

THE BURIAL OF DON BOSCO AT VALSALICE

(as described by A. Notario

As it became evident to us that Don Bosco was soon to die, Don Rua and Bishop Cagliero, together with Fr Cesare Cagliero, the then Procurator in Rome, agreed on certain arrangements for the sad occasion. Relying on the well known kindness of Minister Crispi and Queen Margherita, they planned to request that Don Bosco be buried under the high altar of the Basilica of *Mary Help of Christians* in Turin.

On 30 January 1888 Don Bosco's condition had seriously deteriorated. Cardinal Alimonda, who was in Rome, and was due to deliver the special discourse commemorating the sacerdotal jubilee of Pope Leo XIII at 9 pm, sent a telegram to Turin asking if it were still possible to see Don Bosco. His urgent telegram received no answer, and was taken as a sign that Don Bosco was either on the point of death or had already passed away.

At 6 am on 31 January we received a telegram in Rome announcing Don Bosco's death.

Cagliero and Notario went to Minister Crispi; and to ensure an interview at so early an hour (8.30 am) they had armed themselves with a letter of introduction from the minister's nephew, Urbanino Ratazzi; the latter also sent his private secretary to accompany them.

Crispi had already heard the news of Don Bosco's death, and expressed his deep sympathy. He spoke of his esteem for him and his gratitude for having 'in difficult times eaten the bread of Don Bosco'.

Encouraged by these remarks, Fr Cagliero made known his request. Crispi looked concerned and said that it was impossible to grant permission there and then; that a law of Parliament was necessary, and that in the present circumstances the Parliament would assuredly stand in his way. (Crispi had dismissed Duke Leopold Torlonia, Mayor of Rome, for going to the Cardinal Vicar to offer his congratulations on the occasion of the Pope's priestly jubilee.)

We repeated our request nevertheless, and Crispi said he would give it some thought; he would speak to Pagliano, the Minister for Health, when he arrived; they should return about 11 am. We went to the Vatican and sought Queen Margherita's support.

At 11.30 am we went again to Crispi. He smiled and told us he had high hopes of a solution. He sent for Pagliano, who arrived, greeted us, and dropped into Piedmontese - which Crispi understood, having lived for a considerable time in Turin. 'Don Bosco was a great man', he said. 'Why do they want to bury him in the dank and dark crypt of the Valdocco Basilica? I know Turin well. They should bury him in their college at Valsalice. It is

400 metres from the city confines, and there is no need for a law to be passed to bury him there. Article 17 of the Public Health Bill will cover the matter; all you need is the signature of the local Prefect. Don Bosco should be buried at Valsalice; he is a saint; he will be canonised and Valsalice will become a place of pilgrimage.'

We thanked the minister for his suggestion and at midday I sent a telegram to Turin: 'Petition refused. Use Valsalice'.

We went to *Sacro Cuore*, and when Monsignor Manacorda, a guest there, heard of Pagliano's suggestion, he said, 'The prophet Balaam has spoken! At Valsalice you will have to inscribe on Don Bosco's tomb the words of Job: *The thorn bushes and the willows by the stream give him shelter in their shade* (JOB 40:22).

That evening Fr Cagliero tried again with deputies and senators at the court, but ended with little hope.

At supper that night Bishop Manacorda said, 'Fr Cesare, you should stay here; but someone should go to Turin immediately to see to the formalities and accomplishment of Crispi's decision. Fr Notario, off you go to Turin'. I left in the evening with two Chileans.

At Turin I prayed by the remains of Don Bosco in the church of St Francis. Then I explained the situation to the Superiors - but they were too distraught, and incapable of grasping the facts. Fr Sala even came out with the remark: 'Either in the Basilica or in Spain!' So to set arrangements in train, I went to the mayor, Count Voli, who had held Don Bosco in very high esteem, and who had as a young man helped him with the copying of his *History of Italy* in preparation for printing. He called Signor Lombardi, who was in charge of the cemetery, and told him, 'I shall personally see that all goes well with the funeral procession; you must arrange for a suitable place to keep Don Bosco's remains until a grave is prepared at Valsalice'. In fact Mayor Voli sent two carriages to head the cortège. This was on 1 February.

On 2 February I went with Count Radicati di Primeglio, ex-Prefect of Turin, to the incumbent Prefect, Count Lovera di Maria, to obtain his signature for the interment at Valsalice. It was 8.30 am, and the Prefect was still in his dressing gown; and on the table before him was the *People's Gazette*. After the usual polite formalities, he remarked to Count Radicati, 'The *People's Gazette* says nothing about Don Bosco'. (Actually the *People's Gazette* had merely mentioned Don Bosco in the Death Notices, whilst all the other Italian dailies had written at length about him.)

I then presented our request, saying, 'Would you please sign this document; it has the approval of Minister Crispi'. He read the statement and curtly refused to sign.

I was very annoyed and told him, 'If you do not sign the document, Excellency, I shall return to Rome tomorrow and report the matter to Minister Crispi; you will lose your job!' He answered in Piedmontese, 'You will certainly be wasting your time'. I pressed the matter again and again, but he persisted in his refusal.

I left and accompanied the return of Don Bosco's remains to the Oratory. I then hastened back to Rome the same evening.

With Fr Cagliero I went immediately to Crispi. He was quite upset - and with effect! He called Pagliano and told him to order Mayor Voli to allow Don Bosco to be buried at Valsalice without let or hindrance. 'Within forty-eight hours Lovera will no longer be Prefect of Turin', he said. And so it transpired.

Don Bosco's remains were kept at the church of St Francis for a few days whilst the tomb was made ready at Valsalice. He remained buried there till 1929, when he was transferred in glory to the *Basilica of Mary Help of Christians*.

Signed:

A. Notario.