

# The Flood and the Life-saving Raft (1886)

*No one can save themselves from the fury of the waters in great floods. Everyone needs a rescuer to take them in their boat. Those who do not get into the boat risk being swept away by the raging waters. Don Bosco understood a deeper meaning in his dream, the life-saving raft, and he passed it on to his young people.*

At the “Good Night” on Monday, January 1, 1866, Don Bosco spoke thus:

I seemed to be near a village that looked like Castelnuovo d’Asti, but was not. You boys were joyfully playing about in a vast, open prairie, when suddenly water surged from the far end of the plain and we found ourselves surrounded by a flood that grew more threatening as it kept rushing toward us. The Po River had overflowed and was spawning raging torrents.

Very much frightened, we ran as fast as we could toward a thick-walled, isolated grist mill and did not stop until we got to its courtyard. The surging flood, however, soon reached us, forcing us to seek safety in the upper floors, wherefrom we could gauge the wide sweep of the disaster. The whole Po valley from the Superga hills to the Alps had become an immense lake engulfing meadows, fields, orchards, woods, hamlets, villages and towns.

The water kept rising and so we had to climb to the top floor. Realizing that our situation was desperate, I urged you to put all your trust in God and in Our Blessed Mother. As the water neared the top floor and chilled our hearts with terror, a huge raft suddenly materialized in front of us. It was our only chance for safety. Breathless with fear, everyone wanted to jump on it, but no one dared because of the wall jutting out of

the water kept the raft away from the building. The only way to get across the water was by treading a long, narrow tree trunk connecting the raft with the mill. But this was risky because one end of the trunk rested on the raft and kept bobbing up and down. Bracing myself, I was the first to cross over. To make it easier for you and encourage you, I appointed priests and clerics to help you at both ends of the makeshift bridge. Oddly enough, they tired very fast and became so exhausted that they had to lie down and rest. The same happened to those who relieved them. Wondering what the matter might be, I tried it myself. In no time I too felt exhausted.

Meanwhile, many boys were growing impatient. Spotting a long, wide plank floating by, they seized it and maneuvered it into position to use as a gangplank to the raft. Then, either out of panic or recklessness, they rushed onto it without waiting for help.

"Wait, wait!" I shouted. They paid no attention to me. Bumping into each other or otherwise losing their balance, many fell off and were swallowed up by the murky, putrid waters. Eventually, the unsteady catwalk overturned. All in all, one-fourth of you boys were lost.

Up to this point I had been steadying my end of the tree trunk while you were crossing. Noticing that the water level was now above the wall, I managed to push the raft flush against the mill where Father Cagliero, one foot on a windowsill, the other on the raft's edge, helped the still stranded boys safely aboard. Some, however, had climbed up to the roof and were huddled on the ridge. The ever-rising flood, meanwhile, had submerged the eaves and part of the rafters, but had also raised the raft. Seeing those boys in their predicament, I shouted to them to pray with all their hearts and not to panic. Then I told them to link their arms and step down to the raft which was now poised at the eaves' level. They followed my instructions and with their companions' help boarded the raft. On it a very generous quantity of bread was

safely stored in many baskets. When all of you were safely aboard I took command, though still jittery. "Mary is the Star of the Sea," I said. "She never forsakes those who trust in Her, so let us get under Her protecting mantle. She will lead us out of danger and guide us safely to port.""

Then we let the raft go to the mercy of the waves, and it began to float away. The wind-swept waters propelled it so swiftly that we had to hold fast to each other for dear life and form one body, lest we be swept away.

In no time we had travelled a great distance. but abruptly the raft came to a stop and then spun round and round with such speed that we thought we were surely being sucked into a whirlpool. Fortunately, a mighty gust of wind pulled us out of it in the nick of time. We then sailed on at a more moderate speed. We had to contend with a few more small whirlpools, but finally we came to a full stop near a beautiful, vast shore, perfectly dry, sloping upward like a hill rising from the middle of the sea. Enticed by it, many of you immediately shouted that God had placed man on land and not on water, and, urging others to follow, jumped ashore without permission.

Alas, their joy was short-lived! A sudden storm again swelled the waters and dashed them against the bank. Submerged to the waist and screaming in terror, those boys were finally swallowed up by the waves. "How true indeed," I exclaimed brokenheartedly, "that he who clings to his own way pays with his own coin!" The raft too, tossed by the billows, threatened to sink. As you all turned to me pale and trembling, I tried to bolster you up.

"Take courage, sons," I shouted. "Mary will not forsake us!"" Then, one in heart and voice, we recited the acts of faith, hope, charity and contrition, several Our Fathers and Hail Marys and the Hail, Holy Queen. Finally, still kneeling and holding one another by the hand, we said a few more prayers privately.

Some foolish fellows however, ignoring the danger, stood up and began walking about as if nothing had happened, loudly laughing among themselves and almost making fun of their praying companions. Abruptly the raft stopped and swiftly spun round and round, while a furious wind swept all thirty of them into the deep, slimy water. In no time they disappeared. At this sight, more fervently than ever we invoked the protection of the Star of the Sea by singing the Salve, Regina. Soon the storm abated, but the raft kept going as if self-propelled-whither we did not know.

Meanwhile relentless rescue activity was going on, both to prevent boys from accidentally falling into the water and to pull them out promptly. Indeed, there were some who foolishly leaned over and lost their balance; then there were others who cruelly and unashamedly enticed companions to the raft's edge and pushed them over. For this reason, several priests were busy readying sturdy fishing poles and giving them out, while others were already at their rescue stations. As soon as a boy fell in, a pole would be lowered and the poor fellow would either grasp it or get hooked by his clothes and rescued. But even among the rescuers there were some who were more of a hindrance than a help. The young clerics meanwhile were kept busy holding back the boys, who, thank God, were still a great multitude.

I stood at the foot of a lofty mast in the center of the raft, surrounded by very many boys, clerics and priests ready to carry out my orders. As long as they followed my instructions, everything went on smoothly and we felt tranquilly happy and safe. But soon several began to complain that the raft was uncomfortable and the voyage too long, arduous and dangerous. Others argued about our destination or the means of escaping from the flood. Still others deceived themselves into thinking that the land was not far off or were afraid that soon food would run out. The upshot was that they wrangled among themselves and refused to obey. I tried to reason with them

but in vain.

At this moment, other rafts came into sight. apparently on a course different from ours. Following their own whims, the dissenters decided to leave me. They threw some planks into the water and, jumping on them and on others even wider which were floating nearby, they steered toward the other rafts. I can't tell you how greatly pained I was to see these unfortunate sons of mine rush headlong to their ruin. The wind blew and the waves kept rising. Some boys were swallowed up by the raging billows, others were caught in whirlpools, and still others rammed into floating debris and sadly drowned. A few managed to board the rafts, but, soon after, the rafts broke apart. As night fell, we could hear the victims' heart-rending cries. At this spectacle, these words came to my mind: *In mare mundi submergentur omnes illi quos non suscipit navis ista.* [In the sea of this world all shall perish who are not aboard this ship-Our Lady's ship.] The number of my dear boys was now considerably reduced, but we kept up our trust in Our Heavenly Mother as we moved on throughout the dark night. At daybreak, our raft entered a very narrow strait between two muddy banks lined with brush, boulders, rocks, logs, branches, broken planks, masts and oars. Our raft was surrounded by tarantulas, toads, snakes, dragons, crocodiles, sharks, vipers and other hideous animals. Overhanging willows harbored strange-looking, oversized cats which devoured human flesh, while huge monkeys, swinging from the branches, attempted to snatch boys who in their fear squatted low to escape their clutches.

Here, to our surprise and horror, we saw again those unfortunate boys who had drowned. The waves had finally cast them up to this shore, shattered to pieces upon the rocks or partially buried in mud; hair, arms, torsos and heads were visible here and there. A few corpses were also floating about. Suddenly a boy cried out from the raft: "Look! A monster is devouring so-and-so!" Repeatedly calling the lad by

name, he pointed him out to his terrified companions. Something worse yet-a mammoth blazing furnace with people in it-was coming into view not too far from where we stood. Feet, legs, arms, hands and heads were bubbling up and down like beans in a boiling pot. With dismay we recognized many of our pupils. The lid over the furnace bore a large inscription: "Sixth and Seventh Commandments."

Nearby rose a lofty hill dotted here and there with trees. A large number of boys who had fallen off the raft or left it of their own accord wandered about on it. Heedless of danger, I jumped off the raft and dashed up to them. As I got close, I noticed that their eyes, ears and hair and even their hearts were covered with vermin that most viciously gnawed at them. One lad seemed to be in greater pain than the rest. I tried to get closer to him, but he ran away and hid behind a clump of trees. I saw others loosening their clothes to get some relief, exposing at the same time their waists girded with snakes or vipers clinging to their chests. To all I pointed out a gushing mineral spring. Whoever washed in its cool waters was instantly cured and could return to the raft. Most of the boys followed my suggestion, but some refused. Delaying no further, I beckoned to those who had been cured to follow me, and they did so without fear because the monsters had now vanished.

As soon as we were aboard the raft, the wind rose again and out we glided through the rest of the strait into the limitless ocean. Sorrowing over the sad lot of those left behind, but grateful for Our Lady's protection, we thanked Her by singing *Lodate Maria, o lingue fedeli* [O Praise Her! O Bless Her]. Instantly, as if by Mary's command, the wind abated and the raft began to glide rapidly and smoothly, as though propelled by the playful, backward push of the boys' hands on the water.

Then a rainbow appeared in the sky, more marvellous and colorful than the northern lights. Inscribed on it was a

mysterious word "MEDOUM." Though we had no idea what it meant, it seemed to me that its letters could stand for *Mater Et Domina Omnis Universi Maria* [Mary, Mother and Mistress of the Whole Universe].

After a long time we sighted land, and as we drew nearer, we felt an inexpressible thrill in our hearts. Before our eyes was the delightful sight of enchanting meadows dotted with trees of every kind, radiant with light as if the sun were rising behind the background of hills-a light whose soft brilliance, like that of a glorious summer evening, instilled a feeling of rest and peace.

Our raft finally came to shore, slid on the and stopped at the foot of a luscious vineyard. Of this raft we may well say, "O God, You gave us a bridge to enable us to cross the groundswells of this world and to reach Your safe harbor." You were all very anxious to get into the vineyard, and a few of you, more eager than the rest, jumped off at once. But after only a few steps, remembering what had happened to their companions when the raft was going through the strait, those boys quickly ran back. All eyes were turned on me with the silent question: "May we?"

"Yes," I said after a moment's reflection. "It's safe."

Shouting with joy, you all ran out into those neatly arranged rows of vines and trees. From the vines hung clusters of grapes like those of the Promised Land, and the trees were laden with the choicest and most delicious fruit.

In the center of that very vast vineyard stood an imposing castle that was encircled by a most beautiful garden enclosed within massive walls. We headed for it and were allowed in. Tired and hungry, we reached a large, richly decorated dining hall. A long table held all kinds of food we could eat to our hearts' content. Toward the end of our meal, a richly clad, indescribably handsome young man came into the hall and warmly

greeted each of us by name. Noticing our bewilderment and wonder at his beauty and the many splendid things we had seen, he remarked, "Friends, this is nothing! Come and see!"

We followed him. From the balconies he showed us the gardens, telling us that they were for our recreation. He then led us on a tour of the whole building and through halls ever more breath-taking for their architectural beauty. Finally, opening a door leading into a church, he invited us to step in. The church looked small from outside, but as soon as we walked in, we realized how wrong we were. It was so vast that we could hardly see the other end. The floor, the walls and the ceiling were exquisitely ornamented with marble, silver, gold, and precious stones. "How heavenly!" I exclaimed, bewildered. "I wouldn't mind staying here forever!"

At the center of this majestic temple, on a rich pedestal, stood a huge, magnificent statue of Mary, Help of Christians. By now many of you had scattered about to admire the church's beauty. Calling you together, I asked you to gather in front of Our Lady to thank Her for the many favors She had bestowed on us. I realized then how vast the church was! There were thousands of you, but it looked as if you were but a small group.

While we stood admiring the statue's heavenly beauty, to our great wonderment it suddenly seemed to come alive and smile.

"Her eyes are moving!" several cried out. Clearly, Our Lady was turning Her eyes with unspeakable motherly affection on all of you.

"Our Lady is moving Her hands!" you all exclaimed moments later. Indeed She was slowly opening Her arms and spreading Her mantle to gather us all under it. Tears of emotion ran down our cheeks.

"Her lips are moving," whispered a few. A profound silence fell over us.

"If you will be loving children to Me, I will be a loving mother to you!" Our Lady spoke.

At these words we all fell to our knees and broke into the song, "O Praise Her! O Bless Her!"

The singing was so heartfelt and sweet that I awoke, overwhelmed by it.

As you see, my dear children, we can recognize in this dream the stormy sea of this world. If you will readily obey me instead of listening to evil counselors, at the end of our lives, after struggling to do good and to avoid evil by overcoming our bad inclinations, we shall reach safe harbor. There we shall be met by Our Lady's messenger who, in God's name, will usher us into His most consoling presence to rest from our toils. But if you disregard my advice and follow your own whims, you will be miserably shipwrecked.

Later on, privately, Don Bosco gave more detailed explanations of this dream, which seemingly concerned not only the Oratory but the Salesian Congregation as well:

The prairie is the world. The all-engulfing flood is its vices, irreligious maxims and persecution of the faithful. The grist mill, set apart in peace but equally threatened, is the House of Bread, the Catholic Church. The bread in the baskets is the Holy Eucharist, the food for the voyagers. The raft is the Oratory. The tree trunk linking the mill to the raft is the Cross, symbolizing one's immolation to God through Christian mortification. The plank, placed by the boys as an easier bridge to the raft, is the transgression of the rule. Many boarded the raft for selfish, base motives: self-advancement, money, honors, comfort, higher status and so on. These were the ones who did not pray and even mocked those who did. The priests and clerics symbolize obedience and show the wonders of salvation that may be achieved by it. The whirlpools represent frightful past and future persecutions.

The boys who set foot on the island that was flooded soon after are those who, despising their vocation, leave the Oratory to go back to the world.

The same must be said of those who sought refuge on other rafts. Those who fell into the water, but held out their hands to their companions on the raft and, with their help, scrambled on it again, are the boys who, on unfortunately falling into sin, regain God's grace through sincere sorrow. The strait, the big cats, monkeys and other monsters signify the disturbances, enticements and allurements of sin. The vermin on the eyes, tongue, and heart symbolize immodest looks, foul talk and disorderly affections. The spring of healing water stands for confession and Communion. The miry swamp and the fire signify places of sin and damnation.

This does not mean, though, that all those who fell into the mud or into the fiery furnace are destined for hell. God forbid! It means that at that time they were in the state of mortal sin, and had they died then and there, they would certainly have been eternally lost. The verdant island and the church represent the Salesian Society solidly established and triumphant.

The handsome youth welcoming the boys and leading them on a tour of the palace and of the church seemingly is a deceased pupil already in heaven-perhaps Dominic Savio.

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