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### **Don Bosco's Childhood Dream: a Theological Reading**

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The account that Don Bosco gives, in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, of the dream he had when he was nine years old, is one of the most relevant texts of the Salesian tradition. The telling of this story has accompanied the transmission of the charism in a dynamic way, becoming one of its most effective symbols and one of its most eloquent syntheses. This is why the text appeals to readers, who recognise themselves in a spiritual tradition with the characteristics of a “biblical” text which claims uncommon charismatic authority and exerts a consistent performative energy, touching the affections, moving to action and generating identity. Indeed, the constitutive elements of the Salesian vocation are authoritatively established there, like a testament to be handed on to future generations, and returned, through the mysterious experience of the dream, to their transcendent origin. Just as is the case for the grand pages of the Bible, the forward movement towards fulfilment and the reference to the origins are inseparably intertwined in the narrative.

The truth is that this narrative has produced a rich history of effects in its reception by those who have inherited it, and generated a true *communitas* of readers who have identified with its message. There are countless men and women, consecrated and lay, who have found inspiration in it for discerning their personal vocation and for implementing their educative and pastoral service. From the outset, the breadth of this history of consequences instructs those who are ready to analyse the text about the delicacy of the hermeneutic operation they are about to take in hand. Studying this dream means not only investigating an event that took place in a boy's life some two hundred years ago, but also intervening critically in something that bears a spiritual message, and that is an identifying symbol, a story that carries the weight of a “founding myth” for the Salesian world. A story cannot acquire such a generative force without there being a profound reason

to justify it, and the scholar cannot but question himself to grasp its nature.

Even before the impact of the dream on the experience of its spiritual heirs is considered, the history of the dream's impact on the founder's own experience must be examined. Don Bosco recounts that "all my life this [dream] remained deeply impressed on my mind" from the night it happened 42, all the more so because it had "recurred several times more in ever clearer terms"<sup>43</sup>, each time suggesting to him the direction his life should take and guiding him in the fulfilment of his mission. In the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, moreover, he recalls his state of mind when, on the solemnity of Corpus Christi and now a priest, he returned to the hamlet where he was born, to celebrate one of his first Masses there:

*As I drew near the house and saw the place of the dream I had when I was about nine, I could not hold back the tears. I said: "How wonderful are the ways of Divine Providence! God has truly raised a poor child from the earth to place him amongst the princes of his people."<sup>44</sup>*

When Don Bosco went to Rome in 1858 to discuss the foundation of the Congregation and Pius IX "asked me to tell him everything that had even the suggestion of the supernatural about it", he told the Pope about the dream, and received the order to "write out the dream in all its detail and leave it as an encouragement to the sons of [the] Congregation."<sup>45</sup> A further confirmation of the fact that this nocturnal experience remained an essential point of reference throughout Don Bosco's life is found in a well-documented episode from the saint's old age.<sup>46</sup> Don Bosco was in Rome for the solemn consecration of the Church of the Sacred Heart, the construction of which he had taken upon himself at the request of Leo XIII. On the morning of 16 May 1887, he went to celebrate Mass at the altar of Mary Help of Christians, but during the celebration he had to stop several times, overcome by intense emotion that even prevented him from speaking. When he had returned to the sacristy and regained his habitual calm, Fr Viglietti, who had assisted him during the Mass, asked the elderly priest the reason for his tears and he replied: "I had [...] so vividly before my eyes the scene of that time at ten years of age when I dreamt of the Congregation, and so well saw and heard my brothers and my mother discussing and questioning the dream I had had."<sup>47</sup> Don Bosco, who was by then at the end of his life, had finally grasped the full meaning of the message that had been communicated to him in the dream as an open, forward-looking message: "In good time you will understand everything." Recounting the episode, Lemoyne

notes: “sixty-two years of hardships, sacrifices and struggles have passed by. All of a sudden, an unexpected flash of lightning had revealed to him in the building of the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome, the crowning of the mission so mysteriously outlined for him on the very threshold of life.” 48

However we understand the contours of that childhood dream experience and the details of its narration, we can fully agree with Stella’s assertion regarding the importance that it had in Don Bosco’s awareness:

*This dream at nine years of age was not a dream like the many others Don Bosco would certainly have had during his childhood. Apart from the problems that are tied to it, that is, to its re-enactment and the texts that hand it down to us, and apart from the now unresolvable question regarding when it actually took place, and those regarding the circumstances that possibly provoked it and immediately provided the fantastic suggestions – apart from all this, it is clear that Don Bosco was vividly struck by it; indeed it transpires that he must have felt it as a divine communication, as something, as he himself says, that had the appearance (the signs and guarantees) of the supernatural. For him it was like a new divine character indelibly stamped on his life.<sup>49</sup>*

The dream at nine years of age, in short, “conditioned Don Bosco’s whole way of living and thinking. And in particular, the way he felt God’s presence in each person’s life and in the history of the world.”<sup>50</sup>

A commentary on the theological and spiritual themes found in the dream at nine years of age could have such wide-ranging developments as to include a comprehensive treatment of “Salesianity”. Read from the perspective of the history of its consequences, the dream opens up countless avenues for exploring the pedagogical and apostolic traits that have characterised the life of St John Bosco and the charismatic experience that originated from him. The nature of our survey and its place within a larger research project require, however, that we limit ourselves to a few elements, focus our attention on the main themes and suggest directions for deepening our understanding of them. Let us therefore choose to focus on five significant areas for spiritual reflection, in the following order, (1) the Oratorian mission, (2) the call to the impossible, (3) the mystery of the Name, (4) maternal mediation and, finally, (5) the strength of meekness.

# 1. The Oratorian mission

The dream at nine years of age is full of youngsters. They are present from the first to the last scene and are the beneficiaries of everything that happens. Their presence is characterised by cheerfulness and playfulness, which are typical of their age, but also by disorder and negative behaviour. In this dream, children are therefore not the romantic image of an enchanted age, neither are they untouched by the evils of the world, nor do they correspond to the postmodern myth of youth as a season of spontaneous action and perennial openness to change which should be preserved through eternal adolescence. The children of the dream are extraordinarily “real”, both in physical likeness, and when they are symbolically represented in the form of animals. They play and squabble, laugh and swear, just as they do in reality. They seem neither innocent, as a pedagogy of spontaneity imagines them to be, nor capable of acting as if self-instructed, as Rousseau thought them to be. From the moment that the children appear, in a “very large yard”, which looks ahead to the great playgrounds of future Salesian Oratories, they invoke the presence and action of someone. However, the impulsive response of the dreamer is not the right intervention; the presence of an Other is required.

The appearance of the children is linked to the appearance of the Christological figure, as we can now openly call him. The One who said in the Gospel: “Let the little children come to me” (Mark 10:14), comes to point out to the dreamer the attitude with which the children must be approached and accompanied. He appears as a strong, manly, majestic figure with traits that clearly highlight his divine and transcendent character; his way of acting is marked by assurance and power and he manifests authority over things that happen. The dignified man, however, does not strike fear, but rather he brings peace where before there had been confusion and noise, and he shows a benevolent understanding in John’s regard and guides him to a path of gentleness and charity.

The relationship between these figures – the boys on the one hand and the Lord (to whom the Mother is then added) on the other – defines the boundaries of the dream. The emotions that John feels in the dream experience, the questions he asks, the task he is called to perform, the future that opens before him are totally linked to the dialectic between these two poles. Perhaps the most important message that the dream

conveys to the dreamer, the one that he probably understood first because it remained stamped in his imagination, before even understanding it in a reflexive way, is that those figures will become part of his memory and that he will not be able to forget them for the rest of his life. The encounter between the vulnerability of young people and the power of the Lord, between their need for salvation and his offer of grace, between their desire for joy and his gift of life, must now become the centre of his thoughts, the space of his identity. The musical score of his life will be entirely written in the notes that this generative theme gives him: modulating it in all its harmonious potential will be his mission, one into which he will have to pour all his gifts of nature and grace.

The dynamism of John's life thus appears in the dream-vision as a continuous movement, a sort of spiritual coming and going, between the boys and the Lord. From the group of children into which he had immediately jumped, John must let himself be drawn to the Lord who calls him by name, and then he must set out again from the One who sends him and go and place himself, with much more authority, at the head of his companions. Even if he had received such powerful blows from the children in a dream that he still feels the pain on waking up, and even if he listens to the words from the dignified man that leave him confused, his coming and going is not a purposeless journey but a path that gradually transforms him and brings a life-giving energy and love to young people.

That all this happens in a yard [the English translation of the word *cortile*, which can also mean a courtyard] is highly significant and has a clear educational value, since the oratory courtyard will become the privileged place and the exemplary symbol of Don Bosco's mission. The whole scene is played out in this setting, both vast (a very large yard) and familiar (close to home). The fact that the vocational vision does not have a sacred or celestial location as its background, but the space in which the children live and play, clearly indicates that the divine initiative adopts their world as a place of encounter. The mission entrusted to John, even if it is clearly understood in a catechetical and religious sense ("to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue"), has the world of education as its habitat. The association of the Christological figure with the courtyard and the dynamics of play, which a nine-year-old boy could certainly not have "constructed". In fact, it summarises the dynamics of the mystery of the Incarnation, in which the

Son takes our bodily nature in order to offer us his, and highlights how nothing human needs to be sacrificed to make room for God.

The courtyard thus speaks of the closeness of divine grace to how children “feel”: to accept this grace it is not necessary to leave aside one’s chronological age, or to neglect its needs, or to counter its rhythms. When Don Bosco, by then an adult, writes in the *Giovane provveduto* (The Companion of Youth) that one of the deceptions of the devil is to make young people think that holiness is incompatible with their desire to be joyful and with the exuberant freshness of their vitality, it is but a return in mature form of the lesson indicated in the dream and which then becomes a central element of his spiritual magisterium. The courtyard speaks of the need to understand education at its innermost core, that is, the attitude of the heart towards God. In that place, the dream teaches, there is not only room for an original openness to grace, but also for a place of resistance wherein the ugliness of evil and the violence of sin lurk. Hence the educational horizon of the dream is clearly religious, and not merely philanthropic, and it presents the symbolism of conversion, not merely that of self-development.

In the courtyard in the dream, filled with children and inhabited by the Lord, John is given a revelation of what will be the pedagogical and spiritual dynamics of later Oratorian courtyards or playgrounds.

## **2. The call to do the impossible**

While for the boys in the dream it ends with celebration, for John it ends with dismay and even with tears. This is an outcome that can only be surprising. It is customary to think, in fact, with some simplification, that visits from God are bearers exclusively of joy and consolation. It is therefore paradoxical that for an apostle of joy, for the one who as a secondary school student will help found the “society for a good time” and who as a priest will teach his children that holiness consists in “being very happy”, the vocational scene ends with tears.

This can certainly indicate that the joy spoken of is not pure leisure and simple light-heartedness but an inner response to the beauty of grace. As such, this can only be achieved through demanding spiritual battles, of which Don Bosco to a large extent will have to pay the price for the benefit of his young people. He will thus personally relive the exchange of roles which has its roots in the paschal mystery of Jesus and which is

prolonged in the circumstances of the apostles: “We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak but you are strong. You are held in honour but we in disrepute” (1 Cor 4:10), but precisely in this way “we are workers with you for your joy” (2 Cor 1:24).

The confusion with which the dream closes, however, recalls above all the disturbing upset that the great biblical characters experience in the face of the divine vocation that reveals itself in their lives, and directs them in a completely unexpected and disconcerting direction. The Gospel of Luke affirms that even Mary, at the words of the Angel, felt a sense of profound inner turmoil (“but she was much perplexed by his words” Luke 1:29). Isaiah had felt lost before the revelation of God’s holiness in the temple (Is 6). Amos had compared to the roar of a lion (Am 3: 8) the strength of the divine Word by which he had been seized, while Paul would experience on the road to Damascus the existential reversal that resulted from his encounter with the Risen One. While they witness to the attraction of an encounter with God that totally seduces them, biblical men and women, at the moment of their call, seem to hesitate, afraid as they are of something that overwhelms them, rather than throw themselves headlong into the adventure of the mission.

The upset that John experiences in the dream appears to be a similar experience. It arises from the paradoxical character of the mission that is assigned to him, which he does not hesitate to define as “impossible” (“Who are you ordering me to do the impossible?”). The adjective, “impossible”, may seem “exaggerated,” as children’s reactions sometimes are, especially when they express a sense of inadequacy in the face of a challenging task. But this truth of child psychology does not seem sufficient for shedding light on the content of the dream dialogue and the depth of the spiritual experience it communicates. All the more so since John is made of real leader’s quality and has an excellent memory, which will allow him in the months following the dream to immediately start putting a little oratory into place, entertaining his friends with active games and repeating the sermons of the parish priest. So, in the words with which he frankly declares that he is “unable to speak about religion” to his companions, it is good to hear the distant echo of Jeremiah’s objection to the divine vocation resound: “I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy” (Jer 1:6).

It is not on the level of natural attitudes that the demand for the impossible is at stake here, but on the level of what can fall within the

horizon of the real, of what can be expected according to one's own image of the world, of what falls within the limit of experience. Beyond this frontier, the region of the impossible opens up, which, in biblical terms, is the space of God's action. It is "impossible" for Abraham to have a child by a barren and elderly woman like Sarah; it is "impossible" for the Virgin to conceive and give to the world the Son of God made man; salvation seems "impossible" for the disciples, if it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Abraham answered, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" (Gen 18:14); the Angel tells Mary that "nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37); and Jesus responds to unbelieving disciples that "what is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:27).

The most important event in which the theological question of the impossible arises is, however, that decisive moment in the history of salvation, namely, the Easter drama where the impossible frontier to be overcome is the very dark abyss of evil and death. How is it possible to conquer death? Is death not itself the mandatory emblem of impossibility, the insurmountable limit to every human possibility, the power that dominates the world, its checkmate? And does not the death of Jesus irrevocably seal this limit? With this death, more than with any other, death triumphs as the end of all possibility, because with the death of the Holy One it is a question of destroying the possibility of everything and everyone.<sup>51</sup>

Yet right at the core of this supreme impossibility, God has created absolute novelty. By raising the Son made man in the power of the Spirit, he has radically reversed what we call the world of the possible, and broken through the limits within which we enclose our expectation of reality. Since even the powerlessness of the cross cannot prevent the gift of the Son, the impossibility of death is overcome by the newness of the risen life, which gives rise to a definitive creation and makes all things new. From now on and "once and for all" it is no longer life that is subject to death, but death that is subject to life.

It is in this space created by the resurrection that the impossible becomes effective reality. It is here that the dignified man of the dream, resplendent with Easter light, asks John to make the impossible possible. And he does so with a surprising formula:



*“Precisely because it seems impossible to you, you must make it possible through obedience.”*

These are the words with which parents urge their children, when reluctant, to do something they do not feel capable of doing, or do not want to do. “Obey and you will see that you will succeed,” says Mum or Dad: the psychology of the world of children is perfectly respected. But they are also, and much more, the words with which the Son reveals the secret of the impossible, a secret that is completely hidden in his obedience. The dignified man who orders something impossible, knows through his own human experience that impossibility is the place where the Father works together with his Spirit, provided that the door is opened through his own obedience.

Naturally, John remains upset and bewildered, but this is the feeling that any human being experiences in the face of the impossible Easter miracle, in other words, in the face of the miracle of miracles, of which every other salvific event is a sign. After a detailed analysis of the phenomenology of the impossible, J.L. Marion comments, “On Easter morning, only Christ can still say I: so that, before him, every transcendental I must recognise itself as [...] a challenged me, because bewildered.”<sup>52</sup> Easter means that what is most real in history is something that the unbelieving ego considers a priori impossible. The impossibility of God, to be recognised in his reality requires a change of horizon, which is called faith.

It should therefore come as no surprise that in the dream the dialectic of the possible-impossible is intertwined with the other dialectic of clarity and obscurity. It characterises first, the very image of the Lord, whose face is so luminous that John cannot look at it. A divine light shines from the face that paradoxically produces darkness. Then there are the words of the man and the woman who, while clearly explaining what John must do, leave him confused and frightened. Finally, there is the symbolic transformation of the wild animals, which, in turn, leads to an even greater misunderstanding. John can only ask for further clarification: “I begged the lady to speak so that I could understand her, because I did not know what all this could mean”, but the answer he gets from the woman of stately appearance only postpones the moment of understanding: “In good time you will understand everything.”

In truth, this means that only by carrying out what is already understandable in the dream, that is, through obedience, will an

opportunity be provided to clarify its message. This does not consist, in fact, simply in an idea to be explained, but in a performative word, an effective expression, which precisely by realising its own operative power manifests its deepest meaning.

This dialectic of light and darkness and the corresponding means of accessing truth are the elements that characterise the theological structure of the act of faith. Believing, in fact, means walking in a luminous cloud in a way that indicates to a man the path he is to follow but at the same time takes away from him the possibility of dominating it with his gaze. To walk in faith is to walk like Abraham who “set out not knowing where he was going” (Heb 11:8); however, this does not mean that he set out on an adventure, moving at random, but rather, in the sense that he set out in obedience “for a place he was to inherit”. He could not know in advance the land that was promised to him, because, in fact, it was his availability and interior surrender that contributed to making it exist as a land of encounter and covenant with God, and not simply as a geographical space to be reached in a material way. Mary’s words to John – “in good time you will understand everything” – are therefore not just words of benevolent maternal encouragement, like those that mothers offer to their children when they cannot explain any further, but words that really contain the maximum light that can be offered to those who must walk in faith.

### **3. The mystery of the name**

At this point in the reflection, we are able to better interpret another important element of the dream experience. It is the fact that at the heart of the tension between possible and impossible, and between known and unknown, and also, at the centre of the dream narrative itself, is the theme of the mysterious “name” of the dignified man. The tightly-knit dialogue in section III is, in fact, interwoven with questions that raise the same issue: “Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?”; “But who are you that speak so?”, and finally: “My mother tells me not to mix with people I don’t know, unless I have her permission; so tell me your name.” The dignified man tells John to ask his mother for his “name”, but, in fact, the latter will not tell him. It remains shrouded in mystery until the end.

We have already mentioned, in the part dedicated to reconstructing the biblical background of the dream, that the theme of the “name” is closely

related to the episode of Moses being called to the burning bush (Ex 3). This passage is one of the central texts of the First Testament revelation and lays the foundation for all of Israel's religious thought. André LaCoque has suggested that it should be defined as the "revelation of revelations", because it constitutes the principle of unity of the narrative and prescriptive structure that qualifies the narrative of the Exodus, the "mother cell" of the entire Scripture. 53 It is important to note how the biblical text expresses the close unity between the condition of slavery of the people in Egypt, the vocation of Moses and the revelation of God's name. The revelation of God's name to Moses does not take place simply as the transmission of information to be known or data to be acquired, but as the revelation of a personal presence which is aimed at giving rise to a stable relationship and initiating a process of liberation. In this sense, the revelation of the divine name is oriented towards the covenant and the mission. 54 The "name" is both God-revealing and performative, for those who receive it are not simply introduced into divine secrecy, but are the recipients of an act of salvation. 55

The "name", in fact, unlike the concept, does not designate merely an essence to be thought about, but an otherness to be referred to, a presence to be invoked, a subject that proposes itself as a true interlocutor of existence. While implying the proclamation of an incomparable ontological richness, that of Being that can never be adequately defined, the fact that God reveals himself as an "I" indicates that only through a personal relationship with Him will it be possible to access his identity, the Mystery of Being that he is. The revelation of God's personal "name" is therefore an act of speech that challenges the recipient, and asks him to place himself facing the speaker. Only in this way, in fact, is it possible to grasp the meaning of the "name". This revelation, moreover, stands explicitly as the foundation for the liberating mission that Moses must carry out: "I-am has sent me to you" (Ex 3:14). Presenting himself as a personal God, and not a God bound to a territory, as the God of promise, and not purely as the lord of immutable repetition, Yahweh will be able to provide a path for his people in their journey towards freedom. He therefore has a "name" that makes itself known inasmuch as it establishes a covenant and directs history.

This name, however, will be fully revealed only through Jesus. The so-called priestly prayer of Jesus, which we read in John 17, identifies the

heart of the Christological mission in the revelation of the name of God (v. 6, 11,12,26). In this passage, as Ratzinger comments,

*“Christ himself appears to us almost as the burning bush, from which the name of God flows over men.”* 56

In him God becomes fully “invocable”, for in him God entered totally into coexistence with us, inhabiting our history and leading it into its definitive exodus. The paradox here is that the divine Name that is revealed by Jesus coincides with the very Mystery of his person. In fact, Jesus can attribute to himself the divine name – “I am” – revealed to Moses in the bush. The divine name is thus revealed in its unimaginable Trinitarian depth, of which only the paschal event will fully manifest the Mystery. Through his obedience to the death of the cross, Jesus is exalted in glory and receives a “name that is above every other name”, so that before Him every knee bends, in the heavens, on earth and under the earth. Only in the “name” of Jesus, therefore, is there salvation, because in his history God has fully fulfilled the revelation of his own Trinitarian mystery.

“Tell me your name”: this question of John’s cannot be answered simply through a formula, a name to be used as an external label of the person. To know the “name” of the One who speaks in the dream, it is not enough for John to receive information; it is necessary for him to do something before his act of speaking. That is to say, it is necessary for him to enter into that relationship of intimacy and surrender which the gospels describe as “remaining” with Him. This is why, when the first disciples asked Jesus about his identity – “Teacher, where do you live?” or literally, “where are you staying?” – he replies, “Come and see” (Jn 1:38ff). Only by “remaining” with him, dwelling in his mystery, entering into his relationship with the Father, can anyone truly know who he is.

The fact that the character in the dream does not respond to John by giving his name, as we would by sharing what is written on our identity card, indicates that his “name” cannot be known only as external information. God reveals his truth only when it is sealed with an experience of covenant and mission. Therefore, John will only know that “name” by experiencing the dialectic of the possible and the impossible, of clarity and darkness; he will know it by carrying out the Oratorian mission entrusted to him. John will know who the dignified stranger is by bringing him within himself, thanks to a story lived as a history inhabited by Him. One day Cagliero would testify that Don Bosco’s way of loving

was “very tender, great, strong, but entirely spiritual, pure, truly chaste”, so much so that “it gave a perfect idea of the love that the Saviour bore for children.” 57 This indicates that the “name” of the dignified man, whose face was so bright as to blind the vision of the dreamer, really entered as a seal into the life of Don Bosco. He had the experientia cordis through the path of faith and the sequela Christi. This is the only way in which the question asked in the dream could be answered.

## 4. Maternal mediation

In the uncertainty about the One who sends him, the only firm point that John can grasp in the dream is the reference to a mother, indeed to two: the mother of the dignified man and his own. The answers to his questions, in fact, sound like this:

*“I am the son of the woman whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day” and then “Ask my Mother what my name is”.*

That the location of possible clarification is Marian and maternal is undoubtedly an element that deserves reflection. Mary is the person in whom humanity achieves the highest correspondence to the light that comes from God and the creature through whom God has given his Word made flesh to the world. It is also significant that upon his awakening from the dream, the one who best understands its meaning and scope is John’s mother, Margaret. On different levels, but analogously, the Mother of the Lord and the mother of John represent the feminine face of the Church, which shows itself capable of spiritual intuition and is the womb in which the great missions come into being and are given birth.

It is therefore not surprising that the two mothers resemble each other, and precisely on the point of answering the question that the dream presents, namely, the identity of the One who entrusts John with his life mission. The common gestures of prayer, the angelic greeting that was usual three times a day in every family, suddenly appear for what they are: a dialogue with the Mystery. John discovers that at the school of his mother he has already established a bond with the stately Woman who can explain everything to him. There is, therefore, already a kind of female conduit that bridges the apparent distance between “a poor, ignorant child” and the man “nobly dressed”. This feminine, Marian and maternal mediation would accompany John throughout his life and

would mature in him as a particular disposition to venerate the Virgin under the title of Help of Christians, and to become her apostle for her children and for the whole Church.

*The first help that Our Lady offers him is what a child naturally needs: a teacher. What she must teach him is a discipline that will make him truly wise, one without which "all wisdom is foolishness."*

It is the discipline of faith, which consists in giving credit to God and in obedience, even when faced with the impossible and the obscure. Mary presents this as the highest expression of freedom and as the richest source of spiritual and educational fruitfulness. To carry within oneself the impossibility of God and to walk in the darkness of faith is, in fact, the art in which the Blessed Virgin herself excels above every other creature.

Mary used this experience as a type of practical training in her peregrinatio fidei, which was not infrequently marked by obscurity and misunderstanding. One needs only to think of the episode of the rediscovery of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41-50). To the mother's question: "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety", Jesus responds in a surprising way: "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" And the evangelist notes: "But they did not understand what he said to them." It is even less likely that Mary understood when her motherhood, which had been solemnly announced from on high, was greatly expanded to become the common inheritance of the community of disciples: "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven, is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:50). And then, at the foot of the cross, when it became dark all over the earth, the "Here I am" that she pronounced at the first moment of her call, took the form of extreme renunciation, namely, the separation from her Son in whose place she was to receive sinful children for whom she was to let a sword pierce her heart.

When the stately woman of the dream begins to carry out her task as teacher and places a hand on John's head, and then says to him "In good time you will understand everything", she draws forth these words from the spiritual depths of the faith that made her the mother of every disciple at the foot of the cross. John will have to remain under her discipline for the rest of his life: as a young man, as a seminarian, as a priest. In a special way, he must remain there when his mission takes on

dimensions that at the time of the dream he could never have imagined, when, that is, he must become the founder of religious families, in the heart of the Church, destined to work for the youth of every continent. Only as a priest, will John understand the deepest meaning of the gesture with which the dignified man gave his mother to him as his “teacher”.

When a young person enters a religious family, he finds a novice master to whom he is entrusted and who will introduce him to the spirit of the Order and help him to assimilate it. When it comes to a Founder, who must receive from the Holy Spirit the original light of the charism, the Lord arranges that it is his own Mother, the Virgin of Pentecost and the Immaculate Model of the Church, who acts as his Teacher. She alone, the one who is “full of grace”, understands every charism from within, like a person who knows every language and speaks each one as if it were her own.

In fact, the woman of the dream knows how to point out in a detailed and appropriate way the riches of the oratory charism. She adds nothing to the words of her Son, but illustrates them with the scene of wild animals who become meek lambs and indicates the qualities that John will have to develop to carry out his mission, namely, becoming “humble, strong, energetic”. These three adjectives, which describe strength of spirit (humility), of character (strength) and of the body (energy), there is a great realism. These are the words of advice given to a young novice who already has a lengthy experience of oratory work and knows what the “field” in which he must “work” requires. The Salesian spiritual tradition has carefully guarded the words of this dream that refer to Mary. The Salesian Constitutions clearly make reference to this when they state: “The Virgin Mary showed Don Bosco his field of labour among the young”, 58 and recall that “under the guidance of Mary his teacher, Don Bosco lived with the boys of the first oratory a spiritual and educational experience that he called the Preventive System.” 59

*Don Bosco recognised Mary as playing a decisive role in his educational system, and saw in her motherhood the clearest inspiration of what it means to “prevent”.*

The fact that Mary intervened at the first moment of his charismatic vocation and that she played such a central role in this dream, will forever make Don Bosco understand that she belongs to the roots of the charism and that if her inspiring role is not recognised, the charism is not understood in its authenticity. Given to John as Teacher in this dream,

she must also be given to all those who share in his vocation and mission. As Don Bosco's successors never tired of affirming, "the Salesian vocation cannot be explained either in its birth or in its continuing development without the continual and maternal guidance of Mary." 60

## 5. The strength of gentleness

"You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love": these words of the dignified stranger are undoubtedly the best-known words of John's dream at nine years of age, the words that somehow sum up the message and convey its inspiration. They are also the first words that the dignified man says to John, and they interrupt his forceful efforts to put an end to the disorder and swearing that the boys are engaged in. They are not only a formula that conveys an ever-valid wisdom saying, but advice that specifies the way in which John is to carry out the order ("he told me to take charge of these children and added these words") with which, as has been noted, the intentional movement of his consciousness has already been reoriented. The heat and passion behind the use of his fists must become the driving force of love, and the disjointed energy of repressive intervention must make room for gentleness.

The term "mansuetudine" [which becomes "gentleness" rather than "meekness" in the English translation] has significant weight here, especially when we remember that the corresponding adjective is used at the end of the dream to describe the lambs frolicking around the Lord and Mary. This suggests what is probably a relevant observation: for those who were originally ferocious animals to become "gentle" lambs, their educator must himself first become gentle. Both, albeit from different points, must experience a real transformation to enter the Christological orbit of gentleness and love. It is easy to understand what this change requires for a group of rowdy and quarrelsome boys. For an educator it may be less obvious. In fact, for the educator who has already embraced good, positive values, order and discipline, what change can be asked of this person?

Here is something that will have a decisive impact on Don Bosco's life, first of all at the practical level of his way of acting and, to a certain extent, also at the level of theoretical reflection. It will lead Don Bosco to categorically exclude an educational system based on repression and



punishment, and to choose with real conviction a method that is entirely based on love that Don Bosco will call the “preventive system”. Apart from the different pedagogical implications that derive from this choice, it is interesting to highlight here the theological and spiritual dimension that underlies this direction, and for which the words of the dream are in some way the origin and the trigger.

By placing themselves on the side of the good and the “law”, educators may be tempted to frame how they act with young people in such a way that order and discipline are established essentially through rules. Yet the law contains an ambiguity within it that makes it insufficient for guiding someone to freedom, and this, not only because of the limits that every human rule contains within itself, but also because of a limit that is ultimately of a theological order. The whole of Paul’s reflection on the law is a great meditation on this truth, since Paul had learnt from his personal experience that the Law had not prevented him from being “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence” (1 Tim 1:13).

Scripture teaches that the same Law given by God is not enough to save man, if there is not another personal principle to integrate and internalise it in the heart of man. Paul Beauchamp sums up this dynamic nicely when he states: “The Law is preceded by a “you are loved” and followed by a “you will love”: “you are loved” is its foundation, and “you will love” its fulfilment.” 61

Without this foundation and this fulfilment, the law bears in itself the signs of a violence that reveals its inability to generate the good that it requires people to accomplish. To return to the scene of the dream, the fists and blows that John uses in the name of a sacred commandment of God, which prohibits blasphemy [swearing, as the English says], reveal the inadequacy and ambiguity of any moralising impulse that is not internally incarnated from above.

It is therefore also necessary for John, and for those who will learn the “preventive spirituality” from him, to embrace an unprecedented educational logic which goes beyond the regime of the law. This logic is made possible only by the Spirit of the Risen One, poured into our hearts. In fact, only the Spirit allows us to move from a formal and external justice (be it the classic justice of “discipline” and “good conduct” or the modern one of “procedures” and “objectives achieved”) to a true inner holiness which does good because it is inwardly attractive. Don Bosco will show that he has this awareness when he

clearly declares in what he wrote about the Preventive System, that it is entirely based on the words of Saint Paul: “Charitas benigna est, patiens est; omnia suffert, omnia sperat, omnia sustinet.”

Only theological charity, which makes us participants in the life of God, is capable of imprinting on the work of education the character that identifies its unique gospel quality. It is not for nothing that the New Testament locates the distinctive features of the “wisdom that comes from above” in gentleness: it “is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” (Jas 3:17). This is why, for those who practise it, performing the work of peace, eventually reaps “a harvest of righteousness” (Jas 3:18). The “gentleness”, or in Salesian terms the “loving-kindness”, that characterises such wisdom is the defining sign of a heart that has gone through a true Easter transformation, and let itself be stripped of all forms of violence.

The power of this initial imperative, which perhaps we have identified too much as an injunction, reflects the very strong words of the gospel: “For I say to you, do not resist an evildoer” (Matthew 5:39) or “Put your sword back in its place” (Matthew 26:52; cf. Jn 18:11). It refers to one of the novel qualities of the Christ event, that for which the absoluteness of its truthful claim is expressed only in the form of agape, that is, of the gift of self for the life of the other. Starting with the opening words of the dream, we find ourselves at the very heart of Christian revelation, where it is a question of the authentic “Face of God” and the conversion that it entails. The “style” of Christian education, its capacity to generate practices and attitudes truly rooted in the Christological event, depends exactly on this correspondence with the “Face of God”.

Religious language alone is incapable of honouring him. The story of Jesus clearly shows that even within that language, with its codes and its rites, its rules and its institutions, something can take root that does not come from God and that on the contrary resists and opposes him. The Christological event explodes these contradictions within the practice of the sacred as the children of Adam pass it on to their children, adapting it to their standards of justice and punishment; ready, in the name of the Law, to stone the adulteress and crucify the Holy One of God!

In the face of this distorted way of understanding religion, Jesus came to inaugurate another Kingdom of which he is the Lord, and the logic of which is revealed by his messianic entry into Jerusalem. By entering the Holy City on the back of a donkey, Jesus presents himself as the Messiah who does not conquer people with arms and armies but through the gentle strength of truth and love alone. The gift of his life, which he will bring to its completion in the city of David, is the only way through which the Kingdom of God can come into the world. His gentleness as a Paschal Lamb is the only force with which the Father wants to win our hearts.

“You will have to win these friends of yours not with blows but by gentleness and love.” Reading these words against the background of gospel revelation means recognising that through them John is given an interior direction that has its one and only source in the Heart of Christ.<sup>62</sup> “Not with blows but by gentleness” is the educational translation of the “very personal” style of Jesus.

Of course, “winning” young people in this way is a very demanding task. It implies not giving in to the coldness of an education based only on rules, nor to the apparent goodness of a proposal that refuses to denounce the “ugliness of sin” and present the “value of virtue”. Establishing the good by simply showing the strength of truth and love, witnessed through dedication “to one’s last breath”, is the image of an educational method that is at the same time a true and proper spirituality.

It is not surprising that John in the dream resists entering into this dynamic and asks for a better understanding of the identity of the One who is demanding it. But when he has understood this dynamic, first, by turning the message into the oratory as an institution and then also by founding a religious family, he comes to believe that telling the dream in which he learned that lesson will be the most beautiful way to share with the most authentic meaning of his experience with his sons. It is God himself who has always been our guide, it is he who started the initial movement of what would become the Salesian charism.

42 MO-en 34ff.

43 MO-en 72. The complete text says: “So the end of the rhetoric year approached, the time when students usually ponder their vocations. The dream I had had in Morialdo was deeply imprinted on my mind; in fact it had recurred several times more in ever clearer terms, so that if I wanted to put faith in it I would have to choose the priesthood towards which I actually felt inclined. But I did not want to believe dreams, and my own manner of life, certain habits of my

heart, and the absolute lack of the virtues necessary to that state, filled me with doubts and made the decision very difficult.”

44 MO-en 96.

45 MO-en 36. Don Bosco's first visit to Rome took place between 21 February and 14 April 1858. He met the Pope again on various occasions, on 9, 21 (or 23) March and 6 April that year. According to Lemoyne it was at the second meeting (21 March) that the Pope heard the account of the dream and ordered Don Bosco to write it down. Regarding this journey cf. Braido, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà* (LAS, Roma 2003) 1, 378-390.

46 Stella says that we have solide testimonianze (solid testimonies) of this (PST1, 32).

47 C.M. Viglietti, *Cronaca di don Bosco. Prima redazione (1885-1888). Introducció, texto crítico y notas por Pablo Marín Sánchez* (LAS, Roma 2009) 207.

48 MB XVIII, 341 (BM XVIII 289).

49 PST1, 30.

50 PSTI, 31ff.

51 J.L. Marion, “Nulla è impossibile a Dio,” *Communio* 107 (1989) 57-73, 62.

52 *Ibid.*, 72.

53 A. LaCocque, “La révélation des révélations: Exode 3:14,” in P. Ricoeur – A. LaCocque, *Penser la Bible* (Seuil, Paris 1998) 305.

54 With reference to Ex 3:15, in which the divine Name is joined to the human singular “you shall say”, A. LaCocque states: “The greatest of paradoxes is that he who alone has the right to say ‘I’, who is the only ‘ehjeh [I am who am] has a name that includes a second person, a ‘you’” (A. LaCocque, “La révélation des révélations: Exode 3,14,” 315).

55 A. Bertuletti, *Dio. Il mistero dell'unico*, 354.

56 J. Ratzinger, *Introduzione al cristianesimo. Lezioni sul simbolo apostolico* (Queriniana, Brescia 1971) 93.

57 *Copia Publica Transumpti Processus Ordinaria*, 1146r.

58 C 70.

59 C 20.

60 E. Viganò, *Mary renews the Salesian Family of Don Bosco*, AGC 289 (1978) 1-35, 28. For a critical reception of Marian devotion in the history of the Salesian Constitutions, cf. A. van Luyn, “Maria nel carisma della ‘Società di San Francesco di Sales’,” in AA.VV., *La Madonna nella “Regola” della Famiglia Salesiana* (LAS, Roma 1987) 15-87.

61 P. Beauchamp, *La legge di Dio* (Piemme, Casale Monferrato 2000) 116.

62 For this reason, Article 11 of the Constitutions states that “the Salesian spirit finds its model and its source in the heart of Christ, apostle of the Father”, specifying that it is revealed in the attitude of the “Good Shepherd who wins hearts by gentleness and self-giving.”