Historical outlines concerning the Oratory of St Francis de Sales

Critical ed. in P. Braido, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani…*, pp. 9-29, 56-77.

[1862]

The idea of the Oratories came from frequenting the prisons in this city. In these places of spiritual and temporal misery there were many young men in the flower of their youth, alert, good-hearted, well able to be the consolation of their families and an honour to their town; and here they were locked up, discouraged, the opprobrium of society. Carefully considering the reasons for this misfortune one could see that for most of them they were unfortunate more for want of education than out of malice. One could note also that little by little they could be led to appreciate their dignity as human beings, that they could reason, and that they must earn their bread in life through honest effort and not by stealing. In other words as soon as their minds were enlightened by a moral and religious principle they began to feel something good in their hearts which they could not explain  but which made them want to be better people. In fact many changed their behaviour while still in the prison, while others when released lived in such a way that they would not end up there again.

So we had confirmation  that these young men were unfortunate for want of religious and moral instruction and that these two educational means were ones that together could  keep good boys good and lead the unruly ones to make wise judgement  when they were released from these places of punishment.

As a trial,  some appropriate catechetical programmes were begun in the prisons around the capital and a little later in the sacristy of the church of St Francis of Assisi. And thus the Sunday gatherings began. Boys released from prison were invited  as well as others who we found and collected here and there in the streets and squares and workshops during the week. Moral and religious stories, hymns, small gifts, some games were the lure we used to deal with them on Sundays and other holy days.

Throughout 1841 on average  around seventy boys attended. With great satisfaction the oratory continued at St Francis of Assisi for three years, until the extraordinary number of boys forced us to choose a larger place. Then in 1844 Don Bosco, for reasons of Church employment, had joined the administration of the pious work of the Refuge in Valdocco. There a suitable place was selected and on December 8, 1844  the first chapel destined exclusively for the young people  was blessed. This chapel consisted of two rooms next to the building used by the two priests who were running the aforesaid work of the Refuge. The Oratory lasted  a year here.

In autumn 1845, because of the growing number of boys, a number that often exceeded two hundred, the building which up until then had served as a chapel was now to be used for something else, so it was necessary to seek a more appropriate place. For about four months  we went to St Martin’s  near the city Mills but finished there to give way to another catechism program for young people. St Peter’s in Chains cenotaph, the Moretta House, an enclosure belonging to the Filippi house served as an Oratory up until spring 1846.

That year we rented and then bought the Pinardi house in the Valdocco district, and this is where the Oratory of St Francis de Sales arose. The number of boys grew such that in 1850 it often went beyond two and also three thousand.

With a view to providing for this need, in 1851 the current church was put up and that was done with help from the Lotteries, raffles  of items and other private donations.

*The Oratory of St Aloysius at Porta Nuova.* In 1847, seeing that such a huge number of boys could no longer be contained in the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, another was opened at Porta Nuova between dei Plantini and Valentino streets. Administration of this was entrusted to Fr Giacinto Carpano, and then was passed on to others. Currently Fr Leonardo Murialdo[[1]](#footnote-2) is its zealous director. The average number of boys is around 500.

*The Guardian Angel Oratory.* The extraordinary number of boys coming to the Oratory at Porta Nuova soon made us  realise that another site was needed where the greatest need was felt. Vanchiglia is a heavily populated part of Turin and full of youngsters who just wander about on Sundays and Holy Days. The worthy Fr Cocchi  had already opened an oratory there but had to abandon it due to other things he had to do. So in the same place with an an almost identical purpose, in 1849 we reopened the Guardian Angel Oratory there, near the Po. Administration was entrusted to Fr Robert Murialdo, but since his health is currently up and down it has been entrusted to Fr Michael Rua[[2]](#footnote-3). The average number presently attending this Oratory is around four hundred.

*General observations.* We could call these Oratories places aimed at dealing with youngsters at risk  on Sundays and other Holy Days by offering them pleasant and honest recreation after they have attended the church services. So as well as the churches there are enclosures that are large enough  for recreation and other suitable places for lessons and to bring the pupils under cover during bad weather in the cold season and when it rains. Ways of attracting them to come are: small prizes, games and a kind welcome; medals, holy pictures, fruit, something to eat or a snack; sometimes a pair of socks, shoes or other clothing item for the poorest ones; finding them work, going to see their families or their employers. The games are: bocce (bowls), quoits, stilts, see-saws of various kinds, leap-frog, gymnastics, military exercises, singing, concerts with instruments and vocals. But what attracts the youngsters most is the kind welcome they receive. Long experience has led us to understand that the good result of education of the young consists especially in knowing how to make oneself loved so that one can then be feared.

The religious services on Sundays and other holy days are as follows: Mass followed by a story from the bible or Church history, or an explanation of the Gospel of the day; then recreation. After midday catechism in classes, vespers, a brief instruction from the pulpit, Benediction and then followed by the usual recreation. Once religious services are over everyone is free to stay and play or to go home. Once night falls we send everyone home and the Oratory is closed.

There is a set of rules guiding everything in church, recreation and school. Those taking part are priests, clerics and some good citizens who help out with everything. During Lent, in all three places there is catechism each day at midday for those who are not free at other times during the day. We even celebrate Mary’s month with a sermon or spiritual reading, rosary and Benediction at sunrise or at the time in the evening when we say the *Hail Mary* according to circumstances.

People taking the most active part at the beginning of the Oratory have been, as well as those already mentioned: Fr Ponte[[3]](#footnote-4), Fr Trivero, Fr Pacchiotti[[4]](#footnote-5), Dr John Vola. Of particular help has been the worthy Fr John Borel. He has been the soul and support of things exercising his priestly ministry and in material and moral assistance. Chevalier Dr (Fr) Baricco[[5]](#footnote-6) has also taken part several times.

*Sunday school.* Many youngsters, either for lack of means or facilities are already moving on in years but have not had the necessary instruction for learning a trade. During the week they were not able to attend school of any kind, so this need suggested Sunday classes. We  started these in 1845. It seemed difficult at the beginning given that there were no books or people to give advice or direction. We had school, we taught things but during the week,  what had been taught and learned  on Sundays was mostly forgotten. Just the same we mostly overcame this serious obstacle by taking just one area of study at a time and having just one lesson to be learned through the week. This way we succeeded in getting them to learn how to read and write and then the four arithmetical operations, and then the elements of the metric system, Italian grammar and Bible history, but without ever passing on to something new if what we already had in hand was not yet well understood. The public performances that were offered satisfied important personages who honoured us with their presence, amongst whom Fr Aporti[[6]](#footnote-7), the city Mayor, Chevalier Bellono,[[7]](#footnote-8) and Chevalier Fr Baricco.

*Evening classes.* Amongst the multitude of boys who came another need appeared, since although the Sunday classes produced good results, nevertheless they were not sufficient for many. So we began to invite them to come during the week on days and at times that were most convenient for the pupils. One boy encouraged another and in a short while it was considered appropriate to set a fixed time and this was in the evening, just when the working boys had finished their day’s work.

In 1846  the evening classes began for the first time. Attendance was extraordinary to the point where we had to limit ourselves to the number of pupils we could physically take in the squeezed circumstances. Since evening schools were then opened by the city administration in many parts of the city it was not necessary to offer them in the other oratories. They continue until the present only in the Oratory of St Francis de Sales. The subjects taught are: reading, writing, the metric system, Italian, plainchant, vocal music, instrumental music and some drawing, pianoforte, organ and also French.

*Day school during the week.* Another type of boy can be found on the loose wandering the city and these are the ones who are either very poorly dressed or since they cannot settle down to discipline are not accepted in the public schools or are expelled from them. For the most part they are either orphaned or neglected by their parents even at a tender age and so they wander the streets and squares brawling, cursing and stealing. We opened a school for them in the Oratory of St Francis de Sales and another in St Aloysius. A considerable number attend in both oratories and through the careful and kindly concern of the teachers satisfactory results have been obtained in terms of proper behaviour and discipline. A few of them were then admitted to classes in town, others in evening schools and some others yet found employment.

*The Home at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales.* Amongst the young people who come to these Oratories we find some who are so poor and abandoned that almost anything we did for them would be almost useless without providing somewhere where they could live, eat and be clothed. We tried to do this with the attached Home at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales. At the beginning we rented out a small house there in 1847 and began to gather up a few of the poorest  boys. At the time they went out to work in the city coming home to the Oratory to eat and sleep. But the serious need that we became aware of from various towns around the province made us determine to extend our acceptance also to boys who were not attending the Turin oratories.

One thing happened after another. Abandoned young people swarmed in from everywhere. So we established a platform whereby we accepted only boys between the ages of twelve and eighteen, without father and mother, completely abandoned and poor. But since going into the city into public workplaces had bad consequences, we extended our place, rebuilt existing parts and built new (we have seven hundred boys) workshops so that everything is now here at home. The trades taught are tailoring, boot-making, book-binding, carpentry, printing and study for those whose behaviour and attitude to academic subjects make them suitable for it.

The earnest desire many showed for taking regular academic courses meant we had to make exceptions in our acceptance conditions. So for studies were also accepted boys who were not abandoned nor completely poor so long as their behaviour and attitude to study was such that it left no doubt that they could hope for an upright and Christian success in an academic career.

*Administration.* In the house we even have a set of regulations to guide everything. There is a Rector on whom everyone depends. He has a prefect as his vice and who is responsible for accounts and correspondence. A Director looks after the school, keeps in touch the teachers and study assistants, catechists or spiritual directors. A bursar looks after service staff, repairs and all the domestic arrangements in general. The shop heads or master craftsmen in each workshop also depend on him. There are no fixed fees, so the house is supported only by charity coming mostly from private donations. The city council usually gives an annual grant of 300 francs for lighting and wood for the evening classes during winter. It is not possible to calculate the precise expenses for the whole house or for each individual but we could establish somewhere around 60 cents per day per person all up. The church, the buildings, the site for the house and oratory at Valdocco are the property of Don Bosco. Those at Porta Nuova and Vanchiglia are leased.

*Results.* To understand the results obtained in these schools, the Oratories and the Home at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales we need to divide the pupils into three groups: the undisciplined, the restless and the good. The good ones stay that way and make marvellous progress in goodness. The restless type, those already accustomed to wandering around not doing much work achieve some success through a trade with assistance, instruction and by being kept busy. The undisciplined ones mean we have a lot to do. If we can get them to gain some taste for work we can mostly win them over. By the means already indicated we can obtain some results which could be explained thus: 1. That they do not get worse. 2. Many improve in common sense so can earn their bread in an upright manner. 3. Those who seemed to be insensitive under vigilance over time become more pliant—if not completely, at least to some extent. We leave it to time to profit from the good principles and know how to put them into practice.

This means that every year we have been able to place more than a hundred boys with good employers where than can learn a trade. Many have returned to the families they fled from and are now more docile and obedient. Not a few were placed with upright families as domestics.

The coming and going of boys from the Home at this Oratory comes to around three hundred a year. A few of them have a found a place with the National Guard or Military Band, others continue with the trade they learned here while some serve in upright families and yet a sizeable number of others take up teaching. These ones sit for the regular exams or remain here at home or go as teachers to towns that are asking for them. Some also take up other civic careers.

Amongst the students many tackle an ecclesiastical career. These, once they have finished their secondary studies, are mostly sent off to the various bishops who look after them lovingly to help them and allow them to continue in the career they have aspired to. Amongst these we have chosen a number who carry out a teaching role in this house, teach catechism in the Oratories, assist in the various workshops and dormitories. When they become priests they continue to exercise their sacred ministry on behalf of the boys here or those who attend other oratories in the city. Others follow their inclination and are assigned to other aspects of ministry which the ecclesiastical superior judges them suitable for.

One very deserving person in the oratories and this house is Fr Victor Alasonatti[[8]](#footnote-9) who has tirelessly dedicated all his efforts for many years in these charitable works.

As for all the personnel of this house and the oratories, including domestic staff, nobody receives a stipend, but each offers his work for free.

1. Leonardo Murialdo (1828-1900), Saint, former collaborator at the Guardian Angel Oratory in Vanchiglia (1851), took on the running of the St Aloysius Oratory at Porta Nuova, at Don Bosco's request in 1857, and remained there until 1865. Following that he became the director of the Collegio degli Artigianelli (a boarding school for trade students), set up by Fr Cocchi in 1849, and then founder of the Congregation of St Joseph; he carried out intense activity in the social sector, especially on behalf of workers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Michael Rua (1837-1910), Blessed, Don Bosco's principle collaborator from the earliest days of the Oratory, would succeed him in leading the Salesian Congregation (1888-1910). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Fr Pietro Ponte (1821-1892) chaplain of the *Opere Barolo*. He stayed with Don Bosco in the Pinardi house for more than a year (1847-1848). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Fr Sebastiano Pacchiotti (1806-1885), chaplain at the *Opere Barolo*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Dr (Fr) Pietro Baricco (1819-1887), professor, member of the Turin city council, responsible for public education in the city. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ferrante Aporti (1791-1858), priest and pedagogue from Mantova, the first in Italy, in 1828, to open infant schools. Classes given in Turin in 1844 at the Higher School of Method brought him to the attention of public opinion, so much so that after the 1848 war he took refuge in the city, was made a senator and took on various important roles in citizens' cultural institutions. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Giorgio Bellono (1806-1852), Mayor of the city from 1850 to 1852. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Fr Vittorio Alasonatti (1812-1865), first Prefect of the Oratory at Valdocco (from 1854) and of the Salesian Society (from 1859 until his death). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)