

□ Reading time: 24 min.

*“The Journey to the City of Fire” is one of Saint John Bosco’s most famous “dreams”, which he recounted to his boys on 3 May 1868. In this dramatic vision, the educator, escorted by an enigmatic “man in a bonnet”, travels through a desolate landscape to the ramparts of hell, where he sees young people he knows falling among invisible snares and eternal flames. Each episode is a moral symbol: the threads represent human respect, the knives prayer, the bronze doors the consequences of sin. Don Bosco transformed the anguish of the dream into catechesis, warning his pupils against disobedience, impurity, avarice and idleness, and indicating the sacraments, Marian devotion and obedience as paths to salvation. The account remains an unparalleled document of his pastoral zeal and ardent educational charity.*

Sunday night, May 3 [1868] the feast of St. Joseph’s patronage, Don Bosco resumed the narration of his dreams:

I have another dream to tell you, a sort of aftermath of those I told you last Thursday and Friday which totally exhausted me. Call them dreams or whatever you like. Anyway, as you know, on the night of April 17 a frightful toad seemed bent on devouring me. When it finally vanished, a voice said to me: “Why don’t you tell them?” I turned in that direction and saw a distinguished person standing by my bed. Feeling guilty about my silence, I asked: “What should I tell my boys?”

“What you have seen and heard in your last dreams and what you have wanted to know and shall have revealed to you tomorrow night!” He then vanished.

I spent the whole next day worrying about the miserable night in store for me, and when evening came, loath to go to bed, I sat at my desk browsing through books until midnight. The mere thought of having more nightmares thoroughly scared me. However, with great effort, I finally went to bed.

Lest I should fall asleep immediately and start dreaming, I set my pillow upright against the headboard and practically sat up, but soon in my exhaustion I simply fell asleep. Immediately the same person of the night before appeared at my bedside. (*Don Bosco often called him "the man with the cap."*)

"Get up and follow me!" he said.

"For heaven's sake," I protested, "leave me alone. I am exhausted! I've been tormented by a toothache for several days now and need rest. Besides, nightmares have completely worn me out." I said this because this man's apparition always means trouble, fatigue, and terror for me.

"Get up," he repeated. "You have no time to lose."

I complied and followed him. "Where are you taking me?" I asked.

"Never mind. You'll see." He led me to a vast, boundless plain, veritably a lifeless desert, with not a soul in sight or a tree or brook. Yellowed, dried-up vegetation added to the desolation. I had no idea where I was or what was I to do. For a moment I even lost sight of my guide and feared that I was lost, utterly alone. Father Rua, Father Francesia, and the others were nowhere to be seen. When I finally saw my friend coming toward me, I sighed in relief.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"Come with me and you will find out!"

"All right. I'll go with you."

He led the way and I followed in silence, but after a long, dismal trudge, I began worrying whether I would ever be able to cross that vast expanse, what with my toothache and swollen legs. Suddenly I saw a road ahead. "Where to now?" I asked my guide.

"This way," he replied.

We took the road. It was beautiful, wide, and neatly paved. *Via peccantium complanata lapidibus, et in fine illorum inferi, et tenebrae, et poenae* [The way of sinners is smooth stones and at their end are hell and darkness and pain — Sir. 21, 11]. Both sides were lined with magnificent verdant hedges dotted with gorgeous

flowers. Roses, especially, peeped everywhere through the leaves. At first glance, the road was level and comfortable, and so I ventured upon it without the least suspicion, but soon I noticed that it insensibly kept sloping downward. Though it did not look steep at all, I found myself moving so swiftly that I felt I was effortlessly gliding through the air. Really, I was gliding and hardly using my feet. Then the thought struck me that the return trip would be very long and arduous.

“How shall we get back to the Oratory? I asked worriedly.

“Do not worry,” he answered. “The Almighty wants you to go. He who leads you on will also know how to lead you back.”

The road kept sloping downward. As we were continuing on our way, flanked by banks of roses and other flowers, I became aware that the Oratory boys and very many others whom I did not know were following me. Somehow I found myself in their midst. As I was looking at them, I noticed now one, now another fall to the ground and instantly be dragged by an unseen force toward a frightful drop, distantly visible, which sloped into a furnace. “What makes these boys fall?” I asked my companion. *Funes extenderunt in laqueum; iuxta iter scandalum posuerunt* [They have spread cords for a net; by the wayside they have laid snares for me — Ps. 139, 6].

“Take a closer look,” he replied.

I did. Traps were everywhere, some close to the ground, others at eye level, but all well concealed. Unaware of their danger, many boys got caught, and they tripped, they would sprawl to the ground, legs in the air. Then, when they managed to get back on their feet, they would run headlong down the road toward the abyss. Some got trapped by the head, others by the neck, hand, arms, legs, or sides, and were pulled down instantly. The ground traps, fine as spiders’ webs and hardly visible, seemed very flimsy and harmless; yet, to my surprise, every boy they snared fell to the ground.

Noticing my astonishment, the guide remarked, “Do you know what this is?”

“Just some filmy fiber,” I answered.

“A mere nothing,” he said, “just plain human respect.”

Seeing that many boys were being caught in those traps, I asked, “Why do so many

get caught? Who pulls them down?"

"Go nearer and you will see!" he told me.

I followed his advice but saw nothing peculiar.

"Look closer," he insisted.

I picked up one of the traps and tugged. I immediately felt some resistance. I pulled harder, only to feel that, instead of drawing the thread closer, I was being pulled down myself. I did not resist and soon found myself at the mouth of a frightful cave. I halted, unwilling to venture into that deep cavern, and again started pulling the thread toward me. It gave a little, but only through great effort on my part. I kept tugging, and after a long while a huge, hideous monster emerged, clutching a rope to which all those traps were tied together. He was the one who instantly dragged down anyone who got caught in them. *It won't do to match my strength with his, I said to myself. I'll certainly lose. I'd better fight him with the Sign of the Cross and with short invocations.*

Then I went back to my guide. "Now you know who he is," he said to me.

"I surely do! It is the devil himself!"

Carefully examining many of the traps, I saw that each bore an inscription: Pride, Disobedience, Envy, Sixth Commandment, Theft, Gluttony, Sloth, Anger and so on. Stepping back a bit to see which ones trapped the greater number of boys, I discovered that the most dangerous were those of impurity, disobedience, and pride. In fact, these three were linked together. Many other traps also did great harm, but not as much as the first two. Still watching, I noticed many boys running faster than others. "Why such haste?" I asked.

"Because they are dragged by the snare of human respect."

Looking even more closely, I spotted knives among the traps. A providential hand had put them there for cutting oneself free. The bigger ones, symbolizing meditation, were for use against the trap of pride; others, not quite as big, symbolized spiritual reading well made. There were also two swords representing devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, especially through frequent Holy Communion, and to the Blessed Virgin. There was also a hammer symbolizing confession, and other knives signifying devotion to St. Joseph, to St. Aloysius, and to other saints. By

these means quite a few boys were able to free themselves or evade capture.

Indeed I saw some lads walking safely through all those traps, either by good timing before the trap sprung on them or by making it slip off them if they got caught.

When my guide was satisfied that I had observed everything, he made me continue along that rose-hedged road, but the farther we went the scarcer the roses became. Long thorns began to show up, and soon the roses were no more. The hedges became sun-scorched, leafless, and thorn-studded. Withered branches torn from the bushes lay crisscrossed along the roadbed, littering it with thorns and making it impassable. We had come now to a gulch whose steep sides hid what lay beyond. The road, still sloping downward, was becoming ever more horrid, rutted, guttered, and bristling with rocks and boulders. I lost track of all my boys, most of whom had left this treacherous road for other paths.

I kept going, but the further I advanced, the more arduous and steep became the descent, so that I tumbled and fell several times, lying prostrate until I could catch my breath. Now and then my guide supported me or helped me to rise. At every step my joints seemed to give way, and I thought my shinbones would snap. Panting, I said to my guide, "My good fellow, my legs won't carry me another step. I just can't go any farther."

He did not answer but continued walking. Taking heart, I followed until, seeing me soaked in perspiration and thoroughly exhausted, he led me to a little clearing alongside the road. I sat down, took a deep breath, and felt a little better. From my resting place, the road I had already traveled looked very steep, jagged, and strewn with loose stones, but what lay ahead seemed so much worse that I closed my eyes in horror.

"Let's go back," I pleaded. "If we go any farther, how shall we ever get back to the Oratory? I will never make it up this slope."

"Now that we have come so far, do you want me to leave you here?" my guide sternly asked.

At this threat, I wailed, "How can I survive without your help?" "Then follow me."

We continued our descent, the road now becoming so frightfully steep that it was almost impossible to stand erect. And then, at the bottom of this precipice, at the

entrance of a dark valley, an enormous building loomed into sight, its towering portal, tightly locked, facing our road. When I finally got to the bottom, I became smothered by a suffocating heat, while a greasy, green-tinted smoke lit by flashes of scarlet flames rose from behind those enormous walls which loomed higher than mountains.

“Where are we? What is this?” I asked my guide.

“Read the inscription on that portal and you will know.”

I looked up and read these words: *Ubi non est redemptio* [The place of no reprieve]. I realized that we were at the gates of hell. The guide led me all around this horrible place. At regular distances, bronze portals like the first overlooked precipitous descents; on each was an inscription, such as: *Discedite, maledicti, in ignem aeternum qui paratus est diabolo et angelis eius* [Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels — Matt. 25, 41]; *Omnis arbor quae non facit fructum bonum excidetur et in ignem mittetur* [Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire — Matt. 7, 19].

I tried to copy them into my notebook, but my guide restrained me: “There is no need. You have them all in Holy Scripture. You even have some of them inscribed in your porticoes.”

At such a sight I wanted to turn back and return to the Oratory. As a matter of fact, I did start back, but my guide ignored my attempt. After trudging through a steep, never-ending ravine, we again came to the foot of the precipice facing the first portal. Suddenly the guide turned to me. Upset and startled, he motioned to me to step aside. “Look!” he said.

I looked up in terror and saw in the distance someone racing down the path at an uncontrollable speed. I kept my eyes on him, trying to identify him, and as he got closer, I recognized him as one of my boys. His disheveled hair was partly standing upright on his head and partly tossed back by the wind. His arms were outstretched as though he were thrashing the water in an attempt to stay afloat. He wanted to stop, but could not. Tripping on the protruding stones, he kept falling even faster. “Let’s help him, let’s stop him,” I shouted, holding out my hands in a vain effort to restrain him.

“Leave him alone,” the guide replied.

“Why?”

“Don’t you know how terrible God’s vengeance is? Do you think you can restrain one who is fleeing from His just wrath?”

Meanwhile the youth had turned his fiery gaze backward in an attempt to see if God’s wrath were still pursuing him. The next moment he fell tumbling to the bottom of the ravine and crashed against the bronze portal as though he could find no better refuge in his flight.

“Why was he looking backward in terror?” I asked.

“Because God’s wrath will pierce hell’s gates to reach and torment him even in the midst of fire!”

As the boy crashed into the portal, it sprang open with a roar, and instantly a thousand inner portals opened with a deafening clamor as if struck by a body that had been propelled by an invisible, most violent, irresistible gale. As these bronze doors — one behind the other, though at a considerable distance from each other — remained momentarily open, I saw far into the distance something like furnace jaws spouting fiery balls the moment the youth hurtled into it. As swiftly as they had opened, the portals then clanged shut again. For a third time I tried to jot down the name of that unfortunate lad, but the guide again restrained me. “Wait,” he ordered. “Watch!”

Three other boys of ours, screaming in terror and with arms outstretched, were rolling down one behind the other like massive rocks. I recognized them as they too crashed against the portal. In that split second, it sprang open and so did the other thousand. The three lads were sucked into that endless corridor amid a long-drawn, fading, infernal echo, and then the portals clanged shut again. At intervals, many other lads came tumbling down after them. I saw one unlucky boy being pushed down the slope by an evil companion. Others fell singly or with others, arm in arm or side by side. Each of them bore the name of his sin on his forehead. I kept calling to them as they hurtled down, but they did not hear me. Again the portals would open thunderously and slam shut with a rumble. Then, dead silence!

“Bad companions, bad books, and bad habits,” my guide exclaimed, “are mainly

responsible for so many eternally lost.”

The traps I had seen earlier were indeed dragging the boys to ruin. Seeing so many going to perdition, I cried out disconsolately, “If so many of our boys end up this way, we are working in vain. How can we prevent such tragedies?”

“This is their present state,” my guide replied, “and that is where they would go if they were to die now.”

“Then let me jot down their names so that I may warn them and put them back on the path to heaven.”

“Do you really believe that some of them would reform if you were to warn them? Then and there your warning might impress them, but soon they will forget it, saying, ‘It was just a dream,’ and they will do worse than before. Others, realizing they have been unmasked, will receive the sacraments, but this will be neither spontaneous nor meritorious; others will go to confession because of a momentary fear of hell but will still be attached to sin.”

“Then is there no way to save these unfortunate lads? Please, tell me what I can do for them.”

“They have superiors; let them obey them. They have rules; let them observe them. They have the sacraments; let them receive them.”

Just then a new group of boys came hurtling down and the portals momentarily opened. “Let’s go in,” the guide said to me.

I pulled back in horror. I could not wait to rush back to the Oratory to warn the boys lest others might be lost as well.

“Come,” my guide insisted. “You’ll learn much. But first tell me: Do you wish to go alone or with me?” He asked this to make me realize that I was not brave enough and therefore needed his friendly assistance.

“Alone inside that horrible place?” I replied. “How will I ever be able to find my way out without your help?” Then a thought came to my mind and aroused my courage. *Before one is condemned to hell, I said to myself, he must be judged. And I haven’t been judged yet!*

“Let’s go,” I exclaimed resolutely, We entered that narrow, horrible corridor and whizzed through it with lightning speed. Threatening inscriptions shone eerily over all the inner gateways. The last one opened into a vast, grim courtyard with a large, unbelievably forbidding entrance at the far end. Above it stood this inscription: *Ibunt impii in ignem aeternum* [And these (the wicked) shall go into everlasting fire — Matt. 25, 46]. The walls all about were similarly inscribed. I asked my guide if I could read them, and he consented. These were the inscriptions:

*Dabo ignem in carnes eorum ut comburantur in sempiternum* [I will give fire ... into their flesh that they may burn forever — Cf. Judith 16, 21].

*Cruciabuntur die ac nocte in saecula saeculorum* [They will be tormented day and night forever and ever — Apoc. 20, 10].

*Hic universitas malorum per omnia saecula saeculorum* [Here all kinds of torments forever and ever].

*Nullus est hic ordo, sed horror sempiternus inhabitat* [Here disorder and everlasting horror dwell — Job 10, 22].

*Fumus tormentorum suorum in aeternum ascendit* [The smoke of their torments goes up forever and ever — Apoc. 14, 11],

*Non est pax impiis* [There is no peace to the wicked — Is. 48, 22].

*Clamor et stridor dentium* [There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth — Matt. 8, 12].

While I moved from one inscription to another, my guide, who had stood in the center of the courtyard, came up to me.

“From here on,” he said, “no one may have a helpful companion, a comforting friend, a loving heart, a compassionate glance, or a benevolent word. All that is gone forever. Do you just want to see or would you rather experience these things yourself?”

“I only want to see!” I answered.

“Then come with me,” my friend added, and, taking me in tow, he stepped through that gate into a corridor at whose far end stood an observation platform, closed by

a huge, single crystal pane reaching from the pavement to the ceiling. As soon as I crossed its threshold, I felt an indescribable terror and dared not take another step. Ahead of me I could see something like an immense cave which gradually disappeared into recesses sunk far into the bowels of the mountains. They were all ablaze, but theirs was not an earthly fire with leaping tongues of flames. The entire cave — walls, ceiling, floor, iron, stones, wood, and coal — everything was a glowing white at temperatures of thousands of degrees. Yet the fire did not incinerate, did not consume. I simply can't find words to describe the cavern's horror. *Praeparata est enim ab heri Thopeth, a rege praeparata, profunda et dilatata. Nutrimenta eius, ignis et ligna multa; flatus Domini sicut torrens sulphuris succendens eam* [For in Topheth there has been prepared beforehand ... a pit deep and wide with straw and wood in plenty. The breath of Yahweh, like a stream of brimstone, will set fire to it — Is. 30, 33].

I was staring in bewilderment about me when a lad dashed out of a gate. Seemingly unaware of anything else, he emitted a most shrilling scream, like one who is about to fall into a cauldron of liquid bronze, and plummeted into the center of the cave. Instantly he too became incandescent and perfectly motionless, while the echo of his dying wail lingered for an instant more.

Terribly frightened, I stared briefly at him for a while. He seemed to be one of my Oratory boys. "Isn't he so and so?" I asked my guide.

"Yes," was the answer.

"Why is he so still, so incandescent?"

"You chose to see," he replied. "Be satisfied with that. Just keep looking. Besides, *omnis enim igne salietur et omnis victima sale salietur* [Everyone shall be salted with fire; every victim shall be salted — Mark 9, 48].

As I looked again, another boy came hurtling down into the cave at breakneck speed. He too was from the Oratory. As he fell, so he remained. He too emitted one single heartrending shriek that blended with the last echo of the scream that came from the youth who had preceded him. Other boys kept hurtling in the same way in increasing numbers, all screaming the same way and then all becoming equally motionless and incandescent. I noticed that the first seemed frozen to the spot, one hand and one foot raised into the air; the second boy seemed bent almost double to the floor. Others stood or hung in various other positions, balancing themselves on

one foot or hand, sitting or lying on their backs or on their sides, standing or kneeling, hands clutching their hair. Briefly, the scene resembled a large statuary group of youngsters cast into ever more painful postures. Other lads hurtled into that same furnace. Some I knew; others were strangers to me. I then recalled what is written in the Bible to the effect that as one falls into hell, so he shall forever remain. *Lignum, in quocumque loco ceciderit, ibi erit* [Where the tree falls, there it shall lie — Eccles. 11, 3].

More frightened than ever, I asked my guide, “When these boys come dashing into this cave, don’t they know where they are going?”

“They surely do. They have been warned a thousand times, but they still choose to rush into the fire because they do not detest sin and are loath to forsake it. Furthermore, they despise and reject God’s incessant, merciful invitations to do penance. Thus provoked, Divine Justice harries them, hounds them, and goads them on so that they cannot halt until they reach this place.”

“Oh, how miserable these unfortunate boys must feel in knowing they no longer have any hope,” I exclaimed.

“If you really want to know their innermost frenzy and fury, go a little closer,” my guide remarked.

I took a few steps forward and saw that many of those poor wretches were savagely striking at each other like mad dogs. Others were clawing their own faces and hands, tearing their own flesh and spitefully throwing it about. Just then the entire ceiling of the cave became as transparent as crystal and revealed a patch of heaven and their radiant companions safe for all eternity.

The poor wretches, fuming and panting with envy, burned with rage because they had once ridiculed the just. *Peccator videbit et irascetur; dentibus suis fremet et tabescet* [The wicked shall see and shall be angry. He shall gnash his teeth and pine away — Ps. III, 10].

“Why do I hear no sound?” I asked my guide.

“Go closer!” he advised.

Pressing my ear to the crystal window, I heard screams and sobs, blasphemies and imprecations against the saints. It was a tumult of voices and cries, shrill and

confused.

“When they recall the happy lot of their good companions,” he replied, “they are obliged to admit: *Nos, insensati, vitam illorum aestimabamus insaniam et finem illorum sine honore. Ecce quomodo computati sunt inter filios Dei et inter sanctos sors illorum est. Ergo erravimus a via veritatis* [Fools that we were! Their lives we deemed madness and their deaths dishonored. See how they are accounted among the sons of God; their lot is with the saints. We, then, have strayed from the way of the truth — Wis. 5, 4-5].

“That is why they cry out: *Lassati sumus in via iniquitatis et perditionis. Erravimus per vias difficiles, viam autem Domini ignoravimus. Quid nobis profuit superbia? . . . Transierunt omnia illa tamquam umbra* [We had our fill of the ways of mischief and ruin. We journeyed through impassable deserts, but the way of the Lord we knew not. What did our pride avail us?... All those things passed like a shadow — Wis. 5, 7-9].

“Such are the mournful chants which shall echo here throughout eternity. But their shouts, their efforts and their cries are all in vain. *Omnis dolor irruet super eos!* [All evils will fall upon them — Cf. Job. 20, 22].

“Here time is no more. Here is only eternity.”

While I viewed the condition of many of my boys in utter terror, a thought suddenly struck me. “How can these boys be damned?” I asked. “Last night they were still alive at the Oratory!”

“The boys you see here,” he answered, “are all dead to God’s grace. Were they to die now or persist in their evil ways, they would be damned. But we are wasting time. Let us go on.”

He led me away and we went down through a corridor into a lower cavern, at whose entrance I read: *Vermis eorum non morietur, et ignis non extinguetur* [Their worm shall not die and their fire shall not be quenched — Is. 66, 24]. *Dabit Dominus omnipotens ignem et vermes in carnes eorum ut urantur et sentiant usque in sempiternum* [He will give fire and worms into their flesh, that they may burn and may feel for ever — Judith 16, 21].

Here one could see how atrocious was the remorse of those who had been pupils in

our schools. What a torment was theirs to remember each unforgiven sin and its just punishment, the countless, even extraordinary means they had had to mend their ways, persevere in virtue, and earn paradise, and their lack of response to the many favors promised and bestowed by the Virgin Mary. What a torture to think that they could have been saved so easily, yet now are irredeemably lost, and to remember the many good resolutions made and never kept. Hell is indeed paved with good intentions!

In this lower cavern I again saw those Oratory boys who had fallen into the fiery furnace. Some are listening to me right now; others are former pupils or even strangers to me. I drew closer to them and noticed that they were all covered with worms and vermin which gnawed at their vitals, hearts, eyes, hands, legs, and entire bodies so ferociously as to defy description. Helpless and motionless, they were a prey to every kind of torment. Hoping I might be able to speak with them or to hear something from them, I drew even closer but no one spoke or even looked at me. I then asked my guide why, and he explained that the damned are totally deprived of freedom. Each must fully endure his own punishment, with absolutely no reprieve whatever.

“And now,” he added, “you too must enter that cavern.”

“Oh, no!” I objected in terror. “Before going to hell, one has to be judged. I have not been judged yet, and so I will not go to hell!”

“Listen,” he said, “what would you rather do: visit hell and save your boys, or stay outside and leave them in agony?”

For a moment I was struck speechless. “Of course I love my boys and wish to save them all,” I replied, “but isn’t there some other way out?”

“Yes, there is a way,” he went on, “provided you do all you can.” I breathed more easily and instantly said to myself, I don’t mind slaving if I can rescue these beloved sons of mine from such torments.

“Come inside then,” my friend went on, “and see how our good, almighty God lovingly provides a thousand means for guiding your boys to penance and saving them from everlasting death.”

Taking my hand, he led me into the cave. As I stepped in, I found myself suddenly

transported into a magnificent hall whose curtained glass doors concealed more entrances.

Above one of them I read this inscription: The Sixth Commandment. Pointing to it, my guide exclaimed, "Transgressions of this commandment caused the eternal ruin of many boys."

"Didn't they go to confession?"

"They did, but they either omitted or insufficiently confessed the sins against the beautiful virtue of purity, saying for instance that they had committed such sins two or three times when it was four or five. Other boys may have fallen into that sin but once in their childhood, and, through shame, never confessed it or did so insufficiently. Others were not truly sorry or sincere in their resolve to avoid it in the future. There were even some who, rather than examine their conscience, spent their time trying to figure out how best to deceive their confessor. Anyone dying in this frame of mind chooses to be among the damned, and so he is doomed for all eternity. Only those who die truly repentant shall be eternally happy. Now do you want to see why our merciful God brought you here?" He lifted the curtain and I saw a group of Oratory boys — all known to me — who were there because of this sin. Among them were some whose conduct seems to be good.

"Now you will surely let me take down their names so that I may warn them individually," I exclaimed.

"It won't be necessary!"

"Then what do you suggest I tell them?"

"Always preach against immodesty. A generic warning will suffice. Bear in mind that even if you did admonish them individually, they would promise, but not always in earnest. For a firm resolution, one needs God's grace which will not be denied to your boys if they pray. God manifests His power especially by being merciful and forgiving. On your part, pray and make sacrifices. As for the boys, let them listen to your admonitions and consult their conscience. It will tell them what to do."

We spent the next half hour discussing the requisites of a good confession. Afterward, my guide several times exclaimed in a loud voice, "*Avertere! Avertere!*"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

“Change life!”

Perplexed, I bowed my head and made as if to withdraw, but he held me back.

“You haven’t seen everything yet,” he explained.

He turned and lifted another curtain bearing this inscription: *Qui volunt divites fieri, incidunt in tentationem et laqueum diaboli* [Those who long to be rich fall a prey to temptation and to the snares of the devil — 1 Tim. 6, 9].

“This does not apply to my boys,” I countered, “because they are as poor as I am. We are not rich and do not want to be. We give it no thought.”

As the curtain was lifted, however, I saw a group of boys, all known to me. They were in pain, like those I had seen before. Pointing to them, my guide remarked, As you see, the inscription does apply to your boys.”

“But how?” I asked.

“Well,” he said, “some boys are so attached to material possessions that their love of God is lessened. Thus they sin against charity, piety, and meekness. Even the mere desire of riches can corrupt the heart, especially if such a desire leads to injustice. Your boys are poor, but remember that greed and idleness are bad counselors. One of your boys committed substantial thefts in his native town, and though he could make restitution, he gives it not a thought. There are others who try to break into the pantry or the prefect’s or economer’s office; those who rummage in their companions’ trunks for food, money, or possessions; those who steal stationery and books...”

After naming these boys and others as well, he continued, “Some are here for having stolen clothes, linen, blankets, and coats from the Oratory wardrobe in order to send them home to their families; others for willful, serious damage; others, yet, for not having given back what they had borrowed or for having kept sums of money they were supposed to hand over to the superior. Now that you know who these boys are,” he concluded, “admonish them. Tell them to curb all vain, harmful desires, to obey God’s law and to safeguard their reputation jealously lest greed lead them to greater excesses and plunge them into sorrow, death, and damnation.”

I couldn’t understand why such dreadful punishments should be meted out for

infractions that boys thought so little of, but my guide shook me out of my thoughts by saying: "Recall what you were told when you saw those spoiled grapes on the vine." With these words he lifted another curtain which hid many of our Oratory boys, all of whom I recognized instantly. The inscription on the curtain read: *Radix omnium malorum* [The root of all evils].

"Do you know what that means?" he asked me immediately.

"What sin does that refer to?"

"Pride?"

"No!"

"And yet I have always heard that pride is the root of all evil."

"It is, generally speaking, but, specifically, do you know what led Adam and Eve to commit the first sin for which they were driven away from their earthly paradise?"

"Disobedience?"

"Exactly! Disobedience is the root of all evil."

"What shall I tell my boys about it?"

"Listen carefully: the boys you see here are those who prepare such a tragic end for themselves by being disobedient. So-and-so and so-and-so, who you think went to bed, leave the dormitory later in the night to roam about the playground, and, contrary to orders, they stray into dangerous areas and up scaffolds, endangering even their lives. Others go to church, but, ignoring recommendations, they misbehave; instead of praying, they daydream or cause a disturbance, there are also those who make themselves comfortable so as to doze off during church services, and those who only make believe they are going to church. Woe to those who neglect prayer! He who does not pray dooms himself to perdition. Some are here because, instead of singing hymns or saying the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin, they read frivolous or — worse yet — forbidden books." He then went on mentioning other serious breaches of discipline.

When he was done, I was deeply moved.

"May I mention all these things to my boys?" I asked, looking at him straight in the eye.

"Yes, you may tell them whatever you remember."

"What advice shall I give them to safeguard them from such a tragedy?"

"Keep telling them that by obeying God, the Church, their parents, and their superiors, even in little things, they will be saved."

"Anything else?"

"Warn them against idleness. Because of idleness David fell into sin. Tell them to keep busy at all times, because the devil will not then have a chance to tempt them."

I bowed my head and promised. Faint with dismay, I could only mutter, "Thanks for having been so good to me. Now, please lead me out of here."

"All right, then, Come with me." Encouragingly he took my hand and held me up because I could hardly stand on my feet. Leaving that hall, in no time at all we retraced our steps through that horrible courtyard and the long corridor. But as soon as we stepped across the last bronze portal, he turned to me and said, "Now that you have seen what others suffer, you too must experience a touch of hell."

"No, no!" I cried in terror.

He insisted, but I kept refusing.

"Do not be afraid," he told me; "just try it. Touch this wall."

I could not muster enough courage and tried to get away, but he held me back. "Try it," he insisted. Gripping my arm firmly, he pulled me to the wall. "Only one touch," he commanded, "so that you may say you have both seen and touched the walls of eternal suffering and that you may understand what the last wall must be like if the first is so unendurable. Look at this wall!"

I did intently. It seemed incredibly thick. "There are a thousand walls between this and the real fire of hell," my guide continued. "A thousand walls encompass it, each a thousand measures thick and equally distant from the next one. Each measure is

a thousand miles. This wall therefore is millions and millions of miles from hell's real fire. It is just a remote rim of hell itself."

When he said this, I instinctively pulled back, but he seized my hand, forced it open, and pressed it against the first of the thousand walls. The sensation was so utterly excruciating that I leaped back with a scream and found myself sitting up in bed. My hand was stinging and I kept rubbing it to ease the pain. When I got up this morning I noticed that it was swollen. Having my hand pressed against the wall, though only in a dream, felt so real that, later, the skin of my palm peeled off.

Bear in mind that I have tried not to frighten you very much, and so I have not described these things in all their horror as I saw them and as they impressed me. We know that Our Lord always portrayed hell in symbols because, had He described it as it really is, we would not have understood Him. No mortal can comprehend these things. The Lord knows them and He reveals them to whomever He wills.

The next several nights I could not fall asleep because I was still upset by this frightful dream. What I told you is but a brief summary of very lengthy dreams. Later I shall talk to you about human respect, the Sixth and Seventh Commandments, and pride. I shall do nothing more than explain these dreams, which fully accord with Holy Scripture. In fact, they are but a commentary on the Bible's teachings on these matters. Some nights ago I told you something, but I'll tell you the rest and explain it whenever I have a chance to speak to you.

Don Bosco kept his promise. Later, he narrated this dream in a condensed form to the boys of our schools in Mirabello and Lanzo. In the retelling he introduced variations but made no substantial changes. Likewise, when he spoke of it privately to Salesian priests and clerics, with whom he enjoyed greater familiarity, he would add new particulars. Occasionally he omitted details when talking to some people, while revealing them to others. Concerning the devil's traps, while discussing bad habits, he elaborated on the devil's tactics for luring victims to hell. Of many scenes he offered no explanation. For instance, he said nothing about the majestic figures he saw in that magnificent hall, which we are inclined to call "the treasure house of God's mercy for saving boys who would otherwise perish." Were these persons perhaps the principal dispensers of countless graces?

Some variations in his narration stemmed from the multiplicity of simultaneous scenes. As they flashed back into his mind, he would select what he considered most suited to his audience. After all, meditating on the Four Last Things was a

habit with him. Such meditation kindled a most lively compassion in his heart for all sinners threatened by such a frightful eternity. This ardent charity helped him overcome any reticence as he prudently but frankly invited even very prominent people to mend their ways. It also made his words so effective as to work many conversions.

We have faithfully recorded what we ourselves heard at length from Don Bosco or what was testified to us orally or in writing by various priests after coordinating it into one single narrative. It was a difficult task because we wished to record most accurately every word, every link between scenes, and the sequence of incidents, warnings, reproaches, and whatever else he said but did not explain and was perhaps misunderstood. Did we achieve our aim? We can assure our readers that we most diligently sought one thing only: to expound as faithfully as possible Don Bosco's long talks.

*(MB IT IX, 166-182 / MB EN IX, 85-100)*