

□ Reading time: 6 min.

*In the dream that Don Bosco recounted to his young people on the evening of April 4, 1869, set in the church of the Oratory, the essence of his spiritual pedagogy is summarized: leading souls to salvation through sincere confession, sorrow for sins, and the resolution to amend. The vivid images of the horned “big cats” with three nooses around their necks—guilty silence, lack of contrition, absence of resolutions—become an effective catechesis on the dangers that threaten young people and the weapons to overcome them: holy water, a symbol of grace, and the watchful assistance of superiors. This simple but dramatic narrative reveals Don Bosco’s supernatural realism and still today invites us to rediscover Confession as a path to spiritual freedom.*

ON Wednesday evening, March 31, just as the Salesian pupils at Lanzo — most of whom subscribed to *Letture Cattoliche* — were absorbed in the April issue, *The Valley of Almeria*, Don Bosco arrived for a visit.

At the “Good Night” he spoke of his audiences with the Holy Father — his good health, keen intelligence, and warm affection for them — and passed on to them the advice the Pope had given him — the same he had already delivered to the Oratory boys in the Pope’s name. He also told them of the Pope’s blessing.

All through the school year there had not been the slightest illness at Lanzo. All the pupils were in excellent health and had long forgotten Don Bosco’s prediction of the past December [that one of them would die during this school year]. Only those very few to whom he had confided more on the matter watched and kept silent.

Don Bosco spent considerable time in hearing confessions, but he also managed to inspect the house, hold conferences, and interview superiors, subjects, and anyone who wanted to see him. He also sent written proposals to the municipal authorities to enlist their aid in expanding the school facilities but was unable to reach an accord. Despite that, Don Bosco did enlarge some classrooms and also built a new dormitory at a cost of about 20,000 lire.

He left Lanzo on Saturday, April 3, after telling the boys of a dream he had had a few days previously in Turin but had not yet narrated to the Oratory boys. He did so on Sunday, April 4, in the study hall after night prayers, as follows:

I dreamed that I walked out of my room and instantly found myself in church. It was packed tight with the pupils of the Oratory, Lanzo, and Mirabello, as well as many other youngsters unknown to me. The boys were not praying aloud but seemed to be preparing for confession. I observed a very large number crowding around my confessional beneath the pulpit and began to wonder how I could possibly hear them all. I suspected that I must be dreaming. To make sure I was awake, I clapped my hands and distinctly heard the noise they made. To be sure beyond question, I stretched out my arms and felt the wall behind my confessional. With no room for doubt, I said to myself: *I might as well start*. And so I began hearing confessions. Soon, concerned for the number of boys, I got up to see if there were any other confessors, but there were none, so I made for the sacristy hoping to find help. It was then that I noticed that some boys had a noose around their necks which nearly choked them.

"What is that rope for?" I asked. "Take it off." In reply they just stared at me.

"You," I said to a youngster, "go to that boy and slip that noose off his neck."

The boy went but came back, saying: "I can't get it off. Someone is holding it. Come and see."

I more closely scrutinized that huge crowd of boys and thought I saw two very long horns jutting out behind many of them. I got closer to the one nearest me and, drawing up behind him, surprised a large, hideous cat tightly clinging to the noose. Surprised in the act, it tried to crouch lower and hide its snout between its paws. I asked this boy and the others their names, but they did not answer. I questioned that frightful beast but it only crouched lower.

"Go to the sacristy and ask Father Merlone for the holy water," I directed one of the boys.

He soon returned with it, but meanwhile I discovered that behind each boy crouched a cat as hideous as the first one. I continued to hope that it was all a dream. Seizing the sprinkler, I turned to one of those large cats.

"Tell me who you are," I ordered.

Alternately opening and closing its jaws, the hideous animal broke into a growl and prepared to lunge.

"Answer me! " I insisted. "What are you doing here? I do not fear your rage. Do you see this holy water? I'll thoroughly soak you with it."

In dismay the monster began to writhe in unbelievable contortions and again seemed ready to leap at me. I kept my eye on it and noticed that it was holding several nooses in its paw.

"What are you doing here?" I asked again, while threatening it with the holy water. The monster then relaxed its taut position in order to run away.

"Stop!" I demanded. "You stay right here!"

"Look then," it growled, and showed me its nooses.

"What are they? What do they mean?" I asked.

"Don't you understand? I rope these boys into making bad confessions. With these nooses I drag nine-tenths of mankind into hell!"

"How? In what way?"

"That's one thing I won't reveal because you'll tell the boys." "You must tell me. Speak, or I'll drench you with holy water." "Please don't! I'd rather go back to hell."

"Then in the name of Jesus Christ, speak!"

Writhing hideously, the monster answered: "With the first noose I make the boys conceal their sins in confession."

"And with the second?"

"I make them confess without true sorrow."

"And with the third"

"I won't tell you!"

"You had better tell, or you'll be drenched with this holy water!"

"No, no, I will not! I've talked too much already!" And it growled in fury.

"Tell me so that I can inform the directors of our schools," I demanded, raising the sprinkler.

Flames and even a few drops of blood darted from the beast's eyes as it grudgingly muttered: "With the third noose I keep them from making a firm resolution and carrying out their confessor's advice."

"You hideous beast," I exclaimed. I wanted to question the monster further and force it to tell how I could remedy this great evil and offset its diabolical efforts, but all those hideous cats, which until now had done their utmost to stay hidden, began to mutter and then broke out into loud shouts against the one which had spoken. Amid the general uproar, I realized that I could get nothing more from the monster. Therefore, lifting the sprinkler and flinging holy water upon the one who had spoken, I commanded, "Go away," and it disappeared. Then I sprinkled holy water all about, and in the pandemonium which ensued, all those cats scurried away. The din awakened me, and I found myself in bed.

My dear boys, I would never have thought that so many of you had nooses around your necks. You know what they stand for. The first noose shames a boy into concealing sins in confession or lying about the number of times — for instance, accusing himself of committing a sin three or four times when it was exactly four times. This is just as insincere as concealing sins. The second stands for lack of sorrow, and the third for lack of a firm resolution. If we are to rid ourselves of these nooses and wrench them from the devil's clutches, let us confess all our sins, be truly sorry for them, and firmly resolve to obey our confessor.

Shortly before flying into a rage, the monster told me: "See how much good boys draw from confession! If you want to know whether or not I hold them in leash, see if they are becoming better."

I also forced the devil to tell me why he was crouching behind your backs. "So that I can't be seen," it replied. "That way it is easier for me to drag them down into hell." Those of you who had these monsters behind their backs were far more numerous

than I would have believed.

Make what you will of this dream, but it is a fact that I did check on these things and found that what I had dreamed was quite true. Let us therefore take advantage of this opportunity of gaining a plenary indulgence by making a good confession and Communion. Let us do our utmost to free ourselves of the devil's nooses. On the occasion of the golden jubilee of his ordination, the Holy Father has granted a plenary indulgence to all those who next Sunday, April 11, after receiving the sacraments, will pray for his intention. This coming Saturday, Chevalier Oreglia will have a private audience with the Holy Father and will offer him an album bearing your signatures and those of the boys attending our schools [and oratories]. In the meantime, see whether your past confessions were well made. I will remember you all in my Holy Mass next Sunday.

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