

A pergola of roses (1847)

Don Bosco's dreams are gifts from on high to guide, warn, correct, encourage. Some of them were set down in writing and have been preserved. One of these – made at the beginning of the saint's mission – is the dream about the pergola of roses, which he had in 1847. We present it in full.

Don Bosco first related it himself seventeen years later in 1864 when one night, after prayers, as was his custom at times, he gathered the members of his [infant] Congregation in his anteroom for a conference. Among those present were Father Victor Alasonatti, Father Michael Rua, Father John Cagliero, Father Celestine Durando and [the two clerics] Joseph Lazzero and Julius Barberis. After speaking of detachment from the world and from one's own family to follow Our Lord's example, he continued:

I have already told you of several things I saw as in a dream. From them we can infer how much Our Lady loves and helps us. But now that we are all together alone, I am going to tell you not just another dream, but something that Our Lady herself graciously showed me. I am doing this that each of us may be convinced that it is Our Lady Herself who wants our Congregation. This should spur us to work ever harder for God's greater glory. She wants us to place all our trust in Her. I am taking you into my confidence. Please do not mention what I tell you to anyone else in this house or to outsiders, lest you give evil tongues occasion to wag.

One day in 1847, after I had spent much time reflecting on how I might help others, especially the young, the Queen of Heaven appeared to me. She led me into a beautiful garden. There stood there a rustic but wide and charming portico built as a vestibule. Its pillars were dressed with climbing vines whose tendrils, thick with leaves and flowers, stretched upward together and knitted a graceful awning. The portico opened on a lovely walk that soon became,

as far as the eye could see, a breathtakingly beautiful pergola, whose sides were lined with enchanting roses in full bloom. The ground too was covered with roses. The Blessed Virgin said to me: "Take off your shoes!" When I had done so, She added: "Walk under that rose pergola, for this is the path you must take."

I gladly removed my shoes because it would have been a pity to step on such gorgeous roses. I took but a few steps and immediately felt very sharp thorns piercing my feet and making them bleed. I had to stop and turn back.

"I had better wear my shoes," I told my guide.

"Yes, indeed," She replied, "sturdy ones." So I put my shoes on again and returned to the rose pergola, followed by a number of helpers who had just showed up and asked to go along with me. They followed me under the indescribably beautiful pergola, but as I went along I noted that it was becoming narrow and low. Many of its branches were draped like festoons; others instead just dropped straight down. Some branches, here and there, jutted sideways from the rose stalks, while others formed a thicket which partly blocked the path; still others crept along the ground. All the branches, however, were thick with roses. There were roses about me, roses above me, and roses under my feet.

As my feet made me wince with pain, I could not help brushing against the roses at my sides, and even sharper thorns pricked me. But I kept walking. My lacerated legs, though, kept getting entangled in the lower branches. Whenever I pushed aside a bough barring my way, or skirted the sides of the pergola to avoid it, the thorns dug into me and made me bleed all over. The roses overhead also were thick with thorns which pricked my head. Notwithstanding, I went forward, encouraged by the Blessed Virgin. Now and then, however, some sharper thorns pierced me more than others and caused greater pain.

Meanwhile those who were watching me walk under that bower – and they were a crowd – passed comments, such as, "How lucky Don Bosco is! His path is forever strewn with

roses! He hasn't a worry in the world. No troubles at all!" But they couldn't see the thorns that were piercing my poor legs. I called on many priests, clerics, and laymen to follow me, and they did so joyfully, enthralled by the beauty of the flowers. When, however, they discovered that they had to walk over sharp thorns and that there was no way to avoid them, they loudly began complaining, "We have been fooled!"

I answered: "If you are out for a nice time, you had better go back. If not, follow me."

Many turned back. After going on for a while, I turned to look at my followers. You cannot imagine how I felt when I saw that some had disappeared and others had already turned back and were walking away. I went after them and called them back, but it was useless; they would not even listen to me. Then I broke into tears and wept unrestrainedly as I asked myself: "Must I walk this painful path all alone?"

But I was soon comforted. I saw a group of priests, clerics and laymen coming toward me. "Here we are," they said. "We are all yours and ready to follow you." So I led them forward. Only a few lost heart and quit; most of them followed me through.

After walking the whole length of the pergola I found myself in another enchanting garden, and my few followers gathered around me. They were exhausted, ragged and bleeding, but a cool breeze healed them all.

Another gust of wind came and, like magic, I found myself surrounded by a vast crowd of boys, young clerics, coadjutor brothers and even priests, who began helping me care for all those boys. Many of these helpers I knew, but many more were strangers.

Meanwhile I had come to a higher spot in the garden, where a very imposing, majestic building stood. I entered and found myself in a spacious hall so grandiose that I doubt one could find its like in any royal palace. Fresh thornless roses, set all through the hall, filled it with a most delicate fragrance. The Blessed Virgin, who had been my guide all along, now asked me: "Do you grasp the meaning of

what you now see and of what you saw before?"

"No," I said. "Please explain it to me."

She replied: "The path strewn with roses and thorns is an image of your mission among boys. You must wear shoes, a symbol of mortification. The thorns on the ground stand for sensible affections, human likes and dislikes which distract the educator from his true goal, weaken and halt him in his mission, and hinder his progress and heavenly harvest.

The roses symbolize the burning charity which must be your distinguishing trait and that of your fellow workers. The other thorns stand for the obstacles, sufferings and disappointments you will experience. But you must not lose heart. Charity and mortification will enable you to overcome all difficulties and lead you to roses without thorns."

As soon as the Mother of God finished speaking, I awoke and found myself in my room.

Don Bosco understood the purport of the dream and concluded by saying that from then on he knew exactly the path he had to follow. Already known to him were the obstacles and snares with which his adversaries would attempt to block his progress. Many would be the thorns on his path, but he was sure, absolutely sure, of God's will in the matter and of the ultimate success of his great undertaking.

The dream also warned him not to be discouraged by the defection of some who seemed called to help him in his work. Those who first deserted him were priests and laymen who in the early days of the festive oratory had volunteered to help him. Those who came later were his own Salesians, and the wind symbolized the forthcoming divine assistance and comfort. On a later occasion Don Bosco revealed that this dream or vision was repeated in 1848 and in 1856, each time under slightly different circumstances, which we have integrated in our narration to avoid repetitions.

(BM III, 25-28)