

□ Reading time: 3 min.

*Set on the night of Good Friday in 1878, the story “Mary Saves Him” is one of the meaningful dreams that Saint John Bosco used to share with his boys. Through vivid, almost fairytale-like images – a cat hunted by two dogs that turn into monsters, a stick wielded as a last defence, the Madonna invoked with a small medal – the dream depicts the struggle between the forces of evil and divine mercy. At its heart is the vulnerable figure of a young man who, from being a designated victim, is reborn to hope thanks to Marian intercession and the spiritual fatherhood of the saint. It’s a pedagogical parable about the power of repentance, Mary’s maternal protection, and educational courage.*

I sat at Don Bosco’s bedside during the night of Good Friday until about two in the morning. Peter Enria came so that I could retire to the adjoining room and get some sleep. Don Bosco’s stifled cries made me think that his dream must have been an unpleasant one and so at dawn I inquired about it. Here is what he told me:

I found myself with a family which had decided to kill their cat. Both verdict and sentence were passed down to Bishop [Emilian] Manacorda [of Fossano], but he wouldn’t listen. “What have I to do with all this?” he objected. “It’s no concern of mine!”

Confusion wrought havoc in that household. As I stood leaning on a walking stick, a black-looking cat, fur bristling, fearfully terrorized, raced toward me, hotly pursued by two huge mastiffs at close range. When the cat got within a few feet, I called it. It hesitated a moment, but when I called it again and slightly raised the hem of my cassock, it swerved toward me and crouched at my feet. Within seconds the two dogs faced me, growling menacingly.

“Away!” I shouted. “Leave this poor cat alone.”

To my utter astonishment the dogs answered me in human speech: “Nothing doing! We must obey our master, who ordered us to kill it.”

“By what right?”

“It freely chose to serve its master who has the absolute right of life and death over a slave. We have our orders and shall carry them out.”

“The master has rights over the slave’s work, but not over its life,” I retorted. “I shall never permit you to kill this cat.”

“You won’t? You?” So saying, the two mastiffs lunged furiously in an attempt to seize the cat. I raised my stick and frantically struck out at the two assailants, screaming at them to back off.

The struggle lasted a long time as they alternately lunged forward and fell back. I was exhausted. As the beasts stopped to catch their breath, I glanced at the poor cat still at my feet and was astounded to see that it had changed into a lamb. Still amazed by the phenomenon, I turned to the two dogs, and they too had changed, alternately taking on the appearance of bears, tigers, lions, frightening apes, and even more terrible creatures. Finally they became two horrible demons. "Lucifer is our master," they roared. "The lamb you are protecting gave itself to him, so we must drag it before him and kill it."

I turned to the lamb but it was no longer there. In its place stood a very frightened boy, pitifully crying, "Don Bosco, save me!"

"Don't be afraid," I told him. "Do you really want to become a good boy?"

"Oh, yes, indeed I do, Don Bosco! But how?"

"Have no fear," I replied. "Kneel down, hold Our Lady's medal in your hand and pray with me."

The boy obeyed. The demons stood there, eager to pounce on him, but I kept shielding him with my stick. At this point, Enria, seeing me so upset, woke me and thus prevented me from seeing how it all ended. I know who the boy was.

(*BM XIII*, 425-426)