

Great saint, great manager

written by Fr Francesco MOTTO | November 11, 2024

It is not easy to choose, from the hundreds of unpublished letters of Don Bosco that we have recovered in recent decades, the ones that most deserve to be presented and commented on. This time we take a very simple one, but one that in just a few lines summarises an entire project of Salesian educational work and offers us many other interesting facts. It is the one written on 7 May 1877 to a person from Trentino, a certain Daniele Garbari, who had repeatedly asked him on behalf of two brothers how he could found an educational institute in his area, like the ones that Don Bosco was founding throughout Italy, France and Argentina.

Dear Mr Garbari,

My absence from Turin was the cause of the delay in replying to your letters, which I have regularly received. I am very pleased that our institution is well received in these places of yours. The more it is known, the more it will be well-liked by the governments themselves; whether they like it or not, the facts assure us that we must help youngsters at risk in order to make them good citizens or keep them in dishonour in prison.

As for setting up an institute similar to this in the city of Trent or surrounding towns, it does not take much to begin with:

1. A room capable of accommodating a certain number of children, but with their respective workshops inside.
2. Something that can provide a little bread for the Rector and the other people who assist him in the care and management.

The boys are supported

1. by what little monthly boarding fee some of them can pay, or are paid by relatives or other people who recommend them.
2. from the little income the work provides.
3. by grants from municipalities, the government, charitable congregations, and the donations of private individuals. This is how all our trade houses are run, and with God's help we have progressed well. However, it must be taken as a basis that we have always been, and will always be, uninvolved in anything political.

Our overriding aim is to gather children at risk to make them good Christians and upright citizens. This is the first thing to be made clear to the civil and

governmental authorities.

As a priest, then, I must be in full agreement with the ecclesiastical authority; therefore, when it comes to finalising the matter, I would write directly to the Archbishop of Trent, who will certainly not have any difficulties.

Here is my preliminary thought. As the matter continues and more is needed, I will write. Please thank on my behalf all those people who show me kindness.

I wanted to write this myself in my own poor handwriting, but I will hand over the pen to my secretary so that it will be easier to read.

With the greatest esteem and gratitude, I have the honour of being your

Humble servant Fr. Gio Bosco Turin, 7 May 1877

Positive image of Salesian work

First of all, the letter informs us how Don Bosco, after papal approval of the Salesian Congregation (1874), the opening of the first Salesian house in France (1875) and the first missionary expedition to Latin America (1875), was always busy visiting and supporting his already existing works and accepting or not accepting the many that were being proposed to him everywhere over those years. At the time of the letter he had the thought of opening the first houses of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians beyond the one in Mornese – as many as six in the two-year period 1876-1877 – and above all he was interested in establishing himself in Rome, where he had been trying unsuccessfully for more than 10 years to have a place. Nothing came of it. Yet another Piedmontese like Don Bosco, a “priest on the move” like him, was not welcome on the banks of the Tiber, in the capital Rome which was already full of unpopular Piedmontese, certain pontifical authorities and certain Roman clergy. For three years he had to “make do” with being on the outskirts of Rome, i.e. the Castelli Romani and Magliano Sabino.

Paradoxically, the opposite had happened with the city administrations and government authorities of the Kingdom of Italy, where Don Bosco had many, if not friends – their ideas were too far apart, at least great admirers. And for a very simple reason that every government was interested in: to manage the newly-minted country Italy with honest, hard-working, law-abiding citizens, instead of populating the prisons with vagrant “criminals” unable to support themselves and their families with a decent job of their own. Three decades later, in 1900, the famous Jewish anthropologist and criminologist Cesare Lombroso

would give Don Bosco full credit when he wrote: “The Salesian institutes represent a colossal and ingeniously organised effort to prevent crime, the only one indeed made in Italy.” As the letter in question well states, the image of Salesian works in which, without taking sides with the various political parties, boys were educated to become “good Christians and upright citizens” was a positive one, even in the Austro-Hungarian Empire to which Trentino and Venezia Giulia belonged at the time.

Typology of a Salesian House

In the continuation of the letter Don Bosco went on to present the structure of a house of education: rooms where the boys could be housed (and he implied at least five things: **courtyard** to play in, **classrooms** to study in, **refectory** to eat in, **dormitory** to sleep in, **church** to pray in) and “**a plant or workshops**” where a trade could be taught with which the youngsters could live and have a future once they left the institute. As for economic resources, he indicated three assets: the minimum monthly boarding fee that the boys’ parents or relatives could pay, the small income from the craft workshops, public grants (government, municipalities) and especially private charity. It was precisely the Valdocco experience. But Don Bosco was silent here about one important thing: the total **dedication** to the educational mission by the Rector and his close collaborators, priests and lay people, who for the price of a loaf of bread and a bed spent 24 hours a day in work, prayer, teaching and assistance. At least that was the way it was done in the Salesian houses of the time, highly appreciated by both civil and religious authorities, bishops first and foremost, without whose approval it was evidently not possible to found a house “that educated by evangelising and evangelised by educating” like a Salesian one.

Results

We do not know if there was a follow-up to this letter. Mr Garbari’s Salesian foundation project certainly did not go ahead. Nor did dozens of other foundation proposals. But it is historically certain that many other instructors, priests and lay people throughout Italy were inspired by Don Bosco’s experience, founding similar works, inspired by his educational model and his preventive system.

Garbari had to consider himself satisfied, however: Don Bosco had suggested a strategy that worked in Turin and elsewhere... and then he had his hand-written letter which, however difficult to ‘decipher’, was still a letter from a

saint. So much so that he jealously preserved it and today it is kept in the Central Salesian Archives in Rome.