

Faith, our shield and our victory (1876)

"When I devoted myself to this part of the sacred ministry, I intended to consecrate all my efforts to the greater glory of God and the benefit of souls; I intended to work to make good citizens on this earth, so that they might one day be worthy inhabitants of heaven. May God help me to continue in this way until the last breath of my life." (Don Bosco)

The boys were not the only ones eagerly waiting to hear Don Bosco's dream. He kept his promise a day late in his "Good Night" of June 30, the feast of Corpus Christi.

I am happy to see you (he began). How many angelic faces I see turned toward me (general laughter). I was afraid that I would frighten you by telling you this dream. If I had an angelic face, I would say "look at me!" and all your fears would vanish. Unfortunately I am but clay, the same as you. Nevertheless, we are made in God's likeness, and I can say with St. Paul that you are "my joy and my crown." However, do not be surprised if you find a few rough edges in the crown.

But let us get on to the dream. I was rather unwilling to tell you about it lest it frighten you, but then, I thought, a father should keep no secrets from his children, especially if he feels they are concerned and should know what their father thinks and does. So I made up my mind to tell you the dream in every detail. I only beg you not to give it any more importance than you would any other dream. Choose what you like best, whatever helps you most. We all know that people are asleep when they dream (general laughter), but you must also know that I did not have this dream last night. It came two weeks ago, as you were ending your spiritual retreat. I had long prayed to the Lord to show me my sons' state of conscience, how they could be helped to grow stronger spiritually, and how certain bad habits could be uprooted from

their hearts. This was my anxious concern, especially during this spiritual retreat.

Thank God, the retreat went very well for both students and artisans. But the Lord did not end His mercy there. He chose to give me the privilege to read into the boys' consciences much as one would read a book. More astounding, I not only saw each one's present condition but also whatever he would undergo in the future. This happened in a way which truly astonished me because never before have I been enabled to see so well, so clearly, so openly into future events and into my boys' consciences. This was the first time. I had also prayed a great deal to the Blessed Virgin Mary that She would favor me by having none of you harbor a demon in his heart, and I trust that this request has also been granted, since I have reason to believe that you all opened your consciences to me. Well, then, lost in these thoughts and pleading with the Lord to let me know what would be helpful and what would be harmful to my dear sons' souls, I got into bed and my dream began.

This preamble began with expressions of innate, deep humility but ended with an assertion which precludes any doubt about the supernatural nature of the dream-which may well be entitled: Faith, Our Shield and Our Victory.

I seemed to be at the Oratory in the midst of my boys, my glory and crown. It was evening. Dusk was just settling, so one could see but dimly. As I was walking from this portico toward the main gate, an unbelievably huge crowd of boys closed in about me, as you do because we are friends. Some had come to say hello, others to tell me something. Saying a word here and there, I slowly made my way to the center of the playground. Suddenly I heard drawn out moans and sobs followed by a resounding roar with intermingling boyish screams and wild shrieks which seemed to come from the main entrance. The students ran there to see what was happening, but almost immediately they ran back madly to us along with the terrified artisans. Many artisans had already fled from the gate to the other end of the playground.

As the cries and howls of pain and hopelessness kept

increasing, I anxiously asked what was happening and tried to shove forward to help, but the boys about me wouldn't let me. "Let me go," I cried. "Let me see what is happening to frighten everyone so."

"No, no, please don't go!" they shouted. "Stay away. There's a monster which will swallow you up. Run away with us! Don't go there!"

But I wanted to see and, shaking off the boys, I got close to the artisans' playground.

"Look out!" the boys screamed. "Look out!"

"What's wrong?"

"Look! Back there!"

I turned in the direction indicated and saw a horrid animal. At first I thought that it was a giant lion, but it was nothing like an earthly lion. I gazed intently at it. It was monstrous; it looked like a bear, but seemed more ferocious and was far more terrifying. It had an undersized rump but enormous shoulders and a huge belly. Overly large too was its head, with grotesquely cavernous jaws, open wide, ready to swallow a person at one bite. Its mouth sprouted two thick, long, pointed tusks shaped like sharp swords.

I stepped back among the boys, who kept asking what they were to do, but I was frightened too and at a loss. "I wish I could tell you," I replied, "but I don't know myself. Just now let's stay together under the porticoes."

No sooner had I said this than the bear stalked into the second playground and made its way toward us with a slow heavy tread as though assured of its prey. We drew back in terror until we stood here under this portico, the boys clinging fast to me and all eyes centered on me. "Don Bosco, what should we do?" they pleaded. I kept looking at them in silence, not knowing what action to take. Finally I exclaimed, "Let's turn back to the farther end of the portico, where Our Lady's statue stands. Let's kneel and pray more fervently than usual so that She may tell us what to do and what kind of a monster this is, and so that She may rescue us. If it is just a wild animal of some kind, we shall manage to kill it somehow; if it

is a demon, Mary will come to our aid. Don't be afraid. Our heavenly Mother will see to our safety."

Meanwhile the beast kept up its slow approach, belly close to the ground, crouching and preparing to spring and seize us.

We fell to our knees in prayer. It was a moment of utter helplessness. The huge monster had gotten so close that in one leap it could be upon us. Then, all at once-I don't know how or when-we found ourselves on the other side of the wall in the clerics' dining room.

In the center I could see Our Lady. I am not sure, but She looked like the statue we have here in the portico or the one in the dining room itself, or maybe like the statue atop the dome or the one inside the church. But, be it as it may, there She stood, aglow with a brilliance which blazed through the dining room now grown a hundred times in breadth and height. She shone like the sun at midday, thronged by saints and angels.

The dining room seemed like heaven. Her lips moved as though She wished to say something to us.

We were a countless crowd in that dining hall. Astonishment had replaced terror in our hearts. The eyes of all were upon the Madonna.

"Do not be afraid," She reassured us in the gentlest of tones.

"My divine Son is just testing you."

I looked carefully at the persons brilliant in glory who surrounded the Blessed Virgin and recognized Father Alasonatti, Father Ruffino, a certain Brother Michael of the Christian Schools, whom some of you knew, and my own brother Joseph. I saw others too who had once attended our Oratory or belonged to our Congregation and are now in heaven. In their company I also saw several others who are living today.

Suddenly, one of those about the Blessed Virgin loudly announced, "*Surgamus!* Let us rise!" Since we were already standing, we could not understand his command.

"Why *surgamus*? We are already on our feet."

"*Surgamus!*" he repeated in stentorian tones. The boys looked at me, thoroughly surprised and still, waiting for directions

because they had no idea of what to do. I turned toward the one who had given the command and asked, "What do you want us to do? What does *surgamus* mean, since we are already on our feet?"

"*Surgamus!*" he again ordered in a stronger tone. The order made no sense to me; it was incomprehensible.

As I was standing on a table for better control of the crowd, one of those who thronged around the Blessed Virgin addressed me in a wondrously powerful voice. The boys listened intently as he said to me, "You are a priest and should understand what this *surgamus* means. When you offer Holy Mass, do you not say *sursum corda* [lift up your hearts] every day? Are you speaking about the physical act of standing up? Don't you mean instead the uplifting of the heart's love to God?"

Turning to the boys I instantly shouted, "Up, up with your hearts, my sons! Let us strengthen our faith and raise our hearts to God. Let us make an act of love and repentance. Let us earnestly strive to pray with lively fervor. Let us trust in God." I gave a sign and we all knelt down. Moments later, as we softly prayed in an outburst of confidence, we again heard a voice ordering, "Surgite! Rise!" Leaping to our feet, we all felt that we were being lifted from the ground by some kind of supernatural power – how high I cannot say, but I know that we were all raised quite a distance above the ground. I have no idea what supported us. I do recall that I held fast to the sill or frame of a window. All the boys were clinging to windows or doors – one gripping here and one there, some holding on to iron bars or stout spikes, some others to the cornices of the ceiling. We were all hanging in the air, and I wondered that none of us fell to the floor.

Then, behold, the monster we had seen in the playground stormed into the dining room, followed by a vast herd of other wild animals. They stamped about the dining hall growling frightfully, straining for combat and ready to pounce upon us at any moment. But, though they kept eyeing us, staring with bloodshot eyes and tossing their heads, they did not immediately attack us. We looked down on them from above.

Clinging for life to that window, I thought, Were I to fall, how horribly they would tear me to shreds!

Caught as we were in these strange positions, we heard Our Lady sing out the words of St. Paul: *Sumite ergo scutum fidei inexpugnabile*. [Take up, therefore, the impregnable shield of faith. cf. Eph. 6, 16] So harmonious was the sound, so full, so sublimely melodious, that we listened ecstatically. Every note could be heard from the lowest to highest, and we thought that a hundred voices had blended into one.

Intent upon this heavenly song, we noticed a number of graceful young lads, who had descended from heaven on wings, leave Our Lady's side and draw near to us. They bore shields in their hands and put one up against the heart of each boy. They were large shields, sparkling in beauty and reflecting the light which shone from the Madonna. It was a heavenly sight. Each shield seemed to have a steel center, surrounded by a large ring of diamonds, and the whole shield was edged in purest gold. It was all one could hope for in beauty, sweetness, and melody.

As I gazed about me, lost in the music, I was startled by a booming voice which cried: *Ad pugnam!* [To arms!] Then the wild beasts began stamping about furiously. In a flash we all found ourselves on the floor, each on his feet, each engaged in deadly combat with those monsters, protected only by our divine shields. I can't say whether the struggle took place inside the dining hall or out in the playground. The heavenly choir did not interrupt its singing. The monsters rushed at us as smoke streamed from their gaping mouths along with leaden balls, spears, arrows, and weapons of all kinds. But these weapons either missed us or hit our shields and bounced off.

Our adversaries were bent on wounding and slaughtering us, and they kept hurling themselves against us, but all in vain. Meeting us head on, they smashed their fangs and were forced to flee. In waves these hordes of frightful monsters assailed us, but all met with the same fate.

It was a lengthy battle, but finally we heard Our Lady saying: *Haec est victoria vestra, quae vincit mundum, fides vestra.*

[This is the victory that overcomes the world: your faith-cf. I Jn. 5, 4.]

At Her voice, the entire herd of frightened beasts balked and, dashing headlong, disappeared, leaving us safe, free, victorious in that immense dining hall, still ablaze with the brilliance emanating from the Madonna.

Then I carefully studied the faces of those who bore the shields. They were an immense number. Among others I could see Father Alasonatti, Father Ruffino, my brother Joseph, and the Christian Brother who had fought by our side.

But the boys could not take their eyes away from the Blessed Virgin. She was chanting a canticle of thanksgiving which gladdened us with a new joy and an ecstasy beyond words. I doubt that a lovelier canticle can be heard in heaven itself.

Suddenly our happiness was rudely broken by blood-curdling shrieks and cries intermingled with bellowing roars. Were some of our boys being torn to pieces by the wild beasts which had fled the scene but moments before? I immediately tried to rush out and help these sons, but I could not because the boys kept restraining me and firmly refused to let me out of the room. I struggled to free myself. "Let me go to help those poor boys," I begged. "I want to see them. If they are hurt or killed, I want to die with them. I must go, even if it costs me my life." Tearing myself from those who were holding me, I dashed out to the portico. Oh, what horror! The playground was strewn with the dead, the dying and the wounded. Boys, panicking with fear, tried to flee in all directions, only to be pursued by those monsters which pounced on them, sinking their fangs into their arms and legs, tearing them to pieces. Every second some boys fell to the ground and died amid horrifying screams.

But the beast that wrought the most fearful slaughter of all was the bear which had first appeared in the artisans' playground. With its sword-sharp tusks it pierced the boys' chests first from the right side to the left, and then from left to right. The victims fell tragically dead with a double mortal wound through the heart.

With determination I shouted, "Courage, my dear sons!"

Immediately many lads ran to me for protection, but they were pursued by the bear. Summoning up my courage, I stepped forward in its path, joined by some of the boys who had already conquered the beasts in the dining room.

That prince of darkness flung itself upon us but could not hurt us because of our shields. In fact, it could not even touch us because the very sight of the shields forced it to back away in terror and even homage. Then it was that, as I fixed my gaze on the two long sword-sharp tusks, I noticed one word on each in big letters: *Otium* [Idleness] on one, *Gula* [Gluttony] on the other. In utter surprise I kept asking myself: Is it possible that here where everyone is so busy and we do not know where to begin doing all the work we have to do, there is still someone who idles a way his time? As for the boys, I think they keep busy with their work, study and play. It made no sense to me.

Then someone said: "And yet how many half-hours they waste!"

"But gluttony too?" I asked. "Here at the Oratory one could not indulge in gluttony if he wanted to. There is hardly ever a chance. Our food is most ordinary and so is what we drink. We barely have just what we need. How could one be so intemperate as to endanger his eternal salvation?"

Again came the reply: "Oh, you priest! You think you are well versed in moral theology and quite experienced, but on this point you know nothing. You are a babe in arms. Do you not know that one may sin by gluttony and intemperance even when drinking water?"

I wasn't convinced at all, and I wanted a better explanation. While the dining hall was still bright with the Blessed Virgin's presence, I went very sadly to Brother Michael to clear up my doubts. "My friend," he answered, "you are still a novice in these things. I will teach you." As regards gluttony, you must learn that one can be intemperate by eating, drinking or sleeping more than one needs, and by pampering the body in other ways. As for idleness, you must know that it does not just mean being lazy. It also means letting one's fantasy run on to dangerous thoughts. One can

also be idle during study periods by fooling around and disturbing others, by wasting time in silly reading, or by being slothful, especially in church. Idleness is the father, the font and source of many temptations and of all evils. You who are these boys' director must safeguard them from these two sins by striving to strengthen their faith. If you can manage to make your boys temperate in the little things I have mentioned, they will always overcome the devil. Through temperance they will grow in humility, chastity, and other virtues as well. If they will properly use their time, they will never fall into the clutches of the infernal enemy but will live and die as saintly Christians."

I thanked him for his instructions and then, wanting to verify the reality of all this, lest it be a mere dream, I tried to grasp his hand but touched nothing. Again and again I tried but failed. I grasped nothing but air. Yet I could see those people. They were talking and seemed real. I approached Father Alasonatti, Father Ruffino, and my brother, but once more I grasped nothing.

Beside myself, I cried out, "Is this all true or not? Aren't these all real people? Didn't I hear them talk?"

Brother Michael replied, "After all your studies, you should know that as long as my soul is separated from my body, it is useless to try to touch me. You cannot touch a pure spirit. We take on our former likeness only to enable mortal eyes to see us. But when we shall all have risen at the Last Judgment, then we shall put on our bodies, immortal and spiritualized."

Then I tried to draw close to Our Lady who seemed to have something to tell me. I was almost beside Her when I heard a new uproar and more shrieks from outside. I immediately dashed out of the dining hall again, but as I did so, I awoke.

To conclude his account, Don Bosco added these reflections and suggestions:

Whatever this mixed-up dream may mean, it does restate and explain St. Paul's words. However, I was so worn out and exhausted by the strain of this dream that I begged the Lord never to send me any more dreams like that. But – wouldn't

you know it? – the following night that very same dream came back, only this time I had to see it to the end, something I was spared the night before. I was so frightened that I screamed. Father Berto heard me and in the morning he asked me why I had shrieked and if I had passed a sleepless night. These dreams drain me far more than if I were to spend the night at my desk.

As I said, this is only a dream. I do not want you to give it any more importance. Think of it only as a dream, no more. I would not like you to write home about it or tell outsiders who know nothing of the Oratory, lest they say, as they have already, that Don Bosco fills his boys with dreams. I don't really mind, though. Let them say what they will, but let each of us draw from this dream whatever applies. Just now I will not give you any explanations because all of you can easily understand the dream.

I only recommend very strongly that you revive your faith, which is safeguarded particularly by being temperate and avoiding idleness. Let temperance be a friend and sloth an enemy. Some other evening I will return to this subject. For now, good night.

(BM XII, 248-255)