

CONVERSATION WITH URBAN RATTAZZI

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TRANSLATION & NOTES: P. LAWS

INTRODUCTION

This document appeared for the first time in two successive numbers of the 1882 *Salesian Bulletin*, and were written by its editor, Fr John Bonetti, who we must presume got it from Don Bosco, or from Fr John Baptist Francesia who claims to have been present during the conversation.

Urban Rattazzi was a member of Parliament and Minister of State, first in the Kingdom of Savoy, later in that of Italy. As Minister of Grace and Justice in the La Marmora government, he had a keen interest in the reform of the Penal Code, and in particular as it regarded young offenders, an interest which would have caused him to visit Don Bosco, who was acquiring the reputation of being a successful "reformer" of these unfortunate young men. It is this educational theme that gives the document interest for us.

Clearly, what we have is not a transcript of the interview, but a reconstruction by Bonetti based on the recollection - 28 years after the event - of either Don Bosco himself, or Francesia. Given that Don Bosco was still alive at the time of publication, we must accept the basic reliability of the text.

Bear in mind that what we are reading is a magazine article, not an entry for a Biographical Dictionary.

TEXT

Leaving his political views to one side, truth demands that we acknowledge that the lawyer Rattazzi both as a member of Parliament and as a Minister has always looked upon our Oratory and Boarding School with a kindly eye. He used to say that the Government was obliged to protect an Institute such as ours, because it operated very efficiently to lessen the prison population and to produce intelligent citizens at the same time as it was making good Christians of them. In fact, he himself set a good example in this regard. Therefore he encouraged Don Bosco in his work, made grants, recommended the admission of young people, and even entrusted a young cousin to him, Cesere Rattazzi by name, so that he could bring him to a positive point of view, and be guided by sound principles. Then, each time he was appointed to the Ministry, he would be so kind as to inform Don Bosco that he would have nothing to fear.⁷⁶ He showed these kindly dispositions from the time of his first meeting with Don Bosco, coming to our Oratory incognito. The event is worth noting.

⁷⁶ The Government of the emerging Italian State was financing itself partly by suppressing monasteries and selling them. Rattazzi then was reassuring B. that his establishment would not be sequestered.

It was a Sunday morning in the month of April of the year 1854, about ten-thirty. The young people of the Boarding School with many who attended during the day were in church for the second time. They had sung Matins and Lauds of the Office of the Blessed Virgin, had heard Mass, and Don Bosco had gone up into the pulpit and was recounting an episode from Church History, a topic he had taken up some time ago.⁷⁷ In the meantime, a gentleman comes in through the main door of our Church, one whom no one recognised, not even Don Bosco. Hearing the sermon in progress, he sat himself down on one of the benches provided at the back for the faithful, and stayed there listening till the end. Don Bosco had begun on the previous Sunday to tell the life of Pope St Clement and that morning was telling how the saintly pontiff, because of hatred for the Christian faith, had been sent by Emperor Trajan into exile to the Chersonese, today known as the Crimea, where this year the war mentioned above broke out.

Finishing the story, it was his custom to question some of the boys, to see if they had questions to ask, or what moral could be got from this fact of history. He made sure in this way that every one paid attention, and at the same time it added great interest to the telling. So doing this morning, he questioned one of the young externs. Contrary to what might have been expected he came out with a question which while appropriate, was inopportune considering the place, and for the times, very dangerous. He said, If Emperor Trajan committed an injustice, driving Pope St Clement out of Rome and into exile, has not perhaps our government done wrong to exile our Archbishop Mgr Frasoni?⁷⁸ To this unexpected question Don Bosco replied without at all losing his composure, "This is not the place to say whether our government has done good or evil, in sending our most revered Archbishop into exile. This is something that can be discussed at the right time. But it is true that through the centuries and right from the beginning of the Church the enemies of the Catholic Faith have always had its leaders in their sights - popes, bishops, priests - because they believe that if you pull down the columns the building will fall down, and that, having struck down the shepherd, the flock will be scattered and become easy prey to ravaging wolves. Meantime, whenever we hear or read that this or that bishop, this or that priest has been condemned and sentenced, for example to exile, or even to death, we should not at once believe they are guilty, as these people say they are. It could be on this occasion he has been a victim of his duty, that he is a confessor of the faith, that he is a hero of the Church, as were the Apostles, as were the martyrs, as were so many popes, bishops, priests and simple faithful. And then let us always remember that the world, the Hebrew people, Pilate, condemned to death on a cross as an impious blasphemer and subverter of the people, the Divine Saviour himself, while in fact he was truly Son of God, and had urged obedience and submission to the constituted authority; while he had ordered to give to Caesar what is Caesars and to God what is God's". After adding a few other words on the duty of keeping oneself strong in the faith and spiritual life, and respect for the ministers of the Church, Don Bosco came down from the pulpit, whilst we, having said the usual *Our Father* and Hail Mary in honour of St Aloysius and having sung the *Praise for Ever be the*

77 The "Office of the B.V" is a shorter liturgical-style prayer modelled on the longer Breviary, or Prayer of the Church. "Matins and Lauds" correspond to the present-day Office of Readings and Morning Prayer.

78 Relations between Church and State were very strained because of the espousal by the Government of the doctrine of the separation of Church and State, viewed by fervent Catholics as a direct attack on the faith, and a pretext for the confiscation of Church property. The boy's question was a real "clanger"!

Names of Jesus & Mary we left the chapel by the side door. The unknown gentleman came out behind us, and coming into the playground, asked to speak to Don Bosco. The latter had this moment gone up to his room, and a young man accompanied him up. After the first greetings, a brief dialogue occurred between D. Bosco and Rattazzi, heard by the same young man, who as was the custom in those unhappy times, remained there until told by Don Bosco to leave, in case anything happened.⁷⁹ This is the dialogue.

D. Bosco: May I know with whom I have the honour of speaking?

Rattazzi: With Rattazzi.

D.B.: With Rattazzi! With the great Rattazzi (coul gran Ratass), Member of Parliament, Former Speaker of the House, and now Minister of the Crown?⁸⁰

R: Precisely.

DB.: (Smiling) Then I had better hold out my wrists for the handcuffs, and prepare myself for prisons dark.⁸¹

R: For Heaven's sake why?

D.B.: Because of what Your Excellency heard a few moments ago in the Church concerning the Archbishop.

R: Not at all. Leaving aside the matter of whether the question asked by the boy was opportune or no, you replied, and you got out of it admirably, and no Minister in the world could proffer the slightest rebuke. In any case, although I am of the view that it is not a good idea to discuss politics in Church, much less with young people, who are not yet capable of justly weighing things up, nevertheless, one should not have to deny one's personal convictions on anyone's account. I might add that in a Constitutional Government Ministers are responsible for their actions which can be verified by any citizen, and therefore also by Don Bosco. As for myself, although not all the ideas and actions of Mgr Frasoni meet with my approval, I am happy that the severe measures taken against him did not occur during my term of ministry.

D.B.: If that's the case - Don Bosco concluded merrily - I can rest assured that this time your Excellency will not throw me in the cooler, and will let me breathe the free air of Valdocco. So let us pass on to other things.

⁷⁹ For examples of the need to take such precautions, see Biographical Memoirs, vol. 4, p. 429 foll.

⁸⁰ Why does Bonetti give us the Piedmontese expression Don Bosco used? Given that the phrase can also mean "the big rat", could it be that Don Bosco was being rather bold with his guest?

⁸¹ In that very year, R. had had the Penal Code passed into law, which also provided for a prison sentence and a fine for any minister of religion who in the context of public worship criticised the laws and institutions of the State.

After this pleasant beginning, there followed a serious conversation lasting nearly an hour, Rattazzi plying Don Bosco with questions, had him recite chapter and verse how the Institution of the Oratory, and the Boarding School attached to it began, what were its aims, how had it progressed, what results did it achieve. Being as he was a good-hearted man, he gained such a good impression of it all, that from that day forward, as we have mentioned above, he became our advocate and defender. This was a real stroke of good luck for us, insofar as the times becoming harder year by year, and with Rattazzi frequently having the reins of government in his hands, and continuing to be a man of influence, our Oratory had such support from him, without which it would have taken some very hard knocks, and even suffered very heavy losses. Instead it was just the opposite. It seemed as if the Lord wanted to use him for our good, and for not allowing us to come to harm, as for the same end under King Nebuchadnezzar, a powerful minister was used to favour young Daniel and his companions. God never changes. He is always like a father who provides. Happy he who loves him and trusts in him.

Among the various questions asked of Don Bosco by Mr Rattazzi in the above-mentioned conversation, one concerned the means he used to keep order among the many young people who flocked to the Oratory.

"Does not Your Reverence have at his orders", asked the Minister, "at least two or three constables in uniform, or in civilian dress?"

"I have absolutely no need of them, Your Excellency.

"Is that possible? But these youngsters of yours are simply no different from young people everywhere. They also will, to say the least, be unruly, troublesome, quarrelsome. What censures, what punishments to use then, to restrain them, to prevent disorders?"

"Most of these young people are as smart as they come, as the saying is. Notwithstanding this, here we do not use violence, or punishment of any kind."

"This seems to me to be a mystery. Explain the secret!"

"Your Excellency would know that there are two systems of education; one is called the repressive system, the other is called the preventive system.. The former sets itself to educate people by force, by repression, by punishment, when they break the law, when they commit a crime. The latter seeks to educate them with kindness, and gently helps them to observe the law, and it provides them with the most suitable and efficacious means for the purpose. This is precisely the system we use. Above all here we try to inculcate in the hearts of the young the holy fear of God.⁸²

⁸² Tear of the Lord is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and does not denote terror of God, but rather that deep and loving respect which makes us not want to offend Him.

One motivates them with love for virtue and horror of vice, by teaching them their Religion, and with appropriate moral instruction. One directs them on the path of good and sustains them with opportune and kindly counsel, and especially with the life of prayer and religion. Over and above this we surround them, as far as is possible, with loving assistance in recreation, in the classroom, at the work place.⁸³

We encourage them with kindly words, and at the first sign they are neglecting their duties, we remind them in a kind way, and recall them to a good way of behaving. In a word, we do all the things Christian charity suggests so that they might do good and avoid evil ruled by a good conscience and supported by Religion."

"Certainly this is the best method of educating rational beings, but does it serve for every one?"

"For ninety out of a hundred this system offers consoling results. On the other ten nevertheless, it has such a good influence as to make them less stubborn and less dangerous, because of which only occasionally do I have to send a young person away as untameable and incorrigible. So much so that in this Oratory, as in Porta Nuova and Vanchiglio⁸⁴ young people arrive or are brought, who either on account of a bad disposition, or refusal to be led, or even those who through sheer malice were the despair of their parents and their employers and who before many weeks are out, were no longer the same; from wolves, so to speak, they change into lambs."

"It is a pity that the Government is not able to adapt this system for use in their penal establishments in which hundreds of guards are needed to prevent disorders. And the prisoners get worse every day."

"And what prevents the Government from following this system into its penal establishments? Bring Religion into it; set down appropriate times for Religious Instruction and Prayers. Let the one in charge give to these things the importance they deserve. Let God's Minister come in frequently, and let him mix freely with these poor souls and let them hear a word of love and peace, and then the preventive system will be well and truly in use. After a while the guards will have little or nothing to do, but the Government will be able to boast that it has given back so many good-living and useful people to their families and to society.

⁸³ Assistance is the classically Salesian word to denote that being-present-with-and-for, that Presence, which lies at the heart of the Preventive System.

⁸⁴ Don Bosco's other Turinese Oratories.

Otherwise it spends good money in order to correct and punish for a more or less prolonged period difficult and blameworthy people, and when they will have been set free, it will have to follow them and keep them under surveillance in order to protect itself from them, because they are ready to do worse."

Don Bosco continued in this vein for a good while, and given that since 1840 he had known the situation of the juvenile and adult offenders, because following the example of Fr Cafasso and Fr Borel he was accustomed to visit these wretches frequently, so he was in a position to emphasise to the Minister the good effects of Religion on their moral rehabilitation. When he sees the priest, he added, when he hears the word of comfort, the prisoner remembers the happy years when he took part in the catechism classes. He remembers the good advice given him by his Parish Priest and his teacher. He realises that if he has landed up in this place of punishment it is because either he stopped going to church, or because he did not put into practice the teaching he had received. So, calling to mind these happy memories, he more than once feels his heart moved, a tear springs from his eye, he repents, he suffers with resignation, he determines to improve his conduct, and when he has finished his sentence, he goes back into society determined to make up to it for the scandal he has given. If on the other hand the kind face of Religion and its gentle precepts and practices are removed, depriving him of the conversations and good advice of a friend of his soul, then what will become of that wretch in that hideous enclosure? Never to be invited by a loving voice to lift his soul above the earth; never urged to reflect that in sinning he has not only broken the laws of the land, but offended God, the Supreme Law-giver. Never urged to beg God's pardon, nor solaced so that he might suffer a temporal penalty in place of the eternal one God wishes to condone; in his miserable condition he will never see anything but the evil act of contrary fortune.-- Hence, instead of bathing his chains with tears of repentance, he will gnaw at them with ill-concealed rage. Instead of resolving to change his life, he will stubbornly cling to his evil ways. From his companions in crime, he will learn fresh malice, and plot with them one day to commit crime more secretly, so as not to fall again into the arms of Justice, but he will not consider bettering himself, or becoming a good citizen.

Given the favourable occasion, Don Bosco indicated to the Minister the usefulness of the Preventive System especially in the Public Schools and houses of education where one is dealing with souls still innocent of sin souls that willingly resound to the voice of persuasion and love. "I know well," Don Bosco concluded, "that promoting this system is not a task assigned to your Excellency's Department. But a remark from you, a word from you, will always carry great weight in the deliberations of the Ministry of Public Instruction.

Mr Rattazzi listened with keen interest to these and other remarks of Don Bosco. He was completely convinced of the goodness of the system in use in the Oratories, and promised that for his part he would cause it to be preferred to any other in the Government institutions. If then he did not always keep his word, the reason is that also Rattazzi at times lacked the courage to display and defend his religious convictions.