 Reading time: 23 min.

A commentary on the theological-spiritual themes present in the nine-year dream could have such wide-ranging developments as to include a full treatment of "Salesianity". Read, in fact, starting from its history of effects, the dream opens up innumerable avenues for deepening the pedagogical and apostolic traits that characterised the life of St John Bosco and the charismatic experience that originated from him. We have chosen to focus on five avenues of spiritual reflection that respectively concern (1) the oratorian mission, (2) the call to the impossible, (3) the mystery of the Name, (4) maternal mediation and, finally, (5) the power of meekness.

1. The oratory mission

The dream at nine years of age is filled with children. They are present from the first to the last scene and are the beneficiaries of everything that happens. Their presence is characterised by joy and play, which are typical of their age, but also by disorder and negative behaviours. Therefore, in this dream at nine years of age, children are not the romantic image of an enchanted age as yet touched by the evils of the world, nor do they correspond to the postmodern myth of youth as a stage of spontaneous activity and perpetual willingness to change, which should be preserved in eternal adolescence. The children of the dream are extraordinarily "real", both when they appear with their own physical features and when they are symbolically depicted in the form of animals. They play and quarrel, have fun laughing and ruin it with swearing, just like in reality. They seem neither innocent, as spontaneous pedagogy imagines them, nor capable of being their own masters as Rousseau thought. From the moment they appear, in a "very large yard", which foreshadows the large courtyards or playgrounds of future Salesian oratories, they invoke the presence and action of someone. The impulsive gesture of the dreamer, however, is not the right intervention; the presence of an Other is necessary.

The appearance of the Christ figure, as we can now openly call him, is intertwined with the vision of the children. He who in the Gospel said "Let the little children come to me" (Mk 10:14), comes to show the dreamer the attitude with which the children should be approached and accompanied. He appears majestic, manly, strong, with traits that clearly highlight his divine and transcendent nature. His way of acting is marked by confidence and power and manifests full lordship over the things that take place. The dignified man, however, does not instil fear, but rather brings peace where before there was confusion and commotion, manifests

benevolent understanding in John's regard and directs him on a path of gentleness and love.

The *reciprocity* between these figures – the children on the one hand and the Lord (to whom the Mother is then added) on the other – defines the contours of the dream. The emotions that John experiences in the dream experience, the questions he asks, the task he is called to perform, the future that opens up before him are totally bound to the dialectic between these two poles. Perhaps the most important message that the dream conveys to him, what he probably understood first because it was imprinted in his imagination, before even understanding it in a reflective way, is that those figures refer to each other and that *he will not be able to dissociate them throughout his life.* The encounter between the vulnerability of young people and the power of the Lord, between their need for salvation and his offer of grace, between their desire for joy and his gift of life must now become the centre of his thoughts, the place where he finds his identity. The score of his life will be all written in the key that this generative theme gives him: modulating it in all its harmonic potential will be his mission, into which he will have to pour all his gifts of nature and grace.

The dynamics of John's life are therefore portrayed in the dream-vision as a continuous movement, a spiritual back and forth between the children and the Lord. From the group of children among whom John zealously throws himself, he must allow himself to be drawn to the Lord who calls him by name, and then depart from the One who sends him and position himself, with a completely different style, at the head of his friends. Even though he receives punches in his dream from some very strong boys, such that he still feels the pain upon waking up, and even though he hears words from the dignified man that leave him bewildered, his coming and going is not pointless but rather a journey that gradually transforms him and brings an energy of life and love to the youngsters.

That all this takes place in a *yard* (courtyard or playground) is highly significant and has a clear anticipatory value, since the Oratory courtyard or playground will become the privileged place and exemplary symbol of Don Bosco's mission. The whole scene is placed in this setting, both vast (very large yard) and familiar (close to home). The fact that the vocational vision does not have a sacred place or a heavenly location as a background, but the surroundings in which the children live and play, clearly indicates that the *divine initiative assumes their world as a place of encounter*. The mission entrusted to John, even if it is clearly addressed in a catechetical and religious sense ("to teach them the ugliness of sin

and the value of virtue"), has education as its habitat. The association of the Christ figure with the large yard, and the dynamics of the game, which certainly a nine-year-old boy could not have "constructed", goes beyond the usual religious imagery and carries a profound and mysterious inspiration. It encompasses the entire essence of the Incarnation, where the Son takes on human form to offer us his, emphasising that nothing human needs to be sacrificed in order to make room for God.

The yard, then, speaks of *the closeness of divine grace to the way youngsters "perceive" things*. To embrace this there is no need to leave one's own age behind, neglect its needs, or force its rhythms. When Don Bosco, by then an adult, would write in the *Giovane provveduto* (The Companion of Youth) that one of the devil's snares is to make young people think that holiness is incompatible with their desire to be joyful and with the exuberant freshness of their vitality, he would only be giving back in mature form the lesson he grasped in the dream, which later became a central element of his spiritual teaching. The courtyard or playground also conveys the need to *understand education from its deepest core,* which concerns the attitude of the heart towards God. There, the dream teaches, there is not only room for an original openness to grace, but also for the abyss of resistance, where the ugliness of evil and the violence of sin lurk. This is why the educational horizon of the dream is frankly religious, and not just philanthropic, and it enacts the symbolism of conversion, and not just that of self- development.

In the yard of the dream, filled with children and inhabited by the Lord, what will in the future be the pedagogical and spiritual dynamics of Oratory playground and courtyards opens up to John. We would like to once more highlight two features clearly evoked in the actions that the children do first of all, and later the meek lambs.

The first should be noted in the fact that the youngsters "stopped their fighting, shouting and swearing; they gathered round the man who was speaking". This question of "gathering" is one of the most important theological and pedagogical pillars of Don Bosco's view of education. In a famous work written in 1854, the *Introduzione al Piano di Regolamento per l'Oratorio maschile di S. Francesco di Sales in Torino nella regione Valdocco* (The Introduction to the Draft Regulations for the Boys' Oratory of St Francis de Sales in the Valdocco district of Turin) he presents the ecclesial nature and theological meaning of the oratory as an institution, quoting the words of John the Evangelist: "*Ut filios Dei, qui erant dispersi, congregaret in unum*" (Jn 11:52). The Oratory activity is thus placed under the banner of the eschatological gathering the children of God which was at the heart of the mission of the Son of God:

The words of the holy Gospel that make us know that the divine Saviour came from heaven to earth to gather together all the children of God, scattered across various parts of the earth, words that can literally be applied to the youth of our day.

Youth, “that part of human society which is so exposed and yet so rich in promise” is often found to be dispersed and adrift due to the educational disinterest of parents or the influence of bad company. The first thing to do to provide education for these young people is precisely to “gather them, be able to speak to them, teach them morals.” In these words of the *Introduction to the Draft Regulations*, the echo of the dream, which has matured in the consciousness of the educator who is now an adult, is clearly and recognisably present. The oratory is presented as a joyous “gathering” of young people around the only attracting force capable of saving and transforming them, that of the Lord: “These oratories are certain gatherings in which youth is engaged in pleasant and honest recreation after attending sacred church functions.” From childhood, in fact, Don Bosco understood that “this was the mission of the Son of God; only his holy religion can do this.”

The second element that would become an identifying feature of Oratory spirituality is what is revealed in the dream through the image of the lambs running “as if to welcome that man and lady.” The *pedagogy of celebration* will be a fundamental dimension of Don Bosco’s preventive system, which will see in the numerous religious commemorations throughout the year the opportunity to offer young people the possibility of fully embracing the joy of faith. Don Bosco will know how to enthusiastically involve the youthful community of the oratory in the preparation of events, theatrical performances, celebrations that allow for a break from daily duties, appreciating the talents of his boys in music, acting, gymnastics, to guide their imagination towards positive creativity. Taking into account that the education proposed in religious environments of the 19th century usually had a rather austere tone, seemingly presenting devout composure as an ideal pedagogical goal, the lively festivities of the oratory stand out as an expression of a humanism open to understanding the psychological needs of the youngster and capable of supporting his desire to be proactive. The celebration that follows the metamorphosis of the animals in the dream is therefore what Salesian pedagogy should aim for.

2. The call to do the impossible

While the dream ends with celebration for the youngsters, for John it ends in dismay and crying. We can only be surprised at this outcome. The common idea, at

least expressing it in simplistic terms, is that God's visitations are exclusively bearers of joy and consolation. It is paradoxical, therefore, that for an apostle of joy, for the one who as a seminarian would found the "society for a good time" and who as a priest would teach his boys that holiness consists in "being very cheerful", the vocational scene ends with weeping.

This may certainly indicate that the joy spoken of is not pure leisure and simple carefreeness but inner resonance to the beauty of grace. As such, it can only be achieved through challenging spiritual battles which, to a large extent, Don Bosco would have to pay the price of for the benefit of his boys. In this way he himself would relive that exchange of roles that has its roots in the paschal mystery of Jesus and that continues, as was the case for the apostles: "We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute" (1 Cor 4:10), but precisely in this way being "workers with you for your joy" (2 Cor 1:24).

The disturbance with which the dream closes, however, primarily recalls the dizzying feeling that the great biblical figures experience in the face of the divine vocation that manifests itself in their lives, urging them in a completely unpredictable and disconcerting direction. The Gospel of Luke states that even the Blessed Virgin Mary, upon hearing the words of the angel, felt a sense of profound inner turmoil ("But she was much perplexed by his words" Lk 1:29). Isaiah felt lost in the presence of God's holiness in the temple (Is 6), Amos compared the power of the divine Word, by which he was seized, to the roar of a lion (Am 3:8), and Paul experienced a complete existential overturning upon encountering the Risen One on the road to Damascus. While testifying to the allure of an encounter with God that forever seduces, at the moment of the call, biblical figures seem hesitant and fearful in the face of something that surpasses them, rather than diving headlong into the adventure of the mission.

The bewilderment that John experiences in the dream seems similar. It arises from the paradoxical nature of the mission that is assigned to him and that he does not hesitate to describe as "impossible" ("Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?"). The adjective may seem "exaggerated", as sometimes the reactions of children are, especially when they express a sense of inadequacy in the face of a challenging task. But this element of child psychology does not seem sufficient to illuminate the content of the dream dialogue and the depth of the spiritual experience it communicates. Especially since John truly has the stuff to be a leader, and an excellent memory which will allow him in the months following the dream to immediately start doing a bit of oratory, entertaining his friends with acrobatic feats, games and repeating the sermons of the parish priest to them by

word for word. This is why, in the words with which he frankly declares that he is “unable to talk about religion” to those youngsters, it will be good to hear the distant echo of Jeremiah’s objection to the divine vocation: “I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy” (Jer 1:6).

It is not at the level of natural attitudes that the demand for the impossible is played out here, but on the level of what can fall within the horizon of reality, of what can be expected based on one’s image of the world, of what falls within the limits of experience. *Beyond this frontier*, the *region of the impossible* opens up, which is, however, Biblically the space of God’s action. It is “impossible” for Abraham to have a child by a sterile and elderly woman like Sarah; it is “impossible” for the Virgin to conceive and give the world the Son of God made man; salvation seems “impossible” to the disciples if it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Yet Abraham hears himself answer: “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” (Gen 18:14); the angel tells Mary that “nothing will be impossible with God” (Lk 1:37); and Jesus answers the unbelieving disciples that “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God” (Lk 18:27).

The supreme place where the theological question of the impossible is posed, however, is the decisive moment of salvation history, that is, the Paschal drama in which the frontier of the impossible to be overcome is the dark abyss of evil and death. It is *in this space generated by the resurrection* that the impossible becomes actual reality. It is there that the dignified man of the dream, shining with Paschal light, asks John to make the impossible possible. And he does so with a surprising formula: “Precisely because it seems impossible to you, you must make it possible through obedience.” These seem like the words with which parents urge their reluctant children to do something they do not feel capable of or do not want to do. “Obey and you will see that you can do it” Mum or Dad say: the psychology of the child’s world is perfectly respected. But they are also, and much more, the words with which the Son reveals *the secret of the impossible, a secret that is fully hidden in his obedience*. The dignified man who commands something impossible knows through his human experience that impossibility is the place where the Father operates with his Spirit, provided that the door is opened to him through one’s obedience.

John, of course, remains perturbed and bewildered, but this is the attitude that the human being experiences when faced with the paschal impossible, when faced with the miracle of miracles, of which every other salvific event is a sign. It should therefore come as no surprise that in the dream, the dialectic of the possible-impossible is intertwined with the other dialectic of clarity and obscurity. It

characterises first of all the very image of the Lord, whose face is so bright that John cannot look at it. On that face shines, in fact, a divine light that paradoxically produces darkness.

Then there are the words of the man and the lady which, while they clearly explain what John must do, nevertheless leave him confused and frightened. Finally, there is a symbolic illustration, through the metamorphosis of the animals, which however leads to even greater incomprehension. John can only ask for further clarification: “I begged the lady to speak so that I could understand her, because I did not know what all this could mean”, but the answer he gets from the lady of stately appearance postpones the moment of understanding further: “In good time you will understand everything.”

This certainly means that only through the execution of what is already graspable from the dream, that is, through possible obedience, will the space for clarifying its message open up more broadly. In fact, it does not consist simply of an idea to be explained, but of a performative word, an effective expression, which, by realising its operative power, manifests its deepest meaning.

3. The mystery of the Name

At this point in the reflection, we are able to better interpret another important element of the dream experience. It is the fact that at the centre of the dual tension between possible and impossible and between known and unknown, and also, materially, at the centre of the dream narrative, is the theme of the mysterious Name of the dignified man. The tightly constructed dialogue of section III is, in fact, woven of questions that counter the same theme: “Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?”; “But who are you that speak so?”, and finally: “My mother tells me not to mix with people I don’t know unless I have her permission. So tell me your name.” The dignified man tells John to ask his mother for the Name, but in reality the latter will not tell him. It remains shrouded in mystery to the end.

We have already mentioned, in the part dedicated to reconstructing the biblical background of the dream, that the theme of the Name is closely related to the episode of Moses’ vocation at the burning bush (Ex 3). This is one of the central texts of the Old Testament revelation and lays the foundations for all religious thought in Israel. André LaCoque proposed describing it as the “revelation of revelations” because it is the principle of unity of the narrative and the prescriptive structure that qualifies the narrative of the Exodus, the mother-cell of the entire Scripture.[3] It is important to note that the biblical text develops in close unity the condition of slavery of the people in Egypt, the vocation of Moses and the

theophanic revelation. The revelation of the Name of God to Moses does not occur as the transmission of information to be known or data to be acquired, but as the manifestation of a personal presence which intends to give rise to a stable relationship and generate a process of liberation. In this respect, *the revelation of the divine Name is oriented in the direction of the covenant and the mission*. “The Name is both theophanic and performative, for those who receive it are not merely ushered into the divine secret, but are the recipients of an act of salvation.”[i].

The Name, in fact, unlike a concept, does not merely designate an essence to be thought of, but an otherness to be referred to, a presence to be invoked, a subject that proposes itself as a true interlocutor of existence. While implying the announcement of an incomparable ontological richness, that of Being that can never be adequately described, the fact that God reveals himself as an “I” indicates that only through a personal relationship with Him will it be possible to access his identity, the Mystery of the Being that he is. The revelation of the Personal Name is therefore an act of speech that challenges the recipient, asking him to position himself towards the speaker. Only in this way, in fact, is it possible to grasp its meaning. This revelation, moreover, is explicitly placed as the foundation for the liberating mission that Moses must carry out: “I AM has sent me to you” (Ex 3:14). By presenting himself as a personal God, and not a God tied to a territory, and as the God of promise, and not purely as the lord of immutable repetition, Yahweh will be able to sustain the people’s journey, their journey towards freedom. He therefore has a Name that makes itself known insofar as it arouses covenant and moves history.

“Tell me your name”: this question of John’s cannot be answered simply through a formula, a name intended as an external label of the person. To know the Name of the One who speaks in the dream, it is not enough to receive information, but it is necessary to take a position faced with what he says. That is, it is necessary to enter into that relationship of intimacy and surrender which the Gospels describe as “staying” with Him. This is why when the first disciples ask Jesus about his identity – “Master, where do you live?” or more literally, “where do you stay?” – he replies “Come and see” (Jn 1:38ff.). Only by “staying” with him, dwelling in his mystery, entering into his relationship with the Father, can we truly know Who he is.

The fact that the dream character does not respond to John with a name, as we would do by presenting what is written on our identity card, indicates that his Name cannot be known as a purely external designation, but shows its truth only when it seals an experience of alliance and mission. John will therefore know that very Name by going through the dialectic of the possible and the impossible, of clarity and darkness; he will know it by fulfilling the Oratory mission entrusted to

him. He will know Him, therefore, bringing Him within himself, thanks to a story experienced as one that He inhabits. One day Cagliero would testify that Don Bosco's way of loving was "very tender, great, strong, but entirely spiritual, pure, truly chaste", so much so that "it gave one a perfect idea of the love that the Saviour brought to children" (Cagliero 1146r). This indicates that the Name of the dignified man, whose face was so bright as to blind the dreamer, has really entered like a *seal* into the life of Don Bosco. He had the *experientia cordis* through the journey of faith and following Christ. This is the only way in which the dream question could be answered.

4. Maternal mediation

In the uncertainty about the One who sends him, the only firm point to which John can cling in the dream is the reference to a mother, indeed to two: that of the dignified man and his own. The answers to his questions, in fact, sound like this: "I am the son of the one whom your mother taught you to greet three times a day" and then "Ask my mother what my name is."

That *the space of possible enlightenment is Marian and maternal* is undoubtedly something worth reflecting on. Mary is the place in which humanity realises the highest correspondence to the light that comes from God and the creaturely space in which God delivered his Word made flesh to the world. It is also indicative that upon awakening from the dream, the one who best understands its meaning and purpose is John's mother, Margaret. On different levels, but according to a real analogy, the Mother of the Lord and the mother of John represent the female face of the Church, which shows itself capable of spiritual intuition and is the womb in which the great missions are managed and given birth.

It is therefore not surprising that the two mothers are juxtaposed with each other and precisely at the point where it is a question of getting to the bottom of the issue the dream presents, namely the knowledge of the One who entrusts John with the mission of a lifetime. As with the yard near the house, so also with the mother, in the dream intuition the spaces of the most familiar and everyday experience open up and show an unfathomable depth as they unfold. The common gestures of prayer, the Angelus greeting that was customary three times a day in every family, suddenly appear for what they are: dialogue with the Mystery. John thus discovers that at his mother's school he has already established a bond with the stately Lady who can explain everything to him. Therefore, there is already a sort of female channel that allows us to overcome the apparent distance between "a poor ignorant child" and the "nobly-dressed" man. This feminine, Marian and maternal mediation will accompany John throughout his life and will mature in him

as a particular disposition to venerate the Virgin with the title of Help of Christians, becoming her apostle for her children and for the entire Church.

The first help that Our Lady offers him is what a child naturally needs: a teacher. What she has to teach him is a discipline that makes him truly wise, without which “all wisdom is foolishness.” It is the discipline of faith, which consists in giving credit to God and obeying even in the face of the impossible and the unknown. Mary conveys it as the highest expression of freedom and as the richest source of spiritual and educational fruitfulness. To carry within oneself the impossible of God and to walk in the darkness of faith is, in fact, the art in which the Virgin excels above every creature.

She had an arduous apprenticeship in her *peregrinatio fidei*, marked not infrequently by darkness and misunderstanding. Just think of the episode of the finding of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple (Lk 2:41-50). To the mother’s question: “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety” Jesus answers in a surprising way: “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” And the evangelist notes: “But they did not understand what he said to them.” Even less likely did Mary understand when her motherhood, solemnly announced from on high, was expropriated so that it became a common inheritance of the community of disciples: “For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Mt 12:50). At the foot of the cross then, when it became dark over the whole earth, the Here am I spoken at the moment of her call took on the contours of extreme renunciation, separation from the Son in whose place she was to receive sinful children for whom she let her heart be pierced by the sword.

Therefore, when the stately Lady of the dream begins to carry out her task as a teacher and, placing a hand on John’s head, says “In good time you will understand everything”, she draws these words from the spiritual depths of the faith that at the foot of the cross made her the mother of every disciple. John must remain under her discipline throughout his life: as a young man, as a seminarian, as a priest. In a particular way he must remain there when his mission takes on contours that at the time of the dream he could not imagine; when, that is, he must become in the heart of the Church the founder of religious families destined for the youth of every continent. Then John, by then Don Bosco, would also understand the deeper meaning of the gesture with which the dignified man gave his mother to him as a “teacher”.

When a young man enters a religious family, he is welcomed by a novice master to whom he is entrusted to introduce him to the spirit of the Order and help him assimilate it. *When it comes to a Founder*, who must receive from the Holy

Spirit the original light of the charism, the Lord arranges for his own mother, the Virgin of Pentecost and immaculate model of the Church, to act as 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.

In fact, the woman of the dream knows how to indicate to him in a precise and appropriate way the riches of the Oratory charism. She adds nothing to the words of her Son, but illustrates them with the scene of wild animals becoming meek lambs and with the indication of the qualities that John will have to develop to carry out his mission: “humble, strong, energetic”. These three adjectives, which designate the vigour of the spirit (humility), of character (strength) and of the body (energy) are quite concrete. It was the advice that he would give to a young novice who has a long experience of oratory and knows what the “field” in which he has to “work” requires. The Salesian spiritual tradition has carefully preserved the words of this dream that refer to Mary. The Salesian Constitutions clearly allude to this when they state: “The Virgin Mary showed Don Bosco his field of labour among the young”[ii], or remind us that “Under the guidance of Mary his Teacher, Don Bosco lived with the boys of the first Oratory a spiritual and educational experience which he called the ‘Preventive System’”[iii]. Don Bosco recognised Mary as having a decisive role in his educational system, seeing in her motherhood the highest inspiration of what it means to “prevent”. The fact that Mary intervened from the first moment of his charismatic vocation, that she played such a central role in this dream, will make Don Bosco forever understand that she *belongs to the roots of the charism and that if this inspiring role is not recognised, the charism is not understood in its genuineness*. Given as a teacher to John in this dream, it must also be so for all those who share his vocation and mission. As the successors of Don Bosco never tired of affirming, the “Salesian vocation is inexplicable, both in its birth and in its development and always, without the maternal and uninterrupted assistance of Mary.”[iv].

5. The power of meekness (gentleness)

“You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love”: these words are undoubtedly the best known expression of the dream at nine years of age, the one that somehow summarises the message and conveys its inspiration. They are also the first words that the dignified man says to John, interrupting his violent effort to put an end to the disorder and swearing of his companions. It is not only a formula that conveys an ever valid sapiential sentence, but an expression that specifies the way to carry out a command (“he told me to take charge of these children and added these words”) with which, as has been

said, the intentional movement of the dreamer's consciousness is reoriented. The fervour for blows must become the momentum of charity, the disordered energy of repressive intervention must make way for meekness and gentleness.

The term "meekness" gains significant importance here, which is even more striking when one considers that the corresponding adjective will be used at the end of the dream to describe the lambs rejoicing around the Lord and Mary. The juxtaposition suggests an observation that is not without relevance: *for those who were wild animals to become "meek" lambs, their educator must first become meek*. Both, although starting from different points, must undergo a *metamorphosis* to enter the Christological orbit of gentleness and charity. For a group of rowdy and quarrelsome children, it is easy to understand what this change requires. For an educator, perhaps it is less evident. In fact, the educator is already on the side of goodness, positive values, order, and discipline: what change can be asked of this person?

A theme arises here that will have a decisive development in the life of Don Bosco, first of all in terms of the style of the action and, to a certain extent, also in terms of theoretical reflection. This is the orientation that leads Don Bosco to *categorically exclude an educational system based on repression and punishment*, in order to choose with conviction a method that is fully based on love and that Don Bosco will call the "preventive system". Beyond the different pedagogical implications that derive from this choice, for which we refer to the rich specific bibliography, it is interesting here to highlight the theological and spiritual dimension that underlies this approach, of which the words of the dream are in some way the intuition and the trigger.

Placing himself on the side of good and "law", the educator may be tempted to organise his action with the children according to a logic that aims to establish order and discipline essentially through rules and norms. However, even the law carries within itself an ambiguity that makes it insufficient to guide freedom, not only because of the limitations that every human rule possesses, but also because of a limitation that is ultimately of a theological order. All of Paul's reflection is a great meditation on this subject, since Paul had perceived in his personal experience that the law had not prevented him from being "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence" (1 Tim 1:13). The same Law given by God, Scripture teaches, is not enough to save man, if there is no other personal Principle that integrates and internalises it in the heart of man. Paul Beauchamp happily sums up this dynamic when he states: "The Law is preceded by a *You are loved* and followed by a *You will love*. You are loved: the foundation of the law, and *you will love*: its overcoming."[v]. Without this foundation and this overcoming, the law

bears in itself the signs of a violence that reveals its insufficiency to generate that good that it, too, orders to be done. To return to the scene of the dream, the punches and blows that John gives in the name of a sacrosanct commandment of God, which forbids blasphemy, reveal the insufficiency and ambiguity of any moralising impulse that is not inwardly reformed from above.

It is therefore also necessary for John, and for those who will learn preventive spirituality from him, to convert to an *unprecedented educational logic which goes beyond the regime of the law*. This logic is made possible only by the Spirit of the Risen One, poured into our hearts. Only the Spirit, in fact, allows us to move from a formal and external justice (be it the classic one of "discipline" and "good conduct" or the modern one of "procedures" and "objectives achieved") to a true inner holiness which does good because it is internally attracted and earned. Don Bosco will show that he has this awareness when in his writing on the *Preventive System* he frankly declares that it is entirely based on the words of Saint Paul: "*Charitas benigna est, patiens est; omnia suffert, omnia sperat, omnia sustinet*.".

Of course, "winning over" young people in this way is a very demanding task. It implies not giving in to the coldness of an education based only on rules, nor to the goodness of a proposal that renounces denouncing the "ugliness of sin" and presenting the "value of virtue". Conquering the good by simply showing the strength of truth and love, witnessed to through dedication "to the last breath", is the epitome of an educational method that is at the same time a true spirituality.

It is no wonder that John in the dream resists entering this movement and asks to understand well who is the one imparting it. But when he has understood, making that message first an Oratory- based institution and then also a religious family, he will think that telling the dream in which he learned that lesson will be the most beautiful way to share with his sons the most authentic meaning of his experience. It is God who guided everything, it is He himself who imparted the initial movement of what would become the Salesian charism.

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[i] A. BERTULETTI, *Dio, il mistero dell'unico*, Queriniana, Brescia 2014, 354.

[ii] *Const* Art. 8.

[iii] *Const* Art. 20.

[iv] E. VIGANÒ, *Mary renews Don Bosco's Salesian Family*, ACG 289 (1978) 1-35, 28.

[v] P. BEAUCHAMP, *La legge di Dio,* Piemme, Casale Monferrato 2000, 116.