

# THE YOUNG SHEPHERD BOY FROM THE ALPS, OR THE LIFE OF YOUNG FRANCIS BESUCCO FROM ARGENTERA

John Bosco

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**Introduction**

My dear Boys,

Just as I was about to write the life of one of your companions, Francis Besucco died unexpectedly and I decided that his life was the one to write. I feel that as well as pleasing both yourselves and those from his district back at home, my effort will be useful to you; hence I have researched Francis' life and written it up.

Some of you might question whether what I have written really happened. Briefly this is how I went about it. I collected information from the parish priest, the school teacher, his parents and his friends about the years that Francis spent at home; you could almost say that I have simply rewritten and rearranged what they sent me. For the time he spent with us it was simply a matter of collecting the information from many witnesses; these testimonies were written and signed by the witnesses themselves.

It is true that some of the facts recorded will appear far-fetched, and that is one reason why I have been very careful in writing them down. If the facts were unimportant there would be no need to publish them. When you note this boy speaking with a knowledge normally superior to one of his age, you must remember that he showed great diligence in learning, that he was blessed with a good memory and that he was favoured by God in a special way. All of these facts contributed in no small degree to advance him well ahead of his years.

You will also have to take something into account about myself; possibly I have been over indulgent in writing about things which happened between the two of us; for this I ask your forbearance. Please look upon me as a father who is speaking about a son whom he loves tenderly; a father who gives his time to the one he loves and who speaks to his dear sons; he opens

his heart to them to please them and to instruct them in the practice of virtue which Besucco was a model of. Read his life then, my dear boys, and if, as you read, you feel yourself moved to turn away from something wrong or to practice some virtue, render thanks to God the giver of all good things.

May the Lord bless us all and preserve us in His holy grace here on earth so that we can one day bless him forever in Heaven.

## **1 Chapter 1. Home - Parents - Young Besucco's early upbringing**

If you have ever trudged from Cuneo towards the Alps, you would have found it a long, steep and tiring walk; then you would have arrived at a high plain from which you had some picturesque and pleasant views. At night you can see the highest peak in the Alps, Magdalene Mountain, as it is traditionally called by the locals who believe that this saint came from Marseilles to live on top of these uninhabitable mountains. There is a large plateau at the top of the mountain containing a large lake which is the source of the River Stura. In the evening, as far as the eye can see, you see a long, wide deep valley called the Valley of the Lower Alps which once belonged to France. In the morning your eyes are charmed by a succession of hills one lower than the other, resembling a semi-circular staircase descending to Cuneo and Saluzzo. Lying on this plateau and precisely 80 metres from the French border is the Alpine village of Argentera, the home town of the young shepherd Francis Besucco whose life I am writing.

Francis was born in a humble house in this village, of poor but honest and devout parents on March 1, 1850. His father was called Matthew, his mother, Rose. In view of their poverty they asked the parish priest, who had the title of arch-priest, to baptise the child and look after him as a godson. The zealous arch-priest at that time was Father Francis Pepino and he willingly consented to be the child's godfather. His godmother was the priest's mother, Anna, a woman of great piety who could never say no to an act of charity. The parents expressly wanted the child named after his godfather, that is, Francis. The priest wanted to add the name of the saint whose day it was the day he was born, St Albino. Once Francis had made his first communion he never omitted going to the Sacraments each March 1st, and, as far as he could, he passed the whole day in works of Christian piety.

His mother was well aware of the need to give her children a good education and she was solicitous in teaching her son to be pious. The names of

Jesus and Mary were the first words she taught him. Often as she looked into his face and thought of the dangers young people are exposed to she would say: “My dear little Francis, I love you so very much, but I love your soul much more than your body. I would prefer to see you dead, rather than have you offend God. Oh! If I could only have the consolation of seeing you always in the grace of God.”

These and similar expressions were daily occurrences for the boy who, contrary to expectations, grew into a robust little fellow; at the same time those around him noticed his growth in grace. With such an upbringing it is not to be wondered at that Francis was a great consolation to all his family. Both his parents and his brothers tell us how pleased he was, as soon as he learned to speak, to say the names of Jesus and Mary. From the most tender age he showed great pleasure in learning prayers and religious songs, which he loved to sing in the family circle. It was also a delight to see the joy with which he would join the faithful in singing the praises of Jesus and Mary before Vespers on Feast Days. Love and prayer appeared to be second nature to him. His parents, brothers and sisters tell us that from the age of three he never had to be invited to pray; he pestered them to teach him new prayers. Every morning and evening at the usual time he knelt down and recited the prayers which he had already learned and he would not get up until he had learned a new prayer.

## **2 Chapter 2. Death of his godmother - His delight in things to do with the church - His love for prayer**

Young Besucco loved his godmother very much; he regarded her as his second mother and showed his love by little gifts and acts of kindness. He was only three when Anna Pepino fell seriously ill. He wanted to see her as often as he could, prayed for her and showed her signs of his love for her. She died on May 9, 1853, and it would appear that, although he was not present, he had some extraordinary knowledge of her death.

Despite his tender age he began to say an Our Father every morning and evening for his deceased godmother, a practice he kept up all his life. He often said: “I remember my godmother and pray for her every day even though I have every hope that she already enjoys the glory of heaven.” It was probably on account of the affection that Francis showed for his dear mother that the parish priest loved Francis in return and kept an eye on him as much as possible. Whenever Francis saw any member of his family

praying he would assume a recollected posture and raise his eyes and his little hands to heaven foreshadowing the great favours that the merciful God was to shower upon him.

In the morning he would not eat anything until he had said his prayers, unlike the custom of boys his age. When he was taken to Church he never disturbed those around him and they, noticing his devout posture, would be drawn to imitate him. It often happened that those who observed his surprising disposition would say: "It is incredible that a boy of that age could be so good." He willingly took part in any kind of church function and it seemed that he set out to please everybody even if it inconvenienced him. Many times in winter a heavy snowfall would prevent anyone going along to serve Mass. Only the intrepid Francis, courageously facing every danger, would carve out a path through the snow with his feet and hands, and arrive alone at the Church. At first sight he looked like a little animal swallowed up in the deep snow. Matthew Valorso is an eye-witness to this. He was summoned to serve Mass one day half way through January 1863 and as he was lighting the candles he saw something strange enter the Church. He was surprised to find out that it was our courageous little boy who was so happy to finally reach the Church and who called out:

"At last I've made it."

He served the Mass too and afterwards spoke to the parish priest with a big smile on his face:

"This is worth two Masses since I have heard it with double attention and it has made me very happy. I'll continue to come here whatever the cost." Who could fail to like such a pleasant little lad?

That was how Francis grew in grace before God and men. By the time he was five he knew his morning and night prayers perfectly; he used to say them every day with his family; this was the pattern as long as he lived at home. Whilst he was keen to pray he was equally keen on learning the main prayer as he was the shorter prayers.

It was enough for Francis to hear someone say a prayer which he did not know, and he would not rest until he had learned it. Then he would be as happy as if he had discovered a treasure and he would teach it to the household. He would want his prayer to become part of the repertoire of the household or to hear it recited by his friends. The following prayers were, so to speak, his Morning Prayer and his Night Prayer. As soon as he woke he would make the sign of the Cross and jump out of bed saying or singing: "My soul, get up; look up to heaven, love Jesus; love the one who loves you; turn away from the world which cheats you; remember that you have to die and your body will rot away; and so that you may be heard, say three Hail

Mary's to Our Lady.”

In his tender years he did not understand what this prayer meant and he would pester first his father, then his mother, or someone else to explain it to him. When he finally understood it he would say: “Now I can recite it with greater devotion.” In time this prayer became his rule of life.

In the evening as he was going to bed he would devoutly recite the following prayer: “I am going to sleep; I do not know whether I shall wake up again: there are four things that I desire: Confession, Communion, Holy Viaticum, the Papal Blessing. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

He was particularly pleased to discuss matters concerned with his religion and to talk about examples of virtue practised by others, these he would then try to imitate. If at times he looked sad, and needed cheering up, it was sufficient to speak to him of spiritual things or of the advantages of going to school.

### **3 Chapter 3. His obedience - Good advice - Work in the fields**

His parish priest tells us that he was so obedient to his parents that he often forestalled their wishes, that he never refused them anything and that he never showed any unwillingness to carry out their wishes. His sisters tell us that it sometimes happened that they did not do what their parents wanted, either through inadvertence or because they were occupied in some other duty; they were always admonished by their little brother. He would assume an imploring attitude and say to them:

“Look here, mother told you to do this more than half an hour ago and you still haven't done it. You shouldn't displease someone who loves us so much.” He was always kind to his brothers and sisters and never took offence even when he was blamed by them. He generally liked to play with them, because he believed that he could learn only good things from them. He confided in them and he asked them to keep an eye on his defects.

“I regret,” attests the parish priest, “that I am not capable of describing the wonderful harmony which existed in this family; there were eight of them at the time; they were exemplary in everything, whether it be their family life at home or their frequency and devotion at the sacred functions.”

His oldest brother John went to the army five years ago and Francis never stopped giving him advice on how to behave so that he would be as good as he was at home.

“Try,” he concluded, “to be very devoted to Mary most holy. She will certainly help you. For my part I’ll keep praying for you. We shall write again shortly.”

He said all of this when he was about nine years of age. Then he turned to his parents who had lost the son they relied on most for the work in the fields. “You are sad,” he told them, “but God will console us in another way by keeping us in good health and helping us in our work. And I shall do all I can to help you.”

What a wonderful worker he turned out to be. To the amazement of all he set out on his allotted tasks, and he also wanted to take on another work, but his parents did not think he was strong enough. In the midst of all the work in the fields he maintained his sense of cheerfulness despite great fatigue. If at times his father would jokingly tell him that he seemed tired of work, he would reply:

“Yes, it seems that I am not suited to this type of work; my godfather always tells me that I should study; perhaps he will help me.”

And he never let a day go by without telling the family that he wanted to go to school. He used to go to school during the winter, but he never excused himself from the domestic work, as so many boys do, so that he could play during free time. The tenor of his life during the time he went to school in Argentera is as follows.

## 4 Chapter 4. Conduct and events at school

Although his parents really needed him at home, they realised that regular instruction is a very valuable means of learning one’s religion, and so they sent Francis to school. He would get up early and recite his morning prayers, stopping often to meditate on their meaning. He said his prayers alone or with his family. Then he studied until it was time to go to school; after school he would come straight back to do whatever was needed of him at home. His progress in class mirrored his great diligence; he was not a brilliant student, but he did his best and made good use of his time to learn his lessons. His teacher had given the students a general instruction not to wander about of an evening during the winter season, and Besuccio gave a shining example. Not only did he obey scrupulously, but he drew many of his companions to imitate him and this helped their learning and their virtue; it also pleased their teacher Antonio Valorso, their parents and the boys themselves.

Seldom would he go out to play after dinner, and he had ceased to do this almost entirely several months before he came to the Oratory.



After some relaxation he got down to his study until the bell for school sounded. His teacher states that he paid the greatest attention to whatever he was taught and was always respectful. He helped the teacher to teach the young pupils to read and he did this quite naturally. For the whole time that he attended the village school he was regarded by his companions as an example of good behaviour and diligence. They had such esteem for our Francis that they took care when, in his presence, not to let unbecoming words slip out. They were sure that he would not have approved and that he would have let them know it; and it did occur on several occasions. If anyone younger than himself needed help outside of school hours, he was only too willing and he insisted on being asked often. At the same time he did not pass over any occasion to give some salutary advice or to urge greater love of God.

His zealous teacher has told me some facts about Francis at school and I shall pass them on as I heard them. "Every now and then there was a fight amongst his school mates, and he would immediately step into their midst to quiet them down.

"We are friends," he would tell them, "and we should not fight each other, especially over these harmless trifles; let us think well of each other and learn to put up with each other as God wants us to."

Words such as these usually succeeded in restoring the peace. If he saw that his words could not pacify them, he immediately walked away. As soon as he heard the bell for school or for church he invited his companions to finish their games. One day he was playing bocce when he heard the bell for catechism class. Francis immediately said:

"Let us go to Catechism class, we can finish our game after Church."

With that he left them. After church he returned and gently rebuked them for missing the instruction and practices of piety; and then to show that they were still his friends he bought them some cherries. At this sign of generosity and courtesy they promised that in future they would not miss religious functions because of their games.

He would become upset if he heard someone say an indecent word and he would either leave the company or give a severe reprimand. He was often heard to say: "My friends, don't say those words. They offend God and they scandalise others."

Those same companions state that Francis very often invited them to visit the Blessed Sacrament and Our Lady; and that he never missed any opportunity to help them in their school work.

At other times when he heard the Angelus bell he would say:

"Come on, let's say the Angelus; and then we can continue our games."

When on holiday he would invite the same companions to assist at Mass.

As the teacher at the Argentera village school I must say, to the greater glory of God, that the pious young boy Besucco was second to none in his diligence in coming to school during his five years there. If he ever saw companions who were negligent he could warn them so kindly that, whether they wanted to or not, they became more diligent. In school his conduct could not have been better, whether it was keeping silence or paying attention to what was being taught. Besides that he took great pleasure in helping the smaller ones to read. He did this so politely and with such kindness that he was greatly loved and respected by them.”

That was what his teacher said.

## **5 Chapter 5. Life at home in the family - An evening reflection**

As soon as he arrived home from school he ran to kiss his parents and made himself ready to do whatever they wanted before tea time. It was a frugal table but he never grumbled about the quantity or quality of the food. He never wanted his own way and if he noticed others in the family who were dissatisfied he would say to them:

“When you are out on your own you can do it your way, but right now we must do whatever our parents want. We are poor and we cannot live like the rich. It is not important that my companions are well dressed, whilst I cannot have fine clothes. The best suit that we can possibly have is the grace of God.” He had the greatest respect for his parents; he loved them with the most tender, filial love; he obeyed them blindly; and he never ceased praising whatever they did for him. They in their turn loved him greatly for this, and those times when he was not in their company weighted heavy on them. If sometimes his brothers or sisters jokingly said to him:

“You’ve got every reason to be happy, Francis, for you are the Benjamin of the family,” he would reply: “Yes, that’s true, but I always try to be good and to earn their love and yours.”

This was only too true; if ever he was given a present, or he earned some money for services rendered, he would give it to his parents when he got home or he would share it with his brothers and sisters and tell them:

“See how much I love you.”

Of an evening he would remain at home seldom going out to mix with others. He used the time enjoying the company of his family, studied his lessons or completed some other duty. Then at a set hour he invited all

to say the Rosary with the usual prayers, which he prolonged because he liked to say many Our Fathers. He never forgot to ask for special prayers to obtain from God health for his father and brothers who lived away from the homestead in winter seeking work to support the family.

“Who knows,” he used often to say with tears in his eyes, “how much our father suffers for us. He must often be very tired and cold whilst we are comfortable here and eating the fruit of his labours. Let us at least pray for him.”

He spoke about his absent father every day, and, accompanied him in thought everywhere in his journeys.

During the evenings he would often willingly read some devout books which he had obtained from his godfather or his teacher; they in turn only too gladly got hold of them for him. Often when the house was full of people he would say:

“Listen to the beautiful example which I found in this book.” He would then read it aloud, in a resonant voice as though he were preaching. If he ever came across the life of some pious young man, the latter became the subject of his conversation and his imitation. “Wouldn’t I be fortunate, mother, if I could become as good as he was?”

“Two years ago,” says his parish priest “he read the life of St Aloysius, and promptly became his imitator, especially in keeping quiet about his good actions. Some months later he was given the lives of Dominic Savio and Michael Magone. After reading the life of the latter he said that he had a good example for his waywardness, and asked God for the grace to correct his defects, and to imitate the good conduct and holy end of his ‘dear Magone’, as he called him. He wanted to learn about Magone and imitate him and he asked me whether it would be possible for him to go to the same institution so that he would become virtuous. This is the main benefit that our Francis obtained from the reading of good books. May God grant that all my young parishioners would read good books. It would certainly be some consolation to their parents.”

In the morning Francis would raise his innocent soul to heaven; in the evening he would turn his thoughts to death. When asked what he did when he went to bed, he would answer:

“I imagine that I am getting into my grave and then the first thought that comes to my mind is this: What will happen to you if you fall into the grave of hell? I am frightened by this thought and I pray as well as I can to Jesus, Mary, Joseph, my Guardian Angel, and I don’t stop praying until I fall asleep. Oh! how many wonderful resolutions I make when I am in bed for fear of losing my soul. If I wake up in the night I resume praying and I

am quite sorry if sleep surprises me again.”

## **6 Chapter 6. Besucco and his parish priest - Sayings - Going to confession**

Although Besucco seems to have been a privileged soul from his infancy, we must remember that the vigilance of his parents, his own good disposition and the loving care of his parish priest all greatly helped in his moral education. When he was yet a very young child his parents took him to church, they held his hands, they helped him to make the Sign of the Cross well, they pointed out how and where he had to kneel.

As soon as he was ready for it they took him to confession. Because of the example, the advice and the encouragement of his parents he took a liking to this Sacrament and instead of having the usual apprehension or repugnance which boys show when they have to appear before persons in authority, he experienced pleasure.

We must also note that the success of this young boy is in great part due to his parish priest, Father Francis Pepino. This exemplary priest worked zealously for the good of his parishioners. But he was convinced that you cannot have good parishioners if the young are not well educated. Hence he spared nothing in giving help to young people. He taught the boys how to serve Mass; he even taught school, and often went looking for them at home, at work, or in the fields. Any boy who showed an aptitude for study and piety became the special object of his care and interest. It was for this reason that, when he noted the blessings that the Lord was showering copiously on our dear Besucco, he took special care of him and wanted to give him his first lesson in catechism and also prepare him for his first confession. His kindly manner and his fatherly care gained Francis' heart so that he was only too happy whenever he would speak with his parish priest or hear some comforting and pious words from him.

He chose him for his regular confessor and continued to go to confession to him during the time he spent in Argentera. The parish priest advised him to change his confessor from time to time and even presented him with opportunity to do so, but the lad asked him to be his confessor all the time. “I have every confidence in you, Father,” he would say, “you know my heart. I always tell you every secret, I love you very much because you love my soul very much.”

I believe that the greatest thing that can happen to a young boy is the selection of a regular confessor to whom he can open his heart, a confessor

who takes care of his soul, and with kindness and charity encourages him to approach this sacrament regularly.

Francis did not depend on his parish priest only for Confession, but also for everything that could contribute to his temporal and spiritual good. The advice given by his parish priest, or even his very wish was a command for Francis, who carefully and happily carried it out. His manner and frequency in going to Confession were also edifying. A few days before, he would speak of his coming confession, telling his brothers and sisters that he wanted to get some good from it this time. He went to them, particularly in the early years, and asked them to teach him to make a good confession; and asked them how they recognised offences committed and how they remembered their sins over the long period of one month. He was also greatly surprised that, after going to confession, a person could again offend God to whom he had promised to be faithful.

“How good God is,” he used to say, “to pardon our sins despite our infidelity in the resolutions we make to him, but how much greater is our ingratitude in the face of such blessings; we should tremble at the very thought of our infidelity. For my part I am prepared to do whatever I can and to suffer anything rather than offend him again.”

The evening before his confession he would ask his father whether he had any pressing work to do next day. When asked the reason for his question he stated that he wanted to go to Confession. His father, always willingly, consented and Francis passed nearly the whole night praying and examining his conscience so as to be better prepared, although his whole life could be called a continual preparation. In the morning, without speaking to anyone, he went to Church and there prepared himself for the great event with the greatest recollection. He always waited for those people who seemed to be in a hurry. “His thoughtfulness for others,” says his parish priest “especially in the bitter cold of winter, often impelled me to call him into the confessional, as he would be numbed with cold. He would be asked why he waited so long before going to confession.”

“I can wait,” he would reply “because my parents do not blame me for the time spent in church; perhaps others could be annoyed or be told off at home, especially mothers who have children.”

His brothers and sisters sometimes jokingly said to him:

“You go to confession often just to dodge work.” He would reply,

“If you want to go to confession I’ll willingly take your place and do what I can. The more often you go, the happier I shall be.”

And then that master of the spirit would often tell them:

“The laziness you sometimes feel, the uncertainty about confession, the

putting it off from day to day are just so many temptations of the devil. He knows what a powerful and efficacious remedy frequent confession is in the correction of our faults, and he makes every effort to keep us away from it. Oh! When it is a matter of doing good we are always frightened of the world; it is not the world but God who will judge us after death; we shall have to give an account of our works to him alone, and not to anyone else, not to the world; from him alone are we to expect eternal reward.”

“When I have been to confession,” he used sometimes to say to the other members of the family,” I experience such contentment that I would like to die there and then so as to avoid the danger of offending God again.” On days when he went to the Sacraments he used to refrain from all recreations. When the parish priest asked him why he did this he replied:

“Today I have no need to please my body, because the Good God has brought such great and sweet consolation to my soul. My great sorrow is that I am incapable of thanking my Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament for the continued help he gives me.”

Instead he spent the day in holy recollection and, as far as was possible, in Church.

I have it on good authority that in order to receive the Sacraments more worthily he used to say:

“This confession could be the last of my life, and I want to make it as if it really were the last.”

## **7 Chapter 7. Holy Mass - His fervour - Looking after the sheep on the mountainside**

It is not out of place to note that Francis’ parents gave him full liberty to go to Mass every day; sometimes, when he was in doubt about going for fear of omitting some duty they themselves sent him to Mass. He was very happy about this and would say to his parents:

“Oh! Be sure that time taken to hear Holy Mass will be abundantly rewarded during the day, because God pays well and I shall work much more willingly.” On the mornings when he could not go to Mass, he would substitute this with a popular prayer which is widespread in that district. He had learned it when he was four years old. "The Mass begins, St. Mark intones it, the Angels are singing it and the Baby Jesus offers the water and wine. Make me, O Jesus, part of the Mass this morning.”

As a joke his father would ask Francis how he was going to spend that day without Mass and he would reply with the greatest simplicity:

“God will help me just the same, because I have said my prayers and I shall pray more this evening.”

He so readily believed what other people said that his companions sometimes told him some very tall stories. He remained quite calm, however, even when he realised that he was the butt of the leg-pulling. He was never seen to show signs of pride because of the esteem in which he was held by his parents, by his parish priest and by those who knew him. His work at his studies made him better than his companions, but this did not lead him to despise them; on the other hand he was very kind to them when they recited their lessons. If he received a rebuke for some childish prank, he would be quite contrite whether guilty or not and he would answer:

“I won’t do it again; I’ll be better. You are blaming me, but I know that you pardon me.”

And here he would run to embrace and hug his parents, more often with tears in his eyes. They never had occasion to punish their son. During the summer he went to the fields to work with the family. He loved to help his brothers and sisters and worked as hard as he could. He shunned idleness and during the rest periods he would begin a discussion on religion or he would question his father on something he didn’t understand in spiritual matters.

He liked to pray when going to and from work. The parish priest says:

“We would often meet him and he was so absorbed in prayer that he did not notice us. Sometimes he would be scandalised by swearing or bad talk which he could not avoid hearing. He would immediately make the Sign of the Cross or say: ‘Blessed be God. Blessed be his holy name’. He immediately began to talk about something else. When warned by his parents not to follow the bad example of certain companions he would answer: ‘I would rather have my tongue cut out than use it to offend God.’”

When he led the sheep out to pasture he always had a good book with him and he would read it to his companions if they were prepared to listen to him. Otherwise he would read it by himself or say some prayers, following the command of our Saviour to pray always.

To help provide for his family, Francis’ father undertook to look after the common flock and he often set Francis this task, particularly on feast days so that his brothers might take part in parish functions at least on those days. Francis accepted the task obediently and willingly.

“If I can’t go to Church on these days, I shall try to sanctify the feast in some other way.”

He would tell his brothers to remember him in Church. When it was time for the devotions, he would take the animals to a safe spot, then he

would kneel down before a makeshift crucifix to say his prayers or engage in spiritual reading. Sometimes he would hide in a cave in the hills, kneel before a picture he had in his book and recite the very same prayers being said in Church. Afterwards he would make the Stations of the Cross. In the evening he sang Vespers on his own and said the Rosary. It was really a great feast day for him when he could find companions to help him praise God.

To help provide for his family, Francis' father undertook to look after the common flock and he often set Francis this task, particularly on feast days so that his brothers might take part in parish functions at least on those days. Francis accepted the task obediently and willingly.

"If I can't go to Church on these days, I shall try to sanctify the feast in some other way."

He would tell his brothers to remember him in Church. When it was time for the devotions, he would take the animals to a safe spot, then he would kneel down before a makeshift crucifix to say his prayers or engage in spiritual reading. Sometimes he would hide in a cave in the hills, kneel before a picture he had in his book and recite the very same prayers being said in Church. Afterwards he would make the Stations of the Cross. In the evening he sang Vespers on his own and said the Rosary. It was really a great feast day for him when he could find companions to help him praise God. Later he used to recall with great pleasure the pasture fields of Roburento and Dreco in the mountains where he used to take his sheep.

"When I was in the solitude of Roburento," he used to say "I was always very happy. I looked into the deep ravines which led to a kind of dark abyss; and I thought of the dark abysses and the eternal darkness of hell. Birds would fly up from the bottom of the valleys right over my head; and this reminded me that we on earth must lift up our minds to God. As I gazed at the sun rising in the morning, I said to my heart: 'This is like our coming into the world'. Sunset in the evening told me of the shortness of life and the end which comes without our noticing it.

When I gazed at the peaks of the Maddalena and the other mountains white with snow, there came to my mind the innocence of the life that raises us up to God and merits for us his graces, his blessing and the great reward of paradise. After these and other thoughts, I would turn my face to one of the mountains and sing hymns to Our Lady. This was one of my dearest moments because, as I sang, my voice echoed back from the mountains and I rejoiced as if the angels of paradise were helping me to sing the glories of the great Mother of God."

Such were the thoughts in the mind of the pious little shepherd when



he took his sheep up to the mountains and was unable to take part in the sacred functions of the Church.

As soon as he had come home and had something to eat he would run straight to the Church to make up for ( his own words) his lack of devotion during the day. How many apologies would he make to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament in those visits!!

He never failed to make the Sign of the Cross and say some prayer when passing in front of a Church and especially if the Blessed Sacrament was reserved there.

If he was only looking after the family flock, in spring and autumn, then, with his parents' permission, he would bring the sheep home or hand them over to some companions and run along to the parish functions morning and evening. Oh! Why can't all boys imitate the example of Francis and not neglect their religious and their home duties? Unfortunately many dispense themselves for trifling reasons from going to the parish functions on feast days. May the example of this good young boy add weight to the recommendations of priests who preach and encourage keeping Sundays days holy.

## **8 Chapter 8. Conversations - Behaviour in church - Visits to the Blessed Sacrament**

In his conversations and recreations with his companions Francis was always very jovial. He generally chose amusements that exercise the body, and he would say to his parents and companions: "I am training myself for the time when I'll have to go for military service and I'll certainly want to be a good soldier." He avoided quarrels, and to do so he put up with insults and even ill treatment. To avoid becoming involved, he often left the company and hurried home. He used the same prudence in dodging any conversation injurious to the character of others and frequently instead praised the virtues of others. If corrected for some childish fault, he never took offence and never answered back, but would lower his head and show that he was sorry; he would say:

"This correction is a sign of the love you have for me."

If at recreations, he heard the bell for school, for Mass or for devotions, or if his parents called out to him to come home, he never delayed, "These calls are the Voice of God and they require prompt obedience on my part."

From his early childhood, as stated above, Francis showed extraordinary respect and veneration for God's holy House. When he reached the threshold

of the Church his face became serious as befitted this holy place. He wanted to be the first into the sacristy to serve Mass and sometimes ran through the Church, but a look from the parish priest or some other person was enough for him to understand that he should not do this and he would impose a penance on himself. For example he would make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament or remain alone in Church for a considerable period of time and pray in an uncomfortable position, such as holding his arms in the form of a cross or with his hands under his knees.

His parish priest attests:

“How many squabbles have I not seen in the sacristy between Francis and other boys all wanting to serve at the Altar. Often I would put his virtue to the test, and also avoid a reputation for partiality to my godson, by preferring other boys when they came to Church together. He would be somewhat upset, and even shed a tear, but he would not take offence and would remain to assist at Mass with his usual devotion. ‘I’ll make up for this mortification’ he would tell his companions; ‘I’ll be first here tomorrow’, and he nearly always was. These were probably his only squabbles with his companions.” From then on they would be led by the example of Francis to copy his zeal for the service of Holy Mass. Generally he had his hands joined and his eyes fixed on the ciborium or the celebrant, or he read from some devout book. It was touching to see him bring the cruets to the altar. He was recollected, moved about solemnly as he went about his duties as though he were already a cleric perfectly versed in the ceremonies of the Church. Francis was not only happy to give Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament all the honour he could but he tried to make Him honoured also by his companions. Hence on every feast day he went into the sacristy to get the prayer books to give out to his companions so that they would hear Mass with devotion, and not be distracted during Vespers.

“My dear boy, why are you crying so much?” I asked him many times.

“I’ve reason to cry,” he replied, “because some boys don’t want a book. I know they haven’t got one and I see them looking around and not praying.” He would cheer up only when they came and asked for a book. He offered himself willingly for all services in the Church. He lit the charcoal for Benediction, prepared wine and water for Mass, having first checked that nothing required for the ceremony was missing. You could almost say that he was transplanted into the house of the Lord.

It was his custom not only to go to Church every day for the sacred ceremonies, but also for a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. He would kneel in front of Our Lady’s Altar for a long time. Not only his parish priest but many of the townsfolk attest that they saw him during these visits in such a

devout attitude that he seemed ecstatic. Every day he recited the Memorare followed by a Hail Mary and Mary Help of Christians, pray for us. He taught his companions this prayer and had them recite it often. On Feast Days and even on week days he liked to go to the Church to say his night prayers and all the favourite prayers that he had omitted during the week through forgetfulness or inability. Those who saw him admired such virtues in a boy so young.

## **9 Chapter 9. The holy Crucifix - The Rosary - God's presence**

Here it seems opportune to point out how very devoted Francis was to the miraculous Crucifix that has been venerated from times long ago by Confraternities in Argentera, Sambucco, Pietra Porzio, Ponte Bernardo and Bersezio. Large numbers of people go to pray in front of the Crucifix in times of drought and flood. The times when they come in procession to ask for favours and are not heard are very rare. The pious boy was hardly able to distinctly pronounce the two words Blessed Christ (the name given to the miraculous Crucifix) when he asked his father to say an Our Father in front of the Crucifix. The devotion grew up with him. Besides his frequent visits he recited the Rosary every summer evening for three years (1861, 1862, 1863) with the Confraternity by that name. So that he could satisfy his desire to say the Rosary and to hear Mass every day he sometimes forgot his dinner or his tea, but he said that he preferred to think of his soul rather than his body. His mortification in attending to the works of piety had become so habitual that his parents took great care not to be the cause of it. When the Rosary had finished Francis did not go out of Church with the others, but remained inside for some considerable time to appease his burning desire to honour God and His Holy Mother. He believed he had to do this, as he often told his parish priest, because he always felt that he was really in the presence of God.

The thought of the presence of God was so much part of him in the last years of his life that he could be said to be in continual union with God. "Francis is no longer with us," wrote his parish priest, "but we seem to see him in his place near the Altar and to hear him lead the prayers; we were so used to see him at the practices of piety."

In 1860 he was invited to help in the Pious Work of Devotion to Mary Most Holy and he did so willingly. Every evening of the month he led the public recitation of the Rosary, as well as the usual prayers and some special

ones and the faithful accompanied him. There was a good attendance and all admired the extraordinary devotion that stood out in our Francis. If the parish priest needed any help in the discharge of his duties either to exhort a sick person to go to Confession or to prepare him to receive Viaticum, he recommended everything to Francis' prayers and he was sure of a favourable result. There was one particular case, a man known to all to have neglected the affairs of his soul. He was dying and he did not want to be reconciled with God. The parish priest recommended him to the prayers of Francis, and to the admiration of all he yielded quite quickly.

## **10 Chapter 10. He teaches catechism - Young Valorso**

A catechist for the young people was needed and Francis filled the position for four years. He taught carefully and enthusiastically, the boys were pleased to have him and showed him great respect. Hence the parish priest chose him to teach catechism to a large class in Lent. After his own class he would invite the children to go with him and sit in on lessons given to more adult classes. During this instruction, as indeed during all sermons, he paid great attention. He would often go to the Priest after the sermon and ask him how he could put into practice what he had heard in the sermon.

When he reached home it was his custom to tell his parents and the whole family what he had heard in church. They were amazed that such a young boy could remember so much.

In all his religious practices he followed the example of another boy of Argentera, his cousin Stephen Valorso who died in 1861. Stephen loved his practices of devotion so much that his loss was felt throughout the district. "I gathered all the young people together," related the parish priest, "and asked them if there was anyone they knew who could replace our deceased youngster in diligence and in the practice of the religious exercises. They looked at each other for an instant, then they all turned and looked at Francis. He went red in the face, but he came up to me and said:

"I am ready to replace my cousin in the religious practices under your direction. I promise, to the best of my ability, to emulate the diligence of my dead cousin in the tasks in Church, but with God's grace I shall try to be better than he was. His clothes were handed down to me; I am wearing them and I also hope to clothe myself with all his virtues."

Francis began his career by inviting his companions to make a novena of prayer at Our Lady's altar for the soul of Stephen Valorso and to go to

Mass every day during the Novena. Who would have thought that a second novena would shortly be made at the same altar for the one who first thought of it?"

## **11 Chapter 11. The Holy Childhood - The Way of the Cross - Fleeing from bad companions**

In 1857 Francis joined the Confraternity of the Holy Childhood. He was very pleased to be in it, but he had one great problem - no money to pay the monthly subscription. He went to the parish priest, who immediately solved his problem and gave him what was required; he was pleased to reward him for his good conduct. Francis loved to read the annals of the Confraternity. He also admired the solicitude and the diligence of so many boys in helping such a work. Francis often wept in sorrow at not being able to help poor children who did not have the faith, as he would have liked. To make up for his lack of money he offered God his fervent prayers and he got others to join. He took pains to tell his companions about the many children who had been saved.

In 1858 overcoming all human respect he added the Stations of the Cross to his devotions after the Parish Mass on feast days. He kept this up until he departed for the Oratory. But the admirable devotion with which he performed this religious practice frequently made him the object of scorn on the part of some of the boys. Francis' devotion was a sharp rebuke to their own unchristian conduct; they branded him a pretender and a bigot; they exposed him to a kind of persecution in the hope of dampening his enthusiasm for his practices of piety. But, supported by his parents and comforted by his confessor, he paid no attention to them. He took no notice of their gossip nor of their ridicule and kept out of their way; he kept up his devotion of the Stations of the Cross to the edification of many of the faithful who were present.

After that he would often tell his sisters that he no longer paid any attention to the gossip of the world, and that they should not let themselves be intimidated from doing good; they answered that some people were calling him "little monk," "goody goody," etc.

"Do you know why I am ridiculed by the world?" he asked them. "Because I have decided that I no longer belong to the world. We are in the world to please God and serve Him alone, not to serve and please the world. Let us, therefore, work only to gain Paradise for ourselves. This is the very reason why God leaves us in the world."

In line with this thinking when anyone disapproved of the good he was doing, he would turn his back on them and go home, thereby putting into practice what he said every morning on rising:

“Leave the deceitful world alone.” The evil world did not like him because Francis was detached from the world.

The priest often joined the family discussions and Francis asked him when he would be able to make his first Communion, something very dear to his heart. “Soon perhaps,” replied the priest, “if you learn your catechism and you give me further proof of your progress in virtue.” Only a few months were to pass before this young boy, like that other Joseph, merited as a reward for his virtue to be admitted to the banquet of the Spotless Lamb of God, even though only 8 years old.

One day in the spring of 1858 he was looking after the sheep with two other boys a little younger than himself in a field near home. They performed some immodest acts in his presence. This offended him and he rebuked them sternly.

“If you don’t want to be good and give good example, at least don’t give scandal. Would you do such things in front of the priest or your parents? If you don’t dare do them in the presence of other human beings, why do you do them in front of God?”

When he saw that they took no notice of him, he was indignant and left them. And then? One of them ran after him and asked him to join them in what they were doing. Poor Francis stopped and turned on his seducer with kicks and punches. When he saw that he could not win this way, he did something worthy of admiration but not of imitation. He was near a heap of stones and he called out: “Go away or I’ll break your head open.” By this time he was furious and he began throwing stones at the enemy of his soul. The other fellow was hit on the face, shoulders and head and then fled. Francis, frightened by the danger but happy with his victory raced home to safety and to thank God for his deliverance. This episode was related by someone who watched the whole action from about 50 metres away, says the parish priest, and was an example of the degree of virtue Francis had attained.

## **12 Chapter 12. First Communion - Frequent communion**

The following day, on being questioned about the incident by the parish priest, he replied:

“God’s grace freed me, and I’ll never go with companions like that again.”

As a reward for his courage the Priest told him that he would be admitted to First Communion as soon as possible. This made him very happy and he set about preparing himself by avoiding every little known defect and by practicing those virtues compatible with his state. In his simplicity, he often asked the priest and his parents to help him.

“When I go to Holy Communion,” he would say “I shall imagine that I am receiving Jesus from the hands of Our Lady, to whom I now feel that I should recommend myself.”

He took great care to ask one of his companions, whom he knew to be quite devout, to keep a watchful eye on him so that he would not be guilty of any irreverence. He certainly could not have put more effort into his preparation. His parents, his teacher, his parish priest all affirm that all the time he was at home Francis never did anything which could be judged as a deliberate venial sin., His beautiful robe of innocence was the most important element in his preparation for Holy Communion.

He seemed to be ecstatic just after receiving Communion; his face changed colour and reflected the joy which filled his heart. The acts of love towards Jesus on such an occasion are proportionate to the care taken in preparing for Communion.

From then onwards he went to Confession every month and he went to Communion as often as his Confessor would allow it. In later years he used to help younger boys to prepare for Communion and make their thanksgiving. After Communion he heard Mass with the greatest recollection; he did not even want to serve it on those days so that he could be more recollected. During the Mass he was completely absorbed, as he himself said, in contemplating the infinite condescension of Jesus; he did not even read his prayer book but spent the precious time, his face hidden in his hands, in continuous acts of the love of God. Before leaving the Church he went to Our Lady’s Altar with his companions and thanked her for the help she had given them; he also recited the Memorare and quite a number of other prayers in a clear voice trembling with emotion. It was at this time that our Francis so inflamed himself with the love of God that he wanted nothing else in this world other than to do the holy will of God.

“I am beside myself,” he said, “when I consider that on the days on which I go to Communion, I feel myself so drawn to prayer that I seem to be speaking to Jesus Himself and I tell him: Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

His heart was emptied of the things of this world, and God filled it with His grace. The days on which he went to Communion were entirely spent

at home or in Church, and he would ask his companions to go with him to evening devotions so as to make a perfect end to a solemn day. In his later years he would go to Communion every Sunday and also on Feast Days, but he wanted first to go to Confession. He was so humble that he never believed his soul was sufficiently purged of sin; but on the advice of the Confessor he put aside every doubt and gave blind obedience to him.

### **13 Chapter 13. Mortifications - Penances - Custody of the senses - Benefits from schooling**

These rare virtues of his were defended, so to speak, by a continual spirit of mortification. From the time he was a little child he used to fast rigorously for a good part of Lent. When relatives would remonstrate that it was indiscreet for one so young to engage in fasting, he would reply:

“You don’t go to Heaven without mortification. Therefore if both old and young want to go to Heaven, they must go there along the road of mortification. This mortification is also necessary for young people, either to make up for all the offence to God by their many faults or to train them for a mortified life, which everyone needs for salvation. You often tell me that I have many defects; that is why I want to fast.”

His parents, his brothers, his sisters testify that Francis made many wise observations of this kind.

This same spirit of mortification guided him in checking his eyes, so that he would not look at or listen to things offensive to good Christians. He also kept a check on his tongue; if at times he said anything improper, he would impose a penance on himself, e.g. making signs of the cross on the ground with his tongue. Sometimes his parents surprised him when he was performing this exercise of mortification. They asked him one day whether that penance had been given to him in Confession.

“No,” came the candid reply “but seeing that my tongue is so quick in making coarse expressions I voluntarily drag it along the ground, so that it won’t drag me into hell. I am also performing this penance so that God will grant me the grace to go to the place my Godfather promised to send me to study.” And as if all of this wasn’t enough to keep him away from the corruption he observed in bad conversations, in his later years he sought only to mix with those companions he was certain would be of no risk to his soul.

He had a growing desire to go to the Oratory of St. Francis of Sales<sup>1</sup> but

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<sup>1</sup>The word ‘Oratory’ can have different meanings. If taken to mean a weekend gathering



there was one problem in the way. Before they could be admitted as students into the Oratory, boys had to have completed their elementary schooling so that they could begin the first year of High School. But at Argentera the elementary school had only Grade One and part of Grade Two. How could he get over this difficulty? Besucco's good conduct and the charity of the parish priest found the way out. The priest added teaching to his parochial duties, and helped Besucco and other promising boys. Francis was delighted and, with his parents' consent, he set about school duties with added vigour and diligence. He finished up being accepted for First Year of High School. He was forever grateful to his parish priest.

"How can I ever repay his charity on my behalf?"

It was his custom to go to Our Lady's altar every day before school and with the confidence of a son recommend his teacher and himself to the Seat of Wisdom.

"Whatever went on there, I do not know," said the priest "but many a time he came out of Church with tears in his eyes, undoubtedly the effect of the emotions he went through." When he was asked for an explanation, he answered:

"I prayed to Our Lady for you, Father, and asked her to obtain for you from God the thanks I am unable to give you."

"The whole time I taught him," asserted the priest, "he never once gave me any cause to correct him for negligence, because he did his utmost to correspond with all the teaching he was given."

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it means a place where youngsters can recreate with enjoyable games after they have satisfied their religious duties. In Turin there are oratories of this kind: The Oratory of St Francis de Sales in Valdocco; St Joseph at St Salvatio's; St Aloysius near the viale dei Platani; the Guardian Angel's in Vanchiglia; St Martin's near the city mills. There are also weekday oratories with day and evening schools which, in the places already mentioned are on offer during the week for youngsters who cannot pay and cannot attend the city schools. In its widest sense, then, the word Oratory also includes the house at Valdocco in Turin which goes under the name of St Francis de Sales. Youngsters can be taken in there either as working boys or students. Working boys have to be 12 years of age and no older than 18. They need to be orphaned (father and mother) and completely poor and abandoned. Students cannot be accepted unless they have done well at least at Third Grade level and have been recommended for their diligence and good moral behaviour. Moral and ordinary instruction, admission both to classes and games, acceptance as a working lad are all free. Students are accepted gratis for High School so long as, as said above, they are recommended for their exceptional behaviour and attitude to study and they make it clear that they cannot pay all or part of their regular fee boarding fee which would be fr. 24 a month.

## 14 Chapter 14. His wish and decision to go to the Oratory of St Francis de Sales

The parish priest wrote to me and recommended one of his parishioners whose conduct was excellent, who was rich in virtue, but who was poor in worldly goods. "This young lad," he said, "has been a consolation to me for many years and he is a great help in the parish. He serves Mass, he takes part in Church functions, he teaches catechism to younger children, he prays fervently, he frequents the Sacraments in an exemplary manner. I am quite willing to let him go, because I hope that he will become a minister of the Lord."

I was happy to co-operate in the education of such an exceptional young lad and I willingly admitted him to this house. He had also been recommended to me by Lieutenant Eysautier of the Royal Police as a model in study and good conduct.

"When he heard the good news," wrote the parish priest, "this innocent young lad broke into tears of joy and gratitude."

But there was another problem on the way, namely the poverty of his parents who were torn between the good disposition of their son and their own lack of means. The parish priest recommended that Francis make frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and also pray to Our Lady that he might know the will of God in this regard. God listened to his prayers. One morning he went to Mass and Communion and later arrived at school looking happier than usual.

"Well," said the parish priest "what good news have you for me this morning, Francis? Have you received an answer to your prayers?"

"Yes," replied the boy "I have. It was like this. After Communion I promised God that I wanted to serve him forever and with all my heart, which I offered him many times. I also prayed to Our Lady for help in my needs. Then I thought I heard these words: 'Be of good heart, Francis, your wish will be granted'. They made me very happy."

He was so sure that he had heard this answer that he repeated it many times and without the slightest variation to his family. From then on he would say, "I am certain, Father, that I am going where you want to send me, because this is the will of God."

If at times his parents seemed to be wavering in giving their permission he would explain:

"Please don't interfere with my destiny, otherwise I shall become a disgrace to you."

He would ask his mother, his brother, his sisters, his parish priest and other people to persuade his father to give his consent. His father did not require a great deal of persuasion. It seemed quite clear that God was calling Francis to work in his vineyard.

At the end of May 1863, as all difficulties had disappeared and as it seemed to be the will of God, his parents decided to send Francis to the Oratory. He was very grateful to them.

“What a lucky boy I am,” he said. “Oh, how happy I am. Be certain that I want to repay you by my good conduct.”

“He redoubled his fervour and his piety,” wrote his parish priest, “he did nearly a year’s work in June and July.” Francis was aware of this himself.

“You tell me, Father, that you are happy with me. I can’t explain either how I have been able to learn so much in so short a time. To me it is a sure sign that I am following God’s will.”

“But,” interrupted the priest, “what are you going to pay me for all that I am doing for you? I hope you know that I expect to be paid well.”

“Yes, I do,” answered Francis. “I promise that I shall pray often to God and to Mary most holy that you will be granted all the graces you desire. Be sure that I shall never forget you nor those who shortly are to be so many other fathers to me.”

Gratitude was one of the strong points of this good-natured boy.

The last day of July came, the day before Francis was to leave for the Oratory. That morning he went to the Sacraments for the last time in Argentera. His parish priest stated:

I saw him, with tears in his eyes, gaze at the confessional and the altars, with what thoughts who knows. His face shone with remarkable happiness after Communion. The fervour and long time taken for his thanksgiving were certainly abundant compensation for the many Communions that he thought he would still make in this Church. That whole day was a feast day for Francis and I am not capable, due to my present emotion, of describing the very tender scene which followed in my room.

There in the presence of his father he fell on his knees and thanked me profusely for what I had done for him, he assured me of his eternal gratitude and of his docility to all the advice I had given him.

At home he seemed to be no longer of this world; he went about stating how happy and how lucky he was. ‘Oh! How can I ever

thank God for having favoured me like this!' He said good-bye to all his relatives who were amazed to see their nephew or cousin as the case may be, so happy.

'But,' they told him 'you will be homesick and sad being so far away from your relatives, and, who knows, perhaps you will find Turin too hot in the summer.'

'No, now don't worry about me. And my parents, my brothers and my sisters will be happy provided they get good news about me, and I shall try to console them with my letters. I am not afraid of suffering, or of being depressed, because I am sure that I am going to find there everything to make me happy. Imagine how happy I am going to be staying at the Oratory, if just the hope of going there fills me with happiness. The only thing I want is that you will pray for me so that I can always do the will of God.'

"When he met me in the street later that day," continued the parish priest "he told me that he was sorry to be leaving me but that the good reports I would get would console me. That night he could not sleep, but he passed it in prayer and union with God."

## **15 Chapter 15. Events and the trip to Turin**

Early next morning he said goodbye to his dear mother, his brothers and his sisters; they were crying, but although he felt the parting, he remained quite calm. He encouraged them all to have perfect resignation to the will of God. But when he recommended himself to their prayers so that he would always follow the voice of God who was calling him to His service, he burst into tears. His parish priest bade him farewell with these final words: "Go, my dear Francis, God who is taking you away from us is calling you to the Oratory where you will be able to sanctify your soul by emulating the virtues which opened Paradise to Dominic Savio and Michael Magone. During your last months with us you obtained your desire to go to the Oratory of St Francis of Sales from your reading of their lives and holy deaths."

His father accompanied Francis to Turin; he took a small trunk with him: they left on August 1, 1863. As they left Argentera behind, his father asked Francis whether he was sorry to leave his home, his family and above all his mother. Francis' reply was always the same:

“I am sure that I am doing God’s will, and the further I get from home, the greater is my happiness.”

After answering, he continued with his prayers and his father attested that the journey from Argentera to Turin was for Francis almost one continuous prayer.

They reached Cuneo at about four in the morning of August 2. As they passed the Bishop’s palace Francis asked:

“Whose is that beautiful house?”

“The Bishop’s” came the reply. Francis signalled to his father that he wanted to stop for a moment. His father went on a little; when he turned around he saw Francis kneeling in front of the Bishop’s gate.

“What are you doing now?” he asked.

“I am praying to God for His Lordship that he also might help me to get enrolled in the Oratory at Turin and that in due time he might number me amongst his clerics and hence do something useful for me and for others.”

When they arrived in Turin, his father pointed out the wonderful sights of the Capital. His father observed the symmetrical streets, the large squares, the tall majestic porticoes and the well-decorated arcades; he admired the height and the elegance of the buildings; he thought that he was in another world. “What do you think of it, Francis?” he asked the boy, full of wonder. “Doesn’t it seem to you that we are already in Heaven?” Francis smiled and answered: “All these things mean little to me. I won’t be happy until I have been accepted at the Oratory to which I have been sent.”

Finally they reached the longed-for place and full of joy he exclaimed: “Now we are here.” Then he said a short prayer to thank God and Our Lady for the successful journey they had made and for granting his wishes.

His father was moved to tears when leaving him, but Francis comforted him saying:

“Don’t worry about me, the Lord won’t fail us; I shall pray to Him every day for all our family.”

Further moved his father asked him if he needed anything:

“Yes, dear dad, thank my Godfather for the care that he has taken of me; assure him that I shall never forget him and by my concentration on study and my good conduct I shall make him quite pleased. Tell all those at home that I am very happy and that I have found my paradise.”

## 16 Chapter 16. Lifestyle at the Oratory - First meeting

What I have written about Francis Besucco so far forms the first part of his life, I obtained my information from those who knew him and those who lived with him in his home environment. I am now going to write about the second part of his life; but I shall recount things I heard myself, saw with my own eyes or things I was told by the hundreds of boys who were his companions during the time he spent with us. I have been particularly helped by a long and detailed account prepared by Father Ruffino, a teacher in the school here. He had the time and the opportunity to witness and note down the many acts of virtue practiced by our Besucco.

For a long time Francis was very eager to come to this Oratory but when he actually arrived he was quite bewildered. More than 700 boys soon became his friends and companions in recreation, at table, in the dormitory, in church, in school and in the study-hall. It seemed impossible to him that so many boys could live together in the same house without turning everything upside down. He wanted to ask questions of them all, he wanted to know the reason and explanation for everything. Every bit of advice given by the Superiors and every inscription on the walls became for him the subject of reading, meditation and deep reflection.

It was the beginning of August 1863, and I had never seen him before. All I knew of him was what Arch-priest Pepino had told me by letter. One day I was out with the boys at recreation when I saw a boy dressed like the mountain people; he was of medium build, a freckle-faced country boy. He stood there, eyes wide-open, watching the others play. When his eyes met mine, he smiled respectfully and came over to me.

“Who are you?” I asked him, smiling.

“I am Francis Besucco from Argentera.”

“How old are you?”

“I’ll soon be fourteen.”

“Have you come to us to study, or to learn a trade?”

“I’m keen to study.”

“How far have you gone in school?”

“I finished elementary school back home.”

“Why do you want to continue going to school rather than learn a trade?”

“My greatest wish is to be a priest.”

“Whoever advised you in this?”

“I have always wanted it, and I have always prayed to the Lord for help

to realise my aim.”

“Have you ever asked anyone for advice?”

“Yes, I spoke about many times with my Godfather; yes, with my Godfather . . .” He became emotional as he said this, and tears welled up in his eyes. “Who is your Godfather?”

“My Godfather is the Parish priest, the Arch-priest at Argentera; he is so good to me. He taught me my catechism, he taught me school, he clothed me, he kept me. He is such a good man; after teaching me for two years he recommended me to you so that you would accept me at the Oratory.” He began to cry again. His recognition of the benefits he had received and his affection for his benefactors gave me a good idea of his character and good-heartedness. Then I remembered the reverences of his parish priest and of Lieutenant Eysautier and I thought to myself: This boy, with proper education, will become a very good boy. Because experience shows that gratitude in young people is a good pointer to a successful future: on the other hand those who easily forget the favours they have received and the attention given to them stay insensitive to advice and to religious training; they are therefore difficult to educate and their results are uncertain.

So I said to Francis: “I am very pleased that you like your Godfather so much, but I don’t want you to be worried. Love him in the Lord, pray for him, and, if you want to really please him, try to conduct yourself in such a manner that I can send him good reports about you; or, if he comes to Turin, he will be able to appreciate your progress and conduct. Meanwhile go and play with your companions.” He wiped away his tears, smiled affectionately at me and then went to take part in the games with his companions.

## 17 Chapter 17. Happiness

In his humility Francis looked upon his companions as more virtuous than himself and he rated himself poorly when comparing his conduct with theirs. A few days later he again approached me with a rather perturbed look on his face.

“What’s the matter, my dear Besucco?” I asked him.

“Here I am with so many real good companions; I’d like to be as good as they are but I don’t know how to go about it. I need your help.”

“I’ll help you in every way I can. If you want to be good, practise three things only and all will go well.”

“What are these three things?”

“They are: Cheerfulness, Study, Piety. This is the grand programme.

Following it you will be able to live happily and do a lot of good for your soul.”

“Cheerfulness . . . cheerfulness I am already too cheerful. If being cheerful is enough for me to be good, I’ll go and play from morning to night. Will that be all right?”

“Not from morning to night, but only during the hours of recreation.”

He took my advice too literally; convinced that he was doing something pleasing to God by playing, he became very impatient waiting for play time. He was not very good at some of the games, and often knocked into things or fell over. He wanted to walk on stilts, and had a tumble, he wanted to exercise on the parallel bars and fell head over heels. At bocce he either hit others on the legs with the ball or he spoilt the game for others. To sum up, his games always ended up by his falling over or some such mishap. One day a worried Francis limped up to me.

“What is it, Besucco?” I asked him.

“I’m bruised all over,” he answered.

“How did that happen?”

“I’m not very good at the games they play here; I’ve fallen on my head, I’ve hurt my legs and my arms; yesterday I collided with a companion and we both finished up with blood noses.”

“You poor boy! Use a bit of sense, take it easy.”

“But you told me that these recreations pleased God; and I want to do well in all the games with my companions.”

“You don’t quite understand; you must learn these games gradually and play them in accordance with your ability. They are meant to be a means of recreation and not of harm to the body.”

He then understood that recreation should be taken in moderation and directed to the relief of the spirit, otherwise it can cause bodily harm. He continued to be a willing participant in the games, but he was more careful. Also, if free time was somewhat prolonged, he would break off from a game and talk to a studious companion about the rules and discipline of the house or about some scholastic difficulty. Furthermore he learned the secret of doing some good to himself and to his companions in the recreations themselves, by giving some good advice or courteously warning others when an occasion presented itself, just as he used to do at home in a far more restricted setting. By spending part of his recreations in this way, in a short time Besucco became a model in study and in piety.



## 18 Chapter 18. Study and diligence

One day Besucco read these words on a placard in my room: Every moment of time is a treasure. He was puzzled and he said: "I don't understand what these words mean. How can we gain a treasure in every moment of time?"

"But it's true. In every moment of time we can learn some scientific or religious fact, we can practice some virtue, we can make an act of the love of God; before the Lord there are so many treasures which will help us in time and in eternity."

He made no further comment, but he wrote the words down on a piece of paper, and then said:

"I understand." He understood how precious time was and, recalling a recommendation of his parish priest, he added:

"My Godfather also had told me that time is very precious and that we must occupy it well, beginning in our youth."

After that he set about his various tasks with even greater application. To the glory of God I can say that, in all the time he spent in this house, there was never any need to encourage him or advise him in the carrying out of his duties.

It is a custom in this house to read out every Saturday marks the boys are given for their conduct and study during the previous week. Besucco's marks were always the same, namely EXCELLENT.

When it was time to go to the study-hall, he went immediately without a moment's hesitation. It was wonderful to see him so absorbed in his study and writing away like someone doing something really to his liking. He never left his place for any reason whatever; and no matter how long the study period lasted he never took his eyes off his text books or exercise books.

One of his greatest fears was that he would involuntarily break the rules; and, particularly in his first few days, he often asked if he could do this or that. For example, he once asked in all simplicity if he were allowed to write in the study hall, since he thought that they weren't supposed to do anything else there except study. Another time he asked whether he was permitted to put his books in order during study time. He asked the help of the Lord for proper use of his time. Once some companions saw him make the Sign of the Cross during study time; then raise his eyes to Heaven and pray. Afterwards they asked why he did that and he answered: "I often have difficulties in learning and so I ask the Lord to give me his help."

He had read in the life of Michael Magone that before study Michael always said: Maria, Sedes Sapientiae, ora pro me. He began to do this also. He wrote these words on his books, on his exercise books and on some strips

of paper which he used as book-marks. Sometimes he wrote notes to his companions and either at the beginning or on a separate sheet of paper he wrote for them the same invocation to his heavenly mother as he used to call her. I read one of the letters he wrote to a companion. It stated:

You have asked me how I have been able to keep going in Second Year when had I been following the usual routine I would barely have made First Year. I answer frankly that this is a special blessing of the Lord, who has given me health and strength. Besides that I have discovered three secrets which I have used to great advantage. They are:

Never to waste a moment of time when it comes to duties in school or in the study hall.

On holidays or other days when recreation is lengthened I go to study after half an hour, or I discuss school matters with some companions who are further advanced in study than I am.

Every morning before going out of church I say an Our Father and a Hail Mary to St. Joseph. This is the means that has helped me advance in knowledge. From the time I began saying this Our Father I have always found it easier either to learn my lessons or to overcome the difficulties that I often meet in scholastic matters.

“Try it yourself,” the letter concluded with “and you’ll certainly be happy with it.”

We should not be surprised to read that, with such great diligence, he was able to make such rapid progress in school.

When he came to us he almost gave up hope of being able to cope with First Year, but after only two months he was already getting quite satisfactory marks in his class. In school he dwelt on every word spoken by his teacher who never had to reprimand him for inattention. What has been said about Besucco’s diligence in matters of study must also be said about all his other duties, even the smallest: he was exemplary in everything. He had been given the task of sweeping the dormitory. He won admiration for the exactitude with which he discharged this duty without giving the least sign that it was a burden to him.

When he was sick and could not get out of bed, he apologised to the assistant for not being able to do his usual task and he profusely thanked a companion who took his place.

Besucco came to the Oratory with a fixed purpose; in his life here he always had in view the point to which he was aiming, namely to dedicate himself completely to God in the priesthood. To this end he sought to make progress in knowledge and virtue. He was speaking with a companion one day about their studies and the reason why each of them had come to the house. Besucco gave his own reasons and then concluded: "To sum it all up my reason is to become a priest; with the help of the Lord I'll do everything possible to achieve this."

## 19 Chapter 19. Confession

You can say what you like about various systems of education, but I have not found any other firm basis for education than frequent Confession and Communion; and I believe that I am not exaggerating if I assert that morality is endangered when these two elements are missing. Besucco, as we have seen, was trained to approach these two sacraments frequently. When he arrived at the Oratory he grew in fervour in going to Confession and Communion.

At the beginning of the Novena for the Birthday of Mary Most Holy, he went to his director and said:

"I would like to make this Novena well, and, amongst other things, I want to make a general Confession."

When he had heard the reasons for this request the director replied that he did not see any reason for a general confession and he added:

"You needn't worry, especially as you have made a general confession at other times to your parish priest."

"Yes," he replied, "I did so on the occasion of my First Communion and also at a Retreat in my parish, but, as I want to put my soul in your hands, I want to reveal to you everything that is on my conscience so that you can with greater surety give me the advice best adapted to help me save my soul."

The director agreed; he praised him for his decision to choose a regular confessor; he exhorted him to think well of his confessor, to pray for him, and to always lay open before him anything which troubled his conscience. Then he helped him prepare for the general confession he wanted to make. He performed this act with very great expressions of sorrow for his past and resolutions for the future even though, as anyone could judge from what was known of his life, he had never committed any fault which could be deemed a mortal sin. Once he had made a choice of Confessor he did not change him for the whole time that the Lord spared him to us.

He had full confidence in him, he consulted him even outside of confession, he prayed for him and he was very pleased every time he was able to get from him a piece of good advice for his rule of life.

One day he wrote a letter to a friend who had told him that he too would like to come to the Oratory. He recommended that he pray to the Lord for this grace and then he suggested some practices of piety to him, such as the Stations of the Cross; but above all he advised him to go to Confession every week and to go to Communion several times during this week.

Whilst I greatly praise Besucco in this matter, I recommend with all my heart, to all people, but especially to young people to choose a regular confessor in good time, never to change him, except for reasons of necessity. Let them avoid the mistake of some people, who change the confessor almost every time they go to Confession; or, when they have to confess something of greater importance, go to another confessor and then return to their regular confessor. When they act this way they are not committing any sin, but they will never have a sure guide who thoroughly knows the state of their conscience. They will meet the same fate that befalls a sick man who goes to a different doctor each time. The doctor will find it difficult to diagnose the illness, and hence will be uncertain as to what remedies to prescribe.

If by any chance this booklet should be read by anyone who is destined by Divine Providence to be engaged in the education of young people, I would strongly recommend three things to him. First, zealously encourage frequent Confession as a prop to the instability of young people and do everything to assist regularity at this Sacrament. Secondly let them insist on the great usefulness in choosing a regular confessor who is not to be changed without necessity, but let there be a supply of confessors so that everyone can choose him who seems best adapted to the needs of his own soul. But let them always bear in mind that if one changes confessor he does not do anything wrong and that it is better to change him a thousand times than to keep back any sin in confession.

Let them never fail to speak very often about the great secret of Confession. Let them explicitly teach that the Confessor is bound by a secret which is natural, ecclesiastical, divine and civil, and that he cannot for any reason at all, cost what it may, even death, reveal to others what he has heard in confession or make use of it for his own purposes; that, moreover, he cannot even think of things heard in this Sacrament; that the confessor is not greatly surprised nor does he lose his esteem and affection for people because of serious things heard in the confessional; on the contrary the penitent goes up in his eyes. A doctor is quite pleased when he finds out why his patient is seriously ill, because he can then apply the correct remedy; the

confessor who is the doctor of the soul does the same thing. By absolution he cures in God's name all the ills of the soul. I am convinced that we shall obtain wonderful moral results among our boys if these things are recommended and explained; and the results will be the wonderful moral effect the Catholic religion has in the sacrament of penance.

## 20 Chapter 20. Holy Communion

The second prop for young people is Holy Communion. Fortunate are those boys who begin in good time to go to Communion frequently and with the right dispositions. Besucco had been taught to go to communion often and with fruit by his parents and by his parish priest. At home he used to go to Communion every week; then on Feast Days and even some times during the week. When he came to the Oratory he continued to go to Communion with the same frequency, then he went several times a week, and during novenas even every day. Although his innocent soul and his very exemplary conduct made him worthy to receive Communion frequently, nevertheless he considered that he was not worthy of it. His apprehensions grew when a person who came to this house told Besucco that it was better to go less frequently so that he could make a longer preparation and receive Communion more fervently.

One day he went to his superior and told him all his worries.

"Don't you eat material bread for your body with great frequency?" the superior asked him.

"Yes, I do."

"If we eat material bread so frequently for the body which is only meant to live for a short time on this earth, why should we not often, even every day, take spiritual bread for the soul, i.e. Holy Communion (St. Augustine)?"

"But anyone who eats less frequently has a better appetite."

"Anyone who eats sparingly and goes for days without food either faints through weakness or dies of hunger, or when he does decide to eat he runs the risk of getting indigestion."

"If that is the case, I'll try to go more frequently to Holy Communion in the future, because I really know that it is a powerful means for making me good." "Go as frequently as your Confessor suggests."

"He tells me to go every time that there is nothing disturbing my conscience."

"Good; follow that advice. Meanwhile I want to tell you that Our Lord Jesus Christ invites us to eat His Body and drink His Blood every time

that we are in spiritual need, and we live in continual need in this world. He goes so far as to say: 'If you do not eat my body and drink my blood, you shall not have life in you!' For this reason, as the time of the apostles the Christians were persevering in prayer and in feeding themselves with the Eucharistic Bread. In the first centuries all of those who went to hear Mass received Holy Communion. And anyone who heard Mass every day, also went to Communion every day. The Catholic Church at the Council of Trent recommended to Christians that they assist at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as often as possible, and amongst others there are these beautiful words: 'It is the wish of the Council that when the faithful go to Mass they go to Communion not only spiritually but also sacramentally so that the fruit which comes from this Most August Sacrifice may be found more copiously in them'. (Sess. 22, C.6)

## **21 Chapter 21. Reverence for the Blessed Sacrament**

Francis showed his great love for the Blessed Sacrament not only by going frequently to Communion, but whenever an occasion presented itself. At home he was always very pleased to accompany the priest carrying Holy Viaticum. Whenever he heard the bell he immediately asked his parents for permission to go out, and they willingly granted it; then he ran to the Church to offer his services in a manner befitting his age. He was always delighted to do whatever was required, such as, ring the hand bell, carry a lighted torch, carry the ombrellino, say the Confiteor, the Miserere or the Te Deum. At home he would willingly help companions who were younger or less instructed than he was to prepare to receive Communion worthily and afterwards to make the appropriate thanksgiving.

His fervour continued at the Oratory and, amongst other things, he formed the very commendable habit of making a short visit to the Blessed Sacrament every day. He was often seen with a priest or cleric when they were taking a group of boys to say some special prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament. It was also edifying to witness the way he managed to take a companion with him into Church. One day he invited a companion saying:

“Come with me and we shall go and say an Our Father to Jesus, who is there all alone in the tabernacle.”

The companion who was completely absorbed in his game answered that he did not want to go. Besuccio went in alone just the same. The companion felt sorry the next day for having refused the kind invitation of his virtuous

companion and went up to him and said:

“Yesterday you invited me to go into the Church with you and I refused; today I am inviting you to keep me company in doing what I didn’t do yesterday.” Besucco smiled and answered:

“Don’t worry about yesterday. I prayed for both of us. I said three Our Fathers for me and then three for you in front of the Blessed Sacrament. However, I shall go most willingly now and whenever you want to have me for company.”

More than once I have had to go into the church after the evening meal to perform some duty whilst the boarders were happily engaged in a lively recreation in the yard. I did not have a lamp in my hands and I tripped over what seemed to be a sack of wheat. I was quite surprised to find out that I had bumped into Besucco who was kneeling in the dark behind the altar but quite near it. He was praying to his beloved Jesus asking for heavenly help to make himself better, or even to make him a saint.

He would serve Mass very willingly. He took delight in preparing the altar, lighting the candles, taking out the cruets and in helping the priest to vest. Whenever someone else wanted to serve the Mass, he willingly gave way and then heard it with great recollection. Those who have observed him assisting at Mass or at Benediction in the evening are unanimous in asserting that it was impossible to look at him without being struck and edified by the fervour he showed in praying, and by his composure.

He was also very eager to read books and to sing hymns about the Blessed Sacrament. Among the many little prayers he recited throughout the day, his favourite was:

“Blessed and praised every moment be the most holy and divine Sacrament.”

“With this prayer,” he would say “I gain 100 days indulgence every time; and moreover every time I began saying it all the bad thoughts running through my mind disappear. This brief prayer is a hammer with which I am certain to break the horns of the devil whenever he comes to tempt me.”

## 22 Chapter 22. Spirit of prayer

It is so difficult to get boys to enjoy prayer. Their fickle age makes anything which requires serious mental attention seem nauseating and heavy. A boy is very fortunate if he has been trained in prayer and likes it. The fountain of divine blessings is always opened by prayer.

Besucco belonged to the number of these boys. The assistance given

him by his parents from his earliest years, the care taken by his teacher and especially the help of his parish priest all produced the desired end in our Francis. He was not accustomed to meditate, but he recited many vocal prayers. He uttered the words clearly and distinctly and he pronounced them in such a way that he seemed to be speaking to Our Lord, or Our Lady or some saint to whom he was directing his prayers.

He got up and dressed himself as soon as he was called in the morning, made his bed and then went straight to church or else he knelt down by his bedside to pray until the bell called him elsewhere. His punctuality in going to church meant that he could sit next to those companions or go to those places where he knew he would not be distracted. He was always upset whenever he saw anyone talking or acting in a dissipated manner. One day as soon as he left the Church he went looking for a boy who had misbehaved in this way. When he found him he told him what he had done and, having made him see he had done wrong, he urged him to be more recollected in church.

He had a special devotion towards Mary most holy. He was particularly fervent towards her during the novena in preparation for her birthday. Every evening the Rector used to propose some practice in his exercise book. This way, he would say, I shall have a fine present to give to Our Lady at the end of the year. Throughout the day he repeated the practice and reminded his companions of it. He wanted to know the exact spot where Dominic Savio used to kneel to pray in front of Our Lady's Altar; he would go there to pray also. He used to say that he would dearly like to stay there from morning till evening to pray to Our Lady.

"Because I seem to have Savio praying with me; he seems to answer my prayers, and his fervour instils itself into my heart."

Generally he was the last to leave the church because he used always to stop for a short time in front of Our Lady's statue. This often caused him to miss breakfast. Those who noticed it were amazed that a strong, healthy boy of fourteen years would forget his bodily food in favour of the spiritual food of prayer.

Often, especially during holiday time, he went into the church with some of his companions to pray the seven joys of Mary, the seven sorrows of Mary, the litanies or the prayer to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. He never wanted to let others lead these prayers. On Friday whenever he could, he made or at least read the Stations of the Cross. This was one of his special practices of piety.

"The way of the Cross," he used to say "is a spark of fire for me; it helps me to pray and it drives me to put up with anything for the love of God."



He loved praying so much, and he was so used to it that whenever he was on his own or had nothing to do, he would immediately say some prayers. He often began to pray during recreation, and at times involuntarily used little spontaneous prayers during his games. One day he saw his Superior, ran up to him, greeted him by name and then said to him,

“Oh, Holy Mary.”

Another time he wanted to call out to a companion with whom he was playing and he shouted:

“Oh, Pater Noster.”

Whilst these actions caused his companions to laugh at him, they also showed his love for prayer and his ability to recollect himself, to raise his mind to God. According to masters of the spiritual life this denotes a high degree of perfection which is rarely seen in people even far advanced in virtue.

After night prayers said in common every evening he went to the dormitory and knelt down on top of his trunk - not a very comfortable position - for a quarter of an hour or even half an hour to pray. When he was told that this disturbed his companions who were already in bed, he shortened his prayers and made sure that he was in bed at the same time as his companions. However, as soon as he settled into bed, he joined his hands on his breast and prayed until he fell asleep. If he woke up during the night he immediately began to pray for the souls in purgatory and he experienced great displeasure if sleep overtook him before he finished his prayer.

“I’m sorry,” he told a companion “that I can’t spend some time in bed without sleeping. I’m quite distressed. How much good I could do for the souls in Purgatory if I could pray as I want to.”

In short, if we examine the spirit of prayer of this boy we can say that he literally followed the precept of Our Saviour who commanded us to pray always, because he passed his days and nights in continuous prayer.

## **23 Chapter 23. His penances**

Boys generally get frightened when you speak to them of penance. But when the love of God takes possession of a heart, nothing in this world and no suffering distress it; on the other hand every affliction in this life is a source of consolation. Tender hearts believe that suffering brings great results, and that a glorious reward in heaven is reserved for those who suffer during life.

From the earliest years Besucco had a great desire to suffer. Here at the Oratory he redoubled his fervour for suffering. He went to his Superior one day and said:

“I am very worried: Our Lord says in the Gospel that you can only gain entrance to Paradise by innocence or by penance. I can’t go there through innocence because I’ve already lost it. Therefore I have to go there through penance.”

The Superior replied that he should accept as his penances diligence in study, attention in school, obedience to his superiors, putting up with the inconveniences of life such as heat, cold, wind, hunger, thirst.

“But,” Besucco interjected “we must suffer these things as a matter of necessity.”

“That’s right. But if you add suffering for the love of God to what you must suffer as a matter of necessity, it will become real penance, it will please the Lord, and it will bring merit to your soul.”

He quietened down for a time, but he always asked to be allowed to fast, to give up this or that at breakfast, to wear something uncomfortable under his clothing or to put things in his bed. These were always forbidden him. On the Vigil of All Saints Day he asked as a special favour to be allowed to fast on bread and water, but this was changed to abstinence at breakfast time. This pleased him greatly because, as he said would be able, at least in something, to imitate the Saints in Paradise who saved their souls by walking the path of suffering.

It is not necessary to speak of the custody of the senses, especially of the eyes. Anyone who for any length of time had observed his very composure, his behaviour towards his companions, his modesty both inside the house and outside of it would not hesitate to affirm that he could be proposed as the perfect model of mortification and external behaviour of young people.

Although he was prohibited from performing corporal penances, he obtained permission for penances of another kind, namely doing the most humble tasks in the house. Some of the things he tackled with pleasure and great satisfaction were: running messages for his companions, carrying water, cleaning shoes, serving at table when he was allowed to, sweeping the refectory, sweeping the dormitory, carrying away the rubbish, carrying parcels and trunks, provided he was strong enough. These are all examples which could be imitated by certain young people who, when away from home, find it hard to lend a helping hand when they could do so. Sometimes there are young people who are ashamed to accompany their parents because they are not well dressed. It is as though being away from home changes their condition and makes them forget their duty of reverence, respect and obedience to their parents, and of charity towards everyone.

But these small mortifications contented Besucco for a short time only; he wanted bigger mortifications. Sometimes he was heard to complain that

he had performed bigger penances at home and his health had never suffered. His Superior always answered that real penances does not consist in what pleases us, but in what pleases the Lord and promotes his glory. “Be obedient,” added the Superior “and diligent in your duties, be kind and charitable towards your companions, put up with their defects, give them good advice and you will be doing something which pleases the Lord more than any other sacrifice.” Taking literally to heart what he had been told about patiently putting up with cold, he did not clothe himself properly when winter came along. One day I saw him looking very pale and asked him if he were sick.

“No,” he answered, “I’m quite all right.”

I took his hand and then realised that he was still in summer clothing even though we were within the novena for Christmas.

“Haven’t you any winter clothing?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s in my room.”

“Why aren’t you wearing it?”

“Ah . . . for the reason you already know: put up with the cold of winter for the love of God.”

“Go and put it on immediately. See that you are well protected against the cold of winter. If you need anything ask for it and you’ll be given it straightaway.”

Despite all this, however, we could not prevent one behaviour which was possibly the beginning of the illness which carried him to the grave, but more about that later.

## 24 Chapter 24. Particular deeds and sayings

There are some things Besucco said and did which have no direct relation to what we have already described, so they will now be recounted separately. I shall begin with his conversations. When speaking he was somewhat reserved, but jovial and witty. He would willingly talk about his experiences as a shepherd when he took sheep and goats out to pasture. He spoke of the bushes, pastures, valleys, caves and storms in the mountains of Roburento and Dreco as so many other wonders of the world.

He also had some proverbs which for him were undisputed truths. Whenever he wanted someone not to think too much of the things of the world, but rather to think of heavenly things he would say:

“It is very difficult for Heaven to open to anyone who looks at the earth like a goat.”

One day a companion was speaking about religion and he let slip a few

seriously mistaken points of view. Both because he was young and because he wasn't sufficiently well instructed, Besucco kept quiet but he was uneasy and annoyed.

Later he gained courage and with a smile on his face he spoke to all those present:

"Listen, some time ago I read in the dictionary the meaning of the word 'trade' and amongst other things I noted this phrase: 'Let everyone stick to his own trade'. My father said the same thing in different words: Anyone who does what he doesn't know spoils what he does."

They all understood his meaning; the one who had spoken indiscreetly kept quiet whilst the others admired Besucco's shrewdness and prudence.

He was always happy with the arrangements of the superiors. He never complained about the timetable, the setting of the table, the organisation at school, and so on. He always found everything to his liking. When asked how it was that he was always happy with everything he replied:

"I am made of flesh and bones like the others, but I want to do everything for the glory of God; therefore everything that does not suit me will certainly be pleasing to God; hence I always have a good reason for being contented."

One day he was with some boarders who had recently come to the house and who could not settle down to the new kind of life. He comforted them saying: "If we joined the army, would we be able to determine our own timetable? Would we be able to go to bed and get up when we liked? Or would we be free to go for a walk?"

"No," they answered, "but a little bit of freedom . . ."

"We are definitely free," interrupted Francis, "if we are doing the will of God and we only become real slaves when we fall into sin, because then we are the slaves of our greatest enemy, the devil."

"But at home I was able to eat better and sleep more comfortably than here," complained one of them.

"I grant that what you say is true, that is, that at home the food was better and the beds more comfortable, but I'm telling you that you were fostering two great enemies - gluttony and laziness. I'll go further and tell you that we weren't born just to sleep and eat as the goats and sheep do, but we have to work for the glory of God and flee idleness which is the father of all vices. Moreover, haven't you heard what our Superior said?" "I don't remember."

"Yesterday our Superior said, amongst other things, that boys remain here voluntarily and not by force. If anyone is unhappy, he concluded, let him tell me and I'll try to satisfy him; anyone who doesn't want to remain here is free to go, but if he does stay I don't want him spreading discontent."

“I would go elsewhere, but that would cost money and my parents can’t afford it.”

“All the more reason for you to be happy here; if you can’t pay you should show yourself more satisfied than others, because you never look a gift horse in the mouth. And so, my friends, we must be aware that we are in a house of Divine Providence; some pay a little, some pay nothing; and where could we get something else at this price?”

“What you say is true, but if we could have something better to eat . . .”

“Since you’re dying for want of something better to eat, I’ll tell you how to get it; go and board elsewhere.”

“But I haven’t got the money to pay board.”

“Well then, keep quiet, and be content with the food they give you. Especially so since all our other companions are happy with it. If you really want me to speak my mind, my friends, I’ll tell you that strong young people such as we are should not give too much attention to the niceties of life. As Christians we must do some penance if we want to go to heaven; we must mortify our tendency to gluttony in good time. Believe me, this is an easy way for us to obtain the blessings from the Lord and to gain some merit for Heaven.”

It was these and other similar ways of speaking that he helped his companions and became a model to them of Christian politeness and charity.

Whilst we’re on this point, he used to write proverbs and moral sayings on his exercise-books. He was also quite eloquent in his letters and I think it worthwhile to reproduce some of these, which were kindly given to me by those to whom they were written.

## 25 Chapter 25. His letters

These letters are a manifest sign of the goodness of heart and the sincere piety of our Besucco. It is a rare thing, even in older people, to find letters written without human respect and full of religious and moral sentiments. Yet this we should expect of every Christian. But it is indeed very rare to find young people doing this. I should like all of you, dear young readers of mine, to avoid the kind of letter which has nothing religious in it, a letter which could well be written by the pagans themselves.

No, let us use this wonderful means to communicate our thoughts and our plans to those who are far away from us, but let us always distinguish between the Christian and the pagan in our correspondence; and let us never forget some moral thought. Hence I am including some of young Besucco’s

letters which I think will please my readers because of their simplicity and tenderness.

The first bears the date 27th September, 1863, and was addressed to his Godfather, the Arch-priest of Argentera. In it he informs him how happy he is at the Oratory and thanks him for sending him there.

My dear Godfather,

Four days ago my companions went home for twenty days' holiday. I am very pleased to see them have a happy holiday, but I am better off than they are because by staying here I have time to write this letter to you. I hope that you will be pleased with it. First of all I must tell you that I cannot find sufficient words to thank you for all the good you have done for me. Apart from the favours you have done me, especially that of teaching me in your home, you have also taught me so many things, both spiritual and temporal, that are of great help to me. But the greatest of these favours was to send me to this house where nothing is lacking for my soul or my body. I thank the Lord more and more that he has given me this great favour in preference to so many other boys. I ask him with all my heart to give me grace to correspond with so many signs of heavenly kindness. I am more than happy in this place, there is nothing that I want, my every wish is taken care of. I thank you and all the other benefactors for the things you have sent me. I had hoped last week for the consolation of seeing you here in Turin so that you could speak with my superiors about my conduct. Patience, the Lord wants to defer this consolation for me.

From your letter I learned that my dear ones at home cried when they heard my letter read out. Tell them that they have reason to rejoice and not to cry, because I am very happy. I thank you for the precious advice that you gave me, and I assure you that so far I have done all I could to put them into practice. Thank my sister for the Communion that she made especially for me; I'm sure that it has helped me with my studies. Although it seems impossible in such a short time I have been able to get into Second Year. Greet my parents for me and tell them to pray for me and not to be worried because I am in good health, have everything I need and in a word am very happy.

Please excuse me for the delay in writing; over recent days I have

had a lot to do preparing for the exams, which I did better in than I expected to. I really want to express my gratitude to you, but having no other way to do so, I will try to make recompense by asking the Lord to give you good health and happy days.

Give me your blessing, and consider me always as

Your devoted godson,

Francis Besucco.

Francis' father, a knife-grinder by trade, spent summer working in the fields and looking after the animals at Argentera, but in autumn he left and went to other districts to earn his and his family's bread, working with his trade. On 26th October, Francis wrote him a letter in which, noting how happy he was to be in Turin, he expressed his tender filial affection in the following way:

My dear father,

Time is coming, dear father, when you will have to set out through the countryside to provide what the family needs. I cannot possibly accompany you on your trip but I will be with you in my thoughts and prayers. I assure you that every day I ask the Lord to give you health and his holy grace. My Godfather was here at the Oratory and that gave me great pleasure. Amongst other things he told me you were afraid I am going hungry; no, don't worry, I have bread in abundance, and if I were to put aside what I didn't need, you would be able to make a huge loaf out of it, as we say. You just need to know that we eat four times a day and always as much as we want; there is soup for dinner, as well as a second course, and for supper, soup. Once we had wine each day but it has become so expensive that now we have it just on Sundays. So don't worry about me. I have nothing else I want since everything I want is given me.

There are two things which give me great pleasure, and these are that my Superiors are very happy with me and I with them. The other was the visit from the Archbishop of Sassari. He came to see the Rector; he visited the house, spent time talking to many of the boys, and I had the pleasure of kissing his hand and receiving his blessing.

Dear father, greet all the family for me and especially my dear mother. Give my news to my Godfather and keep thanking him

for what he has done for me. Do well on your trip through the countryside and should you find a fixed place to say somewhere let me know and I will quickly give you more news. Pray for me,  
Your affectionate son always,  
Francis.

From the time his Godfather came to visit him, he was very keen to get letters from him. There was one letter which satisfied this burning desire, in which the zealous priest gave him some advice for his spiritual and material wellbeing. Francis wrote back saying how happy he was; he thanked him and promised to put his advice into practice.

The letter, written on 23rd November, expressed the following sentiments:

My dear Godfather,

I received your letter on the 14th of this month. You can imagine what a consolation it gave me. I spent that whole day like a feast day. I read it and reread it many times and the more I did so the more courage I gained for my study and to be a better person. I know now what a great gift you gave me by sending me here to the Oratory. I cannot possibly express my heartfelt gratitude except by going to the church and praying for my benefactors and especially for you; and in order not to lost study time, I go during recreation. Perhaps I should slow down a little because as much as I find great contentment in study and prayer, I should be at recreation with the others because that's what our Superiors tell us to do as something which our study and our health.

Now all classes have started up and from morning to evening, between school, study, singing practice, music, religious practices and relaxation I have no time left to think about myself.

I am happy to say that Lieutenant Eysautier often comes to visit; some days ago he brought me such a beautiful cloak that if you saw me in it you would think I was a little lord.

He recommended that I find a good companion and I did so immediately. This boy is better than me at studies and also more virtuous. As soon as we met we became firm friends. We speak of nothing else between us but study and matters of piety. He also likes recreation but after we have run around for a while we



start walking up and down discussing things to do with school. The Lord is helping me in noticeable ways; I am always going ahead with things here: of the ninety in my class there are only fifteen still ahead of me.

I am consoled to think my friends still remember me; tell them I love them very much and to be diligent in their study and piety. Thank you for the beautiful letter you wrote me and I will try to put into practice the advice contained in it. I have a burning desire to be good because I know that God has prepared a great reward for me and for those who love and serve him in this life.

Forgive me for taking time to write and if I have not put into practice the advice you have given me, my dear benefactor. I ask you to greet everyone at home for me, and since I cannot greet my father personally I do so in my heart, praying to God for him. May God's will, not mine, be done in everything.

Your devoted godson in the most lovable hearts of Jesus and Mary,

Francis.

Francis enclosed a letter with this one to his parish priest; it was addressed to his friend, a virtuous cousin named Anthony Beltrandi, also of Argentera. The construction, the diction, the thoughts of the letter make it worthy of inclusion here as a model of letters that can be exchanged by two good young friends.

My dear friend Anthony,

My Godfather has given me good news of you. He tells me that you should take up study like I did. I can tell you that this is a very good idea and you will be very happy if you go on with it.

Since our good parish priest is prepared to teach you, try to repay him by diligence in the fulfillment of your duties. Throw yourself into the study but accompany it with prayer and devotion; this is the only way to succeed in this undertaking and to be truly satisfied. I am pleased to think that next year you will be my companion in this house.

There is just one little thought I want to leave you: obedience and submission to your parents and your parish priest. And I recommend that you give good example to your companions.

And I want to ask a favour of you. During this winter make the Stations of the Cross after the sacred functions as I used to do when I was home. Endeavour to promote this pious practice and you will be blessed by the Lord. Time is precious, try to use it well; if you have any free time, gather some boys together and get them to revise the Christian Doctrine lesson taught on the previous Sunday. This is a very good way of earning God's blessing. Tell my Godfather to give me some news about you when he writes to me, and in that way I shall be ever surer of your good will. Dear friend, what great suffering I endure when I think of the time that I have wasted and that I could have spent in study or in other good works.

I hope that you will take my letter in good part and if there is anything that displeases you, I ask your forgiveness. Do your very best to ensure that next year we shall be schoolmates here in Turin, if this is pleasing to the Lord.

Cheerio, dear Anthony, pray for me.

Your loving friend,

Francis Besucco.

## **26 Chapter 26. Last letter - Thoughts written to his mother**

The great piety of Francis is revealed in his letters in the previous Chapter. Every spoken or written word contributes to a network of delicate love and holy thought. It seems however that, as he gradually approached the end of his life, he became even more inflamed with God's love. Indeed, it seems from certain expressions that he had some forewarning. When his Godfather received his last letter he exclaimed: "My godson wants to leave me; God wants him for himself."

I refer to it here in its entirety as a true model for whoever wants to wish someone a Happy New Year in a Christian manner. It bears the date, 28th December 1863.

My beloved Godfather,

Any well brought up young lad would certainly commit a serious act of culpable ingratitude if he were not to write to his parents and benefactors at this time of year to wish them every blessing

and happiness. But what should I say to you my beloved and illustrious benefactor? From the day I was born you began to be good to me and look after my soul. My first learning about life, about piety, fear of God, I owe to you. If I have completed some years at school, if I have been able to fly from dangers to my soul, is all due to your advice and your care.

However can I recompense you for this then? Since I have no other way to do so, I will at least try to give you a sign of my continual gratitude by keeping in mind all the benefits I have received, and in these few days left to me I will try with all my strength to wish you copious blessings from Heaven, a good end to the current year and a good beginning to the new year.

There is an ancient proverb which says: Well begun is half done; so I too want to begin this new year well, begin it according to the Lord's will and continue it according to his will.

My studies are going well right now; my conduct in study, dormitory and in piety have always been EXCELLENT. I have had news that my father and brother are in good health. Give this news to those at home and I am sure they will be pleased about it. Tell them not to be worried about anything. I am well and lack nothing.

Could I ask you too to greet my good teacher Antonio Valorso, and tell him that I ask forgiveness for the times I was disobedient and the many times I upset him while I was at school there.

Finally, I renew my assurance that not a day will pass without my asking God to keep you healthy and give you a long life. My dear Godfather, I ask your forgiveness too for all the bother I have been; keep helping me with your advice. I have no other wish than to be good and to correct all my faults. May God's will and not mine always be done.

With great respect and affection,

I remain,

your devoted godchild,

Francis Besucco.

In the letter to his godfather he enclosed a note for his mother, the last one he wrote and which can be considered as his last testament or final words to his parents.

My beloved mother,

We are at the end of the year. God has helped us to live it well. Indeed, I can say that for me this year was a continual run of heavenly favours. While I wish you a good conclusion to the few days that remain, I ask the Lord to give you a good beginning to the new year and one which continues and is filled with all kinds of spiritual and temporal good things. May the Blessed Virgin Mary obtain for you from her Son a long life and happy days. Today I received a letter from my father, from which I know that both he and my brother are in good health and this gives me great consolation. I am sending you here a note of some items they still need.

My dear mother, I was a lot of bother to you at home, and I still am. But I will try to make up for it through my good conduct and my prayers. I ask you to do whatever you can so my sister Maria can study, so that through this she can be better instructed in her religion. Goodbye, my dear mother, goodbye. Let's offer the Lord our actions and our hearts and recommend the salvation of our souls especially to him. May the Lord's will always be done.

For my part, wish every good to all those at home, pray for me,

Your affectionate son,

Francis.

From these last letters we see clearly that Besucco's heart seemed no longer of this world but of someone who though walking with feet on the earth has his soul already with God whom he wants to constantly speak and write about.

As his fervour grew for religious things, so too did his keen desire to withdraw himself from the world. If I could, he often said, I would like to separate my soul from my body so that I could better understand what it means when we say we love God. "If it weren't that I am not allowed," he went so far as to say, "I would like to abstain from all food so that I could enjoy at length the great pleasure experienced in suffering for the Lord. What great consolation the martyrs must have experienced in dying for the faith."

In short, he exemplified by word and deed what St. Paul said: "I desire to be annihilated so as to be glorified with my Lord."

God saw the great love that this little heart had for Him and to prevent the evil of the world from ruining him, He decided to call him to Himself; he

allowed an inordinate love of penance to a certain extent to be responsible for it.

## 27 Chapter 27. A badly chosen penance and the beginning of his illness

Francis had read in the life of Dominic Savio how once he had imprudently let the cold of winter set in without putting heavy blankets on his bed. Besucco decided to imitate him. He deemed that the order given to him to be warmly clothed applied only to the daytime, and that he was free to mortify himself in bed at night. He said nothing to anybody, took the woollen blankets issued to all the boys but, instead of putting them on his bed he folded them up and put them under his pillow. Things seemed to be all right until the early days of January, when one morning he was so benumbed with cold that he couldn't get up with the others. The Superiors were told that Besucco stayed in bed because he was ill, and the infirmarian was sent to see him and find out what he needed. When he arrived, he asked what was the matter.

"Nothing at all," Francis replied.

"If it is nothing, then why did you stay in bed?"

"Well I'm just a little off colour."

The infirmarian went to pull up his blankets and found that he was covered by only one summer blanket.

"Where are your winter blankets, Besucco?"

"Here under the pillow."

"Why did you do this?"

"No special reason when Jesus was on the cross he wasn't covered any better than I am."

It didn't take long to realise that Besucco was quite ill and he was transferred immediately to the infirmary. The doctor was called at once, he thought at first that the illness was not serious and diagnosed it as a simple cold.

But on the following day he noticed that instead of going away, the illness was causing inflammatory congestion in the stomach, and that it had taken a turn for the worse. The usual remedies were applied - laxatives, emetics, blood-letting and doses of various medicines, but nothing seemed to work.

One day he was asked why he had been so careless as not to cover himself sufficiently in bed. He replied: "I am sorry that this has displeased my superiors, I hope however that the Lord will accept my little penance in satisfaction for my sins."

“But what of the consequences of your imprudence?”

“I shall leave the consequences in the hands of the Lord. I am not interested in what the future holds out for my body provided everything turns out to the greater glory of God and to the advantage of my soul.”

## 28 Chapter 28. He is resigned to his illness - Edifying words

His illness lasted for eight days; for him it was an exercise, for his companions an example, in patience and Christian resignation. The illness hampered his breathing and this led to severe, continual headaches; he had to submit to further painful surgical treatment; they tried several drastic remedies. But nothing they did was able to alleviate the illness and it served only to highlight his admirable patience. He never gave any sign of resentment nor did he complain. If it was suggested that the medicine did not taste nice he would immediately reply:

“If it tasted sweet, it would be more pleasant in my mouth, but it is only right that I should do some penance for my greediness in the past.” Another time he was asked if he was suffering greatly.

“Yes, it is true that I am suffering a lot, but what is this compared to what I should suffer because of my sins? I should like to assure you, however, that I am quite happy; I had never thought that I would get so much pleasure from suffering for the love of the Lord.”

If anyone did something for him, he thanked him profusely, saying immediately:

“May the Lord reward you for your kindness towards me.” Not sure as to how to express his gratitude to the infirmarian, he said to him more than once:

“May the Lord reward you for me, and if I go to Heaven, I’ll pray with all my heart for you that the Lord will bless and help you.”

One day the infirmarian asked him whether he was afraid of dying.

“My dear infirmarian,” he replied “if the Lord wanted to take me to Paradise with him I should be very pleased to obey his call; however, I fear that I am not sufficiently prepared. But despite this I place hope in his infinite mercy and I recommend myself wholeheartedly to Mary Most Holy, to St. Aloysius Gonzaga and to Dominic Savio. I hope that with their protection, I shall have a happy death.”

On the fourth day of his illness, the doctor began to fear for the life of our Francis. Beginning to speak to him of this last moment, I said: “My

dear Francis, would you like to go to Heaven?"

"Can you imagine me not wanting to go to Heaven? But I have to earn it first."

"If you had a choice between being cured and going to Heaven, what would you choose?"

"These are two different things: to live for the Lord, or to die to go to the Lord. The first pleases me, and the second pleases me even more. But who can assure me of Heaven after the many sins I have committed?"

"In making such a proposal to you, I took it for granted that you are sure of going to Heaven. But, if you are assuming that you might go elsewhere, I only wish that you would forget about it."

"How then can I deserve Heaven?"

"You can lay claim to Heaven through the merits of the Passion and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ."

"Will I go to Heaven then?"

"Most surely, but when the Lord wants it."

He then looked at those present, rubbed his hands and joyfully exclaimed:

"It's a contract then: Heaven and nothing else; to Heaven and nowhere else. Don't speak to me of anything else, only Heaven."

"I am happy," I then told him, "that you show such a strong desire to go to Heaven, but I want you to be ready to do the holy will of God . . ."

He interrupted what I was saying with:

"Yes, yes, let the holy will of God be done in everything, both in Heaven and on earth."

On the fifth day of the illness he asked to receive the Sacraments. He wanted to make a general Confession: this was denied him. There was no need for it as he had made one a few months previously. However, he was deeply moved as he prepared for that last confession with very great fervour. After confession he appeared to be very happy and he said to the person who was assisting him:

"In the past I promised Our Lord a thousand times that I would not offend him anymore, but I did not keep my word. I have renewed this promise today and I hope to be faithful right up to my death."

That evening he was asked if he had any messages for any one.

"Yes," he told me, "tell everyone to pray that my time in purgatory may be short."

"What would you like me to tell your companions on your behalf?"

"Tell them to avoid scandal, and to always make good confessions."

"And to the clerics?"

“Tell the clerics to give the boys good example and good advice whenever it is needed.”

“And your Superiors?”

“Tell my superiors that I thank them for all their kindness towards me; tell them to keep working for the salvation of souls; and when I am in Heaven I shall pray to God for them.”

“And what have you to say to me?”

He was quite moved by these words, he looked at me straight in the eye and then replied:

"I ask you to help me to save my soul." For a long time I have prayer to the Lord that I may die in your arms. I ask you to carry out this work of charity and help me until the last moments of my life.

I assured him I would not abandon him whether he recovered or remained ill, and even more so if he found himself at the point of death. He was very happy after that and wanted only to receive the Holy Viaticum.

## **29 Chapter 29. He receives Viaticum - Other edifying words - Something he regrets**

On the sixth day of his illness (January 8), he asked to go to Holy Communion.

“How I would like to go to Communion with my companions in church,” he said “it is eight days since I last received my dear Jesus with them.” Whilst he was preparing to receive Communion he asked someone who was helping him the meaning of the word Viaticum.

“Viaticum,” came the reply “means help and a companion for the journey.”

“Oh, what wonderful help shall be mine, having with me the bread of Angels for the journey I am about to undertake.”

“Not only will you have this heavenly bread,” he was told “but you will have Jesus himself as your help and companion on the great journey you are preparing to make to eternity.”

“If Jesus is my friend and companion I have nothing to fear; on the other hand I have everything to hope for in his great mercy. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul.”

Then he made his preparation. He did not need help as he had his usual prayers which he recited one after the other. He received the Holy Host with those signs of piety which are better imagined than described.



After Communion he settled down to make his thanksgiving. When asked if he needed anything, he answered nothing other than: "Let us pray." After a long thanksgiving he turned to those standing by and asked them not to speak of anything to him except Heaven.

Then the Bursar of the House visited him, to his great delight.

"Oh, Father Savio," he said with a smile, "this time I'm going to Heaven."

"Courage now! Let us place both life and death in the hands of God; let us hope to go to Heaven but when God wants it."

"Father Savio, please pardon me for all the trouble I've given you; pray for me, and when I'm in Heaven I'll also pray to God for you."

Some time later when I saw that he was reasonably at ease, I asked him if he had any messages for his parish priest. This seemed to disturb him, "My parish priest," he answered "did a lot for me. He did his utmost to help me save my soul. Tell him that I have never forgotten his advice. I shall not have the pleasure of seeing him again in this world, but I hope to go to Heaven and I shall pray to the Blessed Virgin to help him keep all my companions on the right track and then one day I'll be able to see him and all his parishioners in Heaven."

He was choking with emotion as he finished speaking.

After he had rested I asked him if he wanted to see his relatives.

"It is not possible for me to see them," he answered "because they are too far away, they are poor and they can't afford to come here. And also, my father is working away from home. Tell them that I die resigned, cheerful and happy. Tell them to pray for me. I hope to go to Heaven. I'll wait for them all there. To my mother . . ." He could not go on.

Some hours later I asked him: "Have you by any chance a message for your mother?"

"Tell my mother that God has heard her prayer. Many times she told me: 'My dear Francis, I want you to live for a long time in this world but I would rather have you die a thousand times than see you become the enemy of God because of sin.' I hope that my sins have been forgiven and I hope I am the friend of God and that I shall soon go to enjoy Him for eternity. Bless my mother, O my God, give her courage to accept my death with resignation; give me the grace to see her and all the family in Heaven, where we shall enjoy your glory."

He wanted to go on talking, but I told him to be quiet and rest a while. He became worse on the evening of January 8 and it was decided to give him Extreme Unction. When asked if he wanted to receive this Sacrament he answered:

"Yes, with all my heart."

"Have you perhaps anything bothering your conscience?"

"Yes there is something that has been on my mind all my life, but I never imagined that it would give me so much sorrow at the point of death."

"What is it that is troubling you and causing remorse?"

"I have the deepest sorrow for not having loved God as much as he should have been loved in my life."

"Don't worry about that for in this world we can never love God to the extent that he deserves to be loved. We need only do our best; only in Heaven can we love him as he should be loved. There we shall see Him as He really is, we shall know him and enjoy his goodness, his glory and his love. How fortunate you are because shortly you're going to have this wonderful opportunity. But now prepare to receive Extreme Unction, which is the sacrament that wipes away the stain of sin and also gives us bodily health if this is good for the soul."

"I don't want to discuss the health of the body any more," he replied, "as for my sins, I ask forgiveness and I hope that they will be completely forgiven. I trust also that I shall obtain the remission of the punishment I must suffer for them in Purgatory."

### **30 Chapter 30. He receives the Holy Oils - His spontaneous prayers during this**

When everything had been prepared for the last sacrament that man receives in this mortal life, he wanted to say the Confiteor himself, along with the other prayers; and he said his own prayer at each anointing.

Father Alasonatti, Prefect of the house, was administering it to him. At the anointing of the eyes, our pious sick boy said: "O my God, pardon me for looking at things I should not have looked at and for reading things I should not have read." At the ears: "O my God, pardon me for all that I have listened to that was contrary to your holy law. Please grant that while being closed for ever to the world they may be opened to hear your voice calling me to enjoy your glory."

At the anointing of the nostrils.

"Pardon me, O Lord, for all the satisfaction I have taken in smelling things."

At the mouth:

"O my God, pardon me for my gluttony and for all the words which have offended you in one way or another. Grant that as soon as possible my tongue may sing your praises for all eternity."

At this point, the Prefect was quite overcome with emotion and said:

“What beautiful thoughts, how wonderful in a boy so young.”

Continuing with the administration of the Sacrament he anointed the hands, saying:

“By this holy anointing and by his most compassionate mercy, may God pardon you every sin committed by the sense of touch.”

The sick boy continued:

“O my great God, with the veil of your mercy and through the merits of the wounds in your hands cover and wipe out all the sins I have committed by my actions throughout my life.”

At the feet:

“Pardon, O Lord, the sins that I have committed with these feet, either by going where I should not have gone or by not going where my duties summoned me. May your mercy pardon all the sins I may have committed by thought, word, deed or omission.”

He was told more than once that it was sufficient to say these spontaneous prayers silently in his heart and that God did not ask for the great effort he was making to pray aloud. He was silent for a few moments but then continued in the same tone of voice as before. At the finish he seemed so tired and his pulse was so weak that we thought that he was about to draw his last breath. Shortly afterwards he recovered slightly and, in the presence of many people, he addressed these words to the Superior.

“I have prayed a lot to the Blessed Virgin so that I would die on a day dedicated to her and I hope I shall be heard. What else could I ask of the Lord?” In answer to his question he was told:

“Ask the Lord to grant you to do all your Purgatory in this world so that when you die your soul will go straight to Heaven.”

“Oh, yes,” he immediately replied, “I ask for this with all my heart. Please give me your blessing. I hope that the Lord will make me suffer in this world to the point that I have done all my purgatory and so, when my soul is separated from my body, it will fly straight to Heaven.”

It would seem that the Lord heard his prayer as he improved somewhat and his life was prolonged for about twenty-four hours.

## **31 Chapter 31. A marvellous fact - Two visits - His precious death**

Saturday, 9th January, was the last day on earth for our dear Besucco. He had perfect use of his senses and his reason throughout the day. He wanted

to pray all the time, but he was told not to as it tired him too much.

“Well, at least,” he said, “let someone near me do the praying and I shall repeat in my heart the words he says aloud.”

Just to please him it was necessary to have someone by his bed praying continuously. Amongst those who visited him that day there was a companion who was a bit troublesome.

“How are you Besucco?” he asked.

“My dear friend,” he replied, “I am at the end of my life. Pray for me in these my last moments. But remember that one day you too will find yourself in a similar state. Oh, how happy you will be if you have been good! But, if you don’t change your way of life, how sorry you are going to be at the moment of death!” His companion began to cry and from that moment onwards thoughts more about his soul; today he is still one of the good boys.

At ten in the evening he was visited by Lieutenant Eysautier and his wife. The Lieutenant had had a hand in Francis’ admission to the Oratory and he had helped him considerably. Besucco was very happy to see them and he showed lively signs of gratitude. This courageous man was greatly edified when he saw the happiness in the boy’s face, also the signs of devotion which he demonstrated and the assistance he was getting, and he said:

“Dying like this is a real pleasure, and I would like to find myself in a similar state.”

Then he turned to the dying boy and said:

“Dear Francis, when you get to Heaven pray for me and for my wife . . .” But he was overcome with emotion and could not continue; he departed after giving the sick boy a final wave of his hand.

About half past ten it seemed that Francis had only a few more minutes to live. He moved his hands from under the blankets and tried to lift them up. I took them and joined them together on top of the bed.

He separated them and lifted them up again. He was smiling and his eyes were fixed as if gazing at something he liked. Thinking that perhaps he wanted a crucifix, I put one in his hands. He took it, kissed it, and put it on the bed, and straightaway lifted up his arms again in an outburst of joy. His face appeared to be stronger and to have more colour in it than when he had been healthy. Its beauty and radiance was such that it eclipsed the infirmary lights. The ten bystanders were dumb-founded and their astonishment grew when the dying boy 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, Oh you faithful tongues; let your harmony resound in the heavens.”

Afterwards he made several efforts to lift himself up and devoutly stretching out his hands, he began to sing again:

“Oh Jesus, on fire with love, would that I had never offended you. Oh my dear good Jesus, I do not want to offend you any more.”

Without interruption he intoned the hymn:

Pardon, dear Jesus,  
Mercy, my God,  
Before sinning again I want to die.

We all listened in stunned silence. Our eyes were riveted on Francis who seemed to have become an Angel with the Angels in Paradise. To break the tension the director said: "I believe that at this moment our Besucco is receiving some extraordinary grace from the Lord and his heavenly Mother, to whom he has been so devoted during his life. Perhaps she has come to take his soul to Heaven.”

We were all further astonished as Besucco continued to sing, but his words were all truncated as if he were answering questions. I was only able to catch these phrases:

“King of Heaven ... so beautiful ... I am a poor sinner ... I give you my heart ... Give me your love ... My dear good Lord ...”

Then he fell back on the bed without a sign of life. But when he realised that no one was praying and no one was suggesting spontaneous prayers to him he immediately turned to me and said:

“Help me. Let us pray. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, assist me in this my agony. Jesus, Mary and Joseph may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you.” I suggested to him that he rest, but without paying any attention to me he continued:

“Jesus in my mind, Jesus in my mouth, Jesus and Mary I give you my soul.”

It was eleven o'clock when he wanted to speak again, but he could say only two words:

“The Crucifix.” He asked to be blessed with the crucifix to gain the plenary indulgence at the moment of death, something he had often asked for and that I had promised him.

When he had given this blessing the Prefect began reading the Depart, Christian soul whilst the others prayed on their knees. At eleven fifteen

Besucco looked intently at me, and tried to smile; then he raised his eyes heavenward indicating that he was departing. A few moments later his soul left his body and flew gloriously, so we fondly hope to enjoy heavenly glory in the company of those who have served God by the innocence of their life in this world and who are now enjoying him and blessing him in Heaven.

## 32 Chapter 32. Suffrages and upset

One cannot describe the grief and sorrow caused throughout the whole house by the loss of such a dear friend. Many prayers were said there and then around the bedside. Next morning the news spread amongst his companions, who gathered in the Church to find some comfort in their sorrow and also to pay a tribute to their dead friend. They prayed for the repose of his soul, if indeed he still had need of prayers. Many went to Communion for this purpose. The Rosary, the office, prayers in common, and in private, Communions, Mass, in short, all the practices of piety which took place in our Church on that Sunday were directed to God for the eternal repose of the soul of our good Francis.

Something rather unusual happened that day. His features became so handsome and his face took on such a healthy glow that in no way did he seem to be dead. As a matter of fact he had never seemed so extraordinarily good-looking even when he was in good health. His own companions far from displaying the morbid fear boys generally have for the dead were eager to go to see him and they all said that he really looked like an angel from Heaven. That is why in the portrait drawn after his death he looks better than when alive.

Then, those who spotted objects connected in some way or other with Besucco vied with one another to get them and to keep them as remembrances of him. It was commonly voiced about that he had gone straight to Heaven. Some said that he did not have any need of our prayers for he is already enjoying the glory of Heaven here and now.

“For sure,” added another boy, “he is certainly enjoying the sight of God and praying for us.”

“I believe,” stated a third boy, “that Besucco already enjoys a throne of glory in Heaven and that he is invoking divine blessings on his companions and friends.”

On the following day, January 11th, Mass was sung by his companions here in the Church at the Oratory. Many went to Communion as always for the greater glory of God, and also to pray for the eternal repose of the soul

of Francis, if indeed he still had need of prayers. After the Mass the boys escorted the coffin to the parish church and then to the cemetery.

Francis was buried in grave number 147 in the fourth row on the western side.

### **33 Chapter 33. Commotion in Argentera and veneration of young Besucco**

The virtues which had shone forth in this young boy for the space of about fourteen years at Argentera appeared even more resplendent when he died and when news arrived of his holy death. Fr Francis Pepino sent me a moving account of what occurred there; it possesses something of the supernatural. I shall keep the full story for a more opportune time but I'll give a few excerpts here.

Father Pepino writes:

When news of the serious illness of Francis arrived there were public prayers with a sung Mass, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and prayers for the sick. The news of his death reached us on the evening of January 13 and it quickly spread. In less than an hour Francis was being presented by most of the parents as an example to their respective children. I cannot say enough about the sorrow of the parents and the benefactors of this dear boy, who always pleased everybody with his exemplary conduct and who never offended anyone. Mary, the younger sister of Francis, clearly told me of his death on January 10th. She told me that at about midnight of the previous night, when she was in bed with her mother, she heard a loud noise in the upstairs room where Francis used to sleep. She clearly heard a handful of sand fall on the floor, and fearing that the noise would make her mother suspect that Francis was dead, she began speaking to her in a loud voice - something this girl did not usually do. Several other people, convinced of his holiness, prayed to him for favours and obtained what they sought.

I don't want to discuss what I have just quoted; I intend only to be factual and to leave whatever inferences can be drawn from these facts to the judgement of my readers. Here are a few more excerpts from the source previously quoted.

During February a two year-old boy was in danger of death. The parents considered the case hopeless and turned to our Besucco, whose virtues were being proclaimed by everyone. They promised furthermore that if the boy were cured they would promote the practice of the Stations of the Cross in imitation of Francis. The boy recovered quickly and is now in perfect health. A few days ago I myself recommended to the prayers of our dear boy the father of a family who was seriously ill. At the same time I also recommended him to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament to whose honour and glory this man had consecrated himself as a cantor. I am not giving the names of these people simply to save them from any undue criticism. The sick man showed immediate improvement and within a few days appeared perfectly cured.

Anna, Francis' oldest sister, was married in March. She was later troubled with an affliction which gave her no peace, day or night. In a moment of greater pain she called out: My dear little Francis, help me in my need, obtain some rest for me. No sooner said than done. From that night on she began to sleep peacefully and she has continued to do so. O Encouraged by the success of her prayer Anna again turned to Francis for help at a time when her life was in great danger, and again her every wish was granted.

Whilst, for the greater glory of God, I have collected accounts of what happened to others, I must not omit telling you that I used to recommend myself to the prayers of my godson when he was alive and I continued to do so with greater faith after his death. As a result of my faith I have obtained favours at different times.

## 34 Chapter 34. Conclusion

I have come to the end of the life of Francis Besucco. I would like to have said much more about this virtuous boy, but, since this could be the cause of certain criticism from those who do not recognise the wonders of the Lord in his servants, I shall await a more opportune time to publish them, if the divine goodness allows me to live long enough.

Meanwhile, my dear readers, before I finish writing, I would like both of us to come to a conclusion which will be to our mutual advantage. It is certain that sooner or later death will come for both of us, and it is possible that it will come sooner than we think. It is equally certain that if we don't perform good works during our life we won't be able to reap their fruit at the point of death, nor we can we expect any reward from God. Now since Divine Providence gives us time to prepare for this last moment, let us occupy this



time in good works and so be assured that we shall collect the reward we merit at the appropriate time. We can expect to find people who will laugh at us because we practice our religion. Don't pay any attention to them. . . Who ever listens to them acts wrongly and betrays himself. If we want to be wise before the face of God, we must not be afraid of appearing stupid before the world, because Jesus Christ assures us that the wisdom of the world is foolishness in the eyes of God. Only the continuous practice of our religion can make us happy in time and in eternity. Anyone who does not work in summer has no right to enjoyment during winter, and anyone who does not practice virtue during his life cannot expect any reward after death.

I encourage you, Christian reader, I encourage you to perform good works whilst we have time; our sufferings are of short duration and what we shall enjoy lasts forever. I call down the divine blessings upon you, and in your turn please pray to the Lord God to have mercy on my soul, so that after having spoken about virtue, about the method of practicing it, and about the great reward that God has prepared in the next life for those who practice it. I may not suffer the terrible misfortune of neglecting to do it myself with irreparable harm to my own salvation. O Lord, help me, help me to persevere in the observance of your precepts during the days of my life so that we can one day go to Heaven to enjoy great happiness for ever and ever. Amen.