

ANDREA BOZZOLO

DON BOSCO'S CHILDHOOD DREAM

THEOLOGICAL READING



L/AS

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childhood dream

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Piazza dell'Ateneo Salesiano, 1 - 00139 ROMA

Tel. 06 87290626 - e-mail: las@unisal.it - <https://www.editricelas.it>

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PRESENTATION

The year 2024 will mark - with a certain degree of approximation - the bicentenary of Don Bosco's "nine-year dream". This anniversary refers to one of the events that Don Bosco considered to be the most important in his personal experience and the most decisive for his mission. He himself states in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* that this dream remained deeply impressed in his mind throughout his life and he attributes to it a particular prefigurative value for the development of his work. And that's not all. When, in 1858, Don Bosco went to Rome to dialogue with Pius IX about the creation of the Congregation, and Pius IX asked him to recount "everything that had even the suggestion of the supernatural about it", he told the Pope about this same dream. The Pope ordered him to "write out the dream in all its detail and to leave it as an encouragement to the sons of that Congregation whose formation was the reason for that visit to Rome".

Indeed, Don Bosco's sons and daughters have always considered this account to be a "sacred" page, full of charismatic suggestions and inspirational force. It is true, however, that the elusive nature of the dream experience, the great distance in time (around fifty years) between the moment of the dream and its writing, and the difficulty of assessing its "supernatural" nature raise serious questions about the real consistency of the event recounted by the saint. I believe it is important not to shy away from these questions, precisely to prevent a text of extraordinary value from being confined to the realm of romance or edifying literature.

A few years ago, I tried to confront with these questions and, on the basis of reasoned reflection, I attempted to put forward some possible answers, which I still find convincing. The result is a study that addresses hermeneutical questions (more complex) and proposes a theological-spiritual reading of the dream (simpler). The essay has already been published by LAS in 2017 as part of a voluminous study

on Don Bosco's dreams, to which I refer the reader eager for further reading.¹ The bicentenary seems a timely occasion to make it available also in this independent and more accessible form.

My sincere thanks to the Australia-Pacific province for the translation.

I hope that this work will help us to listen meditatively to the words with which Don Bosco gave us this intimate event that is at the origin of our charism.

Don Andrea Bozzolo
Vice-Chancellor of the Pontifical Salesian University

¹ A. BOZZOLO (ed.), *I sogni di don Bosco. Esperienza spirituale e sapienza educativa*, LAS, Roma 2017.

Abbreviations

- ACG / AGC *Atti del Consiglio Generale* / Acts of the General Council
- BM *The Biographical Memoirs of St John Bosco*, English (American) edition published by Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, New York from 1965 onwards.
- MB *Memorie biografiche di Don Bosco (del Beato ...di San) Giovanni Bosco*, 19 voll, (da 1 a 9: G.B. Lemoyne; 10: A. Amadei; da 11 a 19: E. Ceria) + 1 vol. di Indici (E. Foglio). San Benigno Canavese - Torino 1898-1939 (Indici, 1948). See BM above for English.
- MO-it G. Bosco, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di san Francesco di Sales*. Introduzione, note e testo critico a cura di A. da Silva Ferreira, LAS, Roma 1991.
- MO-en J. Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales*, (Translation by Daniel Lyons from the E. Ceria 1946 version), Salesiana Publishers New Rochelle, New York, 2010.
- PST1 P. Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica. I. Vita e opere*, LAS, Roma 1979.
- PST2 P. Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica. II Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*, Pas-Verlag, Zurich 1969.
- RSS *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane*, Rome, 1982 onwards.

DON BOSCO'S CHILDHOOD DREAM
HERMENEUTICAL QUESTIONS
AND A THEOLOGICAL READING

Andrea Bozzolo

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,¹ all the more so because it had “recurred several times more in ever clearer terms”,² 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.”³

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

¹ MO-en 34ff.

² 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.”

³ MO-en 96.

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.”⁴ 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.⁵ 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.”⁶ 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.”⁷

⁴ 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.

⁵ Stella says that we have *solide testimonianze* (solid testimonies) of this (PST1, 32).

⁶ C.M. VIGLIETTI, *Cronaca di don Bosco. Prima redazione* (1885-1888). Introducció, texto crítico y notas por Pablo Marín Sánchez (LAS, Roma 2009) 207.

⁷ MB XVIII, 341 (BM XVIII 289).

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.⁸

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.”⁹

1. Sources

The dream at nine years of age has been passed down to us in various edited versions. When tackling the problem of the sources that Lemoyne had drawn from when writing the *Biographical Memoirs*, Desramaut tracked down six different versions.¹⁰ The first (A) was

⁸ PST1, 30.

⁹ PST1, 31ff.

¹⁰ F. DESRAMAUT, *Les Memorie I de Giovanni Battista Lemoyne. Étude d'un ouvrage fondamental sur la jeunesse de saint Jean Bosco* (Maison d'études Saint Jean Bosco, Lyon 1962) 250-256. The study was taken up and developed by A. LENTI, “Don Bosco's Vocation-Mission Dream. Its Recurrence and Significance,” *Journal of Salesian Studies* 2 (1991) 45-156. Cf. also Idem., *Don Bosco storia e spirito. 1. Dai Becchi alla Casa dell'Oratorio (1815-1858)* (LAS, Roma 2017) 211-225.

the one Don Bosco wrote in his *Memoirs of the Oratory*.¹¹ The second (B) is contained in Cagliero's deposition at the ordinary process for canonisation. Cagliero says he had heard this dream from Don Bosco in 1858-59 after the latter, when visiting Rome, had received an order from Pius IX to put it in writing.¹² The third (C) is by Fr Barberis, substantially repeating Don Bosco.¹³ The fourth (D) comes from Giuseppe Turco, Don Bosco's childhood friend. Passed on by an unidentified intermediary, it was collected by Fr Lemoine.¹⁴ The fifth (E) is Fr Rua's exposition, at the ordinary process, of the account he had learned from Lucia Turco, Giuseppe's sister.¹⁵ The sixth (F) is the very short account that Giuseppe Turco himself gave at the process.¹⁶ Desramaut shows how versions A, B and C have Don Bosco as a direct source, while D, E and F depend on memories passed on through the Turco family.

¹¹ The critical edition is found in MO-it 34-37. Fr Berto, Don Bosco's secretary, takes this account literally, obviously representing it in the third person in his deposition at the ordinary process for canonisation, as can be read in the *Copia Publica Transumpti Processus Ordinaria 1080v (= verso) - 1081r. auctoritate constructi in Curia Ecclesiastica Taurinensi super fama sanctitatis vitae, virtutum et miracolorum Servi Dei Ioannis Bosco Sacerdotis Fundatoris Piae Societatis Salesianae, 277r (= retto) - 279r.*

¹² Ibid. 1080v (= verso) - 1081r.

¹³ In its most ancient form it is found, without indicating from whence it came, in G.B. LEMOINE, *Documenti per scrivere la storia di D. Giovanni Bosco, dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales e della Congregazione Salesiana*, I, 153.

¹⁴ Ibid. I, 68-69.

¹⁵ "Lucia Turco, who belonged to a family where D. Bosco often went to stay with her brothers and sisters, told me that one morning they saw him arrive more cheerful than usual. Asked what was the cause, he replied that he had had a dream during the night which had cheered him up. Asked to recount it, he said that he had seen a great Lady coming towards him, who had a very large flock behind her, and approaching him, she called him by name and said: 'Here, John: I entrust all this flock to your care.' I then heard from others that he asked 'How shall I take care of so many sheep and lambs? Where will I find pastures to keep them?' The Lady answered him, 'Do not fear, I will assist you' and then disappeared" (*Copia Publica*, 2476v).

¹⁶ "While he was a cleric, he also told me one day that he had had a dream, that he would settle somewhere where he would gather a large number of young people to instruct them" (*Copia Publica...*, 768v).

Basing himself on Don Bosco's assertion that the dream had been repeated several times and indulging his inclination to keep all the sources at his disposal, Lemoyne reported the different but largely convergent versions of the dream in the *Biographical Memoirs*, attributing them to different ages.¹⁷ Desramaut, in the study cited above, discusses the plausibility of Lemoyne's choice, and considers it mostly the result of an artificial association, except perhaps in the case of the D version. In fact, it is plausible, although not demonstrable with secure historical arguments, that John Bosco told his friend Giuseppe Turco about the dream following one of the occasions on which it had recurred.

At any rate, the version we are referring to for our work is definitely the one that Don Bosco wrote in his own hand in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*. The writing down of the dream and all the events connected to the origin of the Oratory had been requested, as we have said, by Pius IX in 1858. Don Bosco, however, delayed by his many commitments and by a reluctance to talk about himself, was slow to get down to work. This is why the Pope urged him once again, in 1867, during another audience, to write down his recollections. After delaying for another six years, Don Bosco finally began the manuscript of the *Memoirs* in 1873, finishing it in 1875. Copied beautifully by his secretary, Fr Gioacchino Berto, the text was revised and corrected by the author on several occasions until 1879.¹⁸

¹⁷ In Volume I of the *Biographical Memoirs*, Lemoyne faithfully reports the account of the dream at nine years of age that Don Bosco offers in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* (MB I, 123-126 or BM I 95-96); cross-referencing various piece of information at his disposal, he attributes the version passed on by Turco (D) to a repetition of the dream that took place in 1831, when Don Bosco was 16 years old (MB I, 243ff or BM 182ff); Barberis' version (C) to a further repetition that took place in 1834 when John was 19 years old (MB 1,305ff or BM 229ff); and finally Cagliero's version (B) to the time when John was by then a cleric (MB I,424 or BM 315ff).

¹⁸ For matters related to the date of composition of the original manuscript, Fr Berto's copy and Don Bosco's corrections, cf. E. CERIA's introduction to the first printed edition of the document. *G. (san) Bosco, Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855* (SEI, Torino 1946) 6; F. DESRAMAUT, *Les Memorie I de Giovanni Battista Lemoyne*, 116-119; the Introduction to the critical edition MO 18-19.

On the basis of this data, we can state that the dream, which took place around 1824 (we cannot be more precise about the date) and which recurred several times more in the years that followed “in ever clearer terms”, was written down by Don Bosco about fifty years after the event. By that time, he was able to grasp the meaning of the dream’s message in a richer and more profound way than he had understood it as a boy, an understanding of the dream had certainly grown in him through his many life experiences, and generated growth in both narrative and interpretative terms. This evolution poses a complex hermeneutic challenge which we need to be aware of. In fact, different time horizons merge and interact with each other in the text that we are reading: the time of the (at least partial) fulfilment of the dream, which corresponds to the time in which Don Bosco fixes it in the manuscript of the *Memoirs*, the time of growth in his understanding, which begins with the first narration to family members and gradually develops in his consciousness, the chronological time in which the dream occurred and the oneiric (dream) time, a kind of “suspended” or “other” time that is internal to the nocturnal experience. These different time horizons, fused together in Don Bosco’s narration, interact in turn with the reader’s time, the reader’s expectations, questions and preconceptions within an interpretative tradition that has passed it down to us. It is not possible to tackle the study of this dream seriously without being aware of this multiplicity of levels, from which important hermeneutical questions derive that we will try to focus on in the next section. Before delving into such issues, however, we must first of all place the dream narrative in its narrative context, that is, in the whole of the work that has passed it down to us.¹⁹

The *Memoirs of the Oratory* is an autobiographical text in which Don Bosco brings together the history of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales and his own personal life story, with the intention of leaving a

¹⁹ For an understanding of the narrative logic in the *Memoirs*, see the excellent essay by A. GIRAUDO, “L’importanza storica e pedagogico-spirituale delle Memorie dell’Oratorio,” in G. BOSCO, *Memorie dell’oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855* (LAS, Roma 2011) 5-49.

valuable lesson for the future to his spiritual heirs.²⁰ The author's intentions are made explicit from the very first lines of the manuscript:

Now, what purpose can this chronicle serve? It will be a record to help people overcome problems that may come in the future by learning from the past. It will serve to make known how God himself has always been our guide. It will give my sons some entertainment to be able to read about their father's adventures. Doubtless they will be read much more avidly when I have been called by God to render my account, when I am no longer amongst them.²¹

The *Memoirs*, then, are an edifying story that intends to pass on, through the selection and linking together of facts, not only the fundamental events that marked the birth of the Oratory, but also the profound secret that lay behind this experience, made it possible and characterised it in an essential way. The work, however, is not a mere chronicle of events, but it also clearly shows the intention to involve the reader in the adventure narrated, to the point of having him participate in it as a story that involves him and, as he is caught up in the tale, that he is called upon to continue.²² This trait has been effectively emphasised by Pietro Braido, who coined the felicitous

²⁰ Addressed to Salesians present and future the *Memoirs* can clearly be distinguished from other earlier historical texts written by Don Bosco: the letter to the city's Vicar in 1846; The *Outline* and *Historical Outlines* of 1854 and 1862, that focus on events connected with the catechism lessons at St Francis of Assisi, and which then moved to the Barolo Refuge etc. until arriving at the Pinardi House. These texts were aimed at the authorities or the public, or benefactors and supporters to whom Don Bosco wanted to offer a briefing on the birth and purpose of his institution, also presenting the activities that took place there and the educational results achieved.

²¹ MO-en 30.

²² "The apex of this strategy of pulling the readers along is reached with the dream of the shepherdess, placed in the move from the *Convitto* to Valdocco, that is, from the stage of initial experiences of a mostly personal nature, to the ultimate realisation of the Oratory, which is of a community nature [...]. In the lambs transformed into shepherds [...] Don Bosco's children were and are invited to recognise themselves as continuers of the providential mission foreseen from the beginning in the prophetic experience of the dream, as a living part of history". (A. GIRAUDO, "L'importanza storica," 19).

expression *memoirs of the future* to highlight the character of testament even before it being a document, that characterises Don Bosco's narration.²³

In this interpretative reconstruction of the past that connects the genesis of the Oratory with a precise spiritual event of the narrator, the dream at nine years of age comes to play a "strategic" role. It is precisely through it, in fact, that the key to the interpretation of the entire story is offered, and the prodigious fact that constitutes its supernatural origin is identified. With regard to the Oratory of St Francis de Sales and the Religious Congregation that came into existence there, there is not only the initiative of a generous priest, but a truly divine initiative, of which the dream is the most evident feature. Noting the role that the dream plays in the narrative structure of the *Memoirs*, Giraudo states:

This event becomes part of the text's strategy as the true beginning of the Oratorian "memory", determining its division into three decades. The *Ten Years of Childhood* (1815–1824) is in fact represented as a significant, but not properly "Oratorian" prelude. Instead, the decade from 1825–1835, the First Decade, begins precisely with the narrator depicting himself at the age of ten, intent on looking after the children by doing "what was possible at my age and forming a kind of festive oratory." In this way, the dream-beginning, evoked through literary devices borrowed from fiction, takes on a special value: it becomes a foreshadowing of an historico-literary text whose meanings, strategies and structures it consciously anticipates; in short, it becomes an identifiable trace of a rhetorical orchestration aimed at the author's intentions. It is significant that it is precisely in a prophetic and prefigurative sense that it has been interpreted in the Salesian tradition.²⁴

The dream is thus placed within the structure of the *Memoirs* as the pillar from which the arches of the narrative begin. In its quality

²³ P. BRAIDO, "Scrivere 'memorie' del futuro," *RSS* 11 (1992) 97-127.

²⁴ A. GIRAUDDO, "L'importanza storica," 21ff.

of prodigious happening, it is, in some way, the decisive premise for understanding the supernatural logic of everything that follows. Certainly, Don Bosco does not attribute any fatalistic character to this premise, as if he had found his destiny preordained in a cogent manner. In the development of the story, he in no way hides the tortuousness of a complex path of vocational discernment from which the dream did not dispense him in the slightest. Yet, rereading it in retrospect from his position as priest and founder, he cannot but understand it as an anticipatory and prophetic revelation. The words with which he seals the tale – “the things I shall have to say later will give some meaning to all this” – are a clear testimony to this.²⁵

Once these things have been recognised, the question that the scholar of Don Bosco and his spiritual experience must necessarily ask can only be the following: is the exceptional importance that Don Bosco attributes to this dream, so much so as to place it as the key to reading the *Memoirs*, essentially the result of a narrative device motivated by edifying intentions, or does it express a personal conviction seriously rooted in factual reality? Put another way and more bluntly: does Don Bosco exaggerate the various details of the story, emphasising the importance of the event in order to better pull his readers into this epic of the Oratory, or does he bring back to life the original details of an event that was *in itself* exceptional? Is there an original greatness in the historical *fact* or is this merely attributable to how it is narrated?

It must be made clear that the way one understands the work of critical interpretation depends on the answer given to these questions: whether it should take the form of a demythologising deconstruction as a way of accessing an actual historical truth *beyond* the narrative, or whether it should take the form of a trusting (but not naive) reception of the narrative as a way of finding the historical depth of the event *through it*.

²⁵ MO-en 36.

2. Hermeneutical issues

Responding to the questions that the dream account poses is necessary but very challenging. It is necessary, because they profoundly affect the way we understand Don Bosco's spiritual experience and the charism that came from it. Although Don Bosco's greatness is based on his holiness of life and not on the extraordinary phenomena that accompanied it, the latter cannot be considered as irrelevant and secondary, neither historically nor theologically. In fact, the same critical approach applies to the prodigious in the lives of the saints – obviously on a derivative and analogical level – that theology applies to the miraculous gestures of Jesus recounted in the gospels. Such gestures cannot be reduced to marginal elements, but “are an essential moment of the revelation of the Kingdom, which Jesus explicitly linked to his proclamation as signs of the Kingdom that is already here (*Mt* 12:28). Jesus's miracles are but one aspect of his word: it is said that Jesus' word is not doctrine, but an act, an act that heals.”²⁶ They are therefore a kind of “signature” that the Father places on the works of the incarnate Son, to show that his works make God's action present in history and inaugurate eschatological time for humankind.

The disciple is therefore called to contemplate God's liberating activity in Jesus' gestures as miracle worker – God who takes care of humankind – and to receive a word that challenges him by faith. In the thaumaturgical gestures of Jesus, the disciple is thus summoned to contemplate the liberating action of God, who cares for human

²⁶ A. BERTULETTI, *Dio, il mistero dell'unico* (Queriniana, Brescia 2014) 395ff. “They intervene against the forms of disease that give concrete form to the evil that threatens the whole of existence. They actualise God's commitment to man and achieve their effect when they confirm the radical disposition that Jesus called ‘faith’: the intimate conviction that God's will towards man is unequivocally determined in favour of his salvation. [...] This explains the analogy, emphasised by the evangelists, between miracles and parables. Like miracles, parables combine the dimension of judgement with the dimension of edification. They are intended to overcome the resistance that man opposes to the acceptance of God's word because of his apparent lack of trust. An event has occurred in the present that changes the face of the earth, but it must be sought in order to be understood” (396).

beings, and to receive a word that challenges them by faith. The question of whether the gospel narrative gives voice to real events, so as to restore their challenging significance, or only to emphatic and belated reconstructions that are ultimately distant from historical reality, is obviously not a question that can leave us unaffected. Given all due proportion, the question we must ask ourselves about the extraordinary in Don Bosco's life and in particular about the dream when he was nine, belongs to the same order of considerations.

Formulating the answer, however, is very demanding, because it implies dealing with at least three orders of problems which we will now attempt to confront, aware of their complexity and the limits of our research. They concern the relationship between memory, story and history (§ 2.1.), the nature of the dream experience (§ 2.2.) and the theological criteria that allow us to approach extraordinary phenomena in spiritual life and interpret their meaning (§ 2.3.). What reliability can an edifying account, formulated fifty years after the fact, have in accessing the actual quality of the experience? Assuming that the narrative is reliable, can an experience as "vague" as that of the dream have such strong relevance that it can be proposed, in the light of subsequent events and their interpretation from a believer's perspective, as a key to the interpretation of Don Bosco's life story? Having also acquired this data, can one reasonably believe that the dream when he was nine years old was a supernatural phenomenon of a prophetic nature?

These three questions, obviously, are strictly intertwined, because the possible supernatural character of the dream cannot but have a particular prominence due to the way in which the narrator preserves its memory, and for the margins of narrative freedom with which he conveys the message. Thus, also the anthropological consistency that is recognised in the dream experience obviously affects the possibility of it having a strong existential relevance and being a space for divine communication. The three problems should in a sense be considered together, but their complexity and the desire to be clear, as far as possible in this type of question (!), suggests proceeding *per partes*. The reader who finds it difficult to come to terms with such reasoning can dispense with the effort and go directly to the dream commentary.

2.1. *Memory, story and history*

The most mature reflection on the question of narration is probably the one put forward by French Philosopher Paul Ricoeur with his idea of *narrative identity*, which he first formulated in *Time and Narrative*, within a theory of storytelling, which is taken up again in *Oneself as Another*, within the framework of a theory of the subject.²⁷ The intersection between the two perspectives – that of narration and that of personal identity – is revealing, because Ricoeur’s thesis consists in maintaining that the world of the subject and the world of the text cannot be understood as two separate and autonomous worlds, of which the former (the story) would simply be the sign (always defective with respect to the original) of the latter (the historical reality, ultimately unattainable in its factualness). The theory of narrative identity asserts, on the contrary, that subject and story only exist together: human beings cannot have access to themselves other than by telling their story and the story cannot be understood except through the willingness to allow one’s identity to be transformed.²⁸

The basis of this theory is the awareness of the dialectic that is internal to what language calls, in a single word, the *identity* of man. Two meanings are superimposed in this term, meanings that Latin

²⁷ P. RICOEUR, *Tempo e racconto*. I (Jaca Book, Milano 1986); *Tempo e racconto* II. *La configurazione del racconto di finzione* (Jaca Book, Milano 1987); *Tempo e racconto* III. *Il tempo raccontato* (Jaca Book, Milano 1988); ID., *Dal testo all’azione. Saggi di ermeneutica* (Jaca Book, Milano 1989); ID., *Sé come un altro* (Jaca Book Milano, 1993); ID., “L’identità narrative,” *Revue des sciences humaines* 95 (1991) 35-47. [We note that these all exist in English in various editions that can be found online: *Time and Narrative* and *Oneself as Another*.]

²⁸ Therefore, there is always a circular movement between text and action: they are the objective and subjective pole of the same implementation. The text reveals the action because it provides the model for interpreting it. Action is like a text because it has a project, an intention, an agent (what, why, who). For this reason, the story shows the specific features of human action: the hierarchical structure of complex actions; their historical character; their teleological structure, that is, the reference to the total horizon of life. But on the other hand, language is not understood radically except as an action: it not only expresses something already constituted, but contributes to constituting it.

expresses with two different lemmas: *idem* and *ipse*. The first designates identity as “sameness” and implies the idea of something that remains and does not change, the second designates identity as “ipseity” and indicates what is proper, personal, not foreign. Through this distinction, Ricoeur shows that one cannot understand a person’s identity merely as the permanence in time of a reality equal to itself (*idem*) other than at the price of losing its irreducible *ipseity*. Personal identity, in fact, is realised in the dialectic of what remains and what continually changes and therefore resembles a story more than an object. The use of the same name to designate a person from birth to death does not cancel out the fact that this person continually experiences bodily and psychic change. Indeed, the time experienced by the *ipse* is never reducible to physical-cosmic time, even if it is not separable from it. According to Ricoeur, therefore, the concept of narration can provide a good model to give access to *ipseity* because the process of self-constitution organises a sequence of separate, conflicting and heterogeneous events into a unity. Understanding human life as a narrative unity makes it possible to synthesise permanence and change, without one taking over from the other.²⁹

The theory of narrative identity therefore poses the question of personal identity beyond the alternative between an *I* that would have immediate access to its own identity, being transparent to itself, and a *He* that can be grasped from the outside with the tools of analytical reconstruction, that is, an historical actor reduced to its objective representation. The personal identity is neither that of the Cartesian *I* nor that of the historical *He*, but that of a *Self*, accessed only through the form of narration. It cannot be returned in the form of a concept (no one can say the Self simply in the abstract form of an idea), nor

²⁹ As Ricoeur states, “subjectivity is neither an incoherent sequence of events nor an immutable substantiality, inaccessible to becoming. It is precisely that kind of identity that only narrative composition can create with its dynamism. The narrative identity lies in the middle [...] between pure change and absolute identity” (P. RICOEUR, “La vita: un racconto in busca di narratore,” in ID., *Filosofia e lingua*, ed. D. Jervolino [Guerini e Associati, Milan] 169-185, 184ff.).

through the heuristic model of the natural sciences (the *Self* is never by definition objectifiable as a fact). The complexity of the lived experience can only be restored through the *mimesis* of the narrative that gathers the events of existence into a web. Narrative mediation shows that *self-knowledge* is an *interpretation of self*.

Two further annotations must be added to these briefly recalled theoretical elements. The profound reason why man can only know himself by interpreting himself is to be found in the fact that the events of life themselves, and not simply the language that narrates them from a distance, have an original symbolic prominence which makes them irreducible to mere empirical fact. The *Self* happens in them, and does not merely manifest itself. This is why the memory that articulates them in the story is the only key to accessing the intentional quality that they have and that constitutes, beyond any positivist reductionism, the singular form of their historicity.³⁰

Secondly, the act by which the narrator configures the *fabula* of his discourse does not simply end with the text, but is intended for the reader. Reading is a crucial moment, for in the “fusion of horizons” lies the narrative’s capacity to transfigure the experience of the recipient. The text always invites the reader to see the world in a different way and, since narration is never ethically neutral, it also invites the reader to act differently. One cannot, therefore, access the meaning of the text without bringing into play the configuration of one’s own identity, the symbolic horizon within which one’s own story is placed.

For the problem we are dealing with, that is, the link between memory, narrative and history in the narrative of the dream at nine years of age, Ricoeur’s theory offers theoretical elements of undoubted interest. It allows us to grasp with greater clarity that the account that Don Bosco gave us of his experience cannot be taken as a mere

³⁰ For this reason, even the most scientifically detached work of the historian ultimately has the form of a story, which defines a starting point and a point of arrival, reached through an intertwining in which protagonists and other actors caught in the interaction of a plot are enacted. History cannot be summed up in theory; it can be understood only in so far as it is told, that is, that it has a narrative intelligibility.

material account of the event, but must be understood as the narrative *mimesis* through which Don Bosco configures his own identity, gathering the episodes of his life story together according to a certain interweaving. In this way, by giving us his *Memoirs*, Don Bosco makes his *Self* accessible to us in a form that would not be attainable through simple documentary reconstruction.

The fact that the dream episode appears as a founding element in the narrative architecture of the *Memoirs* indicates the importance that the narrator has recognised in the structuring of his identity. Don Bosco draws the arches of his story by making the dream the anticipation of the general picture of history *because*, in the *a posteriori* reprise he makes of his life, he finds there the event that makes it *possible* to gather it into unity.

In this sense, the fact that the account is written fifty years after the fact does not reduce its credibility. An account compiled upon awakening or even an (impossible) empirical recording of the psychic phenomenon would not offer us any more authentic access to what John Bosco as a child experienced in his *ipseity*. Such reasoning would betray a vision of the self as the transparency of consciousness to itself and would reduce the contours of human experience to the limits of an immediacy without any depth. Our daily experience of life does not coincide with the degree of awareness that accompanies it and with the restitution we are able to make of it in the moment. Many happenings (actions, choices, attitudes, encounters) only become clear to us in their implications at a distance, through the recovery we make of them in dialogue with a friend or a spiritual guide. Narrative and comparison with others thus enable us to recognise what the strict contemporaneity of facts prevented us from seeing. To put it in the most accessible way, the meaning of experience is like a seed that grows in the soil of consciousness and only deploys its energies through the resources of “culture” that allow it to be interpreted. Memory, therefore, is not just a filter that selects and holds memories, destined to fade more and more; it is the place of narrative elaboration of the symbolic depth of experience that our *Self* experiences. This is the ultimate reason why without memory there is no identity.

To read the dream at nine years of age as a kind of chronicle of the facts, treating the words of the dream as if they were *ipsissima verba*, would be a *naive hermeneutic*. Such a reading could perhaps appear as an expression of the utmost trust in the realism of the text, but in reality, it would imply a substantial disregard for the complex plot of the tale with the illusion of being able to arrive at the materiality of an incontrovertible datum. The “growth” that the event fifty years earlier underwent in Don Bosco’s consciousness is not an element to be ignored or removed, because it was precisely through this growth that the sense of the dream experience matured to the point of finding the time, the context and the most appropriate words to be returned in the questioning form that it had.³¹

To read the dream as a mere “artificial construction”, the result of an intentional emphasis that would have filled the gaps of memory, would be a *hermeneutic of suspicion* that, frankly, does not seem justified. In fact, it would call into question not only the re-proposal of an event, but the overall reliability of the complete picture that Don Bosco offers us of his narrative identity. The structural role that the story of the dream has in the plot of the *Memoirs* is, in fact, equal to the importance it has in the configuration that the narrator gives of his life. The interpretation of that dream as a manifestation of a divine initiative, evident both between the lines of the story and rightly present in its explicit formulation, calls into question the deepest convictions that accompanied Don Bosco in the exercise of his mission and in the transmission of the charism: as something that did not come from him, but had precisely another origin. The dream is a symbol of this origin in *narrative terms* – and therefore in Don Bosco’s consciousness *truly so*. This is why a radical distrust of a saint who tells his own story would refer rather to a verification of the existential horizon of the reader, that is, a verification of his willingness to allow himself to be re-figured by the event of the word offered to him.

³¹ The very corrections found in the manuscript, and which the precious critical edition of Antonio Da Silva Ferreira makes available, attest to the accurate quality of this linguistic selection.

In conclusion, we believe that reading the account of the dream at nine years of age as the narrative *mimesis* that honestly returns the importance that the dream experience had in the constitution of Don Bosco's *Self* is the *most coherent hermeneutic*: both critical and trusting. This makes it possible to affirm that greatness therefore originally belongs to the real fact (history), but, only through growth in consciousness (memory), was it able to find the words to be returned by narration (story).

2.2. *The dream experience*

But can a *dream* have such significance? The reasoning of modern Western man immediately leads us to answer 'no'. This immediacy, however, is not simply a spontaneous thing, but because of the cultural patterns that have settled in our culture over the centuries of the Enlightenment.

While for ancient man, with the exception of Aristotle and some of his followers, dreams refer to something objective, real and concrete, whether linked to the divine, the magical or the ordinary,³² for modern man, who tends to make the spaces of spiritual consciousness coincide with those of alert awareness, they present themselves as a sort of diminished experience to which only a very modest coefficient of reality can be assigned. The history of philosophy shows that with the affirmation of the Cartesian *Cogito*, there is a corresponding proportional ousting of the dream from the boundaries of truth and a tendency for it to be marginalised in the realm of illusion. That which is not ascribable to the domain of clear and distinct ideas, that which does

³² For the classical world, see. E. DODDS, *I Greci e l'Irrazionale* (La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1959) (in particular the chapter *Schema onirico e schema di civiltà*) [available in English on archive.org as *The Greeks and the Irrational*]; L. BINSWANGER, *Il sogno. Mutamenti nella concezione e interpretazione dai greci al presente* (1928) (Quodlibet, Macerata, 2009); for the biblical world see J.M. HUSSER, "Songe," in *Supplement au Dictionnaire de la Bible* 12 (1996) 1439-1543; E.R. HAYES - L.-S. TIEMEYER (eds.), *"I Lifted my Eyes and Saw". Reading Dream and Vision Reports in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomsbury, London 2014).

not belong to the world of lucid and rational meanings, is regarded as a weak moment of consciousness.

Luisa De Paula writes lucidly:

In the period from the *Meditationes de prima philosophia* to the *Traumdeutung*, the waking man distances himself from his nocturnal self by confining it to the non-place of unreality. The dualistic split between waking mind and dream intelligence is also and immediately a monopoly of the former in the sphere of the real. The divorce of the waking consciousness from the nocturnal cogito and the supremacy of the former over the latter cannot therefore be understood either as a biological and constitutive datum of the human being, or as an independent variable of the historical process, but should rather be framed within that broader path of western civilisation that has led to the divorce between ego and world, body and soul, senses and reason, together with the progressive marginalisation of either term from the horizon of reality.³³

Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* is to a large extent the culmination of this process. The father of the theory of psychoanalysis, in fact, brings the question of the dream to the centre of the attention of culture at the price of understanding it not as an original experience to be understood for its own value, but as a derived reality, a *symptom*, a residue. In Freud's conception the "manifest content" of the dream is like an illusory facade concealing a hidden truth, the "latent thought" that must be attained. The imaginary experience of the dream, therefore, has no value for itself, has no meaning of its own, but is only the distorted reverberation of something that is *elsewhere*, in the unconscious. It is therefore of interest only in so far as it refers to a pre-existing meaning, of which it is nothing more than an expression. In order for the dream to make sense again, modern psychology has postulated the unconscious, a non-place where nocturnal creations refer to frustrated desires and removed fantasies.³⁴

³³ L. DE PAULA, *Il sogno tra radicalismo scettico e realismo onirico*, <http://www.uniurb.it/Filosofia/isonomia/2008depaula.pdf>, 3.

³⁴ "Freud failed to go beyond a fundamental postulate of 19th century psychology:

However, this approach has shown its inadequacy over time and psychoanalysis itself has now distanced itself from the Freudian approach. Consciousness, in fact, “lives the adventures of the night with the same intensity of the day; the images of dreams present themselves to us with an evidence not inferior to the images of wakefulness.”³⁵ Perception does not coincide with awareness: we are continually immersed in perceptions (sound, visual, tactile) that do not necessarily attract our vigilant attention, but do not cease to be real. It is therefore not possible to reduce the reality of consciousness to attentional wakefulness and the instruments of thought. The way in which the perception of the world and the giving of meaning take place in us implies taking into consideration a wider range of experiences than those that we can rationally dominate.

In dreaming, therefore, man is no “less” himself than in waking life, but is so in a different form, the specific value of which must be acknowledged in the *continuum* of existence. By dreaming, man establishes a different relationship with things, implements a different way of inhabiting the world which is not merely “illusion”, even if it does not have the lucid form of cognitive abstraction. Neuroscience now agrees on this fact thanks to established research. Radioscopic visualisation shows that while we dream, our brain registers maximum peaks of activity, comparable to those it only reaches in moments of maximum concentration in wakefulness.

that the dream is a rhapsody of images. If the dream were only that, one could exhaust it in a psychological analysis conducted either in the mechanical style of a psychophysiology or in that of a search for meanings. But the dream is probably much more than a rhapsody of images, for the simple reason that it is an imaginary experience; and if it cannot be exhausted – as we have just seen – by a psychological analysis, it is because it also falls within the scope of the theory of knowledge. Until the 19th century, it was precisely in the terms of a theory of knowledge that the problem of the dream was posed. The dream is described as an absolutely specific form of experience, and if it is possible to highlight its psychology, this is done secondarily and derivatively from the theory of knowledge that situates it as a type of experience. It is this forgotten tradition that Binswanger takes up in *Dream and Existence*” (M. FOUCAULT, *Il sogno* [Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2003] 28).

³⁵ L. DE PAULA, *Il sogno tra radicalismo scettico e realismo onirico*, 16.

In order to give the dream back its ability to speak, therefore, it is necessary to recover the consciousness' original relationship with the body and the world. Contemporary philosophy, with its background in phenomenology, offers significant contributions to the elaboration of a balanced approach that allows the integration of neuroscience data and attention to the experiences of the subject. In this way, the dream moves from being a non-place of consciousness to a phenomenological awakening of a personal World (*Eigenwelt*). This of course implies respect for the *chiaroscuro* dimension that the dream brings with it, its escape from the demands of the sleepless ego to forcibly enclose it in its own categories.

The idea that the dream manifests the unfolding of the *Lebenswelt* or vital world of the person in how he is constituted, recovers and reinterprets an intuition of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who in one of his fragments states, "To those who awake, there is one world in common, but to those who are asleep, each is withdrawn to a private world of his own" (*idios kosmos*).³⁶ Ludwig Binswanger, the greatest³⁷ exponent of existential analysis and phenomenological psychiatry, and Michel Foucault, in the initial phase of his thinking, offered an important contribution for developing this intuition. Rather than fixating on individual dream images in order to decipher their hidden rational meaning, they showed the opportunity to look at the dream as an intentional act of consciousness in order to bring out its directions of meaning.

Foucault writes in this regard:

The dream, in its transcendence and through its transcendence, unveils the original movement by which existence, in its irreducible solitude, projects itself towards a world that constitutes itself as the place of its history [...] By breaking with this objectivity that enchants the vigilant consciousness, restoring to the human subject its radical freedom,

³⁶ This is fragment IX, quoted in M. FOUCAULT, *Il sogno*, 42.

³⁷ L. BINSWANGER, *Il sogno. Mutamenti nella concezione e interpretazione dai greci al presente* (1928) (Quodlibet, Macerata 2009); *Sogno ed esistenza* (1930) (SE, Milano 1993).

the dream paradoxically reveals the movement of freedom towards the world, the original point from which freedom becomes the world.³⁸

In this way, the original role of the imagination within the movement of transcendence of consciousness is recovered. It

is not something merely additional or incidental to what is the object of perception or sensation, but is rather the precondition of appearance, the indispensable prerequisite for any “reality”, thing or person, to become present to me, and the dream experience is the revelation in transparency of the incessant work of the imagination.³⁹

Imagination shows the originally constitutive movement of being-ness in the world, the series of intentional acts by which a world is made present to consciousness. This recovery is very important, because it broadens the horizons of the relationship between man and truth: truth cannot appear to man without showing its connection to the world and without involving the imaginative dimension.

It also recovers the need to grasp the dream within the subject’s vital horizon, within the totality of the subject’s openness to the world and to life. This is how the philosopher María Zambrano speaks of it:

Instead of simply being analysed, (the dream) has to be assimilated, which is a real process. The interpretation of reality dreams takes place with a certain lucidity in a kind of second-degree dream during wakefulness. The person who has taken part in the dream continues it lucidly [...]. Valid knowledge appropriate to the person’s processes must be active: only then will it be true and liberating knowledge.⁴⁰

³⁸ M. FOUCAULT, *Il sogno*, 43.

³⁹ L. DE PAULA, *Il sogno senza inconscio. Immaginazione notturna tra psicologia e fenomenologia* (Alpes, Roma 2013) 31. Even just to see a loved one I need imagination. It is thanks to it that, at the heart of perception, I am able to shape the person and the objects that surround him or her. In perceptual experience, a movement of ulteriority and transcendence is always at work, an intentional dynamic that organises and coordinates sensory activity, opening up its horizon.

⁴⁰ M. ZAMBRANO, *Il sogno creatore* (Mondadori, Milano 2002) 24.

The dreamlike imagination cannot therefore access wakefulness through the analysis that deconstructs it, but must transfer itself into the dreamer's action. It is more open forward than backward; it is more an expression of a movement in which the person situates himself than a deposit of what he has already experienced. The dream therefore indicates a "direction", an "orientation" of one's own world: not with the lucid clarity of the idea, but as the inner movement of the imagination. It is by listening to such movement that the dream can be understood.

It is not difficult to understand at this point that, if one emerges from the modern prejudice towards the dreamer, the inspiring and guiding force that the dream at nine years of age had on the life of Don Bosco boasts solid reasons for plausibility. Within the horizon of the most recent anthropological acquisitions on "dream consciousness" it is a fact that does not raise objections. The childhood dream expressed a "towards", an intentional "movement" of the dreamer's life (indeed, as we shall see, a correction of movement) that demanded to become reality. John's *Lebenswelt* expresses itself in a fascinating way, in its wealth of references: environmental references (the field, the house), relational ones (his mother), religious ones (the two majestic characters), cultural ones (the youngsters, the ferocious animals, the lambs), but above all with the clarity of a direction of life that is expressed there: not with the lucidity of the idea, since the dreamer does not understand things precisely at this level, but with the help of the images loaded with energy.

Having established the anthropological possibility that a dream has a real guiding force in life, we now come to the third order of questions. In John's dream we meet two characters who present themselves as transcendent characters, indeed with a clear Christological and Marian connotation: the dignified man and the woman of stately appearance. Are they simply images that emerge from a boy's nocturnal fantasies, perhaps as a result of some previous event that offered a cue, or is it, as Don Bosco seems to have believed with growing conviction, a supernatural phenomenon? In the awareness that it is not possible to arrive at incontestable answers to these kinds of questions – if only because personal beliefs, attitudes, experiences and positions are at play in this area, more than in others – we will try to provide the reader with at least

some elements that can contribute to clarification, without giving up on suggesting what we consider to be the most convincing answer.

2.3. *The extraordinary phenomenon*

To address the question of the “supernatural” character of the dream at nine years of age, it is worth remembering first of all that the presence of extraordinary phenomena in Don Bosco’s life is a well-documented and very consistent fact. The episodes in which the miraculous intrudes into the saint’s life are numerous and, in many cases, this happens under the very eyes of those who would then give sworn testimony during the canonisation process. This is the case of sudden recoveries from serious or incurable diseases, such as blindness or paralysis, which occur when Don Bosco imparts the blessing of Mary Help of Christians, or of the multiplication of loaves, narrated among others by Fr Dalmazzo who directly witnessed the miracle as a boy, or of the prophecies of future events which various witnesses attested were fulfilled in detail.

It is also important to recall the attitude that Don Bosco has always had towards these exceptional phenomena that accompanied his ministry. According to the testimonies of the witnesses, he was very detached from it all, did not in any way seek the fame that derived from it, but on the contrary feared the hubbub that such facts gave rise to about him. A more direct testimony to Don Bosco’s attitude towards his dreams comes from Fr Cagliari, who said in his deposition for the ordinary process:

I was present in 1861 when he told us another dream in which he had seen the future of the fledgling Congregation, not yet recognised [praised, commended] by the Holy See. And here I notice a delicacy of the Servant of God who, from the time he had begun to have these dreams, consulted his Spiritual Director, the learned and holy Fr Cafasso, who told D. Bosco to go ahead conscientiously in giving importance to these dreams, which he judged to be to the greater glory of God and souls! And D. Bosco told this to us, his closest friends.⁴¹

⁴¹ *Copia Publica Transumpti Processus Ordinaria*, 1195r-v.

Therefore, Don Bosco demonstrated the attitudes of responsibility, gratitude and humility towards dreams and, more generally, the “extraordinary” that surrounded his life, that the great spiritual masters have always recommended in these circumstances. From this perspective he also demonstrated exceptional spiritual stature and an admirable freedom of spirit. His dreams, accepted with humble docility and wise discernment,

founded convictions and supported enterprises. Without them one could not explain some characteristic features of the religiosity of Don Bosco and the Salesians. They deserve to be studied carefully, not only for their pedagogical and moralistic content, but already for what they were in themselves and for the way they were understood by Don Bosco, his young people, his admirers and his spiritual heirs.⁴²

The realism and practical common sense that Don Bosco had inherited from his people, of which his grandmother’s blunt “We must not pay attention to dreams” was an eloquent expression, would not have allowed dreams to influence him so deeply had he not considered them bearers of a spiritual message that was to be followed.⁴³

Regarding the dream at nine years of age more directly, the starting point for reasoning about its supernatural character can only be the following passage from the *Memoirs*:

But when I went to Rome in 1858 to speak to the Pope about the Salesian Congregation, he asked me to tell him everything that had even

⁴² PST2, 507.

⁴³ Among his disciples, in any case, the belief that dreams were, for the most part, true “divine visions” was widespread. This is how Cagliari expresses himself, for example, in the above-mentioned deposition: “Among the revelations that the Servant of God had as a child and as a priest, and that he called dreams...” (*Copia Publica Transumpti Processus Ordinaria*, 1135r). Cerruti also attests that this was the common notion among the boys: “I and the great majority of my companions have almost always believed them to be visions, that is, ways in which the Lord showed Don Bosco what he wanted from him, and above all what was necessary for our spiritual good” (*ibid.*, 1362v). Testimonies of this kind could be multiplied.

the suggestion of the supernatural about it. It was only then, for the first time, that I said anything about this dream which I had when I was nine or ten years old. The Pope ordered me to write out the dream in all its detail and to leave it as an encouragement to the sons of that Congregation whose formation was the reason for that visit to Rome.

Don Bosco, who was deeply convinced that no one should put his hand to the foundation of a religious institute without clear signs from above, seems to express his conviction, with these words, that the dream he had as a boy had been one of these signs. Pius IX's order to draw up an accurate draft appeared to be an authoritative, if implicit, confirmation of this.

But how are these supernatural communications, of which the history of spirituality offers numerous testimonies, to be understood, and to what extent is it possible to express an opinion as to their authenticity? The careful reflection that a theologian of the calibre of Karl Rahner has developed in this regard in his essay *Visions and Prophecies* can help us formulate an answer to these questions.⁴⁴

For a theological understanding of these phenomena, Rahner introduced an important correction to the approach of textbook apologetics which considered them within the framework of the relationship between public and private revelations. Noting the inconsistencies of this scheme, the German theologian took the opportunity to frame the question from the perspective of the charismatic phenomena with which the Holy Spirit contributes to leading the Church through the centuries, by offering her particular lights to face the challenges she faces. When dealing with visions, therefore, it is not a question of asking whether they add anything to Christological revelation, but rather how and to what extent they contribute to embodying it in a specific era and situation. Their value is not essentially at the level of assertion, as an attestation of a certain truth, but at the *imperative* level.

⁴⁴ K. RAHNER, *Visions and Prophecies* (Herder and Herder, New York, 1964) though quotations here are a direct translation from the Italian edition: K. Rahner, *Visioni e profezie* (Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1995). Page references are from the Italian edition.

They do not primarily convey an idea, but rather a command, an attitude to be assumed; they are signs that configure a spiritual experience, urging the recipient, and possibly others involved with this individual, to fulfil a certain task important for the life of the Church. The imperative inspired by God in a member of the Church for the Church to act in a given historical situation seems to us to be the essence of a prophetic “private revelation” of a post-Christian type.⁴⁵

That such phenomena are possible is a sure fact of faith: “The possibility of private revelation through visions and related auditory experiences is, for a Christian, fundamentally certain. God, as a personal and free God, can make himself perceptible to the created spirit not only through his works but also through his free and personal word.”⁴⁶ What they are, on the other hand, can only be the result of careful discernment, and never requires a true and proper assent of the *fides cattolica*, since their content is not entrusted to the official Church for it to transmit them authoritatively to the faithful, but rather a credit that is linked to the clarity that can be achieved. In some cases, this credit may come to be, for the recipient of the vision and possibly also for others, a matter of true and proper *fides divina*, that is, a credit given personally to God by recognising that one has been challenged by him.

Rahner therefore calls for an attitude of healthy balance that, much more than in the past, recognises the essential and irreplaceable role of the prophetic charism in the life of the Church, but at the same time recalls that “in these questions, the clearest and most apodictic answers, as well as the simplest and most practical solutions, are not necessarily also the most just.”⁴⁷

With regard to the modalities of the supernatural vision, it should be noted first of all that the manifestation of God through signs and images “corresponds more to the fundamental character of Christianity

⁴⁵ K. RAHNER, *Visioni e profezie*, 52. Post-Christian is understood here in the sense of “belonging to an era that follows the Christological event”.

⁴⁶ K. RAHNER, *Visioni e profezie*, 38ff.

⁴⁷ K. RAHNER, *Visioni e profezie*, 31.

rather than a pure *mystical union* devoid of ‘images’, from which the ancient problem always emerges anew, as to whether such a religiosity of the pure transcendence of the spirit is authentically Christian.”⁴⁸ The analogy between these visions and the structure of the incarnation, in which human and divine are united without confusion, implies recognising that in the phenomenon we are dealing with it is necessary to keep in mind both the psychic laws that derive from the spiritual capacities of the person who has the vision, as well as the initiative with which God intervenes in the subject.

This means first of all that “in order for a vision to truly be the spiritual reality of a particular subject, it must really be, metaphysically speaking, the ‘act’ of this subject, that is, not only caused in the subject by God, but also really the operation of this subject, which he himself has accomplished.”⁴⁹ Even the visions provoked by God, in fact, are rooted in the psycho-physiological structure of the subject, who will experience them within the horizons of his own life (e.g. in the language he speaks, with images that he can recognise and so on).⁵⁰ In our case, whatever the theological quality of the event, it must be maintained that what happens is achieved through the human faculties of John Bosco as a boy. It is really he who is dreaming; his consciousness

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 39, note 12. On the other hand, it is necessary to understand, precisely from this fundamental incarnational structure in which God and creation are gathered in unity without confusion, that one can access God only in the sign – even in the figure of the vision – only if one does not attach oneself to the sign (*noli me tangere*) as if it were something definitive and ultimate, God himself, but one attests to it by transcending it, and grasps it by leaving it free” (*ibid.*).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 66.

⁵⁰ “Concretely, it will obviously be almost impossible to say exactly where, in the act of vision, the boundary runs between the *necessarily* valid psychic laws and the natural laws, even if not necessary, which are suspended through the miraculous intervention of God.” (66) Moreover, “if it is necessary to suppose a subjective element already in the imaginative vision, this can be even more so *after* the vision, even where they are absolutely honest people: involuntary corrections, errors of memory, use of preconceived thought patterns and a vocabulary already packaged in the story with which the perspectives are inadvertently moved, involuntary additions of an additional type, psychological description and interpretation of the event, which succeed for better or worse depending on the self-observation capacity of the visionary” (97ff).

is not a sort of passive screen on which celestial images are projected so to speak, but it fully contributes, with its imaginative capacity, to producing figure and discourse.

A second important clarification concerns the fact that, as Rahner notes, the expression, “this vision is caused by God”, is in itself extraordinarily ambiguous, because any grace is caused by God, even when it is perfectly explicable within natural laws. The religious person rightly recognises the free grace of God for his or her salvation even in an event that can be explained naturally. In a very particular sense, however, those visions which have their origin in an authentically supernatural intervention of God, that is, beyond the laws of physical and psychic nature, must be described as being “of divine origin”.⁵¹ And even in this case it is still necessary to distinguish between (a) what is the result of God’s habitual indwelling in the soul – which can give rise to psychic phenomena in a believer that can truly be called supernatural visions, without being miracles in the technical sense – and (b) what is the result of a miraculous intervention of God that suspends the laws of nature and therefore also the normal psychological laws. Very aptly Rahner states:

It is clear that, in practice, it will not be easy to say whether a vision is to be considered as caused by God in the first or second sense of a supernatural event, especially since the two moments can converge in the same vision. Moreover, it must be remembered that the *religious* meaning of a supernatural vision in the first sense, by its nature can be essentially greater than one that is supernatural in the second sense, since what is miraculous in the technical sense must not, from the ontological and ethical point of view, also necessarily be the most perfect.⁵²

Finally, leaving aside other aspects of this complex problem, it is still important to identify an element that helps to understand what

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 68.

⁵² *Ibid.* 69.

is meant when a vision is interpreted as “prophecy” and what distinguishes authentic Christian prophecy from the (disputed) psychic phenomenon of foresight. In the case of parapsychological visions, says Rahner, the seer sees “a small random part of the future, one could say a small absolutely random piece of a long film, but without this piece being inserted in a broader development, in itself meaningful, having an explanation of meaning.”⁵³ Very different is the nature of the genuine prophetic vision:

This is not, at least at its core, a “vision,” but a “word.” It properly does not show a piece of the future as an image, but shares something of it as it explains it. Such an explanation is, precisely because of this, obscure in its details – precisely because it comes from God, not in spite of the fact that it comes from God – because it speaks of the meaning of the future and, far from being understood as a means to shelter oneself from this or to foresee it, intends rather to keep open the freedom of the person who dares to trust in God. It does not therefore have the style of a chronicler who miraculously moves into the future itself and from there explains what he has experienced, but rather reveals to the man to whom he addresses himself, something of his current situation, through that glimpse of the future that he needs to sustain his present *now*, in fidelity and trust.⁵⁴

At this point we need to return to our dream, summarising the data already acquired and trying to take a definitive step forward. We said that the dream at nine years of age plays a fundamental architectural role for developing the narrative interweaving of the *Memoirs*, a role that corresponds to the existential importance that Don Bosco attributes to this dreamlike experience in the structuring of his narrative

⁵³ *Ibid*, 119. The parapsychological seer impersonally grasps a shred of the future, which absolutely causally, senselessly and blindly slips into the sphere of his knowledge. What is seen directly, is seen clearly and concretely, as if on the spot. This can be referred to as a *report*. But what is seen so clearly remains in itself isolated and therefore, despite its clarity, incomprehensible.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

identity. It has also been said that the story, written fifty years later, is not simply an account, but is a *narrative recovery* that comes from the memory that gathers its own history together in a unity and gives back the meaning of the original experience in a mature and thoughtful way. This becomes all the more understandable now that we have seen that the meaning of dreams is not to be sought in individual images or in precise words, but in the direction in which the imagination shows itself moving in its act of transcendence and openness. It is within this dynamic context that individual details manifest their unity and orientation.

Now, in the light of what has been said about supernatural visions, we wonder if these pages about the dream to which Don Bosco attaches so much importance are merely the empty echo of an experience in which, without realising it, he has listened only to himself, or whether it actually gives us the content of a special divine communication of a prophetic and anticipatory nature.

The clarifications provided so far allow us to frame our response without *maximalist* or *minimalist* excesses. *Maximalist* and misleading would be the idea that the content of the dream is an encounter with the Lord and the Virgin in which they are seen and heard in a manner analogous to what happens in normal sensory perception. Their statements would therefore be understood as words that came “materially” from the lips of Jesus and Mary, who came down from heaven to visit the boy from the Becchi. As we have seen, this concept goes beyond the anthropological dimension of the event, that is, it neglects the role that the consciousness of John Bosco as a boy – his cognitive horizon, his imagination, his faculties – played in the phenomenon, and thus accepts the naive idea of spiritual immediacy. It would be *minimalistic*, on the other hand, but equally misleading to reduce the dream to a creation of the dreamer’s unconscious or to an expression of his fervent religious imagination. The content of the dream would not at all have the features of something received, but simply of something produced. This thesis is not metaphysically impossible, but it runs up against a great deal of the moral and spiritual evidence. To support it, in fact, it must be stated that by placing the story of the dream when

he was nine as a key to the reading of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* and therefore of his apostolic and spiritual story, Don Bosco was deceived or, even worse, deceived himself, about an absolutely decisive element for his personal history and for the life and mission of his religious Congregation, that is, the presence of a very special call from above, of which the dream was the sign and seal. A boy's unconscious would have produced an important charismatic text from nothing, one which has inspired thousands and thousands of believers, and would have offered important spiritual insights to one of the great founders in the Church's history, without any particular intervention on God's part: very hard to imagine!

Leaving aside these two excesses at both ends of the spectrum, and taking into account the theological stature of the mission that God assigned to Don Bosco – the stature of a mission destined to develop in a surprising way for the benefit of the universal Church – it is *quite reasonable to believe that the dream was indeed, as Don Bosco understood it, a supernatural communication similar to those that can be read in the great biblical stories of the dreams of the patriarchs or the nocturnal visions of the prophets*. On the basis of the criteria normally taken into account in spiritual theology, this evaluation seems the most consistent with the whole of the saint's spiritual story. However, it seems to us to be difficult, but less important, to be able to say whether the supernatural nature of this communication is to be understood as a charismatic reflection of the action of grace in the heart of the one called, or as a real “miraculous” vision in the technical sense. And indeed, it has been said that its “religious” meaning does not depend precisely on this.

Finally, it is more important to highlight that *precisely because the enlightenment came from God, it did not simply have the features of immediate intelligibility* which would have dispensed John Bosco from the difficulties of vocational discernment and from reference to ecclesial mediation. In essence, the content of the dream did not present the boy from the Becchi with the future in the manner of clear foresight, but through *an injunction in the present*. He heard himself saying what he had to do in the present for that future to become possible, as a gift that did not exempt him from commitment, but rather imposed it,

and in a very demanding way. This also confirms that the dream was not an empty echo in which the boy listened only to his unconscious, but was a true religious experience in which he listened to a message from God.

An act of the dreamlike consciousness of John Bosco as a boy which at the same time is also the prophetic word of God, rendered in the form of a recollection, a story in which the prophecy is already read in terms of its ongoing fulfilment: this, in conclusion, is the dream that we are now preparing to retrace and whose message we will try to interpret.

3. A theological reading

3.1. Narrative structure and dream movement

Based on the hermeneutical premises developed thus far, we can now approach the text of the dream at nine years of age, which we record according to Antonio da Silva Ferreira's critical edition and from which we will deviate only for two small variants.⁵⁵ We divide the story into paragraphs which, for convenience, we accompany with an acronym in square brackets. [Translator's note: the translated versions come from the English New Rochelle 2010 edition].

[C1] A quell'età ho fatto un sogno, che mi rimase profondamente impresso nella mente per tutta la vita.

It was at that age that I had a dream. All my life this remained deeply impressed on my mind.

[I] Nel sonno mi parve di essere vicino a casa in un cortile assai spazioso, dove stava raccolta una moltitudine di fanciulli, che si trastullavano. Alcuni ridevano, altri giuocavano, non pochi bestemmiavano. All'udire

⁵⁵ The critical text is in MO-it 34-37. The two variants are indicated by Aldo GIRAUDO in G. Bosco, *Memorie dell'oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855* (LAS, Roma 2011) 62ff., note 18: "presemi", where Da Silva reads "presomi"; and note 19: the addition of "ed ogni cosa disparve", accidentally omitted by Da Silva.

quelle bestemmie mi sono subito lanciato in mezzo di loro adoperando pugni e parole per farli tacere.

In this dream I seemed to be near my home in a fairly large yard. A crowd of children were playing there. Some were laughing, some were playing games, and quite a few were swearing. When I heard these evil words, I jumped immediately amongst them and tried to stop them by using my words and my fists.

[II] In quel momento apparve un uomo venerando in virile età nobilmente vestito. Un manto bianco gli copriva tutta la persona; ma la sua faccia era così luminosa, che io non poteva rimirarlo. Egli mi chiamò per nome e mi ordinò di pormi alla testa di que' fanciulli aggiungendo queste parole: «Non colle percosse ma colla mansuetudine e colla carità dovrai guadagnare questi tuoi amici. Mettiti adunque immediatamente a fare loro un'istruzione sulla bruttezza del peccato e sulla preziosità della virtù». Confuso e spaventato soggiunsi che io era un povero ed ignorante fanciullo incapace di parlare di religione a que' giovanetti. In quel momento que' ragazzi cessando dalle risse, dagli schiamazzi e dalle bestemmie, si raccolsero tutti intorno a colui, che parlava.

At that moment a dignified man appeared, a nobly dressed adult. He wore a white cloak, and his face shone so that I could not look directly at him. He called me by name, told me to take charge of these children, and added these words: "You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love. Start right away to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue." Confused and frightened, I replied that I was a poor, ignorant child. I was unable to talk to those youngsters about religion. At that moment the kids stopped their fighting, shouting, and swearing; they gathered round the man who was speaking.

[III] Quasi senza sapere che mi dicessi, «Chi siete voi», soggiunsi, «che mi comandate cosa impossibile?» «Appunto perché tali cose ti sembrano impossibili, devi renderle possibili coll'ubbidienza e coll'acquisto della scienza». «Dove, con quali mezzi potrò acquistare la scienza?». «Io ti darò la maestra sotto alla cui disciplina puoi diventare sapiente, e senza cui ogni sapienza diviene stoltezza».

«Ma chi siete voi, che parlate in questo modo?» «Io sono il figlio di colei, che tua madre ti ammaestrò di salutar tre volte al giorno». «Mia madre mi dice di non associarmi con quelli che non conosco, senza suo permesso; perciò ditemi il vostro nome». «Il mio nome dimandalo a Mia Madre».

Hardly knowing what I was saying, I asked, "Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?"

"Precisely because it seems impossible to you, you must make it possible through obedience and the acquisition of knowledge."

"Where, by what means, can I acquire knowledge?"

"I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her, all wisdom is foolishness."

"But who are you that speak so?"

"I am the son of the woman whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day."

"My mother tells me not to mix with people I don't know unless I have her permission. So tell me your name."

"Ask my mother what my name is."

[IV] In quel momento vidi accanto di lui una donna di maestoso aspetto, vestita di un manto, che risplendeva da tutte parti, come se ogni punto di quello fosse una fulgidissima stella. Scorgendomi ognor più confuso nelle mie dimande e risposte, mi accennò di avvicinarmi a Lei, che presemi con bontà per mano, e «guarda», mi disse. Guardando mi accorsi che quei fanciulli erano tutti fuggiti, ed in loro vece vidi una moltitudine di capretti, di cani, di gatti, orsi e di parecchi altri animali. «Ecco il tuo campo, ecco dove devi lavorare. Renditi umile, forte, robusto; e ciò che in questo momento vedi succedere di questi animali, tu dovrai farlo pei figli miei». Volsi allora lo sguardo ed ecco invece di animali feroci apparvero altrettanti mansueti agnelli, che tutti saltellando correvano attorno belando come per fare festa a quell'uomo e a quella signora. A quel punto, sempre nel sonno, mi misi a piangere, e pregai quello a voler parlare in modo da capire, perciocché io non sapeva quale cosa si volesse significare. Allora Ella mi pose la mano sul capo dicendomi: «A suo tempo tutto comprenderai».

At that moment, I saw a lady of stately appearance standing beside him. She was wearing a mantle that sparkled all over as though covered with bright stars. Seeing from my questions and answers that I was more confused than ever, she beckoned me to approach her. She took me kindly by the hand and said, "Look." Glancing round, I realised that the youngsters had all apparently run away. A large number of goats, dogs, cats, bears, and other animals had taken their place.

“This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong, and energetic. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children.”

I looked round again, and where before I had seen wild animals, I now saw gentle lambs. They were all jumping and bleating as if to welcome that man and lady.

At that point, still dreaming, I began crying. I begged the lady to speak so that I could understand her, because I did not know what all this could mean. She then placed her hand on my head and said, “In good time you will understand everything.”

[C2] Ciò detto un rumore mi svegliò ed ogni cosa disparve. Io rimasi sbalordito. Sembravami di avere le mani che facessero male pei pugni che aveva dato, che la faccia mi duolesse per gli schiaffi ricevuti; di poi quel personaggio, quella donna, le cose dette e le cose udite mi occuparono talmente la mente, che per quella notte non mi fu possibile prendere sonno. Al mattino ho tosto con premura raccontato quel sogno prima a' miei fratelli, che si misero a ridere, poi a mia madre ed alla nonna. Ognuno dava al medesimo la sua interpretazione. Il fratello Giuseppe diceva: «Tu diventerai guardiano di capre, di pecore o di altri animali». Mia madre: «Chi sa che non abbi a diventar prete». Antonio con secco accento: «Forse sarai capo di briganti». Ma la nonna, che sapeva assai di teologia, era del tutto inalfabeta, diede sentenza definitiva dicendo: «Non bisogna badare ai sogni». Io era del parere di mia nonna, tuttavia non mi fu mai possibile di togliermi quel sogno dalla mente. Le cose che esporrò in appresso daranno a ciò qualche significato. Io ho sempre taciuto ogni cosa; i miei parenti non ne fecero caso. Ma quando, nel 1858, andai a Roma per trattar col Papa della congregazione salesiana, egli si fece minutamente raccontare tutte le cose che avessero anche solo apparenza di soprannaturali. Raccontai allora per la prima volta il sogno fatto in età di nove in dieci anni. Il Papa mi comandò di scriverlo nel suo senso letterale, minuto e lasciarlo per incoraggiamento ai figli della congregazione, che formava lo scopo di quella gita a Roma.

With that, a noise woke me up and everything disappeared. I was totally bewildered. My hands seemed to be sore from the blows I had given, and my face hurt from those I had received. The memory of the man and the lady, and the things said and heard, so occupied my mind that I could not get any more sleep that night.

I wasted no time in telling all about my dream. I spoke first to my brothers, who laughed at the whole thing, and then to my mother and grandmother. Each one gave his own interpretation. My brother Joseph said, "You're going to become a keeper of goats, sheep, and other animals." My mother commented, "Who knows, but you may become a priest." Anthony merely grunted, "Perhaps you'll become a robber chief." But my grandmother, though she could not read or write, knew enough theology and made the final judgement, saying, "Pay no attention to dreams."

I agreed with my grandmother. However, I was unable to cast that dream out of my mind. The things I shall have to say later will give some meaning to all this. I kept quiet about these things, and my relatives paid little attention to them. But when I went to Rome in 1858 to speak to the Pope about the Salesian Congregation, he asked me to tell him everything that had even the suggestion of the supernatural about it. It was only then, for the first time, that I said anything about this dream which I had when I was nine or ten years old. The Pope ordered me to write out the dream in all its detail and to leave it as an encouragement to the sons of that Congregation whose formation was the reason for that visit to Rome.

3.1.1. Characters and structure

The dream story presents a development that follows very simple narrative structures, although it is not lacking in some complexity. Fundamentally, they are based on a tripartite scheme which provides for the presentation of the actor, action and reaction from time to time. Without being able to exclude a literary component of plot completion, especially in the dialogues, the absence of any artificial sophistication in the construction of the plot is quite apparent. This confirms, also at the analytical level, the plausibility of substantial correspondence to a child's dream experience.

Although fundamental elements of Salesian spirituality are obviously to be found in the narrative fabric, one can further observe the absence of some words that would become "technical" in explaining Don Bosco's mission, such as "loving kindness", "assistance", "education", "souls", "salvation" and so on. The ideas that correspond to them are expressed through the language accessible to a peasant lad: "take

charge of”, “win these friends of yours”, “field” in which to “work”, make yourself “humble, strong, energetic”, “teach... sin and virtue”.

The protagonist of the dream is clearly the dreamer himself, the places are ones that are familiar to him, populated with a cheerful and festive youthful presence, but also already spoiled by evil (fights, clashes, blasphemies). The other characters are somehow all known to him. Apart from the children, none of whom is identified, and his mother, who is a presence evoked but not personally active in the dream, the two interlocutors of the dreamer are the dignified man and the woman of stately appearance, clearly identifiable as Jesus and Mary. The traits of the man are his *età virile* [which has not been literally translated in English as “manly age” but implied by “dignified”], his noble dress, specified with the detail of a white mantle that “*gli copriva tutta la persona*” [again not literally translated as “envelops the whole person,” but implied by the word “cloak”] the face so bright that “I could not look directly at him”: all details that seem to refer to the gospel imagery of the transfiguration of the Lord. His actions are marked by authority (“he told me to...”), but also by closeness to John (“he called me by name”) and they had a pacifying effect on the children, who gathered around the one who was speaking. The woman of stately appearance is introduced as the mother of the dignified man, and she also has a mantle that seems embroidered with very bright stars and is the teacher from whom one learns true wisdom. The element that most directly points to her identity, revealing her unequivocally as a Marian figure, is the reference to the boy’s daily custom, having learned the *Angelus* from his mother, with which he greets the Virgin three times a day.

It is interesting to note that there is no reference to the father figure in the dream, which clearly corresponds to John’s situation, fatherless, as he tells us, since the age of two. Perhaps this also translates into the lack of a direct reference to the Father in heaven, since the space of the transcendent is fully occupied by the figures of Jesus and Mary. This too seems like a trait of John’s religious experience as a child that does not undergo any theological completion at the time of writing. This absence of an explicit fatherly presence could perhaps suggest some

inspiration for reflection on its connection with the mission that John receives in the dream: it is proper to the father, in fact, to be strong and energetic and work for the good of his children. In fact, fatherhood will be precisely the most evident characteristic of the love that Don Bosco will embody for countless numbers of young people. However, we leave this discourse in suspense, as the dream has left it, limiting ourselves to suggesting that the absence of the father may be precisely the symbolic space that John will have to personally fill.

The account is presented with a structure that can be divided into the following sections:

- [C1] initial frame
- [I] vision of the boys and John's intervention
- [II] the appearance of the dignified man
- [III] dialogue on the identity of the character
- [IV] apparition of the woman of stately appearance
- [C2] closing frame

Leaving aside, for now, the initial (very short) and final (much broader) frame, we call attention to the content of the dream experience. The division into four sections corresponds to a clear sequence of scenes.

The first [I] presents the beginning of the vision, with a challenging situation to which John gives an immediate and impulsive response. The second [II] introduces the "twist" of the appearance of the dignified man that interrupts John's initiative and guides it in another direction, through an order and a teaching that provoke confusion and fear in him. This scene could be continued, including the part of the dialogue with the character, but the description of the boys who stop fighting and gather around the speaker introduces a pause in the narrative, opening up to a new unity in our opinion. The third section [III] differs from the others because it does not contain actions, only a rapid dialogue made up of four pressing questions and their answers. At the centre of the dialogue is the question of the character's identity, but the answers gradually shift attention to the

presence of his mother. The last part of the dream [IV] presents the appearance of the second character, the stately woman through whom John's doubts are to be answered. It too indicates a task to be carried out and proposes preparation, but its discourse is intertwined with a scene that is a "vision within the vision", explicitly introduced by the imperative: "look". Words and vision convey an explanatory message, but the conclusion is actually marked by growing confusion in the dreamer and the reference to things being understood in the future.

3.1.2. Narrative tension

Taking up the individual units in more detail to bring out the narrative tension running through them, we can say that in the first section [I] it is possible to recognise first of all the spatial location of the dream in a very spacious yard near home. From the outset, domestic proximity and openness of the horizon qualify the imaginative environment in which the *Lebenswelt* of the dreamer unfolds. The setting is cheerfully populated with children having fun. However, the element of disturbance by not a few who are swearing immediately takes over. The behaviour is perceived by the dreamer as unacceptable and challenging and he intervenes with resolute and violent movement, in which it is not difficult to recognise the naturally impetuous character of the boy from the Becchi.⁵⁶ The first episode can therefore

⁵⁶ On the impulsive and fiery disposition of Don Bosco's character we have these significant testimonies of those who knew him very closely: "By his own admission, which I heard, he was naturally fiery and arrogant and could not endure being resisted, yet with many acts he was able to restrain himself so much as to become a peaceful and meek man and so much a master of himself that he seemed never to have anything to do" (MARCHISIO, in *Copia Publica Transumpti Processus Ordinaria*, 629r). The judgement of Fr Cagliari and Fr Rua is similar: "By his own admission, he was naturally fiery and arrogant, so he could not suffer being resisted, and he felt an inexpressible internal struggle when he had to ask someone for charity" (CAGLIERO, *ibid.*, 1166r); "He was fiery, as I, and many others with me, could see; because in various circumstances we realised how much effort he had to make to repress anger because of the setbacks that happened to him. And if this occurred in his advanced age, it leaves room to believe that his youthful character was even more lively" (RUA, *ibid.* 2621 r-v).

be schematically divided into these three moments: (1) spatial location of the dream, (2) the negative behaviour of a group of children, (3) John's spontaneous reaction.

There is an obvious structural parallelism between section II and IV. In both, in fact, there is a clear ternary element: the appearance of the character, his order/instruction (presented in turn in tripartite form), reaction to the character's words. In the case of the dignified man the text can be ordered as follows:

- (1) appearance of the dignified man and his characteristics
- (2) his order/instruction
 - a. to take charge of the children [indirect speech]
 - b. not by blows
 - c. start right away...
- (3) John's reaction and the children's reaction.

In the case of the stately woman:

- (1) vision of the woman and her characteristics
- (2) Her order/instruction, intertwined with a symbolic scene
 - * vision of ferocious animals
 - a. here is your field
 - b. make yourself humble, strong and energetic
 - c. What you see... you will have to do,
 - ** change of ferocious animals into meek lambs
- (3) John's reaction and the Lady's assurance of future understanding.

The structural and thematic parallelism is clear: the two characters are presented with similar characteristics which combine transcendence (nobility of dress and splendour of the person) and closeness (he calls by name, she invites him to approach, takes him by the hand, puts her hand on his head); in both cases there is the imperative assignment ("start right away", "[This] is what you must do") of a youthful mission and the teaching about the method of kindness and gentleness to follow. Even the outcome of the meeting is the same in both scenes:

John comes away confused and dismayed, while the recipients of his mission have had a peaceful transformation (in the first scene the boys stop fighting and gather around the dignified character, and in the second the ferocious animals become meek lambs that are jumping and bleating around the man and the lady). Despite the parallelism of the elements, however, from a functional and dynamic point of view the two moments are not simply a repetition. The second, in fact, appears as a resumption of the first that *intensifies the dynamics and contrasts, increasing the light, but paradoxically also the darkness and disturbance*. With this dialectic, therefore, the two episodes keep the tension of the dream movement alive.

In a way fully suited to the psychology of a child, who spontaneously turns to his mother for explanations, *the function of the second scene is to offer a maternal clarification of the first*. The mother of the dignified man appears as *a mediator for understanding the message* which she has an appropriate understanding of. However, while she explains the content through images (the vision of animals), as mothers often do with their children, she *also preserves the dimension of mystery* that surrounds it. The name of the character, which John should have known from the woman, remains unknown, while the task entrusted to him becomes only partly clearer. What at first appeared to be a moral instruction to be carried out “immediately” on a group of boys, later appears as a long-term future mission, a field to be worked on assiduously, carrying out an operation illustrated in an enigmatic way: “what you will see *happening* to these animals in a moment is what you must *do* for my children.” The task assigned is to bring about a (spiritual) metamorphosis that certainly does not seem to be on a human scale. No wonder the nine-year-old did not understand: the *tension between clarity and obscurity of the first apparition (section II) is radicalised in the second (section IV)*, leading to extreme consequences.

The increase in tension between the first and second apparitions is achieved through the tense dialogue of section III, with its four pressing questions/requests: “Who are you...?”; “Where, by what means...?”; “Who are you...?” “Tell me your name.” It is clear that the central question concerns *the identity of the character* who produces the “twist

of fate” in the dream, requiring the dreamer to change his way of acting. The theme of the mission that the child will have to carry out (central to sections II and IV) is, in this way, inseparably linked to the question about the instigator who assigns it to him. But together with the question of the instigator, there is also the question of the feasibility of the task, which seems completely disproportionate to the resources of the dreamer. To the dialectic between clarity and obscurity of the mission, mentioned above, is added a *tension between the possibility and impossibility* of the enterprise, evidently provided by the first lines of the dialogue: “Who are you who are ordering me to do the impossible?” “Precisely because it seems impossible to you, you must make it possible through obedience and the acquisition of knowledge.”

The answers in this section III, on the other hand, gradually shift attention towards the question of the mother, which will appear in section IV, with a significant doubling of figures. In fact, there are two mothers spoken of: the mother of the dignified man and John’s mother. The latter is already a reliable teacher for him and he appeals to her teaching to justify his request: “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 shows that he knows and approves of the teachings of John’s mother, to whom he also appeals: “I am the son of the woman whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day.” But this is another mother, “My Mother” says the man, at whose school John must place himself to learn the wisdom that makes impossible things possible.

This section III, therefore, if on the one hand it seems a transition between the two apparitions, on the other it introduces thematic elements of great depth: the dreamer will find the key to accessing the identity of the dignified man and to acquiring the wisdom that makes possible the impossible from the Mother/Teacher of the mysterious character, whom his mother/teacher has already made known to him. This concatenation shows how *the tension between a “surplus of the unknown” and the “familiarity of the already given” is the narrative tone of the dream*, the form in which the transcendent *novum* enters the *Lebenswelt* of the dreamer to modify it from the foundations.

Summarising the narrative structure that emerges from the analysis, we can therefore arrive at this scheme:

[I] *initial situation*

1. Spatial location of the dream
2. deviant behaviour of the children
3. John's spontaneous reaction

[II] *section regarding the dignified man*

The appearance of the dignified Man and his characteristics

2. His order/triple instruction:
 - a. to take charge of the children (indirect speech)
 - b. not by blows...
 - c. start right away...
3. the different reactions of John and the children

[III] *intermediate dialogue*

“Who are you...?”

“Where, by what means...?”

“Who are you...?”

“Tell me your name.”

[IV] *section regarding the woman of stately appearance*

1. Vision of the woman and her characteristics
2. Her order/triple instruction intertwined with symbolic scene:
 - * vision of ferocious animals
 - a. here is your field
 - b. make yourself humble, strong and energetic
 - c. What you see... you must do
 - * change of ferocious animals into meek lambs
3. John's reaction and the woman's assurance of future understanding

3.1.3. Intentional movement

The analysis of the structure of the text and the examination of the narrative tension that runs through the story now allows us to grasp the “movement towards”, the “direction”, the “intentional movement” that characterises the dream experience. We have seen

that the scene takes place in a familiar environment but from the beginning is very open and populated with presences (children playing). The perception of an element of disturbance (swearing) sees John intervening fiercely because he wants to repress this negative behaviour. Here, therefore, is a first “movement towards”, which expresses a natural tendency to active intervention, to take responsibility and perhaps an inclination to seeking the limelight, all of which fully correspond to the data we know about the dreamer’s natural temperament.

However, while this gesture takes shape with all its impetus made up of fists and words (“I jumped immediately amongst them... at that moment”), a surprising fact happens that *calls for a decisive change in the intentional “movement” and imparts a new “direction”*. The elements that must change are two: firstly, the objective, which must be to “win” over his companions by becoming their leader, and not simply to repress evil; secondly, the method: “not by blows, but by gentleness and love.” All the further development of the dream can be considered as the clarification and deepening of this change of direction, its future prospects and its present needs.

Faced with this intentional change of movement required “from the outside”, however, a resistance immediately emerges that comes “from within” the dreamer. It manifests itself in the form of objections which rely on two elements: inadequacy (“poor and ignorant child, unable to talk about religion”) and difficulty in understanding (“I did not know what all this could mean”). The first objection is answered by indicating the means that make the impossible possible: obedience and knowledge/wisdom. The second is answered with a reference to the future: what is not clear now, will be in time. The *paradox* contained in these answers cannot be concealed, since in essence they affirm that only by obeying the command will it become fully clear what it really requires (!). However, there is an assurance of power/possibility, guaranteed from above, which compensates for the inadequacy/impossibility perceived by the narrator and an offer of present and future light that makes the degree of obscurity sustainable. Although the new movement – or to put it clearly in Christian terms: the new mission

– may seem arduous and obscure, it must therefore be implemented. This is the character of *injunction* that the dream brings with it.

The injunction comes from the two mysterious characters. The dignified man is really the origin and the decisive reference: not only does he intervene first and imperatively, but the objection subsequent to the vision of the animals is once again addressed to him (“I begged for the Lady to speak *so that* I could understand her”). The woman of stately appearance, who is assigned to John as a sure and authoritative teacher, actually depends on the son, since ultimately she does nothing but mediate his will. From the theological point of view, that she may be a teacher of what seems impossible and obscure to human beings (*Lk* 1:37) is entirely pertinent.

The impact of the injunction on the consciousness of the dreamer is described in the final frame of the dream. The *Memoirs* narrate that John wakes up and everything disappears. The dream vision ends, but not its effects, imprinted not only in the mind, but also on the body:

I was totally bewildered. My hands were sore from the blows I had given and my face hurt from the blows I had received. The memory of the man and the lady, and the things seen and heard, so occupied my mind that I could not get any more sleep that night.

This is entirely plausible, since the nerve centres of the brain during sleep actually send their signals to the body’s organs, in such a way as to dispose them to action. Just as a dream can make you scream out loud, so, if the experience is very engaging, it can make your hands and face ache. There is nothing like the body, in fact, as a reliable witness of the impact – physical and psychic – of the real, because it is not only organic mass, but “flesh” that pulsates and vibrates. The testimony of the body, in this case, is particularly strong, equal to the intensity of the impulse it registered: an impulse that would end up guiding an entire life; indeed, it would end up guiding many.

After having been awake for a long time, because he could not get any more sleep that night, John “wastes no time” telling his brothers about the dream, and they laugh, then to his mother and grandmother, as one day he will tell future readers. Thus begins the conflict of interpretations, which Don Bosco does not hide: the funny one (keeper of

goats) and the irresponsible one (robber chief), the sceptical one (pay no attention to dreams) and the spiritual one (becoming a priest). The one who best approaches the heart of the experience is his mother, already evoked in the dream experience. The one who will give the dream the authoritative coverage it needed to become a public message and an ecclesial prophecy is the one who plays the symbolic role of father in the Church, the Pope.

But we are already beginning to make a faith reading, and for this to unfold more clearly it needs to have a background. The images and dynamics of the dream must therefore be related to what, in the life of the Church, constitutes the “canon” of the language of faith, that is, the Scriptural texts.

3.2. *Biblical background*

Among the biblical texts that must be considered as a hermeneutical criterion for the spiritual experience of the dream at nine years of age, there are obviously, first of all, the ones that refer to the possibility that God communicates with man through the mediation of dream imagination. This conviction is expressed, albeit with due caution, clearly in both the First and New Testaments and has an extensive and articulated series of attestations. For the First Testament suffice it to recall the dreams of Abraham (*Gen* 15:12ff), Jacob (*Gen* 28:10), Joseph (*Gen* 37:5-11; in *Gen* 39-41 Joseph later appears as an interpreter of the dreams of two dignitaries and of Pharaoh), Gideon (*Judg* 6:25ff.), Samuel (*1 Sam* 3:2ff), Nathan (*2 Sam* 7:14 -17) and Solomon (*1 Kings* 3). After the exile, the night visions of Zechariah (*Zech* 1-6) and Daniel (*Dan* 7) – in *Dan* 2 Daniel explains the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar – are described, while the prophet Joel announces that dreams and visions will accompany the time of the outpouring of the spirit: “Then afterwards, I will pour out my spirit upon flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy; your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall have visions” (*Joel* 2:28). The particular importance of this text appears if we take into account that it is taken from *the Acts of the Apostles* in the part that narrates

the miracle of Pentecost (*Acts* 2:17-21), and in the outpouring of the Spirit of the Risen One is seen the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel and in the signs that accompany it the coming of the time in which the prophetic charism spreads among the people of God. Among the First Testament texts still to be counted is the foreboding dream of Judas Maccabeus, who foretells victory before the battle against Nicanor (*2 Mac* 15:11ff.).

The possibility that God speaks to man through the dream is therefore fully accepted in Scripture, even if there are warnings that advise against trusting in deceitful dreams (*Deut* 13:2-4) and every form of divination is categorically prohibited (*Deut* 18:10).

In the New Testament, the *Gospel of Matthew* presents three divine communications in a dream to Joseph (*Mt* 1:20; 2:13; 2:20) and one to the Magi (*Mt* 2:12), and reports that, during the passion of Jesus, Pilate's wife sends a note to him to say: "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him" (*Mt* 27:19). In *the Acts of the Apostles*, night visions are reported by Ananias (*Acts* 9:10-12) and Paul (*Acts* 16:9; 18:9).⁵⁷

The biblical attitude toward dreams is therefore complex: wisely prudent, but not preconceived. It makes room for the possibility that men of God receive particular revelations during sleep, but it categorically excludes that such communications can be requested or solicited.

The most obvious analogy that can be found between a biblical episode and the dream of the boy from the Becchi is probably to be found in the nocturnal vocation of Samuel, described in *1 Sam* 3:1ff. Although the inspired text does not describe a dream of Samuel, the passage is introduced with the statement that in those days "visions were not widespread", thus suggesting that this kind of phenomena

⁵⁷ If, on the one hand, Job affirms that God "in the dream, in the vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on mortals, while they slumber on their beds, then he opens their ears and terrifies them with warnings, that he may turn them aside from their deeds and keep them from pride" (*Job* 33:14-17); on the other hand the prophets warn: "Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you; and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name: I did not send them" (*Jer* 29:8-9; cf. *Jer* 27:9)

belongs to the experience that the young Samuel has during the night, hearing himself repeatedly called by name. On the other hand, the idea of a true night vision while the boy is sleeping is confirmed by the fact that the next morning Samuel “was afraid to tell the vision to Eli” (3:15). For Samuel, too, the experience of a nocturnal call in his sleep is prolonged in other visions. At the end of the nocturnal vocation scene, it is said that “the LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD” (3:21).

Norbert Hofmann⁵⁸ highlighted the parallels that can be found between the dream at nine years of age and the biblical accounts of prophetic vocation, among which the prophet Jeremiah’s dream can be taken as a prototype:

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’ Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’ But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, “I am only a boy”; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.’ Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth (*Jeremiah 1: 4-9*).

The outline of the story of vocation that underlies these verses and that also occurs in other vocation scenes of the First Testament presents this list of elements: description of the situation of departure and encounter with the one who calls, mission, objection of the one called, assurance of help, sign. Comparing the biblical scheme of First Testament vocation and the structure of the dream, Hofmann concludes that between the two “there appears to be a broad convergence not only of a formal nature, but also in terms of content, which can also

⁵⁸ N. HOFMANN, “Der Berufungstraum Don Boscos,” *Schriftenreihe zur Pflege salesianischer Spiritualität* 29 (1991) 1-48. A reduced edition in Italian can be found in: N. HOFMANN, “Il sogno della vocazione di don Bosco,” in ABS, *Bollettino di collegamento* n. 11, 43-65.

be verified in the analysis of the details.”⁵⁹ In particular, among these traits of similarity, those that have more clear theological importance deserve to be highlighted, such as the sudden and unexpected character of the heavenly figure who bears the call; the social character of the mission, which never concerns only the personal affairs of the one called, but a people entrusted to him; the awareness of the one called of his own radical inadequacy due to the disproportion that exists between the greatness of the task and the scarcity of personal abilities. In the case of Jeremiah, the parallelism between the objections of the young prophet – “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy” – and John’s objections in the dream – “Confused and frightened I replied that I was a poor ignorant child, I was unable to talk to those youngsters about religion” – is quite evident. This does not necessarily imply a conscious use of the biblical scheme by the author of the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, since the common nature of the call experience is sufficient to justify the similarity of the text. It should not be surprising, in any case, that biblical stories played an inspiring role, at least implicitly, in Don Bosco’s narrative act.

With respect to the question of the change of “intentional movement” – from an impulsive gesture of repression of evil to a liberating action of guidance towards good – the most evident First Testament reference point is the story of Moses. The Book of Exodus does not speak about the leader’s youth. The only episode that stands between his birth and his coming of age is the killing of the Egyptian and his flight (*Ex 2:11-15*), followed by the narration of the marriage with Zipporah, the daughter of Reuel. The song deserves to be reported, because it offers the possibility of some important considerations:

¹¹ One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labour. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. ¹² He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. ¹³ When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in

⁵⁹ N. HOFMANN, “Il sogno...”, 53.

the wrong, ‘Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?’¹⁴ He answered, ‘Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?’ Then Moses was afraid and thought, ‘Surely the thing is known.’¹⁵ When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well.

The text highlights the growth of Moses, which is not only physical but also spiritual. This growth is expressed in an *outreach* to his brethren, which the text recounts twice: in v. 11 and v. 13. Thus the verb “go out” that will be central in the theology of the Exodus appears for the first time in this passage. It expresses here the spontaneous and natural movement of Moses, a movement that, although born of the will to do justice and repress an evil, is nevertheless realised in a violent and disjointed way with negative outcomes. Therefore, a first “exodus” of Moses is described in these verses, the limits of which are shown because “violence does not eliminate injustice, rather it makes the situation worse than before, and above all because at the origin of this exodus there is still no mission on the part of God – meaningfully in this whole affair he is silent – but only the ideal and enthusiasm of a man.”⁶⁰ Only through the call to the burning bush, the archetypal place for the theme of the revelation of the divine Name, does Moses receive the new inner direction, the movement that will put him at the head of the people and allow him to guide his people in the right path of exit, in the true exodus.

In the New Testament, the same theme of a change of inner direction is recognisable in the story of Paul of Tarsus. At first, his adherence to the Law of God passed down by the fathers is expressed in an aggressive and violent zeal which seeks to suppress what seems incompatible with the religious education received. But, as Paul unleashes his inner drive, he experiences an encounter on the road to Damascus that turns him upside down. It is the encounter with a light that makes him blind

⁶⁰ *Esodo*, a new version, introduction and commentary by M. PRIOTTO (Paoline, Milano 2014) 72.

and leads him to go to the school of Ananias, to learn to understand what God really wants from him in a new way. From now on, Paul will define himself as one “called to be an apostle” (cf. *Rm* 1:1; *1 Cor* 1:1) or “apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (*2 Cor* 1:1; *Eph* 1:1; *Col* 1:1), thus emphasising that this change is not the result of his inner search, the development of his thoughts or reflections, but the fruit of an unpredictable divine intervention which has oriented his life in a new direction. For this reason he, who had been “a persecutor and a man of violence” (*1 Tim* 1:13), learned to “become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some” (*1 Cor* 9:22).

Both the experience of Moses and that of Paul illuminate in a penetrating way the inner transformation required of John to abandon his spontaneous impulse towards reality and his claim to improve it with his own strength, and enter into the movement and style with which God acts in history.

This style is connoted essentially, in the dream as in Scripture, through pastoral symbolism. Although in the dream at nine years of age the terminology of the “shepherd” does not appear explicitly, the imagery that corresponds to it is clearly attested to, especially where the boys for whom John will have to work are represented as meek lambs.⁶¹ This imagery, on the other hand, was familiar to a boy who, like all his companions, spent several hours of the day in pastures taking care of the animals. This daily activity was therefore an element of spontaneous connection with the religious experience of the people of Israel, where pastoral care was one of the fundamental symbols to

⁶¹ Although the terminology of the “shepherd” does not explicitly recur in the story, its symbolism is undoubtedly in the background. Moreover, it will become explicit in a second dream, which the *Memoirs of the Oratory* narrate later, qualifying it as a sort of “appendix to the one I had at Becchi” (MO [2010] 109). In this dream, which Don Bosco has on the night before the second Sunday of October 1844, he once again sees the scene of animals making a din that become meek lambs, but to this is added a wonderful new element, since many lambs “were transformed into shepherds, who as they grew took care of others” (130). The same female figure of the dream when he was nine also returns in this one, in the figure of a “shepherdess”. The pastoral imagery, which in the first dream was present as an implicit background, thus becomes progressively clearer.

express the leadership of the community and the care of its life. The flocks need skilled men to guide them and defend them from fierce beasts; in the same way the people need wise guides, who with dedication and responsibility look after their lives. For this reason, in the First Testament the title of “shepherd” is normally attributed to kings and other roles of responsibility, without forgetting that the two greatest leaders of Israel – Moses and David – were first pastors in the literal sense. The title, however, refers above all to God, because through the shepherds placed as leaders for the people it is He Himself who actually guides him: “Give ear, O shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock” (*Ps* 80:2); “We are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand” (*Ps* 95:7); “The Lord is my shepherd” (*Ps* 23:1); “He will feed his flock like a shepherd and his flock, he will gather the lambs in his arms” (*Is* 40:11). Among all the First Testament texts that make use of this metaphor, Chapter 34 of Ezekiel emerges in particular. In it the prophet expresses a harsh judgement on false pastors, who instead of devoting themselves to the good of the people follow their own interests, and reports God’s decision to take on the role of pastor in the first person (“myself will be the shepherd of my sheep ... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.” This commitment is completed with the promise that God makes to raise up a shepherd according to his heart: “I will set up over them one shepherd... and he shall feed them and be their shepherd” (*Ez* 34:23).

In the New Testament the image of the shepherd, which Jesus uses in parables and which reveals his inner attitude when he is moved before abandoned crowds, reaches its culmination in the great Christological discourse of *Jn* 10. In controversy with the false political and religious guides, described as mercenaries, Jesus presents himself as the “good shepherd”, that is, the authentic shepherd sent by God, who knows his sheep one by one and offers his life for them. The image of the shepherd is therefore one of the privileged forms in which the theology of Christ’s mission is expressed. The Son sent by the Father is the guide through which God leads the whole of humanity to himself, freeing it from evil and introducing it to the pastures of life. This

image, however, is also used in the New Testament for those whom Jesus associates with his mission, the apostles and their successors, establishing them in turn as guides and pastors of his community. Jesus' words to Peter "Feed my lambs" (*Jn* 21:15) are one of the highest expressions of this pastoral mandate. The task that the Risen One entrusts to the Apostle appears as a true participation in the gesture that Jesus himself continues to carry out personally, leading those who are part of his flock through the paths of history.

The biblical depth of the pastoral metaphor casts a significant light on the scene of the dream that presents the meek lambs that run jumping and bleating around the dignified man and the lady. The mission that the boy of the dream receives and that totally exceeds his strength is made possible by the fact that ultimately he must not rely on his strength, but rather must act "inside" the vital space of the Risen One. It is not difficult to understand that the Shepherd who will transform the fierce animals is himself and that, for this reason, the lambs will gather joyfully around him and his Mother, and not around John.

This consideration thus leads us to the subject of the Christological and Mariological symbolism of the dream, to which we have already necessarily referred in the commentary on the sections of the story, so crucial is it to its understanding. We have mentioned the numinous and familiar characteristics that characterise the two figures. They are characterised by a sparkling light, which makes it even impossible to fix his gaze on the man, while it shines from all sides in the woman's mantle. Light is clearly one of the most characteristic features of religious symbolism to express the divine and the transcendent: God himself is "wrapped in light as with a garment" (*Ps* 104:2). However, we do not need to summarise here all the biblical richness of this metaphor, as well as to explain all the scriptural (especially apocalyptic) references that can be found for the traits and actions that describe the two figures. The reader who has the slightest familiarity with Scripture will immediately grasp its suggestions. On the other hand, it is more important, at this point of reflection, to stop to grasp some theological and spiritual themes that the dream presents and that it conveys to readers as a legacy to guard and cultivate.

3.3. *Spiritual themes*

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.

3.3.1. 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” (*Mk* 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. We would still like to stress two more elements clearly evidenced in the dream through the actions first of the children, and then of the meek lambs.

The first element that must be noted is the fact that the youngsters “stopped their fighting, shouting and swearing: they gathered round the man who was speaking.” The theme of “*gathering*” is one of the most important theological and pedagogical elements of Don Bosco’s educational vision. In a famous passage written in 1854, the *Introduction* to the *Draft Regulations for the boys Oratory of St Francis de Sales in Turin in the Valdocco region*,⁶² he presents the ecclesial nature and the theological meaning of the oratory as an institution by quoting the words of the evangelist John: “*Ut filios Dei, qui erant dispersi, congregaret in unum*” (Jn 11:52). The activity of the Oratory is thus placed under the sign of the “eschatological gathering” of the children of God that is the centre of the mission of the Son of God:

It seems to me that the words of the Holy Gospel, which tell us that our divine Saviour came down from heaven to earth to gather together all the children of God scattered all over the world, could be applied literally to the young people of our times.

⁶² The critical text is published in P. BRAIDO (ed.), *Don Bosco educatore. Scritti e testimonianza*, 3rd ed. (LAS, Roma 1996) 108-111.

Youth, “the most vulnerable yet most valuable portion of human society,” are often scattered by the lack of interest of parents in their education, or by the influence of bad companions. The first thing to be done is to provide for the education of these young people precisely by “gathering them, being able to speak to them, instructing them in the moral life.” In these words of the *Introduction* to the *Draft Regulations*, the echo of the dream, now matured in the awareness of the adult educator, is present in a clear and recognisable way. The Oratory is presented as a joyful “gathering” of young people around the one attractive force capable of saving and transforming them, that of the Lord: “These oratories are gatherings in which young people, after they have attended church services, are entertained with pleasant and wholesome recreation.” As a child, Don Bosco understood that “this was the mission of the Son of God; this can only be done by his holy religion.”

The second element that will become a feature of Oratorian spirituality is what is revealed in the dream through the image of the lambs, all of whom were jumping and bleating “as if to welcome that man and lady.” The *pedagogy of celebration* will be a supportive dimension of Don Bosco’s Preventive System. This will seek to offer children the opportunity to breathe fully the joy of faith through the many religious celebrations held throughout the year. Don Bosco will enthusiastically involve the youthful community of the Oratory in the preparation of events, such as theatrical performances and other events that provide a diversion from the fatigue of daily duty, and that will enhance the talents of the boys in music, acting, and gymnastics, thereby guiding their imagination in the direction of positive creativity. If we consider that usually the education proposed in the religious circles of the nineteenth century had a rather austere feel to it and seemed to present devout behaviour as a pedagogical ideal to be achieved, then the healthy festivity of the Oratory stands out as an expression of a humanism open to meeting the psychological needs of young people and one capable of accommodating their creativity. The festive joy that follows the transformation of the animals in the dream is therefore what Salesian pedagogy must aim for.

In fact, celebration and festivity offer human beings the opportunity to escape the constraints of everyday life, to abandon the roles that hem them in their relationships and to bring to light what is essential, what is truly the foundation of the joy of living and allows them to recognise themselves as a community. At the root of festive behaviour, however, there is an inescapable question which concerns its origins. In all cultures, festive behaviour presupposes an authorisation which the participants in the festivities cannot provide of their own account. The feast cannot simply be the result of an autonomous decision; it cannot be celebrated without there being a real reason for doing so, and this reason must arise from an experience that really enlarges the spaces of the heart and introduces freedom. Otherwise, the freedom that is experienced during the celebration will only be an empty outer shell which covers frustrated aspirations; ultimately, such a celebration will be an illusion that can only disappoint. Instead of freedom we experience restriction, instead of community it produces “a herd”, instead of joy there is only noise that imitates joy but does not produce it.

The festive celebrations at the Oratory are centred on that transformation through which the noisy crowd are changed into the lambs of the dream. The centre, the origin and the goal of youthful festive celebrations are the presence of Jesus and his Mother. Don Bosco knows that authentic joy springs from the peace of a conscience that lives in friendship with the Lord. For this reason, he prepared for feast days with novenas that helped introduce the heart of the young to the life of grace, and through the sacrament of Confession which was presented as a true experience of inner healing. The festive celebration is therefore the culminating moment of a true journey of spiritual transformation in which God’s grace is the driving force, while in turn it refers to a future fulfilment which will take place in the joy of heaven, when the transfiguration of humanity will be fully accomplished. Scripture teaches that all creation is, from the outset, oriented towards the Sabbath, the day of God’s rest, which is not an “empty time”, but rather a space for the free gift of encounter and the celebration of friendship. Human beings spontaneously carry within themselves the yearning to enter “God’s Day”, to journey towards a

fullness of life that no longer experiences the weight of existence and the fatigue of everyday life. This tension is particularly alive in the young who search more intensely for play and fun that are the anticipation of a greater happiness. Don Bosco was able to use the creaturely basis and the educational space in this tension to create a spiritual experience of true festivity made possible by the gift of grace.

The link between *recreation in the courtyard* and *celebration in the liturgy* is certainly one of the mature consequences of the intuitions that the dream carried within it. In a passage from *The Memoirs of the Oratory*, describing the liveliness of a typical day among the youngsters, Don Bosco states: “I made use of that unorganised recreation period to introduce my pupils quietly to thoughts of religion and use of the holy sacraments.”⁶³ In the famous Letter from Rome of 1884, which is one of the most valuable expressions of his spiritual wisdom, he identifies a very close relationship between “unwillingness” to engage in recreation and “coldness” in approaching the sacraments. In the mission of the Oratory that the dream entrusts to him, courtyard and church, play and liturgy, healthy fun and a life of grace must be closely linked as two inseparable elements of a single pedagogy.

3.3.2. 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

⁶³ MO-en 136.

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” *Lk* 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” (*Lk* 1:37); and Jesus responds to unbelieving disciples that “what is impossible for mortals is possible for God” (*Lk* 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.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ J.L. MARION, “Nulla è impossibile a Dio,” *Communio* 107 (1989) 57-73, 62.

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.”⁶⁵ Easter means that what is most *real* in history is

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

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.

3.3.3. 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 LaCocque 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.⁶⁶ It is important to note how the biblical text expresses the close unity between

⁶⁶ A. LACOCQUE, "La révélation des révélations: Exode 3:14," in P. Ricoeur - A. LaCocque, *Penser la Bible* (Seuil, Paris 1998) 305.

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.*⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸

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.

⁶⁷ 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).

⁶⁸ A. BERTULETTI, *Dio. Il mistero dell'unico*, 354.

This name, however, will be fully revealed only through Jesus. The so-called priestly prayer of Jesus, which we read in *Jn* 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.”⁶⁹ 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

⁶⁹ J. RATZINGER, *Introduzione al cristianesimo. Lezioni sul simbolo apostolico* (Queriniana, Brescia 1971) 93.

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.”⁷⁰ 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.

3.3.4. 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,

⁷⁰ *Copia Publica Transumpti Processus Ordinaria*, 1146r.

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 (*Lk* 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" (*Mt* 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”,⁷¹ 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.”⁷²

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.”⁷³

⁷¹ C 70.

⁷² C 20.

⁷³ 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.

3.3.5. 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.”⁷⁴

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

⁷⁴ P. BEAUCHAMP, *La legge di Dio* (Piemme, Casale Monferrato 2000) 116.

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” (*Mt 5:39*) or “Put your sword back in its place” (*Mt 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.⁷⁵ “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.

⁷⁵ 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.”

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.

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The year 2024 will mark - with a certain degree of approximation - the bicentenary of Don Bosco's «nine-year dream». This anniversary refers to one of the events that Don Bosco considered the most important in his personal experience and the most decisive for his mission. Indeed, Don Bosco's sons and daughters have always considered this account to be a «sacred» page, full of charismatic suggestions and inspirational force.

The essay has already been published by LAS in 2017 as part of a voluminous study of Don Bosco's dreams, but the bicentenary seems a timely occasion to make it available also in this independent and more accessible form.

Andrea Bozzolo is a Salesian priest with a doctorate in Classics and Theology. He teaches dogmatic theology at the Pontifical Salesian University, where he has also been Rector since 2021. He was an expert at the Synod on Youth and the Synod on Synodality. His most recent LAS publications include *Il rito di Gesù. Temi di teologia sacramentaria*, LAS, Roma 2013 and *La cultura affettiva. Cambiamenti e sfide*, 2022.



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