

Schoolboy Apostle



***A Brief Life of
Saint Dominic Savio
By
Philip J. Pascucci, S.D.B***

Introduction

"Having become perfect in a short while, he reached the fullness of a long career; for his soul was pleasing to the Lord, therefore he sped him out of the midst of wickedness. "

That quotation from chapter four of the book of Wisdom is generally applied to holy persons who died early in life. Examples, among many, are St. Tarcisius, St. Agnes, Blessed Laura Vicuna, and St. Dominic Savio, an adolescent of fifteen years. At his death he had acquired such holiness that even his schoolmates recognized and emulated his style of goodness and apostleship among them. A schoolboy apostle is what Dominic became, under the guidance of his teacher and spiritual father, St. John Bosco.

An Exceptional Meeting

Early on the morning of the first Monday of October in 1854, a young boy is walking with his father toward Don Bosco, who was in the town of Murialdo on an excursion with some of his students from Turin. The boy's bright smile and respectful tone immediately impressed the priest.

"Who are you?" asked Don Bosco. "Where are you from?"

"I'm Dominic Savio. I come from Mondonio. This is my father. My teacher, Father Cugliero, told you about me."

Taking Dominic aside, Don Bosco asked about his school work and his life at home. As Don Bosco was about to call the boy's father, Dominic asked, "What do you say, Father? Will you take me to Turin with you to study?"

"Well, you look like good material to me!" "Good material, Father? Good for what?"

"To make a beautiful garment for the Lord, son." "Then take me with you, Father. You be the tailor, and I'll be the cloth. Make of me a beautiful garment for Our Lord."

"I'm a bit afraid that your health may not hold up under the strain of study. "

"Don't worry about that, Father. God has given me health and strength so far, and He won't fail me in the future. "

"What do you want to do when you finish your studies?"

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

"Fine! Now let's see how quick you are at learning.

Take this book [an issue of the *Catholic Readings*] and see if you can learn this page by heart. Come back tomorrow and recite it to me."

Don Bosco sent Dominic off to join the other boys who were playing, and then he turned to have a word with his father. To Don Bosco's surprise, Dominic returned in eight minutes. Smiling, he said, "I can recite it now if you want me to, Father! "

To the amazement of Don Bosco, Dominic learned the passage by heart and also understood its meaning quite well.

"Very good," said Don Bosco. "Since you have anticipated my wishes, I will anticipate the answer. You may come to Turin with me. From now on you are one of my boys. Pray for both of us that we may do God's Will."

Overjoyed and grateful beyond words, Dominic took Don Bosco's hand and said, "I hope to behave so well that you will never regret my conduct!"

Off, then, to Don Bosco's school in Turin went Dominic Savio. It was early October 1854. He was twelve-and-a-half years old.

Who Was Dominic Savio

On a beautiful spring day, April 2, 1842, in the hamlet of Riva, two miles from the town of Chieri, in Piedmont, northern Italy, Dominic Savio was born. He was the second of eleven children born to Charles and Brigid Savio, who were poor, hard-working, pious people. The father was a blacksmith.

Dominic was a remarkable boy, a real boy among boys, and in a true sense an apostle among his companions and friends. He felt the surge of anger and the attraction of the good things in life, but he knew how to control the rebellion of nature against its Maker.

Young Dominic was unusually bright and good for his age. Therefore, the pastor, Father John Zucca, of the town of Murialdo, decided to admit him to first Holy Communion when he was only seven years old. This was very remarkable in an age when it was the norm to put off first Communion until the child was eleven or twelve.

Death but Not Sin

It was a fervent Communion the boy made. At that time he formed the program of his whole life. It comprised four resolutions:

1. I will go to Confession and Communion as often as my confessor will allow.
2. I will sanctify Sundays and holy days in a special way.
3. Jesus and Mary will be my friends.
4. Death but not sin.

This last resolution was ever before him, and he kept it faithfully.

'Toughening Up

Imagine a boy of ten trudging a total of twelve miles to and from school every day for a whole school year. That's what Dominic Savio did, because the school he attended was three miles away from home, and he had to go and come twice a day. On one very hot day an elderly man met the boy and asked, "Aren't you afraid to walk so far alone on this country road?"

"I'm not alone," replied Dominic. "I have my guardian angel with me at every step."

"But surely you find the journey long and tiresome in this very hot weather!"

"Nothing seems tiresome or painful when you are working for a Master who pays well."

"And who is your master?"

"He is God, our Creator, who rewards even a cup of cold water given for love of Him."

This long walk every day, however, took its toll on young Dominic's health. Therefore, the next year his parents decided to move from Murialdo to another village called Mondonio.

In the school at Mondonio an incident occurred which nearly cost Dominic his good reputation. One day a serious offense was committed by a certain pupil who, if discovered, would be expelled. The culprit's scheme threw all the blame on eleven-year-old Dominic Savio. Next day the class received a scolding. Dominic was singled out as a culprit who deserved to be expelled, but since it was his first offense he was to be pardoned, but never again.

The boy made no reply but stood hanging his head. However, the real guilty boy was soon discovered. Regretting his previous harsh words, the teacher asked Dominic why he had not defended himself.

His answer came slowly but simply: "I knew that the guilty fellow was already under threat of expulsion for other things, but I hoped to be forgiven since it would be my first offense. I also remembered how Our Lord had been unjustly accused. "

Some months afterward, in October of 1854, the parish priest arranged the meeting between Dominic Savio and Don Bosco, and that famous conversation took place.

Dominic Starts at Don Bosco's School

When he entered Don Bosco's office for the first time, Dominic noticed an ornamented placard hanging on the wall. It read, DA MIHI ANIMAS; CAETERA TOLLE.

"What's the meaning of those words, Father?"

The priest's heart leaped with joy. It was exactly what he wished. "And I longed that he would understand the meaning," wrote Don Bosco.

"That's my motto, Dominic. It means: GIVE ME SOULS; TAKE AWAY ALL ELSE."

"Ah! I understand, Father. Here the aim is not money but souls. That's what I want to do, save my soul. Help me, won't you, Father?"

At that moment the seed of a new type of holiness was sown in Dominic's soul. His would no longer remain a merely personal holiness, but it would begin to be active and communicative. The boy had begun to understand, and he would understand more and more as time went on. Meanwhile, Don Bosco patiently and prudently awaited occasions for forming his young pupil more and more.

Goodness, by its nature, is communicative. God is infinitely good, and He has communicated some of His goodness to all created things and people. In the history of humanity nothing appears so communicative as sanctity. Henri Bergson, an outstanding philosopher, studied this phenomenon and was so impressed that he asserted there is no

argument which more conclusively proves the presence of God in the world than the beneficent dynamism of the saints of the Church. St. John Bosco, the teacher and guide of Dominic Savio, illustrates this truth admirably. Don Bosco was so engrafted in Christ, the Vine, that Pope Pius XI characterized him as "Union with God." Don Bosco imbibed his goodness and apostolic spirit directly from Christ, and young Dominic imbibed the same spirit through his master, Don Bosco.

December 8, 1854

At the time Dominic entered the Salesian school in Turin, the whole Catholic world was awaiting the proclamation of the dogma of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception. Under Don Bosco's saintly direction the boys were keenly aware of the coming event. The atmosphere in the school was vibrating with an enthusiasm that only a very devout son of Mary, such as Don Bosco was, could arouse. Upon Don Bosco's suggestion, in the evening of that memorable December 8, 1854, Dominic went to Our Lady's altar in the school chapel. There he offered himself, body and soul, to the Immaculate Mother of God, and he renewed the four resolutions of his first Holy Communion, especially the last, DEATH BUT NOT SIN! "From that day onward," wrote Don Bosco, "Dominic made such evident progress in virtue, that I began to write down everything I noticed about him."

Dominic's Great Desire

The next forward step in Dominic Savio's ascent to holiness was taken on the second Sunday of Lent, 1855. Don Bosco gave the boys a talk in chapel on how necessary and easy it is to become a saint. Dominic was profoundly impressed and began to think most seriously about it. He even seemed to be worrying himself sick. In a few days Don Bosco asked him if something was bothering him, if he was suffering some illness.

"On the contrary, Don Bosco! I am suffering something good. I have an intense longing to become a saint. Your sermon last Sunday "

The master seized the occasion. "Dominic, begin by saying all your prayers devoutly. Perform all your duties exactly, and always be cheerful. The Lord loves a cheerful giver." Dominic obeyed.

But, in his eagerness to advance in holiness, Dominic began to put pieces of wood or small stones in his bed and would use insufficient blankets. When Don Bosco found that out, he quickly stopped him and advised his pupil again that he could become a saint by always being cheerful and by fulfilling perfectly all his duties.

The wise touch of Don Bosco was molding his pupil with the same delicacy that the hand of the sculptor forms his masterpiece. Before sending Dominic into the apostolate of action, Don Bosco points out to him the apostolate of good example, the exact fulfillment of duties, and a happy, serene disposition. Don Bosco knew that a boy of edifying conduct is already an apostle, but he also knew that among youth, an apostolate without serenity and cheerfulness cannot be effective. Sometime later Dominic again went to Don Bosco and unburdened his continued intense longing to become a saint. At this point the master revealed to him, without beating about the bush, the great secret, that of his own sanctity: "Dominic, you must dedicate yourself to gain souls for God." That did it.

Dominic's Work At Apostleship

During the next two years Dominic climbed from virtue to virtue. He became a heroic apostle of charity, meekness, and purity among his companions. St. John Bosco, his confessor, spiritual director and master, recorded numerous examples and anecdotes which reveal young Dominic's virtues.

Does an argument arise among his companions? Dominic calms the boys and settles the dispute. Does a smutty paper or magazine get into the school? Dominic destroys it in front of his offending companions.

"What's the idea, Savio? That's mine," says one of the boys.

"You should be ashamed, Carlo!"

"Well, what have you got eyes for anyway?"

"To see the beautiful face of God and of His Blessed Mother, should I get to heaven."

Does some boy remain away from Confession and Communion too long? Dominic sidles over to him during a game and extracts a promise to go with him to Confession come Saturday. Saturday comes, but the fellow doesn't show up. When they meet again Dominic says, "Ah, you disappointed me. You didn't keep your promise." An excuse follows.

"That's one of the devil's tricks," answers Savio. The boy goes to Confession and later tells Savio how glad he is for following his advice, and that he will go frequently in the future.

One day Dominic offered a friendly correction to a companion. The boy forgot that this was an act of kindness and answered with insults and struck and kicked Dominic. Being older and bigger than his offender, Dominic could easily have retaliated with interest.

"But," wrote Don Bosco, "he sought no revenge save that of Christian charity. At first Dominic became red in the face, and then stifling all feeling of resentment, he replied, 'I forgive you, if you have done wrong. But don't try that sort of behavior on others.'"

"Examples such as these of Dominic's mortification, charity, self-forgetfulness, humility, can easily be multiplied, for they were part of Dominic's very life," wrote St. John Bosco of his heroic pupil-apostle. So active and effective was Dominic's apostolate among his companions that Don Bosco remarked, "Dominic catches more fish with his little stratagems than many preachers do with their sermons."

The Peacemaker

Dominic often broke up fights and hatreds that were becoming dangerous. On one occasion two boys had decided to have a stone battle to the finish. The reason was that one boy had insulted the family of the other .

The two boys became so enraged that the only way they could think of settling the affair was to fight to the end with stones. They were to meet in the lot about ten minutes' walk from the school.

Dominic Savio learned about the coming fight and spoke to the boys, both of whom were older and bigger than he. In spite of all his entreaties and advice, they would not change their minds.

After school Dominic met them again and said, "Since you persist in this insane and sinful quarrel, I ask you to accept one condition."

"All right, as long as you don't try to stop the fight." "He is a good-for-nothing bum!" shouted one boy, and the other spit back. "I won't be quiet till I split his skull!"

Dominic shuddered at the threats, but to check a greater evil, he continued, "What I ask won't stop the fight."

"Well, what is it?"

"I'll tell you when we get there." "You're trying to trick us!"

"No, I'm not! I'll be with you all the time." "Then you're going to call somebody."

"I should, but I won't. Let's go! I'm coming along. But you must give me your word!"

They did so, and off they went to the open lot. Dominic had all he could do to keep them from fighting on the way. When they arrived, Dominic did something the other two had not bargained for. He waited till they paced off their positions, each picking five stones. Then he spoke.

"Before you start," he said, "you must keep your promise!" Taking out a small crucifix which he used to wear around his neck, Dominic held it up.

"You have to look at this crucifix," he said, "and you have to throw the first stone at me and say, 'Jesus was innocent and died forgiving his murderers, but I am a sinner, and I'm going to offend him by bloody revenge!'"

He strode up to the angrier boy, knelt before him and said, "You start! Throw the first stone at me! Aim for my head!"

Taken by surprise, the boy began to tremble. "No!" he protested. "Never! I have no grudge against you. I'll even defend you if anyone hits you!"

Dominic ran up to the other boy. He too was astonished and assured Dominic he was his friend and meant him no harm. Then Dominic stood up. Looking at them stemly, he said with great emotion: "You are both ready to face danger to save me, and I mean nothing to you! Yet, to save your own souls, for which Christ died, you can't even overlook a stupid remark made at school! You will lose your souls by this sin!"

Dominic stood there, silent, crucifix in hand. Both boys broke before his courageous stand.

"At that moment," one of them later admitted, "all my determination broke down and a cold chill ran through me. I hated myself for having forced a good friend like Dominic to go to such lengths to keep us from sin. To show my regret, I forgave the boy who had insulted me and asked Dominic to tell me of some good priest who would hear my confession. "

Love for Our lady

Dominic had a special love for the Immaculate Heart of Mary. When in church he always knelt before her altar, begging her for the grace of keeping his heart free from every impure desire. "Mary," he would pray, "I always want to be your son. Let me die rather than commit a single sin against chastity."

Every Friday he found a few minutes during recreation to go to the chapel with some friends and recite the Seven Sorrows of Mary or the Litany of the Sorrowful Virgin. Not content with his own devotion to Our Lady, he was only too happy to get some schoolmate to offer her a prayer. One Saturday, for example, he invited a companion to recite Our Lady's Vespers with him, but the lad tried to get out of it by pleading that his hands were cold. Dominic took off his own gloves and gave them to him. Another time he lent his coat to a boy to have him go to church with him for a few moments.

Dominic drew up an interesting set of stories about our Lady to tell his schoolmates and kindle their devotion. He often dropped a good hint now and then to get someone to go to confession and Communion in her honor, and he was the first to set the example. A pleasant episode bears out his tender love for Mary. The boys of his dormitory had decided to set up a little shrine to Our Lady at their own expense so as to keep the month of May. Dominic was very excited about it, but when he found out how much it would cost, he exclaimed, "What can I do? I haven't a cent!" Then he had an idea. He got a book he once received as a prize and, giving it to the boys, said, "Now I can do my share for Mary! Take this book and sell it!" The others were so impressed that they too got books and things and had a little raffle to pay for their project.

After they bought the decorations they began setting up the shrine, but by the eve of Mary's feast they had not yet finished. "I'll stay up all night to get things ready," volunteered Dominic. But his friends knew that he was still recovering from a recent illness and made him go to bed. "All right," he agreed, "but when you finish, wake me up. I want to be among the first to see our shrine to Mary!"

Dominic Lasting Tribute to Mary

About ten months before his death, with a strange but sure presentiment of that approaching end, he confided to Don Bosco: "Father, I desire to do something for Mary. But I must do it at once, for I fear that should I wait, it will be too late."

Therefore, to achieve his great desire of gaining his companions for God and of his desire to do something for Our Lady, what did he do? He created, with Don Bosco's approval, a sodality which had as its object to promote devotion to Mary, in order to obtain her protection in life and especially at death, and also to promote frequent Confession and Communion. Dominic called it the Sodality of the Immaculate

Conception. On June 8, 1856, nine months before his death, Dominic had all the rules approved by Don Bosco, and the first members were enrolled. The Sodality still exists in some Salesian schools and produces great good among the students.

If we put the founding of the Immaculate Conception Sodality by Dominic Savio together with the apostolic direction that his holiness received from Don Bosco, it becomes clear that devotion to Mary, in the minds of both saints, was to be translated into the active apostolate of that motto: GIVE ME SOULS; TAKE AWAY ALL ELSE. Truly, this is real Marian devotion, for " the mission of Our Blessed Mother is to bring Jesus to the world and the world to Jesus. Consequently the Church invokes Mary as Queen of Apostles.

Eucharistic Devotion

Before going to Don Bosco's Oratory, Dominic used to go to confession and Communion once a month, as was the practice in the schools. But when he heard Don Bosco tell the boys, "If you want to keep on the path to Heaven, do three things: go to Confession regularly, receive Communion often, and choose a steady confessor to whom you can unburden your heart and whom you will not change without necessity. "

Dominic observed that advice diligently. But his great love was for the Eucharist. At first he went to Confession and Communion every two weeks, then every week. Observing his spiritual progress, his confessor (Don Bosco) advised him to go to Communion three times a week and by year's end every day. Dominic placed unlimited confidence in his confessor, sometimes speaking to him of his spiritual problems even outside of Confession. No one could induce him to change confessors. But when his regular confessor advised him to go to another priest, especially during a retreat, Dominic promptly obeyed.

Dominic was a happy student. "When I am at all worried," he would say, "I go to my confessor, and he tells me what God wants me to do, because our Lord tells us that the confessor speaks as God's own voice. Then if I want something important, I go to Communion. What else do I need to be happy?" This accounts for his deep contentment and the joy that shone through his behavior.

His preparation for Communion was thorough and devout. The night before, on going to bed, he offered a special prayer with the aspiration, "Blessed and praised every moment be the most holy and divine Sacrament!" In the morning he gave himself enough time for preparation. But his thanksgiving knew no bounds. Very often, unless he were reminded, he would forget all about breakfast and recreation and school, so intent was he in his prayer and in contemplating God's goodness.

To spend time in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament was his delight, and he made at least one visit a day, taking other boys with him. No act of devotion and respect with regard to the Blessed Sacrament was too much for Dominic Savio. If he met a priest carrying viaticum to the sick, he at once knelt in the street, and if he had time he went with the priest to the house. Once, while it was raining and the streets were muddy, finding no dry spot, Dominic promptly knelt in a puddle. A boy who was with him objected, "You didn't have to dirty your clothes! Our Lord does not ask that much!"

"My knees and clothes belong to God and should do Him service," was the reply. "When he passes by I will gladly kneel in the mud to pay Him homage! I would even throw myself into a furnace to share in the infinite love that made Him institute this Sacrament!"

On a similar occasion, he noticed a soldier who, not wishing to dirty his trousers, merely stood at attention as the Blessed Sacrament passed by. Dominic hesitated to correct him, and so he spread his handkerchief over the dirty cobblestones and motioned to the soldier to kneel on it. Taken aback, the soldier hastily knelt on the bare street.

On the feast of Corpus Christi, Dominic was told he could dress as an altar boy and join in the parish Eucharistic procession. He went gladly, saying it was the best favor anyone could do him.

Favors from Heaven

Don Bosco himself was an eyewitness to extraordinary events concerning Dominic Savio. Don Bosco wrote, "I am recording things I have seen with my own eyes. I assure you I am adhering strictly to truth. The reader is free to form his own considered opinion. II Several times, particularly on days when Dominic received Communion or when the Blessed Sacrament was exposed, he appeared to be rapt in ecstasy, so much so that he would remain in church indefinitely, unless someone called him for his regular duties.

One day Dominic was missing from breakfast, from class, and from lunch. No one knew where he was. On being informed, Don Bosco guessed that he was in church as he had been at other times. His guess was right. He went into the sanctuary behind the main altar. There was Dominic, standing as immovable as a rock. One foot was over the other; one hand rested on a bookstand, the other was pressed against his heart. His face was fixed toward the tabernacle. He did not flutter an eyelash. Don Bosco called him. No answer. He shook him. Dominic looked at Don Bosco and asked, "Is Mass over already?"

"Look, Dominic," said Don Bosco as he showed him a watch. "It's two o'clock."

Dominic apologized for breaking a school rule. Don Bosco then sent him for something to eat, adding, "If anyone asks where you were, say you were carrying out an order of mine." Thus he would not be embarrassed by questions from classmates.

Another day, Don Bosco just finished his thanksgiving after Mass and was about to leave the sacristy when he heard someone talking in the sanctuary. Upon investigating, he found Dominic alternately speaking and then listening, as in conversation. Among other things, Don Bosco heard Dominic say, "Yes, my God, I have said it before, and I will keep on saying it--I love You and I want to love You till death. If You see that I am about to commit a sin, make me die first! Yes, death first, but not sin!"

At times Don Bosco asked Dominic what happened to him on such occasions. "I don't know," was his answer. "I get distracted and lose track of my prayer, and then I see such wonderful things that the hours fly by like seconds!"

One day Dominic dashed into Don Bosco's room, saying, "Hurry, Father, come with me! You have important work to do!"

"Where?" asked Don Bosco. "Don't waste time!" he urged.

With Dominic's insistence, Don Bosco agreed to go with him. They left the house, hurried down one street, into another, and up a third, without saying a word, and then into another street. They hurried along a line of tenements, and finally Dominic stopped before one. He ran up the stairs to the third floor with Don Bosco following. Dominic stopped at one door, rang the bell, and told Don Bosco, "Here!" He then dashed back down into the street.

The door of the apartment opened, and a woman stood before Don Bosco. "Hurry!" cried the woman. "There's little time. My husband is dying. He left the Church, but now he wants to die a good Catholic!" The man made his peace with God and died.

Days later, Don Bosco asked Dominic how he knew about that dying man. His face clouded over with a look of distress, and tears came to his eyes. Don Bosco did not insist.

"Innocence of life," wrote Don Bosco, "love of God, and the desire of Heaven had so elevated his soul that he could be said to be living always absorbed in God."

Sometimes he would stop playing, gaze off into the distance, and begin walking alone. On being asked why he had left the game, he would say, "Those distractions come over me, and Heaven seems to open up above me, and I have to walk away so as not to say things the boys will laugh at."

Dominic often spoke of the Pope and expressed the wish to see him before dying, hinting that he had something important to tell him. Since he kept repeating this, Don Bosco asked him what was this important thing he had to tell the Holy Father.

"If I could talk to the Pope," he replied, "I would tell him that in the midst of all his troubles he must not cease to take special care of England. God is preparing a great triumph for the Catholic Church there!"

"How do you know?" Don Bosco asked.

"I'll tell you," he answered, "but don't repeat it to others because they may tease me. If you go to Rome, tell it to Pius IX."

"One morning, as I was making my thanksgiving after Communion, a strong distraction came over me. I seemed to be on a very vast plain, full of people blanketed in a heavy fog. They were moving about, floundering in the dark. 'This is England,' someone nearby told me. I was just about to ask questions when I saw Pope Pius IX, majestically dressed, as I have seen him in pictures. Bearing a bright torch in his hands, he strode through that immense throng of people. As he walked, the fog cleared in the light of his torch, and people could be seen in clear daylight. 'This torch,' I was told, is the Catholic faith which must bring light to the English people."

When Don Bosco went to Rome in 1858, he gave Dominic's message to Pope Pius IX. He listened with kindly interest. "This encourages me," said the Pope, "to continue working energetically for England, in which I have already shown greatest interest. If nothing more, it is the advice of a good soul."

Favors from Our Lady

Dominic's sister, Theresa, testified that on the morning of September 12, 1856, Dominic rushed to Don Bosco's room.

"Please, Father," he asked, "may I go home?"

"Why?"

"My mother is very sick, and Our Lady wants to cure her."

"How do you know?" "I just know, that's all."

"Has someone written to you?" "No, but I know just the same."

Don Bosco gave him permission because, as he later told Mr. Savio, "When your son insists on anything, I do well to agree with him."

Don Bosco gave Dominic fare for the coach to Chieri and then a carriage to Mondonio. On his way the boy met his father, who was hastening for a doctor.

"What are you doing here?" he asked his son. "I'm going to see mother. She's very sick."

"Go to grandmas!" insisted Mr. Savio and rushed on. Dominic ran home.

Mrs. Savio was in labor. The neighboring women were doing what they could for her but were fast losing hope. Dominic suddenly rushed into the house. Disregarding the objections of the women he ran upstairs to his mother, saying, "I know she's sick. That's why I came!" His mother was alone.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I found out that you were sick, and I came to see you." Forcing herself to sit up, she replied, "Oh, it's nothing. Go downstairs, or go next door. I'll call you later."

"I'll go, Mom, but first I want to hug you!"

He quickly embraced his mother and kissed her. Then he left the house and returned immediately to Turin.

A few minutes later Mrs. Savio's labor pains reached their climax and subsided. It was at five that evening that Dominic's baby sister, Catherine, was born. By the time Mr. Savio returned with a doctor the birth was over.

The women who assisted Mrs. Savio noticed she was wearing a green scapular. Not having seen it before while they were nursing her, they inquired where she obtained it. She too was surprised but then replied, "Now I know why Dominic wanted to hug me before leaving, and why I have been safely delivered and cured. He must have put this scapular on me as he embraced me, because I've never had one like this before."

On his return to the Oratory, the only answer Dominic gave Don Bosco was, "My mother is cured. Our Lady, whom I put about her neck, has cured her." That same scapular later saved the life of Theresa herself in similar condition, as well as the lives of several women. While Dominic was at home, during his last illness, he one day told his mother as he embraced her, "Do you remember the time I came to see you when you were very sick and I left a scapular about your neck? That's what cured you. Take good care of it and lend it to other women in the same condition. As it saved you, it will save them. Only, please don't ever ask for anything in return."

The scapular, however, was lost. "I had very many requests for this miraculous scapular," testified Theresa. "It was lent to many women in labor who were in danger of death. To my regret, it was never returned to me."

Time Is Running Out

In the school of Don Bosco, and in all Salesian schools, a monthly Exercise For A Good Death was held. Pius IX had enriched the practice with indulgences. Dominic always carried it out with great devotion. At the end of the prayers an Our Father and Hail Mary were recited "for the one among us who shall be the first to die." One time Dominic playfully remarked, "Don't say 'for the one among us'. Just say 'for Dominic Savio, who will be the first among us to die.'"

At the end of April 1856, Dominic went to Don Bosco and asked how he should spend the month of May in honor of Our Lady.

"Do your duties carefully," said Don Bosco. "Speak of Mary to your companions every day, and behave so well that you can receive Communion every day."

"I will, Father - very carefully. Now, what favor shall I ask for?"

"Ask Our Lady for health and the favor of becoming a saint."

"Yes, to become a saint and to die a happy death and have her help in my last moments and be taken by her to Heaven!"

Dominic showed great fervor that month. He wrote about Mary, he spoke of her; everything he did was for her--studying, singing, going to school. Every day he made sure he had some little incident about Our Lady to tell his friends.

One day a boy asked him, "What are you going to do next year if you do all this now?"

"Let me worry about that," Dominic answered. "I'll do alii can now. Next year, if I'm alive, I'll tell you what I'll do."

Since Dominic began showing signs of failing health, Don Bosco called in several doctors. All admired his lightheartedness, bright wit and quick responses. Doctor Vallauri examined him and remarked to Don Bosco, "What a fine treasure you have in this boy!"

"But what is causing him to fail so quickly day by day?" asked Don Bosco.

"His bodily frame is weak, and his mind is developed beyond his age. He is under constant spiritual pressure. All this just eats away his strength."

"What remedy can we use?"

"The best thing would be to let him go to Heaven because he seems so well-prepared. However, the only remedy that can prolong his life is to relieve him of his studies completely for some time and just give him little odd jobs that will not tire him."

Last Days at the Oratory

Dominic's weakness was not such as to keep him always in bed. Some days he went to school or to the study hall, or he would do some little chores. Though his health kept becoming worse, Dominic did not want to go home, because it meant breaking off his studies and regular practices of piety.

Some months before, Don Bosco had sent him home, but he returned to the Oratory after a few days. Don Bosco admitted that he was just as sorry as Dominic that he had to go home. But the doctors had advised that he go home, and Don Bosco was determined to obey them, all the more so because he noticed of late that Dominic had contracted a persistent cough.

The boy's father was notified, and it was arranged that Dominic should leave the Oratory on March 1, 1857. Dominic bowed to the decision, but only at a sacrifice.

"Why are you so sorry to go home?" asked Don Bosco.

"You should be glad to be with your parents again."

"I want to end my days at the Oratory," he replied. "You will go home for a while, and, when you are better, you can come back."

"No, Father, no! I'll go, but I'll never come back!" The night before he left, he refused to budge from Don Bosco's side, looking for all sorts of questions to ask.

"What can a sick boy do to gain merit before God?" "Offer God your sufferings."

"Will I be able to see my parents and friends from Heaven?"

"Yes, you will be able to see everything at the Oratory and your parents. You will know everything that concerns them, and so many other wonderful things besides. " "Can I visit them sometimes?"

"If such visits are for God's glory, yes."

Dominic kept asking many, many other questions like these. On the morning of his departure from the Oratory, Dominic made the Exercise For A Good Death with his companions. With great devotion he went to Confession and Communion.

He spent the rest of the morning packing and said goodbye to his friends, to one of whom he paid back two cents he owed the boy, saying, "Let's get this fixed, so I won't have to worry about it when I present my accounts to God." He spoke to the boys of the Immaculate Conception Sodality, insisting that they be faithful to their promises to Mary and to place the utmost confidence in her.

Before leaving, he told Don Bosco, "Since you don't want this poor body of mine, I'll have to take it back to Mondonio. But it would have burdened you only a few days, and all would soon be over. But God's will be done! If you go to Rome remember what I asked you to tell the Pope about England. Pray that I may die well. Goodbye till we meet in Heaven."

As they approached the gate to the main road, Dominic was holding on to Don Bosco's hand. He turned to his companions.

"Goodbye. Pray for me. We'll see each other where we will always be with God." Upon reaching the gate, Dominic turned back and asked Don Bosco, "Will you give me a present to remember you?"

"How about a book?"

"No, I want something better."

"Do you want money for your trip?"

"Yes, that's it--money for my trip to eternity. You told me once that the Pope had granted you plenary indulgences for the hour of death. Put my name among those who can gain that indulgence."

"Gladly, my boy. You can consider yourself in that number now. I'll put your name on the list right away."

Dominic then walked out of the Oratory. It was two o'clock in the afternoon of March first. He had lived there almost three years to his great joy, and to the edification of both schoolmates and superiors. He was never to return.

Dominic's final Days

For the first four days at home Dominic was doing well and did not remain in bed. Then he became weaker, his appetite failed, and his cough became worse. Upon examination by the doctor, it was found that the boy's illness was much worse than it seemed. Thinking that Dominic had an infection, the doctor used the accepted remedy of the time bleeding. Dominic was bled several times. He seemed to rally.

However, Dominic asked to have the priest hear his Confession and to give him Communion. This request pained his parents, but to please him they called in the pastor who confessed him and gave him Viaticum. Dominic then recalled the resolutions at his first Communion. Several times he repeated, "Jesus, Mary! Yes, you will always be my friends! I say it again and again - death but not sin!"

After four days, the doctor had good news for the parents. "Thank God," he said. "We are past danger. The sickness is beaten. All he needs now is rest."

They were overjoyed at the news. Dominic smiled and said, "The world is beaten. All I need now is a careful appearance before God!"

After the doctor left, without being misled by the good news, Dominic asked for the Anointing of the Sick. To please him, his parents agreed. On being anointed he prayed: "My God, forgive me my sins. I love You and I want to love You forever. May this Sacrament, which You are letting me receive in your infinite mercy, cancel all the sins I have committed by sight and hearing, by my mouth, hands, and feet. May my body and soul be sanctified by the merits of Your holy passion! Amen." Dominic's mind was so clear and his voice so loud, that one would think he was just fine.

Well Done, Good and faithful Servant

It was the night of March 9th, the last day of Dominic's life. He had been bled ten times and other remedies had been tried. He was so very weak, and the Papal Blessing was given to him. He was deeply consoled on realizing that he was receiving the Pope's blessing and a plenary indulgence. He kept repeating, "Thanks be to God!"

No one but Dominic himself could have suspected he was so close to death. An hour and a half before he died, the pastor came to see him, and, noting how calmly he rested, was surprised to hear him recommend his soul to God. The boy kept praying in long, drawn out sighs, showing how anxious he was to go swiftly to eternity. After reciting a few prayers with Dominic, the pastor turned to leave.

"Please, Father," called Dominic, "give me a little remembrance before you go."

"What remembrance can I leave you?" "A word of comfort! "

"I know of nothing better than to recall the Passion of Christ. "

"Thanks be to God!" Dominic answered.

He then fell asleep and rested for half an hour.

He then opened his eyes, looked at his parents, and gasped, "Dad, it's time! Take my prayerbook and read for me the prayers for a good death!"

For a while he seemed to be resting. Then slowly he awoke. Smiling, he said clearly, "Goodbye, dad, goodbye! The pastor wanted to tell me something else, but I can't remember ... Oh, what a beautiful sight I see!"

With these words and the smile of Heaven on his lips, Dominic breathed his last ...

This detailed account of Dominic's last days and his edifying death is not pious embellishment. The one who kept the Oratory informed, wrote Father Michael Rua, was Dominic's pastor.

Visions Beautiful

Soon after his death, Dominic appeared to his distraught father. After verifying it was his son, Charles Savio said, "Oh, my dear boy! How wonderful you look! Why, I scarcely know what to say! Are you in Heaven?"

"Yes, dad, I am in Heaven."

"Will you pray for us, for mother and me?" "Yes, I will pray for you!"

With that the vision faded.

But the most breathtaking apparition of Dominic was granted to Don Bosco on the night of December 6, 1876, nineteen years after Dominic's death. The youth appeared radiant in glory to encourage and to advise Don Bosco about the future of his work for boys. In that vision Don Bosco asked his pupil, "Dominic, what gave you the most comfort at the hour of death?"

Back came the answer: "What comforted me most at the point of death was the assistance of the powerful and loving Mother of God." Very likely that is what caused the joyful outburst, "Oh, what a beautiful sight I see."

March 5th of the Holy Year 1950 saw the glorious Beatification of Dominic Savio by Pope Pius XII. It is a curious coincidence that March 5, 1950, was the second Sunday of Lent, and it was the second Sunday of Lent, 1855, that St. John Bosco gave the boys at the Oratory where Dominic Savio was a pupil, the sermon on how easy it was to become a saint. Full recognition of Dominic Savio's holiness came on June 12, 1954. On that day, in ceremonies held at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Dominic was canonized a saint of the Church.

Epilogue

Popes have said that Dominic Savio is a providential patron for our youth, particularly during the dangerous years of pre-adolescence and early adolescence. If our boys and girls can be preserved and strengthened during these difficult and important years, they will more surely be preserved during their later teens. This is Dominic's unique and God-given mission for youth.

DEATH BUT NOT SIN! That was Dominic's lifelong motto. It can become the battle cry of our youth today!