

SAINT DOMINIC SAVIO

By J. J. Ryan, S. D. B.

On March 5, of this Holy Year, 1950, crowds of youth from almost every country in the world stormed the great Basilica of St. Peter's Rome, to witness the beatification ceremony of an Italian Salesian school boy. Seventy thousand voices echoed through that mighty edifice as Our Holy Father was borne on the Sedia Gestatoria into St. Peter's to venerate the Relic of this youthful Confessor. Twenty thousand more outside in the Square took up the cry of triumph and flung it along the piazza of Bernini out on to the timeless Tiber, across ancient Europe and over to the new lands of the Atlantic and the Pacific. So profoundly moving was this gigantic manifestation of youthful enthusiasm and joy that the Holy Father, Pius XII was heard to exclaim:

“Never was such a sight seen in St. Peter's before.”

It is worth while, then, to know something of this schoolboy, who has merited such glory and world-wide renown. Never before in the history of Catholic schools has school life been so exalted and dignified than in the Church's recognition of the holiness of life of Dominic Savio, the Schoolboy Confessor.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Dominic Savio was born on April 2, 1842, in a village of Piedmont, North Italy, with the lovely name of Riva di Chieri. Here, his father, Charles Savio, worked as village blacksmith, carpenter and general handyman. Charles Savio and his wife, Brigid, were highly respected among their rural kinsfolk, and although they were never much ahead of poverty, they were rich in the strong, sturdy faith of the Piedmontese peasantry. The strong, muscular blacksmith looked fondly that April day on his new-born son. Like every other father, he looked ahead and wondered what the future would bring. Certainly the present had little to offer. His home was a humble cottage; his work in the fields and at the forge provided little more than the bare necessities of life. So, from a worldly point of view, his son's future was very insecure, and none too bright. But the parents' trust in God was as deep as their faith and as a pledge of that confidence they decided at the baptism of their child on the morrow, he would be named Dominic, that is, “of the Lord.” How truly he was a child “of the Lord” they could scarcely realise then, but the strong Catholic spirit of the Savio home was the first and most enduring influence in the making of this saintly boy.

Impressionable and precocious to an unusual degree, the child responded with rare docility to the early training of his pious mother, and gifted with a wonderful memory, he had learned his prayers at the early age of four years. When five years old he could serve Mass and the sight of the small boy standing tip-toed and with arms fully outstretched to lift the Missal from the altar, was often an amusing topic of conversation among the villagers. His devotion at this early age to Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament was most remarkable. It attracted the notice of the parish priest, who was astonished at the workings of Divine Grace in one so young. Often the child was seen in the early hours of the morning before the church door was opened, kneeling in prayer on the doorstep. Rain, hail or snow, he would be there waiting to be admitted into the home of his Eucharistic Lord.

In those days children were not permitted to make their first Holy Communion until they were eleven or twelve years old. Dominic at the age of seven knew his catechism by heart and had a clear understanding of the Holy Eucharist and a strong desire to receive It. The parish priest, however, although fully aware of the boy's rare gifts of grace and nature, hesitated to admit him to first Holy Communion because he was so young. He realized, however, that Dominic's knowledge and grasp of the meaning of this solemn act was much more advanced than that of other children. After talking the matter over with several of the local clergy, he decided that in view of the boy's spiritual preparedness he should be allowed to make his first Holy Communion. Dominic was overjoyed at the news and at once set about preparing himself as well as possible. The night before the great day he said to his mother:

“Tomorrow is my First Communion Day, so please forgive me all the wrong I have done you, and I promise to behave myself much better in the future. I will do better at school and be more respectful and more obedient.”

Even at that early age he realized the necessity of striving to be virtuous. On his First Communion Day he scribbled down on the fly-leaf of his prayer book four resolutions, which reveal what was to be the tenor of his spiritual life in the years ahead. They were:

- (1) I will go to Confession often and will receive Holy Communion as often as my Confessor will allow me.
- (2) I will keep Sundays and days of obligation holy.
- (3) My friends will be Jesus and Mary.
- (4) Death rather than sin.

These resolutions made by Dominic at the age of seven show how far he was already advanced in the spiritual life, and how practical his piety was, in spite of his tender years.

HEROIC SCHOOLDAYS

Dominic went to the local school until he was ten years old. Then it became necessary for him to finish his education at a higher school. This meant a walk of eight miles or so a day to and from the nearest municipal school at Castelnuovo. It was a long and lonely road, and in those days infested with tramps and footpads. The peasant folk, who saw him trudging along day after day to school in the rains and snows of winter and under the scorching sun of summer, shook their heads in disapproval and doubted the commonsense of the blacksmith, who sent his son so far afield alone for his schooling.

A man, meeting Dominic one day on his way under a blazing sun, ventured to ask him:

“Are you not afraid, my boy, to tramp along these roads alone?”

“I am never alone, sir, for my Guardian Angel is always with me.”

“But surely, you must find it tiring to do this long walk every day, and in this heat, too!”

“Nothing is tiring, when one does it for God, Who repays so well.”

The man was deeply impressed by the spontaneity and simplicity of the boy’s answers, and that evening as he sat with the villagers in the big barn for their evening gossip, he related the incident and capped it with a prophecy:

“A boy of ten, who thinks so seriously at that age, is sure to be heard of again, what ever career he chooses.”

Charles Savio, however, was very reluctant to allow his son to undertake so long a journey on foot, and it was only Dominic’s keenness for knowledge that induced him to consent. His decision proved wise, for the boy made great progress at his new and distant school. His master was delighted with his progress both in virtue and learning:

“There was,” he testifies, “a certain charm in his manner that won instant sympathy. Gentle in his ways and ever kind, no one ever saw him out of his usual good humour.

From the first day he came to school until he left, he was always first in his class in almost all the subjects he studied. This success was due not only to his quick intelligence, but also to his great love of learning.”

Although at school Dominic was always ahead in most things, he was never aloof or lordly. The seriousness he showed in his studies was never carried into his playtime. In recreation he was never a swot or a pedant but the centre of all games and merriment. His teachers often marvelled at the zest he put into his games, handicapped, as he was at times, by poor health, for he was never very robust. His warm and sympathetic heart and unfailing gaiety made him a companion much sought after by the other boys. Never did he stoop to cheap popularity, but was at all times and in all circumstances impervious to anything low or mean.

One hot summer’s day some schoolmates asked him to go with them for a swim. Dominic readily joined them in this pleasant and healthy boyish exercise. During the course of the swim the behaviour and conversation of some of the boys were most unbecoming, and Dominic realized with a shock that he had laid himself open to real moral danger. It cut deeply into his sensitive soul, and that night he cried bitterly at the realization that such a favourite boyhood pastime should be turned, by the evil-minded, into an offence against God. He made up his mind never to be led into such danger again. Some days later, when the same boys tried again to persuade him to go with them, he manfully refused, and for the future he was very careful in his choice of companions.

His determination in this regard did not come from prudish or smug self-righteousness. The incident was a challenge to

his life's ideal, "Death rather than sin." He met the challenge and it meant a dogged struggle, but, as his teacher remarked, "his courage was superhuman." He needed at times, all the courage he could muster, for his uprightness frequently brought down on him the spite, and in some cases, the hatred of malicious youths. He simply could not stand the truckler and the squealer. A few of this type once planned to corner him, and in some way to destroy his reputation of loyalty to his school authorities.

The teacher one morning discovered a serious offence, so serious as to deserve immediate expulsion. The culprit, helped by some of his companions, plotted to lay the guilt on Dominic. They framed their plot and went to the headmaster. So plausible was their story that the master, as he himself afterwards admitted, allowed himself to be persuaded of Savio's guilt. In his indignation he severely rebuked the boy in public, and thundered his threats of immediate expulsion, if he should ever again be guilty of such despicable conduct.

The assembled school stared with round-eyed amazement at Dominic as he stood silent with head bent, as if in tacit avowal of his guilt.

To the plotters of this mean and contemptible act Savio's honour and good name were irretrievably shattered. He had either to squeal or bear dishonour. He chose dishonour. The assembled school was dismissed and Dominic was regarded as a fallen idol. But there was no trace of ill-will in his relations with his calumniators; he went about his duties with the same good spirit and diligence.

Later, however, the real culprit was discovered, and the headmaster, full of remorse, asked Dominic why he had made no attempt to clear himself of the charge. The boy replied:

"I said nothing because the other boy had been in trouble before, and this time would certainly have been expelled. But as it was my "first offence" I had hopes of being let off. I also thought of Our Lord and how He had been falsely accused."

Dominic's honour was thus vindicated, and the fact that he had not squealed on his calumniator made him a greater sport than ever in the eyes of the boys, and in the estimation of his teachers a pupil of inflexible character.

THE APOSTOLIC SCHOOLBOY

At twelve years old Dominic felt called to the priesthood. His parish priest accordingly advised his father to apply to Don Bosco in Turin. Don Bosco promised to interview the boy on his next visit to Murialdo, which was not far from Mondonio, where the Savio family had now taken up their abode. The meeting of the saint and the schoolboy took place early in October, 1854, and Don Bosco himself relates what took place that morning.

"I was struck by his serene expression and cheerful but modest demeanour. I sensed at once the work of Divine Grace in one so young and was filled with admiration. We understood each other perfectly at once. We talked for some time and then Dominic asked:

"Well, Father, what do you think of me? Will you take me back to Turin with you?"

"Dominic, I think there is some good stuff in you."

"Good stuff, Father! 'What is it good for?"

"To make a fine vestment for Our Lord."

"Splendid idea, Father. I'll be the cloth; you be the tailor. So take me with you and start the cutting out at once."

"I'm afraid your health will not stand the study ahead."

"Never fear, Father. God has given me health enough so far. He will not let me down now."

"What are you going to be?"

"If God gives me the grace, I want to be a priest."

"Good. Now I want to see how quick you are at your lessons. Take this book and learn page nine by heart; then come along tomorrow and we'll see how you got on."

Dominic ran out to join in the fun with the other boys Don Bosco had brought to Murialdo on one of his customary picnics. But before taking part in the games he looked steadily at page nine, read it over a few times, and within eight minutes ran back joyfully to Don Bosco with the whole page by heart. Don Bosco was amazed and exclaimed:

“Bravo, Dominic! Since you have learnt it so quickly, you can have my answer right now. Yes, you can come with me to Turin and be one of my boys.”

Dominic hardly knew what to say in return but in gratitude he gasped a promise.

“I will try never to give you cause to complain.” With that he rushed out in the open field and threw himself into the fun with sheer joy and delight.

A month later Dominic stood in Don Bosco’s room in his school at Turin, known as the Oratory of St. Francis of Sales. It was his first day at his new school and he felt at home from the outset. A large inscription painted on the wall of the humble room caught the lad’s eye. It read: “Give me souls; take away all else.” He studied it attentively and then made his comment:

“I see, Father, here your business is souls, not money. I hope I will have a share in your business.”

This apostolate for souls was the specific element Don Bosco was to infuse into the ardent soul of this schoolboy. From the very outset of his new life at St. John Bosco’s school the boy’s interior life, already so intense in one so young, broke out into a startling apostolate at school. He became, in more modern terminology, a “Catholic Actionist.” Pius XI, in declaring him the Venerable Servant of God on July 9, 1933, declared:

“Dominic, therefore, is truly a providential lesson for our own times, especially for our young people, who are so enthusiastically and courageously rallying to Our call for Catholic Action.”

There was no phase of school life outside the sweep of his apostolate. War against indecent literature, against blasphemy, against hatred and ill-will of every kind; a crusade for more frequent Communion, for devotion to Mary Immaculate and for the teaching of the Catechism among his companions, these were some of the objectives of his apostolate for souls.

One day a lad lounged against the wall in the playground, his eyes glued to an indecent picture in a cheap magazine. Several of his kind craned their necks over his shoulder to feast their eyes. Dominic joined the growing crowd to see what was going on. As soon as he became aware of the nature of the attraction he pushed his way ahead, snatched the magazine and tore it to bits. For a split second there was dead silence. Then his voice rang out clear and fearless in denunciation:

“Cut this out, chaps; there’s no room for such stuff here.” The lads shuffled uneasily in their guilt, and then one took up the defence.

“But it was only a joke,” he protested.

“You’ll hardly see the funny side of it when you’re burning in hell,” was Dominic’s rejoinder. It stifled any further defence. Dominic, however, was never merely repressive; he appealed to their finer instincts.

“Can’t you see,” he pleaded, “that God gave you your eyes to see and to admire the beauty of His creation, not to look upon such sinful things as that?”

His manliness and moral courage won their respect and admiration.

Blasphemy or irreverence of any kind shocked and pained him profoundly. His reaction was always quick and spontaneous.

One day while on a walk his friend noticed him take off his cap and murmur something to himself.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Did you not hear that shopkeeper take Our Lord’s Name in vain?” Dominic replied. “I would certainly have pointed it out to him, but I feared I might have made matters worse. So I contented myself by saying, ‘Blessed be the Name of Jesus’.”

On another occasion he overheard a man utter a horrible blasphemy. He whispered an ejaculation of atonement and then walked right up to the blasphemer and said respectfully:

“Excuse me, sir. Could you tell me, please, how to get to the Oratory of St. Francis of Sales?”

His gentle manner mollified the man’s ruffled temper, and he became more affable: “I’m sorry, lad, I can’t help you. I’ve never heard of such a place.”

“Thanks just the same,” Dominic replied; “you might help me some other way.”

“Certainly, my lad, I’ll do all I can.”

Dominic came up closer to the big man and said in an undertone: “I’d be very glad if you refrained from blaspheming when you’re in a temper.”

The man was dumbfounded for an instant, but the boy’s frankness and courage refreshed him.

“You’re right, my son. It’s a bad habit of mine. I’ll do my best to get rid of it.”

At times Dominic had to assume the role of peacemaker among his schoolmates and try to check the universal tendency of school boys to settle their disputes with their fists. On one such occasion two lads had a fierce tussle in which their respective family reputation was impugned most bitterly. There was murder in the air. A fight with fists was out of the question. Family honour could only be vindicated by more murderous methods. The supporters of the rivals contended that dishonour could only be effaced by the traditional duel. But neither sword nor pistol was to hand, so all that could be done was to have recourse to man’s most primitive weapon, the stone. A duel with stones was then decided on with adventurous solemnity and the whole group of boys were sworn to secrecy. Dominic, who was in the “know,” tried to reconcile the enemies but they were beyond the appeal of reason. They had sworn revenge on each other and they would see the matter through without any show of cowardice.

“Very well,” said Dominic, “if you mean to go on with this fight, will you promise me one thing?”

Savio’s standing with the whole school was too great to be brushed aside without further consideration. “All right, Savio,” agreed the lads, “provided you do nothing to stop the fight.”

“You can carry on your fight after you’ve kept your promise.”

“What is it?” they asked.

“That’s my secret,” affirmed Dominic; “you’ll know what it is when you get there.”

“Look here, Savio, you’re trying to fool us and to stop the fight.”

“I’m doing nothing of the kind. All I want is your promise to do what I ask. Now let us get along.”

The site chosen for the fight was an open stretch of waste land on the outskirts of the city. The duelists chose five stones each and took up their stand about fifteen yards apart. As they stood face to face all their enmity and personal bitterness blazed forth anew, The violence of their hatred robbed them of the sense of danger there was in their deadly fight. They poised to take aim, but like a flash Dominic rushed into the fray and stood motionless and hatless midway between the enraged combatants.

“Now friends, this is the moment of your promise. Look steadily at this.” He held aloft a small crucifix. “Now say aloud with me. ‘My Lord died on the Cross forgiving His enemies. I now will offend Him by my wilful act of vengeance’.”

With this he pocketed his crucifix and turning to the one and the other he said:

“Now begin your fight, but throw the first stone at me.”

The boys were completely taken by surprise and the sight of their mutual friend standing between them and their murderous intent shook them for the moment in their evil determination.

Then the more infuriated of the two yelled out hoarsely:

“Get out of the way, Savio, we don’t want to hurt you.”

“No, you don’t want to hurt me, yet you do not scruple to offend God by this sinful outburst of hate and revenge. Can’t you see just how senseless the whole thing is? It’s not a clean outright fight. It’s sheer senseless murder.”

This last minute appeal made so unexpectedly by their friend blunted the edge of their fury. They lost their bravado and their better sense prevailed. One of them dropped his stones and shuffled over to his schoolbooks lying on the ground. He picked them up and made off in the direction of the city. In the distance the belfries pealed out across the evening stillness and the Angelus chimed over another triumph of grace as a boy knelt in sorrow outside the confessional of a city church.

“JESUS AND MARY SHALL BE MY FRIENDS”

From his childhood Dominic had shown an extraordinary devotion to Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. At the school of St. John Bosco this devotion was paramount. In fact the saint's system of education was fundamentally Sacramental. He gave his boys every opportunity for frequent Confession and Holy Communion. Dominic made full use of this opportunity and his love and devotion to the Holy Eucharist was the source of all the joy and zeal that characterized his young life. His daily Communion and his frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament transformed his youthful ardour into apostolic zeal, which, as Pope Pius XI affirmed, “animated the whole life of this fortunate boy.”

It happened one morning that Dominic was missing from breakfast and at the midday meal he had not put in an appearance. No one knew where he was. Don Bosco was informed and he at once surmised where he might be. He went into the chapel and there in a corner near the Sanctuary he saw the boy standing motionless with his gaze fixed on the Tabernacle. The priest called him softly by name but there was no response. He came nearer and touched him on the arm. The boy merely looked at him and asked:

“Oh, is the Mass over?”

“See,” said Don Bosco, holding out his watch, “it's nearly two o'clock.”

Dominic apologized for breaking the rule and went off about his ordinary duties. On another occasion Don Bosco heard a conversation going on in the Sanctuary. He went to investigate and there saw Dominic holding a conversation with someone invisible.

“I will die,” he was protesting, “rather than commit sin.”

Don Bosco asked him what happened on these occasions and Dominic replied with great simplicity and frankness:

“I seem to get distracted and lose the trend of my prayers. Then I see such beautiful sights that make the hours pass like moments.”

There were many extraordinary incidents in Dominic's life connected with the Blessed Sacrament. He rushed suddenly one day into Don Bosco's room.

“Come quickly, Father,” he said, “you're needed at once.”

“Where am I to go?” the priest asked.

“Hurry, Father, hurry. Follow me.”

Off he went in haste through a poor quarter of Turin with the priest following him in silence. At length the boy stopped before a house and then went up to the third floor and knocked on a door.

“It's here you're wanted, Father.”

With that he went off. A woman came to the door and seeing the priest exclaimed in surprise:

“Quick, Father, quick, or you'll be too late. My husband gave up the practice of his faith and now he wants to be reconciled before he dies.”

The man had just time to make his confession and his peace with God. On his return, Don Bosco asked the boy how he knew there was a man dying in that house. Dominic, however, seemed reluctant to explain and the priest did not press him further.

On another occasion Dominic knocked at a door and asked if there were anyone in the house sick with the cholera. The man at the door affirmed that there was no one suffering from that dread disease in the house.

“I'm sure there must be someone sick here,” persisted Dominic.

“I'm afraid you've mistaken the house. We are all safe and well in here. Are you sure you've come to the right house?”

The boy went across the street and took a good look at the house. He came back and knocked again.

“I'm sorry to annoy you,” he said politely to the exasperated man, “but there must be a sick person here. This is the house, all right.”

The man was on the verge of being rude, but the earnest plea of the boy and his apparent goodness of heart checked him.

“All right,” he snapped, “have it your way. Come in and we'll take a look.”

They went from room to room, floor to floor and no one sick was discovered. At length they came to an old lumber room where, to the man's horror, they found an old woman huddled up and on the point of death. She was a charwoman and kept her mops and brooms in the room. She had gone there that morning to get them before going out to her work and had collapsed, a victim to the disease. The priest was sent for and arrived just in time to administer the Last Sacraments.

On July 9, 1933, when Pius XI declared Dominic the Venerable Servant of God, the Pontiff, in his panegyric on the holiness of life of this boy, said:

“He possessed the purity of the lily, as angelic purity, inspired by his tender devotion to the Most Holy Virgin, the Mother of all Purity. This virtue was always carefully guarded, first by his parents, then by Don Bosco and his Salesians. The boy himself was ever on the offensive to protect this beautiful virtue. He marshalled all the energies of his great soul against anything that might have the remotest danger for this virtue. Purity— this indispensable, this forerunner of all other gifts of God, the gift of the greatest vocations. Purity! the love of Mary, of her Divine Son, this perfume to which the heart of God so readily responds! How great is the need to lift on high the standard of this resplendent virtue among our youth of today!”

Dominic's inviolable purity was the measure of his devotion to Our Lady. It proved how strong and unshakeable this devotion really was. St. John Bosco himself attests:

“Dominic's life was a continual act of devotion to the Blessed Virgin.”

The output of that life of devotion to Mary Immaculate was Dominic's insuperable chastity. In 1854, Pius IX defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady.

Dominic wanted to do something to perpetuate in some way the affectionate remembrance of this august title of the Mother of God.

“I would like to do something to honour Our Lady and I must do it soon or I shall be too late.”

He did it. He founded among his companions the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception, which still exists in Salesian schools throughout the world today. The aim of the Sodality was to practise and spread devotion to the Mother of God and to promote frequent Communion among his companions. The Sodality was a powerful influence in the school in promoting piety, and especially in enkindling love and devotion to God's Holy Mother. Our Lady did not fail to reward her young apostle with several remarkable graces.

One day Dominic came to Don Bosco to ask leave to go home as his mother was seriously ill and that Our Lady wanted to cure her.

“How did you get this news of your mother's illness?” asked the priest. “Has any one written to your’

“No one has written or said a word to me, Father, but I know just the same.”

That was enough for Don Bosco. He did not press the matter further. He knew the boy's extraordinary virtue and his supernatural sources of knowledge, so he let him go. Dominic arrived home to find his mother's condition very critical. His father had gone off to fetch the doctor. Dominic entered the sick room and, jumping on the bed, embraced and kissed his mother fondly. He then left her as quickly as he had come and returned directly to Turin. On his arrival he went straight to Don Bosco and told him all that happened and how Our Lady had cured his mother. In the meantime, the doctor came and found the mother completely recovered. The neighbours, who had gathered to be of some assistance, found a silk cord around the mother's neck, to which was attached a medal of Our Lady. Dominic had put it there when he embraced his mother and Our Lady had worked the cure. The cord and medal were treasured by the Savio family and used under the instruction of Dominic in similar cases with the same miraculous results.

On another occasion, Don Bosco thought it wise to send Dominic home for a time as his health gave some reason for anxiety. The boy accordingly set out by coach for home but had to complete the journey for some miles on foot. He reached home very tired and unexpected as he had not informed his mother of his home-coming. The good woman was completely surprised when he came in foot-sore and tired.

“Whatever has happened, Dominic?” she asked in astonishment. “Have you come all this way alone?”

“No, mother, I was not alone. As soon as I got out of the coach at Castelnuovo, a beautiful and majestic lady was

waiting to meet me, and she came with me all the way.”

“Then why didn’t you ask her in to rest for a while?”

“I couldn’t, mother. As soon as I got here she disappeared and I saw her no more.”

The good woman hurried outside and looked up and down the road but there was no sign of a lady anywhere. She wondered who the lady could have been. In her mind there was a query: “Was the beautiful lady who had accompanied her boy on the way home the Mother of God?” Certainly in the realization of the boy’s deep and constant devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, it seems in no way unlikely that she would disdain to protect, if need be, by her visible presence this child of predilection.

DOMINIC’S LOVE OF PENANCE

“The life of Dominic Savio,” attested Pius XI, “all prayer and penance, even if it does not rise to the heights of the austerities told of in the history of sanctity, was, nevertheless, a life of true penance. Indeed, it gives a most useful lesson to us all, especially to the youth of our day, because it was a penance possible to all. He showed in his life a continual vigilance and the command of the spirit over the body.”

Dominic, young as he was, was fully persuaded that he could not preserve the innocence of his life without the practice of penance. Yet there were several reasons why he should not undertake the practice of penance. There was his age, for he was not yet fifteen; the delicate state of his health and the purity of his life. Yet withal he was imbued with the spirit of penance and had resolved to fast on bread and water every Saturday in honour of Our Lady, but his confessor forbade him to do so. He began to fast during Lent and Don Bosco, on hearing of this, would not allow him to continue. The boy then sought for permission to go without his breakfast, but his state of health would not permit this.

His youthful ardour, however, sought ways and means to mortify himself secretly. He put pieces of sharp iron and wood in his bed, and in winter discarded the extra blankets supplied to the boys. He tried his hardest to come by a hair-shirt, but his secret devices of penance were discovered, and his Superiors wisely restrained him from any practice of severe bodily penance. He then set himself to practise penance in other ways. He bore without complaint the heat or the cold; at table he passed the choicest food to others and gave himself generously to the service of the sick and the infirm. Yet he felt he should undertake something more severe.

“I really don’t know what to do,” he said rather sadly to Don Bosco one day Our Lord says that without penance we cannot get to heaven and I have been forbidden all forms of penance. My chances of getting to heaven are not very great.”

“The penance God asks of you is obedience.” Put up with everything for the love of God,” Don Bosco replied, “and you will be sure of gaining merit in His sight.”

At these words Dominic seemed satisfied and went happily on his way.

THE PLAYGROUND APOSTLE

No sketch of Dominic’s life, no matter how brief, would be complete without some reference to this charming phase of his apostolate.

“If I could win all my schoolmates to God, how happy I would be!”

This was the inspiration of his school life, and the playground was his mission field. He was the life and soul of every recreation and game, which he used as a means to serve God with an ever-cheerful heart. Don Bosco once remarked:

“Savio catches more souls with his games and tricks than many a priest with his preaching.”

His ever happy mood and lively happy spirits made him a great favourite at playtime and the other boys readily joined him in what ever games he organized. By preference Dominic was frequently to be found with the troublesome and the wayward, but his playmate of predilection was the careless and indifferent boy in the practice of his religion. Here he would use all the skill of an angler until he had hooked his fish. Shouldering his bat he would come with a cheery invitation to a game, and then with tireless zest, as though nothing else mattered, throw him self into the play. Hot and flushed he would call for a breathing-space and as they cooled off, he would ask the lad quite unaffectedly:

“What about coming to Confession on Saturday?”

Invariably the trick worked.

At other times he would come into the playground with an orange or a handful of roasted chestnuts and call out loudly above the noise of recreation:

“Who wants an orange? Who would like some chestnuts?” Naturally, they all wanted the prize, but Dominic saw to it that the lucky boy was the winner in an impromptu Catechism quiz. Not unusually, with an ulterior motive on Dominic’s part, the winner turned out to be the worst boy in the school.

His moral ascendancy over his companions was clearly evidenced time and time again. They took from him with pleasure the advice they would not have too readily taken from others.

One day during playtime a man came up to some boys and began to tell them funny stories. He was soon the centre of a large group of lads all hanging on his words. Seeing the ready response of his audience, the man suddenly changed the topic of his conversation and began to revile religion and morality. A few of the more sensible boys, aware of his motives, tried to persuade the others to come away from the offender, but they took no notice and remained listening to his impious talk. Dominic appeared on the scene and no sooner had he grasped what was taking place than he abruptly called out:

“Come away, boys! Don’t you see he’s out for no good?”

The boys, obedient to the voice of a friend, whom they loved and respected, ran off to join the games and left the devil’s agent talking to the thin air. This apostolate of the playground is a marked feature of St. John Bosco’s system of education. St. Dominic Savio is a pre-eminent example of its efficacy.

DOMINIC’S LOVE OF ENGLAND

In the early months of 1857 Dominic’s failing health again gave cause for anxiety and Don Bosco thought it prudent to send the boy to the country, hoping that the change of air might help to restore his strength. Accordingly, on March 1 of that year Dominic was leaving Don Bosco’s school for his home in Mondonio and priest and pupil stood on the threshold to say a few words of good-bye.

“Why,” asked Don Bosco, “are you unwilling to leave us? You should be glad you’re going home to see your parents.”

“I wanted, Father, to end my days here at the Oratory.”

“Never mind! You’ll come back again when you’re better.”

“No, Father, I won’t come back. I am going now, but I shall never return.”

He held out his hand to this great priest, who, during the three years at his school, had moulded him into a giant of sanctity.

“Good-bye, Father. You will have none of my poor body, so I must take it to Mondonio. Yet I would not have been such a burden to you much longer; all would have soon been over. But God’s will be done! If you go to Rome, remember what I told you about England, and tell the Holy Father all about it. Good-bye till we meet in heaven.”

How can we account for this love of a boy of fifteen for England, a land he had never seen and whose language he did not speak? England seemed to be the beloved object of those mysterious longings the Holy Spirit had fostered in the ardent soul of this apostolic boy. He had long desired and prayed to become a priest that he might go to labour for the conversion of England, and now his last thought on the day of his departure from Don Bosco, and on the very threshold of eternity, was for England.

It is not unusual to find in the childhood of great saints interior longings to go to some foreign land to win souls for Christ. St. Teresa of Avila wanted to go to convert the Moslems, the Little Flower to China; England for Dominic Savio was the land of his missionary dreams. It happened this way. It struck Don Bosco how frequently Dominic, towards the end of his life, spoke of the Holy Father and expressed a keen desire to see him before he died, alleging that he had something of great importance to tell him. Don Bosco one day asked him what this secret was he had to tell the Pope.

“If I could see the Holy Father,” he replied, “I would tell him, although great suffering is in store for him, not to lessen his solicitude for England because God is preparing a great triumph for Catholicism in that kingdom.”

“What makes you think that, Dominic?” Don Bosco asked.

“I will tell you, but please don’t tell any one else, because they might laugh at me. I was making my thanksgiving one morning after Holy Communion and I had a great distraction. I seemed to see a vast plain covered in darkness and filled with a multitude of people groping about like travellers who had lost their way. A person standing beside me said:

“‘This country is England.’

“I was on the point of asking for a further explanation when I saw our Holy Father, Pius IX, just as I have seen him in portraits. He was majestically dressed and held aloft a bright torch. As he advanced the darkness dispelled and the whole land was bright as if ablaze with the noon-day sun. The voice again said:

“‘That torch is the Catholic Faith, that will again enlighten England.’”

This “distraction,” or what seems more likely, this prophetic vision, impressed indelibly the thought of England on the boy’s mind. He spoke often of England to Don Bosco and to his companions. So imbued was he with the longing to work for England that he inspired St. John Bosco himself with an ever-growing love for England and a burning zeal for its conversion.

The late Cardinal Salotti in his “Life of Dominic Savio” gives an explanation of this “distraction.” He says:

“The words of Savio were doubly prophetic. When he mentioned the sorrows, which were to overwhelm the soul of Pius IX, he doubtless foresaw the way of Calvary to be trodden by the Pope after the exile of Gaeta. And when he comforted him by the vision of England, he foretold how Almighty God was preparing by means of the Sovereign Pontiff, a triumph for religion in that country; a triumph fulfilled in the numerous conversions and in the liberty granted to Catholic worship. Who knows that after receiving the Sacred Host, he perhaps, saw and rejoiced in, from afar, the wonderful days of September, 1908, when, during the Solemn Eucharistic Congress in London, 20,000 school children assembled on the Thames Embankment and walked in procession to Westminster Cathedral, amidst a multitude of devout onlookers; and when the Cardinal Legate of the Pope himself walked in this imposing demonstration of faith along the flower-strewn streets of this great metropolis, while hymns were raised to proclaim the triumph of the Holy Eucharist.”

Don Bosco related this vision of Dominic’s to Pius IX, and, the Pope, greatly consoled by the message, saw in it the Divine approbation of his restoration of the Hierarchy in England a few years previously.

DOMINIC’S DEATH

A few days after his arrival home Dominic grew weaker and the doctor pronounced his condition serious. He asked his father to call the priest, and he later received the Last Sacraments with indescribable devotion and fervour.

“Now I am at peace. With Our Divine Lord I am not afraid to set out on the long journey to eternity.”

It was March 9, 1857, and as his strength diminished rapidly, he looked at the Crucifix and repeated some verses of a favourite hymn. He then turned to his father:

“Father, it is time. Get my prayer-book and say the prayers for a happy death.”

The father in great sorrow read the prayers to which his dying son responded. When the prayers had been said, the boy added:

“Yes, Father, that is just what I want; To sing the praises of God for all eternity.”

After a brief rest he opened his eyes again and said with a smile:

“Good-bye, Father, good-bye.” Then, after a pause: “Oh, what a beautiful sight I see.”

With his hands joined and still smiling he gave up his young soul to God.

They buried him in the little graveyard of Mondonio, in an ordinary grave. It was all a poor man could do for his son. But the simple peasant folk regarded it more as a shrine than a tomb, for they called him their “piccolo santo” (their little saint).

The fame of his holiness grew apace and confidence in his power of intercession before God became world-wide. His grave at Mondonio quickly became a place of pilgrimage, and many extraordinary favours and cures of all kinds were obtained through his intercession. In 1914 his Cause for Canonization was formally introduced at Rome, and his remains

were raised from the humble grave of Mondonio. This had to be done at night fall as the villagers were hostile to any attempt to take from them their “little saint.” His remains were taken to the great Basilica of Mary, Help of Christians, Turin, which now flanks the very playground where he played and carried out his fruitful apostolate. He rests there now not far from the shrine of his great and loving spiritual Father, St. John Bosco, who so perfectly made of this “good stuff” a “fine vestment for the Lord.”

Dominic Savio was declared a Venerable Servant of God by Pius XI on July 9, 1933, and was beatified by our present Holy Father, Pius XII, on March 5, of this Holy Year of 1950. This was a great day of triumph for this schoolboy who had sanctified himself at school. There was nothing extraordinary in his life. He set before himself an ideal and he achieved it. Never before has the Glory of Bernini in St. Peter’s framed the image of a boy so young, as tens of thousands of faithful from almost every land under the sun hailed him as the Blessed Servant of God.

May God in His love hasten the day when the Church will bestow the supreme glory of sainthood on this Schoolboy Confessor, who in life was on fire with the ideals:

“Death rather than sin.”

“If I could win all my schoolmates to God, how happy I should be.”

Nihil obstat:

W. M. COLLINS,
Censor Dioc.

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