

A year of dreams from above

Dear friends: we are on the threshold of a new year, 2024, a very special year because we are commemorating the bicentenary of Don Bosco's dream when he was 9. This dream was much more than a charming episode of a 9-year-old boy; it was like a vision and a premonition of what he was to do in the course of his life.

62 years later, celebrating his first and last Mass in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome, consecrated two days earlier, Don Bosco burst into tears more than 15 times because, like in a film in rapid succession, he saw all the scenes of his life unfold, realising that he had always been guided by Divine Providence and in particular led by the hand of Her, the Help of Christians, to the point of saying: "She did everything."

That New Year's Eve in 1862

This commemoration leads me to think of a significant New Year's Eve in Don Bosco's life. It was the first of January 1862.

The *Biographical Memoirs* recount that Don Bosco, ill until the day before, announced that he had important news to give to all those at the Oratory, young and old. "It is impossible to describe the emotion, caused by Don Bosco's promise, which in the meantime stirred up all the youngsters. With what impatience they spent the night from 31 December to 1 January, and the following day! With what anxiety they waited for the evening to hear what the good father would tell them!" recounts Fr Lemoyne. "Finally, after the prayers, the young men waited in profound silence for Don Bosco, who raised his chair and revealed the mystery and said: – the strenna I am giving you is not mine. What would you say if Our Lady herself came in person to say a word to each one of you? If she had prepared for each one a note of her own to show him what he most needed, or what she wanted from him? Well, this is

exactly how it is. Our Lady gives each one a gift! I see that some will want to know and will ask: – How did this happen? Did Our Lady write the notes? Did Our Lady herself speak to Don Bosco? Is Don Bosco Our Lady's secretary? – I answer: I tell you nothing more than that. I wrote the notes, but how this came about I cannot say, nor is there anyone who would take it upon themselves to question me, for that would put me in the wrong. Let everyone be content to know that the note came from Our Lady. It is something unique! I have been asking for this grace for several years and I have finally obtained it. Each of you therefore consider the item as if it came from the mouth of the Virgin Mary herself. Come therefore to my room and I will give each of you your own note." Don Bosco could say this because he himself had received from Our Lady, at the age of nine, the message that would mark the whole course of his life.

Then, continuing the narrative of that very evening, the Salesians began to pass by Don Bosco's room to collect their note. Many revealed what it said. The one made out to Fr Bonetti, who wrote the daily chronicle, said: *Increase the number of my children.* The good priest wrote this recommendation in his chronicle and added: "In the meantime, my sweetest Mother, you who have given me such dear advice, give me the means to put it into practice, and see to it that I truly increase this beautiful number, but that I also be included in it."

Fr Rua's said: "Have recourse to me with confidence in the needs of your soul."

The next morning, the young men crowded around the door of Don Bosco's room to receive their note. I can easily imagine how Don Bosco knew how to get to the heart of every Salesian and every boy in the Oratory, not with an invention but with the profound conviction of what Our Lady wanted for each one of them, and at the same time he managed to do it in that way in which Don Bosco was always a true master and a true genius: I am referring to the art of personal encounter, dialogue, of the gaze that reaches deep into the heart.

And as I read this, I wondered if it might not happen to us. We sent greeting cards to many people. If Mary had sent a card to the Salesian Congregation and to each one of us, to the beautiful and great Salesian Family, Don Bosco's family, what would she have written?

Walking like Don Bosco

It is nice to imagine it. I assure you that in my imagination there are so many beautiful things that Our Lady could ask of us both personally and as the family of Don Bosco, born to accompany the boys and girls of the world – especially the poorest and neediest – in their process of growth, maturation, transformation...

The mystery of the New Year, which at bottom develops the mystery of Christmas, tells us, "You are not conditioned by the past. You can start afresh today, because there is something new in you. Take the divine Child in your arms, who brings you into contact with all the new that is available, genuine and intact, in your soul. Start again with the little ones, the young ones. Trust the new in you! Every day is the first day."

Perhaps it would be enough to make our own the words Mary says to John Bosco in her dream: "Here is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong and energetic." Perhaps a more "spiritual" advice was expected, but only those who are humble can be kind because they can enjoy the presence of others. Humility is the door of love towards the little ones, the helpless, the wounded by life.

Only people who are solid and strong can walk behind Jesus today in spite of everything. For we want to see the prisoners free, and the oppressed no longer oppressed; a message even the poor can still believe in.

It means listening to the voice of the burning bush that will never be consumed: "I will break your chains and make you walk tall." Mary wants the Salesians, and all her Family, the beautiful family of Don Bosco of all times to walk like Don Bosco. And for this the best guarantee will always be to have

Her as the true Teacher who is above all Mother. A true grace for our family.

This is how the Rectors Major have expressed it throughout our history. As did my predecessor Fr Ziggiotti: "I will give you a Teacher under whose discipline you can become wise, and without whom all wisdom becomes foolishness" is the fateful word of the first dream, pronounced by the mysterious character, 'the Son of She whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day.' So, it is Jesus who gives Don Bosco his Mother as his Teacher and infallible guide on the hard path of his entire life. How can we be thankful enough for this extraordinary gift from Heaven to our Family?".

Happy New Year 2024 with my best wishes for each of you and your families. May it be a beautiful year for all of us and a year of Peace for this still suffering humanity.