

MICHAEL RUA: A BLESSED FOR THE PEOPLE*

If anyone had held out for him the prospect of beatification, Don Michael Rua, the successor of Don Bosco, either would have laughed or would have been scandalized. In his humility he took himself for a disciple of Don Bosco, and did not wish to be anything else.

Holiness, however, was in him, just because, in faithfulness to the founder of the Salesians, he had taken the way that goes from love of the poor to union with God. He was one who made the immense work, to which he had subjected himself, an instrument of perfection, used as a Christian, a religious, a son of Don Bosco.

A holiness, lived socially, like Christ, who spent charisms and blood to serve the multitudes; like one who lived — these are his words — as if he would never have to die. In a word he made his work an expression of love, which cost sacrifices and aroused joy: a kind of uninterrupted liturgy, as a result of which he felt he was in God's service whether he was celebrating Mass or teaching or travelling or whatever he was doing.

That there was holiness in him, was recognized, moreover, in the midst of his ordinary occupations, by not a few persons who were good judges of it.

As early as 1869, for example, the Jesuit, Secundo Franco, had confessed that he was unable to say if Don Bosco's virtue was greater than that of Don Rua. And Don Bosco himself said: "Don Rua could work miracles if he wished to". Another saint, Pius X, speaking of Don Rua after his death, testified: "whenever I saw him, it seemed to me that he could be put on the altars".

* Proclaimed Blessed by Pope Paul VI, 29 October 1972.

GREAT DON BOSCO

Don Bosco is great because of the courageous, new, ingenious enterprises carried out for the elevation of abandoned boys, of the poor, the ignorant, the lost, etc.: Sunday schools, vocational schools, orphanages, seminaries, missions, constructions and services of every kind to bring them to life again and to hope in life. But I think that one of the best measures of his greatness can be found in the formation of boys, taken from the humblest strata of the working people whom he made priests, teachers, skillful workers, and even saints. Just think of Domenico Savio, and now Michael Rua. He made the latter, chosen when he was a poor, shy boy, eight years old, the most comprehensive continuer of his work, so that he could be taken, for virtue and for achievement, as the living proof of Don Bosco's educative capacities. Becoming Major Rector at the Saint's death and remaining such until his own death, that is, for 22 years, from 1888 to 1910, Don Rua raised the number of houses inherited from the Founder from sixty-four to three hundred and fourteen, setting them up in all the continents, to evangelize, educate, heal, from pagans to lepers, from children to the old, from the ignorant to the learned.

Likewise the Salesians rose from seven hundred under Don Bosco, distributed in six nations, to four thousand, distributed in thirty nations.

In all this conservative activity, which raised works of physical and spiritual rebirth for the people, sometimes associating with this service, following the example of a St. Vincent de Paul and of a St. John Bosco, also the most generous spirits of the high classes, the Blessed intended to bear an up-to-date testimony to the perennial relevance of Christianity, in a historical period in which anti-clerical, secular and atheistic ideologies were being spread in the midst of Christendom in several parts of Europe, confusing the people and often inducing them to desert the churches. And so Don Rua brought back a breeze of youth, in the midst of the depression caused by the political events of national unity, embittered by the Roman question.

Continuing his master's initiative, he, too, devoted himself with amazing success to reconstructing a modern image of the Church in the midst of the workers, almost sweeping away the fictitious barriers behind which, for many people, the vitality of the faith seemed turned to stone. At the same time

he succeeded in completing the Master's apostolate to reconstruct the image of the Papacy, often distorted by the wild sectarianism of the period.

FOLLOWING HIS MASTER

This effusion, which reached the extreme limits of the earth, together with the many journey and studies in every direction, shows us how open that soul was, eager to reach everyone, out of charity, feeling indebted to everyone. It was charity that made him tireless and inexhaustible, that infused an endless vitality into him. He himself explained: "He who loves is always happy".

He slept very little in order to work very hard, he was distressed by every adversity, he assumed burdens of every kind, and yet "he was always happy". He had God in his heart: and God, like love, is joy.

It was he who developed, in modernity of ideas and means, the function of service of his long rectorship, which acted as one of the elements preparing that process of *aggiornamento* which culminated in Vatican II: that Council defined by Paul VI "an act of love for God, for the Church, for mankind".

The Salesian action for mankind takes its place in the Christian sociological cycle that was expressed in the *Rerum Novarum* at those times and now is polarized round *Populorum Progressio*.

"Following the example of Don Bosco — his biographer Agostino Auffray recalls — he was in the habit of reminding the cooperators and friends of the Salesian works of the evangelical function of wealth, so that everyone would feel the need to contribute to the moral and Christian elevation of the popular classes". For this reason he helped to found workers' clubs, to support the Catholic Working Women's Unions, to collaborate with Leon Harmel and with the constructors of the new Catholic sociology, aimed at making the masses the people and the people the Church.

Knowing by experience that the society of tomorrow is established on the young people of today, he had an extraordinary capacity for loving and understanding boys, particularly those inclined to delinquency, managing to guide to virtue and professional abilities even the wildest pupils, a forerunner in the type of magisterium most demanded today.

ATTRACTED TEENAGERS

Thus he attracted thousands and thousands of teenagers to the Oratories, particularly in the larger towns, succeeding in making them live the joy of innocence. Like St. Augustine, he did not believe in harsh repression, in fierce pedagogies: he believed in kindness and he understood spirits by the light of that divine intelligence, love. He believed in games, singing, merriment; he was able to become a boy with the *birichini* (little rascals): the model director, as Don Bosco had moulded him.

Of course serenity and joy did not mean superficiality for him, so severe with himself, with that limpid simplicity in which his many-sided action moved. On the contrary, they were the fruit of that assiduous passing from pain of love, in which the followers of the Cross seek the solution to evils. "To arrive at the Promised Land — Don Bosco had warned him on the day of his first Mass — it is necessary to cross the Red Sea and the desert: you will have to work a great deal and suffer a great deal". And Don Rua was so convinced of this that he summed up in a maxim of evident wisdom the whole cycle of pain in its passing to love. "Every cross — he said — is heavy for one who drags it along. For him who embraces it lovingly and takes it up on his shoulders generously, it becomes light".

Under this sweetness, a real childhood of the spirit, could be felt the suffering he bore at all the miseries, present in his heart; but a suffering united by love to a fortitude that made him resemble a martyr.

MAN FOR OUR TIMES

In a word, we can see in the new Blessed of the Catholic Church the Christian as he is most demanded by our times. And the value of his testimony, which lasted his whole life, was seen already at his death, when the Town Council of Turin, composed mainly of Radicals and socialists, paid him concordant and triumphant tribute, recalling him, amid the emotion of all, as a saint, nay more as "the ideal saint that mankind in its agitated life is seeking with longing"; the "worthy continuer to Don Bosco", so that the people of Turin "saw personified (in him) the living miracle of an institution that, springing out of nothing, without government aids . . . rises and is maintained all over the civilized world, supporting principles of freedom, equality justice and love. . ."