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**“The perennial significance of the foundational dream of**

**St John Bosco and contemporary resonances in the teaching of**

**Pope Francis especially as directed to the young.”**

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**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of MA (Christian Spirituality)**

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**ABSTRACT**

**THE PERENNIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FOUNDATIONAL DREAM OF ST JOHN BOSCO**

The year 2024 is of particular significance for the worldwide Salesian Family, a spiritual family made up of religious priests, Sisters and Brothers, and lay people which, inspired by the enduring charism of St John Bosco, is committed to furthering his mission on behalf of today’s young people. The year 2024 marks the bicentenary of the dream that John had at the age of nine and that had a profound and lasting impact on his own vocational journey and on the spirituality of the 32 Religious Groups which today make up the Salesian Family. It is the aim of this dissertation to explore the perennial significance of the ‘foundational dream’ of St John Bosco for the Salesian Family and the Church at large.

The dissertation has four chapters. The chapter 1 first examines some significant events in the early life of John Bosco and then those events leading to the founding and subsequent world-wide expansion of the Salesian Congregation and the Salesian Family. The chapter 2 presents the background to John’s foundational dream and then explores in some detail its contents and their implication for his future ministry as a priest. The chapter 3 examines in greater detail three key elements identified in the dream: [1] the sacramental nature of ‘Salesian presence’, [2] the crucial role of loving kindness in building confidence in relationships with the young, [3] play and recreation as tools of youthful spiritual formation. The chapter 4 explores the role of dreams in the journey of young people to spiritual maturity with particular reference to the teaching of Pope Francis, especially in his Apostolic Exhortation, ‘*Christus Vivit’*, and the implications of his call to the young to ‘*dream big’*.

The dissertation will conclude by briefly evaluating the extent to which the foundational dream of St John Bosco remains perennially significant in the context of the Salesian mission.

**DISSERTATION**

**Chapter One: Setting the Scene**

* 1. **Introduction**

One night, two hundred years ago, in Becchi, a cluster of nondescript farm dwellings in the north Italian province of Piedmont, a nine-year-old boy had a dream. The name of the dreamer was John Melchior Bosco; his dream was a groundbreaking event for, despite the advice of Nonna Zucca, his paternal grandmother, who told him that he should ‘pay no attention to dreams’, John did not forget his dream (Bosco 1989 p. 20). In fact, it stayed with him for the rest of his life, and, what is more, through God’s providence, John was inspired to share his dream with others so that over time what he dreamt of became a reality. Today, John’s dream lives on in the worldwide Salesian Family, and John himself is universally honoured as ‘Don Bosco’, the saintly ‘Father and Teacher of the Young’.

**1.2 Aims**

The aims of this dissertation are:

[1] to explore the more important influences on John Bosco’s vocational journey and the events that led to the foundation of a new religious congregation, the Salesians of Bosco, and the growth of the worldwide Salesian Family;

[2] to analyse the nature and constituent elements of John Bosco’s boyhood dream;

[3] to explore three key elements – Salesian presence, loving kindness, play and recreation - that the dream provided for the development of Don Bosco’s ‘Preventive System’ and its impact on the Salesian way of educating the young;

[4] to examine the resonances between Don Bosco’s foundational dream and the teaching of Pope Francis on the place of dreams in the lives of today’s young people and the challenge for them to ‘dream big’.

**1.3 Don Bosco – His Early Life and Important Influences**

John Melchior Bosco was born in August 1815, a couple of months after Napoleon’s epic defeat at the Battle of Waterloo. His parents, Francis and Margaret, were share-croppers whose hard work guaranteed that their three sons and Francis’ elderly mother, Nonna Zucca, had the food and accommodation they needed. Tragedy struck the young family when John was less than two years old; his father died a few days after contracting pneumonia. In his autobiographical *‘Memoirs of the Oratory’,* Don Bosco recalled the impact of his father’s death.

One thing only do I remember, and it is my earliest memory. We were all going out from the room where he had died, and I insisted on staying behind. My grieving mother addressed me, "Come, John, come with me," "If papa's not coming, I don't want to come," I answered. "My poor son, come with me; you no longer have a father," my mother replied. (Bosco 1989 p. 7)

Francis’ untimely death placed a heavy burden on Margaret’s shoulders. But she was a strong woman, a woman of faith, determined to do her best for her family. ‘Her outstanding qualities were her even temper, sense of commitment and piety’ (Wirth 1982 p. 4). Margaret became John’s first spiritual guide; from her he learned the meaning given to life by Christian faith and practice. Margaret taught him his prayers, recited in common with the other members of the family; she prepared him for his first confession and also assisted him at the important moment of his first communion.

It was under Margaret’s wise and prudent guidance that John learned, little by little, how to overcome the negative aspects of his character, and to direct his creative energy and his apostolic zeal to the spiritual and moral wellbeing of his companions. As an old man John would recall how, when he was just five years old, he had wanted to gather boys together for catechism classes. After his dream at the age of nine, John became more concerned than before for his companions’ welfare as he recounts in the *Memoirs*:

When I was ten years old, I did what was possible at my age and formed a kind of festive oratory. Though I was still pretty small, I was studying my companions' characters. […] This gift won me the love and esteem of the boys my own age, and I was thus in demand as judge or friend. For my own part, I tried always to help and never to hurt. So my companions were quite fond of me. (Bosco 1989 p. 27)

When, at the age of 14, John had almost despaired of finding a way to resume his elementary schooling, he had the good fortune to meet an elderly priest, Don Giovanni Calosso, living in semi retirement at Morialdo, a hamlet within walking distance of John’s home at Becchi. John was later to describe Don Calosso as “his greatest benefactor” for the invaluable help he gave him. For twelve months until his untimely death, Don Calosso provided the supportive fatherly presence and spiritual accompaniment for which John had been unconsciously looking. ‘It was then that I came to realise what it was to have a regular spiritual director, a faithful friend of one's soul’ (Bosco 1989 p. 36). With Don Calosso’s encouragement, John made regular use of the sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion and began his study of Latin.

John was already sixteen when at last he was able to begin his secondary schooling at the Royal College in Chieri. It proved to be a very positive time for John. He soon made some firm friends among his fellow students and with them formed the *Società dell’allegria,* a small group whose main purpose was to help its member to grow in virtue and to deepen the knowledge of their faith. John also received considerable support and encouragement from both his confessor and from his class teachers, the great majority of whom were priests. It was during his final year at the Roal College that John applied for admission to the archdiocesan seminary at Chieri. He was accepted and in November 1835 began his six years of seminary formation.

**1.4 The Beginnings of Don Bosco’s Mission on Behalf of the Young**

Seminary life was austere and demanding; the prevailing culture ‘rather bleak, even Jansenistic, with emphasis on piety rather study’ (Desramaut 1979 p. 7). The seminary was guided by the members of the seminary staff with whom John always had a good relationship, but their reserve and distance from him and his fellow seminarians pained him greatly.

The rector and the other superiors usually saw us only when we returned after the holidays and when we were leaving for them. The students never went to talk to them, except to receive corrections. The staff members took weekly turns to assist in the refectory and to take us on walks. That was all. How often I would have liked to talk to them, ask their advice, or resolve a doubt, and could not. […] This only served to inflame my heart to become a priest as quickly as I could so that I could associate with young people, help them, and meet their every need. (Bosco 1989 p. 131)

The chance to do what he so desired to do, namely, to associate with young people, to help them, and meet their every need, came during the three years of post-ordination studies that John, now ‘Don Bosco’, spent at the Pastoral Institute in Turin between 1841 and 1844. There he came under influence of one member of the staff, in particular, Don Joseph Cafasso, a saintly priest who was to play a decisive role in the spiritual and pastoral regeneration of the Piedmontese clergy and laity in the mid nineteenth century. It was Don Cafasso, who, as Don Bosco’s tutor and spiritual guide, directed him and encouraged him to develop his ministry on behalf of poor and abandoned youngsters. It was from Don Cafasso, too, that Don Bosco drew lessons for his own spiritual life, along with his passion for the salvation of souls, tireless charity, zealous faith and pastoral courage. Don Bosco later wrote of Don Cafasso:

If I have been able to do any good, I owe it to this worthy priest in whose hands I placed every decision I made, all my study, and every activity of my life. It was he who first took me into the prisons, where I soon learnt how great was the malice and misery of mankind. (Bosco 1989 p. 182)

In the 1840s the population of Turin was increasing rapidly, the result of migration from the surrounding country areas and the growth of factories and small industrial workshops. In the slums springing up on the fringes of the city, living conditions were desperate and poverty widespread, especially among the young.

Youth gangs, and manual labourers or apprentices, flooded the squares and streets at weekends, or gathered in the fields out in the suburbs. They were filthy, completely neglected, illiterate, given to alcohol, theft and immoral behaviour, and heading for a sad future. (Giraudo and Biancardi 2022 p. 159)

It was the plight of these young people and the need to offer them a brighter and happier future that greatly preoccupied Don Bosco so that when in May 1846 he had to make a definitive choice between taking forward his growing pastoral apostolate on behalf of a rapidly growing number of poor, needy youngsters and continuing his work for young girls at the Refugio founded and directed by the Marchioness Borolo, where he had been working since leaving the Pastoral Institute, Don Bosco had no hesitation in telling his employer:

I have thought it over already, my Lady Marchioness. My life is consecrated to the good of young people. I thank you for the offers you’re making me, but I can’t turn back from the path which Divine Providence has traced out for me. (Bosco 1989 p. 251)

Fr Frank Moloney~~,~~ in his essay, Remembering a Dream, argues that Don Bosco, having found himself ‘caught up by a divine urgency, like the prophets of old’, could make no other choice.

The need to break through the accepted cultural constraints of his time was too strong for Don Bosco, and he made his choice. The divine urgency of the prophetic vocation took over, and he began to develop his system wherein youngsters were not only told that they are loved but they were shown that they were loved. (Moloney 2024 p. 10)

The path to which Don Bosco was now committed had first been pointed out to him during his dream at the age of nine. He could never have imagined that it would be such a demanding path to follow. After a year-long search, in April 1846, he finally found a permanent home in Valdocco, a poor, socially deprived area of Turin, for his ‘Oratory’, that unique Salesian creation that was for his youngsters, a home, a school, a church and a playground.

**1.5 The Founding of a Religious Congregation – The Salesian Society**

The number of youngsters and young men wanting to spend their free time at Don Bosco’s Oratory continued to increase and so too did the Oratories under his direction; by 1850 they had grown to three in number. In order to progress his mission Don Bosco relied increasingly on the generous help of a small army of volunteers who included sympathetic members of the diocesan clergy and committed lay men and women from the city of Turin. But by the mid 1850s Don Bosco had come to the conclusion that if his much-needed work for the young was to flourish in the present and expand into the future, he could no longer rely on the goodwill of volunteers alone. He now understood that he needed to gather around him a group of followers prepared to make some form of permanent commitment to ’being with Don Bosco’, and that these followers would have to come from the young men he was educating.

The anticlerical climate of the time made Don Bosco’s task especially difficult, but after receiving timely advice from Urbano Rattazzi, the government minister responsible for the legislation suppressing religious orders and congregations, and with the fatherly encouragement of Pope Pius IX, Don Bosco decided that the time had come to start his own religious congregation. The Salesian archives contain the minutes of a meeting held in Don Bosco’s office during the evening of Sunday 18 December 1859, attended by Don Bosco himself, Don Victor Alasonatti, his Vicar assistant, and sixteen young men who ranged in age from 15 to 24 years. The minutes record that:

All [present were] united in one and the same spirit with the sole purpose of preserving and promoting the spirit of true charity needed for the work of the Oratories on behalf of neglected young people at risk. […] The gathered group then decided to form a society or congregation with the aim of promoting the glory of God and the salvation of souls, especially of those most in need of instruction and education, while providing the members with mutual help toward their own sanctification. (Bosco 2017 p. 129)

In this way the Salesian Society came into being. It was to be another 18 months, when, on 14 May 1862, the first group of 22 Salesians made their first triennial vows in the presence of Don Bosco. In the years that followed a steady stream of other young men came forward to dedicate themselves to making the dream of the young John Bosco a reality.

From 1863 onwards new Salesian works were opened outside Turin, first in other parts of Italy and then in France and Spain. As a newly ordained priest Don Bosco had dreamt of being a missionary, but Don Cafasso had convinced him that his work was with the poor youngsters of Turin. However, Don Bosco’s interest in the overseas missions remained undiminished, and towardsthe end of 1874, after the definitive approval of the constitutions of the Salesian Society, and at a time when invitations for Salesian foundations were reaching Don Bosco from many parts of the world, he at last felt ready to send a group of Salesians to establish communities and works beyond the confines of Europe. But where to send them?

In late 1874, when Don Bosco received a request from the Archbishop of Buenos Aires which included the possibility of the first evangelisation of the native peoples of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, he checked out the descriptions of the topography of the area and its peoples, and was elated to discover that they matched perfectly the details he had seen in a dream a couple of years earlier. The first Salesian missionaries left for Buenos Aires in November 1875. By Don Bosco’s death in 1888 almost 150 Salesians were working in schools and parishes in Argentina and Uruquay, and the first Salesian presences in the mission territory of Patagonia had been established.

**1.6 Expansion of the Salesian Mission Worldwide**

After the death of Don Bosco, the total number of Salesians continued to grow rapidly. The period of the First World War and its immediate aftermath witnessed a reduction in the number of new entrants to the Salesian Society. They began to rise again in the inter-war period. The duration of the Second World War saw another temporary pause in the growth in numbers, but the number of new entrants increased again in the 1950s and 1960s reaching a maximum in 1967, with a total of 21,614 professed Salesians. In the 60 years since the Second Vatican Council, in common with the majority of other religious orders and congregations, there has been a steady decline in the total number of professed Salesians.

Figures in the Salesian *Annuario* for 2023 show that at the end of 2023 there were just under 14,000 Salesians worldwide (*Annuario 2023* p. 224). With the opening of two new Salesian presences in Greece and Botswana early in 2024, Salesians are now working in 133 different countries around the world. On six continents they are responsible for the running and staffing of over 3,000 oratories and youth centres, a similar number of schools and vocational colleges, and over 300 centres for street children and migrants and refugees.

Don Bosco was what might be described as a ‘serial founder’. During his lifetime, he not only founded the Salesian Society, but with St Mary Mazzarello he co-founded the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, commonly known as the ‘Salesian Sisters’. He also established two groups for the laity: the Salesian Cooperators and the Associates of Mary Help of Christians. Since Don Bosco’s death, his dream and the richness of his charism have continued to inspire the founding of other groups, animated by his spirit and sharing his mission of service to the young, the poor, and those still to be evangelised. As Article 2 of the *Salesian Family Charter* explains:

To the first four groups founded by him (Don Bosco), numerous other groups have been added in the course of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the new millenium. From the Founder, some of his spiritual sons have drawn inspiration and guidance in order to give life, in different continents and in various social-cultural contexts, to new groups, sometimes begun in collaboration with the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and with the support of the Salesian Cooperators and the friends of the Salesian work. (Internet Source 1)

Today there are 33 groups spread over six continents; their members make up the worldwide Salesian Family which stives to make the dream of Don Bosco a reality in the world of today. In his annual New Year letter (*Strenna*) to the members of the Salesian Family for the start of 2024, the bicentenary of the boyhood dream of Don Bosco, Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime, the current Rector Major of the Salesian Family, wrote.

I believe that the bicentennial anniversary of the dream that “affected Don Bosco’s whole way of living and thinking, and, in particular, his way of sensing the presence of God in each one’s life and in the history of the world” deserves to be placed at the centre of the Strenna, which will guide the educative and pastoral year of the entire Salesian Family. It can be taken up and further explored in the evangelising mission, educational interventions and in the social promotion activities carried out by our Family‘s groups everywhere around the world, a Family which finds its inspirational father in Don Bosco. (Internet Source 2)

It is the aim of the next three chapters of this dissertation to explore how Don Bosco’s boyhood dream can continue to animate ‘the evangelising mission, the educational interventions and the social promotion activities’ undertaken by the different groups in the Salesian Family.

**1.7 Conclusion**

This first chapter began with an examination of the main influences on Don Bosco’s life from his childhood to his first full-time ministerial appointment as a priest. It next explored the growth in his ministry among the poor and abandoned young people of Turin and the establishment of the first three ‘Oratories’. Reference was then made to the founding of the Salesian Society and its rapid growth first in Europe then further afield. The final part of the chapter summarised the growth of the worldwide Salesian Family and the present status of the global Salesian mission.

The second chapter will focus on the dream of the nine-year-old Don Bosco, the text of which is to be found in Appendix 1. After a brief introduction to Don Bosco’s dreams in general, reference will be made to his ‘vocation dreams’ and the similarities between the narrative of his first ‘vocation dream’ and those of the prophets Samuel and Jeremiah in the Old Testament. The greater part of the second chapter will be devoted to a critical examination of the content of the boyhood dream narrative and its impact on Don Bosco’s own life and mission and on the mission of the Salesian Family today.

**Chapter Two: The Dream at the Age of Nine**

**2.1 Introduction**

Everyone dreams, but not everyone remembers their dreams. The nine-year-old John Bosco could not forget the strange dream he had one summer’s night in 1824. In his *Memoirs*, he writes: ‘All my life this (dream) remained deeply impressed on my mind’ (Bosco 1989 p.18). For over 60 years till his death at the age of 72, dreams were to be a constant occurrence in Don Bosco’s life. Every night, he would lie down to rest at the end of a day of demanding activity, and, as he drifted off into sleep, he would begin to dream. Don Bosco did not remember the majority of his dreams, but the details of over 140 dreams are preserved in the Salesian central archives in Rome.

Scientific research has shown that a person’s dreams reflect his concerns and the current events in which he is involved. Sometimes a person’s dreams follow a narrative storyline; sometimes they may be made up of seemingly random images; often they will involve strong emotions. (Internet Source 3). The contents of Don Bosco’s dreams are important because they give us an insight into his concerns and the challenges he was facing at different stages of his life journey.

**2.2 Resonances with Scriptural Vocation Narratives**

All of Don Bosco’s dreams have a significant spiritual content. This should not surprise us. John A Sandford, a Jungian analyst and Episcopalian minister, in his book, *Dreams, God’s Forgotten Language*, has written:

In our dreams the whole host of the spiritual world lives on. Demons and angels, Satan and the spiritual forces of God, all the psychic world of the first Christians, all these and much more are recreated for us nightly. […] When understood and acted upon, our dreams help us establish a conscious relationship to this inner image of God. They are the Voice of God. (Sandford 1968 p. 179)

From the response that dreams provoked in individuals such as the Patriarch Abraham and Joseph, the spouse of Mary, it is clear from what is written in the books of both the Old and the New Testaments that dreams were understood to be revelations from God. Indeed, the author of the book of Job affirms: ‘God speaks first in one way and then in another, but no one notices. He speaks by dreams and visions that come in the night, when slumber comes on mankind and men are all asleep in bed’ (Job 33.14,15). Through dreams God makes his will known, and offers guidance as to how it might be accomplished. Moloney argues that this was the way Don Bosco interpreted and used his dreams.

John Bosco dreamt dreams, as we all do, but he often taught in terms of them. Because he believed so strongly in God, he learned to see the hand of God guiding the path of his life. […] He used them (his dreams) to communicate his belief that he was being guided by the divine. He took every opportunity to communicate his passion and mission to others. *One of the means* he used for this was his reporting of dream experience that he regarded the substance of some form of divine inspiration for what he was doing, and later for what he wanted his Salesians to do. (Moloney 2024 p. 3)

In his *Introductory Essay* for the volume, *Dreams, Visions & Prophecies of Don Bosco*, the Salesian historian, Arthur Lenti, offers what he describes as ‘a kind of typology for Don Bosco’s dreams’ based on their content and function (Brown 1986 p. *xlvi*). Lenti includes Don Bosco’s boyhood dream in a group of what he calls ‘vocation dreams’, dreams in which he was given clear directions for his life and future ministry. There are examples of similar ‘vocation dreams’ in both the Old and the New Testament.

The contents of two Old Testament dream narratives, in particular, mirror the contents of John’s boyhood dream narrative. The first is the call of the young boy Samuel. Although the biblical text does not make clear the time of the day, nor whether in fact Samuel can be described as ‘dreaming’, the text does state that while Samuel ‘was lying in the Yahweh’s sanctuary’ one night, he heard a voice repeatedly calling him by name: ‘Samuel, Samuel’. In his confusion, Samuel called on the elderly priest, Eli, for guidance. Eli eventually told Samuel that he should say to the one calling him: ‘Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.’ When Samuel did as Eli recommended, Yahweh God revealed to him the action he intended to take against Eli and his family. It was in this way that Samuel became Yahweh’s messenger, his prophet, a role that he would continue to live out into the future. Indeed, the narrative concludes by stating that: ‘As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground’ (1 Sam 3.21).

There are also clear parallels between the content of Don Bosco’s boyhood dream narrative and the biblical account of the call of the prophet Jeremiah. The Book of prophet Jeremiah contains the following account of his call and his response to it.

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. (Jer 1.4-9)

Jeremiah’s call narrative has certain similarities with the content of Don Bosco’s boyhood dream: the unexpected summons from a heavenly figure to take on a new role and the responsibility for a specific mission, the social character of the mission, the objections of the one called who is only too aware of the size of the task he is being given and of his limitations, and the promise that help will be provided to ensure the successful outcome of the mission. As a child John would not have been aware of the similarities that his call shared with those of Samuel and Jeremiah, but reflection as he grew older and more familiar with the call stories of the Old Testament, may well have convinced John that the Lord had communicated with him in a very personal and profoundly moving way in his dream at the age of nine. This is the opinion of the Salesian scholar, Andrea Bozzolo.

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. (Bozzolo 2024 p. 38)

In his *Strenna* (New Year message) to the members of the Salesian Family for 2012, Fr Pascal Chavez Villaneuva, the ninth successor of Don Bosco, proposed that the boyhood dream provides a simple but comprehensive way of understanding the basic components of Don Bosco’s future apostolic mission and that of the Salesian Family.

In it (the dream at nine) the field of work entrusted to him was described: the young; the aim of his apostolate was pointed out: to make them grow as individuals through education; a method of education which would be effective was offered him: the Preventive System; the context in which all that he did, and today all that we do, was presented: the marvellous plan of God, who, first of all, and more than anything else, loves the young. It is He who enriches them with all kinds of gifts and makes them responsible for their development, so that they can take their rightful place in society. In God's plan, not only are they assured of success in this life, but of eternal happiness too. (Internet Source 3)

Following Fr Chavez Villaneuva’s schema, the different elements of John’s childhood dream narrative, will be examined, breaking open their implications for Don Bosco’s own mission and that of those who share his dream today.

**2.3 The Significance of the Locus of the Dream**

In the paragraph in his *Memoirs* immediately before the narrative of his boyhood dream, Don Bosco describes how, during the months of the long summer holiday season, he had spent much of his day working in the fields with his older brother, Anthony. Every day John would have had the opportunity for recreation, for playing games with his companions, the children of the local area. Perhaps, during the very afternoon before he fell asleep and began to dream, John had been playing with these same companions and the conduct of some of them had left him troubled and upset. This upset, and the emotions attached to it, may well have carried over into John’s dream.

The dream narrative begins with John by identifying the place or location in which his encounter with the ‘dignified man’ (henceforth referred to as ‘the stranger’) and ‘his Mother’ takes place. He reports that: ‘In this dream I seemed to be near my home in a fairly large yard’ (Bosco 1989 p. 18). The Italian word ‘*cortile’* that is translated into English as a ‘yard’ can also be translated as ‘courtyard’ or ‘playground’. It is very significant that in his dream, the nine-year-old John and his companions come face to face with the two heavenly visitors in a place that is very familiar to them, somewhere close to John’s home at Becchi, a place where he is already gathering his friends together to entertain them, to animate their play and keep them free from sin. ‘The fact that the vocational vision does not have a sacred or celestial location but the space in which the children live and play, clearly indicates that the divine initiative adopts their world as ‘a place of encounter’’ (Bozzolo 2024 p. 63). This mirrors the mystery of the Incarnation, that moment in time ‘when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (John 1.14).

The ‘yard’ of the dream speaks of the closeness of divine grace to the youngand the truth that to receive and accept this grace it is not necessary for the young to leave aside all that brings them happiness and fulfilment. John will later come to understand that God’s grace is available to the young wherever they are and whatever their age or their condition. However, they cannot access this grace on their own; they need the help of others to do so. For which reason, just as Jesus had to humble himself to become man so as to redeem humankind, so John and those who become his disciples would have to take the risk of ‘going down’ into the world of the young to raise them up so that they too might come to share in the life of grace the risen Jesus was offering them.

**2.4 The Central Role of Young People in the Dream**

From the beginning to the end of John’s dream narrative the young are its central characters, even though they take no part in the dialogue. Everything revolves around the group of local children with whom John has been playing. The narrative records that at the outset, “some were laughing, some were playing games, and quite a few were swearing” (Bosco 1989 p. 18). Though their innate goodness is presumed, the children are not totally innocent; for that reason, they are very ‘real’ and easy to identify with. The narrative describes how they are in perpetual motion as children usually are. First, they are playing games, then they gather around the stranger with whom John is talking, and when the Lady appears, they run away only to reappear, first as a menagerie of ‘goats, dogs, cats, bears and other animals’, and then, transformed into a flock of ‘gentle lambs’, they are ‘all jumping and bleating’. It will be John’s task to capture their youthful energy and enthusiasm, and to transform it into grace-filled, heaven-directed activity.

Don Bosco recalls that when the stranger appeared, ‘he called me by name’. In both the Old and New Testaments, when the Lord invites someone into his service and asks them to undertake a particular mission, he calls that person individually, ‘by name’. This should not surprise us because in the ‘good shepherd discourse’ in the gospel of John, Jesus tells the Pharisees listening to him that his sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd of the flock as “one by one he calls them and leads them out” (John 10.2). For a person to be called ‘by name’ is to be recognised as a unique creation, infinitely precious in the Lord’s sight. John’s being called ‘by name’ underlines his uniqueness and the truth that he has been entrusted with a task given to no one else. If he fails to carry it through, there is no guarantee that someone else will step up to take his place. John in his turn must come to understand that he too has to call each of the youngsters entrusted to his care ‘by name’. In this way, he will be respecting their individuality and the uniqueness of their vocation. In Don Bosco’s outreach to the young there would be no place for a ‘one size fits all’ approach.

**2.5 John’s Mission and the Strategy he must use to fulfil it**

The dream narrative next makes clear that John is ‘called by name’, for a specific purpose: ‘to take charge of these children’. John’s natural ascendancy over his companions is enhanced by the mandate he receives from the stranger, but it is made clear to him that the authority he has over his peers as their leader is to be exercised in a very specific way. Before the stranger’s appearance, John had reacted to the use of bad language and swearing by some of his companions with physical force: ‘I jumped immediately amongst them and had tried to stop them by using my words and my fists’ (Bosco 1989 p. 18). However, the first words of direction that John receives from the stranger make clear that this kind of response is no longer acceptable: ‘You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love.’ This simple statement contains what will become the heart, the essential core, of Don Bosco’s approach to the education of the young.

The *leit-motif* of Don Bosco’s presence among the young as father and teacher can be located in the words […] addressed to a nine-year-old boy: ‘You *will have to win these friends of yours not with blows but with gentleness and love’*, and his own reflection as an adolescent*: ‘If ever I become a priest, I would like to do things differently.’*  Here we have the key to the charismatic element in the Salesian educative system. (Moloney 2024 p. 5)

In the stranger’s instructions, John, for the first time, hears his companions referred as ‘these friends of yours’. ‘Making friends with the young’ will be the key to the success of his work, a success that will be assured only through the demanding exercise of ‘gentleness and love’. The importance of ‘gentleness’ explains why Don Bosco later chose St Francis de Sales, a saint known for his outstanding gentleness, to be the principal patron, first of the ministry he had started on behalf of the young, and then of the religious congregation he founded to continue that work. ‘This Saint (Francis de Sales) by his protection can obtain for us from God the grace of imitating his extraordinary gentleness and zeal for winning souls’ (Bosco 1989 p. 217).

Nor did John forget the essential place that ‘love’ must have in any ministry conducted on behalf of the young. In a famous letter addressed to his Salesians from Rome in May 1884, 60 years after his first dream, Don Bosco shared with them what he had been told in a dream the night before.

If you want to be loved, you must make it clear that you love. Jesus Christ made himself little with the little ones and bore our weaknesses. He is our master in the matter of the friendly approach.  […] One who knows he is loved loves in return, and one who loves can obtain anything, especially from the young. (Bosco 2017 p. 505).

The choice of the word ‘gentleness’ in the advice John receives is very significant, especially when we remember that the adjective ‘gentle’ is used at the end of the dream to describe the behaviour of those companions of John who, a little earlier in the dream, had been described as ‘wild animals’. Bozzolo comments: ‘For those who were originally ferocious animals to become ‘gentle lambs’ their educator must himself first become gentle’ (Bozzolo 2024 p. 79). This would be no easy task for John. Testimonies given at the process for his beatification confirm that John had a fiery personality. Don Giacomelli, one of his seminary companions and a life-long friend, testified that John had a sensitive nature and could easily lose his temper. Don Bertagna, a moral theologian and another good friend of John’s, testified that he was ‘hard headed and not always open to advice that differed from his own plans’ (Grech 2019 p. 10). That John, as a priest, became known for his gentleness is a tribute to his determination to put into practice the advice he had received from the stranger.

Having shared with John the strategy he would have to employ to ensure the success of his mission the stranger next outlined its content. ‘Start right away to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue’ (Bosco 1989 p. 18). The urgency of the situation meant that the mission entrusted to John could not be postponed till a later date. The moral and religious education of his companions had to start immediately because sin corrupts, and from an early age it can weaken and disfigure the sinner. A life of virtue is the only antidote.

In the *Companion of Youth,* the spiritual vademecum Don Bosco first published in 1847 for the guidance of his young people, Don Bosco offered this advice:

Our Lord also wants you to know that if you practise virtue in your youth, you will be confirmed in it for the remainder of your days, which will be followed by an eternity of glory**.** On the other hand, if you begin badly in your youth, you will surely continue so until death, and inevitably secure hell for yourself. Therefore, when you see people addicted to the vices of drunkenness, gambling or swearing, you can be sure that these vices began in their youth. (Bosco 1954 p. 8)

Being an intelligent and perceptive nine-year-old, John reacted quite strongly against being told by the anonymous stranger what he had do and how he had to do it. “Confused and frightened, I replied that I was a poor ignorant child […] unable to talk to those youngsters about religion.” And he added for good measure: “Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?” (Bosco 1989 p.18) The Australian Salesian, Ian Murdoch, has commented: ‘In John’s response there is nothing of false humility or modesty, but simply recognition of the enormity of the task, the limitations of the human subject, and all the complexities of the human situation’ (Murdoch 2009 p. 22).

It should not surprise us that at the moment of their call, those of whom the Lord asks something seemingly impossible, are initially confused, and fearful that the task they are being asked to undertake may well overwhelm them. At once, the stranger explains to John how the impossible can become possible: ‘through obedience and the acquisition of knowledge’. Bozzolo suggests that it is only in the context of the resurrection of Jesus that ‘achieving the impossible’ can be understood.

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.” […] 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. (Bozzolo 2024 p. 70)

It is through Jesus’ obedience, ‘even to death on a cross’, that the impossible is achieved: his victory over death and sin, the miracle of miracles. John too will achieve the impossible, but only if he is prepared to accept the pain and darkness involved in obediently living out the will of the heavenly Father. It is a lesson that John takes very much to heart. In his later roles as teacher of the young and founder of two congregations of Religious, Don Bosco attached great importance to obedience. In the constitutions of the Salesian Society, unlike the order adopted in similar constitutions, namely, poverty, chatity and obedience, the vow of obedience is treated first, before the vows of poverty and chastity. And Article 4 of the Companion of Youth, written specifically for the spiritual guidance of young people, is titled, “The first great virtue of youth is obedience to parents and to those who have authority over us” (Bosco 1954 p. 8).

**2.6 ‘The Lady of Stately Appearance’ who becomes John’s Teacher**

And as to ‘the acquisition of knowledge’, how is a nine-year-old boy who has just described himself as ‘a poor, ignorant child’ to achieve this? The stranger again has the answer to John’s question. ‘I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her, all wisdom is foolishness.’ While John is trying unsuccessfully to persuade the stranger to reveal his name, he becomes aware that a ‘*‘*Lady of stately appearance’ is now standing beside the stranger. The latter explains to John that ‘the Lady’ is not unknown to him, that he has learnt how to honour her at the school of his mother.

Seeing that John is ‘more confused than ever’, the Lady quickly takes control of the situation. She ‘beckons John to approach her’. Through this simple gesture the Lady shows John that to work effectively with the young the first step he must take is to get close to them, as first he must get close to her. The Lady’s closeness to John is confirmed when she ‘kindly takes his hand’, as she must often have taken the hand of her own son when helping him to grow ‘in wisdom, in stature, and in divine and human favour’. (Luke 2.52)

Having won John’s trust, the Lady continues to teach him. The first word she speaks to him is: ‘Look!’ John must learn to see things as they really are. In this way he will quickly identify what are the true needs of the young and respond accordingly. As John glances around, he sees that ‘the youngsters had apparently run away’. The ‘wild animals’ who take their place personify the situations of pain, trauma and abuse that many young people find themselves struggling with. The Lady confirms that these young people are to be John’s ‘field of work’. His mission is to minister to the young, especially those in danger of being lost, of losing hope. The Lady insists that if he is to do this effectively he must make himself ‘humble, strong and energetic’. The virtues that John and those who share his dream must cultivate are humility, fortitude and perseverance. Developing and deploying these virtues will bring about a transformation in John as a result of which he will begin to see his youngsters as the Lady sees them. They are ‘her children’ and John will be accountable for their spiritual and moral wellbeing, their growth in virtue.

It is at this point in the dream narrative that John becomes aware of a miraculous transformation. ‘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’ (Bosco 1989 p. 19).

As Cardinal Fernández Artime suggests in his *Strenna* for 2024, this transformation is at the heart of the dream.

The most important thing that happens in the dream and that Don Bosco himself learns and, afterwards, all his followers, is discovering that the transformation process is always possible. It is an “Easter” movement – let me call it that – of conversion and transformation, of wolves into lambs, and lambs into what, in today’s language, we would call a youth community that celebrates Jesus and Mary. It certainly seems to me an essential and central element of the dream. (Internet Source 2)

**2.7 Conclusion**

Only slowly as he matures in his vocational choice would John come to understand the full implications of the transformation he saw happening before him. His initial reaction was to begin to cry. At once, the Lady placed her hand on his head, and told him: ‘In good time you will understand everything.’ Although he did not then appreciate it, John would remain for the rest of his life under the Lady’s guidance: as a teenager, as a seminarian, as a priest, as the founder of a religious congregation that would spread to the four corners of the globe. Only as an elderly priest in the last year of his life, did John come ‘understand everything’.

It was on 16 May 1887, as he celebrated Mass for the first time at the altar of Mary Help of Christians, in the newly consecrated Sacred Heart Basilica in Rome, that Don Bosco at last came to ‘understand everything’. It was a simple weekday Mass that normally would have lasted some thirty minutes, but on that coccasion it lasted nearly two hours. During the Mass, Don Bosco broke down in tears at least ten times, unable to continue. As he offered the eucharistic sacrifice, his boyhood dream at the age of nine flashed before his eyes. So did his entire life’s mission. He came to understand, as the Lady had assured him he would, that all he had done was a fulfillment of that first dream. The comment of Russ Parker rings true:

We can conclude, therefore, that dreams are of great significance in the ways that God works, and ignoring or dismissing them diminishes our awareness of God in our lives. Dreams are also our own personal journey of discovery in which we explore what is going on in and around our lives. If we listen to our dreams, we can discover more of who we are and open more of ourselves to the fresh winds of God’s renewal in our live (Parker 2002 p. 79).

Chapter two first explored dreams as a universal human expereince. It next focused on Don Bosco’s dreams in general before examining his dream at the age of nine as an example of a ‘vocational dream’. The greater part of chapter two has been devoted to a detailed survey of the content of the narrative of the boyhood dream. Chapter three will explore the framework the dream provided for the development of Don Bosco’s ‘Preventive System’ and the impact of the dream on the Salesian way of educating the young. Particular reference will be made to the following: Salesian presence, loving kindness (‘amorevolezza’), and the link between recreation and spiritual formation.

**CHAPTER THREE: THE TEMPLATE OF THE DREAM AND ITS IMPACT ON THE SALESIAN APPROACH TO EDUCATION**

**3.1 Introduction**

Don Bosco’s dream at the age of nine offered him a framework, a template, which, several decades later he would use to construct his own unique system of education. In just over five hundred words the dream narrative identifies:

[a] the nature of John’s future mission - to teach the young about *“the ugliness of sin and the beauty of virtue”,*

[b] the method he must use *– “not by blows, but by gentleness and love”,* what would later become known as Don Bosco’s “Preventive System”,

[c] the aim of John’s mission – to transform *“the wild animals”* [wayward and in disciplined youngsters] into *“lambs”* [good and virtuous youth],

[d] John’s teacher and mentor [Mother Mary] – *“I will give you a teacher; under her guidance you will become wise”,*

[e] the qualities that will be required of John – *“You must make it possible through obedience and the acquisition of knowledge.”* *“Make yourself, humble and energetic.”*

[f] the context in which everything Don Bosco was to achieve must be understood – the marvellous plan of God who, more than anything else, loves the young and desires their eternal happiness.

This third chapter will focus on three essential elements of the educational ‘method’ developed by Don Bosco, commonly known as the Preventive System, that encapsulate the characteristics identified above: [1] Salesian presence, [2] loving kindness and the confidence and trust it engenders, [3] recreation as a tool for the spiritual formation of the young.

**3.2 Salesian Presence**

The young John Bosco recounts that at the start of his dream at the age of nine he found himself in a large yard near his home. ‘A crowd of children were playing there. Some were laughing, some were playing games, and quite a few were swearing. I jumped immediately amongst them’ (Bosco 1989 p. 18). In the dream, as in real life, the young John’s presence among his companions was always a physically active presence. Years later, as he reflected on his experience of working with and for the young as a priest and as the founder of a religious congregation dedicated to their wellbeing, Don Bosco came to appreciate more fully the vital importance of ‘presence’.

According to Don Bosco, what is demanded of those who share his dream is a presence that involves establishing relationships with the young based on mutual respect, equality and co-operation, rather than fear and superiority; it is a presence that is all about engaging with the young, interacting with them - speaking and listening, playing and praying, laughing and crying, encouraging and challenging, regulating and guiding. Salesian presence is a presence created out of innumerable daily encounters.

The Salesian educationalist, Peter Gonsalves, has written of what he calls this ‘endearing presence’.

The potential for happiness is in the here and now – not in what was, what will be or what could be. This concrete way of being fully with the student is called ‘presence’. In its most profound sense, presence means being in this place and at this time as “a sign and bearer of the love of God for young people” (SDB Constitutions, article 2). (Gonsalves 2010 p. 57)

Pope Francis alluded to this sacramental dimension of Salesian presence in his Address to the members of the 28th Salesian General Chapter on 4th March 2020.

Your consecration is, first of all, a sign of gratuitous love both of the Lord and for the Lord in his young people, a love that is not defined primarily by a particular ministry, function or service, but through a “presence”. Even before he does anything, the Salesian is a living reminder of a “presence” in which availability, a willingness to listen, joy and dedication are essential elements. […] The first call is to be a joyful and liberating “presence” among young people. (Francis 2020 p. 62)

‘While catering for his group of Oratory boys, Don Bosco still managed to maintain his one-to-one relationships with each and every boy’ (Grech 2029 p. 82). In continuity with Don Bosco’s own practice, the Salesian formative presence among today’s young people has both a group and an individual or personal dimension; the two dimensions are essential.

In a letter to his Salesians written after the 28th General Chapter in 2020 the Rector Major of the Salesian Family reminded them of the importance of an individual ‘accompanying presence’:

“Presence” does not only consist in spending time with young people as a group, but in meeting them individually in a personal way, establishing a relationship that allows us to get to know and listen to their desires, their difficulties and struggles and, at times, their fears and qualms. It is a relationship that seeks to go beyond superficial knowledge, offering friendship characterised by mutual confidence and sharing. (Fernández Artime 2020 p. 25)

Jack Finnegan, the Salesian theologian and spiritual writer, in a collection of essays, *Spiritual Accompaniment: An Educational and Spiritual Journey with Young People in the Way of Don Bosco*, published in 2018, wrote:

The Salesian practice of spiritual accompaniment of both individuals and groups is gentle and yet dynamic in nature. It develops in a compassionate space between conversation and friendship characterized by intuitive response rather than a structured methodology. It is grounded in friendship and is open to exchange, communication, true dialogue, and mutual influence. Salesian spiritual accompaniment is never a monologue, never manipulative, or domineering. It always seeks to be Spirit-led, attentive to the whispers of the soul and the traces of the divine in people’s lives in the here and now (Attard & Garcia 2018 p. 143).

In his book, *Spiritual and Emotional Maturity*, the priest psychologist, Amedeo Cencini, identifies twoessential components of anactive and accompanying presence with and for individual young people. Both components involve sharing. The first type of sharing is what he describes as “real, physical sharing”.He argues that “a daily shared life is the best source of information to know - and help - a person” (Cencini 2011 p. 41). In his *Memoirs of The Oratory,* Don Bosco identifies several individuals with whom he lived, studied and shared his life, and whose physical presence and example greatly helped him on his vocational journey. These individuals included Don Calosso and Don Cafasso referred to in Chapter One; both priests offered John more than encouragement and simple advice given at a distance.John shared with them his dreams for the future and his passion for learning; they walked with him and helped him realise his dreams.

The second component that Cencini identifies, focuses on the spiritual dimension of sharing. The sharing that Don Bosco practised and encouraged his Salesians and other collaborators to engage in, has to includea sharing of what can best be described as ‘experiences of God’.Sharing these experiences of the transcendent must change not only the young person accompanied, but also the person whose role it is to offer guidance and support.This dynamic is at the heart of Don Bosco’s spirituality. He insisted that the shared journey not only brings salvation to the young person, but is also the particular path of salvation for the Salesian guide.

To accompany a young person […] implies more than spiritual direction or teaching things or establishing a one-way relationship; it is sharing and celebrating of experiences, always new and full because they will be “experiences of God”, shared by two people undertaking a journey towards him. To accompany essentially means to share, and in this instance, it means to share something as vital as “the bread for the journey”, that is, faith, the memory of God, of the struggle and search for meaning. […] Theirs is not just friendship but “friendship in the Spirit”. It can really be said that the one who accompanies continues his own formation when accompanying the young along the ways of the Spirit (Cencini 2011 p. 42-3)

A young person’s spiritual journey is a shared journey, an ‘accompanied journey’. According to Finnegan, ‘the images that best sum up the Salesian tradition (of spiritual accompaniment) are those of a ‘companion for the journey’ or a ‘spiritual friend’ who has an informed, accepting, compassionate and contemplative respect for another’s unique liberty of spirit before God’ (Attard & Garcia 2028 p. 143). This understanding of spiritual accompaniment is rooted in the way in which Jesus accompanied his disciples at every stage of their journey. It is exemplified best in the episode in Luke’s gospel which describes the encounter between the risen Jesus and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24.13–35). There are several striking features in this passage, not least the reciprocity and mutuality captured in the dialogue between Jesus and the two disciples. Michael T. Winstanley highlights, in particular, the way in which Jesus allows the disciples to take the initiative in inviting him to stay with them:

The disciples thus take the initiative in responding to Jesus and his words. It is not without significance that Jesus waits to be asked, for he never imposes himself, never forces his friendship; with remarkable sensitivity he reverences our freedom. But once the offer of hospitality is extended, he accepts it promptly (Winstanley 2017, p. 351).

By accepting the disciples’ hospitality and by sharing a meal with them Jesus demonstrated his commitment to his personal presence among them. It thus became a ‘transforming presence’, as any truly Christian presence must be.

**3.3 Loving Kindness and Confidence**

‘You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love (loving kindness)’ (Bosco 1989 p. 18). John never forgot these words of advice spoken by the stranger in his dream at the age of nine. He came to understand that before he could become a sacramental presence revealing God’s love to others, especially the young, he had first to open himself to that same transforming love. That he succeeded in this task is testified by the Salesian author, Eugenio Ceria, in his reflection, *Don Bosco with God.*

In the Oratory, Don Bosco’s kindness could be seen everywhere. It was like the sun that gives light and heat even where it cannot be seen. […] He never lost sight of three maxims inspired by his priestly heart and which he constantly repeated to his Salesians. These were the three things that enabled him to win the affection and trust of the young. Firstly, love what young people love and, in that way, they will come to love the things we love for the good of their souls. Secondly, love them in that they will know that they will know that they are loved. Thirdly, make every effort to ensure that none of them ever leaves us unhappy (Ceria 2008 p. 125).

In the introduction to his spiritual manual for the young, *The Companion of Youth,* first published in 1847, just six years after his priestly ordination, Don Bosco wrote:

My friends, I love you with all my heart, and your being young is reason enough for me to love you very much. You will certainly find books written by persons much more virtuous and much more learned than myself; but I assure you, you would be hard put to find anyone who loves you more than I do in Jesus Christ, or who cares more about your true happiness than I do. (Bosco 1954 p. 2)

To the young priest Michael Rua, who became his first successor as Rector Major, on his appointment as the rector of the first Salesian community outside Turin, Don Bosco gave this simple advice: ‘Learn how to make yourself loved rather than feared (Bosco 2017 p. 478). He subsequently gave this same advice to all those Salesians whom, like Rua, he appointed to the role of rector or leader of a local Salesian community. It is virtually identical to the advice given St Benedict in Chapter 64 of his *Rule* to a monk who has been elected abbot: ‘Let him strive to be loved rather than feared’ (Benedict 1998 p. 63).

In his famous *Letter from Rome*, dated 10 May 1884, Don Bosco shared with his Salesians the advice he had received earlier in a dream.

The youngsters should not only be loved, but they themselves should know that they are loved. […] By being loved in the things they like, through taking part in their youthful interests, they are led to see love in those things which they find less attractive, such as discipline, study and self-denial, and so learn to do these things too with love. (Bosco 2017 p. 504)

The love of which Don Bosco writes is a ‘tough love’, spiritually mature, impartial, generous, selfless, self-sacrificing love. It is the love of neighbour commanded by Jesus; a love expressed in deeds, not just in words. It is a love that must be expressed with a certain style, much like Jesus, or loving parents, would express it - with loving concern, with caring friendliness, with tender loving care. Don Bosco used the Italian noun, “*amorevolezza”,* to describe this love. He believed that only by loving in this way would those who later share his dream be able to establish relationships with young people at a truly personal level.

In the *Letter from Rome* Don Bosco also stressed the role that loving kindness has in helping create a climate of trust and confidence:

And so, if you want everyone to be of one heart and soul again for the love of Jesus you must break down this fatal barrier of mistrust, and replace it with a happy spirit of confidence. […] By a friendly informal relationship with the boys, especially in recreation. You cannot have love   without this familiarity, and where this is not evident there can be no confidence. If you want to be loved, you must make it clear that you love. Jesus Christ made himself little with the little ones and bore our weaknesses. He is our master in the matter of the friendly approach.  (Bosco 2017 p. 505)

In the short ‘Life’ or biography of his saintly pupil Dominic Savio that Don Bosco wrote in 1859, he describes his first meeting at Becchi with the 13-year-old Dominic.

It was early on the morning of the first Monday of October that I saw a boy coming towards me with his father. His serene expression, and charming but respectful manner captured my gaze.

“Who are you and where do you come from?” I asked him.

“I am Dominic Savio. Father Cugliero has spoken to you about me and I have come with my father from Mondonio.”

I took him aside and asked him about himself and his studies. We found common ground immediately and a relationship of trust and mutual confidence sprang up immediately. (Bosco 2017 p. 1178)

‘A relationship of trust and mutual confidence sprang up’: Don Bosco’s whole method of education is based on this affective relationship. Confidence is not easily gained, nor trust established. The spiritually self-sacrificing love, expressed in the word ‘*amorevolezza’*, is a necessary condition for trust. It cannot be bought, forced or commanded. Don Bosco knew that it was difficult for any educator to establish such a trustful, responsive relationship with youngsters, especially with adolescents. How did he succeed? His never-failing presence and availability; his simple and ordinary manner of speaking and acting; his well-timed and gentle approach; his serene and smiling face; his completely non-threatening and disarming attitude usually succeeded in opening the way to trust.

Fr Paul Albera, who became Don Bosco’s second successor, was a pupil at Don Bosco’s school in the Valdocco district of Turin. He later described his own experience of Don Bosco’s loving kindness in these words: ‘Don Bosco loved us in a unique way, all his own: he completely fascinated us, but there are no words to make it understandable to anyone who has not experienced it personally. [...] I felt that I was loved in a way that I had never experienced before, not even the very fervent love which my unforgettable parents had for me’ (Giraudo 2021 p. 17)

A short paragraph from the *Letter on Punishments,* attributed to Don Bosco if not actually written by him, contains a simple but profound summary of what his pastoral ministry among the young had taught Don Bosco about the importance of always relating to them with loving kindness.

I have learned from my own experience that when a child is punished in haste, especially when other means have been ignored, little, if anything is actually achieved. St. Gregory once wrote that we cannot force ourselves into the human heart. It is like an impenetrable fortress; the only way one can gain entry into it is through kindness and affection. (Ribotta 1995 p. 97)

**3.4 Play and recreation as Tool of Spiritual Formation**

As the narrative of his dream makes clear the young John Bosco’s encounter with ‘the stranger’ and the Lady’ took place at a time when he and his companions were ‘at play’. ‘Some were laughing, some were playing games, and quite a few were swearing’ (Bosco 1989 p. 18). Decades later, Don Bosco would share with his young Salesians his conviction that one of the best places for them to get to know and to accompany young people was in the playground, when they were ‘*at play’.* Breaks, recreations, games, and play in general, were activities that would best allow his Salesians to associate with young people, not simply as teachers, but as brothers and friends.

Pope John Paul II in his commemorative letter, *Iuvenum Patris*, addressed to Fr Egidio Vigano SDB, the then Rector Major of the Salesian Congregation, on the occasion of the first centenary of Don Bosco’s death in 1988, made reference to the role of games and recreation in his educational project.

In this connection must be recalled at least the ample space and importance given by the Saint to recreational periods, to sport, music, the theatre or (as he liked to express it) the life of the playground. It is there, in spontaneous and joyful relationships, that the shrewd educator finds ways of intervening, as gentle in expression as they are efficacious because of their continuity and the friendly atmosphere in which they are made. (Internet Source 5)

The testimony of a young diocesan priest, Fr Giuseppe Vespignani, who had received Don Bosco’s approval to stay at the Oratory between 1876-7 and discern whether or not he was being called to be a Salesian, confirms the effectiveness of Don Bosco’s gentle ‘ways of intervening’. When Vespignani, rather timid by nature and somewhat disheartened after two unsuccessful attempts to teach catechism to some of the Oratory youngsters, approached Don Bosco for help, he received the following advice.

Join them (the boys), treat them in a friendly way and be like one of them.

Where and how am I to join them? I’m not made for playing, running and laughing in their company, my poor health hinders me.

All right then. Go to the pump (at the edge of the playground). When it’s breakfast time you will find a crowd of boys waiting there to drink. They will be talking about studies, school, games, and everything. Go among them, make friends with everyone and your success will be guaranteed. (Vespignani 2009 p. 71)

Some years later, in his famous *Letter from Rome,* Don Bosco reminded his Salesians that by ‘being loved in the things they like, through their teachers taking part in their youthful interests, young people are led to love those things too that they find less attractive, such as discipline, study and self-denial’ (Bosco 2017 p. 504). As Carlo Loots suggests, ‘this practice teaches that it is best to follow first, to be allowed to guide later’ (Loots 2018 p. 5). In fact, Don Bosco believed that one of the times in which the educator’s presence was most effective was during periods of active recreation. He encouraged his Salesians, if they were physically able to do so, to get actively involved in the games the boys were playing. He rejected the criticism of himself and his Salesians made by those Church officials who argued that such active involvement in physical games offended ecclesiastical decorum. Rather, he argued, this was the best way for an educator to win the youngsters’ affection and to foster that trust which is at the heart of the educational relationship.

Don Bosco frequently underlined the spiritual and moral advantages of active recreation for both the youngsters in his care and his Salesians. In agreement with the teaching and the practice of St Philip Neri, Don Bosco taught that physical recreation and team games were powerful means of preserving the virtue of purity in his youngsters and strengthening their commitment to the vow of chastity among his young confreres. In a conference to a group of his seminarians in 1887 Don Bosco gave them this advice:

Let us keep busy even during recreation and, if it is our duty, let us watch our pupils, leading them in their games and keeping them together in the playground. Even if it is not your task, do your share too, and let recreation time really give you an uplift to dispel gloom, worries, and disturbing and dangerous thoughts” (Lemoyne 1989, Vol XIII, p. 619].

The Salesian historian, Arthur Lenti, has written: ‘It is fair to say that Don Bosco’s concept of playas an educational tool was innovative and ahead of his time. He recognized not merely the *utility* of play, but also its *necessity*for a young person’s total development. Education for Don Bosco meant helping the young person grow toward maturity. Play is an activity that is necessary for any young person’s growth to maturity’ (Lenti 2008 p. 162).

Modern research confirms this; for example, an article on the World Humanitarian Movement website describes how physical activity plays a crucial role in child development, contributing to the growth of a child’s physical health, cognitive and social development, and emotional well-being. ‘By promoting physical activity, we can help children develop the physical, cognitive, and emotional skills they need to lead healthy, happy, and successful lives’ (Internet Source 6). For which reason, games and other shared activities are a key means for winning the affection, confidence and trust of young people that are at the heart of the educational adventure.

According to Lenti, ‘The playground, as it functioned at Don Bosco’s Oratory, was one of his original creations’ (Lenti 2008 p. 162). While every 19th century school, especially boarding schools, had a playground, often it was small and restricted in size. As a consequence, the students stood around in small clusters talking or playing some non-physical games. Don Bosco wanted a playground large enough to allow a great number of young people to take part in games, the kind of games that involved a lot of physical movement and running, even if it meant various games criss-crossing at the same time. The boys were left free to choose the games they wanted to play, provided these were not physically or morally dangerous.

In his *Memoirs of the Oratory* Don Bosco describes what happened during the early years of his Oratory apostolate.

When we came out of church, there was a period of free time for each to do as he pleased. Some continued their catechism class, some practised their singing, some worked at their reading. Most of them, however, jumped about, ran, and enjoyed themselves in various games and pastimes. All those exploits of jumping, running, juggling, tightrope walking, stick balancing that I had learned long before from acrobats, were practised under my instruction. In this way I could control that crowd, which, in the main, could be described thus: "Like a horse or a mule, without understanding…

Recreation times at the Oratory were filled with games and noise: running, jumping, juggling, tightrope walking, stick balancing, bocce, stilts, mock war games with wooden sticks as rifles, wooden swords and gymnastics to name but a few. (Bosco 1989 p. 267)

In his treatise, *The Preventive System in the Education of the Young,* published in 1877, Don Bosco spelt out what caring for poor and abandoned youngsters for more than 40 years had taught him: the noisier, the more boisterous the games and other activities his youngsters and the Salesians assisting them were engaged in, the better.

Give them ample liberty to jump, run, make a din as much as they please. Gymnastics, music, recitals [of poems etc], theatricals, hikes, are very effective methods for getting discipline; they encourage good living and good health. Just ensure that the plot, the characters and the dialogue are suitable. That great friend of youth, St Philip Neri, used to say, "Do whatever you wish; for me it is enough you do not sin." (Bosco 2017 p. 492)

**3.5 Conclusion**

In this third chapter, first the vital role of Salesian presence in the education of the young was explored. Then the importance of loving kindness and the mutual confidence it engenders were examined, and finally, the essential role that games and recreation played in Don Bosco’s own ministry and that they continue to have today’s educational project was discussed. In the fourth chapter, the place of dreams in the teaching of Pope Francis especially in his talks and writings aimed at young people will be explored.

**CHAPTER FOUR: THE PLACE OF DREAMS IN THE TEACHING OF POPE FRANCIS PARTICULARLY AS DIRECTED TO YOUNG PEOPLE**

**4.1 Introduction**

During his eleven-year pontificate, Pope Francis has shown himself to be a pastor who is not afraid to dream himself, nor has he been slow to encourage others to dream. At the beginning of his pontificate, in his first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis wrote:

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation (Francis 2013 no. 27).

Seven years later in 2020, in the *Prologue* to his collection of reflections on the impact of the Covid crisis on the world of the 21st century, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, Francis would write:

This is a moment to dream big, to rethink our priorities – what we value, what we want, what we seek – and to act in our daily life on what we have dreamed of. What I hear at this moment is similar to what Isaiah hears God saying through him: Come, let us talk this over. Let us dare to dream (Francis 2020 p. 4).

For Pope Francis ‘daring to dream’ is part of the vocation of every Christian. Through their ‘dreaming’, Christians can ensure that the prophecy of Joel is fulfilled: ‘I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams (Joel 3.1). The ‘audacity to dream’ is one of the ways in which men and women, young and old, mirror the creative activity of the Almighty Father. Today, in this first century of the third millennium, this prophetic ‘audacity to dream’ has never been more needed.

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis reminded the Catholic faithful, and especially young people, of a very important truth: ‘The very first dream of all is the creative dream of God our Father, which precedes and accompanies the lives of all his children’ (Francis 2019 no 194). Three years earlier, in another Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia,* Francis had shared his conviction that: ‘Each child has a place in God’s heart from all eternity; once he or she is conceived, the Creator’s eternal dream comes true’ (Francis 2016 no. 168). But, as the young John Bosco discovered, it is no easy task for a child to ensure that the Creator’s eternal dream does, in fact, ‘come true’ for him or her. Help is needed to bring this about.

Providing that help is the context in which Pope Francis, himself a past pupil of a Salesian school in Buenos Aires, and someone very much aware of Don Bosco’s reputation as ‘a man of dreams’, challenged the spiritual sons of Don Bosco gathered in Turin for their 28th General Chapter in 2020. Towards the end of his Address to the members of the General Chapter, Pope Francis exhorted them to do as their ‘Father’, Don Bosco, had done, namely, to ‘dare to dream’.

One of Don Bosco’s “literary genres” are his dreams. With them, the Lord himself mapped out his way in life and the life of your whole Congregation, expanding the imagination to include everything possible. The dreams, far from keeping him asleep, helped him, as they did St. Joseph, to embrace another dimension and another depth of life, those born out of the depths of God's compassion. (Francis 2020 p.64))

Pope Francis closed his address by inviting the assembled capitulars ‘to dream and dream big’, and not just for themselves and for the good of the Salesian Congregation, but for ‘all the young people deprived of the strength, the light and the comfort of friendship with Jesus Christ, deprived of a community of faith to support them, of a horizon of meaning and of life. Dream [...] and make others dream as well!’ (Francis 2020 p. 65)

It is on the Salesians and on all those others inspired by Don Bosco’s boyhood dream that Pope Francis has placed the primary responsibility ‘to dream’ and ‘to make others dream as well’. As the spiritual children of a dreamer, the sons and daughters of Don Bosco are challenged to immerse themselves in the lives of the young. In this way they will be able to help every young person to discover their dream, the dream of God in them, and to support these same young people in their journey of making God’s dream ‘come true’. According to Fr Fernández Artime, the Rector Major of the Salesian Family, ‘this is the most precious gift that ‘the children of the dreamer’ can offer young people’ today (Internet Source 2).

**4.2 The Ability to Listen**

Towards the end of *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis identifies the quality that he considers most necessary in those privileged to accompany the young in discovering the dream the Lord has in mind for them. ‘When we are called upon to help others discern their path in life, what is uppermost is the ability to listen’ (Francis 2019 no. 291). Francis goes on to describe the three kinds of sensitivity that the listening of which he writes, demands. The first is the kind of sympathy directed to the individual.

It is a matter of listening to someone who is sharing his very self in what he says. A sign of this willingness to listen is the time we are ready to spare for others. More than the amount of time we spend, it is about making others feel that my time is their time, that they have all the time they need to say everything they want. The other person must sense that I am listening unconditionally, without being offended or shocked, tired or bored. […] Attentive and selfless listening is a sign of our respect for others, whatever their ideas or their life choices in life (Francis 2019 no. 292).

Maybe, because on occasions during his own vocational journey Don Bosco had failed to find the ‘listening ear’ he needed, he himself was always very generous in the time he gave to listening to those under his care and guidance. Giuseppe Brosio, one of Don Bosco’s early collaborators, describes how Don Bosco received the boys who came to his room looking for advice, or just to talk: ‘He received them with the same respect he showed distinguished visitors, asking them to sit on the sofa while he sat at his desk and listened very attentively as if what they told him was most important’ (Lemoyne 1989 Vol IV, p. 188). In the only extant letter written by St Dominic Savio and addressed to his father, Dominic shares some exciting news; Don Bosco has gifted him with an hour of his precious time.

Now the big news is that for the first time ever I was able to spend a whole hour alone with Don Bosco. Before this I had never had a chance to be alone with him for even ten minutes. This time I had a long talk with him about a lot of things, including the “association” to protect us from the cholera. (Lemoyne 1989 Vol V, p. 218)

**4.3 Choices to be made**

In *Christus Vivit,* Pope Francis quotes these words of Pope Paul VI: ‘Youth, as a phase in the development of the personality, is marked by dreams which gather momentum, by relationships which acquire more and more consistency and balance, by trials and experiments, and by choices which gradually build a life project’ (Francis 2019 no. 137). Don Bosco fulfilled his mission and achieved heroic holiness because his boyhood dream provoked in him a vocational response, the life-defining choice to become first, a priest, and then a pastor/shepherd whose whole life was to be dedicated to the spiritual and physical well-being of the young. Having reflected on his own vocational journey, the joy of helping the young people entrusted to his care to discover the dream that God had in mind for them became for Don Bosco a key priority. He came to understand that the worst kind of poverty the young can experience is to be prevented from dreaming, or to have inauthentic, manufactured dreams imposed upon them. Don Bosco did whatever he could to prevent this happening. He recognised, too, the importance of finding ways to help his young people deepen their friendship with Jesus. This is a conviction shared by Pope Francis: “No matter how much you live the experience of these years of your youth, you will never know their deepest and fullest meaning unless you encounter each day your best friend, the friend who is Jesus” (Francis 2019 no. 150).

Just as Jesus, ‘the stranger’ in his dream narrative, revealed to the young John Bosco the vocation he was being invited to embrace to ensure that his dream became a reality, so the same Jesus continues to reveal to the young people of today the dream that the Father has in mind for them. “When the Lord awakens a vocation, he thinks not only of what you already are, but of what you will one day be, in his company and in that of others” (Francis 2015 no. 289). The temptation is to reject or ignore the Lord’s invitation. Pope Francis is aware of this danger, and in an address to young people in 2020 he gave them this advice:

Dear young people, dear brothers and sisters, let us not give up on great dreams. […] We were not created to dream about vacations or the weekend, but to make God’s dreams come true in this world. God made us capable of dreaming, so that we could embrace the beauty of life.

And to his own question: ‘How do we begin to make great dreams come true?’ Pope Francis gave this answer:

With great choices. […] Trivial choices lead to a trivial life; great choices to a life of greatness. Indeed, we become what we choose, for better or for worse. […] Yet if we choose God, daily we grow in his love, and if we choose [to love others](http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.popefrancishomilies.com%2Flove-our-neighbour&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AOvVaw02RBpYp20IJsf9c3AGi8Vk), we find true happiness. Because the beauty of our choices depends on [love](http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.popefrancishomilies.com%2Flove&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AOvVaw1n1w39NVd7t7So-adwQOW6) (Internet Source 7).

Returning to this same theme some months later at a gathering of young people in Athens, Pope Francis told them:

Choosing is a challenge. It involves facing the fear of the unknown, emerging from the chaos of uniformity, deciding to take your life in hand. To make right choices, you should remember one thing: good decisions are always about others, not just about ourselves. Those are the decisions that are worth making, the dreams worth striving to accomplish, those that require courage and involve others (Internet Source 8).

During the 2021 World Youth Day Mass in St Peter’s, Pope Francis in his homily challenged the young people present ‘to stand tall while everything around them seems to be collapsing; to be sentinels prepared to see the light in night visions; to be builders amid the many ruins of today’s world; to be capable of dreaming’ (Internet Source 8). He then drew their attention to the link between dreaming and their relationship with Jesus and openness to the Holy Spirit.

When you make Jesus your life’s dream, and you embrace him with joy and a contagious enthusiasm, it means you do not wish to live in the night. This does us good! Thank you for all those times when you work courageously to make your dreams come true, when you keep believing in the light even in dark moments, when you commit yourselves passionately to making our world more beautiful and humane. Thank you for all those times when you cultivate the dream of fraternity, work to heal the wounds of God’s creation, fight to ensure respect for the dignity of the vulnerable and spread the spirit of solidarity and sharing. (Internet Source 9).

Having stressed that fraternity, solidarity, justice and peace are Jesus’ own dreams for humanity, Pope Francis then made reference to what the late Cardinal Martini often stressed, namely, that the Church and society need ‘dreamers who remain ever open to the surprises of the Holy Spirit’. Francis concluded his homily by expressing the hope that every one of the young people listening to him would become one of these dreamers: ‘dreamers who keep us open to the surprises of the Holy Spirit’ (Internet Source 9).

**4.4 Temptations to be avoided**

According to Pope Francis, the would-be ‘dreamer’ faces two temptations: being either too fearful or too anxious. The narrative of his boyhood dream describes the young John Bosco’s first reaction to being told by ‘the stranger’ what he must do for his companions: ‘Confused and frightened’, and ‘hardly knowing what he was saying’, he asked: ‘Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?’ The situation did not improve when ‘the Lady’ showed John the ‘field of his work’. ‘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’ (Bosco 1989 p. 18).

As the Salesian author, Gildasio Mendes, has written: ‘Clearly, for a child, a dream, even if a revelation from God, is not easy to assimilate and quickly understand’ (Mendes 2024 p. xi). Therefore, to be anxious and afraid in the face of new challenges are understandable human reactions, but they must never be allowed to paralyse the young or stifle their enthusiasm. Speaking to a group of young people in Athens and directing his remarks in particular to Aboud, a young refugee who had escaped by sea with his family from worn-torn Syria, Pope Francis told them:

Salvation lies in the open sea, in setting sail, in the quest, in the pursuit of dreams, real dreams, those we pursue with eyes open, those that involve effort, struggles, headwinds, sudden storms. Please don’t be paralysed by fear: dream big! And dream together! As with Telemachus [the son of Odysseus], there will always be those who try to stop you. There will always be those who tell you: “Forget it, don’t risk it, it’s useless”. They are the destroyers of dreams, the slayers of hope, incurably stuck in the past. (Internet Source 8)

And in *Christus Vivit,* Pope Francis gives his youthful readers this similar advice:

Keep following your hopes and dreams. But be careful about one temptation that can hold us back. It is anxiety. Anxiety can work against us by making us give up whenever we do not see instant results. Our best dreams are only attained through hope, patience and commitment, and not in haste. At the same time, we should not be hesitant, afraid to take chances or make mistakes. Avoid the paralysis of the living dead, who have no life because they are afraid to take risks, to make mistakes or to persevere in their commitments. (Francis 2019 no. 142).

**4.5 Conclusion**

Although the nine-year-old John Bosco did not appreciate it at the time of his dream, what ‘the Lady, who ‘took him by the hand’ was inviting him to do was to become a ‘father’ to ‘her children’, those youngsters who before his eyes had been transformed from ‘wild animals’ into ‘lambs’. What he was being asked to create was a ‘spiritual family’, bound together by love and mutual respect, by the *amorevolezza* discussed earlier.

Keeping his new family united was to be an ongoing challenge for Don Bosco, because, as Pope Francis explained in a talk to a group of young people in 2020, ‘love does not come cheap’, nor is love ‘easy’.

Love is our greatest dream in life, but it does not come cheap. Like all great things in life, love is magnificent, but not easy. It is our greatest dream, but not easy to explain. And when you dream of love, don’t go looking for special effects, but realize that each of you is special, each of you. […] Dream of a beauty that goes beyond appearances, beyond cosmetic impressions, beyond the fads of the moment. Dream fearlessly of creating a family, having children and raising them well, spending your life in sharing everything with another person. (Internet Source 10).

Like his own parents, Margaret and Francis, Don Bosco, as his pastoral ministry among the young developed, was not afraid to ‘dream fearlessly of creating a family’. However, it was to be a new kind of family, a family bound together by a shared, prophetic dream, a dream that had never been dreamt before. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia,* Pope Francis warns of a danger to which all families, both physical and spiritual, are prone. ‘You can’t have a family without dreams. Once a family loses the ability to dream, children do not grow, love does not grow, life shrivels up and dies’ (Francis 2016 no. 169).

‘Once a family loses the ability to dream…’ The words of Pope Francis have a particular relevance today as the Salesian Family celebrates the two hundredth anniversary of Don Bosco’s foundational dream. They underline the responsibility of the Salesian Family for ensuring the perennial significance and relevance of the young John Bosco’s boyhood dream for the world of today, especially the world of the young. In this context the comment of the Salesian scholar, Frank Moloney, is particularly appropriate.

[…] it is urgent that we continue (to remember) those two elements that lie at the heart of Don Bosco’s dream: do things differently and do them with loving care for all concerned. Our recalling the heritage of Don Bosco should not lead us elsewhere but test our loyalty to his foundational dream: to nurture, nourish and evoke an alternative consciousness among the young, and – where necessary – an alternative action. (Moloney 2024 p. 13)

Through their willingness to accompany the young both as individuals and in groups, and their active self-sacrificing presence among them, especially during recreation and times of play, the Salesians of Don Bosco and those who work side by side with them will ensure that Don Bosco’s dream never dies and that the worldwide Family he helped create continues to grow.

Reflecting on the importance that play and recreation should have in the school apostolate, Professor John Lydon suggests that ‘the value of extra-curricular engagement in building student confidence and a ‘family atmosphere’ in schools constitutes *the* distinctive contribution of St John Bosco to a philosophy of Catholic education’ (Lydon 2022 p. 9). Lydon’s suggestion finds moving confirmation in an article written by the staff and students of the Salesian Secondary School in Pallaskenry, County Limerick, to mark the bicentennial of Don Bosco’s foundational dream, and published in the April-June 2024 edition of the Irish *Salesian Bulletin*.

Don Bosco’s legacy, known for its firmness yet allowance for space and freedom, resonates deeply within our institution. Here in Pallaskenry, we embrace this philosophy, providing students with the liberty to express themselves through music, art, crafts, sport, and playfulness, just as Don Bosco envisioned. […] They (our students) won’t recall specific teaching methods or techniques from our classroom, but they will forever remember how we made them feel – whether through advice, attentive listening, or simply being there. We let them know that everything they dream of can be achieved if they work hard and go through life with a positive outlook. (Salesian Bulletin, April-June 2024 p. 9)

The testimony of Pallaskenry School staff and students confirms that what the dream-vision ignited in the young John Bosco at the tender age of nine still lives on, and that his legacy, woven into the fabric of thousands of Salesian works and institutions around the world, is very much alive. The Bulletin article concludes with these inspiring words, words with which, I believe, Pope Francis would very much agree:

Let the young dare to dream. Let them embrace the confidence to declare, as Martin Luther King Jr. did, “I have a dream.” For dreams have the remarkable power to come true. (Salesian Bulletin, April-June 2024 p. 9)

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**Appendix**

**Don Bosco’s Boyhood Dream**

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

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."

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."

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 the morning 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." (Bosco 1989 p. 18-20)

**Dissertation: Examiner’s Report**

This is an intellectually sophisticated dissertation demonstrating a high level of knowledge and understanding of the topic area throughout.  The analysis of scholarship is most comprehensive both in terms of seminal historical documents and more recent teachings of Pope Francis in a contemporary context.  A very well written dissertation.

§  41 bibliographical references constitute a broad critical retrieval of the literature. There is an appropriate balance between ecclesial and scholarly sources. The use of primary sources in relation to the Salesian charism represents a distinctively positive feature.

§  The structure of this dissertation is especially coherent, enabling the topic to be explored and analysed effectively. Chapter 1 explores the significance and impact of the Founder of the Salesians in the context of development of the Catholic Church’s education mission. This enables the contextualizing of the foundational dream of St John Bosco and its cogency in relation to the mission of the Salesians of Don Bosco. The final chapter relates the dream to contemporary developments in the form of Pope Francis’ teaching on the accompaniment of young people.

§  Biblical, historical and contemporary perspectives in relation to St John Bosco’s foundational dream are retrieved comprehensively. The exploration of resonances with scriptural vocation narratives represents a positive feature while the ‘accompaniment’ as a central feature of the Salesian education vision is acknowledged.

§  The concept of ‘presence’ comprises a seamless thread throughout this dissertation, confirming the centrality of presence as the pedagogical instrument at the heart of the Salesian education vision. The integral relationship between presence and constructive engagement in the form of extra-curricular activities is explored effectively.

§  This dissertation is very well written and signposted with a strong range of bibliographical references. It will be of interest to involved in Salesian and other forms of youth ministry challenged to maintain a rich heritage in the form of a distinctive religious ethos.

§  The conclusion summarises the nature and scope of the assignment, encompassing pertinent points in relation to the significance of St John Bosco’s foundational dream and the formation of young people.

§  Academic convention is adhered to in the bibliography and within the text.

The aspirational nature of the dissertation might have been balanced by a greater degree of criticality.  Nevertheless, there is much of value and significance that could be published here which would be of interest to Salesian and broader contexts.