

Don Bosco's last will and testament

With a will, as we know, someone disposes of their belongings for the time after their death. One would not think, therefore, that what we are about to deal with is an overly pleasant topic. Yet it serves to make us better appreciate Don Bosco's great serenity and prudence. Even as a young man, he always had the thought of death before him and spoke of it often.

Various manuscripts of his last will and testament are preserved in the Central Salesian Archives (ASC 112 – FdB No. 73).

In Turin in 1846 he became so ill that his life was at risk. In the 1850s there were those who tried to assassinate him. And Don Bosco always kept himself prepared for every event.

The first of Don Bosco's wills that we possess dates back to 26 July 1856, when Don Bosco was about to turn 41 years of age and his mother was still alive. It began with these words: "In the uncertainty of life in which every man who lives in this world finds himself..., etc."

He left the usufruct of his possessions in Turin to Fr Vittorio Alasonatti, economer of the Valdocco house, and the property to the cleric Michael Rua, who was his right-hand man even then.

He left the Castelnuovo property to his relatives, bearing in mind that his mother, who was still alive was to remain the beneficiary. When his mother died in November of that year, he corrected what he had written: "All that I possess in Castelnuovo d'Asti, I leave to my brother Giuseppe..."

Later manuscripts

In February 1858, Don Bosco left for Rome for the

first time in order to attend an audience with Pope Pius IX and present him with his plan for the Salesian Society. He had decided to go there by sea and return by land through Tuscany, the States of Parma, Piacenza, Modena and Lombardy-Veneto. He set off on the early morning of 18 February after a freezing snowy night, accompanied by his faithful cleric Michael Rua.

He only did the Turin-Genoa stretch by train. He then had to embark on the *Aventino*, a steamboat that ran to Civitavecchia. From Civitavecchia to Rome he travelled by mail coach. On 21 February he arrived in the city of the Popes where he was the guest of Count De Maistre in Via del Quirinale 49, at the Quattro Fontane, while Don Rua stayed with the Rosminians (MB V, 809-818).

But before embarking on that journey Don Bosco had arranged not only for a passport but also to make a will.

Another copy of Don Bosco's will bears the date 7 January 1869. In it he appointed Fr Michael Rua as his universal heir and executor, as far as Salesian property and, in the event of the latter's death, Fr John Cagliero.

On 29 March 1871 he reconfirmed Fr Rua and Fr Cagliero as his heirs and, for the Castelnovo properties, his relatives. In the same year, during his illness in Varazze, he wrote a confirmation of his previous will on 22 December 1871 (MB X, 1334-1335).

The 1884 Testament

In 1884 Don Bosco was about to leave for France for the tenth time in search of money for the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome. He was in poor health. Dr Albertotti, who had been called in to dissuade him from the journey, after examining him had said:

"If he makes it to Nice without dying, it will be a miracle."

"If I don't come back, patience" Don Bosco had replied, "it means we'll put things right before we go, but we have to go" (MB XVII, 34).

And so he did. On the afternoon of that 29

February he sent for a notary and witnesses and dictated his will, as if he was about to leave for eternity. Then, bringing in Fr Rua and Fr Cagliero, and pointing to the notarial deed on the table, he told them:

“Here is my will... If I never return, as the doctor fears, you will already know how things stand.”

Fr Rua left the room with a swollen heart. The saint beckoned Fr Cagliero to stop and left him a gift of a small box containing his father's wedding ring.

On 7 December that year Fr Cagliero was consecrated titular Bishop of Magida and left for America on 3 February 1885, as Apostolic Vicar in Patagonia.

Don Bosco's spiritual testament

The Central Salesian Archives also contains a manuscript of Don Bosco's *Memoirs* covering the years 1841-1886, known in the Salesian tradition as *Don Bosco's Spiritual Testament*. We quote a particularly significant passage from it:

“Having thus expressed the thoughts of a Father towards his beloved children, I now turn to myself to invoke the Lord's mercy upon me in the last hours of my life.

– I intend to live and die in the holy Catholic religion which has the Roman Pontiff, Vicar of Jesus Christ above the earth, as its head.

– I believe and profess all the truths of the faith which God has revealed to holy Church.

– I humbly ask God's forgiveness for all my sins, especially for every scandal given to my neighbour in all my actions, in all the words spoken at an inappropriate time; I especially ask His pardon for the excessive care I have taken of myself under the specious pretext of preserving my health...

– I know that you, my beloved children, love me, and this love, this affection is not limited to mourning after my death; but pray for the eternal repose of my soul...

– May your prayers be addressed with special purpose to Heaven so that I may find mercy and forgiveness at

the first moment that I present myself to the fearful majesty of my Creator" (F. MOTTÒ, *Memorie...*, *Piccola Biblioteca dell'ISS*, n. 4, Roma, LAS, 1985, p. 57-58).

It is a document that needs no comment!

The dream at 9 years of age. Genesis of a vocation

The 9-year-old's dream presented in ten points, the genesis of a heavenly vocation, confirmed by the fruits it produced, presented at the 42nd Salesian Spirituality Days in Valdocco, Turin.

Two hundred years ago, a poor nine-year-old boy, with no future other than to be a farmer, had a dream. He told it in the morning to his mother, grandmother and siblings, who laughed it off. The grandmother concluded "Don't pay attention to dreams." Many years later, that boy, John Bosco, wrote: I agreed with my grandmother. However, I was unable to cast that dream out of my mind."

First: it is an imperious order

Fr Lemoyne, Don Bosco's first historian, summarises the dream as follows: "It seemed to him that he saw the Divine Saviour dressed in white, radiant with the most splendid light, in the act of leading an innumerable crowd of youngsters. Turning to him, he had said, 'Come here: put yourself at the head of these young people and lead them yourself.' 'But I am not capable', John replied. The Divine Saviour insisted imperiously until John placed himself at the head of that multitude of boys and began to lead them according to the command that had been given him. Like Jesus' 'Follow me'."

Second: it is the secret of joy

That dream came again and again. With an overwhelming charge of energy. It was a source of joyful security and inexhaustible strength for John Bosco. The source of his life. At the diocesan process for Don Bosco's cause of beatification, Fr Rua, his first successor, testified, "I was told by Lucia Turco, a member of a family where D. Bosco often went to stay with her brothers, that one morning they saw him arrive more joyful than usual. Asked what was the cause, he replied that during the night he had had a dream, which had cheered him up."

Third: the answer

The question for everyone is, "Do you want an ordinary life or do you want to change the world?"

Viktor Frankl emphasises the difference between "meaning of life" and "meaning in life". The meaning of life is associated with questions such as Why am I here? What is the meaning of it all? What is the meaning of life? Many people look for the answers in religion or in a noble mission for the greater good, such as fighting poverty or stopping global warming. It is often difficult to find the meaning of life; the struggle to grasp this concept can be exhausting, especially in times of difficulty, when we struggle even to make it through the day. On the other hand, it is much easier to find meaning in life: in the ordinary things we do as a matter of habit, in the present moment, in everyday activities at home or at work. It is precisely meaning in life that is the preferred means of experiencing spiritual well-being.

Fourth: a sign from on high

In the seminary, Don Bosco wrote a page of admirable humility as motivation for his vocation: "The dream at Morialdo always remained with me; indeed it had been renewed much more clearly on other occasions." We can be sure: he had recognised the Lord and his Mother. Despite his modesty, he did not doubt at all that he had been visited by Heaven. Nor did he doubt that

those visits were intended to reveal to him his future and that of his work. He said it himself: "The Salesian Congregation has not taken a step without being advised to do so by a supernatural deed. It has not reached the point of development in which it finds itself without a special command from the Lord."

Fifth: continuous assistance

"I then heard from others that he asked: 'How will I care for so many sheep? And so many lambs? Where will I find pastures to keep them?' The Lady answered him: 'Fear not, I will assist you, and then she disappeared.'"

Sixth: a Teacher

A mother.

Seventh: a mission

"Here is the field of your work" the Woman continued. "Make yourself humble, strong, and energetic: and what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children."

Eighth: a method

"You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love."

Ninth: the recipients

"Glancing round, I realised that the youngsters had all apparently run away. A large number of goats, dogs, cats, bears and other animals had taken their place."

Tenth: a Work

"Worn out, I wanted to sit down beside a nearby road, but the shepherdess invited me to continue the trip. After another short journey, I found myself in a large courtyard with porticoes all round. At one end was a church. I then realised that four-fifths of the animals had been changed into lambs and their number had greatly increased. Just then several shepherds came along to take care of the flock; but they

stayed only a very short time and promptly went away. Then something wonderful happened. Many of the lambs were transformed into shepherds, who as they grew took care of the others. I wanted to be off because it seemed to me time to celebrate mass. 'Look again,' she said to me, and I looked again and saw a wondrously big church. Inside the church hung a white banner on which was written in huge letters: *Hic domus mea, inde gloria mea.*"

That is why, when we enter the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, we enter Don Bosco's dream.

Don Bosco's testament

The Pope himself asked Don Bosco to write the dream for his children. He began like this: "Now, what purpose can this chronicle serve? It will be a record to help people overcome problems that may come in the future by learning from the past; it will serve to make known how God himself has always been our guide; it will give my sons some entertainment to be able to read about their father's adventures. Doubtless they will be read much more avidly when I have been called by God to render my account when I am no longer among them."

This is why the Salesian Constitutions begin with an "act of faith": "With a feeling of humble gratitude we believe that the Society of St Francis de Sales came into being not as a merely human venture, but by the initiative of God."

Don Bosco's nine-year dream. Theological – spiritual

nuclei

A commentary on the theological-spiritual themes present in the nine-year dream could have such wide-ranging developments as to include a full treatment of "Salesianity". Read, in fact, starting from its history of effects, the dream opens up innumerable avenues for deepening the pedagogical and apostolic traits that characterised the life of St John Bosco and the charismatic experience that originated from him. We have chosen to focus on five avenues of spiritual reflection that respectively concern (1) the oratorian mission, (2) the call to the impossible, (3) the mystery of the Name, (4) maternal mediation and, finally, (5) the power of meekness.

1. The oratory mission

The dream at nine years of age is filled with children. They are present from the first to the last scene and are the beneficiaries of everything that happens. Their presence is characterised by joy and play, which are typical of their age, but also by disorder and negative behaviours. Therefore, in this dream at nine years of age, children are not the romantic image of an enchanted age as yet touched by the evils of the world, nor do they correspond to the postmodern myth of youth as a stage of spontaneous activity and perpetual willingness to change, which should be preserved in eternal adolescence. The children of the dream are extraordinarily "real", both when they appear with their own physical features and when they are symbolically depicted in the form of animals. They play and quarrel, have fun laughing and ruin it with swearing, just like in reality. They seem neither innocent, as spontaneous pedagogy imagines them, nor capable of being their own masters as Rousseau thought. From the moment they appear, in a "very large yard", which foreshadows the large courtyards or playgrounds of future Salesian oratories, they invoke the presence and action of someone. The impulsive gesture of the dreamer, however, is not

the right intervention; the presence of an Other is necessary.

The appearance of the Christ figure, as we can now openly call him, is intertwined with the vision of the children. He who in the Gospel said "Let the little children come to me" (Mk 10:14), comes to show the dreamer the attitude with which the children should be approached and accompanied. He appears majestic, manly, strong, with traits that clearly highlight his divine and transcendent nature. His way of acting is marked by confidence and power and manifests full lordship over the things that take place. The dignified man, however, does not instil fear, but rather brings peace where before there was confusion and commotion, manifests benevolent understanding in John's regard and directs him on a path of gentleness and love.

The *reciprocity* between these figures – the children on the one hand and the Lord (to whom the Mother is then added) on the other – defines the contours of the dream. The emotions that John experiences in the dream experience, the questions he asks, the task he is called to perform, the future that opens up before him are totally bound to the dialectic between these two poles. Perhaps the most important message that the dream conveys to him, what he probably understood first because it was imprinted in his imagination, before even understanding it in a reflective way, is that those figures refer to each other and that *he will not be able to dissociate them throughout his life*. The encounter between the vulnerability of young people and the power of the Lord, between their need for salvation and his offer of grace, between their desire for joy and his gift of life must now become the centre of his thoughts, the place where he finds his identity. The score of his life will be all written in the key that this generative theme gives him: modulating it in all its harmonic potential will be his mission, into which he will have to pour all his gifts of nature and grace.

The dynamics of John's life are therefore portrayed in the dream-vision as a continuous movement, a

spiritual back and forth between the children and the Lord. From the group of children among whom John zealously throws himself, he must allow himself to be drawn to the Lord who calls him by name, and then depart from the One who sends him and position himself, with a completely different style, at the head of his friends. Even though he receives punches in his dream from some very strong boys, such that he still feels the pain upon waking up, and even though he hears words from the dignified man that leave him bewildered, his coming and going is not pointless but rather a journey that gradually transforms him and brings an energy of life and love to the youngsters.

That all this takes place in a *yard* (courtyard or playground) is highly significant and has a clear anticipatory value, since the Oratory courtyard or playground will become the privileged place and exemplary symbol of Don Bosco's mission. The whole scene is placed in this setting, both vast (very large yard) and familiar (close to home). The fact that the vocational vision does not have a sacred place or a heavenly location as a background, but the surroundings in which the children live and play, clearly indicates that the *divine initiative assumes their world as a place of encounter*. The mission entrusted to John, even if it is clearly addressed in a catechetical and religious sense ("to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue"), has education as its habitat. The association of the Christ figure with the large yard, and the dynamics of the game, which certainly a nine-year-old boy could not have "constructed", goes beyond the usual religious imagery and carries a profound and mysterious inspiration. It encompasses the entire essence of the Incarnation, where the Son takes on human form to offer us his, emphasising that nothing human needs to be sacrificed in order to make room for God.

The yard, then, speaks of *the closeness of divine grace to the way youngsters "perceive" things*. To embrace this there is no need to leave one's own age behind, neglect its

needs, or force its rhythms. When Don Bosco, by then an adult, would write in the *Giovane provveduto* (The Companion of Youth) that one of the devil's snares is to make young people think that holiness is incompatible with their desire to be joyful and with the exuberant freshness of their vitality, he would only be giving back in mature form the lesson he grasped in the dream, which later became a central element of his spiritual teaching. The courtyard or playground also conveys the need to *understand education from its deepest core*, which concerns the attitude of the heart towards God. There, the dream teaches, there is not only room for an original openness to grace, but also for the abyss of resistance, where the ugliness of evil and the violence of sin lurk. This is why the educational horizon of the dream is frankly religious, and not just philanthropic, and it enacts the symbolism of conversion, and not just that of self- development.

In the yard of the dream, filled with children and inhabited by the Lord, what will in the future be the pedagogical and spiritual dynamics of Oratory playground and courtyards opens up to John. We would like to once more highlight two features clearly evoked in the actions that the children do first of all, and later the meek lambs.

The first should be noted in the fact that the youngsters "stopped their fighting, shouting and swearing; they gathered round the man who was speaking". This question of "gathering" is one of the most important theological and pedagogical pillars of Don Bosco's view of education. In a famous work written in 1854, the *Introduzione al Piano di Regolamento per l'Oratorio maschile di S. Francesco di Sales in Torino nella regione Valdocco* (The Introduction to the Draft Regulations for the Boys' Oratory of St Francis de Sales in the Valdocco district of Turin) he presents the ecclesial nature and theological meaning of the oratory as an institution, quoting the words of John the Evangelist: "*Ut filios Dei, qui erant dispersi, congregaret in unum*" (Jn 11:52). The Oratory activity is thus placed under the banner of the eschatological gathering the children of God which was

at the heart of the mission of the Son of God:

The words of the holy Gospel that make us know that the divine Saviour came from heaven to earth to gather together all the children of God, scattered across various parts of the earth, words that can literally be applied to the youth of our day.

Youth, "that part of human society which is so exposed and yet so rich in promise" is often found to be dispersed and adrift due to the educational disinterest of parents or the influence of bad company. The first thing to do to provide education for these young people is precisely to "gather them, be able to speak to them, teach them morals." In these words of the *Introduction to the Draft Regulations*, the echo of the dream, which has matured in the consciousness of the educator who is now an adult, is clearly and recognisably present. The oratory is presented as a joyous "gathering" of young people around the only attracting force capable of saving and transforming them, that of the Lord: "These oratories are certain gatherings in which youth is engaged in pleasant and honest recreation after attending sacred church functions." From childhood, in fact, Don Bosco understood that "this was the mission of the Son of God; only his holy religion can do this."

The second element that would become an identifying feature of Oratory spirituality is what is revealed in the dream through the image of the lambs running "as if to welcome that man and lady."

The *pedagogy of celebration* will be a fundamental dimension of Don Bosco's preventive system, which will see in the numerous religious commemorations throughout the year the opportunity to offer young people the possibility of fully embracing the joy of faith. Don Bosco will know how to enthusiastically involve the youthful community of the oratory in the preparation of events, theatrical performances, celebrations that allow for a break from daily duties, appreciating the talents of his boys in music, acting,

gymnastics, to guide their imagination towards positive creativity. Taking into account that the education proposed in religious environments of the 19th century usually had a rather austere tone, seemingly presenting devout composure as an ideal pedagogical goal, the lively festivities of the oratory stand out as an expression of a humanism open to understanding the psychological needs of the youngster and capable of supporting his desire to be proactive. The celebration that follows the metamorphosis of the animals in the dream is therefore what Salesian pedagogy should aim for.

2. The call to do the impossible

While the dream ends with celebration for the youngsters, for John it ends in dismay and crying. We can only be surprised at this outcome. The common idea, at least expressing it in simplistic terms, is that God's visitations are exclusively bearers of joy and consolation. It is paradoxical, therefore, that for an apostle of joy, for the one who as a seminarian would found the "society for a good time" and who as a priest would teach his boys that holiness consists in "being very cheerful", the vocational scene ends with weeping.

This may certainly indicate that the joy spoken of is not pure leisure and simple carefreeness but inner resonance to the beauty of grace. As such, it can only be achieved through challenging spiritual battles which, to a large extent, Don Bosco would have to pay the price of for the benefit of his boys. In this way he himself would relive that exchange of roles that has its roots in the paschal mystery of Jesus and that continues, as was the case for the apostles: "We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute" (1 Cor 4:10), but precisely in this way being "workers with you for your joy" (2 Cor 1:24).

The disturbance with which the dream closes, however, primarily recalls the dizzying feeling that the great biblical figures experience in the face of the divine vocation

that manifests itself in their lives, urging them in a completely unpredictable and disconcerting direction. The Gospel of Luke states that even the Blessed Virgin Mary, upon hearing the words of the angel, felt a sense of profound inner turmoil ("But she was much perplexed by his words" Lk 1:29). Isaiah felt lost in the presence of God's holiness in the temple (Is 6), Amos compared the power of the divine Word, by which he was seized, to the roar of a lion (Am 3:8), and Paul experienced a complete existential overturning upon encountering the Risen One on the road to Damascus. While testifying to the allure of an encounter with God that forever seduces, at the moment of the call, biblical figures seem hesitant and fearful in the face of something that surpasses them, rather than diving headlong into the adventure of the mission.

The bewilderment that John experiences in the dream seems similar. It arises from the paradoxical nature of the mission that is assigned to him and that he does not hesitate to describe as "impossible" ("Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?"). The adjective may seem "exaggerated", as sometimes the reactions of children are, especially when they express a sense of inadequacy in the face of a challenging task. But this element of child psychology does not seem sufficient to illuminate the content of the dream dialogue and the depth of the spiritual experience it communicates. Especially since John truly has the stuff to be a leader, and an excellent memory which will allow him in the months following the dream to immediately start doing a bit of oratory, entertaining his friends with acrobatic feats, games and repeating the sermons of the parish priest to them by word for word. This is why, in the words with which he frankly declares that he is "unable to talk about religion" to those youngsters, it will be good to hear the distant echo of Jeremiah's objection to the divine vocation: "I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy" (Jer 1:6).

It is not at the level of natural attitudes that the demand for the impossible is played out here, but on the

level of what can fall within the horizon of reality, of what can be expected based on one's image of the world, of what falls within the limits of experience. *Beyond this frontier, the region of the impossible* opens up, which is, however, Biblically the space of God's action. It is "impossible" for Abraham to have a child by a sterile and elderly woman like Sarah; it is "impossible" for the Virgin to conceive and give the world the Son of God made man; salvation seems "impossible" to the disciples if it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Yet Abraham hears himself answer: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" (Gen 18:14); the angel tells Mary that "nothing will be impossible with God" (Lk 1:37); and Jesus answers the unbelieving disciples that "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Lk 18:27).

The supreme place where the theological question of the impossible is posed, however, is the decisive moment of salvation history, that is, the Paschal drama in which the frontier of the impossible to be overcome is the dark abyss of evil and death. It is *in this space generated by the resurrection* that the impossible becomes actual reality. It is there that the dignified man of the dream, shining with Paschal light, asks John to make the impossible possible. And he does so with a surprising formula: "Precisely because it seems impossible to you, you must make it possible through obedience." These seem like the words with which parents urge their reluctant children to do something they do not feel capable of or do not want to do. "Obey and you will see that you can do it" Mum or Dad say: the psychology of the child's world is perfectly respected. But they are also, and much more, the words with which the Son reveals *the secret of the impossible, a secret that is fully hidden in his obedience*. The dignified man who commands something impossible knows through his human experience that impossibility is the place where the Father operates with his Spirit, provided that the door is opened to him through one's obedience.

John, of course, remains perturbed and bewildered,

but this is the attitude that the human being experiences when faced with the paschal impossible, when faced with the miracle of miracles, of which every other salvific event is a sign. It should therefore come as no surprise that in the dream, the dialectic of the possible-impossible is intertwined with the other dialectic of clarity and obscurity. It characterises first of all the very image of the Lord, whose face is so bright that John cannot look at it. On that face shines, in fact, a divine light that paradoxically produces darkness.

Then there are the words of the man and the lady which, while they clearly explain what John must do, nevertheless leave him confused and frightened. Finally, there is a symbolic illustration, through the metamorphosis of the animals, which however leads to even greater incomprehension. John can only ask for further clarification: "I begged the lady to speak so that I could understand her, because I did not know what all this could mean", but the answer he gets from the lady of stately appearance postpones the moment of understanding further: "In good time you will understand everything."

This certainly means that only through the execution of what is already graspable from the dream, that is, through possible obedience, will the space for clarifying its message open up more broadly. In fact, it does not consist simply of an idea to be explained, but of a performative word, an effective expression, which, by realising its operative power, manifests its deepest meaning.

3. The mystery of the Name

At this point in the reflection, we are able to better interpret another important element of the dream experience. It is the fact that at the centre of the dual tension between possible and impossible and between known and unknown, and also, materially, at the centre of the dream narrative, is the theme of the mysterious Name of the dignified man. The tightly constructed dialogue of section III is, in fact, woven of questions that counter the same theme:

“Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?”; “But who are you that speak so?”, and finally: “My mother tells me not to mix with people I don’t know unless I have her permission. So tell me your name.” The dignified man tells John to ask his mother for the Name, but in reality the latter will not tell him. It remains shrouded in mystery to the end.

We have already mentioned, in the part dedicated to reconstructing the biblical background of the dream, that the theme of the Name is closely related to the episode of Moses’ vocation at the burning bush (Ex 3). This is one of the central texts of the Old Testament revelation and lays the foundations for all religious thought in Israel. André LaCoque proposed describing it as the “revelation of revelations” because it is the principle of unity of the narrative and the prescriptive structure that qualifies the narrative of the Exodus, the mother-cell of the entire Scripture.³ It is important to note that the biblical text develops in close unity the condition of slavery of the people in Egypt, the vocation of Moses and the theophanic revelation. The revelation of the Name of God to Moses does not occur as the transmission of information to be known or data to be acquired, but as the manifestation of a personal presence which intends to give rise to a stable relationship and generate a process of liberation. In this respect, *the revelation of the divine Name is oriented in the direction of the covenant and the mission*. “The Name is both theophanic and performative, for those who receive it are not merely ushered into the divine secret, but are the recipients of an act of salvation.”^[1]

The Name, in fact, unlike a concept, does not merely designate an essence to be thought of, but an otherness to be referred to, a presence to be invoked, a subject that proposes itself as a true interlocutor of existence. While implying the announcement of an incomparable ontological richness, that of Being that can never be adequately described, the fact that God reveals himself as an “I” indicates that only through a personal relationship with Him

will it be possible to access his identity, the Mystery of the Being that he is. The revelation of the Personal Name is therefore an act of speech that challenges the recipient, asking him to position himself towards the speaker. Only in this way, in fact, is it possible to grasp its meaning. This revelation, moreover, is explicitly placed as the foundation for the liberating mission that Moses must carry out: "I AM has sent me to you" (Ex 3:14). By presenting himself as a personal God, and not a God tied to a territory, and as the God of promise, and not purely as the lord of immutable repetition, Yahweh will be able to sustain the people's journey, their journey towards freedom. He therefore has a Name that makes itself known insofar as it arouses covenant and moves history.

"Tell me your name": this question of John's cannot be answered simply through a formula, a name intended as an external label of the person. To know the Name of the One who speaks in the dream, it is not enough to receive information, but it is necessary to take a position faced with what he says. That is, it is necessary to enter into that relationship of intimacy and surrender which the Gospels describe as "staying" with Him. This is why when the first disciples ask Jesus about his identity – "Master, where do you live?" or more literally, "where do you stay?" – he replies "Come and see" (Jn 1:38ff.). Only by "staying" with him, dwelling in his mystery, entering into his relationship with the Father, can we truly know Who he is.

The fact that the dream character does not respond to John with a name, as we would do by presenting what is written on our identity card, indicates that his Name cannot be known as a purely external designation, but shows its truth only when it seals an experience of alliance and mission. John will therefore know that very Name by going through the dialectic of the possible and the impossible, of clarity and darkness; he will know it by fulfilling the Oratory mission entrusted to him. He will know Him, therefore, bringing Him within himself, thanks to a story experienced as one that He

inhabits. One day Cagliero would testify that Don Bosco's way of loving was "very tender, great, strong, but entirely spiritual, pure, truly chaste", so much so that "it gave one a perfect idea of the love that the Saviour brought to children" (Cagliero 1146r). This indicates that the Name of the dignified man, whose face was so bright as to blind the dreamer, has really entered like a seal into the life of Don Bosco. He had the *experientia cordis* through the journey of faith and following Christ. This is the only way in which the dream question could be answered.

4. Maternal mediation

In the uncertainty about the One who sends him, the only firm point to which John can cling in the dream is the reference to a mother, indeed to two: that of the dignified man and his own. The answers to his questions, in fact, sound like this: "I am the son of the one whom your mother taught you to greet three times a day" and then "Ask my mother what my name is."

That *the space of possible enlightenment is Marian and maternal* is undoubtedly something worth reflecting on. Mary is the place in which humanity realises the highest correspondence to the light that comes from God and the creaturely space in which God delivered his Word made flesh to the world. It is also indicative that upon awakening from the dream, the one who best understands its meaning and purpose is John's mother, Margaret. On different levels, but according to a real analogy, the Mother of the Lord and the mother of John represent the female face of the Church, which shows itself capable of spiritual intuition and is the womb in which the great missions are managed and given birth.

It is therefore not surprising that the two mothers are juxtaposed with each other and precisely at the point where it is a question of getting to the bottom of the issue the dream presents, namely the knowledge of the One who entrusts John with the mission of a lifetime. As with the yard near the house, so also with the mother, in the dream

intuition the spaces of the most familiar and everyday experience open up and show an unfathomable depth as they unfold. The common gestures of prayer, the Angelus greeting that was customary three times a day in every family, suddenly appear for what they are: dialogue with the Mystery. John thus discovers that at his mother's school he has already established a bond with the stately Lady who can explain everything to him. Therefore, there is already a sort of female channel that allows us to overcome the apparent distance between "a poor ignorant child" and the "nobly-dressed" man. This feminine, Marian and maternal mediation will accompany John throughout his life and will mature in him as a particular disposition to venerate the Virgin with the title of Help of Christians, becoming her apostle for her children and for the entire Church.

The first help that Our Lady offers him is what a child naturally needs: a teacher. What she has to teach him is a discipline that makes him truly wise, without which "all wisdom is foolishness." It is the discipline of faith, which consists in giving credit to God and obeying even in the face of the impossible and the unknown. Mary conveys it as the highest expression of freedom and as the richest source of spiritual and educational fruitfulness. To carry within oneself the impossible of God and to walk in the darkness of faith is, in fact, the art in which the Virgin excels above every creature.

She had an arduous apprenticeship in her *peregrinatio fidei*, marked not infrequently by darkness and misunderstanding. Just think of the episode of the finding of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple (Lk 2:41-50). To the mother's question: "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety" Jesus answers in a surprising way: "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" And the evangelist notes: "But they did not understand what he said to them." Even less likely did Mary understand when her motherhood, solemnly announced from on

high, was expropriated so that it became a common inheritance of the community of disciples: "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Mt 12:50). At the foot of the cross then, when it became dark over the whole earth, the Here am I spoken at the moment of her call took on the contours of extreme renunciation, separation from the Son in whose place she was to receive sinful children for whom she let her heart be pierced by the sword.

Therefore, when the stately Lady of the dream begins to carry out her task as a teacher and, placing a hand on John's head, says "In good time you will understand everything", she draws these words from the spiritual depths of the faith that at the foot of the cross made her the mother of every disciple. John must remain under her discipline throughout his life: as a young man, as a seminarian, as a priest. In a particular way he must remain there when his mission takes on contours that at the time of the dream he could not imagine; when, that is, he must become in the heart of the Church the founder of religious families destined for the youth of every continent. Then John, by then Don Bosco, would also understand the deeper meaning of the gesture with which the dignified man gave his mother to him as a "teacher".

When a young man enters a religious family, he is welcomed by a novice master to whom he is entrusted to introduce him to the spirit of the Order and help him assimilate it. *When it comes to a Founder*, who must receive from the Holy Spirit the original light of the charism, the Lord arranges for his own mother, the Virgin of Pentecost and immaculate model of the Church, to act as his Teacher. She alone, the "full of grace", understands all charisms from within, as someone who knows all languages and speaks them as if they were her own.

In fact, the woman of the dream knows how to indicate to him in a precise and appropriate way the riches of the Oratory charism. She adds nothing to the words of her Son, but illustrates them with the scene of wild animals becoming

meek lambs and with the indication of the qualities that John will have to develop to carry out his mission: “humble, strong, energetic”. These three adjectives, which designate the vigour of the spirit (humility), of character (strength) and of the body (energy) are quite concrete. It was the advice that he would give to a young novice who has a long experience of oratory and knows what the “field” in which he has to “work” requires. The Salesian spiritual tradition has carefully preserved the words of this dream that refer to Mary. The Salesian Constitutions clearly allude to this when they state: “The Virgin Mary showed Don Bosco his field of labour among the young”[\[ii\]](#), or remind us that “Under the guidance of Mary his Teacher, Don Bosco lived with the boys of the first Oratory a spiritual and educational experience which he called the ‘Preventive System’”[\[iii\]](#). Don Bosco recognised Mary as having a decisive role in his educational system, seeing in her motherhood the highest inspiration of what it means to “prevent”. The fact that Mary intervened from the first moment of his charismatic vocation, that she played such a central role in this dream, will make Don Bosco forever understand that she *belongs to the roots of the charism and that if this inspiring role is not recognised, the charism is not understood in its genuineness*. Given as a teacher to John in this dream, it must also be so for all those who share his vocation and mission. As the successors of Don Bosco never tired of affirming, the “Salesian vocation is inexplicable, both in its birth and in its development and always, without the maternal and uninterrupted assistance of Mary.”[\[iv\]](#).

5. The power of meekness (gentleness)

“You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love”: these words are undoubtedly the best known expression of the dream at nine years of age, the one that somehow summarises the message and conveys its inspiration. They are also the first words that the dignified man says to John, interrupting his violent effort to put an end to the disorder and swearing of his

companions. It is not only a formula that conveys an ever valid sapiential sentence, but an expression that specifies the way to carry out a command ("he told me to take charge of these children and added these words") with which, as has been said, the intentional movement of the dreamer's consciousness is reoriented. The fervour for blows must become the momentum of charity, the disordered energy of repressive intervention must make way for meekness and gentleness.

The term "meekness" gains significant importance here, which is even more striking when one considers that the corresponding adjective will be used at the end of the dream to describe the lambs rejoicing around the Lord and Mary. The juxtaposition suggests an observation that is not without relevance: *for those who were wild animals to become "meek" lambs, their educator must first become meek*. Both, although starting from different points, must undergo a *metamorphosis* to enter the Christological orbit of gentleness and charity. For a group of rowdy and quarrelsome children, it is easy to understand what this change requires. For an educator, perhaps it is less evident. In fact, the educator is already on the side of goodness, positive values, order, and discipline: what change can be asked of this person?

A theme arises here that will have a decisive development in the life of Don Bosco, first of all in terms of the style of the action and, to a certain extent, also in terms of theoretical reflection. This is the orientation that leads Don Bosco to *categorically exclude an educational system based on repression and punishment*, in order to choose with conviction a method that is fully based on love and that Don Bosco will call the "preventive system". Beyond the different pedagogical implications that derive from this choice, for which we refer to the rich specific bibliography, it is interesting here to highlight the theological and spiritual dimension that underlies this approach, of which the words of the dream are in some way the intuition and the trigger.

Placing himself on the side of good and "law", the educator may be tempted to organise his action with the

children according to a logic that aims to establish order and discipline essentially through rules and norms. However, even the law carries within itself an ambiguity that makes it insufficient to guide freedom, not only because of the limitations that every human rule possesses, but also because of a limitation that is ultimately of a theological order. All of Paul's reflection is a great meditation on this subject, since Paul had perceived in his personal experience that the law had not prevented him from being "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence" (1 Tim 1:13). The same Law given by God, Scripture teaches, is not enough to save man, if there is no other personal Principle that integrates and internalises it in the heart of man. Paul Beauchamp happily sums up this dynamic when he states: "The Law is preceded by a *You are loved* and followed by a *You will love*. You are loved: the foundation of the law, and *you will love*: its overcoming." [\[v\]](#). Without this foundation and this overcoming, the law bears in itself the signs of a violence that reveals its insufficiency to generate that good that it, too, orders to be done. To return to the scene of the dream, the punches and blows that John gives in the name of a sacrosanct commandment of God, which forbids blasphemy, reveal the insufficiency and ambiguity of any moralising impulse that is not inwardly reformed from above.

It is therefore also necessary for John, and for those who will learn preventive spirituality from him, to convert to an *unprecedented educational logic which goes beyond the regime of the law*. This logic is made possible only by the Spirit of the Risen One, poured into our hearts. Only the Spirit, in fact, allows us to move from a formal and external justice (be it the classic one of "discipline" and "good conduct" or the modern one of "procedures" and "objectives achieved") to a true inner holiness which does good because it is internally attracted and earned. Don Bosco will show that he has this awareness when in his writing on the *Preventive System* he frankly declares that it is entirely based on the words of Saint Paul: "*Charitas benigna est,*

patiens est; omnia suffert, omnia sperat, omnia sustinet.”.

Of course, “winning over” young people in this way is a very demanding task. It implies not giving in to the coldness of an education based only on rules, nor to the goodness of a proposal that renounces denouncing the “ugliness of sin” and presenting the “value of virtue”. Conquering the good by simply showing the strength of truth and love, witnessed to through dedication “to the last breath”, is the epitome of an educational method that is at the same time a true spirituality.

It is no wonder that John in the dream resists entering this movement and asks to understand well who is the one imparting it. But when he has understood, making that message first an Oratory- based institution and then also a religious family, he will think that telling the dream in which he learned that lesson will be the most beautiful way to share with his sons the most authentic meaning of his experience. It is God who guided everything, it is He himself who imparted the initial movement of what would become the Salesian charism.

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[\[i\]](#) A. BERTULETTI, *Dio, il mistero dell’unico*, Queriniana, Brescia 2014, 354.

[\[ii\]](#) Const Art. 8.

[\[iii\]](#) Const Art. 20.

[\[iv\]](#) E. VIGANÒ, *Mary renews Don Bosco’s Salesian Family*, ACG 289 (1978) 1-35, 28.

[\[v\]](#) P. BEAUCHAMP, *La legge di Dio*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 2000, 116.

Wonders of the Mother of God invoked under the title of Mary Help of Christians (2/13)

[\(continuation from previous article\)](#)

Chapter II. Mary shown to be the help of Christians by the Archangel Gabriel in the act of proclaiming her the Mother of God.

The things thus far set forth were gathered from the Old Testament and applied by the Church to the Blessed Virgin Mary; now let us turn to the literal meaning according to what is written in the Holy Gospel.

The Evangelist St Luke in Chapter I of his Gospel relates that the Archangel Gabriel having been sent by God to announce to Mary Most Holy the dignity of Mother of Jesus, said to her: *Ave, gratia plena, Dominus tecum, benedicta tu in mulieribus*. Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women.

The Archangel Gabriel greeting Mary calls her full of grace. Therefore Mary possesses the fullness of it.

St Augustine expounding the words of the Archangel thus greets Mary: Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you; You in your heart, You in your womb, You in the depths of your being, You in your help. *Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum, tecum in corde, tecum in ventre, tecum in utero, tecum in auxilio*. (August. in Serm. de nat. B. M.).

The angelic doctor St. Thomas says of the words *Gratia plena* that Mary must truly have had the fullness of graces and reasons thus: The closer one is to God, the more one participates in God's grace. Those Angels in heaven who are closest to the divine throne are more favoured and richer than the others. Now Mary, closest of all to Jesus because she gave him human nature, was to be enriched with grace. (*D. Thomas* 3, p., qu. 27, act. 5).

The Angel Gabriel said it very well, proclaiming Mary, full of grace, St Jerome observes, because that grace, which is communicated only in part to other saints, was lavished in Mary in all its fullness.

Dominus tecum. The Archangel to confirm this fullness of grace in Mary explains and amplifies the first words *gratia plena* by adding *Dominus tecum*, the Lord is with you. Here all doubt of exaggeration of the previous words falls away. It is no longer only God's grace that comes in all its abundance in Mary, but it is God Himself who comes to fill her with Himself and establish His dwelling in her chaste womb, making it His temple, thus sanctifying the Most High His tabernacle: *Sanctificavit tabernaculum suum Altissimus*.

So too, according to the sense of the Church, comment st. Thomas Aquinas and St Laurence Justinian and St Bernard.

And since Mary, in her profound humility, was disturbed and asked for an explanation of such an extraordinary annunciation, the Archangel Gabriel confirmed what he had said and developed its meaning. *Ne timeas, Maria*, said Gabriel, *invenisti enim gratiam apud Deum: Ecce concipies in utero et paries filium et vocabis nomen eius Jesum*. Fear not, O Mary, for you have found favour with God: Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son, whose name you shall call Jesus. And wanting to explain how the mystery would take place, he added: *Spiritus Sanctus superveniet in te et virtus*

Altissimi obumbrabit tibi, ideoque et quod nascetur ex te Sanctum vocabitur Filius Dei. The Holy Spirit will descend upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and for this reason also that which will be born of you is Holy and will be called the Son of God.

Let us now listen to St Antoninus, Archbishop of Florence, to explain these words of the Gospel.

“From these words (*invenisti gratiam*) the excellence of Mary is made manifest. The Angel in saying that Mary found grace does not mean that she found it only then, whereas Mary already had grace before the Angel’s Annunciation; she had it from birth; therefore she never lost it, she found it rather on behalf of the whole human race that had lost it with original sin. Adam by his sin lost grace for himself and for all, and with the penance he did afterwards he only recovered grace for himself. Mary then found it for all, because through Mary all had grace virtually, inasmuch as through Mary we had Jesus who brought grace to us.” (*D. Antoninus part. tit. 15, § 2*).

Therefore, what the holy Fathers teach is unquestionable, namely that Mary, finding this grace, restored to mankind as much good as the evil that Eve had brought us by losing grace.

So Cardinal Ugone, taking the floor on behalf of the men, humbly presents himself to Mary and says to her: “You must not hide this grace, which you have found, because it is not yours, but you must put it in common so that those who lost it may regain it as is right. Therefore let those who sinned and lost grace run to the Virgin, and finding it with Mary, let them say humbly and confidently: ‘Give us back, O Mother, our property, which you have found. And they will not be able to deny having found it, for the Angel bears witness to this, saying: *Invenisti*, you have found it, not bought it, for that would not be grace, but freely received it, therefore

invenisti, you have found it."

The same truth is gathered from the words that St. Elizabeth spoke to Mary. When the Blessed Virgin went to visit St Elizabeth, the latter, as soon as she saw her, was filled with the Holy Spirit, and so full that she began to prophesy in an inspired manner: *Benedicta tu inter mulieres, et benedictus fructus ventris tui.*

Are we not to confess that Mary had received the mission to sanctify? And yes, it was precisely Mary who brought about this sanctification of Elizabeth, since St Luke says precisely: *Et factum est ut audivit salutationem Mariae Elisabeth exultavit infans in utero eius et repleta est Spiritu Sancto Elisabeth.* And it came to pass that as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Precisely when Mary came into her house she greeted her and Elizabeth heard the greeting. Origen says that St John could not feel the influence of grace before she who bore the authority of grace was present to him. And Cardinal Ugone, observing that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and sanctified John on hearing Mary's greeting, concludes: 'Let us greet her therefore often, so that in her greeting we too may find ourselves filled with grace, since it is written of her especially: Grace is poured out on your lips, so that grace flows from Mary's lips. *Repleta est Spiritu Sancto Elisabeth ad vocem salutationis Mariae: ideo salutanda est frequenter ut in eius salutatione gratia repleamur; de ipsa enim specialiter dietim est: Diffusa est gratia in labiis tuis (Ps. 14) Unde gratia ex labiis eius fluit.'*

Saint Elizabeth, following the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, with which she had been filled, returned Mary's greeting by saying to her: *Benedicta tu inter mulieres:* Blessed art thou among women. With these words, the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of Elizabeth, exalted Mary above every other fortunate woman, wanting to teach that Mary had

been blessed and favoured by God by electing her to bring to men that blessing, which had been lost in Eve and had been hoped for for forty centuries, that blessing which, by removing the curse, was to confound death and give us eternal life. To her kinswoman's congratulations Mary also responded with divine inspiration: *Magnificat anima mea Dominum, quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae, ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent omnes generationes*. My soul exalts the greatness of the Lord.... For he has looked upon the lowliness of his handmaid, for behold, from this moment blessed shall all generations call me. (Lk 1, v. 46 et seqq.).

Why would they call her blessed of all generations? This word embraces not only all men who lived at that time, but those still to come afterwards until the end of the world. Now in order that Mary's glory might extend to all generations, and that they might call her blessed, it was necessary that some extraordinary and everlasting good should come from Mary to all these generations; so that being perpetual in them the reason for their gratitude would be reasonable the perpetuity of praise. Now this continual and admirable benefit can be none other than the help that Mary lends to men. Help that must embrace all times, extend to all places, to all kinds of people. St Albert the Great says that Mary is called blessed par excellence, just as by saying the Apostle we mean St Paul.

Antonio Gistandis, a Dominican writer, asks the question how Mary can be said to be blessed by all generations while she was never blessed by the Jews and Mohammedans? And he answers, that this was said in a figurative sense to indicate that of each generation some would bless her. For, as Liranius says, in all generations there were converts to the faith of Christ who blessed the Virgin; and in the Alcoranus [Koran] itself, which is the book written by Muhammad, we find many praises to Mary (Ant. Gistandis Fer. 6, 4 Temp. adv.). For this very reason Mary is proclaimed blessed among all

generations: *Beatam me dicent omnes generationes.*

Here is how anointed and abundantly sentimental Cardinal Ugone comments on this passage: “They shall call me blessed all generations, that is, of the Jews, of the Gentiles; or of men and women, of rich and poor, of angels and men, for through her all received the blessing of health. Men were reconciled, and angels repaired; for Christ the Son of God wrought health in the midst of the earth, that is to say, in the womb of Mary, who may be called the centre of the earth. For unto her turn their eyes those who enjoy heaven, and those who dwell in hell, that is, in limbo, and those who labour in the world. The first to be redeemed, the second to be atoned, the third to be reconciled. Therefore blessed shall Mary say all generations.” And here he exclaims in a rhapsody of veneration: “O blessed Virgin, because to all generations you gave life, grace and glory: life to the dead, grace to sinners, glory to the unfortunate.” And applying to Mary the words with which Judith was praised, he says to her: *Tu gloria Ierusalem, tu laetitia Israel, tu honorificentia populi nostri quia fecisti viriliter.* First of all, the voice of the angels comes to praise her, whose ruin is repaired by her: secondly, the voice of men, whose sadness is gladdened by her; then the voice of women, whose infamy is wiped out by her work; finally, the voice of the dead in limbo, who through Mary are redeemed from slavery and gloriously introduced into their homeland.

[\(continued\)](#)

St Francis de Sales. Complete works and concordances

St Francis de Sales was considered a founder of a new school of spirituality, named after him: Salesian spirituality. By following this spirituality, many men and women have arrived at holiness. Getting to know it is a duty for those connected to this school of spirituality, especially for those religious groups of men and women who are in some way part of the great Salesian family.

The word spirituality means a doctrine of spiritual life, that is, one that deals with the principles of Christian perfection and the means to achieve it.

Speaking of Salesian spirituality Fr Eugenio Ceria wrote:

“Fundamentally, there is but one doctrine of spiritual life, the one contained in the pages of the gospel; however, developments and implementations can and do vary. The three evangelical counsels, for example, which are at the basis of religious life, although they always remain the same in substance, nevertheless take on different forms in practice, according to the diversity of the particular goals desired by the founders, in accordance with the needs and tendencies of the times. All the Saints and all the schools of holiness that have flourished and do flourish in the Church are substantially inspired by the gospel; but how many accidental differences between them! Thus we have the spirituality of St Benedict, of St Francis of Assisi, of St Dominic, of St Ignatius, and the consequent Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican, Ignatian spirituality, each with its own unmistakable character, and yet all equally suited to lead souls to perfection.

Some Saints, such as St John Bosco, did not systematically set out their own doctrine of spiritual life in writing, but created institutions in which they embodied it and from the

study of which it can be brought to light; other Saints, on the contrary, not only gave rise to institutions professing a form of spiritual life that corresponded to their views, directing souls on the path to perfection according to the norms and methods they preferred, but also deliberately formulated the theories that formed the basis of their spiritual activity. One of the latter is St Francis de Sales, master of the asceticism that is known as Salesian.”

Salesian spirituality has produced its fruits in many people who have attained holiness, and was confirmed by the canonisation of St Francis de Sales in 1665 (less than 50 years after his death) and his proclamation as a Doctor of the Church in 1877.

Thanks to God and to his life experience, St Francis de Sales also leaves a written legacy in which the informative principles of Salesian spirituality are identified, mainly in the Introduction to the Devout Life, the Treatise on the Love of God, the Spiritual Conferences and the collection of his Correspondence. In the Introduction, he writes for people who tread the ordinary paths of holiness, in the Treatise and Conferences he writes for those who wish to progress in the ways of contemplation, and in the Correspondence he writes for both cases.

There have been various efforts to present his entire French work in a complete edition. Mention may be made of Béthune Editeur’s 4-volume version from 1836, Migne’s 9-volume version from 1861 to 1864, Berche et Tralin’s 10-volume version from 1898, Luis Vives’s 12-volume version from 1899, and lastly the Monastère d’Annecy’s 27-volume version from 1892 to 1964, which is the most complete and reliable.

Fortunately, this latest version by the Monastère d’Annecy is in digital format, and we want to present it to all those who can read it in French.

No.	Vol.	Title	Topic	pp.	Pub.
I		The Catholic Controversy	Defence of the authority of the Church; The Rules of Faith, The Rules of Faith are observed in the Catholic Church	420	1892
II		Defending the Standard of the Holy Cross	On the honour and virtue of the true Cross; On the honour and virtue of the image of the Cross; On the honour and virtue of the sign of the Cross; On the quality of the honour due to the Cross; On the manner of honouring the Cross	432	1892
III		Introduction to the Devout Life (Philothea)	The counsels and exercises required to lead the soul from its first desire for the devout life to a full resolution to embrace it; various counsels for the elevation of the soul to God through prayer and the sacraments; several counsels concerning the exercise of the virtues; the counsels necessary against the more ordinary temptations; exercises and counsels to renew the soul and confirm it in devotion.	574	1893

IV	1	<u>Treatise on the Love of God (Theotimus)</u>	Six books: Containing a preparation for the whole treatise; History of the generation and celestial birth of divine love; Progress and perfection of love; Decadence and ruin of charity; Of the two principal exercises of holy love, which are accomplished through complacency and benevolence; Exercises of holy love in prayer.	362	1894
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V	2	Treatise on the Love of God (Theotimus)	Seventh books: Of the soul's union with its God, which is perfected in prayer; Of the love of conformity by which we unite our will to God's, which is given to us by his commandments, counsels and inspirations; Of the love of submission by which our will is united to God's good pleasure; Of the commandment to love God above all things; Of the sovereign authority which sacred love has over all the virtues, actions and perfections of the soul; Contains some counsels for the soul's progress in holy love.	512	1894
VI		The True Spiritual Conferences (21)	21 talks	480	1895
VII	1	Sermons (autograph), I	1593-1602 – 65 sermons	492	1896
VIII	2	Sermons (autograph), II	1603-1622 – 95 sermons	448	1897
IX	3	Sermons (collection), I	1613-1620 – 42 sermons	492	1897

X	4	Sermons (collection), II	1594-1622 – 30 sermons	480	1898
XI	1	Letters, I	>1593-1598 – 120 letters	486	1900
XII	2	Letters, II	1599-1604 – 150 letters	524	1902
XIII	3	Letters, III	1605-1608 – 173 letters	464	1904
XIV	4	Letters, IV	1608-1610 – 210 letters	480	1906
XV	5	Letters, V	1611-1613 – 219 letters	470	1908
XVI	6	Letters, VI	1613-1615 – 263 letters	484	1910
XVII	7	Letters, VII	1615-1617 – 172 letters	480	1911
XVIII	8	Letters, VIII	1617-1619 – 233 letters	500	1912
XIX	9	Letters, IX	1619-1620 – 203 letters	496	1914
XX	10	Letters, X	1621-1622 – 221 letters	484	1918
XXI	11	Letters, XI	Undated letters – 136 letters + 5 letters in volume 26	352	1923
XXII	1	Opuscles, I	First series: Studies and private life and Second series: Apostolate – 48 pamphlets	400	1925
XXIII	2	Opuscles, II	Third series. Controversy and Fourth series. Episcopal Administration – 35 pamphlets	448	1928
XXIV	3	Opuscles, III	Fourth series. Episcopal Administration and Fifth series: Foundations and reforms – 141 pamphlets	568	1929
XXV	4	Opuscles, IV	Fifth series: Foundations and reforms – 20 pamphlets	568	1931

XXVI	5	Opuscles, V	Sixth series: Asceticism and Mysticism – 69 pamphlets	506	1932
XXVII		Analytical table	Doctrinal index; Index of names; Index of places; Scriptural index	316	1964

The detailed index of all Complete Works can be found [HERE](#).

The version of the volumes in PDF format can be found [HERE](#).

A concordance of the Complete Works in French can also be found [HERE](#).

We wish you a fruitful reading.

Laura Vicuña: a daughter who “begets” her mother

Stories of wounded families

We are used to imagining the family as a harmonious reality, characterised by the co-presence of several generations and by the guiding role of parents who set the norm and of children who – when they learn this – are guided by them in life’s experiences. Nonetheless, families often find themselves beset by dramas and misunderstandings, or marked by wounds that attack their optimal configuration and give them a distorted and false image.

The history of Salesian holiness also has stories of wounded families: families where at least one of the parental figures is missing, or the presence of the mother and father becomes, for different reasons (physical, psychic, moral and spiritual), penalising for their children, now on

their way to the honours of the altars. Don Bosco himself, who had experienced the premature death of his father and the estrangement from the family by the prudent wish of Mamma Margaret, wanted – and this is no coincidence – the Salesian work to be particularly dedicated to “poor and abandoned youth” and did not hesitate to reach out to the young people formed in his oratory with an intense vocational pastoral (demonstrating that no wound from the past is an obstacle to a full human and Christian life). It is therefore natural that Salesian holiness itself, which draws on the lives of many of Don Bosco’s young people later consecrated through him to the cause of the Gospel, bears within itself – as a logical consequence – traces of wounded families.

Of these boys and girls who grew up in contact with Salesian works, we present Blessed Laura Vicuña, born in Chile in 1891, fatherless and whose mother began a cohabitation in Argentina with the wealthy landowner Manuel Mora; Laura, therefore, hurt by her mother’s situation of moral irregularity, was ready to offer her life for her.

A short but intense life

Born in Santiago de Chile on 5 April 1891, and baptised on the following 24 May, Laura was the eldest daughter of José D. Vicuña, a fallen nobleman who had married Mercedes Pino, the daughter of modest farmers. Three years later a little sister, Julia Amanda, arrived, but soon her father died, after suffering a political defeat that undermined his health and compromised, along with the family’s financial support, also his honour. Deprived of any “protection and prospect of a future”, the mother landed in Argentina, where she resorted to the guardianship of the landowner Manuel Mora: a man “of proud and haughty character” who “did not hide his hatred and contempt for anyone who opposed his plans.” A man, in short, who guaranteed protection only on the surface, but was actually used to taking what he wanted by force if necessary, exploiting people. In the meantime, he paid for the studies for Laura

and her sister at the boarding school run by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Their mother – who was under Mora's psychological influence – lived with him without finding the strength to break the bond. However, when Mora began to show signs of unhealthy interest in Laura herself, and especially when the latter embarked on the path of preparation for her First Communion, she suddenly realised the gravity of the situation. Unlike her mother – who justified one evil (cohabitation) in view of a good (her daughters' education at boarding school) – Laura understood that this was a morally illegitimate argument, which put her mother's soul in grave danger. At this time, Laura also wanted to become a Sister of Mary Help of Christians herself: but her request was rejected because she was the daughter of a "public concubine". And it is at this point that a change took place in Laura (received into the boarding school when "impulsiveness, ease of resentment, irritability, impatience and wanting to be seen" still dominated in her) that only Grace, combined with her own commitment, could bring about: she asked God for her mother's conversion, offering herself for her. At that moment, Laura could move neither "forwards" (entering the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians) nor "backwards" (returning to her mother and Mora). With a gesture then charged with the creativity typical of saints, Laura embarked on the only road still accessible to her: one of height and depth. In her First Communion resolutions she had noted:

I resolve to do all I know and can to [...] make reparation for the offences that you, Lord, receive every day from people, especially from people in my family; my God, give me a life of love, mortification and sacrifice.

The intention in an "Act of Offering" was now finalised, which includes the sacrifice of her very life. Her confessor, recognising that the inspiration was from God, but ignorant of the consequences, agreed, and confirmed that Laura was "aware of the offering she has just made". She spent the

last two years in silence, cheerfulness and with a smile. And yet, the gaze she cast on the world – as confirmed by a photographic portrait, very different from the familiar hagiographic stylisation – also speaks of the painful awareness and pain that she felt. In a situation where she lacked both the “freedom from” (conditioning, obstacles, hardships) and the “freedom to” do many things, this pre-teen testified to the “freedom for” of total self-giving.

Laura did not despise, but loved life: her own and her mother's. For this she offered herself. On 13 April 1902, Good Shepherd Sunday, she asked herself, “If He gives life... what is stopping me from giving mine for Mum?” Dying, she added. “Mum, I am dying, I myself have asked Jesus... for almost two years I have been offering Him my life for you..., to obtain the grace of your return!”

These are words devoid of regret and reproach, but loaded with great strength, great hope and great faith. Laura had learnt to accept her mother for what she was. Indeed, she offered herself to give her what she alone could not achieve. When Laura died, her mother converted. Laurita de los Andes, the daughter, had thus helped to generate her mother in the life of faith and grace.

Strenna 2024. “The dream that makes you dream”

A heart that transforms “wolves” into “lambs”

During my service as Rector Major I have been able to see that the Strenna is one of the most beautiful gifts that Don Bosco and his successors offer the entire Salesian Family every year. It helps us on our journey together and spreads out to

reach the most faraway places, while at the same time leaving the freedom to individual ones to accept, integrate and value what is proposed for the journey of all the individual educative and pastoral communities.

In this 2024 we will celebrate the second centenary of the “dream-vision young John had between the ages of nine and ten at his home at the Becchi”[\[1\]](#) in 1824: *the dream at nine years of age*.

I believe that the bicentennial anniversary of the dream that “affected Don Bosco’s whole way of living and thinking. And in particular, his way of sensing the presence of God in each one’s life and in the history of the world”[\[2\]](#) deserves to be placed at the centre of the Strenna, which will guide the educative and pastoral year of the entire Salesian Family. It can be taken up and further explored in the evangelising mission, educational interventions and in the social promotion activities carried out by our Family’s groups everywhere around the world, a Family which finds its inspirational father in Don Bosco.

“I would like to recall here the ‘dream at nine years of age’. In fact, it seems to me that this page of autobiography provides a simple, but at the same time prophetic presentation, of the spirit and mission of Don Bosco. In it the field of work entrusted to him is described: the young; the aim of his apostolate was pointed out: to make them grow as individuals through education; a method of education that would be effective was offered him: the Preventive System; the context in which all that he did, and today all that we do, was presented: the marvellous plan of God who, first of all and more than anything else, loves the young.”[\[3\]](#) This is what Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva, Rector Major Emeritus, wrote by way of conclusion to the commentary on Strenna 2012, offered to the Salesian Family for the first year of the three-year period in preparation for the bicentenary (year 2015) of Don Bosco’s birth.

This text is a beautiful summary that presents the essence of what the dream at nine years of age is in its simplicity and as a prophecy, in its charismatic and educational value. It is an emblematic dream. And throughout this year we will try to bring it even closer to the heart and life of the entire Family of Don Bosco. It is a dream, a “very famous dream-vision that would become and still is an important pillar, almost a founding myth, in the Salesian Family’s soaring imagination”,[\[4\]](#) which, of course, needs to be contextualised and given critical attention – something that Don Bosco himself did and that our experts in Salesian history have done – in order to offer a reading and provide an up-to-date, vital and existential interpretation. Undoubtedly it is a dream that Don Bosco kept in his mind and heart throughout his life, as he himself declares, “It was at that age I had a dream. All my life this remained deeply impressed on my mind.”[\[5\]](#) It is, therefore, a dream that stayed with him and has been part of the journey of the Salesian Congregation until today. And undoubtedly it reaches our entire Salesian family.

In the words of Fr Rinaldi, referring to the first centenary of the dream, we read, “Its content is in fact of such importance, that on this centenary anniversary, we must make it our strict duty to understand it more profoundly through more regular meditation on every detail, and to put it generously into practice if we want to deserve our name as true sons of Don Bosco and perfect Salesians.”[\[6\]](#) And now we are intensely experiencing the extraordinary event of this second centenary that will undoubtedly see many events throughout the Salesian world. Let the expression of all this arrive at its most celebratory, festive and also profound moment in the hopeful revision of our lives, making courageous proposals to young people to help them dream “big”, assured of the presence of the Lord Jesus, and “hand in hand” with the Teacher, the Lady, our Mother.

1. “I HAD A DREAM...”: A VERY SPECIAL DREAM

Just like that, two hundred years ago the very young John Bosco had a dream that would “mark” him throughout his life; a dream that would leave an indelible mark on him, whose meaning Don Bosco fully understood only at the end of his life. Here, then, is the dream told by Don Bosco himself according to the critical edition of Antonio da Silva Ferreira from which we depart only through two small variants.[\[7\]](#)

[Initial frame] It was at that age that I had a dream. All my life this remained deeply impressed on my mind.

[Vision of the boys and John’s intervention] In this dream I seemed to be very near my home in a very large yard. A crowd of children were playing there. Some were laughing, some were playing games, and quite a few were swearing. When I heard these evil words, I jumped immediately amongst them and tried to stop them by using my words and my fists.

[Appearance of the dignified man] At that moment a dignified man appeared, a nobly-dressed adult. He wore a white cloak and his face shone so that I could not look directly at him. He called me by name, told me to take charge of these children, and added these words: “You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love. Start straight away to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue.” Confused and frightened, I replied that I was a poor, ignorant child. I was unable to talk to these youngsters about religion. At that moment the kids stopped their fighting, shouting and swearing; they gathered round the man who was speaking.

[Conversation regarding this character’s identity] Hardly knowing what I was saying, I asked, “Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?” “Precisely because it seems impossible to you, you must make it possible through obedience and the acquisition of knowledge.” “Where, by what means, can I acquire knowledge?” “I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her, all wisdom is

foolishness." "But who are you that speak so?" "I am the son of the woman whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day." "My mother tells me not to mix with people I don't know unless I have her permission. So tell me your name." "Ask my mother what my name is."

[Appearance of the stately-looking woman] At that moment, I saw a lady of stately appearance standing beside him. She was wearing a mantle that sparkled all over as though covered with bright stars. Seeing from my questions and answers that I was more confused than ever, she beckoned me to approach her. She took me kindly by the hand and said, "Look" Glancing round, I realised that the youngsters had all apparently run away. A large number of goats, dogs, cats, bears and other animals had taken their place. "This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong, and energetic. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children." I looked round again, and where before I had seen wild animals, I now saw gentle lambs. They were all jumping and bleating as if to welcome that man and lady. At that point, still dreaming, I began crying. I begged the lady to speak so that I could understand her, because I did not know what all this could mean. She then placed her hand on my head and said, "In good time you will understand everything."

[Final frame] With that, a noise woke me up and everything disappeared. I was totally bewildered. My hands seemed to be sore from the blows I had given, and my face hurt from those I had received. The memory of the man and the lady, and things said and heard, so occupied my mind that I could not get any more sleep that night. I wasted no time in telling all about my dream. I spoke first to my brothers, who laughed at the whole thing, and then to my mother and grandmother. Each one gave his or her own interpretation. My brother Joseph said, "You're going to become a keeper of goats, sheep and other animals." My mother commented, "Who knows, but you may become a priest." Anthony merely grunted, "Perhaps you'll become a

robber chief." But my grandmother, though she could not read or write, knew enough theology, and made the final judgement saying, "Pay no attention to dreams." I agreed with my grandmother. However, I was unable to cast that dream out of my mind. The things I shall have to say later will give some meaning to all this. I kept quiet about these things, and my relatives paid little attention to them. But when I went to Rome in 1858 to speak to the Pope about the Salesian Congregation, he asked me to tell him everything that had even the suggestion of the supernatural about it. It was only then, for the first time, that I said anything about this dream which I had when I was nine or ten years old. The Pope ordered me to write out the dream in all its detail and to leave it as an encouragement to the sons of that Congregation whose formation was the reason for that visit to Rome.

The same dream would reoccur several times in Don Bosco's life, and he himself, who recounted that first event in his own handwriting in the *Memoirs*, the bicentenary of which we are now celebrating, on several occasions recounts what he dreams of again so many years later. In fact, the dream he had when he was nine was not an isolated dream, but belongs to a long and complementary sequence of dreamlike episodes that accompanied Don Bosco's life. He himself connects and integrates three fundamental dreams: the one in 1824 (at the Becchi), the one in 1844 (at the Convitto, the Church's pastoral centre) and the one in 1845 (when working with the Marchioness Barolo), finding some elements of continuity and others that are new. We can always recognise the thread of that first frame and scene in the field at the Becchi in the dreams, but with new details, reactions, messages tied to the stages of life that Don Bosco at the height of his mission, no longer the little nine-year-old John, was experiencing.

On another occasion, many years later, Don Bosco himself told Fr Barberis about it in 1875, when he was already sixty years old. At that time Don Bosco had seen the birth of the Salesian

Congregation (18 December 1859), the Archconfraternity of Mary Help of Christians (18 April 1869), the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (5 August 1872) and the Pious Society of Salesian Cooperators – according to the original name given by Don Bosco – approved on 9 May 1876.

When this dream presents itself for the last time, Don Bosco is, as I have already said, a mature man: he has experienced many situations, he has faced and overcome numerous difficulties, he has seen for himself what the Grace and Love of the Virgin Mary have worked in his boys; he has seen many miracles of Providence and he has suffered not a little. “In good time you will understand everything” the first dream had told him, prophetically and in 1887 at the Mass of consecration of the church dedicated to the Sacred Heart in Rome, he heard that voice echo in his ears and wept with joy, wept at contemplating the wonderful effects of his invincible faith.”[\[8\]](#)

2. A DREAM WHICH ALL THE RECTORS MAJOR HAVE MADE REFERENCE TO

I am particularly impressed by the fact that all the Rectors Major, with the exception of Fr Rua from whom I could not find any quotation, have referred to ***the dream***, to this dream of Don Bosco that has marked our Congregation and the Salesian Family. I am availing myself at this moment of some magnificent research work carried out by Bro. Marco Bay[\[9\]](#).

Fr Paul Albera, Don Bosco’s second successor, referring to the Oratory at Valdocco as Don Bosco’s Oratory, the first and for many years only work, refers to the dream as the mysterious dream in which Providence entrusts him with the mission:

“The first, and for many years only work of D. Bosco was the festive Oratory, his festive Oratory, as he had already glimpsed it in the mysterious *dream he had when he was nine years old* and in the subsequent ones that progressively enlightened his mind regarding the Work of Providence entrusted to him.”[\[10\]](#)

Fr Philip Rinaldi, Don Bosco's third successor, is the one who has the opportunity of experiencing the first centenary of this dream and tries to ensure that the entire Congregation is imbued with the grace of experiencing this event. And hence he encourages people as follows:

"In my circular letter on the Jubilee of our Constitutions I have already mentioned to you, my dear sons, the centenary of Don Bosco's first dream, inviting you to meditate on this dream and to practise it (...) Let us reread together, my dear confreres, the pages written by our Ven. Father for our instruction, in obedience to the Vicar of Jesus Christ; yes, let us reread it with great veneration, and fix it in our minds word for word, these pages which evangelically describe to us the supernatural origin, the intimate nature and the specific form of our vocation. The more you read, the more it becomes new and bright." [\[11\]](#)

And in this same letter he has the confreres understand that, just as with Don Bosco's dream at nine years of age he was called to a mission, so we too, under the guidance of the Virgin, have been called, with the benevolent guidance of the Virgin herself who takes us by the hand, shows us our field of work and encourages us in a thousand ways to acquire the gifts of humility, strength and health. We understand perfectly how the commanding invitation to be strong, humble and energetic is applied to us. The invitation that the Lady of Dream gave to the young John Bosco.

We too have been ordered to acquire the means necessary to put this method into practice, that is, obedience and knowledge, under the guidance of the Virgin; which we have done (or are doing) during the years of our religious and priestly formation. During all these happy years the Blessed Virgin took us, too, kindly by the hand and, pointing out our future field of work, encouraged us in every way to acquire humility, fortitude and health, which are the qualities strictly necessary for every true son of Don Bosco. Finally, we too

will be shown countless numbers of young people, at first completely ignorant of the things of God, and perhaps already unhappy victims of evil, running enlightened, healed and joyful to celebrate Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary.[\[12\]](#)

And, almost as an encouragement to celebrate this bicentenary in a great and significant way, let me take up the Salesian Bulletin at the time of Fr Rinaldi, which tells of the celebration in Rome that took place in his presence:

“Because of a dream” wrote the *Corriere d’Italia* on 2 May last. “Because of the ideal beauty of a dream – yesterday in the large courtyard of the Opere di Don Bosco in Rome, thousands of yearning and applauding souls crowded together, with Cardinal Cagliero, the venerable Missionary, and Don Bosco’s own Successor, Fr Rinaldi, and the Minister of P. I [Public Instruction], Pietro Fedele, to pay the moving homage of all the powers of the spirit to the incomparable Master who, in the luminous humility of the Faith, had followed the radiant paths of that sublime dream (...) A lively crowd of young people, boys and girls, Don Bosco’s pupils; a large crowd of people from all walks of life – professionals, teachers, soldiers, priests – all gathered in the name of the gentle Master.”

“A hundred years ago (another Holy Year, why forget?) Don Bosco as a boy dreamed a sweet and mysterious dream; he saw, first, a group of street-kids quarrelling among themselves, swearing and cursing, and he tried to call them to order with his stick; then he saw a Lady and a Man leading him to another group of beasts, this time of dogs and cats, also quarrelling, barking and smirking – but at a mysterious sign from the Two, they turned into flocks of peaceful lambs.”

“A hundred years later that dream is a reality – splendid, vibrant, grand; – it is a miraculous story that already involves the destiny of millions of people in Schools, in Missions, in life, in prayer, in hope; all who have greeted and still greet Don Bosco, the greatest and holiest teacher of

life that the Church and Italy have given to the world in our century.”[\[13\]](#)

And **Fr Peter Ricaldone**, fourth successor of Don Bosco, sees the seedling of the festive Oratory and the entire Salesian Work in the dream that young John had when he was nine. Many more steps would follow, says Fr Ricaldone, many stations along a pilgrimage, before arriving at Pinardi, in his home town.

There is no doubt that we must trace the first seedling of the festive Oratory and of the entire Salesian Work, as I said just now, back to the prophetic dream that young John had at the age of nine. Since when the Woman of stately appearance told the little shepherd of the Becchi: “This is the field of your work: make yourself humble, strong and energetic. And what you see happening to these animals in a moment, is what you must do for my children.”

The Becchi, Moncucco, Castelnuovo, Chieri, are other steps: but young John Bosco had hardly set out; he was walking towards a much more distant goal. 8 December 1841 is, more than a point of arrival, another starting point. He must go on new pilgrimages before arriving at the Pinardi shed, in Valdocco, his promised land. To return to the first image, the tender seedling has finally found the soil it belongs in; from now on we will see it strengthen and extend beyond all human prediction.[\[14\]](#)

Fr Ricaldone even believes that Don Bosco’s love and zeal for vocations also originated from his dream at nine years of age:

Don Bosco’s love and zeal for vocations has its first origin in the prophetic dream he had at the age of nine, reproduced in different but substantially uniform ways over the space of almost twenty years (...) In fact, after that dream, the desire to study to become a priest and dedicate himself to the salvation of young people increased in John.[\[15\]](#)

Fr Renato Ziggiotti, Don Bosco's fifth successor, stresses in a very particular way the great gift that the Teacher was for Don Bosco. In fact, it is the Lord who gives the gift of his Mother to young John, above all as a guide. It is expressed this way:

"I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her all wisdom is foolishness." These are the prophetic words of the first dream, pronounced by the mysterious character, "the son of the woman whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day." It is therefore Jesus who gives Don Bosco his Mother as his Teacher and infallible guide along the hard journey of his entire life. How can we give sufficient thanks for this extraordinary gift that was given by Heaven to our Family?[\[16\]](#)

And she, the Mother, the Madonna, the Lady of the dream would be everything for Don Bosco. This certainty was very strong and all-encompassing in Fr Ziggiotti and is what led him to ask every Salesian:

Our Lady, to whom he was consecrated by his mother at birth, who illuminated his future in the *dream at nine years of age* and then returned to comfort and advise him in a thousand ways in dreams, in the prophetic spirit, in the interior vision of the state of souls, in miracles and countless graces, which he worked by invoking her; Our Lady is everything for Don Bosco; and the Salesian who wants to acquire the spirit of the Founder must imitate him in this devotion.[\[17\]](#)

And **Fr Luigi Ricceri**, Don Bosco's sixth successor, has some magnificent expressions regarding the significance of the dream at nine years of age. Fr Ricceri emphasises how important this dream was for Don Bosco to the point of remaining impressed in his heart and mind forever, and how through this, he felt called by God:

The dream at nine years of age. It is the dream – Don Bosco

writes in his “Memoirs” – that “all my life... remained deeply impressed on my mind” (MO, 34).

The indelible impression of this dream-vision is due to the fact that it was like a sudden light that clarified the meaning of his young life and traced his path. Like little Samuel, Don Bosco feels called and sent by God in view of a mission: to save young people in all places, in all times: those of Christian countries and the “multitude” of those who in non-Christian regions are still waiting for the great advent of the Lord.[\[18\]](#)

This is the dream, Fr Ricceri says, in which Don Bosco, still without full lucidity due to his young age, intuitively grasps the great value of living to save souls, and this conviction takes shape in his life, in his mind, in his spirit, increasingly as a gift of grace. And it is through this decisive event in his life that Don Bosco had the *first great insight into what the preventive system would be in the future*. “You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love” Don Bosco writes in his narration of the event, hearing it from the Lady’s lips. So much so that in the future we can talk about a precious relationship between Don Bosco and the Mother of the Lord. This is how Fr Ricceri expresses himself so beautifully:

Starting from this dream, the relationship between Don Bosco and the Mother of Jesus is strengthened, that permanent collaboration that characterises the life of the future apostle.[\[19\]](#)

Fr Egidio Viganò, Don Bosco’s seventh successor, offers us other no less inspiring reflections. I am happy to see this magnificent line of continuity from all the Rectors Major in reading, meditating and interpreting the dream par excellence, drawing out ideas that are helpful even for our current times. Fr Viganò confirms, like other successors of Don Bosco before him, that Mary is the true inspiration, Teacher and guide of John, our Father Don Bosco’s vocation.

It is of special interest, I think, that in the famous dream when he was only nine – a dream many times repeated and one to which Don Bosco attached great importance in his life – in his faith awareness, Mary appeared as an important personage directly in a mission project for his life, a woman showing a particular pastoral preoccupation for the young; in fact she appeared “as a shepherdess”. And we should take note that it is not John who chooses Mary; it is Mary who takes the initiative in the choice; at the request of her Son, she will be the inspirer and guide of his vocation.[\[20\]](#)

The wonderful experience John had allowed him to establish a very personal relationship with Mary – the Lady of the dream – and it is for this reason that Don Bosco would experience intimately, throughout his life and on many occasions, the very special and great affection on the part of Mary. It is a very special relationship with the Virgin Mary.

Also **Fr Juan Edmundo Vecchi**, Don Bosco’s eighth successor, notes that convinced as Don Bosco was that he was sent to the young, everything must be focused on that one sacred purpose, the young, and he must devote all his energies to them. Such is the thread of the story that Don Bosco makes of his life in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* starting from the *first dream*: “The Lord sent me to look after boys, therefore I must cut down on other work and keep myself fit for them”,[\[21\]](#) always convinced that he was an instrument of the Lord and that his whole life was marked by this call and mission among the young. Another great expert on Don Bosco confirms this: “The faith of being the Lord’s instrument for a very singular mission was profound and firm in him. This was the basis in him of the characteristic religious attitude of the biblical servant, the prophet who cannot escape the divine will.”[\[22\]](#)

Finally, **Fr Pascual Chávez**, Don Bosco’s ninth successor, offers one that moves me among a large number of texts. It is a hymn to the mother figure of Mamma Margaret who, with the grace of God, was able to accompany young John by interpreting

and intuiting how, in the dream he had when he was nine, the Lord and the Virgin Mary were calling her son to a very special vocation. One could speak of Mamma Margaret, Fr Pascual says, as a true “Salesian” educator.

It was this educative skill that enabled Mamma Margaret to identify the particular potentialities hidden in her children, bring them to light, develop them, and return them almost visibly to their own hands. This was the case especially with John, her most outstanding offspring. How impressive it is to see in Mamma Margaret the clear sense and awareness of her “maternal responsibility” in the constant Christian guidance of her children, while always leaving them autonomous about their vocation in life, right up until her death!

If young John’s dream at the age of nine revealed many things to him about his future, it did so primarily for Mamma Margaret; it was she who first hazarded the interpretation: “Perhaps you will become a priest!” And some years later, when she realised that their home environment was a negative one for John because of the hostility of his stepbrother Anthony, she made the sacrifice of sending him to work as a farm-hand in the Moglia farm at Moncucco. A mother who deprives herself of her youngest son to send him to work at a place far from home makes a great sacrifice, but she did it not only to avoid a rift in the family but also to set John on the road revealed to both of them in the dream (...) Divine Providence gave her the grace to be a “Salesian educator”.[\[23\]](#)

3. THE PROPHETIC DREAM: a precious jewel in the charism of Don Bosco’s Family

In the previous points we read how Fr Philip Rinaldi invited the confreres, and certainly at that time the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian Cooperators, the Devotees of Mary Help of Christians and I imagine also the Past Pupils, to read the dream, to understand it, to internalise it and to feel its echo in their heart. I have no doubt about that. Certainly there has been a unanimous view in

everything that has been written – be it historical research, historical-critical studies, reflections on Salesian spirituality or educative and pastoral interpretations – in recognising that this dream is much more than a simple dream. In fact, it contains so many charismatic elements that I dare to call it *a precious jewel of our charism* and a real road map for *Don Bosco's Family*.

You could really say that nothing is missing from it and there is nothing superfluous. That is what I want to refer to now.

Looking at the dream

Where to look right now? In the first instance, at the **dream itself**, since it contains an extraordinary charismatic wealth. As I have already said, there is not a word too many and certainly nothing missing. The effort Don Bosco made in writing it down, to convey to us the fact that it is not just **“a” dream, but that we must see it as “the” dream** that would mark his entire life, is more than evident – even though at the time, as a child, he could not have imagined it. In fact, “Don Bosco, almost sixty years old – he felt old then and was so for the time – had to pose the problem of giving a historical-spiritual foundation to his Congregation by recalling the providential origins that justified it. What could be better than ‘telling the story’ to his sons of the cradle of the ‘Congregation of the Oratories’ in its genesis, development, purpose and method, as an institution willed by God as an instrument for the salvation of youth in new times?” [\[24\]](#) Indeed, the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, in which Don Bosco tells the story of his dream, are nothing more than the dream unfolded in his life story, in the Oratory and in the Congregation. This is why he also says in the introduction to his manuscript:

Therefore I am now putting in writing those confidential details that may somehow serve as a light or to be use to the work which Divine Province has entrusted to the Society of St Francis de Sales.” [\[25\]](#) And “Now, what purpose can this

chronicle serve? It will be a record to help people overcome problems that may come in the future by learning from the past. It will serve to make known how God himself has always been our guide. It will give my sons some entertainment to be able to read about their father's adventures. Doubtless they will be read much more avidly when I have been called by God to render my account, when I am no longer among them.[\[26\]](#)

The story told in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* (and of the dream at nine years of age which is part of that) has been of such importance that it has involved its study, for their whole lives, by significant Salesian experts, seizing upon different perspectives over the years. A rich and noteworthy example, for example, comes from the various emphases that the great scholar of Salesian pedagogy, Fr Pietro Braido, made over several decades. It would be "an edifying story left by a founder to the members of his Society of apostles and educators who had to perpetuate his work and style, following his directives, guidelines and lessons" (1965); or "a history of the oratory that is more 'theological' and pedagogical than real, perhaps the 'theoretical' animation document that Don Bosco most long pondered and desired" (1989); "perhaps the richest book of contents and preventive guidelines" that Don Bosco wrote: "a manual of pedagogy and spirituality 'told' from a clear oratorian perspective" (1999); or even a writing in which "the parable and the message" come before and "above history", to illustrate God's action in human affairs, and thus, rejoicing and recreating, "to comfort and confirm the disciples" from a clear "oratorian" perspective (1999).[\[27\]](#)

One of the precious stones of this jewel to which I am referring, is the one that allows those of us who enter the dream with a Salesian heart, whatever our Christian and Salesian journey or in the Family of Don Bosco, to be questioned in our heart: are we ready to learn, are we willing to be surprised by God who accompanies our life, as he guided the life of Don Bosco, and to feel like sons and daughters

before that immense fatherhood that emanates from the figure of our father? Because:

If we do not become a **BELIEVER** and if we are not convinced that God works in history, in the history of Don Bosco and in each one's personal history, we will understand little or nothing of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* and the dream, and it will simply be a "beautiful story".

If we do not become **SONS or DAUGHTERS**, we will not be able to attune ourselves to the fatherhood that Don Bosco intends to communicate through the *Memoirs of the Oratory*.

If we do not become **DISCIPLES**, ready to learn, we will not truly enter into the spirit of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* and of the dream.

It seems to me that these three initial dispositions (faith, being children of, and discipleship) are "essential keys" to understand and take on, for ourselves, what Don Bosco has narrated and left us as a spiritual legacy. What took place in his life, and marked and enlightened him forever, Don Bosco wanted to be a legacy that would profoundly help his Salesians and all of us who, by grace, feel and are part of his Family.

Young people, key characters in the dream...

From the first moment of the dream, the "Oratorian mission" entrusted to young John Bosco is evident, even if he does not know how to carry it out or how to express it. As we can see, the scene is full of youngsters, who are absolutely real in young John's dream.

Therefore, it seems to me possible to state that **the young** are the central characters in the dream, and that even if they do not utter a word, everything revolves around them. In addition, the "heavenly" characters themselves and young John Bosco are there thanks to them and for them. The whole dream, then, is about them and for them: for the youngsters. If we exclude the young people from this dream, nothing significant for our mission would remain.

But what is interesting is that they are not like a photograph that fixes an image within an instance. These youngsters are in perpetual motion and activity: both when they are being aggressive (like wolves), when they cannot stand each other, and when, after being transformed in the way that the Lady of the Dream asks of young John, they become youngsters (like lambs) who are calm, friendly and warm. The most important thing that happens in the dream and that Don Bosco himself learns and, afterwards, all his followers, is discovering that the *transformation process* is always possible. It is an “Easter” movement – let me call it that – of conversion and transformation, of wolves into lambs, and lambs into what, in today’s language, we would call a youth community that celebrates Jesus and Mary. It certainly seems to me an essential and central element of the dream.

...where there is a clear vocational call

“This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong, and energetic. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children.” [\[28\]](#) What happens in the dream is above all a *call*, an invitation, a vocation that seems impossible, unachievable. Young John Bosco wakes up tired, he has even been crying; and when the call comes from God (the dignified-looking character in the dream is Jesus), the direction that such a call can take is unpredictable and disconcerting.

This call is something very special in the dream; it is of a *unique richness*. I say this because it would seem that, due to his age, lack of a father, almost total lack of resources, poverty, internal family problems, quarrels with his half-brother Anthony, difficulties in accessing school because of the distance and the need to work in the fields, there is no possible future for John other than to stay there cultivating the fields and looking after the animals. Even to us it might seem like an unrealisable dream, far away, perhaps destined for someone else, but not for him. It is the same

interpretation that young John's relatives also give of the dream, as confirmed by his grandmother's words: "Pay n attention to dreams".[\[29\]](#)

However, it is precisely this difficult situation that makes Don Bosco (at this time young John) very human, in need of help, but also strong and enthusiastic. His willpower, character, temperament, fortitude and the determination of his mother, Mamma Margaret, a deep faith on the part of both his mother and John himself, make all this possible. The dream would always be there, but he would discover it through life: *I understood how, little by little, everything came true...* There is no magic, it is not a "fairy" dream, there is no predestination, but a life full of meaning, demands, sacrifices, but also of faith and hope that urges us to discover and live it every day.

In the dream, a very respectable man appears, of dignified appearance, who speaks to John, questions him, puts him in the hands of his Mother, the Lady. There is definitely a sending on mission. A mission as educator and pastor wherein a method is also pointed out: gentleness and love. Here is an example of his vocational response:

John, faithful from an early age to divine inspiration, begins to work in the field assigned to him by Providence. He has not yet reached the age of ten and is already an apostle among his compatriots in the village of Murialdo. Is it not a Festive Oratory, even in embryo, sketched out, that young John began in 1825, using means compatible with his age and his education?

Endowed with a prodigious memory, a lover of books, regularly listening to sermons, he treasures everything, instructions, facts, examples, to repeat them to his small audience, instilling with admirable effectiveness the love of virtue in those who rush to admire the skill of his games and to hear his childish but warm words.[\[30\]](#)

And she, Mary, will forever mark young John's dream and Don Bosco's life

We are coming to the central moment of the dream: the Lady's motherly mediation (linked to the mystery of the name). For John Bosco, his mother and the Mother of the one he greets three times a day, it will be a place of humanity in which to rest, in which to find safety and refuge in the most difficult moments.

"I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her, all wisdom is foolishness." In fact, it is she who tells him both the field where he will have to work and the method to be used: "This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong and energetic." Mary is called upon from the very beginning for the birth of a new charism, as it is precisely her speciality to carry and give birth: for this reason, when it comes to a Founder who must receive from the Holy Spirit the original light of the charism, the Lord disposes that it is his own mother, the Virgin of Pentecost and immaculate model of the Church, who is to be his Teacher. She alone, the "full of grace", understands all charisms from within, as someone who knows all languages and speaks them as if they were her own.[\[31\]](#) It is as if the Man of the dream said to the very young John Bosco: "From now on, be in agreement with her."

"Let us note at once, here, that it is not John who chooses Mary, but that it is Mary who presents herself with the initiative of the choice: She, at the request of her Son, will be the Inspirer and Teacher of his vocation."[\[32\]](#)

This **feminine-maternal-Marian dimension** is perhaps one of the most challenging dimensions of the dream. When we look at this serenely, this aspect turns into something beautiful. It is Jesus himself who gives him a teacher, his Mother, and that he must "ask my Mother what my name is"; John must work "with her children", and it is "She" who will see to the continuity of the dream in life, who will take him by the hand until the end

of his days, until the moment when he will truly understand everything.

There is an enormous intentionality in wanting to say that in the Salesian charism on behalf of the poorest youngsters, those most deprived, most lacking in affection, the dimension of treating them with “kindly”, with gentleness and love, as well as the “Marian” dimension, *are indispensable elements* for those who want to live this charism. Our Lady has to do with formation in the “wisdom of the charism”. And that is why it is difficult to understand that in the Salesian charism there can be someone (person, group or institution) who leaves the Marian presence in the background. Without Mary of Nazareth we would be talking about another charism, not the Salesian charism, nor about the sons and daughters of Don Bosco. Fr Ziggiotti says it beautifully in this research we have done on the comments of the Rectors Major on the dream:

I would like to persuade all the Salesians of this very important fact, which illuminates the whole life of the Saint with heavenly light and therefore gives an indisputable value to everything he did and said in his life: Our Lady, to whom he was consecrated by his Mother at birth, who shed light on his future in the *dream at nine years of age* and then returned to comfort and advise him in a thousand ways in dreams, in the prophetic spirit, in his inner vision of the state of souls, in miracles and countless graces, which he worked by invoking her; Our Lady is everything for Don Bosco; and the Salesian who wants to acquire the spirit of the Founder must imitate him in this devotion.[\[33\]](#)

Docile to the Spirit, trusting in Providence

There is certainly much to learn. Becoming humble, strong and energetic means preparing for what lies ahead. John Bosco must be obedient, docile to the Master’s wisdom. He will have to learn to see and discover the processes of transformation; to understand that the route, the journey made with these young people leads to life, and to the encounter with the Lord of

the dream and with his mother; leads to Jesus and Mary. John Bosco discovered all this.

At stake is obedience to God, docility to the Spirit. Just as Mary is the one who “lets things happen”, who lets what God has thought and dreamed happen to her, to the point of proclaiming that “fiat” to God, that the *Lord has done great things in me*, so also the Salesian, the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, every Salesian Cooperator, every devotee of Mary help of Christians, every member of our Salesian Family which is the Family of Don Bosco, will have to learn to do precisely this style of *docility to the Spirit*. I add that I would like this style to become flesh and life at all stages of initial and ongoing formation in every group, congregation and Salesian institution. And let us not forget that the “formators”, the “formandi”, should be, we should be, the first to “let ourselves be formed” by the Spirit, like Mary.

The dream offers, like no other element, like no other reality, what I believe can be described as “*inalienable*” clues to the DNA of the charism. It is these clues or “principles” that can help us read, discern, and act in tune with creative fidelity.

And let us not forget that this is a community task, we must carry it out together, “synodally” – we could say today in line with recent synodal work – as a Salesian Family.

Accompanying Don Bosco in reflecting on his dream at nine years of age means also emphasising his abandonment to Providence, placing us, like him, in the “in good time you will understand everything”. The dream itself was, for Don Bosco, an act of Providence. This is the radical conviction, the fundamental choice of life, “the essence of Don Bosco’s soul”, the central point, the deepest and most intimate part of him. There is no doubt that the abandonment to Divine Providence, as he had learned from his mother, was decisive for our father and must be for us the guarantee of the

continuity of Salesian spirituality. It is abandonment to God, trust in God, because the God that Don Bosco learned to love is a reliable God. He really acts in history, and he has done so in the history of the Oratory, to the point that Don Bosco went so far as to say to the Salesian Rectors on 2 February 1876:

The other Congregations and Religious Orders had in their beginnings some inspiration, some vision, some supernatural fact which gave impetus to the foundation and ensured its establishment; but mostly it stopped at one or a few of these facts. Here, however, things are quite different among us. It can be said that there is nothing that has not been known before. No step was taken by the Congregation without some supernatural fact advising it; no change or refinement or enlargement that was not preceded by a command from the Lord.. For example, we could have written down all the things that happened to us before they happened and written them down minutely and accurately.[\[34\]](#)

However, “not by blows”. The art of kindness and educative patience

The dream not only speaks of a past, but also of a present, of a today that is extremely current. The “not by blows” that Our Lady says to young John in the dream challenges us even today, and makes it more necessary than ever to reflect on our Salesian way of educating young people, because the discourse of hatred and violence continues to increase. Our world is becoming increasingly violent and we, educators and evangelisers of the young, must be an alternative to what so distressed young John in his dream and which hurts us so much today. As the Rector Major Fr Pascual Chávez once stated in the Strenna for 2012,[\[35\]](#) we will undoubtedly have to “face the wolves” that seek to devour the flock: indifference, ethical relativism, consumerism that destroys the value of things and experiences, false ideologies, and other things that really impact on us and are real violence.

I believe that this message is as relevant today as it was when young John (our future Don Bosco, father and teacher) received it.

The “not by blows” is an “absolute no”. It is very clear, and it is the only correction – we could almost say reproach – that John Bosco receives in the dream. And first of all it is for us a certainty, the great certainty that the path of force and violence does not lead in the right direction of the charism. The “blows” of the dream can take a thousand forms today; in fact, I have been interested in reading, reflecting and specifying many of the more or less subtle forms of violence that surround us and that must be banned from our educative and pastoral horizon and our charismatic universe.

“Not by blows” means consciously fighting every kind of violence, without any justification:

Physical violence that harms the body (pushing, kicking, slapping, squeezing or immobilising, throwing things).

Psychological and verbal violence that damages self-esteem. The kind of violence that insults and disqualifies, that isolates, that monitors and controls without respect. The violence and psychological abuse that makes some people feel they never give enough of themselves; the violence that makes people see themselves as always being different and wrong, even immature for thinking what they honestly think; the violence and abuse by those who are only interested in others when they want to profit from them.

Emotional-sexual violence that injures the body, the heart and the most intimate affections; that leaves indelible signs of pain and can manifest itself verbally or in writing, with looks or signs that denote obscenity, harassment, bullying and even abuse.

Economic violence whereby money that is yours or used to do good is withheld, embezzled, stolen.

Violence is also cyber-violence, “cyberbullying” with harassment carried out through the internet, websites, blogs, with text or email messages, or videos.

Violence that arises from social exclusion that sees people, students, adolescents excluded, or publicly humiliated, without any respect.

Violence characterised by mistreatment, by verbs such as threatening, manipulating, devaluing, rejecting, denying, questioning, humiliating, insulting, disqualifying, mocking, showing indifference.

There is no doubt that we charismatically possess the antidote for these life-threatening situations. It is about Don Bosco's pastoral genius: “ Recalling, on the other hand, that Mary's intervention in John Bosco's first dream was what initially configured that ‘apostolic genius’ that characterises us in the Church, I invite you to focus our reflection together on the project that characterises our pastoral genius: the Preventive System.”[\[36\]](#)

SHE, the Lady: Teacher and Mother

The Lady of Dream presents herself as Teacher and Mother. She is the mother of both: of the dignified Man of the dream and of young John himself; a mother – let me paraphrase – who, taking him by the hand, says to him:

“Look”: how important it is for us to know how to look, and how serious it is when we cannot “see” young people in their reality, for who they are; when we cannot see what is most authentic in them, and what is most tragic and painful in them and in their lives. **“Look”** s the first word we hear from “the woman of stately appearance, wearing a mantle that sparkled all over, as though covered with bright stars.”

Without wanting to “interpret” a single verb too much, it seems to me that there is a “preventive” sign of what would in fact be the path that our father would have to follow, made

above all of *experiential* learning. We think how much the eyes matter in Don Bosco's life... It is what he sees, when he arrives in Turin – or rather what Cafasso helps him to see – that gives birth to our mission. It is from *how he sees* every boy (we recall the first encounters in the biographies he writes): there is the introduction that is like a miracle that is followed by everything else, both for Savio, for Magone, for Cagliero, for Rua... In the museum in Chieri there is a sculpture that represents the eyes and gazes of Don Bosco, placed next to his altar in 1988. There is something unique in his gaze and that “look” spoken said by the Lady is no less original and unique.

It is precisely around “looking” that one can find an explicit reference to a word as fundamental to us as *assistance*. And we all know how essential it is.

My attention, however, does not stray very far from the dream field at the Becchi, because in fact, without young John realising it, he will be formed through *experience*: he will learn from life, especially in moments of extreme difficulty and fatigue.

Look leads the individual to decentralise, to grasp something that goes beyond their horizon and exceeds their imagination and that becomes an invitation, challenge, provocation, appeal and guide. Because it asks for a full and total involvement through which John will work for his boys. This also shows the importance of *the environment* in all of Salesian pedagogy.

It takes nothing away from the essential care of interiority and silence. We are called to raise our gaze, both when we fix it on the mystery of God, and when we pass by the man who “was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers” (Lk 10:30). And it is what always characterised the person of Don Bosco, from childhood to the end of his life.

“Learn”: become humble, strong and energetic, because you need simplicity in the face of so much arrogance; strength in the face of so many things you have to face in life; and that kind of energy that is resilience, or the ability not to be discouraged, not to “drop your arms” when you seem unable to do something.

It is interesting that what makes young John “meek” (humble, strong, energetic) are the *events* (experience) that Providence (Mary) places along his journey. For example, when some time after the dream, in February 1828 (and he was only twelve years old) his mother Margaret was forced to send him away from home because of the squabbles with Anthony. In the evening, John arrives at the Moglia farmhouse, where he is welcomed more out of pity than because of a real need – it was not in winter when they would have been looking for cowherds. In any case, the farmhouse is quite far away but at the same time quite close to Moncucco where there is one of the best parish priests that the diocese of Turin had, Fr Francesco Cottino (about whom, until now, our Salesian literature still says very little). John met with him every Sunday. For John it is the first “one on one”, the first meeting with a real guide. So a season that could only be sad and dark becomes a very important opportunity for his journey. We also know that on 3 November 1829, Uncle Michael would bring him back to the family, to the Becchi. And that on 5 November John would meet Fr Calosso returning from the Buttigliera mission.

I therefore consider it very important to strongly underline the incredible direction-accompaniment of Providence. John corresponds to it by engaging freely. However, events and people who follow each other at the right time are the architects of that “humble, strong and energetic” so essential for the mission that in the meantime matures more and more in him.

Evident, therefore, is a *primacy of Grace*, which applies above all to us if we are able to let ourselves be formed and which

thus becomes fruitful for the mission. To the point that there are no longer limits or difficulties such as to prevent growth towards that fullness of life that is holiness, whatever the context, even the most challenging.

Obviously, all this does not exempt us from putting all our efforts into improving situations and overcoming injustices. In fact, Don Bosco would “ally” himself with Providence without limiting his efforts, the meetings, the drafting of employment contracts to defend and protect the young apprentices invited to the first oratory. And above all, Don Bosco *does not limit their reaching for the sky!* Indicating that there is always “one more”, a high goal to strive for.

A similar lesson was suggested by Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta with her “useless” work for the dying of Calcutta. Among other things, on a poster he had written by hand and hung in his room at the beginning of his new life for the poorest of the poor, he had written these words in black and white: “Da mihi animas cetera tolle”.

“And be patient”, that is, let us give time for everything and let God be God.

4. A DREAM THAT MAKES US DREAM

Dear members of the Salesian Family, I cannot conclude my commentary on the Strenna without expressing for the young people and for us, the many dreams that I carry in my heart. They can be identified with the desire to continue growing in charismatic fidelity; or with the yearning and serene provocation in the face of changes that are difficult for us, with resistances that can stifle the living fire of our charism. Or encouragement to seek to translate Don Bosco’s dream into reality but two hundred years after!

I share them with you, in the hope that anyone who reads me, in any part of the vast Salesian world, can feel that something of what is written here is also destined for him or

her. These seem to me to be some concrete elements for making this dream at nine years of age come true:

Don Bosco showed us throughout his life that only authentic relationships transform and save. Pope Francis tells us the same thing: "it is not enough to have structures, if authentic relationships are not developed within them; it is actually the quality of these relationships that evangelises." [\[37\]](#) That is why I express the wish that every house of our Salesian Family around the world be or become a truly educational space, a space of respectful relationships, a space that helps to grow in a healthy way. In this we can and must make a difference, because authentic relationships are at the origin of our charism, at the origin of the encounter with Bartholomew Garelli, at the origin of Don Bosco's own vocation.

Every choice made by Don Bosco was part of a larger project: God's plan for him. Therefore, no choice was superficial or trivial for Don Bosco. His dream was not an anecdote of his life, or a simple event, but a vocational response, a choice, a path, a life program that took shape as it was lived. I dream, therefore, that every Salesian, every member of Don Bosco's Family feels, by vocation and choice, that they are uncomfortable and experience first hand the pain, weariness and fatigue of so many families and so many young people who struggle every day to survive, or to live with a little more dignity. And may none of us be reduced to being passive or indifferent spectators in the face of the pain and anguish of so many young people.

"The primordial dream, the creative dream of God our Father, precedes and accompanies the life of all his children." [\[38\]](#) *Our God has a dream for each of us, for each of our young people*, a project thought up, "designed" for us by God himself. The secret of everyone's much-desired happiness will be precisely to discover the correspondence and the encounter between these two dreams: *ours and God's*. And then

understanding what God's dream is for each of us means, first of all, realising that the Lord has given us life because he loves us, beyond what we are, including our limits. We must believe, then, that our God wants to do great things in each of us! We are all precious, we have great value because, without each of us, something will be missing from the world and the Church. In fact, there will be people that only I can love, words that only I can say, moments that only I can share.

And without dreams there is no life. For human beings, for all of us, dreaming means projecting oneself, having an ideal, a meaning in life. The worst poverty of young people is preventing them from dreaming, depriving them of their dreams or imposing invented dreams on them. Each of us is a dream of God. It is important to find out what is mine, what dream God has for me. And we must try to develop it, to achieve it, because it is about our happiness and that of our brothers and sisters.

We remember how Don Bosco wept with emotion and joy when, on 16 May 1887, he saw the dream that defined his life, his vocation, his mission "come true".

God *does great things with "simple tools"* and speaks to us in many ways, even in the depths of our heart, through the feelings that move within us, through the Word of God received with faith, deepened with patience, internalised with love, followed with trust. Let us help ourselves and our boys, girls and young adults to listen to their hearts, to decipher their inner movements, to give voice to what is stirring within them and within us, to recognise which signs or "dreams" reveal the voice of God and which ones, on the other hand, are the result of wrong choices.

"The trials and frailties of young people help us to be better, their questions challenge us, and their doubts cause us to reflect on the quality of our faith. Their criticisms are also necessary for us, because often it is through them

that we hear the voice of the Lord asking us for conversion of heart and renewal of structures.”[\[39\]](#) An authentic educator knows how to discover with intelligence and patience what every young person carries within themselves, and as such will act with understanding and affection, trying to make himself loved.[\[40\]](#) I dream and wish to meet every day, in every Salesian house around the Salesian world, Salesians and lay people who believe in the miracle that Salesian education and evangelisation have the power to achieve.

To live humanly is to “become”, it is to realise oneself: It is to enjoy the results of the patient processes with which God works and intervenes in our lives. How I long for our educational passion to resemble that of Don Bosco, “the father of Salesian loving-kindness”, so that in all our presences in the world, boys and girls may encounter not only trained professionals, but true educators, brothers and sisters, friends, fathers and mothers.

Don Bosco, “street priest” *ante litteram* [before the term existed], was literally consumed in this undertaking. The Salesians (and those who are inspired by Don Bosco) are indeed “children of a dreamer of the future”, but of a future that is built on trust in God and in everyday life, immersing themselves and working in the lives of young people, amid the hardships and uncertainties of every day.[\[41\]](#) And that is why the encounter *with the Lord of Life*, helping each young person to discover their dream, the dream of God in each one, and supporting them in their journey to make it come true, is the most precious gift that we can offer young people. How much I want this to be done in all our houses.

While Don Bosco’s heart beat at all times, we are “convinced that each young person carries in his heart the desire for God” and “are called to offer opportunities for encounter with Jesus, the source of life and joy for every young person.”[\[42\]](#) Don Bosco could not tolerate that in his houses his sons and daughters did not propose an encounter with Jesus to boys,

girls, adolescents and young adults – even in the freedom with which we educate to faith today in the most diverse contexts. Today, too, we are called to make him known, to discover how he fascinates each individual and to help young people of other religions to be good believers starting from their own faith and ideals. I dream that this will become a reality in all Salesian houses around the world.

“Everywhere Salesian Work must aim at the poorest and most needy young people in society, and must employ the thousand means with them that are inspired by preventive love. Don Bosco wept when he saw so much youth growing up corrupt and unbelieving; and he wished he could have extended his care – watching over, admonishing, instructing, in a word, preventing – to all the youth of the world (...) That is why in accepting new foundations he gave preference to those places where the youth were ruined by neglect.” [\[43\]](#) I really dream of one day seeing the entire Salesian Congregation with the same dedication that Don Bosco had towards his poorest children. I dream of seeing each of my confreres joyfully giving their lives in favour of the least. In many cases this is already the case. I dream that each of our houses is filled with that “smell of sheep” to which Pope Francis refers today for every call to an apostolic vocation. And I also wish this for our entire Salesian Family: no one should feel excluded from this call.

“John’s life before his priestly ordination is truly a masterpiece of preparation for his vocation.” [\[44\]](#) Speaking to young people about their vocation, Pope Francis says: “I am a mission on this Earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world It follows that every form of pastoral activity, formation and spirituality should be seen in the light of our Christian vocation.” [\[45\]](#) As Don Bosco always did, I consider it a duty for us to help every young person, in all our proposals, to discover what God expects of them, to have ideals that make them “fly high”, to give the best of

themselves, to desire to live life as gift of self.

Mary shines out for being a mother and carer. When, as a very young girl, she received the angel's announcement, she did not refrain from asking questions. When she accepted and said "yes", she staked everything, risked everything, on this. When her cousin needed her, she put her plans and needs aside and left, without delay. When the pain of her Son impacted on her, she was the strong woman who sustained him and accompanied him to the end. She, who is Mother and Teacher, looks at the world of young people who seek her, even if there is so much noise and darkness along the way; she speaks in silence and keeps the light of hope lit.[\[46\]](#) I really dream that in fidelity to Don Bosco we will make our boys, girls and young adults fall in love with that Mother no less than he did, because "Our Lady is everything for Don Bosco; and the Salesian who wants to acquire the spirit of the Founder must imitate him in this devotion."[\[47\]](#)

5. FROM THE DREAM AT NINE YEARS OF AGE TO THE ALTAR OF TEARS

I have come to the end of this commentary. I could add more, but I believe that what I have written can reach everyone's heart That would be great news.

I simply want to invite you to take a minute internalising and contemplating this text from the *Biographical Memoirs* that describes in a few lines what Don Bosco felt, shedding copious tears, before the altar of Mary Help of Christians in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus a few days after its consecration.

In those moments Don Bosco saw and heard the voices of his mother Margaret, the comments of his brothers and grandmother who evaluated the dream, even questioning it. Right there, at that moment, sixty-two years later, he understood everything, just as the Teacher had foretold.

This narrative moves me every time and it is for this reason

that I invite you to read it again and to meditate on it personally. Once again.

No less than fifteen times after he had started the Holy Sacrifice the *Biographical Memoirs* tells us, Don Bosco had to stop, overcome

by powerful emotion, which caused him to shed tears. From time to time, Father Charles Viglietti, who was assisting him, had to divert his attention so that he could continue.

(When he was asked) the cause of such emotion, he replied: "There appeared before my eyes the scene when at the age of ten I dreamt about the Congregation I could actually see and hear my mother and brothers, as they argued about the dream...

At that time Our Lady had said, 'In due time you will understand everything.' Since that day, sixty-two years of hardships, sacrifices, and struggles have passed by. All of a sudden, an unexpected flash of lightning, had revealed to him in the building of the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome, the crowning point of the mission so mysteriously outlined for him on the very threshold of life.[\[48\]](#)

I truly believe that Mary Help of Christians continues to be a true Mother and Teacher for our entire Family. I am convinced that the prophetic words of the first dream spoken by the Lord Jesus and Mary continue to be a reality in all places where the charism of our Father, a gift of the Spirit, has taken root. And I am sure that in every house, beyond our efforts and our efforts, we can apply what Don Bosco said about the Sanctuary at Valdocco:

Every brick is a grace of Mary Help of Christians; we have done nothing without her direct intervention; she has built her own house and it is a wonder in our eyes.

May She, the Immaculate and Help of Christians, continue to lead us all by the hand. Amen.

Valdocco, Turin, 8 December 2023

Fr Ángel Card. Fernández Artime, S.D.B.

Rector Major

[1] F. MOTTO, *Il sogno dei nove anni. Redazione, storia, criteri di lettura*, in «Note di pastorale giovanile» 5 (2020), 6.

[2] P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica. 1. Vita e opere*, LAS, Roma 1979, 31ff.

[3] P. CHÁVEZ V., *Let us make the young our life's mission by coming to know and imitate Don Bosco*, in AGC 412 (2012), 35-36.

[4] F. MOTTO, *op. cit.*, 6.

[5] J. BOSCO, *Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855*, in ISTITUTO STORICO SALESIANO, *Salesian Sources 1. Don Bosco and his work*, LAS, Rome 2014, 1329.

[6] Cf. F. RINALDI, *Circular Letter published in ASC Year V – N. 26 (24 October 1924)*, 312-317.

[7] G. Bosco, *Memorie dell'oratorio di san Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*, in Istituto Storico Salesiano, (saggio introduttivo e note storiche a cura di A. da Silva Ferreira), "Fonti", serie prima, 4, March 1991. Cf. A. Bozzolo, *Il sogno dei nove anni, 3.1 Struttura narrativa e movimento onirico* in A. Bozzolo (a cura di), *I sogni di Don Bosco. Esperienza spirituale e sapienza educativa*, LAS-Roma, 2017, p. 235. note: an English translation of this is available at <http://sdl.sdb.org:9393/greenstone3/library/collection/dbdonbos/document/HASH3f428469cbc5458e999f74?>

[8] R. ZIGGIOTTI (ed. Marco Bay), *Tenaci, audaci e amorevoli. Lettere circolari ai salesiani di don Renato Ziggiotti*, LAS, Roma 2015, 575.

[9] Salesian Brother Marco Bay has been a professor at the Pontifical Salesian University in Rome and is currently director of the Salesian Central Archives in Rome (UPS). He generously placed in my hands the research he had carried out on the references that the previous Rectors Major had made on the dream at nine years of age.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Fr Luis Timossi, SDB, of the Ongoing Formation Centre in Quito, and Fr Silvio Roggia, SDB, Rector of the Blessed Ceferino Namuncurá Community in Rome, for their notes and suggestions.

[10] P. ALBERA, *Direzione Generale delle Opere Salesiane, Lettere Circolari di don Paolo Albera ai salesiani*, Torino 1965, 123; 315; 339.

[11] F. RINALDI, Lettera circolare pubblicata in ACS Anno V – N. 26 (24 October 1924), 312-317.

[12] *Ibidem*.

[13] *La commemorazione di un “sogno”*, in BS Anno XLIX, 6 (June 1925), 147.

[14] P. RICALDONE, Anno XVII. 24 March 1936 N. 74.

[15] P. RICALDONE, *op. cit.*, N. 78.

[16] R. ZIGGIOTTI, *op. cit.*, 129.

[17] R. ZIGGIOTTI, *op. cit.*, 264.

[18] L. RICCERI, *La parola del Rettor Maggiore. Conferenze, Omelie Buone notti*, v. 9, Ispettorato Centrale Salesiana, Torino 1978, 27.

[19] *Ibid*, 28.

[20] E. VIGANÒ, *Lettere circolari di don Egidio Viganò ai salesiani*, vol. 1, Roma, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, 1996, 10.

[21] *BM VII*, 171-172. Quoted in J. E. VECCHI, *Educatori appassionati esperti e consacrati per i giovani. Lettere circolari ai Salesiani di don Juan E. Vecchi*. Introduction, key words and indexes by Marco Bay, LAS, Roma 2013, 380.

[22] P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Vol. II, p. 32. Quoted in J. E. VECCHI, *op. cit.*, 381.

[23] P. CHÁVEZ VILLANUEVA, *Lettere circolari ai salesiani (2002-2014)*. Introduction and indexes by Marco Bay. Presentation by Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, Roma, LAS, 2021, p. 450.

[24] F. MOTTO, *op. cit.* 8.

[25] *Ibid*, 10.

[26] J. BOSCO, *Memoirs of the Oratory*, quoted in F. MOTTO, *op. cit.*, 9.

[27] F. MOTTO, *op. cit.*, 10.

[28] Quoted in P. RICALDONE, Anno XVII. 24 March 1936 N. 74.

[29] J. BOSCO, *op. cit.*, 1177.

[30] P. RICALDONE, Anno XX Novembre–Dicembre 1939 N. 96

[31] A. BOZZOLO (ED), *Il Sogno dei nove anni*. Questioni ermeneutiche e lettura teologica, LAS, Roma 2017, 264. Cf. fn 7 re availability of this in English.

[32] E. VIGANÒ, *Lettere circolari di don Egidio Viganò ai salesiani*, vol. 1, 1996, Roma, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, 1996, p. 10.

[33] R. ZIGGIOTTI, *op. cit.*, 264.

[34] F. MOTTO, *op. cit.*, 7.

[35] Cf. P. CHÁVEZ, *“Let us make the young our life’s mission by coming to know and imitate Don Bosco”*. *First year of preparation for the bicentenary of his birth. Strenna 2012*, in AGC 412 (2012), 3-39.

[36] E. VIGANÒ, *Lettere circolari di don Egidio Viganò ai salesiani*, vol. 1, 1996, Roma, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, 1996, p. 31.

[37] SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Young people, faith and vocational discernment*. Final Document. Elledici, Torino, 2018, n°128.

[38] FRANCIS, *Christus vivit. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and All the People of God*, LEV, Vatican City 2019, no 194.

[39] SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Young people... op. cit.*, no. 116.

[40] Cf. XXIII Capitolo Generale Salesiano, *Educare ai giovani nella fede*, CCS, Madrid, 1990, n° 99. [GC23, no. 90]

[41] Cf. F. MOTTO, *op. cit.* 14.

[42] R. SALA, *Il sogno dei nove anni. Redazione, storia, criteri di lettura*, in «Note di pastorale giovanile» 5 (2020), 21.

[43] F. RINALDI, *Il sac. Filippo Rinaldi ai Cooperatori ed alle Cooperatrici Salesiane. Un'altra data memoranda*, in BS Anno XLIX, 1 (Gennaio 1925), 6.

[44] E. VIGANÒ, *Lettere circolari di don Egidio Viganò ai salesiani*, vol. 2, 1996, Roma, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, 1996, p. 589.

[45] FRANCIS, *Christus vivit*, no. 254.

[46] Cf. FRANCIS, *op. cit.*, 43-48, 298.

[47] R. ZIGGIOTTI, *op. cit.*, 264.

[48] *BM XVIII*, 288 [Taken from the English New Rochelle translation].

Don Bosco and ecumenical dialogue

Ecumenism is a movement that arose at the beginning of the 20th century among the Protestant Churches, later shared by the Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church itself, and aims at Christian unity. The Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council states that by Christ the Lord the Church was founded one and the same and that the division of the Churches not only openly contradicts the will of Christ, but is also a scandal to the world. Our times, therefore, differ not a little in this respect from those of Don Bosco.

When one speaks of “Protestants” in Piedmont, one’s thoughts go first of all to the Waldensian Evangelical Church. The history, at times tragic and heroic, of this small people and church that found refuge, a stable home and its religious centre in the Pinerolo valleys is fairly well known. Less well known is the strong spirit of proselytism on the part of the Waldensians after the Emancipation Edict signed by King Charles Albert on 17 February 1848, which granted them civil and political rights.

Among the most conspicuous initiatives of their growing anti-Catholic propaganda in Piedmont, and then throughout Italy, was that of the popular press, which consequently provoked a lively reaction from the Episcopate and corresponding apologetic initiatives in defence of Catholic doctrine. In this field, behind the directives of the Holy See and the Piedmontese Bishops, Don Bosco also moved

strongly concerned to preserve the youth and people of our lands from heresy.

Don Bosco's *Catholic Readings*

One can understand how Don Bosco felt the duty to enter the fray in defence of the faith among the people and the youth. He engaged in courageous action in the popular Catholic press because he soon realised that the Waldensians in Piedmont were only the bridgehead of the premeditated Protestant siege of Italy (G. SPINI, *Risorgimento e Protestanti*, Milan, Mondadori Ed., 1989, pp. 236-253).

In this regard, an article by N. Fabretti appeared in *Il Secolo XIX* on 30 January 1988, entitled: *Don Bosco, a "young" saint*, which, among other things, declared him to be: "orthodox to the point of intolerance, violent against Protestants whom he considers, if they do not convert, to be children of the devil and damned", and "a furious polemicist... who with his 'Catholic Readings' obsessively debunks Luther and Protestants and publicly insults the Waldensians." But these vulgar accusations do not touch the real Don Bosco.

The *Catholic Readings*, whose publication began in March 1853, were popular booklets that Don Bosco had printed monthly for the religious education of the youth and the people. Carrying out a simple catechesis, often in narrative form, he used these periodicals to remind his readers of Catholic doctrine on the mysteries of the faith, the Church, the sacraments, Christian morals.

Rather than arguing directly with the Protestants, he emphasised the differences that separate us from them, referring to history and theology as they were known at the time. It would be pointless, however, to look in booklets he printed, such as the *Avvisi ai Cattolici* and *Il Cattolico istruito nella sua religione*, ("Catholic Readings" 1853, nos. 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 12) for the elements most emphasised by the doctrine on the Church today. Rather, they reflect a catechesis that would now require clarification and integration. Don Bosco's apologetic style, then, mirrored that

of well-known Catholic authors from whom he drew.

Today, in an ecumenical climate, certain initiatives may appear disproportionate to the danger, but one must keep in mind the environment of the time in which the polemic started from the Protestants themselves and “religious controversy was felt as a daily necessity to evangelise the people”” (V. VINAI, *Storia dei Valdesi*, Vol. III, Torino, Ed. Claudiana, 1980, p. 46).

The anti-Catholic Protestant literature of the time, in fact, presented Catholicism as a repository of sin, religious hypocrisy, superstition, and cruelty towards Jews and Waldensians. A well-known Protestant historian states in this regard: “We can say that in 1847 Italy was surrounded by a sort of Protestant siege, laid around it by Anglican Episcopalianism, Scottish Presbyterianism and the ‘free’ evangelism of Geneva and Lausanne, with support also from American Protestantism. Within the peninsula, besides the traditional foreign communities, there are already two bridgeheads, the Waldensians and the Tuscan ‘evangelicals’. Outside, there are two organised communities with their own press in London and Malta’ (G. SPINI, op. cit., p. 226).

But this was not enough. Don Bosco, as well as enduring attacks of suspicious origin, was debunked in various issues of the 1853-54 issues of the Protestant weekly “La Buona Novella” (“La Buona Novella”, Years 1853-54, Year III, no. 1, pp. 8-11; no. 5, pp. 69-72; no. 11, pp. 166-168, n. 13, pp. 193-198; no. 27, pp. 423-424).

Those were times of “wall against wall”!

Don Bosco intolerant?

Don Bosco certainly did not deserve such insults. Louis Desanctis, a Catholic priest who had gone over to the Waldensian Church, gave great impetus to Protestant evangelisation with his presence in Turin, even arguing against Don Bosco’s publications. But when, due to internal disagreements, he ended up leaving the Waldensians and moving towards an Italian Evangelical Society, he had much to suffer.

It was then that Don Bosco wrote to him to invite him to his home to share “bread and study” with him. Desanctis replied that he never thought he would find such generosity and kindness in a man who was openly his enemy. “*Let us not pretend*” he added, “*You fight my principles as I fight yours but while you fight me you show that he love me sincerely, extending a beneficent hand to me in the moment of affliction. And so you show that you know the practice of that Christian charity which in theory is practised so well by so many...*” (ASC, *Raccolta originale* N. 1403-04).

Even if Desanctis did not feel like drawing the logical consequences of his situation, this letter remains significant as it uncovers the true Don Bosco, certainly not “the orthodox to the point of intolerance” or the “furious polemicist” described by the “*Il Secolo XIX*” columnist, but the man of God interested only in the salvation of souls.

Don Bosco and animals

Did Don Bosco love animals? Are they present in his life? And what relationship did he have with them? Some questions that are attempted to be answered.

Birds, dogs, horses, etc.

In the stable of the *Casetta* where Mamma Margaret had moved with her children and mother-in-law after the unexpected death of her husband Francis, there was a *small cow*, a *calf* and a *donkey*. In the corner of the house, a chicken coop.

John, as soon as he was able, took the cow out to pasture, but was more interested in *bird nests*. He himself recalls this in his *Memoirs*: “I was also quite clever at catching birds in cages, snares, traps and nets. I was very

good at finding birds' nests" (MO 40).

The various incidents of his "trade" are well known. We remember the time when his arm got caught in the crack of a tree trunk, where he had discovered a titmouse nest; or the other time when he watched a cuckoo slaughter a brood of nightingales. Another time he saw his magpie die of gluttony after swallowing too many cherries, including pits. One day to reach a nest found on an old oak tree, he slipped and fell heavily to the ground. And one sad day, returning from school, he found his favourite blackbird, bred in a cage and trained to chirp melodies, killed by the cat.

As for chickens, the fact of the mysterious hen left under the sieve in his grandparents' house in Capriglio and freed by John amidst relieved laughter dates back to those years. Also from those years is the incident of the turkey stolen by a rogue and returned with courage and a touch of childish imprudence. From the Chieri years is the trick of the chicken in jelly brought to the table and coming out of the pot alive and squawking.

John struck up a true friendship with a dog at Sussambrino, his brother Joseph's hunting hound. He trained him to catch pieces of bread on the fly and not eat them until ordered to. He taught him to climb up and down the barn ladder and to do jumps and circus tricks. The hound followed him everywhere and when John took him as a gift to relatives in Moncucco, the poor animal, overcome with homesickness, returned home alone in search of his lost friend.

As a student in Castelnuovo, John also learned to ride a horse. In the summer of 1832, the provost, Fr Dassano, who was tutoring him at school, entrusted him with the care of the stables. John had to take the horse for a walk and, once outside the village, he would jump on its back and gallop it.

As a new priest, invited to preach in Lauriano, about 30 km from Castelnuovo, he set off on horseback. But the ride ended badly. On the Berzano hill the animal, frightened by a large flock of birds, reared up and the rider ended up on the ground.

Don Bosco then took many other rides in his wanderings around Piedmont and outings with the boys. Suffice it to recall the triumphant ascent to Superga in the spring of 1846 on a horse harnessed to the highest standards, sent to him at Sassi by Fr G. Anselmetti.

Much less triumphant was the Apennine crossing on the back of a donkey on the journey to Salicetto Langhe in November 1857. The path was narrow and steep, the snow deep. The animal stumbled and fell at every turn and Don Bosco was forced to dismount and push it forward. The descent was even more adventurous and only the Lord knows how he was able to reach the village in time for his sacred mission.

That was not Don Bosco's last journey on a donkey. In July 1862 he travelled six kilometres from Lanzo to Sant'Ignazio in the same way. And so, probably, on other occasions.

But one of Don Bosco's most glorious rides was the one in October 1864 from Gavi to Mornese. He arrived in the village late in the evening to the festive sound of the bells. The people came out of their houses with lamps lit and knelt down as he passed, asking for a blessing. It was the people's hosanna to the saint of youth.

Animals in Don Bosco's dreams

If we move on to consider Don Bosco's dreams, we find a great variety of domestic and wild animals, peaceful and wild, representing the young and their virtues and faults, the devil and his flatteries, the world and its passions.

In the 9-year-old's dream when the boys disappeared, a multitude of goats, dogs, cats, bears and other animals appeared, all of which were then transformed into meek lambs. In his dream as a 16-year-old the stately Lady entrusted him with a flock; as a 20-year-old he again saw the youngsters in his dream transformed into lambs; and finally in 1844, the lambs were transformed into shepherds!

In 1861 Don Bosco had the dream of a walk in Paradise. On that trip the young men with him found themselves

facing lakes to cross. One of them was full of ferocious beasts ready to devour anyone who tried to cross.

On the eve of the Feast of the Assumption in 1862, he dreamt that he was at the Becchi with all his young men, when a 7-8 metre long snake appeared on the meadow. It was horrifying. But a guide taught him how to catch it with a rope, which was later changed to a rosary.

On 6 January 1863 Don Bosco told the boys the famous dream of the elephant that appeared in the courtyard at Valdocco. It was huge and amused the boys amiably. It followed them into the church, but knelt down in the opposite direction with its trunk turned towards the entrance. Then it went out into the courtyard again and suddenly, its mood changed, and with fearful jabs it pounced on the youths to tear them apart. Then the statuette of Our Lady, still placed under the portico today, came alive, and opened her mantle to protect and save those who took refuge with her.

In 1864 Don Bosco had a dream of crows fluttering over the Valdocco courtyard to peck at the boys. In 1865 it was the turn of a partridge and a quail, symbols of virtue and vice respectively. Then came the dream of the majestic eagle descending to seize a boy from the Oratory; and then again one of a big cat with eyes of fire.

In 1867 it seemed to Don Bosco that he saw a large disgusting toad, the devil, enter his room. In 1872 he told the dream of the nightingale. In 1876 that of the hens, the furious bull, and also the cart pulled by a pig and an enormous toad.

In 1878, he saw in a dream a cat being chased by two hounds. And so on.

Leaving it to the experts to discuss these dreams, we know however that they had a great pedagogical function in Don Bosco's houses and that especially in some of them it is difficult not to see a special intervention of God.

The grey dog

But if we want to get to the threshold of mystery,

we must recall "Grigio", that mysterious dog that appeared so many times to protect Don Bosco at times when his life was in danger.

In his *Memoirs* Don Bosco writes: "The grey dog was the topic of many conversations and various conjectures. Many of you have seen him and even petted him. Now, laying aside the fantastic stories which are told of this dog, I will tell you plainly only what is pure truth" (MO 188). And he goes on to tell of the risks he ran in returning to Valdocco late at night in the 1850s and how this big dog would often suddenly appear at his side and accompany him home.

He tells, for example, of that evening in November 1854 when along the street leading from the Consolata to the Cottolengo (today Via Consolata and Via Ariosto, perpendicular to Corso Regina), he noticed two prowlers following him who then jumped on him to smother him, when the dog appeared, attacked them angrily and forced them to make a hasty escape. Finally he tells of Grigio appearing to him to him one night on the road from Morialdo to Moncucco, as he was on his way, alone, to Cascina Moglia to visit his old friends.

But his *Memoirs*, written in the 873-75, could not mention what really seems to be the final apparition of Grigio which took place on the night of 13 February 1883. While Don Bosco was coming from Ventimiglia, having found no carriage, he was making his way on foot in the pouring rain to the new Salesian house in Vallecrosia, just when with his feeble eyesight he no longer knew where to place his feet, his old friend, the very faithful Grigio, whom he had not seen for several years, came to meet him. The dog came up and wagged his tail gleefully and then, running ahead of him, found his way through the mud and thick darkness to guide him. When he reached Vallecrosia, and greeted Don Bosco with his paw, he disappeared (BM XVI, 20-21).

Finding himself in Marseilles having lunch at the Olive house, Don Bosco recounted the event. The lady then asked him how such an appearance was possible, because the dog would have been too old by then. And Don Bosco, smiling,

answered her: "Maybe it was an offspring of Grigio!" (BM XVI, 21). He then evaded an embarrassing question, as it could not have been a natural phenomenon, but he did not say it was his imagination. He was too sincere for that.

According to the testimonies of Joseph Buzzetti, Charles Tomatis and Joseph Brosio, who lived with Don Bosco from the earliest days, Grigio resembled a guard dog. No one, not even Don Bosco, ever knew where it came from or who its master was. Charles Tomatis said something more: "It had a truly frightening appearance. Every time she saw it, Mamma Margaret would unfailingly exclaim: 'Oh, what an ugly beast!' It looked like a wolf, with a long snout, erect pointed ears, and gray fur. It was over three feet tall." (BM IV, 497). No wonder it inspired fear in those who did not know it.

Once, instead of accompanying Don Bosco home, he prevented him from going out. It was late in the evening and Mamma Margaret tried to dissuade her son from going out, but he was determined and thought of having some older boys accompany him. At the gate of the house they found the dog lying down. "Oh, it's you, Grigio" said Don Bosco, "Come along; let's go!" But the dog, instead of obeying, emitted a fearful howl and did not move. Twice Don Bosco tried to pass and twice Grigio prevented him from passing. Then Mamma Margaret intervened: "*Se 't veule nen scoteme me, scota almeno 'l can, seurt nen!*" (If you don't want to listen to me, at least listen to the dog, don't go out). And the dog won. It was later learned that hired killers were waiting outside to take his life (BM IV, 498).

So Grigio often saved Don Bosco's life. But he never accepted food or any other kind of reward. He would suddenly appear and disappear into thin air when the mission was accomplished.

But then what kind of dog was Grigio? One day in 1872 Don Bosco was a guest of the Baroni Ricci in their country house at Madonna dell'Olmo near Cuneo. Baroness Azeglia Fassati, Baron Carlo's wife, brought up the subject of

Grigio and Don Bosco said: "Let's forget it," he said. "I have not seen him for some time now!" It could not have been more than two years, since he had publicly stated in 1870: "That dog has been an important part of my life! It sounds ridiculous to call him an angel, yet it is no ordinary dog because I saw him again just two days ago!" (BM X, 177). Could that have been the Moncucco occasion?

But on another occasion he went on to say: "Sometimes I thought I should try to find out where it came from and to whom it belonged, but then I decided that it really did not matter as long as the dog was a good friend to me. All I know is that in the many dangers I encountered, that dog was a true godsend to me." (BM IV, 502).

Like St Rocco's dog! Certain phenomena pass through the net of scientific research. For those who believe, no explanation is necessary; for those who do not believe, no explanation is possible.

Luigi Variara the Founder who was himself 'founded'

'Founded' in a glance that marked a lifetime

Louis Variara was born on 15 January 1875 in Viarigi (Asti). Don Bosco had come to this village in 1856 to preach a mission. And it was to Don Bosco that the father, on 1 October 1887, entrusted his son to take him to Valdocco. Don Bosco would die four months later, but the knowledge that Louis had of him was enough to mark him for life. He himself remembered the event as follows: "It was in the winter season and one afternoon we were playing in the large courtyard of the oratory when suddenly there was a shout from one side to the other: 'Don Bosco, Don Bosco!' Instinctively we all rushed

towards the spot where our good Father appeared, whom they were taking out for a ride in his carriage. We followed him to the place where he was to get into the vehicle; immediately Don Bosco was surrounded by a crowd of his beloved boys. I was anxiously searching for a way to put myself in a place where I could see him at my leisure, for I longed to meet him. I got as close as I could, and as they helped him into the carriage, he gave me a gently look, and his eyes rested intently on me. I don't know what I felt at that moment... it was something I cannot express! That day was one of the happiest for me; I was sure that I had met a saint, and that that saint had read in my soul something that only God and he could know."

He asked to become a Salesian: he entered the novitiate on 17 August 1891 and completed it on 2 October 1892 with perpetual vows in the hands of Blessed Michael Rua, who whispered in his ear: "Variara, don't vary!" He studied philosophy at Valsalice, where he met the Venerable Fr Andrea Beltrami. Here, in 1894, Fr Michael Unia, the famous missionary who had recently started working among the lepers in Agua de Dios, Colombia, passed by. "What an astonishment and joy" Frn Variara recounts" when, among the 188 companions who had the same aspiration, fixing his gaze on me, he said 'This one is mine'".

He arrived at Agua de Dios on 6 August 1894. The place had a population of 2,000, 800 of whom were lepers. He immersed himself totally in his mission. Gifted with musical skills, he organised a band that immediately created a festive atmosphere in the "City of Sorrow". He transformed the sadness of the place with Salesian cheerfulness, with music, theatre, sport and the lifestyle of the Salesian oratory.

On 24 April 1898, he was ordained a priest and soon proved to be an excellent spiritual director. Among his penitents were members of the Association of the Daughters of Mary, a group of about 200 girls, many of whom were lepers. It was in the face of this realisation that the first idea of consecrated young women, albeit lepers, was born in him. The Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus

and Mary began on 7 May 1905. It was “founded” in full submission to religious obedience and, a unique case in the history of the Church. He founded the first religious community made up of people affected by leprosy or daughters of leprosy sufferers. He wrote: “Never have I felt as happy to be a Salesian as I do this year, and I bless the Lord for sending me to this leprosarium, where I have learnt not to let heaven be stolen from me.”

Ten years had passed since he arrived at Agua de Dios: a happy decade full of achievements, including the completion of the “Don Miguel Unia” kindergarten. But now a period of suffering and misunderstandings was beginning for the generous missionary. This period would last 18 years, until his death at Cúcuta in Colombia on 1 February 1923 at 48 years of age and 24 of priesthood.

Fr Variara knew how to combine in himself both fidelity to the work that the Lord asked of him, and submission to the orders that his legitimate superior imposed on him and that seemed to lead him away from the ways willed by God. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 14 April 2002.

Founded in spiritual friendship

In Turin-Valsalice, Fr Variara got to know the Venerable Andrea Beltrami, a Salesian priest stricken with consumption, who had offered himself as a victim to God for the conversion of all sinners in the world. A spiritual friendship was born between Fr Variara and Fr Beltrami, and Fr Variara was to be inspired by him when he founded the Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in Colombia, to whom he proposed ‘victim consecration’.

The Venerable Andrea Beltrami is the forerunner of the victim-oblative dimension of the Salesian charism, “The mission that God entrusts to me is to pray and to suffer” he said. “Neither to heal nor to die, but to live to suffer”, was his motto. Very exact in his observance of the Rule, he had a

filial openness to his superiors and an ardent love for Don Bosco and the Congregation. His bed became an altar and pulpit, where he immolated himself together with Jesus and from which he taught how to love, how to offer and how to suffer. His little room became his whole world, from which he wrote and in which he celebrated his bloody Mass: "I offer myself as a victim with Him, for the sanctification of priests, for the people of the whole world", he repeated; but his Salesianity also led him to have relationships with the outside world. He offered himself as a victim of love for the conversion of sinners and for the consolation of the suffering. Fr Beltrami fully grasped the sacrificial dimension of the Salesian charism, desired by the founder Don Bosco.

Fr Variara's daughters wrote of Fr Beltrami as follows: "We are poor young people struck down by the terrible disease of leprosy, violently torn and separated from our parents, deprived in a single moment of our liveliest hopes and our most ardent desires... We felt the caressing hand of God in the holy encouragements and pitiful industries of Fr Louis Variara in the face of our acute pains of body and soul. Persuaded that it is the will of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and finding it easy to accomplish, we began to offer ourselves as victims of expiation, following the example of Fr Andrea Beltrami, a Salesian."

Founded in the Hearts of Jesus and Mary

Founder ... founded, of the Institute of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. In his life he encountered great difficulties, such as in 1901 when the "Don Miguel Unia" house was being built, but he entrusted himself to the Virgin, writing: "Now more than ever I have confidence in the success of this work, Mary Help of Christians will help me"; "I only have money to pay for one week, so ... it is up to Mary Help of Christians, because the work is in her hands." In painful moments, Father Variara renewed his devotion to the Virgin, thus finding the serenity and trust in God to continue his mission.

In the great obstacles he encountered in founding the Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts, Father Variara acted in the same way as at other times. At the time he had to leave Agua de Dios. In the same way he acted when he was told he had contracted leprosy. "Some days" he confessed, "despair assails me, with thoughts that I hasten to banish by invoking the Virgin." And to his spiritual daughters, far away and removed from his paternal guidance, he wrote: "... Jesus will be your strength, and Mary Help of Christians will spread her mantle over you." "I have no illusions" he wrote on another occasion, "I leave everything in the hands of the Virgin." "May Jesus and Mary be blessed a thousand times over, live always in our hearts."