

**Spreading Good Books**  
**Don Bosco's Letter of March 19th 1885**

Feast of St. Joseph, 1885

Dearest Children in Jesus Christ,

The Lord is witness of how keenly I desire to see you, to be with you, to talk over our affairs with you, and to find comfort in confidential, heart-to-heart exchanges. Regrettably, my dearest children, my failing strength, the lingering effects of past illnesses, and the urgent business requiring my presence in France at this time, prevent me, at least for the present.

And so, since I cannot pay you a visit in person, I do so by this letter. I feel certain that you will be happy to know that I am thinking of you, you who are my glory and my support, as well as my hope. And, in accordance with my desire to see you grow every day more in zeal and merits before God, I will not neglect from time to time to suggest to you such means as will help make your ministry ever more fruitful.

One such means, the one I wish to commend most warmly to your zeal is the spreading of good books. I do not hesitate to describe this work as divine, because God himself made use of it, for the regeneration of mankind. The Books which he inspired were the means through which the true teaching was brought to the world.

It is noteworthy, moreover, that books, even though lacking the force of the living word, carry the greater advantage in certain situations. A good book can find its way into homes where the priest is not welcome. It will be kept as a souvenir or accepted as a present even by a bad person. A good book enters a home without blushing. If rebuffed, it is not discouraged. If taken up and read, it teaches the truth calmly. If set aside it does not complain, but patiently awaits the time when conscience may rekindle the desire to know the truth. It may perhaps be left to collect dust on a table or on a library shelf, and given no attention for a long time. But then comes the hour of solitude, of sadness, of sorrow, of boredom, of need for relaxation, of anxiety about the future-and this faithful friend shakes off its dust, opens its pages, and, as was the case with St. Augustine and St. Ignatius, it may bring about a conversion. A good book is gentle with those that are hampered by human respect and addresses them without arousing suspicion in anyone. It is on familiar terms with good people, and is always ready to make meaningful conversation and to travel along with them at any time anywhere. How many souls have been saved, preserved from error, encouraged in the practice of virtue through good books.

The person who gives a good book as a gift may only barely succeed in awakening the thought of God thereby. In most instances, however, the good that is done is much greater. Once brought into a family, if it is not read by the person to whom it was given, the book will be read by a son or a daughter, by a friend or a neighbor. In a small town that book may touch the lives of one hundred people. Only God knows how much good a book can do in a city, in a public library, in a workers' association, in a hospital, where the friendly gift of a book is much appreciated. The fear that someone may refuse the gift of a good book should not deter us on the contrary. A salesian in Marseilles was wont to visit the docks regularly and take along a supply of good books to give away to stevedores, repairmen and sailors. Such gifts were invariably gladly and thankfully accepted; and sometimes those men would immediately page through the book and then peruse it with curiosity.

Let these simple preliminary reflections suffice. I would now like to draw your attention to some of the reasons why we, as Christians and especially as Salesians, should make every effort and use every possible means to spread good books.

1. This is one of the most important apostolates entrusted to me by Divine Providence, and you know that I worked at it untiringly, even when engaged in a thousand other tasks. The vicious hatred displayed by the enemies of good, and the persecutions unleashed against me, are clear proof both that Error regarded those books as a formidable foe, and that the work had the blessing of God.

2. In point of fact, it is only with God's special assistance that we were able to spread good books to such an extent. The number of copies of pamphlets and books made available to the people through us over a period of less than

thirty years surpasses the twenty million. While some books surely went unread, some may have had upwards of one hundred readers. Thus the number of people reached by our books greatly surpasses the number of copies distributed.

3. The spreading of good books is one of the principal apostolates of our Congregation. Our Constitutions, in chapter 1, article 7, lay down that the Salesians

*shall apply themselves to spreading good books among the people, employing all the means that Christian charity inspires. Finally, they shall endeavor both by the spoken and the written word to raise a barrier against irreligion and heresy, which strive in so many ways to work their way among the uneducated and the ignorant. Toward this end should also be directed occasional sermons preached to the people, and the spreading of good books. [Salesian Constitutions]*

4. Accordingly, those books should be chosen for distribution which are generally held to be good, moral and religious. Moreover, those should be given preference that are published by our printing establishments, for the following reasons: first, the profits derived therefrom can be channeled toward helping so many youngsters that are in need; and secondly, our publications tend to cover the field systematically and on a wide scale, and thus to address every segment of society.

There is no need to belabor the point. But with deep satisfaction I should like to comment on the fact that over the years I have spared no effort, whether by the spoken or by the printed word, to help one category of society in particular, the young. By the *Catholic Readings* I tried to reach people at large and enter into their homes. Through the *Companion of Youth*, I tried to draw young people to the Church, instill into them the spirit of piety, and win them over to the frequent reception of the sacraments. Through the *Italian* and *Latin* classics series, in expurgated editions, through the *History of Italy*, and through other books of a historical and literary character, I tried to be present to them in the classroom, in order to guard them against so many errors and against the passions that would surely be fatal to them for this world and the next. I have also always wanted to continue to be their companion in their leisure time. To this end I am planning the publication of a series of entertaining books, which, it is hoped, will soon see the light of day.

Finally, through the *Salesian Bulletin* I aimed, among other things, at keeping alive in the young people that have graduated from our schools and returned to their families a love for the spirit of St. Francis de Sales and for his teaching, in the hope that they would in turn be apostles to other young people. I am not claiming to have accomplished successfully what I set out to do. I only wish to emphasize that it is now up to you to continue the project and coordinate all efforts so as to bring it to completion in all its phases.

I beg and beseech you therefore-do not neglect this important sector of our mission. Begin by working with the young people that Providence has entrusted to you; and then by word and example inspire them to be, in their turn, apostles for the spreading of good books. Here I rest my case. After reading this letter draw your own conclusions.

See to it that our young people learn their moral and Christian principles especially from our publications, yet without depreciating those of others. But let me tell you of my disappointment on learning that in some of our houses books published by us specifically for young people were either unknown or held in no esteem. Recall how St. Augustine, renowned as he was as a master of letters and as an orator, once appointed bishop, preferred common language and inelegance of style to risking not being understood by his people. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you always. Pray for me.

Most affectionately in Jesus Christ,



Father John Bosco