

Apparition of the Blessed Virgin on the Mountain of La Salette

Don Bosco presents a detailed account of the "Apparition of the Blessed Virgin on the mountain of La Salette," which occurred on 19 September 1846, based on official documents and the testimonies of the visionaries. He reconstructs the historical and geographical context – two young shepherds, Maximin and Mélanie, in the heights of the Alps – the miraculous encounter with the Virgin, her warning message against sin, and the promise of graces and providences, as well as the supernatural signs that accompanied these demonstrations. He recounts the spread of the devotion, its spiritual influence on the inhabitants and the whole world, and the secret revealed only to Pius IX to strengthen the faith of Christians and testify to the perpetual presence of miracles in the Church.

Author's Protest

In obedience to the decrees of Urban VIII, I protest that regarding what is said in this book about miracles, revelations, or other events, I do not intend to attribute any authority other than human; and in bestowing the title of Saint or Blessed upon anyone, I do so only according to opinion, excepting those things and persons already approved by the Holy Apostolic See.

To the Reader

A certain and marvellous fact, attested by thousands of people and which all may still verify today, is the apparition of the Blessed Virgin, which occurred on 19 September 1846. (On this extraordinary event, many pamphlets and several newspapers printed at the time may be consulted, notably: "Account of the Apparition of Mary Most Holy," Turin,

1847; "Official Decree on the Apparition," etc., 1848; the booklet printed under the care of Fr. Giuseppe Gonfalonieri, Novara, Enrico Grotti.)

Our merciful Mother appeared in the form and figure of a great Lady to two shepherds – a boy of 11 years and a peasant girl of 15 – on a mountain in the Alps situated in the parish of La Salette in France. She appeared not only for the good of France, as the Bishop of Grenoble states, but for the good of the whole world, to warn us of the great wrath of her Divine Son, kindled especially by three sins: **blasphemy, the profanation of Sundays, and eating meat on forbidden days.**

Other miraculous events follow, gathered from public documents or attested by persons whose faith excludes all doubt about what they report.

May these facts confirm the good in religion and refute those who, perhaps out of ignorance, would limit the power and mercy of the Lord by saying: "It is no longer the time of miracles." Jesus said that greater miracles would be performed in His Church than those He Himself worked, and He set neither time nor number. Therefore, as long as the Church exists, we shall always see the hand of the Lord manifesting His power through wondrous events, because yesterday, today, and always, Christ will be the one who governs and assists His Church until the end of time.

But these visible signs of Divine Omnipotence are always harbingers of grave events that reveal the mercy and goodness of the Lord or His justice and indignation, yet in such a way as to bring greater glory to Him and greater benefit to souls. Let us ensure they are for us a source of graces and blessings, an encouragement to a living faith, active faith, faith that moves us to do good and flee evil, making us worthy of His infinite mercy in time and eternity.

Apparition of the Blessed Virgin on the Mountains of La Salette

Maximin, son of Pierre Giraud, a carpenter from the village of Corps, was an 11-year-old boy. Françoise

Mélanie, daughter of poor parents, also from Corps, was a 15-year-old girl. There was nothing remarkable about them: both were ignorant and rough, both tending cattle in the mountains. Maximin knew only the Our Father and Hail Mary; Mélanie knew little more, so much so that, due to her ignorance, she had not yet been admitted to Holy Communion.

Sent by their parents to tend cattle in the pastures, it was purely by chance that on 18 September, the eve of the great event, they met on the mountain while watering their cows at a spring.

That evening, returning home with the cattle, Mélanie said to Maximin: "Who will be the first to reach the mountain tomorrow?" And the next day, 19 September, a Saturday, they ascended together, each leading four cows and a goat. The day was fine and clear, the sun bright. Around noon, hearing the *Angelus* bell, they made a short prayer with the sign of the Cross; then they took their provisions and ate by a small spring to the left of a stream. After eating, they crossed the stream, left their bags by a dry fountain, descended a little further, and fell asleep some distance apart, which was not usual for them.

Now let us hear the account from the shepherds themselves, as they gave it that evening to the owners and later thousands of times to thousands of people.

"We had fallen asleep..." recounts Mélanie. "I woke first and, not seeing my cows, woke Maximin, saying, 'Come, let's find our cows.' We crossed the stream, climbed a little, and saw them lying on the opposite side. They were not far. Then I went back down, and five or six steps before reaching the stream, I saw a brightness like the sun but more brilliant, though not the same colour, and said to Maximin, 'Come, come quickly and see this light below.' (It was between two and three in the afternoon.)

Maximin came down at once, asking: 'Where is this light?' I pointed to the small spring with my finger, and he stopped when he saw it. Then we saw a Lady in the midst of the light;

she was seated on a pile of stones, her face in her hands. In fear, I dropped my stick. Maximin said: 'Hold your stick; if she does anything to us, I'll give her a good beating.'

Then the Lady rose, crossed her arms, and said, 'Come near, my children. Do not be afraid; I am here to give you great news.' We crossed the stream, and she advanced to where we had slept. She stood between us, weeping all the while she spoke (I saw her tears clearly). 'If my people will not submit, I am forced to let go of the hand of my Son. It is so strong, so heavy, I can no longer restrain it.'

'How long I have suffered for you! If I wish my Son not to abandon you, I must pray to Him unceasingly; yet you take no heed. However much you pray or do, you can never repay the care I have taken for you.'

'I gave you six days to work; I reserved the seventh, and you will not grant it to me. This is what makes my Son's hand so heavy.'

'If the potatoes spoil, it is all your fault. I showed you last year (1845), yet you paid no heed, and finding spoiled potatoes, you blasphemed, mingling my Son's name with it.'

'They will continue to spoil, and by Christmas this year (1846), you will have none left.'

'If you have wheat, do not sow it; what you sow will be eaten by worms, and what grows will turn to dust when you thresh it.'

'A great famine will come.' (Indeed, a great famine occurred in France, with crowds of starving beggars flocking to cities by the thousands. While grain prices rose in Italy in early 1847, France suffered severe hunger throughout the winter of 1846–47. But the true scarcity of food, the real famine, was felt during the disasters of the 1870–71 war. In Paris, a grand personage hosted a lavish meal of meat on Good Friday. Months later, even the wealthiest citizens were reduced to eating vile food and the flesh of unclean animals. Many died of hunger.)

'Before the famine, children under seven will tremble and die in the arms of those holding them. Others will do penance for the famine.'

'The walnuts will spoil, and the grapes will rot...' (In 1849, walnuts spoiled everywhere, and grapes were ruined for over twenty years across Europe due to cryptogamic disease from 1849 to 1869.)

'If they convert, stones and rocks will turn into heaps of grain, and potatoes will spring from the earth.'

Then she said:

'Do you say your prayers well, my children?'

We both replied: 'Not very well, Lady.'

'Ah, my children, you must say them well morning and evening. When you have no time, say at least an Our Father and Hail Mary; when you have time, say more.'

'Only a few old women go to Mass; the others work all summer on Sundays. In winter, the young, when idle, go to Mass only to mock religion. In Lent, they go to the butchers like dogs.'

Then she asked: 'Have you seen spoiled wheat, my boy?'

Maximin answered: 'Oh no, Lady.' Unsure whom she addressed, I whispered,

'No, Lady, I have not seen any yet.'

'You must have seen some, my boy' (turning to Maximin). 'Once near the Coin area with your father. The field's owner told your father to see his spoiled wheat; you both went. You took some ears in your hands, and rubbing them, they turned to dust, and you returned. Half an hour from Corps, your father gave you bread, saying: 'Take, my son, eat bread this year; I know not who will eat it next if the wheat keeps spoiling.'

Maximin replied: 'Oh yes, Lady, now I remember; I had forgotten.'

Then the Lady said: 'Well, my children, you will make this known to all my people.'

She crossed the stream and, without turning, repeated: 'Well, my children, you will make this known to all my people.'

She then climbed about fifteen steps to where we had gone to

find our cows, walking on the grass without touching it, her feet barely grazing the tips. We followed; I passed before her, Maximin slightly on the side. The beautiful Lady rose (Mélanie gestured, raising her hand a metre or more), hovering momentarily. She looked to Heaven, then earth; then we saw her no more—no head, arms, or feet—as if melting away, leaving only a light in the air, which then vanished.

I said to Maximin: 'Perhaps she is a great saint?' He replied: 'Had we known, we'd have asked her to take us.' I said: 'What if she were still here?' Maximin reached for the light, but it was gone. We looked carefully but saw nothing.

I said: 'She does not wish us to see where she goes.' Then we returned to our cows."

This is Mélanie's account. Asked how the Lady was dressed, she replied,

"She wore white shoes with roses around them—of all colours; yellow stockings, a yellow apron, a white dress covered in pearls, a white neckerchief edged with roses, a high cap slightly tilted with a crown of roses. She had a chain with a crucifix: on the right, pincers; on the left, a hammer; at the cross's end, another large chain hung, like the roses around her neckerchief. Her face was white, elongated; I could not look long, for she dazzled us."

Questioned separately, Maximin gave the same account without variation in substance or form, which we refrain from repeating here.

Innumerable and crafty questions were put to them, especially for two years, under interrogations lasting 5, 6, or 7 hours, aiming to confuse or trap them in contradictions. Surely no accused was ever so rigorously examined by courts of justice regarding an alleged crime.

Secret of the two little shepherds

Immediately after the apparition, Maximin and Melanie, on their way home, questioned each other about why the great Lady, after saying "the grapes will rot," had paused briefly before speaking and merely moved her lips without

making audible what she was saying?

As they discussed this between themselves, Maximin said to Melanie: "She told me something, but forbade me to tell you." They both realised they had each separately received a secret from the Lady, with the prohibition not to reveal it to others. Now consider, dear reader, whether children can keep silent.

It is incredible to recount how much was done and attempted to extract this secret from them in any way possible. It is astonishing to read of the thousands upon thousands of attempts made for this purpose by hundreds upon hundreds of people over twenty years. Prayers, surprises, threats, insults, gifts, and seductions of every kind—all came to nothing; they remained impenetrable.

The Bishop of Grenoble, an octogenarian, felt it his duty to command the two privileged children to at least convey their secret to the Holy Father, Pius IX. At the name of the Vicar of Jesus Christ, the two little shepherds promptly obeyed and resolved to reveal a secret that until then nothing had been able to wrest from them. They therefore wrote it themselves (from the day of the apparition onwards, they had been sent to school, each separately); then they folded and sealed their letter—all this in the presence of distinguished persons chosen by the bishop himself to serve as witnesses. The bishop then sent two priests to deliver this mysterious dispatch to Rome.

On 18 July 1851, they presented to His Holiness Pius IX three letters: one from Monsignor Bishop of Grenoble, accrediting these two envoys; the other two contained the secret of the two young children of La Salette. Each had written and sealed the letter containing their secret in the presence of witnesses who had attested to their authenticity on the envelope.

His Holiness opened the letters and began reading Maximin's. "There is truly," he said, "the candour and simplicity of a child." During this reading, a certain emotion manifested on the Holy Father's face; his lips tightened, his cheeks

swelled. "It concerns," the Pope said to the two priests, "it concerns scourges with which France is threatened. She is not alone in guilt—Germany, Italy, all of Europe are guilty too, and deserve punishment. I greatly fear religious indifference and human respect."

Pilgrimage to La Salette

The fountain near which the Lady—that is, the Virgin Mary—had rested was, as we said, dry; and according to all the shepherds and villagers of those parts, it only gave water after heavy rains and the melting of snow. Now this fountain, dry on the very day of the apparition, began to gush the following day, and from that time the water has flowed clear and uninterrupted.

That barren, rugged, deserted mountain, inhabited by shepherds for barely four months a year, has become the stage for an immense gathering of people. Entire populations flock from all sides to this privileged mountain. Weeping with tenderness and singing hymns, they bow their foreheads to this blessed ground where Mary's voice resounded. They are seen kissing reverently the spot sanctified by Mary's feet, and they descend filled with joy, trust, and gratitude.

Every day, an immense number of faithful devoutly visit the site of the miracle. On the first anniversary of the apparition (19 September 1847), over seventy thousand pilgrims of every age, sex, condition, and even nation covered the surface of that land...

But what makes the power of that voice from Heaven felt even more is the remarkable change in morals among the inhabitants of Corps, La Salette, the entire canton, and all the surrounding areas—and it spreads still further afield... They have ceased working on Sundays; they have abandoned blasphemy... They attend church, heed their pastors' voices, receive the sacraments, and fulfil the Easter duty with edification—until then generally neglected. I omit the many striking conversions and extraordinary graces in the spiritual order.

On the site of the apparition now stands a majestic church with extensive buildings, where travellers, after satisfying their devotion, can comfortably refresh themselves and even spend the night if they wish.

After the event of La Salette, Melanie was sent to school, making marvellous progress in knowledge and virtue. But she always felt so inflamed with devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary that she resolved to consecrate herself entirely to Her. She entered the Discalced Carmelites, among whom, according to the journal *Echo de Fourvière* (22 October 1870), she was called to Heaven by the Holy Virgin. Shortly before her death, she wrote the following letter to her mother.

11 September 1870.

Dearest and most beloved mother,

May Jesus be loved by all hearts. This letter is not only for you but for all the inhabitants of my dear village of Corps. A family father, most loving towards his children, seeing that they forgot their duties, despised the law imposed on them by God, and became ungrateful, resolved to punish them severely. The spouse of the Father of the family begged for mercy and at the same time went to the two youngest children of the Father—the weakest and most ignorant. The spouse, who cannot weep in her spouse's house (Heaven), finds abundant tears in the fields of these wretched children. She expresses her fears and threats if they do not turn back, if they do not observe the Master's law. A very small number embrace the reform of the heart and set themselves to observe the holy law of the Father; but alas! The majority remain in sin and sink deeper into it. Then the Father sends punishments to chastise them and draw them from this state of hardness. These wretched children think to escape punishment—they seize and break the rods that strike them instead of falling to their knees, begging for mercy, and above all promising to change their lives. Finally, the Father, further angered, takes up a

stronger rod and strikes—and will strike—until He is acknowledged, until they humble themselves and beg mercy from Him who reigns on earth and in Heaven.

You understand me, dear mother and beloved inhabitants of Corps: this Father is God. We are all His children; neither you nor I have loved Him as we ought; we have not kept His commandments as we should, now God chastises us. A great number of our soldier brothers die; families and entire cities are reduced to misery; and if we do not turn to God, it is not over. Paris is very guilty for rewarding a wicked man who wrote against the divinity of Jesus Christ. Men have but one time to sin; but God is eternal and punishes sinners. God is angered by the multitude of sins and because He is almost unknown and forgotten. Now who can stop the war that does so much harm in France and will soon recommence in Italy? etc., etc. Who can halt this scourge?

We must: 1) recognise that in this war there is solely the hand of God; 2) humble ourselves and ask with mind and heart forgiveness for our sins; sincerely promise to serve God with mind and heart and obey His commandments without human respect. Some pray, asking God for the triumph of us French. No—this is not what the good God wants. He wants the conversion of the French. The Blessed Virgin came to France, and France did not convert. She is thus more guilty than other nations; if she does not humble herself, she will be greatly humbled. Paris, this hearth of vanity and pride—who can save her if fervent prayers do not rise to the heart of the good Master?

I remember, dear mother and beloved inhabitants, my dear village—I remember those devout processions you made to the sacred mountain of La Salette so God's wrath would not strike your land! The Holy Virgin heard your fervent prayers, your penances, and all you did for love of God. I think and hope you must now do even more—beautiful processions for France's salvation; that is, for France to return to God, for God waits

only for this to withdraw the rod with which He scourges His rebellious people. Let us pray much—yes, pray; hold your processions as you did in 1846 and '47: believe that God always hears the sincere prayers of humble hearts. Let us pray much, pray always. I never loved Napoleon, for I remember his whole life. May the divine Saviour forgive him all the evil he has done—and still does!

Let us remember we were created to love and serve God, and that outside this there is no true happiness. Mothers must raise their children Christianly, for the time of tribulations is not over. If I revealed their number and nature, you would be horrified. But I do not wish to frighten you; trust in God, who loves us infinitely more than we can love Him. Let us pray, pray—and the good, divine, tender Virgin Mary will always be with us: prayer disarms God's wrath; prayer is the key to Heaven.

Let us pray for our poor soldiers, for so many grieving mothers who have lost their children; let us consecrate ourselves to our good Heavenly Mother; pray for the blind who do not see it is God's hand now striking France. Pray much and do penance. Hold fast to the Holy Church and our Holy Father, her visible head and the Vicar of Our Lord Jesus Christ on earth. In your processions and penances, pray much for him. Lastly, remain at peace, love one another as brothers, promising God to keep His commandments—and truly keep them. And by God's mercy, you will be happy and die a good and holy death, which I desire for all, placing you under the protection of the august Virgin Mary. I embrace you heartily (relatives). My health is in the Cross. The Heart of Jesus watches over me.

Maria of the Cross, victim of Jesus

First part of the publication, "Apparition of the Blessed Virgin on the Mountain of La Salette with Other Miraculous Events, Collected from Public Documents by the Priest John Bosco," Turin, Oratory of St. Francis de Sales Printing Press,

Crown of the Seven Sorrows of Mary

The publication "Crown of the Seven Sorrows of Mary" represents a cherished devotion that St. John Bosco instilled in his young followers. Following the structure of the "Way of the Cross," the seven sorrowful scenes are presented with brief reflections and prayers to guide towards a deeper participation in the sufferings of Mary and her Son. Rich in tender imagery and contrite spirituality, the text reflects the desire to unite with the Sorrowful Mother in redemptive compassion. The indulgences granted by various Popes attest to the pastoral value of this text—a small treasury of prayer and reflection to nurture love for the Mother of Sorrows.

Preface

The primary aim of this booklet is to facilitate remembrance and meditation of the bitterest Sorrows of the tender Heart of Mary, a devotion most pleasing to her, as she has often revealed to her devotees, and a most efficacious means for us to obtain her patronage.

To make this meditation easier, it is first practised with a chaplet indicating Mary's seven principal sorrows, which can then be meditated upon in seven distinct brief reflections, much like the *Way of the Cross*.

May the Lord accompany us with His heavenly grace and blessing so that the desired intention is achieved, so that each soul may be deeply moved by the frequent remembrance of Mary's sorrows for spiritual benefit and the greater glory of God.

Chaplet of the Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary with Seven Brief Reflections Presented in the Form of the Way of the Cross

Preparation

Dearest brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, we undertake our usual devotions by meditating devoutly on the bitterest sorrows that the Blessed Virgin Mary endured in the life and death of her beloved Son, our Divine Saviour. Let us imagine ourselves present at Jesus hanging on the Cross, as His afflicted Mother says to each of us, "Come and see if there is any sorrow like mine."

Trusting that this merciful Mother will grant us special protection as we meditate on her sorrows, let us invoke divine aid with the following prayers:

Antiphon: Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Thy faithful, and kindle in them the fire of Thy love.

*Send forth Thy Spirit, and they shall be created,
And Thou shalt renew the face of the earth.*

*Remember Thy Congregation,
Which Thou hast possessed from the beginning.
O Lord, hear my prayer,
And let my cry come unto Thee.*

Let us pray.

*Enlighten our minds, we beseech Thee, O Lord, with the light of Thy brightness, that we may see what is to be done and have the strength to do what is right. Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

First Sorrow: The Prophecy of Simeon

The first sorrow was when the Blessed Virgin Mother of God presented her only Son in the Temple in the arms of the holy elder Simeon, who said to her, "This child shall be a sword that shall pierce thy soul," foretelling the Passion and death

of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

One *Our Father* and seven *Hail Marys*.

Prayer`

O sorrowful Virgin, by that sharp sword with which the holy elder Simeon foretold that thy soul would be pierced in the Passion and death of thy dear Jesus, I beseech thee to obtain for me the grace always to remember thy wounded heart and the bitterest pains suffered by thy Son for my salvation. Amen.

Second Sorrow: The Flight into Egypt

The second sorrow of the Blessed Virgin was when she had to flee to Egypt due to the persecution of cruel Herod, who wickedly sought to kill her beloved Son.

One *Our Father* and seven *Hail Marys*.

Prayer

O Mary, most sorrowful sea of tears, by the anguish thou didst endure fleeing to Egypt to protect thy Son from Herod's barbaric cruelty, I implore thee to be my guide, that through thee I may be freed from the persecutions of visible and invisible enemies of my soul. Amen.

Third Sorrow: The Loss of Jesus in the Temple

The third sorrow of the Blessed Virgin was when, after being in Jerusalem with her spouse Joseph and her beloved Son Jesus the Saviour during Passover, she lost Him on the return to her humble home and mourned the loss of her only Beloved for three days.

One *Our Father* and seven *Hail Marys*.

Prayer

O disconsolate Mother, thou who sought thy Son anxiously for three days after losing His bodily presence, pray that sinners too may seek Him with acts of contrition and find Him. Amen.

Fourth Sorrow: Meeting Jesus Carrying the Cross

The fourth sorrow of the Blessed Virgin was when she met her most sweet Son carrying a heavy Cross on His tender shoulders

to Mount Calvary to be crucified for our salvation.

One *Our Father* and seven *Hail Marys*.

Prayer

O Virgin, more afflicted than any other, by the agony thou didst feel in thy heart upon meeting thy Son as He bore the wood of the Holy Cross to Calvary, grant that I may accompany Him continually in thought, weep for my sins, the cause of His and thy torment, and grow in love for Him. Amen.

Fifth Sorrow: The Crucifixion of Jesus

The fifth sorrow of the Blessed Virgin was when she saw her Son raised upon the hard wood of the Cross, shedding blood from every part of His Most Sacred Body.

One *Our Father* and seven *Hail Marys*.

Prayer

O Rose among thorns, by the bitter sorrow that pierced thy heart as thou beheld thy Son wounded and lifted on the Cross, grant that I may seek only Jesus

crucified, remembering always that my sins caused His suffering. Amen.

Sixth Sorrow: The Descent from the Cross

The sixth sorrow of the Blessed Virgin was when her beloved Son, wounded in the side after His death and taken down from the Cross, was placed in thy most holy arms, so pitilessly slain.

One *Our Father* and seven *Hail Marys*.

Prayer

O afflicted Virgin, thou who received thy dead Son into thy arms, kissing His most sacred wounds and weeping a sea of tears, grant that I too may wash with tears of true contrition the mortal wounds my sins inflicted upon thee. Amen.

Seventh Sorrow: The Burial of Jesus

The seventh sorrow of the Virgin Mary, our Lady and Advocate,

was when she accompanied the Most Holy Body of her Son to the tomb.

One *Our Father* and seven *Hail Marys*.

Prayer

O Martyr of Martyrs, Mary, by the bitter torment thou didst suffer when, after burying thy Son, thou had to depart from that beloved tomb, obtain for all sinners the grace to recognise the grave harm of being far from their God. Amen.

Three *Hail Marys* shall be recited in profound respect for the tears shed by the Blessed Virgin in all her sorrows, to implore through her a similar sorrow for our sins.

Hail Mary, etc.

After finishing the Chaplet, the Lament of the Blessed Virgin is recited—the hymn “*Stabat Mater*,” etc.

Hymn – Lament of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The Supreme Pontiff Innocent XI, grants the indulgence of 100 days each time the *Stabat Mater* is recited. Benedict XIII granted the seven-year indulgence to those who recite the Crown of the Seven Sorrows of Mary. Many other indulgences were granted by other Popes especially to the Brothers and Sisters of the Company of the Sorrowful Mary.

The seven sorrows of Mary meditated in the form of the Way of the Cross

Stabat Mater dolorosa
 Iuxta crucem lacrymosa,
 Dum pendebat Filius.
 Cuius animam gementem
 Contristatam et dolentem
 Pertransiuit gladius.
 O quam tristis et afflicta
 Fuit illa benedicta
 Mater unigeniti!
 Quae moerebat, et dolebat,
 Pia Mater dum videbat.
 Nati poenas inclyti.
 Quis est homo, qui non fleret,
 Matrem Christi si videret
 In tanto supplicio?
 Quis non posset contristari,
 Christi Matrem contemplari
 Dolentem cum filio?
 Pro peccatis suae gentis
 Vidit Iesum in tormentis
 Et flagellis subditum.
 Vidit suum dulcem natura
 Moriundo desolatum,
 Dum emisit spiritum.
 Eia mater fons amoris,
 Me sentire vim doloris
 Fac, ut tecum lugeam.
 Fac ut ardeat cor meum
 In amando Christum Deum,
 Ut sibi complaceam.
 Sancta Mater istud agas,
 Crucifigi fige plagas
 Cordi meo valide.
 Tui nati vulnerati
 Tam dignati pro me pati
 Poenas mecum divide.
 Fac me tecum pie flere,
 Crucifixo condolere,
 Donec ego vixero.
 Iuxta Crucem tecum stare,
 Et me tibi sociare
 In planctu desidero.
 Virgo virginum praeclara,
 Mihi iam non sia amara,
 Fac me tecum plangere.
 Fac ut portem Christi mortem,
 Passionis fac consortem,
 Et plagas recolere.
 Fac me plagis vulnerari,
 Fac me cruce inebriari,
 Et cruore Filii.
 Flammis ne urar succensus,
 Per te, Virgo, sim defensus
 In die Iudicii.
 Christe, cum sit hinc exire,
 Da per matrem me venire
 Ad palmam victoriae.
 Quando corpus morietur,
 Fac ut animae donetur
 Paradisi gloria. Amen.

At the cross her station keeping,
 Stood the mournful Mother weeping,
 Close to Jesus to the last.
 Through her heart, His sorrow sharing,
 All His bitter anguish bearing,
 Now at length the sword had passed.
 Oh, how sad and sore distressed
 Was that Mother highly blest,
 Of the sole begotten One!
 Christ above in torment hangs.
 She beneath beholds the pangs
 Of her dying glorious Son.
 Is there one who would not weep,
 Whelmed in miseries so deep,
 Christ's dear Mother to behold?
 Can the human heart refrain
 From partaking in her pain,
 In that Mother's pain untold?
 Bruised, derided, cursed, defiled,
 She beheld her tender Child,
 All with bloody scourges rent.
 For the sins of His own nation,
 Saw Him hang in desolation
 Till His spirit forth He sent.
 O thou Mother, fount of love!
 Touch my spirit from above,
 Make my heart with thine accord.
 Make me feel as thou hast felt;
 Make my soul to glow and melt
 With the love of Christ my Lord.
 Holy Mother, pierce me through;
 In my heart each wound renew
 Of my Savior crucified.
 Let me share with thee His pain,
 Who for all my sins was slain,
 Who for me in torment died.
 Let me mingle tears with thee,
 Mourning Him who mourned for me,
 All the days that I may live.
 By the Cross with thee to stay;
 There with thee to weep and pray,
 Is all I ask of thee to give.
 Virgin of all virgins best,
 Listen to my fond request:
 Let me share thy grief divine.
 Let me to my latest breath,
 In my body bear the death
 Of that dying Son of thine.
 Wounded with His every wound,
 Steep my soul till it hath swooned
 In His very blood, away.
 Be to me, O Virgin, nigh,
 Lest in flames I burn and die,
 In His awful Judgment day.
 Christ, when Thou shalt call me hence,
 Be Thy Mother my defence,
 Be Thy Cross my victory.
 While my body here decays,
 May my soul Thy goodness praise,
 Safe in Paradise with Thee. Amen.

Invoke divine help by saying:

We beseech Thee, O Lord, to anticipate our actions by inspiring us, and to continue them by helping us, so that all our prayer and work may always begin with Thee, and, having begun through Thee, may be ended. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Act of Contrition

Most Afflicted Virgin, alas! How ungrateful I have been in the past towards my God, with what ingratitude I have responded to His countless benefits! Now I repent, and in the bitterness of my heart and the weeping of my soul, I humbly ask Him for forgiveness for having offended His infinite goodness, firmly resolved in the future with heavenly grace, never to offend Him again. Ah! By all the sorrows you endured in the barbaric passion of your beloved Jesus, I beg you with the deepest sighs to obtain for me from Him, pity and mercy for my sins. Accept this holy exercise I am about to perform and receive it in union with those pains and sorrows you suffered for your son Jesus. Ah, grant me! Yes, grant me that those same swords that pierced your spirit may also pierce mine, and that I may live and die in the friendship of my Lord, to eternally partake of the glory He has acquired for me with His precious Blood. Amen.

First Sorrow

In this first sorrow, let us imagine ourselves in the temple of Jerusalem, where the Most Blessed Virgin heard the prophecy of the old Simeon.

Meditation

Ah! What anguish the heart of Mary must have felt upon hearing the sorrowful words with which the holy old Simeon foretold the bitter passion and atrocious death of her sweetest Jesus: while at that same moment there came to her mind the insults, abuses, and tortures that the wicked Jews would inflict on the Redeemer of the world. But do you know what was the most

piercing sword that wounded her in this circumstance? It was the consideration of the ingratitude with which her beloved Son would be repaid by men. Now reflecting that, because of your sins, you are miserably among these, ah! Throw yourself at the feet of this Sorrowful Mother and say to her weeping (all kneel): Ah! Most Compassionate Virgin, who experienced such bitter anguish in your spirit seeing the abuse which I, unworthy creature, would make of the blood of your beloved Son, grant, yes grant by your most afflicted Heart, that in the future I may respond to the Divine Mercies, make use of heavenly graces, and not receive in vain so many lights and inspirations which you will deign to obtain for me, so that I may be among those for whom the bitter passion of Jesus is an eternal salvation. Amen. *Hail Mary* etc. *Glory be* etc.

Mary, my sweet love,
Imprint your sorrows in my heart.

Second Sorrow

In this second sorrow, let us consider the most painful journey the Virgin made towards Egypt to save Jesus from Herod's cruel persecution.

Meditation

Consider the bitter sorrow Mary must have felt when, at night, she had to set out on her journey by the Angel's order to preserve her Son from the massacre ordered by that fierce Prince. Ah! At every animal cry, at every gust of wind, at every rustle of leaves she heard in those deserted roads, she was filled with fear lest some harm befall the child Jesus she carried with her. Now she turned one way, now another, now hastened her steps, now hid herself, thinking she was overtaken by soldiers who might tear her most beloved Son from her arms and subject Him to barbaric treatment before her eyes. Fixing her tearful gaze upon her Jesus and pressing Him tightly to her breast, giving Him a thousand kisses, she sent forth the most anguished sighs from her heart. And here reflect how many times you have renewed this bitter sorrow for

Mary by forcing her Son with your grave sins to flee from your soul. Now that you know the great evil committed, turn repentantly to this merciful Mother and say to her:

Ah, sweetest Mother! Once Herod forced you and your Jesus to flee because of the inhuman persecution he commanded; but I, oh! How many times have I obliged my Redeemer, and consequently you too, to depart quickly from my heart, introducing into it the cursed sin, merciless enemy of you and my God. Ah! Full of sorrow and contrition, I humbly ask your forgiveness.

Yes, mercy, O dear Mother, mercy, and I promise in the future with Divine help to always keep my Saviour and You in full possession of my soul. Amen. *Hail Mary* etc. *Glory be* etc.

Mary, my sweet love,
Imprint your sorrows in my heart.

Third Sorrow

In this third sorrow, let us consider the most afflicted Virgin who, weeping, searches for her lost Jesus.

Meditation

How great was Mary's sorrow when she realised, she had lost her beloved Son! And how her grief increased when, having diligently searched for Him among friends, relatives, and neighbours, she could find no trace of Him. Not minding discomfort, fatigue, or dangers, she wandered for three continuous days through the regions of Judea, repeating those words of desolation: Has anyone seen Him whom my soul truly loves? Ah! The great anxiety with which she sought Him made her imagine at every moment that she saw Him or heard His voice, but then, finding herself disappointed, oh how she shuddered and felt more keenly the grief of such a deplorable loss! Great confusion for you, O sinner, who, having so often lost your Jesus through grave faults, took no care to seek Him, a clear sign that you make little or no account of the precious treasure of Divine friendship. Weep, then, for your blindness, and turning to this Sorrowful Mother, say to her

sighing thus:

Most Afflicted Virgin, ah, make me learn from you the true way to seek Jesus whom I have lost by following my passions and the wicked suggestions of the devil, so that I may succeed in finding Him, and when I have regained possession of Him, I will continually repeat those words of yours, I have found Him whom my heart truly loves. I will keep Him always with me, and never let Him depart again. Amen. *Hail Mary* etc. *Glory be* etc.

Mary, my sweet love,
Imprint your sorrows in my heart.

Fourth Sorrow

In the fourth sorrow, let us consider the meeting of the sorrowful Virgin with her suffering Son.

Meditation

Come, then, O hardened hearts, and see if you can endure this most tearful spectacle. It is the most tender, most loving mother meeting her sweetest, most beloved Son; and how does she meet Him? O God! Amidst the most impious mob dragging Him cruelly to death, covered with wounds, dripping with blood, torn by injuries, with a crown of thorns on His head and a heavy beam on His shoulders, weary, gasping, languishing, seeming at every step about to breathe His last.

Ah! Consider, my soul, the mortal shock the Most Holy Virgin felt at the first glance she fixed upon her tormented Jesus. She would want to bid Him a last farewell, but how, when grief prevents her from uttering a word? She would throw herself at His neck, but remains motionless and petrified by the force of inner affliction. She would vent her grief with tears, but her heart feels so constricted and oppressed that she cannot shed a tear. Oh! And who can restrain tears seeing a poor mother plunged in such great anguish? But who is the cause of such bitter sorrow? Ah, I know, yes, it is I with my sins who have made such a barbaric wound in your tender heart, O Sorrowful

Virgin. Yet who would believe it? I remain unmoved, without being touched. But if I was ungrateful in the past, I shall be so no more.

Meanwhile, prostrate at your feet, O Most Holy Virgin, I humbly ask your forgiveness for so much sorrow I have caused you. I know and confess that I do not deserve pity, being the true reason you fell with grief upon meeting your Jesus all covered with wounds; but remember, yes remember that you are the mother of mercy. Ah, show yourself thus to me, and I promise in the future to be more faithful to my Redeemer, and so make up for so much displeasure I have given your most afflicted spirit. Amen. *Hail Mary* etc. *Glory be* etc.

Mary, my sweet love,
Imprint your sorrows in my heart.

Fifth sorrow

In this fifth sorrow, let us imagine ourselves on Mount Calvary where the most afflicted Virgin saw her beloved Son expire on the Cross.

Meditation

Here we are at Calvary where two altars of sacrifice are already raised, one in the body of Jesus, the other in the heart of Mary. Oh, tragic spectacle! We behold the Mother drowned in a sea of anguish as she sees her dear and beloved child torn from her by pitiless death. Alas! Every hammer blow, every wound, every laceration that the Savior receives upon His flesh deeply reverberates in the heart of the Virgin. She stands at the foot of the Cross so penetrated by sorrow and pierced by grief that you could not decide who would be the first to expire—Jesus or Mary. She fixes her eyes on the face of her agonizing Son, observes His languishing pupils, His pale face, His livid lips, His laboured breath, and finally realizes that He no longer lives and has already surrendered His spirit into the hands of His eternal Father. Ah, her soul then makes every possible effort to separate from her body and unite with that of Jesus. And who can endure such

a sight?

Oh, most sorrowful Mother, instead of withdrawing from Calvary to avoid feeling such acute anguish, you remain motionless there to drink to the last drop the bitter cup of your afflictions. What confusion this must bring to me, who seek every means to avoid the crosses and small sufferings that the Lord deigns to send for my good? Most sorrowful Virgin, I humble myself before you—ah! Grant that I may once clearly know the preciousness and great value of suffering, that I may become so attached to it that I never tire of exclaiming with St. Francis Xavier: “More, Lord, more, Lord—more suffering, my God.” Ah yes, more suffering, O my God. So be it. *Hail Mary*, etc. *Glory be*, etc.

Mary, my sweet beloved,
Imprint your sorrows upon my heart.

Sixth sorrow

In this sixth sorrow, let us imagine ourselves seeing the disconsolate but Virgin Mother receiving into her arms her deceased Son taken down from the Cross.

Meditation

Consider the most bitter pain that pierced Mary’s soul when she saw the lifeless body of her beloved Jesus placed in her lap. Ah! As she fixed her gaze upon His wounds and sores, beholding Him crimson with His own blood, the force of her inner grief was such that her heart was mortally pierced, and had she not died, it was Divine omnipotence that preserved her life. Oh, poor Mother—yes, poor Mother, who leads to the tomb the dear object of your tenderest affections, who from a bouquet of roses has become a bundle of thorns due to the mistreatment and lacerations inflicted by wicked executioners. And who would not pity you? Who would not feel crushed by sorrow seeing you in such a state of affliction as to move even the hardest stone to pity? I see John inconsolable, Magdalene and the other Marys weeping bitterly, Nicodemus unable to bear the grief any longer. And I? I alone shed no

tear amid such sorrow! Ungrateful and thankless wretch that I am!

Ah! Most merciful Mother, here I am at your feet, receive me under your powerful protection and let my heart be pierced by the same sword that passed through your most afflicted spirit, that it may soften at last and truly weep for my grave sins, which brought you such cruel martyrdom. So be it. *Hail Mary*, etc. *Glory be*, etc.

Mary, my sweet beloved,
Imprint your sorrows upon my heart.

Seventh sorrow

In this seventh sorrow, let us consider the most sorrowful Virgin as she sees her deceased Son enclosed in the tomb.

Meditation

Consider the mortal sigh that escaped Mary's afflicted heart when she saw her beloved Jesus laid in the tomb! Oh, what pain, what grief her spirit felt when the stone was raised to seal that most sacred monument! It was impossible to detach her from the edge of the sepulchre, for her sorrow rendered her insensible and immobile, never ceasing to gaze upon those wounds and cruel lacerations. And when the tomb was finally sealed—ah, then the force of her inner anguish was such that she would undoubtedly have fallen dead had God not preserved her life. Oh, most tormented Mother! You will now depart from this place with His body, but surely your heart remains here, for here lies your true treasure. Ah, fate—may all our affection, all our love, remain with Him. How can we not be consumed with love for the Savior, who shed all His blood for our salvation? How can we not love you, who suffered so much for our sake?

Now, sorrowful and repentant for having caused so much pain to your Son and such bitterness to you, we prostrate ourselves at your feet. And for all those sorrows you allowed us to meditate upon, grant us this favour, that the memory of them may remain vividly impressed upon our minds, that our hearts

may be consumed with love for our good God and for you, our sweetest Mother, and that the last sigh of our life may be united to those you poured forth from the depths of your soul in the sorrowful Passion of Jesus, to whom be honour, glory, and thanksgiving for all ages. Amen. *Hail Mary*, etc. *Glory be*, etc.

Mary, my sweet beloved,
Imprint your sorrows upon my heart.

Then the *Stabat Mater* is recited, as above.

Antiphon: "*A sword shall pierce your own soul also*"—Simeon's prophecy to Mary.

Pray for us, O most sorrowful Virgin.

That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray

O God, in whose Passion, according to the prophecy of Simeon, a sword of sorrow pierced the sweetest soul of the glorious Virgin and Mother Mary, mercifully grant that we who recall her sorrows may attain the blessed fruit of Your Passion. You who live, etc.

Praise be to God and to the most sorrowful Virgin.

With ecclesiastical approval

The Feast of the Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary, celebrated by the Pious Union and Society, falls on the third Sunday of September in the Church of St. Francis of Assisi.

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The shepherdess, the sheep and lambs (1867)

In the following passage, Don Bosco, founder of the Valdocco Oratory, recounts a dream he had between 29 and 30 May 1867 to his young people, which he narrated on the evening of Holy Trinity Sunday. In a boundless plain, flocks and lambs become an allegory for the world and the boys: lush meadows or arid deserts represent grace and sin; horns and wounds denounce scandal and dishonour; the number “3” foretells three famines – spiritual, moral, material – that threaten those who stray from God. From the account flows the saint’s urgent appeal: to preserve innocence, to return to grace through penance, so that every young person can be clothed in the flowers of purity and partake in the joy promised by the good Shepherd.

On Trinity Sunday, June 16 [1867]—the feast on which twenty-six years before Don Bosco had celebrated his first Mass – the Oratory boys eagerly awaited the narration of the dream he had promised them on the 13th. He took to heart the good of his spiritual flock and always abided by the exhortations of Holy Scripture: “Take good care of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds.” [Prov. 27, 23] He constantly prayed for an intimate knowledge of his little lambs, for the grace of carefully watching over them and providing for their well-being after his death, and for their daily spiritual and bodily nourishment. On that Sunday, therefore, after night prayers, he thus addressed the Oratory community:

The night of the 29th or 30th of May, as I was lying in bed unable to fall asleep, I began thinking of my dear boys. I wish I could dream up something good for them, I said to myself. After mulling over this for a short while, I made up my mind to have a dream. Lo and behold, I fell asleep and found myself in an immense plain packed tight with huge sheep. Divided into flocks, they were grazing on meadows which

stretched as far as the eye could see. Wanting to get closer to them and marveling that anyone could own so many flocks, I looked for the shepherd. I soon spotted him leaning on a staff and went up to him.

"Whose flock is this?" I asked him.

He did not answer. I repeated my question.

"Is that any of your business?" he replied.

"That's no answer!" I countered.

"All right! They belong to their owner!"

"Thanks, but who is he?"

"Don't be so impatient. We'll come to that."

I then followed him for a close look at the flocks and the land. In places the meadows were luscious and dotted with shade trees. Here the sheep were healthy and gorgeous. In other places the plain was barren and forbidding, bristling with thorns and yellow thistles, and with not a blade of grass in sight. Here a large flock was grazing, but it looked miserable. I kept asking questions about the sheep, but my guide ignored them and simply told me, "You need not concern yourself with the sheep. I'll show you the flock you must shepherd."

"Who are you?"

"I am the owner. Follow me."

He took me to another area where I saw thousands of little lambs so weak that they could hardly move. The land was parched and grassless. Short, withered tufts and brush were the only vegetation because the countless lambs had devoured everything else. It was obvious that the soreplagued little things had suffered and were still suffering a great deal. Strangely, all sported thick, long horns like those of old rams, tipped with an appendage in the shape of an S.

Puzzled and perplexed at this sight, I could not believe that such little lambs could have so quickly consumed their feed and could already sport such thick, long horns.

"How is it," I asked the shepherd, "that these little lambs have such horns?"

"Take a close look," he replied.

I did and was surprised to see the figure 3 all over their bodies: back, neck, head, snout, ears, legs, hoofs.

"What's this?" I exclaimed. "I don't understand."

"I'll tell you! This great plain is the world. The lush meadows symbolize the Word of God and His grace. The parched and barren areas are the places where people don't listen to the Word of God and only aim at pleasing the world. The sheep are the adults; the lambs are the youngsters. For these God has sent Don Bosco. This area of the plain is the Oratory; the lambs are your boys. The parched soil represents the state of sin; horns symbolize dishonor; the letter S stands for scandal. Scandal-giving is the cause of these boys' perdition. Those with broken horns once gave scandal but do not do so now. The figure 3 stands for their triple punishment—spiritual, moral and material famine: spiritual famine by the lack of spiritual aid they will seek in vain; moral famine by being deprived of God's Word; material famine by the lack of food. Having devoured all their pasture, the lambs have nothing left but dishonor and the three famines. This scene also shows the present pitiful state of so many boys in the world; at the Oratory, at least, even the unworthy have something to eat."

While I listened and in bewilderment observed everything that was pointed out to me, a new wonder took place. All the lambs reared up on their hind legs, grew tall, and turned into boys. I got closer to see if I knew any of them. All were Oratory boys. Very many I had never before seen, but all claimed to be Oratory pupils. Among those I did not know were also a few who are now here. They never let themselves be seen by Don Bosco, never ask his advice, always dodge him. They are the boys Don Bosco does not know. But the greatest majority by far comprised boys who will come to the Oratory in the future.

As I sadly eyed that multitude, my guide took my hand and said, "Come, I'll show you something else." He led me to a far corner of the valley where hillocks and a thick hedge of dense foliage enclosed a vast, luxuriant meadow covered by patches of aromatic herbs of all kinds and dotted with wild flowers

and shady groves through which limpid streamlets made their way.

Here I found a multitude of very happy youngsters. Using the meadow's flowers, they had fashioned or were still making themselves very beautiful robes.

"At least you have these boys to console you," my guide remarked.

"Who are they?"

"Boys in the state of grace."

I can truthfully say that never had I seen anything or anyone so beautiful beyond compare! Never could I have imagined such splendor. I will not try to describe what I saw. It defies description. But a more wonderful sight was in store for me. As I was enjoying the vision of those happy boys and noting that many were yet unknown to me, my guide said, "Let's go. I want to show you something that will bring you greater pleasure and comfort."

He took me to another meadow carpeted with flowers prettier and sweeter-scented than those I had just seen. It looked like a royal garden. There were but few lads here, yet they were so extraordinarily handsome and brilliant as to outshine and eclipse those I had shortly before admired. Some of those boys are here now; others are still to come.

"These boys have preserved untainted the lily of purity," my guide explained. "They still wear the spotless robe of innocence."

I stood entranced. Nearly all wore floral wreaths of indescribable beauty. Each flower was a cluster of thousands of tiny, brightly-hued disk florets of unbelievable charm, each with more than a thousand colors. The boys wore an ankle-length garment of dazzling white, embroidered with flowers like those of the crowns. Sparkling light radiated from these flowers to swathe the boys' bodies and reflect its comeliness upon them. In turn, the flowers reflected each other's beauty, those in the crowns mirroring those of the garments, and each throwing back the rays emanating from the others. As the rays of one color hit others of a different color, new rays and new

colors were generated in an endless array of splendor. Never could I imagine such a fascinating, bewildering spectacle in heaven itself!

Yet that is not all. The sparkling flowers of the boys' crowns and dazzling garments were mirrored in the flowers and garments of their companions. Let me add that the brilliant countenance of each boy blended with those of his companions and, in reflection, increased its own intensity a hundredfold, so that those beautiful faces of innocence were clothed in blinding light, each boy mirroring the loveliness of his companions in unspeakable splendor. We call this the "external" glory of the saints. There is no way to describe even faintly each boy's beauty in that ocean of light! I recognized some boys who are now here at the Oratory. Could they see but one-tenth of their present beauty, I am sure that they would endure fire and torture or the cruelest martyrdom rather than lose it.

Once I could tear myself away from this heavenly vision, I asked my guide, "Are these the only ones who never lost God's grace?"

"Well," he replied, "don't you think that their number is quite large? Furthermore, lads who have lost their baptismal innocence can still follow their companions along the way of penance. Look at that meadow; it still boasts of many flowers. They too can be woven into most beautiful crowns and garments, and the boys can join their companions in the glory of heaven."

"What other suggestion can you give my boys?" I asked.

would make every sacrifice to preserve it. Tell them to be brave and to practice this fair virtue, which overrides all others in beauty and splendor. The chaste are lilies growing in God's sight.

I walked toward the boys to mingle among them, but I stumbled against something and awoke to find myself in bed.

My dear sons, are you all innocent? Perhaps a few of you are. To them I say: for heaven's sake, never lose such a priceless gem! It is a treasure worth God Himself. If you could only

have seen how beautiful those boys were with their crowns! I would have given anything in the world to prolong the enjoyment of that spectacle. If I were a painter, I would consider it a rare privilege to be able to paint what I saw. Could you but know how beautiful innocence is in a lad, you would undergo the most painful ordeal and death itself in order to safeguard that treasure. Though I was profoundly comforted by the number of those who had returned to the state of grace, I still wished that it might have been greater. I was also very much surprised to see that some boys who here appear to be good wore long, thick horns.

Don Bosco ended his narrative with a warm exhortation to those who had lost their innocence to strive earnestly to regain it by penance. Two days later, on June 18, after night prayers, Don Bosco gave more explanations of his dream:

There should be no further need of explaining, but I will repeat some things I have said. The great plain is the world, particularly the places and states of life from which you were called to come here. The area where the lambs grazed symbolizes the Oratory, and they are its past, present, and future pupils. The arid, the fertile, and the flowery meadows represent the state of sin, of grace, and of innocence. Horns stand for scandal; broken horns symbolize an end to scandal-giving. The figure 3 on every lamb stands for the three punishments that God will inflict upon those boys: famine of spiritual aid, famine of religious instruction and of God's Word, and famine of material food. The boys radiating light are those in the state of grace, particularly those still retaining their baptismal innocence. What glory awaits them!

Let us then, dear boys, bravely practice virtue. Those lads in the state of sin must do their utmost to start a new life and, with God's help, persevere till death. If we cannot all join the innocent ones around the Immaculate Lamb, let us at least follow along after them.

One boy asked me if he was among the innocent ones. I told him no, but that his horns were broken off. He also asked if he had any sores, and I said yes.

“What do you mean?” he insisted.

“Don’t worry,” I replied. “They are dried up and will disappear. They are no longer a dishonor. They are like the scars of a soldier who, regardless of his many wounds, was still able to overcome his enemy. They are marks of glory. But, yet, it is more glorious to come away from the combat unscathed. To achieve this is truly admirable!”

In the course of his explanation, Don Bosco also said that before long there would be an epidemic, a famine, and a lack of means to do good to ourselves. He predicted that within three months something would happen. This dream was as impressive and effective as others in the past.

(MB IT VIII 839-845 / MB EN VIII 360-364)

Prophets of Forgiveness and Gratuity

In these times, where day after day the news communicates experiences of conflict, war, and hatred, how great is the risk that we as believers end up being drawn into a reading of events reduced merely to a political level, or limit ourselves to taking sides for one faction or another with arguments tied to our own way of seeing things, our own interpretation of reality.

In Jesus’ discourse following the Beatitudes, there is a series of “small/great lessons” that the Lord offers. They always begin with the verse “you have heard that it was said”. In one of these, the Lord recalls the ancient saying “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Mt 5:38).

Outside the logic of the Gospel, this law is not only

uncontested but may even be taken as a rule expressing how to settle scores with those who have offended us. Obtaining revenge is perceived as a right, even a duty.

Jesus presents himself before this logic with a completely different, wholly opposite proposal. To what we have heard, Jesus says, "But I say to you" (Mt 5:39). And here as Christians, we must be very careful. The words of Jesus that follow are important not only in themselves but because they express in a very concise way His entire message. Jesus does not come to tell us there is another way to interpret reality. He does not approach us to broaden the spectrum of opinions about earthly matters, particularly those touching our lives. Jesus is not just another opinion – He himself embodies the alternative to the law of revenge.

The phrase, "but I say to you," is fundamentally important because now it is no longer just the spoken word, but Jesus himself. What Jesus communicates to us, He lives. When Jesus says, "do not resist an evil person; if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also" (Mt 5:39), He lived these very words himself. Certainly, we cannot say of Jesus that He preaches well but acts poorly in His message.

Returning to our times, these words of Jesus risk being perceived as the words of a weak person, reactions of someone no longer capable of responding but only of enduring. Indeed, when we look at Jesus offering Himself completely on the wood of the Cross, this may be the impression we get. Yet we know perfectly well that the sacrifice on the cross is the fruit of a life that begins with the phrase "but I say to you". Because everything Jesus told us, he ultimately took upon Himself fully. And by taking it fully, He managed to pass from the cross to victory. Jesus' logic apparently communicates a losing personality. But we know well that the message Jesus left us, which He lived fully, is the medicine this world desperately needs today.

Being prophets of forgiveness means embracing good as a

response to evil. It means having the determination that the power of evil will not condition my way of seeing and interpreting reality. Forgiveness is not the response of the weak. Forgiveness is the most eloquent sign of that freedom which can recognise the wounds evil leaves behind, but those same wounds will never become a powder keg fuelling revenge and hatred.

Responding to evil with evil only widens and deepens humanity's wounds. Peace and harmony do not grow on the soil of hatred and revenge.

Being prophets of gratuity requires from us the ability to look upon the poor and the needy, not with the logic of profit, but with the logic of charity. The poor do not choose to be poor, but those who are well-off have the possibility to choose generosity, kindness, and compassion. How different the world would be if our political leaders in this scenario of growing conflicts and wars had the wisdom to look at those who pay the price in these divisions – the poor, the marginalised, those who cannot escape because they cannot manage so do so.

If we start from a purely horizontal reading, there is cause for despair. We have no choice but to remain closed in our grumbling and criticisms. And yet, no! We are educators of the young. We know well that these young people in our world are seeking reference points of a healthy humanity, of political leaders capable of interpreting reality with criteria of justice and peace. But when our young people look around, we know well they perceive only the emptiness of a poor vision of life.

We who are committed to the education of the young have a great responsibility. It is not enough to comment on the darkness left by an almost complete absence of leadership. It is not enough to remark that there are no proposals capable of igniting young people's memory. It falls to each of us to light that candle of hope in this darkness, to offer examples of humanity fulfilled in daily life.

Truly, it is worth being prophets of forgiveness and gratuity

today.

The Education of Conscience with St. Francis de Sales

It was most likely the advent of the Protestant Reformation that brought the issue of conscience—and more precisely, “freedom of conscience”—to the forefront. In a 1597 letter to Clement VIII, the Provost of Sales lamented the “tyranny” that the “state of Geneva” imposed “on the consciences of Catholics.” He asked the Holy See to intervene with the King of France to ensure that the Genevans would be granted “what they call freedom of conscience.” Opposed to military solutions for the Protestant crisis, he glimpsed in *libertas conscientiae* a possible way out of violent confrontation, provided reciprocity was respected. Claimed by Geneva for the Reformation and by Francis de Sales for Catholicism, freedom of conscience was about to become a pillar of modern thought.

The Dignity of the Human Person

The dignity of the individual lies in conscience, and conscience is first and foremost synonymous with sincerity, honesty, frankness, and conviction. The Provost of Sales acknowledged, for example, “to ease his conscience,” that the project of the *Controversies* had been somewhat imposed on him by others. When presenting his reasons in favour of Catholic doctrine and practice, he took care to specify that he did so “in conscience.” “Tell me in conscience,” he asked his opponents. A “good conscience” ensures one avoids certain acts that contradict oneself.

However, individual subjective conscience cannot always be taken as a guarantee of objective truth. One is not always

obliged to believe what someone says in conscience. "Show me clearly," the Provost said to the lords of Thonon, "that you are not lying at all, that you are not deceiving me when you say that in conscience you had this or that inspiration." Conscience can fall victim to illusion, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. "Hardened misers not only do not confess their greed but do not even think in conscience that they are greedy."

The formation of the conscience is an essential task because freedom of conscience carries the risk of "doing good and evil," but "choosing evil is not using, but rather, abusing our freedom." It is a difficult task because conscience sometimes appears as an adversary that "always fights against us and for us." It "steadily resists our bad inclinations," but does so "for our salvation." When one sins, "inner remorse moves against our conscience with a drawn sword," but only to "pierce it with holy fear."

A means to exercise responsible freedom is the practice of the "examination of conscience." Examining one's conscience is like following the example of doves that look at each other "with clear and pure eyes," "groom themselves carefully, and adorn themselves as best they can." Philothea is invited to perform this examination every evening before bed, asking oneself, "how one behaved at various times of the day. To make it easier, one should reflect on where, with whom, and in what occupations one was engaged."

Once a year, we must conduct a thorough examination of the "state of our soul" before God, our neighbour, and ourselves, not forgetting an "examination of our soul's affections." The examination—Francis de Sales tells the Visitandines—will lead you to "probe your conscience deeply."

How to lighten the conscience when burdened by error or fault? Some do so poorly, judging and accusing others "of vices they themselves succumb to," thinking this will "soften their conscience's remorse." This multiplies the risk of rash judgments. Conversely, "those who properly care for their conscience are not at all prone to rash judgments." The case

of parents, educators, and public officials deserves special consideration, for “a good part of their conscience consists in carefully watching over the conscience of others.”

Self-Respect

From the affirmation of each person’s dignity and responsibility must arise self-respect. Socrates and all ancient pagan and Christian thought had already shown the way:

It is a saying of the philosophers, yet held valid by Christian doctors: “Know thyself”—that is, know the excellence of your soul so as not to debase or despise it.

Certain acts offend not only God but also human dignity and reason. Their consequences are deplorable:

The likeness and image of God we bear within us is stained and disfigured, the dignity of our spirit dishonoured, and we are made similar to irrational animals [...], enslaving ourselves to our passions and overturning the order of reason.

There are ecstasies that elevate us above our natural state and others that debase us. “O men, how long will you be so senseless,” writes the author of *Theotimus*, “as to trample your natural dignity, voluntarily descending and plunging yourselves into the condition of beasts?”

Self-respect helps avoid two opposite dangers: pride and contempt for one’s gifts. In a century where honour was highly exalted, Francis de Sales had to denounce crimes, particularly duelling, which made his “hair stand on end,” and even more, the senseless pride behind it. “I am scandalised,” he wrote to the wife of a duelling husband; “truly, I cannot fathom how one could have such unbridled courage even over trifles.” Fighting a duel is like “becoming each other’s executioner.” Others, conversely, dare not acknowledge their gifts and thus sin against gratitude. Francis de Sales condemns “a certain false and foolish humility that prevents them from seeing the good in themselves.” They are wrong, for “the goods God has

placed in us must be acknowledged, valued, and sincerely honoured.”

The first neighbour I must respect and love, the Bishop of Geneva seems to say, is myself. True self-love and due respect demand that I strive for perfection and correct myself if needed, but gently, reasonably, and “following the path of compassion” rather than anger and fury.

There exists a self-love that is not only legitimate but beneficial and commanded, “Charity well-ordered begins with oneself,” says the proverb, reflecting Francis de Sales’ thought—provided one does not confuse self-love with self-centredness. Self-love is good, and Philothea is asked to examine how she loves herself:

Keep good order in loving yourself? For only disordered self-love can ruin us. Ordered love requires that we love the soul more than the body and seek virtue above all else.

Conversely, self-centredness is selfish, “narcissistic” love, fixated on itself, jealous of its beauty, and concerned only with self-interest. “Narcissus, say the profane, was a youth so scornful he would offer his love to none; finally, gazing at his reflection in a clear fountain, he was utterly captivated by his beauty.”

The “Respect Due to Persons”

If one respects oneself, one is better prepared to respect others. Being “the image and likeness of God” implies that “all human beings share the same dignity.” Francis de Sales, though living in a deeply unequal society marked by the ancient regime, promoted thought and practice marked by “respect due to persons.”

Start with children. St. Bernard’s mother—says the author of Philothea—loved her newborns “with respect as something sacred God had entrusted to her.” A grave rebuke from the Bishop of Geneva to pagans concerned their contempt for defenceless lives. Respect for a baby about to be born emerges in a letter written according to the Baroque rhetoric of the time to a

pregnant woman. He encourages her by explaining to her that the child forming in her womb is not only “a living image of the Divine Majesty”, but also an image of its mother. He advises another woman:

Offer often to the eternal glory of your Creator the little creature whose formation He has wanted to take you as His cooperator.

Another aspect of respect for others concerns the theme of freedom. The discovery of new lands had as a disastrous consequence, the re-emergence of slavery, that recalled the practice of the ancient romans at the time of paganism. The sale of human beings degraded them to the level of animals.

One day, Marc Antony bought two youths from a merchant; back then, as still happens in some lands, children were sold—men procured and traded them like horses in our countries.

Respect for others is subtly threatened by gossip and slander. Francis de Sales insists heavily on “sins of the tongue.” A chapter in Philothea which deals explicitly with this subject, is titled Honesty in Words and Respect Due to Persons states that ruining someone’s reputation is “spiritual murder,” robbing them of “civil life.” When condemning vice, one should spare the person involved as much as possible.

Certain groups are easily scorned. Francis de Sales defends the dignity of common people, citing the Gospel. He comments that “St. Peter was rough, coarse, an old fisherman of low station; a trader of low condition. Saint John, on the contrary, was a gentleman, sweet, lovable, wise; saint Peter, instead, was ignorant.” Well, it was St Peter who was chosen to guide others and to be the “universal superior”.

He proclaims the dignity of the sick, saying that, “the souls who are on the cross are declared queens.” Denouncing “cruelty towards the poor” and exalting the “dignity of the poor”, he justifies and specifies the attitude to be taken towards them, explaining “how we must honour them and, therefore, visit them

as representatives of our Lord." No one is useless; no one is insignificant. "There is no object in the world that cannot be useful for something; but you must know how to find its use and place."

The "one-different" Salesian"

The eternal human that has always tormented human society is reconciling individual dignity and freedom with that of the others. Francis de Sales offered an original solution by coining a term. In fact, assuming that the universe is made up of "all things created, visible and invisible" and that "their diversity is brought back into unity", the Bishop of Geneva proposed to call it "one-diverse", that is, "unique and diverse, unique with diversity and diverse with unity."

For him, every being is unique. People are like Pliny's pearls, "so unique in quality that no two are perfectly equal." His two major works, *Introduction to the Devout Life* and *Treatise on the Love of God*—are addressed to individuals, Philothea and Theotimus. What variety and diversity among beings! "Without doubt, as we see that two men are never perfectly equal as to the gifts of nature, so they are never perfectly equal as to the supernatural gifts." The variety also enchanted him from a purely aesthetic point of view, but he feared an indiscreet curiosity about its causes:

If someone asked why God made melons larger than strawberries, or lilies bigger than violets; why rosemary isn't a rose or a carnation a marigold; why peacocks are prettier than bats, or figs sweet and lemons sour—we'd laugh and say: poor man, the world's beauty requires variety, it is necessary that in things there are diverse and differentiated perfections and that the one is not the other. This is why some are small, others large; some harsh, others sweet; some more beautiful, others less. [...] All have their value, their grace, their splendour, and all, seen in the totality of their varieties, constitute a wonderful spectacle of beauty.

Diversity does not hinder unity; on the contrary, it makes it richer and more beautiful. Each flower has its characteristics that distinguish it from all the others. "It is not exactly of the roses to be white, it seems to me, because those vermilions are more beautiful and have a better scent, which however is proper to the lily." Of course, Francis de Sales does not tolerate confusion and disorder, but he is equally an enemy of uniformity. The diversity of beings can lead to dispersion and rupture of communion, but if there is love, "bond of perfection", nothing is lost, on the contrary, diversity is exalted by the union.

In Francis de Sales there is certainly a real culture of the individual, but this is never a closure to the group, the community or society. He spontaneously sees each person marked by their "state of life," which marks the identity and belonging of each one. It will not be possible to establish an equal programme or project for all, simply because it will be applied and implemented in a different way "for the gentleman, the artisan, the servant, the prince, the widow, the maiden, the married." It must also be adapted "to the strengths and duties of each individual. The bishop of Geneva sees society divided into vital spaces characterized by social belonging and group solidarity, as when he deals with "the company of soldiers, the workshop of craftsmen, the court of princes, the family of married people."

Love personalizes and, therefore, individualizes. The affection that binds one person to another is unique, as demonstrated by Francis de Sales in his relationship with Chantal's wife, "Every affection has a peculiarity that differentiates it from the others. What I feel for you possesses a certain particularity that comforts me infinitely, and, to say everything, is very fruitful for me." The sun illuminates each and every one, "illuminating a corner of the earth, it does not illuminate it less than what it would do if it did not shine elsewhere, but only in that corner."

The human being is in a state of becoming

A Christian humanist, Francis de Sales ultimately believed in the human person's capacity for self-improvement. Erasmus had coined the phrase: *Homines non nascuntur sed finguntur* (Men are not born but made). While animals are predetermined beings driven by instinct, humans, in contrast, are in perpetual evolution. Not only do they change, but they can also change themselves, for better or for worse.

What entirely preoccupied the author of *Theotimus* was perfecting himself and helping others to perfect themselves, not only in religious matters but in all things. From birth to the grave, man is in a state of apprenticeship. Let us imitate the crocodile, which "never stops growing as long as it lives." Indeed, "remaining in the same state for long is impossible. in this traffic, whoever does not advance falls behind; on this ladder, whoever does not climb, descends; in this battle, whoever does not conquer is conquered." He quotes St. Bernard, who said, "It is written especially for man that he will never be found in the same state: he must either advance or regress." Let us move forward:

Do you not know that you are on a journey and that the path is not made for sitting but for moving forward? He is so made for progress, that moving forward is called walking.

This also means that the human person is educable, capable of learning, correcting themselves, and improving themselves. And this holds true at all levels. Age sometimes has nothing to do with it. Look at these choirboys of the cathedral, who far surpass their bishop's abilities in this domain. "I admire these children," he said, "who can barely speak yet already sing their parts; they understand all musical signs and rules, while I, a grown man who might pass for a great figure, would not know how to manage." No one in this world is perfect:

There are people naturally frivolous, others rude, others still reluctant to listen to others' opinions, and others prone to indignation, others to anger, and others to love. In short, few are free people are free from one or another of

these imperfections.

Should we despair of improving our temperament, correcting some of our natural inclinations? Not at all.

For though these traits may be innate and natural in each of us, if they can be corrected and regulated through disciplined effort, or even eradicated, then, I tell you, Philothea, it must be done. Bitter almonds have been made sweet by piercing them at the base to drain their juice; why should we not drain our own perverse inclinations to become better?

Hence, the optimistic yet demanding conclusion. "There is no good nature that cannot be corrupted by vicious habits, nor any nature so perverse that it cannot, first by God's grace and then through diligent effort, be tamed and overcome." If man is educable, we must never despair of anyone and guard ourselves well against prejudice in regard to people:

Do not say: That man is a drunkard, even if you have seen him drunk; 'an adulterer,' for having witnessed his sin; 'incestuous,' for catching him in that disgrace, because one action is not enough to define a thing. [...] And even if a man were long steeped in vice, you'd risk falsehood by calling him vicious.

The human person has never finished tending their garden. This was the lesson the founder of the Visitation nuns instilled when urging them to "cultivate the soil and garden" of their hearts and minds, for no one is "so perfect as to need no effort to grow in perfection or preserve it."

The Seven Joys of the Madonna

At the heart of St. John Bosco's educational and spiritual work, the figure of the Madonna holds a privileged and luminous place. Don Bosco was not only a great educator and founder but also a fervent devotee of the Virgin Mary, whom he venerated with deep affection and to whom he entrusted all his pastoral projects. One of the most distinctive expressions of this devotion is the practice of the "Seven Joys of the Madonna," presented in a simple and accessible way in his publication "The Well-Provided Young Man," one of the most widely circulated texts in his spiritual pedagogy.

A Work for the Souls of the Young

In 1875, Don Bosco published a new edition of "The Well-Provided Young Man for the Practice of His Duties in the Exercises of Christian Piety," a manual of prayers, spiritual exercises, and rules of Christian conduct designed for boys. This book, written in a sober and fatherly style, aimed to accompany young people in their moral and religious formation, introducing them to a full Christian life. It also included devotion to the "Seven Joys of the Most Holy Mary," a simple yet intense prayer structured in seven points. Unlike the "Seven Sorrows of the Madonna," which is much more well-known and widespread in popular piety, Don Bosco's "Seven Joys" focus on the joys of the Most Holy Virgin in Heaven, the result of an earthly life lived in the fullness of God's grace.

This devotion has ancient origins and was particularly dear to the Franciscans, who spread it from the 13th century onwards, as the Rosary of the Seven Joys of the Blessed Virgin Mary (or Seraphic Crown). In the traditional Franciscan form, it is a devotional prayer composed of seven decades of Hail Marys, each preceded by a joyful mystery (joy) and introduced by an Our Father. At the end of each decade, a Glory Be is recited. The joys are: 1. The Annunciation by the Angel; 2. The

Visitation to St. Elizabeth; 3. The Birth of the Saviour; 4. The Adoration of the Magi; 5. The Finding of Jesus in the Temple; 6. The Resurrection of the Son; 7. The Assumption and Coronation of Mary in Heaven.

Drawing from this tradition, Don Bosco offers a simplified version, suited to the sensibilities of young people.

Each of these joys is meditated upon through the recitation of a Hail Mary and a Glory Be.

The Pedagogy of Joy

The choice to propose this devotion to young people was not merely a personal preference of Don Bosco but fits entirely within his educational vision. He was convinced that faith should be transmitted through joy, not fear; through the beauty of goodness, not the dread of evil. The "Seven Joys" thus become a school of Christian gladness, an invitation to recognise that, in the life of the Virgin, God's grace manifests as light, hope, and fulfilment.

Don Bosco was well aware of the difficulties and sufferings many of his boys faced daily: poverty, family abandonment, job insecurity. For this reason, he offered them a Marian devotion that was not limited to tears and sorrow but was also a source of consolation and joy. Meditating on Mary's joys meant opening oneself to a positive vision of life, learning to recognise God's presence even in difficult moments, and entrusting oneself with confidence to the tenderness of the heavenly Mother.

In "The Well-Provided Young Man," Don Bosco writes touching words about Mary's role: he presents her as a loving mother, a sure guide, and a model of Christian life. Devotion to her joys is not merely a devotional practice but a means to enter into a personal relationship with the Madonna, to imitate her virtues, and to receive her maternal help in life's trials.

For the saint from Turin, Mary is not distant or inaccessible but close, present, and active in the lives of her children. This Marian vision, strongly relational, permeates all Salesian spirituality and is reflected in the daily life of

the oratories: environments where joy, prayer, and familiarity with Mary go hand in hand.

A Living Legacy

Even today, devotion to the “Seven Joys of the Madonna” retains its spiritual and educational value. In a world marked by uncertainties, fears, and fragility, it offers a simple yet profound way to discover that Christian faith is, above all, an experience of joy and light. Don Bosco, a prophet of joy and hope, teaches us that authentic Christian education involves valuing affections, emotions, and the beauty of the Gospel.

Rediscovering the “Seven Joys” today also means recovering a positive outlook on life, history, and God’s presence. The Madonna, with her humility and trust, teaches us to cherish and meditate in our hearts the signs of true joy, the kind that does not fade, because it is founded on God’s love.

In a time when even young people seek light and meaning, Don Bosco’s words remain relevant: “If you wish to be happy, practice devotion to the Most Holy Mary.” The “Seven Joys” are, then, a small ladder to Heaven, a rosary of light that unites earth to the heart of the heavenly Mother.

Here is also the original text taken from “The Well-Provided Young Man for the Practice of His Duties in the Exercises of Christian Piety,” 1875 (pp. 141-142), with our own titles.

The Seven Joys That Mary Enjoys in Heaven

1. Purity Cultivated

Rejoice, O immaculate Spouse of the Holy Spirit, for the contentment you now enjoy in Paradise, because through your purity and virginity you are exalted above all the Angels and elevated above all the saints.

Hail Mary and Glory Be.

2. Wisdom Sought

Rejoice, O Mother of God, for the pleasure you experience in

Paradise, because just as the sun here on earth illuminates the whole world, so you, with your splendour, adorn and make all of Paradise shine.

Hail Mary and Glory Be.

3. Filial Obedience

Rejoice, O Daughter of God, for the sublime dignity to which you were raised in Paradise, because all the hierarchies of Angels, Archangels, Thrones, Dominions, and all the Blessed Spirits honour, revere, and acknowledge you as the Mother of their Creator, and at your slightest command, they are most obedient.

Hail Mary and Glory Be.

4. Continuous Prayer

Rejoice, O Handmaid of the Most Holy Trinity, for the great power you have in Paradise, because all the graces you ask of your Son are immediately granted; indeed, as St. Bernard says, no grace is granted here on earth that does not pass through your most holy hands.

Hail Mary and Glory Be.

5. Humility Lived

Rejoice, O most august Queen, because you alone deserved to sit at the right hand of your most holy Son, who sits at the right hand of the Eternal Father.

Hail Mary and Glory Be.

6. Mercy Practised

Rejoice, O Hope of sinners, Refuge of the afflicted, for the great pleasure you experience in Paradise in seeing that all who praise and revere you in this world are rewarded by the Eternal Father with His holy grace on earth and with His immense glory in Heaven.

Hail Mary and Glory Be.

7. Hope Rewarded

Rejoice, O Mother, Daughter, and Spouse of God, because all

the graces, all the joys, all the delights, and all the favours you now enjoy in Paradise will never diminish; indeed, they will increase until the day of judgment and last for eternity.

Hail Mary and Glory Be.

Prayer to the Most Blessed Virgin

O glorious Virgin Mary, Mother of my Lord, source of all our consolation, through these your joys, which I have recalled with the greatest devotion I could muster, I beg you to obtain for me from God the remission of my sins and the continual help of His holy grace, so that I may never render myself unworthy of your protection but rather have the fortune to receive all those heavenly favours you are accustomed to bestow upon your servants, who devoutly remember these joys that overflow from your beautiful heart, O immortal Queen of Heaven.

Photo: shutterstock.com

The Tenth Hill (1864)

Don Bosco's dream of the "Tenth Hill", recounted in October 1864, is one of the most evocative passages in Salesian tradition. In it, the saint finds himself in a vast valley filled with young people: some already at the Oratory, others yet to be met. Guided by a mysterious voice, he must lead them over a steep embankment and then through ten hills, symbolising the Ten Commandments, towards a light that prefigures Paradise. The chariot of Innocence, the penitential ranks, and the celestial music paint an educational fresco: they show the effort of preserving purity, the value of repentance, and the irreplaceable role of educators. With this

prophetic vision, Don Bosco anticipates the worldwide expansion of his work and the commitment to accompany every young person on the path to salvation.

It came to him the night of October 21, and he narrated it the following night. [Surprisingly] C ...E... a boy from Casale Monferrato, had the same dream, during which he seemed to be with Don Bosco, talking to him. In the morning the boy was so deeply impressed that he went to tell it all to his teacher, who urged him to report to Don Bosco. The youngster met Don Bosco as he was coming down the stairs to look for the boy and tell him the very same dream. [Here is the dream]:

Don Bosco seemed to be in a vast valley swarming with thousands and thousands of boys-so many, in fact, that their number surpassed belief. Among them he could see all past and present pupils; the rest, perhaps, were yet to come. Scattered among them were priests and clerics then at the Oratory.

A lofty bank blocked one end of the valley. As Don Bosco wondered what to do with all those boys, a voice said to him: "Do you see that bank? Well, both you and the boys must reach its summit."

At Don Bosco's word, all those youngsters dashed toward the bank. The priests too ran up the slope, pushing boys ahead, lifting up those who fell, and hoisting on their shoulders those who were too tired to climb further. Father Rua, his sleeves rolled up, kept working hardest of all, gripping two boys at a time and literally hurling them up to the top of the bank where they landed on their feet and merrily scampered about. Meanwhile Father Cagliero and Father Francesia ran back and forth encouraging the youngsters to climb.

It didn't take long for all of them to make it to the top. "Now what shall we do?" Don Bosco asked.

"You must all climb each of the ten bills before you," the voice replied.

"Impossible! So many young, frail boys will never make it!"

"Those who can't will be carried," the voice countered. At

this very moment, at the far end of the bank, appeared a gorgeous, triangular-shaped wagon, too beautiful for words. Its three wheels swiveled in all directions. Three shafts rose from its comers and joined to support a richly embroidered banner, carrying in large letters the inscription *Innocentia* [Innocence]. A wide band of rich material was draped about the wagon, bearing the legend: *Adiutorio Dei Altissimi, Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*. [With the help of the Most High, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.]

Glittering with gold and gems, the wagon came to a stop in the boys' midst. At a given order, five hundred of the smaller ones climbed into it. Among the untold thousands, only these few hundred were still innocent.

As Don Bosco kept wondering which way to go, a wide, level road strewn with thorns opened before him. Suddenly there also appeared six white-clad former pupils who had died at the Oratory. Holding aloft another splendid banner with the inscription *Poenitentia* [Penance], they placed themselves at the head of the multitude which was to walk the whole way. As the signal to move was given, many priests seized the wagon's prow and led the way, followed by the six white-clad boys and the rest of the multitude.

The lads in the wagon began singing *Laudate pueri Dominum* [Praise the Lord, you children – Ps. 112, 1] with indescribable sweetness.

Don Bosco kept going forward, enthralled by their heavenly melody, but, on an impulse, he turned to find out if the boys were following. To his deep regret he noticed that many had stayed behind in the valley, while many others had turned back. Heartbroken, he wanted to retrace his steps to persuade those boys to follow him and to help them along, but he was absolutely forbidden to do so. "Those poor boys will be lost!" he protested.

"So much the worse for them," he was told. "They too received the call but refused to follow you. They saw the road they had to travel. They had their chance."

Don Bosco insisted, pleaded, and begged, but in vain.

"You too must obey," he was told. He had to walk on.

He was still smarting with this pain when he became aware of another sad fact: a large number of those riding in the wagon had gradually fallen off, so that a mere hundred and fifty still stood under the banner of innocence. His heart was aching with unbearable grief. He hoped that it was only a dream and made every effort to awake, but unfortunately it was all too real. He clapped his hands and heard their sound; he groaned and heard his sighs resound through the room; he wanted to banish this horrible vision and could not.

"My dear boys," he exclaimed at this point of his narration, "I recognized those of you who stayed behind in the valley and those who turned back or fell from the wagon. I saw you all. You can be sure that I will do my utmost to save you. Many of you whom I urged to go to confession did not accept my invitation. For heaven's sake, save your souls."

Many of those who had fallen off the wagon joined those who were walking. Meanwhile the singing in the wagon continued, and it was so sweet that it gradually abated Don Bosco's sorrow. Seven hills had already been climbed. As the boys reached the eighth, they found themselves in a wonderful village where they stopped for a brief rest. The houses were indescribably beautiful and luxurious.

In telling the boys of this village, Don Bosco remarked, "I could repeat what St. Teresa said about heavenly things-to speak of them is to belittle them. They are just too beautiful for words. I shall only say that the doorposts of these houses seemed to be made of gold, crystal, and diamonds all at once. They were a most wonderful, satisfying, pleasing sight. The fields were dotted with trees laden simultaneously with blossoms, buds, and fruit. It was out of this world!" The boys scattered all over, eager to see everything and to taste the fruit.

(It was in this village that the boy from Casale met Don Bosco and talked at length with him. Both of them remembered quite vividly the details of their conversation. The two dreams had

been a singular coincidence.)

Here another surprise awaited Don Bosco. His boys suddenly looked like old men: toothless, wrinkled, white-haired, bent over, lame, leaning on canes. He was stunned, but the voice said, "Don't be surprised. It's been years and years since you left that valley. The music made your trip seem so short. If you want proof, look at yourself in the mirror and you will see that I am telling the truth." Don Bosco was handed a mirror. He himself had grown old, with his face deeply lined and his few remaining teeth decayed.

The march resumed. Now and then the boys asked to be allowed to stop and look at the novelties around them, but he kept urging them on. "We are neither hungry nor thirsty," he said.

"We have no need to stop. Let's keep going!"

Far away, on the tenth hill, arose a light which grew increasingly larger and brighter, as though pouring from a gigantic doorway. Singing resumed, so enchanting that its like may possibly be heard and enjoyed only in paradise. It is simply indescribable because it did not come from instruments or human throats. Don Bosco was so overjoyed that he awoke, only to find himself in bed.

He then explained his dream thus: "The valley is this world; the bank symbolizes the obstacles we have to surmount in detaching ourselves from it; the wagon is self-evident. The young sters on foot were those who lost their innocence but repented of their sins." He also added that the ten hills symbolized the Ten Commandments whose observance leads to eternal life. He concluded by saying that he was ready to tell some boys confidentially what they had been doing in the dream: whether they had remained in the valley or fallen off the wagon.

When he came down from the stand, a pupil, Anthony Ferraris, approached him and told him within our hearing that, the night before, he had dreamed that he was with his mother and that when the latter had asked him whether he would be coming home next Easter, he had replied that by then he would be in

paradise. He then whispered something else in Don Bosco's ear. Anthony Ferraris died on March 16, 1865.

We jotted down Don Bosco's dream that very evening, October 22, 1864, and added this note: "We are sure that in explaining the dream Don Bosco tried to cover up what is most mystifying, at least in some instances. The explanation that the ten hills symbolized the Ten Commandments does not convince us. We rather believe that the eighth hill on which Don Bosco called a halt and saw himself as an old man symbolizes the end of his life in the seventies. The future will tell."

The future is now past; facts have borne out our belief. The dream revealed Don Bosco's life-span. For comparative purposes, let us match this dream with that of The Wheel of Eternity, which we came to learn only years later. In that dream each tum of the wheel symbolized a decade, and this also seems to be the case in the trek from hill to hill. Each hill stands for a decade, and the ten hills represent a century, man's maximum life-span. In his life's first decade, Don Bosco, as a young boy, begins his mission among his companions at Becchi and starts on his journey; he climbs seven hills-seven decades-and reaches the age of seventy; he climbs the eighth hill and goes no farther. He sees beautiful buildings and meadows, symbols of the Salesian Society which, through God's infinite goodness, has grown and borne fruit. He has still a long way to go on the eighth hill and therefore sets out again, but he does not reach the ninth because he wakes up. Thus he did not live out his eighth decade; he died at the age of seventy-two years and five months.

What do our readers think of this interpretation? On the following evening, Don Bosco asked us our opinion of the dream. We replied that it did not concern only the boys, but showed also the worldwide spread of the Salesian Society.

"What do you mean?" a confrere countered. "We already have schools at Mirabella and Lanzo, and we'll have a few more in Piedmont. What else do you want?"

"No," we insisted. "This dream portends far greater things."

Don Bosco smiled and nodded approval.

Don Bosco attends a devils meeting (1884)

The following pages take us into the heart of Saint John Bosco's mystical experience, through two vivid dreams he had between September and December 1884. In the first, the Saint crosses the plain towards Castelnuovo with a mysterious person and reflects on the scarcity of priests, warning that only tireless work, humility, and morality can make authentic vocations flourish. In the second dream cycle, Bosco witnesses an infernal council: monstrous demons plot to annihilate the nascent Salesian Congregation, spreading gluttony, greed for riches, freedom without obedience, and intellectual pride. Amidst omens of death, internal threats, and signs of Providence, these dreams become a dramatic mirror of the spiritual struggles that await every educator and the entire Church, offering both severe warnings and bright hopes.

Two dreams he had in September and December provide a precious teaching. The first, which he had the night of September 29th, was a lesson to priests. He had found himself walking through a plain on his way to Castelnuovo. An old priest, whose name he did not recall, was walking beside him. Their conversation was about priests. "Work, work, work" they both said. "That should be the purpose and the glory of a priest! Never grow weary of working. How many souls might thereby be saved! How much one could accomplish for the glory of God! If only the missionary were truly a missionary, the pastor a pastor. How many miracles of holiness would be shown forth everywhere! But unfortunately,

many are work-shy and prefer their own comforts.”

As they were talking on this subject, they came to a place known as Filippelli. Here, Don Bosco deplored the current scarcity of priests.

“It is true that priests are few,” the other said, “but if all priests would only act as priests, there would be enough of them. Yet how many priests there are who do nothing for the ministry, whereas if they were to be active in their ministry, if they would pass their examinations as confessors, they would fill an immense void within the church. God gives us vocations in keeping with our needs. When clerics were subjected to military draft, everyone was scared, as if no one would ever become a priest.

But when these fantastic ideas subsided, we saw that instead of diminishing, the number of vocations were increasing.”

“What can be done now to increase the number of vocations among boys?” Don Bosco asked.

“Nothing more than to safeguard their morality jealously,” his companion said. “Morals represent the nursery garden of vocations.”

“Presbyter discat domum regere et sanctificare. No greediness, no excessive preoccupation with temporal things. Let a priest first become a model in his own home, and then he will be the first model outside of it.”

At a certain moment as they were walking, the other priest asked Don Bosco where he was going. Don Bosco pointed toward Castelnuovo.

Then, he let the other priest go ahead of him, lingering behind with a group of people who walked on ahead. After walking only a few steps, Don Bosco woke up. In the dream, we see a recollection of his former walks in that area.

Predicting the death of Salesians

The second dream concerned the Congregation, and forewarned against threats that might undermine its existence. More than a dream, this was a theme that recurred in a series of dreams.

The night of December 1st, the cleric Viglietti was abruptly awakened by piercing screams coming from Don Bosco's room. He leapt out of bed immediately and listened.

In a voice choked by sobs, Don Bosco was calling, "Ah! Oh, help! Help!"

Viglietti entered his room at once and asked, "Are you sick, Don Bosco?"

"Oh, Viglietti!" he said as he woke up. "No I am not sick, but I was unable to breathe, you know. That is enough, now. Go back to bed and sleep peacefully."

Next morning when Viglietti brought him his usual cup of coffee after Mass, Don Bosco confessed, "Oh, Viglietti, I cannot take it anymore. My whole chest is sore from having screamed so much last night. I have been dreaming now for four consecutive nights. These dreams force me to scream out and they tire me out. Four nights ago I saw a long line of Salesians walking one after the other, every one of them carrying a flagstaff with placards with a printed number on them. On one I saw 73, on another 30, 62 on a third, and so on. When many of them had gone by, the moon appeared in the sky, and as soon as a Salesian appeared you could have spotted a number, which was never higher than 12, and behind it there were many little black dots. All the Salesians that I saw went by and sat down beside an empty grave."

This is the explanation of his dream as it was given him: the number on the placards represented the number of years that each of them was to live; the appearance of the moon in different shapes and phases indicated the last month of their existence; the black dots represented the days of the month in which they were to die. He kept on seeing more and more of them, at times standing in groups; these were Salesians who were to die all together, on the same day. He said that if he were to mention all the accessory details and circumstances minutely, it would take him at least ten full days.

He witnesses a devils council

"I dreamed again three nights ago," he continued.

"I will tell you about it in brief. I thought I was in a big hall where many great devils were gathered as though for a convention. They were discussing how they could destroy the Salesian Congregation. They looked like lions, tigers, serpents and other animals, though their appearance was somewhat muddled, looking somewhat like human beings. They also looked like shadows, now higher, now lower; now smaller and now taller – just like bodies would look behind a lamp if one were to move it this way or that way. Now lowered to ground level and then raised up again. The whole fantastic vision was terrifying.

"One of the devils stepped forward to open the session. He proposed one way by which the pious Society might be destroyed: gluttony. He expounded on the consequences of this vice: sluggishness in doing good, corruption of morals, scandal, no spirit of sacrifice, and no concern for the boys.

"But another devil responded, 'Your suggestion is neither general nor effective, nor can all members of the Society be undermined by it collectively, for the dining table of religious is always frugal, the wine measured, their regular meals are set by their rules, their superiors are alert so as to prevent disorder. Instead of causing scandal, anyone who was to eat or drink to excess would sooner arouse disgust. No, this is not a weapon to use against the Salesians. I will find some other way that is more effective, and more likely to help us in our intent: love of riches. When the love of riches enters a religious Congregation, the love for comforts will also enter with it and the members will attempt everything to secure money (peculium) for themselves, the bond of love will be shattered. Since everyone will think only about his own needs, the poor will be neglected in order to dedicate themselves only to those who have means, and there will be stealing from the Congregation.'

"This devil would have continued speaking, but a third stood up and said, 'Gluttony? Get lost! Riches? Get lost! The love of riches will affect only a few among the Salesians! The Salesians are all poor; they have but a few opportunities of

making money for themselves. On the whole, their structure is so designed, their needs so immense with all the boys and the houses they have, that no matter how big any sum of money may be, it will soon be used up. It is impossible that they hoard anything. But I do have one infallible means by which we can conquer the Salesian Society for ourselves, and this is freedom. So let us teach the Salesians to disregard their rules, refuse certain assignments because they are burdensome and less glamorous, create division from their superiors by proposing conflicting opinions, and go home on the pretext they have been invited, and so on.'

"While the devils were discussing among themselves, Don Bosco was thinking I am all ears to hear what you are saying. I want to know. Go ahead – talk! By all means, talk because this will enable me to upset your conspiracy.

"Just then a fourth devil leapt to his feet, shouting, 'Rubbish! You are only proposing broken weapons! The superiors will know how to check such a freedom, and will expel from their houses anyone who ventures to rebel against the rules. Maybe a few will be led astray by their craving for freedom, but the vast majority will remain steadfast in their duty. Now I have a weapon that will surely undermine the whole Congregation down to its foundations. It is a weapon against which the Salesians will hardly be able to defend themselves. It will carry the rot to their very roots. Now listen to me carefully – convince them that their main glory should consist in their learning! This means inducing them to study for the sake of study, learning for the sake of attaining fame and not for the sake of practicing what they preach and not for using their learning for the benefit of their neighbor. They will become arrogant in their attitude toward the poor, ignorant and lazy as far as their sacred ministry. No more Festive Oratories, no more catechism classes for the boys, no more humble classrooms where they could teach poor, abandoned boys, no more long hours in the confessional. They will hold onto only preaching, but only occasionally, in a form well measured and sterile because it will only be an outlet for their own

vanity, aimed at being praised by their listeners, not at saving souls.'

"This devil's suggestion was hailed by applause. Don Bosco foresaw the day when the Salesians might really be led to believe that the interests of the Congregation and its honor lay solely in learning, and he grew afraid that not only would they act accordingly, but they would also preach that such a belief should be shared far and wide.

"Don Bosco was again standing in a corner of the room, watching everything and listening to all that was said. One of the devils discovered him, and shouted, pointing him out to the others. At his scream, all the devils rushed at him and yelled, 'We will put an end to this!'

"A whirl of infernal ghosts pushed and seized him by his arms, and at this point, he began to yell, 'Let me go! Help!'

"At last he woke up, his chest all sore from so much screaming."

Lions, tigers and monsters dressed as lambs

The following evening, he saw that the devil had begun working on the Salesians in their most essential core, urging them to neglect their rules. He was able to see them all distinctly, some were keeping the rules and others were breaking them.

The last night, the dream became more fearful than ever. Don Bosco saw a big flock of sheep and lambs representing so many Salesians. He approached them, trying to caress the lambs, but as he drew nearer, he saw that their wool was not real. It was not a lamb's wool, for hidden under it there were lions, tigers, pigs, panthers, and bears. Every one of them had a hideous, ferocious monster at their sides.

Some were standing in a huddle talking in the midst of the flock. Unnoticed, Don Bosco approached the group to hear what they were saying. They were discussing what to do in order to destroy the Salesian Congregation.

One was saying, "We must cut the Salesians' throats."

Another chuckled and said, "We should strangle them."

But just then, someone saw that Don Bosco was standing by listening. This demon sounded the alarm and they all shrieked together that they should start by killing Don Bosco. At that, they all rushed at him to choke him. It was then that he uttered the terrible cry that had awakened Viglietti.

Don Bosco had a heavy heart, not only because of the diabolical violence with which he had been attacked, but also because he had seen a great banner floating over the heads of the flock, and on it was written "*BESTIIS COMPARATI SUNT*" [They are like beasts]. As he said this, he bowed his head and wept.

Viglietti took his hand and pressed it against his own heart. He said, "Ah, Don Bosco! With the help of God, all of us will always be faithful, devoted sons, will we not?"

"Dear Viglietti, be good and get ready to see what is going to happen. I have barely outlined these dreams to you. It would have taken me much longer were I to have told you everything in detail. How many things did I see! Some of the confreres of our houses will not live to see another Christmas Novena.

"Oh, if I could only talk to the boys. If I only had the strength to be among them, if I could only make a tour of all our houses, do all that I used to do, revealing the secrets of individual consciences to everyone as I saw them in the dream. If I could only say to some, 'Break the ice, make a good confession for once!' They would answer, 'But I do make a good confession!' Then I could reply by telling them all that they concealed, and that would stop them from opening their lips again. If I could only say a word to some of our Salesians, as well, to show them how much they need to put their own conscience in order by repeating their confessions.

I saw how some kept their rules and others didn't. I saw many youths who would go to San Benigno and become Salesians, but then leave us again.

Even some, who are now already Salesians, will defect. There will be those who will seek only knowledge, the brand of knowledge that inflates the ego and craves praise. This will have them disregard the advice of those whom they consider

less learned as they are.”

These sorry thoughts were interwoven with providential consolations that filled Don Bosco’s heart with joy.

The evening of December 3rd, the bishop of Para (that is the focal point of his dream about the missions) arrived at the Oratory. The following day, he said to Viglietti, “How mighty Divine Providence is! Listen and then tell me if God does not protect us. Father Paul Albera wrote to tell me that he could no longer go on, but needed one thousand francs immediately. That same day, a religious lady in Marseille, who was looking to see her brother in Paris, gave Father Paul Albera a thousand francs, delighted for having obtained from our Lady the grace of seeing him again. Father Joseph Ronchail is in a serious predicament, and has urgent need of four thousand francs. Today, a lady wrote to Don Bosco and told him that she is holding four thousand francs at his disposal. Father Francis Dalmazzo does not know where to turn for money. Today, a lady donated a substantial sum of money for the Church of the Sacred Heart.”

Then on December 7th, he experienced a great joy for Bishop John Cagliero’s consecration. All of these things were even more encouraging because they were manifest signs of God’s hand over the work of His servant.

(BM XVII 352-358)

Don Bosco and the Sacred Heart. Protect, atone, love

In 1886, on the eve of the consecration of the new Basilica of the Sacred Heart in the centre of Rome, the ‘Salesian Bulletin’ wanted to prepare its readers – co-workers, benefactors, young people, families – for a vital encounter

with 'the pierced Heart that continues to love'. For a whole year, the magazine presented the Salesian world with a veritable 'rosary' of meditations: each issue linked an aspect of devotion to a pastoral, educational or social urgency that Don Bosco – already exhausted but still lucid – considered strategic for the future of the Church and Italian society. Almost 140 years later, that series remains a small treatise on the spirituality of the heart, written in simple but ardent tones, capable of combining contemplation and practice. Here we present a unified reading of that monthly journey, showing how Salesian intuition still speaks to us today.

February – The guard of honour: in vigil over wounded Love

The new liturgical year opens in the *Bulletin* with a surprising invitation: not only to adore Jesus, present in the tabernacle, but to 'keep watch over Him' – a freely chosen hour in which every Christian, without interrupting their daily activities, becomes a loving sentinel who consoles the Heart pierced by the indifference of the carnal. The idea, which originated in Paray-le-Monial and flourished in many dioceses, became an educational programme: to transform time into a space for reparation; to teach young people that fidelity comes from small, constant acts; to make the day a widespread liturgy. The related vow – to donate the proceeds from the *Manual of the Guard of Honour* to the construction of the Roman Basilica – reveals the Salesian logic: contemplation that immediately translates into bricks and mortar, because true prayer (literally) builds the house of God.

March – Creative charity: the Salesian stamp

In his great conference on 8 May 1884, Cardinal Parocchi summarised the Salesian mission in one word: 'charity'. The *Bulletin* takes up that discourse to remind us that the Church conquers the world more with gestures of love than with theoretical disputes. Don Bosco did not establish elite

schools but simple hospices. He did not take children out of their environment just to protect them, but to return them to society as solid citizens. It is charity 'according to the needs of the century': a response to materialism not with controversy, but with works that show the power of the Gospel. Hence the urgency of a large sanctuary dedicated to the Heart of Jesus, to make an outstanding visible sign of the love that educates and transforms in the heart of Rome.

April – Eucharist: 'masterpiece of the Heart of Jesus'

Nothing, for Don Bosco, is more urgent than bringing Christians back to frequent Communion. The *Bulletin* reminds us that 'there is no Catholicism without Our Lady and without the Eucharist'. The Eucharistic table is the 'genesis of Christian society': from there fraternity, justice, and purity are born. If faith languishes, the desire for the living Bread must be rekindled. It is no coincidence that St. Francis de Sales entrusted the Visitation Sisters with the mission of guarding the Eucharistic Heart. Devotion to the Sacred Heart is not an abstract sentiment, but a concrete path that leads to the tabernacle and from there pours out into the streets. And it is once again the Roman construction site that serves as a test. Every lira offered for the basilica becomes a 'spiritual brick' that consecrates Italy to the Heart that gives itself.

May – The Heart of Jesus shines in the Heart of Mary

The Marian month leads the *Bulletin* to intertwine the two great devotions. There is a profound communion between the two Hearts, symbolised by the biblical image of the 'mirror'. The Immaculate Heart of Mary reflects the light of the Divine Heart, making it bearable to human eyes. Those who dare not look at the Sun, look at its light reflected in the Mother. Latria for the Heart of Jesus, 'hyperdulia' for that of Mary: a distinction that avoids the misunderstandings of the Jansenist polemicists of yesterday and today. The *Bulletin* refutes the accusations of idolatry and invites the faithful to a balanced love, where contemplation and

mission feed each other. Mary introduces us to her Son and her Son leads us to His Mother. In view of the consecration of the new temple, it asks that the two invocations that stand out on the hills of Rome and Turin be united: Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary Help of Christians.

June – Supernatural consolations: love at work in history

Two hundred years after the first public consecration to the Sacred Heart (Paray-le-Monial, 1686), the *Bulletin* affirms that the devotion responds to the illness of the times: 'the cooling of charity due to an excess of iniquity'. The Heart of Jesus – Creator, Redeemer, Glorifier – is presented as the centre of all history: from creation to the Church; from the Eucharist to eschatology. Those who adore that Heart, enter into a dynamism that transforms culture and politics. This is why Pope Leo XIII asked everyone to contribute to the Roman shrine: a monument of reparation but also a 'bulwark' against the 'impure flood' of modern error. It is an appeal that sounds timely: without ardent charity, society falls apart.

July – Humility: the physiognomy of Christ and of Christians

The summer meditation chooses the most neglected virtue: humility, 'a gem transplanted by the hand of God into the garden of the Church.' Don Bosco, spiritual son of St. Francis de Sales, knows that humility is the door to other virtues and the seal of every true apostolate. Those who serve young people without seeking visibility make present, 'Jesus' hidden life for thirty years.' The *Bulletin* unmasks pride disguised as false modesty and invites us to cultivate a double humility: of the intellect, which opens itself to mystery; and of the will, which obeys recognised truth. Devotion to the Sacred Heart is not sentimentality. It is a school of humble thinking and concrete action, capable of building social peace because it removes the poison of pride from the heart.

August – Meekness: the strength that disarms

After humility comes meekness: a virtue that is not weakness but self-control, 'the lion that produces honey', says the

text, referring to the enigma of Samson. The Heart of Jesus appears meek in welcoming sinners, firm in defending the temple. Readers are invited to imitate this twofold movement: gentleness towards people, firmness against error. St. Francis de Sales returns as a model. With a calm tone, he poured out rivers of charity in turbulent Geneva, converting more hearts than harsh polemics would have won over. In a century that 'sins by being heartless,' building the sanctuary of the Sacred Heart means erecting a training ground for social meekness—an evangelical response to the contempt and verbal violence that already poisoned public debate at that time.

September – Poverty and the social question: the Heart that reconciles rich and poor

The rumblings of social conflict, warns the *Bulletin*, threaten to 'smash the civil edifice to pieces.' We are in the midst of the 'labour question'. Socialists are stirring up the masses, capital is concentrated. Don Bosco does not deny the legitimacy of honest wealth, but he reminds us that true revolution begins in the heart. The Heart of Jesus proclaimed the poor blessed and He experienced poverty firsthand. The remedy lies in evangelical solidarity nourished by prayer and generosity. Until the Roman Basilica is completed, writes the newspaper, the visible sign of reconciliation will be missing. In the following decades, the social doctrine of the Church will develop these insights, but the seed is already here. Charity is not almsgiving; it is justice that comes from a transformed heart.

October – Childhood: sacrament of hope

'Woe to those who scandalise one of these little ones.' On the lips of Jesus, the invitation becomes a warning. The *Bulletin* recalls the horrors of the pagan world against children and shows how Christianity changed history by entrusting a central place to children. For Don Bosco, education is a religious act; the treasure of the future Church is preserved in schools and oratories. Jesus' blessing

of the children, reproduced on the front pages of the newspaper, is a manifestation of the Heart that “closes itself like a father’s” and announces the Salesian vocation: to make youth a “sacrament” that makes God present in the city. Schools, colleges, and workshops are not optional: they are the concrete way of honouring the Heart of Jesus alive in young people.

November – Triumphs of the Church: humility conquers death

The liturgy commemorates the saints and the dead. The *Bulletin* meditates on the ‘gentle triumph’ of Jesus entering Jerusalem. The image becomes the key to understanding Church history. Successes and persecutions alternate, but the Church, like the Master, always rises again. Readers are invited not to let themselves be paralysed by pessimism. The shadows of the moment (anticlerical laws, reduction of orders, Masonic propaganda) do not cancel out the dynamism of the Gospel. The Basilica of the Sacred Heart, built amid hostility and poverty, will be the tangible sign that, ‘the stone with the seals has been turned over’. Collaborating in its construction means betting on God’s future.

December – Beatitude of sorrow: the Cross welcomed by the heart

The year ends with the most paradoxical of the beatitudes: ‘Blessed are those who mourn’. Pain, scandalous to pagan reason, becomes in the Heart of Jesus a path to redemption and fruitfulness. The *Bulletin* sees in this logic, the key to understanding the contemporary crisis. Societies based on entertainment at all costs produce injustice and despair. Accepted in union with Christ, however, pain transforms hearts, strengthens character, stimulates solidarity, and frees us from fear. Even the stones of the sanctuary are ‘tears transformed into hope’; small offerings, sometimes the fruit of hidden sacrifices, which will build a place from which, the newspaper promises, ‘torrents of chaste delights will rain down.

A prophetic legacy

In the monthly montage of the *Salesian Bulletin* of 1886, the pedagogy of crescendo is striking. It starts with the little hour of watch and ends with the consecration of pain; from the individual faithful to the national building site; from the turreted tabernacle of the oratory to the ramparts of the Esquiline Hill. It is a journey that intertwines three main axes:

Contemplation – The Heart of Jesus is first and foremost a mystery to be adored: vigil, Eucharist, reparation.

Formation – Every virtue (humility, meekness, poverty) is proposed as a social medicine, capable of healing collective wounds.

Construction – Spirituality becomes architecture: the basilica is not an ornament, but a laboratory of Christian citizenship. Without forcing it, we can recognise here the pre-announcement of themes that the Church would develop throughout the 20th century: the apostolate of the laity, social doctrine, the centrality of the Eucharist in the mission, the protection of minors, and the pastoral care of those who suffer. Don Bosco and his collaborators recognised the signs of the times and responded with the language of the heart.

On 14 May 1887, when Leo XIII consecrated the Basilica of the Sacred Heart through his vicar Cardinal Lucido Maria Parocchi, Don Bosco—too weak to ascend the altar—watched hidden among the faithful. At that moment, all the words of the 1886 *Bulletin* became living stone: the guard of honour, educative charity, the Eucharist as the centre of the world, the tenderness of Mary, reconciling poverty, the blessedness of suffering. Today, those pages call for new breath. It is up to us, consecrated or lay, young or old, to continue the vigil, to build sites of hope, to learn the geography of the heart. The programme remains the same, simple and bold: **to guard, to atone, to love.**

In the photo: Painting of the Sacred Heart, located on the

main altar of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome. The work was commissioned by Don Bosco and entrusted to the painter Francesco de Rohden (Rome, 15 February 1817 – 28 December 1903).

St Francis de Sales instructs him. Future of vocations (1879)

In the prophetic dream Don Bosco recounted on 9 May 1879, Saint Francis de Sales appeared as a caring teacher and gave the Founder a booklet full of warnings for novices, professed members, directors, and superiors. The vision was dominated by two epic battles: first young men and warriors, then armed men and monsters, while the banner of “Mary Help of Christians” guaranteed victory to those who followed it. The survivors set off for the East, North, and South, foreshadowing the Salesian missionary expansion. The Saint’s words emphasised obedience, chastity, educational charity, love of work, and temperance, indispensable pillars for the Congregation to grow, withstand trials, and leave its children a legacy of active holiness. It concluded with a coffin, a stern reminder to be vigilant and prayerful.

Think as we may of this particular dream, Don Bosco had another dream which he narrated on May 9. In it he saw the fierce battles which faced the men called to his Congregation, and he was given several valuable instructions for all his sons and sound advice for the future.

[I saw] a hard-fought, long-drawn-out battle between youngsters and a varied array of warriors who were armed with

strange weapons. Survivors were few.

A second fiercer and more terrifying battle was being waged by gigantic monsters fully armed, well-trained tall men who unfurled a huge banner, the center of which bore an inscription in gold, *Maria Auxilium Christianorum*. The combat was long and bloody, but the soldiers fighting under the banner were protected against hurt and conquered a vast plain. The boys who had survived the previous battle linked forces with them, each combatant holding a crucifix in his right hand and a miniature of the banner in his left. After engaging together in several sallies over that vast plain, they split, some heading eastward, a few to the north, and many for the south. Once they all left, the same skirmishes, maneuvers and leave-takings were repeated by others.

I recognized some boys who fought in the first skirmishes, but none of the others, who nevertheless seemed to know me and asked me many questions.

Shortly afterward I witnessed a shower of flashing, fiery tongues of many colors, followed by thunder and then clear skies. Then I found myself in a charming garden. A man who looked like Saint Francis de Sales silently handed me a booklet. I asked him who he was. "Read the book," was the reply.

I opened it, but had trouble reading, managing only to make out these precise words:

"For the Novices: Obedience in all things. Through obedience they will deserve God's blessings and the good will of men. Through diligence they will fight and overcome the snares set by the enemies of their souls.

"For the Confreres: Jealously safeguard the virtue of chastity. Love your confreres' good name, promote the honor of the Congregation.

"For the Directors: Take every care, make every effort to observe and promote observance of the rules through which everyone's life is consecrated to God.

"For the Superior: Total self-sacrifice, so as to draw himself and his charges to God."

The book said many other things, but I couldn't read any further, for the paper turned as blue as the ink.

"Who are you?" I again asked the man who serenely gazed at me.

"Good people everywhere know me. I have been sent to tell you of future events."

"What are they?"

"Those you have already seen and those which you will ask about."

"How can I foster vocations?"

"The Salesians will harvest many vocations by their good example, by being endlessly kind toward their pupils, and by urging them constantly to receive Holy Communion often."

"What should we bear in mind when admitting novices?"

"Reject idlers and gluttons."

"And when admitting to vows?"

"Make sure that they are well grounded in chastity."

"How are we to maintain the right spirit in our houses?"

"Let superiors very often write, visit and welcome the confreres, dealing kindly with them."

"What of our foreign missions?"

"Send men of sound morality and recall any who give you serious reason to doubt; look for and foster native vocations."

"Is our Congregation on the right path?"

"Let those who do good keep doing good. [Rev. 22, 11] Not to go forward is to go backward. [St. Gregory the Great] The man who stands firm to the end will be saved." [Mt. 10, 22]

"Will the Congregation grow?"

"It will reach out so that no one will be able to check its growth, as long as the superiors meet their obligations."

"Will it have a long life?"

"Yes, but only as long as its members love work and temperance.

Should either of these two pillars fall, your entire edifice will collapse and crush superiors, subjects and followers beneath it."

Just then four men showed up bearing a coffin and approaching

me.

"Whom is that for?" I asked.

"For you."

"How soon?"

"Do not ask. Just remember that you are mortal."

"What are you trying to tell me with this coffin?"

"That while you are still living you must see to it that your sons practice what they must continue to practice after your death. This is the heritage, the testament you must bequeath to them; but you must work on it and leave it [to your sons] as a well-studied and well-tested legacy."

"Can we expect roses or thorns?"

"Many roses and joys are in store, but very sharp thorns also threaten.

They will cause all of you acute distress and sorrow. You must pray much."

"Should we open houses in Rome?"

"Yes, but not hurriedly; proceed with extreme prudence and caution."

"Is the end of my mortal life near at hand?"

"Don't be concerned. You have the rules and other books. Practice what you preach and be vigilant."

I wanted to ask more questions, but muffled thunder rumbled through the air with flashes of lightning. Several men, rather horrid monsters, dashed toward me as if to tear me to pieces. But then a deep darkness enveloped me, shutting everything out. I felt that I must be dead and started to scream frenziedly. I awoke and found I was still alive. It was a quarter to five in the morning.

If we can draw some good from this dream, let us do so. In all things let honor and glory be given to God forever and ever.

(BM XIV, 88-90)

Photo on the title page. Saint Francis de Sales. Anonymous. Sacristy of Chieri Cathedral