 Reading time: 41 min.

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, intuits 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 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 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, Ispettoria 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, nº128.

[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, nº 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].