 Reading time: 5 min.

One evening, saddened by a certain general indiscipline noticed at the Valdocco Oratory among the boarders, Don Bosco came, as usual, to say a few words to them after evening prayer. He stood for a moment in silence on the small desk at the corner of the porticoes where he used to give the youngsters the so-called “Good Night”, which consisted of a short evening sermon. Glancing around, he said:

“I am not satisfied with you. That’s all I can say tonight!”

Then, without allowing them to kiss his hand [a customary mark of respect to a priest] he would slowly walk away toward the stairs leading to his room without saying another word. Stifled sobs could be heard while tears
ran down many faces as all went to bed sorrowful and pensive. To them, offending Don Bosco was the same as offending God. (BM IV, 394).

The evening peal

Salesian Fr John Gnolfo says in his study: *Don Bosco’s “Good Night”,* points out that the morning is the awakening of life and activity, the evening instead is suitable for sowing an idea in the minds of young people that germinates in them even while sleep. And with a daring comparison he even refers to Dante’s ‘evening peal’:

Era già l’ora che volge il desìo
ai naviganti e intenerisce il core…
“It was the hour when longing stirs
the hearts of sailors and softens their souls…”

It is precisely at the hour of evening prayer that Alighieri describes, in fact, in the eighth Canto of “Purgatory”, the kings in a small valley while they sing the hymn of the Liturgy of the Hours *Te lucis ante terminum*… (Before the light ends, O God, we seek Thee, that Thou mayest keep us).

Don Bosco’s “Good Night” was a fond and sublime moment! It began with praise and evening prayers and ended with his words that opened his children’s hearts to reflection, joy and hope. He really cared about that evening meeting with the whole Valdocco community. Fr G. B. Lemoyne traces its origin to Mamma Margaret. The good mother, putting the first orphan boy who came from Val Sesia to bed, offered some recommendations to him. From there came the beautiful custom in Salesian boarding schools of addressing brief words to the youngsters before sending them off to rest (BM, 142). Fr E. Ceria, quoting the Saint’s words when thinking back to the early days of the Oratory, “I began to give a very short

little sermons in the evening after prayers" (MO, 156 New Rochelle, 2010), thinks rather of a direct initiative of Don Bosco. However, if Fr Lemoyne accepted the idea of some of the early disciples, it was because he thought that Mamma Margaret's "Good Night" emblematically fulfilled Don Bosco's purpose in introducing that custom (Annals III, 857).

Characteristics of the "Good Night"

A characteristic of Don Bosco's "Good Night" was the topic he dealt with: some topical time that made an impression, something actual that created suspense and also allowed questions from the listeners. Sometimes he would ask questions himself, thus establishing a dialogue that was highly attractive to all.

Other characteristics were the variety of topics covered and the brevity of the discourse to avoid monotony and consequent boredom in the listeners. However, Don Bosco was not always brief, especially when he recounted his famous dreams or the journeys he had made. But it was usually a speech of just a few minutes.

These were, in short, neither sermons nor school lessons, but short affectionate words that the good father addressed to his sons before sending them off to rest.

Exceptions to the rule, of course, made an enormous impression, as happened on the evening of 16 September 1867. After every means of correction had been attempted by the superiors, some boys turned out to be incorrigible and were a scandal to their companions.

Don Bosco stood up on the little podium. He began by quoting the Gospel passage where the Divine Saviour pronounces terrible words against those who scandalise the children. He recalled the serious admonitions he had repeatedly made to the boys causing scandal, the benefits they had obtained at the college, the fatherly love with which they had been surrounded, and then he continued:

"*They think they are not known, but I know who they are and could name them in public. If I do not name them, do not think that I am not fully aware of them.... That if I wanted to name them, I could say: It is you, A... (and pronounced first and last name) a wolf who prowls among his companions and drives them away from the superiors by ridiculing their warnings... It is you, B... a thief whose words tarnish the innocence of others... You, C... a murderer who with certain notes, with certain books, tears Mary's children from her side... You, D... a demon who spoils his companions and prevents them from attending the Sacraments with your taunts...*"

Six were thus 'named'. Don Bosco's voice was calm. Every time he

mentioned a name, a muffled cry from the culprit could be heard echoing amidst the sullen silence of his stunned companions.

The next day some were sent home. Those who were allowed to stay changed their lives: the “good father” Don Bosco was not an easy-going man! And exceptions of this kind confirm the rule of his “Good Night”.

The key to morality

There was a reason why, one day in 1875, Don Bosco listed the secrets employed at Valdocco to those who were amazed that the Oratory did not have certain disorders complained of in other colleges, and among them he pointed out the following: ” Another powerful means of persuasion, exercising a good influence over the boys, was the short fatherly talks addressed to them every evening after prayers. These short talks forestalled any trouble” (BM XI, 203-204).

And in his precious document on*The Preventive System in the Education of Youth*, he left it written that the “Good Night” from the Rector of the House could become “the key to morality, good progress and success in education” (Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales, p. 239-240).

Don Bosco saw that his boys experienced their day between two solemn moments, even if they were of very different kinds. In the morning the Eucharist, so that the day would not dampen their youthful ardour, in the evening, prayers and the “Good Night” so that before sleep they would reflect on the values that would illuminate the night.