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# Resilience as a Basis for the Birth of the First Past Pupils' Movement of Catholic Schools

Odporność jako cecha leżąca u podstaw  
założenia Stowarzyszenia Byłych Uczniów  
Szkoł Katolickich

## ABSTRACT

Despite being the largest group in the Salesian Family, with 100,000 affiliated members worldwide, the Past Pupils of Don Bosco Movement has to date lacked a biography of their charismatic founder, the Turin-born Carlo Gastini (1833–1902), the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of whose death was commemorated in 2022. A family man, bookbinder and teacher, as well as occasional poet and actor, he was the first boarder at the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales. Little was known about him, beyond three specific anecdotes. However, from 1847 to 1902, he was linked to Valdocco as a pupil (first as a day pupil and then as a boarder), seminarian, parishioner, worker and entertainer. His life was parallel to that of Don Bosco himself, who was a second father to him, and to the development of his own congregation, the Salesian Family and even Italy as a nation. The culmination of his gratitude since 1849 was the charismatic foundation, in 1870, of the Past Pupils of Don Bosco Movement, which celebrated its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2020. Its basis was simple: create an instrument of mutual

## KEYWORDS

Don Bosco, the Past Pupils of Don Bosco Movement, oratory, Carlo Gastini, Salesians in Spain, resilience

## SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

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help among his former colleagues, just as Don Bosco had taught them to do when they were students at the Oratory. Creating a cohesive group centred on values is a proposal for facing difficulties together. In Spain, the Movement found one of its deepest-rooted abodes.

## ABSTRAKT

Mimo że wychowankowie Stowarzyszenia Byłych Uczniów Ks. Bosko stanowią największą grupę w rodzinie salezjańskiej, liczącą sto tysięcy członków zrzeszonych na całym świecie, to jednak jak dotąd brakowało im biografii swojego charyzmatycznego założyciela, urodzonego w Turynie Carla Gastiniego (1833–1902), którego 120. rocznicę śmierci uczczono w 2022 roku. Człowiek rodzinny, introligator i nauczyciel, a także okazjonalnie poeta i aktor, był pierwszym wychowankiem Oratorium św. Franciszka Salezego. Niewiele o nim wiadomo, poza pewnymi trzema anegdotami. W latach 1847–1902 był związany z Valdocco jako uczeń (najpierw jako uczeń dzienny, a następnie jako osoba mieszkająca w internacie), seminarzysta, parafianin, robotnik i artysta. Jego życie było przypadło na czasy, w których żył ks. Bosko, a którego on traktował jako swego drugiego ojca; to także okres powstania i rozwoju rodziny salezjańskiej, a nawet Włoch jako narodu. Wyrazem jego wdzięczności wobec salezjanów było założenie w 1870 roku charyzmatycznej fundacji – Stowarzyszenia Byłych Uczniów Ks. Bosko, które w 2020 roku obchodziło 150-lecie swego istnienia. Jego założenia były proste: stworzyć środowisko wzajemnej pomocy między byłymi kolegami, tak jak nauczył ich tego ks. Bosko, gdy byli studentami Oratorium. Stworzenie spójnej grupy wokół wartości było więc propozycją wspólnego stawiania czoła trudnościom. Stowarzyszenie to znalazło w Hiszpanii podatny grunt i szybko się zakorzeniło.

## Introduction

Practically all Catholic educational entities, whether schools or universities, have some organisation of past pupils, former students or alumni. For some, it is just an external body that energises its members as an autonomous entity; for others, it is an internal department that encourages its members without their participation or autonomy. The difference between the two is notable, since the charismatic identity is radically different. The former would be constituted as a transfer to public associations of the faithful which appeal to a founder; the

latter, on the other hand, would not even be an association of faithful or even a civil one, but rather people grouped together by a moral bond in which no appeal is made to a founder or charism. Therefore, the former constitute an ecclesial reality based on affiliation, i.e. the free, conscious granting of a commitment that materialises in participation, solidarity and communion, whilst the latter lack their own initiatives and carry out a gregarious activity with respect to the institution to which they belong.

This distinction is the reason why to date few studies have been devoted to the phenomenon of sociology of religion that alumni movements constitute, despite their almost universal spread. Our research is dedicated to the first of them, the Past Pupils of Don Bosco, founded in Italy in 1840, whose members are also the most numerous in the Church today.

## The Unconditional Welcome

### *Turin, Year Zero*

The history of Turin is an example of the upheavals that affected Europe in the 19th century resulting from the rupture of the hegemony of the Christian faith in Western culture following the French Revolution, the new liberal model that was to gradually replace class societies and the socioeconomic changes caused by the Industrial Revolution. By the time the young Giovanni Bosco arrived in Turin in 1841, the city had doubled its population from 1800. The arrival of steam power had expanded its traditional craft of steel forging, giving rise to the mechanical industry that at the end of the 19th century would see the birth of Fiat and Lancia. The walls had just been demolished and, in front of the elegant bourgeois centre, built in imitation of Paris, suburbs would be built along the two rivers—Valdocco along the Dora and Vanchiglia along the Po—to take advantage of the rivers' power.

In addition to water, that huge industry needed capital (from French banks) and labour (from the Piedmont countryside). As is the case today, the dream soon turned sour when it was realised that there was not enough work to go round, that the work was precarious

and that life in the city led to overcrowding in the suburbs and the mutation of the values of natural society: the rural society of nature, faith and solidarity was countered by the urban reality of mercantilism, freemasonry and individual freedom.

In the year of Don Bosco's ordination to the priesthood, 7,148 children under the age of 10 years (*Stato civile Comune di Torino 1814–1836*)<sup>1</sup> were employed in Turin as builders, tailors, carpenters, painters, chimney sweeps and in many other trades, working up to 14 hours a day. Marginalisation in the suburbs and the harsh working conditions led to alcoholism, abuse and illness, leaving many of them orphaned. The lack of work drove them to commit crime, filling Turin's prisons with young people kept in overcrowded conditions. The majority were incarcerated in the correctional centre known as La Generala (1847–1944), and many of them were executed in the Rondò della Forca.

The young priest, walking the streets, visiting the prisons and accompanying Fr Cafasso in assisting the dying, was deeply moved. He could not help but identify himself with those young people who, like him but for different reasons, had left the Piedmontese countryside to go to the regional capital. He had to find a way to help them.

### *An orphaned child*

In the same context in which Don Bosco began to develop his mission in Turin, in 1828 the Gastini family arrived in the capital of Piedmont from Casale Monferrato. Antonio Gastini and Maria Pernigotti settled next to the parish of San Dalmazzo, on the outskirts of the centre. Antonio Gastini had found work in the Turin municipal police force. It was during this period in Turin that his three children would be born: two boys and a girl. The first to be born was Marco, in 1830; Carlo was born on 23 January 1833 and was baptised on 25 January in the parish of San Dalmazzo (*Registro degli Atti di Nascita... 1833: 2*).<sup>2</sup> No trace of their sister's birth has been found, despite the other members of the Gastini family revering her.

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1 I thank Mr Luigi Balice for the information.

2 I thank the diocesan archivist, Fr Alessandro Giraudò, for the information.

The family's happiness would be cut short a few years later. The father of the family died in 1847, probably after an illness,<sup>3</sup> leaving Maria in charge of their three children, two of whom had to work. Fourteen-year-old Carlo, known in the family as Carlino or Carluccio, found work as an apprentice in a neighbourhood barber's shop, near number 11 Via San Francesco d'Assisi, where he met Don Bosco. The unexpected change which forced him to seek work was common to children and young people of that time. Without any doubt, it created a state of anxiety due to the fragility of their circumstances, that is, the feeling that we can all go from a structured, stable situation to an unstructured, unstable one unexpectedly.

### *The teenager at the Oratory*

Carlo Gastini's life changed providentially during the first half of 1847. On a Saturday in June of that year, the young priest Giovanni Bosco—who only a year earlier had settled in Valdocco with his mother, Margherita Occhiena, in a simple shed rented from Filippo Pinardi—entered the barber's shop. Just a month earlier, with the welcome of a young man from Valsesia, he had begun his mission in an Oratory. One day, Don Bosco went to a barber's shop to get a shave. There he met an apprentice and, despite the owner's opposition, asked that young man be the one to shave him. Don Bosco's face suffered, but the following day Carlo went to the Oratory which was opened on holidays, basically on Sundays (Bosco 1903: 269–270). Carlo would integrate well into the Oratory (p. 270).

At the end of that year, Gastini, who was 14 years old,<sup>4</sup> lost his mother, Maria to illness. His brother Marco was doing military service, fighting with the Piedmontese army in the First War of Independence (1848–1849). Carlo and his sister had been left alone in the world—or almost. One night that winter, when he was returning to Valdocco, Don Bosco providentially found him with his sister. She

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- 3 It is therefore strange that, at 14 years old, he had not yet received his First Communion, even though the custom at that time in Italy was to do so at the age of 11.
  - 4 Don Bosco thought he remembered him being 11, as he says in his *Biographical Memoirs*, but the various accounts of the date of Antonio Gastini's death unequivocally fixes his age at 14 years.

was crying by an elm tree on Viale San Massimo (today Corso Regina Margherita), near the Rondò della Forca. Carlo explained to him that, as their mother had died and had not been able to pay the rent on the house during her illness, the landlord had evicted them and left them on the street. Without a doubt, Don Bosco saw in Gastini the opportunity to help young people survive misfortunes.

His sister was temporarily entrusted to a widowed woman of limited means but with strong Christian values; however, because she was unable to take care of the girl, she ended up in the Casale Monferrato orphanage, where she died shortly afterwards. Sometime before, on 1 January 1848, Carlo had become a boarder at the Oratory as a craftsman (*Censimento dei giovani 1847–1869*). Felice Reviglio and Giacinto Arnaud were already there. Gastini was younger than Reviglio (1831) and Buzzetti (1832), but the same age as Giacomo Bellia (1833) and older than Michele Rua (1837), Giovanni Francesia (1838) and Giovanni Cagliari (1838).

Don Bosco applied what he had experienced at home, and it helped him survive his orphanhood. After the morning mass and rosary, they would go out to work in the city with a bread roll in their pocket; they returned for lunch and dinner. Their meagre diet, consisting of vegetable stew and vegetables from Don Bosco's mother's garden, was infinitely better than what they had been fed in their previous life. The young boys spent the day with Don Bosco and provided for all their daily needs, as he himself had experienced with his first mentor, Don Calosso, in 1829–1830. One Sunday in 1848, the year in which Don Bosco was shot through a window in Valdocco, Carlo Gastini had a severe toothache, which Don Bosco cured by laying his hands on him (Bosco 1903: 383). Those young boys were so grateful to Don Bosco that they considered him their true father. Gastini and Reviglio wanted to convey their admiration of, gratitude to and affection for Don Bosco on 24 June 1849, giving him two silver hearts that they had bought in the best jewellery store in the city.

#### *Don Bosco's seminarian*

Don Bosco was already thinking about the possibility of founding a religious institute, which would later become the Salesian Congregation, to give greater scope, freedom and continuity to his works.

He did not forget the political and media persecutions of 1848, nor the desertions of some of his assistants that same year at the Oratory. Therefore, on 23 July 1849 he organised two one-week retreats to train new catechists. Among the more than 800 young people who attended the two oratories, he chose 71; among them was Gastini, who was finally chosen along with Buzzetti, Bellia and Reviglio.

Don Bosco worked hard and patiently with them to give them a personal structure (Bosco 1903: 423–424). He began to help them reform their moral conduct, making them attend sacraments more frequently, teaching them Italian and Latin grammar and providing them with lodging, clothing and food. They helped Don Bosco in Valdocco and on Sundays accompanied him to Porta Nuova or Vanchiglia. Gastini would be one of the witnesses, on 1 November 1849, of the miracle of the multiplication of the chestnuts.

Carlo was finally able to wear the cassock on 2 February 1851. It was imposed on him by Don Bosco himself, who was “radiant. It seems that the first lambs are finally becoming shepherds” (Bosco 1980: 230). The following day the new clerics began their philosophy classes. He also promoted the setting up of the Salesian theatre, which Don Bosco entrusted to Gastini and Tomatis, as well as catechesis for day pupils. One pupil, in a letter to his parents, considered Gastini an excellent teacher (Bosco 1904: 185). However, Carlo would leave the diocesan seminary that same year (p. 379), specifically between 12 October and 24 November 1851, since for reasons unknown to us he did not take the exams (*Elenco dei giovani aspirant...* 1852).

For the next four years, Carlo Gastini continued to live in the Oratory as a boarder, and from 1854 he was an assistant at the printing press. It seems as if he was not yet ready to go out again and live alone in the harsh reality of Turin. In fact, that year a cholera epidemic broke out in the city; whilst Don Bosco helped the sick, Gastini stayed in Valdocco praying that none of them would become infected. Printing and theatre were Carlo Gastini’s two occupations in Valdocco during this new stage of his life, in which he grew a beard (his previous clerical status did not allow him to do so), giving him a half-venerable, half-comical appearance.

Personal evolution would progressively lead Carlo Gastini to develop his new life. Although he would always be linked to Don Bosco and Valdocco, he already had a trade that allowed him to earn

a living. In October 1857 he left the Oratory (*Censimento dei giovani 1847–1869*) and married Giuseppa Lora. Despite his new family, his new house and his new work, Gastini maintained his bond with the institution that had welcomed him: he never missed festivities and was always available to help.

Gastini, like the rest of his companions, had witnessed numerous examples of how Don Bosco had the gift of prophecy. At the beginning of May 1860, Carlo went to ask him how long he would live. “Until you are 70 years old”, he told him (Gastini 1902).

In 1861 the Oratory suffered a new series of public persecutions. Gastini left his well-paid job and returned to Valdocco to work as chief bookbinder, a job he would never leave. His goal was to be as close as possible to his second father, as he would admit years later (Gastini 1883). The new printing works was launched on 31 December. That same year, for his name day, Carlo brought Don Bosco some elegantly bound books with an even better dedication: “So that, after having bound so many books for you, I too may be bound with you in the book of life” (*Carlo Gastini, primo presidente Exallievi...* 1970: 8). In 1863 his daughter Felisa was born, whom Don Bosco baptised himself and who would be known to all in Valdocco as Felicina.

Despite his consolidated family life, he never left Don Bosco’s house, which was once his refuge. Gastini was chief bookbinder of the Salesian Publishers and Press until his retirement (Bosco 1905: 143). He produced more than 200 works, which formed one of the most important Italian-language catalogues of its time. From 1877 he published the *Salesian Bulletin*, founded by Don Bosco, who actively participated in the editorial work until 1887, a year before his death. Thanks to its prestige in Gastini’s time, the Salesian Publishers and Press was invited to the Universal Exhibition in Barcelona (1886).

### *Gastini’s death*

Carlo continued to be the soul of the Oratory’s internal celebrations even in 1873. Almost 20 years had passed since his departure from Valdocco, but he was still part of the daily life of *papa Giovanni*; it was no accident that Gastini and Buzzetti would appear in the dream *The Mysterious Steed* that Don Bosco had in 1875 (Bosco 1930: 257–260).



On 29 April 1876, Giuseppina died at the age of 36. Felicina would go on to train with the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and would marry her first cousin Eugenio (Stato civile 1893: 22), the youngest of Marco Gastini's five children, on 7 May 1893.

Gastini and Reviglio were almost an institution in Valdocco. In 1894, his former companion Giuseppe Rollini painted him in the chapel of Saint Francis de Sales in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians.

Just a year later his granddaughter Rosa would be born (Stato civile 1895: 20). Everyone was aware that Gastini was getting old, and in some way, they tried to pay tribute to him during his lifetime. On 23 June 1898, he still took part in the Oratory's internal celebration, but the end was near. Since Don Bosco's death things had not been the same: once again, he felt like an orphan. His capacity for resilience seemed linked to having a moral reference.

In mid-January 1902 Carlo fell ill. Aware of Don Bosco's prophecy, he wanted to prepare himself for death. Numerous visitors tried to cheer him up, but one day he said to Fr Rua: "I'm 70 years old now and I must die. I have nothing to do down here anymore. I hope that Don Bosco helps me join him in heaven" (Gastini 1902: 61). At his interlocutor's insistence, he replied: "No, no! I won't get out of bed anymore. I'm 70 years old and I must die" (p. 62). And so, it was. After being anointed by his good friend Michele, Carlo died on 28 January 1902, one day after turning 70, just as *papa Giovanni* had predicted.

## Maintaining the Spirit of the Oratory Beyond the Oratory

The great work of Carlo Gastini, in addition to his family, was the founding of the Past Pupils of Don Bosco movement. In that foundation is its proposal of resilience: in the face of the fragility of the street, the security of a home (in the Oratory) and the safety of a group (outside the Oratory).

As mentioned above, on 24 June 1849 Gastini and Reviglio gave two silver hearts to Don Bosco. In the following years, a commission was established to collect funds from the boarders and day pupils to present Don Bosco with a gift. In 1850 they gathered at the foot of his rooms to congratulate him with a short concert; afterwards, they

sent representatives up to take him the gift, which he thanked them for from the balcony to great applause.

The following year, the music was accompanied by the reading of letters and the reciting of poems, some of them composed for the occasion as a token of gratitude. This effort was undoubtedly the result of the rhetoric, Latin and Italian classes they had received at the Oratory. Don Bosco wanted his pupils to be able to behave in a dignified manner, without anyone laughing at them because of their education. Many took the opportunity to ask for his advice or ask him questions. His guidance continued to give them security. From 1858 onwards, these events took place in the dining room built under the church of Saint Francis de Sales, until in 1866 they were held on the third floor of the former *Casa Filippi*; in 1886 they began to take place in the theatre.

On 7 March 1869, Pope Pius IX approved the Salesian Congregation. This is why the celebration of 1870 was special: Carlo Gastini spread the word to summon the former pupils to a location in Valdocco on the corner of Piazza Statuto and Via San Donato; they met on 24 June to express their gratitude to Don Bosco for the education they had received, and they brought him a coffee set as a gift. From 1871 onwards, past pupils would gather every year to celebrate Don Bosco's name day. They had finally found a stable group bond with their former preceptor.

That first era was coming to an end. The tributes had gone from being something personal (1849), through a collective act (1850–1870) of the current pupils, to something no longer internal, but external (1870–1873) of the older pupils or, as they were known, the *antichi allievi* or former pupils.<sup>5</sup> They had not stopped being students: they had only become the oldest students.

From 1874 until the year of his death in 1888, Don Bosco reciprocated the tribute on his name day with a fraternal lunch, which meant that he reserved an entire day to be with his past pupils. Let us not forget that the Salesian Congregation had been founded in 1859, the Association of Mary Help of Christians would be established in 1869 and the Salesian Cooperators would become a reality

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5 The expression has been maintained in Spanish, but not in Italian, where the expression *antichi allievi* has been replaced by *ex allievi*.

in 1876. The year 1875 was special, as the first missionary expedition to Patagonia, led by Giovanni Cagliero—who was later appointed Cardinal—set off in that year. That year the gift from the attendees was a golden monstrance.

In 1876 a reference to Gastini as president of the Past Pupils appears for the first time. In a communication to Fr Rua and Fr Lazzero dated 24 April, Don Bosco mentions him as “from outside, master of the bookbinders and president of the past pupils” (Bosco 1938: 198). Two days later, in another letter to them, he elaborated on this when talking about “Gastini with his friends” (*ibidem*). The word is not coincidental: it is referring to a united, compact group.

In 1877, the Archbishop of Buenos Aires was present at the celebration and gave Carlo a coin, which he gave to Don Bosco. At the insistence of García Zúñiga, Gastini replied with a phrase that has gone down in history: “We all belong to Don Bosco here. Nothing is ours, everything is his” (Bosco 1948: 80). It is particularly relevant that in the speech of a former student priest, Giovanni Turchi, mention was made of the existence of a commission, which we know Gastini presided over, at the head of a society of past pupils of the Oratory, and which had been established eight years earlier, as for the first time there was talk of the Society of Past Pupils of the Salesian Oratory, just as in 1888 there would be official talk of the Committee of Past Pupils of the Oratory for the Demonstrations to the Rev. Don Bosco (Archivio Centrale Salesiano 1888).

## Giving Legal Personality to a Movement

The initiative to bring together the Past Pupils in 1870 had worked: meetings were held regularly, and more and more people attended. In 1894 that group became a legal entity. The annual lunch with Don Bosco was consolidated. In 1878 it took place on 4 August under the porticos of Valdocco, with 194 Past Pupils in attendance. Don Bosco addressed a few words to them, encouraging them to legally establish themselves as an entity.

What else is there left to tell you? Cheer up! Cheer up! Cheer up! It is enough that the spirit be maintained that each now be a missionary among his companions; later, in his own homes, or wherever he lives, giving good examples, good advice and doing good to his own soul.

Nowadays everyone is looking for unions and mutual aid societies. We must try to establish one among ourselves. All of you, some more so, some less so, are able to save so that you can meet your needs in the event of an illness or lack of work. Well then, see to it that this help is not limited to you alone, but that it is also extended to those young people of good conduct who leave the Oratory, or to those companions that you already know.

We will still be able to meet at these family celebrations —which I hope will be many times— won't we? And afterwards, we will be able to form beautiful, compact, numerous families, all together in Heaven, giving each other a word from now on, signing a pact that none of us will break, won't we? (Bosco 1932: 757–759)

This oral, occasional address in 1878 was the authentic mission charter of the Past Pupils of Don Bosco. He gave this new reality a distinctly lay nature, unlike the mixed clerical-lay nature of the Salesian Cooperators, from which he seemed to separate the Past Pupils. But he also gave it a clearly social nature, unlike the religious nature of the Archconfraternity of Mary Help of Christians. The aim was clear: to continue the Oratory beyond the Oratory to allow these young people to retain the same values in adulthood. That was his method to resist an adverse society outside the Oratory. To achieve this, he established a fourfold mission: the maintenance of the values received (faith, honesty, industriousness and commitment), the testimony of those same values (in the family, work and society), mutual solidarity among Past Pupils and the support for Salesian works in its mission with young people. In this case, the order of the items does affect the result.

It was evident that Don Bosco, who had just returned from Barcelona, was ageing and the feeling that the end was approaching was also clear from his almost testamentary words of 13 July: “Meanwhile, wherever you go and wherever you are, always remember that you are sons of Don Bosco, sons of the Oratory .... Blessed are you if you never forget the truths that I strove to engrave in your hearts when you were young” (Bosco 1936: 489). “You were a little flock. You have grown much and will grow yet more. You will be a light shining forth upon the world, and by your example you will teach others how to do good and how to hate and flee from evil. My dear sons, may God help us with His grace, so that one day we may all meet in Heaven” (Bosco 1936: 173–174). He seemed to want to reveal to them the method he had used on them.

On 16 August 1887, the Past Pupils decided to also congratulate Don Bosco on his birthday. Then the words that he had addressed to them on a previous occasion echoed: “Above all I ask you one thing, my dear sons: wherever you may be, always conduct yourselves as good Christians and upright citizens .... Many of you already have a family. Well, share that education that you have received at the Oratory of Don Bosco with your loved ones” (Bosco 1933: 511–512). This time it was more explicit: what helped them overcome a traumatic past was making the Oratory feel like a home and a family.

During his last years, Fr Rua, Don Bosco’s first successor, insisted on adding the former day pupils to the association of the former boarders of Valdocco in order to avoid limiting everything to the small circle of the pupils of the first Oratory, who due to their age were to suffer the same fate as Don Bosco in a few years. Consequently, on 8 December 1894, under the guidance of Giovanni Garbellone, the entity that brought together the former day pupils of the Oratory was founded (*Statute* 1894). The Salesians did not want everything to end with Don Bosco.

In 1896, the annual meeting was held on 12 and 16 July, presided over by Fr Rua. “The Past Pupils of Don Bosco: who could count them today? They are scattered all over the world” (Gli antichi allievi 1896: 202), comments the Salesian bulletin. That year the collection was used to try to free their companions who were imprisoned in Africa due to the first Italo-Ethiopian war (1895–1896). At that same time, they launched a mutual aid association (*mutuo soccorso*) to unite in the context of the post-war economy and the subsequent crisis of 1929. Indeed, let us not forget that in 1878 Don Bosco himself had proposed a mutual aid society to address the difficulties of the young people who were leaving the Oratory—hence the name they adopted: the Past Pupils are organised at the local level as unions, not associations, as a Catholic alternative to syndicates, as Pope Leo XIII had rightly encouraged in *Rerum Novarum*. In fact, when the second entity was created in Lille, France in 1893, its statute specifies that it was created as a form of “Mutual Aid Association.” It is no coincidence that the phrase “mutual help” is repeated: it is the key to resistance. Eight years later, when the Combes law took effect in France, which ordered the confiscation of religious property, he did

not hesitate to make his energetic protest heard in the Senate of the Republic in favour of the Salesians.

On 20 January 1900 Fr Rua wrote a letter to the Salesians for the first time about the importance of the Past Pupils in the Congregation: “In some cities in Europe, America and Africa, the Association of Past Pupils is already established in imitation of what we can call the initial one founded years ago in Turin”; he considered it a “branch of Salesian activity”, concluding: “with these associations (we Salesians) continue to act as guardian angels for our pupils as we did for them when they were young” (XXXVII Viaggio... 1900). His words speak for themselves. Today, in Latin America, the Salinas Savings and Credit Cooperative (Ecuador), the Scrap Metal Workers’ Cooperative (Peru), the Antonio Polo Cooperative to Implement Cooperativism (Venezuela), the San Medardo Salesian Comprehensive Youth Cooperative for Continuing Education (Timor) and, in Spain, the Poblanchina Salesian Youth Cooperative for Mentoring between New and Past Pupils and the Royal Vega Cooperative for Agricultural Purposes are well known.

It is in this context that the work of Fr Rinaldi, who became Don Bosco’s second successor, should be distinguished from that of Gaslini. The latter was the charismatic founder of the Past Pupils of Don Bosco Movement (1870), since he was in charge of bringing together the former pupils of the first Oratory, providing them two occasions a year on which to meet, encouraging them to channel their gratitude for the education they had received, instilling in them a spirit of fraternity and entrusting them with a mission of mutual help, all lived with the vital optimism and Christian hope that he himself transmitted in his written circulars and speeches. Once again, the keys to the Salesian method of resilience appear: spirit of fraternity and mutual help. Fr Rinaldi, on the other hand, as General Prefect of Fr Rua, was responsible for encouraging the creation of the International Federation of Past Pupils of Don Bosco (1908) and of the Past Pupils of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (1911), which Felicina Gaslini would preside over until 1920, as well as convening the 1<sup>st</sup> International Congress of Past Pupils of Don Bosco (1911). Fr Rinaldi, familiar with the recent encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), believed in the role of the laity in society, which would later be strengthened by the Second Vatican Council. In 1920 he even included a memento

to them in the recitation of the Hail Mary that was recited every day in the Salesian works and, in 1926, in a meeting with all the inspectors in Valsalice, he told them the following, which is no small thing:

Some believe that the Past Pupils organisation is a useless work, and that is why they neglect it. I would remind them that they are the fruit of our labours. This organisation is a work of perseverance; with it we wish to reclaim them if they have strayed so that there is no-one in the world, educated by us, who has ideas contrary to ours. We have sacrificed ourselves for them and our sacrifice must not be lost. (*Resoconto dei convegni...* 1926)

The outbreak of the First World War postponed their activities until 1920, when the Second Congress was held, from which the Italian Piero Gribaudo (1919–1921) was elected, followed by his compatriot Felice Masera (1922–1938). That year the Past Pupils inaugurated a monument to Don Bosco, the work of Gaetano Cellini, in front of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians.

During the third presidency, that of Arturo Poesio (1938–1964), the International Federation became the World Confederation in 1954, whose first statutes would be approved in 1956 (*La nuova stampa* 1956: 8). It was no accident that this was in the years leading up to the Second Vatican Council, which, among other things, would highlight the value of the laity. At the head of the new entity would be the Spaniard José María Taboada Lago (1964–1973), later to be succeeded by the Mexican José González Torres (1974–1980), the Swiss Giuseppe Castelli (1980–1992), the Portuguese António G. Pires (1992–2004), the Italian Francesco Muceo (2004–2013), the Slovak Michal Hort (2013–2022) and the Maltese Bryan Magro (2022–).

In 1967 they were one of the founders of the World Organization of Alumni of Catholic Education (OMAEC), and in 1969, because of the reorganisation of the Domingo Savio Circles, the groups of Young Alumni (GEX) emerged. The Italian Domingo Savio was the first Past Pupil to become a saint, in 1954. Another Past Pupil, the Timorese Carlos Ximenes Belo, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996. In 2013, the Argentine Past Pupil Jorge Bergoglio was elected Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church under the name Francis. Today the spiritual descendants of Carlo Gastini are a reality spread across 100 countries and made up of 50 million people.

## Establishment of the Movement in Spain

### *Arrival of the Salesians in Spain*

The Salesian Congregation arrived in Spain at the invitation of Cardinal Joaquim Lluç, O. Carm. (1816–1882), at the time Archbishop of Seville. Catalan by birth (he was great-grandfather to the later minister Ernest Lluç) and a contemporary of Don Bosco (1815–1888), he had seen the ravages that industrialisation had wrought in his homeland. Masses of peasants from the interior of Catalonia began to live in substandard housing, suffer from illness, fall into crime and lose values, as was happening in Manchester, Turin and Lyon. Two years after taking possession of the see of Seville, the Cardinal wrote to Don Bosco on 7 June 1879 (*Cartas del Arzobispo Lluç... 1879*). Two years later, on 16 February 1881, the first group of six Salesians arrived in Utrera, led by Fr Giovanni Branda; by the following year he had already founded the San Diego Schools with day and evening classes as well as a school canteen. The financial support of Diego M. de Santiago, Marquis of Casa Ulloa, who would become the first Salesian Cooperator in Spain, was essential (*Cartas del marqués... 1880a, 1880b*).

The second Salesian foundation would be in Barcelona. This time its precursor would be the diocesan theologian Fèlix Sardà, who through his writings in the *Revista Popular* began to speak of the Salesian works. This resonated with Dorotea de Chopitea (declared venerable in 1983), widow of the banker Josep Maria Serra following his death in 1882, who wrote to Don Bosco on 20 September 1882 requesting a Salesian foundation. The Turinese saint did not wait and on 15 February 1884, with the financial support of the Serra-Chopitea family, a group of seven Salesians arrived from Utrera to Sarrià, then a neighbouring town of Barcelona, again headed by Fr Branda. That same year they founded the Salesian School of Santo Àngel Custodio, with a boarding and day school, and the Salesian Workshops of Sarrià, with day and evening classes.

The consolidation of those two works in Spain motivated Don Bosco himself to visit Barcelona between 8 April and 6 May 1886, at the request of Dorotea de Chopitea. During the 29 days that he stayed in the city, among many other things, the Turinese saint



visited the nascent Salesian work in Sarrià (Alberdi 1966: 229), indicated that in that same municipality the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians—known as the Salesian Sisters—found their first presence in Spain, received land from the Catalan bourgeoisie to found the future Tibidabo basilica and celebrated two masses in the Paròquia de la Mare de Déu de Betlem in Barcelona. The masses were held on 30 April and 1 May in the heart of the Rambla, seeing the need to also found in the centre of the city—as would happen on 19 March 1980 with the Salesian Schools of San José—daytime and evening classes and a festive oratory, that is, an Oratory on the weekend (Alberdi 1986: 146).

As a result of that visit, on 23 October 1886 the first four Salesian Sisters arrived in Barcelona to start founding the Schools of Saint Dorotea, based on the name of their benefactor, Dorotea de Chopitea. On 26 February 1880 the Marquis of Casa Ulloa would become the first of the Salesian Cooperators in Spain (Alberdi 1983: 102). Both seemed to want to replicate in the Spanish Manchester the system that had worked in the Italian Manchester. From that moment the seed of the Salesian charism was planted, because Spain boasted three of the four religious institutions founded by Saint John Bosco: the Congregation of Saint Francis de Sales (1859), the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (1872), the Salesian Cooperators (1876) and the Association of Devotees of Mary Help of Christians (1869). Only the Past Pupils were missing.

### *The establishment of the Past Pupils in Spain*

Following Don Bosco's visit, at an unspecified time students graduating from the Salesian works in Sarrià began to meet occasionally at their old school or workshop to help each other and show their gratitude to the Salesians. Its promoter was another printer, Josep Durán Seuba, a pupil of the school who, during Don Bosco's visit, had had the opportunity to help him at Mass (Artuch 2011: 6).

The first confirmation of the existence of this group of the Salesian Family in Spain came in May 1899, when, during a canonical visit that the Rector Major of the Salesian Congregation, Fr Rua, made to the Salesian works in Spain, it was claimed that “in the house in Sarrià he was met with a very pleasant surprise: a meeting

of former pupils” (Fierro 1966: 3). The meeting had been organised by the recently appointed Major Superior of the Salesian houses of Spain and Portugal, Fr Rinaldi. At the end, the Rector Major encouraged them to lay the foundations for a permanent association (Ceria 1945: 22–23).

The official constitution of the organisation took place on 8 December 1904 in Sarriá. Earlier, in March, the new Prefect General, Fr Rinaldi, during his canonical visit to the Salesian houses in Spain met with a group of them at the Salesian works of Rocafort, in the centre of the city, headquarters of the Salesian Schools of Saint Joseph. At the meeting, a commitment was made to draft statutes and to propagate the new entity among Past Pupils (Fierro 1966: 4).

The board comprised students who attended Salesian schools and workshops, since the president, the printer Josep Duran Seuba, and the vice president, Josep Cubells, were appointed, along with a secretary and a treasurer and several members, including the Congressional deputy, Marià Bordas Flaquer (1879–1938), and the secretary of the Social Defence Committee, the lawyer Gaietà Pareja Novelles. Once again, rich or poor, they felt like brothers, like when they had studied together.

After that first entity, others would emerge throughout Spain, until in 1917 a congress was held in Valencia in which all of them participated and from which the Federation of Salesian Past Pupils of Spain would be founded, with Durán himself being elected president (Fierro 1968: 184). In addition to the terminology, it unified the emblem and the banner and established in Spain the magazine *Don Bosco*, which still exists and whose collections are currently online. Even more important was the creation of a Don Bosco Housing Cooperative for the construction of homes and a mutual society so that orphans could finish their studies, the Saint John Bosco Provident Mutuality. Faced with a lack of housing, the basis for structuring a life (like family or work), mutual aid emerged again in the form of cooperatives. Durán’s national work continued until 1922, when engineer Ángel García de Vinuesa y Díaz, a Past Pupil of Utrera, was elected president; his term lasted until 1955.

The parallels are remarkable: the initiative for the foundation came from the laity, the motives were once again gratitude for the education Past Pupils had received and mutual help among them,

and the promoter was once again a printer; to this we could add the urban context, since the first association did not emerge in Utrera but in Barcelona, which, like Turin, was also industrialised.

Today this ecclesial phenomenon includes a total of 6,000 people in Spain, with 55 associations and six federations that are grouped around the Spanish Confederation of Past Pupils of Don Bosco, based in Madrid. Among those Spanish Past Pupils are four of the 14 Spanish cardinals of the Catholic Church: Carlos Osoro, José Cobo, Cristóbal López and Ángel Fernández Artime.

## Conferring a Charism on the Movement in Addition to a Mission

### *Faith: Trust in Don Bosco*

Alessandro Fabre, who knew Carlo Gastini extremely well, tried to define his personality in 1902, the year after his death: faith in Don Bosco, love for Don Bosco and work with Don Bosco (Gastini 1902: 61). This trinity would seem like a compass for today's Past Pupils: trust in Don Bosco, Salesian joy and co-responsibility in the mission.

Carlo had an assertive personality. He was “moderate” (Bosco 1903: 345–346), “good” (pp. 549–550) and “pleasant” (Commemorazione di Don Bosco... 1894: 167); in short, he had a “good spirit” (La celebrazione... 1929: 6). Don Bosco was for Carlo Gastini a “father”, “good” (Bosco 1937: 368), “understanding” (*Atti del Consiglio Generale...* 1926: 518) and “patient” (Bosco 1903: 621). Thus, he was “a very good friend of Don Bosco” (p. 345) and “completely obedient” (p. 550), to the point that he and his friends asked him one day “what they could do to give him the greatest pleasure” (p. 620).

The relationship between the two had begun under adverse circumstances when Carlo was 14 years old: after being orphaned, he went from the street to being taken in by the Oratory, from losing his parents to having *papa Don Bosco*, from having a brother fighting in the war to belonging to a large spiritual family. At the Oratory he was educated in transcendence, industriousness, creativity and solidarity. “He grew up pious and of good mannerisms” (p. 345). Valdocco would be his home from 1847 to 1856. He was a both moral reference and a strong protector.

It is from these traits of Gastini's personality that his complete trust in Don Bosco stems. A reading of his literary production and the testimonies of the time reveal the sincere and deep affection between Carlino and *papa Giovanni*. In 1890 his companion Luigi Fumero asked him, "Do you remember ever noticing in Don Bosco a gesture, a word, a look, even if distant or indirect, that could be in some way inconvenient or even less improper?" He answered without hesitation: "Never!" (p. 592).

Professional activity was an additional link between the two. Carlo was key to a fundamental dimension of Don Bosco's evangelising mission: the use of communication. The relationship between teacher and pupil, as well as that of father and son, grew. The founding of his own family was not done to the detriment of the previous one, but rather by integrating it.

He paid homage to Don Bosco with the two hearts (1849), the books (1861) and the coffee cups (1870); he organised the annual celebrations between 1870 and 1888. Also, through and for Don Bosco he created the Past Pupils of Don Bosco: "The call to carry out this filial demonstration had come naturally from Gastini" (Bosco 1930: 229). That protection was exercised from affection, not from severity.

He completely trusted Don Bosco, whom he turned to when he had lost his parents, when his teeth hurt, when he wanted to know how long he was going to live. Even in the face of death he did not hesitate for a moment: "I'm now 70 and I must die. I have nothing to do down here anymore. I hope that Don Bosco will help me join him in heaven" (Gastini 1902: 61). A trust until death.

That relationship of trust, gratitude and affection was forged and would be maintained for 41 years, during which time Gastini would also witness how Don Bosco was persecuted, slandered, threatened and attacked, treated as crazy, abandoned by many and impoverished by all, working to the point of exhaustion. Thus, in 1861 Carlo decided to return to work in Valdocco, to move his family to the neighbourhood and to convert the basilica into his parish: he would never abandon the person who had welcomed him into his home and shaped him as a person. His loyalty to Don Bosco was beyond doubt when, on the eve of his death, Fr Rua asked him if he was very fond of Don Bosco. "Are these things to ask me?" (Bosco 1936: 532), he replied.

It is true that Carlo saw his deceased father in Don Bosco, but Bosco had him as one of his children among the great Valdocco family. In 1885, he himself gave him the nickname *il menestrello dei Salesiani*, which would accompany him throughout his life. Carlo appeared in two of his prophetic dreams, *The Dream of Roses* (1847) and *The Mysterious Steed* (1875), and witnessed two of his miracles: that of the teeth (1848) and that of the chestnuts (1849). Furthermore, Don Bosco's prediction of how long Carlo would live appeared in the beatification process of Don Bosco and helped him become a saint (Sacra Rituum Congregatio 1934: *Pars XVII, Summarium* 7).

The spiritual brotherhood was such that, in 1861, when he returned to Valdocco to work at the printing press, he gave him some bound books with this dedication: "So that, after having bound so many books for you, I too may be bound with you in the book of the life". In 1877 he would go on to say that "we all belong to Don Bosco here. Nothing is ours; everything is his" (Bosco 1948: 80). The statement demonstrates the extent to which sharing goods makes up communities, as in religious life.

Gastini contemplates Christ with the gaze of Don Bosco. It is no accident that one of *papa Giovanni's* favourite books was Tomás de Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* (1441). Carlo, imitating Don Bosco, learnt to be the good shepherd—in this case in his family, among his companions and with young people. It is not enough, then, to be admirers, but to be imitators. Don Bosco did not intend to exalt a cult surrounding his own figure, but rather only to transmit a safe path. In 1848 he had told Gastini shortly after meeting him: "Help me save many souls, and yours first" (Bosco 1903: 620).

Carlo was a person of action. Yes, he was creative, but not intellectual: he preached through testimony, experience and emotion. Søren Kierkegaard said in 1850 that whilst an imitator aspires to be what he admires, an admirer remains personally outside (Kierkegaard 1971: 298). Trusting in Don Bosco, Carlo configured himself with Christ and helped others to configure themselves with him and to build the kingdom of God. This was not in vain, according to the Salesian Constitutions: "The purpose of this Society is to bring together its members ... to perfect themselves by imitating the virtues of our Divine Saviour" (Bosco 1905: 663). Carlo Gastini was an imitator of Don Bosco, as he was of Christ.

Throughout his life Carlo Gastini was sincere, spontaneous, optimistic, friendly and pleasant. The starting point was his assertive and empathetic personality. He was “intelligent and cheerful” (Bosco 1903: 549–550) and “pleasant” (Commemorazione di Don Bosco... 1894: 166); in short, he had a “good spirit[,] ... was discreetly cultured ... [and] always in good humour” (La celebrazione... 1929: 6). In his obituary they referred to him as “a friend to everyone, especially to the pupils of the Oratory” (Gastini 1902: 62).

From these traits he derived his deep joy, surely the result of inner peace and the tranquillity of conscience. His friend Luigi Fumero spoke of “his semi-comic seriousness or his semi-serious comedy”; he always carried “a happy and spirited note” (L’amore dei figli 1898: 167); he was “as a child a minister at those family celebrations” (Bosco 1936: 172). Between 1949 and 1901 he was the soul of the annual celebrations for Saint Francis de Sales, Saint Aloysius Gonzaga, Saint John the Baptist and Saint Peter—first for the pupils, and then for them and the Past Pupils.

In 1894 Petroncini called him a *poeta maggiore*. He was creative, as he knew how to create; he was empathetic, as he knew how to act; and he was spontaneous, as he knew how to improvise. A Past Pupil described him as an unequalled artist “in the art of improvisation”, which he exercised on walks, at celebrations, at lunches and on stages. Moreover, he did it in his own style—hence the “Gastinianas” (Due nuovi oratorii salesiani 1899: 301), short, improvised theatrical moments that combined paradoxical joy in sad situations. To this he added “a beautiful voice” (Bosco 1904: 466). In 1894 Petroncini spoke of his noble presence, his imposing voice, his admirable declamation and his dramatic art—hence the talk of “Gastini’s amenity” (Bosco 1930: 229).

He had a great command of the stage, although he focussed on comedic roles, which were not without their difficulties. During his lifetime he wrote 39 theatrical texts and 15 musical works, in addition to performing some of the great works of his time. His favourite role was that of the protagonist in the classic tragedy of San Eustachio and in the comedy *Tonio, A Moral Lesson*, as well as the well scene in the melodrama *Crispin and the Midwife* (1850); *Don Procopio* (1859),

*The Shoemaker Happy with His Profession* (1755) and *The Sane Man in the Choir of Fools* were also part of his repertoire (*Carlo Gastini, primo presidente Exallievi...* 1970: 8). Therefore, it was said that “he entertained the people with his antics” (Bosco 1905: 351).

Don Bosco soon noticed his qualities. Thus, in 1851 he entrusted him with the theatrical productions at Valdocco, together with Carlo Tomatis. Gastini participated in the inauguration of the new theatres in Valdocco in 1885 and 1894. He was naturally funny; one example is the following anecdote that occurred in 1860:

Gastini slept with a companion in a room. At a certain hour, as usual, Gastini got up, left the room and went downstairs to breathe the fresh night air. Tomatis jumped out of bed and ran to wake up his companion; they took the two beds and the bedside table and left only the chairs in the middle of the room. Everything was dark. Gastini came in, tripped over the chairs and began to grumble; he went to where the bed was and couldn't find it; he thought he had the wrong room; he walked around, looked for his roommate and couldn't find him. He struck a match and didn't recognise the place. He talked to himself, expressing his feelings of doubt and strangeness. His companions, huddled together in the room, could no longer hold back their laughter. (Bosco 1907: 272)

Other memorable Gastinian antics are also remembered: also in 1860, Tomatis one day pretended that his head had got stuck in a top hat and Gastini, amidst applause, came out to help him take it off; in 1864, “Carlos Gastini appeared dressed as a clown to play the role of a beggar; and, singing and reciting, he aroused the hilarity of the guests” (Bosco 1909: 768); “he ate our oranges to make the spectators laugh, and ... Piumatti, to punish him, grabbed him, put him in a jug, carried him on his back and began to parade him around the stage” (Bosco 1903: 603).

Petroncini remarked in 1894 on his noble presence, his imposing voice, his admirable recitation and his dramatic art, and jokingly called him *Salesianorum Menestrellum Magnus*. He was funny, but not harsh; he was comical, but not crude. He also had control over the tragic register. In 1884, memories prompted Gastini to recite a six-part poem, which he read by unrolling an almost infinite scroll of paper in which he sang of past times, of the dead and of the absent, which brought to tears even Cardinal Gaetano Alimonda, Archbishop of Turin. In 1889, speaking of Don Bosco, “he unleashed a great flood of tears with the tender story of his adventures and then with

song: he sang with a sweet expression and then, without accepting anything offered to him, he disappeared singing and filling every heart with a sweet melancholy” (Bosco 1903: 603).

His poetry was simple and commonplace, with a few metaphors and appeals to virtue. For example: “This party that awakens in us / so many feelings of joy and love, / that you remember the proofs of affection / that your egregious heart gave us”. Or these other two, whose words “move us and make us love Don Bosco more strongly” (*L’amore dei figli...* 1898: 169): “How many thanks we must humiliate you with / for the traits of your goodness! / How many offers should we make you / for the favours your hand provides!” and “But we are poor, though of heart, / we cannot honour your merits. / Bah, be content, beloved Shepherd / of the good heart, accept the offer”.

The starting point is always everyday life: “Of Saint John the desired festival / we can finally celebrate! / this feast so coveted / that made us sigh this way”. In 1872, for the feast of Saint Francis de Sales, Gastini had all his poems rhyme with -is: *amis, barbis, Ausiliatrix...* instead of *amici, baffi, Ausiliatrice* (Bosco 1929: 307). The poems, dialogues and speeches he composed are full of hope and appeal to emotions rather than intellect. Two other compositions of indeterminate date are illustrative: “Let the mediator come from the air / Olympus with the Muses / if they want to criticise / my abstruse laughter. / It will be from the coming / the cube of the arcane meter / that now dissolves in the verb / of the whole Gastinian. / And I speak with easy rhymes / in verses a little course / but the accents are simple / and well-nourished with love” and “This is the troubadour of Don Bosco: he speaks in Latin, Greek and pure Tuscan. / He is a marvel of art on stage. / He always goes willingly to lunch and dinner”.

None of the difficult situations he went through in Valdocco dampened his joy nor aged him. He took the edge off every situation with his “*allegra sua note*” (*L’amore dei figli...* 1898: 167): “It trembles the strings, memory / of Gastini, songs / of laurels conquered / by sonorous transformations. / But even undaunted / I continue my life / if the meter never changes / my old lyre”. That joy was undoubtedly based on deep hope, as evidenced by the certainty that he would not die until he was 70 years old.



*Charity: Concentric solidarity*

We have already seen that Carlo Gastini had an empathetic and generous personality. He knew how to be grateful. But he was also “pious” (Bosco 1903: 345) and “good” (p. 549). Gastini always tried to do good for others, starting with his immediate circle: companions, family and work. There is a gradation in this search for good, which he directs first to Don Bosco, then to his family and finally to the Past Pupils. The structure of his personality is evident.

We have also spoken of his gratitude to Don Bosco, for whom he sacrificed his savings (1849), entered the seminary (1851) and even changed jobs (1861). He then channelled it towards his family and, after his daughter Felisa was born (1863), towards his pupils: “Once again, dear Father, / praying for you to the eternal God / will be my duty every moment / until I go to heaven. / Communion in exact fulfilment of my duties in my workshop with such generosity towards my young people. / Long live Don Bosco / Carlo Gastini” (1851).

Finally, he focussed his vocation on the Past Pupils, for whom he aimed to move from the emotion of reunion to the definition of a mission. First he brought them together (1870), created a commission (1876), organised the annual celebrations (1870–1888), assumed a mission (1878) and promoted specific initiatives: he gifted bound books (since 1861), donated liturgical subsidies (since 1876), gave gifts (cups, portfolios and liturgical objects) and placed plaques (Valsalice, Turin, I Becchi), and even promoted the restoration of Don Bosco’s house in his hometown.<sup>6</sup> It seems evident that they would begin to feel like members of his family.

Gastini, aware of the need to continue helping, promoted an entity that updated the values its members had received (faith, honesty, industriousness and commitment), witnessed them socially (in the family, work or society) and supported in solidarity the Past Pupils and, through Salesian works, young pupils. He did it without any protagonism: “We all belong to Don Bosco here. Nothing is ours; everything is his” (Bosco 1948: 80) (1877).

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6 The plaque was removed around 1988, when Don Bosco’s house in I Becchi was restored.

## Conclusions

We live in a world that is increasingly shaped by a dual contradictory dynamic: individualism, which since 1950 has led to atomisation in urban areas with the consequent competitive selfishness and loneliness despite massification, and collectivism, typical of the Californian hippie movements of the 1950s, attempts to create collaborative communities as demonstrated by digital socialisation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Gastini was a person of his time, aware of the problems and opportunities, who, using the means of his time (those of popular entertainment and social solidarity), tried to go as far as possible. With a long-term, far-sighted vision, he proposed a theology of the laity before the Second Vatican Council, because until *Lumen Gentium* (1964) the role of the laity would be secondary to the clergy in the Church. It must also be noted that he promoted collective collaboration prior to today's forms of collaborative work, shared ownership, shared mobility and collective knowledge. He made it clear in 1877 that no-one was more than anyone else ("We all belong to Don Bosco here") and that everything belongs to everyone ("Nothing is ours, everything is his"). Home and community are the bases of the Salesian preventive system.

Gastini's life was full of providential moments that led him towards a life of trust, joy and solidarity, sensing the role that corresponded to the pupils in the post-industrial world. "You will be a light shining forth upon the world, and by your example you will teach others how to do good and how to hate and flee from evil" (Bosco 1936: 173–174). It is an invitation to live in the world through Christian commitment. Today, like yesterday, he challenges us with a disturbing question, which is indeed quite a challenge: What are you willing to do for others?

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