

THE 'LITTLE PRIEST' OF VALDOCCO  
Natale Cerrato

How tall was Don Bosco? We could settle for 166 centimetres.

A few years ago a journalist with historical ambition vilified Don Bosco as 'the tough little priest of Valdocco'. He portrayed him as a man of very limited intellect and character, and to get a laugh he maintained that Don Bosco was only 163 centimetres tall.

Of course, we know that the size of a man is no measure of his character or intelligence. However, just how tall was Don Bosco?

The Boscos of the Becchi were known by the people of the district as Ij Boschèt, or Boschetti (little Boscos) <sup>1</sup> 119], and this nickname could give the impression that they were diminutive in size. But Francesca Bosco, great-grand-daughter of Joseph Pin dij Boschèt, Don Bosco's brother, wrote in a letter dated 28 November 1980 that the diminutive was merely a local usage and had nothing to do with the stature of a person. The Becchi Boscos were called Boschetti just as the Cavallos were called Cavallini. <sup>2</sup> Possibly, too, the nickname may have been used to distinguish the Boscos and the Cavallos from others of the same name but of different families or in different areas.

Don Bosco's biographer, Father J. B. Lemoyne, lived with the saint for twenty-four years and described him as of ordinary height; and all his acquaintances declared that he was of medium stature.

What then can we say of the 163 centimetres? Father M. Molineris, in his *Vita episodica di Don Bosco* (published posthumously at Colle in 1974), offers us an explanation. The information we have on Don Bosco's stature is based mainly on data taken from his first two passports - 1850 when he went to Milan, and 1858 when he made his first journey to Rome <sup>3</sup>

On the first passport Don Bosco's height is given as 38 oncie. Since one source gives an oncia as equalling 4.28

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<sup>1</sup> v. MO 119.

<sup>2</sup> Similarly in English we have 'Smithy' for Smith, 'Johnny' for John, 'Willy' for William, 'Charley' for Charles, etc. [ACMcD]

<sup>3</sup> v. Central Salesian Archives, 72-E-10-12.

cms, and another as 4.35 cms, we arrive at 162 to 165 cms. In the second passport Don Bosco's height is given directly in the decimal system as 167 cms. Which measurement is more exact? To split the difference, let us say 166 cms.

Don Bosco came under the military law of 1815, and in 1835 would have been conscripted. The prescribed height for a soldier in those days had to be at least 154 cms (about a dozen centimetres less than Don Bosco's 166 cms).

In the Kingdom of Sardinia during the period 1828-37, 25% of army call-ups were between 154 and 162 cms in height. The same percentage (25%) of the Turin military call-ups of the same period were identical to Sardinia's, except that 18% of the Turin call-ups were only from 141 to 154 cms in height and declared temporarily unfit for service.<sup>4</sup>

With rather cruel irony Levra states in his history that 'the brave conscripts depicted in 'risorgimental' paintings who marched away in 1848 singing the praises of Charles Albert, and in 1859 sang La bela Gigogin, could hardly be seen as models of physical prowess'.

Don Bosco then, with his 166 cms, could have been considered in those days as taller than normal. (Of course, he may even have been somewhat taller.) Certainly his physical strength was well beyond the normal, as is borne out in his own memoirs: 'My boldness and strength made me feared by all my companions, even those older and bigger than myself'.

This he demonstrated when some hooligans began to bully his fellow student Luigi Comollo. 'I immediately lost control and gave way to brute force. Instead of grasping a chair or a stick, I actually seized one of the bullies from behind and used him to bludgeon his companions.' Comollo was horrified and called out to him, 'Your strength frightens me. You must remember that God did not give it to you to massacre your companions!'<sup>5</sup>

It is plain then that Don Bosco was of medium height, certainly not small for those times, and of unusual physical strength. Hence the journalist who wished to ridicule him for his height gives himself away as one who ridicules what he has no knowledge of.

The renowned Dominican priest Ceslao Pera paints a very different picture of the saint. 'Whoever looks at the painting of Blessed John Bosco must agree with me that on that square-jawed and energetic face one can see the image

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<sup>4</sup> v. U. Levra, *L'altro volto di Torino risorgimentale 1814-48*, Torino 1988, p.62

<sup>5</sup> MO 60-61.

of a rural Piedmontese, sturdy and rugged as the mountain rocks...But this is only one aspect of this saint...'<sup>6</sup>

Tempio di Don Bosco  
June-July-August 1995

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[II]

JOHN AND THE TIGHTROPE  
Teresio Bosco

At Colle there is a small monument in bronze constructed to recall the antics of young John Bosco when he entertained his friends with conjuring tricks and acrobatics stunts.

Don Bosco tells us in his memoirs: 'On feastedays the lads from the nearby families and even from distant villages used to come looking for me, wanting me to perform for them a few tricks that I had learned and practised.

'Whenever there was a market day or a fair I used to go and study the various 'magicians' and acrobats. I watched their conjuring with particular attention and studied their dexterity. When I went home I practised and practised until I succeeded in reproducing what I had seen. You can imagine how many tumbles I took, how many falls, and accidents I had to risk! You will find it hard to believe that at eleven years of age I had succeeded in doing conjuring tricks and somersaults and tightrope walking in quite a professional way.

'Every feastday I put on an afternoon performance.

'At the Becchi there is was a field with quite a few trees in it. One of these was a autumn pear tree that was very robust. I would knot a rope round it and fasten it to another tree nearby. Beside this I used to put a table with a box full of equipment for my conjuring tricks. On the ground I spread out a mat for my acrobatics.

'When all was ready and I had a good number of spectators eagerly waiting for me to start, I would invite them to say the Rosary and sing a hymn. Then I stood on a chair and preached them a sermon; (summarising the homily they had heard at the morning Mass); or I would recount some interesting facts that I had read in a book. After

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<sup>6</sup> P C Pera OP: *I doni dello Spirito Santo nell'anima del Beato Giovanni Bosco*, Torino, SEI, 1930 p. 10-11.

this I would say a short prayer and start the show. The preacher was transformed into a professional acrobat.

`I went through my somersaults, walked on my hands, and performed various daring gymnastics. Then came the conjuring tricks. I swallowed coins and retrieved them from the noses of spectators; I multiplied coloured pellets and eggs, I changed water into wine; I executed a fowl, chopped it into pieces and then brought it back to life, chirping merrily. Finally I jumped onto the rope and walked along it as confidently as on a footpath: leaping, dancing, hanging by my hands, somersaulting, and swinging by my feet.

`A couple of hours of these activities left me exhausted, and I finished the show with the spectators joining me in a prayer. Then we all went home. Anyone who blasphemed, indulged in bad talk or refused to join in our common prayer would be refused admission to my performance.'

For young and old the admission fee to John Bosco's performance was the Rosary, the summary of the Parish priest's sermon (there were some who lived a long way from the church and could attend Mass but rarely), the entrance prayer, the promise to avoid blasphemy and bad talk. Young John was most generous in giving up his time and efforts. But as a good Piedmontese he always demanded a price: not in cash but in some good deed for God and for impoverished youngsters.

Where was Mamma Margaret?

The first to hear these Memoirs were the oratory boys; and they used interrupt, asking questions and seeking explanations. As Don Bosco wrote these pages, he recalled these questions and wrote jotted down his replies:

`But going to fairs and markets and watching conjurers' sessions cost money! Where did you find the cash?'

`I earned the money in a dozen ways. I used any tips I got, any presents, any coins my mother or others would give me on feast days for buying sweets. Also I used to catch and sell birds; and I used to go mushrooming, and gather herbs that could be used for medicinal or colouring purposes.

`You also ask whether my mother allowed me to attend markets and fairs and acrobatic shows.

`Well, I can tell you that my mother truly loved me. I told her everything - my plans, my humble adventures; I would do nothing without her consent. She knew all that was going on and she gave me her permission. If I needed anything she did her best to get it for me. My friends too were generous in lending me things I needed.

Noisy enjoyment

John used his shows and games to spread happiness amongst his friends. He had their imagination racing in healthy, enjoyable and exciting fantasies. He had them dreaming and enthusiastically hastening to attend his displays.

The kindness Don Bosco had for his pupils inspired trust and happiness. He remembered how he had himself revelled in his boyish jaunts through the Becchi hills and knew the ecstasy of noisy enjoyment, the sheer exhilaration of running wild, exploding the energy contained in that stick of dynamite we call youth.

To dash about breathlessly in the fresh air, to race across an expansive green oval, was Don Bosco's ideal for his boys. His call to them was to play, jump and shout. His sole interest was that they should keep close to God.

For Don Bosco a happy lad was a healthy lad.  
'Play, jump and be as noisy as you like. Just keep close to God.'

Tempio di Don Bosco  
June - July - August 1995)

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[III]

MAMMA MARGARET'S FOUNTAIN  
Teresio Bosco

As one exits the Temple at Colle and descends towards the 'pylon of the dream' there are signposts that lead to Mamma Margaret's fountain that is only a few metres away and is now clearly placarded. This was the spring where all the families of the Becchi district used to come to draw water.

Every day Mamma Margaret made many journeys down to this fountain to fill her pail with the fresh spring water and slowly make her way back to the kitchen of the Bosco cottage. Such frequent daily journeys for a housewife were very taxing, and the writer still remembers the sighs of his own mother (with her bad back) and her delighted smile when the first tap was installed in their house to supply water from the communal aqueduct.

Joseph chosen before John

Don Bosco used tell of an interesting episode regarding that fountain. On one sweltering day he and Joseph were returning from the fields with their mother - all three

with a mighty thirst. Margaret immediately fetched a bucket of refreshingly cold water from the fountain and placed it on the door step of the house. She then ladled out the the first drink and gave it to Joseph.

Four-year-old John was hurt that his mother had given preference to his brother, and immediately began to sulk. When his mother then brought the ladle to him, he refused it with a pout.

Margaret did not wheedle him with, 'Poor little dear, I left you last and you are pulling a face! Never mind! Next time you will be first.' Instead she said nothing, but simply carried the pail into the kitchen and closed the door. Very soon the door opened and in came John.

'Mamma', he cried. 'Yes, John?' 'Aren't you going to give me a drink?' 'But I thought you weren't thirsty!' 'Sorry, mamma.' 'Here you are, then', and she filled the ladle for him.

#### A love both maternal and paternal

Psychologists tell us that for proper character development a child needs the demanding love of a father and the spontaneous, serene and joyous love of a mother.

The demanding love of a father stimulates and urges commitment, attainment of aims and objectives; it always insists that the child be 'worthy of his father'. A psychologist recently described this situation with the appropriate expression that 'the father is law'.

A mother's love is spontaneous, serene and joyous, and kindles a joie de vivre in the child. It has nothing to do with a child's achievements. It is a love that consoles in times of discomfit; the child knows that he is loved not for his successes but for what he is, namely, for the very fact that he is her child.

Mamma Margaret possessed an instinctive balance that enabled her to unite and alternate both a calm firmness and a serene joyousness. She was sweetness personified, but also full of energy and strength. Her sons knew that when she said no, she really meant no. There were no wily tricks that could effect a weak change.

Don Bosco's love had the stamp of his mother's.

This love that was both serenely joyous and firmly demanding was the first of the character qualities that marked the personality of Don Bosco. He had never had the experience of growing up with both a father and a mother. The only love he knew well was the love of his mother; but she lavished on him the love of both a father and a mother.

Thus Don Bosco was able to cultivate the same sort of love for his boys: a love that showed itself concurrently and alternatively as calmly firm and joyously serene - a

love that was both paternal and maternal. And he desired his Salesians to foster this same kind of love.

As one lingers a moment at the fountain of Mamma Margaret, at the surrounding earth that is at times green or parched according to the sudden moods of the hillside, one is easily given to serious thoughts. Our young charges (whether in their families, in various groups, or in our schools) really need to experience a love that is both calmly firm or joyously serene. Are we giving them this kind of love? Are we able to be demanding without upsetting them, and gentle without spoiling them? Are they convinced that our no means no and will not dither into a yes by any wily whims or tantrums? Do they realise that our yes or no springs from a genuine love for them? Do we show ourselves irritable, moody, or offensive in our behaviour? Or have we learned to control these problems?

Tempio di Don Bosco  
September-October 1995

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[IV]

DON BOSCO AND THE VOYAGES OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS  
Natale Cerrato

Don Bosco had the happy knack of discerning the talents of his disciples and encouraging them to use these talents to the best of their ability - and he could achieve this without pressure or manipulation. He was able to count on their natural inclinations and the affection they had for him.

Thus it was that he was able to choose the vivacious, talented, spontaneous, intelligent and impulsive John Cagliero, and turn him into the most representative character of the Salesian Society in South America. Such was the case also with John Baptist Lemoyne, a priest of sensitivity, of austere spirituality and ready penmanship: Don Bosco encouraged him to use his talents; and he became a polished speaker, poet and dramatist, and the first historian of the Salesian Society. Many other Salesians received the same sort of attention at the hands of our saint.

In 1871 Don Bosco, who for 18 years had been responsible for the publication of the Catholic Readings (a series of monthly religious pamphlets for the masses) wished to add to the collection the history of Christopher Columbus. For this enterprise he chose Father Lemoyne, who, like Columbus, was a native of Genoa. On 4 March he wrote to his young protégé at Lanzo, where he was the rector: 'Surely it is most fitting for a Genoese to undertake the task of writing about the maritime adventures of another Genoese'. And he ended his letter with a number of suggestions and a few snippets of information.

'Do the work at your convenience', he wrote, 'and in your usual attractive and buoyant style, with the short sentences and clarity of thought that have distinguished your other works.'<sup>7</sup>

This was a fascinating challenge, for Father Lemoyne was intensely interested in things historical; and he immediately set about the task.

In less than two years he produced a work of 549 pages, subdivided into three parts. It constituted the first three pamphlets of the yearly output (1873) of the Catholic Readings. Under the title of Christopher Columbus and the discovery of America the three booklets were printed at the Oratory and were widely distributed. Later editions came out in one volume, the tenth edition being entirely redrafted and issued in 1892; this year was the fourth centenary of the Discovery of America and the volume received a special prize at the Columbus Exposition at Genoa.

It is plain, then, that Father Lemoyne's work was not a hurried job rushed off with little care for historical exactness. It was no mere historical novel or 'Hollywood history', and we are assured of this too by the recently published Christopher Columbus, mariner, written by the famous historian Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison.<sup>8</sup> This work makes it clear that Lemoyne's history is essentially accurate history: the great Genoese explorer Lemoine painted as deeply religious, fearless, magnanimous and a veritable genius in navigation accords exactly with the facts as found in Morison's tome.

Father Lemoyne openly manifests his personal love for Genoa - the very love Don Bosco made use of to induce him to compile such a demanding work.

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<sup>7</sup> Correspondence 896.

<sup>8</sup> Done into Italian by T. Colusso (Milan, Loganesi & Co. 1991).

In the second chapter we read of the glorious Christian traditions of Columbus' city that added to the grandeur of the famous navigator; and furthermore in part two of the book, after having described the misfortunes of the third voyage, Lemoine quotes from the last will or Charter of Inheritance that Columbus prepared in favour of his eldest son Diego:

'I direct Diego, or whoever will possess the aforesaid goods, to fulfil the following duties: that in all undertakings, the honour, prosperity and progress of the city of Genoa be always kept in mind and that all possible appropriate means be employed to defend and further the opulence and decorum of this Republic in all that will not be contrary to the Church of God and the dignity of the King of Spain.'<sup>9</sup>

It is interesting to note that Don Bosco had truly hit the mark in entrusting to Father Lemoyne, Genoese, the task of writing the life of Christopher Columbus, the most illustrious son of his home city, the man whom Morison does not hesitate to call 'one of the greatest navigators, if not the greatest, of all time.'<sup>10</sup>

The adverse publicity resulting from certain recently resuscitated anti-Columbus theories, and the controversies regarding his birthplace, detract nothing from the significance of Don Bosco's venture into history and his discerning choice of Father Lemoine as his able executor.

Tempio di Don Bosco  
September - October 1995

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[V]

DON BOSCO THE CONTEMPLATIVE  
Nicola Cotugno

CONTEMPLATION, CHARITY AND THE GRACE OF UNITY IN DON BOSCO

We do not identify contemplation with prayer, but we categorically maintain that it is impossible to achieve contemplation without prayer.

Rather than theorise about these two terms, contemplation and prayer, let us examine the charismatic character of Don Bosco and see how he practised them both and how they were interwoven one with the other. It will

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<sup>9</sup> Ed. 1892, p. 276.

<sup>10</sup> S.E. Morison, op. cit., p. 8.

help us to better envision and understand the spiritual life, and increase our generosity as we follow in the footsteps of Christ.

#### DON BOSCO AND PRAYER

We know that someone once asked: When did Don Bosco pray? The question implies that Don Bosco was not seen as one who dedicated himself explicitly to long hours of prayer as saints traditionally did - as did for instance his contemporary Murialdo, for whom daily Mass (prayerful preparation, celebration and thanksgiving) was a matter of four hours. Father Ceria wrote that Don Bosco 'did not spend a long time in meditation as did other saints'.

However, since Don Bosco's holiness was officially declared by the Church; and since the Church does not recognise holiness without prayer, the questions naturally arise: How did Don Bosco view prayer? How did he pray?

First of all, the fact must be established that Don Bosco really did pray.

Father Barberis writes: 'It can be said that Don Bosco never really ceased praying. I can say that I have seen him hundreds of times deep in prayer going upstairs and downstairs. I also observed how he always prayed when travelling, whenever he was not proof-reading documents.

'He prayed on his knees, with bowed head, a smile on his face. It was natural for those near him to endeavour to pray well.'

Brother Pietro Enria wrote that he lived with Don Bosco for thirty-five years and always saw him praying in that manner. 'Prayer was for him an absolute and indispensable must. For Don Bosco prayer obtained everything and triumphed over everything; it was like water to a fish, air to a bird, a gushing spring to a deer; it was as warmth to the body, or weapon to the soldier'. 'Prayer does violence to the heart of God'.

Don Ceria wrote: 'In Don Bosco the spirit of prayer was like martial discipline to a good captain, observation to an artist or scientist. It was the habitual disposition of his soul; he prayed with ease, constancy and love'.

It is interesting to note that Don Bosco referred to his institution as an oratory, to indicate that his work was founded on prayer. 'He called his building an oratory to emphasise that prayer should be the only force in which we should put our trust'.

The name oratory was not a random choice: it was a clarion call that right from the beginning Don Bosco intended his educational efforts on behalf of the young to be solidly based on the ideal of prayer. The pastoral genius of the saint aimed at imbuing daily living with the exalted goal of Christian spirituality - which is

sanctity. In giving his life to the young, sanctity was his aim.

It was this purpose he had in mind when he wrote the lives of Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco. He strove to create an atmosphere that imbrued his boys with these values so that they actually became part of their lives.

A pedagogue is measured by his ability to create an educative atmosphere that can transform pupils from within. Don Bosco effected this at Valdocco so that the Oratory ambience reflected his own way of living and praying. The value of a tree is judged by the quality of its fruit. When we ponder on how people prayed at Valdocco we get some idea of the nature and the manner of prayer the saint inspired, encouraged and directed.

Father Ceria provides us with the following important statement: `We witnessed Salesians of greatly differing personalities and cultures and of vastly diverse habits: yet they all showed certain common characteristic traits that seemed to mark them with a common origin.

`They exhibited a calmness and serenity in their words and actions; a true fatherliness in manner and expression, and especially did they exhibit a piety that was plainly the nub and fulcrum of their Salesian life. They prayed much and with great devotion; there was meaning and purpose in their prayers; prayer always seemed to find a place in their speech whether they spoke privately or publicly. Yet these men gave no signs of possessing extraordinary graces of prayer: in fact, we saw them fulfil with trusting simplicity nothing more than the practices of piety as prescribed by the Rule or our traditional prayers.

#### PRAYER FOR DON BOSCO WAS APOSTOLIC

As Father Peter Brocardo maintains, Don Bosco's Give me souls; take away all else was primarily a fervent prayer rather than a motto; of its very nature it was an apostolic appeal imbued with vocation and mission (God calls us and sends us).

Don Bosco prayed as an apostle and an educator, essentially with a view to action. As an apostle, he prayed before, during and after all activities: prayer was an essential and necessary factor in all his ventures.

He prayed after the manner of his particular era. Father Caviglia writes, `Don Bosco did not create any special practice, prayer or devotion (such as the Hail Holy Queen, the Rosary, Retreat or Stations of the Cross, etc.) Forms and formulas did not take pride of place with him: for he was a realist and he aimed at simplicity and substance. `Even as a founder', writes Father Brocardo, `he did not feel the need to impose on his disciples

further community practices than what was normal for good Christians (or good priests in the case of the clergy)'.  
In his constant striving for the grace of a unity imbued with pastoral charity, Don Bosco built all his life on prayer: he never ceased to further the glory of God in his endeavour to sanctify the lives of his young charges.

Tempio di Don Bosco: June-August 1995.

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[VI]

DON BOSCO THE CONTEMPLATIVE  
Nicola Cotugno  
Work - Prayer

Work and prayer! Martha or Mary?

The Benedictine motto, Ora et labora (Work and pray) is well known throughout the world. It is frequently applied to the Gospel episode of Martha and Mary, and Scripture readers have been quick to assert that prayer is the better choice, and should never be sacrificed for activity.

It should be said immediately that of course the aim of prayer is union with God. But the aim of all human activity is union with God. Union with God means to live for the glory of God. The apostle Paul makes this very clear in his first letter to the Corinthians: So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. And in his letter to the Colossians, we read, And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

It would seem that Don Bosco followed the example of Martha very much more than that of Mary. However, this is only what appears on the surface. Actually he was always on the side of Mary in so far as all his activity was realised in the closest union with the Lord. Yet at the same time he was always on the side of Martha since he never ceased to carry out whatever the Lord inspired him to do. Actually, contemplation is the union of both Martha and Mary.

To be in harmony with both Martha and Mary is what renders us, in the words of John Paul II, contemplatives in action. In other words, when we are active we are also contemplative, for our activity is the practical expression of our being united with the Lord. It is here

that Don Bosco, without having written anything explicitly on the subject of spirituality, became a master of the spiritual life, opening up vast horizons for the following of Christ for us today who belong to a culture of frenetic activity.

Don Bosco was reared according to the principles of the Mother of Jesus: at Nazareth she achieved the supreme human experience of union with God in her daily family life of work and prayer, of silence and sharing. Thus our saint became the Father and Master of young people throughout the world, being a witness to them of the mystique of activity, right to the point of achieving 'ecstasy of action'.  
The question is, how?

Don Bosco transformed work into prayer

Today we view work and activity in general from a new angle. John Paul II's encyclical *Laborem exercens* speaks of the spirituality of work or activity in a way completely unknown in the time of Don Bosco. However, in daily living, Don Bosco was a most valuable and prophetic witness of this kind of spirituality. Moved by the Holy Spirit, who had infused in him the supernatural gift of pastoral charity, he actually succeeded in transforming all his activity into genuine prayer. When Don Bosco worked, he was actually praying.

Pius XI envisaged the life of Don Bosco as 'a truly genuine and profound martyrdom: a life of work so gargantuan that the mere contemplation of it left one exhausted'. One could say that Don Bosco was fettered to an endless orbit of activity that must have been a material hindrance to prayer. However, the saint had turned every one of his activities into an authentic psalm of praise of God, so that all his life was transformed into one great liturgical symphony to God's glory.

Don Bosco always had his breviary close at hand - the breviary of good works in accordance with the graphic expression of St Augustine: 'Sing to God not only with your voice, but also with the accompanying psalter of good works.'

We have already seen that in Don Bosco, pastoral charity (the synthesis of theological life) achieved a consistency and unity in his life. Love of charity fused the whole personality of Don Bosco into a perennial and intense experience of union with God. Thus action and meditation, work and prayer, are only two aspects of the same love. Between prayer and work there exists a perfect relationship of identity.

Father Ceria considered this the great secret of Don Bosco, the most characteristic and distinctive aspect of his spirituality. He says that 'the specific difference in

Salesian piety is being able to turn work into prayer'. And Pius XI confirmed this: 'Indeed this was one of the most splendid characteristics of the saint - he was able to be available to everyone, in spite of being engrossed in endless urgent concerns and beleaguered by innumerable requests and consultations; in all this turmoil he remained in the constant presence of God, unperturbed and serene, ever in utter calm, so that in him work was effectively prayer, and the great principle of Christian life was realised - that he who works also prays. There is no danger of overstressing the reality of this prayer-work attitude in Don Bosco'.

Bishop Bertagna, in his deposition for the canonical process of Don Bosco's canonisation, wrote the following: 'One could say that he regularly worked half the night: and I often heard him remark that when he was in better health he used sometimes sit writing at his desk for two nights running. Despite all this, he was regularly in the sacristy for morning Mass and available for several hours in the confessional.

Some of his letters contain certain confidential remarks that really touch the heart: 'All this work is getting me down'; 'I am worn out and can go on no longer'; 'I am tired and exhausted'. His doctor wrote, 'He is overdoing the night vigils and his incessant labours and they are wearing him out. At first he was not aware of this; but about 1880, eight years before his death, one could say that his body was reduced to a worn out engine barely ticking over. Yet despite his bodily infirmities his intellect still shone forth with brilliance and energy, and he never lost his ardent desire to attain his glorious objective'. Professor Fissore of the Turin University remarked, 'He is worn out through so much work. He is not dying of any sickness; he is simply a lamp that is faltering because of lack of oil'.

And if for Don Bosco to work was to pray, we may safely affirm that his prayer was phenomenal, monumental, enormous in the highest degree - absolutely spectacular!

Tempio di Don Bosco  
September - October 1995

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[VII]

DON BOSCO THE CONTEMPLATIVE  
Nicola Cotugno

The world's highest mountain to be climbed - union with  
God

Father Egidio Viganò, with his mountaineering experience, once made the following remark: 'To participate in Don Bosco's spirituality means to climb with him the highest mountain of all the mountain ranges in the world: union with God'.

We have already seen how Don Bosco's charismatic vision of Christian spirituality consists of transforming our daily work into genuine prayer. Let us now see how Don Bosco actually attained this work-prayer union, since like him we are called to strive for total holiness and like him we are immersed in a technical culture, in the turmoil of our activity.

The grace of unity incorporates the character of Don Bosco in Love

It is logical to argue that when Don Bosco prayed he was united to God. However, it is not so easy to affirm that in all his activities he experienced the same degree of union with God.

Nevertheless, he actually did. Through pastoral charity the saint of Valdocco was able to transform work into prayer.

Turning again to Father Viganò: 'It is by exercising a similar pastoral charity that we too are able

- to transform work into prayer;
- to unite and permeate consecration with mission and vice versa;
- to effect the mutual suffusion of evangelisation and human progress, (we evangelise by educating and educate by evangelising); and
- to achieve unity despite the many pernicious divisions in the human heart (a fusion that only this charity can achieve)'.

Father Viganò continues, 'This is why we do not identify the interior life with prayer; nor do we consider it as a static attitude; nor elevate it to a definitive goal'; though, of course prayer is a means of arriving at union with God. 'We must be convinced of this: we do not pray to sanctify our work, as if holiness itself is to be found only in prayer and not in apostolic labours; we pray and work, we are immersed in action and we contemplate God because we are moved from within by the same pastoral charity that is the soul of prayer and apostolic action. Our holiness is not identified with prayer; all holiness is identified with love. And the love that is engendered by our holiness is the love that is pastoral charity' (E. Viganò).

Don Bosco climbed the mountain of union with God

It would be an exaggeration to hold that Don Bosco was born with this union with God. Analysing the saint's interior life, his seventh successor commented that 'the vital forces of the interior life imply a continual growth'. Fifty years ago Father Rinaldi had affirmed the same truth, when he wrote that 'Don Bosco attained perfection by identifying his exterior activity, so vast and full of responsibility, with an interior life that arose from his sense of the presence of God...and that, little by little it became a reality that was persistent and vital, and developed into perfect union with God'.

How can we say that Don Bosco attained 'perfect union with God' little by little?

At the risk of arguing on minimal data we draw attention to three stages in this journey of contemplation:

ecstasy of action;  
mystique of action; and  
perfect union with God.

#### Ecstasy of action

St Francis of Sales writes: 'Holy ecstasies are of three kinds: intellectual, emotional, and operative. The first is light, the second fervour and the third action. The first consists of awesome reverence; the second, of devotion; and the third of activity'.

The third kind of ecstasy, namely action, was lived by Don Bosco to an heroic degree. It is a pity that the saintly Bishop of Geneva did not pause a while to explain the meaning of the expression ecstasy of action. Still, we have his description of the Christian life that conveys the meaning and clarifies one of the primary aspects of the ecstatic dimension of the life of Don Bosco. He has left us a description of the Christian life that conveys his thoughts and helps us understand a primary aspect of the 'ecstatic dimension of the life of our Founder': Do not steal, do not lie, do not commit adultery, love and honour your father and mother, do not kill: in other words, live according to the natural reason of man; but leave all your goods; love poverty; treat humiliations, persecutions and martyrdom, as happiness and joy; keep within the limits of total chastity; and finally, despite all worldly opinions and maxims, live this mortal life with incessant abnegation of self. This is not to live humanly, but superhumanly; it is not to live in ourselves, but outside ourselves and above ourselves; and since no one can exit from himself in this way except the Eternal Father support him, then consequently this sort of living must be a continual rapture and a perpetual ecstasy of action and activity. As the great Apostle said to the

Colossians, You have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.

We do not find the expression ecstasy of action in the language of Don Bosco. But it is certainly to be found in his life. His existence was one great ecstasy of action. 'It should be noted', writes Father Brocardo, 'that two of Don Bosco's successors, Father Rinaldi and Father Viganò, have seen in this teaching of St Francis of Sales a true expression of the spirituality of Don Bosco'.

In what other way could we envisage his heroic abnegation? his continual domination of his emotions? his radical adhesion and following of the Christ of chastity, humility and poverty? his gradual exhaustion in his work of saving souls? his constant seeking of the will and glory of God? All this can only be explained by his superhuman and "ecstatic living", to which the Father raises souls that love him above all else, since they live totally absorbed and assimilated in God?'

But this ecstasy of action is only the first step in attaining the perfect union with God achieved by Don Bosco.

Tempio di Don Bosco  
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[VIII]

DON BOSCO THE CONTEMPLATIVE  
Nicola Cotugno

The mystique of action

Father Rinaldi has testified that Don Bosco's attainment of Christian perfection, namely union with God, was a gradual process. It was a journey made in stages, and these stages varied in character. We have examined the first one: Ecstasy of action. This article now examines the second stage and is garnered from the thoughts of St Francis de Sales' on the mystique of action.

The mystique of action and union with God

What do we mean by mystique? The normal definition accepted by scholars is objectively: the hidden reality of Christian mystery; and subjectively: the totally free and infused experience of the divine life within us. Traditionally the mystical life culminates in the grace of infused prayer or contemplation in the strict meaning of the word.

It must be remembered that the mystique of action is a way of experiencing union with God. In fact, the criterion of authenticity of the mystical in all its forms and expressions, is that it must lead to union with God - which is nothing other than the holiness of life in the plenitude of love.

Father Brocardo writes that 'in contrast to contemplative mystique, Don Bosco, the active mystic, sought and found God not only in certain moments of explicit prayer, but in the very exercise of activities that were apostolic, charity-motivated, and directed to the progress of mankind: he "reached out and touched God" whilst participating and collaborating in the activities that were part of his salvific designs'.

Don Bosco was able to be an instrument in the hands of God; he realised that he was God's agent to further the great mystery of redemption, especially among the young.

'Don Bosco not only believed this reality, but profoundly experienced it and lived it to the full.

'What mystics call the divine 'touches' (the 'visits' of the Word, that come and go), were for Don Bosco his grand prospectives, those sudden flashes that shed light on the coming of the Kingdom and compelled him to assume responsibility for prodigious tasks that were impossible for humans alone.

Because Don Bosco's activities were mystical (that is, the fruit of an overpowering divine action) his activity transcended the forces and capability of his person. His achievements amazed the world and confounded the wise because there was no apparent relationship between cause and effect. Don Bosco was moved and possessed by God, and he ventured beyond the human. In him there was the daring courage of the saint who was strengthened by God and surpassed himself. As Jesus was transfigured in the rapture of prayer, so was Don Bosco absorbed in mystical consolation when he contemplated God as he worked for the young and the masses.'<sup>11</sup>

Thus was Don Bosco a mystic in the true sense of the word. He was one of the greatest mystics of activity. For this reason we can also conclude that he was a prophet and a master of the spirituality demanded by our modern culture that is so immersed in activity.

Through his experience of this mystique of action Don Bosco endowed our modern Church with a remarkable model: he demonstrated a new way of evangelising a culture - a way appropriate in the case of both man and God.

Given that God has acted in and through Don Bosco so intensely, then surely he must have left in him some sign

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<sup>11</sup> Pietro Brocardo

of his presence? Let us analyse this sign in the third stage of our saint's journey towards union with God.

























