

«Honest citizens and good Christians». Don Bosco and Salesian education in the 150-year history of united Italy*

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Even a quick reading of the recent and important collection of studies and research edited by Don Francesco Motto, *Don Bosco's Salesians in Italy. 150 Years of Education*¹, finds confirmation of what that same editor states in the

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¹ F. Motto (ed.), *Salesiani di Don Bosco in Italia. 150 anni di educazione*, Roma, LAS, 2011. This important volume edited by Don Francesco Motto presents in the first section two broad quantitative and statistical studies (G. Malizia, F. Motto, *L'evoluzione dell'Opera Salesiana in Italia* (1861-2010). Quantitative data; and S. Sarti, F. Motto, *Andamento e dislocazione delle case salesiane in Italia – Andamento e provenienza dei salesiani italiani*. Statistical data 1861-2010); the second section, which is purely historical in nature, is a reedition of some excellent previously published contributions (F. Traniello, P. Braidò, P. Stella, F. Motto, P. Bairati, F. Targhetta, F. Motto) and collects some unpublished studies (L. Tullini, S. Oni, A. Giraudò); finally, the third and last part includes a series of significant «accounts» of Salesian experiences and initiatives over the last decades: educational theatre, experiences of recovery from maladjustment and juvenile delinquency, specialised publishing for young people, youth pastoral work, international voluntary work and developmental education, professional training (M. Novelli, V. Chiari, M. Filippi, R. Tonelli, F. Colombo, G. Malizia, M. Tonini). Another equally important publication should also be noted, published at the same time and dedicated to the experience and educational commitment of the *Istituto femminile delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*: G. Loparco, M.T. Spiga (eds.), *Le Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice in Italia. Donne nell'educazione*, Roma, LAS, 2011.

Introduction to the text, where he underlines that «just as Italian history would be unimaginable without taking account of the active presence of the Church, thus without some reference to the work of the Salesian Family, the historical account of Italian society over the last 150 years would not be complete»².

Indeed the rich and documented panorama of the numerous and incisive educational and cultural Salesian works destined to provide sustenance for faith and to promote human and civil growth to generations and generations of young people over Italy's 150 years of unity is there to testify a presence and a primary role, that certainly cannot be ignored – or even minimized – by historians and by those who aspire to recover in its entirety the *memory* of that great collective experience that was the construction of the united country and the laborious maturation of a common national identity and a shared sense of belonging to a single civil community.

We would do wrong to Don Bosco and to the Salesians, however, if, before pausing to analyse the numerous and diverse educational and scholastic experiences through which, in the course of these 150 years, people tried to provide the Country with many «honest citizens and good Christians»³, we did not draw attention to the *inspiring* principles and to the *ingrained* convictions that constantly nourished the work of the Salesian Family and which made such experiences possible.

Recovering the entire memory of the united country and emphasising the fundamental role played by Don Bosco and the Salesians in the civil and cultural growth of individuals and entire communities means bringing to the fore a precise model of spirituality and religious commitment that lies at the base and that has constantly nurtured and characterised the experience of the Founder and the more than one century of work of the Salesian Family.

Especially since, like in the case of Don Bosco and the Salesians, the often reiterated objective of working with the young generations through education in order to make many «honest citizens *and* good Christians», does not allude to two distinct educational pathways – that of a civil character and that, more precisely, of a religious nature – but it reflects a single and whole *model* of human and personal growth⁴.

To grasp the significance of the extraordinary investment achieved by the Salesian Family in the course of these 150 years in the ambit of social and civil growth of generations and generations of young people through a host of educational and scholastic initiatives and experiences, it seems opportune,

² F. Motto, *Introduction*, in Id. (ed.), *Salesiani di Don Bosco in Italia. 150 anni di educazione*, cit., p. 7.

³ Cfr. P. Braidò, *Buon cristiano e onesto cittadino. Una formula dell'«umanesimo educativo» di Don Bosco*, «Ricerche Storiche Salesiane», XXXVI, 1994, pp. 7-75.

⁴ On this subject see: P. Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, Roma, LAS, 1979-1988², 3 vols.; and, with a more purely pedagogical and educational approach, P. Braidò, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*, Roma, LAS, 2009³, 2 vols.

therefore, to start with this *model* and to shed light, albeit rapidly, on its particular spiritual and cultural roots.

The plan that animated Don Bosco and that was to fuel the whole pastoral and educational experience of the Salesian Family, was summarized in the well-known and graphic formula «to save souls», repeatedly proposed in writings and letters⁵.

But for this priest from Piedmont who worked in the post-revolutionary society of the first decades of the nineteenth century⁶, what new and demanding meanings did this traditional all-encompassing and almost generic formula, to save souls» take on?

Don Bosco took for himself one of the pivots of the spiritual path of François de Sales (1567-1622), the great spiritual master and bishop of Geneva who lived between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries⁷, after whom he named his religious Institute: *Christian perfection* is not a privileged state, the appanage of a minority of elected souls, but can be reached by all Christians of whatever condition of life.

The world thus became a place where the Christian was called to enact his own perfection and *everyday life* thus represented the *normal context* in which every believer could gain *eternal salvation*, not by dint of exceptional actions, but through *the performance of the duties of his station*, i.e. his responsibilities that derived from his being a part of the community⁸. However, precisely during those years in which Don Bosco had arrived in Turin to carry out his sacerdotal ministry, the traditional ways of life and habits that for centuries had characterised the everyday experience of urban and rural communities appeared to be overwhelmed by an irreversible crisis of vast dimensions⁹.

⁵ Cfr. G. Bosco, *Epistolario (1835-1875)*, introduction, critical texts and notes edited by F. Motto, Roma, LAS, 1991-2003, 4 vols.; and P. Braido (ed.), *Don Bosco educatore. Scritti e testimonianze*, Roma, LAS, 1997³.

⁶ Significant thoughts, in this context, in P. Stella, *Il prete piemontese dell'800 tra la rivoluzione francese e la rivoluzione industriale*, Minutes of the conference promoted by the «Piedmont study centre for history and religious sociology» (Turin, 27 May 1972), Torino, Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1973; and Id., *Don Bosco*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2001, pp. 23-37.

⁷ Cfr. M. Marcocchi, *Alle radici della spiritualità di Don Bosco*, in M. Midali (ed.), *Don Bosco nella storia. Atti del 1° Congresso internazionale di studi su Don Bosco (Università Pontificia Salesiana, Roma 16-20 gennaio 1989)*, Roma, LAS, 1990, pp. 158-170.

⁸ On the spirituality of François de Sales (1567-1622) and the influence he exerted on the founders of the new religious institutions of the nineteenth century see R. Sani, «*Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*». *Istituti religiosi, educazione e scuola nell'Italia moderna e contemporanea*, Macerata, eum, 2009, pp. 62-78 and *passim*.

⁹ On this subjects see: F. Della Peruta, *Aspetti sociali dell'età della Restaurazione*, in *La Restaurazione in Italia. Strutture e ideologie, Atti del 47° Congresso di Storia del Risorgimento italiano. Cosenza 15-19 sett. 19744*, Roma, Istitute for the History of the Italian Risorgimento, 1976, pp. 423-469; Id., *Infanzia e famiglia nella prima metà dell'Ottocento*, «Studi Storici», 3, 1979, pp. 473-491; G. Botti, L. Guidi, L. Valenzi (eds.), *Povertà e beneficenza tra Rivoluzione e Restaurazione*, Napoli, Morano, 1990.

This crisis was testified by the emergence, in towns (first of all Turin), of ever increasing pockets of malaise and poverty, for the appearance of a new type of pauperism of dimensions that had been unknown in previous centuries: a pauperism whose dominant characteristic was a composite and painful humanity of men, women and children who, from the countryside, poured incessantly into the great urban centres in search of a stable job, less precarious homes than those they had left behind them and better conditions of life¹⁰.

And it was precisely with regard to this army of *the new poor*, and in particular to their youngest members, generally lacking not only in every means of sustenance, but also of knowledge and the skills that could help them integrate positively into urban reality, that Don Bosco and the Salesians' intense educational experience was to unfold¹¹.

Three fundamental intuitions characterised, in my view, Don Bosco's choices at this juncture; three intuitions that were to become the pivotal elements (the real governing and unifying factors) of the Salesian Family's vast and many-sided educational and scholastic work:

- the perception that the marked condition of *precariousness and social malaise*, which characterised Turin (and the entire peninsula) in the first decades of the nineteenth century, was not a transitory or short-term phenomenon, but constituted, in some ways, one of the characteristic traits of the new social situation triggered by the dissolution of the *ancien régime* (and which, subsequently, the incipient processes of economic and productive reconversion and of secularization of social mentality and customs would contribute to accentuate and extend¹²);
- the impression that, in the face of such profound and radical changes, the traditional forms, instruments and ways by which the Church, during

¹⁰ For a description of the socio-economic problems of the post-Napoleonic phase in Italy see: *La Restaurazione. Strutture e ideologie*, cit.; and G. Politi, M. Rosa, F. Della Peruta (eds.), *Timore e carità. I poveri nell'Italia moderna*, «Annali della Biblioteca Statale e Libreria Civica di Cremona», Cremona, 1982 (especially contributions by A. Bellinazzi, *ibid.* pp. 375-389; and by A. De Bernardi, *ivi*, pp. 399-416). On the specific situation in Turin and Piedmont see the documented work by G. Chiosso, *La gioventù «povera e abbandonata» a Torino nell'Ottocento. Il caso degli allievi-artigiani della Mendicizia istruita (1818-1861)*, in J.M. Prelezo (ed.), *L'impegno dell'educare. Studi in onore di Pietro Braido promossi dalla Facoltà di Scienze dell'Educazione dell'Università Pontificia Salesiana*, Roma, LAS, 1991, pp. 375-402.

¹¹ Cfr. P. Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale 1815-1870*, Roma, LAS, 1980; and P. Braido, «Poveri, abbandonati, pericolanti e pericolosi»: *pedagogia, assistenza, socialità nell'«esperienza preventiva» di Don Bosco*, «Annali di storia dell'educazione e delle istituzioni scolastiche», 3, 1996, pp. 183-236.

¹² Cfr. M. Romani, *Storia economica d'Italia nel secolo XIX (1815-1882)*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1982. On the specific situation in Turin: C. Bermond, *Torino da capitale politica a centro manifatturiero. Ricerche di storia economica, sociale e urbanistica nel trentennio 1840-1870*, Torino, Tirrenia-Stampatori, 1983.

previous centuries, took on the task of «saving souls» were appearing largely to be in need of an overhaul¹³;

- the awareness that those traditional forms of *Christian charity* (alms, assistance, the many ways of providing «relief for the poor») were no longer sufficient to meet need, and that they had to be replaced by *education*, in the realisation that *education* itself represented *an eminent form of charity*, the only one that was able to provide incisive and lasting answers¹⁴.

Against the subtle and recurrent temptation of certain currents and expressions of early nineteenth century Catholicism (and of the following eras) of a *fuga mundi* or, better, of a *damnatio mundi*, Don Bosco did not reject modern society (and the *secular state* that was its expression) and he did not yearn for an impossible return to the past, rather, in the face of *modernity* (of modern society) – whose negative aspects, pitfalls, lacerations and risks he of course did not deny or belittle – he showed a fundamentally positive attitude¹⁵.

However uncertain and lacerating it appeared, this modernity constituted the horizon within which man's personal and collective history was being constructed and his faith and salvation were at stake. There was thus the need to work *within modernity*, to reap and positively utilize its potentialities and its most salient developments.

The «Christian optimism» that inspired Don Bosco's attitude, and that characterized his approach to the problems of the young generations of the Salesians, was reflected in this openness and willingness to rethink faith – and Christian educational tradition itself – in the light of the new challenges posed by modernity¹⁶.

Don Bosco and his first companions and colleagues were able to foresee that, in a society ever more effected by economic and social transformation, by the separation from the countryside and by the growing fragmentation of life in urban centres, by the emergence of large pockets of malaise and precariousness among the young generations, «to save souls» meant not only tackling essential training and religious handling of young people, but also – and especially – reassembling the fragments of precarious lives, often marked by abandonment, by poverty and by ignorance in a real *life plan* which could

¹³ On this subject see: G. Verucci, *Chiesa e società nell'età della Restaurazione (1814-1830)*, in N. Raponi (ed.), *Istituzioni e società nella storia d'Italia. Dagli stati preunitari d'antico regime all'unificazione*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1981, pp. 399-426.

¹⁴ On this subject see Sani, «Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam». *Istituti religiosi, educazione e scuola nell'Italia moderna e contemporanea*, cit., pp. 83-87.

¹⁵ Cfr. P. Scoppola, *Don Bosco nella storia civile*, in M. Guasco, P. Scoppola, F. Traniello, *Don Bosco e le sfide della modernità*, Torino, Study Centre for Journalism in Piedmont "Carlo Trabucco", 1988, pp. 12-13.

¹⁶ Cfr. Scoppola, *Don Bosco nella storia civile*, cit., pp. 18-19; and Marcocchi, *Alle radici della spiritualità di Don Bosco*, cit., pp. 158-170.

reintegrate individuals into the dimension of the community, and restore to them a social and civil role and dignity, enabling the growth of a real feeling of identity and belonging.

In this perspective, the «honest citizen» and the «good Christian» can really be seen as two closely interwoven dimensions of a single educational project¹⁷.

To paraphrase Vincent Depaul (another great French spiritual writer of the *Grand Siècle* so dear to Don Bosco), who wrote: «The poor die of hunger and damn themselves»¹⁸; one could say that for Don Bosco and the Salesians: *The young generations live in civil and social precariousness and damn themselves*. And these two dimensions of existence appear inexorably interconnected.

The objective – which was at the same time genuinely religious and eminently secular – to find a remedy for the *existential precariousness* of the young generations, characteristic of modern society, even if destined always to appear in new forms from one generation to the next up to the present day, thus represents the *unifying principle* around which their vast and multifaceted educational work became established and developed, as is so well illustrated, from its origins and through its evolution, by the various collected essays in the books recalled above¹⁹.

Indeed, we could even say that each one of these educational works emerged – and sometimes evolved over time as the conditions of necessity, which caused its appearance, changed²⁰ – in order to provide an answer to the *existential precariousness* characteristic of towns and modern society, of a society that is destined to evolve under the sign of secularisation, and in which, therefore, religious experience no longer appeared as a natural environment – and almost taken for granted – of social living and collective existence, and thus needed to be constantly internally revived and refounded in the consciences of individuals and communities.

In other ways, this was a society that, once its ties had been cut with traditional forms of sociality, of community cohabitation and of progressive integration

¹⁷ On this subject see the excellent analysis by Braido, *Buon cristiano e onesto cittadino. Una formula dell'«umanesimo educativo» di Don Bosco*, cit., pp. 36-48.

¹⁸ Cfr. R. Sani, *Spiritualità e ideali di vita religiosa in Francia e in Italia tra Rivoluzione e Restaurazione*, «Annali della Facoltà di Scienze della Formazione. Università di Macerata», vol. I, 2004, pp. 337-355.

¹⁹ Motto (ed.), *Salesiani di Don Bosco in Italia. 150 anni di educazione*, cit.; and Loparco, Spiga (eds.), *Le Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice in Italia. Donne nell'educazione*, cit.

²⁰ With reference, for example, to two fundamental institutions in the context of the Salesian educational proposal – Oratories and Professional Schools – see the effective reconstructions of the recorded evolution over time offered by Cnos-Fap (ed.), *Don Bosco, i salesiani, l'Italia in 150 anni di storia*, Roma, Istituto Salesiano Pio XI, 2010; and the fundamental L. Van Looy, G. Malizia (eds.), *Formazione professionale salesiana. Memoria e attualità per un confronto*, Roma, LAS, 1997. On a more general level, see also the reflections proposed in M. Wirth, *Da Don Bosco ai giorni nostri. Tra storia e nuove sfide (1815-2000)*, Roma, LAS, 2000; and in J.G. González, G. Loparco, F. Motto, S. Zimniak (eds.), *L'educazione salesiana dal 1880 al 1922. Istanze, attuazioni in diversi contesti*, Rome. LAS, 2007, 2 vols.

with adult life, experienced the dramatic absence of new and significant spaces for socialisation and sharing of a broader membership than that assured by the original family and parental microcosm, of real opportunities for and experiences of individual and collective growth, of institutions that were able to place individuals, especially those at a formative age who were undergoing the educational process, within an *educational community*, within a universe of *significant interpersonal relations*, capable of assuring, through the acquisition and sharing of the heritage of community values not only their human but also their civil and social growth²¹.

The experience of the *Salesian Oratories* (from Don Bosco's prototype in Valdocco to the most recent and evolved forms of Youth Centre) was seen, in this perspective, to be an exemplary response to the changes described above²².

Don Bosco started from a traditional Catholic educational setting (one thinks of the traditions of Philip Neri and Charles Borromeo²³) in order to create an original space for socialisation and growth for young people, around which other spaces would be built designed to favour and enable the integration of the young generations into the adult world: spaces for teaching and training, along with those for introduction into the workplace and the productive economy²⁴.

The *Salesian Oratory*, a practically unique experience of its type and destined to find considerable success in the course of the 150 years that have passed since Unity, has for a long time represented (long before schools, which only became places of popular and mass socialisation in very recent years; and other institutions and associations), especially for the children of the *populus* and the youth of the lower classes, the principal – and sometimes only – form of access to a broader and more articulated community than that of the family of origin, the place in which they could experience for the first time the values and the rules of civil cohabitation, the space where they could recognize themselves as

²¹ Cfr. P. Braidò, *Prevenire non reprimere. Il sistema educativo di Don Bosco*, Roma, LAS, 2006; and Id., *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*, cit.

²² On this subject see: G. Chiosso, *L'oratorio di Don Bosco e il rinnovamento educativo nel Piemonte carloalbertino*, in P. Braidò (ed.), *Don Bosco nella Chiesa a servizio dell'umanità. Studi e testimonianze*, Roma, LAS, 1987, pp. 83-116; Id., *Don Bosco e l'oratorio (1841-1855)*, in M. Midali (ed.), *Don Bosco nella storia. Atti del 1° Congresso internazionale di studi su Don Bosco (Università Pontificia Salesiana, Roma 16-20 gennaio 1989)*, cit., pp. 171-212; P. Braidò, *Don Bosco per i giovani: l'«Oratorio». Una «Congregazione degli oratori»*, Roma, LAS, 1988; L. Caimi, *Gli Oratori salesiani in Italia dal 1888 al 1921*, in F. Motto (ed.), *L'Opera Salesiana dal 1880 al 1922. Significatività e portata sociale*, Roma, LAS, 2001, 2 vols., I, pp. 199-229. Also see the fascinating G. Bosco, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*, introduction, notes and critical text edited by A. da Silva Ferreira, Roma, LAS, 1991.

²³ Cfr. C. Gasbarri, *L'Oratorio Filippino 1552-1952*, Roma, Institute of Roman Studies, 1957; G. Barzaghi, *Tre secoli di storia e pastorale degli oratori milanesi*, Leumann (Turin), LDC, 1985.

²⁴ Cfr. G. Bosco, *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, introduction and critical texts edited by P. Braidò, Roma, LAS, 1985, pp. 66-72 and *passim*. Also see the attentive reflections of P. Braidò, *Introduzione*, in Id. (ed.), *Don Bosco nella Chiesa a servizio dell'umanità. Studi e testimonianze*, cit., pp. 34-36.

part of a wider community and experience a dimension of faith that was not cut off and separated from the everyday realities of the world but interwoven and almost blended into life itself²⁵.

Besides the Oratories, one of the most interesting aspects of the Salesian educational proposal regarded *professional training*. This was a sector that, from the first craft workshops created by Don Bosco in Valdocco²⁶, in the space of a few decades, he made extraordinary progress, developing into a vast network of institutions and initiatives (craft schools, professional workshops, evening courses for young workers, farm colonies, boarding schools for factory workers, training centres and other institutions spread throughout many urban and rural centres of the peninsula), capable of dealing with the varied and growing needs of working class youth to have openings into the workplace and the productive economy²⁷.

Those who are familiar with the history of schools and teaching in our country know that the work undertaken by Don Bosco and the Salesians went on to develop in a context marked by a significant absence of initiative by the State.

The Casati Law, passed on the eve of national unification (1859), in fact, completely ignored professional training²⁸ and, even in the decades that followed, this fundamental sector of training, linked to the very outcomes of economic and productive development of the country, was extensively neglected and scarcely considered by the ruling classes of the peninsula²⁹.

In this context, therefore, for many years the vast and articulated network of Salesian professional schools came to play a role that not only added to public functions, but that substantially substituted a structural shortfall in the presence of the state and local authorities³⁰.

²⁵ On this subject, see now the fine observations presented in G. Chiosso, *I cattolici e l'educazione popolare. L'esperienza dei Salesiani*, in Id., *Alfabeti d'Italia. La lotta contro l'ignoranza nell'Italia unita*, Torino, SEI, 2011, pp. 125-175.

²⁶ Cfr. L. Panfilo, *Dalla Scuola di arti e mestieri di Don Bosco all'attività di formazione professionale (1860-1915). Il ruolo dei Salesiani*, Milano, Libreria Editrice Salesiana, 1976; L. Pazzaglia, *Apprendistato e istruzione degli artigiani a Valdocco (1846-1886)*, in F. Traniello (ed. by), *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*, Torino, SEI, 1987, pp. 13-80.

²⁷ On this theme, see now the fundamental reconstruction presented by J.M. Prellezo, *Scuole professionali Salesiane. Momenti della loro storia (1853-1953)*, Roma, Salesian Institute Pio XI, 2010.

²⁸ Cfr. M.C. Morandini, *Da Boncompagni a Casati: la costruzione del sistema scolastico nazionale (1848-1861)*, in L. Pazzaglia, R. Sani (eds.), *Scuola e società nell'Italia unita. Dalla legge Casati al Centro-Sinistra*, Brescia, La Scuola, 2001, pp. 9-28. But also see G. Castelli, *L'istruzione professionale in Italia*, Milano, Vallardi, 1915; and A. Tonelli, *L'istruzione tecnica e professionale di Stato nelle strutture e nei programmi da Casati ai nostri giorni*, Milano, Giuffrè, 1964.

²⁹ On this subject see: G. Vigo, *Istruzione e sviluppo economico in Italia nel secolo XIX*, Torino, ILTE, 1971; C.G. Lacaita, *Istruzione e sviluppo industriale in Italia 1859-1914*, Firenze, Giunti-Barbèra, 1973; and M. Barbagli, *Disoccupazione intellettuale e sistema scolastico in Italia (1859-1973)*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1974.

³⁰ Cfr. Prellezo, *Scuole professionali Salesiane. Momenti della loro storia (1853-1953)*, cit., esp.

In recent years, a similar commitment in the ambit of professional training has been the object of growing attention by historians, some of whom – I am thinking of Pietro Scoppola – rightly underline how it reflected «a new Catholic attitude faced with the reality of the capitalist economy»: «without foregoing their ethical inspiration, but going beyond every ideological exception», Don Bosco and the Salesians showed themselves capable «of identifying and treading an original and modern path within the reality of emerging capitalism»³¹.

Scoppola's thoughts can be broadly shared, and we could also add further elements that are in line with the meaning of work and professional training in Don Bosco and the Salesians' idea of education: a question, as we shall see, that constitutes a core aspect of the more overall aspiration to train «honest citizens» and to promote a sense of citizenship amongst young people.

The desire to safeguard young people from the dangers of cities and from the moral and spiritual pitfalls of the workplace, providing them with the opportunity to learn a trade and to receive a complete civil and religious education in a protected environment, typical of the origins and first experiences at Valdocco, represented only one aspect of the Salesian educational proposal³². The other equally important aspect concerned the significance attributed to work itself in the context of education of poor and abandoned.

Right from the outset, for Don Bosco and his colleagues it was work that represented the principal and most effective instrument for people's personal and social growth and maturity: it constituted not only a formidable means for the acquisition by young people – including the more problematic ones and those that were «at risk» – of inner discipline and an orderly and regular lifestyle, but also a source of virtue and their own values (determination, precision, commitment, sense of responsibility, constructive spirit, faith in their own resources and capacities etc.), as well as an instrument for their positive integration into civil society.

Don Bosco and the Salesians were convinced that the professional education of poor and abandoned young people would have important outcomes not only in terms of the personal growth of individuals but also collectively and within a community context. Indeed, they felt that where a full educational plan was applied aimed at turning these young people into honest and laborious craftsmen and factory workers, the base would be created for real, peaceful social harmony³³.

chaps. II and III.

³¹ Scoppola, *Don Bosco nella storia civile*, cit., pp. 13-14.

³² Cfr. Pazzaglia, *Apprendistato e istruzione degli artigiani a Valdocco (1846-1886)*, cit., pp. 20-29.

³³ Cfr. E. Ceria, *Annali della Società salesiana. I: Dalle origini alla morte di S. Giovanni Bosco (1841-1888)*, Torino, SEI, 1941, pp. 649-659 and *passim*. But also see Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale 1815-1870*, cit.

In reality, faced with the choice of favouring professional and technical training, also because of the necessity to guarantee an essential and rapid introduction into the workplace for young people of the poorest and most neglected classes, Don Bosco and the Salesians' initiative with schools was notable from the start for an effort to open the doors of the so-called *schools of culture* to more capable and deserving youngsters, regardless of their social background or their family standing, offering access to the various grades and branches of junior and senior high schools³⁴.

Unlike other secondary institutes and colleges in the hands of other religious orders, and destined predominantly for the elite Catholic youth, largely a privilege for the young offspring of the medium and high Catholic bourgeoisie who were mistrustful towards the marked secular bias assumed by public state education, the Salesian schools (primarily senior high lyceums, but also technical schools and institutes³⁵) were characterized from the first decades following unification, by their *marked interclass imprint* and, above all, by their incisive function as a *mechanism for social elevation* for those young people whose economic and family conditions would have otherwise excluded them from any possible access to high school levels and confined them to elementary and popular levels. In this context, as Don Bosco wrote, it was not only a question of «providing a means, for some through the arts and the trades, and for some through studies, of honestly earning the bread of life», but also to «promote secondary education within the least well-to-do class of the people»³⁶.

And in this context the *hostels and boarding schools* for the poorest students revealed themselves as destined to create the conditions for the performance of a similar job of *redemption and social promotion*³⁷.

³⁴ Cfr. the interesting annotations by F. Cerruti, *Le idee di Don Bosco sulla educazione e sull'insegnamento e la missione attuale della scuola*, S. Benigno Canavese, Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1886, *passim*. A few passing references in B. Bellerate, *Don Bosco e la scuola umanistica*, in M. Midali (ed.), *Don Bosco nella storia. Atti del 1° Congresso internazionale di studi su Don Bosco (Università Pontificia Salesiana, Roma 16-20 gennaio 1989)*, cit., pp. 315-329; and in G. Proverbio, *La scuola di Don Bosco e l'insegnamento del latino (1850-1900)*, in Traniello (ed.), *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*, cit., pp. 143-185.

³⁵ Quantitative data and indications on the geographical evolution of the Salesian secondary schools in Italy between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are now collected in G. Malizia, F. Motto, *L'evoluzione dell'Opera Salesiana in Italia*, in Motto (ed.), *Salesiani di Don Bosco in Italia. 150 anni di educazione*, cit., pp. 46-49.

³⁶ G.B. Lemoyne, *Memorie biografiche di Don Giovanni Bosco* [then: *del Venerabile Servo di Dio Don Giovanni Bosco*], Torino, Libreria Salesiana Editrice, 1898-1917, 9 vols., VII, pp. 327-328.

³⁷ Cfr. F. Casella, *Il Mezzogiorno d'Italia e le istituzioni educative salesiane. Richieste di fondazioni (1879-1922). Fonti per lo studio*, Roma, LAS, 2000; and, above all, the documented and penetrating work by A. D'Angelo, *Educazione cattolica e ceti medi. L'Istituto salesiano «Villa Sora» di Frascati (1900-1950)*, Roma, LAS, 2000, whose analysis goes well beyond the events relating to the Lazio institution and enables us to formulate general hypotheses on the social recruitment of young boarders and on the cultural project that characterised this type of Salesian work.

This was a choice that undoubtedly went against the grain and broke away from the heavy social conditioning and rigid classist separation of the educational paths and models that were introduced into the Italian school system by the Casati law of 1859 and reiterated by the Gentile reform of 1923³⁸.

But it was also a choice that required a special commitment in terms of teaching methodology and cultural mediation, that was also able to guarantee to the pupils who came from culturally disadvantaged families to be able to face their peers who were from more well-to-do and bourgeois extraction.

Finally, if one does not bear in mind the radical openness to modernity and progress that characterised the Christian vision of Don Bosco and the Salesians and that provided nervous energy to their dedication to the young generations and their educational proposal, it is hard to grasp the real significance of their extraordinary and pioneering commitment:

- regarding the *periodical press for young people*: from the Turinese «Letture Cattoliche», published from 1853³⁹, up until the extraordinary range of magazines and comics for children and adolescents of different ages⁴⁰;
- regarding *school and popular publishing*: through the dense network of first the Salesian Printers and Publisher-Booksellers⁴¹, and then, at the beginning of the 20th century, in perfect harmony with the emergence in Italy of the great national publishing centres, with the founding of the SEI, the International Publishing Company⁴²;
- and lastly, regarding *theatre* (with the youth Companionships) and later concerning *cinema* (with the Salesian youth *Cine Clubs*)⁴³.

³⁸ Cfr. Pazzaglia, Sani (eds.), *Scuola e società nell'Italia unita. Dalla legge Casati al Centro-Sinistra*, cit., especially the essays in the first section of the volume («From Unity to Fascism»).

³⁹ Cfr. L. Giovannini, *Le «Letture cattoliche» di Don Bosco esempio di «stampa cattolica» nel secolo XIX*, Napoli, Liguori, 1984. For a general picture of educational and popular Salesian journalism in the nineteenth century, see also S. Pivato, *Don Bosco e la «cultura popolare»*, in Traniello (ed.), *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*, cit., pp. 257-287.

⁴⁰ Of great interest, and full of references to young people's periodicals of the twentieth century is the recent I. Mattioni, *Da grande farò la santa. Modelli etici e valori religiosi nella stampa cattolica femminile per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza*, Firenze, Nerbini, 2011.

⁴¹ On this subject see: F. Traniello, *La cultura popolare cattolica nell'Italia unita*, in S. Soldani, G. Turi (eds.), *Fare gli italiani. Scuola e cultura nell'Italia contemporanea. I. La nascita dello Stato nazionale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1993, pp. 429-458; R. Sani, *L'editoria educativo-popolare cattolica tra le due guerre*, in L. Pazzaglia (ed.), *Chiesa, cultura e educazione in Italia tra le due guerre*, Brescia, La Scuola, 2003, pp. 329-357.

⁴² F. Targhetta, *La capitale dell'impero di carta. Editori per la scuola a Torino nella prima metà del Novecento*, Torino, SEI, 2007; Id., *Serenant e illuminant. I cento anni della SEI*, Torino, SEI, 2008.

⁴³ Cfr. S. Pivato, *Il mondo cattolico e il cinema: preliminari per una storia*, in G. Gori, S. Pivato (eds.), *Gli anni del cinema in parrocchia 1930-1960*, Rimini, Maggioli, 1981, pp. 6-21; and, above all, A. Turchini, «Cine e balocchi»: spettacolo e cinema nella formazione dei giovani, in L. Pazzaglia (ed.), *Chiesa e progetto educativo nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra (1945-1958)*, Brescia, La Scuola, 1988, pp. 397-422.

In this setting it is of course not possible even to touch on these subjects, which were the object of an attentive and documented reconstruction in the volume edited by Don Francesco Motto.

Here, more simply, it is worth underlining how the many initiatives that were undertaken in the area of mass popular and youth culture also followed the line of a religious presence that could take on the civil and cultural growth of the populations of the peninsula, and in particular that of the young generations at the moment when the initial signs of social fragmentation and homogenization of consciences appeared to be undermining – or at least weakening – the capacity of the traditional educational institutions and agencies (primarily families and schools) to address the younger generations.

And it is certainly significant that such a commitment was undertaken with greatest intensity in the years of totalitarian Fascism⁴⁴, and then, in the aftermath of the Second World War, with the great anthropological and cultural changes related to the economic boom and the arrival of the *consumer society*⁴⁵.

Just as Don Bosco did in the Turin of the nineteenth century, so his spiritual sons who worked in times that were closer to us felt that there was a need to create new channels of communication and dialogue to deal with the growing absence and educational proposals by the adult world with towards the younger generations.

Over the course of the long and problematic twentieth century, Don Bosco's old objective of «saving souls», working to cultivate «honest citizens and good Christians» expressed itself in numerous educational initiatives and experiences which made a concrete contribution to bestowing dignity to generations and generations of young people, especially those from the poorest and most neglected classes, who in recreational, educational and scholastic spaces learnt what it meant *to be Italian*, to feel part of a community and to share a heritage of ethical and civil values and significances.

In a brilliant essay of a few years ago Piero Bairati noted that, from a point of view of action rather than ideology, the relationship of the work of the Salesians with modern Italian society and with the unified State «did not come across as a slothful and impotent refusal of the new emerging social and political order»; on the contrary, «it was a relationship of active competition, of an intense and industrious attempt to create a society that was parallel but not separate, different but not closed into itself»⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ Cfr. P. Braido, *L'Oratorio salesiano in Italia e la catechesi in un contesto socio-politico inedito (1922-1943)*, «Ricerche Storiche Salesiane», XLVIII, 2006, pp. 7-100; and S. Oni, *I Salesiani e l'educazione dei giovani durante il periodo del fascismo*, in Motto (ed.), *Salesiani di Don Bosco in Italia. 150 anni di educazione*, cit., pp. 247-271.

⁴⁵ On this subject see F. Traniello, *Educazione cattolica, pastorale quotidiana e dinamiche sociali*, in Pazzaglia (ed.), *Chiesa e progetto educativo nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra (1945-1958)*, cit., pp. 95-116.

⁴⁶ P. Bairati, *Cultura salesiana e società industriale*, in Traniello (ed.), *Don Bosco nella storia*

Bairati's analysis is certainly well-thought out and evocative as it grasps and highlights certain aspects and dimensions of the Salesian presence in our country which were inexplicably denied or unknown⁴⁷.

In my opinion, however, in order to gain a full understanding of the real significance of the educational work of Don Bosco and the Salesians over the 150-year history as a united country, much more than the creation of a «parallel society», we need to refer to the extraordinary commitment given to the service of the *single* Italian society that has developed over these 150 years.

This was a commitment that was undertaken without a hankering for the past and without the temptation of separateness or otherness, in the knowledge that Italian society of the last 150 years, albeit with all its fragility and inadequacies, was *the* place where bringing up children as honest and industrious citizens meant, in substance, to also making them into *good Christians*, or «to save [their] souls».

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della cultura popolare, cit., p. 333. But see the stimulating observations made in the ambit of the entire contribution, at pp. 331-357.

⁴⁷ Cfr. Motto, *Introduzione*, cit., pp. 13-14.