 Reading time: 13 min.

In 1884, while in Rome, a few days before returning to Turin, Don Bosco had two dreams that he transcribed into a letter that he sent to his beloved sons and boys in Valdocco. It is known as "The Letter from Rome" and is one of the most studied and commented on texts. We are offering the full, original text for your reading.

My most beloved children in Jesus Christ:
I am always thinking of you, whether I am near you or far away. I have only one wish and that is to see you happy in this world and eternity. It was this thought, this desire, that induced me to write you this letter. My dear boys, I feel the weight of being away from you and not seeing you, not hearing you, causes such a pain for me that you can hardly imagine. That was why I would have liked to write you this letter a week ago, but all the things I had to do prevented me. Nevertheless, although there are now only a few days left before my return home, I want to anticipate my return among you at least by means of a letter, not being able to do it in person. It is one who loves you tenderly in Jesus Christ who writes to you, and it is his duty to speak to you with the liberty of a father. You will allow me to do this, will you not?
And you will be attentive and will put into practice what I am now about to tell you. I have told you that you are the one and constant thought of my mind. On one of these past evenings, I had gone to my room, and while I was getting ready for bed, I had begun to say the prayers that my dear mother had taught me. Just then, I do not know whether sleep overcame me or whether something distracted me, but it suddenly seemed that two former boys from the Oratory appeared before me.
One of them came up to me, greeted me affectionately and said, "Oh, Don Bosco! Do you recognize me?"
"Yes, I recognize you," I answered.
"Do you still remember me?" the other asked.
"I remember you and all the others. You are Valfre and you attended the Oratory prior to 1870."
"Listen," he said then, "would you like to see the boys who were at the Oratory in my day?"
"Of course! Show them to me," I said. "I would be delighted."

So Valfre showed me the boys and they all looked the same. They were the same height and age as I had known them then. I thought I was in the old Oratory at

recreation time. It was a picture full of life, full of movement and merriment. Boys were running, skipping and jumping. Some were playing leapfrog and others were playing ball. In one corner, there was a cluster of boys avidly listening to a priest, who was telling a story. In another corner, a cleric was playing flying donkey and trades with another cluster of boys. People were singing and laughing everywhere and there were clerics and priests with cheerful boys gathered around them. It was obvious that the utmost cordiality and familiarity existed between the boys and their superiors.

I was mesmerized by that spectacle, and Valfre said to me, “You see, familiarity breeds affection, and affection breeds confidence. This is what opens up their hearts and the boys reveal everything to their teachers, assistants and superiors. They are frank in their confession and outside of it, and docile and obedient to anything they are told to do by someone they know is honestly fond of them.”

Just then, the other former pupil, who now had a white beard, came up to me and said, “Don Bosco, would you now like to see and know the boys who live at the Oratory today?” This was Joseph Buzzetti.

“Yes,” I answered. “It is already a month since I saw them last.”

He pointed them out to me. I saw the Oratory and all of you at recreation, but I no longer heard the shouts of joy, singing or the lively animation that I had just seen before.

Sadly, boredom, weariness, sullenness, and diffidence were evident on the boys’ faces and in their actions. It is true that I saw a good many of them running and playing, but I also saw a good many more who were standing alone and leaning against the pillars, prey to disquieting thoughts. Other boys had withdrawn from the general recreation to sit on the stairs, the corridors or on the balconies overlooking the garden. Others strolled slowly in groups, talking softly among themselves, casting suspicious or malicious glances around them. Here and there, someone smiled, but such smiles were accompanied by glances that not only aroused suspicion, but also the conviction that had St. Aloysius been in the company of those boys, he would have blushed. Even among the boys who were playing, I saw a few so listless that it was obvious that they found no pleasure in their games.

“Have you seen your boys?” the past pupil asked.

“Yes, I have seen them,” I answered with a sigh.

“How different they are today from what we were!” the former pupil exclaimed.

“Unfortunately! How listless they are at recreation!”

“This causes the indifference that many show when they receive the Holy Sacraments. They are careless in their practices of piety in church and elsewhere, and that is why they are reluctant to live in an environment where Divine

Providence showers all its bounty on their bodies, souls and intellects. That is why many of them do not follow their vocation and are ungrateful to their superiors, and that is why they grow secretive and complain while other deplorable things occur as a consequence."
"I see, I see." I said. "But how can I restore the former vivacity, cheerfulness and expansiveness of these dear children of mine?"
"With charity!"
"With charity?2 I asked. "But are not my boys loved enough? You know that I love them. You know how much I have suffered and endured for them during the course of some forty years, and all that I am still suffering and enduring now! All the privations, humiliations, oppositions and persecution I have endured in order to provide them with food, shelter, teachers and especially in order to ensure the salvation of their souls! I have done all I could and all I know for them, who represent the love of my whole life."
"I am not referring to you."
"Then to whom do you refer? To those who took my place? To the directors, prefects, teachers and assistants? Don't you see how they spend the youthful years of their lives caring for those entrusted to them by Divine Providence? Don't you see that they are martyrs of their work and study?"
"I see it and I am aware of it, but that is not enough. The best is still missing."
"What is it that is missing?"
"The boys must not only be loved, but they must know that they are loved."
"Don't they realize that everything that is done for them is done out of love?"
"No, and I repeat, it is not enough."
"So what then is needed?" I implored.
"That they be helped to understand and love the things that are not so agreeable to them, by participation in their childish pleasures. The things that are disagreeable to them are discipline, study, and self-mortification. They must learn these things with love and enthusiasm."
"Please explain yourself more clearly!"
"Watch the boys at recreation."
I watched them and then said, "What special thing is there to see?"
"You do not see it, even though you have been educating boys for all these years? Look again! Where are our Salesians?"
I looked and saw that there were only a few priests and clerics mingled with the boys, while even fewer participated in their games. The superiors were no longer the animating spirit at recreation. For the most part, they strolled up and down, talking among themselves, without paying any attention to what the boys were

doing. Occasionally, someone did observe some wrongdoings, but they did nothing to correct the behavior. There were some Salesians who would have liked to mingle with the boys in their groups, but I saw that some of these youngsters were studiously trying to get away from their teachers and superiors.
“Were you not always in the midst of the boys at the Oratory in the old days, especially at recreation time?” my friend asked. “Do you remember those wonderful years? It was a thing for rejoicing, like Heaven, a period upon which we shall always look back lovingly, for we were guided by affection and held no secrets from you.”
“Certainly! Everything was delightful then for me as well, and the boys were all eager to come and talk to me. They were always eager for my advice, so that they could put it into practice. But now I see that continuous audiences with others, increased business matters and my health prevent me from doing all this.”
“That is all very true, but if you are unable, why are the Salesians not imitating you? Why do you not insist and demand that the Salesians behave toward the boys the same way as you did?”
“I talk myself hoarse, but unfortunately, they do not feel like shouldering the burdens as we once did.”
“So by neglecting to do what costs them least, they lose what is most important, and waste all their efforts thereby. They must learn to love what the boys love, so that the boys may love that which is dear to their superiors. In this way, their efforts will be light. The cause of the present change in the ways of the Oratory lies in the number of boys who do not confide in their superiors. Once their hearts were like an open book before their superiors, and they loved them and obeyed them promptly. But now they look on the superiors precisely as superiors, no longer as fathers, brothers and friends. Therefore, they fear them and love them little. If there is to be but one heart and soul, then for the love of Jesus, this fatal barrier of diffidence must be broken so heartfelt trust can take its place.”
“What must be done to break down this barrier?” I asked.
“It is imperative to achieve familiarity with the boys, especially at recreation time. Without familiarity, affection cannot be shown and without affection, there cannot be confidence. He who wants to be loved has to show that he loves. Jesus Christ became little with the little ones and shouldered our own infirmities. There we have the master of familiarity. A teacher who is seen only at the teacher’s desk is only a teacher and no more, but if he joins the boys at recreation, he becomes a brother. If one is seen only when he preaches from the pulpit, we shall only say of him that he is doing his duty, but should he utter a word or two during recreation time, his will be regarded as the word of someone who loves. How many conversions were brought about by such words whispered unexpectedly into the ear of a boy at play!

Those who know they are loved give love in return, and those who are beloved, especially by children, will obtain everything. Such a feeling of confidential trust is like an electric current between the boys and their superiors! They lay bare their hearts and make their needs known and reveal their faults. A love like this will enable the superiors to endure fatigue, displeasures, ingratitude, annoyance, shortcomings and neglect on the part of the boys.

Jesus Christ did not snap the reed already bent, nor did He extinguish the smoldering wick. That's your model! Then you'll have no chance to see people who work for vanity, who will punish only to take revenge on their offended pride or who leave their assistance assignment out of jealousy for the overpowering ability of others. There will be no one who knocks down others in order to be loved and esteemed by the boys. Then you will not see anyone who favors one child and neglects all the other boys, someone who neglects his very serious duty to assist out of love of his personal comfort.

If there is really true love, nothing but the love of God will be sought after and the salvation of souls. When this kind of love wanes, then things will begin to go wrong. Why should charity be substituted by the coldness of a rule? Why is it that the superiors abandon the observance of those educational rules dictated to them by Don Bosco himself? Why is it that the system of preventing transgressions with vigilance and love is slowly being replaced with one of less worth? If neglected, these laws will breed contempt for the superiors and will be the cause of very serious shortcomings.

And this does happen if familiarity is missing. If the Oratory is to return to its former happiness, the former system must come back. The superior should be always ready to listen to any doubts or complaints with all eyes to supervise their behavior and all heart to look for the temporal and spiritual good of those entrusted to him by Divine Providence. Then the boys will no longer barricade their hearts. Only in cases of immoral demeanor are the superiors to be inexorable. It is better to run the risk of expelling an innocent boy than to risk retaining one that will cause a problem. The assistants must look at it as their duty to report to their superiors anything that may in any way be offensive in the eyes of God that is brought to their attention."

Then I asked, "What is the best thing to do to make sure that a family spirit, love and trust emerge triumphant?"

"Strict observance of the house rules."

"Nothing more?"

"The most appetizing course in any meal is a good cheer."

As my former pupil finished speaking on this note, I continued watching the

recreation with real displeasure, and little by little I was overcome by increasing fatigue. Such weariness overcame me that I could no longer endure it, so I shook myself and returned to my senses.
I found myself standing at the foot of the bed. My legs were so swollen and painful that I could no longer stand upright. It was very late, so I went to bed, determined that I would write all this to my beloved children.
I do not want to have such dreams because they tire me excessively. The next day, I felt myself aching all over and could not wait to get to bed that next evening. But as soon as I was in bed, the dream started all over again. I saw the playground, the boys who are now in the Oratory, and the same former pupil.
“I will tell the Salesians what you told me, but what am I to tell the boys at the Oratory?” I asked him.
He answered, “That they must appreciate all that their superiors, teachers and assistants are tirelessly doing out of love for them, for if it were not for their welfare, they would not shoulder such sacrifices. Tell them they must learn how to endure the faults of others, for perfection is not of this world and is found only in Paradise. They must desist from complaining because this makes the heart grow cold. Above all, that they must strive to live in the holy grace of God. He who is not at peace with God will not find peace within himself or with others.”
“Do you mean to say that among the boys there are some who are not at peace with God?”
“This is the primary cause of the malaise of which you are now aware, and which must be remedied. There is no need for me to specify such causes now. A person who has secrets to safeguard and who fears that his secrets will be discovered is the one who is distrustful. At the same time, the heart that is not at peace with God is full of anguish and is restless, intolerant of obedience, irritated over nothing and feels that everything is going wrong. And since he has no love, he feels that the superiors do not love him.”
“Yet, my friend, do you not see how often boys go to confession and communion here at the Oratory?”
“It is true that they go frequently to confession, but the thing that is radically wrong in the case of many of the boys is that they lack steadfast resolution when they go to confession. They do confess, but confess always the same faults, temptations, bad habits, acts of disobedience and neglect of their duties. They go on this way for months and months, even years, sometimes right through their fifth year of high school. Such confessions count for little or nothing at all. They, therefore, bring no peace of mind, and if a boy is summoned before the judgment of God in such a state of mind, it would fare badly for him.”

“Are there many such boys at the Oratory?” I asked.
“There are only a few in comparison with the great many boys living in the house,” he answered as he pointed them out to me.
I looked around and saw these boys, but in those few, I saw things that grieved my heart sorely. I do not want to commit them to paper, but when I return, I shall confer with those concerned. At this time, I will only say that it is now time to pray and make steadfast resolutions not only with words, but in deeds, and to show that the Comollos, the Dominic Savios, the Besuccos and the Saccardis still live amongst us in spirit.
Finally, I asked my friend, “Have you anything else to tell me?”
“Tell all of them, old and young alike, to remember always that they are the children of Mary Help of Christians. They should remember that she brought them here to rescue them from the dangers of the world, so that they might love one another like brothers. They should give glory to God and to her with their good conduct. They must remember that it is our Lady who provides them with food and with the possibility of studying, together with countless graces and miracles. They must remember that it is now the vigil of the feast of this most holy mother of theirs, and with her assistance, the barrier of diffidence that the devil has been able to erect between the boys and their superiors to bring about the ruin of souls must come down.”
“Are we going to succeed in removing this barrier?”
“Most certainly, provided that old and young alike are willing to endure a few minor mortifications for the love of Mary and put into practice all that I have been saying.”
Meanwhile, I continued watching the boys and saw how some of them were heading for eternal damnation, and I felt so sharp a pain in my heart that I woke up. I saw many important things that I would like to tell you, but this is neither the place nor do I now have the time for it.
After all this, do you know what this poor old man, who has consumed his whole life for his beloved boys, wants from you all? Nothing more than the return of the happy days of the old Oratory when love and Christian trust between the boys and their superiors and the spirit of harmony and mutual endurance for the love of Jesus Christ prevailed. I need you to comfort me with the hope and the promise that you will do everything I wish for the benefit of your own souls. You do not realize how lucky you have been to live at the Oratory. I declare to you before God that a boy who enters a Salesian house will be immediately taken under the special protection of the Most Holy Virgin. So let us all work in harmony. The charity of those who command and must obey should ensure that the spirit of St. Francis of Sales reigns among us. Oh, my beloved children, the time is drawing near when I shall have to

leave you for eternity.
[Note by his secretary: here Don Bosco stopped his dictation, his eyes filled with tears, not out of regret, but out of the infinite tenderness that was evidenced by his glance and the tone of his voice.]
I, therefore, am most anxious to leave you, my priests, clerics and most beloved children, on the road of God on which our Lord Himself wishes you to walk.
To this same end, the Holy Father (whom I saw on Friday, May 9th) sends you his sincerest blessing. I shall be with you in front of the picture of our loving Mother Mary Help of Christians on her feast day. I want this magnificent feast to be celebrated with the greatest solemnity, and I want Father Lazzero and Father Marchisio to make sure that you are cheerful, even in the dining room. This feast of Mary Help of Christians should be the prelude to the eternal feast we shall enjoy one day together in Paradise.

Rome, 10 May 1884
Most affectionately in Jesus Christ,
Rev. John Bosco
(BM XVII, 85-94)