

We are Don Bosco, today

"You will complete the work I am starting; I will make the sketch, you will add the colors" (Don Bosco)

Dear friends and readers, members of the Salesian Family, in this month's greeting in the Salesian Bulletin, I will focus on a very important event that the Salesian Congregation is experiencing: the 29th General Chapter. Every six years, this assembly takes place in the journey of the Salesian Congregation, the most important that the Congregation can experience.

Many things are a part of our lives, and this Jubilee year is giving us many important events. However, I want to focus on this because, even if it seems far from us, it concerns us all.

Don Bosco, our Founder, was aware that not everything would end with him, but that his would surely be just the beginning of a long journey to be undertaken. At the age of sixty, one day in 1875, he said to Don Giulio Barberis, one of his closest collaborators: "You will complete the work I am starting; I am making the sketch, you will add the colors [...] I will make a rough copy of the Congregation and I will leave to those who come after me the task of making it beautiful."

With this happy and prophetic expression, Don Bosco was outlining the path that we are all called to take; and the General Chapter of Don Bosco's Salesians is fulfilling this in these times to its fullest in Valdocco.

The prophecy of the candy

Today's world is not that of Don Bosco, but there is a common characteristic. It is a time of profound changes. Complete, balanced, and responsible humanisation in its material and spiritual components was the true goal of Don Bosco. He was concerned with filling the "inner space" of the boys, forming "well-formed minds," "honest citizens." Today, this is more relevant than ever. Today's world needs Don Bosco.

In the beginning, there was a very simple question for everyone: "Do you want an ordinary life or do you want to change the world?" Can we still talk of goals and ideals today? When the river stops flowing, it becomes a swamp. The same is so with human beings.

Don Bosco never stopped moving forward. Today he does so with our feet.

He had a conviction regarding young people: "This most delicate and precious portion of human society, upon which the hopes of a happy future are founded, is not innately perverse... because if it sometimes happens that they are already corrupted at that age, it is rather due to thoughtlessness than to consummate malice. These young people truly need a helping hand that takes care of them, nurtures them, guides them..."

In 1882, in a conference to the Cooperators in Genoa: "By removing, instructing, and educating young people in danger, it is good for the whole of civil society. If young people are well educated, we will have a better generation over time." It is like saying: only education can change the world.

Don Bosco had an almost frightening capacity for vision. He never says "until now," but always, "from now on."

Guy Avanzini, an eminent university professor, continues to repeat: "The pedagogy of the twenty-first century will be Salesian, or it will not be."

One evening in 1851, from a first-floor window, Don Bosco threw a handful of candies among the boys. There was an outburst of joy, and a boy, seeing him smile from the window, shouted: "Oh Don Bosco, if only you could see all the parts of the world, and in each of them so many oratories!"

Don Bosco fixed his serene gaze in the air and replied: "Who knows if the day will come when the children of the oratory will truly be scattered all over the world."

Looking afar

What is a General Chapter? Why take up room with these lines on a topic that is specifically for the Salesian Congregation?

In the constitutions of life of Don Bosco's Salesians, in article 146, the General Chapter is defined as follows:

"The General Chapter is the principal sign of the Congregation's unity in diversity. It is the fraternal meeting in which Salesians carry out a communal reflection to keep themselves faithful to the Gospel and to their Founder's charism, and sensitive to the needs of time and place.

Through the General Chapter, the entire Society, opening itself to the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord, seeks to discern God's will at a specific moment in history for the purpose of rendering the Church better service."

The General Chapter is therefore not a private matter for the consecrated Salesians, but a very important assembly that concerns all of us, that touches the entire Salesian Family and those who have Don Bosco within them, because at the centre are the people, the mission, the Charism of Don Bosco, the Church, and each one of us, of you.

At the centre is faithfulness to God and to Don Bosco, in the ability to see the signs of the times and the different places. It is a faithfulness that is a continuous movement, renewal, ability to look afar and, at the same time, keep our feet firmly planted on the ground.

For this reason, about 250 Salesian brothers have gathered from all over the world to pray, think, discuss, and look afar... in faithfulness to Don Bosco.

Also, from the construction of this vision, the new Rector Major, the successor of Don Bosco and his General Council, will be elected.

This is not something outside your life, dear friend who is reading, but within your existence and in your "affection" for Don Bosco. Why do I tell you this? So that you accompany all this with your prayer: the prayer to the Holy Spirit to help all the capitulars to know the will of God for a better service to the Church.

I believe that the GC29, I am sure, will be all this. It will be an experience of God to clean up other parts of the sketch that Don Bosco left us, as has always been done in all the

General Chapters in the history of the Congregation, always faithful to his design.

Confident that even today we can continue to be enlightened to be faithful to the Lord Jesus in fidelity to the original charism, with the faces, music, and colours of today.

We are not alone in this mission, and we know and feel that Mary, Mother Help of Christians, the Helper of the Church, a model of fidelity, will support the steps of each one of us.

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 “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)

Hiking to Heaven (1861)

We shall now narrate another inspiring dream of Don Bosco which occurred on the nights of April 3, 4, and 5, 1861. "Its striking details," Father Bonetti remarks, "will aptly convince our readers that this is such a dream as God now and then graciously sends to His faithful servants." We shall report it here as detailed in Bonetti's and Ruffino's chronicles.

"After night prayers on April 7," they wrote, "Don Bosco mounted the little rostrum to give the 'Good Night' and spoke as follows:

I have something very strange to tell you tonight – a dream. It's only a dream, so do not give it more importance than it merits. Let me first tell you, though, that I am quite honest with you, as I would like you to be honest with me. I keep no secrets from you, but what is said within the family should be kept in the family. I don't mean to imply that it would be a sin to tell others, but even so I'd rather you didn't. Talk about it all you want, and laugh and joke to your heart's content among yourselves, or even with those few who may – in your opinion – benefit spiritually from it.

This dream has three parts because it lasted three nights. This evening I'll tell you only the first part, leaving the rest for other nights. Surprisingly, on the second and third night I resumed the dream at the very point I had left off when I awoke.

PART ONE

Since dreams come while sleeping, I too was asleep. A few days ago, having to go out of town, I passed by the green-clad hills of Moncalieri.¹ I was deeply impressed. Possibly this charming scene came back to my mind, stirring a desire to go hiking. As a matter of fact, that's what I decided to do in my dream.

I seemed to be with my boys in a vast plain which stretched out to a massively high hill. As we were all standing there, I suddenly proposed a hike.

"Yes, yes!" they all cheerfully shouted. "Let's go!"

"Where to?" we asked one another undecidedly. While we looked hopefully at each other for suggestions, someone abruptly

blurted out, "Let's hike to heaven."

"Yes, yes, to heaven!" the cry arose on all sides.

We started off, and after a while we reached the foot of the hill and began climbing. A magnificent view soon unfolded before our eyes. As far as we could see, the hillside was dotted with trees and saplings of all kinds – some small and tender, others tall and vigorous, none thicker than a man's arm. There were pears, apples, cherries, plums, vines, and other fruit trees. Amazingly, each tree had some flowers just blossoming and others in full bloom, some fruits just forming and others lusciously ripe. In other words, each tree showed the best of each season at one and the same time. The fruit was so plentiful that the branches sagged under its weight. Surprised at this phenomenon, the boys kept asking me for explanations. To satisfy their curiosity somewhat, I remember saying, "Well, it's like this. Heaven is not like our earth with its seasons. Its climate is always the same, embodying the best of every season. It is very mild and suitable for every tree and plant."

We stood entranced by the beauty surrounding us. The gentle breeze, the calm, and the fragrant air about us left no doubt that this climate was ideally suited to all kinds of fruits. Here and there, the boys were plucking apples, pears, cherries, or grapes while slowly climbing. When we finally reached the top of the hill, we thought we were in heaven, but in reality we were quite far from it.

From this vantage point we could see, beyond a vast plain, an extensive plateau and, in its center, a very lofty mountain soaring straight up to the clouds. Many people were determinedly struggling up its steep sides, while on its summit stood One inviting and encouraging them to go up. We also spotted some persons descending from the top to help those who were too exhausted to continue the steep climb. Those reaching the top were greeted with vibrant cheers and

jubilation. We understood that paradise was at that peak, and so we started downhill toward the plateau and mountain.

After covering a good part of the way – many boys were running far ahead of the crowd – we were in for quite a surprise. Some distance from the foot of the mountain the plateau held a big lake full of blood. Its length would extend from the Oratory to Piazza Castello. Its shore was littered with human limbs, fractured skulls, and remnants of corpses. It was a gruesome sight, a veritable carnage! The boys who had run on ahead stopped in their tracks terrified. Being far behind and having no inkling of what was ahead, I was surprised to see them stop with horrified looks on their faces.

“What’s wrong?” I shouted. “Why don’t you keep going?”

“Come and see!” they replied. I hurried over and gazed upon the grim spectacle. As the others came up, they too took in the scene and immediately became silent and dispirited. Standing on the banks of that mysterious lake, I sought a way across, but in vain. Just in front of me, on the opposite bank, I could read a large inscription: *Per sanguinem!* [Through blood!]

Puzzled, the boys kept asking one another: “What does all this mean?”

Then I asked someone (who he was I can’t remember) for an explanation, and he replied, “This is the blood shed by the very many who have already reached the mountain’s summit and are now in heaven. It is the blood of martyrs. Here, also, is the blood of Jesus Christ. In it were bathed the bodies of those who were martyred in testimony of the faith. No one may enter heaven without passing through this blood and being sprinkled by it. It guards the Holy Mountain – the Catholic Church. Whoever attempts to attack her shall drown in it. The torn limbs, mangled bodies, and broken skulls dotting the shore are the gruesome remains of those who chose to fight the Church. All have been crushed to bits; all have perished in

this lake."

In the course of his explanation, the mysterious youth named many martyrs, including the papal soldiers who died defending the Pope's temporal power.

Then, pointing eastward to our right, he showed us an immense valley four or five times the size of the lake. "Do you see that valley?" he asked. "Into it shall flow the blood of those who will pass this way to scale this mountain – the blood of the just, of those who will die for the faith in days to come." Seeing that the boys were terrified by all they saw and heard, I tried to encourage them by saying that, if we were to die martyrs, our blood would flow into that valley, but our limbs would not be tossed about like those of the persecutors.

We then hastened to resume our march, skirting the shore of the lake. At our left stood the hill we had come down from; at our right were the lake and mountain. Where the lake ended, we saw a strip of land dotted with oaks, laurels, palms, and other trees. We went through it in search of a trail to the mountain, but only came across another vast lake. Floating in its waters were dismembered human limbs. On the shore stood an inscription: *Per aquam!* [Through water!]

"What does all this mean?" the boys again asked, mystified.

"This lake," someone replied, "holds the water which flowed from Christ's side. Small in quantity then, it has increased, is still increasing, and will keep increasing in the future. This is the baptismal water which washed and purified those who climbed this mountain. In this same water all who must still climb will have to be baptized and purified. In it must be cleansed all those who want to go to heaven. There is no other way to paradise than through innocence or penance. No one can be saved without being cleansed in this water." Then, pointing to the dismembered limbs, he added, "These are the remains of those who have recently attacked the Church."

Meanwhile, a number of people and some of our own boys, too, were swiftly darting across the lake, skimming over the waters without wetting the soles of their feet. We were astonished at this, but were told, "These are the just. When the souls of the saints are freed from their bodily prison or when their bodies are glorified, they not only can tread lightly and swiftly over water, but they can also fly through the air."

Hearing this, all the boys, eager to cross the lake like the other people, looked at me inquiringly. No one, however, dared attempt it.

"For my part, I don't dare," I replied. "It would be rash to believe ourselves so just as to be able to cross the lake without sinking."

"If you don't dare, we dare even less," they all exclaimed.

Continuing on our way, always skirting the mountain, we reached a third lake as large as the first, full of flames and more torn human limbs.

On the opposite shore an inscription proclaimed: *Per ignem!*
[Through fire!]

While we were observing that fiery lake, that same mysterious person spoke again and said, "This is the fire of the charity of God and His saints. These are the flames of love and desire through which all must pass if they have not gone through blood and water. This is also the fire with which tyrants tortured and consumed so many martyrs. Many are they who had to go through it before climbing the mountain. But these flames will also serve to reduce their enemies to ashes."

Thus for the third time we were seeing God's enemies crushed and defeated.

Wasting no time, we advanced past the lake and came upon a fourth one, even more frightening, shaped like a huge amphitheatre. It was full of dogs, cats, wolves, bears, tigers, lions, panthers, snakes, and other fierce monsters

eager to pounce upon anyone within their reach.

We saw people stepping over the heads of these raging beasts. We also saw boys fearlessly following them and suffering no injury.

I tried to call them back, shouting as loudly as I could: "Stop! Can't you see that those beasts are just waiting to devour you?" It was useless.

They didn't hear me and kept treading upon the monsters' heads as if they were on firm, safe ground. My usual guide then said to me: "Those beasts symbolize the devils, the dangers and snares of the world. Those who step over them unharmed are the just, the innocent. Don't you know what Holy Scripture says? 'They shall tread upon the asp and the viper; they shall trample down the lion and the dragon.' [Cf. Ps. 90, 131] It was of such souls that David spoke. And doesn't the Gospel say: 'Behold, I have given you power to tread upon serpents and scorpions and upon all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you'?" [Luke 10, 19]

We still kept asking one another: "How shall we cross over? Do we have to step over these wild beasts too?"

"Yes, let's go!" someone told me.

"I don't dare!" I replied. "It would be rash to believe ourselves so good as to be able to tread safely over these fierce beasts. Do as you wish, but not I."

"Then we won't try it either," the boys concluded.

We left that place and came upon a vast plain crowded with noseless, earless, or headless people. Some, moreover, had no limbs, others had no hands or feet, and still others had no tongue or eyes. The boys were simply struck dumb at such an odd sight. A mysterious person explained: "These are God's friends. To save their souls, they have mortified their senses

and performed good works. Many lost parts of their bodies in carrying out harsh penances or in working for God or their fellow men. The headless ones are those who in a special manner consecrated themselves to God.”

While we were pondering these things, we could see that many people, having crossed the lake, were now ascending the mountain.

We also saw others, already at the top, helping and encouraging those who were going up, giving them joyous, hearty cheers of welcome as they reached the top. The handclapping and cheering woke me, and I found myself in bed. This ended the first part of the dream.

The following night, April 8, Don Bosco again spoke to the boys, who couldn't wait to hear the continuation of the dream. He began by repeating his prohibition to put their hands on one another or move around the study hall, and added, “If one has to leave the study hall, he must ask his monitor's permission.” By now the boys were becoming restless. Smiling upon their upturned faces, Don Bosco briefly paused and then went on thus:

PART TWO

You will remember that at the bottom of a deep valley, near the first lake, stood another lake yet to be filled with blood. Well, after seeing all I have already described and going around that plateau, we found a passage taking us into another valley, which in turn opened into a large, wedge-shaped plaza. We entered it. Wide at the entrance, it gradually tapered into a trail at its other end near the mountain. At this point the trail was wedged between two huge boulders so close together that only one person at a time could squeeze through. The plaza was filled with cheerful, happy people, all heading for the narrow mountain trail.

“Could that be the trail to heaven?” we asked one another. As

the people reached it and squeezed through single-file, they had to pull their clothes tight, hold their breath, and discard whatever they carried. This sufficed to convince me that surely this was the way to heaven, for I remembered that, to get there, one must not only rid himself of sin, but also give up all worldly ties and desires. "There shall not enter into it anything defiled," says the Apostle John. [Apoc. 21, 27] We stood briefly watching that scene. Then we did a very foolish thing. Instead of trying to squeeze through the trail, we turned back to see what was happening in the valley past the entrance of the plaza. We had noticed a great crowd of people far off, and we were curious to know what went on there.

We started off on a boundless stretch of land and were faced by the odd sight of people and many of our boys yoked to various kinds of animals. "What can this mean?" I mused. Then it flashed across my mind that the ox is a symbol of laziness, and I understood that those boys were lazy. I clearly recognized them. They were habitually indolent, sluggish in their work. So I said to myself, "It serves you right! Stay where you are! If you don't want to work, that's just where you belong!"

I saw others yoked to donkeys, carrying loads or grazing. These were the stubborn boys who obstinately resist suggestions and orders. Other lads were paired with mules and horses, reminding me of what Holy Scripture says: "He has become like the horse and the mule which have no understanding." [Ps. 31, 9] These were the boys who never give a thought to their souls. Such empty heads!

Still others were feeding with pigs. Like them, they grunted and wallowed in the mire. These were the boys who feed on earthly pleasures by gratifying their lower passions. They are far from their heavenly Father. What a sad spectacle! They reminded me of what the Gospel says about the prodigal son being reduced to that sad state "by loose living." [Luke 15,

Finally, I saw a multitude of people – and some of our boys too – cavorting with cats, dogs, cocks, rabbits – animals symbolizing thieves, scandal-givers, braggards, and spineless individuals who don't have the courage to stand up for their religious beliefs. We now realized that this valley represented the world. I took a good look at each of the boys, and then we moved on to another very large area of that boundless plain. The ground sloped so gently that we did not even notice it at first. A little way off there seemed to be a flower garden, and we decided to look at it. We first came across most beautiful red roses. "How gorgeous!" the boys shouted, running to pluck a few. But they were disappointed! Though full-blown and colourful, those roses were rotten inside and gave off an extremely foul stench. Fresh-looking violets were there too, but when we picked a few we saw that they also were blighted and smelly.

We kept going and came to several charming groves of trees laden with luscious fruit. They were truly enticing orchards. A boy ran up to a tree and plucked a large pear. A more beautiful one would be hard to find. Yet, as soon as he bit into it, he flung it away in disgust. It was stuffed with clay and sand and tasted awful.

"How can this be?" we asked.

One of our boys, whose name I well remember, replied, "Is this all the world can give us? It's a worthless sham!"

While we wondered where we were headed for, we became aware that the road was sloping, though ever so slightly. One boy remarked, "We're going downhill. It's no good!"

"Let's take a look, anyway!" I replied.

Meanwhile, a vast multitude of people overtook us and kept going down the road in coaches, on horseback, or on foot. The

last-named group kept jumping and running about, singing and dancing or marching along to the beat of drums. The merrymaking was beyond description.

"Let's wait a while and see before going along with them," we decided.

Presently a couple of boys noticed some individuals in the crowd who seemed to be directing various groups. They were handsome, well dressed, and quite gracious in manner, but it was obvious that their hats covered horns. That vast plain, then, symbolized our wicked, corrupt world so well described by the Holy Spirit: "Sometimes a way seems right to a man, but the end of it leads to death." [Prov. 16, 25]

Then and there a mysterious person said to us: "See how men almost unknowingly fall into hell." At this I immediately called back the boys who had gone ahead. They ran to me, crying, "We don't want to go down there!" Still shouting, they kept running back to where we had come from, leaving me alone. When I finally caught up with them, I said, "You're right. Let's get out of here, or we too shall fall into hell before we realize it!"

We wanted to return to the plaza from which we had set out and finally get started on the trail to the mountain. Imagine our surprise when, after a long walk, we saw no trace of the valley leading to heaven, but only a meadow. We turned this way and that, but could not find our bearings.

"We have taken the wrong road!" someone cried.

"No, we haven't," replied another.

While the boys were arguing, I woke up. Thus ended the dream on the second night.

Before sending you to bed, though, I must tell you one more thing. I do not want you to give any importance to this dream;

just remember that pleasures which lead to perdition are deceitful; they are not pleasures at all! Remember also to be on guard against bad habits which make us so similar to beasts and deserving of being yoked with them.

Guard especially against sins that turn us into unclean animals. It is, indeed, most unbecoming for a man to be brought down to the level of beasts, but it is far more unbecoming for a creature made to God's image and likeness, an heir to heaven, to wallow in the mire like swine through those sins which Holy Scripture labels "loose living."

I told you only the highlights of my dream – and briefly too – because to narrate it as it was would take too much time. As a matter of fact, last night too I gave you but a hint of what I saw. Tomorrow night I will tell you the rest.

On Saturday 2 night, April 9, Don Bosco continued the narration of his dream:

PART THREE

I would rather not tell you my dreams. In fact, the night before last I had no sooner started my narration than I regretted my promise. I truly wished I had never said a word at all. However, I must confess that if I kept these things to myself I would feel very uneasy. Narrating them, in fact, is a great relief. I will therefore continue with the last part of the dream. Let me first say, though, that the past two nights I had to cut short many things which were better left unsaid, and I left out others which could be seen but not described.

After taking in all the scenes I mentioned, after seeing various places and ways through which one may fall into hell, we were determined to get to heaven at all costs, but try as we might, we always strayed off and came upon new sights. Finally we hit upon the right road and reached the plaza; it was still crowded with people striving to go up the mountain.

If you remember, it gradually tapered into a very narrow trail wedged between two lofty boulders. Just beyond them was a rather long, very narrow, rayless bridge spanning a frightful gorge. As soon as we saw the trail, we all shouted, "There it is! Let's go."" And so we did.

Some boys immediately began running, leaving their companions behind. I wanted them to wait for me, but they had got it into their heads to arrive there first. On reaching the bridge, however, they became frightened and stopped. I tried to urge them to advance bravely, but they refused.

"Go ahead," they replied. "You try it first, Father! The bridge is too narrow. If we miss one step, we're through!" Finally one boy mustered enough courage to attempt the crossing; another followed him and then the rest. Thus we reached the foot of the mountain.

We looked for a trail but found none. We walked around looking for one, but our search was hindered on all sides by boulders, crags, ravines, and briers. The climb looked steep. We knew we were in for a hard time. Nevertheless, we did not lose heart and eagerly began to work our way up. After a short but very exhausting climb with hands and feet, occasionally helping one another, the obstacles began to decrease until we finally found a trail and were able to climb more comfortably.

Eventually we reached a spot on the mountainside where a great many people were suffering such horrible and strange pains that we were filled with compassion and horror. I cannot tell you what I saw because it's too distressing and you could not bear it. I leave this out entirely.

We saw also very many people climbing the mountain on all sides.

As they reached the summit they were greeted with loud cheers and applause by those who were already there. We could also hear a truly heavenly music, a most melodious singing, which

encouraged us all the more to keep climbing. While we ascended, a thought struck me, and I said to the boys near me, "Isn't this funny? Here we are on our way to heaven, but are we alive or dead? What about the judgment? Or have we already been judged?"

"No," they replied laughingly. "We are still alive."

"Well," I concluded, "alive or dead, let's get to the top and see what's there!" And we quickened our step.

By dint of perseverance we finally got close to the summit. Those already there were getting ready to greet us, but, as I looked behind to see if the boys were following, I found to my great sorrow that I was almost alone. Only three or four boys had kept up with me.

"Where are the others?" I asked, somewhat upset.

"They stopped here and there," was the answer. "Perhaps they will come up later!"

I looked down and saw them scattered about the mountain trail, hunting for snails, picking scentless wild flowers, plucking wild berries, chasing butterflies and crickets, or just resting on some green patch under a shady tree. I shouted as loud as I could, waved to them, and called them by name, urging them to hurry up and telling them that this was no time to rest. A few heeded me, so that now I had about eight boys around me. All the others turned a deaf ear, busy with silly trifles. I had no intention at all of going to heaven with only a few boys, and therefore I decided to go down and get after those lazy fellows. I told the boys near me to wait and then I started down.

As many boys as I met, I sent up the mountain. I urged, exhorted, reprimanded, even jabbed and shoved, as needed.

"For heaven's sake, go up," I kept saying. "Don't waste time

on trifles!"

In the end, after reaching nearly every one of them, I found myself almost at the scarp of the mountain which we had climbed with so much effort. Here I stopped some boys who, exhausted and discouraged, had given up the ascent and were on their way down. As I turned to resume the climb with them, I stumbled against a stone and woke up. Now that you have heard the whole dream, I ask two things of you.

First, don't tell it to outsiders, because they would only make fun of it.

I tell you these things just to please you. Talk about this dream among yourselves all you want, but remember that it is only a dream. Secondly, please don't come to ask me if you were there or not, who was or wasn't there, what you were or weren't doing, if you were among the few or the many, where I saw you, or similar questions, because then we would have a repetition of last winter's commotion. For some this could be more harmful than useful, and I don't want to disturb your consciences.

I only tell you that, if this had not been a dream but reality and we had died then, of the seven or eight hundred boys we have here, very few would have made it to heaven – perhaps only three or four.

Now, lest you get me wrong, let me explain this rash statement.

What I mean is that only three or four would make it straight to heaven without having to go through purgatory. Some might have to spend only a minute there; others, perhaps a day; still others, several days or weeks; nearly all, at least a short time. Now would you like to know how to avoid that? Strive to gain as many indulgences as you possibly can. If you rightly carry out these practices of piety to which indulgences are attached and gain a plenary indulgence, you

will go straight to heaven.

Don Bosco gave no private explanation of this dream to any of the pupils and said very little otherwise on the various meanings of the things he had seen. It would not have been easy. This dream, as we shall show, portrayed a variety of tableaux: the Oratory as it was and as it would be; all the boys who were there now or would come later – each with his moral traits and his future; the Salesian Society – its growth, vicissitudes, and destinies; the Catholic Church – her persecutions and triumphs; and other events of general or particular interest.

With tableaux so bewildering in their vastness and interaction, Don Bosco simply could not thoroughly describe everything he had so vividly seen in his dream. Besides, discretion dictated – and duty required – that some things be kept secret or disclosed only to prudent persons to whom such a revelation might be comforting or serve as a warning.

In narrating to his boys the various dreams of which we shall have occasion to speak in due time, Don Bosco only told them what was best for them, since this was the intent of Him who gave these mysterious revelations. Occasionally, however, because of the deep impression he had received, in an effort to choose his subject matter, Don Bosco hinted vaguely at other incidents, things, or ideas. Occasionally these seemed incoherent and unrelated to his narrative, but strongly suggested that he was holding back much more than he told. Such is the case in his narration of the hike to heaven. We shall attempt to throw some light upon it both by quoting a few words we heard from Don Bosco and also by making a few comments of our own. However, we submit them to the readers' judgment.

1. Seemingly, the hill Don Bosco met at the start of his hike is the Oratory. Its verdure suggests youth. There are no old trees there, large and lofty; rather, youth's blossoms are

ever flowering, and flowers and fruit blossom and ripen in every season. Such is the Oratory, or such it should be. Like all of Don Bosco's works it is sustained by charity, which Holy Scripture describes as a garden blessed by God, yielding precious fruits of immortality, similar to Eden's garden, where stood also the tree of life.

2. The mountain climbers are prefigured in the man described in Psalm 83, whose strength comes from the Lord. In this valley of tears he – and many others too – resolved to climb steadily to the summit of the mountain, to the tabernacle of the Most High, that is, to heaven. [Cf. Ps. 83, 6] Our Lord, the lawgiver, will bless them, fill them with His grace, and help them to grow in all virtues until they see God in the heavenly Jerusalem and are eternally happy with Him.

3. The lakes seemingly sum up the history of the Church. The countless severed limbs scattered about the shores are the remnants of persecutors, heretics, schismatics, and rebellious Christians.

From certain expressions of Don Bosco in his dream we gather that he saw events both present and future. The chronicle remarks:

"Speaking privately to a few about the vast valley near the lake of blood, Don Bosco said, 'That deep valley is to be filled especially with the blood of priests, perhaps very soon.'"

The chronicle continues: "During the last few days Don Bosco paid a visit to Cardinal De Angelis who said to him: 'Tell me something to cheer me up.'

" 'Very well, I will tell you a dream.'

"Don Bosco then began to narrate his dream, but with more details and remarks. When he came to the lake of blood, the

cardinal became serious and sad. Don Bosco cut his account short, saying, 'That will be all for now!'

" 'Go on,' said the cardinal.

" 'Not now,' Don Bosco repeated, and then passed on to more cheerful topics.

4. The straight, narrow pass between the two boulders, the narrow wooden bridge (Our Lord's Cross), the self-assurance of a man of faith that he can cross it, the peril to which a man exposes himself in so doing if he does not have the right intention, the various obstacles before the mountain trail becomes passable – all this, if we are not mistaken, may refer to religious vocations. The people in the plaza may be boys called by God to serve Him in the Salesian Society. In fact, all those waiting to start on the trail to heaven looked happy and content and enjoyed themselves. This would indicate mostly young people. As for the climbers who had stopped in their ascent or were turning back, could this not suggest a cooling in following one's vocation? Don Bosco's own interpretation of this incident could indirectly allude to vocations, but he did not deem it wise to elaborate.

5. On the slope of the mountain, just past the initial obstacles, Don Bosco saw people in pain. Father Bonetti's chronicle offers this explanation: "Several asked him about this privately, and he replied, 'This place symbolized purgatory. If I had to preach on this subject, I'd just describe what I saw. It was simply frightful.

There were all kinds of torments. I will only say that I saw people crushed under presses, hands, feet and heads sticking out all around, eyes bursting from their sockets. These people were so badly squashed and crushed that the sight was truly bloodcurdling.'"

We shall conclude with an important observation which can apply to this and other dreams which we shall narrate. In

these dreams or visions, as they may be called, there nearly always appears a personage who acts as Don Bosco's guide or interpreter.

Who can he be? This is the most amazing and consoling part of these dreams, but Don Bosco kept it in his heart.

(MB IT VI, 864-882 / MB EN VI, 508-520)

Faith, our shield and our victory (1876)

"When I devoted myself to this part of the sacred ministry, I intended to consecrate all my efforts to the greater glory of God and the benefit of souls; I intended to work to make good citizens on this earth, so that they might one day be worthy inhabitants of heaven. May God help me to continue in this way until the last breath of my life." (Don Bosco)

The boys were not the only ones eagerly waiting to hear Don Bosco's dream. He kept his promise a day late in his "Good Night" of June 30, the feast of Corpus Christi.

I am happy to see you (he began). How many angelic faces I see turned toward me (general laughter). I was afraid that I would frighten you by telling you this dream. If I had an angelic face, I would say "look at me!" and all your fears would vanish. Unfortunately I am but clay, the same as you. Nevertheless, we are made in God's likeness, and I can say with St. Paul that you are "my joy and my crown." However, do not be surprised if you find a few rough edges in the crown.

But let us get on to the dream. I was rather unwilling to tell you about it lest it frighten you, but then, I thought, a father should keep no secrets from his children, especially if

he feels they are concerned and should know what their father thinks and does. So I made up my mind to tell you the dream in every detail. I only beg you not to give it any more importance than you would any other dream. Choose what you like best, whatever helps you most. We all know that people are asleep when they dream (general laughter), but you must also know that I did not have this dream last night. It came two weeks ago, as you were ending your spiritual retreat. I had long prayed to the Lord to show me my sons' state of conscience, how they could be helped to grow stronger spiritually, and how certain bad habits could be uprooted from their hearts. This was my anxious concern, especially during this spiritual retreat.

Thank God, the retreat went very well for both students and artisans. But the Lord did not end His mercy there. He chose to give me the privilege to read into the boys' consciences much as one would read a book. More astounding, I not only saw each one's present condition but also whatever he would undergo in the future. This happened in a way which truly astonished me because never before have I been enabled to see so well, so clearly, so openly into future events and into my boys' consciences. This was the first time. I had also prayed a great deal to the Blessed Virgin Mary that She would favor me by having none of you harbor a demon in his heart, and I trust that this request has also been granted, since I have reason to believe that you all opened your consciences to me. Well, then, lost in these thoughts and pleading with the Lord to let me know what would be helpful and what would be harmful to my dear sons' souls, I got into bed and my dream began.

This preamble began with expressions of innate, deep humility but ended with an assertion which precludes any doubt about the supernatural nature of the dream-which may well be entitled: Faith, Our Shield and Our Victory.

I seemed to be at the Oratory in the midst of my boys, my glory and crown. It was evening. Dusk was just settling, so one could see but dimly. As I was walking from this portico toward the main gate, an unbelievably huge crowd of boys

closed in about me, as you do because we are friends. Some had come to say hello, others to tell me something. Saying a word here and there, I slowly made my way to the center of the playground. Suddenly I heard drawn out moans and sobs followed by a resounding roar with intermingling boyish screams and wild shrieks which seemed to come from the main entrance. The students ran there to see what was happening, but almost immediately they ran back madly to us along with the terrified artisans. Many artisans had already fled from the gate to the other end of the playground.

As the cries and howls of pain and hopelessness kept increasing, I anxiously asked what was happening and tried to shove forward to help, but the boys about me wouldn't let me.

"Let me go," I cried. "Let me see what is happening to frighten everyone so."

"No, no, please don't go!" they shouted. "Stay away. There's a monster which will swallow you up. Run away with us! Don't go there!"

But I wanted to see and, shaking off the boys, I got close to the artisans' playground.

"Look out!" the boys screamed. "Look out!"

"What's wrong?"

"Look! Back there!"

I turned in the direction indicated and saw a horrid animal. At first I thought that it was a giant lion, but it was nothing like an earthly lion. I gazed intently at it. It was monstrous; it looked like a bear, but seemed more ferocious and was far more terrifying. It had an undersized rump but enormous shoulders and a huge belly. Overly large too was its head, with grotesquely cavernous jaws, open wide, ready to swallow a person at one bite. Its mouth sprouted two thick, long, pointed tusks shaped like sharp swords.

I stepped back among the boys, who kept asking what they were to do, but I was frightened too and at a loss. "I wish I could tell you," I replied, "but I don't know myself. Just now let's stay together under the porticoes."

No sooner had I said this than the bear stalked into the

second playground and made its way toward us with a slow heavy tread as though assured of its prey. We drew back in terror until we stood here under this portico, the boys clinging fast to me and all eyes centered on me. "Don Bosco, what should we do?" they pleaded. I kept looking at them in silence, not knowing what action to take. Finally I exclaimed, "Let's turn back to the farther end of the portico, where Our Lady's statue stands. Let's kneel and pray more fervently than usual so that She may tell us what to do and what kind of a monster this is, and so that She may rescue us. If it is just a wild animal of some kind, we shall manage to kill it somehow; if it is a demon, Mary will come to our aid. Don't be afraid. Our heavenly Mother will see to our safety."

Meanwhile the beast kept up its slow approach, belly close to the ground, crouching and preparing to spring and seize us. We fell to our knees in prayer. It was a moment of utter helplessness. The huge monster had gotten so close that in one leap it could be upon us. Then, all at once-I don't know how or when-we found ourselves on the other side of the wall in the clerics' dining room.

In the center I could see Our Lady. I am not sure, but She looked like the statue we have here in the portico or the one in the dining room itself, or maybe like the statue atop the dome or the one inside the church. But, be it as it may, there She stood, aglow with a brilliance which blazed through the dining room now grown a hundred times in breadth and height. She shone like the sun at midday, thronged by saints and angels.

The dining room seemed like heaven. Her lips moved as though She wished to say something to us.

We were a countless crowd in that dining hall. Astonishment had replaced terror in our hearts. The eyes of all were upon the Madonna.

"Do not be afraid," She reassured us in the gentlest of tones. "My divine Son is just testing you."

I looked carefully at the persons brilliant in glory who surrounded the Blessed Virgin and recognized Father

Alasonatti, Father Ruffino, a certain Brother Michael of the Christian Schools, whom some of you knew, and my own brother Joseph. I saw others too who had once attended our Oratory or belonged to our Congregation and are now in heaven. In their company I also saw several others who are living today.

Suddenly, one of those about the Blessed Virgin loudly announced, "*Surgamus!* Let us rise!" Since we were already standing, we could not understand his command.

"Why *surgamus*? We are already on our feet."

"*Surgamus!*" he repeated in stentorian tones. The boys looked at me, thoroughly surprised and still, waiting for directions because they had no idea of what to do. I turned toward the one who had given the command and asked, "What do you want us to do? What does *surgamus* mean, since we are already on our feet?"

"*Surgamus!*" he again ordered in a stronger tone. The order made no sense to me; it was incomprehensible.

As I was standing on a table for better control of the crowd, one of those who thronged around the Blessed Virgin addressed me in a wondrously powerful voice. The boys listened intently as he said to me, "You are a priest and should understand what this *surgamus* means. When you offer Holy Mass, do you not say *sursum corda* [lift up your hearts] every day? Are you speaking about the physical act of standing up? Don't you mean instead the uplifting of the heart's love to God?"

Turning to the boys I instantly shouted, "Up, up with your hearts, my sons! Let us strengthen our faith and raise our hearts to God. Let us make an act of love and repentance. Let us earnestly strive to pray with lively fervor. Let us trust in God." I gave a sign and we all knelt down. Moments later, as we softly prayed in an outburst of confidence, we again heard a voice ordering, "Surgite! Rise!" Leaping to our feet, we all felt that we were being lifted from the ground by some kind of supernatural power – how high I cannot say, but I know that we were all raised quite a distance above the ground. I have no idea what supported us. I do recall that I held fast to the sill or frame of a window. All the boys were clinging

to windows or doors – one gripping here and one there, some holding on to iron bars or stout spikes, some others to the cornices of the ceiling. We were all hanging in the air, and I wondered that none of us fell to the floor.

Then, behold, the monster we had seen in the playground stormed into the dining room, followed by a vast herd of other wild animals. They stamped about the dining hall growling frightfully, straining for combat and ready to pounce upon us at any moment. But, though they kept eyeing us, staring with bloodshot eyes and tossing their heads, they did not immediately attack us. We looked down on them from above. Clinging for life to that window, I thought, Were I to fall, how horribly they would tear me to shreds!

Caught as we were in these strange positions, we heard Our Lady sing out the words of St. Paul: *Sumite ergo scutum fidei inexpugnabile*. [Take up, therefore, the impregnable shield of faith. cf. Eph. 6, 16] So harmonious was the sound, so full, so sublimely melodious, that we listened ecstatically. Every note could be heard from the lowest to highest, and we thought that a hundred voices had blended into one.

Intent upon this heavenly song, we noticed a number of graceful young lads, who had descended from heaven on wings, leave Our Lady's side and draw near to us. They bore shields in their hands and put one up against the heart of each boy. They were large shields, sparkling in beauty and reflecting the light which shone from the Madonna. It was a heavenly sight. Each shield seemed to have a steel center, surrounded by a large ring of diamonds, and the whole shield was edged in purest gold. It was all one could hope for in beauty, sweetness, and melody.

As I gazed about me. lost in the music, I was startled by a booming voice which cried: *Ad pugnam!* [To arms!] Then the wild beasts began stamping about furiously. In a flash we all found ourselves on the floor, each on his feet, each engaged in deadly combat with those monsters, protected only by our divine shields. I can't say whether the struggle took place inside the dining hall or out in the playground. The heavenly

choir did not interrupt its singing. The monsters rushed at us as smoke streamed from their gaping mouths along with leaden balls, spears, arrows, and weapons of all kinds. But these weapons either missed us or hit our shields and bounced off.

Our adversaries were bent on wounding and slaughtering us, and they kept hurling themselves against us, but all in vain. Meeting us head on, they smashed their fangs and were forced to flee. In waves these hordes of frightful monsters assailed us, but all met with the same fate.

It was a lengthy battle, but finally we heard Our Lady saying: *Haec est victoria vestra, quae vincit mundum, fides vestra.* [This is the victory that overcomes the world: your faith-cf. I Jn. 5, 4.]

At Her voice, the entire herd of frightened beasts balked and, dashing headlong, disappeared, leaving us safe, free, victorious in that immense dining hall, still ablaze with the brilliance emanating from the Madonna.

Then I carefully studied the faces of those who bore the shields. They were an immense number. Among others I could see Father Alasonatti, Father Ruffino. my brother Joseph, and the Christian Brother who had fought by our side.

But the boys could not take their eyes away from the Blessed Virgin. She was chanting a canticle of thanksgiving which gladdened us with a new joy and an ecstasy beyond words. I doubt that a lovelier canticle can be heard in heaven itself.

Suddenly our happiness was rudely broken by blood-curdling shrieks and cries intermingled with bellowing roars. Were some of our boys being torn to pieces by the wild beasts which had fled the scene but moments before? I immediately tried to rush out and help these sons, but I could not because the boys kept restraining me and firmly refused to let me out of the room. I struggled to free myself. "Let me go to help those poor boys," I begged. "I want to see them. If they are hurt or killed, I want to die with them. I must go, even if it costs me my life." Tearing myself from those who were holding me, I dashed out to the portico. Oh, what horror! The playground was strewn with the dead, the dying and the wounded. Boys, panicking with

fear, tried to flee in all directions, only to be pursued by those monsters which pounced on them, sinking their fangs into their arms and legs, tearing them to pieces. Every second some boys fell to the ground and died amid horrifying screams.

But the beast that wrought the most fearful slaughter of all was the bear which had first appeared in the artisans' playground. With its sword-sharp tusks it pierced the boys' chests first from the right side to the left, and then from left to right. The victims fell tragically dead with a double mortal wound through the heart.

With determination I shouted, "Courage, my dear sons!" Immediately many lads ran to me for protection, but they were pursued by the bear. Summoning up my courage, I stepped forward in its path, joined by some of the boys who had already conquered the beasts in the dining room.

That prince of darkness flung itself upon us but could not hurt us because of our shields. In fact, it could not even touch us because the very sight of the shields forced it to back away in terror and even homage. Then it was that, as I fixed my gaze on the two long sword-sharp tusks, I noticed one word on each in big letters: *Otium* [Idleness] on one, *Gula* [Gluttony] on the other. In utter surprise I kept asking myself: Is it possible that here where everyone is so busy and we do not know where to begin doing all the work we have to do, there is still someone who idles away his time? As for the boys, I think they keep busy with their work, study and play. It made no sense to me.

Then someone said: "And yet how many half-hours they waste!"

"But gluttony too?" I asked. "Here at the Oratory one could not indulge in gluttony if he wanted to. There is hardly ever a chance. Our food is most ordinary and so is what we drink. We barely have just what we need. How could one be so intemperate as to endanger his eternal salvation?"

Again came the reply: "Oh, you priest! You think you are well versed in moral theology and quite experienced, but on this point you know nothing. You are a babe in arms. Do you not know that one may sin by gluttony and intemperance even when

drinking water?"

I wasn't convinced at all, and I wanted a better explanation. While the dining hall was still bright with the Blessed Virgin's presence, I went very sadly to Brother Michael to clear up my doubts. "My friend," he answered, "you are still a novice in these things. I will teach you." As regards gluttony, you must learn that one can be intemperate by eating, drinking or sleeping more than one needs, and by pampering the body in other ways. As for idleness, you must know that it does not just mean being lazy. It also means letting one's fantasy run on to dangerous thoughts. One can also be idle during study periods by fooling around and disturbing others, by wasting time in silly reading, or by being slothful, especially in church. Idleness is the father, the font and source of many temptations and of all evils. You who are these boys' director must safeguard them from these two sins by striving to strengthen their faith. If you can manage to make your boys temperate in the little things I have mentioned, they will always overcome the devil. Through temperance they will grow in humility, chastity, and other virtues as well. If they will properly use their time, they will never fall into the clutches of the infernal enemy but will live and die as saintly Christians."

I thanked him for his instructions and then, wanting to verify the reality of all this, lest it be a mere dream, I tried to grasp his hand but touched nothing. Again and again I tried but failed. I grasped nothing but air. Yet I could see those people. They were talking and seemed real. I approached Father Alasonatti, Father Ruffino, and my brother, but once more I grasped nothing.

Beside myself, I cried out, "Is this all true or not? Aren't these all real people? Didn't I hear them talk?"

Brother Michael replied, "After all your studies, you should know that as long as my soul is separated from my body, it is useless to try to touch me. You cannot touch a pure spirit. We take on our former likeness only to enable mortal eyes to see us. But when we shall all have risen at the Last Judgment,

then we shall put on our bodies, immortal and spiritualized.” Then I tried to draw close to Our Lady who seemed to have something to tell me. I was almost beside Her when I heard a new uproar and more shrieks from outside. I immediately dashed out of the dining hall again, but as I did so, I awoke.

To conclude his account, Don Bosco added these reflections and suggestions:

Whatever this mixed-up dream may mean, it does restate and explain St. Paul’s words. However, I was so worn out and exhausted by the strain of this dream that I begged the Lord never to send me any more dreams like that. But – wouldn’t you know it? – the following night that very same dream came back, only this time I had to see it to the end, something I was spared the night before. I was so frightened that I screamed. Father Berto heard me and in the morning he asked me why I had shrieked and if I had passed a sleepless night. These dreams drain me far more than if I were to spend the night at my desk.

As I said, this is only a dream. I do not want you to give it any more importance. Think of it only as a dream, no more. I would not like you to write home about it or tell outsiders who know nothing of the Oratory, lest they say, as they have already, that Don Bosco fills his boys with dreams. I don’t really mind, though. Let them say what they will, but let each of us draw from this dream whatever applies. Just now I will not give you any explanations because all of you can easily understand the dream.

I only recommend very strongly that you revive your faith, which is safeguarded particularly by being temperate and avoiding idleness. Let temperance be a friend and sloth an enemy. Some other evening I will return to this subject. For now, good night.

(BM XII, 248-255)

The “Good Night”

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

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

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

The evening peal

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

*Era già l’ora che volge il desìo
ai naviganti e intenerisce il core...*

*“It was the hour when longing stirs
the hearts of sailors and softens their souls...”*

It is precisely at the hour of evening prayer that Alighieri describes, in fact, in the eighth Canto of “Purgatory”, the kings in a small valley while they sing the

hymn of the Liturgy of the Hours *Te lucis ante terminum...* (Before the light ends, O God, we seek Thee, that Thou mayest keep us).

Don Bosco's "Good Night" was a fond and sublime moment! It began with praise and evening prayers and ended with his words that opened his children's hearts to reflection, joy and hope. He really cared about that evening meeting with the whole Valdocco community. Fr G. B. Lemoyne traces its origin to Mamma Margaret. The good mother, putting the first orphan boy who came from Val Sesia to bed, offered some recommendations to him. From there came the beautiful custom in Salesian boarding schools of addressing brief words to the youngsters before sending them off to rest (BM, 142). Fr E. Ceria, quoting the Saint's words when thinking back to the early days of the Oratory, "I began to give a very short little sermons in the evening after prayers" (MO, 156 New Rochelle, 2010), thinks rather of a direct initiative of Don Bosco. However, if Fr Lemoyne accepted the idea of some of the early disciples, it was because he thought that Mamma Margaret's "Good Night" emblematically fulfilled Don Bosco's purpose in introducing that custom (Annals III, 857).

Characteristics of the "Good Night"

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

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

These were, in short, neither sermons nor school lessons, but short affectionate words that the good father

addressed to his sons before sending them off to rest.

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

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

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

Six were thus 'named'. Don Bosco's voice was calm. Every time he mentioned a name, a muffled cry from the culprit could be heard echoing amidst the sullen silence of his stunned companions.

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

The key to morality

There was a reason why, one day in 1875, Don Bosco listed the secrets employed at Valdocco to those who were amazed that the Oratory did not have certain disorders

complained of in other colleges, and among them he pointed out the following: " Another powerful means of persuasion, exercising a good influence over the boys, was the short fatherly talks addressed to them every evening after prayers. These short talks forestalled any trouble" (BM XI, 203-204).

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

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

Blessed Maria Troncatti, a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, will be canonised

On November 25th, 2024, Pope Francis authorised the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints to promulgate the decree regarding the miracle attributed to the intercession of Blessed Maria Troncatti, a professed Sister of the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, born in Corteno Golgi (Italy) on February 16th, 1883, and who died in Sucúa (Ecuador) on August 25th, 1969. With this act of the Holy Father, the path to the canonisation of Blessed Maria Troncatti is opened.

Maria Troncatti was born in Corteno Golgi (Brescia) on February 16th, 1883. Devoted to parish catechesis and the sacraments, the adolescent Maria developed a deep Christian sense that opened her to a religious vocation. The *Salesian Bulletin* arrived in Corteno, and Maria thought about her religious vocation. However, out of obedience to her father and the parish priest, she waited until she was of age before asking for admission to the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. She made her first profession in 1908 in Nizza Monferrato. During World War I (1915-1918), Sister Maria attended health assistance courses in Varazze and worked as a Red Cross nurse in the military hospital. During a flood in which she risked drowning, Maria promised the Madonna that if she saved her life, she would go to the missions.

In 1922, Mother General, Caterina Daghero assigned her to the missions in Ecuador. She spent three years in Chunchi. Accompanied by the missionary Bishop Mons. Comin and a small expedition, Sister Maria and two other sisters ventured into the Amazon rainforest. Their mission field was the land of the Shuar Indians, in the south-eastern part of Ecuador. They settled in Macas, a village of colonists surrounded by the collective homes of the Shuar. Together with her sisters, she carried out a difficult work of evangelization amidst various risks, including those posed by forest animals and the dangers of swirling rivers. Macas, Sevilla Don Bosco, and Sucúa are some of the “miracles” still flourishing out of Sister Maria Troncatti’s work: nurse, surgeon and orthopaedic doctor, dentist, and anaesthetist... But above all, she was a catechist and evangeliser, rich in wonderful resources of faith, patience, and fraternal love. Her work for the promotion of Shuar women flourished in hundreds of new Christian families, formed for the first time by the free personal choice of the young spouses. She was nicknamed “the doctor of the jungle”, fighting for human promotion, especially of women. **She was the “little mother” (*madrecita*),** always eager to reach out not only to the sick but to all those in need of help and hope.

From a simple and poor clinic, she founded a real hospital and personally trained the nurses. With maternal patience, she listened, fostered communion among the people, and educated both natives and colonists in forgiveness. "A glance at the Crucifix gives me life and courage to work", this is the certainty of faith that sustained her life. In every activity, sacrifice, or danger, she felt supported by the maternal presence of Mary Help of Christians.

On August 25th, 1969, in Sucúa (Ecuador), the small plane carrying Sister Maria Troncatti to the city crashed a few minutes after take-off, on the edge of that jungle which had been for almost half a century her "heart's homeland", the space of her tireless donation among the "Shuar". Sister Maria experienced her last take-off: the one that took her to Paradise! She was 86 years old, all spent as a gift of love. She had offered her life for reconciliation between the colonists and the Shuar. She wrote, "I am increasingly happy with my missionary religious vocation!"

She was declared Venerable on November 12th, 2008, and **beatified during the pontificate of Benedict XVI in Macas (Apostolic Vicariate of Méndez – Ecuador) on November 24th, 2012**. In the beatification homily, Cardinal Angelo Amato outlined her figure as a consecrated and missionary woman. In the ordinariness and simplicity of her maternal and merciful gestures, Card. Amato highlighted the extraordinary nature of the "example of dedication to Jesus and his Gospel of truth and life" for which, more than forty years after her death, she was remembered with gratitude. "Sister Maria, animated by grace, became an untiring messenger of the Gospel, expert in humanity and a profound knower of the human heart. She shared the joys and hopes, the difficulties and sorrows of her brothers and sisters, both great and small. She was able to transform prayer into apostolic zeal and concrete service to others". Cardinal Amato concluded the homily by reassuring

those present, including the Shuar, that “from heaven, Blessed Maria Troncatti continues to watch over your homeland and your families. Let us continue to ask for her intercession, to live in fraternity, concord, and peace. Let us turn to her with confidence, so that she may assist the sick, console the suffering, enlighten parents in the Christian education of their children, and bring harmony to families. Dear faithful, as she was on earth, so from heaven Blessed Maria Troncatti will continue to be our Good Mother”.

The biography written by Sister Domenica Grassiano, “Jungle, Homeland of the Heart”, helped to make the testimony of this great missionary known and to spread her fame of holiness. This Daughter of Mary Help of Christians singularly embodied the pedagogy and spirituality of the preventive system, especially through that motherhood that marked her entire missionary witness throughout her life.

As a young Sister in the 1920s: while continuing as a nurse, she dedicated particular attention to the oratory girls, especially to a group of them who were rather neglected, noisy, and intolerant of any discipline. Sister Maria welcomed and treated them in such a way that “they had a veneration for her: they knelt before her, so great was their esteem. They felt in her a soul belonging entirely to God and entrusted themselves to her prayer”.

She also reserved **special attention for the postulants**, communicating trust and courage, “Be brave, do not let yourself be taken by regret for what you have left behind... Pray to the Lord, and He will help you realise your vocation”. The forty postulants of that year all reached to receiving the habit and making their profession, attributing this result to Sister Maria’s prayers, which instilled hope, especially when she saw difficulties in adapting to the new way of life or in accepting separation from one’s family.

As Mother of the poor and needy. With her example and message,

she reminds us that “we do not only care for the body, but also for the needs of the human soul: for those who suffer from the violation of rights or from a broken love; for those who find themselves in darkness regarding the truth; who suffer from the absence of truth and love. We care for the salvation of people in body and soul”. How many souls she saved! How many children she saved from certain death! How many girls and women she defended in their dignity! How many families she formed and safeguarded in the truth of marital and family love! How many fires of hatred and revenge she extinguished with the strength of patience and the giving of one’s life! And she lived all this with great apostolic and missionary zeal.

The testimony of Father Giovanni Vigna, who worked for 23 years in the same mission, illustrates very well the heart of Sister Maria Troncatti, “Sister Maria stood out for her exquisite motherhood. She found a solution to every problem that proved always the best, in light of the facts. She was always willing to discover the positive side of people. I saw her treat human nature in all its aspects, even the most miserable: she treated them with that excellence and gentleness that were spontaneous and natural in her. She expressed motherhood as affection among the Sisters in the community: it was the vital secret that sustained them, the love that united them to one another; the full sharing of labours, pains, and joys. She exercised her motherhood especially towards the younger ones. Many Sisters experienced the sweetness and strength of her love. This was also true for the Salesians who frequently fell ill because they did not spare themselves in their work and effort. She cared for them, supported them morally, sensing crises, fatigue, and turmoil. Her transparent soul saw everything through the love of a Father who cares for us and saves us. She served as God’s instrument for wonderful works!”

Don Bosco and music

For the education of his youngsters Don Bosco made much use of music. Even as a boy he loved singing. As he had a beautiful voice, Mr Giovanni Roberto, head cantor of the parish, taught him Gregorian chant. Within a few months, John was able to join the orchestra and perform musical parts with excellent results. At the same time, he began to practise playing a spinet which was a plucked string instrument with a keyboard, and also the violin (BM I, 173).

As a priest in Turin, he acted as music teacher to his first oratory boys, gradually forming real choirs that attracted the sympathy of the listeners with their singing.

After the opening of the hospice, he started a school of Gregorian chant and, in time, also took his young singers to churches in the city and outside Turin to perform their repertoire.

He composed hymns such as the one to the Infant Jesus, *'Ah, let us sing in the sound of jubilation...'*. He also initiated some of his disciples into the study of music, among them Fr John Cagliero, who later became famous for his musical creations, earning the esteem of experts. In 1855 Don Bosco organised the first instrumental band at the Oratory.

He did not, however, get ahead of the good Don Bosco! Already in the 1860s he included a chapter on evening music classes in one of his Regulations in which he said, among other things:

'From every student musician a formal promise is demanded not to go and sing or play in public theatres, nor in any other entertainment in which Religion and morality could be compromised' (MB VII, 855).

Children's music

To a French religious who had founded a festive Oratory and asked him if it was appropriate to teach music to boys, he replied: '*An Oratory without music is like a body without a soul!*' (BM V, 222).

Don Bosco spoke French quite well albeit with a certain freedom of grammar and expression. One of his replies concerning the boys' music was famous in this regard. Father L. Mendre of Marseilles, parish priest of St Joseph's parish, was very fond of him. One day, he sat beside him during entertainment in the Oratory of St Leo. The little musicians would occasionally play a flat note or two. The abbot, who knew a lot about music, winced each time. Don Bosco whispered into his ear in his French: "*Monsieur Mendre, la musique de les enfants elle s'écoute avec le coeur et non avec les oreilles*" (Father Mendre, children's music is listened to with the heart and not with the ears). The priest later recalled that occasion countless times, revealing Don Bosco's wisdom and goodness (BM XV, 58 n.3).

All this does not mean, however, that Don Bosco put music before discipline in the Oratory. He was always amiable but did not easily overlook failures of obedience. For some years he had allowed the young band members to go for a walk and a country lunch on the feast of St Cecilia. But in 1859, due to incidents, he began to prohibit such entertainment. The youngsters did not protest openly, but half of them, urged on by a leader who had promised them to obtain permission from Don Bosco, and hoping for impunity, decided to leave the Oratory anyway and organise a lunch of their own accord before the Feast of St Cecilia. They had taken this decision thinking that Don Bosco would not notice and would not take action. So they went, in the last days of October, to lunch at a nearby inn. After lunch they wandered around the town again and in the evening they returned to dine at the same place, returning to Valdocco half-drunk late at night. Only Mr Buzzetti, invited at the last moment, refused to join them and warned Don Bosco. The latter calmly declared the band disbanded and ordered Buzzetti to collect and lock up all the

instruments and think of new pupils to start instrumental music. The next morning, he sent for all the unruly musicians one by one, telling each of them that they had forced him to be very strict. Then he sent them back to their relatives or guardians, recommending some more needy to city workshops. Only one of the mischievous boys was later accepted because Fr Rua assured Don Bosco that he was a naive boy who had allowed himself to be deceived by his companions. And Don Bosco kept him on probation for some time!

But with sorrows one must not forget consolations. 9 June 1868 was a memorable date in Don Bosco's life and in the history of the Congregation. The new Church of Mary Help of Christians, which he had built with immense sacrifices, was finally consecrated. Those who were present at the solemn celebrations were deeply moved. An overflowing crowd packed Don Bosco's beautiful church. The Archbishop of Turin, Archbishop Riccardi, performed the solemn rite of consecration. At the evening service the following day, during Solemn Vespers, the Valdocco choir intoned the grand antiphon set to music by Fr Cagliero: *Sancta Maria succurre miseris*. The crowd of faithful was thrilled. Three mighty choirs had performed it perfectly. One hundred and fifty tenors and basses sang in the nave near the altar of St Joseph, two hundred sopranos and contraltos stood high up along the railing under the dome, a third choir, made up of another hundred tenors and basses, stood on the orchestra that then overlooked the back of the church. The three choirs, connected by an electric device, maintained synchrony at the Maestro's command. The biographer, present at the performance, later wrote:

"The harmony of all three choirs singing in unison cast a spell over the entire congregation. As the voices blended together, the listeners felt that they had been immersed into a sea of voices which rose from all directions. During the singing, Canon John Baptist Anfossi was kneeling behind the main altar with Don Bosco. As far as he could remember, he had never seen or heard Don Bosco stir or say

anything while at prayer. On this occasion, however, Don Bosco looked at him with moist eyes full of joy and whispered, 'Dear Anfossi, doesn't it feel like being in heaven?'
(*BM IX*, 128).

The Salesian presence in Ethiopia and Eritrea

The Salesian mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea had its beginnings in 1975, when the first three Salesians –from Ireland Fr Patrick Morrin, from USA Bro. Joseph Reza and from Italy Bro. Cesare Bullo – arrived in Mekele (Tigray-Ethiopia). Under the guidance of the Middle East (MOR) Province, they responded to the Congregation's call to explore new frontiers. Later, in 1982, other missionaries from the Lombardo-Emiliana Province (ILE) arrived in Dilla as part of *Project Africa*. The Salesian presence in Eritrea began in Dekemhare in 1995. In 1998, the communities of the two provinces united to form the Mariam Kidane Meheret Vice-Province (AET).

In October 2025 we will celebrate fifty (50) years of presence (Golden Jubilee). It is the time to thank the Lord and praise him, and to remember and thank those who have made the blessing of Salesian Charism reality for the young people of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Special thanks goes to all the missionaries and all the benefactors, may God bless you abundantly.

When God wants to bless His people, he makes use of other people. When he wanted to bless all his people he called Abraham: "*and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my*

voice" (Genesis 22:18), when He wanted to free his people from slavery he called Moses (Exodus 3), and when he wanted to remind his people of his love he called prophets. And in our time God has spoken through his Son: *"but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds"* (Hebrews 1:2). His love is revealed to us through the incarnation of the Second Person of the most Holy Trinity – the Word of God became flesh (cf. John 1:14) comes to show us how much God loves us: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life"* (John 3:16).

And when he wanted to bless Ethiopian and Eritrean young people through the Charism of the Salesians he inspired the late bishop of the Adigrat Eparchy Bishop Abune Hailemariam Kahsay who asked the Salesians to come to his Eparchy and offer holistic education to young people. If we say yes to the Lord to collaborate with him in blessing his people, we need to be consistent, persevering and take commitment to try to understand his plan and his time, as well as to make our contribution. Since the answer of the Salesians was late in coming he asked three of his priests who were studying in Italy to become Salesians, and in this way to start the Salesian presence in Ethiopia. One of those three – Abba Sebhatleab Worku – after becoming a Salesian, was teaching philosophy in Lebanon, while following his initial formation – and was appointed as bishop of the Adigrat Eparchy succeeding Abune Hailemariam Kahsay. As the Word of God says *"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit"* (John 12:24). The fruit did not come when Abune Hailemariam was alive but the seed with which he collaborated to sow gave fruit after his death. Then Abba Sebhatleab Worku made his final profession before being consecrated bishop, and he was able to welcome the first Salesians on 17 October 1975 in Mekele. From then on it spread to different parts of

Ethiopia (Adigrat, Adwa, Shire, Dilla, Soddo, Adamitullu, Zway, Debrezeit, Addis Abeba, Gambella) and in Eritrea (Dekemhare, Asmara and Barentu).

There are sixteen presences (13 communities in Ethiopia, two communities and one presence in Eritrea). In Ethiopia we are running Six (6) Technical Institutes, Eight (8) Primary Schools, Five (5) Secondary Schools, thirteen (13) Oratory/Youth Centers, one (1) home for Children at Risk, Five (5) Parishes, three (3) Aspirantates, formation houses for the novices and postnovices.

Geographically Ethiopia is located in East Africa (Horn of Africa) bordering with Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan and South Sudan. It is one of the ancient countries (sometimes called Aksumite Kingdom). In history it developed but through lack of continuity and conflict, much of the past has been destroyed and it is trying to start anew, instead of building on what was already begun, causing the country to remain as one of under-developed countries.

In just the last fifty years of Salesian presence, we have seen three bloody wars: 1974-1991 – seventeen (17) years of civil war to overthrow the dictator and to build a democratic government; 1998-2000 two years of bloody war with the excuse of a “border” conflict with Eritrea. In 2020, a conflict broke out between the Federal Government and its allies and the Tigray Region; although it apparently ended in 2022 with the Pretoria Agreement, the war continued between the Federal Government and the Amhara Region and is still ongoing. Moreover, conflicts that began years ago in the Oromia region – one of Ethiopia’s largest regions – continue to persist.

War consumes immense human and material resources, destroys infrastructure and human relations, and hampers investment and tourism. We witness these effects in our own countries and in many parts of the world.

As Salesians, we believe that the only way out from conflicts and war, from poverty and lack of peace is through education and we have continued within the war and conflict giving education for the poor young people to build their future and their peaceful co-existence. Practising the Salesian preventive system: being with the young, being interested in their life and with a readiness to listen to them and to dialogue with them, trying to give them the values of *Religion, being reasonable with them, and starting everything by loving them* makes it possible for us to educate them.

Throughout our fifty year journey we have faced political (lack of stability and wars), social, economic challenges. Nowadays the main challenge is political instability and the issue of resources (human and financial). Following the directions of the General Chapters, we have sought to work together with lay people, and even though we have made progress, there is still a long way to go. The work with the Salesian Family is also another challenge that needs to be addressed. We are so grateful for the provinces who have contributed to the foundation and growth of the Salesian presence in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

We are still in an emergency situation following the war and lack of stability, because there are many Internally Displaced People in the camps – in schools (many government schools are not providing education for students) in Tigray. Our schools are accommodating students from among Internally Displaced People (IDPs), and these students and their families are still in need of daily food. We intervene when we can – thanks to the help that comes from the Don Bosco network and from other benefactors, and the students are fully dependent on us for all school materials.

For religious life we face a lack of prepared formation guides. Even though there are still vocations, our capacity to take care of them is difficult, considering the times we are living in. We need more prepared personnel.

There are one hundred and four (104) Salesians in Ethiopia and Eritrea including those who are in initial formation. The majority are local vocations already holding responsibility which shows that the foundation is established. The Vice-Province (AET) has three main priorities – *Salesian Charismatic Religious Identity, Youth Ministry involving the lay people, and Self-sustainability.*

And we hope that slowly we will learn from our own history and make an effort to live together in harmony so that the mission moves smoothly towards the young people who are in need, and make a good contribution to the education and growth of the young – *Good Believers and Upright Citizens.*

Together with our benefactor and all collaborators, we are committed to continuing to journey with the young people to work for a better society and the Church!

Fr Hailemariam Medhin, sdb
Superior of the AET Vice-Province

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*...

St Francis de Sales at the service of education

Francis de Sales was convinced that 'on the good or bad education of the youth depends radically the well-being or malaise of society and the state'; he also believed 'that colleges are like nurseries and seminaries, from which come out those who will later fill offices and hold positions, destined to be administered well or badly to the extent that previously the grafts have been well or badly cultivated'. He therefore wanted 'youth to be educated equally in piety and morals, as in letters and sciences.

School, boarding school and vocational training in Thonon

The formation of youth in studies and the Catholic faith was particularly urgent in Thonon, a town near Geneva. Several projects occupied the spirit of Francis de Sales for many years, at the time when he was provost and later as bishop.

Before the town's return to Catholicism, there was a school in Thonon founded thanks to a bequest that ensured sufficient resources for the education of twelve schoolchildren. In 1579, education was provided there by two or three governesses. With the restoration of Catholicism in Thonon in 1598, the provost de Sales asked that the bequest be

used for twelve pupils 'who were Catholics'.

But the project that was closest to the provost's heart was to bring the fathers of the Society of Jesus to Thonon: 'Whoever would add to this a Jesuit college in this town, would make the whole of the surrounding area, which, as far as religion is concerned, is almost completely indifferent, participate in this good. The provost prepared a *Memoir* in which he strongly affirmed the general conviction: 'There is nothing more useful for this province of Chablais than to build a college of the Society of Jesus in the town of Thonon'.

At the end of October 1599 the first Jesuit arrived, at the end of November a second and the others were on their way from Avignon. Towards the end of the year, the Jesuits who arrived in Thonon began with a 'little school', which would have one hundred and twenty pupils the following year. As a result of the turmoil in 1600, they were dispersed for several months, after which they started schools again with about three hundred pupils.

But what use would grammar schools be if, for humanity's sake, pupils were forced to attend Protestant colleges? There was an urgent need to create secondary and higher classes in philosophy, theology, Holy Scripture and law. At the beginning of December 1602, everything seemed ready for the opening of the college and future university of Thonon. Now, a few days later, the failed attempt by the Duke of Savoy to retake Geneva caused the Jesuits to leave again. They were soon forced to withdraw permanently.

After the Jesuits' departure, the school was revived with the help of local staff. The college of Thonon would not see any real development until late 1615, when the bishop called on the congregation of Barnabites, already established in the college of Annecy.

While literary studies were being provided for, another project mobilised the energies of the provost and his collaborators. In 1599, François de Sales advocated the foundation of a 'residence of all sciences and arts', i.e. a

kind of professional school with a printing press, a paper factory, a mechanics workshop, a passementerie and an armoury.

The idea of an institution for training in the 'arts and crafts' should be emphasised, because learning normally took place at home, with the father teaching his trade to the son destined to succeed him, or with a craftsman. On the other hand, it can be seen that Francis de Sales and his collaborators were interested in manual trades considered vile, which the majority of humanists seemed to ignore. Promoting the 'mechanical arts' also meant valuing the craftsmen that the elites tended to despise.

The small schools in the diocese

In 1606, there were fifteen boys' schools in the diocese, where grammar, literature and catechism were taught. On the surface, this was little. In reality, literacy was fairly widespread in the parishes; short courses were organised at certain times of the year, especially in the winter season, thanks to temporary agreements with teachers and especially thanks to the goodwill of the parish priests and assistant priests.

Teaching was elementary and consisted first of all in learning to read by means of a spelling book. The teacher usually did not have his own room, but used any room, a stable or a stable. Sometimes 'his lessons, held in the open air, even at an altitude of 1500 or 2000 metres, with pupils sitting on a stone, a cart, a fir-tree trunk or on the arms of a plough, were not without charm and picturesqueness'.

As one can guess, the teachers were generally recruited from among the diocesan clergy and religious. In the will of a certain Nicolas Clerc, it is stipulated that the parish service 'shall be performed by a rector capable of instructing the youth up to and including grammar'; should he 'digress and neglect the divine office or the instruction of the youth, after being admonished three times' and 'referred to the bishop', he shall be deprived of his income and replaced by another clergyman.

In 1616, the bishop accepted the request of the principals of the town of Bonne, who begged him to provide them with a monk from a neighbouring convent, entrusting him with 'instructing the youth in letters and piety', 'in view of the great fruit and usefulness that can be derived from it in view of the good instruction that he has begun to give to the youth of the said town and its neighbourhood, who intend to send their own children there'.

The boarding schools

Secondary education provided in boarding schools in Savoy originated mostly through the development of primary schools, which, thanks to donations, were able to add Latin, grammar and fine arts classes.

The bishop intervened to save the college of La Roche, where he had done his first grammar studies. The college did not always enjoy quiet days. In 1605, Francis de Sales wrote to the canons of the collegiate church to silence 'the personal opinion' of some, begging them to 'again secure the general consensus': 'you can and must contribute,' he wrote them, 'not only with your voices, but also with your warnings and the work of conviction, since the erection and preservation of this college will serve the glory of God and the Church', and will also procure 'the good of this city'. The spiritual purpose was, yes, in first place, but the temporal good was not forgotten.

In Annecy, the bishop followed closely the life of the college founded by Eustache Chappuis, in which he himself had studied from 1575 to 1578. The difficulties he was experiencing probably led him to visit this institute frequently. Moreover, the presence of the bishop was a sought-after honour, especially on the occasion of philosophical disputes, to which 'Monsignor, the most reverend bishop of Geneva' was invited.

The records of the college's decisions indicate his presence on the occasion of discussions as well as interventions to support requests or to draw up contracts with

professors. According to one witness, the bishop went there early in the morning to attend 'public events, disputes, performances of historical events and other exercises, to encourage the youth, and, in particular, public disputes in philosophy at the end of the courses'. The same witness adds: 'I often saw him personally take part in philosophical disputes'.

In reality, according to one of the professors of the time, 'fine literature as well as healthy morals had lost much of their lustre' and income had declined. The administration was experiencing shocks. The bishop dreamed of a new and stable direction for the college, which appeared to him 'almost like a wasteland'.

In 1613, while passing through Turin, he was suggested the name of a new congregation that was sailing with the wind in its sails: the Barnabites. In Milan, he met their superior general and the deal was concluded. In December 1614, he signed the contract for the Barnabites to enter the Chappuis college.

Francis de Sales was so pleased with the Barnabites that, as we have said, he called them without delay to Thonon. In April 1615, he was able to write to a friend of his: 'Certainly, our good Barnabites are really very good people: sweeter than can be said, compliant, humble and gentle far more than is fashionable in their country'. Consequently, he suggested that they should also come to France:

'For me, I think that, one day, they will be of great service to France, because they do good not only by the instruction of the youth (which is not excessively necessary in a country where the Jesuit fathers do it so excellently), but they sing in choir, hear confessions, give catechism even in the villages to which they are sent, preach; in a word, they do all that can be desired, they do it very cordially, and they do not ask much for their livelihood.'

In 1619 he was involved in negotiations to have

the Barnabites take charge of the college in Beaune, Burgundy. Since this deal failed, they were able to settle in Montargis the following year.

Higher studies

The Duchy of Savoy, being unable to count on large cities and seeing its stability often threatened, did not have its own university. Students who were able to do so went to study abroad. Francis de Sales' brother Louis was sent to Rome to study law there. In France, there were Savoyard students in Montpellier, where they went to study medicine, and in Toulouse, where they went to study law.

In Avignon, the Savoyard Cardinal de Brogny had founded a college in his palace to receive twenty-four law students free of charge, sixteen of whom were from Savoy. Unfortunately, the Savoyards lost the places reserved for them. In October 1616, Francis de Sales made several attempts with the Duke of Savoy and also in Rome to find 'some effective remedy against the disorders that, in the same college, have occurred' and so that the seats in the college would be returned to 'Your Highness' subjects'. On the occasion of his last journey, which took him to Avignon in November 1621 and before he finally ended it in Lyons, he spoke at length with the pope's vice-legaie to once again defend the Savoyard interests of the college.

Savoyard students were even to be found in Louvain, where Eustache Chappuis had founded a college for Savoyards attending the university. The Bishop of Geneva was in constant and friendly contact with Jacques de Bay, president of the college; on several occasions Francis de Sales wrote to him to recommend those who went there to place themselves, as he said, 'under your wings'. In cases where parents encountered difficulties in bearing the costs, he said he was ready to reimburse them. He followed his students: 'Study more and more,' he wrote to one of them, 'with a spirit of diligence and humility'. We also possess a letter from 1616 to the new president of the college, Jean Massen, in favour of

a theology student, his own relative, whose 'progress in letters and virtue' he hoped for.

Schools for girls?

All that has been said so far only concerns the education of boys. It was only for them that schools existed. And for girls? At the time of François de Sales, the only institutions that could offer help to families in this respect were women's monasteries, which were, however, primarily concerned with recruitment. Jeanne de Sales, the last daughter of Madame de Boisy, was sent to the monastery in 1605, 'to give her a change of air and give her a taste for devotion'. She entered at the age of twelve, but as she felt no attraction for religious life, it is not reasonable, asserted Francis de Sales, 'to leave a young girl who does not intend to stay there forever for so long in a monastery'. She withdrew already in her second year.

But what to do if the monastery was closed to them? There was the solution of the Ursulines, who were beginning to be known as a congregation for the education of young women. They had been present in the French capital since 1608. The bishop encouraged their coming to Chambéry, writing in 1612 that 'it would be a great good thing if, in Chambéry, there were Ursulines, and I would like to contribute by doing something for this'; 'three daughters or courageous women would be enough,' he added, 'to begin'. The foundation would not take place in the ancient capital of Savoy until 1625.

In 1614, he was able to rejoice at the recent arrival of the Ursulines in Lyon, 'one of the congregations,' he said, 'that my spirit loves most'. He also wanted them in his diocese, particularly in Thonon. In January 1621, he wrote to the superior of the Ursulines of Besançon to try to encourage this project, because, he wrote, 'I have always loved, esteemed and honoured those works of great charity that your congregation uses to practise, and therefore, I have always deeply desired its diffusion also in this province of Savoy'. The project, however, could only be implemented in

1634.

The education of young girls in the Visitation monasteries

When, starting in 1610, Francis de Sales founded with Jeanne de Chantal what was to become the Order of the Visitation, the question of the admission and education of young women destined or not destined for religious life soon arose. We know the case of the daughter of the Lady of Chantal, the cheerful and coquettish *Franceschetta*, who was only eleven years old when her mother, wanting her to become a religious, took her with her into the house that was to become the home of the first Visitandine. But the young girl had to take another path. Girls sent to monasteries unwillingly had no choice but to make themselves unbearable.

In 1614, a nine-year-old girl, daughter of the guardian of the castle of Annecy, was accepted at the first Visitation monastery. At the age of fourteen, by dint of insistence, she was allowed to wear the religious habit, but without having the requisites to be a novice. Sick with lung disease, she aroused the admiration of the founder, who felt 'an incredible consolation, finding her indifferent to death and life, in a gentle attitude of patience and with a smiling face, in spite of the very high fever and the many pains she suffered. As her only consolation, she asked to be allowed to make her profession before she died'. Very different, however, was another companion, a young woman from Lyons, daughter of the chief merchant and great benefactor, who made herself unbearable in the community to the point that Chantal's mother had to correct her.

At the Visitation in Grenoble, a twelve-year-old girl asked to live with the religious. To the superior, who hesitated to accept this 'rose' who might bear some thorns, the founder advised with a smile and a hint of cunning:

'It is true that these young girls do give some thorns; but what should one do? In this world, I have never found a good that did not cost something. We must arrange our wills in such

a way that they do not seek comforts, or, if they seek them and desire them, know how to adapt themselves serenely to the difficulties that are always inseparable from comforts. In this world, we have no wine without a bottom. We must therefore calculate well. Is it better that we have thorns in our garden so that we can have roses, or that we have no roses so that we do not have thorns? If it brings more good than evil, it will be good to admit it; if it brings more evil than good, it should not be admitted.

In the end, the founder was very circumspect about admitting young girls into the Visitation monasteries, because of the incompatibility with the way of life of religious women.

In fact, the Visitation had not been conceived and desired for such a work: 'God,' the founder wrote to the superior of Nevers, 'has not chosen your institute for the education of little girls, but for the perfection of the women and young ladies who are called to it at the age when they are already able to answer for what they do'. He was well aware that monastery life could hardly provide a suitable environment for the development of girls: 'Not only experience, but also reason teaches us that girls so young, placed under the discipline of a monastery, generally disproportionate for their age, begin to detest and hate it'.

Despite some regrets, Francis de Sales did not become the founder of an institute dedicated to education. However, it is a fact that his efforts in favour of the education and upbringing of boys and girls, in all its forms, were numerous and burdensome. The overriding motive that guided him was spiritual, especially when it came to keeping the youth away from the 'poison of heresy', and in this regard he succeeded rather well, as the Catholic Reformation gained ground; however, he did not neglect the temporal good of educating the youth for the benefit of society.