

A few days after the death of Count Carlo Cays, Count Alberto Della Torre di Rinco addressed these comforting words to Luigi, the son of the deceased: *All my friends without exception speak to me of your saintly father with the greatest respect and affection. It is plain that his holy life was an inspiration to all. What is most consoling is their conviction that he was truly a saint; and that people think more of praying to him for his assistance rather than for the repose of his soul.*

Count Carlo Cays of Giletta and Caselette possessed nobility of rank, was highly educated and a wealthy man; he could have lived in the comfort of his Caselette mansion, surrounded by magnificent parklands, and without a care in the world. Life's enjoyments had been handed to him on a plate.

Yet the Count moved out of his estate and went to live in 19th century Turin, a city of poverty and plagued by innumerable delinquents, victims of an unjust social inequality. He moved in with the boys harboured by Don Bosco, offering his services to them as a brother-and-father-figure. He sought to help the poor, putting himself at their disposition with his instruction, wealth, energy and time. He gave himself to them entirely, and later added the activities of the priesthood conferred on him at the age of sixty-four.

He had been born in Turin in 1813 of a noble family at Nizza Monferrato. When he was six years of age his mother died and at fifteen years of age he lost his sister. In 1836 he took out a degree in Law, and used his legal prowess in the defence of the rights of the poor and against the injustices and abuses to which they were subjected.

The following year he married Erminia Agnese Provana, and had two children: Vittoria (who died when still a child) and Luigi.

After eight years of married life he was widowed at the age of 32 and was left with his six-months-old son Luigi. His parents pressed him to marry again but he remained single, dedicating his life totally to the education of his son and the assistance of the poor.

He was elected mayor of Caselette, and one of his first concerns was the donation to the municipality of land for the local cemetery. He also set up a lending library and organised the construction of canals, water-piping and fountains to better the distribution of drinking water for the populace. He was respected by the people as *a thorough gentleman and a man of incomparable kindness.*

The friendliness of this noble and educated gentleman when dealing with the humble villagers was proverbial. To quote what was said of him by some of the villagers: *Our elderly citizens passed the word around that the count liked polenta; and since no one at the castle cooked it, he used to invite himself to one of the houses of the peasantry, where he chatted with the inmates, and enjoyed with them a helping of polenta; when leaving, he insisted on paying them for their hospitality and the meal'.*

In 1857 he was elected to the Subalpine Parliament; and a few years later, when his Catholic ideals found politics insufferable, he resigned and retired to private life.

When he arrived in Turin, the city still had a rural atmosphere and was peopled largely by the struggling poor, the hungry and (when employment could be found) the under-paid and over-worked - in short, a city overrun by famished delinquents. It was indeed a bleak period when Turin was a city in great need of help and solidarity.

In 1850 Count Carlo Cays became a member of the St Vincent de Paul Conference, the movement that was founded in Paris (1833) by a young Catholic man, Frederick Ozanam (beatified on 22 August 1997 by John Paul II). The members of this charitable organisation reinforced their faith by practical acts of solidarity on behalf of those in need, especially urgent cases. Carlo Cays took on roles of considerable responsibility and guidance in the Society, being Regional President of the ten Conferences in Turin, and also giving his own personal help to the needy and the sick.

He was always profoundly interested in the rearing of his son Luigi, and on the occasion of young man's impending marriage wrote to him: *Remember that love has no room for selfishness; and the stronger love is, the readier it is to make sacrifices for the one loved. We cannot attain happiness by striving for the impossible; we need to limit ourselves to what is within our means. Let us be satisfied with the things the good Lord has given us, for if we hanker after the impossible, we run the risk of never achieving happiness.*

At Don Bosco's Oratory he helped out with the teaching of Religion and organised and took part in the charity raffles. He was one of the first lay persons to become a Salesian Cooperator. It was to him that Don Bosco and Bishop Moreno (of Ivrea) turned to settle their disagreements regarding the *Catholic Readings*.

Carlo Cays and Don Bosco became sincere friends and close collaborators. The following is a quaint and charming example. The Count had often invited the Valdocco priest to a meal in his Caselette Castle; and Don Bosco had often promised to come on the Count's birthday, 4 November

(Feast of St Charles Borromeo) - but had never been able to keep his promise. Then one day the saint sent a message to the Count that that year he would finally be able to come and celebrate the occasion with him. The Count expressed his incredulity: *Like past promises? If Don Bosco comes for the Feast of St Charles, I shall eat a whole dog!* When Don Bosco heard of the Count's reply, he made a special note on his calendar and made sure he was able to go to the castle. At the end of the meal, he turned to the Count and said: 'I have kept my word: and now it is your turn to keep yours! I have brought with me a whole dog - and you have to eat it'. Then he took from his pocket some biscuits that the cook had made into the shape of a dog.

With the passing of time the Count's Salesian and priestly vocation had been developing. Don Bosco invited him to reflect and make a Spiritual Retreat and thus resolve whatever difficulties remained before making his final decision. After a few days, Carlo Cays went to Don Bosco to discuss matters with him.

Whilst he waited to see the saint, a woman had taken her daughter to Don Bosco to receive his blessing. The girl was suffering from convulsions, paralysis and mental disturbance as the result of an accident.

When the girl and her mother went into the room where Don Bosco received his visitors, Carlo Cays vowed to himself that if the girl came out of the room cured, he would take it as a sign that the Madonna wished him to become a Salesian. After a few minutes the girl ran from the room and told the people waiting there that she had been miraculously cured. On 20 September 1878 Carlo Cays was ordained priest in the Turin Cathedral. He was 64 years of age.

Don Bosco sent him to France to direct a Salesian School there. After two years he returned to Turin and was appointed one of the Confessors at Valdocco; he also worked as biographer of deceased Salesians. He died on 4 October 1882 in the presence of Don Bosco.

Father Michael Rua, the future Rector Major of the Salesians, wrote, *May God grant that our last day and our passage to eternity may be like that of our beloved Father Carlo Cays. His was the death of a saint.*