

□ Reading time: 15 min.

This vivid dream narrative, recounted by Don Bosco at the end of the 1876 spiritual exercises, offers a powerful allegory of the spiritual life and the Salesian mission. A furious bull, embodying the devil and the seven deadly sins, sows terror but is overcome by those who humble themselves, remain united in obedience, and adore the Blessed Sacrament. Two fundamental truths emerge from the scene: "Work and temperance" as a motto and guarantee of apostolic fruitfulness, and the warning to avoid four lethal nails – gluttony, self-interest, murmuring, and idleness – along with the hidden serpent of ambiguity. The dream concludes with the triumphant vision of the Congregation which, faithful to these principles, will spread the Gospel to the four cardinal points, guiding crowds of young people towards Christ.

As a retreat souvenir, Don Bosco related a dream rich in symbolism—one of the most instructive he had ever had. Father Lemoyne took notes as he spoke and immediately afterward wrote the dream out completely and showed it to Don Bosco, who made only slight changes. For clarity we will divide the narrative into four parts.

Part I

It has been said that we are to pay no heed to dreams, and I assure you that most of the time I too agree. Nevertheless, though dreams may not reveal future events to us, they can at times help us to see our way through intricate problems and to act wisely in different matters. Therefore we may accept what they have to offer us that is good.

Just now I want to tell you about a dream that absorbed my mind, you might say, all through the retreat and that especially last night upset me. I will tell it as I saw it, because I think that it has many valuable lessons, but I will condense it here and there so as not to be too lengthy.

Well, then, it seemed we were all together on our way from Lanzo to Turin, aboard some vehicles—either coaches or railway cars, but just which I am not sure. At a certain point on our way, I can't recall where, our vehicles stopped. I got off to see what had happened and faced a man who defies all description. He seemed to me both tall and short at the same time, stout and slim, red and white, walking on the ground and floating in the air. Totally confused and bewildered, I made bold to ask, "Who are you?"

His only answer was, "Come with me!"

I first wanted to know who he was and what he wanted, but I had no time to find out. "Hurry!" he said. "Let's get the vehicles into this field." The astonishing thing was that he spoke loudly and softly at the same time and in different tones, so that my amazement knew no bounds.

The field was very vast and, to all appearances, quite flat, unplowed and as smooth as a threshing floor. Not knowing what to say and seeing his determination, we turned the vehicles around into that vast field, and once there we ordered everyone to get down. They all did so very quickly, and no sooner were all off than the vehicles immediately disappeared, leaving no trace.

Not knowing how to conduct myself with that stranger, I stammered, "Will you now tell us why you made us stop here?"

"To save you from very great danger!" he replied.

"What danger?"

"A raging bull which leaves not a living person in its path: 'A roaring bull seeking whom to devour.'" [Cf. 1 Pet. 5, 8]

"Easy, my friend!" I retorted. "You apply to a bull what St. Peter says of a lion — *leo rugiens*, a roaring lion."

"That does not matter in the least. There it was a roaring lion, here it is a roaring bull. What matters is that you had better be on guard. Call all your followers about you and immediately and very seriously tell them to be on guard and very alert. As soon as they hear the roar of a bull, an unusual and thundering roar, they are immediately to fling themselves face down upon the ground and stay that way until the bull has passed. God help anyone who will not obey you. Whoever refuses to lie face to the ground as I have ordered will be as good as dead. Holy Scripture tell us that the lowly shall be exalted and the proud will be humbled."

Then he immediately added, "Quickly, quickly! The bull is on its way! Shout as loud as you can to fall to the ground!"

I did so and he insisted, "Louder! Louder!"

I yelled so loudly that I'm sure I frightened Father Lemoyne who sleeps next door to me. I was shouting at the top of my voice.

In an instant the bellow of a bull was heard, and the man told me, "On guard! On guard! Make them all lie next to one another in two straight rows, with an aisle for the bull to pass between them!" I shouted out his orders. In a flash everyone lay flat on the ground, and we could see the bull far off, thundering forward in a fury.

Although just about everyone lay flat on his face, a few remained standing in order to have a good look at the bull.

"Now you will see what happens to them," the man told me. "You will see what they get for refusing to lie low."

I wanted to warn them again, to shout, and to run to them, but he forbade me. I insisted that he let me go to them, but he answered sharply, "Obedience applies to you too! Lie down!"

Before I could get down, I heard a thundering bellow, awesome and frightening. The bull drew closer. Terror seized all, and they kept asking, "Who knows? Who knows?" "Do not fear!" I shouted. "Stay down!"

And my friend kept yelling: "He who humbles himself shall be exalted and he who exalts himself shall be humbled ... he who humbles himself ... he who humbles himself..." [Lk. 14, 11]

I found one thing strange and astonishing. Pressed flat to the ground as I was, face to the earth and eyes in the dust, I could still clearly see everything happening about me. The bull had seven horns set almost in a circle, two below the snout, two in the place of eyes, two in a normal position, and one on the crest. Even more amazing was the fact that the horns were very tough but mobile, and the bull kept turning them as he wished, so that to gore and fling his victim to the ground he did not have to turn from side to side. He kept running forward without a turn, knocking down anyone he encountered. The horns below the snout were the longest, and they wrought frightful havoc.

The bull was now upon us. The man shouted, "Now you will see the power of humility." Instantaneously, to our astonishment, we found ourselves lifted high into the air, so that the bull could not possibly reach us. Those few who had refused to lie flat on the ground were not raised up. The bull rushed them and in a flash tore them to pieces. Not one was spared. Meanwhile, hanging in the air, we were scared stiff at the thought of what our fate would be if we fell to the ground. We could see the angry bull straining toward us and leaping high to sink his horns into us, but he could not do us the least harm. More furious than ever, he rent the air with a frightful roar as if to tell us he was leaving to seek reinforcements. And so "in great wrath" [cf. Apoc. 12, 12] he stormed off.

Then we instantly found ourselves again on the ground, "Face the south!" the man shouted.

Part II

We did so, and suddenly, to our amazement, everything changed around us. To the south we saw the Blessed Sacrament exposed and many candles burning on either side. The field was gone, and we seemed to be in a very vast church, all beautifully decorated.

While we were all kneeling in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, a host of most horrid, roaring bulls appeared, their heads bristling with horns. They came

close to us, but since we were in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, reciting the chaplet in honor of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, they could do us no harm. After a while, I don't know how, we turned around and saw that the bulls had left. Looking back to the altar, we saw that the candles had disappeared, the Blessed Sacrament was no longer in sight, and the church itself had vanished from sight, and we found ourselves back in the field where we had been before.

You know well enough that the bull symbolizes the devil, our spiritual enemy, who in rage against us continually tries to harm us. The seven horns are the seven capital sins. We can be rescued from the horns of this bull, that is, from the devil's assaults, and not fall into those sins mainly by humility, the bedrock of virtue.

Part III

Meanwhile, we kept looking at each other, confused and amazed. No one spoke, for we did not know what to say. Everyone expected me or the dream personage to say something. Drawing me aside, he said, "Come, I will show you the triumph of the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales. Climb that rock and you will see!"

A huge boulder stood in the middle of that boundless field, and I climbed on it. A limitless panorama spread before me. I would never have thought that the field was so immense; it seemed to cover the entire earth.

People of every race, color and nation were gathered there. They were such a multitude that I never thought the world could hold so many. I carefully observed the first who came into my view. They were dressed like us. Those in the front ranks I could recognize. I saw many Salesians leading groups of boys and girls; they were followed by other Salesians with more groups, and more came after them and still more whom I did not know, until they became a huge blur. They were numberless. To the south I could see Sicilians, Africans, and an innumerable host of people I did not know. All had Salesians in the lead, but I could recognize only those in the first few ranks.

"Turn around," the man ordered. My gaze met countless masses of other people wearing animal skins and a kind of cloak of velvet sheen, brilliantly dyed in various colors. I was told to face the four points of the compass. Among other things, in the east I saw women whose feet were so tiny they could barely stand or walk. The wonder of it all was that everywhere I saw Salesians leading squads of boys and girls and countless crowds of adults. I always recognized those in the front ranks, but not those who followed, not even the missionaries. At this point I must cut short many things because it would take too long.

Then my guide said to me, "Look and pay close attention, even though you will not

understand what I am now telling you. What you have seen is the harvest awaiting the Salesians. Do you see how immense a harvest it is? This vast field you stand on is the Salesians' field of labor. The Salesians whom you see are already at work and you know them, but then the horizon extends as far as you can see, filled with people yet unknown to you. This means that not only in this century but also in the next and in future centuries, Salesians will labor in fields of their own. Do you know under what conditions the achievements you have seen are to be reached? I will tell you. Take heed: you must have these words engraved on your coat-of-arms as your watchword, your badge. Note them well: Work and temperance will make the Salesian Congregation flourish. Have these words explained repeatedly and insistently. Compile and print a handbook that will clearly explain that work and temperance are the legacy you are bequeathing to the Congregation, and will be also its glory."

"I will most willingly do so," I replied. "It is wholly in keeping with our purpose. It is what I keep insisting upon day after day and stress upon every occasion."

"Are you really quite convinced? Have you thoroughly understood me? This is the heritage you will leave them. Tell them clearly that as long as they live by it, they will have followers from the south, the north, the east and the west. Now bring the spiritual retreat to a close and send them on their way. These will set the norm; others will follow."

Then coaches suddenly appeared to take us all to Turin. I kept looking at them. They were quite peculiar, the strangest I had ever seen. Everybody began to step aboard, but since they had neither railings nor sides, I feared that our boys might fall off, and so I didn't want to let them go. But my guide told me, "Let them go. They are quite safe if they faithfully abide by the words: 'Stay sober and alert.' [1 Pet. 5, 8] If these words are diligently carried out, no one will fall, even though the coach has no hand grips and is in rapid motion."

Part IV

They left and I remained alone with that man. "Come," he said quickly. "I want to show you a very important thing. Oh, you have so much to learn! Do you see that coach out there?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what it is?"

"I can't see it that well."

"Draw closer then. Do you see that placard there? Go closer and look at it carefully. There is an emblem emblazoned on it. It will tell you what the coach is."

I went up to the placard and saw four very thick spikes painted on it. I turned to him and said, "Unless you explain, I cannot understand."

"Don't you see those four nails? Look at them closely. They are the four nails which pierced and so cruelly tormented Our Divine Savior's body."

"And so?"

"They are also the four nails which plague religious congregations. If you can keep these four nails away, that is, if your Congregation is not plagued by them, if you are wise enough to shunt them off, things will go well and all of you will be safe."

"I am still no wiser than before," I replied. "What do these nails symbolize?"

"If you want to know, go inside this coach. It has four compartments, one for each nail."

"What do the compartments mean?"

"Look at the first." I did so and read the words, "Their god is their belly" [Phil. 3, 19]. "Ah, now I begin to understand," I exclaimed.

My guide remarked, "This is the first nail which plagues and destroys religious congregations. If you are not careful, it will create havoc among you also. Fight it relentlessly, and you shall see that things will go well with you."

"Now read the inscription on the nail of the second compartment: 'They are busily seeking their own interests rather than those of Jesus Christ.' [Phil. 2, 21] This refers to those who seek their own comfort and ease, scheming for their own advantage and perhaps that of their family, rather than for a Congregation which is working for Jesus Christ. Be on guard, drive scourge far from you, and you will see the Congregation prosper."

On the third compartment I saw the third nail's inscription. I read: "Theirs is the tongue of an asp." My guide said: "A fatal nail for any congregation will be grumblers and complainers, those who, right or wrong, are forever criticizing."

The fourth compartment read: "Chamber of idleness." The guide remarked: "Here idlers abound. When idleness gains a footing in a community, it totally destroys it. On the other hand, as long as your men work hard, you will face no danger. Now take note of another thing which is too often overlooked. I want you to give it special attention. Do you see that little cubicle which belongs to no compartment and yet reaches a little into all?"

"I see it but it's just a heap of leaves and grass, tall and short, all tangled together."

"Good! Take a close look at it!"

"But why?"

"Read carefully the nearly half-hidden inscription."

I peered intently and read: "The snake lurks in the grass."

"What are you driving at?"

"Look, there are some people who lie low. They clam up and never confide in their superiors; they keep their secrets to themselves. Be on guard, for the snake lurks in the grass. They are a real scourge, a plague for any congregation. Bad as they might be, once discovered, they might be corrected, but, no, they remain hidden and we are unaware of them, and the evil becomes worse and poison builds up in their hearts. By the time they are found out, it is too late to repair the damage they have already done. So, then, learn well what things you must keep far from your Congregation. Keep well in mind what you have heard. Give orders to have these things explained at length again and again. If you do so, you can rest secure that your Congregation will increasingly prosper."

Then, lest I forget anything he told me, I asked him permission to write it all down. "You can try if you want to," he answered, "but I doubt that you have time. Be alert!"

As he was talking and I was all set to write, I seemed to hear a confused roar, a rumble all about me, and the very ground seemed to quake. I swiftly looked around to see what else was happening and saw that the boys who had departed shortly before were all dashing toward me from every direction in utter fright. Just behind them came a roar and then a bellowing bull in pursuit. His very reappearance struck me with such terror that I awoke.

I have told you this dream on this occasion before we return to our houses because I am well convinced and can say in all truth that we would worthily close this retreat if we were to resolve to live up to our motto, Work and temperance, and strive to a man to keep from us the four great nails which plague religious life. They are gluttony, comfort and ease, grumbling and idleness. To this we might add that each one is to be always open, truthful and trusting with his superiors. In this way we shall not only benefit our own souls but also help to save those whom Divine Providence will entrust to our care.

Don Bosco had originally planned—and then promised in the course of his narration—to explain later at length the point on temperance through an appendix to the dream itself. However, when he went on to the second part of his talk, which we shall soon record, it slipped his mind. When he was awakened, as he said, by the reappearance of the roaring beast, he became anxious to know something more, and he got his wish as soon as he fell asleep again. What he then saw he later described at Chieri, and Father [Joachim] Berto, who was present, wrote it down and forwarded it to Father Lemoyne, who added it as a conclusion to his account.

I was anxious to know the results of temperance and the consequences of intemperance [Don Bosco went on]. So, with this thought, I returned to bed. Hardly

had I fallen asleep when my guide reappeared and invited me to follow him and see the effects of temperance. He led me into a most lovely garden, filled with an abundance of flowers of every kind: full-blown roses, the symbol of charity, beds of carnations, jasmines, lilies, violets, perennials, sunflowers, and countless others, each representing a virtue.

“Now pay close attention,” the guide said. The garden vanished and I heard a loud racket.

“What’s that noise? Where is it coming from?” I asked.

“Turn around and see.”

I turned and saw a grotesque sight: a box-like cart being drawn by a pig and a toad of enormous size.

“Go near and look inside.”

I did and saw that it was brimming over with the most loathsome animals: crows, snakes, scorpions, snails, bats, crocodiles and salamanders. Not being able to look at or stand the stench of those loathsome animals, I turned away in horror. At that moment I woke up with a start,

but the stench remained with me for some time. I was still so shaken up by the horrible spectacle that I could get no further rest that night.

Father Lemoyne, concerned only with the dream, did not think of recording the second part of Don Bosco’s talk, but we have it summarized as follows by Father [Julius] Barberis:

Desirous now of giving you a special remembrance to keep throughout the course of this year, I would say: Look for every way to preserve the queen of virtues, that virtue which safeguards all others, that virtue which, once possessed, never comes alone but has all others in its retinue. Once we lose it, the others either do not exist or are soon lost.

Love this virtue, love it much, and remember that we have to work and pray to keep it: “[This demon] can be driven out only by fasting and prayer.” [Mk. 9, 28] Yes, we need prayer and mortification of the eyes, of rest, of food, and especially of wine. We are not to seek comforts of the body; rather, I would say, we should work it hard. We must not give it special treatment unless we have to for reasons of health. For all other cases, we are to give our body what it strictly needs, and nothing more, for the Holy Spirit says: “The corruptible body burdens the soul.” [Wis. 9, 15] Does it? Well, what did St. Paul do? “I chastise my body — he wrote — and bring it into subjection so that it may serve the soul.” [Cf. 1 Cor. 9, 27]

As I did at the last retreat, I now recommend three things: OBEDIENCE, PATIENCE, and HOPE.

The other recommendation I make is humility, which we must strive to acquire and

impress upon our boys and others. It is a virtue which is usually called the basis of Christian life and perfection.

It is sometimes said — and I would never allow it — that things should be done just to please me. No, my dear sons, don't aim at that. Seek to please the Lord. Be smart! What reward could I possibly give you if you strive to please me? Just my own nothingness. Set your minds firmly on pleasing the Lord. If at times you receive an unpleasant assignment, carry it out just as well, with good will and with the conviction that you will earn the love of Our Lord Jesus Christ and heaven's eternal reward.

Each of you should have a copy of the rules. Read them and study them. Let them be our code of law, the norm to which we seek to conform our life in its entirety. I especially recommend fidelity to the practices of piety and—as a special retreat souvenir—that you introduce and carry out faithfully whatever concerns the Exercise for a Happy Death. I can assure you that one who carries out this monthly practice well will not need to worry about the salvation of his soul, for he will be secure in the knowledge that he is always walking in the path of his own vocation. It will happen that several of you cannot find a day when you can be entirely free of duty, but that doesn't matter. Let them do what they really must for their work. But there must be no one who cannot find a good half hour on that day to ask himself seriously: 1. If I were to die this moment, would my conscience be fully in order? 2. What have been my main faults this month? 3. From last month to this, in what did I do better? 4. Were I to die now, would I leave a mess in whatever concerns my duties? Would my superiors have no idea of what belongs to me and of the financial responsibilities of my office? After these reflections, we must try earnestly to straighten out whatever is not in order.

One more consideration about doubts which anyone may have in regard to his own vocation—whether it really is his vocation, and whether he can be truly sure that the life he has embraced is what the Lord wishes of him.

First of all, bear this well in mind: I have never accepted anyone of whom I have not been positive that the Lord has called him.

Furthermore, by the mere fact that you have come together here at Lanzo from different places, notwithstanding difficulties of one kind or another, and setting aside your work. Because of your conviction that you are here for a special reason, it is my belief that this is a true sign that God is calling you to embrace this way of life. Moreover, at this very moment I have not the least fear to say that all of you here present have been called by the Lord. All you have to do is to respond and set your hearts to observe the rules. Yes, indeed, my answer to each of you would be Our Divine Savior's reply to the young man: "If you wish to enter into eternal life,

keep the commandments." [Mt. 19, 17]

"Do this and you shall live." [Lk. 10, 28] Keep the rules. Anything else? Do this and you will live. Do you know when a vocation becomes questionable? Doubts will arise when you begin to transgress the rules. Yes, then you will really have doubts about your vocation, and if your transgressions continue, you will run the serious risk of losing it.

Take heart, then! Let the exact observance of our rules be the souvenir to seal all others, both those which your good retreat preacher has gradually inspired and those which your own meditations, examen of conscience and Holy Communions have prompted. Let it also be the seal of all I have counseled in this conference and you will be happy!

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