

VARIA 4

**The Sacerdotal Spirit of
St. John Bosco**

BY
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A Lecture delivered to the Directors
of the Salesian Co-operators
of Lazio in 1928



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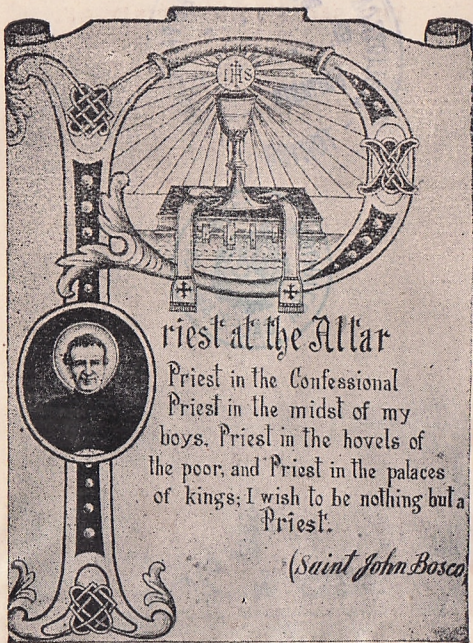


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Priest at the Altar

Priest in the Confessional
Priest in the midst of my
boys. Priest in the hovels of
the poor, and Priest in the palaces
of kings; I wish to be nothing but a
Priest.

(Saint John Bosco)

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THE SACERDOTAL SPIRIT OF
ST. JOHN BOSCO.

FROM THE LECTURE DELIVERED BY
DR. EUGENE CERIA S.C.,

*to the Directors of the Salesian
Co-operators of Lazio in 1928*

1. I have been asked to address you on Don Bosco's Sacerdotal spirit. Putting it like that though provokes the objection, "Had Don Bosco then a sacerdotal spirit of his own?" It would be absurd to suppose it. The only Priest and the Eternal Priest is Jesus Christ. We are priests, it is true, *but pro Christo legatione fungimur*. We are Christ's ambassadors. (Cor. V. 20.) No priest has a right to claim a sacerdotal spirit of his own making. Every priest has the strict duty of assuming as far as lies in his power the spirit of the only Priest, a spirit which he is bound to develop in the exercise of his sacred ministry. Particularly

here *sufficit discipulo ut sit sicut magister eius*...enough that a disciple should fare like his master. (Matt X, 25.)

Let us look at it in another way. What kind of sacerdotal spirit was Don Bosco's?

In 1886 political passions in Italy were keeping a hundred and eight Episcopal Sees vacant. The Government was casting around for a compromise. The Prime-Minister, Bettino Ricasoli, called Don Bosco to Florence to use him as a kind of semi-official arbiter between the Government and Pius IX. In those sad times Don Bosco could not remain standing by with his arms folded and he did go to Florence. He made his way to the Palazzo Pitti and presenting himself to the Minister, he said literally: *Your Excellency, be it known to you that Don Bosco is a priest at the altar, a priest in the confessional, a priest among his boys; and as he is a priest in Turin, so he is a priest in Flor-*

ence: a priest in the houses of the poor, a priest in the palaces of Kings and Ministers.

2. Priest.....priest.....priest..... full seven times the word resounds; Don Bosco usually spoke slowly with a sweet gravity weighing every word. He never accompanied his words with lively gestures and never used strong and over-animated expressions. How well would he calm the excitement of anyone who lost his head. In this way he must have spoken then as well, and what an impression must those seven ringing words have had on the mind of the Minister. Had the minister shown any sign of bewilderment, Don Bosco would have dispelled it by telling him what he had told others: *My way of speaking sounds new to you, because Your Excellency has never had an opportunity of speaking with the Catholic Priest.*

After all Don Bosco had only said in a rather novel way what he must have said often. A priest is always a

priest and he must show himself a priest everywhere. Now to be a priest for Don Bosco meant what it means for all priests. *Da mihi animas caetera tolle* as he wrote on the Salesian Coat of Arms. He made this maxim a rule from the day of his ordination, to work and humble himself everywhere and always whenever the salvation of a soul was in question. He chiselled it deeper in his mind as the years went on. For instance, six years after his first Mass he wrote that saying of St. Chrysostom among his Spiritual Retreat Souvenirs...*The priest is the soldier of Christ*...quite so. The soldier too, is always a soldier, that is, he is always "on service". So now, let us see Don Bosco's "Priestcraft" in practice.

3. A PRIEST AT THE ALTAR

The priest is essentially the minister of the altar, *altari deserviunt*... they do the temple's work. (Cor, IX 13.) It is within the precincts of the sanctuary that the Divine Worship

takes place. The Divine Sacrifice is offered on the altar and Divine Worship, notes his biographer Don Lemoyne, was "the breath of Don Bosco's soul". Though poor, he built sumptuous churches. He exacted neatness and decorum on the sanctuary, propriety and order in the sacred vessels and vestments. He was scrupulous in following liturgical prescriptions and exacted diligence in the holy ceremonies and the utmost accuracy in the chant of sacred music. He taught and made others teach boys how to serve Mass.

With what faith too did Don Bosco look upon the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass! He showed it before, during and after celebrating.

Before Mass. See him coming down to say Mass. He makes his way steadily to the sacristy acknowledging greetings with a smile, allowing them to kiss his hand, but never breaking silence. He is fully taken up with the action he is about to perform. In the sacristy he prepares himself composedly.

During Mass.....recollected, devout, exact. He uttered the words clearly and unaffectedly and generally never took more than half-an-hour. He used to carry the *Rubricae Missalis* about with him to read them from time to time. That precious little booklet, quite worn out by use, is still preserved. The example of the father had its influence on his sons. The Marquis Scarampi used to voice his impressions in these words, "I like going to the Oratory for Mass because Don Bosco's young priests say Mass like old priests, whereas in other churches old priests can be seen saying Mass with the impulsiveness of youth."

The custom of priests serving one another's Mass during the Spiritual Retreat to find out any defects was introduced by him and is still in force among his sons.

○ *After Mass*: Only evident reasons of charity compelled him to shorten his thanksgiving. A telling incident has been recorded by his biographer. ○ It

happened on the day of the consecration of the shrine of Mary, Help of Christians. There was much ado in the Oratory, big people to look after, celebrities coming and going. At the end of that lengthy ceremony, Don Bosco said the first Mass at Our Lady's Altar. The hour was late and Fr. Lemoyne, who served the Mass, records that he came back to the sacristy *after a long thanksgiving.*

At Frohsdorf in 1883, he was the guest of Count Chambord who was seriously ill. He had travelled two nights. After a short visit to the august patient, he went to say Mass in the Count's private chapel. The prince waited eagerly to have him by his bedside. When Don Bosco had finished Mass and was told about it, he nodded understandingly but did not interrupt his thanks giving. A second envoy arrived. Don Bosco nodded again and went on praying. The Count Du Bourg impatient for his master's sake used to comment later, "Well,

everything comes to an end in this world, even Don Bosco's prayers."

4. A PRIEST IN THE CONFESSIONAL

Don Bosco had added this. Of course here we would need a volume. There is indeed a booklet on "Don Bosco, Friend of Souls" written by Don Francesia. It is a veritable mine of details and episodes, but rather than a complete story, it is just a gleaning of personal remembrances and in consequence, merly a good contribution to the story of Don Bosco as a confessor. The conscientious biographer so often quoted, states, "Don Bosco's every phrase was an invitation to confession" hyperbole perhaps, but would that all hyperboles were as justified as this in the present case. We are God's assistants (1 Cor. III, 9.) in the saving of souls—especially in hearing confessions. *Dei adjutores sumus*. A man who had no other driving power in all his holy enterprises save an insatiable thirst for

souls, could not naturally grow tired of hearing confessions. Authorised by Pope Pius IX to confess *quocumque Ecclesiae loco* he heard confessions in churches, houses, hospitals, jails, in coaches and buses, in the street and in fields, in a word, everywhere. But conscious of having been sent by Providence for youth, he spared neither time, nor strength, nor sacrifice hearing the confessions of boys. "In doing so," Cardinal Cagliero attests in the process, "Don Bosco set a rare example of constancy, sacrifice and patience...he worked like a martyr and deserved the palm of martyrdom, for, in the saying of St. Francis of Sales, one can be a martyr confessing God before men and confessing men before God. The diary of the last two months of his life on this earth records an incident that could be called the last canto of an epic. "That evening," it tells us, "some thirty boys of the higher forms went up to his room to make their confessions. Though told that it would not be convenient to see

Don Bosco then, as he was exhausted, they did not go away.....Don Bosco being informed acknowledged that he could not stand the strain but exclaimed several times, "Still, this is the last time I can hear their confessions. Let them come."

The apostle of confession distinguished himself also by his disposition in confessional. He was brief, never hasty, benevolent to the extreme. These are the words of Cardinal Cagliero who was his penitent for many years. Those still living from among that fortunate number who had the happiness of making their confession to him, remember the efficacy and unction of his advice.

5. A PRIEST AMONGST HIS BOYS.

So we had given a first instance as to how Don Bosco was a priest amongst his boys. He loved them. "It is enough for me to know that you are young, in order to love you," he says in the introduction to the *Giovane*

Provveduto. But, he loved them as a priest. "It would be difficult to find one who has a greater love for you in in Jesus Christ." And he proved it by not sparing himself in hardships; sorrows and sacrifices of every kind for the spiritual welfare of their souls and of course he treated them as a priest ought. One of the maxims so often preached and practised by him goes like this: "See to it that no boy goes away from us displeased." He spoke to them as a priest: "*Monita salutis dabat eis* (Tobias 1,15). This is the gist of all his public and private talks to boys. His first word to every pupil who came to the Oratory was the "salvation of your soul," and that was the last word when the boy left. And when they met again that was the inevitable word.

And what about his magic "words in the ear?" You can find a handsome bouquet of them in the *Memoria Biografiche*.

Lastly he educated them as a priest should. He brought to education the

preventive system by modernizing it and basing it totally "on reason, religion and affection." From the day his mind reached the age of reason until his death, Don Bosco was an angel of God among his boys.

6. A PRIEST IN TURIN IN FLORENCE, EVERYWHERE.

Don Bosco professes himself a priest in Turin, a priest in Florence ; that is to say wherever he goes, he goes as God's Minister *ad dandam salutis plebis eius* (Luke 1, 77). The principles that informed his actions and words wherever he was called by his priestly zeal by social obligations are exemplified in that souvenir he gave to the future Mgr. Spandre, Bishop of Austi. When he was still, a young boy he was about to leave the oratory for the diocesan Seminary: "*Quære lucrum animarum non quæstum pecuniarum*". They equally shine in the direction given to his first missionaries: "Seek for souls, and not money honour or dignity."

Let us now look at Don Bosco in his apostolic ramblings. He preached much and in many places. The devil of rhetoric and eloquence did not keep idle in his regard also. He does not conceal it himself in his unedited *memoirs*. His exceptional talents for thorough studies stood in the way at the beginning and no wonder: "Oh that human eagerness for show! But *caritas Christi* (Cor. 2-5, 14), that sacerdotal love for souls held a tighter grip on God's faithful minister than any other temptation. He possessed a great efficacy of word in a very high degree but he would humbly prepare before preaching. He warns us that: "The most effective sermon is the best prepared sermon." He would humbly pray before ascending the pulpit. Whereas he used to go to confession every week when in Turin, and when he was preaching he would go often to the tribunal of Penance. That had nothing to do with scruples; but rather the greater fruits of grace he expected the more he wanted to please God.

7. PRIEST IN THE PULPIT.

Naturally, such dispositions begot great simplicity in subject and language. He went to Rome some 20 times and as long as health allowed him his sermons were countless. The Jesuit Father Angelina exclaimed once after having heard one of his sermons : "How much unction and truth in so few words."

Verbum Dei non est alligatum (II. Timothy, 2, 9). "There is no imprisonment in the word of God." Somebody wrote after a speech he made in Rome (in the church of St. Augustine) before a numerous aristocratic audience : "He upbraided them well and nobody complained : rather all were satisfied. "God speaks through his mouth," people said.

Those dispositions were again responsible for the fact that the usual topics of his sermons were Confession, Sin and the Last Things, no matter where the place and who the audience. Once he was invited to preach the

panegyric on the patron feast of a certain illustrious convent of Nuns. The church was packed with important people and noble dames. There was breath-holding expectation. But Don Bosco somehow or other dexterously managed to turn his speech round to the necessity of striving after perfection and of saving one's soul by means of good confessions. *Si quis loquitur quasi sermones Dei*, "If one of you preaches let him remember that it is God's message he is uttering." (Peter, 4, 11).

He travelled widely on business but as he was filled with the thought of God and Eternity he was *salt and light* (Matthew 5,13). In other words he was no less a priest in ordinary intercourse and conversation than he was on the pulpit. Marvellously did the Marquis of Villeneuve strike home when he once said at Marseilles in front of an aristocratic audience: *Don Bosco preche toujours*. "Don Bosco is always preaching."

8. A PRIEST AMONG THE POOR

At 70 Don Bosco used to be moved to tears whenever he recalled to mind the lesson his mother gave him when he was a poor student. The gist of it was a real threat: "When you are a priest should you by misfortune become rich I will never pay you a single visit, remember it well." And he did remember it. He considered himself an administrator, never a master of all the treasures that Providence sent him. Deeply steeped he was in the spirit of the first evangelical beatitude he always saw in the poor his sharers in heaven as the Lord appointed them to be (Mathew 5,3). When he was the guest of the Bishop of Pinerolo he was left alone one day in the palace and invited the gardener and the butler to lunch. Humbly they tried to refuse but, "Nothing doing", he said, "You don't want to sit with me at table! Are we not going to be together in heaven for all eternity?"

Like Jesus he had a predilection for the poor and like his Divine Master he

picked his disciples from the children of the people. Who does not know that to say the word "Don Bosco" and poor youth are synonymous? How touching was it to see him enter the houses of poor people with his hat in his hand! After stating that no one in need who appealed to him was sent away without help, the biographer concludes with a happy expression: "Poor as he was, Don Bosco was as generous as a king." The Messiah quoted amongst the other distinguishing marks of his Divine Mission that of *pauperis evangelizantur*. A priest is a priest also in so much as he reproduces the divine model in the *evangelizare pauperibus*: preaching the gospel to the poor". (Luke 4,18).

9. A PRIEST WITH THE GREAT

I am changing Don Bosco's phrase slightly following his reference to the poor in order to include that kind of people he must have had in mind without mentioning. He could not specify all. "With the poor and with Kings". Assuredly he speaks about sovereigns

and working folk but we cannot leave out the learned and the rich under penalty of omitting those with whom Don Bosco held intimate intercourse and Don Bosco would certainly not approve of the omission.

He knocked ceaselessly at the rich man's door, and from the rich he got plenty. His gratitude was profound, but it was a priest's gratitude; it never smacked of servility. He began from the principle. "When we beg from the rich we do them a great charity by helping them to keep the Lord's command...*quod superest, date eleemosynam...* You should give alms out of the store you have. (Luke XI. 41.)

10. A PRIEST WITH THE LEARNED

And if he was not obsequious to the rich he did not feel at all awkward with the learned. He was conscious of his Priesthood, and after all, had they not souls to save also? We are filled with admiration when we read his conversation with the seventy-year-old Count.

Cibrario. Count Cibrario was an historian of certain renown and had been once upon a time, Secretary of State. Don Bosco went so far as to tell him, "My dear Count, you know I have a great affection and esteem for you. Well! then, if you yourself admit that your life cannot last much longer, remember that you have some accounts to settle with our Holy Mother the Church before you die." On another occasion he induced Paul Bert, French Minister for Education under Gambetta, to undertake an immediate revision of a particular moral text-book of his which had raised quite a storm of controversy in those days.

11. A PRIEST WITH AUTHORITIES AND KINGS

In his relations with those invested with authority Don Bosco never belied his mission. He was not a man to leave his apostolic frankness with his hat in the hall, and he did not mollify it in the slightest just to suit the company. Of course he obeyed that other

not less apostolic injunction...*Reddite omnibus debita...cui honorem, honorem* Pay every man his due.....respect and honour if it be respect and honour. (Rom. XIII, 7.) Consequently he would never speak disparagingly of rulers and always wanted his children to respect the constituted authority. Though times were extremely critical, he always remained the priest.

One example—The Minister Ratazzi consulted him one day as to whether he had incurred excommunication on account of the harm he had done the church. Don Bosco asked for three days to think it over and came back on the third day with his answer: "Your Excellency, I have been pondering over your query. I have studied it and tried my best to find a way out to be able to say that Your excellency has not incurred any censure, but I am sorry to say I have not succeeded." In 1874 at Rome, he made this confidence to his secretary coming out from the minister Villian's Office: "I let him know some salutary home truths."

The anecdote from Lanzo is worth a hundred. The Salesian College there was chosen as a rendezvous where to serve refreshments to the authorities who came up for the inauguration of the Railway. The Minister with other senators and members of the Parliament were present. Don Bosco went to Lanzo in order, as he put it, to save the Rector of the house from any embarrassment. Little by little he became the king (centre) of the feast, masterfully turning the small talk of these gentlemen to salutary reflections. Sometime afterwards, commenting on the happenings of that day he remarked: "I do believe that it was a long time since they heard so many sermons. They are to be pitied too; they never hear a truth coated with such sweetness as not to irritate them or a word springing from a sincere heart."

In the statement we are commenting upon there is mentioned of a king. The word is not a mere expletive or just put there for the sake of emphasis and priestly liberty. And what about the

repeated admonitions addressed to King Victor Emmanuel II? They did annoy him and made him think; but notwithstanding, this he once confessed to Mgr. Charvaz, Bishop of Gensà:—"You know, my Lord? Don Bosco is really a Saint." *Rem acut tigit*. He struck home indeed: that sanctity was the secret of all. *Veritas odium parit*: truth engenders hatred, but not when it is seasoned with true sacerdotal charity: then it is that truth of the gospel that sets us free (John. VIII, 32).

12. A PRIEST IN HIS WRITINGS

Don Bosco was a priest in everything. He never posed as a writer, but he did write a good many books and he wrote them for the sole purpose of doing good to souls. The critical edition of his *Opera omnia* is at present well under way. In the last three years three big volumes have been published. The ensemble of so many publications—not less than a hundred—will demonstrate

that he never wrote a line that was not intended to promote Faith and Christian life. Commenting on his *Storia Ecclesiastica*, Don Bosco set out a rule of his that is the clue of the literary standards he closely followed: "I do not write for scholars and the learned" he said, "but for the people and for youth. If by narrating some less decorous happenning or controverted fact I were to trouble the faith of a simple soul would not that be like inducing it to error? If I expose an unworthy member of a Congregation in front of a reader, do I not implicate the whole community and is this not a tactical error? Only those who can scan the history of 2,000 years can see that the faults of a most eminent figure cannot tarnish the sanctity of the Church but rather stands as a proof of her divinity..... Disastrous impressions brought about in early years by imprudent words have often caused havoc to faith and morals." "Morals" Don Bosco said. Indeed the moral sensibility of St. John

Bosco where youth was concerned especially trembled at the lightest cause. All his works reflect limpidly his sacerdotal delicacy wherever the "beautiful virtue"—as he called it was concerned.

13. A PRIEST WITH THE POPE

Don Bosco was a priest with his superiors and fellow priests. He was a priest with the Pope. He had laid down this programme for himself "entirely with the Pope, for the Pope, for love of the Pope." And there were many applications of this programme, for instance, he used to say: "When you come across an author who does not write well about the Pope, know that that book should not be read." Somebody questioned him once, "What about the recent annexation of the Roman Provinces?" That was a sore point that kept even members of the clergy divided. Don Bosco answered. "As a citizen, I am prepared to defend my country even at the cost of my life, but as a Christian, and a Priest I will

never acquiesce to all that." Mgr. Manacorda, Bishop of Forsano, who knew him well could say of him in his funeral oration: "Nobody ever heard a phrase that was not prompted by a childlike docility, regarding the Pope. At his death Don Bosco confided to Mgr. Cagliero: "Tell the Pope what I have kept a secret until now. The Salesian Congregation and the Salesians have as their special aim to uphold the authority of the Holy See always and everywhere." A dying echo of Don Bosco's feelings on this subject was gathered by Card. Alimonda: "Hard times, Your Eminence! I have gone through hard times!...but the authority of the Pope....!"

14. A PRIEST WITH THE HIERARCHY

He venerated the Bishops, the plentitude of the priesthood. The Archbishop of Turin, Mgr. Franzoni, during his imprisonment and exile, The Bishop of Fermo, the Cardinal D'Angelis and the Bishop of Guastalla, Mgr. Rotta,

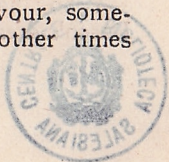
once confined by the Government in Turin, had sublime proofs of Don Bosco's devotion to Bishops. To have a Bishop in the Oratory was a great joy for Don Bosco. He used to announce his arrival. He would wait for him at the entrance and present him to the boys with his biretta in his hand. In the decree about the heroicity of his virtues we can detect a veiled allusion to the difficulties that took place between Don Bosco and the Archbishop Gastaldi. The full story of that long and most regrettable incident has not yet been made public. * Those who will read it entire will have a tangible proof as to what lengths Don Bosco under such impossible conditions could go when it was a question of behaving as a priest towards his Bishop.

* This lecture was given by Fr. Ceria in the year 1928. Since then the life written by Gard. Salotti and later on the *Memorie Biografiche* have given a full account of this regrettable Calvary that purified Don Bosco's heart at the climax of his work.

15. A PRIEST WITH PRIESTS

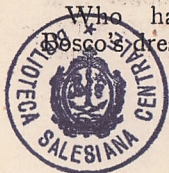
The sacerdotal character that Don Bosco respected in his own person was an object of reverence for him in others. Every priest that knocked at the door of the Oratory was sure of a cordial reception; but Don Bosco did not forget even among priests that he was a priest for them as well; indeed, he never lost sight of their souls:—"A PRIEST" he would used to say "must work for the salvation of souls but more than any one else he must think of saving his own." For priests he had a constant respect. Therefore he used to greet them with his usual "*salve, salvando, salvati.*"

He paid parish priests great deference according to the high idea he had about the parochial ministry. The deference eventually became embodied in the tradition of his houses. It was severe blow for Don Bosco to hear of any priest's misconduct but he would not exhaust himself in useless lamentations. Far from that, he would endeavour, sometimes of his own accord, at other times



at the request of Bishops taking things over with them with respectful charity to rehabilitate them by exhortation, by engaging in long conferences and giving them financial help. A good number were restored in this way to the sacerdotal honour. What can we say about his zeal for raising up new priests? In the field of ecclesiastical vocations his merits direct or indirect bordered on the incredible. History has not yet supplied exhaustive evidence in this regard. When Don Bosco foresaw how disastrously political upheavals would affect the clergy, he set about increasing the number of disciples of the sanctuary with all his might. He spared neither expense nor hardship. Even if it had been a case, as often happens, of "raising up children to Abraham out of the very stones." Initiatives that later on grew in the Church are but the blossoming of seeds sown by Don Bosco.

Who has not heard about Don Bosco's dreams? Well, some times he



had some curious ones. Once for instance, he saw Garibaldi going about shooting crows in a forest. Whatever it was for some queer reason or other the redoubtable hunter stopped shooting and looked about for game, when to his astonishment he found that at his very feet and all around, as far and as wide as he could see, numberless mushrooms were shooting up capped with a priest's hat.*

Here our review must end. Don Bosco, a model and glory of the Catholic Clergy, was what he was an account of his being a real priest: a priest in his spirit, a priest in the whole of his life. That will always be the case for every priest if it all could be said, as was said of Don Bosco "LUCERNA EIUS EST AGNUS" (Apoc. XXI. 23).

* This incident is not recorded by Lemoyne. The writer nevertheless got it in 1886 from the lips of the then missionary and later Bishop Aloysius Lassagna who heard it.

Permissu Superiorum.



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*The incident is not recorded in the
The writer's notebook for the 1938-1939
the list of the then relations and later
Theop. Aloysius Loring who lived in

Examiners' Supervisor

