 Reading time: 15 min.

Set in January 1876, the piece features one of Don Bosco's most evocative "dreams," his favourite tool for stirring and guiding the young people of the Oratory. The vision opens onto a vast plain where sowers are hard at work: the wheat, symbolising the Word of God, will only sprout if protected. But ravenous hens swoop down on the seed, and while the farmers sing verses from the Gospels, the clerics tasked with guarding it remain silent or distracted, letting everything be lost. The scene, brought to life with witty dialogue and biblical quotes, becomes a parable of the murmuring that stifles the fruit of preaching and a warning to be actively vigilant. With tones that are both paternal and stern, Don Bosco transforms the fantastical element into a sharp moral lesson.

In the latter half of January, Don Bosco had a symbolic dream which he mentioned to several Salesians. One of them, Father Barberis, urged him to tell it at a "Good Night" because the boys loved to hear his dreams, which greatly benefited them and made them feel closer to the Oratory.
"True," Don Bosco replied, "these dreams help a lot and the boys are eager to hear them. My only trouble is that I need lungs of steel. Truthfully, these dreams do shake people up because almost always they touch everybody and each one asks in what condition I saw him, what he is to do and how he should understand the different facets of the dream. They pester me day and night. All I need do to urge them to make a general confession is tell them one of my dreams. Well, let's do this. Next Sunday while I give the 'Good Night' to the boys, you ask me some questions and I then will tell my last dream."

On January 23 he mounted the platform after night prayers, his beaming countenance revealing, as always, his joy at being with his sons. When everybody quieted down, Father Barberis raised his hand. "Excuse me, Don Bosco," he said, "may I ask you a question?"
"Certainly."
"I heard that recently you had a dream about seeds, sowers, and hens and that you told the cleric Calvi about what you saw. Would you kindly tell us too? We'd like to hear it."
"Aren't you nosy!" Don Bosco replied in mock rebuke that provoked general laughter.
"I won't mind your calling me nosy, so long as you tell us the dream," Father Barberis insisted. "I think all the boys back me up, and I am sure that they are most

eager to hear you."
"In that case, I will tell you. I had intended to keep it to myself because of some things which concern some of you personally, things which might even make you uneasy, but since you asked for it, I will narrate it."
"Oh, Don Bosco, if you have a hard knock in store for me, please spare me in public."
"I will tell things just as I saw them and let each one take what pertains to him. Before I begin,just remember that dreams happen during sleep when we have no control over our mind. If you find anything good in this dream, a warning or anything at all, take heed, but do not become ill at ease because of it. I said that I dreamed while I was sleeping because some boys dream while they are awake, much to their teachers' annoyance. [So, let me start.]

I seemed to be in Castelnuovo d' sti where I was born. Before me stretched a vast field set in a beautiful plain. The field was not ours, and I had no idea who owned it. Many people were working with hoes, spades, rakes and other tools; some were plowing, sowing, harrowing and doing other chores. Scattered foremen supervised the work; I seemed to be one of them. Elsewhere a group of peasants were singing. I gazed in astonishment, unable to figure out where I was. Why are these people working so hard? I kept asking myself. Then I answered my own question: To provide bread for my boys. It was truly delightful to see these good peasants working so hard and pursuing their tasks with untiring zest and diligence.
A few, however, were having fun.
As I took in the scene, I noticed several priests and many clerics of ours, some close to me, others farther away. I must be dreaming, I told myself.
My clerics are in Turin, not here at Castelnuovo. But why am I wearing winter clothing? Yesterday the temperature was near freezing, and still these people are sowing wheat. I clapped my hands and began walking off, saying, I am not dreaming; this really is afield; that cleric over there is so-and-so; that other one I know too. If I were dreaming, how could I see all this?
Just then I spotted nearby a kindly old man whose countenance inspired trust. He was watching me and the other people intently. I went up to him.
"Tell me, my good man," I said, "what's going on over here? What is this place? Who are these workers? Whose field is this?"
"Fine questions you ask!" the man answered. "A priest, and you don't know these things?"
"Please tell me if this is a dream. I feel I'm dreaming and all I see is just unreal."
"What you see is quite real, and I think you are wide-awake. Don't you realize it?

You are talking, laughing and joking."
"People can dream that they are talking, listening and acting as though they were awake," I objected.
"Forget that! You are here in body and soul."
"All right, if I am awake, tell me who owns this field."
"You studied Latin. Which is the first noun of the second declension that you learned in Donatus? 1 Do you remember?"
"Surely, but what does that have to do with my question?"
"A great deal. Now tell me what that noun was."
"Dominus."
"And its genitive?"
"Domini."
"Very good! Therefore this field is Domini, of the Lord."
"Ah! Now I see!" I exclaimed.
I was surprised at the old gentleman's explanation. Just then I saw several people carrying bags of wheat grains while a group of peasants sang, *Exiit, qui seminat, seminare semen suum* [The sower went out to sow his seed-Luke 8, 5].
I thought it was a shame to throw good seed into the ground to rot. Would it not be better, I wondered, to grind it into flour for bread or pasta? But then I thought: He who sows not, reaps not. Unless the seed is sown and rots, what can one reap?
Meanwhile a large flock of hens were scurrying from all sides to peck at the wheat that was being scattered, while the peasants were singing, *Venerunt aves caeli, sustulerunt frumentum et reliquerunt zizaniam* [The birds came, ate up the wheat and left the cockle].
I looked about me and observed the clerics. One stood with arms folded, totally unconcerned; another was chatting with his companions; others shrugged their shoulders or looked the other way. There were some who laughed at what they saw and unconcernedly went on with their games or chores. No one tried to shoo the hens away. Resentfully I said to each of them, "What's wrong with you? Don't you see those hens eating up all the seeds and destroying the hopes of these good peasants? What kind of harvest are we going to have? Why do you stand there so mum? Why don't you shoo the hens away?"
Their only response was a shrug of the shoulders and a blank stare. Some did not even move. They had been totally unconcerned with what was going on in the field before I shouted at them, and they were paying no attention now.
"You are a bunch of fools," I went on. "Can't you see that the hens have had their fill? Couldn't you at least clap your hands to scare them off?"
As my words were ineffective, I began clapping my own hands, and this prompted

some of them to begin chasing the hens away, while I muttered to myself: Now they chase them away, now that all the wheat has been gobbled up!
Just then the same choir of peasants sang these words, *Canes muti nescientes latrare* [Dumb dogs unable to bark-Is. 56, IO].
Astounded and exasperated, I faced the kindly old man. “Please tell me what this is all about,” !pleaded. “I can’t make any sense out of it. What does the seed mean?”
“The seed is the word of God.”
“What is the meaning of the hens gobbling it up?”
Changing tone, the old man went on, “If you want a full explanation, here it is. The field is the Lord’s vineyard as the Gospel says, but it can also symbolize the heart of man. The farmhands are Gospel workers who sow the word of God, especially by preaching. This word can bear much fruit in people’s hearts if they are prepared, but then birds come and pluck it away.”
“What do the birds symbolize?”
“They symbolize murmuring. After hearing an inspiring sermon, one lad joins his companions and finds fault with the preacher’s gestures, voice, or some word of his. He destroys the good effect of the sermon.
Another will point out a physical or intellectual shortcoming of the preacher or ridicule his pronunciation. Again the sermon is made fruitless. The same can be said about good books; finding fault with them destroys the good they can do.
Murmuring is all the nastier because it is generally done on the sly; it grows and thrives where we would least expect it. Wheat, even when sown in a poorly tilled field, will take root, grow and bear fruit. When a storm breaks over a freshly sown field, that field becomes soggy, but it still yields a harvest. Even where the seed is not of the finest quality, it will still grow; it may yield less, but yield it will.
However, when hens or birds flock and peck at it, the field will yield nothing at all.
So it is with sermons, exhortations and good resolutions; if they are followed by distractions or temptations, their good effect will be lessened but not destroyed, but if there is murmuring or backbiting or some similar thing, all is wiped out. Whose duty is it to sound the alarm, take a firm stand, cry out and make sure that murmuring and unbecoming talk are silenced? You know the answer.”
“What were those clerics doing?” I asked. “Couldn’t they have prevented all that?”
“Of course, but they did not,” he went on. “Some just stood there watching; others paid no attention; some were unaware of what was going joined the murmurers and did their share to destroy the word of God.
You are a priest. Insist on this point. Preach, exhort, speak out, and never be afraid of saying too much. Make everybody understand that criticizing those who preach, exhort or give good advice is very harmful indeed. Furthermore, being silent and

passive when a wrong is being done and one's duty calls for action makes one an accomplice in the evil deeds of others."
Deeply impressed by these words, I kept looking for other failings so as to shame the clerics into doing their duty, but they had already begun shoving the hens away. I took a few steps but tripped over an abandoned rake and woke up.

"Now let's draw a lesson from all this," Don Bosco said. "Father Barberis, what do you think of this dream?"
"I think it's a good reprimand. Let the chips fall where they may."
"It should certainly do us some good," Don Bosco went on. "My dear boys, avoid murmuring because it is a very grave evil. Shun it like the plague and try to make others avoid it too. At times even good advice and excellent deeds are not as effective as is the prevention of murmuring or of harmful talk. Let us bolster our courage and attack these evils openly. There is no greater misfortune than to rob one of the benefit of God's word. One utterance, one smart remark can do just that.
"This dream came several nights ago, but last night I dreamed again and I wish to tell you about it, too. It's only about nine o'clock, and I'll try to be brief."

I found myself somewhere else. I can't remember where. I know I was not in Castelnuovo, but I don't think I was at the Oratory either. Someone dashed over to me. "Don Bosco!" he cried. "Come quickly!"
"Why the hurry?" I asked.
"Don't you know what has happened?"
"No! Tell me!"
"So-and-so is very ill. He is dying. Such a fine, lively lad!"
"Are you joking?" I replied. "Just this morning I was talking with him while strolling about the porticoes and now you tell me he is dying!"
"Don Bosco, I am not trying to fool you. I must tell you the truth: that boy needs you very badly. He wants to see you and speak to you one more time. Quickly, or you will be too late."
With no idea of direction, I hurriedly followed the messenger and came to a crowd of people who in tears begged me, "Hurry! His end is near!"
"What happened?" I asked. I was taken to a room where a boy lay in bed, his face sunken and deadly pale. A racking cough and rattle in his throat barely allowed him to speak.
"Are you not so-and-so?" I asked him.
"Yes, I am."
"How are you feeling?"

“Very sick.”
“What happened? Yesterday and today you were walking happily along the porticoes.”
“Yes, but let’s hurry. I must make my confession because I have little time.”
“Do not be upset. You made your confession only a few days ago.”
“I know, and I don’t think I have any big sin on my conscience, but I want to be absolved again before I go to my Divine Judge.”
While hearing his confession I noticed that he was rapidly failing. Phlegm nearly choked him. We must hurry, I thought, if he is still to receive Holy Viaticum and the Anointing of the Sick. Really, he will not be able to receive Viaticum because it would take too long and his cough would keep him from swallowing. I must get the oil of the sick.
I left the room and sent someone for it. Meanwhile the boys around me kept asking, “Is he really in danger? Is he really dying, as people are saying?”
“Unfortunately, yes,” I replied. “Don’t you see how his breathing has become more labored and the phlegm is choking him?”
“Then it would be better to give him Holy Viaticum too, to strengthen him before sending him to Our Lady’s arms.”
As I busied myself getting things ready I heard someone say, “He is dead!”
I went back into the room and found the boy lying with his eyes wide open, no longer breathing.
“Is he dead?” I asked those who had been caring for him.
“Yes,” they answered.
“How did it happen so quickly? Isn’t he so-and-so?”
“Yes.”
“I can’t believe it! Just yesterday he was walking with me along the porticoes.”
“Yesterday he was walking and now he is dead,” they answered.
“Fortunately he was a good lad,” I exclaimed. Then, turning to the boys around me, I went on: “See, he was not even able to receive the Last Sacraments. Let us thank the Lord, though, for giving him time to make his confession. He was a good boy and frequented the sacraments. Let us hope he has gone to a better life or at least to purgatory. But if this had happened to others, what would their fate have been?”
We then knelt down and recited the *De Profundis.*
I was about to re-enter my room when I saw Ferraris come in great haste.
“Don Bosco,” he cried breathlessly, “do you know what happened?”
“Yes, unfortunately I do know? So-and-so is dead.”
“That’s not what I wanted to tell you. Two others have died.”
“What?”

“Yes!”And he named them.
“When? I don’t understand.”
“Yes, two others died before you could get to them.”
“Why didn’t you call me?”
“There was no time. Still, can you tell me when the one you mentioned died?”
“Just a few minutes ago.”
“Do you know what day this is and what month?”
“Of course! It’s January 22, the second day of the novena of St. Francis de Sales.”
“No, Don Bosco,” Ferraris countered. “Check your calendar.” I looked at the calendar and saw May 26.
“Incredible!” I exclaimed. “We are in January, and I am sure because I’m wearing winter clothing. No one dresses like this in May, and we would not have the heat on.”
“I can’t explain it either, but today is May 26.”
“Just yesterday one of our boys died, and it was January.”
“You are wrong,” Ferraris insisted. “It was Easter time.”
“That’s even more incredible.”
“But it was Easter time! He was far luckier than the other two who died in Mary’s month.”
“You are confusing me,” I told him. “Explain things better. I can’t make heads or tails of what you are saying.”
“I am not lying. Things are just as I told you. If you want to know more and get a better explanation, take heed!”
He spread out his arms and loudly clapped his hands. The sound woke me up.
“Thank heaven,” I said, “that it was only a dream. Was I scared!”
That is the dream I had last night. Make what you want of it. I don’t care to give it too much importance. Today I checked out the boys who seemed to be dead in my dream, and I found them alive and well. It is certainly not advisable for me to tell you who they are. Still, I shall keep an eye on them and if necessary give them wholesome advice. I’ll prepare them with caution and not make them aware of it. If death should overtake them, it will not find them unprepared. But let no one go about saying, “It could be this one or that one.” Let each one keep himself ready. Don’t let this dream frighten you. Its only effect should be that one which Our Divine Savior Himself pointed out in the Gospel: “Be ready, because at an hour that you do not expect, the Son of Man is coming.” [Luke 12, 40] My dear boys, the warning the Lord gives us is a grave one. Let us always be ready because, when we least expect it, death may overtake us. The unprepared risk a bad death. I shall do my best to keep myself ready, and you should do the same, so that at whatever hour it may

please the Lord to call us, we may be ready to pass into eternal happiness. Good night.

Don Bosco was always listened to in religious silence, but when he narrated these extraordinary things, not a cough or even the slightest shuffling of feet was to be heard from the hundreds of boys present. The deep impression he made lasted for weeks, even months, and radical changes were noticeable in the conduct of certain young scamps. Don Bosco's confessional would also be crowded. It never occurred to anyone that he might have invented these stories to frighten the boys and thus improve their conduct, since his predictions of forthcoming deaths always came true and the states of conscience which he saw in his dreams corresponded to reality.

But was not the fear produced by such gloomy predictions a crushing nightmare? It does not seem so. In a crowd of over eight hundred boys the odds against being one of the doomed ones were too great for any one individual to feel unduly threatened. Besides, the general belief that Don Bosco prepared those who were destined to die without frightening them and that those who did die would certainly go to heaven helped to dissipate fears. Then, too, it is common knowledge that young people quickly change their mood. Momentarily they may be shaken, but they soon shake off their fears. Those who lived through those days have unanimously confirmed this.

After the boys had gone to bed, a few confreres gathered around Don Bosco to learn if one of them would be among those to die. Shaking his head with his usual smile, Don Bosco kept them at bay, saying, "Do you really expect me to tell you who it is and risk having someone die before his time?"

Realizing that he would not disclose names, they asked him whether his first dream had shown him any clerics among the murmurers. Don Bosco, who had taken a few steps, stopped and, with a sweeping gaze at his questioners, smiled enigmatically, as if to say, "Yes, a few, but only a few, no more!"

They then pressed him to say at least if they had been among the silent observers. Don Bosco dodged the question, merely saying that they were to avoid murmuring and help others to avoid it along with any kind of wrongdoing, especially unbecoming talk.

"God help the priest or cleric," he said, "who is supposed to be in charge and sees wrongdoing and does not stop it. I want it to be known and borne well in mind that when I say 'murmuring' I do not mean merely backbiting, but every word and expression that may destroy the wholesome effect of God's word. In conclusion, I insist that it is a serious evil to keep silent in the face of wrongdoing, taking no

personal action to stop it or have those in charge do so."
One of the bolder bystanders daringly asked Don Bosco, "How does Father Barberis fit into the dream? You said that there was something in it which concerned him, and Father Barberis himself seemed to expect a reprimand." When Father Barberis seemed to be pleased to have the secret revealed, Don Bosco said, "Well, Father Barberis does not speak enough of this topic; he does not stress it as much as is needed." The latter admitted that for two years he had not specifically dwelt on this topic with his novices.
He was therefore quite grateful for the observation and resolved to keep it in mind for the future.
Then all went upstairs and, after kissing Don Bosco's hand, withdrew to their quarters, except Father Barberis who, as usual, saw Don Bosco to his room. Because it was still early and he knew that he was too deeply stirred by his own narrative to sleep, Don Bosco, contrary to his custom, invited Father Barberis to enter, saying: "It's early. Let's walk in my room a bit." For another half-hour they conversed. Among other things, Don Bosco said, "I saw everyone in that dream, and the part that each played. I use this knowledge when hearing confessions or when exhorting publicly or privately as long as I see it has a good effect. Years ago, I paid no serious attention to these dreams, until I noticed that, generally, they were more effective than a sermon, and in some cases even more effective than a retreat. Now I make use of them, and why not? Holy Scripture says: 'Test everything; retain what is good.' [I Thess. 5, 21] I see that these dreams do a lot of good and are liked, so why keep them secret? In fact, I notice that they also help to make many boys fond of our Congregation."
"I too have experienced the benefit and help of these dreams," Father Barberis interrupted. "They are even helpful when told to others. Where people know you, we can say that they are your dreams; where you are unknown, they can be presented as parables. I wish that I could gather them together and present them in the form of parables. Both old and young, great and small would eagerly read them and benefit spiritually."
"Yes, I also firmly feel that they would do a lot of good."
"But I suppose no one has put them down in writing," Father Barberis sighed regretfully.
"I have no time," Don Bosco went on, "and some dreams I no longer remember."
"I remember those concerning the progress of our Congregation and Our Lady's mantle," Father Barberis added.
"Ah, yes," exclaimed Don Bosco, and he mentioned several such dreams. Then his countenance became grave and, almost in a worried tone, he went on, "When I

think of the responsibilities of my position, I tremble all over…. What a fearful account I shall have to give God for all the favors He bestowed on our Congregation!”
(BM XII, 28-37)

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