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Jesus and Mary

DON BOSCO FINDS MARY IN THE CHURCH

by
JOHN AYERS, S.D.B.

A Don Bosco *Pamphlet* Publication
New Rochelle, New York

Don Bosco Finds Mary
in the Church

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FOREWORD

This study, from the pen of Father John Ayers, S.D.B., was written for the Newsletter of the Australian Salesian Province of Mary Help of Christians.

It was a response to the Rector-Major's appeal that we reactivate our devotion to Mary Help of Christians as a positive step on the road to renewal.

In the introduction to the Acts of the 21st General Chapter, the Rector-Major, Father Egidio Vigano, wrote:

"I want to draw your attention here to what I call a strategic element: the reactivation of the Marian aspect of our vocation; she will ensure a climate which will render our efforts efficacious. A doctrinal and cultural revival of devotion to Mary, Help of Christians, designed to insert the Salesian Family actively into the Marian movement of the present day, will enable us (even 'miraculously' as Don Bosco assures us) to realise a new flourishing of vocations, and the courage and clear thinking that we need so much today in the fight for the faith."

May this study make us all a little more aware of the Marian heritage we have received from our Founder and may our efforts to renew our Marian devotion bring many vocations to the Salesian Family in this land dedicated to her under the title of Help of Christians.

Father W.L. Cornell, S.D.B., Provincial

Don Bosco Finds Mary
in the Church

PART ONE

Don Bosco Finds Mary in the Church

Two enigmatic remarks on Mary Help of Christians, one by Don Bosco and the other by Father Philip Rinaldi, throw light on our Salesian Marian heritage. They set this fundamental devotion in the ecclesial and educational context which was originally intended by our Founder as the Salesian ambient.

In 1885, on a visit to St. Sulpice in Paris, Don Bosco came out with this remarkable observation that puzzled the congregation: "I am delighted to learn that Pope Pius VII, of happy memory, also came to visit this church. Such a recollection pleases me, since Pius VII is the very Salesian par excellence."

In turn, in his conferences at Foglizzo in 1914, Father Rinaldi startled the students by a quote that many at the time saw as pure rhetoric. "Mary Help of Christians is the Salesian Congregation.... Without her we cannot understand our spirit or educational system."

In this first part we shall try to trace the ecclesial genesis of Don Bosco's charismatic Marian devotion, before presenting a subsequent article dealing with Mary as the living embodiment of the Salesian Spirit and of the Preventive System.

Genesis of Don Bosco's Devotion

Among Don Bosco's unpublished writings in the Salesian archives is a poem he wrote in 1835 as a twenty-one-year-old seminarian, entitled "On the Firmness of Pius VII Oppressed by Napoleon."

"Dukes and Kings
Flee before him,
Pale with fright.
Cities, kingdoms
Crushed and humbled
By cruel oppressor.
Pius alone stands firm:
Pius, the just man

Whom Heaven protects,
Will kneel to Christ alone,
Master and Giver of the Law.
By prayer he conquers.
The believing Church
Now hymns his triumph,
The triumph of all history."

(Translated from Father Peter Broccardo's Footnote)

While there is no explicit reference to Mary's help in this youthful poem, the very choice of theme and the references implied in "heaven protects . . . by prayer he conquers . . . the triumph of all history" are very significant.

A contemporary historian wrote that "Pius VII was to become a folk hero in Piedmont, especially among the youth, for his intrepid stand against Napoleon," an admiration not lost on the young seminarian who would come to regard him "as the very Salesian par excellence."

Father John Baptist Lemoyne recalls how, even in his own youth, "there was hardly a house in Piedmont where there was not a picture of Pius VII, who was considered a quasi-martyr." In 1815, the year following his triumphant return from imprisonment at Fontainebleau, the Pontiff had gone to Savona to crown the Madonna of Mercy in gratitude for his liberation, exclaiming in the presence of King Charles Emmanuel I, "She is, indeed, the Help of Christians."

From Genoa on May 19th, Pius VII stopped unexpectedly at Turin, to the rapture of a huge, enthusiastic crowd, where the Holy Shroud was brought out especially for his veneration. Church bells sounded, cannons were fired, as bishops, clergy, and faithful jammed the Piazza, following the Pontiff in procession from Turin Cathedral to the Sanctuary of the Consolata. It was, in fact, Pius VII's eighth trip to this subalpine country. In September, a few months later and only one month after the birth of John Melchior Bosco, he was to institute the feast of Mary Help of Christians.

It is almost impossible to contend that the Bosco household alone remained untouched by the news or impact of Pius VII's Piedmont visits, or still less of his great Roman triumph in Mary's name. The prominent space given the Pontiff's death in 1823 by Turin newspapers time and again hearkened back to his 1814-15 triumph, a reference that would have reached even Mamma Margaret's isolated backwater of the Becchi; and that would later be seen by her son "as the triumph of all history." In that very year, Margaret had dedicated her newborn son to Mary.

Four years before Don Bosco's poem, i.e., in 1831, Pope Gregory XVI, at his very inauguration address, had spoken of "Mary Help of Christians who liberated Pius VII and will, by her faithful protection, help us also in these difficult times."

In all this, we have only one of several indications that Don Bosco knew of and practiced devotion to Mary Help of Christians before 1862.

Just How Early?

We cannot overlook, either, the *L'Armonia* article of 1858 which relates how "the Oratory prize-giving evening was climaxed by a popular song that described the sorrows and joys of the Romans at the exile and return of Pius VII." In that same year Don Bosco gave great prominence to the May 24th feast in his *Month of May* booklet, while his *Galantuomo* almanac already listed the 24th of each month as a special commemoration, even though the novena proper was a later addition.

Some earlier references, though not so explicit, merit our attention. At the Castelnovo school the father of young John's schoolmate, Mr. Joseph Turco, the vigneron, often encouraged the battling student, "Cheer up, Johnny, be good and study, and you'll see that the Madonna will help you." In his forgotten dream at sixteen, John had been specifically promised by the Grand Lady, "Have no fear, I will help you." A seminary companion, John Giacomelli, recalls how he and John Bosco construed Marian hymns together. "When we sing 'Show yourself a Mother,'" said John Bosco of the *Ave Maris Stella*, "we are saying 'Show yourself to be our helper, our protector, for at the first instant of the Incarnation we all become the people of Mary Ever Virgin.'" In construing *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, John Bosco arranged it as *Succure cadenti populo, qui curat surgere*. "This explains," said John, "Mary's goodness and our duty to cooperate with her. There is Mary's secret of helping us to help ourselves—our cooperation."

Some commentators (including Father Peter Stella) seem to doubt the accuracy of Father Giacomelli's testimony that "Don Bosco had affixed five holy pictures of Mary to his 1848 calendar. On the third was printed, 'O Virgin Immaculate, you who have brought victory over all heresies, come now to our aid: from our hearts, we have recourse to you: Mary Help of Christians, pray for us.' Underneath, Don Bosco had written 'From here we expect our consolation.'"

By 1858, after Father Giacomelli had "souvenired" them as a memento, Don Bosco had substituted three new holy cards, and

again had written on one, "Terrible as an army in battle array." It seems a simple, straightforward testimony. (One card was Our Lady of Victories.)

It should be recalled here that we are dealing not merely with the use of a title, but rather with the deeper theme or concept that underlies it; that is, Mary's ecclesial intercession linking her with the apostolic church and papal history, as well as her pastoral, everyday help. Such a theme, as we shall see in the following pages, recurs throughout Don Bosco's thought and practice from the earliest times.

In 1847, in his very first "Good Night" at the renovated Valdocco shelter, Don Bosco said, "A great help to you, my dear boys, is devotion to Mary most holy. By her patronage she will obtain for you help in this world, and the joys of heaven in the next." The prayer, "Dear Mother Mary, ever Virgin, help me to save my soul," while missing from the 1847 *Companion of Youth*, is already present in 1854.

John Villa recalls how in 1855 Don Bosco urged his pupils to write "Mary, help me!" in their exercise books, and to use it in troubled moments of temptation.

On at least five occasions in Don Bosco's youth and seminary years, we read how "he recited the Litany of Our Lady every day," a litany which clearly includes the "Help of Christians" title.

In narrating his "Garden of Roses" dream of 1847, Don Bosco began by saying, "One day after I had spent much time reflecting on how I could help others, especially how I could help youth, the Queen of Heaven appeared to me," etc.

Simultaneously he was acquiring that "ecclesial spirit" that would lead him instinctively to that distinctive Roman and Catholic note in his Marian approach. A fellow seminarian testifies that "when older priests or some professors took an anti-papal stand during informal discussions on the revolution in Italy, John would humbly take up the defence of Pope and Church and smilingly conclude, "Let us follow the maxims of universality": Petrine tradition.

That he was able to communicate this Marian-Ecclesial spirit to his co-workers and boys is shown by the hymn composed by Joseph Bongiovanni; a twenty-year-old prospective seminarian in 1858. His *Salve, Salve, pietosa Maria* was to become an oratory favourite, although it was not included in the *Companion of Youth* until 1870. It was sung, according to Father Lemoyne, on the Autumn excursions:

"Hail, all Hail, O Holy Mother,
Seated in your majesty;
Here the faithful come together

Seeking help on bended knee.
In days past, and now as never,
You have humbled each new foe;
All in vain their cruel endeavour,
Yours the victory, Christians know."

To the First Dream

Again perhaps, we have overlooked that in the bull *Ineffabilis Deus* of Pius IX in 1854 for the Immaculate Conception Definition, the Pope expressly calls on "Mary Immaculate, the most powerful help of Holy Church, who as a garrison blots out all heresies and delivers the believing people from harmful opinions of every kind"; words, as Father Broccardo observes, that boosted Don Bosco's emerging Marian tendencies.

As early as 1844 Don Bosco had already dreamed, under the guidance of the Shepherdess, of the great Basilica (still nameless) even then bearing the inscription "This is my house; from here my glory will go forth," indicating at this early stage the missionary (outgoing) and hence ecclesial nature of his Marian apostolate. A similar ecclesial link is offered us by the existence of six books in Don Bosco's library, all predating 1845, on the history of the Turin martyrs—a post-apostolic connection that would loom large in the Basilica's subsequent story: Solutor, Adventor, and Octavius.

Father Valentini makes the peculiar claim (now taken up by others) that "in his writings on Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco makes no reference to the institution of the feast of Pius VII until the *Catholic Readings* of May 1868." Leaving aside the unpublished poem quoted at the start, this claim is flatly contradicted by several examples, most notably by his 1858 book, *The Month of May*. Here is the salient quote: "As a sign of gratitude toward the great Queen of Heaven, the glorious Pius VII, recalling Mary's protection that restored him to his Pontifical See and brought peace for the Church after a series of sad events, instituted in 1815 the feast in her honour which is called Mary Help of Christians."

What is noteworthy about this quotation is that it is taken almost verbatim from the official Roman decree of September 1815, which Don Bosco must have had in front of him while writing. In the same article Don Bosco refers to "Mary, terrible as an army in battle-array when the rights of the Church are at

an army in battle array when the rights of the Church are at stake." The old argument falls flat under such evidence. And Father Stella's insistence that "Don Bosco's [early] devotion was of a purely personal devotion to the Madonna for grace now and at the hour of death" has no foundation in this light. One could ask, also, what is closer to the heart of the Paschal, ecclesial mystery than Mary's presence with believers at the hour of death? Eschatology is the apex of the Paschal Mystery.

Without straining for associations, we can turn back the hands of the clock even to the first boyhood dream for implicit references to Mary as Help of Christians.

The "Majestic Lady" was very different in appearance from the iconography of the time—invariably homely, sentimental Madonnas (see the representations, for example, of *La Consolata*, *L'Addolorato*, etc., reproduced in the Marian Academy publications). Later Father Rinaldi was to admit that he "had been put off religion for a time in his own youth by the saccharine devotions far removed (significant!) from apostolic action." The "Majestic Lady" seems much closer to the strong, hieratic icons of the early apostolic Church. At her bidding John had to make himself "humble, robust, and strong," all powerful indications of her own militancy.

Even the quasi-scriptural promise, "I will give you a Guide," appears deliberately patterned on "I will give you a Helpmate" of Eve and Genesis, as Don Bosco was accustomed to do when he spoke of his boyhood. (See David as Shepherd Boy; Joseph as Dreamer; Moses as Wanderer; Abraham as Father of a great multitude, etc.). In a subsequent dream (1844) we find the exact Calvary and Easter quotations, "Behold your Mother" and "I will go before you." So, too, there would be interplay upon the expression, "How is this possible?" of young John with Mary's "How can this be"?

Again the "teacher of Wisdom" given him is strangely evocative of the Sancta Sophia or Wisdom Image of Mary as Protector of the Eastern Churches; just as "Some day, little John, you will understand," intentionally or coincidentally, brings to mind "his hour" of John's Gospel, with its Marian climax. The whole imagery of sheep and shepherdess denotes the ecclesial-pastoral connection used in early Church liturgy, with Mary as Mother of the Church.

One could go on pursuing this theme further, but let Pius XI's words at Don Bosco's canonization sum it up: "Mary Help of Christians is the title Don Bosco cherished, among all the titles of God's Mother: Mary Help of Christians, that help on which he relied to band together his powerful auxiliaries with whom he would march to save souls in the Church.

List of Influences

The influences on Don Bosco's evolving devotion to Mary Help of Christians were manifold and progressive. There are many ambivalent and even contradictory opinions as to what first turned his Marian devotion toward her saving help in the Church. Keeping in mind that all such influences overlap, they can be listed as followers—not necessarily in chronological order or in order of importance:

1. The prior devotion to Mary Help of Christians in Piedmont, especially in Turin and its environment, due to the Confraternity of Our Lady Help of Christians (from Bavaria), and to the lingering memory of Pius VII in Piedmont.
2. Don Bosco's first visit to Rome (1858) and his contact with the early post-apostolic or apostolic spirit of the Church of the Catacombs and Martyrs; with the *Romanità* and *Cattolicità* of the Eternal City; with the Papacy; and with archeology through John Baptist De Rossi. (Almost certainly, this visit is the most influential on his emerging Marian devotion.)
3. His own bent toward Church history, especially history of the early Popes, which turned his thoughts toward Mary's role in history.
4. The life, influence, and actual words of Pius IX, and the whole ambient of Church and State during the Risorgimento.
5. His own supernatural lights, especially the dreams of the Basilica (1844) and the Two Columns (1862).
6. The events leading up to and the actual building of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, especially in the diary references of Marchesa Fassati.
7. His own maturity of thought on Mary's role in the Church as a result of long pastoral and educational experience, and the insights of Saint Francis de Sales.
8. In 1860, the Papal territory of Spoleto (where Pius IX had once been bishop) fell to the Risorgimento. In 1862 several local people claimed miraculous cures and messages from an image of the Madonna. Crowds came from all over Italy; the news was widely reported in Turin, and the bishop announced plans to build a church in honor of the Madonna of Spoleto, whom he officially named *Aiuto dei Cristiani*, Help of Christians. The events at Spoleto provided a climate of interest in Mary's role in social and church life, but their influence on Don Bosco's Marian thought may be vastly overrated.

Devotion in Piedmont

It is a fact of history that Piedmont was the centre of devotion to Mary Help of Christians in Italy almost two centuries before Don Bosco's birth.

Much has been made of Don Bosco's readiness to absorb local Marian devotions: *Madonna del Castello*, *Adolorata*, *Consolata*, *S.S. Rosario*, *Immacolata*, etc. But none of these was anywhere near as widespread or as organized as devotion to *L'Ausiliatrice* was from 1800-1850.

Such devotion had crossed the Alps, via France from Bavaria, in 1657. At Monaco the Confraternity of Mary Help of Christians had been founded in 1627, begun by the Capuchin Fathers and approved by Pope Urban VIII. The first Italian centre had been erected in Turin (1657) with its own chapel at the church of St. Francesco di Paolo. In thirty years it had spread throughout Italy, sometimes keeping the German title of "Mary—Help."

In the first fifty years of Don Bosco's lifetime there were 10,000 members enrolled at San Francesco di Paolo alone. Over 30,000 Masses were celebrated for deceased members every year, and booklets that ran to several editions spread the prayers, novenas, and regulations of the Confraternity. Bishops and the Royal Family were among its members, with the House of Savoy as pathfinder.

Among the hundreds of centres in Piedmont we could list places linked with Don Bosco's territory: Chieri, Castelnuevo, Avigliana, Curriana, and Bruino. Altogether, from 1789 to 1859, there were four affiliated associations, all linked with the original at Monaco.

Most significant of the places listed above is Bruino, where there was a well-known shrine to Mary Help of Christians and where the Confraternity especially flourished. The parish priest there was no less than Father Calosso, Don Bosco's own mentor, who had been assigned this pastoral field just prior to his retirement in 1829.

Among the names listed on the Turin registers are those of Father Victor Allassonati and Marchioness di Barola (1834 and 1827, respectively). Archbishop Franzoni is also registered, and from his place in exile he asked that "Turin be consecrated to Mary Help of Christians, and that a new branch [of the Confraternity] be set up on a huge scale throughout the diocese." Both wishes were to be fulfilled after his death.

In the face of all this, one may ask, perhaps a little wryly, "Was Don Bosco living in a hermetically sealed cave not to have been influenced by such devotion?"

All proof is to the contrary. When he came to write his six

booklets on *L'Ausiliatrice* in the 1860's, Don Bosco would borrow wholesale from the earlier booklets of the Confraternity. Although Father Alphonse Stickler does not acknowledge it, Don Bosco was also to take the regulations of this old Confraternity and reproduce them, article by article, almost verbatim, when he founded his own "Association of Devotees of Mary Help of Christians" in 1869. In turn, the earlier Confraternities would take a plagiarist's revenge by "lifting" Don Bosco's own historical sections in their reprint booklets in 1895.

How powerful such devotion was in Piedmont can be gauged from our Founder's *Galantuomo* article of 1857. "What a shame that the recent annals of the Sardinian army (House of Savoy) did not reveal what many eyewitnesses have told us: how our brave soldiers died for king and country doing so in the faith of our Church and strengthened by the help of the most Holy Virgin, in whom Piedmontese soldiers have always had such great trust."

First Rome Visit

It was above all, his first Rome visit in 1858 that confirmed Don Bosco in his *Romanità* and *Cattolicità* and reinforced his ecclesial-Marian concept.

If he still had any trace of what the Italians call *campanilismo*, a mentality that sees the Church as beginning and ending with the local bell-tower, such parochialism was shed during this visit.

In Father Lemoyne's detailed account (*Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, Vol. X) there is a naive freshness about Don Bosco, a boyish, starry-eyed delight in everything, as he came face-to-face with the essential greatness and goodness of Rome for the first time. One feature stands out: his rapture at Marian shrines, in the catacombs, with apostolic and early Church links—especially with Saint Peter—and his fascination with the papacy.

A key visit was his lengthy stay at the Dominican Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, the seat of the Archconfraternity of Mary Help of Christians in Rome. Here he looked on the endless array of trophies captured from the Turks at Lepanto and Vienna and read over the church entrance: "To Mary Help of Christians go our prayers today, that she may safeguard her city, turning aside the assaults of the wicked so that she may speed up the triumph of the Catholic Church." He was to return here for a second and third visit during his stay. He saw similar trophies and the same devotion at Our Lady of Victory Church, and saw the Lepanto tapestries in the halls of the Vatican Museum.

Don Bosco went to see the Marian icon, *Salus Populi Romani*, The Saving Help of the Christian People, the Lucan prototype of

all Eastern icons with its liturgical, majestic image. He went out of his way to visit the royal Polish descendants of John Sobieski, hero of Vienna. During his ten-hour visit to the Catacombs, he found delight "in the ancient paintings of Our Lady . . . this should silence the Protestant arguments."

He gloried in the evidence of the early Church militant and what it had suffered, often to martyrdom. He not only "kissed the chains of Saint Peter, but hung them around his neck and shoulders," just as he kissed the floor of the Marmentine prison and the soil of the Colosseum in memory of Saint Peter and the first martyrs. He also "stayed a long time" at papal tombs.

Perhaps a key meeting was his one with the celebrated archeologist John Baptist De Rossi, whose recent discoveries of frescoes showing the Blessed Virgin as a liturgical figure seated between Peter and Paul had aroused great interest in Rome. De Rossi was to act as his personal guide in the catacombs of Saint Sebastian and Saint Callistus.

Don Bosco's cup overflowed at his meeting with Pius IX. The Pope singled out for special praise Don Bosco's *Lives of the Popes of the First Three Centuries*, which he judged "to be of valuable service to the Church at such a critical time." On Easter Sunday he was to find himself trapped under the Sedia Gestatoria, with the Pope's foot—perhaps symbolically—resting on his shoulder, a predicament for which the Pope later "ribbed" him.

Despite his full schedule of appointments and visits to churches and to educational institutes, Don Bosco still found time to accept an invitation "to eat his last Easter Egg in Rome" with the Jesuit Superior General and the editor of *Civiltà Cattolica*.

What writing was Don Bosco engaged in during this first Roman visit? He wrote his booklet on *The Month of May* (1858), with its clear stress on the liturgical presentation of the feast of Mary Help of Christians, instituted by the glorious Pius VII. Every fortnight he dispatched proofs via Father Michael Rua to Turin. These proofs recalled the triumph of Pius VII "of glorious memory" to Rome in 1814, and the institution of the feast of the Help of Christians on May 24th. Here we begin to understand why Don Bosco said, "Pius VII is the very Salesian par excellence." Three Jesuit booklets of the time drew a parallel between "Pius VII and Pius IX," both forced into exile by cruel oppressors, but returning in triumph with Mary's powerful help"—Don Bosco himself was to use this image later on. It is the official, liturgical, papal element of the Marian title that attracts Don Bosco, before all else. He will recall these apostolic, ecclesial elements when he commissions a painting for the High Altar in Turin, with Mary standing majestically between Peter and Paul and surrounded by all the apostles.

His first Rome visit would remain a cherished charismatic experience. Yet Don Bosco did not stop at mere antiquarianism, love for a long-lost past. On his return, besides describing such places of interest, he "often told his boys how, on passing through Genoa on the return trip, he had noticed that when the church bells rang the Angelus, the people, including railway porters, doffed their hats and caps and stood still to recite the Angelus." Ever practical, Don Bosco's Marian devotion would demand living experience.

All the ecclesial, apostolic, papal elements of Don Bosco's devotion to *L'Ausiliatrice* came together in Rome in 1858. It was the vintage year for his growing Marilogy.

History of the Popes

Both in theory and practice we have good grounds to claim that Don Bosco's historical leanings helped him see Mary's intervention in Church history and that his ecclesial spirit preceded and led to his Marian spirit.

Bishop Manoconda, at the Month's Mind in 1888, recalled how "Don Bosco was a humble, gentle man, but the mere mention of the word 'Roman Pontiff' made him catch fire, come alive and wax enthusiastic, reflecting his perfect obedience and childlike docility toward the Pope." Wasn't this the expression of his *sensus fidelium* or church spirit?

As a seminarian, Church history had been his special subject, and from 1851 to 1861 "he had read the Bollandists, every volume from cover to cover. By 1859 he had saved enough money to buy his own set for the Oratory, saving the clerics, as John Turchi relates, "from dashing off to the diocesan library, sometimes one after the other, to bring him back a volume to check a point of reference."

Besides the *Lives of the Early Popes*, he had written a brief *Church History* in 1845, which he always hoped to expand into a giant volume. Unfortunately the manuscripts were left behind in a railway carriage and he ended up entrusting the task to Father John Bonetti to finish. "The popes must be the centre of all history," he noted. "It is a serious fault to attempt a Church history and not give them central prominence." No effort of time or labour should be spared when the Church and the Pope are at stake."

That he had done his own homework well is testified by Msgr. Tripepi, himself a well-known history scholar. "Don Bosco is a genuinely learned man; a man of God and a man of science," he noted, after having read our Founder's *Lives of the Early Popes*.

Like his historian friend Abbot Rohrbacher, Don Bosco could

not help but refer to Mary's crucial role in Church history. "When the Abbot died in 1856," Don Bosco wrote, "his last words were 'Mary Help of Christians'—as if to say, she was always the Help of Christians in history, as she is today, and as she will be at all times, especially at the hour of death."

All this he would draw together into a synthesis in his *Maraviglie della Madre di Dio*: "Today it is the Catholic Church itself that is under attack. She is attacked in her functions, in her sacred institutions, in her head, in her doctrine, and in her discipline; she is attacked precisely as the Catholic Church, as the centre of truth and as the teacher of all the faithful. Hence the need, universally felt, to invoke Mary's help."

Here we have a precise, scholastic terminology worthy of an Aquinas, and a breadth of vision comparable to Augustine's in his *City of God*.

Influence of Pius IX

We have seen how Don Bosco, either by intuition or drawing on Jesuit publications, had seen a parallel between the critical times of Pius VII and Pius IX.

After the breaching of the Porta Pia gate during the Rome Revolution, Pius IX had expressly turned to Mary Help of Christians. "As the strong defender of the Church, Mary has always safeguarded the people of God. Today, in these dangerous times, she is still our most faithful Helper."

Catholic newspapers of the time had picked up their cue from him. "Catholics today," wrote Turin's *Unità Cattolica*, "do not distinguish between the cause of Pius and the cause of Mary, the cause of the Immaculate and the cause of the Pontiff who defined this dogma."

L'Armonia recalled that "as Mary aided his predecessor, Pius VII, she will aid the Holy Father in our time, as the perpetual Help of Christians, till the day of his eventual triumph."

We recall how, during the Rome visit, the Pope was so impressed by Don Bosco's strong ecclesial and papal spirit that he wished to make him a monsignor. Now the voice of the same Pope, according to Don Bosco, was the decisive one in choosing a title for the new Basilica in Turin. "While we were deliberating on a title for the new edifice," writes Don Bosco, "an incident removed all doubt. The Supreme Pontiff, Pius IX, who never lost sight of anything for the benefit of the Church, having been informed of the erection of a new church, sent his first gracious offering of 500 francs, letting it be known that 'Mary Help of Christians' would be a title most apt and pleasing to the Majestic Queen of Heaven."

Don Bosco had evidently been up to his usual begging caper . . . "having been informed"! The title, too, seems to have been already chosen . . . "removed all doubt"; but Pius' was the casting vote, in Don Bosco's mind.

If, like Pius VII, Pius IX was not to be "the very Salesian par excellence," at least his name was to be always linked with the beginnings of our Society and the erection of our Mother Church of Mary Help of Christians.

Supernatural Influences

There is hardly a dream of Don Bosco where the help of the Madonna does not play some major part. The childhood dream and its many replays, the Dream of the Roses, the Dream of the Basilica (repeated often), the Dream of the Two Columns, all reveal her as the Help of the Church and of individual believers.

It is impossible to say to what degree such dreams were to move Don Bosco toward the choice of his Marian devotion for his life's work and Basilica. We are on tricky ground here, due to the overlapping of natural and supernatural, and due to Don Bosco's own reticence. Who can measure the supernatural?

Vague or not, such evidence is compelling enough to merit our attention when put as a compendium: "Mary has always been my guide . . . How good the Madonna has been to us! . . . Mary has always helped and will continue to help me, always . . . Mary loves us, even to excess! . . . We cannot go wrong; it is Mary who guides us . . . All that I have done, all my sons will do after me, can be attributed to Mary's help."

In some of the dreams there is a Marian-ecclesial association dating back to the early Roman Church. Thus Mary is accompanied in one dream by the three Turinese martyrs from Roman times, Solutor, Adventor, and Octavius.

When Don Bosco dreamed that the exact spot of their martyrdom was at the precise Gospel corner of his future Marian Sanctuary, his illumination was broadly confirmed by no less a scholar than Canon Lawrence Gastaldi (his later nemesis as Archbishop), who had written a book on the subject.

Don Bosco's circular announcing the opening of the Basilica gives the origin of the word Valdocco as *Vallis Occisorum*, i.e., *Valle Degli Uccisi*, or "Valley of the Martyrs." A few years ago when Father Eugene Valentini looked up the original of the circular in the Salesian Archives, he was amazed to find that it had been composed and handwritten by Gastaldi himself (with amendments by Don Bosco).

In doing so, Don Bosco was laying stress on the *Romanità* and

Cattolicità of his *L'Ausiliatrice*, Helper of the Early Church, Helper of Martyrs.

Just as Don Bosco kept his emerging religious society under wraps, just as he muted his "Preventive System" in the early days, letting it evolve slowly, so too he would not rush the unveiling of his cherished Marian title. But, like the other secrets, it was always there in embryo, and it is clear from his dreams, that each step in its progressive development was taken only after heavenly inspiration from Mary. He moves from inspiration to practice and from practice to theory.

We are given a passing, tantalizing insight into such mystical inspirations by an illuminating phrase from one of his dreams. "Mary also gave me many other details. From that moment I have always gone ahead without the slightest fear of the future."

Christening the Basilica

As much of the background to the opening and naming of the Turin church is available elsewhere, we can confine ourselves here to a few less well-known connections: Father Julius Barberis' peculiar claim; the revealing diaries of Marchesa Fossati; and the root of the trouble with Turin's municipal authorities.

In his large volume on *L'Ausiliatrice*, Father Barberis, at first sight, would seem to have suffered a sudden rush of nationalism to the head, with what seems an extraordinary assertion. "Why did Don Bosco choose the title 'Help of Christians'? Because of his great love for his Italian fatherland... Pius V was a Piedmontese [he was in fact born, by a strange coincidence, in the town of Bosco]; Innocent XI was an Italian, as was Pius VII. And so Don Bosco seized the chance of putting his love for Italy in a glorious light." If we are tempted to smile at the ingenuousness of Father Barberis, perhaps we could look for a moment at Don Bosco's own rejoinder to the Turin Architectural Supervisor's objections to the title, "Help of Christians."

Don Bosco is in good form, buttering up the architect with thick blarney, as only he could. "Signor Architetto, you possibly with all your work haven't had time to study the origins of this same title. It calls to mind the victory won by the Italians and Spaniards at Lepanto against the Turks; and, besides, it reveals the liberation of Vienna in the name of Prince Eugene of Savoy" (Father Lemoyne also called the Basilica "a revival of Piedmont's glory").

Father Barberis, in all simplicity, seems to have taken Don Bosco's play on national flattery too literally and too seriously! The old novice-master, all dove, could not see the shrewdness of the

serpent in our Piedmontese Founder, experienced in local politics.

In her diaries for 1862-63, Marchesa Fossati has written: "Don Bosco has undertaken the construction of a church in Turin for public use. Just recently he spoke to me of his progress and difficulties, especially in the choice of a title to be given to the church. We have all wanted to see it dedicated to the Holy Virgin Help of Christians. This last point was immediately agreed upon."

A later extract from the diary (in French) reads, "Among the many acquaintances of Don Bosco is a well-to-do gentleman who has been suffering from deep depression. Don Bosco has often brought him temporary relief, but not permanent peace of mind as he is, one might say, too Jesuitical by nature [sic]. At last this gentleman brought an abandoned child to Don Bosco, begging him to accept the youngster into the Oratory. Don Bosco did so, saying to his benefactor, 'I won't ask anything from you because, although I know you would want to pay something for his upkeep, I am going to build a church and then you can give me a donation.' 'On one condition,' replied this gentleman, 'that you name your church after Mary Help of Christians, since sooner or later we all reach a point in life where we need the help of the Blessed Virgin.'"

With the municipal authorities, as we have seen earlier, Don Bosco struck unexpected trouble.

"Why this title?" demanded the Architect-General, who was also foxing. "It's not acceptable in these times. Play down this title, play it down. It doesn't go down well; it's a novelty here in Turin, and besides the Madonna already has too many titles."

Don Bosco's tongue-in-cheek reply, "I'm asking you to approve building plans, not a title," finally won the day.

The reason for this strange opposition has always posed a mystery, but perhaps a laconic entry in the same Fossati diary for June 12, 1864, may shed some light. "On Monday construction began on Don Bosco's church. All the preliminary difficulties have finally disappeared, and God knows how many arose. What gave rise to them is the title 'Help of Christians,' considered a title hostile to the government, since the Spoleto events."

Here then was the rub! Spoleto had acquired political overtones, since some anti-revolutionary followers had made it a rallying point for their political views, right as they may have been, instead of a religious centre. "The centre of Italy! The centre of all Mary's glories! The centre of the church!" read their banners, inflammatory at such a time.

Don Bosco was to prove himself more circumspect and broadminded. His choice of titles had a much older, much deeper connection with the early Church and scripture. For him there was

nothing novel, still less political, about such an apostolic, ecclesial title. "Mary," Don Bosco was to write, "was greeted: as Help of Christians from the very beginnings of the Church" (*Maraviglie*).

Slight help to his own Marian activity as it might have been, Spoleto also raised divisive political issues which Don Bosco would have wanted to avoid.

What Spoleto Connection?

We Salesians today are so indebted to the monumental work of Father Peter Stella with its incredibly patient, fine-combed research, that it is painful (and possibly dangerous!) to differ from him on the Spoleto-Turin connection.

When he attempts to derive a causative connection by writing "Without Spoleto, Don Bosco would probably not have become the apostle of Mary Help of Christians," one feels an uneasy sense that he is flogging a pet hobbyhorse of his own, rather than writing in his usual dispassionate manner.

Fundamentally the Spoleto-Turin connection is based on the following doubtful or flimsy premises:

1. A claim by a Passionist Father, Don Salvatore, that Don Bosco "visited Spoleto on his visits to Rome, and there decided to dedicate his Society and Church to Mary Help of Christians" (a classic anachronism).
2. Evidence that Don Bosco was aware of and spoke of the Spoleto apparition (granted as he did of La Salette, for which he wrote booklets, etc.).
3. That Don Bosco drew on Spoleto for his dream of the columns, and that Spoleto predated both his dreams and the Basilica's naming (granted, only initial-factor).
4. That Don Bosco was in correspondence with Msgr. Armaldi, Bishop of Spoleto, and borrowed from the Bishop's writings on *L'Ausiliatrice* (granted, but of no significance).
5. That Don Bosco's techniques to popularize the devotion were modelled specifically on Spoleto methods (a half-truth at best).

Let us examine, first, Don Salvatore's claim: "I can personally recall how, every time he passed through here on the way to Rome, Don Bosco found time to stop off to celebrate Mass, or at least to visit the miraculous image of the Madonna of the Stars" (later called Mary Help of Christians).

How well does such a claim stand up? Don Bosco's first visit to Rome took place in 1858, four years before the Spoleto events ever happened. His second visit to Rome was in 1867, by which time not only was the Salesian Congregation already under

L'Ausiliatrice's widespread care, but the Turin Basilica had been named and already built. It is an anachronism serious enough to totally invalidate all Don Salvatore's claim. (As the American comedian Jimmy Durante used to say, "Everyone wants to get in on the act!")

As for the correspondence with Msgr. Amaldi, the only surviving letter simply praises Don Bosco for "his priestly zeal"; and had Don Bosco, veritable magpie-jawdaw that he was, *not* borrowed from Msgr. Amaldi's pastorals and addresses, one would be more surprised! (See earlier references to his borrowings from 1834, 1846 publications of the Confraternity of S. Francesco di Paolo.)

Don Bosco, naturally, was very much aware of the happenings at Spoleto. On May 24, 1862, he had announced the Spoleto events to his boys at the "Good Night." The house chronicle records that Don Bosco "spoke of these happenings at Spoleto *con sua grande contentezza*." One can only back up Father Broccardi here where he writes, "This phrase implies a preformed state of mind." Don Bosco had already walked along the path much earlier and much farther well before. We cannot forget that at various times Don Bosco also spoke to his boys about Lourdes, La Salette, the Miraculous Medal apparitions, Alphonse Ratisbonne and his Marian De Sion mission, etc.

Of Don Bosco's "Dream of the Two Columns," one only has to turn back to the long succession of Marian-auxiliary dreams (1824, 1844, 1845, 1856, 1858, etc.) to see that it was merely a more spectacular repetition of earlier manifestations. The basilica name was already implicit in the ecclesial note of the 1844 dream, and the evidence given earlier in this article confirms this.

To claim that the techniques to popularize Marian devotion were a *Deus ex Machina* from Spoleto overlooks Don Bosco's earlier orders for "7,000 pictures of Mary" (1854), and the trunkloads of material from the souvenir shop in Rome after his 1858 visit. The publication of favours, and ex-votive offerings were techniques already used by Saint Alphonsus Liguori and others long before him.

All we are left with, then, is a *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* argument that is weak in the extreme, and only half true at that, as we have seen from the earlier dates in Don Bosco's practice and writings.

What then is the significance of Spoleto for Don Bosco? Simply an awareness that the time was ripe and the religious climate ideal for his long-standing devotion to be spread on a wider scale: a minor catalyst.

Don Bosco would studiously avoid the quasi-political overtones and crusading spirit that marred Spoleto; he would give

his Marian devotion a universal, ecclesial note that Monsignor Amaldi, alone of the Spoleto devotees, had caught. Don Bosco would hearken back to the liturgical, official origins of the May 24th feast to give it safe ground for permanence.

That the Spoleto constellation proved only a short-lived meteorite, reverting back to the Madonna of the Stars title and finally fizzling out altogether in 1871, is not surprising. Its connection with Mary Help of Christians was a contrived, nominal one. The sentimental "Madonna of the Stars" image was poles apart in iconography from the majestic, ecclesial protrait, traditional in the early Church and Bavarian precedents; and so it was destined to remain a purely local devotion. (The "Stars" were *not* the traditional *Ausiliatrice* 12 stars, but simply a packed, star-dotted background.)

Don Bosco was the most eclectic of men, and no one would blush or feel threatened to find he had borrowed, even heavily, from Spoleto, provided his own early links with *L'Ausiliatrice*, discussed above, were admitted. But when such links are contemptuously dismissed out of hand, and the sweeping assertion is put forward on minimal and sometimes clearly erroneous evidence that the Spoleto connection is not only imitative but derivative, then we are no longer dealing with history but with a preconceived hypothesis.

It is sad to think that Don Bosco's very originality here, his ability to rise above local, effusive devotions to an ecclesial, liturgical (see the Pius VII—May 24th link) Marian spirit is now being challenged by a theory that is groundless. Turin was outgoing, dynamic; Spoleto smug, static.

In fact, everything contradicts the Spoleto connection. The whole Spoleto mentality (excepting Msgr. Armaldi's) was one of immoderate crusading and imprudent confrontation against the transitional government of the time, a mentality utterly foreign to Don Bosco's calm, broad-minded attitude to the modern world. Time and the demise of the Spoleto Marian "Cruzada" have proved him right.

Perhaps there are still some who overrate the Spoleto influence, while underestimating the originality of Don Bosco's own Marian insights.

In His Maturity

That Don Bosco's whole approach to Mary and the Church had matured over the years through his own pastoral and educational experience, till it reached its apex in 1858-68, should not surprise us. In the Gospel pages Mary herself only gradually attains

spiritual maturity, contemplating all these things, treasuring them in her heart. There is no sudden "Eureka" discovery.

Father Egidio Vigano strongly insists that *L'Ausiliatrice* represents the full flowering of Don Bosco's mentality and activity, giving Salesian work its unique form and fragrance.

This devotion, for the Salesian Family, seems to match what the theologians call "the central principle of cohesion," by which all our lifeworks achieve unity and integration: in this practical Marian synthesis all the multifold projects come together and slip neatly into place. Just as Mary's crucial and constant intervention changes the course of history, so Don Bosco sees the *Ausiliatrice* as shaping the Congregation's destiny.

In this Marian synthesis all the apparent sets of tensions are resolved: personal prayer and liturgical worship; the local church and the universal Church; the early Church and the contemporary Church; religious contemplation and pastoral action; church loyalty and civil loyalty are all harmonized into a peaceful Marian Oratorio, as Don Bosco had hoped.

Without this *Ausiliatrice* as centre-point, the Salesian work is in danger of splintering or of going off at a tangent, cut off from its unifying charism, its centre of gravity.

Just how Don Bosco had risen above the effusive period-piety of the time can be gauged from his *Maraviglie*, where over fifty pages are devoted to an in-depth scriptural presentation, drawing on early Church Fathers, the Magisterium, and his own prayerful reflections.

A brief synopsis of his own chapter headings shows his depth:

1. "Mary seen figuratively in the Old Testament as help of the human family."
2. "Mary revealed as Help of Christians by the Angel Gabriel in the act of announcing that she is the Mother of God."
3. "Mary at the Cana marriage feast manifests her zeal and her influence with her Son."
4. "Mary appointed as Help of Christians by Jesus dying on Calvary."
5. "Those who are faithful to the pristine Church have constant recourse to Mary as powerful Help of Christians."

Similarly, in his historical approach Don Bosco did not confine himself to the well-worn path of Lepanto and Vienna. He brings in the Castilian kings defeating the Moors, Vadislaus of Poland triumphing over the Teutons, Heraclius against the Persians, Louis of France and Richard of England against the Saracens—all off-the-beaten-track material that shows the extent of his research.

No wonder that a highly critical ex-librarian in the school of Pius XI could pay this tribute: "There are half-hidden signs that Don Bosco was compiling a scientific work from clearly-grasped basic concepts: signs of a genuine scientific method."

These were signs, one might add, of a mature, comprehensive grasp not only of history but of life in general.

Conclusion

"There is only one great devotion in our times," Romano Guardini has written, "devotion to the Church. All other devotions today can be found included therein."

Vatican II and its aftermath seem to have proved him right. Just as *Lumen Gentium* set the Marian treatise within the framework of the Church, so too has Don Bosco inserted his Marian activity into the heart of the Church ever active in salvation history. Our traditional legacy of "three great devotions," we have come to realise, is in fact integrated into a single splendid devotion—the Church.

Our "pastoral-love-in-action" may take a Eucharistic form, a Marian form, a papal (or institutional) form, but each is ecclesial in tendency. "Everything in the Church," insists our great Doctor, Francis de Sales, "belongs to love, happens in love, for love, and from love." So it would find expression in our patron's "mysticism of action." This is equally true of our great Marian apostolate.

There is great inspiration in our Salesian Marian work from the words spoken by our Founder in 1884 to a reporter from *Journal de Rome*. To the question, "What do you think of the future of the Church in Europe and Italy?" Don Bosco replied, "I am not a prophet... only you journalists seem to have that charism, so perhaps I should be asking you! No one but God can predict the future; however, humanly speaking, I must say that the future looks dark.

"To me the outlook seems very bleak, but I am not afraid of anything. God will always save the Church, and the Madonna who visibly protects the contemporary world will know how to raise up redeemers."

We can hope that, for all its shortcomings, the Salesian Family is numbered among the redeemers whom Mary will raise up to help save the world of today.

PART TWO

Our Marian Spirit and Pedagogy

In his "Long-Live-Salesian-Youth" address to Salesian pupils in Rome, Pope John Paul II spoke of "Mary's motherly pedagogy." A huge banner overhead read, "Holiness for us means being happy."

Only a week before he had reminded another youth group of Dominic Savio's appearance to Don Bosco, when the pupil-saint assured the teacher-saint, "What consoled me most at the hour of death was the help of Mary most holy."

A digest of all the Pope's recent youth-discourses bears the impress of his own early Salesian connections: his Christian humanism as a poet and realist, as a scholar and outdoors man-of-the-hills. A resume follows:

"Jesus loves you . . . remember that: Jesus loves you. You belong to Christ; He is your Liberator. In your search for religious values, of great importance is your close contact with nature during the summer. At such a time you have a chance to become more open to the *action of grace*, to the beauty of joy and of loving friendships. Such joy finds its expression in song. Even now there still rings in my ears so many youth groups singing their new religious songs as pilgrims."

"You have a chance then to deepen your insights into the scriptures and liturgy. Through your enthusiastic associations as a young community, you are implementing in present-day society the Gospel patterns of justice, kindness, duty and service. You are intrepid witnesses to the Risen Christ. My word for you is optimism, union, and fortitude. Under the guidance of the Salesians, try, dear young people, to be good, joyful, and generous."

"In Mary's fond presence you young have that goodness, grace, and holiness that alone can make you truly happy. For

today, still, *Mary is Mother of Grace and Queen of Victories.*"

In such simple language, ending as he always does on a Marian climax, Pope John Paul is putting his finger on the dynamic pulse of Salesian spirituality and education.

New Letter from Rome

The XXI General Chapter of the Salesian Society declared: "In the mind of Don Bosco and in the Salesian tradition, the 'Preventive System' tends more and more as time goes on to identify itself with Salesian spirituality." In so doing, it seemed to be groping toward that elusive correlative supplied earlier by Father Philip Rinaldi.

"Mary Help of Christians is the Salesian Society.... Without her we cannot understand our spirit and educational system."

Mary is the missing middle-term that alone relates our religious mission to our educational life so that they become one of a piece in the Salesian Family.

This is the very theme of Father Vigano's "new letter from Rome": the triad of spirituality, education and Mary's presence.

Such a link is, first of all, a fact of history. Father Peter Berutti has neatly synthesized it for us: "The Blessed Virgin has thought out Don Bosco's work. She herself has given it its tone and minute details for over a hundred years. She worked patiently to bring it about: assisting, caring, making it flourish through graces till it has become a masterpiece of her motherly love and wisdom, one of the most blessed and successful works in the modern Church. Before our eyes we have her marvellous house, comparable with the world's greatest sanctuaries. What extraordinary marvels will she still bring about if we continue to know her, follow her, and serve her with love and fidelity!"

Inspirer, Animator and Perfector

Yet the historical link, for all its importance, is just not good enough. There has to be some vital, intrinsic connection or else our Marian tradition could be limited to a scissors-and-paste montage of devotional practices (good and important as they are) or to mere nostalgia.

Such musings will eventually lapse into escapism or pessimism, something akin to Father John Francesca's poem:

"Who will sing the far-off-days
Of twenty years ago?"

Who will hymn Don Bosco's praise?
One old, old poet I know."

Instead, Don Bosco's original "Lesson from Rome" was able to blend idealism and realism. In his forthright style he was able to arrive at practical conclusions.

"Tell all, young and old," he wrote, "that they are Sons of Mary Help of Christians. She has brought them all here to protect them, to help them love one another, to give glory to God and to Mary by their holy lives. It is through her help that the barriers of mistrust between Salesians and boys will fall, and then we shall see that new Comollos, Dominic Savios, and Besuccos will live again in our midst."

It will be necessary for us to rediscover the intrinsic connection between Mary and Salesian education as originally intended and practised by Don Bosco. A broad theological approach may help us identify "the vitamins of the heart" for a healthy Salesian Family.

Tying Loose Strands

A Salesian synthesis, according to Father Beyer, S.J., is still to be written. From a Salesian viewpoint we could answer that our life is too rich and complex to be reduced to a series of formulae. Our living Salesian treatise is being constantly spelt out along the lines of daily experience as religious and educators.

Yet without some broad working-synthesis we will continue to trail many loose ends which can trip us up. They leave many questions that we have been almost too afraid to ask, let alone try to answer.

"Where does Francis de Sales come in? How much is Don Bosco's original contribution? What extra metamorphoses have our spirit and education undergone over the years? Is our Marian dynamism reconcilable with the Christocentric thought of Vatican II? Can we save our sacramental heritage from the tag of magic, mechanical addenda? Is the whole Salesian presence compatible with new insights into freedom in education?"

In answer we can fall back on the prophetic suggestion of Father Angelo Franco: "In the manifold Salesian mystery, we will find that everything begins at least to come together in the treatise on *de gratia Christi*."

Grace as Matrix

In *grace* we have the all-surrounding Salesian matrix. Not only

have Don Bosco's basic concepts for our spirituality and educational life-style been borrowed from the operation of grace, but so has his very terminology.

The terms *preventive, assistance, presence, initial contact, fond attraction, personal relationship, loving-kindness, familiarity, auxiliary-help, joyful experience, cooperation, and freedom* are all to be found there in that grace-treatise (and earlier, naturally, in scripture) in their pristine meaning.

What Don Bosco called "Sacred pedagogy, the great art of forming the man"; what we now describe as "evangelizing by humanizing and humanizing by evangelizing," is no more than a feeble reenactment of the work of grace.

Grace is at the hub of all our Salesian momentum. In this gracious help of Christ, bridging the gap between the human and divine, in His active intervention as "Lord and centre of all history," but still in all gentleness respecting the free will of man, we find the sum-total of our Salesian pedagogy: that complete and unified formation in culture and faith that alone fosters "honest citizens and good Christians."

The whole Salesian Family—our Congregation, pupils, Cooperators—redeemed from its helplessness by God's loving grace, becomes in turn an auxiliary and coadjutor of Christ's redemptive work for youth. "Freely you have received, freely give" (Mt 10:8). Every Salesian, by a vocational imperative, is called to be a Help of Christians.

But it is in Mary as "Lady and center of all history"—to paraphrase Pope John Paul—that we find our prototype of grace, the only bona fide Christian humanism. As *L'Immacolata* she is our Exemplar, first of the redeemed in *holiness*. As *L'Ausiliatrice*, she is our Auxiliary-Helper first in the co-redemptive work *in action*. Here the Salesian equation balances: *holiness* (or Pastoral Love) *in action*.

Two of our Salesian Sisters are relevant here. Sister Lina Dalcerci writes: "Devotion to Mary is essentially formation in grace, in perfect adherence to the pedagogy of Don Bosco which is essentially *a pedagogy of grace*." In turn she quoted Pavanetti: "Don Bosco makes of grace the centre of his Preventive System, surrounding it with assistance, happiness and confidence."

With the Pope, Father John Vecchi reminds Salesian educators of "Mary as Mother of Grace, who accompanies the development of grace from its first moment . . . until the young are grafted into the work of the Church."

Here we have the classical genesis of holiness left us by Saint Francis de Sales: "From the ecstasy of contemplation to the mysticism of love, from the mysticism of love to the ecstasy of action."

Only in concrete action (effective help) does this Marian holiness reach its apex.

Don Bosco and the Paschal Mystery

Is this stretching the long bow, building up an entire system from a few isolated snippets from Don Bosco's life? Not really.

There is a danger, as Father Peter Braidon reminds us, "of gathering a few selective and badly misunderstood quotes or episodes from the *Biographical Memoirs*, and using them to shore up our own preconceived concepts." Or as Father Eugene Cerny comments, "Unfortunately only Don Bosco is able to explain Don Bosco's thought for us."

While not guilty of a clerical "confessionalism," Don Bosco never hesitated to stress grace as our Salesian focal point.

In the life of Father John Francescica we read how he was quoting Professor Aporti on education. "Aporti," Don Bosco interrupted, "I'll tell you who Aporti really is. He is one of those priests bent on reducing the role of religion in education to that of social convenience, to external practices and mere good fellowship. He completely obscures the supernatural element—that vital life of grace."

Throughout his *Companion of Youth*, in his classical lives of the young, especially of Colle and Savio, in his talks to Cooperators (as we shall see in the next paragraph) Don Bosco keeps coming back to the centrality of grace in education, giving substance to his belief that "only a Christian can practice the Preventive System in its entirety."

But it is in his *Month of May* booklet, written for the most part in Rome, 1858, that he has left us a comprehensive presentation of grace at work in the Paschal Mystery. Written under the heading "Mary Help of Christians," it merits a full quotation.

"By the dignity of a Christian, I mean to speak here of the great dignity you acquired when born again in the womb of the Church in the waters of Baptism. At that moment you were drawn to the love of God.

"For you, then, the doors of the Church and of Heaven were opened. Into your heart were poured the infused virtues of faith, hope and charity; and so, now made a Christian, you could lift your eyes to Heaven and say, 'God is my Father, He loves me and commands me to call Him by name—Our Father in Heaven.'

"Jesus, the Saviour, calls me His brother, and as a brother I belong to Him, to His merits, to His passion, His death, His dignity and glory. The sacraments of His loving kindness are instituted for me. For me He has a place ready in Paradise.

"Remember your dignity, Christian; and while you thank Him for these graces, spare a thought for so many others who, forgetting or ignorant of these graces, live in sin or false worship. With these great graces, tell me, how have you cooperated?"

"Then turn to Mary as the pure believer, the most helpful Virgin, and say: 'If I come to you, I am certain to get this grace of God; to regain my lost dignity if only you intercede on my behalf. Help of Christians, pray for us.'"

We can so easily miss the master of summary and simplicity at work here, stepping down the high voltage of the elaborate Paschal Mystery for safe domestic use. We could overlook the vital grace-current and Mary's key role in transmitting it which he spells out, or the gradation from personal holiness to "spare a thought for others."

No Piazza Big Enough

In the title "Immaculate Help of Christians" which Don Bosco originally gave to the Turin Basilica and the famous painting above its main altar—a title Don Bosco was still using in 1882—we have a perfect synthesis of this *grace at work, holiness in action*. This curious hybrid title represents a lot more than a transition from one historical period to another," as Father Albert Caviglia and others have seen it.

Lorenzoni was startled, as any artist would be, by Don Bosco's original assignment: "On high, we see Mary most holy amid the choirs of angels; closest around her are the apostles; then the choir of prophets, virgins and confessors. On earth below are the emblems of Mary's great victories and people of all nations of the earth in the act of lifting their hands toward her, calling on her help." (Don Bosco almost certainly had sent a copy of the Iffeldoef (Bavarian) Madonna—a clumsy and overcrowded icon along these very lines, an *Ausiliatrice* portrait).

To such a grandiose project, poor Lorenzoni could be pardoned for his sardonic reply: "And where do you intend to hang it, in the Town Hall Piazza?"

Just what the eventual portrait, an artistic compromise, was meant to signify is described for us in Don Bosco's opening-day brochure: "The major impact of the picture is the idea of religion, meant to arouse devotion in the onlookers." In the ecclesial language of today we would call it "the Church personified." And in the thought of the Salesian quartet (Philip Neri, Francis de Sales, Vincent de Paul, and Don Bosco) we know what "religion" implied. It was the theme they found in the Epistle of Saint James.

"This is religion, pure and undefiled before God the Father: to give help to orphans and widows in their tribulation [activity] and to keep oneself unspotted from the world [holiness of grace]." This grace at work, or holiness in action was admirably compressed into "The Immaculate Help of Christians."

Such an embodiment of the Church vigorously at work would help rescue Marian practice from a possible simpering pietism.

Let us look for a moment at early indications of the Salesians, as seen by Don Bosco, as auxiliary cooperators of grace at work in a mission for which "no piazza would be big enough."

Most Divine to be Cooperators

Among the quotations edging the first cover of the *Salesian Bulletin*, Don Bosco gave pride of place to, "Of all the divine works, the most divine is to become a cooperator in the salvation of souls."

Here he correctly attributes the quote to Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite; but in the copy of the Constitutions sent to Rome in 1861, our Founder blithely attributes it to Saint Augustine (to the delight, possibly, of Pius IX who, as a former Bishop of Spoleto, would have grasped Don Bosco's Marian-bearings anyway).

The same quotation is repeatedly found in Don Bosco's talks to Salesian Cooperators at Lyons, Paris, Genoa, where he always brackets the quote with Saint Augustine's: *Animam Salvasti, Animam Tuam praedestinasti* (In saving souls, you have predestined your own salvation). The parity with his semi-humorous quotation to priests or religious, *Salve, salvando, salvati* (Greetings, save yourself by saving others) is evident enough.

In a letter to Count Caesar Balbo in 1872, the saint wrote along identical lines. "In praying to Mary most holy for your daughter Maria (she helped publish the *Catholic Readings*), I have asked for her the precious gift of holiness, and for the *still more precious gift* of being able to bring that holiness into her apostolic work at all times."

In Don Bosco's eyes, grace was never spiritual euphoria, mere personal bliss, but a gift to be shared, even materially. There is a forgotten ring of menace in his prophetic words to the Cooperators at Lyons in 1883: "the whole Salesian Family is involved."

"If you draw back now and withhold your cooperation, if you let these poor youths become victims of communist theories, the help which you refuse them today they will come to demand from you one day—no longer with cap in hand, but with a knife at your

throat. Then, perhaps, together with your cloak they will take away your life."

Each act of "divine cooperation" in the Marian work of grace is the refrain to the words of the very first Salesian General Chapter in 1877: "As the Help of Christians, to whom we entrust this Chapter, Mary holds nothing dearer to her heart than to help those who not only seek to serve and love her Divine Son themselves, but who set out expressly to find a way to help others love and serve Him."

At times our Founder rises to a poetic note when he writes of this coredemptive mission. Inscribed on the flyleaf of his Breviary (still preserved) is a fused quotation from Dante and Silvio Pellico: "I shall return from this most holy shade, pure and ready to leap the stars . . . It is love which moves the sun and the other constellations."

From the time he was a seminarian ("Here is Mary's secret of helping us to help ourselves—our cooperation") to his final public interview ("Mary will know how to raise up *redeemers* in the contemporary world—I do not fear the future"), Don Bosco stressed that Salesians as religious and educators were primarily cooperators in the redeeming mission of grace.

Sodalities and Camelot

This is precisely the underlying rationale of the sodality initiative at the Congregation's start. In the Society of the Immaculate, Marian devotion is intended to express itself by holiness, but by holiness in the form of concrete apostolic action.

"I was amazed," Don Bosco could write, "at the progress that *grace* had already made in Dominic Savio's soul." But by the same token, as an educator he went on to stress, "The very *first* thing that Dominic was advised to do in order to become a saint was to try to win souls for God."

Even at such early times, Don Bosco was not the possessive octopus. "Try to start off the Immaculate Conception Sodality," he writes to Don Rua, as new rector, "but remember you are only its promoter and not its director. Consider such a function as the task of the young men themselves." Don Bosco's Salesians would not be factotum educators, who leave no room for personal initiative.

A likely Marian nexus with the early sodalities can be traced through an allocution of Pius XII in 1948.

Addressing a group of young French students and apprentices from the St. Vincent de Paul Conference, he told them, "Your

Olivaint Conference founded in 1852 was meant to revive the traditions of the Society of Mary Help of Christians, namely, to see to the complete formation of young men for public life along Christian principles. In its formation and apostolic work it came under attack from anti-clericals, who saw in it a type of army pledged to serve the Church and defend religion. This led to its temporary suspension."

Father Fedele Giraudi saw in this reference to the St. Vincent de Paul Conferences not only a link with our own sodality start (Don Bosco had often corresponded with or visited the Paris and Rome Conferences from 1852-1878), but another reason, besides Spoleto, for the hostility toward Don Bosco's controversial title for the new basilica.

It was just this gracious presence of Mary as Exemplar and Helper that was to create the Oratorian heart of our early Salesian Camelot. "The grace of God," writes Bernard Haring, "somehow becomes visible in the gentleness and joyfulness of the person who has cooperated with it."

So Father Valentini attributes the "youthful innocence, springtime freshness, and green years vitality of early Valdocco and Mornese" to the all-surrounding "ambient of grace" and all-pervading "presence of Mary" which was our Marian charism, both gracious and vigorous at the same time.

It was this Camelot idealism that led most sodality members to embrace personal consecration to Mary—a forerunner, in most cases, to religious vows. In a reversal of roles the "child was to become father of the man," with the educated becoming in turn the educators and the sodality maturing into the religious congregation. Salesian spirituality and Salesian education would no longer be distinguishable in this Marian matrix.

The Becchi dream's didactic note—"teach them the beauty of virtue and the ugliness of sin"—could only be realized through a Majestic Lady, John Bosco's "Teacher of Wisdom."

Law and Grace in Education

Don Bosco's initial distinction between "the two systems of education from time immemorial—the repressive and preventive" has in fact a scriptural origin.

From the prophets to Christ and the Pauline letters, scripture advocates the *charis* (grace) method of spiritual formation over the *torah* (law) approach. It implies no dichotomy (despite actual tensions in history) between the institutional and charismatic Church as such. There is simply a stress that an inner

religion of the heart, based on filial love and personal conviction, free from any external compulsion, must be present if the law is to be of any value whatsoever. Otherwise the law merely generates an impersonal eye-service and lip-service of whitened sepulchres.

In this divine system of education, the graced soul knows that *lex est amor qui obligat* (the law is love which compels us) and that law is "no more than a codified expression of God's love for us" (Paul VI). Grace, then, is inseparably bound up with gentleness, freedom, and loving kindness.

For this reason contemporary writers go out of their way to avoid any presentation of grace as a static or impersonal "thing." To underline its dynamism, they speak of grace as "our personal encounter and relationship with Christ" . . . "God's loving self-communication" . . . and "the powerful presence of the good God in our daily life."

Helpful as they are, none of them can touch the Master Aquinas where (to gladden our Salesian hearts) he writes of grace as *potestas fruendi divinis personis in Trinitate* (The power of taking delight in the family-life of the Trinity).

By quite a remarkable parity with our Salesian context, Church Fathers and later theologians describe actual graces as "the divine help or activity (*Auxilium et motio Dei*) which precedes, accompanies, and follows man's good works as an assistance to habitual (sanctifying) grace."

From this they derive the terms *prevenient*, *concomitant*, and *subsequent* grace—all aids to help man rise above the purely natural order to enter into the supernatural Christ life.

They all tend toward the whole purpose of the Incarnation as spelt out in Jn 10:10. "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full."

Our life-style as Salesians and educators is nothing but this.

A Divine Education System

With apologies for a schematic form for the moment, the intrinsic connection between "the grace-life-style" and "the Salesian life-style" may be caught from the following:

- * Grace takes the first step, prior to any initiative or merit on the part of man.
- * Grace stems from an initial fond attraction of the better part of the soul toward God's loving kindness.
- * Grace (habitual grace) is a kindly, saving Presence that stays with us, until rejected.

- * Grace is an actual experience of divine life, and therefore as mystery defies a full understanding.
- * Grace is the meeting-place of all man's natural and supernatural gifts, the Christian humanism par excellence that weds faith and culture.
- * Grace by its nature is adaptable and ever new, different for every person and situation, since "the Spirit breathes where He wills."
- * Grace is drawn to spiritual need and poverty, since like all love, it is complementary by nature, drawn to opposites.
- * Grace brings with it the bliss and delight of family life; here the life of the Trinity.
- * Grace is the centre-point of harmony, where man is made perfect in his moral, intellectual, social, and physical being.
- * Grace begins with fond love, proceeds by cooperative love, and ends in total love.
- * Grace is at its peak when man's helpful redemptive activity is at its maximum, since God is "pure act."
- * Grace revolves around free will, man's absolute liberty to accept or reject this gentle divine assistance. Without such freedom no man can even begin to merit in the life of grace.
- * Grace (created grace) is found in its perfection only in Mary, full of grace and mediator of every grace.

There should be no need to compare each step of this divine education system with our own Salesian system. It would be enough simply to focus on one initial grace.

In Salesian writings, an inordinate space and emphasis seem to be given to Don Boco's initial meeting with a youngster. This can be verified in the lives of Bartholemew Garelli, Savio, Besucco, Magone, Colle, Rua, and Cagliero.

This angling to make a vital and unique "heart speaks to heart" rapport with the better part of each individual soul (the *scintilla animae* or "gleam of the soul") is solely to prod the spirit and help grace flow. To dismiss it as a mere exchange of pleasantries, or, still less, as an educator's bait for popularity is to shortchange Don Bosco's earnestness. For him it was the start of the whole process of education in grace.

The same affinity (should one say *consanguinity*) with grace could be detailed out for each step of the above.

Before going on to examine how this "system" of divine education is illuminated by the experience of Mary, let us pause for a moment on the firm ground of Salesian examples.

Down-to-Earth Devotion

Far from being theoretical, such a gracious presence of Mary in the Salesian ambient can be so real as to be downright disconcerting. So down-to-earth is our Marian awareness that visitors could be taken aback by it all, as if Salesians claim to hold some sort of mortgage on Mary's help.

A brief, anecdotal documentary from our family history may evoke this Marian intimacy.

The homely prototype is captured by Don Bosco's visit to the Salesian Sisters at Mornese in 1885. "You ask me for a souvenir," he responded to the Sisters, "but I am old and feeble. I only want to tell you Our Lady loves you so much that *she is here present* among you." Here Don Bosco's secretary, Father Bonetti intervened. "What Don Bosco really means is that she is watching over you, protecting you in spirit." "No, no!" Don Bosco cut him short, *Tutto commosso*. "I don't mean that at all. I tell you Mary is really here among you, walking through this house, caring for it under her very mantle."

Taking Don Bosco at his word, Mary Mazzarello used to deposit the key of the house at the foot of the *Ausiliatrice's* statue each night before retiring. "Mary, you see, is the real superior of this house," she explained.

In a similar vein, Father John Balzola, a rugged pioneer missionary in the Amazon, used to "post a letter" to Mary each evening in a hollow tree trunk behind her statue. He had not "gone crazy" in the jungle heat, but remained loyal to Salesian tradition in his long solitude.

Earlier, as a late vocation to Valdocco, this same one-time farmer had thought of abandoning his heavy priestly studies. One morning at the 5:30 basilica Mass, Father Rinaldi intervened. "See, John, how I use this small candle (not the six tall ones) to read the missal in the half-light. So Mary often uses 'little Salesians,' so that people may read God's word by their light."

Just how concrete and pragmatic this Marian recourse of ours is can be illustrated by the life of Father Peter Ricaldone. As a cleric in Seville, the future rector major was assigned to an oratory of young desperadoes who terrified the neighbourhood after dark, having first shot out the street lamp. After a fervent novena in preparation for Mary's feast on May 24th, local

parishioners were astonished to find a heap of five hundred *shanghais* (slingshots) piled up before Mary's statue—a gesture of reform and nocturnal peace!

The same holy innocence shines out from the pages of Father John Francescia. This guileless nonagenarian, destined to hold the Chair of Classics at Turin University, found Latin without Mary's assistance, beyond him as an adolescent. He records it for us in a verse disarming in its simplicity:

“In grief I prayed the Virgin mild
To lumen my dark Latin;
She shone like moonlight on her child
At Vesper time and Matin.
And every cipher lay revealed
And every obscure pattern.

She sat me with the Doctors then
In Turin's seat of learning;
Enthused I took up scholar's pen,
All fire for Classics burning.
I tremble now, the least of men
Such laurels, honours spurning.

On a more sombre note is the faith of the dying Father Peter Berutti (Prefect General) stricken with terminal cancer but still light of heart: “Just as well the Blessed Virgin has the gift of bilocation, trilocation and central location for us Salesians! Last night the agony was so intense I could not have endured it without her presence at my bedside. Can you imagine, for a moment, the Madonna enjoying the bliss of paradise while her sons were suffering here on earth?”

Again the young priest-soldier Louis Mathias in World War I visited the Pathe Film Company to obtain “films suitable as entertainment for French soldiers” on leave in Paris. During the screening it became painfully obvious that Pathe's version of what constituted suitable “entertainment for French soldiers” was world's apart from his own! A young cleric, Guerri, later Archbishop, heard him murmur “Mother of God, make this blessed machine break down.” At a critical moment the projector-lamp blew. It was a whimsical Lepanto victory in miniature!

Finally, the former provincial of Australia and California, Father Ambrose Rossi, related a memorable Salesian anecdote:

“During the Alpine Campaign (1917) our unit was assigned to dislodge an Austrian patrol from a strategic hillside cave. Sounds of singing came to us as we crept forward, grenades in hand. It was a Latin hymn, *Inviolata, integra et casta es, Maria*—a hymn for

December 8th in a few days' time. We followed our Captain in a dramatic entry. 'Good evening, boys,' he said in German, 'Like you, we're Catholics.' After this risky introduction, both sides in this strange war concluded the hymn together before Mary's candle-lit picture. There were brief handshakes, a toast together, and then we went back to our lines.

"Two years later at our Crocetta International Seminary, an Austrian Salesian stood up to give his item for our December 8th academy. 'I'm going to tell you how the power of Mary's help saved me as a soldier-cleric,' he began. Then to my amazement he proceeded to tell how he and his companions owed their lives to a picture of *L'Ausiliatrice* during a cave ambush. I could not let him finish, and leapt on to the stage beside him. 'I, a Salesian like you, was among that raiding-party,' I shouted, and we ended by narrating each detail in antiphonal fashion, to the standing ovation of the whole assembly. It was a night of triumph, and a memorable Salesian academy for December 8th."

Such a presentation may leave one open to the charge of naivety and gullibility. So be it. "I will give you a Mistress who will teach you wisdom, and without whom all wisdom becomes so much folly," the Becchi shepherd boy was promised.

There are precedents. In 1878 the Vicar Capitular of Turin complained to Rome of "the folk-lore accounts and favours published at the basilica accounts which hold religion up to ridicule in this unbelieving age." The court of history has passed its verdict since then.

Immaculate Preventive System

Both Father Quadrio and Father Valentini have shown how our Founder wanted Mary Immaculate to be regarded as the ideal of the "Preventive System."

By *prevenient grace*, God's intervening assistance beforehand, Mary was preserved from every stain. So God's Mother became first of the redeemed, the unique graced-one so highly favoured in this divine preventive system of grace.

Yet Mary's role in scripture is more dynamic than exemplary. Her kind presence and active help pervade the Gospels when she intervenes at crisis-points. "And the Mother of Jesus was there" . . . "And there stood by Mary, the Mother of Jesus."

At the Visitation, Cana, Calvary, and Pentecost she is alert to personal need or ecclesial distress, and in fact anticipates it beforehand by providing assistance. In the text, "And Mary rising up went with haste into the hill country," the early Church saw the prompt help under adverse conditions which characterizes grace, and the Church as Cooperator in grace: *L'Ausiliatrice*.

Adaptation is her forte. Spontaneous and open to the Spirit, she can handle the unexpected and out of the ordinary. Egypt's exile, the temple search, the hostile hometown mob did not upset her equilibrium, though she is "troubled."

God's People in the Church community are everything for her. At the Annunciation, along the Via Crucis, in the Upper Room, at Easter's *Regina Caeli*, *alleluia*, she is their representative or spokeswoman. She is steeped in the culture and religion of her own race.

The theme of her Servant Song (Magnificat) is proof enough of the gentle, loving kindness and practical help that made her the prototype for the Beatitudes. She is in her element among the poor Anawim.

Some twenty-seven times Luke's Gospel calls to mind the ecstatic joy of Christ's advent, most of it revolving around Mary's presence as the Cause of Our Joy. The same Gospel is filled with familiarity, as it pervaded her family house at Nazareth.

Absorbed in *religion* as the Daughter of Sion, emanating *loving kindness* from a grace-filled heart, Mary also brings *reason* into play. She exercises her free-will decisively, not as a robot, but after heartfelt pondering; an intelligent colleague and cooperator in every faith-mystery.

Assumed in the Paschal Mystery, she continues her ecclesial function as Mother of Grace. Always her activity, "the divine work of being a cooperator in the salvation of souls," remains subordinate to Christ's work, to the Church's mission.

And so, on looking at Mary's countenance and spiritual features, the Salesian Society recognises its own identity as religious, as educator. "Mary, Help of Christians is the Salesian Society."

Not for a moment does this detract from the centrality of Christ in our work. The very lifeblood of our spirit is "*gratia Christi*," the grace of Christ. Writing under our Founder's direction, Father Julius Barberis has left us our cue: "Jesus has left us the authentic principles and practices of all education. He came to educate the world. Let us follow these searchings of the Gospel, trying to do in our small way as Jesus did; nothing else. On this fundamental point is based all Don Bosco's system; it is all so simple, so straightforward." (Ricaldone, *Don Bosco Educatore*, I, 96)

The Helplessness of God

In referring to the Salesians, Cardinal Gilroy once seemed guilty of specious reasoning. "In Australia, Asia, and Europe I have seen

the Salesians undertake works that seemed apparently beyond their strength. In fact they seemed headed for certain failure. And so, in this way, they have given Mary the chance of doing what they could not do, and invariably Mary has come to their help. The Salesians' very existence and work are proof of the power of the Virgin Mary."

And yet he was being no more specious than Thomas Aquinas. In his *Summa* (Q.35-39) he is daring enough to talk of "the helplessness of God." "The most profound gift, as we see in the Incarnation, is the opportunity we give others to express their love. It is strange that we miss the obvious truth that without the initial helplessness of the Christ-Child none of the cherished privileges of helping others would be possible."

In the Incarnation, God's Son gives up His divine "aseity" or self-sufficiency to become utterly dependent on the help of others.

In a proud world that idolizes power and disdains childlikeness as weakness we can easily forget this Salesian heritage. "I am fully aware of the great blessing of being a son (though unworthy) of this glorious Mother," writes Francis de Sales, "but, trusting in her help, we can take on quite extraordinary enterprises."

This is the *genius peculiaris* enshrined over our Salesian domestic hearth. Here we find our confidence and magnanimous vision at a faltering start or a threatening moment—Mary is our family heroine.

And so Don Bosco could joke with the Swiss Guards crowding around to have their photograph taken with this famous visitor to the Vatican. "Why the rush to be photographed with a country bumpkin priest?" He could downplay hero-worshipping crowds or pupils: "Fancy feting an ex-cowherd from the Butteglia paddocks . . . Don Bosco, the greatest? You're like the hayseed at one Tombola raffle, ignoring the artistic prizes, and with eyes only for the giant salami-sausage!" Or Mary Mazzarello could refuse our Founder's request to accompany her departing missionaries to a Papal Audience: "The Pope will be expecting to find an accomplished directress, and instead would find an ignorant peasant woman." We hear echoes, too, of Francis de Sales: "Can you expect delicate fruit from this old mountain tree?"

All this heavily underscores the pure gratuitousness of grace, undeserved apart from the strange fascination our very helplessness exercises over God's fondness.

And here lies the instinctive gravitation toward poor and abandoned youth in Salesian history. It is a human reenactment of the whole grace-process as first realised in the servant-helper of the Lord. Here lies our compulsion to be at one with the young at

their level, sharing their interests, activities, and wavelength in the here-and-now situation.

Father Paul Avallone rightly attributes the first inkling of Don Bosco's vocation among the poor to his feeling of utter helplessness at his father's death. "Our Founder was primarily a father in every sense" (P. Rinaldi).

All this was no pose or affectation of personal humility. It was equally valid for our fragile congregation. Don Bosco has admitted as much, as the Salesian archives reveal. "The Lord chooses weak instruments, for His honour rather than man's. The hand of the Lord worked this way at our start, development, and spread. Short of material funds, lacking moral and scientific means, Father John Bosco relied totally on God's help, and so felt confident to face up to evil times and repeated opposition. In this way he set on foot a work that aims to bring help to all youth in distress" (132, Archives).

Help always presupposes helplessness. Here lies our confidence. For the whole Salesian Family, bound in its frailness to Mary's help as she in turn depends on the gracious help of God, is committed to helpless youth. It stands or falls by this interaction of mutual assistance. And Mary is the keystone of this world-spanning arch of help.

Saint Francis de Sales, the Doctor of Gracious Love

In the life of this gentlest of saints and strongest of men, Francis de Sales' genial mission had its real origin in a crisis of grace, resolved by Mary.

His head filled with the contemporary controversies over grace and free will, he felt certain he was predestined to eternal punishment. Crushed by this obsession, as a student he knelt before the Black Madonna at St. Etienne-des-Grès where he often had been heard to pray "in a semi-audible tone." Here he recited a *Memorare* as a cry from the heart to Mary. "The scales fell from his eyes, and all heaviness of heart left him forever. Certain that God wants all men to be saved and, in His goodness, gives man's will strength enough to cooperate," he abandoned himself to gracious Love.

This experience (not theory) of grace shaped his entire life's work. From now on he would gently foster grace and love through grace and love, the Marian ideal. It took the form (as the Salesians' new Constitutions read) of an "optimistic humanism which helps all to believe in the natural and supernatural resources of man, without ignoring his weakness." This is an act of

faith in the essential goodness of the created world. It freed him for vigorous action as the very height of mysticism.

As a maestro of harmony in the Church of the time, Francis would intervene dramatically to bring peace during the grace vs. free-will controversies. When the Dominicans and Jesuits were at loggerheads over a solution, Francis wrote personally to Pope Paul V suggesting a truce. The Pope heeded his peace-making advice, declared both systems on "auxiliary grace" orthodox, and forbade both sides to invoke the term "heretical."

Again Francis stepped in to restore harmony when the Thomist and Renaissance theologians were disputing over "predestination": whether God's gracious will to save all men first takes into account "the foreseen merits" of each individual. His letter to Lessius (1619) noted, "a true solution has to harmonize both God's loving grace and the cooperation of man's free will." It did the trick, at least for the time being.

It was the voice of experience and moderation, an echo from the Paris crisis. This experience made him a spiritual master and perfect model of education in a climate of liberty.

We can bypass here his quite revolutionary approach in demonasticizing religious life to concentrate on his highlighting of freedom as a core of education.

A French commentator explains his educative style: "Francis de Sales preferred to *build souls from within*; to make them live vigorously rather than preserve them from all risks. Obviously he did not leave aside protective measures needed in the delicate stages of formation or budding virtue, but he insisted that interior love has a vital force which self-immunizes against danger. He used to repeat: "In the ship of divine love there are no galley slaves; all the rowers are volunteers."

For him "discipline" was a state of mind and heart in the internal forum encompassing self-mastery through a formed and right conscience. "Order" was merely a state of affairs in the external forum, often imposed by others.

Thus he rebuked Msgr. Camus, "What a despot you are! You try to bend the will of these young men as if you were the very landlord of their hearts, while God with His gentle spirit in the order of grace never for a moment compels souls . . . Had there been a better method than gentleness, Jesus would have taught it. Instead He asks us to learn only two lessons from His heart—to be gentle and humble of heart. Is not God Himself a Father, His Son a Lamb, His Spirit a Dove? And are you wiser than God?"

To a gathering of his past pupils, Don Bosco stressed, "I consider as a Salesian Old Boy anyone who has come, even for a short time, under the gentle influence of Saint Francis de Sales."

It was Francis de Sales, as the mysterious guide, to whom Don Bosco turned concerning "a good spirit in the house, for vocations and the missions, and about the future of the Congregation." It was his patronage he invoked when Salesian spirit and educative kindness seemed to be slipping (Letter to South America, Letter from Rome).

And what is the Marian connection? In the dialogues which dot Saint Francis' works, the Blessed Virgin is always held up as the model of freely willed cooperation with God's grace. The long, two-page dialogue in the *Treatise on the Love of God* is typical.

The Visitation itself (for which Francis named a congregation of nuns) is the epitome of the Salesian ideal: "mysticism in action," when Mary by her presence brings the joy of salvation, in adverse conditions, to a believer in distress.

School for Saints

After a visit to the Oratory in 1848, the Marquis of D'Azeglio, while praising the work in general, criticised the Rosary "as a tedious, repetitious prayer." "I'll stand by this practice," answered Don Bosco, "as my institute is founded on it. I'd be prepared to drop other important things—even your great friendship—rather than give up this Rosary."

It seems a far-fetched reaction to place so much importance on a single devotional practice. Yet it is verified by *Marialis Cultus*, which explains the Rosary as the embodiment "of the whole mystery of grace, that *kenosis*, *death* and *resurrection* which constitute the entire Paschal Mystery."

This mystical presence of Mary in the life of grace was Don Bosco's constant aim. His "joy" was nothing but the deep abiding gladness that comes only from dying to self and rising to a new life in Christ.

While the list of isolated Marian practices in the life of Don Bosco's protege is impressive, much more important was the deeper spirit that ran through Dominic Savio's life. "All the life of Dominic," Don Bosco points out, "can be said to be *an uninterrupted practice of devotion* [singular] *to Mary most holy*."

It was this Marian mentality of mind and heart that set alight young hearts for "mysticism in action" in this school for saints. While Dominic could write, "I ask the Madonna for the grace to be a saint" (*L'Immacolata*), he would also enthuse, "If only I could win over the souls of all my friends for God; so many still need our help" (*L'Ausiliatrice*). He and his companions had taken Don Bosco at his word: "To save your souls is not *the main* but *the only*

motive why you are here. I need your help and total cooperation in this work of grace" ("Good Night" Talk).

Spiritual direction for Don Bosco was informal, but a living continuum. The whole cordial ensemble of his spiritual direction—"Good Night" talks, group conferences, the incidental word-in-the-ear, personal notes, the penetrating look, the rare office-counselling, and above all Confession—was geared to preserve, restore, or augment the life of grace.

Rather than "getting across" to his pupils or Salesians, it was set to lift up their spirit to a higher plane (inspiration) or to galvanize them into apostolic action (animation).

The substitute words "counselling" or "communication," minus their original Valdocco value and impact, are defective and half charged, as they fail to convey the ecclesial dynamism of the original Salesian saga. They could rob our divine preventive system of its very mystique—the vital throb of grace.

Only half the message is here. Besides "the beauty of virtue" Don Bosco had the Marian commission "teach the ugliness of sin." Some have written of this "sin-fighting role" as an obsession. They have called for a "more realistic approach" today, introducing our pupils to the hard and stark facts of the world as it is (crime, drugs, abortion, sex-exploitation, etc., treated in open-class discussion). It is profitable to read Don Bosco's words on such a method in Chapter II of Don Bosco's life of Luigi Colle: "It is folly to devote every effort to developing knowledge and information, and ignore the faculty of willing and loving through acts of self-sacrifice and generosity."

Thomas Aquinas could counter any suggestion of a "Polyanna land of Fantasia virtue": "Nothing is so unreal as sin. The further we draw away from the great uncreated Reality, who is God, the more we drift into falsehood and total self-deception." Sin is the only "never-never" mirage on the very real horizon of grace.

Father Philip Rinaldi, in fact, says our Founder wanted his pupils "to pass from an ignorance of evil directly to an utter detestation of it." "In all confidence," he writes, "I once thought Don Bosco out of date here. I read widely, but after long experience I was compelled to admit he was correct. Granted, such a stage of ignorance does not last long. But let nature take its course and wait for the opportune moment for a tactful, confidential talk; never in a public group." This is a remote ideal, perhaps, but still an ideal.

To this "education through innocence," Father Valentini attributes not only so many vocations to the celibate life at the Congregation's start, but the remarkable soundness of those who chose married life instead.

In this very area of "sinfulness," some older adolescents could find one Marian presentation off-putting. It is the "Mother won't be pleased *unless...*" syndrome. Nothing could turn older students off more from Marian devotion than such a strictly conditional love: one totally opposed to the whole Incarnational, Catholic tradition. In fact, the earliest use of "Auxilium" is found in Saint Ephrem's hymn as "Auxilium Peccatorum," "Help of Sinners," a positive assistance for the half defeated. Don Bosco's "Dream of the Tailor Shop" comes to mind: "You will be working mainly not with new garments, but with worn ones patched by the help of Mary." Through the sacraments she would lead them to the "more abundant life" of grace.

I once sat in on a fascinating debate between a young Korean priest, Father Ignatius Kil, and the well-known Father Peter Stella. In faltering Italian, Ignatius was trying to convince Father Stella that Don Bosco's system was a Marian mysticism comparable to John of the Cross at his best. I thought he had far the better of the debate, as he was able to draw on the actual experience of Dominic Savio, as leader of this school for saints.

I Will Die of Grief

Don Bosco knew a crisis when he saw one. With his "refusal to lament over the times" and his willingness "to run ahead to the point of temerity" in the apostolate, he was not one to indulge in lamentations or scare-talk. Which lends his Rome letter even greater weight. In his eyes the Preventive System was at least in partial eclipse in May 1884.

The letter was no sudden inspiration. The background to it shows a growing uneasiness that his original aim and work were being misinterpreted.

In 1884 Father Lemoyne wrote to Turin: "Our Father can no longer talk about anything else except the heroic times of the Oratory." To Father Barberis, he had painstakingly set out a detailed plan for the philosophy students' course in "Sacred Pedagogy." At Paris in 1883 he had repeated: "In what does this urgent work for the young consist? In two things, loving kindness at all times, and the chapel always open, with every chance for frequent Confessions and Communion." The 1884 house chronicle reads: "Don Bosco has set up a commission to study ways to get a better spirit in the Oratory." Just weeks prior to the Rome letter, Don Bosco wrote from the Vatican, "All this week I've been thinking of the 4th and 5th senior classes, and have written about this to the Prefect of Studies."

Nor did his uneasiness stop with the letter. In 1885 came the famous letter to South America: "I would like to give everyone a conference on the Salesian Spirit . . . The Preventive System is distinctively ours." A fragment from Father Canepa (1884) in the Salesian archives reads, "Already during the past year a proposal has been put forward to study the reasons why the senior classes have lacked and still lack trust and confidence. What I suggested at the time has been now covered, far better I notice, by Don Bosco in his letter from Rome."

It all adds up to a moving climax in a remarkable letter from our Founder to Father Cerruti in 1885: "Throughout my life I have tried to combat a pagan education by my ideal of reforming it on a solidly Christian basis. This I have done by editing expurgated pagan classics, as well as publishing Christian writers; I have referred to this in my advice to rectors, teachers and Salesian assistants. And now, old and failing, I will die with grief at not having been properly understood."

Today we might call the spectre that haunted Don Bosco's last years the spirit of "naturalism in education" and the spirit of "secularism in religious life."

The affinity with Father Vigano's new Rome letter need not be pressed too far. But we can all pool our suggestions. We may have lacked confidence in our personal and collective experience as Salesians. We may have introduced executive-type administration patterns. We may have lacked discretion by borrowing indiscriminately from behavioral and social sciences or from child-welfare theories. We may have over-borrowed from the "desert" spirituality of some modern authors. Instead of a delicate auxiliary-graft onto our renewed Salesian stock, we could have been guilty of wholesale dumping, with the original Salesian creation buried and inoperative at the bottom of the heap.

And the greatest casualty every time is the grace-life, "that power of taking delight in the family life of the Trinity." It suffers not only insofar as grace constitutes the origin, content and end-aim of Salesian life (this must be equally true for any "Christian education"), but more especially since the gentle *modality* of grace is the very *method* or *life-style* which sets us apart as Salesians. Here we find both our consanguinity and affinity with *grace*.

There is a temptation in crisis time to take the easy way out: to transfer the renewal burden to the juridical level by tightening up or loosening up (as a repressive method would do), instead of putting it back on the charismatic plane of a deepening down by prayerful reflection, as a "preventive" method must do.

Amateur as each diagnosis might be, Father Vigano's

prescribed remedy is most professional: to rediscover Mary Help of Christians, whom we have lost sight of behind contemporary clouds.

The Whole World Running

Those watching the quick succession of Papal requiems and inaugurations on T.V. in 1980 may have detected an apocalyptic note. There came to mind Don Bosco's *Dream of the Two Columns*. One saw the Church "in distress and under assault after the deaths, in quick succession of two Popes." Under a new Pontiff it was to "stabilize itself between the two pillars of the Eucharist and *L'Ausiliatrice*," before a remarkable renewal.

All the last three or four Popes have come within the large Salesian circle. "If I were like Saint Francis de Sales I would not mind if they were to make me Pope" (John XXIII) . . . "I can call myself a Salesian as I directed my priest-nephew to the Salesian Family" (Paul VI) . . . "My mother regularly used to read to us as children from the works of Saint Francis de Sales" (John Paul I) . . . "To the Salesian parish priest and the youth apostolate here I owe my priestly vocation" (John Paul II).

All of them have had close rapport with Mary as *Ausiliatrice*. "As a child I kept a *Salesian Bulletin Ausiliatrice* cover above my bed" (John XXIII) . . . "To you, *Auxilium Episcoporum*, Mother of the Church, we entrust the entire fruits of this Council" (Paul VI) . . . "We faithful have this childlike instinct. In tears or in pain a child goes directly to Mother; her help, in his eyes, is all powerful" (John Paul I) . . . "I got my devotion to Mary from the Salesians" (John Paul II).

The fresh attraction the Church holds over the modern world can be found here: a new gentle grace and Marian joy. The whole world is running after this magnetic spirit, reminiscent of the village crowds flocking to join Don Bosco's autumn excursions. It employs a "popular pedagogy for everyday people," with a festive gala atmosphere as drawing power for this homely catechesis. It is a flow on from Francis de Sales: "We can get all men to accept salvation, if we can only make salvation attractive to them." Already on John's ordination day, his mysterious petition (ahead of its time) was for simplicity and power in spreading the Good News—"efficacy of the Word."

It would be a pity if Salesians, as pioneers of this Marian "grace in the market place," were now to head in the opposite direction.