

DON BOSCO'S DREAM AS A NINE-YEAR-OLD

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Turin, 18 September 2017

English translation: Australia-Pacific Province,
Melbourne 2024

1. Don Bosco's "dreams": introductory questions

Dreams are a very valuable part of Don Bosco's spiritual experience and of his wisdom as an educator. In no way can they be reduced to simple edifying stories. Yet while they do not always have equal value, they are sources of great importance that deserve to be studied and further examined for a whole range of reasons. One first and fundamental reason is that Don Bosco himself attributed an inspirational value to some of them and allowed himself to be guided by them in various ways. As Pietro Stella has authoritatively written:

His dreams [...] were the basis of his convictions and supported his undertakings. Without them some features of the religiosity of Don Bosco and the Salesians would not be explained. Hence they deserve to be carefully studied not only for their pedagogical and moral content but also for what they were in themselves and for the way they were understood by Don Bosco, his boys, his admirers and spiritual heirs.¹

Undoubtedly Don Bosco was prudent in accepting the message of his dreams; he subjected them to lengthy spiritual discernment and never understood them as an alternative approach to the prayerful search for of God's will. He waited many years, in some cases even decades, before telling them to his sons, and only decided to do so when Pius IX, who had perceived in them the sign of a mysterious action of the Spirit, urged him to do so. Despite the caution with which Don Bosco used dreams, it is undeniable that many aspects of the Oratory and the very foundation of the Salesian Congregation are so closely intertwined with them that it would be difficult to understand the spiritual adventure of the priest from Valdocco in all its richness by neglecting their contribution.

A second reason for paying particular attention to these pages is that some of them present themselves as spiritual documents of the highest value, in which it is possible to find, in the evocative form typical of dream symbols, a summary expression of the traits that make up the Salesian charism. It is no coincidence, therefore, that from the beginning of the Congregation some of these dream accounts were used by the first novice director, Fr Giulio Barberis, to introduce aspirants to Salesian life in the original style of apostolic consecration that Don Bosco gave rise to. And indeed, the attitudes that needed to be adopted by those who wanted to live with Don Bosco and assimilate his spirituality were the ones evoked in the images from these dreams. Don Bosco's successors in the leadership of the Congregation and the Salesian Family would often return to some of these texts, and as a result their educational and spiritual message and their power to challenge has resounded across the ages.

* In this paper I am offering a brief summary of a broader study about to be published in a volume dedicated entirely to Don Bosco's dream: A. BOZZOLO (ed.), *I sogni di don Bosco. Esperienza spirituale e sapienza educativa*, LAS, Roma 2017.

1 P. STELLA *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica: Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*, Pas-Verlag, Zürich 1969, 507.

A third reason, finally, can be identified in the fact that these pages often offer access to Don Bosco's inner world, something that is not so easy to find in his other writings. This is something that has perhaps not yet been sufficiently highlighted and whose potential is waiting to be realised. We all know how little Don Bosco was inclined to talk about himself and how careful he was about confiding the movements of his own soul to others. Growing up in a peasant farmer setting where he breathed a love for work and a taste for the practical, Don Bosco was not inclined to dwell on observation of his inner state. His educational and apostolic charism, moreover, urged him to express the quality of his faith through zealous charity rather than through reflection on and analysis of experience. And so we are accustomed to believe that we do not have many documents that allow us to dig into the depths of this priest devoured by apostolic passion, who had neither the time nor the inclination to narrate his own spiritual autobiography. Yet the stories of his dreams – and some of them in particular – are an exception in our view, and while narrating them, Don Bosco could do no less than lay bare his own heart and allow a glimpse of the rich world of his emotions: the fear he was seized by when faced with his mission, dismay in the face of the difficulties, his instinctive attitude of defence in the face of a task that seemed beyond him, the anguish with which he reacts to the sight of sin, but even more the immense joy of perceiving the closeness of Jesus and the protection of Mary, the amazement of discovering himself to be an instrument of divine plans, the wonder at seeing the horizons of his own fruitfulness expanded to the point of influencing ecclesial and social events of the time and embracing the vast boundaries of missionary activity. As he recounts his dreams, Don Bosco inevitably speaks about himself, that profound “self” that so often remained demurely in the shadows when he described the development of his work or when he wrote texts destined for the instruction of God's people or the catechesis of his young people.

While there are many reasons for interest in investigation of this subject, nevertheless we cannot hide the difficulties implied by such an undertaking, and the objections that the scholar must deal with. The first and most radical of these concerns the very *consistency* of the dream experience, which common sense suggests is elusive and ephemeral of its very nature, so much so that rarely does memory succeed in preserving a vivid image of it in wakeful moments. As a result, it is only natural to question which realm of reality the phenomenon of dreaming should be categorised under. What place should be given to it within human consciousness? What dignity and role can be attributed to it as a source of knowledge?

In-depth reflection on these questions, which would seem to undermine any claim to rigorous work, paradoxically proves to be a valuable opportunity for theoretical clarification. Entering into the complex issue of dreams, in fact, it becomes clear that many of the suspicions surrounding it stem from a specific anthropological model that emerged in modernity but does not hold up under further critical examination. They depend, in fact, to a large extent on the modern tendency to identify human consciousness with the vigilant attention of a conscious subject, thus confusing the reality of perception with its degree of awareness and improperly identifying the realm of knowledge with the acquisition of clear and distinct ideas about an analytically investigated object. It is clear that starting from these assumptions, dreams can only be pushed back into a kind of “black hole” of consciousness, as an experience diminished to the limit of unreality. In this way, however, the modern subject reduces their own world only to the time they are awake, and loses contact with what exists in their nocturnal condition, in which individuals certainly do not cease to exist, to feel, to experience – albeit in a different way – their being in the world. Therefore, understanding the phenomenon of dreams in its true nature requires reassessing the underlying theoretical assumptions

that govern the usage of terms like “consciousness”, “knowledge”, and “reality” within the realm of experiences.

If the dream is understood as a dynamic event, as an emerging appearance of an intuited direction, as an image of an evolving intentionality, it is clear that its narrative cannot be a sort of shorthand report, a detailed reproduction that claims to capture every detail in a definitive form. The narrative of the dream is rather an attempt to express and extend the dynamics of an experience perceived in a mode different from conceptual clarity, an experience that can only come to words like in childbirth, while consciousness seeks to understand its meaning within its own perspective on life. The record of words that *seek* to express a *movement* of transcendence is what most faithfully captures the complexity of the nocturnal event. The dream, then, is not matter for a laboratory, nor is the account that conveys it an objective recording. The experience it gives voice to concerns the most intimate regions of our world, which no rationalistic approach is able to name.

A second difficulty, more directly connected with the specific scope of our investigation, is that very different experiences have been handed down to us under the category of “dreams of Don Bosco”: 1. Real extraordinary phenomena (mostly of the type that spiritual theology calls “imaginative visions”); 2. Special dream experiences in which Don Bosco somehow received a word from God, one which inhabits the soul of the righteous person without the event having a miraculous form, that is, without suspending the normal laws of nature; 3. The common dreams of a zealous priest, in which the echo of his perspective on life and consequently a certain moral message, resounded; 4. Didactic stories presented in the literary genre of the dream. Distinguishing which of these categories the different “dreams” should be attributed to is not a simple undertaking but one that is not impossible, at least in theory, provided one approaches the data without prejudice, with patience, humility, and a sense of limitation.

A third problem, contingent but real, concerns the study of Salesian sources. The “dreams of Don Bosco” have come down to us through processes of writing and rewriting that need to be carefully reconstructed from time to time (where possible). While we are lucky enough to have a handwritten account from Don Bosco for some dreams, or a text he personally revised, for other accounts we must entrust ourselves to editing by those who listened to his narration and then wrote it down. Many of these sources still lie in the archives waiting to be patiently studied, so as to arrive at the genealogy of the texts that have merged into the *popular* version, which is usually the one reported in the *Biographical Memoirs*. Historical work on sources therefore remains an essential requirement for any further advancement in research. However, this attention to the intricate process connecting the dream experience, its narration, the sharing of it, and its interpretive evolution within the consciousness of the individual and in the tradition that preserves it, necessitates avoiding simplistic and exaggerated interpretations. These interpretations should not succumb to the illusion of a type of “immediatism” in the relationship between God and humans, nor should they adhere to a historical positivism that seeks to merge the complex facets of human experience into a singular methodology.

2. The dream at nine years of age: narrative structure

The story that Don Bosco tells in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* of the dream he had at the age of nine is one of the most relevant texts of the Salesian tradition. His narration has vitally accompanied the transmission of the charism, becoming one of its most effective symbols and one of its most eloquent concise expressions. This is why the text appeals to readers, who recognise themselves in

that spiritual tradition whose characteristic is a “sacred” written account which claims an uncommon charismatic authority and exerts a consistent performative energy, touching the affections, moving to action and generating identity. The constitutive elements of the Salesian vocation in this written account are both established in an authoritative way, as a testament to be handed down to future generations, and traced back, through the mysterious experience of the dream, to their transcendent origin.

The text provided here is from the critical edition of Antonio da Silva Ferreira, from which we depart only in two small variations.² We divide the account into paragraphs which, for convenience, we accompany with an abbreviation in square brackets.

[C1] It was at that age that I had a dream. All my life this remained deeply impressed on my mind.

[I] In this dream I seemed to be near my home in a very 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] 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] 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.”

² The critical text is in MO 34-37 (Though the English translation is from the New Rochelle 2010 edition, so pp 34-36). The two variations are pointed out by Aldo Giraud in G. BOSCO, *Memorie dell’oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*, LAS, Roma 2011, 62ff., footnote 18.

[IV] 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] 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 or her 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.

It would be important to carry out a detailed narrative analysis of the text, which however we do not have time to carry out now, to bring out some tensions and dynamics of great interest. Therefore, I limit myself to schematically reporting the structure that the text reveals:

[I] *initial situation*

1. Spatial placement of the dream
2. Deviant behaviour of the children
3. John’s spontaneous reaction

[II] *section with the dignified man*

1. Appearance of the dignified man and his features
2. His command/threefold teaching:
 - a. placing himself at the head of children (indirect speech)
 - b. not by blows...
 - c. start right away...
3. Different reactions of John and the children

[III] *meanwhile, an exchange*

- “Who are you ...?”
- “Where, by what means...?”
- “Who are you...?”
- “Tell me your name”

[IV] *section with the lady of stately appearance*

1. vision of the lady and her features
2. her command/threefold teaching intertwined with the symbolic scene:
 - * vision of wild animals
 - a. This is the field of your work
 - b. Make yourself humble, strong and energetic
 - c. What you will see...you must do
 - * change of wild animals into meek lambs
3. John’s reaction and the Lady’s assurance he will understand in the future.

3. Core theological and spiritual concepts

A commentary on the theological and spiritual concepts in the dream at nine years of age could have such wide-ranging developments as to include a full treatment of “Salesianity”. Indeed, if it is interpreted from the point of view of the history of its effects, the dream opens up countless avenues for exploring the pedagogical and apostolic traits that characterised the life of St John Bosco and the charismatic experience that originated from him. We choose to focus on five avenues of spiritual

reflection that concern (1) the oratory mission, (2) the call to do the impossible, (3) the mystery of the Name, (4) maternal mediation and, finally, (5) the power of meekness.

3.1 The oratory mission

The dream at nine years of age is filled with children. They are present from the first to the last scene and are the beneficiaries of everything that happens. Their presence is characterised by joy and play, which are typical of their age, but also by disorder and negative behaviours. Therefore, in this dream at nine years of age, children are not the romantic image of an enchanted age as yet touched by the evils of the world, nor do they correspond to the postmodern myth of youth as a stage of spontaneous activity and perpetual willingness to change, which should be preserved in eternal adolescence. The children of the dream are extraordinarily “real”, both when they appear with their own physical features and when they are symbolically depicted in the form of animals. They play and quarrel, have fun laughing and ruin it with swearing, just like in reality. They seem neither innocent, as spontaneous pedagogy imagines them, nor capable of being their own masters as Rousseau thought. From the moment they appear, in a “very large yard”, which foreshadows the large courtyards or playgrounds of future Salesian oratories, they invoke the presence and action of someone. The impulsive gesture of the dreamer, however, is not the right intervention; the presence of an Other is necessary.

The appearance of the Christ figure, as we can now openly call him, is intertwined with the vision of the children. He who in the Gospel said “Let the little children come to me” (Mk 10:14), comes to show the dreamer the attitude with which the children should be approached and accompanied. He appears majestic, manly, strong, with traits that clearly highlight his divine and transcendent nature. His way of acting is marked by confidence and power and manifests full lordship over the things that take place. The dignified man, however, does not instil fear, but rather brings peace where before there was confusion and commotion, manifests benevolent understanding in John’s regard and directs him on a path of gentleness and love.

The *reciprocity* between these figures – the children on the one hand and the Lord (to whom the Mother is then added) on the other – defines the contours of the dream. The emotions that John experiences in the dream experience, the questions he asks, the task he is called to perform, the future that opens up before him are totally bound to the dialectic between these two poles. Perhaps the most important message that the dream conveys to him, what he probably understood first because it was imprinted in his imagination, before even understanding it in a reflective way, is that those figures refer to each other and that *he will not be able to dissociate them throughout 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 place where he finds his identity. The score of his life will be all written in the key that this generative theme gives him: modulating it in all its harmonic potential will be his mission, into which he will have to pour all his gifts of nature and grace.

The dynamics of John’s life are therefore portrayed in the dream-vision as a continuous movement, a spiritual back and forth between the children and the Lord. From the group of children among whom John zealously throws himself, he must allow himself to be drawn to the Lord who calls him by name, and then depart from the One who sends him and position himself, with a completely different style, at the head of his friends. Even though he receives punches in his dream from some very strong boys, such that he still feels the pain upon waking up, and even though he hears words from the dignified man that leave him

bewildered, his coming and going is not pointless but rather a journey that gradually transforms him and brings an energy of life and love to the youngsters.

That all this takes place in a *yard* (courtyard or playground) is highly significant and has a clear anticipatory value, since the Oratory courtyard or playground will become the privileged place and exemplary symbol of Don Bosco's mission. The whole scene is placed in this setting, both vast (very large yard) and familiar (close to home). The fact that the vocational vision does not have a sacred place or a heavenly location as a background, but the surroundings in which the children live and play, clearly indicates that the *divine initiative assumes their world as a place of encounter*. The mission entrusted to John, even if it is clearly addressed in a catechetical and religious sense ("to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue"), has education as its habitat. The association of the Christ figure with the large yard, and the dynamics of the game, which certainly a nine-year-old boy could not have "constructed", goes beyond the usual religious imagery and carries a profound and mysterious inspiration. It encompasses the entire essence of the Incarnation, where the Son takes on human form to offer us his, emphasising that nothing human needs to be sacrificed in order to make room for God.

The yard, then, speaks of *the closeness of divine grace to the way youngsters "perceive" things*. To embrace this there is no need to leave one's own age behind, neglect its needs, or force its rhythms. When Don Bosco, by then an adult, would write in the *Giovane provveduto* (The Companion of Youth) that one of the devil's snares is to make young people think that holiness is incompatible with their desire to be joyful and with the exuberant freshness of their vitality, he would only be giving back in mature form the lesson he grasped in the dream, which later became a central element of his spiritual teaching. The courtyard or playground also conveys the need to *understand education from its deepest core*, which concerns the attitude of the heart towards God. There, the dream teaches, there is not only room for an original openness to grace, but also for the abyss of resistance, where the ugliness of evil and the violence of sin lurk. This is why the educational horizon of the dream is frankly religious, and not just philanthropic, and it enacts the symbolism of conversion, and not just that of self-development.

In the yard of the dream, filled with children and inhabited by the Lord, what will in the future be the pedagogical and spiritual dynamics of Oratory playground and courtyards opens up to John. We would like to once more highlight two features clearly evoked in the actions that the children do first of all, and later the meek lambs.

The first should be noted in the fact that the youngsters "stopped their fighting, shouting and swearing; they gathered round the man who was speaking". This question of "gathering" is one of the most important theological and pedagogical pillars of Don Bosco's view of education. In a famous work written in 1854, the *Introduzione al Piano di Regolamento per l'Oratorio maschile di S. Francesco di Sales in Torino nella regione Valdocco* (The Introduction to the Draft Regulations for the Boys' Oratory of St Francis de Sales in the Valdocco district of Turin) he presents the ecclesial nature and theological meaning of the oratory as an institution, quoting the words of John the Evangelist: "*Ut filios Dei, qui erant dispersi, congregaret in unum*" (Jn 11:52). The Oratory activity is thus placed under the banner of the eschatological gathering the children of God which was at the heart of the mission of the Son of God:

The words of the holy Gospel that make us know that the divine Saviour came from heaven to earth to gather together all the children of God, scattered across various parts of the earth, words that can literally be applied to the youth of our day.

Youth, “that part of human society which is so exposed and yet so rich in promise” is often found to be dispersed and adrift due to the educational disinterest of parents or the influence of bad company. The first thing to do to provide education for these young people is precisely to “gather them, be able to speak to them, teach them morals.” In these words of the *Introduction to the Draft Regulations*, the echo of the dream, which has matured in the consciousness of the educator who is now an adult, is clearly and recognisably present. The oratory is presented as a joyous “gathering” of young people around the only attracting force capable of saving and transforming them, that of the Lord: “These oratories are certain gatherings in which youth is engaged in pleasant and honest recreation after attending sacred church functions.” From childhood, in fact, Don Bosco understood that “this was the mission of the Son of God; only his holy religion can do this.”

The second element that would become an identifying feature of Oratory spirituality is what is revealed in the dream through the image of the lambs running “as if to welcome that man and lady.” The *pedagogy of celebration* will be a fundamental dimension of Don Bosco’s preventive system, which will see in the numerous religious commemorations throughout the year the opportunity to offer young people the possibility of fully embracing the joy of faith. Don Bosco will know how to enthusiastically involve the youthful community of the oratory in the preparation of events, theatrical performances, celebrations that allow for a break from daily duties, appreciating the talents of his boys in music, acting, gymnastics, to guide their imagination towards positive creativity. Taking into account that the education proposed in religious environments of the 19th century usually had a rather austere tone, seemingly presenting devout composure as an ideal pedagogical goal, the lively festivities of the oratory stand out as an expression of a humanism open to understanding the psychological needs of the youngster and capable of supporting his desire to be proactive. The celebration that follows the metamorphosis of the animals in the dream is therefore what Salesian pedagogy should aim for.

3.2. The call to do the impossible

While the dream ends with celebration for the youngsters, for John it ends in dismay and crying. We can only be surprised at this outcome. The common idea, at least expressing it in simplistic terms, is that God’s visitations are exclusively bearers of joy and consolation. It is paradoxical, therefore, that for an apostle of joy, for the one who as a seminarian would found the “society for a good time” and who as a priest would teach his boys that holiness consists in “being very cheerful”, the vocational scene ends with weeping.

This may certainly indicate that the joy spoken of is not pure leisure and simple carefreeness but inner resonance to the beauty of grace. As such, it can only be achieved through challenging spiritual battles which, to a large extent, Don Bosco would have to pay the price of for the benefit of his boys. In this way he himself would relive that exchange of roles that has its roots in the paschal mystery of Jesus and that continues, as was the case for 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 being “workers with you for your joy” (2 Cor 1:24).

The disturbance with which the dream closes, however, primarily recalls the dizzying feeling that the great biblical figures experience in the face of the divine vocation that manifests itself in their lives, urging them in a completely unpredictable and disconcerting direction. The Gospel of Luke states that even the Blessed Virgin Mary, upon hearing the words of the angel, felt a sense of

profound inner turmoil (“But she was much perplexed by his words” Lk 1:29). Isaiah felt lost in the presence of God’s holiness in the temple (Is 6), Amos compared the power of the divine Word, by which he was seized, to the roar of a lion (Am 3:8), and Paul experienced a complete existential overturning upon encountering the Risen One on the road to Damascus. While testifying to the allure of an encounter with God that forever seduces, at the moment of the call, biblical figures seem hesitant and fearful in the face of something that surpasses them, rather than diving headlong into the adventure of the mission.

The bewilderment that John experiences in the dream seems similar. It arises from the paradoxical nature of the mission that is assigned to him and that he does not hesitate to describe as “impossible” (“Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?”). The adjective may seem “exaggerated”, as sometimes the reactions of children are, especially when they express a sense of inadequacy in the face of a challenging task. But this element of child psychology does not seem sufficient to illuminate the content of the dream dialogue and the depth of the spiritual experience it communicates. Especially since John truly has the stuff to be a leader, and an excellent memory which will allow him in the months following the dream to immediately start doing a bit of oratory, entertaining his friends with acrobatic feats, games and repeating the sermons of the parish priest to them by word for word. This is why, in the words with which he frankly declares that he is “unable to talk about religion” to those youngsters, it will be good to hear the distant echo of Jeremiah’s objection to the divine vocation: “I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy” (Jer 1:6).

It is not at the level of natural attitudes that the demand for the impossible is played out here, but on the level of what can fall within the horizon of reality, of what can be expected based on one’s image of the world, of what falls within the limits of experience. *Beyond this frontier*, the *region of the impossible* opens up, which is, however, Biblically the space of God’s action. It is “impossible” for Abraham to have a child by a sterile and elderly woman like Sarah; it is “impossible” for the Virgin to conceive and give the world the Son of God made man; salvation seems “impossible” to 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. Yet Abraham hears himself answer: “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 answers the unbelieving disciples that “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God” (Lk 18:27).

The supreme place where the theological question of the impossible is posed, however, is the decisive moment of salvation history, that is, the Paschal drama in which the frontier of the impossible to be overcome is the dark abyss of evil and death. It is *in this space generated by the resurrection* that the impossible becomes actual reality. It is there that the dignified man of the dream, shining with Paschal 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 seem like the words with which parents urge their reluctant children to do something they do not feel capable of or do not want to do. “Obey and you will see that you can do it” Mum or Dad say: the psychology of the child’s world 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 fully hidden in his obedience*. The dignified man who commands something impossible knows through his human experience that impossibility is the place where the Father operates with his Spirit, provided that the door is opened to him through one’s obedience.

John, of course, remains perturbed and bewildered, but this is the attitude that the human being experiences when faced with the paschal impossible, when faced with the miracle of miracles, of which every other salvific event is a sign. 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 of all the very image of the Lord, whose face is so bright that John cannot look at it. On that face shines, in fact, a divine light that paradoxically produces darkness. Then there are the words of the man and the lady which, while they clearly explain what John must do, nevertheless leave him confused and frightened. Finally, there is a symbolic illustration, through the metamorphosis of the animals, which however leads to even greater incomprehension. 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 lady of stately appearance postpones the moment of understanding further: “In good time you will understand everything.”

This certainly means that only through the execution of what is already graspable from the dream, that is, through possible obedience, will the space for clarifying its message open up more broadly. In fact, it does not consist simply of an idea to be explained, but of a performative word, an effective expression, which, by realising its operative power, manifests its deepest meaning.

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 centre of the dual tension between possible and impossible and between known and unknown, and also, materially, at the centre of the dream narrative, is the theme of the mysterious Name of the dignified man. The tightly constructed dialogue of section III is, in fact, woven of questions that counter the same theme: “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 the Name, but in reality the latter will not tell him. It remains shrouded in mystery to 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’ vocation at the burning bush (Ex 3). This is one of the central texts of the Old Testament revelation and lays the foundations for all religious thought in Israel. André LaCoque proposed describing it as the “revelation of revelations” because it is the principle of unity of the narrative and the prescriptive structure that qualifies the narrative of the Exodus, the mother-cell of the entire Scripture.³ It is important to note that the biblical text develops in close unity the condition of slavery of the people in Egypt, the vocation of Moses and the theophanic revelation. The revelation of the Name of God to Moses does not occur as the transmission of information to be known or data to be acquired, but as the manifestation of a personal presence which intends to give rise to a stable relationship and generate a process of liberation. In this respect, *the revelation of the divine Name is oriented in the direction of the covenant and the mission*. “The Name is both theophanic and performative, for those who receive it are not merely ushered into the divine secret, but are the recipients of an act of salvation.”⁴

3 A. LACOCQUE, *La révélation des révélations: Exode 3,14*, in P. RICOUER - A. LACOCQUE, *Penser la Bible*, Seuil, Paris 1998, 305.

4 A. BERTULETTI, *Dio, il mistero dell'unico*, Queriniana, Brescia 2014, 354.

The Name, in fact, unlike a concept, does not merely designate an essence to be thought of, 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 announcement of an incomparable ontological richness, that of Being that can never be adequately described, 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 the Being that he is. The revelation of the Personal Name is therefore an act of speech that challenges the recipient, asking him to position himself towards the speaker. Only in this way, in fact, is it possible to grasp its meaning. This revelation, moreover, is explicitly placed as the foundation for the liberating mission that Moses must carry out: “I AM has sent me to you” (Ex 3:14). By presenting himself as a personal God, and not a God tied to a territory, and as the God of promise, and not purely as the lord of immutable repetition, Yahweh will be able to sustain the people’s journey, their journey towards freedom. He therefore has a Name that makes itself known insofar as it arouses covenant and moves history.

“Tell me your name”: this question of John’s cannot be answered simply through a formula, a name intended as an external label of the person. To know the Name of the One who speaks in the dream, it is not enough to receive information, but it is necessary to take a position faced with what he says. That is, it is necessary to enter into that relationship of intimacy and surrender which the Gospels describe as “staying” with Him. This is why when the first disciples ask Jesus about his identity – “Master, where do you live?” or more literally, “where do you stay?” – he replies “Come and see” (Jn 1:38ff.). Only by “staying” with him, dwelling in his mystery, entering into his relationship with the Father, can we truly know Who he is.

The fact that the dream character does not respond to John with a name, as we would do by presenting what is written on our identity card, indicates that his Name cannot be known as a purely external designation, but shows its truth only when it seals an experience of alliance and mission. John will therefore know that very Name by going through the dialectic of the possible and the impossible, of clarity and darkness; he will know it by fulfilling the Oratory mission entrusted to him. He will know Him, therefore, bringing Him within himself, thanks to a story experienced as one that He inhabits. One day Cagliari 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 one a perfect idea of the love that the Saviour brought to children” (Cagliari 1146r). This indicates that the Name of the dignified man, whose face was so bright as to blind the dreamer, has really entered like a *seal* into the life of Don Bosco. He had the *experientia cordis* through the journey of faith and following Christ. This is the only way in which the dream question could be answered.

3.4 Maternal mediation

In the uncertainty about the One who sends him, the only firm point to which John can cling in the dream is the reference to a mother, indeed to two: that of the dignified man and his own. The answers to his questions, in fact, sound like this: “I am the son of the one whom your mother taught you to greet three times a day” and then “Ask my mother what my name is.”

That *the space of possible enlightenment is Marian and maternal* is undoubtedly something worth reflecting on. Mary is the place in which humanity realises the highest correspondence to the light that comes from God and the creaturely space in which God delivered his Word made flesh to the world. It is also indicative that upon awakening from the dream, the one who best understands its meaning and purpose is John’s mother, Margaret. On different levels, but according to a real

analogy, the Mother of the Lord and the mother of John represent the female face of the Church, which shows itself capable of spiritual intuition and is the womb in which the great missions are managed and given birth.

It is therefore not surprising that the two mothers are juxtaposed with each other and precisely at the point where it is a question of getting to the bottom of the issue the dream presents, namely the knowledge of the One who entrusts John with the mission of a lifetime. As with the yard near the house, so also with the mother, in the dream intuition the spaces of the most familiar and everyday experience open up and show an unfathomable depth as they unfold. The common gestures of prayer, the Angelus greeting that was customary three times a day in every family, suddenly appear for what they are: dialogue with the Mystery. John thus discovers that at his mother's school he has already established a bond with the stately Lady who can explain everything to him. Therefore, there is already a sort of female channel that allows us to overcome the apparent distance between "a poor ignorant child" and the "nobly-dressed" man. This feminine, Marian and maternal mediation will accompany John throughout his life and will mature in him as a particular disposition to venerate the Virgin with the title of Help of Christians, becoming her apostle for her children and for the entire Church.

The first help that Our Lady offers him is what a child naturally needs: a teacher. What she has to teach him is a discipline that makes him truly wise, without which "all wisdom is foolishness." It is the discipline of faith, which consists in giving credit to God and obeying even in the face of the impossible and the unknown. Mary conveys it as the highest expression of freedom and as the richest source of spiritual and educational fruitfulness. To carry within oneself the impossible of God and to walk in the darkness of faith is, in fact, the art in which the Virgin excels above every creature.

She had an arduous apprenticeship in her *peregrinatio fidei*, marked not infrequently by darkness and misunderstanding. Just think of the episode of the finding 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 answers 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." Even less likely did Mary understand when her motherhood, solemnly announced from on high, was expropriated so that it became a 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). At the foot of the cross then, when it became dark over the whole earth, the Here am I spoken at the moment of her call took on the contours of extreme renunciation, separation from the Son in whose place she was to receive sinful children for whom she let her heart be pierced by the sword.

Therefore, when the stately Lady of the dream begins to carry out her task as a teacher and, placing a hand on John's head, says "In good time you will understand everything", she draws these words from the spiritual depths of the faith that at the foot of the cross made her the mother of every disciple. John must remain under her discipline throughout his life: as a young man, as a seminarian, as a priest. In a particular way he must remain there when his mission takes on contours that at the time of the dream he could not imagine; when, that is, he must become in the heart of the Church the founder of religious families destined for the youth of every continent. Then John, by then Don Bosco, would also understand the deeper meaning of the gesture with which the dignified man gave his mother to him as a "teacher".

When a young man enters a religious family, he is welcomed by a novice master to whom he is entrusted to introduce him to the spirit of the Order and help him assimilate it. *When it comes to a Founder*, who must receive from the Holy Spirit the original light of the charism, the Lord arranges for his own mother, the Virgin of Pentecost and immaculate model of the Church, to act as his Teacher. She alone, the “full of grace”, understands all charisms from within, as someone who knows all languages and speaks them as if they were her own.

In fact, the woman of the dream knows how to indicate to him in a precise 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 becoming meek lambs and with the indication of the qualities that John will have to develop to carry out his mission: “humble, strong, energetic”. These three adjectives, which designate the vigour of the spirit (humility), of character (strength) and of the body (energy) are quite concrete. It was the advice that he would give to a young novice who has a long experience of oratory and knows what the “field” in which he has to “work” requires. The Salesian spiritual tradition has carefully preserved the words of this dream that refer to Mary. The Salesian Constitutions clearly allude to this when they state: “The Virgin Mary showed Don Bosco his field of labour among the young”,⁵ or remind us that “Under the guidance of Mary his Teacher, Don Bosco lived with the boys of the first Oratory a spiritual and educational experience which he called the ‘Preventive System’”.⁶

Don Bosco recognised Mary as having a decisive role in his educational system, seeing in her motherhood the highest inspiration of what it means to “prevent”. The fact that Mary intervened from the first moment of his charismatic vocation, that she played such a central role in this dream, will make Don Bosco forever understand that she *belongs to the roots of the charism and that if this inspiring role is not recognised, the charism is not understood in its genuineness*. Given as a teacher to John in this dream, it must also be so for all those who share his vocation and mission. As the successors of Don Bosco never tired of affirming, the “Salesian vocation is inexplicable, both in its birth and in its development and always, without the maternal and uninterrupted assistance of Mary.”⁷

3.5 The power of meekness (gentleness)

“You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love”: these words are undoubtedly the best known expression of the dream at nine years of age, the one that somehow summarises the message and conveys its inspiration. They are also the first words that the dignified man says to John, interrupting his violent effort to put an end to the disorder and swearing of his companions. It is not only a formula that conveys an ever valid sapiential sentence, but an expression that specifies the way to carry out a command (“he told me to take charge of these children and added these words”) with which, as has been said, the intentional movement of the dreamer’s consciousness is reoriented. The fervour for blows must become the momentum of charity, the disordered energy of repressive intervention must make way for meekness and gentleness.

The term “meekness” gains significant importance here, which is even more striking when one considers that the corresponding adjective will be used at the end of the dream to describe the lambs

5 C. 8.

6 C. 20.

7 E. VIGANÒ , *Mary renews the Salesian Family of Don Bosco*, AGC 289 (1978) 1-35, 28.

rejoicing around the Lord and Mary. The juxtaposition suggests an observation that is not without relevance: *for those who were wild animals to become “meek” lambs, their educator must first become meek*. Both, although starting from different points, must undergo a *metamorphosis* to enter the Christological orbit of gentleness and charity. For a group of rowdy and quarrelsome children, it is easy to understand what this change requires. For an educator, perhaps it is less evident. In fact, the educator is already on the side of goodness, positive values, order, and discipline: what change can be asked of this person?

A theme arises here that will have a decisive development in the life of Don Bosco, first of all in terms of the style of the action and, to a certain extent, also in terms of theoretical reflection. This is the orientation that leads Don Bosco to *categorically exclude an educational system based on repression and punishment*, in order to choose with conviction a method that is fully based on love and that Don Bosco will call the “preventive system”. Beyond the different pedagogical implications that derive from this choice, for which we refer to the rich specific bibliography, it is interesting here to highlight the theological and spiritual dimension that underlies this approach, of which the words of the dream are in some way the intuition and the trigger.

Placing himself on the side of good and “law”, the educator may be tempted to organise his action with the children according to a logic that aims to establish order and discipline essentially through rules and norms. However, even the law carries within itself an ambiguity that makes it insufficient to guide freedom, not only because of the limitations that every human rule possesses, but also because of a limitation that is ultimately of a theological order. All of Paul’s reflection is a great meditation on this subject, since Paul had perceived in 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). The same Law given by God, Scripture teaches, is not enough to save man, if there is no other personal Principle that integrates and internalises it in the heart of man. Paul Beauchamp happily sums up this dynamic when he states: “The Law is preceded by a *You are loved* and followed by a *You will love*. You are loved: the foundation of the law, and *you will love*: its overcoming.”⁸ Without this foundation and this overcoming, the law bears in itself the signs of a violence that reveals its insufficiency to generate that good that it, too, orders to be done. To return to the scene of the dream, the punches and blows that John gives in the name of a sacrosanct commandment of God, which forbids blasphemy, reveal the insufficiency and ambiguity of any moralising impulse that is not inwardly reformed from above.

It is therefore also necessary for John, and for those who will learn preventive spirituality from him, to convert to 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. Only the Spirit, in fact, allows us to move from a formal and external justice (be it the classic one 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 internally attracted and earned. Don Bosco will show that he has this awareness when in his writing on the *Preventive System* he frankly declares that it is entirely based on the words of Saint Paul: “*Charitas benigna est, patiens est; omnia suffert, omnia sperat, omnia sustinet.*”

Of course, “winning over” 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 goodness of a proposal that renounces denouncing the “ugliness of sin” and presenting the “value of virtue”. Conquering the

8 P. BEAUCHAMP *La legge di Dio*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 2000, 116.

good by simply showing the strength of truth and love, witnessed to through dedication “to the last breath”, is the epitome of an educational method that is at the same time a true spirituality.

It is no wonder that John in the dream resists entering this movement and asks to understand well who is the one imparting it. But when he has understood, making that message first an Oratory-based institution and then also a religious family, he will think that telling the dream in which he learned that lesson will be the most beautiful way to share with his sons the most authentic meaning of his experience. It is God who guided everything, it is He himself who imparted the initial movement of what would become the Salesian charism.

SUMMARY OF BOOKS ON DON BOSCO'S DREAMS

(All in Italian. Only 9 in the list below has been translated into English)

1. *Il sogno oltre l'inconscio. Quell'inquieta certezza che vien dal sonno* (L. DE PAULA)
2. *I sogni nella storia di Giuseppe (Gn 37; 40-41)* (M. PRIOTTO)
3. *Sogno e segno. Il rapporto fra sogno e testo nella Scrittura a partire da Gdc 7,9-15* (M. PAVAN)
4. *La speciale dignità e missione conferita da Dio a Giuseppe di Nazaret nella narrativa dei sogni di Mt 1-2* (M. ROSSETTI)
5. *Il sogno come elemento letterario e spazio teologico nei Padri della Chiesa* (C. BESSO)
6. *Lo stato degli studi sui "sogni" di don Bosco e prospettive di ricerca* (A. GIRAUDO)
7. *Echi di un mondo. Note sul contesto storico-spirituale riflessione nei sogni di don Bosco* (E. BOLIS)
8. *L'immaginario dei sogni di don Bosco. Ipotesi per una poetica onirica* (M. BERGAMASCHI)
9. *Il sogno dei nove anni. Questioni ermeneutiche e lettura teologica* (A. BOZZOLO)
10. *Una casa, una chiesa, un persogolato di rose. Le cinque visite come rivelazione della forma comunitaria del carisma salesiano* (S. MAZZER)
11. *Il sacramento della confessione nei sogni di don Bosco* (R. CARELLI)
12. *«Io ti darò la Maestra». La presenza di Maria nei sogni di don Bosco* (L. POCHER)
13. *La morte e l'aldilà nei sogni di don Bosco. Tra spiritualità e pedagogia* (M. WIRTH)
14. *Le citazioni bibliche nel sogno dei "dieci diamanti"* (F. MOSETTO)
15. *L'uso educativo dei sogni da parte di don Bosco: contesti, processi, intenzioni* (M. VOJTÁŠ)
16. *Recezione e trasmissione dei sogni di don Bosco da parte di don Giulio Barberis: due episodi singolari* (M. FISSORE)
17. *I sogni di don Bosco nel contesto della oralità negro-africana* (F. GATTERRE)
18. *La forza ispiratrice dei sogni missionari di don Bosco. Riflessioni ed esperienze di un salesiano in Cina* (M. FERRERO)
19. *Iconografia dei sogni di don Bosco* (N. MAFFIOLI)