

DON BOSCO'S EYESIGHT

(Natale Cerrato)

Amongst all the photographs of Don Bosco there is one which those who knew him considered as the truest representation of the saint: it was taken on 16 March 1886 by Angelo Ferretto for the Genoa firm of Gustavo Luzzati when Don Bosco was seventy years of age. He was on his way to Spain at the time, and had stayed a few days at Sampierdarena.

In 1888 the photo was touched up by the painter Giuseppe Rollini for the famous portrait done in oils that can now be seen in the rooms of the saint. It was also used by Giovanni Crida for his well known paintings of Don Bosco.

In the Genoa portrait Don Bosco's eyes have a brightness about them that fascinates and impresses the viewer; they really seem to capture the fatherly heart of the saint.

It is hard to believe that when Don Bosco had that photograph taken his right eye was almost blind, and his left eye weak and functioning but poorly.

Even as a youngster the saint suffered from smarting of the eyes caused by his studying long into the night, reading and writing by candlelight or lamplight.

In 1840 when he was at the Chieri seminary, he was once standing at a window looking at the storm clouds, when lightning struck the parapet of the building. He suffered a blow to the stomach by falling masonry and was knocked down unconscious.

Years afterwards, on another stormy night when he was at *Sant'Ignazio sopra Lanzo* during the annual retreat, there was a crash of lightning followed by a downpour of rain, and the glass door of the corridor was shattered by a wild burst of wind. Miraculously Don Bosco was unharmed. However, he contracted a recurring eye trouble, and from that time onwards the sight of his right eye was always very poor.

This was not the last time that the saint was injured by lightning. At Valdocco, on the night of 15 May 1861, his sight was again impaired by a lightning flash: his right eye being damaged almost to the point of complete blindness, and his left eye so weakened that, for it too, the worst was feared. He was then told not to read or write after sunset.

Don Bosco did not obey this prescription, but he did begin to wear dark glasses. (In the *Memorie* they are called 'blue glasses'.)

A past pupil of Borgo San Martino wrote in *La Voce del Collegio* (no. 45 in the issue of Year 13) that one of Don Bosco's visits remained forever engraved in his memory. As soon as he came into the courtyard there was a general rush to meet him, kiss his hand and listen to his fatherly words. Don Bosco was always kind to his boys, and we used to look on him as a prophet. He put on his glasses, and gazing into our eyes, he said jokingly, *Now, my dear young friends, I can see not only you, but also your thoughts.*

It is clear then that Don Bosco wore sun glasses at least occasionally.

He was even obliged to ask for a dispensation from the recitation of the breviary for those occasions when he could not read without considerable fatigue. On one occasion a young cleric (Blessed Fr Philip Rinaldi) mentioned that he needed to see an oculist, and Don Bosco told him: *I too have always had trouble with my eyes; there are times when I find it very tiring to read or write, and sometimes I cannot read at all.*

Don Rinaldi took this to mean that he too would have the same problem; and indeed it happened that he was for quite some time unable to recite his breviary. However, in his later years he found he was able to take up the practice again without distress.

A number of Don Bosco's letters refer to his eye problems. In a letter to Contessa Callori dated 14 November 1873, he wrote, *My oculist has advised me that there is little hope for my right eye, but I can save my left eye from getting worse if I refrain from reading and writing. But I can eat, drink, sleep, walk, etc., and so all is going well.* To the same Contessa, on 25 November 1878, he wrote, *Generally all is well. However, my eyes are rapidly deteriorating. I have never enjoyed good eyesight, but God's will be done: he knows what is best for me.*

In 1879, when visiting France, Don Bosco wrote to Don Rua from Marseilles on 11 January: *My health in general is good. My left eye is no worse, and my right eye a little better. At the moment I am reading 'Le Citoyen', which two months ago would have been quite impossible.*

In 1880 he visited the houses of Saint-Cyr and Navarre before returning to Marseilles. Accompanying him was Fr Ronchail, and later Fr Cagliero. The latter noticed that Don Bosco was a good walker but did not see much on account of his poor eyesight. In that year Don Bosco himself stated that one eye was very weak, but he hoped the good Lord would spare it, for otherwise he would not be able to carry on his work. *Still, the Lord will be able to put things right some way or other.*

From 1880 onwards the deterioration was much worse, so that on 14 October 1884 the saint was constrained to ask

the Sacred Penitentiary for special permission to celebrate the votive Mass of Our Lady on feastsdays, and the Mass for the Dead on ferias. He never complained, and did not pray for a cure. However, his young charges prayed for him; but the Lord knew best. Despite these problems, right to the time of his death Don Bosco never ceased to do his utmost to carry on his labours, making use of helpers and all ways and means possible to further his efforts for the greater glory of God and the good of souls.