

GIANNI ASTI



DON BOSCO
THE CONFESSOR
OF HIS BOYS

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DEDICATION

*This book containing
Don Bosco's advice
to his young penitents
is gratefully dedicated
to Salesian Confessors
and all the youngsters
whose lives they touch
through the Sacrament
of Reconciliation.*

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Foreward

In his own meticulous style, Fr. Gianni has been offering readers of *Il Tempio di Don Bosco*, month after month, edifying stories of Don Bosco. In spite of his many and varied commitments Don Bosco found the time and the energy to hear confessions. He recognized it was an effective means for the human and Christian growth of a youngster.

For that reason alone, this unique collection of stories (for an extended reading) reveals a moving picture of the compassion, tenderness and pastoral wisdom with which Don Bosco was able to restore such peace to the souls of his youngsters that their faces beamed with truly visible joy.

The author, who is a confessor and a spiritual director to youngsters, has gathered these moving and unusual stories gleaned from *the Biographical Memoirs* and from the testimonies of those mentioned within these pages. He has certainly tried to fathom the pastoral heart of Don Bosco and the reason why he spent so much time in the confessional. It was there that Don Bosco assured his boys of the inestimable gift of God's Grace and the destructive action of sin that robbed the soul of its exuberant radiance. He was spurred on by an irresistible affection for his young charges because he wanted them to be happy here and in eternity.

This collection of incidents will be good for priests too. Because of the pastoral dimension of their vocation, they will be spurred on like Don Bosco to give their time and energy to celebrate the sacrament of Confession. It will also benefit youngsters who are often confused by so many illu-

sions. They will find in this little book some secrets to bring them joy and peace of soul as they begin to cherish the efficacy of the sacrament of Confession in the same way that the boys of Don Bosco did.

FR. EMILIO ZENI

INTRODUCTION

I remember youngsters, every summer coming to spend a day at *Colle Don Bosco*. They get down on their knees at one of the priests present there to make their Confession. They have a nice way of beginning their Confession. They would say: "I am here to confess to Don Bosco."

So many youngsters, teenagers, young adults and visitors regularly come to the *Colle* as pilgrims not only take the opportunity to make their Confession but also to profit from the experience.

For them it is a little like meeting Don Bosco, that great apostle of Confession, compared only to that paragon of the Sacrament – the holy *Curé of Ars - St. John Marie Vianney*.

The great esteem that Don Bosco had for the Sacrament of Confession is demonstrated by the fact that he made it one of the pillars of his educative system. In his *Life of Dominic Savio* he writes: "*Experience proves without question that the greatest source of spiritual help lies in the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion. Youngsters, who receive these sacraments frequently, grow up maturely up to the end of their lives, always models of Christian virtue.*"

Don Bosco not only exercised his ministry of hearing Confessions but he also developed an untiring zeal in guiding the faithful especially youngsters to appreciate this Sacrament even more.

We propose to continue this work of his by presenting

here what he told his boys about Confession and how he helped them to live well this extraordinary experience of the Mercy of God.

Above all he wanted to help his boys encounter Jesus that Good Shepherd who had appeared to him in his dream at the age of 9 years. Therefore through his ministry in the Confessional he manifested that extreme tenderness and spiritual fatherhood that he imbibed from his constant union with God.

In particular, in the three biographies of Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco, Don Bosco devoted almost identical pages to the Sacrament of Confession.

This meant that the advice contained in those pages is important and they take into account the particular difficulties that teenagers face in approaching and appreciating this Sacrament. Even while writing for his boys, Don Bosco also had in mind his priests. He encouraged them to warmly welcome penitents especially of this age group for whom they should reserve their most tender attention.

Some boys who went to Don Bosco for their Confession grew up to become famous while others remained perhaps, unknown.

Through each encounter and through each boy, Don Bosco has something to teach even us.

G.A.

Dominic Savio confesses to Don Bosco

The Confessor, the youngster's real spiritual guide

He's a very well known youngster. In *The Life of Dominic Savio* that was published in the columns of the *Catholic Readings*, Don Bosco spoke frequently about the sacraments of Confession and Communion: "Before he came to the Oratory, Dominic had been going to Confession and Communion once a month, as was customary in most schools, but here he went more often. One day he heard a sermon in which the preacher said: 'Boys, if you wish to persevere on the path that leads to heaven, I advise you to go often to Confession and Holy Communion. Choose a confessor to whom you can unburden yourselves freely, and never change him unless it becomes necessary to do so.' Dominic well understood the importance of this advice."

Don Bosco insisted that youngsters frequently approach the Sacrament of Confession because he knew that youngsters are often quite erratic. They get so thrilled by some spiritual experiences but then they are also easily discouraged by the weakness of their wills. That is why they need to be reminded about their resolutions and helped to overcome these shortcomings.

He stresses the importance of choosing a confessor who will become their spiritual guide, their physician and the friend of their souls. He is the one who will help them to discern their God-given and the plan that he has for each of them.

For this reason it is necessary that the confessor knows every youngster's spiritual journey, the problems that he encounters and the signs that the Lord is giving each one of them about their future vocation.

Here is some advice on a general Confession. When writing about Dominic Savio: *"He began by choosing for himself a confessor to whom he would go during his entire stay at the Oratory. In order that this priest should know him thoroughly, he insisted on making a general confession. At first he went to Confession every fortnight, then once a week, receiving Holy Communion with equal frequency."*

For the youngster, a general Confession is very difficult. The hardest thing for him to do is to bare his soul to someone. He jealously guards his secrets and does not wish to express his sins because he is afraid that if he does so, he will fall in the esteem of his priest friend who will then become aware of his weakness. At the same time he is ashamed that he is a slave of sin and he does not quite know how to rid himself of this habit.

It is this confidence that the Saintly Educator insists on so much because he knows how difficult it is to earn it from youngsters. He always found this confidence manifested in the life of Dominic Savio and so he wrote: *"Dominic placed unlimited confidence in his confessor, and would often speak to him matters concerning his soul even outside the confessional."*

In recalling the confidence of Dominic, Don Bosco perhaps recalled the time when he himself was a fourteen-year-old with such confidence in Fr. Calosso. In his *Memoirs of the Oratory* this was what he wrote of his first spiritual director: *"I put myself completely into Fr. Calosso's hands... I bared my soul to him. I revealed to him promptly every word, thought and act and this pleased him because it made it possible for him to influence both my spiritual and temporal welfare. It was then that I came to realise what it was to have a regular spiritual director, a faithful friend of*

one's soul. I had not had one up till then."

Don Bosco remembered Dominic's fidelity to his advice: *"Nothing would induce him to change his confessor. 'The confessor,' he would say, 'is the doctor of the soul. There are only two reasons why people change their doctors; either they have lost confidence in them, or else they are gravely ill. Neither of these is my case. I have every confidence in my confessor, who has a fatherly care for me; and I do not think there is any ailment in my soul which he cannot cure.' But there were occasions when his confessor advised him to go to other priests at such times as during retreats, and Dominic obeyed. Dominic was very pleased with this state of things. 'When I am at all worried and upset' he would say, 'I go to my confessor, who shows me what is God's will; for Jesus Himself assures me that the confessor speaks with the Voice of God. With such thoughts as these Dominic remained truly happy. It was the source of his cheerfulness, of the heavenly joy that radiated from his aspect at all times."* (Taken from the *Life of Dominic Savio* by Don Bosco)

The peace and joy that Dominic experienced are the same sentiments that youngsters experience when they find in a priest a spiritual guide who introduces him to a friendship with God.

The surest means to happiness

Don Bosco's conclusion to the life of Dominic Savio is so wonderful. It is as if he has a suggestion for each of us regarding our fidelity to the Sacrament of Confession: *"Let us often and fervently make use of this means of salvation. But each time that we go to Confession, let us not fail to glance at our preceding ones, to see if they have been well made. If we find that there has been some mistake, let us hasten to repair it. I think that it is the only real way of living contentedly amidst the difficulties of this life and to view the approach of death with serenity. Then with joyful faces and peace in our hearts we shall meet our Saviour Jesus Christ*

who will judge us in His great mercy and lead us all from the sorrows of this life into everlasting happiness, where we shall praise God and bless Him for all eternity. Amen."

That glance into our past confessions that Don Bosco mentions, introduces us to the reflections in the following pages in which he wrote about Confession in the life of Michael Magone.

Michael Magone *confesses* *to Don Bosco*

A Real Treatise on Confession

PART ONE

*How to overcome one's shame
while confessing one's sins
and to avoid insincere Confessions*

In writing the life of Michael Magone, Don Bosco wrote a veritable essay on Confession and in particular about his first Confession at Valdocco. This poor thirteen-year-old, whose father had died, lived on the streets. He was destined to delinquency and sadly he had experience of prison too. Don Bosco met him on a foggy autumn evening at the train station of Carmagnola. Beneath that gruff exterior, Don Bosco realized that Michael, the little ring leader, had a good heart, so he invited him to Turin, to the Oratory at Valdocco.

Don Bosco's pedagogical expertise offered Michael the experience of God and His love; drawing him away from his passion for games, he steered him towards a joyful heart which was the fruit of grace. Michael, that street ruffian, would perform his duties of study and assist his companions in preparation for that great ideal that he felt in his heart - of becoming a priest.

Recalling his life, Don Bosco writes: *"Mickey pulled along for about a month. Each duty only served him to have a grand time. He was content as long as he could skip about in the open and be happy. He had not as yet reflected that true joy comes from peace in*

one's heart and from a clean conscience. But one day, suddenly, that frenzied craving for amusement began to decrease. He became gloomy and pensive and joined in the games only if invited."

A Guardian Angel For A Companion

In this context, Don Bosco underlines the fact that he assigned to his better boys, the role of making them collaborators with him in winning the souls of their companions for God.

Even in the case of Michael, it was a young "guardian angel" who prepared him for his Confession and his subsequent encounters with Don Bosco. In fact, the boy realized that Michael was overcome by melancholy because he saw his companions praying and eagerly approaching the Sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion while he was unable to do the same and for which reason he felt remorse and shame when he recalled the sins he had committed in the years gone by when he indulged in idleness and boasting while he was in the company of his friends. At just the appropriate moment his friend gave him a very decisive suggestion:

"Oh it's very easy. Go to the confessor; open your heart with that 'awkward mess' to him - as you call it. He will give you some good advice and you will come back happy. When we have some trouble we always do that and, that is why we are always happy."

"That is all very well to say, but it is not that easy..." said Mickey with another burst of sorrow choking him.

The watchful eye of Don Bosco sensed Michael's crisis so he gently approached him with great paternal tenderness, ready to gain this youngster's confidence. How many priests and educators are as attentive and sensitive towards youngsters, aware of their difficulties and their sufferings and approach them at the right moment, getting to know their hearts?

"Well Mickey, I want you to do me a favour, but I wouldn't like you to say 'no.'"

"OK just say it!" the boy replied at once; happy to be

able to do something and that too for Don Bosco. "I am ready, to do anything you want, father."

"I would like you to let me enter your little heart just for a moment. I want to see what is it that causes you this great sadness that has been troubling you these last few days."

"Yes, Father, you are right. But I... well, I feel so hopeless and I don't know what to do..." and he began to cry again.

Don Bosco let the boy give vent to his feelings for a little while. Then he resumed in a joking tone:

"Oh, my, is it possible? This is 'General Mickey,' the leader of the army of Carmagnola! There you were ordering everyone about and now you can't even tell me what's in your heart!"

"Yes, I would like to tell you but I don't know how to start. I can't find the words to tell it all..."

"Very well, my boy, you have only to tell me one word and I shall tell you the rest."

"Father, I have a guilty conscience. It is just that..."

"Well, that is sufficient for me. I have understood it all, my dear boy. But it was necessary that you yourself should tell me that word so that I would be able to tell you the rest. For the present, I don't want to enter into the affairs of your conscience. Let me give you a piece of advice to help you to know how to go about it. Think about it. In the past were you able to sort out the matters of your conscience? Now, prepare yourself for a good confession mentioning the last time that you made your last confession. If, either through fear or for any other reason you have kept silent about anything from the time of your first confession you should make a general confession and tell the priest everything that troubles your conscience."

Ashamed To Confess Some Sins

Notice the fatherly tenderness with which Don Bosco invited Michael to confess the sins of his past life, those he had withheld or those he had never confessed. While concentrating on Michael he also thought of the other young-

sters who would read those pages and who seemed to be in the same situation as Michael - prevented by shame they did not confess certain sins because they feared that they would fall in the esteem of the confessor or they were unable to find the appropriate words to use when confessing their sins.

Don Bosco admitted one day that there were some youngsters who always kept silent about their sins and they persisted in that way for months and even years until they found that they were adults. It is also important for a confessor to offer youngsters an opportunity open their hearts to him:

"But that is just my difficulty, Father. How am I to remember all that has happened to me in so many years of wretched living?" Michael asked

"Don't let that worry you, my boy. You can set it all in order with the greatest ease." Don Bosco assured him.

"Tell the Confessor something that you remember in your past life and he will get the trend. Then all you need to say is a 'yes' or a 'no' and how many times it has occurred. You will see how easy that is."

The Temptation to Defer One's Confession

Magone spent that day preparing himself by making an examination of conscience, but there was so much weighing on his heart that needed to be set right, that in the evening he resolved not to go to bed before making his Confession.

"The Lord," he confided to a friend, "has waited for me for such a long time that is true and I do not know if he will wait for me until tomorrow."

Don Bosco wrote down that reflection of Michael because he knew that youngsters tended to postpone their Confession especially when a certain sin weighed heavily on their consciences.

"So, if I can make my Confession this evening, I will not delay it any longer. Besides I really want to break off with the devil at once."

That very evening he courageously presented himself to Don Bosco and made his Confession. He laid down the burden of his sins and faults at the feet of his friend and spiritual father during which time he was occasionally overcome by a deep emotion to the point of tears.

He wanted yet another assurance as to how he would end and so he asked:

"Do you think that all my sins are pardoned? If I were to die tonight, would I be saved?"

"Be at ease, my boy," Don Bosco reassured him. "The Lord in His goodness has waited for you all this time in order to give you a chance to make this Confession. He has certainly pardoned you for everything – and if He should wish to call you this very night into eternity, you will be saved."

"I am so happy, Father!" The boy exclaimed amidst tears of joy. He felt so light and happy as he then went to bed."

PART TWO

The Confessor and Spiritual Fatherhood The Joy of Forgiveness

After that memorable Confession, Michael described his emotions. They were similar one who has experienced the mercy and love of God and at the same time a sense of liberation from the slavery of the past and the shame that had weighed heavily on him. Don Bosco recalls:

"That night was a night of great restlessness and emotion. He later told his friends what went on in his mind during that night.

"It is not easy," he wrote, "to express all the thoughts and feelings that crowded into my poor mind and heart on that memorable night. It was past midnight. My heart was full to overflowing with emotions of joy and rapture. As I could not sleep any more I got up and kneeling by my bedside I thanked the Lord again. I also reflected: how unhappy are those who fall into sin, but how much

unhappier are those who remain and live in it without reflecting on their sorry state. I believe that if these people could but taste, even for a short while the great consolation that one has of being in the grace of God, they would at once go and confess their sins to make peace with our offended Saviour in order to rid their consciences of remorse and to enjoy thus true peace of soul. For the future, my dear Lord, I do not wish to offend you any more. I wish to love you with all the powers of my soul... And if through my wretchedness I should fall again into some small sin, I promise to confess it at once!"

Don Bosco was careful to underline the liberating joy that many youngsters like Michael experienced after a beautiful Confession when they overcame their shame and sincerely confessed their sins.

“And so Michael commenced the new life of a little repentant soul. That marked the end of scraps, troubles and sadness.

He began to effectively use the sacraments of Confession and Communion. The practices of piety that heretofore were boring and almost annoying were now exciting and enjoyable. In fact, such was the joy that he experienced in going to Confession that he approached the sacraments very often and so his confessor was forced to moderate him to prevent him from becoming a victim of scruples.”

For youngsters who like Michael had experienced the same joy, it became easy to frequent Confession even fortnightly. It was a meeting they looked forward to - a meeting with someone who had won their confidence. They gladly had recourse to him if - because of the sensitivity of their age and the violence of their passions they committed some sin which they would have found it difficult to disclose to any other priest. Because they do not know him they ran the risk of withholding their sin and being insincere.

In these cases the availability of a confessor who welcomes

them and makes it possible for them to experience the mercy of God's forgiveness, it is commendable. However, the confessor needs to assist them in confessing well to any other priest in the event they are unable to approach their regular confessor.

A Spiritual Malady

In this connection, Don Bosco also addresses the subject of scruples as he mentioned in the life of Dominic Savio. This serious malady does not only torment youngsters but adults too. The remedy is certainly not more frequent, but regular confession and a prompt obedience to the advice of one's confessor: *"This malady very easily makes its way into the souls of youngsters when they want to give themselves to the service of the Lord. The damage is serious, because the devil confuses the mind and disturbs the heart, making it difficult for the youngster to practice his faith and consequently leads him to return to a life of sin after he has progressed some fair distance along the path of virtue. The easiest means to free oneself from such a disaster is to surrender oneself in utter obedience to one's confessor. When he says something is wrong every effort should be made to avoid it. Does he say that this or that is not wrong? Follow his suggestion and go ahead cheerfully and with peace and joy in your heart. In short, obedience to one's confessor is the most effective means to free oneself from scruples and to persevere in the grace of God."*

The Confessor is a Father and a Friend

The reflections on Michael offered Don Bosco the opportunity to introduce the confessor as a youngster's friend and father.

A teenager confided to his confessor: "You are my father on the spiritual level; it is to you only that I can confide the secrets of my life, those things that I would not be able to tell even my parents."

The joy of this spiritual paternity shines out in the expressions that Don Bosco uses when writing to his young readers: *"The restlessness and anxiety of the young Magone on*

the one hand and the frank and resolute manner in which he took care of the affairs of his soul on the other, give me occasion to suggest to you, my dear youngsters, some reflections that I believe should be very useful for your souls. Be assured of my sincere affection for you and the earnest desire for your eternal salvation. The first thing that I recommend to you is to do all you can to avoid falling into sin; but if you do have the misfortune to commit one, never let the evil one allow you to keep silent about it in Confession. Know that the confessor has the power to forgive every kind and whatever the number of your sins. The more serious the sins that are confessed the greater the joy of heart you will experience, the greater the Divine Mercy that is offered to you through the merits of the precious blood of Jesus Christ with which your soul has been washed of all it's stains.. My dear youngsters remember that the confessor is a father who desires only your good and looks for ways to keep you far from every kind of evil."

Don Bosco returns to the difficulty youngsters have in being sincere in Confession and he takes the occasion to remind them of the secrecy that confessors are bound by.

A Secret More Valuable than Life Itself

"Do not be afraid that you will lose his good graces because you confess to him some serious sin or that you fear the fact that he will disclose it to others. The confessor cannot use any of the matter that he hears in Confession for any profit or gain in the world. He will rather lose his own life but he will not say anything of what he has heard in confession. Rather, I assure you that the greater confidence and sincerity you have in him, the greater will your confidence increase and he will be able to give you more and more valuable advice for the good of your soul. I wanted to tell you these things so that you may never allow the devil to deceive you and convince you to keep silent out of shame for some sin at your Confession. I assure you my dear sons, that as I write to you my hand trembles just thinking of the large number of Christians who go to their eternal damnation only because they have kept silent or have not sincerely confessed certain sins in Confession!"

PART THREE

What Confessors and Youngsters Ought To Know

Seeing Michael Magone's joy after that Confession - the one that changed his life - urged Don Bosco to suggest to youngsters ways and means to prevent them from making bad Confessions. He did this by very discreetly using his spiritual fatherliness to express his anxiety for the salvation and the eternal happiness of his youngsters.

A Word to Youngsters

"If ever anyone of you goes through life and comes to realize that there is some sin that he has willfully withheld, or that he doubts the validity of one of his Confessions, I would like to tell him: "My dear friend, for the love of Jesus Christ, and for the precious blood that he shed for the salvation of your soul, I pray you, settle the affairs of your conscience at the first opportunity you find to make your Confession. Sincerely reveal all that weighs on you as if you were at death's door. If you do not know how to express yourself, just tell your confessor anything that weighs on you from your past life. The confessor knows enough. Take to heart what he tells you and be assured that everything will have been settled."

If a youngster finds a priest who is so attentive as to welcome him in such a way as to win his confidence that he feels urged to sincerely confess his sins, he will more easily fight against temptations that so violently torment him at awareness of inconstancy, idleness and vulnerability of boys at that age. We should also be able to repeat his words with conviction: *"Go frequently and seek out your confessor, pray for him and follow his advice. When you have chosen a confessor whom you feel knows the needs of your soul don't change him without necessity. So long as you do not have a stable confessor in whom you can confide the matters of your soul you are missing a friend. Trust also in the prayers that the confessor prays for his penitents at Holy Mass so that God grants you the grace of making a good Confession and that you may persevere in doing good, you ought to pray for him too."*

Nowadays we wonder how easily we forget the shortcomings of youngsters, suggesting that they approach the sacrament of reconciliation just twice or thrice a year and we hardly insist on the fact that they choose a regular confessor and a spiritual director.

It is true that there are very few priests available for this ministry and even fewer have time to dedicate themselves to this service – yet this is the secret of assisting youngsters on the choice of their vocation either in their preparation for life or their choice of a special consecration.

While Don Bosco recommends the choice of a regular confessor, he desires in this regard, owing to the delicate nature of a youngster's conscience that he be offered the maximum freedom to approach a confessor of his choice: *“Do not hesitate to change your confessor should he be transferred or should it cause you serious inconvenience in approaching him or that he is ill or you are on the eve of a solemn feast and there is a long queue for the same priest. Equally, if there is anything on your conscience that you would not dare manifest to your regular confessor, then, rather than make a sacrilegious Confession, change your confessor not once but even a thousand times.”*

We should be aware that already from the time of one's first Confession, when there are several confessors available and it is wise to give youngsters the freedom to go to the confessor who inspires their confidence and who is to their liking rather than force them to approach a confessor who is free at that time. The more sensitive youngster has already made his choice of the priest to whom he will open his heart.

The spiritual welfare of his youngsters urged Don Bosco to make some suggestions to confessors. While knowing that boys - reading these directives - will feel reassured by the person and the goodness of the priest who welcomes them, they will not be put off by the questions that he may ask them.

To Confessors

“If ever this letter is read by those who are destined by Divine Providence to hear the Confessions of youngsters, I would like to, after omitting several things, humbly suggest:

1. Tenderly welcome any kind of penitent, but especially youngsters. Help them to reveal to you matters of their conscience. Insist that they make their Confession frequently. This is the surest way to keep them away from sin. Use every means at your disposal to offer them suggestions that would help them prevent relapses. Correct them with kindness, but never scold them. If you scold them they will never come looking for you again or they will keep silent about certain sins so as to avoid another reproach.

2. When you have gained their confidence, cautiously investigate whether their past confessions have been well made. This needs to be done because famous authors in ethics and ascetics and those with some authority and great experience agree in stating that the first Confessions of youngsters, if not void, are essentially at least defective due to a lack of education or because they have voluntarily withheld some sins.

Invite the youngster to reflect well on the state of his conscience particularly from the age of seven to ten or twelve years. At that age he is already aware that certain things are seriously wrong but others are not so serious and so he does not confess them.

The confessor should use great prudence and reserve, but he should not omit asking some questions pertaining to the holy virtue of purity. You could say much about this subject but if you remain silent because you wish to be in control of things you would be a poor follower of Christ.

I have written these notes which I deem, in the Lord, to be useful for the souls of youngsters and for their sakes I consecrate all the time that it pleases the Lord to grant me in this world.”

Because of his profound experience with youngsters, Don Bosco desired that they be welcomed kindly, treated with

tenderness and helped to confess their sins, even though they might initially be satisfied with incomplete Confessions.

This doesn't minimize the gravity as some priests in our day surmise, concerning the moral responsibility of certain lapses, as even a boy of seven, eight or nine may perceive as something serious. Difficulties in the area of chastity must not be underestimated but youngsters need to be helped to speak about this area openly and with confidence because this is an area of importance when educating them to love. We have surely met some youngsters who have not approached the sacrament of Confession because a priest scolded them or indiscreetly asked them some embarrassing questions. Unfortunately this has been the sad experience of some adults too.

We shall return to this subject of Confession as we introduce the Confession of the third boy - Francis Besucco.

We shall leave Michael Magone recalling the touching scene at his deathbed. Don Bosco was near his bedside and said:

"Mickey, have you any message for your companions?"

"Yes, Father! Tell them to take care to make their Confessions well."

He tightened his grip on the crucifix and kissed it three times and these were his last words:

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph I place my soul in your hands."

Then he parted his lips as if to smile and gently sank back and quietly expired."

Michael had only just turned fourteen. Many boys would be inspired by his example.

Francis Besucco

confesses

to Don Bosco

*The importance of making a general confession
and the necessity of having a regular confessor*

Francis was called “the little shepherd boy of the Alps.” He was thirteen years old when he left his beautiful village of Argentera, 1600 metres above sea level, in the district of Cuneo, with his father who accompanied him to Turin.

On reading the life of Michael Magone he felt compelled to meet Don Bosco and request him for help with his studies. He was a very sincere and diligent student; an average boy, not exceptionally bright but very determined.

He spent a brief five months at Valdocco before he was ready for heaven. Because of his good nature he was inclined to have a deep God-experience thanks to the religious upbringing he imbibed from his family and the religious education he received from his parish priest who was also his godfather.

The Importance of a General Confession

Francis introduced himself to Don Bosco and immediately expressed his desire to place himself in his hands by asking to make a general Confession. He was not like Michael Magone who was tormented by shame and guilt of the past. He demonstrated a growing relationship with Jesus. That was how Don Bosco wanted his boys to make their Confessions.

In speaking of Francis, Don Bosco took the opportunity to recall the important qualities of this teenager's spiritual life. Some of these are highlighted for our benefit today. In the biography of Francis Don Bosco wrote: *Besucco cultivated the habit of frequenting the Sacraments of Confession and Communion. When he reached the Oratory his fervour and his good will only increased.*

At the beginning of the Novena in preparation for the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary (8 September) he went to the rector and said: "I would like to make a good novena and among other things I would like to make my general Confession."

The rector, who understood why he wanted to make a general confession replied: "You can be at peace especially since you have just made your Confession to your parish priest."

"Yes," he replied, "I already made it on the occasion of my First Holy Communion and then when there was a mission in my village. But since I want to place my soul into your hands, I wish to reveal to you the state of my conscience so that you will be able to know me better and give me some sound advice for the benefit of my soul."

The rector agreed. He praised him for the decision that he wanted a stable confessor. He exhorted him to respect his Confessor, to pray for him and to always reveal to him anything that disturbed his conscience. After that he helped him to make his desired general Confession.

He made his Confession with moving emotions of sorrow for the past and a firm resolution for the future although anyone who knew him would vouch that even at the cost of losing his life he had never committed a mortal sin."

Francis' insistence on making a general Confession leads us to emphasize the value of this type of a Confession especially for those youngsters who are seeking a reliable guide for their consciences and who wish to take their spiritual life seriously.

When speaking to the rectors of his houses in 1876 this is what Don Bosco said: *"Let me mention another matter which I consider extremely important in order to get our boys started on the right path. My long experience has convinced me that unfortunately the boys admitted to our schools need to make a general Confession, or would at least benefit immensely from it. You may prepare a boy for it in this way:*

"Have you made a general Confession yet?"

"No."

"Would you like to choose a day for it? Just think for a moment and tell me in all sincerity: Do you think you have nothing to settle with Our Lord if you were to die tonight? Would you feel perfectly safe on that score?"

"No."

"Well then, when would you like to make your Confession?"

"Whenever you say."

"In that case I urge you to do so when you are ready to tell me absolutely everything."

Then even when he comes around for Confession, ask him, "Are you really ready to open your heart and tell me all everything, no matter what? Or is there something you prefer not to say?" From his answers you will know what action to take.

It may seem an exaggeration, but believe me: my opinion is that perhaps half of the boys accepted in our schools need a general Confession. (EBM 12: 72-73)

For Don Bosco, a general Confession was a necessary prerequisite for effective educative work especially since grace and sanctity were indispensable at the inception fruitful spiritual direction. When speaking to his boys he referred to Pythagoras who insisted that his disciples give him a detailed account of their lives. He went on: *I give you the same advice, my sons. Some people think that to start a new life it is enough to open one's heart to a spiritual director and make a general Confession. That is fine, but it is not enough... Besides remedying the past, we must also provide for the future with a firm resolution... To make steady progress you must reveal your ha-*

bitual failings, the occasions which usually lead you into sin and your dominant evil inclinations. You must attentively and faithfully carry out the advice you are given; keep your heart open and fully trusting; you must manifest your needs, temptations, and dangers as they rise so that your director may guide you with a steady hand. (BM VII, 720)

Therefore the general Confession is advisable for youngsters who wish to take their spiritual lives seriously under the guidance of a chosen confessor. In certain cases, it is also recommended for those intending to follow a particular vocation, those on the verge of undertaking the sacrament of Matrimony, Holy Orders, the Diaconate, on the eve of their Religious Profession, or when they have reached an important stage in their lives or maybe at its conclusion as Francis had requested just a few days before he died.

The Necessity of Having a Regular Confessor

Don Bosco went on: *Having chosen a confessor, he did not change him at all so long as the Lord kept him with us. He had full confidence in him, consulted him outside Confession, prayed for him and rejoiced whenever he received some good advice from him to guide his life.*

A friend once wrote him a letter in which he expressed his desire to come to the Oratory also. He advised o him to pray to God about this and suggested some practical prayers such as the Way of the Cross, but most of all, he urged him to make his Confession every week and receive Communion several times a week.

While I highly praise Besucco for this, I most heartily urge everyone, especially youngsters, not to put off choosing a regular confessor and not to change him unnecessarily. Always going to different confessors, as some do, is an error; similarly, it is unwise to have one confessor for certain sins and another for more serious ones. Those who do so are within their rights, but they will never have a sure and informed guide. Would one go to a different doctor each time he is sick? A new doctor could hardly diagnose his illness

and prescribe a proper remedy.

Don Bosco often spoke of the habit of some teenagers and perhaps even of several adults who spent time making the rounds of churches and shrines searching for a confessor who did not know them. When this becomes a habit, it can become a sign of one's attachment to sin and a weakness of one's will to seek the help of a spiritual director who knows their faults and can suggest an effective remedy.

Note how Don Bosco, while recommending a regular confessor offers the penitent maximum freedom of choice.

He desired that students approach the sacraments regularly, even with great frequency, but with no pressure whatsoever. He urged them and encouraged them, but never forced them. When some desired he arranged for confessors from outside especially on vigils of feast days and feast days themselves.

We will return to the subject of the frequency of Confession when talking about other youngsters who made their Confession to Don Bosco.

As we take leave of Francis, we welcome the valuable suggestion that this teenager gave at the end of his life:

On the fifth day of his last illness he asked to receive the sacraments. He wanted to make a general Confession, which he was not denied, even though he had already made one some months earlier. However, he prepared for his last Confession fervently and with much emotion. After his confession appeared very happy ... that evening I asked him if he had a message for anyone. "Yes," he replied. "Tell everybody to pray for me so I need spend only a short time in purgatory."

"What shall I say to your companions?"

"Tell them to flee from scandal, and always to strive to make good confessions." (EBM 7: 358)

Don Bosco was close at hand while Francis was dying and he was impressed by the serenity with which he ended his earthly existence.

Francis Piccollo *confesses* *to Don Bosco*

*Confidence in the confessor facilitates
the sincerity of the young penitent*

It was at the beginning of August 1872 that Francis Piccolo, who was only eleven years old, came to the Oratory of Valdocco from Pecetto Torinese.

We know the story of the poor orphan boy and we also know the charity of Don Bosco when his mother came to visit him prompted by the straitened circumstances at home and the fact that she was unable to pay the fees which meant that the boy was to be dismissed. Francis saw his poor mother in tears. He was very sad to have to leave Valdocco. Don Bosco came to know of his economic difficulties and he condoned the fees for the rest of the year.

The boy was moved by the goodness and the generosity of Don Bosco. A few years later he told Don Bosco that he wished to give him a 'big gift' – to become a Salesian. Don Bosco gladly accepted his gift. Francis was sent to Sicily and there he imitated Don Bosco and was called "the father of the orphans of Sicily."

Francis regularly went to Don Bosco for his Confession. There was one Confession that was a little special as he himself recounted it. It was handed down by Fr. Seriè who reported it to Fr. Teresio Bosco who inserted into the beautiful new biography of Don Bosco.

The Magnanimity of Don Bosco and the Confidence of his Sons

"It was break time one day in August 1872. At the sound of the bell, an immense crowd of youngsters rushed into the courtyard for the afternoon snack.

The two young men from the bakery had set up enormous baskets full of fresh bread. "One each, no more!" they were shouting. 11 year old Francis Piccollo, recently arrived from Peccetto Torinese, was watching everything and waiting for his turn. He had had his fill of thick soup at lunch time, but that was four hours ago. What was one loaf compared to the hunger he felt? He needed at least two, he thought. But the Oratory was poor, and even bread had to be rationed in 1872.

He was mulling over these thoughts when he noticed that some of his friends, after having taken a loaf, would queue up again and take a second one and a third. He narrates the story himself:

I too allowed myself to be dominated by hunger. Soon I had two loaves, and ran to eat them greedily. But then I began to feel remorse.

"I've stolen," he thought. "How can I receive communion tomorrow? I must go to confession."

But my confessor was Don Bosco. I knew he would be pained to hear that I had stolen. What was I to do? Not so much out of shame, but because I didn't want to displease Don Bosco, I ran out of the Oratory to the Shrine of the Consolata.

I entered the dark church, selected a confessional and began.

"I've come to confess here, because I was ashamed of confessing to Don Bosco." (There was no need for me to say that, but I was accustomed to saying everything). A voice answered:

"Don't worry, go on. Don Bosco will never know a thing."

It was the voice of Don Bosco! Good heavens! I broke into a cold sweat. But if Don Bosco was at the Oratory, how could he be here? A miracle? No, no miracle at all. Don Bosco had been invited, as usual, to hear confessions at the Consolata, and it was my luck that I had bumped into him just when I wanted to avoid him.

"Tell me, my son. What has happened?"

I was shaking like a leaf, but managed to blurt out:

"I've stolen a loaf of bread."

"Are you feeling sick?"

"No."

"Then don't worry. You were hungry?"

"Yes."

"Hunger for bread and thirst for water are healthy feelings. Look, whenever you need something, ask Don Bosco. He will give you all the bread you want. And remember: Don Bosco prefers your trust to your innocence. If you have trust, he will be able to help you. With your feigned innocence, instead, you could slip and fall, and there might be no one to give you a helping hand. Don't forget, Francis, Don Bosco's wealth is the confidence that his boys place in him." (Teresio Bosco, Don Bosco, a New Biography, pg. 386, Tej Prasarini Publ., Mumbai, 2005)

The way Francis thought was common with many others his age and Don Bosco knew that. The youngster had a great esteem for his spiritual director and would not want to displease him by confessing to him some of his more serious sins. That was why he sought out an unfamiliar priest to whom he would confess these sins. In that way he would not lose an esteemed spiritual friend.

Absolute sincerity in Confession

Concerning this, Don Bosco would tell his youngsters: *Don't be afraid to tell your confessor your faults and weaknesses. Being good does not mean not having any faults, oh no! Unfortunately all of us commit faults. Being good means wanting to correct oneself... The confessor seeing his goodwill won't be surprised. In fact his greatest consolation in this world will be to see a youngster confide in him that he wishes to overcome the devil and remain in the grace of God and grow in virtue.*

My dear sons, nothing can take away this confidence; no shame or human misery who knows but there is some sense of misery. Do not go to confession to admit to something so

spectacular ... do not be afraid to tell the confessor some terrible secret ... Don't be afraid that he will recall what you have confessed to him outside Confession. It is his duty not to recall it...

So, have courage my dear sons. Don't give the devil an opportunity to laugh. Make a good Confession admitting everything. Someone might ask: "How does one remedy a sin that he has concealed?" ... Repeat all your Confessions from the time you withheld the sin... The Catechism also says: From the time you make your last good Confession up to the time you wish to make it once more ... In a word, that is how you dodge hell and gain paradise. It's a matter of the moment: the confessor will help you and know that he and you are friends and he wants just one thing, the salvation of your soul." (Bertetto, D., *S. Giovanni Bosco, maestro e guida del sacerdote*. LDC. Colle Don Bosco, 1954, pg 176ss)

Don Bosco's educative power lay in the confidence his youngsters had in him. He said: *Confidence is the key to everything. Genuine trust and friendship ought to reign."*

When accusing ourselves of our sins we are often conditioned by our thoughts. What should we tell the confessor? What will he say? Our main thought ought to be instead: Who am I going to meet? What am I going to receive? I am going to meet the risen Christ who will help me to get out of my sins and weaknesses. I am going to receive his peace.

Luigi Orione

confesses

to Don Bosco

*Formation of a youngster's conscience
and vocational guidance in Confession*

It is the 16th May 2004 and one of Don Bosco's boys, who had become a priest, is being canonised. He is Fr. Luigi Orione.

Luigi arrived at the Oratory in October of 1886 when he was 14 years old. He was the son of a poor road paver from Pontecurone.

For some time, Luigi himself joined his father as a paver. He heard the call to become a Franciscan and entered the Friary of the Franciscans at Voghera but a serious illness had brought him almost to death's door and so was sent home to his family. The sickness seemed to have been a great grace (even though he had shed many tears) because it led him to Valdocco. He was accepted by Don Bosco and from their first meeting, Don Bosco had a particular affection for little Luigi (Luigino).

A simple gaze of Don Bosco during the recreation aroused in Orione a great affection for the saint of youth.

A young boy's Confession that would make him a saint

It was an extraordinary privilege. Little Luigi was permitted to make his Confession to Don Bosco was, by now, old and exhausted and he heard only the Confessions of

some Salesians and of the pupils of the fourth and fifth form.

The memory of that Confession would remain in the heart of Orione and those that followed thereafter, given the state of Don Bosco's health.

Listen to this as narrated by Don Orione who remembers his first face to face encounter with Don Bosco. This was how he told it to Fr. Carletti, a Salesian:

Coming to the episode of the Confession, Luigi was going through periods of particular religious fervour. On the 8th December he had made a perpetual consecration to Mary and now he had the opportunity of making his Confession to Don Bosco. Not knowing if an opportunity of this kind would ever come again, given the precarious nature of the saint's health and since he was only in the first form, he prepared himself with utmost care for this unique experience.

He took with him a notebook in which he had written his general examination of conscience and a complete list of his sins which filled some eight or nine pages. "I accuse myself of all...." Continued Fr. Carletti and the only question to which he responded in the negative was, have you killed anyone? To this he wrote 'no'.

He presented himself with the trepidation of someone who was accused and because 'Don Bosco could read the eyes of his boys many of them did not want to make their Confession to him. They were afraid.'

(This testimony is reported in *Messaggi di Don Orione*, Quaderno 69, Studio di Don Antonio Lanza, Piccola Opera della Divina Provvidenza, Tortona-Roma 1988)

Don Bosco could read hearts

Don Bosco himself confided: *"On several occasions, I saw the consciences of the boys open before me like a book I could read."* To certain boys who approached him he would say: *"Will you tell me, or do you want me to tell you your sins?"* We will return to this special gift that the Lord gave Don Bosco and

which made him so famous. In recent times we have had Padre Pio with a similar gift.

Getting back to the youngster Luigi Orione, he went on: *When I came before him I was afraid of taking out my notebook. Finally I pulled out one and, while I showed him one I was looking at Don Bosco's face. Then, for fear I would be wasting his time I began reading very quickly. Then I turned a page and Don Bosco continued looking, I turned another page and Don Bosco was still peering. As I turned another page Don Bosco said:*

"Well, well, is there still more?"

"Yes, I replied."

"Good, leave it here with me."

He took it and doing this and that (Don Orione repeated his action) and tore them into four pieces and he did the same thing with the second.

Assessing the sinner standing before him, Don Bosco continued his questions and pointed out certain weaknesses that were written in the notebooks but which he had not read. The youngster was shocked at the intuition of the saint and fifty years later he still exclaimed with admiration: "He could read hearts! He could read hearts!"

He went on:

"After that he told me three things that I remember as if he said them today, three things that only the Lord would be able to say."

Don Bosco admonished him:

"Be truly sorry and try not to repeat them. Don't think anymore of those things however big or small they may have been." Then he added: "Be cheerful!"

And Don Orione concluded: "And he smiled at me as only he could smile."

Convinced that he had been in contact with something that was beyond human understanding, Orione arose from that confession, "with his soul flooded with a joy that I don't think I had ever experienced in my life." (This testimony was reported in Messaggi di Don Orione, mentioned above.)

The Formation of the Conscience: an Urgent Moral Duty

Thinking of little Luigi and his serious examination of conscience it is appropriate for us to reflect on the importance of the formation of consciences, particularly among youngsters, especially in these times of so much moral confusion.

How valuable are those first simple examinations of conscience that parents guide their children to make and those that parish priests help youngsters who are preparing for their first Confession and then catechism teachers of the teenagers too.

Luigi Orione recalled that once upon a there were lines outside a confessional in church. Perhaps it is time that we rediscovered and updated this same sensitivity today. Take, for example, the commandment: *Thou shalt not kill*- it can be easily violated commonly by reckless driving, reckless violence... how many of us do that when we drive and over-speed but few of us admit that this is sin. Penitential services that include a common examination of conscience are the very helpful.

A Particular Care of Vocations

Since Divine Providence granted Luigi Orione the grace of making a "face to face" sacramental confession to Don Bosco he would no longer need to fill a little notebook with records of the past but he could now strengthen his wings in order to launch out towards boundless horizons that his spiritual director indicated.

Don Carletti goes on: *"Luigi would not be able to make many*

confessions to Don Bosco, but they were sufficient to provide him with a safe and courageous path for the rest of his life. Those spiritual meetings were not cold and distant encounters between judge and convict but they were warm and lively discussions between a father and his son. Don Orione recalled that those occasions vaguely resembled metal being forged in a furnace.

It was significant that Don Bosco, up to the end of his life, still cared about vocations through their fidelity to the weekly confessions of those who showed an inclination towards a vocation or those who were already Salesians. This is a privileged path and even today we continue to support youngsters on their vocational journey.

In the case of Luigi Orione those encounters with Don Bosco helped him along his path to sanctity. Today the Church recognized that sanctity and has canonized him.

Evasio Garrone *confesses* *to Don Bosco*

*The kindness of the confessor
opens the heart of a young penitent
at confession and about his vocation*

We are helped to extend this reflection on Confession and Vocation through another young eighteen-year-old boy and we see that with Don Bosco, Confession and Vocation are always linked. We would like to also recall another companion, Franchini who would witness the ecstasies of Don Bosco near the altar in his bedroom at Valdocco. The supernatural gifts of this holy confessor are evident in this episode is reported in the *Biographical Memoirs*.

“Evasio Garrone entered the Oratory as a student on August 4, 1878. He was eighteen years old. His home was above a shop. He arrived around seven o’clock in the evening. At the door of the sacristy he saw a procession of youngsters beginning. Curious, he followed the procession and he reached a priest who was hearing Confessions and he was surrounded by many boys who were preparing themselves for the same. He knelt down with them but he was thinking more about his home than about his sins.

When his turn came, since he was unprepared, he remained silent. He could not remember even one sin. The priest then said: “I will speak.” Then one after another he reeled off all his sins in order, mentioning the places, the number and the circumstances. Having done this, he gave the lad some advice with such fervour and affection that with every word he felt more and more reassured and happy as if he was in paradise. Finally after that the confessor said:

“Garrone, thank the Madonna because after six years she has heard your whispers. Have devotion to her and she will save you from many dangers.”

He First Disclosed His Thoughts

Note how the Lord makes his call audible almost immediately as in the case of Garrone and how his first confidant is a priest, often it is the confessor who wins the confidence of the youngster.

“From the age of twelve, the youngster nurtured a secret desire to become a priest but he knew it was impossible for his family to send him to school and for that reason he did not tell them. When he was eighteen years old, he heard Don Bosco speak and that reignited the desire in his heart. He would tell his parish priest, who listened to him kindly, and recommended him to be admitted to the Oratory. Imagine his astonishment when heard precisely the time that had elapsed since he had first had the desire to become a priest and then heard his own name at the moment he entered the Oratory and all the other extraordinary things we have just recorded.

His confession over, he walked to a corner of the sacristy and knelt down, his hands clasped behind his back, lost to the world around him, mulling over the mysterious confessor who had unveiled to him the secrets of his life. He pondered. ‘Who is this priest who seems to know me so well? Is he from my home town? I’ve never seen him in Grana. How can he know me so well?’ He thought about his Confession and all the consoling words he heard. Caught between wonder and emotion, he could scarcely get back onto his feet.

The next day, while in the playground, he saw all the boys run toward a priest who was approaching them. He joined them. It was the same priest who had heard his confession. As soon as he was near, he heard the priest say to a young boy, ‘I’d like to have you cooked too.’ Garrone was astonished. Who was this priest who had called him by name, knew all about him, and wanted to have him “cooked”?

*At once he asked the priest, “Do you come from my home town?”
“No,” was the answer. “Do you know me?”*

"I've never seen you before," replied Garrone, who turned to the boy next to him and asked who the priest was.

"He is Don Bosco, the Oratory's director," was the answer.

"Right, I am Don Bosco," the priest added with a smile.

"But you are not the one who sent me a letter of acceptance, are you?"

Father Garrone later explained to Father Lemoyne that he spoke so boldly because he was being impolite and did not know what he was saying. However, from that moment on, he nurtured a profound respect for Don Bosco. (EBM XIII, pp, 700-701)

We let the reader's curiosity urge him to find out more about this young man and his Salesian vocation while at the same time we strive choose for our spiritual life a priest known for his holiness and experience in the ministry of Confession. He will certainly be most suitable person to help us in finding the will of God for our lives.

Note how the fame, sanctity and sensitivity that surrounded the person of Don Bosco was the best advertisement that drew youngsters to him and how his own boys brought their companions closer to him.

Paul Falla

confesses

to Don Bosco

The Patience of the Confessor

A touching episode narrated in the *Biographical Memoirs* describes the kindness with which Don Bosco interacted with his boys, especially hearing their Confessions. Here's how that was handed down to us:

One Saturday evening while the saint was in his room hearing confessions of the pupils of the upper classes, a pupil of the fourth high school grade, named Paul Falla, noticed a bunch of grapes that was hiding amid the leafy branches as he was on his knees waiting for his turn. He therefore picked it from the twig and calmly began to munch on the grapes. Absorbed in what he was doing, he forgot everything else and noticed it when the penitent between him and the confessor had gotten up and left. After giving the absolution to the boy on the other side of him, Don Bosco turned to young Falla to hear his Confession. With a bunch of grapes in his hand, the boy flushed and stammered an excuse. Don Bosco told him gently: "Do not get upset, finish eating your grapes and then you can make your confession." So saying, he turned to the other side and continued with the confessions. (EBM XVII, p. 143)

With that kind gesture Don Bosco won over the confidence of the boy while on the other hand, if he had lost his temper he would have prevented Paul from making a good confession and perhaps that would have prevented the blossoming of a beautiful vocation. In fact, later that same year, Paul entered the Salesian Novitiate at San Benigno Canavese. He became a priest and later pastor of the parish

of Cavallermaggiore (Cuneo).

One of the virtues that confessors must always exercise especially when dealing with young penitents is the virtue of patience because some of them come to Confession unprepared, distracted or even confused. Refrain from scolding them, rather show them the crucifix and remind them that Jesus endured his sufferings for our sins. You will notice that they become more reflective and serious, ready to admit their shortcomings and make a firm resolution as a sign of their renewed friendship with the Lord.

When he began hearing the Confessions of the boys that he gathered from the streets, Don Bosco practiced patience to a heroic degree. Several pages in the Biographical Memoirs describe this:

Sometimes, especially during the yearly years of the Oratory, as many as a hundred young boys, totally undisciplined, would cluster about him, all anxious to make their confession at once (without benefit of the privacy of a confessional). It was perhaps the second or third confession they ever made, and their boisterous impatience would have dissuaded any other priest from hearing them under such conditions. With no catechists to monitor them, they quarreled to go first, pushing forward and being shoved back. It was a strenuous task to put order in that confusion, but eventually the youngsters would quiet down and kneel in silence. Don Bosco then, turning to the boy nearest to him, would raise his hand to bless him, and the others close-by would all cross themselves as they about to begin their own confessions. Don Bosco, unperturbed, had to hear them standing up, keeping the other young penitents at arm's length as they tried to push forward while he put his ear to the lips of the youngster making his confession in a low voice.

An amazing change would come over the youngsters as they approached Don Bosco. They would suddenly quiet down, seemingly beyond any distraction, intent solely on unburdening their souls. Their faces would show how they understood Don Bosco's brief advice, as silently they withdrew to a quiet corner to recite their penance. Here one could almost see the grace of God spreading its merciful wings over Don Bosco and his charges!

In a short time, too, the behaviour of the boys waiting for their confessions took a turn for the better, even though there was still

room for improvement, as will be clear from what follows.

Don Bosco was unfailingly courteous and cordial in greeting all boys, even if they were rude, ignorant, careless and unprepared for confession, and he always found a way to lead them all to God. Once he characterized youngsters as follows.

They come to the confessional, but don't utter a word, and when they are questioned, they say nothing. If confessions are heard in church, such lads should be called to the front of the confessional, instead of remaining at the grating, for then they will answer more readily. Further, if the priest places his hand over their heads, it helps keep them from gaping around, as they usually do. Generally they open up, but, at the start, the priest must have much patience in kindly and tactfully asking and repeating questions to get them to talk. I have come across boys from whom I first thought I could never extract a single word, but, thanks to a rather unusual trick of my own, I managed to make them talk. When they would not answer my routine questions, I would switch to unusual ones, such as:

"Did you have your breakfast this morning?"

"Yes!"

"Were you really hungry?"

"Yes!"

"Have you got any brothers?" And so on. Once the ice is broken, they kept answering other questions about the state of their conscience and made a clean breast of it. (EBM III, pp. 105-106)

The patience that Don Bosco had with his little penitents was truly admirable. There is also the experience of confessors whom youngsters approach and who smile at them and patiently help them at least for their first few confessions.

A confessor committed to spending several hours in a confessional can be an heroic exercise in patience. Even for penitents the exercise of this virtue becomes meritorious, especially when making their Christmas and Easter confessions. That was also how it was for the boys of Don Bosco. *Very often, on Saturdays, Don Bosco stayed for as long as ten or twelve hours at a time in the confessional, while his once restless and mischie-*

vous charges patiently awaited their turn. (EBM III, p. 106)

These reflections bring us, very opportunely to Don Bosco's meeting with a sixteen-year-old rebel already assigned by his father to a correctional facility.

John confesses to Don Bosco

The Art of Conquering a Penitent's Heart

In every youngster there is a possibility of goodness and Don Bosco demonstrated it. This is confirmed in the encounter we will narrate.

In 1852 Don Bosco accepted into his Oratory a youngster named John who had previously been in a boarder in a city college hostel where he picked up some vile habits and got into bad company. They gave him bad literature and naturally he lost a year because of this.

But he never forgot the catechism that his mother, who had recently died, taught him when he was little. John gave up all religious practices except that before going to bed every night he prayed for his mother.

His father now decided to send him to a correctional facility because of his rebelliousness but he made one last attempt before taking this extreme step. He reminded John of his mother's last moments and that she wished that he go to Don Bosco to pursue his studies. Aware of his mother's desire, John was moved and agreed to make any sacrifice to carry out her wish.

From the *Biographical Memoirs*, we take up the story of his encounter with Don Bosco at Valdocco: *Don Bosco was taken aback at first when he saw the boy, whose name was John. He was wearing a custom-tailored suit and a Calabrese at over fastidiously parted hair; a glittering watch chain hung from his waistcoat, and a slender cane completed his dandified appearance.*

Everything about revealed inordinate vanity. The father quickly agreed to the Oratory's admission requirements, and then, with the excuse of having to attend to some business, he left the boy alone with Don Bosco. Adapting himself to the situation, Don Bosco steered his conversation to topics that appealed to the boy: outings, races, calisthenics, fencing, singing, and music, the mere mention of which excited the frivolous boy's interest.

His father returned to pick him up, and as soon as they were alone he asked his son: "Well, what do you think of the place? Do you like it? How did Don Bosco strike you?"

I like the place a lot, and Don Bosco seems all right, but..."

"But what? Tell me; we still have time to change our plans."

"I like him all right, but he's a priest. That's what spoils it."

"Never mind that. Just look at his personal qualities. You like him, don't you?"

"Yes, but staying with a priest means praying and having to go to confession and Communion. From some of the things he said, he sounded almost as though he knew too much about me...Well, I promised to go there and I'll keep my word. I'll give it a try."

An Educative Environment leads a youngster to God

From things that interest youngsters and leading them to the things of God was the art of Don Bosco's educative system. That's how it should be; creating an environment that helps mature in a youngster a taste for things spiritual. At Valdocco, John found himself in this ambient that favoured his conversion.

"When John entered the Oratory a few days later, his father thought it advisable to brief Don Bosco on the boy's background and on his still intense love for his deceased mother. Away from bad companions and unwholesome reading, he soon forgot the dissipated life he had led the previous year. In a short while John began to enjoy good friends, competition in studies, music, recitations, and dramatics.

His mother's admonition – "Avoid idleness and bad companions" – often returned to his mind; gradually he also resumed his former practices of piety. However, he could not bring himself to go

to confession, even though two months had elapsed since his arrival and there had been novenas as well as solemn feast days on which all the other pupils had received the sacraments.

An Important Anniversary

One evening, Don Bosco called him to his room. Mindful of how much John treasured his mother's memory, he began by asking him: "Do you know whose anniversary it is tomorrow?"

"Of course, I do. It's the anniversary of my mother's death. What I wouldn't give to be able to see her again and talk to her."

"Would you do something that would please her and would also help you a lot?"

"Of course!"

"If you really mean it, then go to Holy Communion tomorrow and offer it for the repose of her soul. This would be a great help to her if she should still be suffering in purgatory."

"I'd do it gladly, but before going to Communion I'd have to go to confession... Oh, well, if that would please my mother, I'll do it; in fact, if it's all right with you. I'll do it right now."

Things had turned out just the way Don Bosco had hoped. He praised the boy's resolve, gave him time for his emotions to subside, and then prepared him for confession. It was a consoling experience for both.

Certain recurrences such as anniversaries of the deceased, serve to celebrate the sacrament of penance and is a fine tradition that has been preserved in the Church and offers these to youngsters who are sensitive to such occasions.

From that day John's journey of conversion became more pronounced.

The need to destroy all flammable material

We are aware that confessors ask penitents not to hold on to material that once was the occasion of sin for them. Don Bosco certainly advised youngsters to destroy everything that reminded them of the sins of the past eliminating anything that could be occasions of sin for them.

One day he rid himself of some immoral books by bringing them

to Don Bosco. "Please burn these," he said. "I do not want to go to hell on account of them." He also destroyed some letters that contained bad advice from former companions by tearing them into pieces.

He then began to apply himself diligently to his studies. In order not to forget his mother's admonition, "Avoid idleness and bad companions," he wrote it on the cover of all his books. On New Year's Day he wrote a fine letter to his father, who was filled with joy at the wonderful change in his son.

Remembering that at home there were many immoral books and magazines, John did not rest until he succeeded in persuading his father to get rid of them. (EBM IV, pp. 348-350)

Flee from the occasions of sin! This is a special recommendation given to youngsters who naturally, because of their frailty, are easily influenced by worldly enticements and bad company they often succumb to for fear of being left out.

A Seventeen-Year-Old confesses to Don Bosco

The advantages of frequent confession

In the early days of the Oratory Don Bosco was always followed by a crowd of youngsters who, on Saturdays and Sundays besieged his confessional to pray and attend Mass with exemplary fervour.

Don Bosco guided them delicately and won over their hearts so that he could guide them spiritually.

Sometimes it happened that the more negligent would not easily surrender to his sacerdotal zeal, it was then that used some of his more expedient methods.

*“From that day I was very eager
to go to Confession”*

We should like to recount this incident in the words of the protagonist himself: *“I was seventeen and had been coming to the Oratory for some months, taking part in the recreation, the games, and even the church services. I liked it especially when they sang psalms and hymns and I joined in with gusto, singing at the top of my voice. However, I had not yet gone to confession. I had no particular reason for not going, but since I’d let some time go by since my last one (before coming to the Oratory), I couldn’t make up my mind to start again. Sometimes, Don Bosco would ask me very nicely to perform my Easter duty, and I would promise at once, but with one excuse or another I always managed to evade his fatherly suggestion. I was satisfied with promising, but never went any further. Don Bosco, however, thought up a very clever way to*

get me to do it. One Sunday, after the church services, I was busy playing barrarotta; it was very hot, and although in shirt sleeves, I was quite flushed and perspiring, what with the heat, the fun I was having, and the long game.

I was all taken up with it, when Don Bosco hurriedly called me and asked: "Would you give me a hand with something which is very urgent."

"Sure! What is it?"

"It may be a bit hard for you."

"That won't matter. I can do it. I'm strong."

"Come to the church with me, then."

Overjoyed to be able to help him, I immediately left the game and started to follow him, just as I was, in my shirt sleeves.

"Not like that," Don Bosco said, "Put your jacket on."

I did as told and followed him into the sacristy, thinking that there must be something he wanted me to move.

"Come with me into the choir," Don Bosco said.

I followed him to a kneeler. I still had not grasped what he was leading me to, and I was about to lift it and carry it where he wanted it.

"No, leave it there," he said smiling.

"What do you want me to do with it?"

"I want you to make your confession."

"I will, When?"

"Now!"

"But I'm not ready now."

"I know you're not ready, but I'll give you all the time you want. I'll say some breviary, and then you can make your confession, just like you've promised to do so many times."

"If that's what you want, I don't mind preparing. At least I won't have to look around for a confessor. I really need to go to confession. It was a good idea to catch me this way, because otherwise I wouldn't have come, for fear that some of my friends might laugh at me."

While Don Bosco read his breviary, I prepared myself and then made my confession. It was much easier than I had expected because my kindly and expert confessor helped me considerably with

the right questions. I was through in no time, and after saying the penance he face me and a good act of thanksgiving, I ran back to play. After that I never felt any repugnance about going to confession; on the contrary, I was always delighted to receive this sacrament whenever I could and began to go very often."

So far, the young man, but we can add that he became most diligent in fulfilling his religious duties and that his example and exhortations attracted many others. (EBM II, 340-341)

How many youngsters through laziness or negligence, through human respect or fear of their companions, put off their confession? It is precisely during this period of their adolescence that bad habits take root or weakness, for example, in the area of purity and confession is the best homeostatic that will stop the hemorrhage with love and spiritual strength.

Against the onslaught of one's passions a teenager has very limited resistance and so it is so important for him to approach the sacrament of Confession. It is worthwhile reading the following words of Don Bosco about frequent Confession.

Confession, but how often?

In a "goodnight" to his boys given on 20th January 1876 this was the advice he gave: *"Frst, do not go to confession more often than once a week. Some, especially the younger ones, would want to go to confession everyday. But do as I say, and everyone will have a chance. However, go to confession at least once a month. Generally every ten or twelve days or every two weeks is a good rule.*

Many say: "We like to go every week." Well, that's quite all right. Others may remark, "I want to receive Holy Communion frequently, but, a few days after confession, I am no better than before, and I don't dare receive without going to confession again." I say: "If you cannot keep your conscience clear for a week, then it is better not to go to Communion so often."

"But I want to do better," you may say. "If I could go to confession more often, I could more easily succeed."

“Not really,” I reply. “Instead of going to confession two or three times a week, make a firmer resolution, and you will find that this is far more effective than going to confession more often with but little sorrow and without determination to amend your ways. This is why your confessor himself has told you to go to confession less frequently.

There is only one case when I think one should go to confession more often, and that is when the confessor himself, after carefully considering one’s spiritual condition says, “Come to confession every time you fall into this or that sin, so as to overcome your habit or evil passion.” When a confessor gives this specific advice for a particular reason, the penitent will doubtless benefit, but, apart from this, go regularly every week or every ten or fifteen days. Then with your confessor’s permission, you may very often go to Holy Communion.” (EBM XII, 19)

Don Bosco not only waited for his boys in the confessional but he went searching for them as we found him do so in this delicate situation mentioned above.

We are aware that it is out of laziness that teenagers do not frequent confession but this applies to others also. The ploy that Don Bosco uses reveals his pastoral zeal and is an encouragement to priests, especially those who live with the young. They should be attentive to each individual youngster and help him to confess frequently, especially so that they remain strong in times of adolescent crises.

Two Youngsters confess to Don Bosco

Fidelity to confession in the adult years is the fruit of a good habit learned at adolescence.

It is sad that in so many families and Christian communities several youngsters, after having received their Confirmation, distance themselves from the Church, give up common prayer, Sunday Mass, Communion and confession. Not a few of them approach a confessor only on the eve of their wedding, having made their confession around the time of the Confirmation or when they just left school or entered college.

This phenomenon was already taking place during the time of Don Bosco.

An Ex-Student confesses to Don Bosco

A former Oratory pupil had not been to confession for ten years and felt a repugnance for it. A relative of his – also a former pupil – invited him to accompany him on a visit to Don Bosco. They found him in the sacristy hearing confessions of the last penitents.

As he stood waiting for Don Bosco to finish, his friend playfully shoved the bewildered young man straight into Don Bosco's arms.

"Feel at ease," Don Bosco told him. "We're still friends, aren't we? If you want to make your confession, it's easier than you think. I'll do it for you."

Moved by Don Bosco's words, the young man made a good confession and resumed the practice of his Faith. He could never get

over the trick his friend had played on him, and what Don Bosco had told him on that occasion. (EBM V, 424)

It is really providential for a youngster or a teenager to find a true friend who can lead him back by his example and through an explicit invitation to frequent confession. We know that often good example is more efficacious than the insistence of teachers and parents.

The role of a priest is certainly very essential in following youngsters through the storms they face during the time of adolescence when unruly passions buffet their souls.

It is very consoling to know of youngsters who, during their adolescence remain faithful to their fortnightly or monthly confession. They manifest, above everything else the delicacy of their conscience and their growth in human and Christian virtue. Being thus accompanied along their vocational journey they find themselves either at the sacrament of matrimony or the consecrated or priestly life well-prepared and their future fidelity is guaranteed.

It is crucial to note at this point that during their youthful years they frequented the sacrament of confession where they candidly and sincerely accused themselves of their sins, mentioning each one by its proper name overcoming all shame and human respect.

That was the disposition of the young worker who confessed to Don Bosco.

The Young Worker confesses to Don Bosco

“The sacristy was full of boys kneeling on the floor while a tall and powerfully built young worker, about twenty years old, was making his confession with great concentration.

It was the first time he had ever approached Don Bosco. In a very audible tone he began to tell his sins which were neither few nor slight. Don Bosco cautioned him to lower his voice and vainly tried to muffle it with a handkerchief. The boys nearest the penitent even nudged him and whispered to him to talk softer. He paid no heed and continued in the same vein, occasionally kicking those who kept tugging at his sleeve. The boys had to plug their ears.

Finally after receiving absolution, the young worker kissed Don Bosco's hand so loudly that a ripple of laughter went through the crowd. He then arose, radiating peace, joy and humility.

As he made his way through the boys, some whispered: "Why did you talk so loud? Everyone could hear your sins."

The young man stopped, spread out his arms, and exclaimed with great candour:

"So what? I did commit those sins, but Our Lord has forgiven me. I'm going to turn over a new leaf! And that's all there is to it!"

So saying, he knelt apart from the rest and spent a half hour in thanksgiving without stirring. (EBM III, 110)

The deportment of this young worker offers us occasion to remember that the secrecy of things heard in confession is valid not only for the confessor but also for those who are present and who happen to hear the sins the penitent is accusing himself of and even the words of the priest.

Remembrances of Don Bosco

In later years, when Don Bosco recalled with great delight the facts mentioned above and he told those who were listening to him in rapt attention: *"You can't imagine how much I regret being no longer able to spend some time with the day pupils, especially the apprentice bricklayers. With God's help, I used to have a chance of doing them a great deal of good. To this very day I am thrilled whenever I can talk briefly with them. In those early years they thought so much of me that they would have done anything to please me. For instance, I would ask someone, "When will you come for confession?"*

"Whenever you say, I'll even come every Sunday."

"No, Every two or three weeks will do."

"Very well, I'll do that."

Then I would continue, "Why do you come to confession?"

"To be in the state of grace again."

"Good! That's what matters most. But is that your only reason?"

"Also to acquire merit."

"Any other reason?"

"Because Our Lord wants it that way!"

"Anything else?" Then, since the youngster did not know what else to say, I myself would add: "And also because it pleases Don Bosco who is your friend and has your interest at heart. Isn't that so?" These words would move him deeply and he would take my hand and kiss it, sometimes even shedding tears of joy. I used to say that in order to give them an ever greater confidence. (EBM III, 110-111)

We hope that many youngsters find zealous priests like Don Bosco able to win their confidence and accompany through their adolescence and their teenage years, till they realize their vocation and if possible even for the rest of their lives.

The boys confess to Don Bosco in his dream

Necessary conditions to make a good confession

We are aware of all the love that Don Bosco had for his boys. One of his main tasks was hearing their confessions frequently so that they received the sacrament fruitfully. That is why we are not surprised that even his dreams were filled with these souls so close to his heart.

So, here is a famous dream in which Don Bosco is busy hearing confessions and at the same time he is involved in a unique struggle. He himself narrated it on the evening of 4th April 1869 and it made a profound impression on his listeners.

The Three Lassos that Lead to Perdition

I dreamed that I walked out of my room and instantly found myself in church. It was packed tight with the pupils of the Oratory, Lanzo, and Mirabello, as well as many other youngsters unknown to me. The boys were not praying aloud but seemed to be preparing for confession. I observed a very large number crowding around my confessional beneath the pulpit. And so I began hearing confessions. Soon, concerned for the number of boys, I got up to see if there were any other confessors, but there were none, so I made for the sacristy hoping to find help. It was then that I noticed that

some boys had a noose around their necks which nearly choked them.

"What is that rope for?" I asked. "Take it off." In reply they just stared at me.

"You," I said to a youngster, "go to that boy and slip that noose off his neck."

The boy went but came back, saying: "I can't get it off. Someone is holding it. Come and see."

I more closely scrutinized that huge crowd of boys and thought I saw two very long horns jutting out behind many of them. I got closer to the one nearest me and, drawing up behind him, surprised a large, hideous cat tightly clinging to the noose. Surprised in the act, it tried to crouch lower and hide its snout between its paws. I questioned that frightful beast but it only crouched lower.

"Tell me who you are," I ordered.

Alternately opening and closing its jaws, the hideous animal broke into a growl and prepared to lunge.

"Answer me!" I insisted. "What are you doing here? I do not fear your rage. Do you see this holy water? I'll thoroughly soak you with it."

In dismay the monster began to writhe in unbelievable contortions and again seemed ready to leap at me. I kept my eye on it and noticed that it was holding several nooses in its paw.

"Look then," it growled, and showed me its nooses.

"What are they? What do they mean?" I asked.

"Don't you understand? I rope these boys into making bad confessions. With these nooses I drag nine-tenths of mankind into hell!"

"How? In what way?"

"That's one thing I won't reveal because you'll tell the boys."

"You must tell me. Speak, or I'll drench you with holy water."

"Please don't! I'd rather go back to hell."

"Then in the name of Jesus Christ, speak!"

Writhing hideously, the monster answered: "With the first noose I make the boys conceal their sins in confession."

"And with the second?"

"I make them confess without true sorrow."

"And with the third?"

"I won't tell you!"

"You had better tell, or you'll be drenched with this holy water!"

"No, no, I will not! I've talked too much already!" And it growled in fury.

"Tell me so that I can inform the directors of our schools," I demanded, raising the sprinkler.

Flames and even a few drops of blood darted from the beast's eyes as it grudgingly muttered: "With the third noose I keep them from making a firm resolution and carrying out their confessor's advice."

I wanted to question the monster further and force it to tell how I could remedy this great evil and offset its diabolical efforts, but all those hideous cats, which until now had done their utmost to stay hidden, began to mutter and then broke out into loud shouts against the one which had spoken. Amid the general uproar, I realized that I could get nothing more from the monster.

Therefore, lifting the sprinkler and flinging holy water upon the one who had spoken, I commanded, "Go away," and it disappeared. Then I sprinkled holy water all about, and in the pandemonium which ensued, all those cats scurried away. The din awakened me, and I found myself in bed. (EBM IX, 279-280)

An old proverb says: "Take good advice even from the devil." Here the devil gave Don Bosco something that would be useful even for us: *"See how much good boys draw from confession! If you want to know whether or not I hold them in leash, see if they are becoming better."*

Don Bosco's experience urges us to truly examine ourselves and our confessions and change our lives.

The Importance of Sorrow and Resolutions at Confession

With regard to the three lassos, we know how much Don Bosco insisted particularly, first of all, on sincerity in confession, and how necessary it was that the confessors win the confidence of youngsters so that they may gradually confess the sins that they have been thus far ashamed of.

The second condition that is more common is the lack of sorrow. We are not used to thinking of our sins in the light

of the Passion and Death of Jesus: recalling and meditating on the Crucifix and the extent of his love, and how often we forget the gifts that we continually receive as the fruits of that love.

Most of all not making resolutions or making them but not remembering them and keeping them means that we do not wish to change our lives and that there is still an affection for sin, that we do not accept the advice of the confessor who has the duty to suggest and help identify the resolutions we have taken. It is true that the advice we receive should be applied to our lives and at times they may not be immediately practicable. In that case it is well to tell the confessor about the difficulty we will encounter so that he may appropriately assist us.

To affirm what we have said above let us read what Don Bosco remembered hearing from the lips of Louis Comollo, his seminary companion: *Frequenting the sacraments of confession and Communion are the two instruments, like two arms to overcome the onslaughts of the common enemy and to avoid being shipwrecked among the rocks on the sea of this world. Strive to have a permanent confessor: open your heart to him, obey him and he will be a sure guide on the road that leads to heaven. But, alas, there are also many who go to confession that bears no fruit! They confess their sins but have no firm purpose of amendment. Remember, therefore, that the sacrament of Penance is placed above sorrow and above the purpose of amendment and where there is a lack of one of these essential conditions, all our confessions become null and sacrilegious.* (BOSCO, GIOVANNI CENNO biografico del giovane Luigi Comollo, SEI, Torino, 1928, pg. 59)

A boy returning from the dead

confesses

to Don Bosco

*Confession flings open the gates of Paradise
and saves one from eternal perdition*

Don Bosco loved his boys so much that he told his boys that he was willing to drag his tongue from Valdocco to Superga to prevent a single grave sin in his houses.

This love of his for his boys like the love of Jesus the Good Shepherd, was seen in a special way in an incident during his life, regarding a young boy whose name is withheld out of respect for him and his family.

It was the resuscitation of a fifteen-year-old boy already dead. Don Bosco interceded with the Lord that he be able to see whether he was somewhere near the gates of hell and so that through a good confession he could be introduced into Paradise.

Even if we have a very reliable testimony of the Marquise Maria Maistre de Fassati , who said: "I heard this from the mouth of Don Bosco himself and I have sought to write it down with utmost fidelity," we wish to resent it as it appeared in the *Biographical Memoirs of Don Bosco*.

There are numerous testimonies of Fr. Rua, Mons. Cagliero, Giuseppe Buzzetti, Peter Enria, Fr. Bonetti, Fr. Garino, many other Salesians and boys. Here it is.

I'm calling you by name: Charles!

Charles. ...,a fifteen-year-old boy who attended the festive ora-

tory, fell seriously ill and in a short time was at death's door. His father owned a small restaurant whose upper floor was the family's living quarters.

The doctor informed the parents that the boy was in very critical condition and that they should see to his spiritual needs. When they asked their son what priest he wanted for his confession, he showed himself anxious to have Don Bosco, his ordinary confessor. Unfortunately, much to the youngster's grief, that day Don Bosco was out of town. Under the circumstances, the assistant pastor was sent for.

Thirty-six hours later the boy was dead; repeatedly he had been asking for Don Bosco. As soon as Don Bosco returned, he was told that people had come several times looking for him; Charles, whom he knew so well, was dying and was very eager to speak to him.

Don Bosco hastened to the boy's house. A waiter first saw him and told him, "It's too late. He died twelve hours ago." Smiling, Don Bosco replied, "Oh no! He's merely asleep; he just seems dead." The waiter stared at him with an air of ironic disbelief.

Meanwhile the boy's parents had come downstairs and, hearing his words, sobbingly told him that poor Charles indeed was dead. "It can't be," said Don Bosco. "May I see him?" He was immediately ushered into the boy's room where his mother and an aunt were praying at his bedside. The body was already laid out for burial, swathed and sewn in a winding sheet with a veil drawn over his face as was then the custom. A lamp was burning beside the bed.

Don Bosco drew near the bed, thinking, "Who knows whether his last confession was a good one? Where is his soul now?" After asking the person who had escorted him into the room to withdraw, Don Bosco recited a short, fervent prayer, blessed the dead boy and called to him twice in a tone of command, "Charles, Charles, get up!" The corpse began to give signs of life. Don Bosco quickly hid the funeral lamp, ripped open the winding sheet, and uncovered the boy's face.

Charles opened his eyes as though awaking from a deep slumber, looked bewilderedly about him, then sat up and asked, "Where am I?" Finally, his gaze fell on Don Bosco. "Oh! Don Bosco!" he exclaimed. "If only you knew! I wanted so much to see you! I sent for

you so many times. ...I need you very badly. Am I glad you woke me up!" "So am I, Charles," replied Don Bosco. "Oh! Don Bosco," continued the boy, "it's a wonder I'm not in hell. In my last confession, I didn't dare confess a sin I had committed a couple of weeks before. A bad companion had talked me into it...."

I dreamt I was on the edge of an immense furnace

"I had a terrible dream. I dreamed that I was on the edge of a big furnace where many devils had chased me. They were just about to push me over when a lady stepped between me and those ugly monsters, saying, 'Wait! He has not yet been judged!'

I was terribly scared, and just then I heard you calling me and I woke up. Now I want to make my confession."

The boy's mother and aunt who had been present all the while, could not believe their eyes. At a word from Don Bosco, badly shaken, they rushed out to summon the rest of the family.

Meanwhile, Charles had sufficiently recovered from his fear of those demons and began his confession with every sign of true contrition. Don Bosco was giving him absolution, his mother and the rest of the family walked into the room. Turning to his mother, Charles said, "Don Bosco is saving me from hell."

For about two hours Charles was in complete possession of his faculties, but all the while his body remained cold, even though he could move, look around, and talk. Among other things, he repeatedly asked Don Bosco to warn the boys always to tell all their sins in confession.

At last, Don Bosco said to him, "Now you are in the state of grace Heaven stands open for you. Do you want to go there or remain here with us?" "I want to go to heaven," replied the boy. "Goodbye then, until we meet in heaven," continued Don Bosco. Thereupon young Charles closed his eyes, lay back on the pillow and quietly fell asleep again in the Lord." (EBM III, 349-351)

From this experience of Don Bosco one easily draws the lesson that a confession made well opens for us heaven and saves us from eternal damnation. It is therefore a sacrament that helps us live well.

Don Bosco knew that every month he let his boys make

spiritual retreat called the “Exercise for a Happy Death” and he told them to take special care to make their confession as if it were the last one of their lives. This exercise was no reason for fear or sadness but an encouragement to live their young lives to the full.

Among the little stories (*fioretti*) that Salesians recall, they remember a boy, who, during the bombing in the last war, fled with his companions beneath the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians and there approached a priest to hear his confession. The priest recognized him and said: “But you made your confession only this morning.” “That’s true, but I don’t know if I’m going to die,” came he reply. We too should remind ourselves to make every confession well. It may well be the last of our lives.

The suggestion that Charles made about bad companions urges us to offer you some reflections on this delicate subject. We will do this by recounting the confession that a youngster made to Don Bosco a few moments before he died.

A Dying Youngster

confesses

to Don Bosco

The echoes of scandal in the heart of a teenager
The confession that Charles made reminds us of the importance to make our confessions well as if it were the last one of our lives. If you have a good memory you will recall the recommendation that the dying Francis Bessucco gave Don Bosco to pass on to his companions. *"Tell them to flee from scandal and to always make good confessions."*

In recounting the following episode in which Don Bosco hears the confession of a dying teenager we wish to especially reflect the gravity of scandal that we receive or we give to others, the necessity to confess it and to make reparation for the damage done. For those who have given scandal and confessed there is heroic pardon. Jesus was the first one to give us an example when, from the cross he forgave his executioners.

Here is the episode as it was recounted in the *Biographical Memoirs of Don Bosco* (EBM VII, 139-140) *"He had been hastily called to the deathbed of a consumptive sixteen-year-old former festive oratory boy, near San Rocco. Overjoyed, the poor lad made his confession, after which his parents returned to his bedside.*

Don Bosco remained at the head of the bed. A ghastly melancholy now suddenly settled upon the boy's features.

"Please, mother," he said suddenly, "ask the boy downstairs to come up. He used to be my friend."

"Why do you want him?"

"I must tell him something."

Noting that the boy's parents were not happy with this request, Don Bosco tried to dissuade him. "Don't bother," he said. "Do you

really need to see him?"

"Yes, I want to tell him good-bye."

You are the one who killed me

The boy was called. With a frightened look at his friend, he edged up to the foot of the bed, while the dying youth, helped by his parents, struggled to a sitting position.

"You murderer," he managed to gasp between racking coughs while pointing at him, "cursed be the moment I first met you! ...Because of you I am dying so young. ...You taught me things I never knew. ... You betrayed me. ...You made me lose God's grace. ... Your foul language and example led me into evil and now make me miserable. Had I only listened to those who begged me to keep away from you...."

The Struggle to Forgive

Everyone was in tears. Shaken and paler even than his dying friend, that wretched boy clung to the bedstead.

"Enough," Don Bosco told the dying boy. "Calm down! Why get upset over the past? Forget it! You've made a good confession and have nothing to fear. God is so good. Everything has been erased and forgotten."

"True, but if it weren't for him, I'd still be innocent....I'd be happy. ...I wouldn't be reduced to this state...."

"There now, forgive him just as the Lord has forgiven you," Don Bosco went on. "Your pardon will obtain mercy for him!"

"Yes, I forgive him!" the poor boy exclaimed, burying his face in his hands and breaking into sobs.

The heartrending scene was more than anyone could bear. At a nod from Don Bosco, the parents took the other boy away, sobbing and so shaken up that he had to be supported.

Don Bosco meanwhile, with a few words that only he could say, again restored peace to the unhappy boy and stayed with him until he died.

We know how scandals resonate in the souls of youngsters, of teenagers and disturb their minds. Those who cause scandal to little ones should beware of the Jesus' warning.

It also helps to forgive those who have been victims of

scandals, but do not expect to get total and immediate forgiveness. Do not ruminate often on the offense, trying to forget them and praying for those who have done wrong is already a path to forgiveness.

Experience also tells us that the teenage victims of scandal experience a lot of shame and confiding this does not happen immediately, sometimes it takes years till they have the courage to break free.

Prevent scandals and invite to denounce the perpetrators seems ever more urgent in our society which is extensively rife with phenomena like pornography and sexual perversity of various kinds.

Don Bosco's Love for the Virtue of Purity

*Don Bosco's immense
zeal for the sustained preservation
of this angelic virtue*

Those who knew Don Bosco knew also his great love for the virtue of Purity and how he used every means to get his boys to cherish it and practice it. He spoke very zealously about Purity, always singing its praises and terming it "this beautiful virtue" or "this angelic virtue." He once told his boys: "When this virtue is present all the others are attracted toward it and are preserved for their good, but if it is lost then all the others are lost too. Always respect Chastity."

On the same subject, the Salesian Fr. Secondo Marchisio adds: "Even though he loved his students very much and they loved him tremendously, yet he reciprocated their affection with his fatherly affection in a restrained and dignified manner. He never allowed himself to be embraced nor did he caress or embrace them. He limited himself to just cheerfully commending their behaviour and by placing his hand on their heads or on their shoulders."

Humility, charity and chastity are the three precious stones with which a cleric should adorn his soul. Writing to the cleric Parigi Don Bosco suggested to him the practice of these three virtues as a condition for spiritual progress in the growth of holiness: "*Si vis progredi in viam mandatorum Dei, perge quemadmodum aliquot abhinc tempore coepisti. Quomodo si volueris animam tuam pretiosis margaritis exonare,*

amicitiam constitue cum humilitate caritate, et castitate. Eo sanctior eris, quo strictior erit haec amicitia.

What are the means for cultivating the virtue of chastity? Don Bosco suggests temperance in food, observance of the prescribed fast periods, promptness in going to bed and rising, commitment to study, flight from idleness, the sign of the cross, short prayerful phrases, prayer, vigilance and flight from dangerous occasions.

The means are simple and practical, but he considered them of use only if they were used well and perseveringly: "These diabolical disturbances will be put to flight by the sign of the cross, with the Mother of Mercy, with the living Jesus, and especially by contempt for them, by prayer and vigilance and by flight from idleness and dangerous occasions.

Don Bosco considered chastity as a virtue, habitual state, absolutely necessary for accession to the priesthood, a condition that could never be passed over. To a cleric who was close to ordination and told him about his difficulties in respect to this virtue, Don Bosco replied: "I have received your letter. Your frankness is praiseworthy and I thank God for the good will that inspired it. By all means, follow the advice of your confessor: *he who hears you, hears me*, says Jesus Christ in the Gospel. Work hard to correspond with the impulses of divine grace which are entering your heart. Perhaps the Lord is calling you to a high level of virtue. But let us not deceive ourselves: if you cannot be victorious in this matter, do not go ahead; do not seek advancement to sacred orders until you have spent at least a year without falling." Then he speaks of the usual means: prayer, flight from idleness and occasions of sin, use of the sacraments, devotion to Our Lady...

Some time later a cleric wrote to him about the same prob-

lems. Maybe Don Bosco knew him better, or maybe less, but the fact is that he sets a shorter period of trial and the tone of the reply is different: "To respond directly to your valued letter, I would need to know how long has passed since the last time you fell. My feeling, before God, is that you should not seek orders until at least six months of trial. But I do not forbid you to seek the opinion of others who have encouraged you to go ahead." In this second case his tone is less precise and cordial; while still delicate. It is more reserved and laconic. He limits himself to expressing his own opinion with great humility without taking a stand and leaves room for the liberty of conscience of the individual.

There is however this particular incident mentioned in the Biographical Memoirs that most eloquently demonstrates Don Bosco's great love for this virtue, to what extremes he would go in order to urge his boys to practise it and how promptly and permanently they ought to strive to get out of its corresponding vice. We quote the incident in its entirety that you may judge for yourself the extent of Don Bosco's zeal to this virtue.

"Chastity ... was one of the favourite topics which Don Bosco frequently stressed while speaking to his boys personally or through their superiors.

A former Salesian pupil gave Bishop (James) Costamagna blanket permission to tell Don Bosco's first biographer the incident we are about to narrate on condition that he remain anonymous. An Oratory boy habitually sinned grievously against purity, particularly during the summer vacations. On returning to the Oratory in the fall of 1880 - his soul laden down with sin - he hurried to go to confession to Don Bosco who did something that, as far as we know, he never did to anyone else. He listened to the confession and then, pressing the boy's face strongly to his own, told him, 'I don't want you to commit sins of this kind ever again for the rest of your life!' We might say that at that moment all his love for purity was profusely poured into the young sinner's soul. In 1899, the latter -

then a religious - stated that he was ready to reveal under oath the marvelous change wrought in him by what the bishop calls 'that extraordinary, most exceptional embrace of Don Bosco.' At that instant the boy felt his sinful attachment being uprooted from his heart, so that when again home on vacation and, later in the military service, he never slipped into his old habit, regardless of the number of temptations." (EBM 14, 434)

Towards the very end of his life, this was what Don Bosco confided to John Cagliero, one of his first boys and later a cardinal regarding his concerns for the youngsters and the virtue of Chastity: "A few days before his last illness" recalls Fr. John Cagliero, "Don Bosco invited me to his room alone and told me: 'See Don Bosco is old, and cannot work anymore; these are the last years of my life. You work with others to save poor youth! You are frightened (then his eyes grew moist with tears), I fear that some of these here will wrongly interpret the manifestations of Don Bosco's affection for the youngsters, and the way in which he used to hear confessions sitting so close to them. I may even have given the impression of being too physical and they might say that to justify himself Don Bosco used to speak to them in the secrecy of confession and thereafter too. I know that there are some who will profit from these interpretations and I fear some spiritual harm."

Don Bosco feared this for a long time. Because of this fear, this is what he wrote in the first draft of the Salesian Constitutions (rules): (1858) : "Whoever is unsure that he will be able to preserve this virtue (of chastity) in thought, word and deed should not take a step toward this congregation because at every step he will be exposed to grave dangers. Words and indifferent looks to which a doubtful interpretation may be added could make youngsters victims of human passion."

Don Bosco's understanding of purity did not stop in just the way he lived his Chastity. It spilt over into all the areas of his life. Fr. Cerruti maintains: "To me, it seems that he practiced Purity of mind, heart and body to a unique degree and that

was the secret of his Christian greatness."

While confessors ought to be discreet in the manner in which they guide youngsters who have fallen into the vices of immorality, they must strive to gain the confidence of their young penitents if they are to help them effectively. Should the youngster be reluctant to disclose details about the frequency and/or the seriousness of his falls it will be difficult for the confessor to help him. Therefore, it is for both the confessor to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help the penitent make effective, fervent and good confessions and for the penitent to seek out a stable and regular confessor, one whom he trusts completely and one who will help him to increase his admiration for this angelic virtue as also to assist him to keep intact this angelic virtue into his adult life so as to carry it untarnished to the end of his days.

Don Bosco Hears the Confession of His Boys

*A beautiful photograph of Don Bosco
and some precious hints to educators*

This totally familiar scene depicts Don Bosco while hearing the confession of his boys. We know that he allowed himself to be photographed on condition that he had his boys near him. Can you imagine how he must have wanted to be near them? This explains why we find little Paul Albera so close and seeming to be on his knees making his confession.

This photograph also reminds us of the joy that Don Bosco experienced hearing the confessions of his boys and the sacrifice he endured being engaged for long hours this ministry.

One of his first boys, Joseph Buzzetti recalls: *"Many a time I saw Don Bosco spend whole nights hearing confessions. At dawn he would still be where he had been sitting at sunset of the day before! One evening, the eve of a solemn feast, as the clock struck ten many boys were still waiting for confession.*

"I think it's time to get some sleep, boys," Don Bosco suggested. "It's very late!"

"Please go on," they begged. Don Bosco obliged, but after a while, one after another, they all dozed off. Don Bosco followed suit, resting his head wearily on the arm of a boy named Gariboldi whose confession he was hearing. The boy's hands were folded, his forearm resting on the kneeler. Don Bosco did not awaken until around five in the morning. Seeing all the boys stretched out on the floor asleep, he turned to poor Gariboldi, who had been awake all night,

and said, "It's really time we all went to bed."

As he spoke the boys awoke and Don Bosco resumed confessions. That afternoon, at about two o'clock Don Bosco noticed that Gariboldi's right arm was in a sling. "What happened to your arm, young fellow?" he asked.

"Oh! Nothing," he answered, unwilling to say more.

Don Bosco was not to be put off by the answer. He pursued the subject.

"Well, if you really want to know, I'll tell you!" the boy replied. His arm was black and blue because all night long it had been pinned to the armrest of the kneeler by Don Bosco's head. He had not awakened him out of respect, although the pressure on his arm had been quite painful. A fine example of the affectionate esteem the boys felt for Don Bosco! (EBM III, 107-108)

Concluding these reflections of ours it seems useful to remember Don Bosco's appeal to educators that we find in the life of Francis Besucco. It seems like a beautiful compilation of his thoughts on hearing the confessions of youngsters.

Advice to Educators

"If it happens that this book is read by those to whom Divine Providence given has charge of the education of youth, in the Lord, I strongly recommend to them three things: First of all, zealously inculcate in them the need for frequent confession. Support youngsters in their inconstancy and it possibly to easily approach this sacrament.

Secondly, insist that is very useful to choose a stable confessor, one he would not need to change, but let there be several confessors so that each one finds a confessor best suited for the good of his own soul.

Moreover, always keep in mind that those who change their confessor do not do something wrong. It is better to change him a thousand times rather than withhold a sin in confession.

Never fail to recall the great secrecy of confession. It is explicitly said that the confessor is bound by the secret, naturally, in the ecclesiastical, civil and divine forums and that under no circumstance nor at the cost of any harm to him, not even death, can he manifest

to anyone things he has heard in confession or use it for himself. In fact, he is not even to think of what he has heard in this sacrament. It is no wonder then that the confessor's affection is not diminished by the serious things he has heard in confession on the contrary he appreciates the penitent all the more.

Therefore, when the doctor discovers all the gravity of the illness of a sick person he rejoices in his heart because now he can apply the appropriate remedy, so does the confessor who is a doctor of our souls, and in the name of God, with absolution, he heals all wounds of our souls.

I am convinced that if these things are recommended and explained properly you will see great results among boys and become aware of marvellous moral properties of the Catholic Faith in the Sacrament of Penance.

Of all the teachings of Don Bosco that seem most suited to our teenagers are: at least make your confession once a month and choose a stable confessor to guide you carefully through the years of your youth and accompany you as you realize your vocation in life as an adult, a married person or a consecrated religious. Youngsters must have the utmost confidence in their confessor and be very sincere with him in their confession.

It is our hope that confessors imitate the zeal of Don Bosco, inviting youngsters to come to confession frequently, seek to advise them, come to know why they find it so difficult to be since and be available whenever they need them. With youngsters, it is good to set aside a fixed time. Avoid being too hasty or too long drawn.

Youngsters want to be heard and so it is important not to interrupt them when they are mentioning their sins; after that, suggest to them some concrete suggestions and some prayer they can recite by themselves.

The penance you give them should be easy to remember. It could often be a prayer they know and could recite and which would lead them to manifest a sincere conversion of heart.

The core of the confession is to help the youngster to re-

flect on the love of Jesus by inviting them to contemplate on the Crucifix and to meditate on Christ's passion and death caused by our sins. Don Bosco insisted very much on the blood that Jesus shed on the cross. This is an excellent exercise that arouses in them sorrow for sin.

Remind youngsters to have a great respect for the Sacrament of Confession as they would for their teachers and their confessors.

In conclusion, dear young friends, we leave you with a precious piece of advice from Don Bosco: *Remember, my dear boys, that confession and Holy Communion are your two most solid supports along the road to heaven. Therefore, if anybody tries to make you give them up, consider him/her an enemy of your soul.*

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DON BOSCO THE CONFESSOR OF HIS BOYS

GIANNI ASTI
Presentation by
Don Emilio Zeni

This book contains what Don Bosco told his boys about Confession and how he helped them to live well this extraordinary experience of God's mercy.

Such was the esteem that Don Bosco had for the Sacrament of Confession that he incorporated it as one of the pillars of his educative system. He not only exercised his ministry in the confessional, but through his tireless pastoral and practical instructions, he encouraged more and more of the faithful and especially youngsters to approach this sacrament and draw much benefit from it.

Particularly in the three biographies of Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco, Don Bosco wrote almost three identical chapters on the subject of Confession. They highlight the difficulties that youngsters encounter as they attempt to approach the sacrament.

For this reason, while writing to his boys, Don Bosco also addressed priests and invited them to welcome with kindness this particular category of penitents for whom he reserved his most tender concern.

Some of the boys who came to him for confession went on to become famous while others remained unknown. But through every encounter with every boy Don Bosco had something to teach them as also today, he has something to teach us too.