

Blessed Luigi Guanella and Saint John Bosco

by the Salesian Missions

"Don Bosco, while preaching a retreat to the seminarians at Bergamo in 1866, so won their hearts that when one of them called at Como and related what Don Bosco had done, he fired the imagination of the seminarians there I, among others, became so attracted by Don Bosco, and my affection for him grew so strong, that, after my ordination in 1870, I went to visit him in Turin."

Such is the testimony of Don Guanella. From that moment, Don Bosco completely captivated him. On becoming parish priest at Savogno, he was keen that Don Bosco should open a house in the diocese of Como, but he came up against the opposition of the bishop. He then tried to get round the difficulty. If the bishop would let him go to Turin and spend some time with Don Bosco, he might, on his return, be able to do something similar in the diocese.

The bishop, though reluctantly, gave his consent. At this point, a new factor entered the drama. It was in the form of a communication from the Curia of Turin. This discouraged Don Guanella from leaving his diocese, and denied him authority to exercise the sacred ministry in Turin.

These were hard times for Don Bosco and his followers. The attitude of the Curia of Turin, under the leadership of the archbishop, was far from benevolent. Situations were also created which, to describe as merely vexatious, would be to indulge in an understatement.

But has it not been said: "to suffer for the Church is nothing; the real test is to suffer from the Church?" And to put up 'serenely' with this alone is certain proof of one's love for the Church. Don Bosco suffered from the Church for long, weary years. Don Guanella sensed the tension and, since he was not up-to-date with all the facts, it is easy to understand his astonishment and his seeking of explanations in things which had nothing to do with it.

So, on December 4, 1874, he wrote to Don Bosco, "perhaps these severe measures (those emanating from the Curia of Turin) may have been provoked by the local police. I cannot think of any other explanation at the moment. You know how I have been under police observation ever since I published my pamphlet "Ammaestramenti". I commend myself to you and beseech the Lord to scatter these storm clouds so that I can soon join you."

A few days later, he had a reply from Don Bosco from Nice: "Your place is ready. You can come when you please." Meanwhile, he managed to find him a substitute for his parish. To his parishioners, Don Guanella gave the following explanation of his departure: "I feel deep down inside me that Divine Providence is calling me to Turin. It will be as God wills. I hope that all will turn out well."

In the catalogue of the Society of St. Francis of Sales for the year 1875, Don Louis Guanella is listed among the novices. As soon as he arrived at the Oratory he met Don Bosco and warmly greeted him. Don Bosco at once said, "Would you like to go to America?" A few minutes earlier, he had decided to accept the missions in South America. It was an important and decisive step in the history of the Congregation, and the saint knew it. "I would indeed," replied Don Guanella in whose head was a load of projects, and whose coming to Turin was more than anything a kind of apprenticeship "like to found in my diocese a community of nuns, and also one of priests, as, in fact, I have arranged with some colleagues of mine." "Here we have everything, Don Bosco insisted." We have nuns, too, and you will join us for good."

In this account of this first meeting, we have in miniature the whole of the drama of Don Guanella's three years with Don Bosco. On one side is the saint who wants to take him over

completely, entrusts to him affairs of great responsibility, confides in him, and intends him to belong to himself in the fullest sense of the expression.

On the other side, is the intention that brought Don Guanella to Turin: to learn, see and gain experience. His bishop, who wants him back in the diocese and, finally, some interior instinct which tells him that the Lord wants something different of him that the time spent with Don Bosco is only a happy transitional period from which, at the proper time, he will emerge to strike out on his own.

He would say of those three years: "Being with Don Bosco was to me like being in heaven." It is an affirmation that leaves no room for doubt as to his feelings.

Don Bosco did not leave him in idleness. He employed him in preaching, in the giving of catechism classes at Valsalice, and as a part-time secretary. He came, too, under the direction of Don Rua in the management of the Oratory of St. Aloysius, which was attended by more than 700 boys.

But the work in which he excelled was that of the Sons of Mary, the work for late vocations. Don Bosco had the idea of this work for some time, but found difficulty in getting it accepted by some of his closest collaborators. Then, in Don Guanella, he found the ideal man. They had long talks about it, and discovered a way to experiment which brought positive results. Naturally, they had to work fast, and to concentrate on essentials. At the Oratory it was nicknamed "the baptism of fire", and it was a phrase which did not displease Don Bosco.

From Rome, he sent Don Guanella a special blessing for his community of young men from the Holy Father, Pius IX and he concluded thus: "Meantime, dear Don Guanella, put your heart and soul into the work. God's grace will not fail you. Serenity, patience, courage! I shall have lots more to tell you on my return."

Don Guanella, when writing to his own bishop, cited Don Bosco's experiment to him. He suggested an addition should be made to the seminary to provide for an accelerated course of studies for adults on the lines of the Sons of Mary. They study, he said, with incomparable good-will, and are wonderfully amenable.

In the following year (1876-77), he sent him as Rector of a new house opened at Trinita in the diocese of Mondovi. There, too, he was guided by Don Bosco. There is extant a gem of a letter which is full of sound, practical suggestions.

In body, he was at Trinita, but his mind was elsewhere. The Bishop kept insisting with him to return to the diocese, and at once.

Don Guanella replied, thanking him once more for having granted him leave of absence until then to stay with his beloved Don Bosco. Then he added immediately: "My own heart, and the advice of pious persons, counsel me to return to the diocese to undertake some special work. I beg of you to free me from parish work so that I may dedicate myself to other works of the ministry."

Would the bishop, moreover, bear in mind "a number of young people who have been waiting for over a year to join me in a foundation of some kind." Among those 'pious' persons, Don Bosco was certainly not to be counted, for, as we shall see, his thoughts were in quite another direction. For his part, the bishop ordered him to return to his parish, after which, the position



could be studied. Don Guanella informed Don Bosco, and from Turin there came a desperate letter.

"My dear Don Louis, If you allow yourself to be carried away by every thought that comes into your head, you will find it hard to know God's Will. One who is bound by religious vows, if he wants to treat them seriously, must reject every counsellor and every project which is not in keeping with the matter of those vows, or in accordance with the will of his Superior. Otherwise there would be as many congregations as individuals, and religious life would become ineffective and sometimes harmful.

"Do not, therefore, think, speak or write about anything else until your triennial vows have expired. Meanwhile, speak only with Jesus Crucified, and ask Him to reveal to you what will make you happy at the hour of death. This is the only way not to make life a failure..."

"Dear Don Louis, help me to save souls. Europe and America are crying out for apostolic laborers. Don't desert me in the fight. Battle bravely and you will secure the crown of glory..."

Half way through July, he returned to the attack with a really attractive proposal. Did he want to work, and to have plenty of it? Then he should stay in the Congregation. There, his desire to work for God would have tremendous scope.

The Holy Father had ordered a missionary expedition to be sent to San Domingo that year. There, the minor and major seminaries, the cathedral and the university had all to be taken over. "Do you think, dear Don Louis, that you would like to take part in this new expedition, and in this new type of mission? The language is Spanish. I believe this is a providential opportunity for you."

Again, in a letter of the 27th of the same month: "With regard to your position, don't forget the saying, "he who finds himself well-off where he is, stays there, and he who is doing well lets well be". Many, not heeding this advice, have allowed themselves to be led astray: they have sought the best and have ended by not doing even well. I speak to you from my heart, because I desire nothing but your happiness here and hereafter."

Don Guanella bowed to the insistence of his bishop. "I deem it my greatest good fortune to have known Don Bosco, but there would have been emptiness in my heart for the rest of my life, because, believe it or not, I have the constant nagging desire to build some ciabotto in my native diocese." 'Ciabotto' is a Piedmontese word signifying a dwelling of little worth. That is what Don Bosco called his foundations. And so off went Don Guanella.

A year or so after Don Bosco's death, he wrote to Don Rua: "I want to record my immense attachment to Don Bosco. Certainly, leaving him was like leaving home." Looking back nostalgically upon the years spent at the Oratory, he spoke in these terms, "There (in the Congregation) I had the example of so many virtues, and the spiritual direction of Don Bosco who did so much good to all. Don Bosco's heart was like a magnet which drew all to himself; his words, few and well-pondered, were as lightning flashes to the mind. My eternal gratitude to Don Bosco and his works."

(Credit: [Salesian Missions](#))