

Family Conversation

Son: "Have you heard what happened in Ukraine?"

Father: "Bah!"

Mother: "Is the soup salty enough?"

Son: "That's a problem, isn't it?"

Father: "Yes."

Son: "Then what do you think?"

Father: "You are right, it lacks a little salt."

Mother: "Here, have some."

Son: "It's strange how it could have come to this."

Mother: "How much did you get for mathematics?"

Father: "I never understood anything about maths."

Mother: "It's cold tonight..."

A husband listens to his wife at most for 17 seconds and then he starts talking.

A wife listens to her husband for a maximum of 17 seconds and then she starts talking.

Husband and wife listen to their children for...

The cricket and the Coin

A wise man from India had a close friend who lived in Milan. They had met in India, where the Italian had gone with his family on a tourist trip. The Indian had acted as a guide for the Italian, taking them to explore the most characteristic corners of his homeland.

Grateful, the Milanese friend had invited the Indian to his home. He wanted to return the favour and introduce him to his city. The Indian was very reluctant to leave, but then gave in to his Italian friend's insistence and one fine day he

disembarked from a plane at Malpensa.

The next day, the Milanese and the Indian were walking through the city centre. The Indian, with his chocolate-coloured face, black beard and yellow turban attracted the gaze of passers-by, and the Milanese man walked around proud to have such an exotic friend.

Suddenly, in Piazza San Babila, the Indian stopped and asked, "Do you hear what I hear?" The Milanese, a little bewildered, strained his ears as much as he could, but admitted that he heard nothing but the great noise of the city traffic.

"There is a cricket singing nearby," the Indian continued, confidently.

"You are wrong," replied the Milanese. "I only hear the noise of the city. Besides, there can't be crickets around here."

"I am not mistaken. I hear the song of a cricket," retorted the Indian and resolutely started searching among the leaves of some shrunken saplings. After a while he pointed out to his friend, who was watching him sceptically, a small insect, a splendid singing cricket, which was cowering and grumbling at those disturbing his concert.

"Did you see that there was a cricket there?" said the Indian.

"It's true," admitted the Milanese. "You Indians have much sharper hearing than us Whites..."

"This time it is you who are wrong," smiled the wise Indian.

"Be careful..." The Indian pulled a coin out of his pocket and pretending not to notice, dropped it on the pavement.

Immediately four or five people turned to look.

"Did you see that?" the Indian explained. "This coin's jungle was more thinner and fainter than the cricket's trill. Yet have you noticed how many Whites heard it?"

"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

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)

Young people's gifts to Mary (1865)

In a dream recounted by Don Bosco in the Chronicle of the Oratory, dated May 30th, Marian devotion transforms into a vivid, symbolic judgment of the Oratory's youth: a procession of boys comes forward, each bearing a gift, before an altar magnificently adorned for the Virgin. An angel, the community's guardian, accepts or rejects these offerings, unveiling their moral meaning—fragrant or withered flowers, thorns symbolizing disobedience, animals embodying grave vices such as impurity, theft, and scandal. At the heart of this

vision resonates Don Bosco's educational message: humility, obedience, and chastity are the three pillars for earning Mary's crown of roses.

Don Bosco found consolation in acts of devotion to Mary, Help of Christians, whom the whole Oratory honored particularly in the month of May. Of his "Good Nights" the chronicle records but one-a most precious one-which he gave on the 30th:

30th May

I dreamed that you boys were heading in procession toward a lofty, richly decorated altar of Our Lady. You were all singing the same hymns to Her but not in the same way: many sang beautifully, others rather poorly and some totally out of tune. I saw too that some kept silent, strayed from the ranks, yawned or kept disturbing others.

Everyone carried gifts, mostly flowers, to Our Lady. The bouquets differed in size and kind. There were bouquets of roses, carnations, violets and so on. Some boys carried very odd presents, such as pigs' heads, cats, slimy toads, rabbits, lambs and so on. A handsome youth stood by the altar. A close look would show that he had wings. He may have been the Oratory's guardian angel. As you boys presented your gifts, he took each and placed it on the altar.

The first to reach the altar offered gorgeous bouquets which the angel silently placed on it. From other bouquets, instead, he had to remove decayed or scentless flowers, such as dahlias, camelias and the like, because Mary is not satisfied with mere looks. Some bouquets even had thorns and nails which, of course, were promptly plucked out and thrown away.

When a boy carrying a pig's head came up, the angel said to him, "How dare you offer this to Our Lady? Don't you know that this animal symbolizes the ugly vice of impurity? Mary Most Pure cannot tolerate such a sin. Step aside. You are not worthy to stand in Her presence."

To those who offered a cat the angel said: "Don't you know better? A cat represents theft, and you dare present it to

Mary? Those who take what does not belong to them, those who steal food from the house, tear their clothes out of spite or waste their parents' money by not studying as they ought, are nothing but thieves!" These too the angel ordered to withdraw. He was equally indignant with boys offering toads. "Toads symbolize the shameful sin of scandal, and dare you offer them to Our Lady? Step aside.

Join the unworthy ones." These boys too shamefully withdrew. Some lads came up with a knife stuck in their hearts, a symbol of sacrilege. "Don't you realize that there is death in your soul?" the angel asked them. "If it weren't for God's mercy, you would be lost forever. For heaven's sake, have that knife removed from your heart!"

Eventually the rest of the boys reached the altar and presented their gifts-lambs, rabbits, fish, nuts, grapes and so on. The angel took them and placed them before Our Lady. Then he lined up all the boys whose gifts had been accepted in front of the altar. I noticed to my deep regret that those who had been made to step aside were much more numerous than I had thought.

Two other angels now appeared at each side of the altar carrying ornate baskets filled with gorgeous, exceedingly beautiful crowns of roses. They were not earthly roses, but heaven-grown, symbolizing immortality. With these the guardian angel crowned all the boys ranged before Our Lady's altar. I noticed among them many whom I had never seen before. Another remarkable thing is this: some of the most beautiful crowns went to boys who were so ugly as to be almost repulsive. Obviously, the virtue of holy purity which they eminently possessed amply made up for their unattractive appearance. Many other boys possessed this virtue too, though not to the same degree. Youngsters excelling in obedience, humility, or love of God were also crowned according to their deserts.

The angel then addressed all the boys as follows: "It was Our Lady's wish that you should be crowned today with these beautiful roses. See to it that they may never be taken from you. Humility, obedience and chastity will safeguard them for

you. With these three virtues you will always find favor with Mary and one day receive a crown infinitely more beautiful than that you wear today."

All of you then sang the first stanza of the *Ave Maris Stella*. Afterward you turned around and filed away as you had come, singing the hymn *Lodate Maria* so full-heartedly that I was really amazed. I followed you for a while; then I went back to take a look at the boys whom the angel had pushed aside, but they were no longer there.

My dear children, I know who was crowned and who was turned down.

The latter I will warn privately so that they may strive to bring gifts pleasing to Our Lady.

Now let me make a few observations:

1. All you were carrying a variety of flowers, but unfailingly every bouquet had its share of thorns-some more, some less. After much thinking I came to the conclusion that these thorns symbolized acts of disobedience, such as keeping money instead of depositing it with Father Prefect, asking leave to go to one place and then going to another, being late to school, eating on the sly, going to other boys' dormitories although knowing that this is always strictly forbidden, lingering in bed after rising time, neglecting prescribed practices of piety, talking during times of silence, buying books and not submitting them for approval, sending or receiving letters on the sneak, and buying and selling things among yourselves. This is what the thorns stand for.

"Is it a sin to break the house rules?" many will ask.

After seriously considering this question, my answer is a firm "yes." I will not say whether it is mortal or venial. Circumstances will determine that, but it certainly is a sin.

Some might counter that the Ten Commandments say nothing about obeying house rules. Well, the Fourth Commandment says: "*Honor thy father and thy mother.*" Do you know what "*father*" and "*mother*" stand for? Not only parents, but also those who take

their place. Besides, doesn't Holy Scripture say: "... *Obey your superiors*"? [Heb. 13, 17] If you must obey them, it follows that they have the power to command. This is why we have rules, and these must be obeyed.

2. Some bouquets had nails among the flowers, the nails which crucified Jesus. How could that be? As usual, one starts with little things and goes on to more serious ones ... He allows himself undue liberties and falls into mortal sin. This is how nails managed to find their way into those bouquets, how they again crucified Jesus, as St. Paul says: "... crucifying again ... the Son of God." [Heb. 6, 6]

3. Many bouquets contained rotten or scentless flowers, symbols of good works done in the state of mortal sin – and therefore unmeritorious – or from human motives such as ambition, or solely to please teachers and superiors. That's why the angel, after scolding those boys for daring to offer such things to Our Lady, sent them back to trim their bouquets. Only after they had done this did the angel accept them and place them on the altar. In returning to the altar, these boys did not follow any order, but went up to the angel as soon as they had trimmed their bouquets and then joined those to be crowned.

In this dream I saw both your past and your future. I have already spoken of it to many of you. I shall likewise tell the rest. Meanwhile, my children, see to it that the Blessed Virgin may always receive gifts from you which She will not have to refuse.

(*BM VIII, 73-76*)

Opening photo: Carlo Acutis during a visit to the Marian Shrine of Fátima.

The handkerchief of purity (1861)

On June 16, Don Bosco gave the boys the spiritual nosegay to pray for the grace of repentance for those with the big ape on their shoulders – boys so few in number that he could hardly speak of them in the plural. Then, at the “2 Good Night” on June 18, he told the following little story, or dream of sorts, as he called it on another occasion. His style of narration, however, was always such as to prompt Ruffino to apply to Don Bosco what Baruch had said of Jeremiah: “[He] dictated all these words to me as if he were reading them, and I wrote them down with ink in the book.” [Jer. 36, 18] Don Bosco spoke thus:

On the night of June 14 I had no sooner fallen asleep than I was startled by a heavy blow on the bedstead, as if someone had struck it with a board. I jumped up and immediately thought that it was lightning.

I looked about but found nothing unusual. Convinced that I had most likely been dreaming, I again tried to sleep. Hardly had I begun to doze when a second blow startled me again. This time I got out of bed and searched everywhere – under the bed, under the desk, and in the corners of the room – but I found nothing amiss. Commending myself to God’s safekeeping, I blessed myself with holy water and slipped into bed. It was then that my mind began to wander and I saw what I am going to tell you.

I seemed to be in our church pulpit, about to start a sermon. All the boys were seated at their usual places, looking up and waiting, but I had no idea what to preach about. My mind was a complete blank. For a while I stood there dumbfounded and dismayed. Never had anything like this happened to me in all my years of ministry. Then suddenly the walls and boys disappeared, and the church turned into an immense valley. I

was beside myself and could not believe my eyes.

"What's this?" I questioned. "A moment ago I was in the pulpit in church and now I am in a valley? Am I dreaming? What's happening to me?"

I decided then to get going, hoping to meet someone and find out where I was. After a while, I came to a stately palace. Its many balconies and broad terraces beautifully harmonized with the building and landscape. In front of the palace there was a large plaza. In a corner, at the right, a large number of boys were crowding around a lady who was handing out handkerchiefs, one to each boy. On taking theirs, the boys walked up to the terrace and ranged themselves along the parapet. Drawing close to the lady, I heard her say to each lad as she gave him a handkerchief, "Do not unfold it when it's windy, but if you are surprised by a wind, turn at once to the right, never to the left."

I keep looking at those boys, but then and there I did not recognize any of them. When all the handkerchiefs had been distributed, the boys were all lined up on the terrace in complete silence. As I watched, one boy took out his handkerchief and unfolded it. Others followed his example and soon all had them out. The handkerchiefs were very large and exquisitely embroidered in gold. On each, lengthwise, there was written in gold: *Regina virtutum* [Queen of virtues].

Suddenly a soft breeze came out of the north – that is, from the left; gradually it grew stronger, then it became a wind. Immediately some boys folded their handkerchiefs and hid them, while others turned quickly to the right. Others, instead, left them exposed and flapping in the wind. Meanwhile the disturbance gained force while ominous clouds gathered overhead and darkened the sky. Lightning flashed as thunderous, frightening rumbles rolled across the heavens, followed by hail, rain, and snow. Unbelievably, many boys still kept their handkerchiefs flapping in the storm. The hail, rain, and snow battered them mercilessly.

In no time they were riddled with holes, torn beyond recognition.

I was stunned, not knowing what to make of it. However, I was in for a still greater shock. As I got closer to those boys for a better look, I recognized every one of them. They were my own Oratory boys. I hurried up to one and asked, "What in the world are you doing here? Aren't you so-and-so?"

"Yes," he replied, "I am." And then, pointing to several others, he added, "So-and-so and so-and-so are here too!"

I then went over to the lady who had distributed the handkerchiefs.

Several men were around her.

"What does all this mean?" I asked them.

The lady herself [hearing my question] turned to me. "Didn't you see the inscription on those handkerchiefs?" she asked.

"Why yes, my lady," I replied. "*Regina virtutum.*"

"Do you understand now?"

"Yes, I do!"

All those boys exposed their purity to the wind of temptation. Some, on realizing the danger, immediately fled. Those are the boys who folded and hid their handkerchiefs. Others, taken by surprise and unable to fold their handkerchiefs, turned to the right. These are the boys who promptly have recourse to prayer when in danger and turn their backs upon the enemy. Others, instead, kept their handkerchiefs open to the full blast of temptation and fell into sin.

Saddened by this sight and the realization that so very few of my boys had kept themselves pure, I nearly lost heart and burst into tears.

When I was able to control myself again, I asked, "Why did even raindrops and snowflakes riddle the handkerchiefs? Aren't they symbols of venial sins?"

One of the men replied: "Don't you know that where purity is concerned *non datur parvitas materiae* [there is no matter that is not considered to be grave]? Nevertheless, don't be downhearted. Come and see."

He moved to the balcony and, signaling to the boys with his hand, shouted, "Right about face!" Nearly all obeyed, but a few did not budge.

Their handkerchiefs were torn to shreds. I noticed, too, that the handkerchiefs of those who had turned to the right had shrunk and were covered with patches. They had no holes but were pitifully shapeless.

"These boys," the lady explained, "had the misfortune of losing purity, but they regained God's grace through confession. Those few who did not stir are those who persist in sin and perhaps will go to perdition." Finally, she said to me: "*Nemini dicito, sed tantum admone.*"

[Tell no one in particular, but give only a general warning.]

(*BM VI, 582-584*)

I killed her for a piece of bread

A man who had not entered a church for twenty years hesitantly approached a confessional. He knelt down and, after a moment's hesitation, said through tears: "I have blood on my hands. It was during the retreat to Russia. Every day some of my people died. The hunger was terrible. We were told never to enter the isbas without a rifle in our hands, ready to shoot at the first sign of... Where I had entered, there was an old man and a blond girl with sad eyes: "Bread! Give me some bread!" The girl bent down. I thought she was reaching for a weapon, a bomb. I fired decisively. She fell to the ground.

When I got closer, I saw that the girl was clutching a piece of bread in her hand. I had killed a 14-year-old girl, an innocent girl who wanted to offer me bread. I started drinking to forget: Imagine!

Can God forgive me?"

Whoever goes around with a loaded rifle will end up shooting.

If the only tool you have is a hammer, you end up seeing everything else as nails. And you spend the day hammering away.

Halloween: a holiday to celebrate?

Wise men tell us that to understand an event, one must know what its origin is and what its purpose is. This is also the case with the now widespread phenomenon of Halloween, which rather than a holiday to celebrate is an event to reflect upon. This is to avoid celebrating a culture of death that has nothing to do with Christianity.

Halloween, as it stands today, is a holiday that has its commercial origins in the United States and has spread throughout the world over the past three decades. It is celebrated on the night between 31 October and 1 November and has some symbols of its own:

- **The costumes:** dressing up in scary clothes to represent fantastic characters or monstrous creatures.
- **Carved pumpkins:** the tradition of carving pumpkins, inserting a light inside to create jack-o'-lanterns.
- **Trick-or-treating:** a custom of knocking on doors of houses and asking for sweets in exchange for a promise not to trick-or-treat.

It seems to be one of the commercial festivals cultivated on purpose by some interested parties to increase their revenue. In fact, in 2023 in the US alone, \$12.2 billion was spent (according to the National Retail Federation) and in the UK

about £700 million (according to market analysts). These figures also explain the widespread media coverage, with real strategies to cultivate the event, turning it into a mass phenomenon and presenting it as just a casual amusement, a collective game.

Origin

If we go looking for the beginnings of *Halloween* – because every contingent thing has its beginning and its end – we find that it dates back to the polytheistic pagan beliefs of the Celtic world.

The ancient people of the Celts, a nomadic people who spread throughout Europe, were best able to preserve their culture, language and beliefs in the British Isles, moreover in Ireland, in the area where the Roman Empire had never arrived. One of their pagan festivals, called *Samhain*, was celebrated between the last days of October and early November and was the 'new year' that opened the annual cycle. As the length of the day decreased and the length of the night increased at that time, it was believed that the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead became thin, allowing the souls of the dead to return to earth (also in the form of animals) and also allowing evil spirits to enter. That is why they used frightening masks to confuse or drive away the spirits, so as not to be touched by their evil influence. The celebration was compulsory for all, began in the evening and consisted of magic rites, ritual fires, animal sacrifices and probably also human sacrifices. On those nights, their Druid priests went to every house to receive something from the people for their sacrifices, under penalty of curses.

The custom of carving a turnip in the shape of a monstrous face, placing a light inside and placing it on the doorstep of houses, in time gave rise to a legend that better explains the meaning. It is the legend of the Irish blacksmith Stingy Jack, a man who tricks the devil several times and, upon his death, is received neither in heaven nor in hell. Being in darkness

and forced to look for a place for his eternal rest, he asked for and received from the devil a burning log, which he stuck inside a turnip he had with him, creating a lantern, the Jack-o'-lantern. But he found no rest and continues to wander to this day. Legend wants to symbolise the damned souls that wander the earth and find no rest. This explains the custom of placing an ugly turnip in front of the house, to instil fear and drive away any wandering souls that might approach on that night.

The Roman world also had a similar festival, called *Lemuria* or *Lemuralia*, dedicated to keeping the spirits of the dead away from homes; it was celebrated on 9, 11 and 13 May. The spirits were called 'lemurs' (the word 'lemur' comes from the Latin *larva*, meaning 'ghost' or 'mask'). These celebrations were thought to be associated with the figure of Romulus, founder of Rome, who is said to have instituted the rites to appease the spirit of his brother Remus, whom he killed; however, it seems that the holiday was instituted in the first century AD.

This type of pagan celebration, also found in other cultures, reflects the awareness that life continues after death, even if this awareness is mixed with many errors and superstitions. The Church did not want to deny this seed of truth that, in one form or another, was in the soul of the pagans, but sought to correct it.

In the Church, the cult of martyrs has been there from the very beginning. Around the 4th century AD, the commemoration of the martyrs was celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost. In 609 A.D., Pope Boniface IV moved this commemoration to the feast of All Saints, on 13 May. In 732 A.D. Pope Gregory III again moved the feast of All Saints (in Old English 'All Hallows') to 1 November, and the preceding day became known as **All Hallows' Eve**, from which the abbreviated form **Halloween** is derived.

The immediate proximity of the dates suggests that the shift in commemoration by the Church was due to a desire to correct

ancestor worship. The last shift indicates that the Celtic pagan festival *Samhain* had also remained in the Christian world.

Diffusion

This pagan celebration – a primarily religious festival – preserved in the vaults of Irish culture even after the Christianisation of society, reappeared with the massive migration of the Irish to the United States following the great famine that hit the country in 1845-1846.

The immigrants, in order to preserve their cultural identity, began to celebrate various festivals of their own as times of gathering and recreation, including All Hallows. Perhaps more than a religious festival, it was a festival without religious references, linked to celebrating the abundance of harvests.

This encouraged the revival of the ancient Celtic use of the lantern, and people began to use not the turnip but the pumpkin for its larger size and softness that favoured carving.

In the first half of the 20th century, the pragmatic spirit of the Americans – seizing the opportunity to make money – extended this holiday nationwide, and Halloween costumes and apparel began to appear in the markets on an industrial scale: ghosts, skeletons, witches, vampires, zombies, etc.

After 1950, the holiday also began to spread to schools and homes. The custom of children going around knocking on houses asking for treats with the expression: 'Trick or treat?' appeared.

Driven by commercial interests, this led to a true national holiday with secular connotations, devoid of religious elements, which would be exported all over the world especially in the last decades.

Reflection

If we look closely, the elements found in the Celtic rites of

the pagan festival Samhain have remained. These are clothes, lanterns, threats of curses.

The clothes are monstrous and frightening: ghosts, creepy clowns, witches, zombies, werewolves, vampires, heads pierced by daggers, disfigured corpses, devils.

Hideous pumpkins carved like severed heads with a macabre light inside.

Kids walking around the houses asking 'Trick or treat?' reminiscent of the 'curse or sacrifice' of Druid priests.

We first ask ourselves whether these elements can be considered worthy of cultivation. Since when have the frightening, the macabre, the dark, the horrific, the hopelessly dead defined human dignity? They are indeed outrageously outrageous.

And we wonder whether all this does not contribute to cultivating an occult, esoteric dimension, given that these are the same elements used by the dark world of witchcraft and Satanism. And whether the *dark* and *gothic* fashion, like all the other decorations of macabrely carved pumpkins, cobwebs, bats and skeletons, does not foment an approach to the occult.

Is it by chance that tragic events regularly occur in conjunction with this festival?

Is it by chance that desecrations, grave offences against the Christian religion and even sacrilege occur regularly on these days?

Is it by chance that for Satanists the main holiday, which marks the beginning of the Satanic year, is Halloween?

Does it not produce, especially for young people, a familiarisation with a magical and occult mentality, distant and contrary to Christian faith and culture, especially at this time when Christian praxis is weakened by secularisation and relativism?

Let us look at some testimonies.

An English lady, **Doreen Irvine**, a former Satanist priestess

converted to Christianity, warns in her book *From Witchcraft to Christ* that the tactic used to approach occultism consists precisely in proposing the occult in attractive forms, with mysteries that incite, passing everything off as a natural, even sympathetic experience.

The founder of the Church of Satan, **Anton LaVey**, openly declared his joy that the baptised participate in the Halloween festival: 'I am glad that Christian parents allow their children to **worship the devil at least one night a year.Welcome to Halloween**'.

Fr Aldo Buonaiuto, of the Anti-cult Service of the Pope John XXIII Community Association, in his paper, *Halloween.The devil's trick*, warns us that 'Satan's devotees consider the "energies" of all those who, even if only for fun, are evoking the world of darkness in the perverse rites practised in his honour, throughout the month of October and in particular on the night between 31 October and 1 November, to be a gift to him'.

Fr Francesco Bamonte, exorcist and vice-president of the International Association of Exorcists (former president of the same for two consecutive terms), warns:

'My experience, together with that of other exorcist priests, shows how Halloween, including the period of time that prepares for it, in fact represents, for many young people, a privileged moment of contact with sectarian realities or in any case linked to the world of occultism, with even serious consequences not only on a spiritual level, but also on that of psychophysical integrity. First of all, it must be said that this feast imprints ugliness at the very least. And by imprinting ugliness on children, the taste for the horrid, the deformed, the monstrous put on the same level as the beautiful, it somehow orients them to evil and despair. In heaven, where only goodness reigns, everything is beautiful. In hell, where only hatred reigns, all is ugly.' [...]

'On the basis of my ministry as an exorcist, I can state that

Halloween is, in the calendar of magicians, occult practitioners and Satan worshippers, one of the most important 'holidays'; Consequently, for them, it is a source of great satisfaction that the minds and hearts of so many children, adolescents, young people and not a few adults are directed towards the macabre, the demonic, witchcraft, through the representation of coffins, skulls, skeletons, vampires, ghosts, thus adhering to the mocking and sinister vision of the most important and decisive moment of a human being's existence: the end of his earthly life. ' [...]

'We exorcists do not tire of warning against this recurrence, which not only through immoral or dangerous conduct, but also through the lightness of entertainment considered harmless (and unfortunately hosted more and more often even in parish spaces) can both prepare the ground for a future disturbing action, even heavy, on the part of the devil, and allow the Evil One to affect and disfigure the souls of the young.'

It is young people in particular who suffer the widespread impact of the Halloween phenomenon. Without serious discernment criteria, they risk being attracted by ugliness and not beauty, by darkness and not light, by wickedness and not goodness.

We need to reflect on whether to continue celebrating the feast of darkness, *Halloween*, or the feast of light, *All Saints*...

A truly blind man

An ancient Persian fable tells of a man who had only one thought: to possess gold, all the gold possible.

It was a voracious thought that devoured his brain and heart.

He could thus have no other thought, no other desire for anything but gold.

When he walked past the shop windows in his town, he only saw the goldsmiths' windows. He did not notice so many other wonderful things.

He did not notice the people, did not pay attention to the blue sky or the scent of the flowers.

One day he couldn't resist: he ran into a jeweller's shop and started filling his pockets with gold bracelets, rings and brooches.

Of course, on his way out of the shop, he was arrested. The police asked him, "But how did you think you could get away with it? The shop was full of people."

"Really?" the astonished man said. "I didn't notice. I only saw the gold."

"They have eyes and do not see," the Bible says about false idols. It can be said of so many people today. They are dazzled by the glitter of the things that shine the brightest: those that the daily advertisements slide before our eyes, as if they were a hypnotist's pendulum.

Once, a teacher made a black speck in the centre of a beautiful white sheet of paper and then showed it to his pupils.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"A black spot!" they replied in chorus.

"You have all seen the black spot that is tiny," retorted the teacher, "and no one has seen the big white sheet."

In the Talmud, which brings together the wisdom of the Jewish teachers of the first five centuries, it is written: "In the world to come, each one of us will be called to account for all the beautiful things that God has put on earth and that we have refused to see."

Life is a series of moments: true success lies in living them all.

Don't risk losing the big white paper to chase a black speck.

The boat

One evening, two tourists who were at a campsite on the shores of a lake decided to cross the lake by boat to go for a “nightcap” at the bar on the other shore.

They stayed there until late into the night, draining a fair number of bottles.

When they came out of the bar they were swaying somewhat, but they managed to take their places in the boat to embark on the return journey.

They began to row briskly. Sweating and puffing, they struggled hard for two hours. Finally, one said to the other:

“Don’t you think we should have touched the other shore by now, long ago?”

“Of course,” replied the other, “but perhaps we have not paddled strongly enough.”

The two redoubled their efforts and rowed resolutely for another hour. Only when dawn broke did they realise, astonished, that they were still in the same place.

They had forgotten to untie the strong rope that tied their boat to the jetty.

How many people struggle and fret all day long without coming to anything because they do not really free themselves from bonds and poor habits.

Progress

An explorer was travelling through the immense forests of the Amazon in South America.

He was looking for possible oil deposits and was in a great hurry. For the first two days, the natives he had hired as porters adapted to the fast and anxious pace that the white man demanded for everything.

But on the morning of the third day, they stood silent, motionless, breathless.

It was clear that they had no intention of setting out again.

Impatiently, the explorer, pointing to his watch, gesticulated and tried to make the leader of the porters understand that they had to move, because time was pressing.

– Impossible, replied the man, calmly. These men have walked too fast and are now waiting for their souls to catch up with them.

People of our age are always moving faster. And they are restless, dazed and unhappy, because their souls have fallen behind and can no longer catch up with them.