 Reading time: 9 min.

The following pages take us into the heart of Saint John Bosco's mystical experience, through two vivid dreams he had between September and December 1884. In the first, the Saint crosses the plain towards Castelnuovo with a mysterious person and reflects on the scarcity of priests, warning that only tireless work, humility, and morality can make authentic vocations flourish. In the second dream cycle, Bosco witnesses an infernal council: monstrous demons plot to annihilate the nascent Salesian Congregation, spreading gluttony, greed for riches, freedom without obedience, and intellectual pride. Amidst omens of death, internal threats, and signs of Providence, these dreams become a dramatic mirror of the spiritual struggles that await every educator and the entire Church, offering both severe warnings and bright hopes.

Two dreams he had in September and December provide a precious teaching. The first, which he had the night of September 29th, was a lesson to priests.

He had found himself walking through a plain on his way to Castelnuovo. An old priest, whose name he did not recall, was walking beside him. Their conversation was about priests. "Work, work, work" they both said. "That should be the purpose and the glory of a priest! Never grow weary of working. How many souls might thereby be saved! How much one could accomplish for the glory of God! If only the missionary were truly a missionary, the pastor a pastor. How many miracles of holiness would be shown forth everywhere! But unfortunately, many are work-shy and prefer their own comforts."

As they were talking on this subject, they came to a place known as Filippelli. Here, Don Bosco deplored the current scarcity of priests.

"It is true that priests are few," the other said, "but if all priests would only act as priests, there would be enough of them. Yet how many priests there are who do nothing for the ministry, whereas if they were to be active in their ministry, if they would pass their examinations as confessors, they would fill an immense void within the church. God gives us vocations in keeping with our needs. When clerics were subjected to military draft, everyone was scared, as if no one would ever become a priest.

But when these fantastic ideas subsided, we saw that instead of diminishing, the number of vocations were increasing."

"What can be done now to increase the number of vocations among boys?" Don

Bosco asked.
“Nothing more than to safeguard their morality jealously,” his companion said. “Morals represent the nursery garden of vocations.”
“*Presbyter discat domum regere et sanctificare.* No greediness, no excessive preoccupation with temporal things. Let a priest first become a model in his own home, and then he will be the first model outside of it.”
At a certain moment as they were walking, the other priest asked Don Bosco where he was going. Don Bosco pointed toward Castelnuovo.
Then, he let the other priest go ahead of him, lingering behind with a group of people who walked on ahead. After walking only a few steps, Don Bosco woke up. In the dream, we see a recollection of his former walks in that area.

Predicting the death of Salesians

The second dream concerned the Congregation, and forewarned against threats that might undermine its existence. More than a dream, this was a theme that recurred in a series of dreams.
The night of December 1st, the cleric Viglietti was abruptly awakened by piercing screams coming from Don Bosco’s room. He leapt out of bed immediately and listened.
In a voice choked by sobs, Don Bosco was calling, “Ah! Oh, help! Help!”
Viglietti entered his room at once and asked, “Are you sick, Don Bosco?”
“Oh, Viglietti!” he said as he woke up. “No I am not sick, but I was unable to breathe, you know. That is enough, now. Go back to bed and sleep peacefully.”
Next morning when Viglietti brought him his usual cup of coffee after Mass, Don Bosco confessed, “Oh, Viglietti, I cannot take it anymore. My whole chest is sore from having screamed so much last night. I have been dreaming now for four consecutive nights. These dreams force me to scream out and they tire me out. Four nights ago I saw a long line of Salesians walking one after the other, every one of them carrying a flagstaff with placards with a printed number on them. On one I saw 73, on another 30, 62 on a third, and so on. When many of them had gone by, the moon appeared in the sky, and as soon as a Salesian appeared you could have spotted a number, which was never higher than 12, and behind it there were many little black dots. All the Salesians that I saw went by and sat down beside an empty grave.”
This is the explanation of his dream as it was given him: the number on the placards represented the number of years that each of them was to live; the appearance of the moon in different shapes and phases indicated the last month of their existence; the black dots represented the days of the month in which they

were to die. He kept on seeing more and more of them, at times standing in groups; these were Salesians who were to die all together, on the same day. He said that if he were to mention all the accessory details and circumstances minutely, it would take him at least ten full days.

He witnesses a devils council

"I dreamed again three nights ago," he continued. "I will tell you about it in brief. I thought I was in a big hall where many great devils were gathered as though for a convention. They were discussing how they could destroy the Salesian Congregation. They looked like lions, tigers, serpents and other animals, though their appearance was somewhat muddled, looking somewhat like human beings. They also looked like shadows, now higher, now lower; now smaller and now taller – just like bodies would look behind a lamp if one were to move it this way or that way. Now lowered to ground level and then raised up again. The whole fantastic vision was terrifying.

"One of the devils stepped forward to open the session. He proposed one way by which the pious Society might be destroyed: gluttony. He expounded on the consequences of this vice: sluggishness in doing good, corruption of morals, scandal, no spirit of sacrifice, and no concern for the boys.

"But another devil responded, 'Your suggestion is neither general nor effective, nor can all members of the Society be undermined by it collectively, for the dining table of religious is always frugal, the wine measured, their regular meals are set by their rules, their superiors are alert so as to prevent disorder. Instead of causing scandal, anyone who was to eat or drink to excess would sooner arouse disgust. No, this is not a weapon to use against the Salesians. I will find some other way that is more effective, and more likely to help us in our intent: love of riches. When the love of riches enters a religious Congregation, the love for comforts will also enter with it and the members will attempt everything to secure money (peculium) for themselves, the bond of love will be shattered. Since everyone will think only about his own needs, the poor will be neglected in order to dedicate themselves only to those who have means, and there will be stealing from the Congregation.'

"This devil would have continued speaking, but a third stood up and said, 'Gluttony? Get lost! Riches? Get lost! The love of riches will affect only a few among the Salesians! The Salesians are all poor; they have but a few opportunities of making money for themselves. On the whole, their structure is so designed, their needs so immense with all the boys and the houses they have, that no matter how big any sum of money may be, it will soon be used up. It is impossible that they hoard anything. But I do have one infallible means by which we can conquer the Salesian

Society for ourselves, and this is freedom. So let us teach the Salesians to disregard their
rules, refuse certain assignments because they are burdensome and less glamorous, create division from their superiors by proposing conflicting opinions, and go home on the pretext they have been invited, and so on.'
"While the devils were discussing among themselves, Don Bosco was thinking I am all ears to hear what you are saying. I want to know. Go ahead – talk! By all means, talk because this will enable me to upset your conspiracy.
"Just then a fourth devil leapt to his feet, shouting, 'Rubbish! You are only proposing broken weapons! The superiors will know how to check such a freedom, and will expel from their houses anyone who ventures to rebel against the rules. Maybe a few will be led astray by their craving for freedom, but the vast majority will remain steadfast in their duty. Now I have a weapon that will surely undermine the whole Congregation down to its foundations. It is a weapon against which the Salesians will hardly be able to defend themselves. It will carry the rot to their very roots. Now listen to me carefully – convince them that their main glory should consist in their learning! This means inducing them to study for the sake of study, learning for the sake of attaining fame and not for the sake of practicing what they preach and not for using their learning for the benefit of their neighbor. They will become arrogant in their attitude toward the poor, ignorant and lazy as far as their sacred ministry. No more Festive Oratories, no more catechism classes for the boys, no more humble classrooms where they could teach poor, abandoned boys, no more long hours in the confessional. They will hold onto only preaching, but only occasionally, in a form well measured and sterile because it will only be an outlet for their own vanity, aimed at being praised by their listeners, not at saving souls.'
"This devil's suggestion was hailed by applause. Don Bosco foresaw the day when the Salesians might really be led to believe that the interests of the Congregation and its honor lay solely in learning, and he grew afraid that not only would they act accordingly, but they would also preach that such a belief should be shared far and wide.

"Don Bosco was again standing in a corner of the room, watching everything and listening to all that was said. One of the devils discovered him, and shouted, pointing him out to the others. At his scream, all the devils rushed at him and yelled, 'We will put an end to this!'
"A whirl of infernal ghosts pushed and seized him by his arms, and at this point, he began to yell, 'Let me go! Help!'
"At last he woke up, his chest all sore from so much screaming."

Lions, tigers and monsters dressed as lambs

The following evening, he saw that the devil had begun working on the Salesians in their most essential core, urging them to neglect their rules. He was able to see them all distinctly, some were keeping the rules and others were breaking them.

The last night, the dream became more fearful than ever. Don Bosco saw a big flock of sheep and lambs representing so many Salesians. He approached them, trying to caress the lambs, but as he drew nearer, he saw that their wool was not real. It was not a lamb's wool, for hidden under it there were lions, tigers, pigs, panthers, and bears. Every one of them had a hideous, ferocious monster at their sides.

Some were standing in a huddle talking in the midst of the flock. Unnoticed, Don Bosco approached the group to hear what they were saying. They were discussing what to do in order to destroy the Salesian Congregation.

One was saying, "We must cut the Salesians' throats."

Another chuckled and said, "We should strangle them."

But just then, someone saw that Don Bosco was standing by listening. This demon sounded the alarm and they all shrieked together that they should start by killing Don Bosco. At that, they all rushed at him to choke him. It was then that he uttered the terrible cry that had awakened Viglietti.

Don Bosco had a heavy heart, not only because of the diabolical violence with which he had been attacked, but also because he had seen a great banner floating over the heads of the flock, and on it was written "*BESTIIS COMPARATI SUNT*" [They are like beasts]. As he said this, he bowed his head and wept.

Viglietti took his hand and pressed it against his own heart. He said, "Ah, Don Bosco! With the help of God, all of us will always be faithful, devoted sons, will we not?"

"Dear Viglietti, be good and get ready to see what is going to happen. I have barely outlined these dreams to you. It would have taken me much longer were I to have told you everything in detail. How many things did I see! Some of the confreres of our houses will not live to see another Christmas Novena.

"Oh, if I could only talk to the boys. If I only had the strength to be among them, if I could only make a tour of all our houses, do all that I used to do, revealing the secrets of individual consciences to everyone as I saw them in the dream. If I could only say to some, 'Break the ice, make a good confession for once!' They would answer, 'But I do make a good confession!' Then I could reply by telling them all that they concealed, and that would stop them from opening their lips again. If I could only say a word to some of our Salesians, as well, to show them how much they need to put their own conscience in order by repeating their confessions.

I saw how some kept their rules and others didn’t. I saw many youths who would go to San Benigno and become Salesians, but then leave us again.
Even some, who are now already Salesians, will defect. There will be those who will seek only knowledge, the brand of knowledge that inflates the ego and craves praise. This will have them disregard the advice of those whom they consider less learned as they are.”
These sorry thoughts were interwoven with providential consolations that filled Don Bosco’s heart with joy.
The evening of December 3rd, the bishop of Para (that is the focal point of his dream about the missions) arrived at the Oratory. The following day, he said to Viglietti, “How mighty Divine Providence is! Listen and then tell me if God does not protect us. Father Paul Albera wrote to tell me that he could no longer go on, but needed one thousand francs immediately. That same day, a religious lady in Marseille, who was looking to see her brother in Paris, gave Father Paul Albera a thousand francs, delighted for having obtained from our Lady the grace of seeing him again. Father Joseph Ronchail is in a serious predicament, and has urgent need of four thousand francs. Today, a lady wrote to Don Bosco and told him that she is holding four thousand francs at his disposal. Father Francis Dalmazzo does not know where to turn for money. Today, a lady donated a substantial sum of money for the Church of the Sacred Heart.”
Then on December 7th, he experienced a great joy for Bishop John Cagliero’s consecration. All of these things were even more encouraging because they were manifest signs of God’s hand over the work of His servant.
(BM XVII 352-358)