 of the young people who grew up around him passed on to the Seminary, some young seminarians asked Don Bosco to accept them into his religious family. This was what happened in the case of the vocation of Angelo Rocca.

Angelo "was a first year student of theology at the Seminary of Turin, but according to him, those walls made him sad. That was why, without the permission of his bishop, he escaped from the seminary and went to Don Bosco. The saint did not hesitate for a moment, he accepted him kindly knowing he was good intentioned and sent him to Lanzo to try out his Salesian vocation (...). His father, upset and

disappointed, did not hesitate to show up at Lanzo and take his son back to the Seminary. To welcome him there was Don Bosco, who, very gently and with persuasive words, was able calm the troubled parent and convince him to let his son be where he was. The cleric Angelo was in love with Don Bosco and remained a faithful witness to his spirit.” (cf. PIETRO BROCARDO, *Don Bosco ti ricordiamo*, Elledici).

At twenty-four Fr Angelo was already a priest and the rector of the Salesian House of La Spezia, and Don Bosco, on a visit there while traveling to Rome, asked Father Angelo to hear his confession. While we can imagine Fr Angelo’s confusion, we admire the humility of Don Bosco and the esteem he had for this young rector.

### **“You’re looking for Peace but you won’t find it here”**

In the *‘Memoirs of the Oratory,’* Don Bosco writes about his own vocation discernment: *“Thinking long over myself, after reading some books which deal with the choice of a state in life, I decided to enter the Franciscan Order. “If I become a secular priest,” I told myself, “my vocation runs a great risk of shipwreck. I will embrace the priesthood, renounce the world, enter the cloister, and dedicate myself to study and meditation; thus in solitude I will be able to combat my passions, especially my pride” which had put down deep roots in my heart.*

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

*I wanted to question this religious but a noise awakened me and I saw nothing more. I revealed everything to my confessor,*

but he did not want to hear of dreams or friars. “In this matter,” he said, “everyone must follow his own inclinations and not the advice of others.” (*The Memoirs of the Oratory: Saint John Bosco*, Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, NY, USA.)

### **A Strange Vocational Request**

Francis Cottrino is another of the many boys who was won over by the loving kindness of Don Bosco. He was attending preliminary classes at the seminary at Cuneo when he came to Don Bosco. Together with some of his companions he had left the seminary to become a Salesian. His first meeting with Don Bosco is described in the Biographical Memoirs: “*For two years, 1874 and 1875, I attended the third and fourth grade in junior seminary of Cuneo. The system then in use featured no diversions, no singing, limited recreation, little or no ceremony in the few church services, and rare reception of the sacraments. Bishop (Andrew) Formica, of happy memory, a saintly prelate who greatly revered our father Don Bosco, invited him to visit our seminary. He came in June, accompanied by the bishop, and was received with honours usually reserved to prelates. In the chapel he offered a brief prayer and then spoke to us so warmly and cordially that he filled us with wonder. We had never seen anything like it. Our awe increased when, after a few pious exhortations, he told us that a bishop was treating us to refreshments and to a fine outing to a place we had never visited before. Who could describe our thrill at the idea of having a new place to visit besides our routine expectations. The sky suddenly darkened, and when Don Bosco finished his talk, there was a furious downpour. We went to the dining room and stood wide-eyed at the repast awaiting us. In no time we gobbled up everything. Meanwhile the clouds vanished and a cool breeze replaced the sultry heat. Overjoyed, we set out along the Viale degli Angeli and walked all the way to the monastery of the Friars Minor Conventuals, where for the first time we venerated the mortal remains of Blessed Angelo*

*of Chivasso. There too we most gratefully prayed for the unknown saintly priest who had brought us such fun.*

*When I came to the Oratory in 1877 I learned the identity of the holy priest and there met seven of my former fellow seminarians. Father (Thomas) Chiappelli among them, all highly enthused about the ever so different regime that reigned at the Oratory” (EBH 10, 540).*

Only if Don Bosco sensed that a rather timid teenager, without the support of a community and the reserve of the religious life would find himself in danger if he embraced the parochial priestly life, he would then advise him then to choose the consecrated life in a monastery or a religious community.

## 23. When God Knocks at the Homes of the Poor

Young candidates for the priesthood or the consecrated life need a cultural and theological preparation suitable for their vocation and a university qualification. This involves years of study and therefore a considerable economic pressure on families who cannot always bear the fees, even if these fees in seminaries or in formation houses of religious institutes set aside scholarships for the poor.

This problem can be an obstacle to the realization of one's vocation. This was so in a special way during the time of Don Bosco. We recall with emotion the inconveniences that he experienced at the age of sixteen when, during the festival in Montafia he competed to climb the grease pole just to get the prize of 20 lire. It was a premium that would help him to continue his studies. *“Proceeding always very calmly I reached the place where the tree was narrow. Then he took a breath and with a last push reached out and pulled the bag of 20 lire and placed it between his teeth while the crowd watched in silence. Then again he reached out and dragged down the salami and a handkerchief. Those twenty lire would certainly not be enough to help him to transfer to Chieri to begin his more serious and demanding studies. He had to buy clothes, shoes and books too. Above all, he had to pay his monthly rent and sharecropping at Sussambrino was not a gold mine.”* (GIOVANNI Bosco, *The Memoirs of the Oratory*, Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, NY, USA).

### **The Beggar Realizes his Dream**

In October, John said to his mother:



“Mamma, if you agree, I’ll take two bags and make a collection from the families around.” It was a hard blow to his self-love. Don Bosco would become the greatest ‘beggar’ of the nineteenth century, but it never came easy to him. That October marked the very first time he overcame his repugnance and set out to beg.

Morialdo was an odd collection of little hamlets and isolated farms. John went from house to house. He would knock at the door and say: “I am Margaret Bosco’s son. I am going to Chieri to study for the priesthood. My mother is poor. Please help me if you can.”

Everybody knew him. They had enjoyed his shows, they had heard him repeat the sermons he had heard in church, and they liked him. But few were well-to-do. They gave him what they could: eggs, maize, a few measures of wheat.

A courageous woman from Becchi went to Castelnuovo to see Fr Dassano, the parish priest. She told him it was a shame not to help such a good boy and compelled him to go begging.

Fr Dassano was ignorant of the whole affair. He thought that in November John would resume his studies at Castelnuovo. After making more inquiries, he collected a small sum of money and sent it to Margaret. He also told her to contact Lucy Matta, a widow who was about to settle in Chieri where her son would also be studying.

*That was a good piece of information. Margaret spoke to the woman and they agreed that John would lodge with her at Chieri for a fee of 21 lire per month.’* (TERESIO Bosco, Don Bosco, A New Biography, Tejprasarini, Mumbai, 2000).

The charity of so many good people and some zealous priests like Fr Dassano and Fr Cafasso helped John Bosco to continue his studies. Even during his last years of Theology, from the seminary, Don Bosco wrote a letter to the king requesting a scholarship to continue his studies.

These difficulties always made Don Bosco more attentive to support the theological studies of poor boys whom the

Lord was calling to the priesthood like Francis Piccollo, whose story is famous for the extraordinary confession he made to Don Bosco at the church of the Consolata; Eusebio Calvi from Palestro and Enrico Bonetti.

### **A Very Beautiful Gift**

Francis Piccollo was at the Oratory of Don Bosco. One day his mother was summoned to the bursar to pay the fee arrears of her son. Francis saw her cry, but Don Bosco reassured her and gave the boy a note to be handed to the bursar which indicated that his debt had been paid in full. Francis was overwhelmed by this sensitivity of Don Bosco and reciprocated this gesture by presenting him the best gift he could: offering himself to become a Salesian.

Fr Piccollo worked for thirty years in Sicily among the poorest children there as a teacher, rector and then the provincial of the Salesian works. He was considered as “the Don Bosco of Sicily.” He lived till 1930.

During the same period, another fine lad, Eusebio Calvi of Palestro, was worried because he could no longer pay the fees. Don Bosco saw him sad and asked, “*What’s wrong Eusebio?*”

“Don Bosco, my parents are unable to pay my fees and I have to interrupt my studies.”

“But aren’t you a friend of Don Bosco?”

“Of course.”

“Then we can fix things. Write to your father not to worry about the past. From now on let him pay what he can.”

“But my father wants to know exactly how much, because he wants to do all he can.”

“What was your fee so far?”

“*Twelve Lire a month.*”

“*Write to him that we bring it down to five, and that he will pay if he can. Come to my office, I’ll give a chit for the bursar.*”

(TERESIO Bosco, Don Bosco, A New Biography, Tejprasarini, Mumbai, 2000).

Even Eusebio Calvi became a Salesian and a priest; he worked in Calabria and Sicily. He lived until 1923.

And finally, the story of another boy who had economic difficulties that blurred the possibility of his following his vocation. “Enrico, twenty-four, from Caprino (Bergamo, had donned the clerical habit, only to put it aside when a very serious obstacle barred his way to the priesthood. In need of work, he came to Turin and found a job, but was unhappy. His longing for the priesthood, his aversion for the profligate people he lived with, (...), made life miserable. Whatever free time he could snatch from his many tasks he spent at Our Lady of Consolation Shrine, begging his heavenly Mother for the favour of soon withdrawing from the world’s dangers.”

### **The Madonna heard his prayers**

She granted his fervent prayer. One Sunday evening, more depressed than usual, he wandered along the tree-lined footpath parallel to the avenue near the Oratory. Loud and happy boyish shouts reached him. He paused a few moments before the Church of St Francis de Sales. (...) He asked a passerby what place that was and was told that it was Don Bosco’s Oratory. Without more ado, he went in, approached Don Bosco, and opened his heart to him. He explained how, due to family circumstances he could not pay the seminary tuition. Don Bosco accepted him, and shortly afterward he became one of the Oratory’s happy residents.

*Enrico Bonetti became a real treasure for the Oratory. He was ordained a Priest and always recalled how full of gratitude he was for the Madonna’s mercy (EBM 6,447).*

Thousands of youngsters would receive these signs of affection from Don Bosco.

While he was so generous in supporting good youngsters, because of the poverty that prevented their families from

paying their fees, Don Bosco was very firm in first assessing their right intention. *He would say later: "The first object of our society is the sanctification of its members. So let everyone who enters divest himself from every other thought or concern. Those who come to enjoy a quiet life, to pursue their studies comfortably, to be free from the control of their parents or exempt from obeying their superior, would no longer be responding to the "follow me" of the Saviour, as they would be looking their own desires which are not good for their souls."*

## 24. A Call Through the Lives of Saints

The story of Fr Francis Cottirino's vocation seen from a distance has roots far deeper than enjoying salami and cherries while visiting a seminary with Don Bosco. It dates from the period when Francis was attending the elementary school at the Seminary of Cuneo. One day, while returning home, he picked up five sheets of badly crumpled and torn paper and flipped through them out of curiosity. On them he found a part of the life of Francis Besucco written by Don Bosco. Cottirino read it with interest and thought to himself, "I would so love to stay with Don Bosco." After his years in the seminary, this desire of his became a reality in 1877 when Francis entered the Oratory of Valdocco.

After the apostles were called by Jesus, his voice is heard through the example of the lives of the martyrs and the saints through whom he continues to sow the seeds of his call in the minds of youngsters calling them to the priesthood or the consecrated life.

Down the centuries many youngsters were fascinated by St Francis of Assisi, by his followers to this day and this was repeated in time through the example of the lives of St Dominic, St Ignatius and many others up to the time of Don Bosco.

Even today, some young people read the life of Don Bosco or see films depicting his dedication to very poor children or hear the call in the stories of the vocations that matured around Don Bosco, like Francis Ghigliotto: *"Young Francis Ghigliotto was a day student in his fifth year of high school. In 1869, after reading some lives of the saints, he prayed that he too, might meet a saint and be able to follow him. Six years later God granted his wish."*

When Don Bosco arrived in Varazze, Father Tomatis, the fifth year high-school teacher, told his students that they were free to speak with Don Bosco and seek his counsel. Ghigliotto and several other boys left the classroom (to see Don Bosco). However, he did not dare present himself to him because he had never met him before. A classmate, seeing his hesitation, pushed him into the room and shut the door. Bewildered, Ghigliotto found himself face to face with Don Bosco, unable to utter a word.

“Well, what did you come for?” asked Don Bosco.

“I...I am in my last year of high school. I came to ask your advice.”

“Good...you give yourself to me and I shall give you our Lord.”

These words disturbed Ghigliotto. Then Don Bosco bade him sit beside him on the sofa. He took out a notebook and asked him, “What is your name?” Ghigliotto became even more startled and turned pale. What could be behind all this?

Don Bosco continued with a smile, “Do not be afraid; just tell me your name.” The boy told him and Don Bosco wrote it in his notebook

*Then he said: “Look, in two months write to me at Turin and then come to spend a week with me at the Oratory. If you like it there, you may stay; if not, you may return home. However, suit yourself. If you don’t want to write, you don’t have to, and it will all be over (EBM 11,305-306).*

### **The Vocation Forged in the School of the Saints**

Direct contact with the saints, or staying at a school of their spirituality, generates in candidates to the consecrated life a desire to emulate their experience of God, their love for Christ to the extent that they want to imitate him/her in their own life.

This desire in teenagers becomes very poignant. For this reason, the years of seminary life are years for “falling in love”

with Christ which they will remember for a lifetime. The radicality and enthusiasm that the teenager experiences, allows him to assimilate more easily the proposed spirituality while adults will require greater humility to assimilate the spirit of the seminary or the spirituality of the founder.

Don Bosco proposed to youngsters that they stay for some time with him and be charmed by his mission. That was the case with Francis Ghigliotto.

“During the two months before receiving his diploma Ghigliotto always kept reminding himself of the letter he was to write to Don Bosco. Finally, he did write it. Then he asked his parents to let him go to Turin for a week. He went and did not return. Two months later, tired of arguing with him by letter, his father threatened to appeal to the Prefect of the province and have him escorted home by the police.

By now the boy was already wearing the clerical habit. His father knew nothing of this, although the boy had confided all to his mother before leaving. This pious woman after shedding some tears, said to the boy, “You know how your father feels about these things. Don’t upset him. Don’t say a word to anybody. Just resolve to do God’s will.”

When Ghigliotto received his father’s threatening letter, he showed it to Don Bosco in the dining room, told him of his fears, and sought his counsel as to what to do and how to answer. “Look,” said Don Bosco, “This is what you should write to him. ‘Dearest parents, one does not usually leave a place where he is happy, and I am happy here. My Superiors take good care of me, and I am able to pursue my studies. So please let me stay.’ Then add whatever you wish.” He did so; and for six months there was no answer and everything remained quiet.

At the end of the school year his grandfather died and he was called home. His fears revived. “Do not worry,” said Don Bosco. “Tell them that rather than cause harm to any family, Don Bosco wishes to be of help, and that if they should need you he is ready to send you home.”

The cleric went home. After listening to his family's difficulties, he made them understand that for the present they really did not need him and that the future should be left in the hands of God. When they heard what Don Bosco thought of the whole matter, his parents became resigned. The parish priest at Varazze tried to persuade him to enter the seminary, but he answered, "I would sooner become a storekeeper than a secular priest. I have no inclination for that life.

Later on his pious mother, on her deathbed exclaimed "Do whatever you wish in regard to the funeral and Masses for my soul; I am happy that my son is a priest and will pray for me."

*Fr Ghigliotto was always firmly convinced that in handling the matter of his vocation Don Bosco had been inspired by God (EBM 11,306-307).*

Meeting a saint like Don Bosco was also the source of the vocation of the two and a half year old Rinaldo Ruffini, whose story is told by his mother and the others who remember the incident well.

### **"Don Bosco clung to me for a long time"**

Rinaldo was among the many children who had the privilege to have been blessed by Don Bosco while the saint was visiting La Spezia in 1887 on his way to Rome for the consecration of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart. His stop lasted for three days and Don Bosco welcomed several children who were brought by their mothers. Each received a blessing with a sign of the cross accompanied by a smile. When Rinaldo's mother brought him to Don Bosco, he took him in his arms and lifted him up hugging him cheek to cheek for quite a while, provoking the protest of others who were treated differently. Don Bosco never justified the mystery of that action for which there were several witnesses.

The significance of that gesture was revealed in the vocation of Rinaldo to the Salesian life which he described as "a child



thinking about the person of Don Bosco always warms my heart. It was the ardour of the vocation of which I never had the slightest hesitation; that ardour burns within me even now that I am so old.”

Those who met Fr Rinaldo Ruffini, one of the last to have known Don Bosco, understood the secret of his entire life; burning with love for his ideal until the end. His patient goodness and unalterable smile, the motherly care with which he followed the young to Salesian houses made him another Don Bosco.

## 26. "Dad, I Don't Have a Vocation"

Parents have a very important role to play in the vocational choices of their children, both in regard to their studies, their careers and the formation of a new family or to a life of special consecration.

In the past many parents dreamed of a vocation to the consecrated life for their children. That was why some youngsters found themselves in seminaries or in houses of formation because of the wish of their families but with no real call from the Lord. In such cases candidates ran the risk of reaching their ordination or their religious profession without any really deep motivation or they would, at some point of time in the future, abandon that path, go through a deep religious crises or worse still abandon the faith in which they were brought up.

On the other hand there were other more commendable attitudes of parents who were committed to give their children a good education, open their minds to noble virtues on which they could base the fundamental choices of their lives and without undue interference allow the youngster to make a choice of her/his own state of life.

It is here that the parents have the right to choose the school best suited to their child's education.

Even on this principle the Church has always defended the right to the education of youngsters especially those called to the priesthood in establishing seminaries or religious houses at which teenagers are offered special formation. When the State begins meddling in the running of seminaries their effects are deleterious because their principles are opposed to the Church of Rome.

In this chapter on the important role of parents in the education of children, we present the story of the vocation of Louis Variara a native of Viarigi, in the province of Asti. Because of the educational concern of his father the Salesian Congregation received a great missionary and apostle of the lepers and highly praised Congregation of the Sacred Hearts; and the Church was given a Blessed.

### **A Little Larger Family**

“Peter Variara did not find it easy in or around Viarigi to help his son Louis to pursue his elementary school. He wanted to guarantee him a great cultural and religious education without hiding his desire that his son enter the seminary just as his elder brother had done. This boy had just died on the threshold of his ordination. Then he remembered his friend Don Bosco. Turin-Valdocco, the Mother House of the Salesians, enjoyed a good reputation for efficiency in studies, especially because of the presence of Don Bosco. Now recently during these last months of his life his reputation as a saint was spreading.

Louis’ admission was not difficult because of his father’s friendship with Don Bosco and there were no onerous conditions involved. His departure for Turin on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1887 was a day of great joy for Peter Variara but naturally a very painful one for his mother.

The admonition of Papa Peter to Louis was peremptory: “Be good, study and recommend yourself to the Madonna, who knows, one day you may be a priest.”

Louis abruptly replied: “Dad, I don’t have a vocation to be a priest.”

The father said: “Be good, pray to Our Lady to Our Lady; she’ll do what’s best.”

The change of ambient made a deep impression on Louis. Passing from the silence and serenity of a little town to a big city and a boarding school of over 800 students disoriented

his self-confidence which lasted for several days. His brother Gelso attests: "He was barely able to keep up with the life at the Oratory, but he gradually came to love it. In the end he accepted the house as his family only a bit larger, inspired greatly by the sanctity which emanated from the presence of Don Bosco exuding such sweet happiness."

Even Mother Lozano affirmed in her confession about Louis, now already grown up: "The memory of his family far away caused him much homesickness and sadness. When his father visited him for the first time, it renewed his pain and he wanted to go home with him but his father, feeling sorry for him tried to console him and encouraged him to persevere. Studies were no problem for him and discipline wasn't an issue for him either. He felt very lonely. But in the end his sociable and cheerful character triumphed and Louis felt as if he was in his *own home*." (ANTONIO ALESSI, Luigi Variara, un apostolo dei lebbrosi Elledici – trans.).

### **"Don Bosco has read my heart"**

The education received in a familiar setting and steeped in the spirituality of Valdocco prepared his heart for the call that the Lord was going to make through the presence of a saint: Don Bosco. Louis saw him on many occasions: On October 13, 1887, on the occasion of the great pilgrimage of the French workers to Turin; on November 24, 1887, for the clerical vestition of the Polish Prince Augustus Czartoryski; and especially on December 20, 1887 which was Don Bosco's last ride in a carriage. Louis speaks of it: "*It was winter. One afternoon we were playing happily in the courtyard, when suddenly a cry shocked everyone: "Don Bosco, Don Bosco!"*"

*As if by instinct all of us made our way towards him accompanying him to the carriage. Don Bosco was surrounded by so many youngsters, but I struggled to get as close to him as possible, to be able to see him and know him better. I really got very close by as he climbed into the carriage and he gave me a long, gentle and penetrating look.*

*I was so certain that I had met a saint and that he had read in my heart something that only God and he could know: my vocation!”*

His father was overjoyed when he came to see him in Valdocco, Louis ran to meet him happy and excited and he said: “Dad, I want to be a priest and a son of Don Bosco.”

Similar to the route taken by Fr Variara is one taken by youngster who recently grew up at the Oratory of Valdocco. He was about thirteen when one Sunday his mother returned from Mass which the boy had not attended because he was sick and she said, “You know, today Fr Cesare spoke of the priestly vocation. Do you feel like becoming a priest?”

The boy immediately replied: “I don’t think so, mom!”

At seventeen, that youngster was always attached to the Oratory, serving his companions even the smallest and the poorest. His mother commented: “You’re always out of the house, always at the Oratory. You could take your bed to sleep there because you spend so many hours of the day there. Can’t you become a priest if you want?” The young man did not answer her but he took it as a hint of what the Lord was doing.

Through the story of this vocation, we want to remind parents of the duty they have to be present with their children as they make their choice of studies or plan their lives looking into all possible vocations including the priesthood and the religious life.

To help them to reflect on the importance of the choices they make which will make them happy or sad for a lifetime is the most beautiful service parents can render to their children.

How beautiful then is the attitude of some mothers who at the birth of their children already hand them over to the Lord, content if a vocation to a special consecration matures within them. In them we seem to see Mamma Margaret who confided to John Bosco, on the day he donned the clerical habit, “*When*

*you were born I consecrated you to Madonna. When you started your studies I recommended you to love her always. Now, John, I urge you to be her own” (GIOVANNI BOSCO, Memoirs of the Oratory).*

## 27. A Call Changes the Heart of a Youngster

Jesus calls who he wants and when one least expects it. Not afraid of the candidates' shortcomings or limitations but drawing them to himself and looking them in the eye, he calls each of them to follow him as they grow in human and Christian maturity till they begin to share his compassion and tenderness for all humanity.

Already the *Gospels* and *the Acts of the Apostles* tell us of the calls recorded throughout the history of the Church down the centuries.

An example is the vocation of Matthew the evangelist. He himself writes: At that time, as he departed, Jesus saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office, and said to him, "follow me." And he got up and followed him. The Pharisees began to murmur because he was eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus replied, "I have come not to all the righteous but sinners" (cf Mt 9, 9-13).

Paul of Tarsus, the great missionary, confesses that before meeting Jesus on the Road to Damascus he was a persecutor of Christians. We know the life of Augustine of Hippo before he met the great bishop Ambrose and his subsequent conversion which would lead him to become one of the greatest saints of the Western Church.

These calls show the gratuitousness of the gift of vocation.

### Meeting a Roadside Youngster

Thinking of Don Bosco and the youngsters known to him, who had received the call when they were least conversant about the "things of God" there comes to mind Michael Magone who said: "If a rogue could become good enough to

be a priest, I would happily be one,” and the story of the other vocation that came out of a clash between Don Bosco and a street urchin who could perhaps begin to live an honest life. Fr Garigliano, his companion at the Chieri school narrated this episode: *“One day while accompanying Don Bosco in Turin, we passed in front of Holy Trinity Church in Via Dora Grossa, and there we encountered a slovenly dressed and cocky looking young man.*

Don Bosco stopped him in a friendly manner and asked, “What’s your name?”

“My name? Why do you want to know? Who are you?” the boy answered.

“Well,” Don Bosco said, “I’m a priest who likes young people. Each Sunday I gather boys in a nice place near the Dora, not far from the Rifugio. I have presents for them, and let them have fun. They like me. My name is Don Bosco. But now that I’ve told you who I am, will you tell me about yourself?”

“I’m just a homeless fellow looking for a job. My mother and father are dead.”

“In that case I’d like to help you... What’s your name?”

“My name is so-and-so.”

“Fine! I hope to see you this Sunday with the other boys. Come and enjoy yourself and I’ll try to find a job for you. You’ll have a good time.”

The boy stared at Don Bosco for a few seconds, then said brusquely: “No, you don’t mean that.”

Don Bosco then handed him a ten soldi piece, saying: “Yes, I do. Just come and see for yourself.”

Moved by this, the boy stared at the money and said: “I’ll come, Don Bosco. If I don’t, you can call me a liar.”

*He did come to the Oratory, and, as a matter of fact, he attended it regularly thereafter. I believe he is now one of your*



own priests, because once, when I called on Don Bosco at the Oratory, I met him there wearing a cassock" (EBM 3, 31-32).

### **"Someone thought of sending him home"**

Don Bosco was not impressed by the character or the liveliness of some youngsters. He knew well how to guide them to the service of the Lord by tempering their exuberance and honing their skills. John Cagliero, for example, *"He showed fine aptitude and a very cheerful disposition. He was always outstanding in competitive games, a champion and leader in calisthenics and full of initiative.*

*At first, it seemed impossible to curb his fiery temperament. On his way to school, especially, he could not bring himself to walk along with the others. He was the despair of cleric Rua, who was in charge of the group. As soon as they were past the Oratory gates, Cagliero would run to Milano Square to see the charlatans doing tricks. Yet, when his classmates got to Professor Bonzanino's doorstep, Cagliero, drenched in perspiration, would already be there waiting for them.*

Rua invariably asked him, "Why can't you walk with us?"

*"Because I like it better my way. What's wrong with going one way instead of another?"*

"How about obedience?"

"Obedience? I'm never late. I am even here ahead of you. I do my homework and I always know my lessons, so why all the fuss?"

He would not change because he derived so much pleasure from watching the charlatans. Soon someone suggested to Don Bosco that perhaps such an undisciplined boy had better be sent back home, but Don Bosco, who appreciated Cagliero's genuine qualities, would not hear of it.

The following year, however, Don Bosco spoke to Cagliero about the virtue of obedience. Thereafter the boy became more amenable to rules and soon was an example to all.

*Don Bosco discovered that Cagliero, among many other talents, had great aptitude for music. He himself taught him the first rudiments and then entrusted him to the cleric Bellia for further instruction. He made the young boy apply himself seriously to this task through a well-trained method which soon was to bear good fruit” (EBM 4, 236-237).*

Cagliero was especially good at Music, the fruit of hard work that led him to repeat certain exercises ad nauseam which was so annoying that one day Mamma Margaret nearly lost her patience and without really meaning it, picked up a broom to threaten the young musician whom she loved as a son.

In 1875, during a conference on Vocation to novices, Don Bosco said, *“If you enter a religious Order be a good religious. I can cite a few instances in our own congregation: someone, for example, not present company, who is a living proof of my words, Father Cagliero. If he had not entered our Congregation he might have become a good priest, or a zealous ecclesiastic, or a piano teacher. Instead he gave up all worldly honours and joined our Society. Yet, look at him! The honours he left behind follow him in far greater measure, so much so that nearly all the newspapers not only in Italy, but in France, Spain, Germany and England are talking about him and hail him as an excellent piano teacher (...), a renowned preacher, (...), a professor of theology [Don Bosco could not add “as great missionary, bishop and cardinal”] (...). He could not have achieved any of this, you may be sure, if he had not entered the Congregation” (EBM 11,478-479).*

Don Bosco not only knew well how to direct the energy of youngsters, but of identifying some of their good qualities encouraging them to use their skills to offer them to the Lord together with the best of themselves. The goal he had before him was holiness that attracts even those who, at first, seem far from God.

## 28. "I Don't Want To Be A Priest Anymore"

One reason for the shortage of vocations that we are experiencing today is the contempt that the world manifests for consecrated religious and the slander that is poured on them. There almost seems to be a certain complacency, especially in the media, about highlighting particularly the scandalous behaviour of priests.

How unfair the world is and particularly certain aspects of social communication when highlighting the weaknesses and failings of consecrated religious, without verifying the reliability of the complaints!

Rarely have the heroic lives of consecrated religious and priests, their acts of charity, even their martyrdom across 2000 years of history. The examples in our times are often kept in hiding.

Even though scandals have been committed priests and their spiritual directors are required strive to live in a radical way their sanctity of life.

### **"I Want To Save My Soul"**

The following story of a vocation presents well these sentiments and highlights the attention that Don Bosco gave to these situations.

"Even among our pupils there are some who, having heard people at home talk spitefully of priests, scorn them as money-minded. Unfortunately, they may have met some who are like that. Some may even feel hostility toward priests because they have never had close contact with them. Here instead, seeing that our priests are concerned with the boys' well-being, and noticing that their best schoolmates have the

privilege to serve at the altar, they shed their prejudices and form a high opinion of the priestly state. Let me tell you what happened recently. A very good boy, after a few months here at the Oratory, manifested his desire to become a priest. Some time later, when I asked him about it, he bluntly replied, "I no longer want to be a priest."

"Why?" I asked. "You had a vocation."

"I don't care. I just don't want it anymore," he firmly repeated. I was dumbfounded because his conduct was still excellent. I pleaded that he at least tell me what had made him change his mind. After much hesitation, he said, "So-and-so proved to me that all priests are bad. Their outward appearance is pure hypocrisy." One of his relatives is a canon, and this boy personally heard him say that certain parish priests were leading scandalous lives. "Sooner than become a bad priest," he declared, "never but never, will I become one. I want to save my soul."

*I urged him not to abandon a vocation so easily, and I showed the untruth of what he had heard. "Try to forget it," I went on. "Don't think about it anymore. Instead spend a few moments before a crucifix or the Blessed Sacrament, and ask yourself: If I were about to die, what is it that I would wish I had done? What state of life would I wish I had chosen in order to do good and be better able to save my soul? Think about it and then let me know.*

The boy followed my suggestion and reported back saying, "I want to become a priest, but not a diocesan one. I want to become a religious."

*That was exactly what I wanted him to say (EBM 12, 70).*

### **I saw him in tears**

Don Bosco was not only attentive in encouraging the vocations of his youngsters, but he was also very close even to priests and religious who for various reasons were living in great vocational difficulties.

“Whenever Don Bosco noticed some priest acting unbecomingly, he was deeply grieved, even to the point of tears. Had he been able to have his way, he would have hidden that unfortunate priest from sight. Several were recommended to him by their bishops or vicars general. With true love and respect for them, he strove to rehabilitate them; he talked to them at great length, exhorted them, and sometimes even helped them financially.

*His zealous efforts were nearly always rewarded and he succeeded in restoring them to their priestly dignity and good reputation. Once they were back on the right path, they persevered. He even converted some who had fallen into heresy and persuaded them to make an edifying retraction (...).*

His most difficult task, however, was to keep away from dangerous occasions those priests who had incurred ecclesiastical penalties for their intemperate drinking. In dealing with them after a lapse, Don Bosco never tried to humiliate them, but rather showed them such kindness and compassion that the hearts of these poor men were deeply touched. Never did he let a word slip that might reflect on their sacred dignity.

*When talking with these unfortunate priests, who sometimes tried to excuse themselves by blaming it on a variety of causes, he knew how to convince them that with God’s grace they could readily overcome all obstacles. He encouraged them to banish all fear with the thought of Mary’s goodness and protection, quoting to them Fr Cafasso’s words: “Even if someone should be ordained a priest without having been called by God, he can be sure that this heavenly Mother will obtain for him through Her Son’s goodness and mercy all the necessary qualifications and graces if he sincerely strives to become a good son of Mary (EBM 5, 433-434).*

These attributes of Don Bosco are now taken up as a real mission by some priests who hasten to help religious in crisis or those who have dishonoured their calling.

We can join them with our prayer, asking the Lord for the gift of holiness for all youngsters called to consecrated life and fidelity and perseverance for those who are living this beautiful vocation with joy.

## **29. A Habit Does Not Make a Monk. It Sets Him Apart**

The clothing ceremony of a religious is a particularly fascinating celebration. The significance of the religious habit, or the cassock for priests, has lost some of its meaning as an outward sign, although Canon Law still provides for the religious to have an ecclesiastical habit and or the habit of its institute as a sign their consecration and a witness to their poverty.

The ancient custom of the vestition where the superior turns to the young candidate who is going to put on the clerical habit and questions her/him: "Do you know what wearing this holy habit signifies and what obligations it involves?" And the young candidate responds: "Yes, wearing the clerical habit signifies my decisively entering the ecclesiastical life which separates me from the world and its vanities and clothes me with Jesus Christ. It obliges me to strive with renewed ardour to acquire the religious virtues especially, humility, purity of life and the love of God and neighbour and so render me as a light shining in the darkness of the world."

In his memoirs, Don Bosco recalled with much emotion these words that he heard on the day of his clerical vestition.

### **Take off the Old and Put on the New**

"Having made up my mind to enter the seminary, - wrote Don Bosco - I took the prescribed examination. I prepared carefully for that most important day because I was convinced that one's eternal salvation or eternal perdition ordinarily depends on the choice of a state in life. I asked my friends to pray for me. I made a novena, and on the feast of St Michael I approached the holy sacraments. Before the solemn high Mass Doctor Conzano, the provost and vicar forane of my

region, blessed my cassock and vested me as a cleric. He instructed me to remove my lay clothing, praying: “May the Lord strip you of your old nature and its deeds.”

*And as he did so, I thought, “Oh, how much old clothing there is to cast off. My God destroy in me all my evil habits.*

When he put the clerical collar round my neck, he said: “May the Lord clothe you with the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Deeply moved, I thought to myself: “Yes, O my God, grant that at this moment I may put on a new nature. May I henceforth lead a new life in complete conformity with your holy will. May justice and holiness be the constant objects of my thoughts, words and actions. Amen. O Mary, be my salvation.”

As if to seal this proposition, Mamma Margaret told her son, “*My dear John, you have put on the priestly habit (...) however it’s not the habit that honours your state, but the practice of virtue. If you should ever begin to doubt your vocation, then – for heaven’s sake! – do not dishonour this habit. Put it aside....*”

These resolutions that rose from the heart of the young seminarian John Bosco, who as a boy felt enamoured by the priestly vocation, should revive in the minds of consecrated religious who are thinking about what commitments this habit reminds them of.

The habit is also an outward sign of one’s desire to conform to Christ, to deny one’s pride, to die to oneself and to fight against individualism and popularity.

Dying to oneself is explained by the uniform choice of the colour black or the dark apparel while the poor material signifies the choice of one to follow the poor Christ.

Although the patterns of certain ecclesiastical habits seem to be old-fashioned we must never forget the significance they’ve had for centuries.



## **Don Bosco's Tough Reaction**

Given the profound significance of the habit and the obligations riding on the one wearing it we can understand the reaction of Don Bosco towards a religious who had come to visit him on the day before his vestition: *“Once when a religious of a distant town came to see him. He wore civilian clothes either for comfort or to avoid abuse. He greeted Don Bosco courteously, but the latter pretended not to recognize him. In amazement the religious emphatically protested that they were friends. At last Don Bosco remarked, “I wouldn’t have believed it! Is it you in this garb? Go, I have no time to waste on you.”*

Please listen! I was afraid I’d be insulted. You know religious receive little respect nowadays.”

“Don’t bother me! I have other people to attend to. If you want me to listen to you, put on your habit!”

*Seeing how determined Don Bosco was, the religious apologised and promised he would never again lay aside his habit. Don Bosco relented and received him”* (EBM 7, 16).

The religious habit is a mute sermon and especially today to a world so hungry for signs.

In the exhortation on Consecrated Life, Pope John Paul II urged religious:

“Since the habit is a sign of consecration and of belonging to a certain religious family, together with the Synod Fathers, I heartily recommend to men and women religious to wear their habits suitably adapted to circumstances, time and place (...). Institutes that from their origins or by provision of the constitutions do not provide for a specific habit should ensure that their members’ dress corresponds to the dignity and the simplicity and the nature of their vocation.”

The Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests of the Congregation of the Clergy takes up the invitation that Pope John Paul II addressed to the Cardinal Vicar of Rome on September 8, 1982 in n. 66: “In a society that is secularized and basically materialistic, where external signs of sacred

and supernatural realities tend to disappear, it is a particularly felt need for the priest, a man of God and a dispenser of his mysteries, be recognizable in the eyes of the community, even in his attire which bear an unequivocal sign of his dedication and his identity as a public minister. The priest must first be recognized by his behaviour but also by his dress, in order to make visible to all the faithful, indeed to every man, his identity and his attachment to God and the Church. For this reason, a cleric should wear a “suitable ecclesiastical dress, in accordance with the norms issued by the Episcopal Conference and legitimate local custom.” This means that the attire, when it is not the cassock, must be different from the manner in which the laity dress, and conform to the dignity and sacredness of his ministry. Without prejudice to exceptional situations, the failure to use proper ecclesiastical attire could manifest a weak sense of his identity as one consecrated to the service of the Church (from the teachings of Paul VI, General Audience of September 17, 1969.”

Don Bosco had this attitude of the Church and the people of God well in mind and taught it with firmness.

### **Make Yourself Visible**

We live in an age in which any ethnic group, any minority group claiming its rightful place tries to show itself. Everyone is looking for an external sign by which they are proud to be identified.

It seems that only in this age, priests and consecrated religious don't seem to want to have themselves to be identified.

There was a time when priests and religious wore civilian clothes like other people, in solidarity with the common folk. At other times they did it to blend in with the others and not live consistently the responsibility of their consecrated vocation.

If in the past a priest mixed with the masses and was asked only for sanctity of life as the only distinctive mark; that is not so today.

People today more than in times past, want to recognize their priests and consecrated religious. They do not want the priest to be like any other person, but different and aware of being a significant reference.

It is strange that lay people are asking their priests to be more visible.

They still want to distinguish a priest and a consecrated religious by the habit he/she wears. He preserves his dignity particularly in the administration of the sacraments with liturgical vestments that the sacrament requires.

Youngsters feel the need of a uniform for their team, college or group. Designer clothes, even if they are a sign of consumerism, manifest a desire to belong to a certain social class. Perhaps because of their fragility and the fear that they will be left out, religious often have a renewed sympathy for new religious habits.

It is no coincidence that some new religious institutes, whose members simply wear their religious habits, live the Gospel radicalism of following Christ, in austerity, prayer and charity and thus become a sign that will draw many vocations to their congregations.

This phenomenon should make us think!

## 30. 'Yes' To God a Way to Holiness

In a circular that Don Bosco addressed to his young Salesians on June 9, 1867, speaking of the qualities necessary to follow a vocation to the consecrated life, he wrote: *“The first object of our society is the sanctification of its members. So, on entry, let everyone divest himself of any other thought or concern. Those who enter to enjoy a quiet life, find a comfortable life to pursue their studies, to be free from the control of their parents or exempt themselves from obeying some higher authority would be in the wrong place and would no longer hear the “follow me” of the Saviour as they would be following their own convenience and not the good of their souls. The apostles were praised by the Saviour and they were promised an everlasting kingdom, not because they abandoned the world but because they professed to be ready to follow him through the difficulties that would come and spend their lives in work, penance, sufferings and even being martyred for their Faith.”*

Probably while writing these words he did not know that some of the boys who grew up around him would be so sanctified: St Louis Orione, Blessed Michael Rua, Blessed Philip Rinaldi, Blessed Augustus Czartoryski, Blessed Luigi Variara and Venerable Andrea Beltrami.

A young man who feels called to the priesthood or the consecrated life must know that the path indicated to him is his privileged path to holiness. Following it, he would very easily reach eternal salvation. The one who takes it up fulfils the will of God and finds peace; if not, then along the way he runs the grave risk of being deprived of the graces necessary for his eternal salvation.

## **Marked by the seal of martyrdom**

Don Bosco went on: *“Then, while we say that everyone who enters the Society is guided by the sole desire to serve God more perfectly and do himself much good, he intends to become better spiritually and assures his eternal salvation. Anyone who is looking for a comfortable and easy life does not enter our Society with a good intention. We remind ourselves of the Saviour’s words: “Whoever wishes to be a follower of mine must go, sell all he has and come follow me.” To follow him who has not an inch of ground to lay his weary head. “Whoever wishes to be a disciple of mine, the Saviour says, follows me with prayer, with penance but especially by renouncing himself and taking up his cross of trials everyday.” But follow him till when? Till one’s death, and if necessary, up to the cross.”*

Behind these words there is already a prophecy attached, referring to some of his youngsters who, following the Lord enthusiastically, bore witness through martyrdom, such were Msgr. Versiglia and Fr Caravario and down to the young Polish and the Spanish martyrs too.

Those who are called to follow the Lord through a vocation of special consecration must then prepare themselves even for martyrdom which is often bloodless and consummated through fidelity to one’s daily duty lived for years in the seemingly hidden common life but which actually is heroic.

## **Don Bosco’s Advice to Encourage Vocations**

At the end of this book on the Vocation, while I hope I have roused youngsters, their parents and educators to the commendable task of vocation orientation, I believe it appropriate to add some suggestions that Don Bosco addressed to those who have the precious task of guiding youngsters called to the priestly and religious life.

*“I need not exhort you again to constantly foster priestly vocations. (...) The unusual scarcity of priests which worsens every year is presently our gravest threat. Let me therefore give*

*you suggestions and hints for a successful quest for priestly vocations (...).*

1) Encourage frequent reception of the sacraments of communion and confession. I will not dwell on this point, because you all know how effective it is and how frequently our pupils receive the sacraments.

2) Show a lot of loving kindness to our boys. Let this loving kindness be a trait of all superiors without exception. It may take the combined efforts of all to win over one candidate, but a single one of you can turn them all away. How responsive a boy becomes when he is well treated! He entrusts his very heart to his superiors.

3) Besides dealing kindly with them – you should also show them great trust (for this Don Bosco suggests entrusting them with some responsibility, drawing one aside and making him feel important).

4) To this end, it is also very conducive to reverently conduct the sacred ceremonies (of Holy Mass and other church services). They are a practical demonstration of the decorum and the holiness that draws one to advance toward the priesthood to which he may feel called.

5) It is also extremely helpful to encourage youngsters to become altar boys. I believe that the Altar Boys' Society is the nursery of priestly vocations.

6) It will also be very helpful to treat a boy familiarly by taking a walk with him, conversing, laughing, listening to what he has to say and encouraging him to tell us about his home life, his parents' farm, his vineyards and so on. If, as a result of these friendly contacts, he asks about his vocation, advise

him to mention it in confession, because that is the time in which his spiritual condition is better known (EMB 12, 70-71).

Don Bosco proposed to his best teenagers daily Communion and frequent Confession. Even in our days we ought to repeat to them this proposal, at least to those who are more sensitive towards spiritual things.

We should get them to be fascinated with Christ, help them to experience the charm of being in his presence, and being influenced by him. Daily Communion will make the heart of the youngster glow with the love of Christ and will thrust him forward to self-donation and charity. It is in this context of love that they often mention the call to the consecrated life.

Respect for the liturgy that Don Bosco speaks of is the ambience in which they will encounter Christ. Being charmed by the mystery of the celebration can spark in them the call. At least in the past, from the ranks of altar boys many vocations sprung up.

Finally, we saw how Don Bosco insisted on familiarity, because he drew the youngster to trusting him so he could talk about his vocation and the privileged place to do this is in the Sacrament of Confession.

Being familiar with youth is an opportunity not to be missed, to witness to them the joy and beauty of a vocation to the priesthood or the consecrated life. I think it is this witness that youngsters need in order to have the courage to say "yes" to God, giving themselves totally to Him through the hands of Mary.

## 31. A Dream: A Prophecy of Hope

At the conclusion of these reflections on vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life it is comforting to recall a dream that Don Bosco had perhaps at Lanzo, in 1877, about the founding of a new Salesian presence in at French Navarre.

It was an invitation to take up an agricultural colony called “St Joseph” meant to look after orphans. Don Bosco seemed averse to the idea considering the difficulties involved in taking care of boys of that type, but after this dream he accepted the property, the farm and the farm house that were offered. To understand why Don Bosco changed his mind, we must carefully examine his dream especially with the presence of Mary in the guise of a peasant, a figure that could resemble the shepherdess of the dream he had at the age of nine. An interesting group of youngsters and clerics were gathered beneath her veil and the boy of the dream, Michel Blain was a soloist in the choir whom Don Bosco met and recognized after his trip to France.

The boy was called Michel, he was born at Toulon. He lost his father and his mother on the same day that the house of “St Joseph” opened, July 8<sup>th</sup> 1878.

A Carmelite maternal aunt directed him to the Salesians at Navarre. They received him on October 16, 1878. He had a good voice and a good ear and learned to sing. He became a Salesian.

Here are some passages of the dream recounted by Don Bosco (cf MB 13,534ss; 14,423).

*“I dreamt that I saw an area which did not resemble the open meadowlands outside Turin. A small rustic cottage facing a*



*small threshing yard seemed to beckon me to its shelter. It was a bare cottage, like that of peasants, and the room in which I stood had doors open into several other rooms both above and below its level. All around I saw racks for farm tools, but no people. I looked through the rooms, but they were all empty. The house was totally deserted. Then, hearing the voice of a small boy singing loud and clear, I stepped outside and saw a lad, ten or twelve years old, sturdily built, dressed like a farmhand. He was standing erect and motionless, staring at me. Beside him stood a peasant woman neatly dressed. The youngster was singing in French: "Ami respectable, Soyez notre père aimable" (Respectable friend, be our kind father.) "Come in, come in," I said from the doorway. "Who are you?" Still staring at me, the young lad repeated his song. "What do you wish from me?" I asked. The same song was his answer. "Please say something? Would you like a present, a medal perhaps, or money?" Ignoring my questions, the youngster looked about him and then started to sing another ditty: "Voilà mes compagnons qui diront ce que nous voulons." (Behold my companions who will tell you what we want) Instantly, a multitude of boys appeared from nowhere, heading toward me through the untilled fields. They sang in unison: "Notre père du chemin, Guidez nous dans le chemin, Guidez-nous au jardin, non au jardin des fleurs, mais au jardin des bonnes moeurs." (Father of the Way, guide us along the Way; lead us to the garden, not a flower garden, but the garden of good morals) "But who are you all?" I asked in astonishment, as I got close to them. The same lad again replied in a ditty: "Notre Patrie c'est le pays de Marie." (Our country is the land of Mary) "I don't understand!" I said. "What are you doing here? What do you want from me?" They all chorused: "Nous nous attendons l'ami qui nous guide au Paradis."*

"That's fine!" I exclaimed. Do you want to come to my schools? You are too many, but we shall manage somehow. If you want to learn your catechism, I will teach you; if you want to come to confession, I am at your disposal. Or would

you like me train you in singing or teach you or give you a sermon?” Gracefully they again chorused: *Notre Patrie c’est le pays de Marie.*” (Our country is the land of Mary)

While listening, I asked myself: “Where am I? In Turin or in France? Just yesterday I was at the Oratory! How strange this is! I don’t understand! As I was immersed in these thoughts, the good woman took the youngster by the hand and pointing to a further, more spacious farmyard, told the crowd, *Venez avec moi* (Come with me), and led the way. All the boys who had clustered about me followed her. As I joined them, new groups of boys arrived carrying sickles, hoes and other farm tools and joined the crowd. Surely I was neither at the Oratory nor at Sampierdarena. I kept saying to myself: I can’t be dreaming because I am walking. If occasionally I slowed down, the throng surrounding me jostled me forward.

Meanwhile, I kept my eyes on the woman who was leading us and who aroused my keenest curiosity. Modestly dressed, she wore a red kerchief around her neck and a white blouse characteristic of young highlanders or shepherdesses, but I sensed an air of mystery about her, although her appearance was quite ordinary. Adjacent to the larger farmyard stood another rustic cottage, and not far from it was a very beautiful home.

When all the boys were gathered in the farmyard, the woman turned to me and said: “Look at those fields, this house! Look at these boys!”

*I looked. The boys were a multitude – well over a thousand times as many as at first appeared. “All these boys are yours!” the woman went on. “Mine?” I echoed. “By what right can you give them to me? They are neither yours nor mine. They belong to God!” “By what right?” the woman continued. “They are my children, and I entrust them to you.” “But how can I look after so many energetic youngsters? Don’t you see how wildly they chase each other through the fields, leap over ditches, and climb trees? Look at those boys fighting. How can I keep order and*

*discipline alone?” “Shall I tell you?” she exclaimed. “Look!” Wheeling about, I saw a second huge crowd of boys surging forward. Over them the woman cast a broad veil, covering them entirely. I had no idea where she got it from. Some moments later she pulled it away, and all the boys had turned into priests and clerics. “Are these priests and clerics mine?” I asked the woman. “They will be if you train them!” she replied. “If you want to know more, come here.” She bade me draw closer to her. “Tell me, my dear lady,” I asked, “What place is this? Where am I?” She did not reply but motioned to the first crowd of boys to gather about her. They came running and she cried out: Attention, garçons, silence. Ouvriers, chantez tous ensemble.” (Attention, boys, silence, sing all together you workers) At her signal, the boys broke into a vigorous chorus: Gloria, honor, gratiarum actio Domino Deo Sabaoth” (Glory, honour and thanks to the Lord God of hosts) Their singing was full of harmony, voices ranging from the lowest to the highest register, the lowest notes apparently rising up from the ground and the soprano voices blending into the highest heavens. Their hymn ended with a resounding: “Ainsi soit-il” (amen) Then I woke up.”*

Fr Lemoyne, who first visited the place that was being offered to Don Bosco, without knowing it, described it to the saint as he had seen it in a dream gave him a welcome surprise. But there was a bigger surprise awaiting Don Bosco himself when he went there on his second visit. As he was strolling across the property, the boys, headed by one who was holding a bouquet of flowers, ran ahead to meet him. When he was but a few steps from the boy, Don Bosco blanched, so strong was his emotion, for the boy’s build and features fitted the dream exactly. He was Mickey Blain, who became a Salesian and was at this date (1932) residing in our school at Nice. That same evening an assembly was held in Don Bosco’s honour. As the choir accompanied Blain’s solo, Don Bosco pointed him out to Father Perrot, the director, and said: “That boy looks like the boy of my dream.”

Father Ceria giving us this piece of information added: “Don Bosco’s dreams often carry prophetic overtones, but one must be cautious of hasty interpretations since often enough predictions may be fulfilled only after a long time. What is a commentator to say if prophets themselves do not always grasp the significance of their own prophecies? Until a few years ago an enigma overshadowed the second group of boys who in the dream were not carrying farm tools and were transformed into priests and clerics. Attempts were made to solve it, one interpretation being that Don Bosco foresaw priestly vocations rising from the pupils of the agricultural school. This explanation, however, was unsatisfactory as being too vague to explain the clear-cut symbolism of the tableau. But when, totally ignorant of the dream, the decision was made to open a house at Navarre for the Sons of Mary, later also a novitiate – the true meaning of that prophecy began to show itself (cf EBM 13,413-417).

We hope that going beyond this first interpretation of the dream of Don Bosco, new times will come and new vocations to the priesthood and the religious life will fill our seminaries and novitiates as youngsters accept the call of Jesus to pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest, and we will entrust this hope of ours to the powerful intercession of Mary.

In concluding the apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, John Paul II wrote: “Every aspect of priestly formation can be referred to Mary, the human being who has responded better than any other to God’s call. Mary became both the servant and the disciple of the Word to the point of conceiving in her heart and in her flesh, the Word made man, so as to give him to mankind. Mary was called to educate the one Eternal Priest, who became docile and subject to her motherly authority. With her example and intercession, the Blessed Virgin keeps vigilant watch over the growth of vocations and priestly life in the Church.” (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 82)

So far the prophecy... and now the hope...

It is beautiful to think that Don Bosco himself gave so many youngsters the joy of being priests totally dedicated to the education of young people, of being one day his voice, as he did one day when a reckless little youngster ruined his voice and almost ruined his chance to be a soloist in the choir. I think it's a nice way to end this book with the memory of this singer and the story of his vocation.

### **He sang with Don Bosco's Voice**

This is the story of the vocation of Natalino Bruasca, the fifteen-year-old chorister who sang ... "with Don Bosco's voice."

"In May 1879, Mother Mazzarello, wishing to celebrate the feast of Mary Help of Christians with great solemnity asked Don Bosco to send the Oratory choir to participate in the festivities. Natalino, Don Bosco's soloist was to be the star. But, the boys, who had never travelled by train, were so excited that during the journey due to some carelessness Natalino inadvertently became hoarse.

*At the Gloria of the Mass when the unwary soloist opened his mouth, instead of the usual melodious singing there came out a horrible bellowing sound. Disheartened by this unimaginable disaster, after Mass Natalino disappeared and was not seen again even at lunch. Needless to say they tried looking for him all over the house. It took a mother's intuition for Mother Mazzarello to find him in a ditch in the vineyard, still sobbing and it took her powers of persuasion to bring him to the community where Don Bosco gave him lunch and assured him: "Forget it... This evening you'll see, you'll see!"*

*After vespers, during which Don Bosco preached a wonderful eulogy on the Madonna, this was followed by the solemn Tantum Ergo with a solo for the soprano that was to be executed by poor Bruasca who was still unsure of himself. But what a surprise it was when the expectant silence was broken by his*

*clear and relaxed voice which sounded as never before so he could not hold back his tears of surprise and emotion.*

However, at this point, Don Bosco had to sing the Oremus, but his voice was so bad and weak that he was hardly heard around the altar in the sanctuary.

After the service however, Don Bosco complimented Natalino: “Did you see? You saw? But now, since I have to give the Cooperators a conference, give me back my voice and you take back yours.” Immediately they were in possession of their own voices.

*Touched by such goodness, Natalino there and then decided to remain with Don Bosco and become a Salesian. He did not let a day pass without telling him: “Don Bosco, you lent me your voice and I gifted my life to you.” And so it was that two years later he made his religious profession, became a Salesian priest and worked until 1939 in the Congregation, maintaining his old enviable voice.”* (MB 14,408-15,863). The incident was also reported in the archives of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians by Sr. Eugenia Leardi, in the booklet *The Sanctuary Madonna Our Lady of Grace*, Nizza Monferrato, 2004.

We hope that Don Bosco, disturbed by the current shortage of vocations grants us those vocations glimpsed in those dreams he had for France. May he lend his voice again to many generous youngsters and teenagers ready to follow Jesus the Good Shepherd, thus perpetuating the extraordinary dream of the lambs becoming shepherds and shepherdesses called through the pages of this slim volume written with simplicity and with the sole aim of loving Don Bosco ever more and reviving in ourselves a greater zeal in our service of drawing vocations to the Salesian Congregation and the Church.

**G**od calls some young people to become priests or religious, i.e., to spend our lives renouncing the formation of a family of their own to give themselves to all people, especially those most in need. Among them the priest take the place of Christ and does what Jesus did: he speaks of God the Father, brings his forgiveness, helps men and women to give up selfishness and sin in order to live in the joy of his grace. This “special call” of God is addressed to some and it is called the “vocation to the priesthood or consecrated life.”

The reflections on this vocation found in this book, are addressed to priests and teachers. They are intended to be a small contribution to the important issue of a lack of vocations, the world over.

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