

THE LIFE OF
DOMINIC SAVIO

THE LIFE OF DOMINIC SAVIO

by
St. John Bosco

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PREFACE

“**L**et us leave a saint to write the life of a saint,” is said to have been the exclamation of the Angelic Doctor Saint Thomas Aquinas, when he entered the cell of his brother doctor, Saint Bonaventure, and found him absorbed in writing the life of his spiritual father, Saint Francis.

The peculiar value of the present little book is that it may be said once more to present the spectacle of a saint writing the life of a saint. Only whereas in Saint Bonaventure’s case a son was writing the life of a father, in this case we have the unique example of a father writing the life of his spiritual son. The writer, the saintly Don Bosco, has already been declared Venerable, and the process for his Beatification is proceeding in Rome.

Little Domenico Savio, whose biography was originally published by Don Bosco very shortly after the holy

child's death, was, as will be seen, Don Bosco's spiritual child, and it is a subject of great joy to all his admirers that his cause also has at last been introduced at Rome with the approval of the Holy See.

The publication of this English translation of the life, may, please God, contribute not a little to the successful issue of the cause of his beatification.

There are reasons why the life of Domenico Savio should be considered particularly appropriate at the present day, and also why it should appeal especially to English Catholics.

As will be seen from the narrative which follows, the boyhood of Domenico to some extent coincided with that of our present Holy Father [Pope Pius X], there were less than seven years between the times of their birth, and in many respects the early years of the one were like those of the other.

Both were sons of humble peasant families in the North of Italy; both as boys had to trudge many miles barefooted day by day to attend school; both were distinguished by identical qualities of mind and soul.

More than this. The boy Giuseppe Sarto of Riese was destined to become "the Pope of the Eucharist," and no acts of his wonderful Pontificate have more profoundly influenced the spiritual life of the Catholic Church

than his legislation on daily Communion and on the first Communion of children on arriving at the use of reason.

Now it is a remarkable fact that the childhood of Domenico Savio anticipated these profound reforms, inasmuch as, owing to his extraordinary sanctity, he was as early as 1849 admitted to his first Communion at the age of seven, and continued thereafter to be a daily Communicant.

At that date such an event must indeed have appeared phenomenal and seems to constitute Domenico a most suitable patron for the juvenile first communicants and daily communicants of the present discipline.

Nor is this all. Domenico Savio, whom we all hope to see one day raised to the Altars of the Church, died as a schoolboy and when not yet fifteen years of age. He was not a Religious of any Order, he was not a Cleric, nor even as yet a church student, though hoping one day to become one; he was just an ordinary schoolboy, fond of his games, as well as of his books. Herein again we seem to see a peculiarly appropriate patron for all Catholic school children, for Domenico may be truly said to be one of themselves, and in these days of educational strife and danger such a patron is more than ever needed by our Catholic schools.

Last of all we cannot but be struck by the extraordinary fact of Domenico's interest in England, as mentioned in chapter ten, and his wonderful vision narrated in chapter nineteen. As far as I know, there is nothing to show why this little Italian schoolboy should have felt any interest in England, or indeed how he came to know anything about it. It reminds one of the case of Saint Paul of the Cross, except that it is a much more wonderful phenomenon in the case of a mere child. For this reason, I feel especially pleased to see the life in an English dress, and I sincerely trust that the book may have a wide circulation in English speaking countries, and that all readers, and specially the children of our schools, may join in earnest prayer for the promotion of the cause of one whom we may hope someday to acclaim as "the Schoolboy Saint."

Bishop Louis Charles Casartelli
Diocese of Salford, England
Saint Bede's College, 6 May 1914

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

YOU have frequently asked me to write something about your former companion, Dominic Savio; and now I have done what I could to satisfy your desire. Here is his life, described with that brevity and simplicity which I know is most acceptable to you.

There were two difficulties in the way of publishing this work; first there was the criticism to which one is exposed, who describes what was performed under the eyes of many witnesses. I think I have overcome this by determining to narrate only what has been observed by you or by myself, and which I keep preserved in your own writing.

The other obstacle was the necessity of often mentioning myself, for as Dominic was three years in this House, I must necessarily refer to things with which I am personally connected. This I think I have overcome by adhering

strictly to the duty of an historian, which is to present the statement of facts, irrespective of the persons concerned. But if, here and there, I should appear to speak too openly of myself, you must put it down to my regard for the boy who has gone, and for all of you besides; for this affection makes me open my heart to you, as a father does when speaking to his children.

Some of you may wonder why I have prepared a Life of Dominic Savio, and not of other youths who were here at school, and lived lives of eminent virtue. It is quite true that Divine Providence deigned to send us several boys who were examples of holiness, such as Gabriel Fascio, Louis Rua, Camillus Gavio, John Massiglia and others; but the incidents connected with these are not so conspicuous and remarkable as those of Savio, whose whole life was wonderful. However, if God gives me health and grace, I intend to publish a collection of facts concerning these other companions, both to satisfy your desires and my own, and so that you may imitate what may be compatible with your state. In this edition I have inserted several new accounts, which will increase the interest of those who have read the former editions.

But I would ask you to try to draw profit from what I am going to describe; say with Saint Augustine: *si ille, cur non ego?* If a companion of mine, of my age and

circumstances, exposed to the same or even greater difficulties, could yet remain a faithful disciple of Christ, why cannot I do the same? Remember that true religion is not a matter of words; there must be deeds. Hence, if you find something related worthy of admiration, do not be satisfied with saying: I like that, or that is very good; but rather say: I want to put into practice what I see is praiseworthy in others.

May God grant you, and all the readers of this book, strength and grace to draw profit from what is therein contained; and may Our Blessed Lady, to whom Dominic was so devout, obtain for us all one heart and mind in serving God, who alone is worthy of being loved above all things, and faithfully served during our whole life.

CHAPTER I

EARLY LIFE AND SIGNS OF EXTRAORDINARY GIFTS

ABOUT ten miles from Turin, in the north of Italy, lies the village of Castelnuovo d'Asti, and there in 1841 lived a good, hardworking couple, Charles and Bridget Savio. About that time, however, there was scarcity of labor in the neighborhood, and they accordingly moved away in the direction of Chieri, which is about nine miles southeast of Turin; and, having settled at the little township of Riva, Charles Savio applied himself to his trade of an ironworker. On April 2nd of the next year, 1842, a child was born, who was to prove a blessing and consolation to his parents; he was given the name of Dominic at baptism, and though no particular importance was attached to the name at the time, the boy, in later years,

held it in particular esteem, as there will be occasion to learn.

When the boy was scarcely two years of age, his parents decided to return to their former neighborhood, and they settled at Murialdo, which is quite close to their early home at Castelnuovo. Like devoted parents, the careful upbringing of their boy was their chief solicitude, and, considering his tender years, Dominic soon displayed an excellent disposition, and piety seemed to be part of his very nature. Morning and evening prayers at once impressed themselves on his childish mind, and at four years of age he could recite them all quite readily; he was always attentive to his mother's wishes, and only left her to say his prayers in some quiet corner, where he was undisturbed.

In the unreflecting manner, natural to them, children are generally a source of worry and disturbance to their mothers; it is the age when they must touch and examine and often taste everything they come across; but Dominic's parents testify that he never gave the least trouble in this way. He was not only obedient to the smallest point, but ready for any expression of a wish, and tried to foresee opportunities of doing them some little service. He was quite above the average in his appreciation for his parents' kindness, and he had his own method of

expressing it, particularly as his father returned from his day's work. He always ran out to meet him, hoped he was not too tired, and promised to pray for him in return for all his labors. So saying, he would enter the house, place his father's chair ready, and attend to all his wants. "This childish appreciation and thoughtfulness," says his father, "were naturally very welcome to me, and as evening drew nigh, I began to feel a particular longing to get home, to receive and give these marks of affection; for the boy was everything to me."

Day by day the child's piety increased, and from the time that he was four years of age, there was no need to remind him of his prayers, whether morning or evening or at meals, or at the time of the Angelus; in fact, he would even remind others, should they appear to forget them. One day some distraction occurred as they were sitting down to dinner, and grace before meals was forgotten; but little Dominic was too attentive: "Father," he said, "We have not yet asked God's blessing on our food," and he straightway made the Sign of the Cross and began the usual prayer.

At another time a stranger was staying in the house, and he sat down to his meal without any act of religion. Dominic did not like to speak of it openly, yet he was too much moved to remain at the table, and went to one

of his quiet corners. When he was questioned about this unusual proceeding by his parents, he replied: “I could not remain at table with one who eats as do the beasts without a thought of God.”