

DON BOSCO AND PRINCE CZARTORYSKI

On 18 May 1883, in Paris, Don Bosco met the Polish prince Augusto Czartoryski. Don Bosco was sixty-eight years old, and Augusto twenty-five.

The meeting left a profound impression on the young Prince.

From then on he carried on a regular correspondence with the saint. Towards the end of 1883, Augusto travelled to Turin and visited Valdocco, and saw with his own eyes the apostolate Don Bosco had initiated.

The young Prince returned to Valdocco on 24 May the following year for the feast of Mary Help of Christians, and from the inn that housed him went every morning to the Basilica to attend holy Mass celebrated by Don Bosco.

On one of those occasions he opened his heart to Don Bosco and told him:

<I wish to become a Salesian!>

Don Bosco counselled him to wait and bade him return to Poland, where he was expected to assume the family title and the responsibility of the estate of his princely inheritance.

In the June of 1885 the young Prince was again in Turin, and made a spiritual retreat with Don Bosco. At the end of the retreat he again discussed with the saint the problem of his vocation. Once more Don Bosco counselled him to pray and wait, and to consider his family.

The Prince's father called him back to Poland, and for the carnival season in 1886 his cousin the Princess Marcellina, organised a great celebration, with banquets, balls and charming young ladies. Everyone had their eyes on the Prince who appeared very reserved, as though he were a stranger, his mind elsewhere.

<In audience with the Pope>

Meanwhile, the young Prince, without neglecting his social or family duties, lived the life of a consecrated soul in the world, his days spent in the presence of God, with regular Confession, daily Mass and Holy Communion, and with special acts of charity towards the poor and needy.

In the April of 1887 he heard that Don Bosco's health was not the best, and the young Prince departed immediately for Turin. He went to Don Bosco and begged him to accept him as a Salesian.

Don Bosco kindly told him that the Salesian Congregation was hardly suitable for him. The Saint was about to travel to Rome,

and Augusto decided to go too, saying that he hoped he would not be a burden to the Saint.

When Don Bosco reached the Rome railway station, Augusto was there to meet him and treated him as royalty, never leaving him.

When again he broached the matter of his vocation, Don Bosco did not seem to hear him, and began to attend to his correspondence. The Prince then conceived the notion of turning to the Pope. Leo XIII received him, and listen attentively to his plea. He then said to him,

<Courage, my son. Go to Turin and give my regards to Don Bosco; tell him that the Pope desires that he accept you into his Congregation.>

On 13 June, Augusto knelt at the feet of Don Bosco and recounted his experience with the Holy Father. Don Bosco was deeply moved and told him,

<Well, dear son, I do indeed accept you. From this moment you are a member of our Salesian Society and will belong to it to the day you die.>

Leaving his father in Poland was a great sacrifice for the young Prince; but on 17 July he became a pre-novice at San Benigno Canavese, Turin, where he adapted himself to the community life and humbly 'put himself last in the line'. He joined his companions in study, work and recreation, and found great peace of mind in his new life. On 24 November 1887, in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, Augusto received the religious habit from Don Bosco. It was the last such ceremony performed by that 'giant of charity' who was nearing the end of his life. After the ceremony, the Prince went to Don Bosco, and the Saint told him:

<Courage, dear Prince, you will be ordained a priest and will prove a great blessing to Poland.>

The Prince entered the novitiate at Valsalice (Turin). On 31 January 1888 Don Bosco died and it was at Valsalice that he was buried. The novice prince visited his tomb daily and prayed there at length as he prepared for his religious profession and priestly ordination.

His fellow novices used to ask him about his life as a prince, but his only reply was that

<life's true privilege was to be a son of God through the merits of Jesus Crucified>.

The young Prince got on well with everybody; he was obedient and contented; every day he lived his vocation to the full; he was simplicity personified. One of his fellow novices, Andrew Beltrami, 18 years old, was a great friend and rivalled his companion in the pursuit of sanctity. They were one in life and death. (Andrew's cause for canonisation was later to be introduced.)

<Salesian and priest>

On 2 October 1888, at the feet of Don Rua, Don Bosco's first successor, Augusto made his vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. He was now a professed Salesian and ready to begin his studies for the priesthood.

The story of the Prince who had left all to become a Religious, soon spread to Poland and indeed throughout Europe. Other Polish youths came to Turin and followed in the Prince's footsteps.

In those days, however, Augusto, already in poor health, fell sick and had to be confined to bed. All were greatly disturbed. He on the other hand was quite calm and serene. He knew that his illness was serious, but in moments of respite he carried on with his priestly studies. The Superiors sent him to Sanremo, where the climate was mild and healthful, and where he could complete his studies.

On 2 April 1892 he was ordained.

His days of priesthood from then on were filled with the celebration of holy Mass, with long periods of prayer, with the offering of his sufferings for the young, for the Church, and for the missions.

His Salesian life was not to be spent in the classroom, laboratory or playground, teaching, playing, catechising, surrounded by young pupils; but in recollection and silence in his tiny room, suffering and offering his pain to God.

He was an extraordinary example for all: for his friend Andrew Beltrami, for his Polish companions, who now were arriving in numbers to join the family of Don Bosco, for the confreres who included Fr Luigi Variara (who too was to die and be considered for canonisation), and Fr Ricaldone (the future fourth successor of Don Bosco)... he was certainly surrounded by a wealth of holiness!

Until Easter 1893, Fr Augusto was able to celebrate daily the holy Sacrifice of the Mass, joining to it his own personal sacrifice and pain.

On 8 April 1893, he died peacefully, invoking the name of Jesus: he was only 35 years of age, but already his reputation had spread abroad.

The Church proclaimed him <Venerable> and we hope will eventually declare him a saint: a true princely saint.