

STUDIES ABOUT DON BOSCO

John Bosco's

Lives of Young People

Biographies of Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco

Introductory essay and historical notes, by

Aldo Giraudo

LAS - ROME

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[Masters and disciples in action](#)

The Life of Dominic Savio (1859) and the biographical outlines of Michael Magone (1861) and Francis Besucco (1864)[\[1\]](#), are amongst the most important of Don Bosco's pedagogical and spiritual narratives, and are an effective narrative illustration of the Saint's educational beliefs and practice during his first twenty years of activity. They present three boys to us, each one different from the other, deeply part of the culture of the time and together they are significant for their freshness and liveliness, their ability to reflect, their quality of spiritual openness, their determination and the impulse to be generous that always marks the adolescent being. The author presents them as zealous and obedient disciples of dedicated and affectionate educators. He presents the several stages of their brief lives in the various settings they grew up in, in their everyday relationships, their duties and their feelings.

[1. Importance](#)

These writings offer essential elements for understanding the heart of Don Bosco's educational message: religiosity as a unifying and vital centre in the growing up process; the common factor of the fatherly and brotherly approach of the educator amongst his pupils; the dynamic interweaving of love, cheerfulness and duty; the effective role of active involvement of young people in their community; the strategic importance of offering them places to be active in. They are considered to be "an already mature pedagogical summary, in which the divine and the human, the supernatural and the natural, duty and happiness, in different ways, achieve a perfection characteristic of Don Bosco's educational system"[\[2\]](#).

Commentators have rightly classified such works as part of the category of edifying biographies and exemplary life models. This is how their author presents them. But as we can well see they are at the same time autobiographical documents of great representative effectiveness: they allow us to observe Don Bosco the Christian educator in action; they introduce us to his mental framework and viewpoint; they bring us into contact with his inner aspirations; they reveal his marvellous, affectionate and at the same time respectful view of young people as active players. Fr Alberto Caviglia's comments are still the sharpest; they are full of insight and fruitful presentation of Don Bosco's *spiritual pedagogy*, despite some lyrical moments and rhetorical enthusiasm typical of the cultural sensitivity in which they were produced[\[3\]](#).

Of the three, the *Life of Dominic Savio* has had better fortune and an important influence well beyond the confines of the Salesian world, for the way it presents the moral and spiritual qualities of the boy, for the dynamic interplay between the holiness of the boy and the way he was led by his Master, and for his fame following the success of the process of Beatification and Canonisation[\[4\]](#). This book succeeded not only because of its presentation of the chief character but also because of the way it presents Don Bosco's pedagogy so completely.

Less known is the *Cenno biografico* (Outline) of Michael Magone, even though the boy seems to be "maybe more immediately sympathetic, because more 'natural', and more exclusively a product of Don Bosco's"[\[5\]](#). His biography seems "less distant from the average picture we have of a young person" and is, "in its succession of chapters, the essential stages of what should have been the more common spiritual life of a young person" in the holy educator's view of things[\[6\]](#).

Almost completely unknown is the *Life of Francis Besucco, the Young shepherd of the Alps*, probably for the wordiness of the "delicate bit on his early childhood and home and parish upbringing in the mountains, in Argentera"[\[7\]](#) (15 chapters taken almost literally from the parish priest), and maybe because of the little time he spent at the Oratory or because he seemed a little naive, almost too ingenuous, and not quite like the conventional picture we have of the Salesian pupil. Albert Caviglia, despite his reservations about the literary form of the early part, considers it a very valuable and "constructive document of the holy educator's spiritual and moral pedagogy..., inasmuch as the author, more than in any other book of its kind, enters into the theory and explains his ideas with the express intention of teaching them"[\[8\]](#), noting that at the time of publication (1864) Don Bosco was "was at the end of his self-formation in pedagogy, and had formulated his thinking definitively"[\[9\]](#). Our sensitivity today, however, also allows us to appreciate the first part of the book, both because it is focused on the educational role of the family and parish, and for its anthropological value, since through Fr Pepino's testimony, we discover many aspects of the emotional climate, spiritual sensitivity and rhythms of life in a culture which has now disappeared, the culture of alpine villages between Piedmont and Provence with a fundamentally Provençal language and tradition.

[2. The historical context of the "Lives": a fruitful period in Don Bosco's work](#)

The decade that elapsed between Dominic Savio's arrival in Valdocco (October 1854) and the publication of the Life of Francis Besucco (July 1864) was a decisive one for Don Bosco and his work. In the years prior to 1854, difficulty in finding stable helpers and a series of people leaving him had convinced him of the need to choose his helpers from amongst the boys most attached to him so he could form them in his spirit. A little at a time he formed a small group of willing helpers around him for the various needs at the Oratory.

2.1. Seeking faithful helpers

In November 1848, when the seminary in Turin was taken over by the Government cleric Ascanio Savio was taken in at the Oratory, and Don Bosco found a very good co-worker. He was energetic, active and available, excellent for catechism lessons, evening and Sunday classes, and in assistance. During the two series of Retreats organised in the following July, Don Bosco chose another four boys who showed good signs of a vocation: Joseph Buzzetti, Charles Gastini, James Bellia and Felix Reviglio. He proposed that they live at the Oratory and tackle their studies with a view to a priestly career, leaving their work. In February 1851, with the permission of the Archbishop, he gave them the cassock. So the four recruits became an active part, along with Ascanio Savio and another seminarian who was living in there, Joseph Vacchetta, of the first apostolic community around Don Bosco. "They are of exemplary conduct and lend a hand with catechism classes in the parish at Borgo Dora, and especially in the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, where as well as catechism classes they help with evening school, teach singing and music and everything for free", Don Bosco wrote in a reference for good conduct^[10]. This small group of disciples, who loved him as a father and their benefactor, allowed him to experience what it meant to work in a group with common desires, efforts and joys. It was a unique family, sharing the rooms in the Pinardi house with Mamma Margaret and some twenty poor working lads, working hard and living simply.

On 31 March 1852 Archbishop Fransoni appointed Don Bosco "chief spiritual director"^[11] of the oratories in Valdocco, Porta Nuova and Vanchiglia. This was a decisive event for future developments. He was now independent in his management of the three institutions, and free to choose and organise his co-workers. So, despite Buzzetti and Gastini not being so suited to study, and Ascanio Savio, discouraged by the austerity of life, abandoning him to join the Oblates of the Virgin Mary (May 1852), followed by Bellia and Vacchetta soon after, he was not dismayed and decided to follow the road he had set out on. He understood that he needed to choose young people, set them up for regular studies, form them from the time they were teenagers to a solid interior life, nurture them in the spirit of sacrifice and generous service, tie them to himself and the mission of the oratory. In October 1852 he gave the clerical habit to Michael Rua and Joseph Rocchietti, who were 15 and 16 years of age respectively. During that school year he took in James Artiglia, John Cagliero, John Turchi and John Baptist, as students. They were all thirteen year olds. The time was now right for developing his work, extending the house and increasing the 'nursery' for vocations.

Once the St. Francis de Sales church was completed (June 1852), Don Bosco laid the foundations for a new building. The building, despite a partial structural collapse while work was in progress, was ready in October 1853^[12]. Now the youthful community could grow in its two main components Students preparing for the priesthood and apprentices for whom the first workshops were built internally . shoemaking and tailoring^[13].

Dominic Savio arrived at the Oratory in October 1854, right at the time the community, having moved into the new premises, began to look like a boarding establishment. The two sections grew: thirty students between 12 and 16 and fifty working boys.^[14] Helping Don Bosco as bursar was generous Fr Victor Alasonatti, who had left aside a peaceful existence as a teacher in town to

dedicate himself to poor boys. With his help Don Bosco was able to rewrite the *Regulations of the Oratory* and adapt it to the new circumstances of the house.

2.2. Developments in the Home attached to the Oratory

While he was doing his studies, Dominic was helping out in the development of the work: pulling down the house and the Pianrdi shed, substituting it with a beautiful building which connected the 1853 house and church of St. Francis de Sales, decorating the porches with biblical writings in Latin and Italian[15], the gradual opening of the classrooms and new workshops. During his first year at Valdocco he attended grammar school run by Prof. Charles Bonzanino, on the third floor of a building in via Guardinfati (today Barbaroux), while his other school mates attended rhetoric classes with Fr Matthew Picco, in via sant'Agostino. The 1855-56 school year saw the embryonic beginnings of the internal school: seventeen year old cleric Francesia was given the year three grammar class[16]. The following year, when the new building was completed, the community grew: there were now seventy working lads and eighty five students. The founder of the Oratory decided to set up Latin classes[17], and called on Prof. Francis Blanch giving him first and second class in grammar. Dominic Savio attended the first year of rhetoric with Fr Picco for a few months, then he got sick. In 1857-58, with 120 students, the three internal class levels were given to Francesia, John Turchi and Fr Joseph Ramello, a priest with somewhat liberal ideas recommended to Don Bosco by the archbishop[18]. Finally, in the 1859-60 school year Don Bosco succeeded in having the entire secondary school internal to the Oratory taught by his own teachers. He gave the first three classes to Celestine Durando, Secondo Pettiva and John Turchi, the last two to Francesia, all clerics whom he had picked from the Oratory and looked after. From then on the student section took on greater importance and its numbers were more than the working boys section.

While the people were growing in their interest in education, encouraged by private or public initiatives and the government was reorganising the national school system, there was a category of students emerging from the lower class and it was urgent for them to be provided for adequately in educational terms: "The keen desire shown by many to take regular academic [humanities] courses has caused some exceptions with regards to admission". It means accepting for study boys who are not abandoned and not totally poor, so long as they have good behaviour and an attitude to study that leaves no doubt that they will succeed as upright Christians in their academic career".[19] Don Bosco's aim was to help these poor but gifted boys to tackle higher studies so they could be of advantage to the Church and society but also to ensure the Congregation at its beginnings had motivated, generous and faithful educators. In a note from that time we read: "Amongst the academic students many take up an ecclesiastical career". ... We choose from amongst them a number who can be teachers in the house, take catechism classes in the Oratories, assist in the various workshops and dormitories. Once some had become priests a number of them continued to exercise their sacred ministry on behalf of young people there or who attend Oratories in other parts of the city. ... For all of the personnel in this house and in the Oratories, including service personnel, nobody receives a stipend, but each one gives freely of his work".[20].

The three biographies do not provide us with the turbulent events of the surrounding scene. Whoever flicks through these pages does not see any echo of the debates inflaming Turin in the 1850s, which went with the process of national unification, and does not pick up the dismay in the Catholic world regarding the forced suppression of religious corporations or the popular enthusiasm for the Crimea campaign, the expedition of the 'Thousand' and the second war of independence. Other sources assure us that all this had an impact on the life of the Oratory.[21] Nor does the development going on inside the Oratory appear: buildings, Don Bosco's cautious steps to found the Salesian Society, his trip to Rome which lasted two months (18 February - 16 April 1858), an absence strongly felt in the Valdocco community, the actual founding of the Congregation, the

opening of the first house at Mirabello Monferrato. In the three *Lives* the Oratory seems to be an island of educational fervour, work and spirituality. There are hints of publishing activity, but all to do with education. The books put into the hands of the pupils are quoted: *The Companion of Youth*, the *Catholic Readings*, the republishing of Luigi Comollo's life, and then the Lives of Dominic Savio and Michael Magone. So, everything focused on the lives of the main characters, their efforts, progress, discoveries and the fervour of their spiritual life, the warmth of their friendships, the crises overcome and their inner joy, confidence and open collaboration with teachers, the commotion aroused at their death. The biographer seems to intentionally want to extrapolate these stories about life from the great events around them, isolate them from all the external noise to show how they functioned as examples, the significance of their education and growth, the pedagogical novelty and the charismatic import. This preserves their universality and freshness despite the particular patina of the time.

2.3. The birth of a Congregation of teachers

Over these years, gradually, the search for dedicated and trustworthy people became more concrete. On 26 January 1854 Don Bosco proposed to his much-trusted Rua, Artiglia, Cagliari and Rocchietti, who were with him at a private conference, "a trial of a practical exercise of charity towards one's neighbour to eventually be a promise and then if it seems possible and convenient, a vow to the Lord". The practical exercise of charity was understood as dedication to poor youngsters and the promise or vow were to express the stable binding of themselves to the mission or the oratory: "from that evening the name Salesians was given to those who proposed or would propose to undertake such an exercise"[\[22\]](#). The vows that the cleric Rua professed before Don Bosco were private and secret: 23 March 1855; but the idea of a religious foundation began to take shape. Paradoxically, by combining the suggestions of Minister Rattazzi, the champion of militant anticlericalism, and Pius IX, fighter for radical liberalism, Don Bosco laid down the legal shape of the new Congregation.

Michael Magone was a pupil at the Oratory when Don Bosco went to Rome to submit his plan of foundation to the Pope and in the months when cleric Rua, secretly, copied the first text of the Rule in beautiful handwriting for ecclesiastical review. The official founding act of the Pious Salesian Society was written up on 18 December 1859, eleven months after Michael's death; the 14 May 1862 the first group of Salesian religious made their vows in canonical form.

When Francis Besucco came to the Oratory (August 1863), Fr Rua was just transferring to Mirabello Monferrato, to open the St Charles school-seminary, the first Salesian work outside of Turin[\[23\]](#). That year the Congregation had 22 professed members and 17 novices. In Autumn 1864, a few months after publishing the *Young Shepherd of the Alps*, the St Philip Neri school (boarding) in Lanzo Torinese was opened. Thus a new phase began, of expansion by opening boarding schools, homes, hostels and schools for young working boys (artisans): this was the way the preventive formation model which Don Bosco had tried out at the Oratory and recounted in his biographies of young people, was then exported and inculturated at global level.

3. Who was Don Bosco writing for?

In writing these three *Lives*, Don Bosco had clear intentions. In reference to readers he was addressing them and the circumstances in which he was producing them. Above all through his selection of interlocutors, but in function of a discourse addressed to a much wider audience. To understand the content and intentions of this discourse we need to keep in mind the actual readers the author has in mind.

3.1. "My dear boys"

The main audience can be found in his introductory letter which serves as a preface: the "dear boys" are students at Valdocco, friends and schoolmates of Dominic, Michael and Francis. The author tackled the work at their request. This detail is important, because it allows us to link the text with real life in context, the discourse with its broader horizons of reference, values and wishes shared by author and those he is dealing with. These are known and loved companions: whose life choices, friendships, examples and word they were witnesses of. The readers were moving in the same scene and recognised the same daily circumstances: mass in the morning, lessons and study, the short *good nights*, encounters with their confessor, his affectionate (or severe) words, the emotions they felt during the monthly *exercise for a happy death*, the novenas and feast days. They too, as chief characters, lived the essential life imposed by their poor circumstances. They saw people and faces they knew page after page. They could hear the echo of a well-known voice in the narrator, Don Bosco. Years later, reading these lines, they would recall the sound of his voice, "one kind of cadence rather than another" and would recall the "very special ascendancy" he had over them. [\[24\]](#)

But as far as the author was concerned, (we pick this up as we read), the audience was a much wider one: it was the varied readership of the *Catholic Readings*. The narrative strategy constantly presents them, sometimes as witnesses, sometimes as interlocutors in the story. Especially that section of youth attending primary schools or tackling Latin with a view to realising their various life plans. Don Bosco points out to them a world with well-defined features of the public school, the home, where teachers with solid Christian principles were looking after them. The readers would see themselves reflected in the story. They were boys from the ordinary ranks of the populace who like Dominic Savio were motivated on a daily basis to social and cultural improvement or were attracted to a vocation, and thronged country lanes or city streets in order to get to school. They could recognise themselves in the psychology of the main characters, they experienced the same upsets and the same joys, had the same spiritual feelings. Marked by the spirit of the time, they could taste the whole scene, were attracted by religious sentiment and devout practices, felt inward moments of emotion and the desire to be heroic, were sensitive to the ethic of duty and willingness to volunteer, were even fond of austerity. Reading the dialogues they could hear familiar things re-echoing. In the story's events they could also see a faithful reflection of the dangers and threats they faced in everyday life, such as the suggestions or bullying of "bad" companions, temptations to avoid doing their duty, frequent illnesses, the death of good friends.

In short, the boys at the Oratory and their peers could find themselves in these stories, their daily life and plans, society and culture, a mindset and lifestyle, also a kind of ritual and relationships that were typical of human existence at a time that was well-defined in social and religious history.

3.2. Educators and pastors

Don Bosco's stories, along with his chief characters, offer active and stimulating educators: parents, teachers and pastors. The author addresses them too, especially when formulating brief pedagogical considerations, or when illustrating the results of their care or presenting the novel style of the educational community at the Oratory with its program of life and interaction and the affection that existed between pupils and formators.

These were times of transition between the old public education system, with its traditional values, entrusted mainly to religious (ecclesiastical) teachers who taught subjects and styles peculiar to scholastic formation, and the new emerging liberal model coming from the reform of public education by Ministers Boncompagni (1848) and Casati (1859), under strong government control, to fulfil its aims and therefore looked on with suspicion by the Catholic world. Up until then the

massive presence of ecclesiastics in the schools seemed completely natural, because it reflected a traditional humanistic education which everyone fully shared, and looked, at the same time to instructing and forming consciences in Christian values, forging wills, refining customs. Now, in the atmosphere of struggle between liberal radicalism and Catholic intransigence such figures were disappearing from the public schools. The secular vision irreparably penetrated society and scholastic institutions, undermining the influence of religious values, at the same time that the demand for education was growing amongst ordinary people. All this aroused apprehension and encouraged new ideas for solutions.

Despite his reservations about rigid State control brought in by school reforms by Gabrio Casati, Don Bosco seized both the challenges and opportunities. The law foresaw the possibility of opening private schools, though subject to inspection and certain constraints^[25]: he took this route because he saw that it could bring good results. He also felt that the time had come to offer models less bound to the mere carrying out of school programs and more focused on a holistic view of education, active involvement and where the pupils played a more active part. He wanted to show that it was also important to create complementary spaces for education outside of the classroom but within the church community. So he saw that there was need for an educational system adapted to new times, but anchored in the substantial values of the Christian tradition.

All these movements are a background to the three *Lives* and filter through their pages, framing a formation approach and a peculiar educational methodology. It is not difficult to discover, chapter after chapter, along with conversations in the foreground with the young readers, a persuasive parallel discourse addressed to the educators and pastors of the young. If some are brought into the picture as moving testimony of the actions and virtues of the three exemplary boys, it is because he wants to highlight them as an important category of interlocutor. In the first seven chapters of the life of Dominic Savio, we hear the voices of parents telling their story, the chaplain from Morialdo, teachers at Castelnuovo and Mondonio; further on we hear from Prof. Bonzanino, Fr Picco, the Provost of Mondonio. In Michael Magone's biography we read the brief but careful letter from the assistant parish priest, discover, through notes by the very young Francesca, an echo of Don Bosco's teachings to his co-helpers, we are moved by the mother's words as she assists her dying son, we admire Fr Zattini's rhetorical ability when he outlines the moral figure of the boy. In the life of Francis Besucco Don Bosco makes broad use of the touching testimony of the parish priest, with items provided by his parents, his older sisters, the village teacher, his school mates, and this gives us the educational atmosphere the young alpine lad grew up in as well as the zealous spirit of the pastor completely dedicated to his mission and attentive to the formation of the boys.

The narrator directs this choir of voices conducting them in function of the special profile he wants to outline. Thus, when he enters the scene himself and becomes a character in the story we sense the continuity without anything being forced, an effective summing up of appropriate educational attitudes, shades of meaning and accentuations that give us an idea of the novelty of his system and his model as an educator.

Here the biographical testimony becomes autobiographical in a complete sense. Don Bosco, in telling of the heroic deeds of his pupils, is talking about himself and the educational climate created at Valdocco; he reveals the intensity and importance of his relationships, attention to individuals, reconstructs the atmosphere of encounters, illustrates the experiences he proposed and the way he got his pupils actively involved. All this allows the reader who is aware of it to find deeper messages, and understand the function of the educator in Don Bosco's system inasmuch as it is part of the important paraphernalia of the educational machine.

This double notion of addressees and models in narrative form, in story and reflection, produces a composite literary genre such that the three *Lives*, like Don Bosco's other writings, become especially a testimony of spirituality and narrative pedagogy, a manifesto of Christian education.

4. The nature of Don Bosc's work

4.1. The literary genre

Francis Cerruti subdivides Don Bosco's printed works into three categories, religious, moral and historical, and locates the three *Lives* amongst the *brief moral works*[\[26\]](#), following the humanistic notion of using the adjective *mores*, for customs and models of behaviour. Cerruti was one of the early addressees of these three biographies, since he was a companion of both Dominic Savio and Michael Magone, then a teacher when Francis Besucco attended Year two in the secondary school section at Valdocco. At the time he offered this classification he was in charge of Salesian schools at the Centre, and was a tireless promoter of Don Bosco's educational system[\[27\]](#). He was very clear about what Don Bosco intended with these writings: not writing up a biography in all its details following the canons of the positivist historian, but offering through narration of assorted moments in the lives of the three young people and seen through his eyes as educator and pastor, a concrete message, an exemplary kind of behaviour.

On the other hand Don Bosco is explicit. As we see in the declaration of intention illustrated by the prologue to the *Life* of Dominic Savio, he indicates he will be presenting an example to imitate[\[28\]](#). We see the same intention in the *Biographical outline of Michael Magone* and the *Young Shepherd of the Alps*.

More recent scholars offer more detail on the literary genre of the three *Lives* taking them back to the typology of 'edifying biographies' which flourished in the "Tridentine era and afterwards" in ecclesiastical and boarding settings. In writing them, Don Bosco takes up the same mechanisms he experienced when writing the *Church history* and *History of Italy*: an essential biographical fabric, well-documented, but "with few chronological data, and episodes classified according to a scholastic, moralistic, hagiographical scheme of virtues: spirit of prayer, innocence or penitence, sacramental practice, devotion to Mary, death crowning a life which corresponded with divine grace"[\[29\]](#). The edifying biography genre, concise as it is, offered him a ready tool for focusing on messages and virtuous behaviour.

As Claudio Magris writes, recalling the essential style of edifying biographies that his Jesuit teachers put before him as a boy, "the brevity was in fact a lesson in literature, the ability to cut away an over-detailed existence... and highlight, like in an epitaph, values and meanings: it was the art of choosing and leaving aside, which is essential for every narrator. Those *little lives* – while about saints belonging to other orders and published especially by the Salesians, the least exclusive and less in competition than those who wrote the *Beata coorte* – were, in their way, a *Spoon River*. Perhaps brevity was not just a rhetorical choice, but it was connected with holiness, which is not a mortifying renunciation but a decisive ability to prune out tempting and suffocating useless junk"[\[30\]](#).

Thanks to their literary genre, whoever takes up these writings of Don Bosco's finds a testimony of real life and the effective presentation of exemplary educational praxis, "an integrated collection of religious and pedagogical messages within a biographical texture", an educational discourse "made to the measure of the boys and their educators". It is essential to see these biographies, "other than within the framework of Don Bosco's literary production, in the context of the educational works he was promoting", and fit them "into a specific culture" keeping in mind "the different writing criteria

put before the reader's attention"[31]. They seem to us to be key documents in Don Bosco's spirituality and pedagogy, that tell of the life experiences of the three boys, and allow us to discover the "the work of the Master and the teaching that he guides them by"[32].

4.2. Use of sources

In the prologue to the three *Lives*, the author attests to his concern "to only tell of things seen by you or me, almost all of which I keep and which are written and signed by your own hand"[33], and he says he has drawn on "certain sources"[34], which in the *Young Shepherd of the Alps* he lists explicitly[35].

These are not just rhetoric on Don Bosco's part. If we examine the original testimonies he collected to support his construction of the biography, and which we still have, we see Don Bosco's honesty, historically, and his documentary concern. Comparison between these materials and the text also tells us how he worked. We see substantial fidelity, along with treatment of data which achieves his aims and involves his readers. The most abundant sources concern Dominic Savio and Francis Besucco.

On his small work on Savio we see his concern to highlight the main character, leaving aside circumstances and people that might distract our attention. The author does this by selecting the data he has gathered, suppressing secondary items, transposing some, extending narratives of "episodes whose retelling could be from memory or the result of literary art and educational motivations".[36] So, while the testimony of the teacher at Castelnuovo is taken up almost literally[37], Fr Cugliero's is extended and dramatised where he is talking about the false accusation by two of his school friends[38]. Anecdotes about his altar serving and when he was promoted to first communion, taken from a document by Michael Rua[39], are transposed into the letter from the chaplain at Morialdo; but the item about Dominic singing in church, at home and the stable is crossed out: "hymns with a school friend alternating with hymns from his father"[40]. There are also some details from witnesses left out, like the indication from Joseph Reano on how he dealt with physical suffering,[41] and his reproaching Don Bosco's elderly Aunt for her "little patience in putting up with her sickness"[42]. Selection is made on the basis of significance and usefulness of data provided, or for reasons of composition, as we can see by comparing the text with the testimonies of close friends[43]. Despite this, the original documents and depositions collected during the beatification process demonstrate that Savio's profile was not overdone; in fact the clean style and scarcity of detail, the narrative emphases, give it a freshness and veracity that restore the essential features of Dominic's experience and overall cast of features.[44]

We find similar features in the life of Francis Besucco. The first 15 chapters of the *Young Shepherd of the Alps* are almost completely made up of the broad and detailed memo sent by the parish priest of Argentera, all in order, minus secondary details. For example he eliminates the sympathetic reference to Francis' mother's habit, who "Knowing how important it was to begin from the outset with a good education in the family, could not suckle her dear baby or give him any motherly service without always having good thoughts in her mind, devout prayers on her lips, so that as well as the milk she might fill him with the spirit of devotion". Also omitted are items about the boy's voice being heard by his mother, in a dream[45] and also his father, similarly[46], while he talks about the premonition Francis' sister had of his death[47]. As well, the testimonies of friends and superiors at the Oratory[48], are dealt with similarly to the ones regarding Dominic Savio.

The Michael Magone case is different. There is nothing about his time with his family, except for essential details in the testimony of the assistant parish priest. Everything happens inside the Oratory after the fortuitous encounter between the boy and Don Bosco at the station at Carmagnola.

The dynamics of the story and the presentation of the main character take advantage of the scarce details. Michael stays at the centre of attention. The author himself is the main witness of the events, but he uses other testimonies: the report from Fr. Francesia, depositions by other friends[49], Fr Zattini's[50] funeral eulogy, full of useful references for drawing up the boy's profile. Overall it is the poorest of the biographies in terms of biographical data, but it is the most effective. Don Bosco's writing provides an "objectivity which is not only historical but representative and certainly puts us in the presence of the reality", as Albert Caviglia notes; and he adds that in each case, the "sympathetic and attractive biography" should be "read as a book of ideas", because, "different from the other boys whom Don Bosco wrote *Lives* of, where he already had the ideas partly prepared, here he had an urchin who in just fourteen months achieved "a wonderful degree of Christian perfection". He was a pure and exclusive product of Don Bosco's pedagogy"[51].

This use of sources on the author's part certainly poses problems of documentary criticism, as revealed by the Benedictine Henri Quentin in 1931-32 during the process for the beatification of Dominic Savio[52]. Notwithstanding this, bearing in mind the literary genre, mentality and aims indicated by the author, it seems evident that Don Bosco did not "manipulate things to construct a model to propose to young people and popular environments" which was not historically true: in the concrete life of his three boys he "recognised, and so did others, the personification of what he thought most dear"[53], and he put this before his readers' eyes for its exemplary value.

Analysis of his way of working with his sources convinces us that the interest in these biographies is not to be sought in the amount of biographical data given or in the way documents are treated, but in the testimonial value of the pedagogical and spiritual message the author intends to give his contemporary readership.

4.3. The text and its parts

We find ourselves faced with three very different books: "The *Life of Young Dominic Savio* is the edifying recalling of the life of a young man who was the embodiment of an accomplished adolescent Christian holiness that was readily at hand for others who were determined enough and desirous enough to follow him. It is different from the two biographies that followed, of Michael Magone and Francis Besucco, where the story is idealised one way or another – especially in the former – with the intention of outlining a model of life for the average youngster of different origins and spiritual levels"[54]. The story highlights unforgettable personalities, drawn up in their essential features from an outward aspect, in their spiritual sensitivity, temperament and broad psychology. They have different starting points. They relate differently to their educators. A different mission is given each one within the unity and general consistency of the message provided for readers. Dominic had a "wonderful tenor of life"[55], "his was a happier, more virtuous and innocent life"[56], he nurtured virtue that seemed "innate", "to the point of heroism" throughout his short life[57]. Michael, a boy who had been "left to his own devices", risked "heading for the road to wrongdoing", but once he heard the Lord's loving call inviting him "to follow him" and "constantly corresponding with divine grace, he succeeded in drawing the admiration of anyone who came to know him"[58]. Francis corresponded obediently to his parents' educational care, and that of his parish priest and teacher, and showed "a higher level of understanding than usual" for his age, "great diligence in learning", "an excellent memory for retaining what he had heard and read", and was "especially" favoured with divine "enlightenment" [59], especially in his spirit of prayer, such that he was "a master at recollecting his spirit and lifting it up to the Lord" at any time of the day[60].

These differences are echoed in the way the story is told. Just the same the architect of the story repeats himself almost identically across the three biographies. We note a threefold division, with a preface and an epilogue: family life, being part of the Oratory, sickness and death. Each biography gives different weight to each of these sections, on the basis of the available sources, the significance of the events and the messages they are meant to carry.

In the *Life of Dominic Savio*, the most balanced of them, the episodes preceding the encounter with Don Bosco (c. VII) are spread across six chapters (chap. I-VI); thirteen chapters illustrate the time spent at Valdocco (chap. VIII-XX); five speak of his illness and death (chap. XXI-XXV); the last two make up the epilogue summing up the work's double message, one given to the funeral eulogy by Prof. Picco (Dominic is a model of virtuous life and exactness in his duties [61]), the other orchestrated by the choral participation of his companions, father, the narrator himself (Dominic is a saint to be recommended [62]).

The biographical outline of Michael Magone, relaxed and engrossing, sums up his earlier life in one simple paragraph (letter from the assistant parish priest, chap. II), and starts with the scene of the encounter at Carmagnola station (chap. I), an excellent literary *incipit*; eleven chapters given to his time at the Oratory (chap. II-XII); another three to his sickness and death (cc. XIII-XV); one to the epilogue (chap. XVI).

The Young Shepherd of the Alps gives fifteen chapters to his earlier history (chap. I-XV), thus highlighting his education at home and in the parish, to the disadvantage of the narrative flow; eleven chapters are on his "tenor of life at the Oratory" (chap. XVI-XXVI); five describe the course of his illness, and his death (chap. XXVII-XXI); the three last chapters are the epilogue (chap. XXXII-XXXIV).

The writing process is identical, marked by the strategy of this literary genre that allows one to focus on the main character and the message. It begins with a *chronological* part by narrating the period from birth to when they enter the Oratory (Savio and Besucco), with a series of chapters to illustrate how they grew up and how their personalities were formed; for Magone this is done in the first two chapters. The chapters at the heart of the three stories, where the didactic element is prevalent, feature a *thematic* treatment that is the most effective for presenting the message the author wants to give to readers. He goes back once again to the *chronological* register for a moving description of the physical decline and death of the main characters. The concluding chapters focus on the "lesson" to be drawn, and repeat some of the points that the author has most at heart.

Similar are some narrative points that give the story its rhythm, illustrate the inner progress of the characters, point to educational theses: 1) the importance of the well-prepared first communions of Dominic and Francis, and its moral and spiritual effect on their lives; 2) the lively description of early and successive encounters between the boys and the director of the Oratory, reconstructing the dialogue and the communication dynamics; 3) highlighting of critical moments and their resolution, a fruitful opportunity for the educator to intervene appropriately to calm them down, encourage reflection, lead them to think more deeply and be aware, fostering process of reformulating how they see themselves and the meaning of life, leading them to choose values, take on commitments; 4) the delicate psychological and spiritual management of the final illness for a resigned and spiritually fruitful approach.

5. Keys to interpretation

Given what has been said, it is evident that the "dear boys", that is the readers the author has in mind at the time of writing, are no longer with us today. They in fact reveal yearnings, mental

schemes and sensitivities largely foreign to us today. If we want to make his method our own and present significant and stimulating models of life for our boys today, we cannot put these biographies into their hands without some interpretation to decode the essential heart of the message and to make it meaningful. This is foreseen in some way in the stories Don Bosco told. In fact not only does he offer explicit instruction for interpretation here and there, but when he enters the story itself, as director of the oratory or confidante or confessor and begins an educational dialogue with the boys, he does it interactively, soliciting their active cooperation, leading them to reflection which broadens their horizons, asking them to grow in awareness, sensitising them to value systems and meaning on different planes from those of common daily experience. The *Lives* themselves, then, through the technique of storytelling and representation, other than communicating models and practices of virtuous behaviour, illustrate the motives that lead to such conduct, show their satisfying results and seek to make them attractive through emotional involvement.

Today the main addressees of these biographies are the educators who seek to be inspired by Don Bosco's method: it is up to them to critically understand the message in order to interpret it and make it practical for today.

The keys to interpretation for a fruitful reading are of two kinds mainly: those that come from the author, an expression of his primary intention; and those we can establish from our own questions and interests inasmuch as we are scholars or wish to continue Don Bosco's mission and pedagogy[63].

5.1. Reading approaches suggested by the author

The introduction and epilogue of each biography offer precise keys to interpretation. In the prologue of the *Life* of Dominic Savio, Don Bosco says that the "marvellous" tenor of life and "outstanding" virtues of the boy have the role of encouraging readers to draw "profit", move from admiration to active imitation[64]. The reading suggested then, guides research into the state of soul, feelings, attitudes, choices and virtuous behaviour which connotes the model of life proposed for imitation. It is an idea taken up again in the epilogue[65], adding a detailed indication that focuses on one of the hinges of Don Bosco's religious pedagogy: "Let us not fail, too, to imitate Savio in his frequenting the Sacrament of Confession. This gave him support in his regular practice of virtue and it was a firm guide which brought him to life's end so gloriously.. We should go frequently and with the right attitude to draw from this source of salvation in our life. It seems to me that this is the surest means for living happily in the midst of afflictions in life, at the end of which we too can look calmly on our approaching death"[66].

This same thesis is also present in the other two biographies, especially in the *Biographical outline* of Michael Magone[67]. Nevertheless the prologue of this latter book is not restricted to suggesting imitation of one or other virtuous aspect; it indicates a deeper and more personal process, and suggests the Gospel dynamic of listening and corresponding: "In this biography of Magone we do not have a young man who left to his own devices would run the danger of taking the road to wrongdoing, but one whom the Lord invited to follow him. He heard the loving call and by constantly corresponding with divine grace arrived at attracting the admiration of those who knew him, thus showing how wonderful are the effect of God's grace for those who correspond with it"[68]. Only real obedience to the action of grace is able to produce the results of "zeal, love and charity", allowing one to live "good, chaste, devout, virtuous lives" and "die happy, serene, calm, trusting in divine mercy"[69]. The reader then is directed to seeking the kinds of listening and correspondence in the spiritual life of the one described, in the simplicity of his daily life: all "easy things", the author has us note, but done "with perseverance" they became "the path that led Michael to a marvellous degree of perfection"[70].

In introducing the *Life* of Francis Besucco, Don Bosco presents himself simply as "a father speaking to a son whom he loves tenderly; a father who wants to express his fatherly affection" to instruct readers "in the practice of the virtues" so they may feel "move to flee vice and to practice virtue"[71]. So, proposed here is a calm, affectionate and contemplative reading of Don Bosco's word. We also need some patience: in fact there are abundant narrative digressions, especially in the first fifteen chapters, drawn from documentation sent in by the good parish priest of Argentera. Don Bosco did not want to skip them, perhaps because they were in harmony with his own spirit and seemed to him to be an enchanting way of representing Francis's soul, his calm and peaceful character, the depth of his affection. Also perhaps because they effectively describe the rich humanity of a simple and genuine popular setting, one rooted in traditional values as was the case for his own youth at the Becchi: a deeply Christian society which he had great nostalgia for and which had begun to fall apart over the years.

All three *Lives* finish with an invitation to be prepared for a happy death. It is a topic dear to traditional spirituality that made the Last Things the preferred topic for meditation and preaching. In Don Bosco's pedagogy, it is spelt out in particular ways, in function of conversion of a "frank and resolute" heart[72] and the total gift of oneself to God. This generates a zealous life, full of spiritual benefits, ethical and joyful commitment. This was the viewpoint from which the monthly exercise of a happy death was celebrated[73]: to educate to a Christian view of life, encourage an effective and regular revision of spirit and action, encourage a style of life constantly open to the action of grace, serene, fruitful in works and results so the soul would be ready for the encounter with the Lord. It is not by chance that the final chapters show the final hours of the main characters as a fervent and serene waiting for the encounter with the Lord. We are amazed by the dialogues, the "commissions" in Paradise, the goodbyes[74]. The moment of death, then, is described almost as ecstatic rapture: Dominic "in a clear voice, and smiling" says goodbye to his father, then exclaims "Oh! what a beautiful thing I see... like nothing I've ever seen..." and he dies "with a beautiful smile on his face"; Michael expires "with his ordinary serenity and a smile on his lips", after having kissed the crucifix and saying: *Jesus, Joseph and Mary I place my soul in your hands*; the concluding moments of Francis' life show extraordinary phenomena and unrestrained fervour: as for his face, "Its beauty and radiance was such that it eclipsed the infirmary lights"; " He lifted his head a little and stretched out his hands as if to shake hands with someone he loved. Then in a joyful resonant voice he sang: *"Praise Mary Afterwards he made several efforts to lift himself up and devoutly stretching out his hands, he began to sing again: O Jesus on fire with love.... He seemed to have become an angel with the angels in paradise"*. On this point and deep down, all of Don Bosco's talks seem to home in on this, which is the core of his message[75]. Everything else seems to be in function of it: the art of his education, his affectionate and creative accompaniment, the advice and programmes of life, Marian devotion and the sacraments are all oriented to the prime object of his thinking and concern about the *grand affair* of eternal salvation[76]. This is how he concludes the *Life* of Dominic Savio: "When our time comes, let us see death approach with peace and joy in our hearts. How happy we will be then to meet Jesus Our Saviour who will judge us according to his mercy, and in his goodness lead us to an eternity of happiness. Amen"[77].

This way of reading things finds sure connection with the religious sensitivity of the readers of his time. But it seems strange to our spiritual and cultural climate today. We want to dodge it, be selective, focus on the nicer and more dynamic elements, excluding what we consider archaic or irrelevant for understanding Don Bosco and his pedagogical message. The same way, when we quote Dominic's "Know that here we make holiness consist in being happy", we pull it out, separate it from the rest of the conversation where the young disciple sums up the Master's proposal for his growth: "Let us try only to avoid sin as the great enemy which steals God's grace from us and our peace of heart, let us try to carry out our duties exactly, and attend our exercises of piety. Begin today by writing this down to remind yourself: *Servite Domino in laetitia*, let us serve the Lord in

holiness"[78]. What we need instead is to read these biographies in their entirety, see their internal coherence, the horizons of meaning they belonged to, with attention to details and without filtering them. This will certainly help us gain a more complete understanding of Don Bosco and his well-developed formation proposal. At the same time it will offer us a stimulating way of critically reflecting on our own educational plans and programmes.

5.2. Observing Don Bosco in action

The keys to interpretation emerging from the questions we pose as disciples of Don Bosco and as educators of the young faced with these little biographies will set other interpretative possibilities in motion which are different but stimulating: how can the key points of Don Bosco's formation programme be reformulated for today? What is the model for integrating education between family, parish, school and oratory? What are the features of the educational setting and the qualifying attitudes of the educator that we find in these works? How is the Saint situated in relation to his pupils? How did he accompany them in critical moments? What are the kinds of active involvement of the pupils in looking after their own peers and how they are being formed? What sort of relationship does the author suggest between education, Christian formation and spiritual life?

Amongst all these interpretative approaches, we limit ourselves to suggesting analysis of the scenes describing the personal relationship of Don Bosco with his chief characters, to find the characteristic features and dynamics.

We note above all the relevance given to the dialogues with the three boys, beginning with the first encounter. What emerges are features of a preventive and educational conversation and a specific way of relating, bound up with the work that follows. Such as when we notice in the *Lives* of Dominic Savio and Michael Magone[79], that the aim of the first encounter is the awareness necessary for mutual trust and confidence: through a warm welcome given to the boy and generous availability in taking on his needs, Don Bosco opens a communication channel with an affectionate tone which opens souls to the kind of interaction characteristic of the educational system at the Oratory. The approach is always informal, empathetic, colloquial: he puts himself at the level of his interlocutor, carries on with a quiet and familiar conversation – verbal and non-verbal –, which removes distrust, allows the boy to freely express himself. This way he can get essential information on his circumstances, history, state of mind, his temperament and the question of education which lies before him. Once he has identified his expectations, he offers him opportunities and real solutions, and helps him to raise his sights, discover new horizons. For his part the boy feels he is accepted, feels understood and loved, discovers the opportunities offered in the relationship with a fatherly adult who is dedicated and respectful and on whom he can count. So he is encouraged to correspond, and led to confidence. This first conversation, which concludes with the decision to admit the lad to the Oratory, arouses feelings of gratitude, happy expectation, desire: these are fruitful starting points for a happy educational relationship. The next encounter, at the time of fitting into the community, presents features of an educational 'contract' where the generous welcome by the educator corresponds with the promise and commitment on the boy's part[80].

The core of the three biographies is made up of description of a *crisis* which is different for each main character and is a key to the narrative flow. The account of how it is overcome, the discussion between educator and one being educated, offers an occasion to illustrate, embody the message the author wants to offer readers in the story of the three boys. They are different situations, tied to personal characteristics of each character. In Dominic the critical moment comes six months after coming to Valdocco, after his offering of himself on 8 December 1854, out of which comes a kind of *moral conduct* "so edifying and tied to practice of virtue" that it even surprises his formator[81].

The state of soul he finds himself in is one of unconditional availability to the inner action of grace and the encouragement offered by his educators. Thus an exhortation to holiness is enough to give rise in him to an unrestrained desire for perfection: this is a “mystical” crisis which the intervention of his spiritual director guides towards virtuous perfection in the everyday and as an apostle, preventing him from turning in on himself and fleeing reality[82].

Michael Magone, after a month at the Oratory, and helped by a good companion, whom Don Bosco said to stay with him, compares himself with the moral climate in that setting, and becomes keenly aware of his own mediocrity: his is an “ethical” crisis, which features guilt and anxiety. Michael succeeds in getting out of this through his own efforts, after a reassuring conversation with the educator who suggests a possible solution. It is a process of conversion that allows him to enter a state of spiritual calmness that he had never experienced before and he takes on a new system of values which he keeps to of his own free will, totally and happily[83].

Francis Besucco, a few days after coming to Turin, gets homesick, feels out of place in a setting so different from the one he came from: he has a “cultural” and affective crisis, feels inadequate, disoriented and inferior to his friends. In his touching conversation with Don Bosco, who consoles and encourages him, guiding him to a much simpler life – "Practice just three things and everything will go well [...]: cheerfulness, Study, Piety"[84] –, He finds a constructive way of dealing with his cultural feelings of being out of place and achieves a more peaceful state of mind.

Despite the difference of the experiences, by overcoming the critical moment the resolution becomes, for each boy, a moment of human and spiritual growth. It is a process of maturing, thanks to which not only is the problem resolved and they find inner balance, but their personal identity is strengthened, values, meanings and ways of acting are interiorised, and they take on a more radical, deeper giving of themselves to God. All this allows a growth in self-awareness, a reconfiguring of approach to daily life and human relationships and an increase in capacity for self-giving love, from which arises the urge to do something, *joie de vivre*, spiritual fervour and obedience to the action of grace.

When the *crises* are resolved in all three *le Lives*, some chapters follow which are devoted to illustrating the educational 'curricula' the characters then undertake under their educator's guidance. Other than the different emphases, we can easily see the unified formation and educational plan outlined by the author in these biographies. It is enough to follow the titles of the chapters to see how they are all in harmony. The emphasis is on scrupulous use of time and diligence in fulfilment of daily duties tackled with love and joy, on regular use of the sacraments of confession and communion, on confidence in the director and confessor, on the spirit of prayer and union with God, on Marian devotion, on the practical exercise of virtue (obedience, charity, mortification of the sense, chastity), on all kinds of service of one's neighbour, on good friendships, on apostolic zeal.

6. Invitation to reading

Why read these edifying biographies today? First of all because they are a precious document of life, a sermon by Don Bosco on the experience of the three characters, reserved for attentive readers. Through them we can introduce ourselves to his inner world, gain access to his viewpoints and concerns, understand how much trust he placed in the resources of the youthful soul. They should also be read because they mirror a complete educational humanism that is worth reconsidering today, a fascinating culture of the spirit which is not obscured by the patina of the era. In their simplicity they restore a moral afflatus, educational enthusiasm and pastoral energy, from whose contemplation we have much to learn so we are not submerged in disenchantment and mediocrity. They are an expression of a formation proposal, an educational and spiritual approach

that seems so far from the world of the young today, but that we feel is important: it is far from us for temporal and cultural reasons, the disappearance of the moral and ideal energy which the 19th century youth had; but it is important for the charismatic and prophetic power it contains, the encouragement it is, and the salutary movements it can arouse in our awareness as educators.

How should we read them? Affectionately, respectfully and with curiosity. The affection of children for their beloved father, for his spiritual legacy and patrimony of experience and wisdom he has left us; the curiosity of the explorer who follows the currents of a great river to find the source and drink from its pure waters; the respect with which the author, who is also confidante and confessor, approached those young souls, accepted their confidence and ideas, and then marvelled at the progress they made.

They should also be read with an open mind, with care and sensitivity. Open-mindedness is essentially intellectual honesty and abandoning prejudice, beginning with the insidious feeling that we are culturally and theologically superior, a feeling which often shows through in research into religious experience from the past, especially if it is 'popular' or devotional'; our attention and care implies careful accuracy with texts, their organisation, possible levels of interpretation, allusions; this sensitivity translates into the effort to feel for the characters, listen to the repercussions of the story on our spirit, our attention to Don Bosco's reasoning, the emphases that he puts here and there.

The *Lives* are not just monuments of adolescence from good times in the past, delightful thumbnail sketches of an educational situation in its charismatic stage: they are an effective way of entering that world by holding the narrator's hand and letting him instruct us.

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Abbreviations

a. anno (year)

aa. articoli (articles)

AAT Archivio Arcivescovile, Torino (Archiepiscopal Archives, Turin)

APARC Archivio della Parrocchia Maria Assunta, Riva presso Chieri (Torino) (Archives of Our Lady of Assumption parish, Riva near Chieri, Turin)

APSAC Archivio della Parrocchia S. Andrea, Castelnuovo Don Bosco (Asti) (Archives of St Andrew's Parish, Castelnuovo Don Bosco, Asti)

APSGM Archivio della Parrocchia S. Giacomo Maggiore, Mondonio San Domenico Savio (Asti)
(Archives of St James the Great Parish, Mondonio, St Dominic Savio, Asti)

APSPPC Archivio della Parrocchia santi Pietro e Paolo, Carmagnola (Torino) (Archives of Sts Peter and Paul Parish, Carmagnola, Turin)

ASC Archivio Salesiano Centrale, Roma (Salesian Central Archives, Rome)

aut. Autografo (original)

AVA Archivio Vescovile, Asti (Archiepiscopal Archives, Asti)

B. V. Beata Vergine (Blessed Virgin)

c. capitolo (chapter) (cc means chapters)

cav. Cavaliere (title of honour = Knight)

cf. confronta/vedi (confer)

corr. Corregge (correct)

Fr don (Fr)

ed. edizione (edition)
f. foglio (sheet)
fasc. fascicolo (collection of sheets, can also be pamphlet)
ins. inserita/o (inserted)

MB G.B. Lemoyne - A. Amadei - E. Ceria, *Memorie biografiche di don [del venerabile servo di Dio / del beato / di san] Giovanni Bosco*, S. Benigno Canavese-Torino, Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana-Società Editrice Internazionale, 1898-1939, 19 voll. (Any references are to Italian edition, not English)

mons. Monsignore (Usually means Bishop or Archbishop)

ms. manoscritto (manuscript)

OE Giovanni Bosco, *Opere edite. Prima serie: Libri e opuscoli*, 37 vol., Roma, LAS, 1976-1977 (Only in Italian – not translated into English)

r retto (front side)

Holiness santo/santa

Holiness M. Sua Maestà

Holiness V. signoria vostra

s.d. senza data (without date)

Bro signor

SS. santi/santissimo/a (Most Holy)

v. verso (back or other side to 'retto')

vol. volume

[1] *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico allievo dell'Oratorio di san Francesco di Sales, per cura del sacerdote Bosco Giovanni*, Torino, Tip. G. B. Paravia e Comp., 1859, 142 p. (and another 5 editions by the same author: ²1860; ³1861; ⁴1866; ⁵1878; ⁶1880); *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales per cura del sacerdote Bosco Giovanni* Torino, Tip. G. B. Paravia e Comp., 1861, 96 p. (with a further ed. by the same author: ²1866); *Il pastorello delle Alpi ovvero vita del giovane Besucco Francesco d'Argentera pel sacerdote Bosco Giovanni*, Torino, Tip. dell'Orat. di S. Franc. di Sales, 1864, 192 p. (with a further ed. by the same author: ²1878).

[2] Pietro Braido, *Il sistema preventivo di don Bosco*, 2 edizione, Zürich, Pas-Verlag, 1964, 58.

[3] Alberto Caviglia, *Savio Domenico e don Bosco. Studio*, in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di don Bosco nuovamente pubblicati e riveduti secondo le edizioni originali e manoscritti superstiti*, vol. IV, Torino, Società Editrice Internazionale, 1943, 5-590; Id., *Il "Magone Michele una classica esperienza educativa. Studio*, «Salesianum» 11 (1949) 451-481, 588-614 (republished in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di don Bosco*, vol. V, Torino, Società Editrice Internazionale, 1965, 131-200); Id., *An unexplored document. La Vita di Besucco Francesco scritta da Don Bosco e il suo contenuto spirituale*, «Salesianum» 10 (1948) 103-113, 257-287, 641-672; 11 (1949) 122-145, 288-319 (republished in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di don Bosco*, vol. VI, Torino, Società Editrice Internazionale, 1965, 105-262). With regard to Caviglia, who he was and what he wrote, cf. Cosimo Semeraro, *Don Alberto Caviglia (1868-1943): i documenti e i libri del primo editore di don Bosco tra erudizione storica e spiritualità pedagogica*, Torino, Società Editrice Internazionale, 1994.

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With regard to editions and translations and the influence of the *Life* of Dominic Savio, cf. José Manuel Pallezo, *La "Vita" di Domenico Savio scritta da don Bosco nella storiografia salesiana (1859-1954)*, in *Domenico Savio raccontato da don Bosco. Reflections on the "Life"*. Acts of Symposium (Salesian Pontifical University, Rome, 8 May 2004), by A. Giraud, Rome, LAS, 2004, 61-102.

[5] Joseph Aubry, *Domenico, Michele, Francesco: tre figure di santi adolescenti*, in G. Bosco, *Scritti spirituali*. Introduction, texts and notes by J. Aubry, Roma, Città Nuova, 1988, 109.

[6] Pietro Braido, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*, 3 edizione corretta e ritoccata, Roma, LAS, 2009, vol. I, 556.

[7] *Ibid.*, I, 556.

[8] Caviglia, *La Vita di Besucco Francesco scritta da Don Bosco*, in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di don Bosco*, VI, 16.

[9] *Ibid.*, 17.

[10] Cf. AST *Grande Cancelleria* m. 259/1 n. 1370: request for subsidy for clerics at the Oratory, ms. Bosco, 1 May 1851.

[11] His decree of appointment is reported in Giovanni Bosco, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 18915 al 1855*. Introductory essay and historical notes by A. Giraud, Rome, LAS, 2011, 218.

[12] We read in a note from 1854 "1853. The main part of the house was pulled down [2 December 1852] then built up again: It was completed, the major part was finished and in October was ready to be lived in This new building allowed dormitories, refectory for the boys living in, to be better organised. The number grew to 65", in Giovanni Bosco, *Cenno storico dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales* [1854], in Pietro Braido (ed.), *Don Bosco educatore. Scritti e testimonianze*, Roma, LAS, 1992, 132.

[13] When the *Catholic Readings* took off in 1854 a book-binders shop was opened; in 1856 the carpentry shop; in 1862 the printing press, metal foundry for making hot metal type characters and an ironmongers workshop (Fedele Giraudi, *L'Oratorio di don Bosco. Inizio e progressivo sviluppo edilizio della Casa madre dei Salesiani in Torino*, Torino, SEI, 1935, 152-153).

[14] In August, while the cholera epidemic was at its height, Don Bosco wrote to the city's mayor: "I need to provide a considerable amount of sheets, blankets, shirts in order to keep eighty youngsters properly clean, given the number of boarders at the house attached to the boys' oratory in Valdocco", letter. G. Bosco - G.B. Notta, 5 August 1853, in Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario*. Introduzione, testi critici e note a cura di Francesco Motto, I: (1835-1863), Roma, LAS, 1991, 229. On the basis of registries kept in the archives we can say "with certainty that at the end of 1856 young people taken in each year were not more than a hundred; no more than two hundred until 1859; they fluctuated between 257 (1854) and 412 (1867) during 1860-1869" (Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale, 1815-1870*, Roma, LAS, 1980, 178).

[15] The verses painted on the pillars referred to the ten commandments; those under the arches were almost a catechesis on the sacrament of penance. In 1965 the writings were substituted by marble slabs with scripture quotes different in some cases from the earlier ones; they can be read in

MB 5, 542-547; cf. Fausto Perrenchio, *L'utilizzazione della Bibbia da parte di don Bosco nell'educazione dei giovani alla fede*, in «Bollettino di collegamento dell'Associazione Biblica Salesiana» n. 10 (1993) 159-165.

[16] Following the school reforms by Boncompagni (Royal decree of 4 Oct. 1848, in *Raccolta degli atti del Governo di S. M. il Re di Sardegna 1848*, Torino, Stamperia Reale, vol. 16/II, 937-966) the primary curriculum was extended to 4 years (two lower and two upper classes) and the order was modified for the so-called Latin school, becoming three years of Latin and Italian grammar, two years of Latin and Italian rhetoric and two years of philosophy. With the Casati reform (Royal decree of 13 Nov. 1859, in *Raccolta degli atti del Governo di S.M. il Re di Sardegna 1859*, vol. 28/III, 1903-1988) the classics secondary school was divided into two levels, the first of five years called 'ginnasio' (junior and middle school) (aa. 194-198), the second of two years called 'liceo' (senior secondary or matriculation) (aa. 199-200); it was also possible to have education managed by private citizens under a double legal prescription: the *private secondary school* (*ginnasio*) (aa. 246-250) and the *paternal school* (aa. 250-253), "not requiring any inspection on the part of the State" (aa. 251): in Don Bosco's thinking and practice, the Valdocco school was, in its early years, more a paternal school than a private secondary school (cf. Braido, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani*, I, 56).

[17] Cf. Braido, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani*, I, 309.

[18] Cf. *ibid.*, I, 349.

[19] Giovanni Bosco, *Cenni storici intorno all'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales* [1862], in Braido (ed.), *Don Bosco educatore*, 147.

[20] Bosco, *Cenni storici intorno all'Oratorio*, 150. One of the first manuscripts of the Regulations also lists the admission conditions for students: "No-one is admitted as a student: 1st If he does not have a special attitude to study, and has done well in his earlier classes; 2nd He must have a certificate of outstanding piety. These two conditions must be backed up by good conduct for some time in the Home at the Oratory; 3rd Nobody is to be admitted to study Latin unless he is willing to embrace the ecclesiastical state; though he is free to follow his vocation once he has concluded his Latin course" (ASC D4820205: *Draft Regulations for the Home Attached to the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. Appendix for students*, ms. s.d., 17).

[21] Don Bosco, for example, published the *Catholic Readings* in those years, the ultra-reactionary *Catholic Catechism on revolutions* by Jesuit Serafino Sordi (Torino, Tip. Fr De-Agostini, 1854) and, when the laws of suppression came in, a combative pamphlet, *The Church's goods: who is stealing them and what are the consequences*, by Barone di Nilinse. *With a short appendix particularly on events in Piedmont* (Torino, Tip. Ribotta, 1855); besides, in *The Power of a good education*, he described the adventures of a past pupil of the Valdocco Oratory who fought courageously in the Crimean War (Torino, Tip. Paravia e comp., 1855). These are books that Dominic Savio had read since he had the entire series for 1854-55 of the *Catholic Readings*, as we see from an original list of books still preserved (cf. ASC A4920108: *Nota dei libri di Savio Domenico*, ms. aut. s.d. [1856]).

[22] ASC A4630102: ms Rua s.d.

[23] Besucco hinted at this in a letter to his parish priest, cf. ASC A1010903: letter. F. Besucco - F. Pepino, 23 Nov. 1863, f2v.

- [24] Paul Albera, *Letter on Don Bosco proposed as a model for Salesians for acquiring religious perfection, educating and sanctifying youth, dealing with one's neighbour, doing good to all*, 24 Oct. 1920, in ACS 1 (1920) 65.
- [25] Cf. Royal decree 13 Nov. 1859, aa. 246-250, 355-356, in *Raccolta degli atti del Governo*, vol. 28/III, 1958-1960, 1983.
- [26] The classification was offered during the testimony given on 20 November 1893 as part of Don Bosco's cause for Beatification, cf. *Public copy of the transumpti processus ordinaria auctoritate constructi in curia ecclesiastica taurinensi super fama sanctitatis vitae, virtutum et miraculorum servi Dei Joannes Bosco sacerdotis fundatoris Piae Societatis Salesianae*, vol. III, anno 1899, f1385v (the document is kept in the Postulator's archives at the Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Romea).
- [27] Regarding the personality and work of F. Cerruti cf. José Manuel Prellezo, *Introduzione*, in Francesco Cerruti, *Lettere circolari e programmi di insegnamento (1885-1917)*. Introduction, critical texts and notes by J.M. Prellezo, Roma, LAS, 2006, 7-42.
- [28] *Savio*, prologue. The invitation is taken up again at the end: "Now, good reader, ... I would like you to come to a conclusion with me..., that is I would like you to resolve to imitate young Savio in the virtues comaptible with our state" (*ibid.*, c. XXVII).
- [29] Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica. I: Vita e opere*, Roma, LAS, 1968, 235.
- [30] Claudio Magris, *L'infinito viaggiare*, Milano, Mondadori, 2005, 20-21.
- [31] Pietro Stella, *Per una storia dell'agiografia in età contemporanea. Il "giovanetto Savio Domenico" (1859) di san Giovanni Bosco*, in *Vita religiosa, problemi sociali e impegno civile dei cattolici. Studi storici in onore di Alberto Monticone*, a cura di Angelo Sindoni e Mario Tosti, Roma, Editrice Studium, 2009, 167.
- [32] Caviglia, *La vita di Savio Domenico scritta da don Bosco*, in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di don Bosco*, IV, xxxix.
- [33] *Savio*, prologue.
- [34] *Magone*, prologue.
- [35] "For the period of time young Besucco lived in his village, I have drawn on the reports sent by his parish priest, his teacher at school, and family and friends. ... For the time he spent amongst us I have tried to accurately collect things that happened in front of a thousand eyewitnesses: all things written down and signed by worthy witnesses of faith" (*Besucco*, prologue).
- [36] Pietro Stella, *Il modo di lavorare di don Bosco*, in *Domenico Savio raccontato da don Bosco*, 2004, 22.
- [37] Cf. ASC A4920131: lett. A. Allora - G. Bosco, 25 Augo. 1857.
- [38] "Having one day scolded him severely for a fault which he was *wrongly* accused of, he put up with everything patiently, said nothing, as if he was really culpable, and bore the correction for

the supposed fault which, as it came to my knowledge later, was committed by one of his classmates", ASC A4920129: lett. G. Cugliero - G. Bosco, 19 Apr. 1857, f2r-v; cf. *Savio*, c. VI.

[39] Cf. ASC, A4920138: *Memorie su Domenico Savio*, ms. Rua s.d., f1r.

[40] ASC A4920130: lett. G.B. Zucca - G. Bosco, 5 May. 1857, f1r.

[41] "Questioned by me on one occasion, when I saw him looking sad, why he was not talking, he told me willingly that he had such bad headaches that it felt like he had two knives in his head; but he was putting up with this patiently so it could be joined to the merits Our Lord Jesus Christ won for him in Paradise. Jesus had suffered much more than him without complaining" (ASC A4920134: *Alcune notizie su Savio Domenico*, ms. Reano s.d., f1v).

[42] This item is interesting for us because it helps us understand the family atmosphere at the Oratory: "He got up from his bed sometimes, and once I found him outside *Magna's* room [dialect for *zia*: Marianna Occhiena]. She was crying and weeping. As young as he was she still scolded her for not putting up with her illness" (*ibid.*, f2r).

[43] Testimonies from John Bonetti, Angelo Savio, Paul Vaschetti, Giusto Ollagnier, Joseph Reano, Anthony Duina, Celestine Durando, Anthony Roetto, Luigi Marcellino and John Baptist Piano are kept in ASC A492.

[44] Cf. Jean Bosco, *Saint Dominique Savio 1842-1857*. Introduction, traduction et notes de F. Desramaut, Paris, Apostolat des Editions-Ed. Paulines, 1978, 10-12.

[45] "She was in bed and her two daughters, Valentina and Maria, sleeping fitfully because of the illness that tormented her, when she seemed to hear these precise words being sung, but so sweetly that it could not be described [verse from a hymn, in Italian, obviously, which becomes important further down]: *Dear child, king of heaven, so beautiful, graceful lily*. Having heard these words she said to herself: "*Dear child*, what does this mean, is it *the voice of my daughter*? no, one says *dear child, king of heaven*, so it is 'your child', it is little Francis, so if he is *king of heaven* then he is saved. My God, if my child is saved, and is *king of heaven*, I beg you to relieve me of my terrible stomach ache otherwise I shall die". Having said that, Francis' mother, Rosa Robert, knew that her stomach ache had gone. It threatened terrible consequences, but she regained the perfect tranquillity with which she and her family had been resigned to God's will. And here, so you can understand the vision better, I must note that Francis' mother being from Arches in the Marboinet canton, did not know how to read Italian, and she assures me she could never have learned a single verse in Italian, but had only heard Francis singing it sometimes, as his sisters also said" (ASC A2280701: *Vita del pio giovanetto Besucco Francesco*, ms. F. Pepino, with notes by Don Bosco, author, s.d. [Jan.-Feb. 1864], 21-22).

[46] "Up until then there had not been the right moment for Fr. Blanchi in the Hostel at Cuneo to send me the bundle of items left there by our dear Francis Besucco, who on the Monday after the Ascension, therefor clearly speaking 'from the other side', told his father: *My dear father, send for my bundle in Cuneo, where it has been for three days*, after which his father felt so unexpressibly happy that he told his family about it. In reading the letter to Valentina, Francis' sister, in which Fr. Blanchi told me the bundle had been received, I was told of the vision and having looked at the circumstances I believe it to be correct" (ASC A1010912: lett. F. Pepino - G. Bosco, 6 June. 1864, f1r).

[47] Cf. *Besucco*, c. XXXIII.

- [48] Cf. Testimony of the infirmarian at Valdocco (ASC A1010913: letter. I. Mamardi - G. Bosco, s.d. [Jan. 1864]), report by Fr Dominic Ruffino (ASC A1010915: *Relazione intorno a Besucco Francesco*, ms Ruffino, s.d. [Jan.-Feb. 1864]) and the collection of testimonies of his peers collected by Francis Botto (ASC A1010917: lett. F. Botto - G. Bosco, 21 Jan. 1864).
- [49] Cf. ASC, A1230106/7: reports s.d. by Matthew Galleano, and another unnamed friend.
- [50] Cf. ASC, A2320101: *In morte di Michele Magone di Carmagnola*, ms Zattini, 23 Feb. 1859.
- [51] Caviglia, *Il "Magone Michele", una classica esperienza educativa*, in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di don Bosco*, V, 132.
- [52] Cf. Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, vol. III: *La canonizzazione (1888-1934)*, Roma, LAS, 1988, 211-224.
- [53] *Ibid.*, 218, summing up Alberto Caviglia's reply to Quentin's objections.
- [54] Braido, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani*, I, 327.
- [55] *Savio*, prologue.
- [56] *Ibid.*, c. XXVII.
- [57] Cf. *Magone*, prologue.
- [58] *Ibid.*, prologue.
- [59] *Besucco*, prologue.
- [60] *Ibid.*, c. XXII.
- [61] *Savio*, c. XXVI.
- [62] *Ibid.*, c. XXVII; This message is reinforced in the 2nd edition and later, by adding the complete *Appendix on graces obtained from God through the intercession of Dominic Savio*.
- [63] An example of a pedagogical reading of this kind is offered by Carlo Nanni, *Destinazione educativa, convinzioni pedagogiche e idea di educazione. Lettura pedagogica della "Vita"*, in *Domenico Savio raccontato da don Bosco*, 155-176.
- [64] *Savio*, prologue.
- [65] *Ibid.*, c. XXVII.
- [66] *Ibid.*, c. XXVII.
- [67] Cf. *Magone*, c. V.
- [68] *Ibid.*, prologue.

[69] *Ibid.*, c. XVI.

[70] *Ibid.*, c. IX.

[71] *Besucco*, prologue.

[72] Cf. *Magone*, c. V.

[73] Don Bosco explained it thus: "This exercise consists in preparing us to make our confession and communion as if they were the last ones in our life" (*Savio*, c. XXI).

[74] "But before departing for Paradise I would like to give you a mission.... When you are in Paradise and have seen the great Virgin Mary, give her a humble and respectful greeting for my part and those in this house. Ask her to deign to give us her holy blessing; take us all under her powerful protection, and help us in such a way that no-one who is or who will be sent to this house by Divine Providence, will be lost" (*Magone*, c. XV).

[75] "I would like us to arrive at a conclusion together which will be to your and my advantage. It is certain that sooner or later death will come to both of us and perhaps it is closer than we can imagine. It is equally certain that if we do not do good works in our life, we will not see their fruits at the moment of death, nor can we expect any reward from God. ... Courage, Christian reader, courage to do good while we still have time; our sufferings are brief but what we will enjoy will last forever. ... May the Lord help you, help me to persevere in observance of his precepts during our life, so that one day we may enjoy in heaven that great good, that highest good for ever and ever Amen" (*Besucco*, conclusion).

[76] "May Divine Providence that teaches man a lesson by calling him when he is old, give us the grace while we are still young to find ourselves prepared for that final moment on which depends eternal beatitude or unhappiness. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be our help in life, in death and keep us firmly on the path that leads to heaven" (*Magone*, prologue).

[77] *Savio*, c. XXVII.

[78] *Ibid.*, c. XVIII.

[79] Cf. *ibid.*, c. VII; *Magone*, c. I.

[80] Cf. *Magone*, c. II.

[81] Cf. *Savio*, c. VIII.

[82] Cf. *ibid.*, c. X.

[83] Cf. *Magone*, c. III e IV.

[84] Cf. *Besucco*, c. XVII.