 Reading time: 9 min.

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.